



MARSHALL DIXON

CREATING THE AMERICAN WEST IN ART

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Cover: Maynard Dixon. *Wide Lands of the Navajo*, 1945. Oil on canvas, 24 x 38 in. Denver Art Museum: Roath Collection, 2013.100

For many, the words “American West” have long conjured a concept as much as a location. Throughout the expansion of the United States into the territories west of the Mississippi River during the 19th and 20th centuries, many Euro-American artists were drawn there because of notions of discovery. They made renderings of the people, landscapes, and wildlife they encountered, which were unfamiliar to them. These depictions helped foster a Euro-American identity rooted in a pioneering spirit of adventure and opportunity, which ultimately led to a doctrine of manifest destiny and the myth of American exceptionalism.

Creating the American West in Art features nearly eighty paintings and sculptures, ranging in date from 1822 to 1946, from the Petrie Institute of Western American Art at the Denver Art Museum. Some of the artists, such as Frederic Remington, Charles Marion Russell, and E. Irving Couse, are almost exclusively associated with the West, while others, including Robert Henri, John Sloan, and Thomas Hart Benton, had established careers elsewhere but temporarily came to the region for inspiration. Reflecting an array

of artistic styles and motivations, the objects will encourage viewers to explore the nuances of a complex American West, including both its challenging history—especially regarding the forced displacement of Native Americans—and its vibrant and diverse natural beauty.

The works of art are presented in five chronological sections related to national and artistic concerns. The first grouping focuses on the widespread curiosity about the vast wilderness and its Indigenous inhabitants during the age of artist explorers. Figures like Alfred Jacob Miller, who first journeyed westward in 1837, hoped to re-create elements of what he saw for audiences on the East Coast and in Europe. William Jacob Hays, a noted naturalist, was interested in recording the physical characteristics of bison in his 1862 painting *Herd of Buffalo*. He depicts the massive form of this uniquely American animal from twelve different angles within a hazy, almost otherworldly atmosphere.

The second section analyzes how sublime western landscapes offered hope for national unification after the horrors of the American Civil War. Large-



Figure 1: Thomas Moran. *A Snowy Mountain Range (Path of Souls, Idaho)*, 1896. Oil on canvas, 14 x 27 in. Denver Art Museum: Roath Collection, 2013.109

scale paintings by Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran revealed the magnificence of lands seemingly unspoiled by human intrusion (fig. 1). Captivated by these visions of grandeur and encouraged by government policies such as the 1862 Homestead Act, many Euro-Americans moved westward for economic opportunity, religious freedom, and artistic growth. This migration impacted relationships between settlers and Native Americans, sometimes worsened existing intertribal conflicts, and created new tensions regarding property rights and cultural assimilation.

By the turn of the 20th century, railroads and barbed wire fences had ended the open-range cattle era of the American West. A third grouping in the exhibition considers the nostalgia for and memorialization of a seemingly nobler West, a viewpoint voiced in this declaration by Frederic Remington: "The West is no longer the West of picturesque and stirring events. ... Romance and adventure have been beaten down in the rush of civilization." Charles Marion Russell, like Remington, became a preeminent artist of the "Old West." His painting *In the Enemy's Country* (fig. 2) captures the glowing jewel tones of Montana



Figure 2: Charles Marion Russell. *In the Enemy's Country*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 24 x 36 in. Denver Art Museum: Gift of the Magness Family in memory of Betsy Magness, 1991.751

skies as confident yet careful Kootenai hunters stride through enemy Blackfeet country, their horses draped to appear like bison. The work was made in 1921, though—decades after both nations had been forced to resettle on reservations, and the buffalo nearly brought to extinction. The sense of loss experienced

by Euro-Americans as the era of expansion came to a close paled in comparison with the loss of Indigenous lifeways caused by genocide, disease, involuntary migration, and forced assimilation.

The final two sections look closely at the role of the West within the development of American modernism. In part because of the outbreak of World War I and the closure of international borders, many American artists who had trained in Europe came to the West for source material, lured especially by the bright, arid environment of New Mexico. There, in 1915, Ernest Blumenschein, E. Irving Couse, Oscar E. Berninghaus, W. Herbert Dunton, Bert Phillips, and Joseph Henry Sharp formed the Taos Society of Artists, a colony devoted to studying both the Native American and Hispanic cultures living within the desert landscape. E. Martin Hennings, who joined the Society in 1924, presents contrasting atmospheres and cultures in *The Rabbit Hunt* (fig. 3). A dark storm fills the background, which visually pushes the brightly lit figures in the foreground toward the viewer, and the men wear modern 20th-century clothing as well as traditional moccasins and blankets, thereby placing Native

Americans in the artist's present rather than in an imagined past.

At the same time, avant-garde artworks from Europe seen primarily in galleries and exhibitions in New York City challenged accepted artistic practice. In them, artists were using bold colors and patterns, radically simplifying or abstracting shapes, flattening three-dimensional forms, and tilting perspectives. For Americans interested in these innovative forms of visual expression, the American West maintained its prominence as a source of inspiration. Its dramatic physical geography and bold light lent themselves to these modern styles and the themes pursued by a new generation of artists, including Marsden Hartley and Raymond Jonson. During a tumultuous era that witnessed technological innovation as well as the tragedies of World War I and the Great Depression, depictions of the West preserved key components of American myth and history.

Katie Delmez
Curator



Figure 3: E. Martin Hennings.
The Rabbit Hunt, ca. 1925.
Oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 39
1/2 in. Denver Art Museum:
William Sr. and Dorothy
Harmsen Collection, 2001.449.
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