

EIR Book Reviews

Smithsonian exhibit aids in analyzing American ideology

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The West as America, Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier

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The issues underlying a scandal over an exhibition, "The West as America," at the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. continue even though the exhibit, which began in March, has ended as of July 28. On May 15, Republican Senators Ted Stevens of Alaska and Slade Gorton of Washington warned the Smithsonian Institution that their Senate Appropriations Committee may have to reconsider funding for the Institution, due to the seeming "political agenda" of several projects sponsored by the Smithsonian.

The Senators cited "The West as America," on exhibit at the NMAA since March 15, plus an unfinished television series, "The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain in the New World," by Carlos Fuentes, the left-wing Mexican novelist.

"The West as America" stirred controversy from its opening day, when Daniel Boorstin, the former Librarian of Congress, wrote on the opening page of the exhibit's guest book that the show was "a perverse, historically inaccurate, destructive exhibit. No credit to the Smithsonian." Since then, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* have run major articles, distancing themselves from the exhibit, while counseling calm. "There may be many reasons to take issue with 'The West as America,'" said the *Times* on May 26, "but none justifies the Senators' reaction."

In some, more liberal quarters, there is fear that the

NMAA show will be used to rekindle the scandal surrounding the late Robert Mapplethorpe, whose homoerotic photographs caused a nationwide flap, and to renew efforts for closer scrutiny of publicly funded art. In other quarters, there is the growing recognition that Stevens and Gorton's citation of the Fuentes project may be a double-edged sword. The television series is part of the Smithsonian's celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World; investigation of the Fuentes project is bound to direct public attention to the federal government's other plans for the celebration.

Earlier this month, the Reagan-appointed director of the commission responsible for overall celebration planning resigned, amid charges of corruption and gross incompetence.

The NMAA exhibit was originally to have traveled to Denver and St. Louis after it finished its run in Washington, but both museums canceled in February, claiming budget restrictions and high insurance costs.

Neo-conservative's dream

"The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920" is a neo-conservative's dream: the perfect target. Although they gathered a fascinating showing of American art, the exhibitors created a commentary which manages to kowtow to every cockamamie, politically correct current around, doing so through a combination of shameless assertion, willful omission, and an awe-inspiring ignorance of the subject matter. Using standard, politically correct semiotics methodology, the exhibitors announce that "works of art don't always mean what they seem to say."

They proceed to "decode" the exhibited art: the late-19th-century landscapes of Albert Bierstadt are really "a catalogue of available resources"; the many portrayals of the Westward



Emmanuel Leutze, The Storming of Teocalli by Cortez and His Troops, 1848. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Conn.; The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection. Over eight feet wide and seven feet tall, a tendentious painting tendentiously misinterpreted in the exhibit.

trek, including George Caleb Bingham's wonderful "Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap" (1851), are actually recruiting posters which "operated to obscure the more difficult aspects of westward travel and Indian/white relations"; Frederic Remington's "Fight for the Waterhole" (1903) speaks to "wealthy industrialists uneasy about social change in the urban East."

Permeating the entire show, claim the exhibitors, is Manifest Destiny, which they define as "white people's conception of progress," a quasi-mystical ideology manufactured by rapacious capitalists in order to justify the domination of the West and its indigenous populations through the introduction of technology and Judeo-Christian civilization. The first room of the exhibit is dominated by an 1846 quote from William Gilpin, silk-screened on the wall:

"The untransacted destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent—to rush over this fast field to the Pacific Ocean—to animate the many hundred millions of its people, and to cheer them upward—to establish a new order in human affairs—to set free the enslaved—to change darkness into light."

Oddly enough, this emblazoned quote edits out the "new order" phrase; perhaps it was chosen by the curators before the end of Operation Desert Storm.

Military superiority

So far, criticism of the exhibit has confined itself to general statements about how silly and inappropriate this all is,

especially since there is a "new mood" in the land, whereby we are all supposed to feel good about our kinder, gentler, and militarily superior America. At least two critics have highlighted one particularly grotesque example. This show includes "The Storming of Teocalli by Cortez and his Troops," an 1848 monumental piece by Emmanuel Leutze, the German painter best known for his "Washington Crossing the Delaware." The exhibit commentary says that this piece, which shows Conquistadores attacking a temple, just as an Aztec priest is about to sacrifice an infant, is meant to portray how "the might of Christianity prevails against a dark and bloodthirsty foe."

The two critics point out that such an interpretation requires selective blindness: Cortez's troops are also clearly shown slaughtering women and children; a monk baptizes a dying Indian, but next to him, a soldier pulls a gold chain off a corpse. (A much more obvious analysis, which neither side has emphasized, is that the work is part of the wave of anti-Roman Catholicism—including the worst rioting in our history, up to that point—which swept the U.S. around the time of the Mexican-American War of 1844-46, our country's first, truly immoral, foreign adventure. The painting equates Aztec barbarism with "monkish tyranny"—both of which can be solved by enlightened Protestant domination.

This is also the intent of the "new order . . . to set free the enslaved" statement by Gilpin, who became a colonel of volunteers in the Mexican war, and later, a governor of Colorado Territory in 1860, during the speculative frenzy of

the Colorado Gold Rush.)

While easily deriding the exhibit's atrocities, none of the critiques has yet addressed the issues which the exhibit raises. These critiques are themselves flawed by the adherence, stated or not, to the concept of Manifest Destiny, Frederick Jackson Turner's 100-year-old thesis that geopolitical necessity demanded that the United States appropriate the entire continent from sea to shining sea. Sure, there was exploitation and genocide, the modern defenders of this theory admit, but you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.

The frontier as test of ideology

This poverty of analysis on both sides of the NMAA debate is symptomatic, and provides us with a useful point of investigation into the ideological conflicts which shaped American history, and which afflict us to this day.

The frontier—the permeable boundary between wilderness and civilization—is the single most important metaphor in American arts and letters. It is embedded everywhere, not only in obvious places like the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain or the films of John Ford, but also in more subtle locations. The calm surface of the sea is all that separates a well-ordered sailing ship from the wild terrors of the deep; Prince Prospero has isolated his castle from the chaos of the outside world, but in his westernmost room he finds death, and death is red.

In this context, the collection which “West as America” assembles is quite fascinating, but the exhibitors' slapdash Marxism requires them to agglutinate all the pieces into a single racist, capitalist conspiracy. Actually, the frontier exists as three distinct concepts in American history, each of which is represented at the NMAA show.

1. The frontier as the edge of law and society. This is the Romantic version, and, tragically, the one which most have been led to accept. “I will speak a word for Nature,” said Henry David Thoreau in 1852, “for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil.” This concept was foisted on the young Republic by the circles around the Boston Transcendental Club, based on their close reading of Immanuel Kant, and Kant's successors such as the historian Leopold von Ranke, theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, and poet Thomas Carlyle.

In Kant's philosophy, there is an unbridgeable chasm (an impassable frontier, if you will) between the scientific creativity which characterizes technological civilization, and other forms of creativity, which must, by Kant's scheme, be irrational. This dualism is what Thoreau reflected when he claimed in 1849, “Inside the civilized man stands the savage still in the place of honor.” The Transcendentalists' Kantianism derived additional influence through an uneasy alliance with Jeffersonian libertarianism, which, based on the philosophy of John Locke, conceived of American democracy as bereft of industry, and based entirely on individual agrarian freeholds. The influence of this ideology is immense, from

Hester Prynne to John Rambo.

One may be the duly elected sheriff of a seemingly civilized, prosperous prairie town, but the only things which will ultimately protect you from the occupants of the high noon train, are your own six-shooters and your willingness to use them. Who would have thought Gary Cooper to be an orthodox Kantian?

2. The frontier as free-enterprise zone. This might be more properly called the “feudalist” version, and is best summed up by Teddy Roosevelt's famous statement concerning the Panama Canal: “We stole it fair and square.” The NMAA organizers would have us believe that this is the only ideology in effect during the Western expansion, and thus, they amass a full representation of jingoistic pieces supporting the Mexican War (including Richard Catton Woodville's famous “News from the Mexican War,” 1853), and engravings from sensationalist illustrated magazines depicting troopers defending their forts from wild Indians (only illustrators and, later, film directors had Indians attack forts; the Indians themselves were never that stupid).

The feudalists found common cause with the Romantics on two issues: They supported the Romantics' culturally relativistic view of Indians as racially unassimilable—all the better to justify Indian removal from land useful for speculation; and they shared the Romantics' hostility to civil society and its possible restraints on “free trade” and unbounded exploitation.

The exemplar of this kind of thinking is U.S. Army Gen. George Armstrong Custer, a mediocre and technically treasonous officer with a genius for self-promotion. He lied in official reports in order to justify a war of depopulation along the right-of-way of the Northern Pacific Railroad, in which he was an investor. His greed was matched only by his arrogance, the which caused him to leave behind his Gatling guns during the reconnaissance at the Little Big Horn River in 1876.

3. The frontier as shock front of technological civilization. “There is a pleasure,” said James Fenimore Cooper in 1843, “in diving into a virgin forest and commencing the labours of civilization, that has no exact parallel in any other human occupation.” This is the outlook of the adherents of the American System school of economics, who saw the development of American republicanism as based on internal improvements and domestic manufactures, with carefully reasoned territorial expansion.

The American System concept of the frontier is the most important, but least understood; it is, for instance, completely beyond the ken of the NMAA exhibitors. Its attitude toward the Romantic racism that would emarginate the Indian, is best stated by Edgar Allan Poe:

“The theorizers of government who pretend to always ‘begin with the beginning,’ commence with Man in what they call his *natural* state—the savage. What right have they to suppose this his natural state? Man's chief idiosyncrasy being reason, it follows that his savage condition—his condi-

tion *without* reason—is his unnatural state.”

The first two concepts of the frontier are actually philosophically identical. The feudalists tend to be just as worshipful of Nature in the abstract as the Romantics, for such worship usefully debases mankind to a tool in the hands of “naturally superior” leaders like themselves. The differentiation between the two is usually the degree of sentimentality. Francis Parkman, author of *The Oregon Trail*, (1849) was a Harvard-trained Brahmin who became a naturalist and the first systematic writer on Native American history; in a famous denunciation of the works of Cooper in 1852, he could write: “Civilization has a destroying as well as creating power. It is exterminating the buffalo and the Indian, over whose fate too many lamentations, real or affected, have been sounded for us to renew them here.” This ideology helps to explain how Teddy Roosevelt, Prince Philip of Britain, and even George Bush, could credibly claim to be environmentalists.

Locke versus Leibniz

These two, and the adherents of the American System, have irreconcilable differences, which go back to the founding of the Republic. In a certain sense, it boils down to two diametrically opposed interpretations of what is meant by the Declaration of Independence’s demand for “the pursuit of happiness,” as Jefferson not unpoetically translated the Greek word *eudaemonia*. Jefferson himself held the interpretation of Locke, who, in his *Second Treatise on Government*, enumerated the fundamental rights of man as the preservation of life, liberty and *property*. Locke saw society as a contract between atomic individuals, who gather in groups merely because a “strong inclination” toward other people was superadded to the human personality by the Creator. Happiness exists in improving one’s own situation, or that of family or friends, without government interference; social progress, and even technological progress, is conceived of as a positive good, but exists only statistically, as an aggregate of individual successes and failures.

Thus, Locke’s ethics allowed him to sanction slavery and to be a major stockholder in the slave-trading Royal African Company, because the benefits to slave-holders somehow overbalanced the harm done to the kidnapped Africans.

Jefferson’s opponents in Alexander Hamilton’s Federalist Party faction saw individual happiness as coincident with the development of the nation. The purpose of government for the Hamiltonians was to foster technological development, and to protect that technological growth from being overwhelmed by British free trade policies, thus increasing each citizen’s mastery over nature. While the Jeffersonians would have each citizen hacking out an existence on his own freehold, the American System advocates would give each citizen the potential to make the kind of contributions that would help not only himself, but the whole nation, if not the whole world.

•In this, the American System used arguments which mirrored Gottfried Leibniz’s refutation of Locke. After the demise of the Federalists, the “American System of Political-Economy” was taken up by the Whig Party factions around Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams, assisted by the two economists, Henry Carey and Friedrich List.

Territorial policy was a major point of contention between the American System advocates and their opponents throughout the first 100 years of the Republic. This used to be common, schoolroom knowledge, but is now no longer taught. Such modern ignorance allows the NMAA exhibitors to make the absurd comment that the supporters of Manifest Destiny sought to overwhelm the wilderness with technology. Actually, the reverse is true: America’s biggest supporters of technological progress led the fight against expansion, and the most vociferous expansionists were fanatical agrarians.

Whig frontier policy is exemplified by the 1825 Annual Report to Congress of Richard Rush, John Quincy Adams’s Treasury Secretary, which called for the federal government to intervene to slow Westward expansion, because it was causing a diffusion of capital and a lowering of population density in the East, thus reducing the nation’s overall rate of growth. Friedrich List publicly hailed Rush’s paper as the successor document to Hamilton’s 1791 “Report on the Subject of Manufactures,” the founding document of the American System; Rush’s report also became the *bête noire* of Jacksonian and Calhounite Democrats for the next 20 years.

Population density was very important to the Whigs. In his writings on economics, Henry Carey insisted that, if the South’s industrial potential were concentrated and developed, then it would break the vicious cycle which demanded ever-increasing cotton production based on slavery to purchase British-manufactured products; in 1843, economist George Tucker formally calculated that, if the population density of the South could be brought above 60 persons per square mile, then it would mean, in his words, “the euthanasia of slavery.” (The South defeated these attempts to save them from themselves; by the time of the Civil War, large parts of the Union had exceeded 100 persons per square mile, while in all of the 11 states of the Confederacy only a handful of areas—the ports of Savannah and Norfolk, the cities of Richmond and Nashville, and a few other places—had just surpassed 45 persons.)

Throughout the antebellum period, the Whigs denounced expansionism as a conspiracy of slave-holders and the British to increase the land available for large-scale, low-population cotton production. Another contributing factor, which was especially responsible for the periodic hysteria for “Indian removal,” as it was euphemistically called, was raw materials speculation. Never was the demand for abrogation of an Indian treaty based on white population crowding or legitimate security concerns; it was always preceded by a local “rush” for the gold, or silver, or nickel allegedly overflowing

on nearby Indian land.

Despite vociferous Whig opposition, the war with Mexico was engineered by President James Polk and the Democrats to protect the annexation of Texas as a slave state, and to bring under U.S. control some millions of acres which might become slave states in the future. It is illustrative that, after Mexico surrendered and U.S. troops occupied Mexico City in 1846, Manifest Destiny Democrats on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee seriously proposed treating the Mexicans like Indian tribes, transporting them *en masse* to inhospitable northern reservations, so that Mexico could be repopulated by white settlers. Ultimately, the U.S. gave the territory below the Rio Grande back to the Mexicans, rather than admit millions of mixed-race Mexicans as American citizens. So much for the “new order . . . to set free the enslaved.”

The real NMAA exhibit

All this violent ideological combat is represented in the NMAA exhibit, although you could not tell it from the exhibitors' commentary. A more useful appreciation of the exhibit pivots on the work of George Caleb Bingham, who, thankfully, has several pieces in the show. Bingham is not America's best artist, but he is certainly our most interesting one. A native of frontier state of Missouri who refused invitations to tour the wilderness, Bingham taught himself painting by studying engravings of the Old Masters. In autobiographical statements, he considered himself first, a Whig political organizer, and second, an artist.

In fact, his first documented work was a giant banner for Henry Clay's 1844 presidential campaign. On one side, it showed Clay amid various symbols of industrial growth and prosperous trade; on the other, he depicted an idyllic prairie with grazing buffalo—a scene not unlike that presented by several other artists at the NMAA show. However, Bingham's prairie was meant to convey the idiocy of Democrats who demanded the annexation of territory which could foreseeably be developed. We have only contemporary journalist reports of this banner; at its first showing, it was destroyed by an outraged mob of Democrats.

One Bingham painting which is not at the NMAA (but was in the earlier Smithsonian Bingham exhibit), “Fur Traders Descending the Missouri” (1845), can be fruitfully compared to a painting which is in this exhibit, Charles Deas's “The Trapper and his Family” (1845). Deas, like his contemporary George Catlin (several of whose anthropological portraits of Indians are at the show), went into the wilderness to get his inspiration. He produced a painting showing a hobo-like trapper battling up the Missouri in a threatening landscape; his canoe is filled with a confused tangle of half-breed children and carelessly stowed pelts; in the bow, his eldest son still retains Indian dress.

Bingham's answer, originally titled “French Trader and His Half-Breed Son,” is the identical pose, with polemical

differences. The French *voyageur*, the acknowledged forebear of the riverboatmen who were the key to Missouri's economy in Bingham's time, goes downriver to engage in trade; his assimilated son, wearing white man's clothes, smiles at the spectator in an emulation of a Raphael print; the river's bank is benign, and a small pet animal sits chained in the bow of the neatly loaded canoe, reminding us both of man's mastery over nature, and the fact that only animals should be chained. In a nutshell: Deas went upstream to find romance; Bingham went to Germany to get more training.

“Fur Traders” is part of a series which Bingham did to support the River and Harbor Bill of 1842. This Whig legislation called for federal funds to be used for the development of the nation's waterway infrastructure—vital to the economy, but ideologically anathema to the Democrats. The bill included measures to dredge and clear the Missouri of snags which made riverboat traffic dangerous. Rivermen called snags “poke stalks”; after President Polk vetoed the bill, they referred to them as “Polk stalks.”

In 1846, Lt. Col. Stephen H. Long of the U.S. Topographical Engineers (the same man who led a U.S.-sponsored Western expedition in 1820) was in charge of dredging and snagging the Western rivers. When the Mexican war started, the ships Long used to clear the rivers were diverted to the war effort.

The NMAA exhibit includes a couple of other Bingham paintings from this series, notably “Watching Cargo” (1849). On the bank, three men with slightly perturbed expressions sit in front of piles of unloaded cargo covered with tarps; one of them is starting a fire to warm them through the coming night; in the distance, a steamboat lies aground on a sandbar. The piece is a political cartoon with the unwritten but explicit caption: “We must sit here all night, because you guys in Washington refuse to help us dredge the Missouri.” (For more information on Bingham's work, the reader is referred to a superlative new biography from Yale University Press, *The Paintings and Politics of George Caleb Bingham*, by Nancy Rash.)

Tucked in a corner of the NMAA show is a painting which were better highlighted: Bingham's “Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers Through the Cumberland Gap.” In the semantics of the time, Boone is shown as a “frontiersman,” leading permanent settlers, not as a “backwoodsman,” shunning other people while he hunts an area before moving on. Boone leads his wife's horse in emulation of Renaissance depictions of the Flight into Egypt, emphasizing that settlement is based on families; a holy light seems to guide the column through the dark Gap. William Gilmore Simms, a very popular antebellum novelist whose work echoes the pro-civilization polemics of J.F. Cooper, called Boone “not merely a hunter. He was on a mission. The spiritual sense was strong in him.” This mission of the American System should be compared to the “new order” of Gilpin, and Gilpin's successors today.