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FRONTIER ARTIST-ADVENTURERS: ART OF THE AMERICAN WEST FROM  
1832 TO 1872

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## **Abstract**

This undergraduate thesis explores the character of the American West through the paintings of artist-adventurers George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran from 1832 to 1872. The thesis identifies and defines five broad western ideals: democracy, opportunity, nature, individualism, and Manifest Destiny. This framework of western ideals is used to explain the life and artwork of each artist-adventurer. A brief biographical sketch of each artist is provided, along with an examination of selected works and how those works demonstrate western ideals. Each artist-adventurer sought preservationist, financial and artistic goals as they traveled into the West. The goals of the artists often conflicted with one another. The biggest difficulty the artists faced was the problem of painting untouched nature while living in an expansionist society. George Catlin struggled to balance the tension between what he perceived as inevitable expansion and the preservation of Indian culture. Albert Bierstadt portrayed the glories of pristine western nature but also supported the westward advancement of the United States. Thomas Moran ignored the realities of a disappearing frontier and instead created an imaginary and idealistic West which served as a national symbol. In the process of painting the untamed western frontier, the artist-adventurers contributed to the westward expansion of the dominant Anglo-American civilization and the disappearance of an unspoiled western landscape. In doing so, they ended up being inadvertent agents of an expansionist society. The thesis concludes with a brief explanation of how the study of art should not just focus on how art reflects society, but also how it can affect society. Finally, this thesis serves as a call for the study of contemporary art to be integrated into history classes.

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## **Introduction**

There is no other region that defines the American landscape like the West. The West has been described as the land of opportunity, an area of primitive nature, a territory that must be conquered, a vast expanse which celebrates the individual, a haven for democracy and equality. Many of these descriptions of the West are steeped in controversy. No Indian would claim that the acquisition of the West by white Americans typifies democracy, and few individuals ever struck out into the wilderness alone. The West provided opportunity but also contained vast deserts and dangerous terrain. It contained a pristine nature, but also a landscape that had already been altered by human activity. So too, Manifest Destiny was not a unanimously accepted philosophy, but rather a political decision that promoted specific interests. Western ideals of opportunity, democracy, individualism, nature, and Manifest Destiny describe both past and present perceptions of the West, but they also can distort the historical realities of the West. In short, in both our collective imaginations and in reality, the West is defined by contradictions.

If the West is by nature contradictory, then it would follow that the art which depicts the region is filled with contradictions as well. This thesis specifically looks at art produced on the western frontier during the middle of the nineteenth century, from 1832 to 1872. I have selected three artists from this time period: George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran. Each artist traveled deep into the West, studying and painting a frontier that had not yet been shaped by the dominant American culture. In this way, they can be called Frontier Artist-Adventurers: Figures who took on a dual role of artist and explorer for the purposes of their artwork and in pursuit of their passions. For each artist, I selected two paintings which embody western ideals and explain how the artists both reflected and shaped popular perceptions of the West. These paintings are not necessarily their most famous paintings, but they are ones which help to

illustrate the conflicting ideals of the American West. Additionally, these paintings reveal how the nature of the western frontier changed over the course of forty years.

George Catlin's 1832 *Fort Union* and *Black Hawk* represent his struggle to balance the preservation of nature and Indian culture with the realities of the ever-westward movement of United States citizens. An eloquent and effusive writer, Catlin fretted over this dilemma in his numerous anthologies that catalogue his travels. He decided that he must become a historian for the Indians and preserve their cultural heritage. Yet in doing so, he implicitly confirmed the ideal of Manifest Destiny. American civilization would eventually overrun the indigenous tribes, so he must come to their rescue to make sure that their culture would not be forgotten. His paintings reflect this contradiction between nature and Manifest Destiny.

A generation later, as Albert Bierstadt completed his second journey westward in 1863, the American West had changed dramatically. The frontier line had been pushed further west as trains and trails crossed much of the country. Catlin's beloved Indian tribes had disappeared or relocated in the oncoming wave of American civilization. Despite these changes, Bierstadt dealt with the same fundamental contradiction of nature and Manifest Destiny. However, unlike Catlin, Bierstadt appeared to accept this contradiction. His paintings celebrated not only the magnificence of nature, but also the grand nation in which these natural wonders were located. Bierstadt and much of the American public saw the beautiful landscapes of the West as nationalistic symbols. His 1864 *Valley of the Yellowstone* focuses mainly on nature, without much visible nationalist sentiment. However, Bierstadt's 1867 *Emigrants Crossing the Westward Plains* clearly illustrates this dual glamorization of nature and Manifest Destiny.

Finally, in 1871 Thomas Moran traveled to Yellowstone with a government survey and painted the finest images of the region that the American populace had ever seen. His paintings

captured national attention, being the first color images of the Yellowstone area, and in 1872 Yellowstone was set aside as a national park. His most famous work, *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, is a massive landscape which captures the natural beauty of the area. *Green River Cliffs* demonstrates Moran's imaginative portrayals of the western landscape. Both of these paintings reinforce the ideal of nature, although by this time it was clear that the western frontier would soon disappear.

Thus Thomas Moran's paintings helped bring the conflict between nature and Manifest Destiny to a conclusion. With the frontier shrinking and the population of the West growing exponentially, American civilization was at a point where it was essential to preserve certain natural landscapes for future generations. Nature, if only a small and selected portion of it, was preserved as Americans continued to populate the West in accordance with Manifest Destiny. The national wonders of the West were incorporated into the ideal of Manifest Destiny as displays of American superiority.

The dichotomy between the expansion of white American society and the preservation of nature was vital for each of these artists. In order to assure financial success, they had to cater their artwork to the tastes of the American public. By celebrating a beautiful, pristine, and charming nature which held opportunity for both the individual and the nation, they inevitably popularized the western landscape. As more and more Americans pushed westward, the very characteristics of the frontier that the artists celebrated disappeared. It is of no surprise that each artist found his greatest success early on in his career. Only Thomas Moran remained popular until his death, and even then his most memorable works were his paintings of Yellowstone completed in the 1870's. Once Americans moved into the West and "civilized" it, the artists no longer had a compelling subject and thus lost some of their appeal.

Therefore, the preservationist goals of the artists and their very livelihood were undermined by their success in depicting the beauty of the American West. In the end, they acted as unwitting agents of an expansionist society. They did not choose this role, but through the quality and success of their artwork they supported western ideals of individual opportunity and Manifest Destiny. Through their paintings of the American West, Catlin, Bierstadt, and Moran ultimately confirmed the inevitability of westward expansion.

## Chapter One: Ideals of the American West

The history of the American West, like all areas of historical study, is frequently the subject of controversy and debate. Disputes rage over fundamental concepts: What geographical areas encompass the West? How has the definition of the West changed over time? Is the meaning of the West malleable, able to be changed to fit the arguments of individual sources and historians? Does the West have an actual physical location or is it more of a process? The frontier poses similar questions: Where is it? How has its location changed? Is it a region or a process? Is the term even useful for historians? The purpose of this thesis is not to provide exhaustive answers for all of these questions, but rather to utilize ideals of the western frontier in order to understand the art of George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran. However, any treatment of the western frontier first needs to provide a basic explanation of both the frontier and the West. Following the examination of these terms, I seek to understand five essential ideals that provide a lens through which we can view art of the western frontier during the middle of the nineteenth century, from 1832 to 1872.

First, what defines the American West? During the Colonial period the West could be considered any area beyond the small coastal communities of the early European settlements. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 determined the provisional government for a territory which encompassed the present states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and parts of Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, none of these states would be considered part of the Northwest even fifty years later, after the expansion of American settlement to lands further west and the inclusion of California and Oregon as states. American conceptions of the West have without question changed over time, but we are still left without any sort of consensus.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 45.

Scholars of the West have struggled to agree on a specific location for the region. The mission statement of the *Western Historical Quarterly* (the official journal of the Western History Association) claims “its purpose shall be to promote the study of the North American West in its varied aspects and in the broadest possible sense.”<sup>2</sup> This mission statement is purposefully vague in order to accommodate all possible opinions. Yet scholars have traditionally given special attention to the Trans-Mississippi West.<sup>3</sup> Is it valid to state that the American West lies beyond the Mississippi? Geographer Gary Hausladen identifies the problem of the West: “The concept of the American West is firmly and forever planted, never mind that each one of us has a different definition of what the region encompasses or how it is demarcated.”<sup>4</sup> The idea of multiple possible locations proves difficult for many new Western historians such as Patricia Limerick: “If ‘the West’ is sometimes in Massachusetts, sometimes in Florida, sometimes in Kentucky, sometimes in Illinois, sometimes in California...then what on earth is a ‘western American historian?’”<sup>5</sup> It is a fool’s errand to try to identify a specific and undisputed location for the West. In fact, the West is not just about a specific geographical region. Instead, we must distinguish between location (or region) and process.

To new Western historians such as Limerick, the history of the nineteenth century reveals a theme of process in the West while the history of the twentieth century focuses on region.<sup>6</sup> However, this explanation seems far too simplistic for our purposes when studying the mid-nineteenth century West. While the West certainly was in a process of change during this period,

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<sup>2</sup> Western Historical Association, “Mission Statement,” *Western Historical Quarterly*.  
<http://www.usu.edu/whq/>

<sup>3</sup> Roger L. Nichols, “Introduction” in *American Frontier and Western Issues: A Historiographical Review*, ed. Roger L. Nichols (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Hausladen, “Introduction,” in *Western Places, American Myths*, ed. Gary Hausladen (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Limerick, “Making the Most of Words: Verbal Activity and Western America,” in *Under An Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*, ed. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: Norton, 1992), 168.

<sup>6</sup> Hausladen, *Western Places*, 7.

it also demarcated a general region—albeit a region with vague borders. Perhaps no one explains it better than Robert Hine and John Faragher. After identifying the various beliefs on where the West begins and ends, they write “whatever its boundaries, the West has always been partly understood through the process of getting there—and the process of changing frontiers that keep redefining themselves...for every party of the country was once a frontier, every region once a West.”<sup>7</sup> This best captures the sense of both process and region, both of which are vital in understanding the West in the nineteenth century.

The West, especially in the nineteenth century, is inextricably linked to the idea of the Frontier. John Faragher explains the traditional definition: “Before the second half of the nineteenth century, Americans understood frontiers to be borderlands between peoples or nations.”<sup>8</sup> These borderland frontiers are what George Catlin saw when he painted thousands of Indians on his 1832 trip up the Missouri River. However, no discussion of the Frontier can take place outside the influence of Frederick Jackson Turner. Turner famously defined the Frontier as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization”<sup>9</sup> While Turner’s cultural myopia made many succeeding historians wince, Turner’s influence in guiding American perceptions of the West cannot be denied. Utilizing Census records of population levels in western lands, Turner proposed the idea of multiple frontiers over the course of American history. As the line continually advanced, the civilizing process took place over and over again. For him, the declaration in the 1890 Census that the frontier was closed heralded a fundamental shift in American society. In a sense, his thesis is an effort to capture the essence of the frontier before it disappeared. Despite his narrow focus and neglect of various minority groups, it was Turner who most eloquently described the long-held perceptions and ideals of the western experience.

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<sup>7</sup> Hine and Faragher, *Frontiers*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994), 239.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1953), 3.

Yet before we discuss these ideals which will serve as our framework, it is important to reconcile the above discussions of the West and the frontier with the purposes of this thesis. For Catlin, Bierstadt, and Moran, the western frontier was not a just a region or a process. It was an adventure, a chance to explore, and a significant theme through which their art found meaning. All three of these artists traveled to frontiers that were rarely traversed and never before painted. Their travels included Catlin's experiences with indigenous Indians on his 1832 trip up the Missouri river to Fort Union, Bierstadt's 1863 journey to the magnificent Yosemite Valley, and Thomas Moran's 1872 trip to what would become Yellowstone National Park. For these artists, the western frontier did not need to be explicitly defined. They knew they were painting and traveling in the Frontier West; the discussions of later scholars about processes and regions would not matter to them. Only through viewing their art and studying their lives can we understand what the West meant to the artists. Their work helped shape the very perceptions of the West that scholars discuss today. These perceptions give the modern viewer unique insight into how these artist-adventurers reflected quintessential Western ideals in their paintings.

Of course, a study of the Western Frontier could evoke a virtually limitless collection of concepts, themes, ideas, and philosophies. This thesis attempts to narrow down this multitude of possibilities into five broad ideals: Democracy, individualism, nature, opportunity, and Manifest Destiny. These ideals encompass the broad range of feelings and perspectives towards the West in the middle of the nineteenth century, from the period of 1832 to 1872. Admittedly, many of the ideals are not necessarily grounded in complete historical accuracy. Democracy was hailed as an essential component of frontier life, but truly popular governance was also severely limited as frontier territories stumbled towards statehood. The West certainly celebrated the individualistic characteristics of its settlers, but development of the region also necessitated

extremely high levels of federal involvement and protection. Nature was beautiful yet savage, pristine but dangerous, cherished but destroyed in the name of progress and civilization. The West provided opportunity to many pioneers, but many settlers neglected the rights of Indians, Mexicans, and other minority groups. Ideals of Manifest Destiny and unrestrained expansion were propagated in the halls of Congress and in the rhetoric of political speeches, but they were also at the center of contentious, bipartisan politics.

Yet for all of the problems with these ideals, they still represent a vision of the American West that holds fast to the imagination of Americans both in the nineteenth century and today. Art can never perfectly depict life in exact detail, but rather interprets the world according to the artist's vision. In the same way, the ideals of the West are reflected not only in the popular culture and beliefs of Americans, but in the paintings of Catlin, Bierstadt, and Moran. Indeed, it does not truly matter if these ideals are accurate depictions of western lives, because their truth does not lie in their historical authenticity but in their effect on popular perceptions. Once these ideals are understood, we begin to see them at work in the lives and paintings of the frontier artist-adventurer.

In a nation where democracy has always been celebrated as a fundamental facet of life, it is no surprise that the ideal of democracy also took hold in the Frontier West. Turner argued without reservation: "This, at least, is clear: American democracy is fundamentally the outcome of the experiences of the American people in dealing with the West."<sup>10</sup> Western politicians began to assert influence in Washington prior to our period of study. These rough and rugged men asserted enormous influence in government policy and emerged as political heroes.<sup>11</sup> Frontier democracy, typified by men such as David Crockett, began to take hold in the 1820's.

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<sup>10</sup> Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 266.

<sup>11</sup> Hine and Faragher, *Frontiers*, 65.

The era was officially ushered in with the election of Tennessean Andrew Jackson to the Presidency in 1828. Western influence continued to grow, especially as more and more western states were added to the Union. Western democracy was not just an ideological vision about the democratic nature of the frontier; rather, the political influence of the West had a significant impact on the direction of American politics in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Western democracy was also inextricably linked to the idea of free, open land. Turner explained: "Most important of all has been the fact that an area of free land has continually lain on the western border of the settled area of the United States...these free lands promoted individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy."<sup>12</sup> Never mind that the land was not really free until the Homestead Act of 1862, or that the free land in question was often inhabited by Indians. Free land could lead to property ownership for all settlers, and property was the key to economic success and upward mobility in the western economy. The West provided a safety valve in the minds of the dispossessed, embodying notions of economic freedom and liberty. In turn, economic freedom led to an appreciation for political freedom and rights. Thus, the idea of free land contributed to democracy developing as a western ideal. Democracy is an ideal which influences each of the remaining ideals that we will discuss. It can also be one of the hardest and most amorphous concepts to see in the art of Catlin, Bierstadt, and Moran.

The promise of free land to the west points to another key western ideal, opportunity. Opportunity in the West is embedded in the essential foundation of American culture and folklore. The theme has found resonance in literature, from Mark Twain to Willa Cather to John

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<sup>12</sup> Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 259.

Steinbeck.<sup>13</sup> The California Gold Rush, one of the most enduring symbols of western opportunity, is celebrated in professional football with the San Francisco 49ers. A generation of American children has completed a journey on a digital version of the Oregon Trail. Opportunity and the West are synonymous in our culture, past and present. Harold Simonson explains how land to the West leads to the ideal of opportunity: “Social mobility became one of America’s distinguishing marks...mobility nurtured optimism...the West symbolized hope.”<sup>14</sup> The ideal of opportunity can link together the idea of free land with the concepts of mobility, optimism, and hope found in the West. In discussing the contemporary literature of the nineteenth century West, Simonson writes: “The spirit of the day was one of expansion: a fervent belief that all things were possible...Americans confidently looked ahead to a time when human problems would disappear.”<sup>15</sup> The West promised opportunity, and America citizens were eager to benefit as they continually moved ever westward into the frontier.

Of course, the West predominantly provided opportunity for white males. Diaries of female pioneers show that many were forced to move westward despite a desire to remain at home. Some stayed behind while their husbands sought riches in the gold rushes. Women could find some opportunities in the West, especially during the California Gold Rush of 1849 when many ran boarding houses. They often made more money than the men who fruitlessly mined for instant wealth. However, most of the opportunities for women were found in prostitution, and prostitutes often came from the poorest classes of women.<sup>16</sup> Along similar lines as the exploitation of women, the mining rushes necessitated the removal of indigenous peoples, who often lost their ancestral lands. Blacks found few opportunities in the West, and many ended up

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<sup>13</sup> Twain, Mark *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; Cather, Willa *My Antonia*; Steinbeck, John *The Grapes of Wrath*.

<sup>14</sup> Harold P. Simonson, *Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism, and a Sense of Place* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1989), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Simonson, *Beyond the Frontier*, 56.

<sup>16</sup> Hine and Faragher, *Frontiers*, 105.

as slaves in those territories where it was allowed, or in slave-like conditions in non-slave states. Even white males often found that the reality of the West did not live up to the promises. A difficult and expensive journey resulted in a disappointing destination. However, none of these factors affected the popular perception of the West as a land of opportunity. This vision of the West remained an integral part of American culture and an important ideal through which we can view the art of the period.

However, as more Americans pursued opportunity in the West, they began to swallow up the free land that was so integral to previously discussed democratic ideal. As frontiers were transformed from untamed areas of wilderness to Americanized settlements during the nineteenth century, expansion into new frontiers was necessary. Expansionists defended the process of American aggrandizement as necessary for protecting democracy. Historian Thomas Hietala writes that “the expansionists went so far as to contend that territorial expansion would actually promote democracy...a sprawling domain did not endanger liberty; it protected it.”<sup>17</sup> Inevitably, this leads us towards another ideal of the West: Manifest Destiny.

The term Manifest Destiny was first used by John O’Sullivan in 1845 when discussing the annexation of Texas. He wrote in the *Democratic Review* about “our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions,” referring to not only to natural population growth but also to the increased influx of European immigrants.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the United States had the complete and divine right to all contiguous land to the Pacific Ocean. While O’Sullivan at first desired the gradual accumulation of land, he eventually supported more aggressive empire-building during the

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism & Empire*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 173.

<sup>18</sup> “John O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. July 17, 1845: 5–10.

Mexican-American war.<sup>19</sup> Manifest Destiny was a way of legitimizing the imperial qualities of the United States expansion throughout the nineteenth century. Although the term “Manifest Destiny” was not coined until the mid 1840’s, this desire for land and expansion was a central tenet of the American experience from the very beginning of European settlement.

The romantic idea of the pioneer experience was an essential characteristic of American growth. In essence, the early frontier was expanded through a more organic process of pioneer land settlement. When pioneers settled on land in disputed territory, the government would then follow with treaties and troops. Manifest Destiny is a natural progression of this time-worn pattern, where the expansion was institutionalized and officially endorsed by the government. We see the beginnings of the Manifest Destiny philosophy in the rhetoric of men who would serve as President, many years prior to O’Sullivan’s use of the term. Thomas Jefferson echoed the sentiments of bestselling author and gentleman farmer Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur in 1787, theorizing that America would find its destiny in the West.<sup>20</sup> While Secretary of State in 1817, John Quincy Adams wrote, “Our proper dominion is the continent of North America...the United States and North America are identical.”<sup>21</sup> Andrew Jackson defended Indian removal in 1830: “What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms...occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion.”<sup>22</sup>

The justification for expansionism was inherent in the civilizing influence of the United States. In 1846, Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton latched onto the idea of Manifest

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<sup>19</sup> Hietala, *Manifest Design*, 173.

<sup>20</sup> Hine and Faragher, *Frontiers*, 43.

<sup>21</sup> John Quincy Adams, as quoted in Hine and Faragher, *Frontiers*, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Jackson, *State of the Union Address, 6 December 1830*, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29472>

Destiny as well: “The van of the Caucasian race now top the Rocky Mountains, and spread down to the shores of the Pacific. In a few years a great population will grow up there, luminous with the accumulated lights of European and American civilization.”<sup>23</sup> Benton dismissively mentioned the extinction of the “red men” who resisted expansion. In this vision of U.S. growth, no race could stand in the way. The ideal of Manifest Destiny could justify both Indian removal and the settlement of the Pacific Coast despite British and Russian claims. While the ethnocentric and potentially violent assumptions of Manifest Destiny may make the modern scholar of western history cringe, its impact on American perceptions of the West has not diminished. Manifest Destiny remains a window through which Americans see the West. Few Americans would argue for the return of western territory acquired through war and imperial expansion. Manifest Destiny was the justification for American expansion and through it the United States acquired much of the West. Without the ideal of Manifest Destiny, we cannot understand how Americans perceived the West in the nineteenth century and how artists depicted expansion.

As we have already seen, the ideals of the western frontier were often inconsistent with reality. However, some of the ideals are also contradictory to one another. Manifest Destiny called for Americans to spread across the entire continent, an impossible accomplishment without strong federal support. At the same time that the government worked on behalf of its pioneering citizens through various offices, later consolidated in the Department of the Interior, the West was celebrated for its spirit of individualism. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark are popularly remembered as heroic individualists, although they were part of a large, federally funded expedition to find an easy water route which would promote commerce and utilize the

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, “The Destiny of the Race,” in *The West in the History of the Nation Volume One: To 1877*, edited by William F. Deverell and Anne F. Hyde, 224-225. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000. [Original Source: *The Congressional Globe*, May 28, 1846].

lucrative fur-trapping areas of the Far West.<sup>24</sup> Revered and celebrated individualists could be little more than government bureaucrats, albeit on a fascinating assignment. Despite the innate contradictions, individualism was a celebrated characteristic of the Frontier West.

Some of the few true individualists were the early mountain men. The historian Ray Allen Billington, although prone to hyperbole, provides a rousing account of their lives: “These aristocrats of the wilderness spent their entire lives in the mountains, renewing contact with civilization only once each year... Calling no man master, and free to move where or when they wished, these Mountain Men contributed more than any other group to the exploration of the West.”<sup>25</sup> Although the heyday of fur trapping lasted for less than twenty years from the 1820s to the 1840s, the trappers’ exploits set the tone for individualism in the West. This individualistic role was eventually taken by the popular frontier politicians discussed previously, and by mid-century American philosophers such as Emerson and Thoreau embraced individualism as well. Literary figures such as Natty Bumppo, the protagonist of James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, or historical figures such as Daniel Boone and David Crockett captured the imagination of Americans throughout the nineteenth century. Turner identifies individualism as a key element in the western experience: “[Individualism] was at the very heart of the whole American movement. The world was to be made a better world by the example of a democracy in which there was freedom of the individual.”<sup>26</sup> As we see, the ideal of individualism is directly connected to the perception that democracy in the West was somehow more widespread and significant. The spirit of individualism continued to live on even as the western frontier became more and more settled. As deeply as individualism permeated the American psyche, there can be no doubt it impacted the art of the mid-nineteenth century.

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<sup>24</sup> Hine and Faragher, *Frontiers*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *The Far Western Frontier: 1830-1860* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 44.

<sup>26</sup> Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 306-307.

Individualism is closely tied with another American philosophical movement in the nineteenth century, romanticism. American romanticism, experienced first by Europeans and then adapted by American thinkers, emphasized the personal thoughts, emotions and experiences of human beings while simultaneously rejecting the cold logic of rationalism. American romanticism was intertwined with transcendentalism by the mid-nineteenth century. Thoreau and Emerson exemplified transcendentalism, whereby people could gain a greater appreciation for the universe and engage with the wilderness. Thus the connection between American romanticism and the idolization of nature is revealed. Of course, no region of the United States demonstrated the purity of nature better than the West. Mary Lawlor writes that “the dominant mode for representing the American West by Europeans and Euro-Americans since at least the middle of the eighteenth century had largely been, to put it simply, romantic. The frontier was typically construed as a border zone that harbored mystery and danger.”<sup>27</sup> The tension in the West was the balance of preserving pristine nature and at the same utilizing the bounties of nature for the progress of civilization. Western authors often faced an almost immediate nostalgia when encountering the wilderness. Lawlor writes, “In imagining the future he heralds, he can only experience the West present to him as something already fondly remembered.”<sup>28</sup> Catlin struggled with the same issues as he painted Indian culture, trying to record their “natural” culture before its inevitable disappearance. Bierstadt and Moran both captured the natural beauty of American landscapes, imagined or not, in areas that would later be preserved as national parks.

Of course, the idea of the West as untouched nature before the onset of Euro-American influence is erroneous. Geographer John Wright writes: “Two dominant myths about the

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild: Naturalism and the Closing of the American Frontier* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>28</sup> Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild*, 18.

Americas at the time of European contact—that the land was largely unoccupied and that the land was ecologically pristine—have proven to be stunningly false.”<sup>29</sup> Indians had already occupied and significantly changed the natural landscape by the arrival of the first Europeans in 1492, and by the nineteenth century the land had changed even more due to European and American settlement and the modifications in Indian culture made possible by the introduction of horses, guns, and alcohol. Simply put, the unspoiled nature of American romanticism was in fact significantly altered far before romanticism existed. Yet the ideal of nature remains steadfast, especially in the culture of the time period. The wilderness was feared and subdued by human activity, and the artists of the period could help preserve it in its original state, before being overtaken by the progress of civilization.

These five ideals, even with all of their inaccuracies and assumptions, characterize the American view of the West in the nineteenth century and remain strong even today. With these western ideals serving as a framework, it is possible to evaluate the lives, travels, and paintings of Catlin, Bierstadt, and Moran from 1832 to 1872. The artists’ use of these ideals in their paintings will help to unveil the purposes behind their art. How did they view the role of individualism? Did they celebrate democracy in their paintings? Did they promote or deny the ideal of Manifest Destiny? How did they depict nature, as something to be cherished or feared? In what ways did they portray the West as a land of opportunity? These are just some of the questions one can ask when viewing their art. While the focus of this thesis is on just three artists and only two selected works from each artist, it is hoped that these ideals provide a structure through which to view their other works and the works of other nineteenth century artists, writers, and thinkers of the American West.

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<sup>29</sup> John B. Wright, “Land Tenure: The Spatial Musculature of the American West,” in *Western Places, American Myths*, ed. Gary Hausladen (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2003), 86.

## Chapter Two: George Catlin and his 1832 Journey to Fort Union

Over the course of his lifetime, George Catlin dedicated the vast majority of his artistic efforts towards his Indian Gallery, a collection of paintings which depicted the culture and appearance of Indian tribes he visited during his extensive travels. This gallery is nothing less than a national treasure, invaluable as both art and as an historical repository for the vanished Indian cultures of the western United States. Although his gallery was neglected by Congress and his work underappreciated during his lifetime, Catlin now commands fame and stature beyond many of his contemporaries. It is not merely his artistic talent that brings him recognition, but also his unwavering dedication to the preservation of Indian heritage. Recollecting the beginning of his many journeys and efforts to record and paint the natives of the West, George Catlin wrote: “I started out in the year 1832, and penetrated the vast and pathless wilds which are familiarly denominated the great ‘Far West’ of the North American Continent.” He concluded that he spent “a life devoted to the production of a literal and graphic delineation of the living manners, customs, and character . . . of a truly loft and noble race.”<sup>1</sup> Catlin left his old life and pursuits behind in an effort to depict western Indian tribes, as yet unspoiled by the continual expansion of American civilization to the frontier. For these reasons, Catlin’s initial 1832 journey is a perfect subject to study within the framework of western ideals.

It was at Fort Union, built by the American Fur Trading Company at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone River just four years prior, that Catlin began his unprecedented undertaking in 1832.<sup>2</sup> Departing from St. Louis on the first steamboat to traverse the upper Missouri River, Catlin was transfixed by the “fairy-land” landscape. He wrote: “I was most of

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<sup>1</sup> George Catlin, *North American Indians: Being Letters and Notes on their Manners, Customs, and Conditions Written During Eight Years’ Travel Amongst the Wildest Tribes Of Indians In North America, 1832-1839*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1903), 1:3.

<sup>2</sup> Billington, *The Far Western Frontier*, 56.

the time riveted to the deck of the boat, indulging my eyes in the boundless and tireless pleasure of roaming over the thousand hills, and bluffs, and dales, and ravines.”<sup>3</sup> Catlin’s landscape, *Fort Union, Mouth of the Yellowstone River, 2000 Miles Above St. Louis*, will be the first painting evaluated using the western ideals framework (**Fig. 1**). This painting shows not only the lush landscape surrounding the fort, but also the intersection of pioneer and Indian. Following Catlin’s return to St. Louis in the autumn of 1832, at the end of his first journey, he took the opportunity to paint a portrait of the recently imprisoned Sac Chief Black Hawk, *Múk-A-Tah-Mish-O-Káh-Kaik, Black Hawk, Prominent Sac Chief* (**Fig. 2**). This will be the second painting evaluated using the western ideals framework. From these evaluations, we see how Catlin incorporated his own ideological views into his art and how his views reflected or denied commonly held beliefs of the time. Of course, Catlin was extremely productive during this initial journey, with an estimated 170 paintings completed during the entire five month trip, and many more of his paintings can be studied for a myriad of reasons.<sup>4</sup> Yet before we evaluate the above-mentioned paintings, it is necessary to overview Catlin’s life before he undertook his first journey west. This context explains Catlin’s purposes in journeying westward and dedicating his life to his Indian Gallery, and will help us to better understand how his artwork reflects western ideals.

A variety of factors may have played a role in Catlin’s decision to make his Indian Gallery a lifelong mission. Catlin does not hesitate in pointing towards a specific impetus. During Catlin’s time in Philadelphia, working as a moderately successful yet unhappy portraitist for several years, a delegation of Indians came to the city. Catlin described the delegation: “In silent and stoic dignity, these lords of the forest strutted about the city, wrapped in their pictured

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<sup>3</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1:21.

<sup>4</sup> Brian W. Dippie, *Catlin and his Contemporaries: The Politics of Patronage*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 27.

robes . . . attracting the gaze and admiration of all who beheld them.”<sup>5</sup> It was this seminal experience which sparked his desire to catalogue the appearance, culture, and customs of the untouched natives of the West. However, while there is no cause to believe that Catlin is being untruthful in his recollections, there were other reasons that provided Catlin the drive and the opportunity to paint his Indian Gallery. Catlin began his western travels not only to preserve disappearing Indian cultures, but also to pursue his love for an immaculate nature, to escape the drudgeries of the artist’s status and criticism from his peers, and to secure the potential for a great financial windfall from both the private and public sector. These three reasons correlate with the western ideals of nature, individualism, and opportunity.

George Catlin, born July 27, 1796 to Putnam and Polly Catlin, grew up in the relatively rural town of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. His father, a Revolutionary War veteran who practiced law, filled political offices, and farmed, was a demanding yet affectionate father who desired success for his sons.<sup>6</sup> The elder Catlin pushed George to enter into law, which he did in 1817 at the prestigious Tapping Reeve and James Gould law school in Connecticut. Putnam wrote to his son: “You are now placed more favorably for study & the improvement of your mind than you could be at any other place in the United States.”<sup>7</sup> However, Catlin was too much of a wandering spirit to embrace law as a profession, even after he entered into the bar. In his *Letters and Notes*, he remembered his childhood spent “with books reluctantly held in one hand, and a rifle or fishing-pole firmly and affectionately grasped in the other.”<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Catlin enjoyed nature from an early age.

His love for nature is clearly seen in the letters from his travels. On his 2,000-mile

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<sup>5</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1:2.

<sup>6</sup> Dippie, *Contemporaries*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Aug. 4, 1817: Putnam Catlin, Montrose, Pa., to son George, Litchfield, Conn. In Marjorie Catlin Roehm, *The Letters of George Catlin and His Family*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1:2.

journey up the Missouri River, where others saw the landscape as monotonous, Catlin saw his “fairy-land” of pristine nature. Catlin wrote: “What man in the world, I would ask, ever ascended to the pinnacle of one of Missouri’s green-carpeted bluffs, a thousand miles severed from his own familiar land . . . without feeling a sweet melancholy come over him?”<sup>9</sup> In Catlin’s mind, Indians were a part of this nature. This savage, wild race of people did not just live in an unspoiled, preserved nature; rather, they were an integral part of that nature. John Hausdoerffer writes that, to Catlin, “Indian bodies and wilderness represented an essential Nature . . . that is best known and preserved when separated from the dynamic environmental, cultural, political, historical, and economic conditions producing it.”<sup>10</sup> Catlin held this belief in a pristine nature despite the fact that fur trappers had been interacting with the Indians for many years, and that Indians had cultivated, hunted, and changed the landscape in their own manner.

Catlin saw a need for the government to preserve and protect the Indians in their natural state, for he saw “the inevitable bane that was rapidly advancing upon them; without that check from the protecting arm of government, and which alone could shield them from destruction.”<sup>11</sup> Clearly, Catlin had a strong preservationist nature within him that would lead towards his desire to create his Indian Gallery. Catlin even wrote in his letters about the possibility of a nation’s park in Yellowstone, complete with wild, untainted Indians: “What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world . . . I would ask no other monument to my memory, nor any other enrolment [*sic*] of my name amongst the famous dead, than the reputation of having been the founder of such an

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<sup>9</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1:67.

<sup>10</sup> John Hausdoerffer, *Catlin’s Lament: Indians, Manifest Destiny, and the Ethics of Nature* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1:69.

institution.”<sup>12</sup> Although this dream of Catlin’s seemed to fade as his fame declined with age, during the twilight of his life Yellowstone was set apart as the first national park in March of 1872. If Catlin desired that nature be preserved, and if Indians were an essential component of that nature, the certain advance of civilization made it necessary for him to preserve the Indians and their habitat through his paintings. Therefore, we see that Catlin’s love of nature, one of the key western ideals, had a large impact on his desire to preserve the Indians and their wilderness through his gallery.

In light of his lifelong penchant and love for nature, the tedious and pedantic practice of law could not possibly hold Catlin’s attention as a young man. He traded in his law books for the brush and palette and moved to Philadelphia in 1821. Historian Neil Harris describes the struggles of American artists to “free themselves from the psychological and social shackles of a mere craft” to become members of an “ancient profession.”<sup>13</sup> In American cities the market for portraits was growing due to an expanding middle class. Hausdoerffer calls this change in society “an aristocracy of virtue” where “status had to be earned . . . based on talents and work ethic” and not based upon blood or wealth.<sup>14</sup> Yet portraiture quickly became a burden to many artists. They desired to paint epic history paintings in the vein of John Trumbull and Benjamin West. However, as Neil Harris brilliantly explains, most American artists were often reduced to an itinerant and servile lifestyle in the egalitarian society of the United States, far different than the lofty status that artists could achieve in the hierarchal society of Europe.<sup>15</sup> Thus American artists were often resigned to painting portraits or miniatures while hoping for a rare commission.

Catlin felt these pressures while working in Philadelphia as a miniaturist, but quickly

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<sup>12</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 1:296.

<sup>13</sup> Neil Harris, *The Artist in American Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 58.

<sup>14</sup> Hausdoerffer, *Catlin’s Lament*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Harris, *Artist in American Society*, 80-81.

earned a reputation and gained admission into the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1824. Having made a name for himself, he moved to New York in 1827. He found some fiscal successes and saw his reputation grow, but also faced harsh criticism from his peers. Fellow artist William Dunlap described Catlin as “utterly incompetent,” and when Catlin later moved to Indian subjects, Dunlap scoffed, “He has no competitor among the Black Hawks and the White Eagles, and nothing to ruffle his mind in the shape of criticism.”<sup>16</sup> Catlin would eventually submit his resignation to the National Academy of Design in 1828 over a dispute concerning the display of his works. Clearly, Catlin did not find the level of acceptance, recognition or success in the traditional art scene that he desired. A letter from his father notes his son’s struggles: “I am anxious as ever to hear of your fame and success as an artist.” His father instructed George to “continue to make every possible exertion—persevere and do not get discouraged.”<sup>17</sup> In this letter, Putnam Catlin does not mention his son’s impending journey to St. Louis in the spring of 1830 in pursuit of his dream to paint the Indians.

This journey to St. Louis and his subsequent voyage up the Missouri River would not have been possible without social connections made during Catlin’s time as a miniaturist and portraitist in the 1820’s. His portrait of New York governor DeWitt Clinton in 1828 “plugged Catlin into a network of military, political, and industrial leaders.”<sup>18</sup> He painted portraits of several army officers and completed *West Point Parade* in 1828, a landscape painting which shows no sign of his desire to capture Indians or nature in its untamed state.<sup>19</sup> His work in West Point would later bring him the opportunity to complete a portrait of the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, General William Clark, upon his arrival in St. Louis in 1830. General Clark was

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<sup>16</sup> William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin’s Indian Gallery* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 14.

<sup>17</sup> February 15, 1830: Putnam Catlin, Montrose, Pa., to son George, Richmond, Va. In Roehm, *Letters*, 46.

<sup>18</sup> Hausdoerffer, *Catlin’s Lament*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Hausdoerffer, *Catlin’s Lament*, 57-58.

the key to fulfilling Catlin's dream of painting the Indians, providing him with the opportunity to join the military-economic expedition to Fort Union in 1832.

These episodes leading to Catlin's 1832 journey westward illustrate two key western ideals. First, Catlin's efforts to find success in the West represent the ideal of individualism. Although financially successful, Catlin resented the criticism of his fellow artists. Despite his father's wishes, he could not settle down in one area and content himself with portraiture, and even when he received a commission for a history painting, *The Virginia Constitutional Convention*, he was extremely unhappy with his mediocre effort.<sup>20</sup> The prospect of painting Indians -- the idea planted by the Indian delegation he had seen in Philadelphia and made possible through his connections -- opened the door to the individualistic West. He would be painting the Indians in their indigenous environment, something no other artist could claim. Catlin wrote: "My enthusiastic admiration of man in the honest and elegant simplicity of nature . . . together with the desire to study my art, independently of the embarrassments which the ridiculous fashions of civilized society have thrown in its way, has led me to the wilderness for a while, as the true school of arts."<sup>21</sup> Although in the company of a large expedition, Catlin saw himself as an individualist breaking away from the warnings of family and friends and the restrictions of eastern society, "myself my only adviser and protector."<sup>22</sup>

The other ideal that Catlin's journey westward represents is opportunity, specifically an opportunity for financial success. George Catlin was nothing if not an entrepreneur, and one who was capable of persuading those with power. Brian Dippie describes Catlin's "modus operandi" thus: "At home, rich men and congressmen, senators and cabinet officers were alike

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<sup>20</sup> Dippie, *Contemporaries*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 3.

handmaidens to his ambition...He would try anything to make a dollar from his art.”<sup>23</sup> However, he did not want to merely paint commissioned portraits and become a lackey to the rich. His rejection of this quick and easy, yet ultimately unsatisfying, route to wealth demonstrated that he was independent and that wealth was not his sole motivator.

Catlin makes impassioned pleas on behalf of the Indians throughout his *Letters and Notes*, and there is no reason to doubt his altruistic motives. However, the potential financial benefits were clear. The Philadelphia *Evening Post* commented that “Mr. Catlin has struck a new path to fame and fortune, and while he leaves a memorial to the true Indian uncorrupted native character, he makes a lasting name for himself.”<sup>24</sup> Catlin sought support for his endeavors as early as February 1829, when he wrote to the outgoing Secretary of War, Peter B. Porter. “I could select and study from the finest models in Nature, unmasked, and moving in all their grace and beauty,” having enough subjects “to open such a Gallery, first in this Country & then in London, as would in all probability handsomely repay me for all my labours.”<sup>25</sup> After his travels in the American West were completed, Catlin would spend the majority of his life exhibiting his Indian Gallery and petitioning Congress to purchase his Indian Gallery.

Catlin understood from the outset the potential for the government purchase of his Indian Gallery. Indian affairs were necessarily a federal responsibility according to the Constitution. The Indian Civilization Act of 1819 increased the federal government’s control over Indian affairs even more by making them potential “wards of the nation.” Brian Dippie explains: “Studying and painting Indians might not be strictly within the scope of the government’s constitutional jurisdiction, but both served functions that were: informed policymaking and

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<sup>23</sup> Dippie, *Contemporaries*, 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Philadelphia Evening Post*, reprinted in George Catlin, *Catlin’s Notes of Eight Years’ Travels and Residence in Europe with His North American Indian Collection*, 2 vols. (London: 1848) 1:225.

<sup>25</sup> George Catlin, quoted in Dippie, *Contemporaries*, 15-16.

effective administration.”<sup>26</sup> Charles Bird King’s work in the 1820’s had proved that Indian paintings could be a profitable enterprise. Commissioned initially by the Department of War and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, King illustrated the conventional image of the noble savage.<sup>27</sup> However, Catlin’s planned Indian gallery held a trump card over King’s earlier work, for Catlin would be painting the Indians in their natural and pristine state.

In the end, although Catlin would remain prosperous due to his business prowess, he would never be able to convince Congress to purchase his Indian Gallery. Several years following Catlin’s return from his journeys west, his father wrote to his brother Francis: “I fear he finds his Gallery to be a continual and tremendous weight on his shoulders. He has had at Washington as much applause as he could expect or wish, but I fear his expenses are enormous, and possibly beyond his receipts, or nearly so. I suspect his friends have detained him in Washington with the expectation the Government would make a purchase of his work.”<sup>28</sup> Putnam voices concerns that if George Catlin should take his gallery to Europe, he may never see his son again. George Catlin did end up taking his Indian Gallery to Europe, although he never sold it to a foreign country as he threatened. His final wish was that the United States government would purchase his Indian Gallery; on his deathbed he asked, “What will become of my gallery?”<sup>29</sup> The original Indian Gallery was donated to the Smithsonian in 1879. The second collection, which Catlin had been trying to sell, was sold in 1912 to the American Museum of Natural History and it now resides in the National Gallery of Art.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, the evidence makes it clear that Catlin had multiple motives for his 1832

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<sup>26</sup> Dippie, *Contemporaries*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Julie Schimmel, “Inventing the Indian” in *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier*, ed. William H. Truettner (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 152.

<sup>28</sup> July 12, 1838: Putnam Catlin, Great Bend, Pa., to son Francis, Navy Yard, Pensacola, Fla. In Roehm, *Letters*, 133.

<sup>29</sup> Dippie, *Contemporaries*, 427.

<sup>30</sup> Dippie, *Contemporaries*, 427,434.

journey to the West. Foremost was his desire to paint the Indians in their natural state and preserve their culture through his art. However, his love of the outdoors, his desire for individual fame, and the potential for great financial success all played a role as well. Catlin demonstrates three western ideals in his motives: nature, individualism, and opportunity. With these motives and ideals in mind, the artwork from his first travels up the Missouri River takes on new meaning. Which of these ideals are seen in his *Fort Union* and in *Black Hawk*? Do these paintings also demonstrate the more political western ideals of Manifest Destiny and democracy?

Catlin arrived at Fort Union on June 16, 1832, upon the *Yellow Stone* steamer. It was the first steamboat that had ever traveled this far on the Missouri River, and its arrival at the fort was met with “roar of cannon for half an hour, and the shrill yells of the half-affright savages, presenting a scene of the most thrilling and picturesque appearance.”<sup>31</sup> It is interesting that in his painting *Fort Union*, completed in 1832 on his journey, Catlin does not bother to document this historic arrival. The appearance of the steamer on these waters symbolically marked the arrival of civilization and technology to the surrounding Indians tribes: Assiniboins, Mandan, Crows, Blackfeet, and more. So too does Catlin’s painting depict, in the terms of Catlin’s day, the meeting of “civilization” and “savage”—the very definition of the frontier, according to Turner. Below an unspectacular sky, the fort lay next to the Missouri River on “a beautiful prairie.” The fort served as a “rendezvous” for local Indians; at times entire tribes would arrive in order to trade and barter for goods.<sup>32</sup> The Indian encampments surrounded Fort Union, dotting the prairie with shelters that seemingly melted into the countryside. Fort Union also served as the central hub of the American Fur Company in this area of the Northwest, where traders would come to restock on tradable goods and replenish their outposts. Thus it served as the meeting point for

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<sup>31</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 24.

two different cultures and a meeting point between those two cultures. How these relationships are depicted in *Fort Union* can inform us about the extent of Catlin's adherence to and creation of western ideals.

The Indian presence is strong, with nearly one hundred Indian shelters present in the painting. However, Fort Union physically dominates the surrounding Indian shelters. Built to withstand attack and provide protection to the traders inside, the Fort was "300 foot square" with "bastions marked with ordnance."<sup>33</sup> A flag rises above the fort, as if simultaneously claiming the surrounding land for the American Fur Company and symbolizing the inevitable civilizing process of the United States. The Indians had been participating in the fur trade for many years, and Fort Union was proof of this relationship. Catlin's notion that he was somehow painting Indians as yet untouched by civilizing forces was erroneous. Catlin's very presence among the Indians served as a reminder that the westward movement of American society was a foregone conclusion to many American citizens. Catlin illustrated the Indians in their supposedly natural state, stretching across the idyllic landscape, but the viewer's eye is naturally drawn to the figures in the foreground and Fort Union lying just above them. Although Catlin wants to preserve the Indians as indigenous subjects and promote the ideal of the West as unspoiled nature, his painting betrays the fact that the civilizing process was continually working to undermine this ideal. This results in a conflict between the ideals of nature and of Manifest Destiny within the painting.

The Indian shelters in the painting represented the "essential nature" that Catlin wanted to preserve. The presence of Fort Union at the center of Indian activity represented the Manifest Destiny of American progress that many U.S. citizens hoped would be inevitable. Catlin would later write in his letters that the Indians were doomed to perish because of the influence from

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<sup>33</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 15.

American pioneers and traders, which would “sooner or later, lead to the most melancholy result of their final extinction.”<sup>34</sup> The ideals of nature and Manifest Destiny are in direct conflict, and Catlin worked in his gallery to preserve some form of Indian nature in his art because he expected Manifest Destiny, although not yet referred to by that term, to prevail.

Beyond the relationship of the Indian shelters and Fort Union, the other major instance of the civilization-savagery theme takes place in the foreground of the painting. Here, on top of the rolling hills which frame the bucolic panorama, an Indian and a man who presumably is a fur trader are in the midst of a discussion. While the fur trader appears to carry a weapon, it is leaning against his shoulder in a non-threatening position. A younger Indian stands next to the older one, and across the hills another group of figures are apparently listening to a standing figure. The main interaction between the Indian and the fur trader could possibly demonstrate the western ideal of democracy. The two figures are on an equal level in the composition; neither one dominates the other. There is no indication of the topic of their conversation, but here Catlin shows that the Indian and a civilized man are capable of talking in an egalitarian manner. Catlin wrote that “the Indians mind is a beautiful blank” and that with the right form of education and the absence of the “vice and iniquities” to which they were introduced, they could have prospered because they are “well worthy of the sincere and well-applied friendship of the enlightened world.”<sup>35</sup> Although Catlin’s writing clearly places the developed, American culture above that of the Indian’s, he grants them equality in mental capacity, something to which few of his contemporaries would acquiesce. Thus Catlin shows through this painting and through his writing that the ideal of democracy and could be fostered in the relations between western Indians and Americans.

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<sup>34</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2: 269.

<sup>35</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 277.

The final two ideals, individualism and opportunity, appeared in Catlin's previously discussed reasons for traveling west, but they are not clearly represented in this painting. Every figure in this painting is depicted in conversation or community, from the actors in the foreground to the Indians milling about the encampment. While the nature of fur traders was often individualistic in the vein of the mountain men, in this painting the fort is the centerpiece and a symbol of the trader's community. Catlin foregoes the ideal of individualism in order to stress the community present near Fort Union, both for the Indian and the American.

While the ideal of individualism is clearly rejected for this work, the ideal of opportunity, in contrast, could possibly be an underlying theme. Catlin shows us the gorgeous landscape that surrounds Fort Union, and the fort itself represents the possibility of trade. However, Catlin's disinclination to show the steamboat *Yellow Stone* or any other noticeable and imminent signs of technological progress or economic opportunity show that opportunity was not an important ideal in this painting. Catlin did not want the viewer of the painting to see the possibility for civilization and expansion, but rather to appreciate the natural beauty and democracy of the scene before the onrush of Manifest Destiny eliminated this pleasant landscape.

However, Catlin's landscapes were not his most celebrated works. He gained much more fame through his Indian portraits and the scenes of their everyday lives. His original mission was to find and paint the cultures of a dying race; to capture the "uncorrupted Indian" who, due to the certainty of their doom, became a "phantom" to Catlin.<sup>36</sup> Having been enormously productive and seeing that his new pursuit to capture these phantoms provided satisfaction, Catlin wound back down the Missouri River, arriving in St. Louis by September. While his extensive work among the tribes in the northwest deserves recognition, this thesis now focuses

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<sup>36</sup> Brian W. Dippie, "Green Fields and Red Men" in *George Catlin and his Indian Gallery*, ed. George Gurney and Therese Thau Heyman (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 40.

upon *Black Hawk* and how this portrait of the imprisoned war chief reflects western ideals.

When Catlin had the chance to paint the famous war chief at the Jefferson barracks just below St. Louis, he could not resist the opportunity. Black Hawk had just recently led the Sac and Fox tribes in a failed attempt to fight back and take control of their tribal lands in Illinois. Although he had attempted to make treaties with the United States in order to heal the rift between himself and another leader, Keokuk, the rights of the Sac and Fox to their tribal lands were continually marginalized by the U.S. government. Removed from his land due to an 1830 treaty, Black Hawk was determined to take back his tribes' land. He wrote in his autobiography: "For this spot I felt a sacred reverence, and never could consent to leave it, without being force there from."<sup>37</sup> After repeated affronts by white settlers, Black Hawk led his followers into battle. The ill-fated Black Hawk war ended with the tribe losing all but 256,000 acres of their original six million acres, hundreds of Indians killed, and Black Hawk imprisoned.<sup>38</sup> During his imprisonment with eight other Indian leaders, Black Hawk had become a popular attraction, gaining the attention of the press. Thus, through painting *Black Hawk*, Catlin fulfilled two western ideals: He saw the opportunity to gain financially through the portrait of a famous figure, but he could also depict a great Indian leader and make a plea for the preservation of Indians in their "natural" state. The painting itself represents multiple western ideals. The ideals of nature and individualism are purposely represented by Catlin, while the ideal of Manifest Destiny is unknowingly affirmed. The ideals of democracy and opportunity are not present this particular painting.

In this work, Catlin depicted Black Hawk in his traditional Indian garb. This was a

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<sup>37</sup> Black Hawk, "Life of Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak or Black Hawk, Dictated by Himself," in *The West in the History of the Nation Volume One: To 1877*, edited by William F. Deverell and Anne F. Hyde, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 193.

<sup>38</sup> Dippie, *Contemporaries*, 45.

conscious decision on the part of an artist who constantly emphasized the need to preserve nature. Clad in “a plain suit of buckskin,” Black Hawk is adorned “with strings of wampum in his ears and on his neck.”<sup>39</sup> According to Hausdoerffer, in Catlin’s mind Indians “were driven naturally rather than culturally.”<sup>40</sup> So by representing Black Hawk in his Indian attire, Catlin is affirming the status of the Indian as a part of nature to be preserved. In his eyes, Indian culture is synonymous with the pristine nature where they supposedly dwelled. Black Hawk also clutches a medicine bag made from the skin of a hawk in his hand, further emphasizing the theme of nature in the painting.

In addition to the ideal of nature, the painting also confirms the ideal of individualism. Black Hawk is stoic and introspective. His lips are pursed and his gaze is steady, defiant even after defeat and imprisonment. There is no indication of kinship, community, or of his fellow tribesmen—Black Hawk is left to speak on his own. The background is empty, without any hint of the homeland for which he was imprisoned. Hausdoerffer writes that Catlin “had intentions to humanize Black Hawk and to sympathize with his personal loss.”<sup>41</sup> This portrait of Black Hawk shows him as an individualistic hero, who stood alone to protest the unfair practices of the United States government.

Catlin knowingly incorporated these references to nature and individualism in this portrait. However, he also reaffirms the ideal of Manifest Destiny by removing Black Hawk from the context of his ongoing struggle to reclaim his lands. The background shows neither the land for which Black Hawk fought nor the prison cell in which he resided. Catlin provides the viewer with no indication of when or where this painting was completed. By placing Black Hawk in a timeless and ultimately meaningless gray haze, Catlin has already closed the door on

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<sup>39</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2:239.

<sup>40</sup> Hausdoerffer, *Catlin’s Lament*, 83.

<sup>41</sup> Hausdoerffer, *Catlin’s Lament*, 118.

the possibility of the ultimate success of Black Hawk's mission. Catlin acts as a preservationist, painting Black Hawk in his regalia before he and the rest of his tribe are lost to the ravages of the oncoming American civilization. Hausdoerffer explains that this painting initiates the vanishing of the Indian race. "This example supports the shared assumption of Catlin's America: the key role of actual Indians in society is one of disappearance."<sup>42</sup> Catlin does not seek to challenge this assumption in his painting. By reaffirming the inevitability of the Indian vanishing, he is in effect contributing to the collective belief that Indian culture would eventually disappear. Catlin wrote repeatedly about the inevitability of Indian disappearance—both his paintings and his writing affirmed the ideal of Manifest Destiny. Although he was saddened by this dismal future, Catlin did not use his paintings as a protest but rather as a way to ensure that Indian culture would not be lost to the historical memory.

In both of the paintings that have been studied, it is clear that George Catlin was a conflicted artist. Passionate about Indians and a staunch defender of their society, he sought to preserve their culture for future generations. He considered the Indians an essential part of nature. However, he also shared in the assumption that their culture would eventually disappear. George Catlin does not affirm the grandness of Manifest Destiny in the vein of Thomas Hart Benton, but rather sees white civilization as a disease which has spread over the Rocky Mountains, to the Pacific coast, and back again. He concludes his *Letters and Notes* with an explanation of how fur traders, alcohol, and disease have brought Indians into a disreputable state and unless this system is changed "there is little hope of improvement, nor any chance for a more than temporary existence."<sup>43</sup> Catlin's Indian Gallery seeks to preserve Indian culture, and by attempting to preserve this culture it also sends an irrefutable message that the Indian culture

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<sup>42</sup> Hausdoerffer, *Catlin's Lament*, 118.

<sup>43</sup> Catlin, *North American Indians*, 2:289.

is doomed to vanish.

In fact, George Catlin was only able to complete his Indian Gallery by utilizing the very system that he condemned for destroying the Indian way of life. His first journey was taken at the expense of the American Fur Company and the United States military. His depictions of the Indians as a vanishing culture supported the notion that American advancement would eventually cause the traditional Indian culture to disappear. By attempting to preserve the Indians for future generations, he was in a way justifying their ultimate demise. However, we cannot hold Catlin too accountable—he was merely one artist in a society which was moving on the path of believed progress toward their assumed destiny in the West. Richard West writes: “No artist could so passionately pour himself into his work the way Catlin did without having sincere respect and affection for the subjects of his work.”<sup>44</sup> Catlin truly did lament the ultimate fate of the Indian, and he made it his mission to ensure that their history would not be forgotten.

How then are we to regard Catlin in the context of the western ideals? In his own life and in his artwork, he represented each of the five ideals. The major theme we see in his paintings is the conflict between nature and Manifest Destiny. To Catlin, the Indian was an essential part of nature. This nature was incompatible with the advancement of American civilization across the continent, which was assumed by Catlin and the Americans of the day to be inevitable. This dichotomy is represented in both *Fort Union* and *Black Hawk*, and many of his other paintings. It is also seen in the work of Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. Although they focused more upon picturesque landscapes of the West, both artists celebrated the glory of nature. Through the celebration of this beautiful nature, they too would lay the groundwork for Manifest Destiny and development to take hold in the American West.

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<sup>44</sup> W. Richard West, “Introduction,” in *George Catlin and his Indian Gallery*, ed. George Gurney and Therese Thau Heyman (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 40.

### **Chapter Three: Albert Bierstadt and his 1863 Journey to Yosemite**

Born in 1830, just as George Catlin was arriving in St. Louis in preparation for his journey to the West, Albert Bierstadt's experiences with the West were far different than Catlin's. Catlin dedicated himself almost wholly to the painting and preservation of Indians. Bierstadt made his first westward journey in 1859, and his paintings reflected a western landscape that was mostly devoid of authentic Indian culture. In 1834 Congress designated "all that part of the United States West of the Mississippi, and not within the states of Missouri and Louisiana, or the territory of Arkansas" shall "be taken and deemed to be the Indian Country."<sup>1</sup> Despite the creation of a permanent Indian frontier, U.S. citizens moved steadily westward during the U.S.-Mexico War, the gold rushes in California and Colorado, and the opening of the Oregon Trail. Dee Brown, although writing in a polemic style and claiming to represent an imaginary monolithic Indian viewpoint, describes how the 1834 act was disregarded by settlers and politicians alike: "only a quarter of a century after the enactment of Andrew Jackson's Indian Trade and Intercourse Act, white settlers had driven in both the north and south flanks of the 95<sup>th</sup> meridian line, and advance elements of white miners and traders and penetrated the center."<sup>2</sup> From 1836 to 1859, the states of Arkansas, Michigan, Florida, Texas, Iowa, Wisconsin, California, Minnesota, and Oregon had been added to the Union, along with Kansas and Nebraska as territories. Expansionists now publicly articulated the ideal of Manifest Destiny as white pioneers swept over the vast plains and the Rocky Mountains, pursuing opportunity in the West at the expense of the Indian tribes.

In light of these developments, the West into which Albert Bierstadt traveled during his

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Congress, "An Act to regulate trade and intercourse with the Indian tribes, and to preserve peace on the frontiers," June 30, 1834. *United States Statutes at Large*. 23<sup>rd</sup> Congress, Session I, Ch. 161, 729.

<sup>2</sup> Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1970), 8.

journeys in 1859 and 1863 was fundamentally different than Catlin's West. If Catlin's essential problem was the difficulty of preserving Indian culture while being a part of the society that would eventually destroy it, then Bierstadt's difficulty was painting the majestic and natural West while United States citizens populated and developed the frontier. Both artists depicted a slowly disappearing subject, and both artists were an inescapable part of the process that led to the vanishing. Because Catlin considered Indian culture an essential part of nature, both artists were upholding the ideal of nature, although in different forms: Catlin through his portrayal of Indian culture and Bierstadt through his grandiose landscape paintings.

Unlike Catlin's ultimate certainty that the Indians were doomed, Bierstadt seemingly painted the American West with the possibility that nature could still be preserved. Bierstadt's 1864 painting *Valley of the Yosemite* celebrates the Yosemite Valley with which the artist was fascinated (**Fig. 3**). The artist depicted Yosemite in at least 34 separate paintings.<sup>3</sup> Yosemite was by no means Bierstadt's discovery, and it is hard to say that it embodied the frontier. The Yosemite Valley had already been explored by other travelers, and California had been a state since 1850. However, Bierstadt's painting popularized the awe-inspiring beauty of the Yosemite Valley and helped lay the foundation of its preservation. According to environmental historian Alfred Runte, the 1864 Yosemite Act protected the valley on the basis of its monumental scale: It was a testament to American credibility and protecting it was "a patriotic duty that was already long overdue."<sup>4</sup> In 1890, more than 1,500 square miles of the Yosemite Valley watershed were set aside as reserved forestland, laying the groundwork for what would eventually become Yosemite National Park.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to the exhaustive gallery found in Gordon Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974), 323-352.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Runte, *National Parks*, 62.

However, Bierstadt's desire to preserve nature through his artwork is not as clearly and consistently articulated as Catlin's desire to preserve the Indian. Bierstadt's 1867 *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, inspired by an encounter with a German wagon train during his 1863 expedition, sends a much different message (**Fig. 4**). Although the painting glamorizes nature like almost all of Bierstadt's works, it also explicitly represents the ideals of opportunity and Manifest Destiny. These two paintings inform the viewer about how Bierstadt dealt with the struggle between the preservation of nature and the development of the American West. Before analyzing these paintings and discussing their conflicting messages about western ideals, it is vital to provide context for Bierstadt's paintings by studying the circumstances that led him to be the foremost landscape painter of the American West. By studying his life and the reasons for his journeys to the West, we also see how Bierstadt's life and artwork reflect the western ideals of nature, Manifest Destiny, and opportunity.

Henry Bierstadt and his family arrived in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in February of 1832, after having left Germany because of the "warlike atmosphere."<sup>6</sup> In tow was his family, including his son, the young Albert. In 1853, the young and enterprising artist returned to Germany in order to study at Düsseldorf under Worthington Whittredge and Emmanuel Leutze. The latter captured the progress of the American civilization to the West in his bombastic and dramatic 1861 ode to expansion, *The Westward Course of Empire Takes its Way*. The Düsseldorf School of painting was highly respected, and Bierstadt was attracted to landscape painting during his four-year stay. According to Matthew Baigell, "by the time Bierstadt arrived, an ample landscape tradition was available to him . . . Düsseldorf landscape paintings usually contained elements that can also be found in Bierstadt's later works."<sup>7</sup> These elements included

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<sup>6</sup> Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1981), 9.

contrasts between light and dark, sunlight hidden behind clouds, dramatic skies, trees, and geological features that portrayed an “anxious mood.”<sup>8</sup> Bierstadt was a hard worker in Düsseldorf, every summer leaving the town for months in order to sketch the Westphalia countryside, which he used as the basis for formal compositions completed during the winter.<sup>9</sup> He also traveled around Germany, Switzerland, and Italy before returning to New Bedford in 1857, well-trained and experienced as a landscape artist in the European tradition. Bierstadt’s time in Düsseldorf demonstrates his passion for nature and his diligent work effort, as well as his lifelong dedication to landscape painting. However, later on in his career he was often criticized for sticking to the landscape forms of the Düsseldorf School.

Bierstadt returned to New Bedford as something of a hero. Surely, this small New England town was not used to having a professionally trained artist. Bierstadt himself organized the first art exhibit in the town’s history.<sup>10</sup> The townspeople became Bierstadt’s first customers and supported him financially. However, Bierstadt was destined for greater things. In 1859, he took the opportunity to travel west for the first time on a surveying expedition with Colonel F. W. Lander. Although his expedition to California, the source of his most famous paintings, would not come until 1863, this first journey into the West demonstrates how western ideals played a key role in Bierstadt’s life. Writing in a letter to *The Crayon*, an early art magazine, Bierstadt explained some of his reasons for traveling to the West. This record is particularly valuable because Bierstadt, unlike Catlin, was not prone to long expositions of his personal philosophies. The letter also illustrates Bierstadt’s acceptance of both nature and Manifest Destiny as important western ideals.

Bierstadt began his letter by describing the dramatic scenery of the Rocky Mountains and

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<sup>8</sup> Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon Hendricks, *A. Bierstadt* (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 1972), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Hendricks, *Painter of the American West*, 52.

explaining his purpose in writing the letter: “If you can form any idea of the scenery of the Rocky Mountains . . . from what I have to write, I shall be very glad; there is indeed enough to write about—a *writing* lover of nature and Art could not wish for a better subject.”<sup>11</sup> Bierstadt appreciated the beautiful scenery and wanted the readers of the magazine to understand that beautiful nature as well. In the mountains of the American West, Bierstadt had found a proper subject for his enormous canvas. Bierstadt compared the western scenery with the European landscape: “The color of the mountains and of the plains, and, indeed, that of the entire country, reminds one of the color of Italy; in fact, we have here the Italy of America in a primitive condition.”<sup>12</sup> Bierstadt mentioned the primal nature of the landscape. In Bierstadt’s eyes, the American West was not yet developed and altered by man, thus making its landscape superior to the European landscape. If beautiful, untouched nature was an essential part of the western experience, it was even more important due to the fact that it demonstrated American superiority.

Linda Ferber argues that Bierstadt painted natural landscapes as national icons, in the same way that man-made monuments became a source of cultural nationalism.<sup>13</sup> Diane Fischer builds upon this argument, explaining that Bierstadt’s use of the landscape as a national icon led towards his famous exaggerations of the western landscape: “Bierstadt embellished nature to convince both enthusiastic Easterners and skeptical Europeans that North America had unparalleled natural wonders.”<sup>14</sup> While Bierstadt undeniably enjoyed nature and its beauties, he was not afraid to alter its appearance in his works in order to support the idea of Manifest Destiny and American Exceptionalism. According to Matthew Baigell, “Bierstadt showed the

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<sup>11</sup> Albert Bierstadt, letter to *The Crayon*, September 1859, 287.

<sup>12</sup> *The Crayon*, September 1859, 287.

<sup>13</sup> Linda S. Ferber, “The Return of History: America Rediscovered Albert Bierstadt,” in *Primal Visions: Albert Bierstadt “Discovers” America 1859-1893*, ed. Diane P. Fischer (Montclair: Montclair Art Museum, 2001), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Diane P. Fischer, “Shifting Perspectives, Changing Times,” in *Primal Visions: Albert Bierstadt “Discovers” America 1859-1893*, ed. Diane P. Fischer (Montclair: Montclair Art Museum, 2001), 15.

landscape's overwhelming strength, beauty, and grandeur, as a metaphor for America's special and expansive place in the world."<sup>15</sup> Catlin seemed to struggle with the idea that America's pristine nature would soon be overrun with pioneers, knowingly or unknowingly espousing the tenets of Manifest Destiny. Bierstadt appeared to accept this dichotomy without difficulty, and thus supported both of these seemingly incompatible western ideals—pristine nature and inevitable expansion—in his writing and in his artwork. In addition to his goals of depicting nature and showing American superiority, Bierstadt's early life also demonstrates the western ideal of opportunity in three ways: His pursuit of social connections, his non-threatening yet majestic painting style, and his businesslike approach to exhibiting and selling his art.

Following his first western expedition, Bierstadt achieved financial and critical success. Historian Gordon Hendricks writes, "The decade following 1860 was the era of his greatest success, both artistically and financially, and coincided with what most historians consider the near-extinction of the Hudson River School."<sup>16</sup> Bierstadt continued the tradition of the Hudson River School by painting the American landscape, but he took its conventions to the western frontier. Bierstadt moved to New York City in 1859, setting up a studio in the Tenth Street Studio Building where numerous other American artists worked, including Bierstadt's rival for the title of America's foremost landscape painter, Frederick E. Church, and his former mentor, Worthington Whittredge.<sup>17</sup> Bierstadt thoroughly enjoyed the New York City social scene, and quickly gained fame, fortune, and connections within high society. Hendricks quotes one New York socialite who claimed that Bierstadt was "probably the most talked-of artist in New York."<sup>18</sup> Although he struggled to sell some of his paintings during the early years of the Civil

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<sup>15</sup> Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt*, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Hendricks, *A. Bierstadt*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Hendricks, *Painter of the American West*, 93.

<sup>18</sup> Hendricks, *Painter of the American West*, 100.

War, after a few years of trying to market his work Bierstadt eventually found the opportunity to travel on a second expedition West in 1863. Bierstadt managed to obtain free rail fare for the trip from Pennsylvania to St. Joseph, Missouri, where he and his companions planned to travel the Overland Trail. Hendricks writes: “These contacts must have been made by Bierstadt: throughout his life he showed a remarkable sensitivity to the importance of knowing the ‘right people.’”<sup>19</sup> Once again, Bierstadt resembles Catlin in his ability to make social connections to finance his trips. It was on this second expedition that Bierstadt discovered Yosemite and found inspiration for his most famous and profitable paintings.

In addition to social connections demonstrating Bierstadt’s pursuit of opportunity, Bierstadt’s painting style also reflects this ideal. Bierstadt was very aware that his ability to survive as an artist depended on the public’s reaction to his paintings. Matthew Baigell writes: “In his wilderness views he focused on the sheer visual beauty of the western mountains . . . avoiding those scenes of the desert or the plains that might convey discomfort. No matter how stupendous the view, he never communicated fear or isolation in nature.”<sup>20</sup> Bierstadt both tamed nature to make it more inviting and pleasing to his audience and exaggerated certain physical features to demonstrate the magnificence of the American landscape. In both aspects he demonstrated a keen sense for what the public desired to see in his western landscapes.

Bierstadt also conducted the display and sale of his art as a profitable enterprise. Linda Ferber explains how Bierstadt exhibited his “Great Paintings” separate from the National Academy of Design in New York. “These exhibitions—like moving panoramas—frequently traveled to other cities after opening in New York, establishing national (and international)

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<sup>19</sup> Hendricks, *Painter of the American West*, 117.

<sup>20</sup> Baigell, *Alfred Bierstadt*, 12-13.

reputations for the artists and providing financial returns as well.”<sup>21</sup> However, this type of profit-driven, businesslike exhibition was not the norm for the mid-nineteenth century. Ferber writes: “It was considered unseemly to acknowledge the commercial activity that was part of the artists’ livelihood; rather, these transactions were publicly disparaged.”<sup>22</sup> Bierstadt’s actions directly contradicted this idealistic view of the artist. Baigell hypothesizes that some critics may have found Bierstadt’s love of nature inauthentic because “they thought his interest in wilderness grew from calculating his chances for sales rather than from a genuine delight in nature.”<sup>23</sup> While fiscal success no doubt played a role in his decision to pursue the western landscape as a subject, it is clear that Bierstadt also loved nature. Although he did not write as eloquently or extravagantly as Catlin, Bierstadt displays his love of nature through his artwork. Baigell claims that Bierstadt “deliberately sought fame and fortune,” but in doing so he was no different than most of his contemporaries.<sup>24</sup> He was simply better than them, if not in his actual artwork then in his ability to provide artwork that the public wanted.

It was Bierstadt’s 1863 western journey which catapulted him to the top of the American art world. *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak*, his gigantic work which firmly entrenched Bierstadt’s in the American consciousness, sold for a probable record \$25,000 in 1865.<sup>25</sup> For the next seven years Bierstadt would utilize material from his journey to California in many of his paintings. This journey was also the source for *Valley of the Yellowstone* and *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*. These works can be evaluated within the western ideals framework. These evaluations will demonstrate Bierstadt’s acceptance the seemingly contrasting ideals of nature

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<sup>21</sup> Linda S. Ferber, “The History of a Reputation,” in *Alfred Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, ed. Nancy K. Anderson (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 25.

<sup>22</sup> Ferber, “History of a Reputation,” *Art & Enterprise*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Hendricks, *Painter of the American West*, 154.

and Manifest Destiny. *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* also shows opportunity in the American West by depicting an idyllic wagon train headed for Oregon. However, the other ideal of individualism is directly refuted in *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, and the ideal of Democracy is notably absent from either painting.

In *Heart of a Continent*, Fitz Hugh Ludlow fastidiously detailed the 1863 journey to the West. The author was a friend of Bierstadt's from New York City who became infatuated with hashish, recently introduced to the United States, to the point where he wrote a book, *The Hasheesh Eater*, about his experiences with the drug.<sup>26</sup> Ludlow had squandered much of the money he made from his popular book, and he saw the trip to the West as an opportunity to pull his life back together.<sup>27</sup> Along with a few other companions, Bierstadt and Ludlow began their journey in April. During the course of the journey Bierstadt continually sketched the landscape. Some of these sketches can be found in *Heart of a Continent*. These sketches would serve as the basis for many of his most famous paintings of the American West. After crossing the Rocky Mountains on the Overland Trail, the two men arrived at the Occidental Hotel in San Francisco on July 17. According to Hendricks, two weeks later they left San Francisco for "their primary California objective—The Yosemite Valley."<sup>28</sup>

Upon entering the Yosemite Valley for the first time, Ludlow described its magnificence: "Far to the westward, widening more and more, it opens into the bosom of great mountain-ranges,—into a field of perfect light, misty by its own excess,—into an unspeakable suffusion of glory created from the phoenix pile of the dying sun."<sup>29</sup> Ludlow could have described

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<sup>26</sup> See Fitz Hugh Ludlow, *The Hasheesh Eater: Being Passages from the Life of a Pythagorean* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857).

<sup>27</sup> Hendricks, A. *Bierstadt*, 21. Bierstadt actually married Ludlow's former wife Rosalie, well known for her beauty, in 1866 after their divorce.

<sup>28</sup> Gordon Hendricks, "The First Three Western Journeys of Albert Bierstadt," *The Art Bulletin* 46, No. 3 (Sep., 1964): 345.

<sup>29</sup> Fitz Hugh Ludlow, *Heart of a Continent* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1870), 431-432.

Bierstadt's 1864 *Valley of the Yosemite* using the same words. Smaller than many of his other paintings, at only 11 ¾ by 19 inches, the painting captures the Valley bathed the light of a sunset. In many ways, it is a visual translation of Ludlow's description. According to Hendricks, this painting is perhaps Bierstadt's first depiction of the Yosemite Valley, and also "one of his finest."<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, the painting firmly supports the western ideal of nature. Even more, this nature is apparently unspoiled and pristine. There is no human activity in this painting, either pioneer or Indian. Some deer drink from the water in the foreground of the painting, but this is the only activity occurring in the painting. This differs from some of Bierstadt's other early works from the same trip: *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* includes Indians in the foreground of the painting, and *Camping in the Yosemite* includes the rest of his traveling party with a campfire. With the absence of any human activity, Bierstadt is clearly affirming the dominion of nature in the West. The water reflects the trees, cliffs, and the dying light of the day; it is clear and pure.

On either side of the river, cliffs rise up into the sky. Unlike many of Bierstadt's other paintings, the cliffs and mountains in the far background are not as grossly exaggerated. Bierstadt often drew imagined mountains that resembled the alpine mountains in an apparent attempt to outdo the European Alps. Alfred Runte writes: "The style was in keeping with the preferences of those who needed reassurance that the mountains of the West were in fact rivals of the Alps."<sup>31</sup> It is not as though Bierstadt completely disregarded the details of the nature he observed and sketched during his journey. Nancy K. Anderson explains: "Bierstadt invented the western American landscape by skillfully joining passages of carefully observed and

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<sup>30</sup> Hendricks, *Painter of the West*, 140.

<sup>31</sup> Runte, *National Parks*, 25.

meticulously rendered detail with freely configured compositions that met national needs.”<sup>32</sup> Yet in this painting, there appears to be no call for Manifest Destiny and no attempt to trump the European Alps. Bierstadt presents an awe-inspiring yet still pleasant glimpse into the West; it does not appear that he had any ulterior motives conveyed in this painting.

Why does this painting lack the ideals of opportunity and Manifest Destiny that Bierstadt endorsed in many of his other works? There is no clear answer. One reason might be the small size of the painting. Bierstadt completed it around the time he was preparing *The Rocky Mountains* for exhibition at the New York Sanitary Fair.<sup>33</sup> While *Valley of the Yosemite* was sold for \$1,600, it was clearly not intended to be a centerpiece for an exhibit due to its small size. Perhaps without the pressure of trying to receive critical accolades and a high compensation, Bierstadt was able to paint the natural Yosemite Valley that he clearly loved. Ludlow described how the artists on the journey sat in a “divine workshop,” working throughout the entire day because “in the Valley they learned more and gained greater material for future triumphs than they had gotten in all their lives.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, even though *Valley of the Yosemite* solely demonstrates the ideal of nature, *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* supports the ideals of Manifest Destiny and opportunity in addition to nature.

Ludlow captured the inspiration for *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* in his writings. Near Fort Kearny on the trail, the group “passed a very picturesque party of Germans going to Oregon.” Ludlow described the “bright and comely faces” of the people, who “represented the better class of Prussian or North German peasantry.” In the end of the passage, Ludlow stated: “The whole picture of the train was such a delight in form, color, and spirit that I could have

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<sup>32</sup> Nancy K. Anderson, “Wondrously Full of Invention: The Western Landscapes of Albert Bierstadt,” in *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, ed. Nancy K. Anderson (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 74.

<sup>33</sup> Hendricks, *Painter of the West*, 154.

<sup>34</sup> Ludlow, *Heart of a Continent*, 434.

lingered near it all the way to Kearney.”<sup>35</sup> If this image struck Ludlow so strongly, we can imagine that it struck Bierstadt in the same way. He most likely completed sketches of the scene that he would later use to paint *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* in 1867 and the nearly identical *The Oregon Trail* in 1869. Both paintings show the wagon train winding down a long day’s journey in a glorious western landscape.

*Emigrants Crossing the Plains* certainly upholds the ideal of nature. A setting sun casts its light over the entire scene, illuminating the features of the landscape and a brilliant sky which contains the myriad colors of the sunset. The scene is framed by a grove of trees on the left and bluffs rising up on the right. A small river winds its way through the center of the painting. Much like *Valley of the Yellowstone*, nature is peaceful and tranquil. There is no threat of the unknown, no warning about the dangers of the wilderness. However, this nature is not untouched by man; the painting contains an explicit message that the pioneers will subdue nature. In this way the ideals of opportunity and Manifest Destiny are fully supported.

Bierstadt depicted nature in almost a servant’s role in this painting. The nature presented is not the wild, untamed nature that is seen in some of Bierstadt’s other paintings, but rather a domesticated nature. Its purpose is to provide for the needs of the wagon train. Baigell describes how nature is portrayed: “Water appears on the trail to quench the thirst of man and animal, assuring the pioneers of their survival and that of their flocks, as well as of their dreams of putting down roots in the new land.”<sup>36</sup> Nature is serving the purposes of the pioneers. Onwards they move into the brilliant sunset, tending to their animals. Unlike the wild deer painted in *Valley of the Yosemite*, these animals are farm animals that are serving man. Cattle and sheep could be used for clothing, meat, and milk, while the horses and oxen are being used

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<sup>35</sup> Ludlow, *Heart of a Continent*, 110-112.

<sup>36</sup> Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt*, 46.

to pull the settlers' belongings across the plains. All of these point towards the promise of an agrarian paradise in the West: The fruitful farmland and fertile valleys that awaited the pioneers. The pioneers did not need to fear nature; they were simply seeking greater opportunities in the West. They would recreate the pleasures of enlightened eastern life in the magnificent landscape of the American West.

Ludlow captured this idea of opportunity in the West when he wrote: "In the wagons all manner of domestic bliss was going on . . . mothers were on front seats, nursing their babies . . . Old men lay asleep on bales of bedding . . . Every wagon was a gem of an interior."<sup>37</sup> Men ride or walk alongside the wagons, herding the flocks and guiding the train westward. Women sit inside the wagon in the foreground of the painting. "For Oregon" is written on the cover of the wagon, stating the ultimate destination of these pioneers. In the background of the painting another set of wagons is also heading westward, perhaps part of the same train. The presence of many pioneers reassures the viewer that the journey is easily undertaken by many Americans. Opportunity for success lay in the West, and the pioneers must simply cross the peaceful and beautiful western landscape. Bierstadt does not bother to include any indication that the journey was often difficult, dangerous, and exhausting. Instead, he supported the western ideal of opportunity in this idyllic depiction of a wagon train traveling on the Oregon Trail.

Implicit in this conception of a bucolic West is the idea of Manifest Destiny. The wilderness of the West did not pose a threat to pioneers because it was their holy mission, their God-given right to conquer the land. This includes not only the landscape of plains, rivers, trees, and mountains but also the indigenous inhabitants of the land. In the background of the painting we see what could only be Indian shelters. They wagon trains pass by the Indian dwellings, signifying the superiority of the dominant culture. Bierstadt affirmed the superiority of Anglo-

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<sup>37</sup> Ludlow, *Heart of a Continent*, 111-112.

European culture in this painting. Another specific example of this belief is seen in his 1892 *The Landing of Columbus*, where Indians literally fall on their faces in adoration of the European explorers.<sup>38</sup>

In his letter to the *Crayon* during his first western trip, Bierstadt wrote: “The manners and customs of the Indians are still as they were hundreds of years ago, and now is the time to paint them as they are rapidly passing away, and will soon be known only as history.”<sup>39</sup> This quote is indicative of Bierstadt’s views on Indians. He did not seem to lament the fact that Indian culture would soon disappear; it was simply an accepted fact. While he shows some desire to record their culture for history, and he even painted Indians on occasion, he ultimately dismissed Indians as “very superstitious and naturally distrustful” and described them as “appropriate adjuncts to the scenery.”<sup>40</sup> Catlin invested his career in painting the Indians and regretted the fact that Indian culture would soon fade away. To Bierstadt, they were simply another component of the western landscape that civilization would soon overtake.

Baigell affirms the ideal of Manifest Destiny contained in this painting: “We know that all is serene and success is predestined, as if a benevolent hand were guiding the caravan through the idealized American landscape . . . by describing the general aspect of the wagon train rather than a specific anecdote about a single group of pioneers, Bierstadt brilliantly captured the ideals of Manifest Destiny.”<sup>41</sup> Therefore, the embrace of Manifest Destiny leads to the rejection of individualism as a western ideal. In this painting Bierstadt does not praise the individualistic frontiersman of years past, who set off into the harrowing wilderness alone. If nature was to be subdued under the heel of Manifest Destiny, the wilderness could no longer be a force that the

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<sup>38</sup> Hendricks, *Painter of the West*, 292. Today, the painting is used as a famous example of the archaic views that Americans once held of Indians.

<sup>39</sup> *The Crayon*, September 1859, 287.

<sup>40</sup> *The Crayon*, September 1859, 286.

<sup>41</sup> Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt*, 46.

frontier hero had to conquer. Rather, in paintings like *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, nature is domesticated and softened in order to make way for the inevitable progress and glory of American Exceptionalism. Individualism is replaced by the dominance of a collective Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny remains the dominant western ideal in the painting, supplanting individualism, superior to nature, and providing a path to opportunity.

At Bierstadt's exhibition of *The Rocky Mountains*, the description in the pamphlet explicitly supported Manifest Destiny: "a city, populated by our descendants, may rise, and in its art-galleries this picture may eventually find a resting place."<sup>42</sup> It is without doubt that Bierstadt specifically supported the ideal of Manifest Destiny in his paintings, including *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*. In doing so he helped create a new and mythic West. Angela Miller writes "Through his canvases, the myth of the West as new golden land came vividly, resplendently alive before the eyes of his audience."<sup>43</sup>

However, by presenting the American West as a new Eden, a paradise waiting for the dominant American civilization to inhabit it, Bierstadt may have unknowingly contributed to the decline of his own popularity. By the time Bierstadt took his third journey west in 1872, he rode on the recently completed transcontinental railroad. Diane Fischer writes: "Along with the railroad came tourists curious to experience the marvels of nature, many of whom had been inspired by Bierstadt's pictures."<sup>44</sup> However, the ease of railroad travel led to increased settlement in the West, rapidly drawing the frontier era to a close. Fischer explains that by the time the frontier was closed in the 1890's, "landscapes of the American West could no longer

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<sup>42</sup> Ferber, "History of a Reputation," 25.

<sup>43</sup> Angela Miller, "Chasing the Phantom: Cultural Memory in the Image of the West," in *Redrawing Boundaries: Perspectives on Western American Art*, ed. Peter H. Hassrick (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 72.

<sup>44</sup> Fischer, "Shifting Perspectives, Changing Times," 13.

function as ‘primal’ visions—the land was simply too settled to perpetuate that myth.”<sup>45</sup>

Bierstadt’s presentation of the West, as primal nature which could be conquered through Manifest Destiny, no longer resonated with the viewer towards the end of the nineteenth century. The heights that he achieved in the decade following his 1863 trip, both critically and financially, were not matched in the latter half of his career.

Bierstadt and George Catlin faced the same tension between the glorification of nature and Manifest Destiny. Catlin responded by celebrating and preserving nature, including the Indian tribes, regretting their eventual disappearance while recognizing what he saw as the inevitability of Manifest Destiny. It is clear that Bierstadt also loved and appreciated nature. However, he did not seem to have the same inclination towards preservation. Bierstadt celebrated the radiant splendor of nature in paintings such as *Valley of the Yosemite* and *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*. He utilized this pristine nature to directly support American expansionism and superiority—nature was resplendent but also utilitarian. By embracing the ideal of Manifest Destiny in addition to the ideal of nature, Bierstadt also showed the West as a place of opportunity for the entire nation. The gradual taming of the frontier led to an absence of meaning in his later works, which tried to depict an unspoiled West that no longer existed. Bierstadt inadvertently became not only an agent of an expansionist society but also the source of his own decline in popularity. The artist was unable to adapt to the new western landscape that his very paintings foretold.

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<sup>45</sup> Fischer, “Shifting Perspectives, Changing Times,” 25.

## Chapter Four: Thomas Moran and his 1871 Journey to Yellowstone

Thomas Moran faced the same difficulties as Albert Bierstadt when he began to paint the western landscape in the 1870's. Although Moran was only seven years younger than Bierstadt, according to Nancy K. Anderson, "Bierstadt had succeeded in establishing himself at such a young age that the two seemed to be of different generations."<sup>1</sup> Bierstadt had burst onto the national art scene in 1863 with his epic *The Rocky Mountains*, and Moran attained a similar level of success with his 1872 *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*. In the nine years between their respective debuts on the national art scene, the United States had fundamentally changed, and so had the West. The most transformative changes were the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869.

According to historian Thomas S. Fern, the "tragedy of the war, the national mourning, and the general drabness across the land" cast a pall over the postwar decades. However, he writes that there was also a "romantic spirit afoot in those postwar years, one that saw promise and a brighter future in the unsettled lands of the West."<sup>2</sup> It was this ideal of opportunity in the West that Moran was able to capture so brilliantly. The opportunity of the frontier beckoned the American people to settle in the West, and more pioneers headed westward in pursuit of a new and better life. The increase in western settlement was made possible not only through a change in public attitudes following the war, but also because of improvements in transportation, namely the continual improvements in the railroad system.

The completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 began a new era in western settlement. In 1863, Bierstadt completed the latter half of his journey to Yosemite traveling on the Overland Trail. Less than ten years later Moran completed his western journey almost

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy K. Anderson, *Thomas Moran* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1997), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas S. Fern, *The Drawings and Watercolors of Thomas Moran* (South Bend: Mossberg and Company Inc., 1976), 10.

wholly by rail, except for the a stagecoach he took to Virginia City, Montana, and the horseback ride into the remote wilderness of Yellowstone.<sup>3</sup> The proliferation of the railroads meant that the western frontier was quickly being settled and developed by the dominant American civilization. It was this increase in western settlement that had led to Albert Bierstadt's decline in popularity. After his call for Manifest Destiny was answered by a new wave of pioneers, Bierstadt's later attempts to depict pristine nature failed to capture the public imagination.

Moran undertook the challenge of portraying unspoiled nature in an increasingly settled western frontier by depicting Yellowstone: a mostly unknown and mysterious region. However, Moran was also able to adapt his paintings of the West to foster a nostalgic vision of the western frontier, showing the frontier as it supposedly existed in the past. Moran painted his imagined nature as untouched and unspoiled: symbols of a storied nation's Manifest Destiny. Joni Kinsey confirms this as she describes the results of Moran's expedition to Yellowstone. His paintings, in conjunction with photographer William Henry Jackson's photographs, demonstrated "the combined power of photography and art to persuade audiences that the region was indeed a national treasure."<sup>4</sup> Moran explicitly served national interests in his depictions of Yellowstone.

Moran used nature as a national symbol, but unlike Bierstadt he also included the western ideal of individualism. This combination effectively transported the viewer back to the glory days of the western frontier. Moran provided the American public with a vision of an eternally unblemished frontier even while the western population continued to grow. Thus Moran was able to effectively combine western ideals of pristine nature, opportunity, individualism, and a national Manifest Destiny to essentially recreate the mythic frontier. This classic frontier appealed to a nation which was reeling from the economic aftershocks of civil war.

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<sup>3</sup>Thurman Wilkins, *Thomas Moran: Artist of the Mountains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 83-85.

<sup>4</sup>Joni L. Kinsey, *Thomas Moran's West: Chromolithography, High Art, and Popular Taste* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 60.

Moran demonstrated this melding of western ideals in paintings from his breakthrough 1871 journey to Yellowstone. The first painting evaluated using the western ideals framework is his *First Sketch of the West, Green River, Wyoming* (**Fig. 5**). In this work, Moran portrays pristine nature untouched by human interferences. However, as Thurman Wilkins writes: “In rendering the scene Moran arbitrarily ignored all evidence of the commercialization of the place . . . even banishing the existence of the entire town with its hundred or so inhabitants.”<sup>5</sup> Neither the town nor the Union Pacific railroad by which Moran arrived are depicted in any of the artist’s multiple renderings of Green River. Even in a small watercolor sketch, a type of painting mainly used as a reference for full-sized paintings, pristine nature acts as a symbol of the American West. Moran resolved the tension between the ideals of nature and Manifest Destiny that Catlin and Bierstadt struggled with by reverting to a romanticized frontier past.

Moran’s most famous work, the 1872 *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, also demonstrates multiple western ideals (**Fig. 6**). The magnificent painting showed the unspoiled glory of Yellowstone and its status as a national landmark. Debuting on May 2, 1872, two months after Congress declared Yellowstone the first national park, the painting immediately received enthusiastic reviews. Wilkins calls it “the first spectacular triumph” of Moran’s career.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Congress obtained the painting to hang in the Capitol, appropriating \$10,000 for the purchase.<sup>7</sup> This purchase occurred as Catlin’s dying wish to sell his Indian Gallery to Congress went unfulfilled. Congress was not interested in a record of Indian history, but rather they wanted to celebrate the majestic landscape of the American West. Located at the seat of the U.S. government, the painting received national recognition. It showed the iconic Yellowstone Park as distinctly American, and affirmed Moran as the foremost painter of both Yellowstone and the

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<sup>5</sup> Wilkins, *Artist of the Mountains*, 82.

<sup>6</sup> Wilkins, *Artist of the Mountains*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Kinsey, *Thomas Moran’s West*, 61.

American West.

However, before these two paintings are analyzed, Moran's own life should be studied. How did Moran's experiences during the earlier part of his career prepare him to paint the American West? Moran's life demonstrates some of the contradictory character of the western ideals: He demonstrated his love of nature through his artwork, he pursued opportunities to travel multiple times before his western journey to Yellowstone, he fulfilled the ideal of individualism through teaching himself how to paint while also utilizing an extensive support network in order to find success as an artist, and he supported Manifest Destiny through his use of nature as a national landmark.

The fifth child of Thomas and Mary Moran, the younger Thomas was born in February 1837, in Bolton, England. Thomas Sr. quickly realized that the industrial town of Bolton did not hold much of a future for his growing family. According to his wife, the real impetus to move came after Thomas Sr. saw George Catlin with his Indian Gallery in London.<sup>8</sup> He left for the United States in 1842, and two years later Mary Moran and the children came to live in New Kensington, Pennsylvania. The opportunities for education and success were much greater for the Moran family in this Philadelphia neighborhood. Thomas Moran stopped attending school following his sixteenth birthday and pursued an apprenticeship at a wood engraving shop.<sup>9</sup> This was where Moran first became acquainted with the world of art, although he became bored with the monotonous work during the three years he was employed. He often took time while at work for sketching and he honed his artistic skills.

Even from a young age the love of nature was clearly embedded in Moran's life. He often sketched the forests around the Schuylkill River, trying to seek out undisturbed nature.

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<sup>8</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> Wilkins, *Artist of the Mountains*, 18.

Wilkins writes: “From the outset Moran’s love of nature was for the pristine state, landscape unspoiled by the encroachments of civilization.”<sup>10</sup> His paintings, both his earlier and later works, often neglect human presence. If humans are pictured, they are dwarfed in comparison to the massive scale of the landscape, having no real impact on nature. Thomas Fern explains how Moran had a keen eye for detail when he sketched nature. Moran’s early style of drawing was “rich in values” and “time consuming” as he sketched out individual parts of nature. Fern concludes: “Moran’s love of nature is evidenced in these early drawings.”<sup>11</sup> Moran held the natural world in high regard and spent many hours each day sketching the details of the forests, rocks, water, hills, and mountains.

However, Moran’s love for nature and his penchant for detail in his sketches did not lead the artist to strictly copy nature. In fact, he avoided copying nature because he did not believe that faithful representation was the task of real art. Moran wrote of British painter J.M.W. Turner, one of the main influences on him: “Literally speaking, his landscapes are false; but they contain his impressions of Nature, and so many natural characteristics as were necessary adequately to convey that impression to others.”<sup>12</sup> Turner had no problem with moving a church steeple or rearranging a landscape in order to create a more aesthetically pleasing painting. While Moran certainly loved nature, he was not hesitant to alter its appearance in his paintings. Fern explains: “To reveal the essence of his subject, he maneuvered the elements in his landscapes until they expressed the right feelings,” and when successful, he altered the landscape without losing “the visual truth, the plausible appearance of the place.”<sup>13</sup> Nature was his source of inspiration, not something that needed to be perfectly preserved with complete

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<sup>10</sup> Wilkins, *Painter of the Mountains*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Fern, *Drawings and Watercolors*, 12-13.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Moran, quoted in Carol Clark, *Thomas Moran: Watercolors of the American West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Fern, *Drawings and Watercolors*, 13.

representational truth. Anderson calls Moran's *Green River* landscapes "carefully constructed fiction that taps the same vein of romantic nostalgia."<sup>14</sup> In this way Moran resembles Bierstadt in his willingness to alter nature in order to accomplish artistic goals.

Moran pursued painting as a vocation, eventually sharing a studio with his brother Edward after Thomas left the engraving shop in 1856. Moran began his career as an artist just as the status of the artist in American society finally became established. Neil Harris describes the two decades before the Civil War as "the brightest and most hopefully moment in the history of American art."<sup>15</sup> While artists could not become outwardly materialistic like other businessmen, Harris argues that "the ideal artist became increasingly a man who made money, enjoyed fame and deserved consultation on matters of general interest."<sup>16</sup> Moran thus seized his opportunity as the business of art in America became more lucrative than ever before. In addition to painting, Moran completed wood engravings, lithography, and commercial work for monthlies such as *Scribner's* and the *Aldine*. Indeed, as Kinsey writes: "Moran published in nearly every available medium."<sup>17</sup> His pursuit of fiscal success mirrors the rise of the businessman-artist in the years prior to the Civil War and demonstrates the ideal of opportunity in Moran's own life.

Moran also sought opportunity on three journeys prior to his expedition to Yellowstone. These trips to Michigan, England, and Continental Europe helped shape Moran's development as an artist. He had grown tired the eastern landscape: "The Alleghenies are mountains to be sure, but they are covered with trees. The others in the East are but foothills."<sup>18</sup> Moran would not travel to the Rocky Mountains and Yellowstone for another ten years. However; in 1860 Moran made his first western trip to Michigan. Inspired by Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha*,

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<sup>14</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Harris, *Artist in American Society*, 254.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, *Artist in American Society*, 248.

<sup>17</sup> Kinsey, *Thomas Moran's West*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Moran, quoted in Wilkins, *Painter of the Mountains*, 29.

Moran sought to satisfy his appetite for a different landscape. Here he sketched the site called the Pictured Rocks which, according to the artist, were “a great sight” that “exceeded my expectations.”<sup>19</sup> While Moran did not ultimately produce many canvases from this first expedition, it still served as his first experience in the West.

Before Moran headed to the far western frontier, he took two journeys to Europe. In the spring of 1862 he followed the footsteps of J.M.W. Turner in England along with his brother Edward. The lessons Moran learned from Turner would be invaluable when he painted Yellowstone. Anderson writes: “There is no doubt that Turner’s color—both in oil and watercolor—made a tremendous impact on Moran, for it is clear that when he saw the landscape of Yellowstone for the first time nearly a decade later it was Turner’s palette that served him so well.”<sup>20</sup> It was this palette of brilliant hues, along with a penchant for falsifying the color of nature to make the painting more vibrant, that Moran took with him to the West. Upon returning to the United States in the fall he immediately married his long-time sweetheart Mary Nimmo.

With his wife and child, Moran made a return trip to Europe in 1866. This time he set up a studio in Paris, but also traveled to Italy in 1867. According to Harris, a stay in Europe had become “a recognized part of the career path and ceased to be the pioneering activity it had been for an earlier generation.”<sup>21</sup> For serious American artists, a stay in Europe was almost a necessity. Access to the wealth of Continental European art, in addition to the experience of the alpine mountains, might have provided more opportunities for a landscape painter like Moran. However, Moran remained staunch in his support of Turner and the British style of painting,

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<sup>19</sup> Aug. 9, 1860: Thomas Moran, Munising, Lake Superior, MI, to Mary Nimmo. In Fritiof Fryxell *Home-Thoughts, From Afar: Letters of Thomas Moran to Mary Nimmo Moran* (Iowa: Wagners Printers, 1967), 23.

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> Harris, *Artist in American Society*, 284.

rejecting the French Barbizon School that was growing in popularity.<sup>22</sup> In 1867, Moran and his family returned to the United States where he continued sell pictures in addition to supplementing his income through other means. Moran did not find his big break until he accompanied F.V. Hayden's survey expedition to Yellowstone in 1871.

Throughout the first fifteen years of his career, Moran worked in many different areas of art in order to provide for his ever-growing family. Anderson writes: "Moran was both a self-proclaimed romantic and a shrewd businessman."<sup>23</sup> Moran embraced the ideal of individualism and the role of an artist-adventurer. As Moran painted the eastern forests in the early part of his career, he transformed them "into a New World sanctuary for that most celebrated creation of the English romantics—the solitary poet-hero."<sup>24</sup> In many of Moran's paintings a lone figure is found reflecting in solitude, in a natural setting pictured as pristine and beautiful. The romantic, solitary, and poetic figure of Moran's earlier eastern works transitioned well into his western landscapes. Moran's background as an artist paved the way for his later depictions of western individualism. Yet this ideal of individualism is not just represented in Moran's art, but also in his own life.

Moran styled himself an individualist. Early in his career, Moran learned from a collection of Philadelphia artists, most notably James Hamilton, who had the strongest influence on Moran's development. Despite the influence of these mentors, Moran later declared that he "was never under any master."<sup>25</sup> While studying in Europe, he did not undergo any formal training but preferred to study the world of European art on his own.<sup>26</sup> Without the type of formal training that Bierstadt had acquired at the Düsseldorf School, Moran developed as an

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<sup>22</sup> Clark, *Watercolors of the American West*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 55.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Moran, quoted in Wilkins, *Artist of the Mountains*, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Wilkins, *Artist of the Mountains*, 55.

artist through self-instruction. He learned directly from the paintings of great masters like J.M.W. Turner. Styling himself as an individualist, Moran was thus the perfect artist to capture the essence of the mythic western frontier.

Yet if Moran developed his painting style outside of any formal program, his main journeys to the West were anything but individualistic. Working for a new magazine, *Scribner's Monthly*, Moran had completed several illustrations of Yellowstone based on amateur drawings from an 1870 government survey before he went west. As F.V. Hayden put together another expedition for the summer of 1871, Moran participated in the survey as a guest, "with a loan of \$500 each from *Scribner's Monthly* and the Northern Pacific Railroad."<sup>27</sup> In effect, Moran traveled to Yellowstone in the debt of three different entities. His illustrations from the journey benefited *Scribner's*, which published the first images of Yellowstone that truly captured the area's breathtaking features. Moran's images from the expedition, along with the photographs of Henry William Jackson, also promoted tourism to the Yellowstone, a fact that Northern Pacific Railroad financier and millionaire Jay Cooke certainly understood. Finally, the United States government was the benefactor of the entire survey expedition. Far from being an individualistic journey on the western frontier, Moran's first experience in the far West was the result of corporate and government interests.

If this contradiction bothered Moran, he did not make it known. Following the rousing success of the Yellowstone expedition and the widespread success of Moran's paintings from the trip, Moran earned "an open ticket for travel west with any survey party."<sup>28</sup> *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* hung in the Capital building and sold for \$10,000. According to Marlene Merrill, "In 1871 the Yellowstone Basin was still regarded by most people as a terra incognita, and it was

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<sup>27</sup> Kinsey, *Thomas Moran's West*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 54.

considered the last great wilderness in the United States.”<sup>29</sup> By becoming the first artist to paint Yellowstone, Moran claimed this lucrative region as his own. In the pursuit of this grand opportunity, which allowed him to reach the upper echelon of American art, Moran was perfectly willing to forgo the ideal of individualism in which he had previously found his identity.

In his depictions of the American West, Moran also supported the ideal of Manifest Destiny. For Catlin, there was a tension between his love of nature, including the Indian, and Manifest Destiny. Bierstadt was unable to reconcile Manifest Destiny with individualism and ended up disregarding the latter. For Moran, the contradictions between western ideals did not seem to be a problem. He was not concerned with the possible ramifications of continued American expansion, or at least he did not make so vocal a plea as Catlin. Rather than painting the reality of a fleeting frontier, he painted scenes which celebrated a mythic western frontier of years past. By depicting untouched nature, he ignored the impact of Indians, by celebrating individualism he overlooked the vast influence of the government in the shaping of the frontier, and by turning the western landscape into national symbols he disregarded the potential dangers of Manifest Destiny. The multilayered and complex tensions of the nineteenth-century west were reduced to a singular focus: the promotion of American Exceptionalism through western ideals of nature, opportunity, individualism, and Manifest Destiny.

Following the end of his second trip to Europe, Moran stated that he intended to “paint as an American on an American basis.”<sup>30</sup> Describing the Grand Canyon, the artist wrote: “[The Grand Canyon of Arizona] awaits the men of original thoughts and ideas to prove to their

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<sup>29</sup> Marlene Deahl Merrill, *Seeing Yellowstone in 1871: Earliest Descriptions & Images from the Field* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Moran, quoted in James Flexner, *That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 300.

countrymen that we possess a land of beauty and grandeur with which no other can compare.”<sup>31</sup> Moran clearly believed in the superiority of the American landscape. Bierstadt had tried to fashion the Rocky Mountains into an alpine landscape. In contrast, Moran was disappointed by the Alps and found them lacking. Wilkins writes: “He could never pay them the respect and veneration he later developed for the ranges of the American West—the Rocky Mountains and the Sierra Nevada. Moran was so little tempted to paint the Alps . . . he abandoned [his only attempt at painting the Alps] incomplete.”<sup>32</sup> Moran’s firm belief in the superiority of the western landscape over Europe came through in artwork that clearly supported the ideal of Manifest Destiny.

By the time Moran painted the American West, pioneers had already settled much of the land. If Manifest Destiny is controversial today, it had largely been accepted by the dominant American culture in the post-Civil War era. Anglo-American civilization had spread from coast to coast, and Yellowstone was one of the few unexplored regions of the United States; it was what one could call a final frontier. Unlike Catlin, who recognized that Indian culture would eventually disappear, Moran did not need to fear that his subject would fade from existence. Moran painted the western landscape as a national symbol, a region which would be indefinitely preserved through government action. There was no tension between ideals of Manifest Destiny and pristine nature, because the American government had already turned the wonders of the western landscape into a national symbol. Where American development had already desecrated the natural western landscape, Moran could conveniently remove the traces of civilization in his paintings in order to create an idealized and mythic western frontier. He manipulated the landscape in this way in his numerous paintings of the Green River.

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Moran, quoted in Thomas D. Murphy, *Three Wonderlands of the American West* (Boston: L. C. Page & Company, 1912), 136.

<sup>32</sup> Wilkins, *Artist of the Mountains*, 64.

Moran's first watercolor of the Green River area demonstrated this type of artistic imagination. Appropriately titled *First Sketch of the West, Green River, Wyoming*, this is Moran's first painting from his seminal journey. The painting is a sketch, so it is not a complete and refined work. Rather, the painting represents Moran's initial impressions of the western landscape. How Moran saw the western landscape, prior to the fame and fortune that followed the publication of his images, shows which western ideals were fundamental to Moran's western artwork. What characteristics of the West did Moran want to illustrate for eastern viewers?

Moran arrived in Green River on his way to meet the rest of Hayden's expedition, which had already been working northward from Ogden, Utah, for a little less than a month. Moran's goal was to meet up with the expedition as soon as possible, but when he stopped in the railroad town of Green River he made sure to capture a landscape that was "unlike any other he had ever seen," but "the lessons of Turner and the literature of romance had provided him with the ideal vocabulary to turn a hot, dusty, desert landscape into a western Xanadu."<sup>33</sup> Enormous buttes rose up above the rugged landscape and the titular river below. In fact, according to Fern, Moran's "interest in the geologic features of the scene is greater than in its plant life . . . Moran's fascination and skill in rendering this aspect of nature remained strong the rest of his life."<sup>34</sup> If Fern's hypothesis is true, the sparse desert landscape of Green River suited Moran's artistic tastes.

Despite the lack of flora and fauna in this scene, *First Sketch* is anything but drab. According to Anne Morand, "it is the only known drawing from the trip that includes considerable color, in the form of washes of blue, pink, and brown and touches of white and gold gouache." The watercolor is small in size, only eight inches across, but "Moran succeeded in

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<sup>33</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Fern, *Drawings and Watercolors*, 13.

creating an impression of breadth and depth in a small format.”<sup>35</sup> Moran effectively portrayed the geologic makeup of the Green River in this first western landscape, but in this characterization, which western ideals does Moran end up supporting?

Green River was of course a railroad town, replete with “a schoolhouse, church, hotel, and brewery.”<sup>36</sup> However, none of these structures, or indeed any recognition of civilization, ever found its way into a Green River painting. In pursuit of pristine nature, Moran had no reason to depict the dusty railroad town. Moran had not come to the West in order to paint small commercial towns, but to capture the grandeur and majesty of the western landscape. Following Turner’s example, Moran had no problem eliminating the existence of the town in order to create his artistic vision of the West. By choosing to paint the geologic features and not include the town, Moran specifically supports a western ideal of an untouched, natural frontier.

The idyllic rearrangement of nature served Moran well throughout his career as an artist. Using this sketch as a basis for future oil paintings of the Green River, Moran found a subject that he returned to again and again. According to Wilkins, there was “moneymaking potential” in the visual diminution of the town and the idealization of the geologic features.<sup>37</sup> An idealization of nature also supported nationalist goals. Moran had traveled to the West specifically to paint the American landscape as an American painter. By choosing to depict a landscape devoid of human influence, he supported the conception of the natural western landscape as a symbol of American superiority. Therefore, it is clear that Moran’s *First Sketch* and the subsequent Green River paintings not only represented the ideal of nature, but also served his personal interests and promoted the goals of an expansionist nation.

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<sup>35</sup> Anne Morand, *Thomas Moran, The Field Sketches, 1856-1923* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 36.

<sup>36</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 48.

<sup>37</sup> Wilkins, *Artist of the Mountains*, 82.

If Moran had to alter the reality of Green River in order to create his idealized western scene, he did not need to do so upon reaching Yellowstone. After catching up with the rest of the expedition at a reconnaissance point in Montana, Moran traveled by horseback into the Yellowstone basin. Here at last, Moran found the immaculate natural landscape that he had sought over the past decade. Ruth Moran, the artist's daughter, explained: "To him it was all grandeur, beauty, color and light—nothing of man at all, but nature, virgin, unspoiled, and lovely. In Yellowstone country he found fairy-like color and form that this dreams could not rival."<sup>38</sup> Ruth's description of her father's ecstasy upon reaching Yellowstone very much resembles Catlin's impressions of the West as he rode the aptly named *Yellow Stone* steamboat up the Missouri River. Both men were overcome by the natural magnificence of the West.

In Yellowstone, Thomas Moran quickly became friends with photographer Henry William Jackson. Jackson later wrote that Moran was "keenly enthusiastic and active in getting about his participation in the work of the expedition," despite the fact that he had never camped out for longer than one night, never ridden a horse, and had no previous experience in the West.<sup>39</sup> Moran quickly went to work, sketching each new marvel that waited in Yellowstone. The survey expedition often broke off into separate groups performing specific scientific duties, and Moran and Jackson ended up spending much of their time on the expedition together.<sup>40</sup> Among all of the experiences and wonders that he experienced, none struck Moran as much as the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone.

Albert Peale, a geologist on the expedition, wrote that the canyon "presented an

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<sup>38</sup> Ruth Moran, quoted in Fritiof Fryxell, *Thomas Moran: Explorer in Search of Beauty*, ed. Fritiof Fryxell (New York: American Book-Stratford Press, Inc., 1958), 9.

<sup>39</sup> William Henry Jackson, "With Moran in the Yellowstone," in *Explorer in Search of Beauty*, 49.

<sup>40</sup> Anne Morand, "Thomas Moran: Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon—In the Field and From the Studio," in *Splendors of the American West: Thomas Moran's Art of the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone*, ed. Anne Morand (Birmingham: Birmingham Museum of Art, 1990), 13.

appearance which words can scarcely describe.”<sup>41</sup> Early twentieth-century travel writer Thomas Murphy wrote: “A long silence ensues as we contemplate the panorama before us. Words are indeed idle; photographs are misleading; the masterpiece of the artist is inadequate.”<sup>42</sup> Jackson wrote of the Canyon: “Moran’s enthusiasm was greater here than anywhere else among Yellowstone’s wonderful features . . . I imagine he carried away in his mind more of its marvelous color and varied forms than he put into his sketches.”<sup>43</sup> Each one of these quotes testifies to the impossibility of trying to capture the overwhelming beauty, color, and magnitude of the canyon. However, Moran’s *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* nobly attempts to capture the grand scale and majestic nature.

Completed about two months after Congress protected Yellowstone as a national park, it is this painting that succeeded far beyond any other in capturing the essence of the park’s beauty. The canyon unfolds before the viewer, stretching into the far distance where a waterfall plunges into the roaring river below. Cliffs rise up on either side of the canyon, and Moran masterfully depicts the swirling colors of his favored rock formations. Some sparse vegetation is scattered across the walls of the canyon, blurring as the canyon stretches miles away. If nothing else, the massive, 7 x 12 foot painting succeeded in expressing the sheer enormity of the canyon. Moran did not need to exaggerate any features of this canyon; the vista was so spectacular that through the very act of painting the canyon, Moran inherently supported the ideal of nature. He finally found the western landscape of his dreams.

In the foreground of the painting, a small lookout point juts off the edge of the canyon wall. Two figures are painted looking out over the brilliant panorama. Moran may well have

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<sup>41</sup>July 30, 1871: Albert Peale, *Yellowstone Lake to Philadelphia Press*, published August 29, 1871. In *Seeing Yellowstone in 1871*, ed. Marlene Merrill (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 35.

<sup>42</sup>Murphy, *Three Wonderlands*, 30.

<sup>43</sup>Jackson, *Explorer in Search of Beauty*, 57-58.

placed the figures here to demonstrate the scale of the painting. He could have perhaps been paying homage to his fellow travelers, including his good friend Jackson. Yet in depicting these two figures, Moran harkened back to an era of western frontier individualism. Viewers of the painting can see these figures as the legendary mountain men, exploring the western landscape far from civilization. Referencing individualism helps establish this painting as an idealized vision of the western frontier. As the actual frontier disappeared with increasing populations, Moran traveled to the mostly unknown wilderness in order to depict an eternal, perfect West.

*The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* and Moran's other images helped to establish Yellowstone as a national symbol. Jackson wrote: "In the proceedings before Congress for the creation of the Yellowstone National Park, the water colors of Moran and the photographs of the Geological Survey were the most important exhibits brought before the Committee."<sup>44</sup> Prior to the 1871 survey, Yellowstone was often seen as a dangerous, hellish place. This reputation accounts for the satanic references in the naming of geological features. The perception of Yellowstone needed to be changed if the movement to protect the park was to succeed. Kinsey writes that Moran helped "bring what previously has been considered alien territory into the psychological consciousness of the people of the United States."<sup>45</sup> *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* helped make the park a national symbol in which citizens could take pride. Robert Parker writes: "Thomas Moran compelled the American people to appreciate the beauty of its own continent, to look upon its wonders through his eyes, and to save these resources of natural beauty."<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, Moran's painting served not only the interests of preservationists but also the

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<sup>44</sup> Jackson, *Explorer in Search of Beauty*, 59.

<sup>45</sup> Joni L. Kinsey, "Thomas Moran's Surveys of Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon: The Coalition of Art, Business, and Government," in *Splendors of the American West*, 29.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Allerton Parker, "The Water-Colors of Thomas Moran," in *Explorer in Search of Beauty*, 83.

interests of the nation's expansionist impulse. *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* confirmed the ideal of Manifest Destiny. If the context of the painting is understood, it is evident that it served not only as a depiction of beautiful nature, but also as a symbol of American superiority. The very act of preservation also served as an act of expansion, claiming the pristine wilderness of Yellowstone as American property. The natural beauty could possibly benefit American citizens, as tourists from the United States and around the world arrived and affirmed the superiority of the American landscape. The following year, Moran painted the Grand Canyon in Arizona, helping to create another national symbol out of a geological feature. Perhaps Nancy Anderson explains this concept the best: "Moran's images were compelling enough to validate the proposition that both conservation and commerce were well served when landscapes as spectacular as Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon were left relatively untouched."<sup>47</sup> Thomas Moran combined ideals of unspoiled nature, commercial opportunity, and Manifest Destiny in his depictions of the American West. His ability to synthesize these ideals allowed him, unlike Catlin and Bierstadt, to remain successful even as his age advanced. By the time Moran died in 1926, he was known as the "dean" of American painters.

Moran's ability to synthesize these western ideals with one another was mostly a result of his specific time and place in the American milieu. With the Civil War finished and the transcontinental railroad completed, the western frontier was quickly fading away, as a united and more mobile American citizenry continued to expand. Just a few years after these changes, Moran took the opportunity to paint one of the greatest and still relatively pure American landscapes. Rather than express the multifaceted realities of the American West in his artwork, Moran instead painted an idealized and ultimately imaginary western frontier. Moran's paintings are undeniably stunning: They helped to form a popular view of the natural West and also

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<sup>47</sup> Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, 61.

contributed to the preservation and appreciation of certain national parks. Yet his paintings end up being mere windows into an idealized western frontier, ignoring the tensions inherent in the West. In the end, Moran failed to question the assumptions and the consequences of an expansionist society as he painted the American West.

## Conclusion

The first chapter of this thesis proposed five different ideals that could be utilized to evaluate art of the western frontier. These ideals are complex, often conflicting with one another in reality and in the paintings of Catlin, Bierstadt, and Moran. Therefore, by identifying how the artists demonstrated the different western ideals, both in their artwork and their lives, the modern viewer is able to better understand their purposes in painting the West and how they reacted to changes in the western frontier.

The western ideal of democracy is not prevalent in the paintings of the artist-adventurers. Two potential reasons for the absence of this western ideal are immediately apparent. First, democracy has always been an amorphous concept. How does one define democracy, much less create a physical representation of the ideal in a painting? Aside from overt symbolism, it is difficult to depict such a vague idea. Second, the artist-adventurers almost all focused on painting nature. Even when the paintings contain the presence of the dominant American culture, such as in Catlin's *Fort Union* and Bierstadt's *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, they are doing so with nature as a backdrop. American democracy was typically associated with community gatherings, politics, and government. When depicting the supposedly virgin land of the West, which lacked the necessary infrastructure for town meetings, elections, and other representations of political participation, it was difficult for artists to represent this type of formalized democracy.

However, the concept of free land was also seen as a key component for western democracy in the nineteenth century. Yet Bierstadt's *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* is the only painting analyzed which truly identifies the land as an agrarian resource. Even then, it is apparent that this painting emphasizes the ideals of opportunity and Manifest Destiny more than

democracy. While it cannot be concluded that the artists rejected democracy as a western ideal, their lives and their artwork analyzed in this thesis make it apparent that representations of democracy were not a prominent concern.

Individualism was a western ideal that both Catlin and Moran saw in their artwork and in their experiences. The artists saw themselves as individualists, exploring and painting the western frontier. In reality, they ended up conforming to the pattern of an expansionist society. Catlin undertook his initial journey to preserve Indian culture with the support of fur trappers and the military, two groups which played key roles in fundamentally altering Indian society. Moran traveled to Yellowstone in the company of F.V. Hayden's government-funded survey, benefiting from its political and commercial ties. Even while identifying themselves as individualists, these artists traveled with the support of a powerful expansionist society.

The ideal of individualism can also be seen in their artwork. Although Catlin promoted the community over the individual in *Fort Union*, his numerous portraits of Indians stress the personal character of the Indians. For example, in *Black Hawk* Catlin painted an Indian war chief who defied the power of the American government and the oncoming pioneers, despite his defeat. In *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, Moran portrayed romantic figures looking over the magnificent western landscape. Moran utilized this individualistic theme in many of his works. So, individualism is clearly affirmed as a western ideal.

On the other hand, Albert Bierstadt does not readily identify with individualism, either in his own life or in his artwork. He replaced individualism with unconcealed support for Manifest Destiny and expansion in *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*. The explanation for why Bierstadt differs from Catlin and Moran comes in his temporal location between the other two artists. Catlin painted the West in 1832 as a conflicted artist, situated between his desire for preservation

and his belief that expansion was inevitable. By the time Moran depicted the West forty years later, railroads stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Rather than trying to depict the difficulties and tensions of expansion, Moran instead painted the mythic western frontier which celebrated untouched nature and the romantic individualist. Bierstadt's highest level of popularity came in the 1860's, after Catlin's prime and before Moran's emergence. During this time Bierstadt highlighted the ideal of Manifest Destiny, as American citizens spread across the continent. However, as expansion and white civilization became realities in the West, the public acclaimed Moran's work, which echoed the idealized western frontier of the past.

Opportunity was a common theme for all of the artist-adventurers. While Catlin predominantly tried to capture the Indian culture, he also painted a variety of landscapes. Although not nearly as picturesque as those of Bierstadt and Moran, his landscapes beckoned the viewer to the rolling hills and fertile land of the West. *Fort Union* is one example, among others, that he painted on his initial steamboat voyage up the Missouri River. Bierstadt depicted the West as a land of opportunity as well. There is perhaps no stronger testament to western opportunity than the idealized wagon train in Bierstadt's *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*. While Moran's work does not identify the presence of opportunity in the west as unashamedly as Bierstadt's paintings, his sweeping landscapes mostly focused on inspirational geological features. The emphasis on beautiful landscapes showed the West as an edenic land.

The ideal of opportunity is also present in the lives of each artist. Catlin's writings indicate that he had the strongest personal convictions about the necessity of preservation, but he also sought fiscal benefit with varying degrees of success. Bierstadt achieved great fame and fortune following his 1863 trip, but later his popularity declined, and he, like Catlin, died relatively impoverished. Only Moran remained financially successful until the end of his career.

While Bierstadt and Moran may have loved nature and sought to preserve it, their primary motivation appeared to be the possibility of success. This acknowledgment of success as a primary motivating factor for the artist-adventurer is not a judgment of their moral character or worthiness as a painter. Rather, their pursuit of opportunity allows the modern viewer to understand how the artists balanced their personal convictions with their reliance on an expansionist society.

The final two western ideals, nature and Manifest Destiny, are the most common themes in the paintings of Catlin, Bierstadt, and Moran. The ideals are also closely interrelated. The core of the artist-adventurer's intention was to paint glorified and immaculate nature. Catlin focused on the indigenous Indian, who he believed represented nature, while Bierstadt and Moran both focused on the dazzling landscapes of the American West. One can assume that the artists developed a deep reverence for nature as well after dedicating their careers towards rendering it in art. The letters left by the artist-adventurers often testify to their love of nature. Their attempts to capture the pristine landscape of the American West were often enormously successful, and they can inspire the viewer even today. Additionally, Yosemite and Yellowstone were set aside as national parks, and each artist-adventurer played a role in the process of preservation.

Yet the ideal of Manifest Destiny, the rationalizing force behind American expansionism, often came into direct conflict with nature. As the dominant Anglo-American culture developed the western frontier, it inevitably altered the celebrated nature of the West. Each artist-adventurer dealt with this fundamental tension differently. Catlin regarded expansion as inevitable and thus tried to preserve nature, namely the Indian culture, while still possible. Thirty years later, Albert Bierstadt recognized both Manifest Destiny and nature in his work.

Celebrating both ideals, he did not focus on the tension between them but rather saw them acting in unison. Nature's beauty and utility demanded the expansion of the American people to the West. Finally, Thomas Moran appeared to ignore the realities of the disappearing frontier and instead focused on recalling the glory days of the earlier nineteenth century. By focusing on pristine nature and removing the presence of settlement in his paintings, he painted a mythic version of the West rather than facing the harsh realities of expansion.

Catlin's call for preservation, Bierstadt's affirmation of expansion, and Moran's creation of a mythic West illustrate how the artist-adventurers faced the realities of a slowly disappearing western frontier. Their calls for preservation conflicted with the social and environmental consequences of Manifest Destiny. Their paintings helped shape perceptions of the West as a land of unrestrained opportunity and inspiring nature. By popularizing the West, they helped pave the way for increased settlement and development. In doing so, the artist-adventurers inadvertently became agents of the expansionist society, contributing to the disappearance of the Frontier West captured in their artwork.

## **Final Thoughts**

This thesis has detailed the ideals of the American West, using them as a framework to evaluate the art of artist-adventurers such as George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran. The purpose of this final section is to detail areas for further study and explain how this thesis could be used in an educational setting.

Identifying specific western ideals can potentially be controversial. I have tried to explore potential problems in the first chapter, by explaining the different ideals and comparing them to the historical development of the West. Each of the western ideals identified contributed to the western experience during the nineteenth century. Of course, there are other potential social and cultural influences that were not discussed in this thesis. Questions about slavery and religion, in particular, are not discussed in depth and are areas which could be analyzed. The impact of the Civil War on perceptions of the West could be integrated as well.

I selected three famous and well-known artist-adventurers for the purposes of analysis. There are many more artists who traveled into the West, and their paintings could also be evaluated using the framework I utilized. In particular, it would be valuable to analyze artists whose main output came in the thirty years between George Catlin's and Albert Bierstadt's journeys westward.

The process of studying the western frontier through art has been meaningful for my future career as an educator. Identifying the different western ideals makes clear the fact that the history often taught in the American school system, both at the secondary level and potentially at the collegiate level, often simplifies the story of the western frontier. In our popular culture, the West is often celebrated as a region exemplifying the western ideals discussed, as we take an Anglo-centric view of American history. However, there can also be a tendency to swing the

pendulum of teaching history to the other side, where the emphasis is not on freedom and possibility but instead oppression. This results in typecasts of Indians idealized as protectors of nature and the dominant white American culture acting as the villain. This broad historical brush does the nation's past a disservice. All students and teachers of history do themselves a favor by critically examining the background of our perceptions about the western frontier.

The principles in this thesis can be utilized as an educational tool in multiple ways. First, the western ideals themselves are useful. They are broad generalizations about how people viewed and experienced the West. By studying these ideals and questioning their veracity, students can develop a more nuanced understanding of the western experience. Each of the western ideals conveys some truth about the western experience. Nonetheless, a wholehearted affirmation of any generalization can be dangerous for a student of history.

Second is the importance of integrating the arts with history. Removed from the context of their time periods, the works of Catlin, Bierstadt, and Moran are reduced to mere pictures, beautiful but ultimately meaningless. By understanding the historical context, we also understand the reasons behind their travels, the beliefs the artists held, and the message their paintings sent about the West. Conversely, studying the paintings of nineteenth century artists on the frontier helps us to understand how western ideals were formed over time. The study of art helps us to better understand the history of the American West, in addition to providing a visual illustration about how contemporary artists viewed the frontier. Too often art is taught separately from history, or paintings are identified as mere representations of culture. This thesis shows that the relationship between history and art is symbiotic, with each providing a better understanding of the other.

Finally, there is a question we must ask ourselves and ask students in response to this

thesis: What ideals have we created for our modern American society and how do those ideals contribute to our understanding of our nation? Only by understanding the ideals we have created for ourselves can we truly evaluate and understand our own culture, society, and history.

## Appendix: Images of Paintings

A large portion of this paper is dedicated to analyzing the art of Catlin, Bierstadt, and Moran. In this appendix I have included images of the six paintings evaluated using the western ideals framework. These images are taken from the websites of the museums that currently hold the paintings. While the images are not of the highest quality, they allow the reader of this thesis to reference the images while reading the main text.

However, I suggest that the reader who is interested in these artists should utilize a few texts that I found very useful during my research. *George Catlin and His Indian Gallery*, edited by George Gurney and Therese Thau Heyman, includes color images of both *Fort Union* and *Black Hawk*. William H. Truettner's *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery* is also an invaluable resource which includes nearly all of Catlin's paintings.

Gordon Hendricks' *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West* includes a two-page spread of *Valley of the Yosemite*, in addition to a comparison of *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* and *The Oregon Trail*. Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber's *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise* is also a very useful resource, as is Baigell's *Albert Bierstadt*, which includes quite a few high quality color plates in addition to an excellent analysis of Bierstadt's work.

Finally, Nancy K. Anderson compiled an excellent catalogue of Thomas Moran's paintings for the National Gallery of Art with the aptly named *Thomas Moran*. This book contains color images of both *First Sketch Made in the West at Green River, Wyoming* and *Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*. It also has an extremely thorough and excellent biography of the titular artist.

Each of these books provides not only excellent images of the artists' work but also detailed analyses of the artists' lives that I could not hope to surpass. Anyone wishing to study

these artists further is encouraged to study the above texts for additional information and as references to relevant primary and secondary sources.

**Fig. 1**

***Fort Union, Mouth of the Yellowstone River, 2000 Miles Above St. Louis, 1832***

George Catlin, 1796–1872

Oil on canvas, 11 ¼ x 14 ⅜ in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.



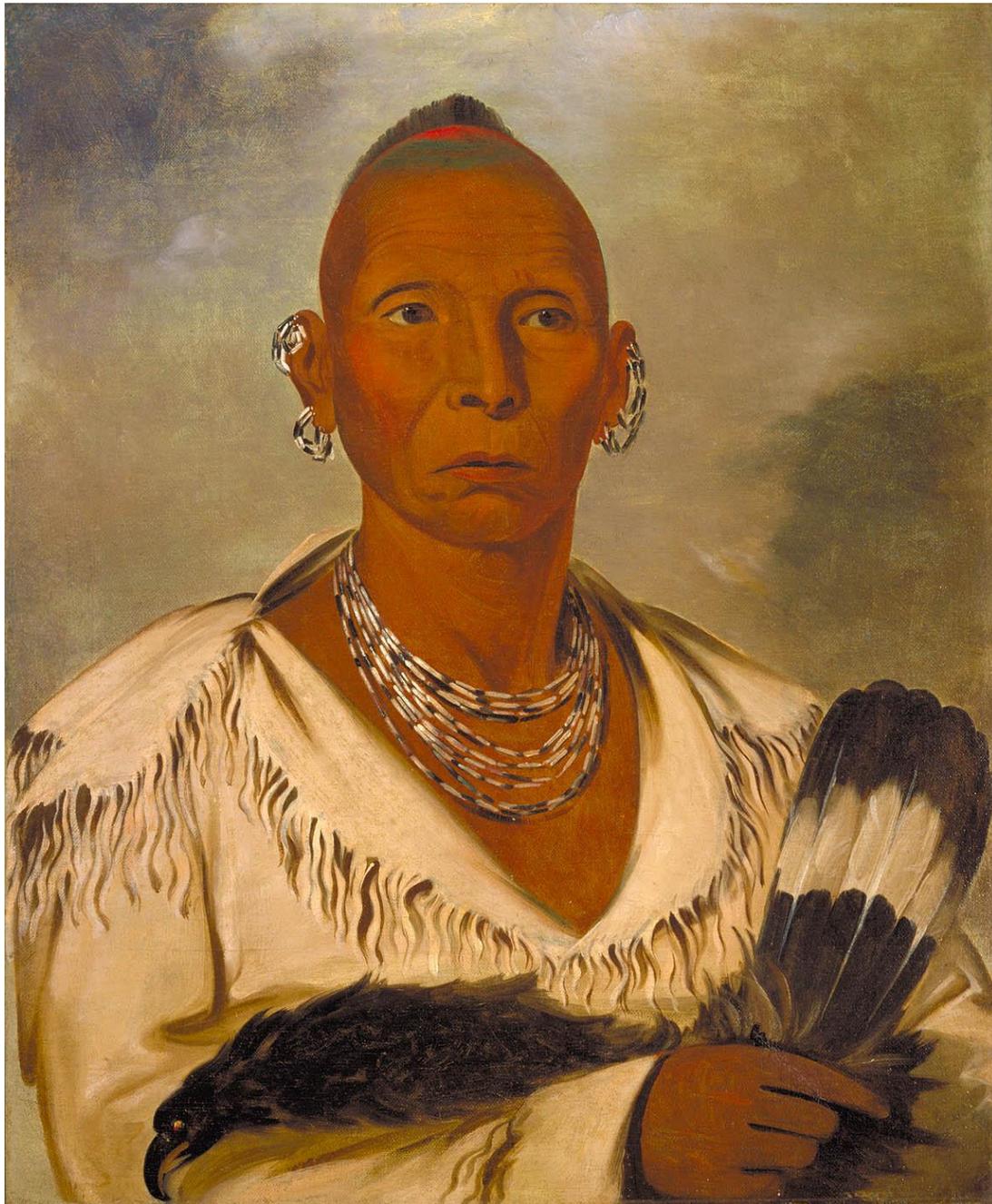
**Fig. 2**

*Múk-a-tah-mish-o-káh-kaik, Black Hawk, Prominent Sac Chief, 1832*

George Catlin, 1796–1872

Oil on canvas, 29 x 24 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.



**Fig. 3*****Valley of the Yosemite, 1864***

Albert Bierstadt, 1830–1902

Oil on paperboard, 11 7/8 x 19 1/4 in.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



**Fig. 4**

***Emigrants Crossing the Plains, 1867***

Albert Bierstadt, 1830-1902

Oil on Canvas, 60 x 96 in.

The National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center, Oklahoma City



**Fig. 5**

***First Sketch Made in the West at Green River, Wyoming, 1871***

Thomas Moran, 1837-1926.

Watercolor, 3.5 x 7.75 in.

Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa



**Fig. 6**

***Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, 1872***

Thomas Moran, 1837-1926.

Oil on Canvas, 84 x 144 in.

Department of the Interior Museum, Washington D.C.



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- Taught 10<sup>th</sup> grade Honors Recent American History and Government
- Wrote daily lesson plans using the principles of Understanding by Design
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- Students achieved an average score of 81% on the multiple-choice final exam for Recent American History, surpassing the district average
- Designed and implemented a campaign election project which will be included in the curriculum of a new American Government and Economic Systems course
- Integrated Promethean Board technology and student laptops with daily lessons
- Observed and aided mentor teacher with AP Comparative Government

*Pre-Student Teaching* *Altoona Area Junior High* Spring 2009

- Observed and taught 7<sup>th</sup> grade Geography for 8 weeks
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*Camp Counselor* *Summer's Best Two Weeks* Summer 2009

- Co-led a cabin of 10 campers during each two-week term
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*Senior Counselor* *Spruce Lake Wilderness Camp* Summer 2007

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V.I.P.S. Tutor at State College Area School District

Fall 2007 to Spring 2009

Penn State Navigators Bible Study Leader

Fall 2008 to Spring 2010