

# Art into History: Western Landscapes and the Politics of Culture

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In the early 1990s a number of public museums and exhibits in the United States suddenly turned into political battlefields, and curators and directors suddenly found themselves in the shooting line of a political "culture war" over the interpretation of American history and identity. This happened, for example, to Martin Harwit, former director of the National Air and Space Museum and responsible for the derailed fiftieth anniversary exhibition of the bombing of Hiroshima. Harwit, who came from a professorship in astronomy at Cornell University, had been hired to improve the museum's scholarship. As it turned out, however, an academic approach to American history was in conflict with "patriotic orthodoxy," as he sees it in his account of the much publicized events, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay*.<sup>1</sup> Because of Enola Gay Harwit lost his job. He was dismissed by the Smithsonian's new secretary, Michael Heyman, on the recommendation of the new critical members of the Institution's Board of Regents, which had undergone a transformation after the GOP took over control of Congress in 1994.

Events did not develop quite as far in the case of National Museum of American Art (NMAA), which in 1991 staged an equally controversial exhibit, "The West as America." But, as this article will demonstrate, it did come close.

1. Martin Harwit, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay*. (New York: Copernicus, 1997). See also Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*. (New York: New Press, 1992).

## "Culture War" and the politics of public history

Until the Vietnam War, the role of American national museums as constructors of collective memories and national identity was more or less unquestioned. The "hidden curricula" of their exhibits could remain unstated because collections and exhibits in general reflected consensual notions about what sort of "imagined community" Americans belonged to and what type of historical narrative did justice to the "American experience."

Even well into the 1980s, for example, the museums under the Smithsonian Institution remained largely untouched by "new history," i.e. the reinterpretations of the past that had been taking place since the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> In response to the Reagan presidency and its tendency to remythologize the American past for political purposes, however, curators and museum directors nationwide appear increasingly to have felt a need to bring more scholarly approaches to bear on public history and, thus, to contribute to creating greater critical awareness in the public of the political uses of history. These efforts culminated in the early 1990s – after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the sudden absence of the cold war argument from politics – when the Reagan coalition seemed to be falling apart and conservative Republicans were looking for issues that might reunite their constituencies on a single issue. For a few years in the early 1990s, some social conservatives held the notion of "culture war" – against liberal attacks on traditional American ideals and "family values" – to be such a remedy.

The so-called culture war of the late 1980s and early 1990s opened with a heated debate on the role of art and cultural institutions in either preserving traditional "national" values or becoming the media through which new identities in a changing American society could be negotiated in the public realm. To many social conservatives, however, the very notion that values and identities might be discussed was regarded as morally corrupting. According to the chairperson of the National

2. Cf. Barton J. Bemstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York: Random House, 1967). Peter N. Carroll and David W. Noble, *The Free and the Unfree: A New History of the United States* (Saddle Brook, N.J.: American Book-Stratford Press, 1977). Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne Cheney, it reflected the extent to which "radical relativists" of a "postmodern generation" had spread their message. This relativism, she held

[...] has affected schools, where in the name of group politics, students are taught fantasy rather than fact.... It has changed cultural institutions such as museums, where curators now see politics as an important part of their mission. It has affected private lives, as psychotherapists, believing objective truth to be an outdated concept, urge patients to lodge accusations of sexual abuse even when there is no evidence to support such a charge... [And] it has changed public life, as journalists have come to disdain objectivity and as public figures have felt less and less constrained by reality.<sup>3</sup>

In her book from 1995, *Telling the Truth*, from which this quote stems, Lynne Cheney picked out the Smithsonian Institution – "heavily dependent on taxpayer dollars" – as a primary example of a public institution which had come under the sway of the radical "academic establishment" and which showed great disdain for ordinary "citizens who come through their doors."<sup>4</sup> The examples she referred to were the Enola Gay exhibit, an exhibit on World War I, and "The West as America."

## The Columbus Quincentenary

"The West as America" was meant to be the NMAA's contribution to the 1992 quincentennial commemoration of Columbus' "discovery" of the Americas. A commemorative event which had been officially sanctioned by many states and also by the Federal Government, which, however, decided only to sponsor exhibitions of a strictly informative nature such as the Library of Congress' *1492: An Ongoing Voyage*.<sup>5</sup> In hindsight this was a wise decision. For, predictably, the public debate about whether to celebrate or not to celebrate Columbus soon turned out to be fraught with

3. Lynne Cheney, *Telling the Truth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 17.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 151.

5. Cf. John Hébert, co-ordinator of the Library of Congress Quincentenary Program: "With the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage of 1492, we have an opportunity to reflect on the significance of an event that, however it may now be interpreted." Quoted from *1492: An Ongoing Voyage* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1992), p. 15. See also Congressional Research Services (CRS), *The Christopher Columbus Quincentenary: an Introduction to the Issues* (Washington: Library of Congress, May 5) 1992.

wide political implications, drawing into its orbit a number of contested issues of significance for the politics of the early 1990s: multiculturalism, environmental protection, wilderness conservation and the teaching of history in schools.

Only ten years before, Daniel Boorstin, former Librarian of Congress, director of the National Museum of History and Technology and senior historian of the Smithsonian Institution, had begun his bestselling book *The Discoverers* by declaring the discovery of America a symbol of the triumph of western civilisation worldwide:

My hero is Man the Discoverer. The world we now view from the literate West – the vistas of time, the land and the seas, the heavenly bodies and our own bodies, the plants and animals, history and human societies past and present – had to be opened for us by countless Columbuses. In the deep recesses of the past, they remain anonymous. As we come closer to the present they emerge into the light of history, a cast of characters as varied as human nature. Discoveries become episodes of biography, unpredictable as the new worlds the discoverers opened to us.<sup>6</sup>

It was the moral dimensions and ramifications of such "eurocentrism" – viz. the "us" in Boorstin's last phrase – which were at the core of the debate which preceded the anniversary. But as had been the case in the political battle in 1990 over the Mapplethorpe photo exhibit (erroneously claimed to have received direct taxpayer support) and the National Endowment for the Arts, no sharp lines were drawn between morality and politics. Mark Falcoff of the conservative American Enterprise Institute for Public Research, for example, openly defended the morality of the whole enterprise, conquest *cum* celebration, in an article in which he critiqued so-called historical "revisionism," ending with the question, "[H]as the spread of European civilization around the globe – not just in the western hemisphere – been on balance a positive factor in world history?" Not surprisingly, he answered his own question, "I think there can be no doubt that it has."<sup>7</sup>

Environmentalist Kirkpatrick Sale, who held the opposing view, concluded his book on Columbus, *The Conquest of Paradise* (1990), by summarizing reasons for not making 1992 an occasion for celebration but for protest:

6. Daniel Boorstin, *The Discoverers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986 (1983)), p. xv.

7. "The Moral Dimensions", *The American Enterprise*, 1991, quoted from reprint in *Dialogue*, no. 2, 1992, p. 26.

Many of those who know well the cultures that once existed in the New World have reason to be less enthusiastic about celebrating the event that led to the destruction of much of that heritage and the greater parts of the people who produced it; some have insisted on labeling the events of 1492 an "encounter" rather than a "discovery" and having it so billed for 1992, some others have chosen to make it an occasion to direct attention to native American arts and achievements, and others still are planning to protest the entire goings-on as a wrongful commemoration of an act steeped in bloodshed, slavery, and genocide. ... And some of those who have thought to draw attention to the environmental destruction wrought in the aftermath of the Discovery, particularly members of various Green movements in the industrialized world, have decided to use the occasion to draw into question the nature of a civilization that could take the earth close to ecocide.<sup>8</sup>

On their own part, the management of the NMAA openly sympathized with the non-celebratory stand and decided not to present a "balanced point of view" in their exhibit.<sup>9</sup> The curator responsible for "The West as America," William Truettner, remembers:

"The West as America" was not supposed to be a celebratory exhibition. It was an exhibition in which we tried to use images of the American West which gave a view of history which was more in line with recent historical studies about the American West. It did not simply repeat the idea that the images represented a heroic moment in American history... There was a combative atmosphere around the quincentenary already at that time, and the exhibition just exacerbated the combat by polarizing everybody's views again... It was that [sic] kind of exhibition where you were either for or against.<sup>10</sup>

## Re-reading the past for the sake of the present

The "West as America" was an exhibit that was meant to be more than just an art exhibit. It was intended to convey a message that might make the audience reflect critically on how images of the West had affected "national behavior" and Americans' view of themselves: American

8. Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (London: Papermac, 1992 (1990)), p. 362.

9. Elizabeth Broun, "The Story Behind the Story of *The West as America*," *Museums News*, September/October 1991.

10. Interview, June 1994.

history, identity and values. Because this message implied a refutation of popular myths about "the opening of the West," the curator could not rely solely on the art that had conveyed such images, nineteenth century landscape paintings. He also had to add a textual commentary which could tell the visitors what the paintings signified. The viewing of the exhibit, thus, involved the visitor very literally in a reading of the past through the eyes of an interpreter. The intervention of the curators as interpreters of public history, however, turned out to be a highly controversial enterprise.

The emphasis of the exhibition was more on ideas than on aesthetics, on the relationship between "ideology" and "image" as William H. Truettner writes in his introduction to the voluminous "catalogue." New western history was represented in this collection of scholarly essays by Howard R. Lamar of Yale University. But it was the spirit of Patricia Limerick, Lamar's former post-graduate student and one of the most cogent and politically engaged representatives of the recent approach to western history, which put the whole project into a contemporary perspective.

In her study from 1987, *The Legacy of Conquest*, Limerick emphasizes the currency of past exploits and ideas. In a more popularized version – after the news of the "scandal" of the exhibit had hit the media in April 1991 – Limerick explained to the readers of the *People Weekly* why she felt it was of crucial importance for Americans to rethink the history of the West. The West, she said, was a key to many of the questions that Americans were concerned with in the present time:

If the American West is just a place where the Anglo-American imagination runs free and paints whatever images it pleases, then we can't live responsibly in this region. The West is a real place with lots of pressing questions – human relations, land use, attitudes toward nature. We have to know where we came from in order to deal with those issues.... We need to look at why we are exhausting our water resources, why we are polluting our environment, how and why we are tearing each other apart over race, language or culture. We must build a sense of community, a common ground."

As for Elizabeth Broun, director of the NMAA, this "common ground," or "new consensus," was already far in the making by 1991.<sup>12</sup> The exhibit just happened to open at a moment when patriotism was riding high. It,

11. *People*, April 22, 1991.

12. "The Story Behind the Story of *The West as America*," *op. cit.*

[...] may have been our misfortune to open the exhibit at a time when Desert Storm fever was sweeping the country, a time when Americans were feeling proud of their country, unified, happy to be past some of the Vietnam guilt. Just at that moment, our museum asked Americans to look hard at their own past and to confront the whole story – not just the upbeat version... We no longer feel we can tell the story of one dominant culture and call it history. Westward expansion was, instead, a confluence of the Anglo-American stream coming from the East, Hispanics from the South, and Asians from the Orient, all joining to make a pluralistic society dominated, it is true, by a white establishment in the East. I believe the exhibit invites a comparison of the historical events of the nineteenth century and changes happening in our society today.<sup>13</sup>

## Disclosing disguises

Traditionally American art historians have seen eastern landscapes and genre scenes (e.g. paintings of the Hudson River School, e.g.) as more typical reflections of national values – America as a "productive" and powerful new nation – than the representations of untamed nature in much of so-called western art. But perhaps it is time to "reinstate western images as an alternate version of those same aims and ideals," Truettner concludes his introduction to the catalogue, thus revealing his guiding thesis that the wild and uncultivated landscapes of western art are ideologically related to the inhabited and civilized "national landscapes" of the East.<sup>14</sup>

In order to prove this point, Truettner begins his article with a quotation from an emigrant guide book published in 1857, in which the author describes territorial expansion as the major accomplishment of mid-nineteenth century America:

If we boast of our own works of improvement in the West, have we not on hand a thousand proofs to sustain us? The former wild prairie, now a cultivated farm; the floating palaces upon the bosom of the river which but a little while ago rolled on undisturbed in its lonely beauty; the churches and school-houses that now stand where

13. *Ibid.*

14. "Ideology and Image: Justifying Westward Expansion," in William H. Truettner, ed.. *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* (Washington and London: The Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), p. 51.

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stood a few summers since the Indian's wigwam; the steam-cars, that fly across the land swifter than the light-footed Chippewa, the arrow from his bow, or the deer that he hunted, – are not all these proofs enough that we are justified in boasting of what we have accomplished?<sup>15</sup>

To this Truettner answers:

Besides extolling expansionism, the passage skillfully disguises the problems of a nation in transition – America shedding its heritage as a wilderness republic and establishing itself as an industrial democracy. Each image – the farm, steamboat, church, and schoolhouse – has been selected to convince the reader that the passage from past to present was inevitable, beneficial, and, above all, peaceful.<sup>16</sup>

The word "disguise" is crucial here, as it reveals Truettner's own agenda as curator and art historian, namely to decode the iconography of nineteenth century paintings from the American frontier and disclose it as ideology. As the subtitle of the book and exhibit indicated – "Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920" – the aim of the exhibit was not merely to interpret paintings, but to re-interpret American history: to strip public history – largely dependent on "images" – of the accretions of false (i.e. "ideological") interpretations and to replace it with a "true" one.

Beneath the layers of myth, Truettner finds the gospel of progress, which he sees as "a religion, in a way, a belief in democracy and free enterprise as key factors in creating a superior civilization" and presupposing "industrial growth and territorial expansion as the means to accomplish that end."<sup>17</sup>

Western expansion depended on the efficacy by which the news of a territory open to colonization was spread. Eastern investors and industrialists, who originally instigated the expansion, saw art as a means to that end. Both in its authentic and its mass-produced, popularized forms, paintings and pictures of western landscapes were supposed to encourage prospective settlers to migrate westward and to prepare them for the higher national purpose of the journey even before leaving the East:

15. Truettner quotes from N.H. Parker, *The Minnesota Handbook for 1856-57*. *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Americans moving into the lands west of the Mississippi brought with them consistent and well-defined attitudes toward democracy, progress, Christianity, and Anglo-Saxon culture. When one begins to strip away the layers of meaning that paintings of the West have acquired in our time, it can be seen that the act of representing this expansionist process is almost as unique as the events of this particular era. Furthermore, the images that evolved from an artistic appraisal of the process offer a transparent view of what was then construed as national purpose.<sup>18</sup>

Emphasizing this expansionist purpose – rather than the ennobling and civilizing experience it has generally been held to be since the publication of Fredrick Jackson Turner's thesis of the significance of the Frontier in American history – Truettner links the "conquest of the West" to the concept of Manifest Destiny, referring to historical studies that have drawn the connections between expansionist rhetoric and American foreign policy in the 1960s. His favored authority was Richard Slotkin, whose *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (1985) and the earlier *Regeneration through Violence* (1973) see the settlement of the West not as the act of courageous and rugged individualists but as the product of "the developing political economy of the Metropolis" that regulated the demand for unappropriated resources beyond the settlement boundaries. It was precisely this metropolitan-based expansion system that welded the alliance between patrons and artists:

No major artist was part of the moving frontier, and historical references in paintings of the nineteenth-century West create only the illusion of authenticity. They more accurately represent the values of the metropolis and were painted by artists who were themselves urban dwellers.<sup>19</sup>

And yet their images show humble pioneering individuals fearlessly pushing the frontier westward – fur trappers, riverboatmen, farmers and cowboys – thereby justifying westward expansionism by disguising it as a democratic effort. They were, in essence, acts of myth-making capable of leading not only contemporary but also later generations of Americans into erroneous conceptions of the past. But, Truettner adds, recent scholarship has slowly "isolated myth as a fable dealing only selectively

18. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

with history and imposing on historical events a certain convenient interpretation" – myth here being used in the Barthian definition as "ideology: as an abstraction broadly defining the belief system of a particular group or society":<sup>20</sup>

In each image it serves to extol progress, "authorizing" westward expansion as a beneficial national undertaking. Ideology functions smoothly and effectively in these images to justify the headlong rush across the continent. It does so with a screen of its own – a developed language that flows effortlessly across social and moral issues, which were not unrecognized in their own time but have become the focus of recent scholarship. The ideology, in effect, mounts a compelling argument on behalf of progress while masking itself as "language", as a detectable phenomenon. This often confers on images of westward expansion a quality of absolute legitimacy, as if what is being described is natural and unquestionable and therefore a fully sanctioned enterprise.<sup>21</sup>

The imbeddedness of expansionist ideology in western art does not presume, however, that the artists consciously conspired to make "the end result justify the means." It is only when "viewed from a new perspective" – i.e. in its contemporary recontextualization – that this agenda, with its dire political implications for present-day America is revealed.

### **Dialogue or didacticism?**

It was these contemporary political implications – environmental, demographic, cultural – which caused resentment among some visitors, especially because the exhibit was arranged in a way that made it difficult for visitors to draw their own conclusions. The commentary was placed on captions from the beginning to the end of the exhibit, which had been divided into six thematic sections: "Prelude to Expansion: Repainting the Past", an introductory section followed by "Picturing Progress in the Era

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 40

21. *Ibid.*

of Westward Expansion", "Inventing the Indian", "Claiming the West", "The West as America" and "Doing the Old America."

Many visitors found the new perspective refreshing as the five visitors books document in full. These books were meant to establish a dialogue with the viewers, and today they make up a treasure trunk for scholars interested in studying popular perceptions of the political issues dealt with in the exhibit and the public debate that it produced:

Thanks for the demystification of Manifest Destiny! (March 15)

Beautiful commentaries on some bad art. Thanks! (March 16)

People don't want to know the truth! Thank God for the Smithsonian! (April 14)

It's about time art museums like the NMAA forgo their usual aesthetic discussions about the art they exhibit and help to deconstruct the usual propaganda foisted on the American public by other institutions of learning. (April 30)

The most intelligent presentation I have ever seen. And, though historical, the most current. Aren't we still creating enemies to prove our "superior" rights on this earth? Only the locations have changed. They are now abroad in the "new world order". That these magnificent pieces can also advance our understanding is a tribute to the curator. (June 8)

Others, however, were critical of the message:

An exhibit of *revisionist* bulljive. Made by anemic, analytical, academics who shed no blood, sweat, or tears in the frontier of the West. (March 16, written by a Californian)

Beautiful paintings. Dumb commentaries. Get a new staff. (March 16)

Deconstructionist b.s.!

An insult to American history. (May 26)

My name is Tony – I felt the paintings were wonderful, and the commentary was the bitter griping of an academic liberal who knows the American left will forever be out of power. (June 3)

This exhibit [is] its own hidden text. Beneath the surface smoulders bigotry, violence, and nihilism. I would guess the authors would have nicely gotten on with the worst exploiters of the "Old West"... These kinds of distorted exhibits undermine anything good and humane in our country. (April 5)

Others, again, refrained from invective and instead offered lengthy and often thoughtful discussions or commentary (some even wrote a full page):

I agree we were deluded. Where would we be as a nation without it, though? (March 21)

The *content* of the commentary provides a valuable and too-often neglected perspective on the American West, but the *tone* of the commentary is insulting: smug, superior, self-righteous. Also, the heavy-handedness of the interpretation often obscures ambiguities in the art. For example, the allegedly glorified Spaniards in "The Storming of Teocalli" are far from glorified. One throws an infant from a height; one plunders gold from a corpse. Surely the image here is more complex than the commentary indicates. And, overall, this is a serious flaw in the exhibit: railroading one polemical line over all the art at hand. Not unlike what the commentators themselves are accusing others of. (March)

To this another visitor added: "Absolutely true!!." This comment is an example of one of the most interesting features of the visitors' books (which totaled five instead of the one volume that the curator had originally expected), namely that it developed a dialogue not only between viewers and the museum but also among viewers themselves:

The editorialization on the intent of the artist introduce [sic] comments or suggestions of racism because of positioning or coloring is just plain nonsense. Give the artist credit for his or her work and the attempt to accurately portray the situations and scenery as they were. – The pictures are excellent. The comments are speculation at best. (March 14)

To this, another visitor responded:

I trust that the cultural ignorance of statements like those above and below, as well as moronic *Post Weekend* review will not deter you from telling the truth in future exhibits as well.

This book should be saved for historians who might note the number of people who still refuse to face the truth, at the end of this century, concerning the events of the last century. (May 19)

At times the commentary turns into a meta-narrative on the craft of the historian:

As an historian, I am moved by the clear-headed interpretation by museum curators. It's about time that we face our own history honestly and without romanticizing the past. (April)

Or:

A fine, intelligent, thought provoking exhibit. Perhaps the text is sometimes a bit heavy-handed – but the perspective is sharp. The success of the show is supported by the negative comments of Daniel Boorstin on the first page of this notebook – for he is a world class chauvinist and propagandist for nationalism. (March 23)

After the first couple of months, the museum's own magazine, *American Art*, did a count that showed that out of 735 comments 509 were positive.<sup>22</sup> The exhibit caused considerable international media attention and greatly increased the number of visitors to the museum compared with the preceding year. But that could partly be explained as the result of the unprecedented publicity the 160-year old museum received after journalists started reading the visitors' comments.<sup>23</sup>

"A perverse, historically inaccurate, destructive exhibit. No credit to the Smithsonian" is Daniel Boorstin's comment on the very first page of the visitors' book. The condemnation from the famous conservative and patriotic historian was immediately seized upon by the media and thereby greatly publicized the exhibit soon after it had opened.

Opinions came mostly from outside the art world. Most consequential for the political reaction that was to follow were articles by Alexander Cockburn and Charles Krauthammer who, by virtue of their status as syndicated columnists, had their opinions published in scores of local newspapers throughout the country.<sup>24</sup> Krauthammer's comments in *The Washington Post* are likely to have caught the attention of Republican senators and congressmen. Like many others, Krauthammer used Boorstin as authority and foil to his own crusade against the PC Left:

It is more than politically correct. It is, in the words of historian and former Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin, "perverse, historically, inaccurate, destructive." Boorstin understates the case. The art that adorns the exhibit ranges from the mediocre to the interesting. The art – Western landscapes, Indian portraits, historical tableaus – is a mere prop, necessary visual backup, for an effusive and running commentary. The walls are full of text: relentless, hectoring, revisionist text.<sup>25</sup>

22. *American Art*, vol. 5, no. 3, Summer 1991, pp. 2-11.

23. Andrew Gulliford, *The Journal of American History*, June 1992, pp. 199-208.

24. Cockburn was mainly fascinated by the comments in the visitors book, see *The Nation*, May 27, 1991, and his column "Ashes and Diamonds", *Isthmus* (Madison, WI) June 7 a.o.

25. Charles Krauthammer first wrote about the exhibit in *The Washington Post* on May 5, 1991 ("Westward Hokum, Political Correctness Comes to the Smithsonian." Later versions appeared in local newspapers in early June. Here quoted from *The Observer*, Charlotte, N.C., June 6, 1991. Boorstin's comment was cited widely. Apart from *The Washington Post*, e.g. *The Nation* and *Newsweek*, May 27, 1991, p. 70.

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The *content* of the commentary provides a valuable and too-often neglected perspective on the American West, but the *tone* of the commentary is insulting: smug, superior, self-righteous. Also, the heavy-handedness of the interpretation often obscures ambiguities in the art. For example, the allegedly glorified Spaniards in "The Storming of Teocalli" are far from glorified. One throws an infant from a height; one plunders gold from a corpse. Surely the image here is more complex than the commentary indicates. And, overall, this is a serious flaw in the exhibit: railroading one polemical line over all the art at hand. Not unlike what the commentators themselves are accusing others of. (March)

To this another visitor added: "Absolutely true!!" This comment is an example of one of the most interesting features of the visitors' books (which totaled five instead of the one volume that the curator had originally expected), namely that it developed a dialogue not only between viewers and the museum but also among viewers themselves:

The editorialization on the intent of the artist introduce [sic] comments or suggestions of racism because of positioning or coloring is just plain nonsense. Give the artist credit for his or her work and the attempt to accurately portray the situations and scenery as they were. – The pictures are excellent. The comments are speculation at best. (March 14)

To this, another visitor responded:

I trust that the cultural ignorance of statements like those above and below, as well as moronic *Post Weekend* review will not deter you from telling the truth in future exhibits as well.

This book should be saved for historians who might note the number of people who still refuse to face the truth, at the end of this century, concerning the events of the last century. (May 19)

At times the commentary turns into a meta-narrative on the craft of the historian:

As an historian, I am moved by the clear-headed interpretation by museum curators. It's about time that we face our own history honestly and without romanticizing the past. (April)

Or:



A fine, intelligent, thought provoking exhibit. Perhaps the text is sometimes a bit heavy-handed – but the perspective is sharp. The success of the show is supported by the negative comments of Daniel Boorstin on the first page of this notebook – for he is a world class chauvinist and propagandist for nationalism. (March 23)

After the first couple of months, the museum's own magazine, *American Art*, did a count that showed that out of 735 comments 509 were positive.<sup>22</sup> The exhibit caused considerable international media attention and greatly increased the number of visitors to the museum compared with the preceding year. But that could partly be explained as the result of the unprecedented publicity the 160-year old museum received after journalists started reading the visitors' comments.<sup>23</sup>

"A perverse, historically inaccurate, destructive exhibit. No credit to the Smithsonian" is Daniel Boorstin's comment on the very first page of the visitors' book. The condemnation from the famous conservative and patriotic historian was immediately seized upon by the media and thereby greatly publicized the exhibit soon after it had opened.

Opinions came mostly from outside the art world. Most consequential for the political reaction that was to follow were articles by Alexander Cockburn and Charles Krauthammer who, by virtue of their status as syndicated columnists, had their opinions published in scores of local newspapers throughout the country.<sup>24</sup> Krauthammer's comments in *The Washington Post* are likely to have caught the attention of Republican senators and congressmen. Like many others, Krauthammer used Boorstin as authority and foil to his own crusade against the PC Left:

It is more than politically correct. It is, in the words of historian and former Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin, "perverse, historically, inaccurate, destructive." Boorstin understates the case. The art that adorns the exhibit ranges from the mediocre to the interesting. The art – Western landscapes, Indian portraits, historical tableaux – is a mere prop, necessary visual backup, for an effusive and running commentary. The walls are full of text: relentless, hectoring, revisionist text.<sup>25</sup>

22. *American Art*, vol. 5, no. 3, Summer 1991, pp. 2-11.

23. Andrew Gulliford, *The Journal of American History*, June 1992, pp. 199-208,

24. Cockburn was mainly fascinated by the comments in the visitors book, see *The Nation*, May 27, 1991, and his column "Ashes and Diamonds", *Isthmus* (Madison, WI) June 7 a.o.

25. Charles Krauthammer first wrote about the exhibit in *The Washington Post* on May 5, 1991 ("Westward Hokus, Political Correctness Comes to the Smithsonian." Later versions appeared in local newspapers in early June. Here quoted from *The Observer*, Charlotte, N.C., June 6, 1991. Boorstin's comment was cited widely. Apart from *The Washington Post*, e.g. *The Nation* and *Newsweek*, May 27, 1991, p. 70.

Art critics were divided over the exhibit. Most damning was Michael Kimmelman's review article in *The New York Times*. Kimmelman found the exhibit "simplistic" and "preachy." It was a way to force works of art into a cultural straitjacket. There were many more historical ambiguities, divided views and nuances than the captions acknowledged, he claimed.<sup>26</sup> One type of myth was just being replaced by another, wrote Alan Trachtenberg of Yale University in *Art in America*. Trachtenberg agreed that "old answers are disintegrating before new realities," but he deplored that the curators had failed to construct a different way of thinking about the nation itself, "one which would take diversity and multiplicity as much into account as distortion and ideological rhetoric" by for example including works by Native Americans.<sup>27</sup> In their compulsion to demystify and expose virtually every displayed work as serving a hegemonic function

[...] the curators tended to deprive viewers of a potentially far more complex view. By a strange twist of intention, they tended to replicate – through reversal – the very beliefs and attitudes they wanted to repudiate. Their demythologizing process led to a simplistic, negative version of the West, a remythologizing of the subject construed in much the same way, only now the focus of all that is wrong with America.<sup>28</sup>

Even sympathizing reviewers (among whom was *Time Magazine's* Robert Hughes) found that a good and "useful" idea expounded by mostly "measured" and "reasonable" writers lost its complexity and historical solidity when transformed into rather "naive," "prosecutorial" and "educational" wall labels.<sup>29</sup>

But it will probably be for the political intervention that the exhibit will be remembered. It began when two Republican members of the Senate Appropriations Committee (responsible for the funding of the Smithsonian), Ted Stevens of Alaska and Slade Gorton of Washington State (later to be followed by Wyoming's Alan Simpson) organized a committee hearing on October 24 at which they expressed their concern

26. *The New York Times*, May 26.

27. *Art in America*, September 1991, p. 122.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

29. See, e.g. Edward J. Sozanski, "'Westward Ho': Naive but Useful", *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April, 21, 1991; Robert Hughes, "How the West Was Spun", *Time*, May 13, 1991.

over a leftist slant in the representation of American history. "To see that exhibit... I'll tell you that really set me off... I'm going to get other people to help me make you make sense,"<sup>30</sup> Ted Stevens shouted to Smithsonian secretary Robert Adams, threatening to withdraw public funding through the National Endowment for the Arts, which under Reagan had already been reduced by 33 percent.<sup>31</sup>

Stevens, Gorton and Simpson had for years been personally engaged in conflicts over conservation and immigrant issues in their home states and clearly saw the exhibit as the brainchild of leftist environmentalism. One of the few ironies of the hearing was that Ted Stevens himself had in fact not seen the exhibit. Instead, he based his accusations and statements on the views of art critic James Cooper, who in an editorial in *The American Arts Quarterly*, had written:

A civilization that rejects not only beauty but also the moral and spiritual foundations of the nation risks an internal crisis of monumental proportions. Free societies require virtuous citizens. To restore transcendent values, and encourage, honor, integrity, self-discipline and humility, we must first embrace them through our culture. To those art administrators who have abandoned absolute values for trendy political causes. it should be made clear that the arts belong not solely to those who receive its grants but to all the people of the United States.<sup>32</sup>

This Senate hearing was widely publicized and commented on. What the public has never learned, however, is that even on July 23 of the same year, four Minority members of the House Subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds (James M. Inhofe, John Duncan, Helen Delich Bentley and C. Christopher Cox) had addressed Robert McC. Adams, referring to "recent newspaper columns" and "distinguished historian Daniel Boorstin." The letter ends:

The Smithsonian Institution has earned its outstanding reputation because of its balanced approach to the presentation of history. "The West as America" distracts from your normally high standards and appears to be a case of poor research and lame

30. Cited in *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, and *New York Times*. See John Fiske, *Power Plays, Power Works* (London: Verso) p. 179 note 21.

31. James Heilbrun and Charles M. Gray, *The Economics of Art and Culture: An American Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 254.

32. *Congressional Record – Senate*, October 24, 1991, S 15156. Cooper's editorial appeared as "A Season in Hell – The Inquisition of Political Correctness," *American Arts Quarterly*, Summer 1991.

commentary based on the author's speculation. We would appreciate your taking a closer look at this matter and assuring us that future exhibits of this kind will not be part of the Smithsonian's program.<sup>33</sup>

Robert McC. Adams, a Reagan appointee, appears embarrassed in his answer of August 27, in which he emphasizes that the exhibition must be seen in the context of 24 preceding shows of western art over the last two decades. He informs the Representatives that "the exhibition was the product, not of the idiosyncratic efforts of a single curator, but of an extended period of collaborative research by a team of scholars from several institutions, all of them well versed in the field of western art." Having claimed the exhibit to be part of "our consistent objective of providing a balanced approach in describing the American experience," however, Adams goes on to disclaim the policy that NMAA director Elizabeth Broun had given her full blessing to, i.e. the adoption of a "decisive point of view."<sup>34</sup> Adams writes:

Nevertheless, I think the Institution must recognize an aspect of the presentation – with wider applications – that needs to be reassessed. The labels in the exhibition were not adequately identified as the views of those who prepared them – hence fallible, subject to correction, with an unavoidable personal element, and, in any case, transient products of their time in just the way that the paintings were products of their time. The impression was left in the minds of some viewers that the Institution directly underwrote the positions taken in the labels so that they provided a kind of validated, "official" view of what the paintings signified and what the artists intended. I can assure you that no such institutional validation was ever intended.<sup>35</sup>

One of the consequences of the criticism of the textual commentary was that many of the captions were changed only three weeks after the exhibit had been opened. William Truettner later assured, however, that they were changed "on our own accord" and not after pressure from Robert McC. Adams. "The Smithsonian was pretty supportive," he said:

33. Public Works and Transportation Committee's subcommittee on Public Buildings and Grounds, letter from the office of James M. Inhofe, July 23, 1991.

34. See "The Story Behind the Story of *The West as America*", Museum News, September/October 1991.

35. Letter dated July 27, 1991, Smithsonian Institution.

We changed the captions because the show had created such a furor at that point that we found that our message wasn't getting through, and there were certain captions that people were obviously more antagonized by than others. So we set about rewriting those to see if we couldn't communicate the ideas of the show more effectively.<sup>36</sup>

Truettner did admit, though, that the management had let him know they were seriously concerned about the threats to cut the funding of the Smithsonian.

An analysis of the first drafts, the original texts and the changed captions shows that William Truettner had relied on his assistant curator, Alex Nemerov, for drafts and Elizabeth Broun's "Kansas ear."<sup>37</sup> When he himself began to rewrite them, he stressed the fact that there is always an element of (political) interpretation and argument in exhibiting art and history. In some cases this necessitated a much longer text than the original one:

These images appear realistic but are carefully staged fictions. They persuaded nineteenth-century Americans that westward expansion was inevitable and just. They also justified the conflict and hardship of nation building.

The changed version reads:

Nineteenth-century artists and the public believed that these images represented a faithful account of civilization advancing westward. Grand compositions filled with light color, and factual detail *persuaded* viewers that western scenes were literally true. A more recent *approach argues* that these images are *carefully staged fictions, constructed from both supposition and fact*. Their *vole* was to *justify* the hardship and conflict of nation building.

This exhibition *advocates* the latter *view*. It assumes that all history is unconsciously *edited* by those who *make* it. Western scenes, therefore, extolled progress but rarely noted damaging social and environmental change. Looking beneath the surface of these images gives us a better understanding of why national problems created during the era of westward expansion still affect us today. [my italics]

Apart from emphasizing the relativity of the approach taken to history and the role of the curator/historian as interpreter of the past, the texts

36. Interview, June 1994.

37. Most of the original drafts, however, were written by Alex Nemerov (at the time writing his dissertation "Making History: Representations of the American West, 1885-1916") of Yale University and later revised by Truettner.

were, in general, considerably toned down versions of the originals as, for example in "Inventing the 'Indian'" from section 3, which originally read:

Nineteenth-century images of Native Americans by white artists are fictions occasionally based on facts. These images teach us more about the feelings and ideas of those who paid for them and made them than they do about the Indians whose lives they represent. Whether portraits of distinguished individuals or genre scenes, historical or allegorical in nature, these works give visual expression to white attitudes toward Native peoples who were considered racially and culturally inferior.

In its rewritten version, artistic complexity and historical value are allowed for, and the former accusation of racism is more implied than openly stated:

Nineteenth-century images of Native Americans are *a combination of fact and fiction*. They often include *ethnographic detail*, but they teach us more about the feelings and ideas of artists and patrons than about the "Indians" whose lives they represent. Whether portraits of distinguished individuals or genre scenes, *historical and allegorical* in nature, these images give visual expression to *white attitudes toward Native peoples*. [my italics]

William Truettner wanted to rewrite more captions, but stopped when even the rewrites themselves seemed to become a public and political issue: "Once we started rewriting captions, the press seemed to take out after us again and said that if we were doing so it must mean an admission that the show *was* overtly political, and that we were trying to tone down the message. But the reason we did it was that we could express the same ideas in a little less controversial form."<sup>38</sup> Truettner, however, refused to revise the basic message of the exhibit and its aim, to create a dialogue with the public with possible implications for a new understanding of what it means to be an American in the light of a reinterpreted past.

38. Interview, June 1994.

## Perspective

One might argue that the style of the exhibit, however educationally productive and politically well-intentioned, did limit the complex messages of the paintings, and was partly responsible for making the dialogue polarized and unproductive.

Of course many visitors who came expecting to have conventional national myths and collective memories confirmed were infuriated by what they read. But many of the critical responses were well-argued and often showed greater sense of nuance and complexity than the commentary. As a matter of fact, many seemed to express exactly that ambiguous mixture of feelings and attitudes that is reflected in much of the western art shown at the exhibit. As one critical visitor wrote:

The commentary suggests a "conspiracy" by easterners, wittingly or unwittingly encouraged by artists, to settle the west [sic] to the personal profit of the conspirators. The commentary suggests an evil intent. I do not believe that the settling of the west was an evil enterprise engineered by evil people for their personal advantage. Many people moved out west in the hope of opportunity. Yes, unfortunate events occurred in the westward expansion, but some positive events occurred as well. It's not all so black and white as the commentary suggests. (April)

No, most likely it was not so black and white in the past.

Nor is it as left and right in the present-day United States as the political reactions indicated in the heat of the "culture war" of the summer of 1991. As can be inferred from polls taken since the early 1980s, there is today wide bipartisan support in the American electorate behind existing legislation on environmental protection.<sup>39</sup> Indeed a majority think that more should be done to fight environmental degradation and preserve the remaining wilderness of the West. Many western Republican Senators and Representatives personally learned this lesson when, after the 1994 Republican Congressional landslide victory, they mistakenly and unsuccessfully began to attack the "environmental lobby" in the belief that they had support for this in their own constituencies. As it turned out – for example in the political battle over

39. Riley E. Dunlap, "Public Opinion and Environmental Policy," in James P. Lester, ed., *Environmental Politics and Policy: Theories and Evidence* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 63-114. Paul L. Murphy, *The Meaning of Free Speech* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1972), p. 15.

the Southern Utah wilderness areas in 1995-96 – they were wrong, as the West seemed to gain a new significance for "new westeners" and "cappuchino cowboys."

Moreover, by the 1996 presidential campaign, leading Republicans had become much more softspolten and cautious on cultural issues than they had been only a few years earlier, in 1992, when some failed to see that they might lose the election by campaigning on cultural rather than economic issues. By the end of the 1990s, the GOP seems to realize that it is a risky political gamble to campaign on a "politics of culture" at a time when many Americans, irrespective of party affiliation, appear to hold complex views on the landscape of the past and the culture of the present.