

## **The Taking – and Re-Making – of The West (additional historical information)**

From the earliest period of European colonization, images of Indians found expression in early drawings, engravings, portraiture, political prints, maps and cartouches, tobaccoist figures, weather vanes, coins and medals, and books and prints. Initially, depictions of Native males and females were used to symbolize the North American continent in the international iconography of the day, representations that proliferated. The Indian Queen, an emblematic figure in use by the end of the sixteenth century, symbolized the Western Hemisphere. Her successor, the Indian Princess, became representative of the American colonies. During the Revolutionary War period, America was portrayed as a feathered Indian defying British tyranny in printed materials of the day.

As the United States grew, it developed a mythology that helped provide Americans with a laudable national heritage while serving to rationalize the dispossession and conquest of indigenous peoples. As National Museum of the American Indian curator Cécile R. Ganteaume points out, “American Indian imagery has been used by the federal government to distinguish the United States from other nations and to define the nation for its citizens, by U.S. armed forces to express military might, by American corporations to signify integrity and by designers to add luster and cachet to commercial products.”

Institutionalized throughout the nation and exported to other countries, these images and others include dual portrayals of the good Indian (those who help Europeans) and the bad Indian (those who resist Europeans), nostalgic vanishing, brave warriors, romantic princesses, and countless ignoble images of brutality and degradation. Such representations obliterate or mask the realities of tribal nations struggling to maintain their populations, lands, resources, and sovereignty. American Indians are richly diverse, yet all too often their public portrayals—in books, advertisements, shop signs, terminology, and even children’s toys and games—are greatly at odds with actual Native peoples and cultures.

**A Dominant Narrative** is the lens through which history is told from the perspective of the dominant culture.

### **The Dominant Narrative of “He Said.” The European Viewpoint**

The only good Indian is a “good Indian”, those who reflect European values and beliefs.

Native Americans are violent, barbarous, “unpredictable” and in need of spiritual Christian guidance to convert them to a place of “goodness.”

Being Indian is an impediment to colonization and so, must be tamed or vanquished (by civilizing or by defeat).

**A Corrected Narrative** is an intentional effort to replace an existing narrative with something new. It is a powerful contributor to social change. This Corrected Narrative can lead to shifts in attitudes, behaviors, practices and policies — and can lead to deeper and lasting changes in systems and cultures.

### **The Corrected Narrative of “We Say.” The Native Perspective**

A good Indian is one who protects the land, honors his people, and respects their culture.

Representations of battles won (or lost) depict documentations of what actually happened. Modern work comprises culture-bound narratives, filled with emotions be they whimsical, ironic, provocative, in-your-face.

Being Indian is showing what “their reality” is through personal reflection.

Being Native American may mean being deeply involved in protecting, teaching and advancing the knowledge and traditions of one's Nation. Or it may mean being less connected to tribal communities while maintaining unique Native American identities in other ways within the larger society. There is no "one way" to be Native American. Every citizen of a respective Nation has a unique culture, history and tradition, and many people identify more as a citizen of a specific Nation rather than collectively as Native American. Even with such a strong identity, contributions and presence, however, contemporary Native American artists are largely invisible to the rest of the country. Until recently their voices were rarely heard seen in cultural centers and what little is reflected in those venues about Native cultures and issues is riddled with misinformation and confusion.

This is why it is important to see and discuss what the narrative was conveyed by those who came vs. what Native people saw/knew was their truth. We begin with a painting by an artist who is considered one of the consummate visual storytellers of the American West, Charles M. Russell.

### **The Death Song of Lone Wolf**

As I have mentioned, many works of art during the late 1800's and early 1900's spotlighted scenes of conflict, focused on the "winning of the West" or of how the West was being changed. Let's look at this battle scene. What do you think is happening? All seem to be Native. Who's winning? Why is one standing alone in the center? (Wait for visitors to answer). This painting is full of detail and pays close attention to each person (and horse). Looking closer one can see points of reference from the confrontation. Carefully rendered and showing important items such as shields, rifles, beadwork/feather patterns, one can – by knowing the clothing – note that there are both Apáasalooke (Crow) and perhaps, Assiniboine warriors fighting against the Oglala Lakota; even individuals could be identified by what a warrior was wearing. The primary figure – Lone Wolf – is singing his death song, as he has become aware that he and his war party have lost this battle. In short, this is an inter-tribal battle. However ... how would Russell have known who or what was happening? Good question!! This scene had to have been told to him which means he chose to convey what happened, he chose to romanticize the battle (ah, the brave warriors). In truth, he was not there and depending on the story versions he heard, he decided what to show and tell. Pure imagination on his part of the event (and unfortunately, we do not know the version that those who were at the battle).

So, as we are in the midst of discussing the details of a battle and how someone who was not Native would depict a conflict, let's look at a Native telling of a battle and how that would look like ...

### **Custer's War**

1876. The Battle of Greasy Grass (also known by Europeans as The Battle of Little Big Horn). A stunning victory by the Cheyenne and Lakota peoples over the United States Army and one that to this day is still "hotly" discussed. Actual accounts of this battle by those who fought there were incredibly rare by Native people. This richly illustrated and annotated depiction of who fought who and how was portrayed beautifully on this muslin by One Bull. He showed himself holding Sitting Bull's shield (here, the light green; to note, One Bull was Sitting Bull's nephew), he showed himself rushing to rescue a friend, and detailed his warrior allies standing their ground and routing the enemy, counting coup as the US soldiers retreated hastily! This extremely "comprehensive" work told the true story through pictographic approaches (which are a way to tell the story in a visual shorthand); this was important as the story would be told in councils and to families, and needed to be accurate and true.

We leave the story of war and as we do, we come to the story of exploring and settling the West. As mentioned, depending on who is telling the story, the truth is not what one always what it appears at first glance to be.

## **Voyageurs**

Here again is a work by Charles M. Russell. With Frederic Remington, Russell was considered the “truthsayer” of what was story of westward expansion and all that it exemplified. To those who were “civilized” he posed a fictional history based on what he felt politicians and city folk should know. He celebrated the West and incorporated the myths and its stereotypes ... all the way to sentimentalizing Native people. He definitely knew his subject matter intimately ... but not necessarily the actual events that he depicted. He was a gatherer of stories and envisioned his work as the way to “make history” ... he was a close observer of people, how they dressed, how they interacted and celebrated the traditions and virtues of the western story. This painting shows the coming of the Europeans navigating new territory, with a priest, a voyageur and yes, a Native guide. Depending on how you interpret the looks of all three, I think the story of this venture would be told very differently.

In contrast we move to a painting by Jim Denomie, a contemporary artist who places Native people front and center, and well, asks that you “think hard” as to what is actually happening between them (and what are they thinking about)

## **The Delegation**

This work reminds me of The Three Horsemen! Steeped in pop culture, these Native warriors are on the move and projecting a humorous, sly, very personal approach to depicting who “we” are. The narrative speaks to chiefs and their “moment in the sun” – these are prominent men going off to Washington D.C. to confer with those “others” in power. The full regalia conveys their status. The painted faces (on them and their horses) speak to the serious nature of their visit. All, however, is done a bit tongue-in-cheek. Denomie wants you to remember the human-ness inherent in these men. The visual approach may be a bit off-beat, however, the artist combines reality and imagination to push a serious dose of righteous attitude at the viewer. This is not storytelling to continue the accepted narrative; this is an in-your-face, fiercely painterly style that tells the story with its emotion bared.

Before leaving these four, I’d like to focus on how each expressed Native people in their work. What would you say about how they visualized who they saw?

We have looked at two thematic narratives – conflict and war, and the exploring and travelling through the West. Another visual theme that invites us to connect with the West is the use of animals and how showing them tells the American West in a different way ...

## **A “Bear” Chance**

I know you are probably smiling looking at this scene. It seems as if the bear all about eating yet, what else does this painting tell us? Phillip R. Goodwin was all about telling the story of the West from the animal’s viewpoint by what they were and how they acted. He specialized in depictions of real wildlife; nothing fictional here! The outdoors life – fishing, hunting, camping, and being out West – was his specialty. He considered himself very much an American painter and illustrator. He reveled in showing the wilderness and all that was adventure. His stories spoke to how an animal really lived. His work was realistic yet influenced by the romanticism he absorbed through his friendship with Charles M. Russell, who loved his work as being “real”. Goodwin is best known for illustrating Jack London’s *The Call of The Wild* and illustrating covers for the magazine, *Outdoor Life*. His thoughts – he wanted to show animals in the woods doing what they should (and did) do, nothing more. He “immortalized” them, in a way ... much as the American West was shown by Russell and Remington.

Finally it is important to note what other aspects of this painting speak to civilizing and pulling back the wilderness. What else do we see? The absence of trees! The bear is looking for food from a constructed, wooden Cream of Wheat shipping carton. This painting is showing the “cleansing” of the environment to make way for farmers/towns. This bear is just one element that will need “to go” to make way for development and the advancement of the European settlers as they make their way West.

Now, let’s contrast Goodwin’s narrative approach of showing an animal’s nature and attempts to survive its new landscape with another artist who looks at animals in a more culturally-bound sense (though we still recognize these fuzzy ones) and who approaches the appropriation of Native life in a wry, yet piqued way.

### **Pocahontas Cessation**

OK – what a difference! Julie Buffalohead has jumped in to telling a story by using animals to “do the talking”. Evocative, whimsical and heartfelt, this work explores the commercialization and appropriation of Native culture (tinged with a bit of nostalgia) yet remains edgy by having the animals making a viewer “think hard.” Storytelling tells this artist’s feelings about being Native and the taking/remaking of Native stories; it is witty anthropomorphism whereby the attributes of human characteristics are placed within the animal. It is provocative as this work is saying “this is not who we are”. It is perpetuating a romantic notion of Pocahontas and John Smith but note – the squirrel is attempting to capture them. The rabbit is being the lookout. The mouse is listening to make sure no one is coming to stop them. These woodland animals are attempting to “stop the story” of un-truths: Pocahontas as a compliant and sensual woman who saved John Smith from being killed. Oh boy – these animals are so not being who or what they are in life; they are stand-ins for Native voices saying “this is NOT the story.” For Julie, animals allow her to use their inherent animal “natures” to tell the social commentary that they would tell. The Native myths that surround each animal is paired to human attributes. This work is intensely personal yet offers a deep introspective look at the worldview of Native people; one is pulled into the story that is a snapshot of a narrative that was made (yet not acknowledged by those who are Native).

Before leaving you, I show you two views of the Frank Myers Steiner Gallery of American Western Art. This gallery offers a visitor a visual narrative from both perspectives of how the West was seen (and won), and I feel it is a good “reference partner” to the traditional and modern art seen within The Americas galleries on the second floor (as seen in a few striking artworks shown).

It has been my pleasure to present this virtual tour today and to introduce you to Mia’s other galleries where Native artists have responded to the European narrative with their Corrected one. I hope that this tour has sparked your interest to explore more of what Mia has and also, the beauty of Native art in The Americas galleries.

I welcome you to visit soon and often.

Waneeshee (may the way be beautiful for you).