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Source: *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, Summer - Autumn, 1990, Vol. 4, No. 3/4 (Summer - Autumn, 1990), pp. 2-21

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3109013>

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Territory, Race, Religion

Images of Manifest Destiny

Matthew Baigell

In recent years, art historians have examined the religious, spiritual, and nationalistic elements in nineteenth-century American art and have explored the way these elements relate to the rhetoric of American individualism, self-reliance, providential protection, middle-class morality, and the establishment of a nation of continental dimensions. As part of what seems to be an ongoing celebration of nineteenth-century American art and culture, many of these commentators tend to regard these elements in a very favorable light. By doing so, they have neglected the baser aspects of American culture—particularly in regard to racism and territorial aggrandizement—not only in paintings of western scenes but in works with “eastern” subject matter as well. Unlike literary, cultural, and social historians, art historians are simply not dealing with the hard fact that, as Michael Rogin has written, “America clearly began not with primal innocence and consent but with acts of force and fraud. Indians were here first, and it was their land upon which Americans contracted, squabbled, and reasoned with one another.”¹

Among the recent writers on western subject matter, one can find, for example, art historian Peter Hassrick explaining that “like the frontier [that early western artists] recorded, their works exuded an aura of freshness

and innocence that induced critics to proclaim their purely American flavor.” Or, in a more specific approach, Sarah E. Boehme argues that “in much of Remington’s early work, the Indian was a foe who symbolized the hostile and resistant forces in the path of progress.” In response, it must first be noted that native Americans did not “symbolize” hostile and resistant forces. They *were* hostile and resistant forces. And second, it is necessary to critically challenge the ways in which whites used the idea of progress to eliminate native Americans. To evade this issue is to sidestep one of the central discussions in recent years of the relations between whites and native Americans. This kind of uncritical acceptance of a self-justifying, nineteenth-century viewpoint flies in the face of both contemporary historical knowledge and scholarly activity in cognate disciplines.²

The racist and imperialist subtexts of a significant amount of nineteenth-century American art must be taken into account if we are to place this work in its proper historical context. When read with these subtexts in mind, however, several familiar paintings become shocking visual counterparts to the most virulent writings found so abundantly in nineteenth-century books, magazines, and newspapers, as well as in the published speeches of political figures. This is particularly evident in

John Mix Stanley, Osage Scalp Dance (detail), 1845. Oil on canvas, 40¾ x 60½ in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of the Misses Henry





- 1 Charles Wimar, *The Attack on an Emigrant Train*, 1856. Oil on canvas, 55 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 79 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. *The University of Michigan Museum of Art*, Bequest of Henry C. Lewis

paintings completed circa 1850 and 1900, years that mark two periods in which the desire for territorial expansion coincided with a significant growth of racism in America.³ The earlier year coincides with the period of explosive territorial acquisition as a result of the Mexican-American War and the Oregon Compromise, an expansion that brought with it the acquisition of subject Mexican and Indian populations. The latter year coincides with the period of overseas expansion, particularly as a result of the Spanish-American War and the acquisition of subject Asian populations in Hawaii and the Philippines.

Two similar works from each

period—*The Attack on a Wagon Train* by Charles Wimar (1828–1862) and *The Emigrants* by Frederic Remington (1861–1909)—suggest the ways paintings helped decontextualize native Americans from their own histories so that they could be reassigned the roles of savages and barbarians who blocked “progress” (figs. 1, 2). Each shows a wagon train being attacked by native Americans. In both, the native American is depicted as a brute who kills defenseless women and children. Our hearts are meant to go out to the pioneers who bravely helped settle the West. The literature of the time is saturated with stories and articles

- 2 Frederic Remington, *The Emigrants*, ca. 1900. Oil on canvas, 30 x 45 in. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The Hogg Brothers Collection



equivalent to the condemnation of native Americans implicit in the paintings. For example, one author, writing in 1841, said that such dastardly provocations

*enlisted . . . the noblest sympathies of the heart; [such pioneers had] . . . a high and generous impulse. . . . They were not mercenary soldiers . . . but were patriots, united in the defence of their homes. . . . True, they often carried the war into the enemy's country, striking him with a violence as ruthless as his own; but it was to reclaim their property, to redeem their friends from a captivity worse than death, or to revenge the atrocities of the marauder.*⁴

Marauder was and remains a particularly manipulative word that needs to be examined outside the context of this quotation. Imagine, for example, that strangers appear in your backyard one day, announcing that they represent a superior civilization; they demand that you leave your property or be killed. Would you resist or comply? Many native Americans, faced with such a dilemma, chose to resist, doubtlessly unaware of Thomas Jefferson's eloquent state-

ment in the Declaration of Independence asserting the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet in an Orwellian inversion of images, if not language, the native Americans are shown as marauders, and the whites, the real plunderers who are seizing their lands, are portrayed as defenders. Wimar and Remington painted a kind of visual double-talk by reversing the roles of defenders and aggressors.⁵

Captivity images such as *Osage Scalp Dance* by John Mix Stanley (1814–1872) introduced the notion of interracial molestation, an issue still more inflammatory than same-race molestation in America (fig. 3). Paintings of male captivity, such as *Captured* by Remington, or of native Americans revealed in the act of scalping, such as *The Summit Springs Rescue, 1869* by Charles Schreyvogel (1861–1912), also instructed their white audiences in the barbaric treatment to which native Americans subjected their captives (figs. 4, 5). Such images provided visual parallels to the many contemporary stories available in books and magazines that described native Americans as sadistic torturers and killers. In



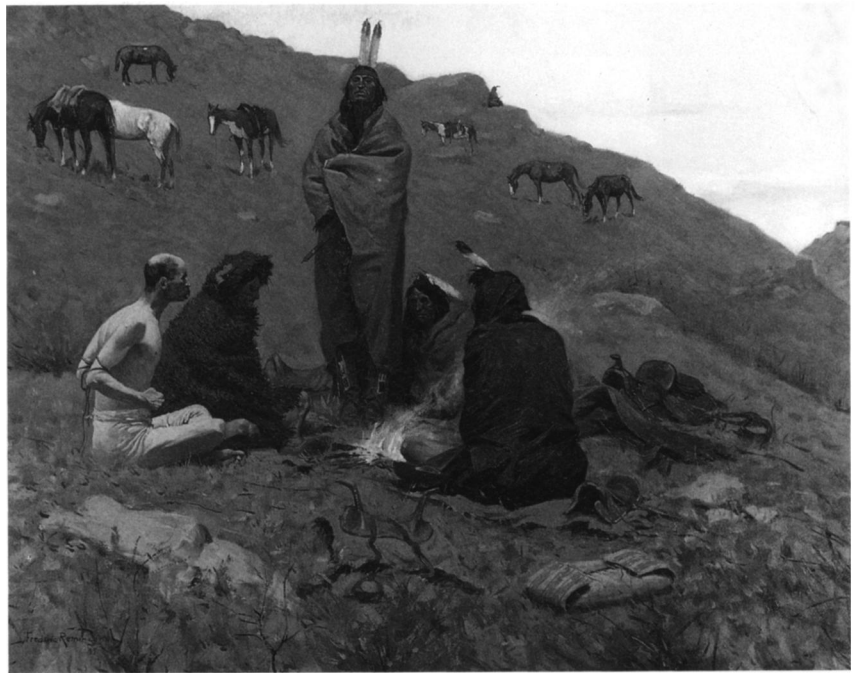
3 *John Mix Stanley, Osage Scalp Dance, 1845. Oil on canvas, 40³/₄ x 60¹/₂ in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of the Misses Henry*

1867 one author, for example, offered for contemplation the notion that “the nature of the outrages and barbarities perpetuated by these savages is not, I think, generally understood in the East. Murder and scalping are their mildest features.”⁶ Without compensatory images and literary texts depicting white cowboys and soldiers attacking, raping, and mutilating native Americans, such paintings as those of Stanley, Remington, and Schreyvogel helped further desensitize Americans to the destruction of native American lives, not to mention cultures.

All of these paintings were predicated on the assumptions that whites were entitled to western lands, that white settlement was inevitable, that justice was on the side of the whites, and

that whites were peaceful while native Americans were warlike. These assumptions can be traced to the first European settlements along the eastern coastline, but the rubric under which these assumptions were made came to be known as Manifest Destiny, a phrase invented in 1845 by journalist John L. O’Sullivan. Arguing against potentially hostile actions by Mexicans and the British in the mid 1840s, he wrote that it is “our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.”⁷ O’Sullivan was among those who argued for possession of the entire continent, from Panama to the North Pole, but even those who were territori-

- 4 *Frederic Remington, Captured, 1899. Oil on canvas, 27 x 40 1/8 in. Sid Richardson Collection of Western Art, Fort Worth, Texas*
- 5 *Charles Schreyvogel, Summit Springs Rescue, 1869, 1908. Oil on canvas, 48 x 66 in. Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming*



ally less aggressive also assumed that Americans were God's chosen people and therefore had claims that transcended laws, customs, or other people's rights. These notions had been asserted continually by public figures since the seventeenth century: they were applied first to the lands along the Atlantic coastline, then to the Mississippi River, then to the Rockies, and finally in 1819 to the Pacific Ocean.⁸

Possession of the land, which in the language of Manifest Destiny was a right given by God to whites, was anchored in Genesis 1:28: "God blessed them [Adam and Eve] and God said to them: Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth." Generations of whites, beginning with New England's John Cotton in 1630, interpreted



6 John Chapman, *The Baptism of Pocahontas*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 12 x 18 in. United States Capitol Art Collection

this passage to mean that tilling the soil gave Americans the right to possess it—to take it from the Indians as well as from French and English fur trappers, who did not work the land but merely lived off of it. In 1846, apropos of American claims to the Oregon Territory, John Quincy Adams even had Genesis 1:28 read into the *Congressional Record*.⁹

This position of Anglo-Saxon hegemony, which became America's inheritance, forcibly excluded from American history anyone who differed or disagreed. There could not be a unified history of the country unless the habits and customs of northwestern Europeans were accepted. Every other point of view was essentially marginalized. As one anonymous voice stated in 1846 (and this was not, by comparison with others, a

particularly rabid voice): "We were Anglo-Saxon Americans; it was our 'destiny' to possess and to rule this continent—we were *bound* to do it! We were a chosen people, and this was our allotted inheritance, and we must drive out all other nations before us!"¹⁰

The Baptism of Pocahontas by John Chapman (1808–1889) is especially interesting, even insidious, in this regard (fig. 6). In the Rotunda of the Capitol Building, where it has been seen by millions of visitors, the painting portrays native Americans cooperating in the destruction of their culture. If this painting has one subtext it is that white religion—namely, Christianity—represents civilization and that native Americans become acceptable only by becoming Christian and accepting white values and customs. (In our

own time, this painting would never survive the scrutiny of an affirmative action committee for any public building, let alone for the Capitol.)

But the subject of Chapman's painting was already anachronistic in 1840, for it was predicated on the discredited belief that native Americans could be incorporated into white society. As one scholar has suggested, "There is considerable evidence to show that after 1830 neither the mass of American people nor the political leaders of the country believed that the Indians could be melded into American society." By this time, biology had been yoked to American expansionist thought, and native Americans, along with Mexicans and blacks, had been assigned a position racially inferior to that of whites, particularly through the research of phrenologists and craniologists. As George Combe, the British phrenologist, asserted in 1841: "The existing races of native American Indians show skulls inferior in their moral and intellectual development to those of the Anglo-Saxon race, and that, morally and intellectually, these Indians are inferior to their Anglo-Saxon invaders, and have receded before them." American popularizers of phrenology such as Orson and Lorenzo Fowler claimed in one of their several publications that native Americans' "small amount of brain in the coronal region of the head, when compared with their immense development of the animal passions and selfish feelings, would bring them chiefly under the dominion of the animal nature of man, and render them little susceptible of becoming civilized, humanized, and educated."¹¹

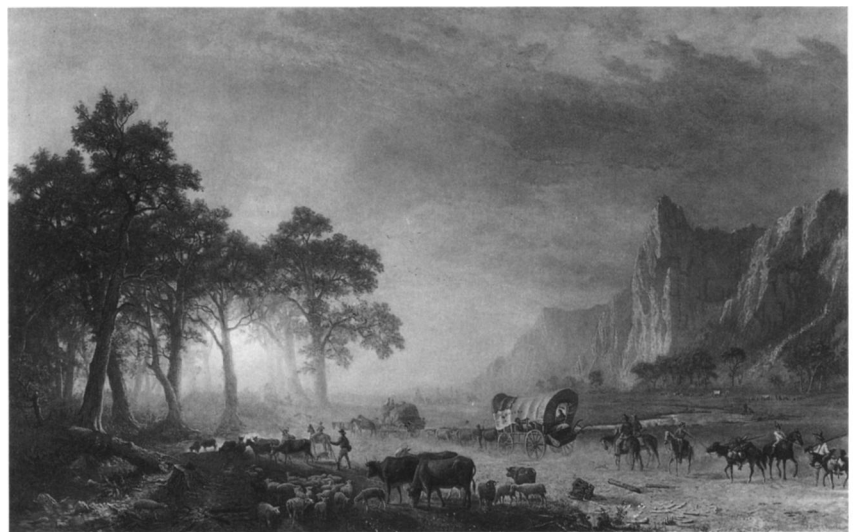
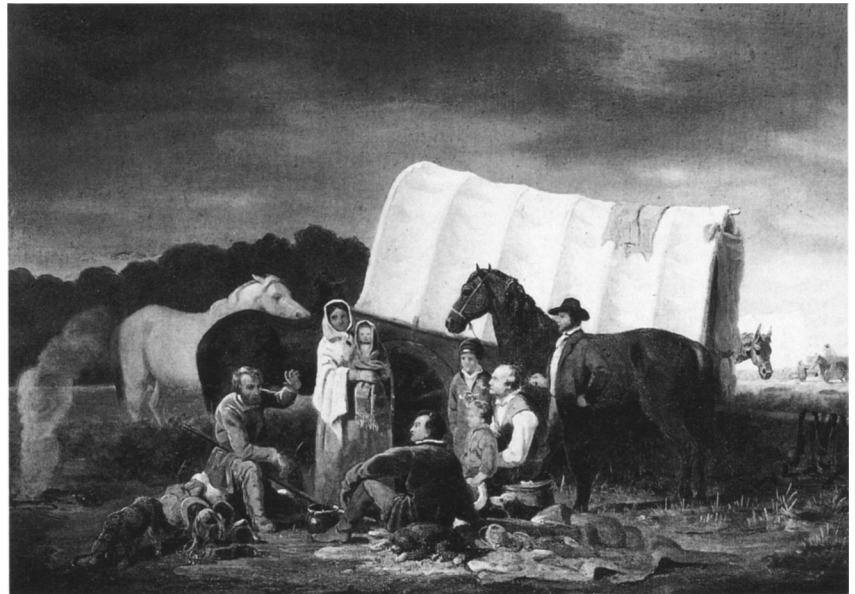
This type of language and the attitudes it engendered infested popular books and magazines from the early 1830s through the early twentieth century. Native

Americans were considered untamable and barbaric, thus justifying their elimination from areas of white settlement. This line of thought was tersely summarized by Samuel Bowles who, in his *Across the Continent*, proclaimed that if western settlement "cannot be secured, short of their [native Americans'] utter extermination, why extermination it must be. Else, we may as well abandon this whole region; give up its settlement; its subjugation to civilization, its development to wealth and Christianity."¹² So strong was the anti-Indian bias that arguments for polygenesis were seriously considered through the 1830s and 1840s. "The doctrine of the Unity of Race, so long believed by the world, is ascertained to be false," it was reported in 1854. "We are not all descended from one pair of human beings. . . . The negro till the end of time will still be a negro, and the Indian still an Indian." However self-serving the logic of this argument, it is worth noting that the famous scientist Louis Agassiz was among those who accepted polygenesis, believing that Adam and Eve had sired only the white race.¹³

Some artists recorded their disdain for native Americans. For example, in 1890 Remington described an Indian as a "human brute. . . . He was a perfect animal, so far as I could see. Never was there a face so replete with human depravity, stolid, ferocious, arrogant, and all the rest." Alfred Jacob Miller (1810–1874), on at least one occasion, realized "how little they are fitted for civilization and its artificial habits. . . . We looked upon [In-ca-t'-ash-a-pa] as a bloody minded fool." And George Catlin (1796–1872), despite his well-known sympathies for native Americans, was nevertheless a Manifest Destinarian, as it were. He considered land near the Mis-

7 William Ranney, *Old Scout's Tale*, 1853.
Oil on canvas, 13½ x 19½ in. *The Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma*

8 Albert Bierstadt, *The Oregon Trail*, 1869.
Oil on canvas, 31 x 49 in. *The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio*



souri River not as the present and future home of its current inhabitants but, in “a few years of rolling time,” as the site of “splendid seats, cities, towers and villas,” as well as “new institutions, new states, and almost empires.” For the native Americans dispossessed by these developments, Catlin offered this comment:

And what a splendid contemplation too, when one (who has travelled these realms, and can duly appreciate them) imagines them as they might in future be seen, (by some great protecting policy of

*government) preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a magnificent park, where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse, with sinewy bow, and shield and lance, amid the fleeting herds of elk and buffaloes. What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A nation's Park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!*¹⁴



9 Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*, 1861. Oil on canvas, 33 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 43 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Bequest of Sara Carr Upton

In other words, without being asked for their opinions, native Americans would become tourist attractions in something of a human zoo. In fact, in 1848, William Medill, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, suggested to Congress that two large reservations be set aside for Plains Indians so that whites could advance westward peacefully.¹⁵

Images of settlers streaming westward recorded typical occurrences of the day. But more important, such images reiterated the legitimacy of possession of the land by settlement and domestication while reinforcing the belief that genetically inferior native Americans would disappear before the advancing whites. Many paint-

ings of such scenes were mere anecdotal accounts of, say, stopping near a stream to water cattle or listening to an old-timer's story, as in *Old Scout's Tale* (fig. 7) by William Ranney (1813–1857). But others, such as *The Oregon Trail* by Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), give clearer pictorial evidence of the implications of Manifest Destiny (fig. 8). Bierstadt included in his painting all of the western landscapes—forest, plains, mountains, wet and dry areas. On the left, the settlers find water for their cattle, insuring sustenance of life in the West. In the center, the caravan moves over the dry plains toward the distant Indian dwellings, which will soon be obliterated.



10 *Thomas Birch, The Landing of William Penn, ca. 1850. Oil on canvas, 34 x 48 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, M. and M. Karolik Collection*

ated. The sun, symbolizing the Deity's presence, indicates that all will proceed with minimum discord. Bierstadt's painting completely mythologizes the advancing frontier, making it the visual equivalent to statements such as that by John Quincy Adams, one of the first to think in terms of continent-wide Manifest Destiny: "The whole continent of North America appears to be *destined by Divine Providence* to be peopled by one *nation*, speaking one language, professing one general system of religion and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs."¹⁶

The most famous painting of this type is *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way* (fig. 9) by Emanuel Leutze (1816–1868). Like

Bierstadt's work, it is a people's history of a journey rather than a confrontation between white and native American cultures. But its anti-native American bias is still clear, for Leutze's intention was, he wrote, "to represent as near and truthfully as the artist was able the grand peaceful conquest of the great west." As Dawn Glanz indicates in *How the West Was Drawn*, "Leutze described in his notes . . . a 'suffering wife,' . . . and 'a lad who has been wounded, probably in a fight with the Indians.'" ¹⁷ Presumably, the suffering and wounds inflicted upon the native inhabitants were of no concern to Leutze.

In contrast to these paintings of whites engaged in peaceful settlement, paintings of native Americans often show them involved in

- 11 Alfred J. Miller, Sir William Drummond Stewart Meeting Indian Chief, ca. 1839. Oil on canvas, 33 x 42 in. The Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma



violent activity. For example, at least fifty artists painted scenes of buffalo hunts, most of these showing Indians engaged in the slaughter.¹⁸ Since it was not the native Americans who caused the near extinction of the buffalo on the western prairies, such works reinforce the stereotype of native Americans as wanton killers.

Even paintings of individual encounters with native Americans were subliminally encoded with discriminatory values, as in Thomas Birch's (1779–1851) *The Landing of William Penn*, in which Penn is depicted as though he were the first white man to arrive on the banks of the Delaware River when, in fact, several thousand others had preceded him (fig. 10). Penn, unarmed, his hand extended in friendship and peace, bravely approaches a native American. The native American, holding a tomahawk, is probably part of a hunting party that has just killed a deer. He is armed and possibly dangerous. Birch suggests that Penn is a man of such peaceful nature and grand moral stature

that he subdues the native American's evident warlike nature by the sheer strength of his character and the civilization he represents. Alfred Jacob Miller (1810–1874), in painting Sir William Drummond Stewart visiting the annual rendezvous of western fur trappers (the mountain men) in 1837, also showed his subject as a man of peace (fig. 11). While the native Americans shoot their guns, Stewart extends his hand in friendship.

Mexicans, like native Americans, were also subject to racial slurs in the mid-nineteenth-century press; even Walt Whitman could not control his disdain for them. In comparison with paintings of native American subjects, however, there are very few nineteenth-century works with Mexican subjects. Although neither features any Mexicans, two paintings in the Rotunda of the Capitol nevertheless suggest the subtle patterns of anti-Mexican sentiment. These are John Vanderlyn's (1775–1852) *The Landing of Columbus*, begun in 1837 and installed in 1847, and



12 John Vanderlyn, *The Landing of Columbus*, 1847. Oil on canvas, 144 x 216 in. United States Capitol Art Collection

William Powell's (1823–1879) *Discovery of the Mississippi by de Soto*, begun in 1848 and installed in 1855 (figs. 12, 13). While it is certainly reasonable that Columbus, as the modern European discoverer of the Western Hemisphere, be honored by a panel in the Rotunda, it can also be argued that Vanderlyn's painting reflected the desire to absorb Columbus's discoveries and those of other explorers employed by the Spanish crown into the history and the territory of the United States. Vanderlyn's work was installed at a time when American soldiers were patrolling the streets of Mexico City and when public discussions were taking place concerning the annexation of all of Mexico into the Union.¹⁹

William Powell's painting—the second, interestingly enough, in

the Capitol showing an explorer in the pay of Spain—points to a similar interpretation. Contemporary accounts do not resolve the issue of how the subject was chosen, but the painting's location in the Capitol Building indicates an attempt to suggest that the territory around the Mississippi River and, by extension, Spanish/Mexican territory to the west and southwest belonged or should belong to the United States.²⁰ Certainly, the Louisiana Purchase had long since validated possession of the Mississippi River Valley, but those lands acquired by the war with Mexico, erupting just when the painting was begun, perhaps still needed validation. Powell's work helped provide that validation by associating Ferdinand de Soto with subsequent American exploration and conquest. In his



13 William Powell, *Discovery of the Mississippi by de Soto*, 1853, Oil on canvas, 144 x 216 in. United States Capitol Art Collection

discussion of de Soto several years earlier, George Bancroft (1800–1891), the major American historian of the mid nineteenth century, attributed to the explorer responsibility for the way in which “the sublime doctrine [Christianity], which, thousands of years before, had been proclaimed in the deserts of Arabia, now first found its way into the prairies of the Far West.”²¹ In the language of the nineteenth century, it would have been one thing to merely state that de Soto explored a certain area of land, but to link him with that land in a Christian (i.e., Protestant) context added a distinctly American flavor to his activities.

Landscapes, as well as farm and pioneer settlement scenes, reveal more than we realize of the tenets of Manifest Destiny, particularly

the injunction in Genesis 1:28 to subdue the land. Aside from whatever moral force the Bible provided, religious admonition blended with secular interpretation to grant legal justification for land ownership and usage in the minds of white nineteenth-century Americans. For example, just after the Revolutionary War, St. John de Crevecoeur, in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, stated through the voice of the narrator:

This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return, it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens.

A half century later, an editorial writer for the New York *Morning News* expressed a similar attitude in his discussion of the acquisition



14 Asher B. Durand, *Progress*, 1853. Oil on canvas, 48 x 71¹⁵/₁₆ in. The Warner Collection, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

of land in Texas:

*It has been laid down and acted upon, that the solitudes of America are the property of the immigrant children of Europe and their offspring. Not only has this been said and reiterated, but it is actually, although perhaps, not heretofore dwelt upon with sufficient distinctness, the basis of public law in America. Public sentiment with us repudiates possession without use, and this sentiment is gradually acquiring the force of established public law.*²²

Considered in this context, paintings such as *Progress* and *First Harvest in the Wilderness* by Asher B. Durand (1796–1886) affirmed both biblical and quasi-legal rights to former wilderness lands (figs. 14, 15). In 1853, when *Progress* was first exhibited, a

critic wrote that “it is purely AMERICAN. It tells an American story out of American facts, portrayed with true American feeling.” In two sentences, the word *American* appears four times without any explanation of what it meant; clearly, the author assumed his readers understood his message or messages. A late-twentieth-century reader might get the following message from the painting: The native Americans, who appear in the wilderness, did not subdue the land nor make it bloom. Instead, they live in a timeless, ahistorical present, lacking any sense of development or progress. This interpretation emphasizes the more negative aspects of nineteenth-century attitudes towards native Americans. As one of Durand’s contemporaries pointed out, “They have ever existed . . .

- 15 Asber B. Durand, *The First Harvest in the Wilderness*, 1855. Oil on canvas, 32 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 48 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. The Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences



like a vacuum in the system of nature." Another noted that "left to themselves, [native Americans had] not in two hundred years, advanced one step in improvement beyond the contemporaries of Raleigh and the Pilgrims. Not one scientific or literary production; not a single invention or discovery in even the practical appliances of life."²³ Similarly, the Indians in the foreground of Durand's painting are but passive observers to the embodiments of progress animating the valley below. Using movement through space to suggest movement through time, Durand depicted stagecoaches, steamboats, a railroad—all the elements marking the rise of civilization. In *First Harvest in the Wilderness*, the warming rays of the sun suggest God's presence and insure the success of the first harvest.

Both paintings are predicated on the inevitability of the whites' success because of their intelligence, determination, and God's munificence. Since they have made the land bloom, they have earned the right, both moral and legal, to possess it. Accordingly, the inhabitants of the city in *Progress*, whose activities lie literally beyond the comprehension of na-

tive Americans, and the residents of the farm in *First Harvest*, who have subdued the wilderness, have earned the moral and legal right to possess the land. They are fulfilling America's providential destiny.

Even Frederic Church's *Hooker and Company Journeying Through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford in 1636* reflects the strength of the idea of Manifest Destiny despite the fact that it is a New England scene (fig. 16). Although he was asked to remain in the Boston area rather than fragment the main body of settlers, Thomas Hooker nevertheless migrated to the Connecticut River Valley primarily because of personal and political differences with neighboring Puritan elders.²⁴ Church's mid-nineteenth-century interpretation glorifies the journey, however, by combining allusions to the parting of the Red Sea and the flight into Egypt. Contemporary literary accounts treated Hooker's journey with similar religious and mythologizing effect. For instance, in a history of Hartford written in 1853, Hooker, we are told, settled that region to "till, create, replenish, extend trade, spread the gospel, spread civiliza-

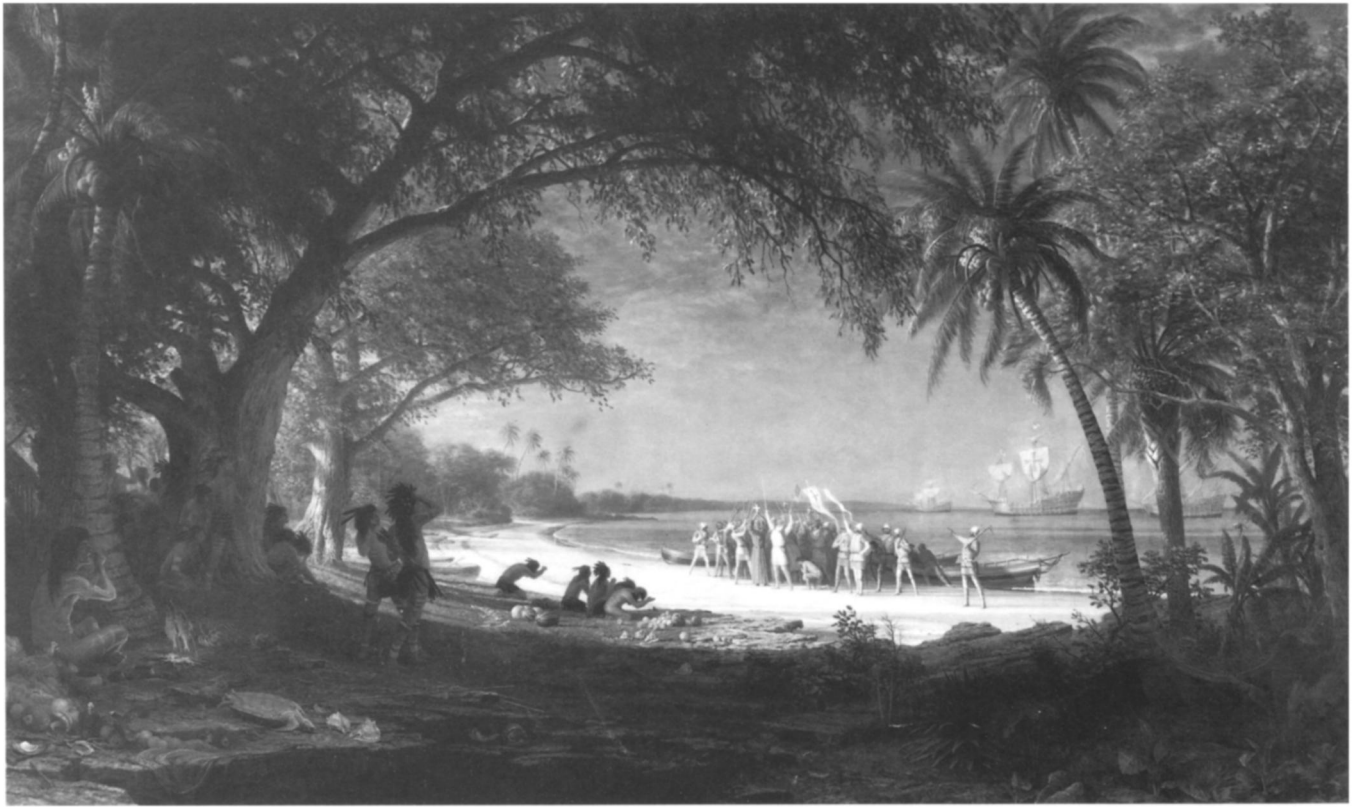


16 *Frederic Church*, *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford in 1636, 1846*. Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 60 $\frac{3}{16}$ in. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut

tion, spread liberty.”²⁵ In this one sentence, the economic, territorial, political, and religious aspects of Manifest Destiny are laid out as plainly as they can be.

During the half century after Church completed this painting, native Americans were becoming increasingly hemmed in between rising white populations and corporate appropriations of mineral-rich lands. In addition, during the 1880s and 1890s, the federal government grew increasingly interested in acquiring overseas territories to house naval bases necessary for trade with Asia. Until these decades, it was assumed that newly acquired territories populated by Anglo-Saxons would be admitted as states as the nation

grew to continental dimensions. Now, at the century’s end, it seemed equally clear to many that potentially new subject populations in Hawaii and the Philippines might never be accorded citizenship but instead be kept in a state of permanent dependency for reasons of race.²⁶ Elaborate military, political, and religious justifications for Anglo-Saxon supremacy were outlined in books by clergyman Josiah Strong, philosopher and historian John Fiske, political scientist John Burgess, and naval historian Alfred T. Mahan.²⁷ Paralleling the arguments contained in these books and reflecting governmental domestic and international policies, anti-native American pictorial images



17 *Albert Bierstadt*, *Landing of Columbus in San Salvador*, 1893. *Oil on canvas, 80 x 120 in. Plainfield Cultural and Heritage Commission, Plainfield, New Jersey*

reached new heights of virulence, particularly in the works of Remington, Charles Russell (1864–1926), and Charles Schreyvogel.

Perhaps the single painting that best reflects this strain in American thought was Bierstadt's *The Landing of Columbus in San Salvador*, one of the most blatantly racist works ever painted by a major American artist (fig. 17). The newly arrived Columbus is bathed in the symbolic sunshine of God's grace and favor. Native Americans, who are and will probably always remain in shadow, kneel before him, somehow knowing that a superior civilization has arrived. Unlike native Americans who are shown in some paintings defending their lands against white settlers, the native Americans here are actors in a white-supremacist fantasy, peacefully welcoming the Europeans as their masters. Columbus and his party seem to provide a visual

equivalent to the condition Josiah Strong described in *The New Era, or the Coming Kingdom*, published in 1893, the same year in which the painting was made:

*The world is evidently about to enter on a new era, that in this new era mankind is to come more and more under Anglo-Saxon influence, and that Anglo-Saxon civilization is more favorable than any other to the spread of those principles whose universal triumph is necessary to that perfection of the race to which it is destined.*²⁸

The paintings considered here represent several different categories: genre scenes, landscapes, portraits of men in action, and historical recreations of past events. All seem to share similar biases, part of the system, described by the American literary historian Sacvan Bercovitch in his discussion of ideology, "of interlinked

ideas, symbols, and beliefs by which a culture . . . seeks to justify and perpetuate itself; the web of rhetoric, ritual, and assumption through which society coerces, persuades, and coheres."²⁹ Using Bercovitch's definition, then, we can say that all of the artists who made these paintings, as well as countless other artists, were co-opted by the prevailing ideology, public policies, and popular beliefs. As much as their work re-

flects the history of nation-building, it also records the racial theories and territorial imperatives on which that nation-building was based. That is, the artists, no less than other groups and individuals in nineteenth-century America, became enmeshed in the discourse of power. The terms of that discourse provide at least as much cause for embarrassment as for celebration.

Notes

This article was developed from a paper of the same title presented at the meeting of the College Art Association in 1989. I want to thank Joel Isaacson for his helpful criticisms of early versions of that paper.

- 1 Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 1.
- 2 Peter Hassrick et al., *American Frontier: Early Western Painting and Prints* (New York: Abbeville Press, Cross River Press, 1987), p. 9; Paul Fees and Sarah E. Boehme, *Frontier America: Art Treasures of the Old West from the Buffalo Bill Historical Center* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), p. 48. It need hardly be noted that racist attitudes toward native Americans continue into our own day.
For further discussion of these and related issues, see Ron Tyler, *Visions of America: Pioneer Artists in a New Land* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1983); William H. and William N. Goetzman, *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986); Celeste Marie Adams, Franklin Kelly, and Ron Tyler, *America: Art and the West* (Houston: American-Australian Foundation of the Arts, 1986); Michael Edward Shapiro and Peter Hassrick, *Frederic Remington: The Masterworks* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988).
- 3 See Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 237.
- 4 "The Romance of Western History," *Knickerbocker* 17 (January 1841): 22.

- 5 According to one historian, "In reality this enduring symbol of the Old West [Indian attacks on wagon trains] occurred much less commonly than the host of pictures of it would suggest." See John C. Ewers, "Fact and Fiction in the Documenting of the American West," in John Francis McDermott, ed., *The Frontier Re-Examined* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), p. 86. Wimar painted this picture while in Düsseldorf.
- 6 James Florant Meline, quoted in Perry T. Rathbone, ed., *Westward the Way* (St. Louis: St. Louis City Art Museum, 1954), p. 110.
- 7 [John L. O'Sullivan], "The True Title," [New York] *Morning News*, 27 December 1845. The full text is reproduced in Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 128-30. See also [John L. O'Sullivan], "Annexation," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17 (July 1845): 5; and Julius W. Pratt, "The Origin of 'Manifest Destiny,'" *The American Historical Review* 32 (July 1927): 795-98. Texas was admitted to the Union in December 1845, the treaty with Great Britain concerning the Oregon Territory was signed in June 1846, and the Mexican-American War lasted from 1846 to 1848.
- 8 See, for example, Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 82, 86, 89; Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Em-*

- pire (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1960), pp. 8, 95, 102; Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansion in American History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1935; New York: AMS Press, 1979), pp. 20, 31; Norman A. Graebner, ed., *Manifest Destiny* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), p. xxi; and Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission*, pp. 12, 16. Even literary figures such as James Fenimore Cooper wrote about "the wonderful means by which Providence is clearing the way for the advancement of civilization across the whole American continent"; quoted in Donald Ringe, *The Pictorial Mode: Space and Time in the Art of Bryant, Irving and Cooper* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), p. 182.
- 9 John Cotton's comments are from his 1630 sermon "God's Promise to His Plantations," cited in Charles M. Segal and David C. Stineback, eds., *Puritans, Indians and Manifest Destiny* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1977), pp. 31–32. For Adams, see Graebner, *Manifest Destiny*, p. xi, and Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission*, p. 31. Americans who were so quick to cite Genesis 1:28 neglected to cite Leviticus 19:9 in regard to their responsibilities as new possessors of the land: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your fields, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I the Lord am your God."
 - 10 "Our Relations with Mexico," *American Review: A Whig Journal* 4 (July 1846): 14. Although this assertion is a somewhat sarcastic paraphrase of imperialist ambitions, the sentiment it contains was widespread.
 - 11 Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, p. 190; for quotes by George Combe and Orson S. and Lorenzo N. Fowler, see pp. 58–59, 144–45, respectively. See also Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), pp. 56–58.
 - 12 Samuel Bowles, *Across the Continent: A Summer's Journey to the Rocky Mountains, the Mormons, and the Pacific States* (Springfield, Mass.: Samuel Bowles & Company, 1865; Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1966), p. 69. Even historians of the caliber of Francis Parkman concurred; see his *The Oregon Trail* (1849; reprint, New York: New American Library, 1950), pp. 77, 85, 205–6.
 - 13 *De Bow's Review*, cited in Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, p. 153. On Agassiz see p. 132.
 - 14 Frederic Remington, quoted in Harold McCracken, *Frederic Remington: Artist of the Old West* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1947), p. 66; Miller, quoted in Carol Clark, "A Romantic Painter in the American West," in Ron Tyler, ed., *Alfred Jacob Miller: Artist on the Oregon Trail* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Amon Carter Museum, 1982), p. 56; George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians* (1841; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 2:148, 1:261–62.
 - 15 See Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Indian in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 171–72.
 - 16 John Quincy Adams, quoted in Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, p. 87.
 - 17 Emanuel Leutze, quoted in Dawn Glanz, *How the West Was Drawn: American Art and the Settling of the Frontier* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 78.
 - 18 Ewers, "Fact and Fiction" in McDermott, *The Frontier Re-Examined*, p. 84.
 - 19 On Whitman see Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, p. 235. Among other remarks, written when he was the editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Whitman asked, "What has miserable, inefficient Mexico . . . to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race?" On Mexico's annexation see Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission*, chap. 5.
 - 20 See the material in the William Powell File, Office of the Architect of the Capitol, Washington, D.C.
 - 21 George Bancroft, *History of the United States* (Boston: C. C. Little and J. Brown, 1842), 1:53.
 - 22 J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782; reprint, New York: Viking Penguin, 1963), p. 54; [New York] *Morning News*, cited in Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission*, p. 25n. See also Michael Kammen, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York: Knopf, 1972), chap. 2.
 - 23 "Review of National Academy of Design," *Knickerbocker* 42 (July 1853): 95; "Our Indian Policy," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 14 (February 1844): 169; "Desultory Thoughts on the Philosophy and the Processes of Civilization," *Knickerbocker* 16 (July 1840): 2.
 - 24 See Matthew Baigell, "Frederic Church's *Hooker and Company*: Some Historical Considerations," *Arts Magazine* 56 (January 1982): 124–25.
 - 25 Thomas Hooker, quoted in David C. Huntington, *The Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church: Vision of an American Era* (New York: Braziller, 1966), p. 28. For a different interpretation of this passage, see Franklin Kelly, *Frederic Edwin Church and the National Landscape* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), p. 7.
 - 26 On corporate appropriation of native American lands, see H. Craig Miner, *The Corporation and the Indian: Tribal Sovereignty and Industrial Civilization in Indian Territory, 1865–1907* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1976). On denial of citizenship to subject populations, see Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission*, pp. 354–57.
 - 27 Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker & Taylor Co., 1885) and *The New Era, or the Coming Kingdom* (New York: Baker & Taylor Co., 1893); John Fiske, *American Political Ideas* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1865); John W. Burgess, *Political Science and Constitutional Law* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1890); and Alfred T. Mahan, *Interests of America in Sea Power* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1897); these works are cited and discussed in Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission*, chap. 11, and in Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 137–38, 165–70.
 - 28 Josiah Strong, quoted in Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, p. 138.
 - 29 Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Problem of Ideology in American Literary History," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Summer 1986): 635.