The art of the American West constitutes a special chapter in our cultural history. It is inseparable from the history of the frontier during a period of something less than the hundred years that it took to explore the rivers, cross the mountains and find the way to the Pacific Ocean. As an artistic phenomenon it also has its beginning and end within that same relatively short period of time. The traditions of landscape and portrait painting, as derived from European precedents, were applied to the subject matter of western America, a landscape and a culture hitherto unknown. From such subject matter were created images that embody the energy and optimism inherent in the expansion of American society into the West.

The artists who created these images were participants in the discovery of a "new world," an experience in large part unprecedented and rich with the romantic elements of danger and the exotic. It is interesting to note, however, that their declared intentions were more objective. They wished to record what they rightly perceived to be a vanishing way of life. Documentation was the basic justification for their involvement in the various expeditions into the wilderness, whether scientific or commercial. In an important way they served a journalistic purpose as well, providing "news" of the West as it was revealed, year after year and campaign after campaign, opening up a wonderland of opportunity for the footloose and the ambitious. Thus their documentation, while basically factual, was also biased by their excitement. Their landscapes might well be more friendly, even idyllic, than the reality. The Native Americans were seen with a degree of detachment, even condescension, that scarcely recognized the fact of their priority on the land or the integrity of their culture. There was no thought but that this native culture, beautiful but impractical in the white man's terms, was merely an obstacle to be brushed aside in the pursuit of "civilization."
It is also possible to see the whole of the development of western art as having consecutive phases. The first phase includes those lucky few artists who were among the first White people to see the West. They are followed by a considerable number of artists who saw it after the initial encounters and were conditioned by the processes of our historical assumption of domain over both the land and the native cultures. The third phase is ours, the contemporary West, an artistic subject of enormous complexity which flourishes in the hands of more practitioners than ever before.

With careful observation as the operative basis for the earliest artists’ efforts it is interesting to see the ways in which their artistic impulses affected their work. Certainly the most professionally accomplished of the first artists in the West was Karl Bodmer, who was imbued with that wonderful amalgam of romantic realism. As though seen for the first time in human experience, he exalted the minutest peculiarity of Indian physiognomy and costume, as well as the rich and subtle nuances of topography. He was very much a part of the nineteenth century’s discovery of the world outside Europe, which had already created the albums of record of the ancient past of Egypt, Greece and Rome. Western America was a new chapter in that discovery.

George Catlin was a decidedly different sort of artist, a home grown discoverer of the West, outside the context of the European tradition. His methods were his own, developed from scratch, as it were, without a trace of the academy. Even so his work has the direct impact of actual experience and he was motivated by a genuine passion for the material. Bodmer, after his American adventure, returned to Europe and settled into the conventions of the Barbizon School. Catlin made his experience into a lifetime’s cause.
Charles Bird King's portraits are something of a special case in that he, among all of the artists of the American West, never traveled west of the Alleghenys. He saw his subjects only as they visited Washington as the guests of the government. Important as they are as documents, it is worth noting that they were created out of their cultural and geographic context.

Other artists, such as Farney and Remington, who were active at the end of the period of the true frontier are actually representative of the second period of western art. Theirs is a vision conditioned not only by their own experience of a disappearing frontier but also by their predecessors and by a large and growing audience for an already legendary West.

The prints in this exhibition were primarily derived from originals, which were drawn or painted in watercolor or oil. From the outset it was assumed that they would be reproduced through the printing processes available at the time. In this mechanical translation their character and impact were inevitably changed. Bodmer's watercolors were the basis for his *Journey Into the Interior of North America*, published in 1839. Similarly Catlin's images reached an international audience in his *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians* published in two volumes in 1841. King's portraits, many of which were destroyed by fire in 1865, reached a widespread public in their lithographic versions published in three volumes by McKenney and Hall under the title, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America*.

While we look at these prints with a different perspective, we share much of the excitement of the original public that viewed them for the first time. We are struck with the excitement of something unknown—we the past and they the future.

*Norman Geske*  
*Director Emeritus*  
*Sheldon Memorial Gallery of Art*
Karl Bodmer
Fort Pierre, 1840

Karl Bodmer
Missouri Indian, Oto
Indian, Chief of the
Puncas, n.d.

Karl Bodmer
Hunting of the Grizzly
Bear, n.d.

Karl Bodmer
Dance of the Mandan
Indians, n.d.

Karl Bodmer
A Skin Lodge of an
Assiniboin Chief, n.d.

Karl Bodmer
Crow Indians, n.d.

George Catlin
Wi-Jun-Jon, Asseniboin
Chief: Going to
Washington, Returning to
his Home, 1844

George Catlin
North American Indians,
1844

George Catlin
Mah To Toh Pa, The
Mandan Chief, n.d.

George Catlin
The Bear Dance, 1844

George Catlin
The Buffalo Dance, 1844

George Catlin
Ball Play, n.d.

George Catlin
Buffalo Bull, Grazing,
1844
James Otto Lewis
*Sun-a-Get or Hard Times, A Pottawatomie Chief*, c. 1835

James Otto Lewis
*Nabu-Naa-Kee-Shick or "The One Side of the Sky"*, A Chippewa Chief, c. 1835

Frederic Remington
*Mexican Infantry on the March*, 1890

Frederic Remington
*An Ox Train in the Mountains*, n.d.

Henry F. Farny
*Snake Dance of the Moqui Indians*, 1886

Henry F. Farny
*The Prisoner*, 1886

Artist unknown
*The Far West-Shooting Buffalo on the Line of the Kansas-Pacific Railroad*, 1871

John J. Audubon
*American Beaver*, n.d.

John W. Audubon
*Rocky Mountain Sheep*, n.d.

Albert Bierstadt
*A Halt in the Yosemite Valley*, n.d.

A. R. Waud
*Pilgrims of the Plains*, 1871

Artist unknown
*Trading on the Plains--A Seductive Offer--The Indian in Doubt*, 1871

Artist unknown
*The Indian War--Indians Attacking a Wagon Train*, 1868

Paul Frenzeny and Jules Tavernier
*Two Bits to See the Pappoose [sic]*, 1874

F.O.C. Darley
*An Indian Foray in the West*, 1858

John Mix Stanley
*Herd of Bison near Lake Jessie*, c. 1853-1854

John Mix Stanley
*Fort Union, and Distribution of Goods to the Assiniboines*, c. 1853-1854

John Mix Stanley
*Council with White Man's Horse*, c. 1853-1854

John Mix Stanley
*Fort Okinakane*, c. 1853-1854

Seth Eastman
*Guarding the Corn Fields*, n.d.

F.O.C. Darley
*Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, 1874

Rufus Zogbaum
*Painting the Town Red*, c. 1886

Peter Rindisbacher
*Hunting the Buffalo*, n.d.