BORDERLANDS
Images of the American West

January 24 – March 8, 2009

Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art
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Norman, Oklahoma 73019
Borderlands: Images of the American West

Critic Henry T. Tuckerman, writing in 1867, offered a prescription for artists seeking a distinctive American art. He explained that “there is nothing in the life of our cities which may be deemed original,” but “it is in our border life alone that we can find the materials for national development, as far as literature and art are concerned.” The borderlands promised international acclaim for any author or artist willing to explore their distinctive character: “Tales of frontier and Indian life – philosophic views of our institutions – the

adventures of the hunter and the emigrant – correct pictures of what is truly remarkable in our scenery, awaken instant attention in Europe. If our artists or authors, therefore, wish to earn trophies abroad, let them seize upon themes essentially American.”

Many of the artists in this exhibition would have agreed with Tuckerman’s opinion, and they traveled westward in the decades following to find inspiration along the borderlands of the United States. Borderlands, those spaces of intercultural connection along the boundaries of American and Native American communities, offered artists ample subject matter that would appeal to contemporary American tastes for the exotic. Eastern American audiences were enchanted by picturesque landscapes of Western terrain, by the unfamiliar dress and customs of Native American communities, and by romanticized recounts of cultural conflict. Artists accompanied military campaigns and scientific surveys in the years following the Civil War, and their images appeared not only in exhibition, military reports and scientific treatises but also in the pages of Harper’s Weekly and later ten-cent magazines such as Collier’s and The Saturday Evening Post. It was Harper’s, for instance, that sent Rufus F. Zogbaum to Fort Reno in Indian Territory in 1888, on the eve of the Oklahoma land runs, to document the military’s interaction with the Cheyenne at Darlington Agency. Over the next year, he published a series of articles and produced numerous drawings and paintings such as Troops Near Ft. Reno.

Zogbaum was not alone in seeking subjects in the borderlands of the West. Frederic Remington, too, had been on assignment from Harper’s when he accompanied General Nelson A. Miles on his campaign against the Apache in the 1880s as part of the journal’s enthusiasm for the Indian Wars. The western flavor of the experience so impressed

Maynard Dixon (U.S. 1875-1946)
Warrior, 1916
Oil on canvas, 30½ x 96 in.
Private Collection
Remington that he accepted a commission in 1898 from William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal* to cover the Spanish-American War because he believed it "the Cowboy's War." In his *Advance at Stone Quarry* (1899), he depicts the picket line advancing on an unseen enemy, a composition he used frequently in his images of the Indian Wars. Remington equated the Cuban Insurrection with a borderland experience in which the Spanish assume the place once held by the Apache.

Such illustrations had a tremendous impact on eastern notions of the West and greatly enthused younger artists with reports of military actions, Indian uprisings, and cowboy life on the prairie. A young Charles M. Russell was undoubtedly influenced by the sensational reports of Major Thomas T. Thornburgh's death in 1879 in a mission to quell an uprising on the White River Ute Reservation in 1879. His *Major Thornburgh* is likely drawn from a number of different sources, including H. Viele's 1879 illustration of the event for *Harper's*.

Although journals and newspapers often prompted artists to investigate life in the American borderlands, some artists such as Charles Schreyvogel and Edwin W. Deming visited Indian nations in the West throughout their careers independent of journalistic sponsorship in search of fresh inspiration; the latter formed close relationships with the Native communities he visited and even lived with the Yuma Apache for an extended period of time. Schreyvogel and Deming also viewed their enterprise as a form of preservation that would record for posterity peoples threatened by assimilation, as in Schreyvogel's *Son of Kalaturi*. Assimilation, however, exacted a tremendous toll on Native life, especially among the tribes of the northern Plains, and those artists who had hoped to find an image of 'unspoiled' tribal life were led to construct romantic images of the past. Both Deming's *Cree Scouts on the Little Bighorn* and Maynard Dixon's *Warriors*, 1916, depict a vision of Plains Indian life no longer in existence in the 20th century. *Warriors*, in particular, portrays a mounted war party in full regalia in a panoramic horizontal composition that suggests the sweep of the high plains, yet Dixon could never have witnessed such a scene in 1916.
The impending consequences of assimilation also led Joseph H. Sharp, with the support of Theodore Roosevelt, to build a cabin at the confluence of the Bighorn and Little Bighorn Rivers in 1902 to paint the Crow before irrevocable change. *Evening Camp Little Bighorn* may depict an encampment Sharp saw from his cabin, although the scene could just as easily be an imaginative recreation of the past.

Sharp’s desire to capture Crow life led him to spend winters in Montana, dividing his time otherwise between his home in Cincinnati and his summers in Taos, New Mexico. Sharp had first visited Taos in 1893 under assignment from Harper’s and found a borderland where Puebloan societies existed alongside Hispanic communities. Sharp recalled that “these visits made me realize the longevity of the southwestern Indian. I found that his Northern prototype would soon become extinct and so I decided to put into my canvasses representations of their present day and time.” He eventually established a permanent residence in Taos in 1912 and became part of a growing art colony that would include at different times Laverne Nelson Black, Carl Oscar Borg, E. Irving Couse, and Julius Rolshoven. Other artists such as Sheldon Parsons and John Sloan would prefer Santa Fe to Taos, but all found interest in the syncretic blend of European and Native cultures in New Mexico and the American West. These dynamic art colonies would knowingly or unknowingly follow Tuckerman’s advice to seize upon themes they considered to be essentially American.


Rufus F. Zoghbaum (U.S. 1849–1925)
*Troops Near Ft. Reno*, 1888
Oil on canvas, 16 × 24 in.
Private Collection
Top:
Joseph Henry Sharp (U.S. 1859-1953)
Evening Camp Little Bighorn, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 16 x 24 in.
Private Collection

Front:
Frank T. Johnson (U.S. 1874-1939)
Sheep Hunter, 1905
Oil on canvas (detail)
Private Collection

Middle, Left:
Julius Rolshoven (U.S. 1866-1930)
Tent Market Scene, n.d.
Oil on board, 13 3/4 x 11 3/4 in.
Private Collection

Middle, Center:
Frederic Remington (U.S. 1861-1909)
Advance at Stone Quarry, 1899
Mixed media, 21 x 16 in.
Private Collection

Middle, Right:
Charles Schreyvogel (U.S. 1861-1942)
Son of Kahatun, n.d.
Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 in.
Private Collection

Bottom:
Charles Abel Corwin (U.S. 1898-1938)
Men on Horses, n.d.
Oil and watercolor on paper, 7 1/2 x 11 3/4 in.
Private Collection