Artists were intrigued by lure of American West

They came on horseback, in wagons and on trains. Some accompanied military units or early settlers. The land, the hunter and the hunted were the subjects of artists whose prize was a view of the West.

Indian uprisings, cowboy life and the frontier itself intrigued artists and their patrons in the late 1800s. Some passed through Oklahoma and painted the unfamiliar dress and ceremonies of the Native Americans.

Newspapers and early pulp magazines commissioned artists. Railroads sought them out in order to encourage travel on their new lines.

Some of those artists of the borderlands are showcased through March 8 at the Fred Jones Jr., Museum of Art on the University of Oklahoma campus. The exhibit opened to a crowd Friday evening.

Dean Porter, director emeritus of the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame, knows a few things about cowboys and the American West. Gene Autry and Roy Rogers were his boyhood heroes.

“I grew up wanting to be a cowboy,” he told a packed museum auditorium Friday. But when he got a job at Notre Dame in 1966, most of what he found — not surprisingly — were religious paintings.

The few Western art pieces owned by Notre Dame were packed out of sight. He did manage to find 19 works by Walter Ufer, an American painter whose specialties were landscape and Indians.

“But nobody could care less about Walter Ufer,” he said.

Some painters witnessed the frontier life and then went back to their studios to paint under better conditions. Others brought their sketchpads, paints and easels with them. Families, too. Among Porter’s favorite were Frederic Remington and Edwin Deming.

“He had the ability to go out and be with the Native Americans,” Porter recalls one writer said of Deming. “Remington saw the West through his rifle scope. Deming was in the same blanket with the Indians.”

Artists faced conditions that were considered primitive. Although not yet spoiled, the West was quickly losing the lure of Native cultures and massive buffalo herds, two essentially American subjects.

“How many artists went out there to paint the survivors?” Porter asked.

“These were the original Americans.”

Porter’s American upbringing didn’t lead to his love for Western art. His studies concentrated on the 1600s.

“I came from a part of the world where Western art didn’t exist. Art ended at the Mississippi except for Georgia O’Keeffe.”

He said the artists displayed in the exhibit brought their own styles. “They reveal themselves in their work,” he said.

“Borderlands: Images of the American West” kicks off a full year of Native American and Western American artwork.

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