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# Redrawing the West with contemporary art

Spirit of Western art remains as new interpretations emerge.

By Julie Kukral Sep 4, 2018



Traditional Western American art may conjure classic images of bucolic landscapes, dramatic “cowboy and Indian” scenes and hyper-realistic renderings of defiant wildlife.

And while many pieces shown in any of Jackson’s 30-plus galleries fall into that classic tradition, the genre is constantly changing just as the West continues to reinvent itself.

Today contemporary artists are expanding the genre of Western art by incorporating traditional themes into their work while offering fresh aesthetics, perspectives and commentaries.

Earlier this summer Wilcox Gallery hosted a three-man “Paintbrush Cowboy” show featuring painters “who live their subject matter.” One of those artists is Wyoming-bred rancher and painter Charles Dayton.

## Timeless themes

“The great redeeming feature of Western art is the timelessness of its elements: the figures, landscapes and animals,” Dayton said in a statement. “How often do you see a painting of a salesperson making a sale, or a group of executives developing strategy? The figure of my father moving cows or making his way up a steep trail with a pack string will always be beautiful.”

The timelessness of those scenes prevails in the way Americans still identify American virtue with the myths and ideals associated with the West.

The mythologization of the West can first be attributed to the time when white Americans began settling the frontier in droves. The Homestead Act of 1862 sparked a wave of migration into the Western territories at a time when the nation was still bitterly divided about the Civil War. The West, being neither North nor South, became a neutral land of opportunity, not just



The genre includes work that casts a critical eye on the mythology of the West. Andy Warhol's "Cowboys and Indians" series contrasts iconic Western "heroes" like John Wayne with Native American images. The series was a limited edition of 250, and it's rare to find a complete set of 10 prints. You can see the full series at Heather James Fine Art until the end of September.

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for individuals but for Americans to project a new shared national consciousness.

The characters of the West, known for their rugged individualism and devotion to a chivalric code of brotherly conduct (think John Wayne), became entwined with the shared mythology of what it meant to be an American.

"Western American art is crucial to helping us understand American culture even in the contemporary moment," Jennifer Henneman of the Petrie Institute of Western American Art said in a PBS documentary about the genre.

"A type like the 'cowboy' still resonates to a profound degree with Americans because of the virtues that are associated with it — independence, ruggedness, self-reliance — these are still qualities that many of us still consider 'American.'"

The perpetuation of those ideals lived on into the 20th and 21st centuries through the virtuous cowboys of Hollywood Westerns and heroic images often depicted in Western art.

From the perspective of American virtues a successful business executive is just as capable a wrangler in a boardroom as a cowboy is on the range. The tropes of the West have become universal and transferable to all aspects of American culture.

### **An evolving genre**

Though many of those themes remain prominent elements in Western art, the genre has, of course, evolved since painters first started depicting scenes of the West in the late 19th century. At every point in time, art serves as a cultural reflection of the period and place in

which it is being created.

Maryvonne Leshe of Trailside Galleries has watched the genre evolve over the last half century. One of the first galleries to open in Jackson, Trailside recently celebrated its 55th anniversary. Leshe has been involved with the gallery for the past 41 years.



“American Family” is by Travis Walker, a Jackson Hole painter who is among a growing number of artists offering fresh takes on the Western genre.

Trailside opened at an important turning point in the history of Western American Art, at the same time the Cowboy Artists of America formed in the early '60s.

“When the Cowboy Artists of America had their first show, nobody knew if it would be a total flop or sell out,” Leshe said.

At that point Western art did not hold the cultural and artistic value that it does now, she explained.

Trailside went on to represent all the early Cowboy Artists and help raise the status of the genre through satellite galleries throughout the country.

### **Growing interest**

The newfound legitimacy of Western art in the second half of the 20th century reinvigorated the genre, opening it up to more participation and, subsequently, wider interpretation.

Leshe also identified an increasing interest and acceptance of wildlife art as fine art as one of the most notable trends in Western art in the past 50 years: Her colleague Joan Griffith said that new interest has grown out of an growing concern about conservation.

Today images of the New West are alive on the very walls of Jackson's galleries. Some work still resembles the traditional scenes and elements of Frederic Remington. The persistence of these works reinforces the legitimacy of the traditional "Western" ideals still in contemporary American cultural fabric today.

Other art takes a more critical approach to Western mythology.

For example, Heather James Fine Art hung a collection of Andy Warhol's "Cowboys and Indians" series this summer that will be up through the end of the month. Warhol contrasts iconic Western "heroes" like Annie Oakley with pop art-renderings of Native American images and motifs.

"While his subject matters vary greatly," gallery manager Sarah Fischel said, "the thread of his commentary runs through all of his works, which is to challenge the viewer to contemplate what makes an icon or hero and what's behind the admiration."

Visions West Contemporary also features various artists who take critical stances against the tropes of Western imagery. Underscoring that the gallery doesn't show stereotypical Western art, gallery director Nathan Larramendy noted that while there's often a Western theme to the work, it's usually satirical.

### **Poking fun at cliches**

He pointed to Tracy Stuckey as an example. Stuckey paints images of high-fashion ski bunnies roughing it in quasi-modern, faux-traditional backgrounds, or seemingly rustic mountain men in fur coats with puffy jackets underneath. In doing so he pokes fun at the cliches and empty romanticism of Western ideals that, as Warhol also explored, have become commodified.



Tracy Stuckey satirizes traditional Western elements by conflating them with elements of shallow modern consumerism. Stuckey is represented by Visions West Contemporary.

And then there are artists who simply apply modern aesthetic onto Western scenes, like Altamira Fine Art's David Grossmann, who paints the traditional subject of landscapes in a highly untraditional way. Or Diehl Gallery's Helen Durant, who paints raw, loose depictions of wildlife that is both humanizing and mystifying.

The prevalence of Western themes and their openness to reinterpretation prove the relevance of the genre as a tool to explore American cultural questions and identities. The broad acceptance of "Western art" and the willingness of artists to work within and against the themes of the genre are what make Western art continue to be relevant in the 21st century.

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Contact Julie Kukral at [fallarts@jhnewsandguide.com](mailto:fallarts@jhnewsandguide.com). Follow @jhngscene on Instagram for more coverage throughout the 2018 Fall Arts Festival. Share your Fall Arts Festival memories with us using #jhfallartsfestival.

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