
The Western frontier held a strong appeal to the artists of the nineteenth century with its breathtaking vistas, hardscrabble cowboys, and Native Americans that they often viewed as “noble savages.” Elevating Western American Art amply reveals this preoccupation by focusing on some of the most important works in the mythologizing of the West. However, it also demonstrates the continued hold that the West, as much an idea as a place, has had on artists through to today.

Elevating Western American Art is in its conception a love song to the Petrie Institute of Western American Art. Its pages are extensively illustrated in full color. The first section of the book is dedicated to the history of western art at the Denver Art Museum, from its foundation to the formation of the Petrie Institute to today. This section of the book is likely to have little appeal as an art historical document but will be of interest for students of museology and museum history.

The majority of the book is composed of thirty essays on the many interesting works in the collection. They are essential for any library that wants to boast a strong collection in the history of the art of the American West. Topics run the gamut from Bierstadt and his ideal landscapes to Motherwell, Warhol and Christo and demonstrate the continuing appeal of the West as subject. Simultaneously revealed are the changing ways the West has been interpreted by artists: from rough and tumble frontier of the nineteenth century to the stark landscape abstracted by the artists of the early twentieth century, to the kitsch and nostalgia of pop art, to an important ecological treasure. The book is useful precisely because it covers so many artists and their connection to the West. Unfortunately the essays are packed in a bit like sardines, often running only a few pages. These essays are most useful to spark ideas and connections; since every essay contains footnotes they are best for those researchers who want to investigate further.

The book seems bound to have access problems in the library. The title does not hint at the wealth of information contained within. Even when using the table of contents, entries often do not include the artist’s name. Compounding the problem, the book lacks an index to help users navigate its multitude of topics. Overall, this book is an excellent resource, but one which many users may need to be pointed towards.

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