

The Lessons of History

Written by Michael LoGuidice
Tuesday, 23 April 2002 18:00

The new exhibit Old West, New West: Art of the American Frontier at the Davenport Museum of Art (DMA) offers some 40 painting and sculptures that show the contrast between the way the West was portrayed in art in the late 19th Century and the way it's being represented today. Two works epitomize the difference: Frederic Remington's *The Bronco Buster* and Lauren Greenfield's *Stardust Plane, Las Vegas*

Having an Old West art show with a Frederic Remington bronze sculpture is like having a Western movie in which the cowboy hero gets the girl. We've all seen it before, we know it's coming, but we love the romance and nostalgia of the image nevertheless. Remington's bronzes have become a staple of realistic art collectors everywhere, and his style is imitated by wildlife sculptors even to this day. He has a romantic eye for composition, motion, detail, and action, and his goal is to sculpt action and make the viewer feel like they are part of the story. The sculptures are truly three-dimensional in that they can be viewed from any side and still give a pleasant experience.

Stardust Plane, Las Vegas, a 1995 photograph by Lauren Greenfield, shows what has happened to the West since modern commercialization moved in: There isn't a square inch of real estate that hasn't been paved over. The airplane's tail has a photograph of a beautiful showgirl reclining on it. There are images of high-rise hotels and casino developments in the background, and you even get the feeling that things are just too busy for us to realize that there might have been a desert under the pavement once. Granted, Las Vegas is likely the most egregious and least environmentally friendly example of commercialization, but that is why this photograph works so well.

If we go back one generation to 1972, the *Galloping Indian #2* gives us a cartoon image of a Native American on a purple horse. There is humor in the image, as the Indian is shown as a stereotype of the fictional portrayals from countless movies set in the Old West. The problem is that we can't tell if the artist is satirizing cultural views of Native Americans or poking fun at the Indian. Given the political situation in the 1960s and 1970s, it's a good bet there is some laughing at the Indian, and as a reflection of the attitudes and morality of the era, this print does a good job of telling us how Native Americans were viewed back then.

Moving up to a work from 2001, *Jungle Jim* is a sensitive sculpture by Deborah Butterfield of a small horse or pony – standing at rest with no saddle – made entirely of rusting and discarded steel tubing from old playground equipment. There is no human riding the animal, and you can see right through it. The hollowness of the tubing, the skeletal figure, and the proximity of other Old West images reminded me of the Ghost Dance movement of the 1870s.

A medicine man named Wavoka (English name of Jack Wilson) had a vision of a great flood that would come upon the land, wiping it clean of all the settlers. Right before the flood, the thunderbirds were to come down and bring up those Native Americans who stayed true to the sacred path. When the waters receded, the buffalo and those Native Americans would then be brought back to the land, and things would be as they were.

The Lessons of History

Written by Michael LoGuidice
Tuesday, 23 April 2002 18:00

Ghost Dance shirts were made to protect the Native Americans from any bullets the white man would use against them. Then there was the performance of the Ghost Dance ceremony, which would call on ancestors in spirit form to come into the bodies of the dancers, making them immortal. During the battle of Wounded Knee (1890), in which 200 Sioux warriors, women, and children were massacred, many wore “ghost shirts” emblazoned with eagle, buffalo, and morning-star decorations.

The tragedy at Wounded Knee effectively put an end to the Ghost Dance, although some Plains tribes performed it until 1985 or incorporated aspects of the ritual into their culture, as in the Ghost Dance hand games of the Pawnee.

With thoughts of the Ghost Dance in my head, the most moving image from the show was the photogravure from the Dubuque Museum of Art, *Medicine Man*. I can't do any better describing this image than Anne Jochum, an eighth-grade student at Sudlow intermediate school in Davenport. The DMA has a “Community Voices” program, in which community members write a short essay on a work of art, and this one does a fine job of describing this image from the 1800s: “This image dramatically communicates the strength and character of this shaman (medicine man). A cheerless day; the lack of setting only puts emphasis on a distinguished figure – a testimonial to a culture that has nearly vanished and would soon fade from existence altogether.” The photogravure image gives us a glimpse of the Native American culture when the leaders of that culture still had some of their dignity.

By defining the Old West as dating from the mid-1800s, the exhibit starts from a period during which most of Native American culture was being or had already been obliterated. Three images from the exhibit can be put side-by-side, illustrating the changing face of Native American culture since then: *Medicine Man*, *Galloping Indian #2*, and *Jungle Jim*. *Medicine Man* shows a Native American in a “natural” setting at the twilight of the culture. *Galloping Indian #2* gives us the 1972 cartoon image of Native Americans. Lastly, *Jungle Jim* gives us hope that in 2001 something new can be built based on something old.

The timing of this exhibit, in juxtaposition with Israel's incursion into the Palestinian territories, could not be better in giving us a perspective on how the United States handled its own problem of an indigenous culture being replaced by a colonizing culture.

Israel seems to be adopting the same strategy against the Palestinian culture as the United States did against the Native American culture. The response by the Palestinians today is remarkably similar to the Sioux response in 1870. During the Ghost Dance movement, the Sioux Indians conducted suicide battles in a holy war against the white man, and they thought the Great Spirit would protect them even though practical reality and science indicated otherwise. In Israel, homicide bombers try to kill as many Israelis as they can by blowing themselves up. It is a Middle Eastern Ghost Dance, in which the Palestinians are conducting a hopeless campaign to return the land to what it was before the Europeans came. The parallels between the homicide bombers and the Ghost Dancers are hard to avoid.

The Lessons of History

Written by Michael LoGuidice
Tuesday, 23 April 2002 18:00

We should never separate art from history, because we lose so much of the lessons that the art of a period can teach us. When we see an image of a shaman across the exhibit hall from a cartoon Indian on a purple horse, or when we see Remington's romantic vision of a bronco rider on the opposite side of a room from a rusting pony, it gives us an opportunity for reflection. Are we doomed to repeat our history and mistakes, or can we learn from our past and create a better future?