

## **GO WEST! PSAM TEXT PANELS FINAL 8/22/16**

EXHIBITION INTRODUCTORY PANEL

THEME PANELS (8)

SHORT TEXT PANELS (5)

*Word count ranges from 150-200 words each.*

OBJECT LABEL EXTENDED TEXT (34)

*Word count average 75 words*

### **[EXHIBITION INTRO PANEL ] PSAM EXHIBITION SPONSORS and CREDITS**

#### ***Go West! Art of the American Frontier from the Buffalo Bill Center of the West***

*Go West!* Presents a century of art from an extraordinary era of exploration and expansion. Featuring 89 artworks and artifacts, it chronicles a pivotal period from 1830-1930 in which cultures were merging, clashing, and finding fortune or hardship in a changing American landscape. Paintings and sculptures by George Catlin, Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Remington, Charles Russell, and N.C. Wyeth document the journeys /images that would solidify our popular understanding of the American West. Objects made by Sioux, Cheyenne, and other Plains Indian tribes reflect the rich cultural heritage of the Native peoples who struggled against encroachment into their lands. The diversity of works presented demonstrates how artists took part in shaping contemporary views of this layered and complex history.

*This exhibition is organized by the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.*

*The Palm Springs showing is funded in part by the museum's Western Art Council and its exhibition Gold Sponsors Joan Dale and R.D. Hubbard, JoAnn McGrath, and Silver Sponsors Miriam Hoover and Michael Leppen, and Irene, George, and Steven Stern. **Additional Sponsors pending.***

## [OVERVIEW/THEME PANEL 1]

“Go West, young man. Go West and grow up with the country.”

--credited to Horace Greeley, ca. 1865

Few aspects of American history have been more decisive in shaping our nation than the exploration and settlement of the Western frontier. The Civil War had only just ended when Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, famously urged America's youth to turn from the rubble and “Go West, young man. Go West and grow up with the country.” America's future was bound to the frontier. With the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, American lands had doubled with the stroke of a pen, and between 1800 and 1900, the nation more than tripled in physical size. When the nineteenth century came to a close, more than fifty percent of the American population lived west of states that bordered the Atlantic Ocean.

Yet in 1893, historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared that the frontier was closed, and by that time, millions of American Indians had been displaced from their ancestral lands. This exhibition considers a century of evolving notions of the American West from the territory's early exploration to the invention of the heroic legends that continue to inspire and challenge us to this day.

## [THEME PANEL 2]

### Into the Wilderness

In the spring of 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and the Corps of Discovery launched west from St. Louis. The vast, unexplored region ahead of them held the promise of settlement, trade, and transcontinental passage. What they encountered, however, was quite different—mountains, deserts, and treeless prairies rather than rich expanses of arable land. Lewis and Clark also confirmed that this imagined virgin wilderness was already home to millions of Indian inhabitants.

Fur trappers and mountain men established the first viable pass through the Rocky Mountains in the 1830s. Within a decade the Overland Trail would become but one of an increasing number of routes traversed by settlers. As boundaries shifted, pioneers hoping to forge homesteads in the wilderness moved westward along with them.

Depictions of frontier life offered accessible views of the West for mid-nineteenth-century American audiences. Paintings such as *Advice on the Prairie* and *Prairie Burial* by William Ranney featured familiar domestic themes in a frontier setting. Pioneer families, as with families anywhere, enjoyed gathering around a fire or shared in the sorrow of the loss of a loved one. Works such as these helped usher in changing attitudes toward the West—from a distant and unwelcoming land inhabited by unfamiliar cultures into a place that could be envisioned as home.

### [THEME PANEL 3]

#### Representing American Indians

The ideal of the “noble savage”—one who lived in nature beyond civilization’s corrupting influences—emerged in the sixteenth century. Two centuries later, the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau drew upon the concept to highlight the hazards of modern European civilization. Henry Inman and George Catlin depicted American Indians as natural but rational beings. Afforded classical attributes that were inspired by Greek and Roman sculpture, artists linked the “savage” to a supposedly more advanced civilization and instituted the Indian as Americans’ noble ancestor.

This first generation of artists who ventured West found their greatest visual opportunities in documenting the people they encountered. The traveling “Indian Gallery” became a popular format to exhibit dozens or even hundreds of paintings of American Indians and their cultural traditions. Some artists—such as Catlin, who had lived among tribes of the Great Plains—added live performers, tipi settings, and other props to enhance the entertainment experience.

By mid-century, however, the “noble savage” was eclipsed by other representations. As clashes with Indian cultures became more frequent, images of American Indians grew more menacing. No longer were they seen as the romantic and exotic figures far removed from American society but as living and present obstacles to westward expansion.

## [THEME PANEL 4]

### The West as Landscape

The earliest representations of the frontier favored images of the people who lived there—American Indians, fur trappers, scouts, and pioneers. In the decades following the Civil War, the nation looked west, and the landscape itself took center stage, although its portrayal often owed as much to imagination as to topographic observation. Trained in the European Romantic tradition, artists often made sketches in the field but returned to their studios in the East to complete their canvases.

Artists such as Thomas Worthington Whittredge and John Frederick Kensett approached the West with a sensibility attuned to the Hudson River valley and eastern vistas. Others, including Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, capitalized on growing national interest in the lands beyond the Missouri River. Bierstadt first crossed the Rocky Mountains in the 1860s, and Moran traveled with the earliest surveys of the Yellowstone region and the Grand Canyon the following decade. Although both artists saw settlement and industrial development spread throughout the western territories and relied on wealthy urban patronage, their paintings presented a sublime natural world seemingly unaffected by man. The West they recorded was marvelous and unexpected, helping to shape an idealized image of the western landscape as an untouched wilderness or a venue for recreation that has persisted to the present day.

## [SHORT TEXT PANEL – 1]

### Remington and the Shaping of an Artistic Vision

By the 1890s Frederic Remington was well known as an illustrator of Old West and military subjects, as seen in the following gallery. After 1900, however, he struggled to be recognized as a fine artist and not merely an illustrator. In 1903 Remington lamented, “People won’t stand for me painting sunsets. . . . Got me pigeonholed in their minds . . . want horses, cowboys, out-West things—won’t believe me if I paint anything else.”

Nonetheless, late in life Remington turned to landscapes and away from the cowboys and cavalry that had marked his illustration career. In these paintings, the artist incorporated an Impressionist aesthetic, and his broad brushstrokes and emphasis on color and light proved successful, winning critical acclaim in the last years of his life. Some works seen here, including *Big Horn Mountains* and *Sunset on the Cheyenne River*, are field studies intended to capture color and mood for use back in the studio, while others, such as *Stormy Morning in the Badlands* and *Shoshonie*, are finished paintings.

## [THEME PANEL 5]

### **Objects of Life, Objects of Art from Plains Indian Cultures**

For Plains Indians, art has always been an integral part of everyday life, embellishing clothing, tipis, objects of ceremony and spiritual practice, tools, and weapons. Nearly every item in daily use was crafted by hand and decorated with fine beadwork, quillwork, stitching, or paint in expression of personal creativity and cultural tradition.

By the 1870s, however, these traditions were challenged as Plains peoples, once migratory hunters and farmers, faced the destruction of the great buffalo herds and were forced onto reservations. Struggle and resistance characterized these early years of reservation life. Prohibited from their sacred lands, tutored in Christian ideologies, and confined to reservations, the Plains Indians' ways of life were forever altered.

On view throughout this exhibition is a selection of items from the mid to late nineteenth century by artists from several tribes of the Great Plains, offering an intimate perspective into their cultures and experiences at a time of great social change. While they had different languages and cultural traditions, all Plains Indians were buffalo hunters and relied upon the distinctive natural resources of the region.

## [SHORT TEXT PANEL – 2]

### **The Last of the Buffalo: Bierstadt and the End of an Era**

Few artists experienced the range of success and failure as deeply as Albert Bierstadt. At the peak of his career, he was celebrated for his monumental landscapes of the American West. But by the 1880s, Bierstadt's romantic style had been displaced by a growing enthusiasm for Impressionism, and his popularity had waned.

*The Last of the Buffalo*, 1888, is considered Bierstadt's most ambitious work and his last effort to win back public favor. Its dramatic narrative draws attention to two endangered icons of the West—the buffalo and the Plains Indian who relied upon the animal for survival. In the painting the two are locked in combat and united by their struggle, underscoring what most believed to be their shared fate in the face of westward expansion. Nevertheless, the painting seemed a relic of the past. By the 1880s most American Indians lived on reservations and were no longer free to hunt on the range, while the buffalo itself was close to extinction following decades of policies that had sanctioned its elimination.

## THE MYTH AND ROMANCE OF THE WEST

### [THEME PANEL 6]

#### **Frontier Heroes: The Cowboy and the Romance of the West**

By the turn of the twentieth century, the life of the cowboy was changing. Fences crisscrossed what had been open grazing land in the West, and big businesses were taking over the cattle industry from small ranchers. The Wild West was becoming tame, and as the population spread across the country, the frontier receded. Cowboys became symbolically aligned with the individuality and strength born of the frontier, and a romanticized ideal of them emerged as the United States became an increasingly urban and mechanized society.

Images of cowboys roping calves and breaking broncos portrayed the skills of these men and, more importantly, represented a frontier ideal of freedom. Cowboys enjoyed a celebrated position in American culture due partially to their rebellion against the restraints of polite society. The reality of cowboy life, however, was quite different: they were poorly paid seasonal workers, often with no permanent homes.

Countless depictions of cowboys by artists including Frederic Remington, Charles M. Russell, and N. C. Wyeth appeared in popular journals between the 1880s and the 1920s, when the profusion of illustrated magazines and books was especially rich. The repeated imagery of cowboys, American Indians, and other frontier characters helped define America's heroic image of the West.

### [SHORT TEXT PANEL – 3]

#### **Buffalo Bill's Wild West**

William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody (1846–1917) is an icon of the American West. Born in Le Claire, Iowa, Cody worked in a variety of occupations—as a teamster, a Pony Express rider, a wagon master, a guide, a cavalryman, and an Army scout. He earned the nickname “Buffalo Bill” while commissioned to hunt buffalo to feed workers building the Kansas Pacific Railroad.

In 1883 Cody launched “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West” near North Platte, Nebraska. An innovative traveling spectacle, his show featured cowboys, Indians, sharpshooters, wild animals, and dramatic re-creations of frontier life. The performers echoed the diversity of the American West and included Native Americans, African Americans, and Mexican vaqueros. By 1892, when Cody introduced the “Congress of the Rough Riders of the World,” his Wild West show featured mounted performers from nearly every continent, including the Lakota Sioux leader Sitting Bull, accompanied by twenty warriors. Cody toured Europe eight times and was seen by millions of spectators.

## [SHORT TEXT PANEL – 4]

### **The West in Bronze**

From elegant portrayals of dignified Indians to rough-and-tumble scenes of rowdy cowboys and dangerous situations, American artists turned to bronze to bring to life some of the most enduring and popular themes of Western art. Many had been rigorously trained in New York and Paris and used sophisticated techniques to produce sculptures that were celebrated at home and abroad as authentically American. Alexander Phimister Proctor grew up in the West and based his work on firsthand observation, while Herman Atkins MacNeil found inspiration in frequent visits to the West while maintaining a studio in Rome, imbuing his figures with classical proportions.

No artist gained greater fame for his Western bronzes than Frederic Remington. His most remarkable sculptural feats were epic compositions of horse and rider—whether a Plains warrior at full gallop or a trooper swooping in to rescue an injured comrade, the hooves of their mounts barely skimming the earth—bravura works proclaiming the heroism of his subjects and his daring as a sculptor.

## [THEME PANEL 7]

### **Mourning the Past: Symbolic Depictions of American Indians**

By the mid-1890s, American Indians were no longer seen as posing a violent threat to Western settlements; they had been moved to reservations or forced to attend federal and missionary boarding schools for cultural and religious assimilation. Artists mourned the passing of traditional Indian life through depictions of defeated warriors, idealized people frozen in pre-reservation times, or as timeless symbols of America. Unlike the artist-explorers of the early nineteenth century, however, they no longer aimed to accurately record the manners and customs of a people largely unknown to Eastern audiences. Instead of representing specific tribes and identifiable individuals, depictions of American Indians became more generalized. Artists often portrayed their subjects with the regalia most associated with Plains tribes—such as eagle-feather bonnets and moccasins—to signify all Indians.

Artists increasingly used Indian subjects in their search for a distinctly American vocabulary. In 1913 James Earle Fraser designed a new nickel with the profile of a Plains Indian on one side and a buffalo on the other, creating a coin that was regarded as truly American. Images of American Indians evoked a wistful regret and a longing for a frontier of the past, which appealed to audiences of the time. While these images implied the extinction of traditional ways of life, however, Indian cultures remained very much alive.

## [THEME PANEL 8]

### **The Art of Survival: Traditions in a Transitional Age**

As Plains Indian culture was altered by reservation life beginning in the late nineteenth century, art became a tool for the preservation of traditions. Objects from this period also reveal cultural adaptations required for survival. In some cases, newly available materials replaced those used in the past—commercial paints replaced natural pigments, and cowhide replaced buffalo hide. In others, completely new forms were introduced, such as the decorated lance case, which would have been used in parades that honored and encouraged remembrance of the past. Pride and identities were expressed in both traditional and more contemporary designs on beaded and decorated garments.

Many art traditions continued, although the use and purpose of the items may have shifted. War shirts, for example, would have been worn during battles, negotiations, and ceremonies. During reservation life, however, war shirts were still made but were now worn for meetings with government officials or for special occasions. Despite the powerful myth of a vanished race conveyed in Euro-American painting and sculpture of the time, art by Plains Indian people is a statement of cultural continuity and survival.

## [SHORT TEXT PANEL HORSE CULTURE – 5]

### **Plains Indian Horse Culture**

Native cultures were transformed following the arrival of the horse on the Plains in the eighteenth century. The near-simultaneous introduction of horses and guns radically altered both Plains warfare and Native economies. Horses created new tribal tensions and caused old ones to flare, encouraging new strategies on and off the battlefield between tribes and against waves of settlers. The combination of horses and guns transformed the dynamic of the hunt as well, allowing buffalo and other animals important to trade to be tracked farther and dispatched more easily. And as beasts of burden, horses lightened the load of everyday life, ushering in a cultural efflorescence on the Plains. The horse was also a central subject in Indian art. A beloved companion admired for its keen intellect and remarkable beauty, the horse was portrayed in paint, beads, and quills on shirts, hide robes, and dresses, and its visage graced a wide range of everyday and ceremonial objects.

*Kevin Gover (Pawnee), Director  
National Museum of the American Indian*