

# UC Berkeley

## Charlene Conrad Liebaw Library Prize for Undergraduate Research

### Title

The Cowboy in the West Wing: On Western Artworks in the Oval Office

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7tb144s4>

### Author

Kersting, Sarah

### Publication Date

2020-04-01

Undergraduate

**The Cowboy in the West Wing:  
*On Western Artworks in the Oval Office***



Sarah Kersting

AS H195: American Studies Senior Honors Thesis

Chair: Dr. Christine Palmer

Reader: Dr. Mark Brilliant

University of California, Berkeley.

Spring 2020

# **The Cowboy in the West Wing: On Western Artworks in the Oval Office**

## **Contents**

Acknowledgments

ii

Abstract

iii

List of Figures

iv

Introduction: The Pioneer in the Smithsonian and the Cowboy in the Oval Office 1

The Story We Tell Ourselves: Heroes and Histories in the Oval Office 11

The Western Metaphor: In Bronze and in Presidential Rhetoric 41

The Western Landscape: The Image that Betrays the Reality 54

Conclusion

68

Bibliography

72

## Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my advisor, Professor Christine Palmer, for her consistent support, thoughtful feedback and reassurance that I would eventually find worthwhile answers to my initial research questions. Thank you for helping me see the forest for the trees. For the advice to “mix the paint,” or take the raw research materials I had assembled and weave them together, I thank my second reader, Professor Mark Brilliant. I wanted to write an inter-disciplinary project and I couldn’t have asked for two better advisors, with two different academic philosophies to help me attempt that. That is to say, I want to thank each of you for your unique approaches to crafting a compelling argument and for helping me decide when to say a lot with a little and when to say a little with a lot. When I reflect on the origin of this thesis topic, I recall sitting in a lecture about Frederic Remington in Professor Margaretta Lovell’s art history course on the “Transatlantic Gilded Age.” She mentioned as a side note that *The Bronco Buster* seemed to be the one piece of art in the Oval office that endured, redecoration after redecoration, and that someone ought to look in to that. For this project, she welcomed me to draw on her expertise in American art history to identify what exactly has hung in the Oval Office over time. So thank you Professor Lovell for encouraging me to take this topic and run with it. I would also like to mention Professor Kathleen Moran because her course on the “Golden Age of Advertising” convinced me to declare American Studies as my discipline of choice. I fell in love with the discipline under her mentorship three years ago and I haven’t looked back. Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude towards my friends and family for their support—the latter could not have possibly anticipated I would be bringing my thesis back to Southern California and completing it in my family home.

## **Abstract**

Sarah Kersting, "The Cowboy in the West Wing: On Western Artworks in the Oval Office," *American Studies*, University of California, Berkeley, Spring 2020.

The artworks that hang on the walls of the Oval Office capture shared American cultural myths and values that are reflected in other modes by which the president expresses his ideal vision of this nation. This is particularly true of artworks which depict elements of Western frontier history, a proliferation of which can be seen in the Oval Office redecorations in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While there are several thematic threads in the body of artworks that have decorated the Oval Office, that of the Western frontier narrative is of particular interest because its ubiquitous presence in many presidents' speeches demonstrates its persuasive power in our culture. Assembling a nearly complete inventory of the Oval Office, I found not only that these artworks stem from culturally prized oversimplifications of frontier history that champion the Eurocentric vision of

this continent, but that this oversimplification has repercussions in the present.

### **List of Figures**

Figure 1. Albert Bierstadt, *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, 1867. Oil on Canvas. The National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma,

<https://nationalcowboymuseum.org/collections-2/object/emigrants-crossing-the-plains/>.

2

Figure 2. George Caleb Bingham, *Daniel Boone Escorting Settler through the Cumberland Gap*, 1851-1852. Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 50 1/4 in. Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St Louis, Missouri,

<https://www.kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu/collection/explore/artwork/193>.

3

Figure 3. Harris & Ewing. "Warren G. Harding," no date. Photograph. Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library Photo Collection, Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library & Museum, Staunton, Virginia,

<http://presidentwilson.org/items/show/23139>.

19

Figure 4. Photograph of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Oval Office. From *LIFE Magazine*, August 10, 1942, Google Books.  
22

Figure 5. "Charting the Trend Towards Western Motifs" Chart made for this thesis with the purpose of illustrating the research of compiling an inventory of artworks in the Oval Office.  
36

Figure 6. Frederic Remington, *The Bronco Buster*, ca. 1909. Bronze. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/bronco-buster-75126>.

41

Figure 7. Frederic Remington, *The Rattlesnake*, ca. 1908. Bronze, 23 1/8 x 17 3/4 x 14 1/2 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11869>.  
41

Figure 8 Frederic Remington. *Bronco Buster*, ca. 1895. Oil on canvas. Peter Newark's Western Americana, Bath, England. Frederic Remington and Emerson Hough, *Remington* (New York: Parkstone Press International, 2012), 72.  
46

Figure 9. Frederic Remington. *Bronco Buster*, date unknown. Colored engraving. Peter Newark's Western Americana, Bath, England. Frederic Remington and Emerson Hough, *Remington* (New York: Parkstone Press International, 2012), 73.  
46

Figure 10. George Catlin, *Buffalo Hunt under the Wolf-skin Mask*, 1832-1833. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C., <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/buffalo-hunt-under-wolf-skin-mask-3972>.  
49

Figure 11. Cyrus Edwin Dallin. *Appeal to the Great Spirit*, cast ca. 1916. Bronze, 21 3/8 x 14 1/2 x 21 3/4 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/21714>.  
49

Figure 12. Thomas Moran, *The Three Tetons*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 20 5/8 x 30 1/2 in. Washington Historical Association, Washington D.C. (White House Collection), <https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Artwork/534.tif.info>.  
54

Figure 13. George Catlin, *Buffalo Bull, Grazing on the Prairie*, 1832-1833. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C., <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/buffalo-bull-grazing-prairie-3948>.  
55

Figure 14. Tom Lea, *Rio Grande*, ca. 1954. Oil on canvas. El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas. <https://texashighways.com/events/tom-lea-1907-2001/attachment/attachment-rio-grande-oil-on-canvas-by-tom-lea-1954-courtesy-el-paso-museum-of-art-gift-of-mr-and-mrs-robert-w-decherd/>.  
61

Figure 15. Julian Onderdonk, *Near San Antonio*, ca. 1918. Oil on canvas, 30 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 41 in. San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas, <https://shop.samuseum.org/products/near-san-antonio-by-julian-onderdonk>.  
61



## **Introduction: The Pioneer in the Smithsonian and the Cowboy in the Oval Office**

In March of 1991, the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art in Washington D.C. put on a temporary exhibition entitled *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*.<sup>1</sup> By May that year, two things had become abundantly clear; the American public loved the exhibit's art but loathed its message.<sup>2</sup> The paintings themselves which made up the exhibit, deemed the Smithsonian's "most controversial exhibition" by *The Chicago Tribune*, and "infuriating" by *The New York Times*, were recognizable, even pleasant to an American audience.<sup>3</sup> It was the curators' critical wall texts, narrating the collection of 164 paintings, photographs and sculptures from the 1820-1920 period of Westward expansion, which ruffled American museum-goers and art critics alike.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition included the works of many popular 19<sup>th</sup> century American artists who informed the American imagination: Frederic Remington, George Caleb Bingham, Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran among others.<sup>5</sup> Those who visited the exhibit saw "traditional paintings of the Old West," or paintings of

---

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Gulliford, "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 1 (1992): 199, JSTOR

<sup>2</sup> This 1991 *Washington Post* article includes mention of a guest book placed in the exhibit which was quickly filled with angry comments in defense of the art. See, Kim Masters, "They Went Thataway: At the NMAA, Revising the Revisionism of 'The West as America'," *The Washington Post*, June 2, 1991, 16, ProQuest.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Kimmelman, "Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian," *The New York Times*, May 26, 1991, ProQuest; Michael Kilian, "Wild, Wild West: The Smithsonian Circles the Wagon Over its latest Exhibit," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1991, 16, ProQuest.

<sup>4</sup> Gulliford, "The West as America," 200-201.

<sup>5</sup> "The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920," Smithsonian Institution, accessed February 29, 2020, <https://www.si.edu/exhibitions/west-america-reinterpreting-images-frontier-1820-1920-event-exhib-3800>.

Native Americans encountered through Westward expansion, dramatic captures of untouched land, and pioneers forging ahead in images like Figure 1, Bierstadt's *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*.<sup>6</sup>

The American public is all too familiar with this narrative. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner articulated the popular "Frontier Thesis," which attributed a set of uniquely American characteristics to the experience of Westward frontier expansion in his work "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Countless Western films and works of art, like the aforementioned Bierstadt, picked up and carried this message forward—that on the frontier, opportunity was abundant, self-reliance was necessary, and hard work was rewarded. The art in the exhibition partook in a kind of cultural story-telling which historian Ray Allen Billington frames as follows: "in a land where a man's worth to society was judged by his own skills; a democratic social system with greater possibilities for upward mobility followed naturally."<sup>7</sup> One such image included in the exhibit was George Caleb Bingham's *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap* (Figure 2), in which a family and a frontiersman confidently stride forward with wilderness stretching out around them, in all directions.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Gulliford, "The West as America," 202.

<sup>7</sup> Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Gulliford, "The West as America," 203.



Figure 1: Albert Bierstadt, *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, 1867. Oil on Canvas. The National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.



Figure 2: George Caleb Bingham, *Daniel Boone Escorting Settler through the Cumberland Gap*, 1851-1852. Oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 50 3/4 in. Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St Louis, Missouri.

The curators challenged this telling of American history, in which American settlers conquer unoccupied land, with a series of labels accompanying the art. One such exhibit label read: "The predominance of negative and violent views" in reference to the pioneer images which included Native Americans, "was a manifestation of Indian hatred, a largely manufactured, calculated reversal of the basic facts of white encroachment and deceit."<sup>9</sup> Essentially, the exhibit told Americans that these paintings and sculptures amounted to "carefully staged fiction" which obscures "damaging social and environmental change."<sup>10</sup> The Smithsonian asked its public to question how much of Turner's, Remington's, or Bingham's capture of American history is myth. In response, *The New York Times* subsequently disparaged the museum for its "political correctness" and Senator Ted Stevens threatened to cut funding to the Smithsonian, revealing the political nature of so-called history paintings.<sup>11</sup>

This exhibition, perhaps revealed the political nature of frontier history itself, a history which received intense curiosity and admiration from the American public from the start. Though there are different measures by which historians today periodize and make meaning of frontier history, it was undoubtedly a short-lived period that profoundly impacted the American identity. The prominent literary and artistic figures who went West to

---

<sup>9</sup> Gulliford, "The West as America," 203.

<sup>10</sup> This refers to a quote from the exhibit walls cited within a 1991 *Washington Post* Article on the topic. See, Kim Masters, "They Went Thataway: At the NMAA, Revising the Revisionism of 'The West as America'," *The Washington Post*, June 2, 1991, 16, ProQuest.

<sup>11</sup> Kimmelman, "Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian."; Masters, "They Went Thataway."

understand and capture elements of life on the frontier, whose art composed the 1991 Smithsonian exhibition, could feel this phase of American history slipping through their fingers, even as they lived it. In an article entitled on “Ranch Life in the Far West” for *Century Magazine*, Theodore Roosevelt lamented that “In its present form stock-raising on the plains is doomed, and can hardly outlast the century.”<sup>12</sup> The prolific American artist Frederic Remington echoed this sentiment by the mid-1890s writing that “the blistered faces of men, the gaunt horses dragging stiffly along to the cruel spurring...are no more,” and finding this West already more “enfeebled” than the West of his early travels only ten years prior.<sup>13</sup>

But this admission on the part of Remington, led not to the end of his career in drawing and painting scenes he observed while living the ranch life in Kansas, and following Native American tribes in Arizona.<sup>14</sup> Rather, when he moved back to his studio in New York, it intensified the thirst among his Eastern city-dwelling contemporaries for images of the West, of cowboys, of hunting and of horseback riding. Thus, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the symbols and landscapes of the transient Western frontier took their permanent place in the American imagination. Remington’s first bronze sculpture made in 1895, *The Bronco Buster*, (pictured on the cover page), was so popular that

---

<sup>12</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “Ranch Life in The Far West. In Cattle Country,” illustrated by Frederic Remington, *Century Illustrated Magazine* XXXIV, no. 13 (Winter 1888): 510, HathiTrust.

<sup>13</sup> Frederic Remington, quoted in Edward G. White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1989), 112.

<sup>14</sup> White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience*, 94; 98.

he lived to see the purchase of more than one hundred copies.<sup>15</sup> The piece, adapted from a sketch he made while living in the West, depicts the figure which Roosevelt and Remington lauded as the toughest and most admirable of cowboy types doing what he does best— keeping his balance while breaking in an untamed horse.<sup>16</sup> Artworks of this ilk promote a notion of the West as a place which required and bred heroic qualities. By Turnerian logic, these qualities and this experience, unparalleled in any other nation, in turn shaped the collective American identity.

In short, *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* and the ensuing controversy revealed the bias of the American art audience towards a particular American origin story. As Ray Allen Billington concedes, “the frontier’s impact on American traits and institutions can never be exactly defined,” but its impact on America’s limited art historical vocabulary is clear—even as recently as the year 1991.<sup>17</sup> The conversation this exhibit started weaves together threads of art history, cultural taste and American storytelling which this essay will explore through a different, but parallel, lens. In the case of this exhibit, we can consider the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art as a space where the visual vocabulary of Anglo-American frontier history—that comprised of pristine landscapes, rough-riding cowboys, and marauding Native Americans— was put on display and scrutinized.

---

<sup>15</sup> James K Ballinger, *Frederic Remington’s Southwest* (Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1992), 66.

<sup>16</sup> Ballinger, *Frederic Remington’s Southwest*, 66; Roosevelt, “Ranch Life in The Far West. In Cattle Country,” 507.

<sup>17</sup> Billington, *America’s Frontier Heritage*, 219.

The aim of this paper is to discuss, instead, another public-facing American space where the very same visual vocabulary decorates the walls, and its mythic or propagandistic nature has gone and continues to go unquestioned. In the Oval Office, of the West Wing of the White House, the president of the United States is the sole curator. Due to television broadcasts and hundreds of photographs of renovations, meetings with foreign dignitaries, and bill signings, the office has become a space in which his audience is global.<sup>18</sup> In the case of more recent administrations, any curious art enthusiast can view a given president's selection of paintings and sculptures in the Oval Office with a quick Google search. The public nature of the space, its significance as the official seat of the president, and the president's freedom to choose the art objects provide a different kind of authority on the president's tastes and tendencies.

There are plenty of carefully crafted texts which allow us to learn about a president's background, hopes and aspirations. One can turn to his inaugural address, highly prioritized policies, biography or autobiography to gain insights. But in selecting art to surround himself for four years, and to be seen by the press and the public, the president wordlessly reveals certain prejudices and preferences. He reveals the story of American culture or origins that he likes to tell himself. Thus the ever-rotating set of faces and places that have decorated the space warrant a closer look. More interesting still, is the way in which the use of certain symbols in Oval Office artworks

---

<sup>18</sup> "Oval Office History," The White House Museum, accessed February 24, 2020, <http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/west-wing/oval-office-history.htm>.

overlaps with the use of metaphors drawn from American history which presidents have mobilized in their inaugural and State of the Union addresses. The art, then, becomes a means to access certain themes and story-telling devices upon which the president relies.

Today, a cast of *The Bronco Buster* sits just feet away from President Donald Trump's desk, in the most broadcasted room in the White House. In his State of the Union address in February, Trump stated in a hyperbole of Turnerian logic, "The American Nation was carved out of the vast frontier by the toughest, strongest, fiercest, and most determined men and women ever to walk the face of the Earth. Our ancestors braved the unknown; tamed the wilderness; settled the Wild West."<sup>19</sup> Today, the Western frontier is alive and well in the American imagination. The presence of Western motifs in the Oval Office offers an interesting way to access a given telling of American history, or the president's distillation of the American imagination. The focus, in this introductory section, on the cultural attachment to Western-oriented art is not to suggest that this is the only kind of art displayed in the Oval Office. What is actually more telling, is that out of the White House's expansive collection of landscapes drawn from every region, American heroes throughout time, seascapes, naval battles and more, the presidents of the

---

<sup>19</sup> Transcript of President Donald Trump's State of the Union Address, on February 4, 2020, transcribed in Nicole Narea and Catherine Kim, "Read the full text of Trump's State of the Union speech," *Vox*, February 5, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/2/4/21123394/state-of-the-union-full-transcript-trump>.



latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have increasingly turned to images of the frontier to hang in the office.<sup>20</sup>

In order to gain any meaningful insight from the paintings and sculptures that inhabit the office for each individual's term, we must treat the objects as a revelation of certain values and preferences, free of meticulous thought or planning on his part. If there were a tidy record of the artworks each president chose to hang in the Oval Office and why they suited his personal taste, this thesis would be merely a human interest story. Instead, this paper aims to ask what, as we move further in time and space from the reality of the frontier, does our leader see in these symbols of frontier history? Why do these metaphors remain so appealing when there is a growing chorus of academics forcing us to evaluate the shameful realities of frontier history? Instances where a president speaks directly about selected artworks are few. Fortunately, however, instances from which we can glean how the president understands the West, and positions it in his telling of American history, are abundant. As Western historian Patricia Limerick once remarked, "When presidential candidates and presidents put the frontier analogy to use, there is a broader lesson available on the persuasive powers given to that analogy."<sup>21</sup> I would like to add, when a president preserves a particular image of a territory through the art he hangs for the American public, and his policies and choices in office do not

---

<sup>20</sup> Doreen Bolger and David Park Curry, "Art for the President's House," in *Art in the White House: A Nation's Pride*, eds. Donald J. Crump, Jane R. McGoldrick and Philip B. Silcott (Washington D.C.: White House Historical Association, 1992), 18-24.

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Limerick, *Something in the Soil* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000), 79.

preserve this territory in practice, there is a greater persuasive or symbolic power ascribed to these images. When placed in conversation with many presidents' environmental policies, these artworks reveal that 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century presidents, almost entirely from the East and Midwest, engage more readily with a nostalgic vision of the West rather than the complicated and varied territory it is today.

The two kinds of Western artworks found in the Oval Office represent two popular mythologies that came out of the brief and novel period of Western settlement. These categories of deceptive imagery are the bronze of the heroic cowboy and the landscape of preserved Western wilderness. Here, I have characterized these works as deceptive because they tell particular stories about the West, while obscuring important truths. The myths that these images of self-reliance and virgin land reflect are as follows: 1) that settling the West was a lone endeavor made successful by the wherewithal of prospectors and frontiersman and 2) that European pioneers discovered sites like Yellowstone and set them aside in their natural state. These narratives, and the revelation that these art objects were made for an Eastern audience by Eastern artists, speak to some of the most important ways in which Western history is rife with myth. Perhaps the elusive nature of the frontier's edge through the 19th century and the brevity of this period allowed for people to believe what they wanted of the frontier. Despite the changing geographic borders, cultural authorities assigned qualities of freedom from social hierarchy and industry to the West

as a *place*, rather than to the frontier *period* as a moment in time. Even if we were to accept these notions of increased freedom and independence as a product of this brief pre-industrialized period in time, we would be ignoring two important realities.

The first reality is that the development of Western land and industry was underwritten by federal support and regulation, not the result of the toil of plucky individuals. The second is that the designation of certain Western territories as places to civilize, and other to set aside as wilderness sites for leisure required the forced removal of both native American peoples and unwanted animal species.<sup>22</sup> It is not as if Yellowstone or the Grand Tetons are sites where Euro-Americans have left things exactly as they were—though the fact that Thomas Moran’s 1895 painting *The Three Tetons* looks much like the park does today would lead one to believe so. The continued cultural admiration of the cowboy figure, as we see both in the selection of *The Bronco Buster* in the Oval Office and the way that Western settlers are spoken about in presidential addresses, continues to credit the frontier experience with the making of distinctly American qualities due to the isolation and unsupported nature of their industries. In reality, Billington argues “even those crown princes of individualism, the ranchers and the miners, depended far more on joint effort than on self-prowess.”<sup>23</sup> He cites numerous examples of miners and cattle raisers forming associations, or relying on governmental regulations to manage their newly settled lands.

<sup>22</sup> Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Billington, *America’s Frontier Heritage*, 146.

The last forty years of academic conversation have undertaken a critical rewriting of American frontier history. The Smithsonian curators attempted to do the same, pivoting their attention instead to art history and the images which perpetuate these myths. Looking at the treatment of the West in our presidents' chosen artworks, speeches, and policies confirms that to question our celebration of the cowboy and the national park would be to cast doubt on the very features of our country that our leaders prize as making us distinctly American. Presidential policies and speeches pertaining to the West reveal that these artworks are not stand alone artifacts. The traces of the frontier in paintings and speeches reveals how many different cultural arenas are tangled in the very same web of history and mythology. The ubiquity of these myths primes the American audience to believe in a simple West with a simple history. The problem with this, then, is that it leads the public to believe a simple solution, like "we need more parks," as President George H. W. Bush once reassuringly stated, is an adequate response to the demands of the West.<sup>24</sup> If we unravel the truth behind our most beloved frontier myths, we will find that simple solutions cannot possibly address the present consequences of the West's complicated past.

In order to guide this critical reading of artworks that have inhabited the Oval Office, I begin this essay by compiling and categorizing, every art object that has been selected to decorate the space. The subsequent section traces the inventory of the Oval Office beginning with the first use of the

<sup>24</sup> George H. W. Bush, quoted in Otis L. Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 306.

office at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and following trends through the present administration. As I lay out the categories that certain committees followed to acquire art for the White House Historical Association's permanent collection, I ask one to consider these works with a critical eye. Just as many academics have found common tropes pertaining to the American identity in presidential campaigns and speeches, the selected artworks cluster around certain visions of America. The following section explores these themes, and identifies a growing interest in America's Western frontier history in the president's vision of American identity.

Entitled "The Western Metaphor," the third section establishes the meaning the cowboy figure was given when the art selections such as *The Bronco Buster* were made. It then confirms that the fascination with which Easterners treated the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has translated into willingness to receive this story about Americans when the president leverages the frontier both in his rhetoric and in the symbols he displays in his office. The final section attempts to investigate the other common category of Western art in the Oval Office, the landscape. It casts doubt on the innocence of a landscape as a simple recording of a place and discusses the Euro-American construction of wilderness as a space devoid of human inhabitants. Finally, I hold these images up next to each president's policies enacted in public space in the West and find that they reinforce a historicized notion of Western land. These artworks, which presidents likely select

without much deliberation, perpetuate a story rooted in the past that more often than not contradicts the treatment of the West in the present.

### **The Story We Tell Ourselves: Heroes and Histories in the Oval Office**

The process of assembling an inventory of art objects which have been displayed in the Oval Office was complex and telling. That is to say, the sparsity of both records of the chosen artworks and of academic responses to the artworks suggests that this means of examining American story-telling has been largely overlooked. To find the appropriate sources which would help to identify the artworks photographed in the Oval Office, I first had to learn the parameters for the president's art selections. Historically, the president is able to choose artworks not only from the White House Historical Association's collection of artworks, but may also borrow from collections of American art objects housed by the Smithsonian Institution or the National Gallery.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, I believed I could find the majority of the works either in digital galleries on the Smithsonian and National Gallery's websites or in a catalogue composed by staff of the Office of the Curator. I found this catalogue in a book entitled *Art in the White House: A Nation's Pride* and edited by former White House staff. This source contains a compilation of the 450 known works in the White House Historical Association's permanent

---

<sup>25</sup> "Decorating the White House: Fact Sheet," The White House Historical Association, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/press-room-old/press-collection/decorating-the-white-house>; Committee on House Administration, *Hearings, Reports and Prints of the House Committee on House Administration* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 28-29, Google Books.

collection.<sup>26</sup> A search through files in each presidential library's digital archive revealed that precise records of selected art objects exist only for the administrations of Kennedy, Nixon and Ford. The history of the Oval Office's usage informed the periodization of my research—I planned to identify the works selected by all presidents spanning from William Howard Taft to Donald Trump.<sup>27</sup>

For this, I turned to a broad variety of sources, primarily for photographs of the Oval Office, from which I could identify familiar and repeatedly chosen artworks. In some instances, magazine articles such as *Town and Country's* "The Oval Office Through the Years, in Photos," provided images of all artworks in a given phase of the Oval Office, with photographs taken from several different angles. This kind of coverage occurred more frequently for more recent administrations. In the case of administrations from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I combed through black and white images from *LIFE Magazine*, presidential library archives, and the White House Museum website. For a select few administrations with Oval Office replicas on their presidential museum websites, photographs or virtual tours online displayed replicas of all selected objects in color. Once I had gathered a comprehensive body of images, I cross-referenced the images of paintings and sculptures with those in *Art in the White House*, The Smithsonian and

---

<sup>26</sup> Betty C. Monkman, "Catalogue of the White House Collection of Paintings, Sculpture and Works on Paper," in *Art in the White House: A Nation's Pride*, eds. Donald J. Crump, Jane R. McGoldrick and Philip B. Silcott (Washington D.C.: White House Historical Association, 1992), 292.

<sup>27</sup> *First West Wing Oval Office*, 1909, Photograph, The White House Historical Association, Washington D.C., <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/first-west-wing-oval-office>.

The National Gallery's catalogues, filtered by the tag "White House." In the rare case when I could not identify an object from photographs and image catalogues, I met with American art historian, Margaretta Lovell, who was able to identify the likely artist or subject matter of a piece.

I soon became familiar with the most commonly selected portraits and landscapes—categories which I will call 'heroes' and 'histories,' respectively, for the purpose of this paper. In the inventory that follows, the discussion of a president's selected 'histories' will refer to landscapes and historical paintings and is intended to question the subjectivity of paintings which supposedly recorded historical events or places. The emphasis on past presidents and significant military figures, among the selected heroes, is unsurprising. The symbolic heroes, who do not represent a particular individual but rather a figure, like *The Bronco Buster*, are more revealing. This paper also looks for the rich meaning the histories—the seascapes, the landscapes and the naval battles—gain when placed in the context of the Oval Office. The complete distillation of this research is presented in chronological order by administration in the schematic I have included on pages 36 through 39. While the larger thematic groupings follow in chronological phases for the most part, the last 6 presidencies will be organized by their choice of Western heroes or of Western histories.

One can only begin to assess the meaning of the selected artworks with an idea of the complete body of artworks from which the president may choose. Though the president has the freedom to decorate the Oval Office,



this freedom is subject to certain constraints which have shaped the White House collection. The selected artworks on the walls, mantle and surfaces of the Oval Office speak to the president's understanding of American history because they are required to be American-made and American-focused works. Art historian and curator John Wilmerding sums up the collection of prints, paintings and sculptures that were displayed in the White House in the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as "reflect[ing] the history of the residence and personalities of the first families that have occupied it."<sup>28</sup> In short, the early White House inhabitants were interested in hanging primarily portraits, to document its inhabitants, and some landscapes that presidents and members of first families bought or received as gifts.<sup>29</sup> Over time, inhabitants of the White House created and upheld a tradition of collecting landscapes, seascapes, cityscapes, portraits, history scenes and a few still lifes.<sup>30</sup> It was not until John F. Kennedy's administration, under the guidance of Jackie Kennedy, that White House inhabitants formalized the process of collecting art and decorative objects.<sup>31</sup> In 1961, Congress passed an act which granted the White House museum status, and formally created an Office of the Curator in charge of the growth and maintenance of the art collection.<sup>32</sup> In turn, the Office of the Curator developed a Special Committee for White House Paintings. By 1964, the president received the aid of a

---

<sup>28</sup> John Wilmerding, "American Art in the White House," in *Art in the White House: A Nation's Pride*, eds. Donald J. Crump, Jane R. McGoldrick and Philip B. Silcott (Washington D.C.: White House Historical Association, 1992), 13.

<sup>29</sup> Wilmerding, "American Art in the White House," 14-15.

<sup>30</sup> Bolger and Curry, "Art for the President's House," 18-24.

<sup>31</sup> Bolger and Curry, "Art for the President's House," 44.

<sup>32</sup> Bolger and Curry, "Art for the President's House," 44.

Committee for the Preservation of the White House, formed to consult on his “acquisition, use and display of historic and artistic objects for the White House.”<sup>33</sup>

Records from committee meetings clarify the parameters of the art collection from which the president chooses objects for the Oval Office, although this decision is otherwise entirely his own.<sup>34</sup> The policies for collecting art, once formalized under Kennedy were as follows. A 1961 press release for the formation of the Painting Committee of the Fine Arts Committee crafted by Henry Dupont stated: “This Committee of Art Historians and Collectors plans to expand the present White House collection of portraits to include other representative works of American artists. These paintings will include landscapes and still lifes in keeping with the history and tradition of the president’s house.”<sup>35</sup> Shortly thereafter, the first meeting of the Painting Committee specified that no contemporary artists were to be included in the collection and that portraits were to “represent government figures or some phase of American history.”<sup>36</sup> An interview with the Chairman of the Special Committee for Paintings James W. Fosburgh

---

<sup>33</sup> Bolger and Curry, “Art for the President’s House,” 44.

<sup>34</sup> Patrick Phillips-Schrock, *The Nixon White House Redecoration and Acquisition Program: An Illustrated History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016), 28.

<sup>35</sup> Press Release regarding the Special Committee for White House Paintings, 21 November, 1962, JBKOPP-SF036-009-p0029, Subject files: White House: Special Committee for White House Paintings: [General], Document 29, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>36</sup> “First Meeting of the Painting Committee of the Fine Arts Committee for the White House”, 6 December, 1961, JBKOPP-SF036-009-p0029, Subject files: White House: Special Committee for White House Paintings: [General], Documents 48-49, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

confirms that there were no prior records nor regulations for what was acceptable to collect.<sup>37</sup>

More interesting, however, is the segment from this interview which reveals that the committee served not only to collect art which dealt with the right time periods and subject matter, but perceived themselves as collecting “an historical coverage of the best American painting from the time the house was first occupied by the president until the present.”<sup>38</sup> With these words, Fosburgh places a judgement, on the cultural value of these images. From his perspective, the White House collects not only art within the aforementioned categories, but the *best* American art. Given the volume of works by Remington, Bierstadt, Bingham, Moran and contemporaries—many of the very same beloved artists featured in the Smithsonian exhibit—that the White House has acquired, it seems this judgement is a widely held understanding of what constitutes ‘good’ American art.<sup>39</sup> The White House Collection holds many of the same kinds of images of Western expansion and frontier narratives, fitting that which the Smithsonian deemed practically propaganda into the neat categories of historical images and landscapes. With the rather recent formalization of the art collecting process, it is clear that some combination of established precedent and official policy have

<sup>37</sup> Biographies of Members of the Special Committee for White House Paintings, August 3, 1959- November 28, 1962, JBKOPP-SF036-009, Subject files: White House: Special Committee for White House Paintings: [General], Document 35, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts; Interview with James W. Fosburgh by unknown interviewer due to redacted files listing interview introduction, August 3, 1959- November 28, 1962, JBKOPP-SF036-009-p0078, Subject files: White House: Special Committee for White House Paintings: [General], Documents 78-83, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with James W. Fosburgh, Document 79.

<sup>39</sup> Monkman, “Catalogue of the White House Collection” 293-365.

served as rules for what is acceptable to hang in the White House. Yet even out of these categories, it seems that which is permitted for display in the Oval Office adheres to stricter unspoken parameters.

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>, the presidents' art selections for the Oval Office have established certain patterns and trends in what can and should be selected from the White House Collection. Broadly, the changing inventory of the Oval Office is comprised of landscapes, history scenes, and portraits. Sculptural objects include animals, ships, frontiersmen and busts of former leaders such as Winston Churchill, or Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>40</sup> Recall now the broad parameters for acquiring White House art, as explained by the Special Committee for White House paintings, which also included still lifes and a stated intention to expand the emphasis of the collection beyond portraiture. Though there have never been explicit rules against it, there have been no paintings of women, such as those popularized by American artists James McNeil Whistler and John Singer Sargent, nor still lifes—subject matter that may be considered decorative art—in the Oval Office.<sup>41</sup>

This unspoken decision is not due to a lack of these images in the broader White House Collection. The catalogue of paintings and sculptures in

---

<sup>40</sup> Sam Dangremond, "The Oval Office Through the Years, in Photos," *Town & Country*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/politics/g12090469/oval-office-pictures-through-the-years/?slide=14>; Jordan Phelps, "President Obama Explains Why Winston Churchill's Bust was Removed from the Oval Office," *ABC News*, April 22, 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/president-obama-explains-winston-churchills-bust-removed-oval/story?id=38602120>.

<sup>41</sup> Though the subject of this thesis does not lend itself to an in-depth investigation of the gendered nature of art in the Oval Office, it is worth raising the question: will it require a female-identifying president for a portrait of a woman to hang on the Oval Office walls?

the collection in *Art of the White House: A Nation's Pride* includes 51 paintings or prints of women and 4 sculptures of women.<sup>42</sup> The collection also includes 13 still lifes and decorative sketches such as Albert Bierstadt's *Butterfly*.<sup>43</sup> The paintings of women include some more anonymous representations of idealized female figures such as Mary Cassatt's *Young Mother and Two Children* or John Singer Sargent's *The Mosquito Net*, but they primarily depict First Ladies.<sup>44</sup> These portraits, then, represent important figures in White House history who, time and time again, were not chosen for display in the office of the president. Placing a portrait in the most public-facing space in the White House confirms, by the president's judgment, the subject's worthiness of glorification or important role in American history. In the case of portraiture, that which a figure stands for is sometimes more legible; Obama stated in an explanation of his selection of Charles Alston's bust of Martin Luther King Jr. that it felt fitting given his status "as the first African American president."<sup>45</sup>

But landscapes, too, can carry an ideological weight. Art historian William Kloss describes Albert Bierstadt's dramatic painting *Rocky Mountain Landscape*, acquired by the White House collection, as follows: "Around a core of light the artist has wrapped a dark cloak, sealing off this extraordinary place from the civilized world."<sup>46</sup> The visual characterization of

---

<sup>42</sup> Monkman, "Catalogue of the White House Collection."

<sup>43</sup> Monkman, "Catalogue of the White House Collection," 296.

<sup>44</sup> Monkman, "Catalogue of the White House Collection," 300; 343.

<sup>45</sup> Phelps, "President Obama Explains."

<sup>46</sup> William Kloss, "Selected Works From the Collection," in *Art in the White House: A Nation's Pride*, eds. Donald J. Crump, Jane R. McGoldrick and Philip B. Silcott (Washington D.C.: White House Historical Association, 1992), 174.

the West as separate from civilization feeds into what scholar Andrew Gulliford called “the myth of the Western frontier as a healthy safety valve for a young nation” in his review of the Smithsonian’s controversial exhibition.<sup>47</sup> This kind of painting, without the presence of figures or words, sells a particular notion of the West. If landscapes, seascapes and depictions of historical developments characterize the history of this country in a particular way, what is the story of American culture that each president is drawn to? Both the heroes who the president deems worthy of presence in his Oval Office and the histories to which he gravitates focus on various aspects of the American origin story, some more mythic than others.

The history of this space and increasing attention paid to its decoration have guided the periodization of this study. The decoration of the space necessarily follows the use of this office itself and the presidents who did not care to personalize the space only merit a brief mention in this section. First and foremost, the Oval Office was not in the plans for the original White House; a complete inventory of art in the office must begin with the year 1909.<sup>48</sup> This year corresponds with William Howard Taft’s presidency and a photograph of his rendition confirms that it was scarcely decorated, save for one small unidentified portrait sketch.<sup>49</sup> Shortly thereafter, there was a 1929 fire in the West Wing which destroyed the Oval Office, prompting a renovation and opportunity for redecoration when it was finally restored

---

<sup>47</sup> Gulliford, “The West as America,” 200.

<sup>48</sup> *First West Wing Oval Office*, 1909, Photograph, The White House Historical Association, Washington D.C., <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/first-west-wing-oval-office>.

<sup>49</sup> *First West Wing Oval Office*, 1909, Photograph.

under Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1934.<sup>50</sup> With this reconstruction, the office moved to its spot above the Rose Garden, making Roosevelt the first President to inhabit the Oval Office as we know it today.<sup>51</sup> Between the office's establishment and first redecorations, photographs such as Figure 4 indicate that Presidents Wilson, Harding, Coolidge and Hoover followed the precedent set by Taft, and displayed only the singular aforementioned portrait on the mantel.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, a complete history of the items moving in and out of the Oval Office effectively begins with Roosevelt.



---

<sup>50</sup> National Photo Company Collection, "Scene in the private office of Pres. Hoover showing the effects of the fire which practically destroyed the Executive Offices," December 26, 1929. Photograph, LC-USZ62-97299. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, Washington D.C.; "The Oval Office," Museum, The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, accessed February 23, 2020, [https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/museum/the\\_oval\\_office](https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/museum/the_oval_office).

<sup>51</sup> "The Oval Office," Museum, The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, accessed February 23, 2020, [https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/museum/the\\_oval\\_office](https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/museum/the_oval_office).

<sup>52</sup> Harris & Ewing, "Warren G. Harding," no date. Photograph, WWPL0873. Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library Photo Collection, *Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library & Museum*, Staunton, Virginia. <http://presidentwilson.org/items/show/23139>.

Figure 3: Harris & Ewing. "Warren G. Harding," no date. Photograph. Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library Photo Collection, Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library & Museum, Staunton, Virginia

This paper aims not only to find trends in the visual stories told in the Oval Office, but also to identify common categories of America's self-imaging in this space.<sup>53</sup> It is important to name and define these categories as the changing inventory of the Oval Office will be laid out chronologically by administration but also by theme, to a certain extent. The common themes noted among the selected heroes and histories are defined as follows. What I will call the self-referential conception of American storytelling is composed of images which depict figures and places connected the history of the presidency and the White House itself. The seafaring, or outward-looking conception of America pertains to objects which speak to the history of America as a nation with a global reach. The last overarching theme, upon which this essay is focused, is the 19<sup>th</sup> century Western frontier conception of the cultural and geographic development of this nation. It is worth noting that after the Western frontier had become completely incorporated into United States territory, the concept of the frontier took new forms. For the purpose of this paper "frontier" will refer to this 19<sup>th</sup> century Western frontier, however the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century saw its own expansion of American involvement overseas and in the race for new technology, both of which realms can be seen geographically, metaphorically or ideologically as their

---

<sup>53</sup> What I mean by self-imaging is a self-reinforcing cycle. It is the process by which purveyors of culture, artists and academics, create images of our history and leaders, in this case political leaders, reinforce the legitimacy of these images by displaying them in institutional spaces such as museums, schools and administrative buildings.



own frontiers. Each of the three categories includes both portraits and landscapes which contribute to their visualizations of American values.

Certain presidents' selections are more easily categorized within one of these three themes, but there have often been multiple historical themes on display at once in the Oval Office. If anything, these competing narratives only reinforce the notion that a focus on a certain telling of American history is an active choice. The telling of American history through the lens of the Western frontier is the most compelling to investigate as it is echoed in other aspects of many presidents' self-presentation. The similar and frequent use of the frontier in many presidents' speeches demonstrates the power this vision of American history has. One need not look further than *The Dallas Morning News*' roundup of photographs of the last ten presidents in cowboy hats at public gatherings to grasp that the cowboy serves as a shorthand for an appealing set of American values.<sup>54</sup>

The art inventory worth detailed investigation begins with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's introduction of the seafaring vision of the America. His imagery was then followed by a combination of the outward-looking conception and the self-referential conception present in the redecorations of President Harry Truman and President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Not only was Roosevelt the first president to heartily decorate the room with many paintings, prints, figurines and knickknacks but, he was also the first to

---

<sup>54</sup> Charles Scudder, "Who wore it best? Cowboy hat photo ops are a presidential tradition," *The Dallas Morning News*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/texana/2018/02/19/who-wore-it-best-cowboy-hat-photo-ops-are-a-presidential-tradition/>.

consistently invite the press into his office.<sup>55</sup> Photographs from a 1942 issue of LIFE magazine highlight his collection of ship models on his desk, among other trinkets and paintings of ships and landscapes on the walls in the background.<sup>56</sup> While the steamship images on his walls did not match with any images in the White House Historical Association's art collection, Margaretta Lovell identified the cluster of paintings on his wall from Figure 5, a photograph from *LIFE*, as a painting of a steamship on a lake, likely Champlain, with smaller prints of romantic landscapes hanging below.<sup>57</sup> She determined that the print or watercolor to the left of the steamship image was likely a painting of steamboats on the Hudson River. The view from his desk included a framed map of the globe suspended over columns of text and another large framed print of a steamboat. Channeling a vision of America as of a seafaring nation with a global reach, the Oval Office decoration which is nearest in time to what Turner deemed the frontier period, holds no imagery of the Western frontier.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup>Kelly Gonsalves, "The President and the Press," *The Week*, accessed February 22, 2020, <https://theweek.com/captured/735643/president-press>; James E. Pollard, "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Press," *Journalism Quarterly*, 22 no. 3 (Fall 1945): Sage Journals, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769904502200302>.

<sup>56</sup> "Speaking of Pictures: The President's Desk is Covered with Gimracks," *LIFE Magazine*, August 10, 1942, Google Books, 9.

<sup>57</sup> Margaretta Lovell, conversation about photographs of Truman, Roosevelt and Eisenhower's Oval Offices, March 5, 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Turner declared the end of the frontier in the year 1890 due to a certain population density in the West as of the 1890 census. See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Frederick Jackson Turner: Wisconsin's Historian of the Frontier*, ed. Martin Ridge (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1986), 1.

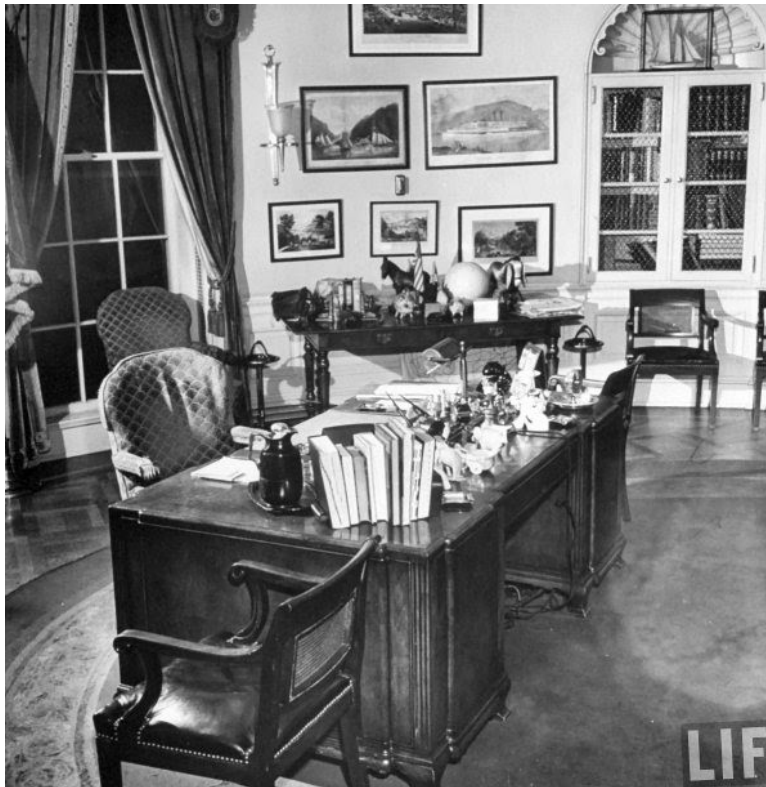


Figure 4: Photograph of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Oval Office. From *LIFE Magazine*, August 10, 1942, Google Books.

Truman and Eisenhower's subsequent redecorations included a combination of outward-looking American imagery and self-referential imagery. Unlike Roosevelt, both included not only histories but also heroes, in the form of previous presidents and Founding Fathers. The global vision of the United States as a world power was articulated in two different ways in Truman's office. On the one hand, this vision was expressed with means of transportation and global contact: he hung a map, a naval painting entitled *U.S.S. Constitution* by Gordon Hope Grant, and a series of illustrations of airplanes.<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, he included two unusual portraits of "South

<sup>59</sup> Harry S. Truman Library, "The replica of the Oval Office in the Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri," May 3, 1960, photograph. Accession Number 60-426. Oval Office Replica, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/photograph-records/60-426>; Photograph of Harry Truman's Oval Office in "Oval Office History," The White House Museum.

Americans liberators” in military dress above the mantle, which can be seen in photographs of his Oval Office replica.<sup>60</sup> In a manner distinct from the display of maritime imagery in F.D.R.’s office, Truman’s choice to honorifically display South American leaders in the office of the American president also speaks to his outward-looking global role. The American heroes he selected were also of military significance. He displayed George Washington, Andrew Jackson and a bronze sculpture of Paul Wayland Bartlett’s *Lafayette on Horseback*, as a call back to an important figure in the American Revolution, Marquis de Lafayette.<sup>61</sup> These heroes are self-referential and celebrate the presidency’s military origins.

Eisenhower’s redecoration reflected a similarly self-referential vision of American pride with the Jean-Antoine Houdon’s porcelain busts of George Washington and Benjamin Franklin as well as Gutzom Borglum’s *Seated Lincoln*.<sup>62</sup> His histories are rather illegible from a thematic standpoint. Over the mantle, he hung an unidentified landscape of a lone house enshrined by trees and mist and to the left of that, a dramatic landscape of what Margaretta Lovell identified as possibly Yosemite Valley by Albert Bierstadt.<sup>63</sup> The formation of NATO and the passage of the Truman Doctrine alongside

---

<sup>60</sup> Larry Nicholson and J. E. Tetirick, “Oval Office Replica at the Harry S. Truman Library,” circa 1959, photograph. Accession Number 59-467. Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/photograph-records/59-467>.

<sup>61</sup> James R. Fuchs, “Oval Office Replica at the Harry S. Truman Library,” September 1957, photograph. Accession Number 58-259-2. Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/photograph-records/58-259-2>.

<sup>62</sup> Photograph of Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Oval Office in “Oval Office History,” The White House Museum.

<sup>63</sup> Photograph of Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Oval Office in “Oval Office History,” The White House Museum.

the international focus of Truman's art selections amount to a term focused on foreign policy, while Eisenhower's selections were anomalous.<sup>64</sup>

Thematically, the artworks in President John F. Kennedy's Oval Office would best fit with those selected by all presidents following Richard Nixon. Artworks encapsulating the Western frontier were first introduced in Kennedy's office, but did not resurface with a sense of permanency until the presidency of Gerald R. Ford. However, Kennedy's redecoration serves as the transition between bodies of art focused on the outward-looking conception and those with an inward-looking or frontier-oriented conception. Luckily, this redecoration was closely attended to, as his office redecoration was just a small part of Jacqueline Kennedy's ambitious program for redecorating the entire White House.<sup>65</sup> Kennedy's seafaring vision of America was composed of the naval paintings *Engagement between the "United States" and the "Macedonian"* by Thomas Birch, *The Constitution and the Guerriere* by Thomas Chambers and *Bonhomme Richard* by Thomas Butterworth.<sup>66</sup> Like Roosevelt several iterations earlier, he also included model ships, specifically *The Danmark*, modeled after a World War II ship and a model of *The Sea Witch*.<sup>67</sup> It is worth noting that these paintings differ from Roosevelt's placid maritime images, as they all portray distinct battles from a moment in

---

<sup>64</sup> Lyle Emerson Nelson, *American Presidents Year by Year* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 547; 582.

<sup>65</sup> Wilmerding, "American Art in the White House," 45-46.

<sup>66</sup> "Items in President Kennedy's Oval Office," About JFK, The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/fast-facts-john-f-kennedy/items-in-president-kennedys-oval-office>.

<sup>67</sup> "Items in President Kennedy's Oval Office," About JFK.

American military history with Great Britain: The War of 1812.<sup>68</sup> Considering the particular moment in which Kennedy was staging the décor for his public-facing office, it is fitting that he selected an image of the battle of the U.S.S. Constitution against the Guerriere, as this was a hopeful defeat of another world power by an American ship.<sup>69</sup> American Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis describes Kennedy's administration as "enter[ing] office in 1961 determined to rationalize the conduct of nuclear war."<sup>70</sup> Kennedy's presidency was distinctly marked by the task of considering an entirely new means of conducting international war, while the art in his Office depicted a historical and successful means of doing so.

The other source of American pride captured by the art in Kennedy's Oval Office was the development of the Western frontier. His redecoration was the first to include images which contribute to the story of American identity questioned by the Smithsonian's *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*. His selected histories were George Catlin's *Buffalo Bull* and *Buffalo Hunt Under the Wolf-skin Mask*—both large scale oil paintings on loan from the Smithsonian.<sup>71</sup> Because Catlin spent the 1830s living among Native American groups and painting in the West, the subject matter of Kennedy's selections would have been

---

<sup>68</sup> "The Constitution and the Guerriere," Browse the Collection, The Met Museum, accessed March 8, 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10431>.

<sup>69</sup> "USS Constitution in the War of 1812," Constitution, Naval History and Heritage Command, last modified January 29, 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/ships/ships-of-sail/uss-constitution-american-ship-of-state/history.html>.

<sup>70</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 79.

<sup>71</sup> "Items in President Kennedy's Oval Office," About JFK.

considered realistic depictions of Native Americans.<sup>72</sup> Catlin's depictions however, are the product of a white artist's experience in various Western territories, and perform an inherent othering of their Native American subjects because they were studies of Native American societies made to satisfy a European cultural fascination. *Buffalo Bull*, which hung to the left of the cluster of naval paintings over the mantle, depicts a singular buffalo, standing large in the frame and dwarfing his surroundings. The plain stretches out around the animal, uninhabited, under a cloudy sky. Right beneath this work, Kennedy hung *Buffalo Hunt Under the Wolf-skin Mask*, in which Catlin depicts two Native American men hunting a herd of buffaloes while crawling on their hands and knees, armed with spears and disguised in animal skins. If the naval images displayed in the Oval Office look outward to ports, maritime commerce and international waters for inspiration, Catlin's images look inward to the United States' distinct internal history of developing the frontier. What is more, we can understand Kennedy's Oval Office as inviting a growing body of Western frontier images in the Oval Office redecorations to come.

We can broadly categorize the three presidencies to follow as relying on self-referential images to capture American values. Many of the selected histories were images of Washington D.C. and all but one of the heroes chosen were past presidents. President Gerald R. Ford also included among his heroes, Frederic Remington's *The Bronco Buster*, which would become a

---

<sup>72</sup> Zena Irma Trinka, *Out Where the West Begins, Being the Early and Romantic History of North Dakota* (St. Paul: Pioneer Co., 1920), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044086963345&view=1up&seq=76>, 46-47.

constant in the Oval Office redecorations to come and open the floodgates to art depicting the American frontier.<sup>73</sup> President Lyndon B. Johnson's White House-oriented heroes can be neatly categorized as presidents who served in times of war or demonstrated great military leadership: George Washington in the American Revolution, Andrew Jackson in the War of 1812 and Franklin Roosevelt in World War II as commander in chief.<sup>74</sup> Aside from the lack of landscapes displayed in his decoration of the office, the most remarkable feature of his décor was the set of three color televisions in the cabinet below his bookshelf.<sup>75</sup> This display during his first term reflects the 1960s technological innovation of color TV broadcast nationwide unfolding under his administration. President Richard Nixon similarly decorated his office with proof of American technological innovation and heroes who served as president—his heroes included Charles Wilson Peale's *George Washington* and Leo Cherne's bronze bust of Abraham Lincoln.<sup>76</sup> In Nixon's office, the photograph *Earthrise*, taken by the *Apollo 8* astronauts in 1968, hung prominently to the left of his desk, in a frequently photographed spot.<sup>77</sup> It flaunts the American success that was the *Apollo 8* mission in the Space

---

<sup>73</sup> Office of the Curator, "IMPORTANT OBJECTS IN THE OVAL OFFICE DURING THE ADMINISTRATION OF PRESIDENT GERALD R. FORD," November 23, 1974, Box 14, folder "Oval Office Objects," Robert T Hartmann Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum, Ann Arbor, Michigan, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0011/1683406.pdf>.

<sup>74</sup> "Artifacts in The Oval Office," Exhibits, The Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, accessed February 24, 2020, <http://www.lbjlibrary.org/exhibits/the-oval-office/#!prettyPhoto>.

<sup>75</sup> "Artifacts in The Oval Office," Exhibits, The Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library.

<sup>76</sup> Phillips-Schrock, *The Nixon White House Redecoration and Acquisition Program: An Illustrated History*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Tony Reichhardt, "A Note from Ho Chi Minh," *Air and Space Magazine*, last modified December 23, 2012, <https://www.airspacemag.com/daily-planet/a-note-from-ho-chi-minh-171112548/>.



Race during the Cold War period. Though neither office included images of the Western frontier, American presidents in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have often likened the challenge of the Space Race to that of conquering the West, calling space a “New Frontier.”<sup>78</sup>

The most popular frontier art object in the Oval Office was introduced in Ford’s administration. *The Bronco Buster* stands out in the body of art on his walls, which depict former presidents and views of the White House or New England. Pieces depicting his heroes were clearly enumerated in a 1974 letter from the Office of the Curator and include: *George Washington* by Charles Wilson Peale, *Portrait of Benjamin Franklin* by Charles Wilson Peale, *Bust of Abraham Lincoln* by Leonard Volk, a statuette of Abraham Lincoln by A. A. Weinman, and *Bust of Harry S. Truman* by an unknown artist.<sup>79</sup> His gallery of histories was made up of A. Wodsworth Thompson’s *Passing the Outpost*, which depicts a Revolutionary War scene, Victor De Grailly’s *Eastport and Passamaquoddy Bay* and a view of Washington from the Anacostia River entitled *City of Washington, 1833, from Beyond the Navy Yard* by George Cooke.<sup>80</sup> Together, these works speak to a patriotic view of America stemming from Eastern colonial origins. The *Bronco Buster*, by comparison, is a symbol of a different set of patriotic values—the distinctly American values of self-reliance and independence which Ray Allen Billington

---

<sup>78</sup> John F. Kennedy, “Excerpt, 1960 Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960,” July 15, 1960, TNC-191-E5-EX, Columbia Broadcasting System, Historic Speeches, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>79</sup> Office of the Curator, “IMPORTANT OBJECTS IN THE OVAL OFFICE.”

<sup>80</sup> Office of the Curator, “IMPORTANT OBJECTS IN THE OVAL OFFICE.”

notes in *America's Frontier Heritage*.<sup>81</sup> President Jimmy Carter's Oval Office ought to be mentioned in the same breath as that of Ford, as he kept almost the exact same body of art objects, save for the added bust of Benjamin Franklin and portrait of Thomas Jefferson.<sup>82</sup> The most important thread of continuity in his decoration was the continued display of the symbolic hero, *The Bronco Buster* since this became a standard selection for all redecorations going forward.

Though each Oval Office redecoration tells some combination of self-referential, out-ward-looking, and Western-oriented stories about America, the last six administrations can be categorized as relying more heavily on the Western narrative. Just as Kennedy introduced Western landscapes and Ford introduced the Western cowboy as a hero, Presidents Reagan, H. W. Bush, Clinton, W. Bush, Obama and Trump expand the Western visual vocabulary with both histories and heroes. Among these presidents' redecorations, the self-referential works are largely various combinations of portraits of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, *The President's House*, and *City of Washington, 1833, from Beyond the Navy Yard*. Because the selections for this type imagery do not differ greatly from one administration to another, the remainder of this section will focus on the increasing use of Western histories and heroes. While Presidents Reagan, Clinton and Trump expanded the body of heroes drawn from frontier history, Presidents H.W. Bush, W. Bush and Obama introduced a combination of Western heroes and

---

<sup>81</sup> Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*, 3.

<sup>82</sup> "Oval Office History," The White House Museum.

histories. Thus, the following analysis will be thematically organized around Western heroes and Western landscapes and follow the chronology of presidential administrations within these two categories.

In order to trace the continuity of *The Bronco Buster* as a symbol in the Oval Office, it is useful to forefront the presidencies who displayed Western imagery solely in the form of heroes. As was critiqued in the 1991 Smithsonian exhibition, the predominant figures in 19<sup>th</sup> century Western narratives, generated by Anglo-American authors and artists were the “cowboy” and the “Indian,” often portrayed in violent conflict with one another. It is worth noting that these archetypes were questioned in the wave of what Patricia Limerick calls “New Western History” which emerged out of late 20<sup>th</sup> century multiculturalism.<sup>83</sup> Meanwhile the whitewashed constructions of the cowboy as the frontier hero and the “Indian” as the observed, studied and vilified other remain unquestioned when presented as bronze sculptures in the Oval Office. I have placed this outdated term in quotations to point to that fact that the artists representing this figure in the 19<sup>th</sup> century used “Indian,” where I instead will use the term Native American. What is more, this term was used by artists as a blanket stand-in for individuals from any number of tribes without distinguishing their particular tribal identity. When considering the body of Western heroes among the selections of Reagan, Clinton and Trump, it is worth considering the characterization of Andrew Jackson as a symbol of Western

---

<sup>83</sup> Patricia Limerick discusses the movement of “New Western History” in the introduction to *Something in the Soil* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000).

expansionism, though he is categorized with other self-referential portrait subjects in the schematic on pages 36 through 39. His violence against Native American tribes in the First Seminole War, and in the forceful relocation of the Cherokees, Seminole, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek and other peoples in the Trail of Tears certainly render him relevant to the discussion of the white expansionism at the cost of Native American lives.<sup>84</sup> To view him as a figure connected specifically to Western expansionism, we can look to his involvement in the annexation of Texas, which was made official shortly after he left office.<sup>85</sup> Otherwise, the selected heroes of the West seen in selected artworks are of the symbolic nature—they do not represent specific historical figures.

When viewed side by side, President Reagan and President Clinton's art selections encompass the emphasis on the archetypes of cowboy and Native American in frontier history.<sup>86</sup> Reagan's selections for the Oval Office tell us that he embraced this characterization as a figure associated with the

---

<sup>84</sup> Christina Snyder, "Andrew Jackson's Indian Son: Native Captives and American Empire," in *The Native South: New Histories and Enduring Legacies*, ed. Tim Alan Garrison and Greg O'Brien (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 84; Elizabeth Prine Pauls, "Trail of Tears," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Trail-of-Tears>.

<sup>85</sup> William Nester, "The Texas Revolution," in *The Age of Jackson and the Art of American Power 1815-1848* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 175-176.

<sup>86</sup> In the case of Ronald Reagan, it may prove more useful to situate his art selection within his pre-presidential life rather than the issues at hand amidst his presidency. His career prior to his presidency provides a clear answer for his fondness not only of Western mythology but of the cowboy figure in particular. As stated in Emerson's *American Presidents Year by Year*, he competed throughout his career for roles with America's favorite cowboy, John Wayne and starred in films such as B-movie *Cowboy from Brooklyn*, *Santa Fe Trail*, *Angel from Texas*, and one of his more popular western films *The Bad Man* in which he plays a rancher; see pages 538, 546 and 550. Additionally, In 1962 when he lost his job doing promotional work for General Electric, he devoted himself to advocating for the Republican Party and merely five years later was elected Governor of California; see pages 627, 655.

West through his Hollywood acting and California gubernatorial careers.<sup>87</sup> His purchase of Rancho del Cielo, his own personal 688 acre ranch in the Santa Ynez Mountains of California confirmed his love of playing cowboy.<sup>88</sup> Along with Remington's *Bronco Buster* he prominently displayed another Bronze Remington entitled *The Rattlesnake*, which similarly depicts a moment in the life of a cowboy as dangerous and exhilarating.<sup>89</sup> In this bronze, the bronco-busting cowboy holds on tight while his horse leaps away from a rattlesnake in fear. A video tour of Reagan's exact office replica at the Ronald Reagan Foundation Library and Institute reveals another Western elements of decoration: a collection of sculptures of bronze saddles.<sup>90</sup> He left two paintings which had endured several administrations, *The President's House* and A. Wodsworth Thompson's *Passing the Outpost* depicting the Revolutionary War period.<sup>91</sup> His collection of portraits adorning his walls were not particularly remarkable as they were simply carried over from the previous redecoration. These included the same portraits Ford and Carter displayed of George Washington as well as the previously selected bronze of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Sully's *Andrew Jackson*.

---

<sup>87</sup> Emerson Nelson, *American Presidents Year by Year*, 455; 534.

<sup>88</sup> Gerald M. Boyd, "Reagan Vacation Begins at Ranch," *The New York Times*, November 27, 1985, B8, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/27/us/reagan-vacation-begins-at-ranch.html>.

<sup>89</sup> "Oval Office History," The White House Museum; "The Rattlesnake," Browse the Collection, The Met Museum, accessed March 8, 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11869>.

<sup>90</sup> "Oval Office," Permanent Exhibitions, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, accessed March 17, 2020, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/library-museum/permanent-exhibitions/oval-office/>.

<sup>91</sup> Dangremond. "The Oval Office Through the Years, in Photos;" "Inside the Reagan Library-The Oval Office," Videocasts, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, accessed March 17, 2020, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/programs-events/webcasts-and-podcasts/podcasts/videocasts/inside-the-reagan-library-the-oval-office/>.

One unusual artwork chosen by President Clinton instead brought attention to the Native American as a figure in frontier history. He displayed a bronze sculpture from the 1890s entitled *Appeal to the Great Spirit* by Cyrus Edwin Dallin which depicts a Native American chief in a feather headdress on horseback.<sup>92</sup> In contrast with the horseback position of *The Bronco Buster*, the chief's position is tranquil, on a still horse, as he performs what the artist himself described as a "final appeal to the Great Spirit for peace with the white man."<sup>93</sup> Despite the White House art collection's ownership of a series of portraits of Native American tribal leaders by Charles Bird King, commissioned in the 1820s by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the only prior feature of Native American figures in the Oval Office was Kennedy's display of *Buffalo Hunt Under the Wolf-skin Mask*.<sup>94</sup> Thus, this piece stands out among his other portrait selections, busts of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

This sculpture became an iconic representation of Native Americans from a series of sculptures Dallin created entitled "The Epic of the Indian," suggesting the European American audience's historic fascination with creating mythology around this figure.<sup>95</sup> The self-referential works Clinton chose included Childe Hassam's *The Avenue in the Rain* and Norman

---

<sup>92</sup> "Oval Office History," The White House Museum; "Appeal to the Great Spirit," Browse the Collection, The Met Museum, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/21714>.

<sup>93</sup> Cyrus Edwin Dallin quoted in the Met Museum's commentary; see "Appeal to the Great Spirit," Browse the Collection, The Met Museum, accessed March 18, 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/21714>.

<sup>94</sup> Kloss, "Selected Works From the Collection," 86.

<sup>95</sup> "Appeal to the Great Spirit," The Met Museum.

Rockwell's *Working on the Statue of Liberty*.<sup>96</sup> Of Hassam's work depicting an avenue lined with American flags, art historian William Kloss writes that it was painted at a moment in which "patriotic fervor peaked," just as the German government declared the continuation of unrestricted submarine warfare, and the United States' need to declare war became clear.<sup>97</sup>

Rockwell's piece portrays a close-up of workers repairing the Statue of Liberty's torch, a symbol universally legible for its message of welcome to immigrants entering the United States.<sup>98</sup> To place generalized cowboy and Native American figures among his other patriotic painting selections was to suggest that they hold an important place in the American origin story. And yet, there is no record of Clinton's understanding or intentions around the display of a figure representative of a people largely eradicated by American leadership, begging the question was the non-specific Native American problematically treated as simply an antiquated symbol from frontier history in this context?

Like President Reagan, our current president also displays Andrew Jackson and *The Bronco Buster* as heroes. This most recent re-decoration confirms that an analysis of Western imagery in the Oval Office must focus on the symbols and interpretations of Frederic Remington's *Bronco Buster*. It

<sup>96</sup> Image of William J. Clinton's Office; see "Oval Office History," The White House Museum; Kloss, "Selected Works From the Collection," 238; Johnathan Jones, "Norman Rockwell's Statue of Liberty can point Trump towards decency," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/nov/23/norman-rockwell-statue-of-liberty-can-point-trump-towards-decency>.

<sup>97</sup> Kloss, "Selected Works From the Collection," 238.

<sup>98</sup> Johnathan Jones, "Norman Rockwell's Statue of Liberty can point Trump towards decency," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/nov/23/norman-rockwell-statue-of-liberty-can-point-trump-towards-decency>.

is the singular piece of frontier imagery which endures. An homage to his home state, a painting by Andrew Melrose entitled *New York Harbor and the Battery* is the only landscape in President Trump's Oval Office.<sup>99</sup> Rather than rely on landscapes to capture his vision of quintessentially American art, President Trump places his emphasis on heroes. Due to images of the office tweeted by Trump himself, and in *Town & Country's* survey of the Oval Office, we know he currently has the following heroes on display: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Winston Churchill Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr. and Andrew Jackson in both sculpture and painting form.<sup>100</sup> In a rare case among redecorations, this choice did not go unnoticed. His display of Jackson has been criticized by several journalists, as he was responsible for the passage of the Indian Removal Act and subsequent violent relocation of numerous Native American tribes.<sup>101</sup> *New York Times* journalist Maggie Haberman attempted to explain his justification for the American people. She wrote that in the process of choosing art objects, Trump added Andrew Jackson because he was "America's first populist president, who has been invoked by Mr. Trump's

---

<sup>99</sup> Image of President Trump's Oval Office; see Dangremond, "The Oval Office Through the Years, in Photos;" Monkman, "Catalogue of the White House Collection of Paintings, Sculpture and Works on Paper," 331.

<sup>100</sup> Donald Trump (@realdonaldtrump), "Congratulations to Eddie DeBartolo Jr. and your wonderful family of friends!," tweet, February 18, 2020, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1229921804992446464/photo/4>; Dangremond, "The Oval Office Through the Years."

<sup>101</sup> Olivia Waxman, "5 Things to Know About the President Whose Portrait Donald Trump Chose for the Oval Office," *TIME*, January 25, 2017, <https://time.com/4649081/andrew-jackson-donald-trump-portrait/>.



aides as inspiration.”<sup>102</sup> In 2017, *New York Times* journalist Jane Coaston wrote of the 45<sup>th</sup> President, “Trump believes in ‘the great man’ theory of history.”<sup>103</sup> His Oval Office selections, where we can glean implicit preferences towards a certain telling of American history, confirm that his beliefs about America’s origin story are centered on the roles of individual heroes, particularly those involved in Western expansion.

Moving back in time momentarily, the redecorations by Presidents H.W. Bush, W. Bush and Obama expanded the Western vocabulary to include both the symbolic frontier heroes, and landscapes upholding a particular vision of a pristine, bountiful West. Chronologically, the passage of *The Rattlesnake* and *The Bronco Buster* from Reagan’s redecoration to that of Bush created a precedent. Motifs of the American West, in a variety of forms were becoming more ubiquitous. Repeating selections of past presidents, President H. W. Bush displayed *The President’s House, City of Washington from Beyond the Navy Yard*, Reagan’s landscape selection of Frederic Edwin Church’s scenic sunset oil painting, *Rutland Falls, Vermont* and Rembrandt Peale’s *George Washington*.<sup>104</sup> However, we can gather more about his image of America from his unique landscape selection, rather than his unremarkable selection of heroes. Like the scenes selected by Kennedy, his unique addition depicted what was historically considered part of the

---

<sup>102</sup> Maggie Haberman, “A Homebody Finds the Ultimate Home Office,” *The New York Times*, January 25, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/us/politics/president-trump-white-house.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=andle-package-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/us/politics/president-trump-white-house.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=andle-package-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0).

<sup>103</sup> Jane Coaston, “Jackson and Ourselves,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/opinion/trump-andrew-jackson-and-ourselves.html>.

<sup>104</sup> “Oval Office History,” The White House Museum.

Western frontier when it was painted, in the year 1895.<sup>105</sup> He hung Thomas Moran's dramatic scene of a tranquil, uninhabited lake and valley with the Teton mountain range looming tall in the background.<sup>106</sup> This piece, *The Three Tetons*, depicts Wyoming's scenic Grand Teton National Park and creates an image of the West as uninhabited and unindustrialized terrain.<sup>107</sup>

The landscapes selected by President George W. Bush reinforced this vision of the West. Along with Western heroes, *The Bronco Buster* and *The Rattlesnake*, George W. Bush also included several landscapes of Texas, his place of upbringing. One such painting was a depiction of a still, unpopulated desert entitled *Rio Grande* by Thomas Calloway, also known as Tom Lea, on loan from his collection in El Paso.<sup>108</sup> To the left of his desk, Bush featured *Near San Antonio*, a tranquil painting of fields in bloom by Texan Julian Onderdonk, famed for painting blue bonnet flowers.<sup>109</sup> Two small Texan paintings entitled *Chili Queens at the Alamo* and *Cactus Flower*, a small painting of a cactus field in bloom by the same artist, hung side by side to the left of the mantle.<sup>110</sup> He also hung the history scene, Wilhelm Heinrich

---

<sup>105</sup> Monkman, "Catalogue of the White House Collection of Paintings, Sculpture and Works on Paper," 332.

<sup>106</sup> Image of George H. W. Bush's Oval Office; see "Oval Office History," The White House Museum.

<sup>107</sup> Monkman, "Catalogue of the White House Collection of Paintings, Sculpture and Works on Paper," 332.

<sup>108</sup> Image of President W. Bush's Oval Office; see Dangremond, "The Oval Office Through the Years, in Photos.;" "Laura & George Bush, Dallas," Tom Lea Institute, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://tomlea.com/about-us/12-travelers/laura-george-bush/>.

<sup>109</sup> Dan R. Goddard, "Re-examining the Legacy of Early San Antonio Painter Julian Onderdonk," *San Antonio Current*, February 1, 2017, <https://www.sacurrent.com/ArtSlut/archives/2017/02/01/re-examining-the-legacy-of-early-san-antonio-painter-julian-onderdonk>.

<sup>110</sup> Edmund Tijerina, "Chili Queens once Ruled Alamo Plaza," *San Antonio Express News*, January 28, 2015, <https://www.expressnews.com/150years/culture/article/Chili-Queens-romanticized-sometimes-shunned-6047507.php>; Heather Brand, "Painting the Wild Blue

Detlev Koerner's *A Charge to Keep*. According to journalist Jacob Weinberg, this genre scene is an illustration of a group of men on horseback racing up a steep slope in the wilderness of Nebraska, a state once considered part of the Western edge of America.<sup>111</sup> Like Remington's popular bronzes, this painting from the same era suggests that adventurous men carving through untamed territory hold a significant place in the history of this nation's development.

Though Barack Obama's Oval Office was not dominated by Western motifs like that of his Southwestern predecessor, his two selections of Western artworks serve as a natural transition into the two sections to follow. These two works, *The Bronco Buster* and *The Three Tetons*, are representative of two popular narratives about the West that are in part composed of history, and in part of whitewashed mythology. The following sections will investigate the construction of the Western hero and the Western landscape which could only have emerged in contrast with the industrialized experience of Americans raised in the "Eastern Establishment," who later went West.<sup>112</sup> Like Clinton before him, President Obama displayed *Avenue in the Rain*, and *Working on the Statue of Liberty* along with portraits of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and a bust of Martin Luther

---

Yonder," Texas Highways, last modified March 15, 2020, <https://texashighways.com/wildflowers/painting-the-wild-blue-yonder/>.

<sup>111</sup> Shaun Randol, "The Outsider Artist," The Mantle: Smart Content for the Global Citizen, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.themantle.com/arts-and-culture/outsider-artist>.

<sup>112</sup> This term refers to the Eastern social and economic structure in which artists and writers like Remington, Moran, and Roosevelt were brought up. See Edward G. White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1989).

King Jr.<sup>113</sup> He also made two new Eastern-oriented additions, entitled *Cobb's Barns, South Truro*, and *Burly Cobb's House, South Truro*.<sup>114</sup> These works by Edward Hopper, one of the few permitted contemporary artists, were painted in Cape Cod in the 1930s. While his non-Western selections were novel to the office, it is worth examining Remington and Moran's repeated pieces within the context of other modes in which the president engages with the Western United States. The Western pieces embody the historicized notions and metaphors from the West, which have been echoed in presidential speeches and often obscure the reality of each presidents' ability to act as a steward over this complex territory.

**Figure 5: Charting the Trend Towards Western Motifs** <sup>115</sup>

Name	Term	Party	Artworks without Western Subject Matter	Artworks with Western Subject Matter
William Howard Taft	1903-1913	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unidentified portrait sketch</li> </ul>	
Woodrow Wilson	1913-1921	D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unidentified portrait sketch</li> </ul>	
Warren G. Harding	1921-1923	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unidentified portrait sketch</li> </ul>	
Calvin Coolidge	1923-1929	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unidentified portrait sketch</li> </ul>	
Herbert Hoover	1929-1933	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unidentified portrait sketch</li> </ul>	

<sup>113</sup> Image of President Obama's Oval Office; see Dangremond, "The Oval Office Through the Years, in Photos."

<sup>114</sup> Allman, William G., "New Additions to the Oval Office," Home, Blog, The White House: President Barack Obama, last modified February 10, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/02/10/new-additions-oval-office>.

<sup>115</sup> For the precise dates of each administration and their political party affiliation, I referenced Michael Levy and Forrest McDonald, "Presidency of the United States of America," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., last modified January 14, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/presidency-of-the-United-States-of-America>. The information in the right two columns however are a distillation of all the information I gathered from a variety of sources throughout the above section of this thesis.

Hoover	1933			
Franklin D. Roosevelt	1933-1945	D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two unidentified romantic landscapes</li> <li>• Two paintings of steamboats on a lake</li> <li>• A painting of a steamboat on the Hudson River</li> <li>• A map of the globe</li> <li>• Several model ships</li> </ul>	
Harry S. Truman	1945-1953	D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Franklin D. Roosevelt</i> by Frank O. Salisbury</li> <li>• <i>U.S.S. Constitution</i> by Gordon Hope Grant</li> <li>• A map of the American Southeast</li> <li>• Illustrations of airplanes</li> <li>• <i>George Washington</i> by Luis Cadena</li> <li>• <i>Andrew Jackson</i> by Clark Mill<sup>116</sup></li> <li>• two unidentified portraits of South American liberators</li> <li>• <i>Lafayette on Horseback</i> by Paul Wayland Bartlett</li> </ul>	
Dwight D. Eisenhower	1953-1961	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unidentified landscape of a lone house in a misty forest</li> <li>• <i>Seated Lincoln</i> by Gutzom Borglum</li> <li>• <i>Benjamin Franklin</i> by Jean-Antoine Houdon</li> <li>• <i>George Washington</i> by Jean-Antoine Houdon</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unidentified romantic landscape, likely Yosemite Valley, possibly by Albert Bierstadt<sup>117</sup></li> </ul>
John F. Kennedy	1961-1963	D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Engagement between the "United States" and the "Macedonian"</i> by Thomas Birch</li> <li>• <i>The Constitution and the Guerriere</i> by Thomas Chambers</li> <li>• <i>Bonhomme Richard</i> by Thomas Butterworth</li> <li>• <i>The White House Long Ago</i> by Jacqueline Kennedy</li> <li>• <i>The Sea Witch</i> model ship</li> <li>• <i>The Danmark</i> model ship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Buffalo Bull</i> by George Catlin</li> <li>• <i>Buffalo Hunt Under the Wolf-skin Mask</i> by George Catlin</li> </ul>

<sup>116</sup> As noted on page 29, Andrew Jackson could be categorized as a Western figure in certain contexts or be considered simply a portrait of a president, placing him under the thematic categorization of self-referential White House art." Because these portraits do not visually elude to his role in the West, portraits of him will not be categorized as "Artworks with Western Subject Matter."

<sup>117</sup> Lovell believed that based on the subject matter and dramatic lighting style of the image, that it was likely the work of Albert Bierstadt, see Margaretta Lovell, conversation about photographs of Truman, Roosevelt and Eisenhower's Oval Offices, March 5, 2020.

Lyndon B. Johnson	1963-1969	D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Franklin D. Roosevelt</i> by Elizabeth Shoumatoff</li> <li>• <i>Andrew Jackson</i> by Thomas Sully</li> <li>• <i>George Washington</i> by Gilbert Stuart</li> <li>• Three color televisions</li> </ul>	
Richard Nixon	1969-1974	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The President's House</i> by an unknown artist</li> <li>• <i>Earthrise</i> photograph by the Apollo 8 astronauts</li> <li>• <i>George Washington</i> by Charles Wilson Peale</li> <li>• <i>Abraham Lincoln</i> by Leo Cherne</li> </ul>	
Gerald R. Ford	1974-1977	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The President's House</i> by an unknown artist</li> <li>• <i>Passing the Outpost</i> by A. Wodsworth Thompson</li> <li>• <i>Eastport and Passamaquoddy Bay</i> by Victor de Grailly</li> <li>• <i>City of Washington, 1833, from Beyond the Navy Yard</i> by George Cooke</li> <li>• <i>George Washington</i> by Charles Wilson Peale</li> <li>• <i>Portrait of Benjamin Franklin</i> by Charles Wilson Peale</li> <li>• <i>Bust of Abraham Lincoln</i> by Leonard Volk</li> <li>• A statuette of Abraham Lincoln by A. A. Weinman</li> <li>• <i>Bust of Harry S. Truman</i> by an unknown artist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Bronco Buster</i> by Frederic Remington</li> </ul>
Jimmy Carter	1977-1981	D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See the above works listed for Gerald R. Ford</li> <li>• <b>In addition:</b></li> <li>• <i>Benjamin Franklin</i> by Jean Antoine Houdon</li> <li>• <i>Thomas Jefferson</i> by Rembrandt Peale</li> <li>• Several unidentified model ships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Bronco Buster</i> by Frederic Remington</li> </ul>
Ronald Reagan	1981-1989	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The President's House</i> by an unknown artist</li> <li>• <i>Passing the Outpost</i> by A. Wodsworth Thompson</li> <li>• An unidentified sculpture of a bald eagle</li> <li>• <i>George Washington</i> by Charles Wilson Peale</li> <li>• <i>Benjamin Franklin</i> by Jean-Antoine Houdon</li> <li>• <i>Andrew Jackson</i> by Thomas Sully</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Bronco Buster</i> by Frederic Remington</li> <li>• <i>The Rattlesnake</i> by Frederic Remington</li> <li>• Several bronze saddle sculptures by an unknown artist</li> </ul>
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The President's House</i> by an unknown artist</li> <li>• <i>City of Washington, 1833, from</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Bronco Buster</i> by Frederic Remington</li> </ul>

George H. W. Bush	1989-1993	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Beyond the Navy Yard</i> by George Cooke</li> <li><i>Rutland Falls, Vermont</i> by Frederic Edwin Church</li> <li><i>George Washington</i> by Rembrandt Peale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>The Rattlesnake</i> by Frederic Remington</li> <li><i>The Three Tetons</i> by Thomas Moran</li> </ul>
Bill Clinton	1993-2001	D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Working on the Statue of Liberty</i> by Norman Rockwell</li> <li><i>Avenue in the Rain</i> by Childe Hassam</li> <li><i>Bust of Abraham Lincoln</i> by Leonard Volk</li> <li><i>Bust of Franklin D. Roosevelt</i> by Jo Davidson</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>The Bronco Buster</i> by Frederic Remington</li> <li><i>Appeal to the Great Spirit</i> by Cyrus Edwin Dallin</li> </ul>
George W. Bush	2001-2009	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>George Washington</i> by Rembrandt Peale</li> <li><i>Abraham Lincoln</i> by George Henry Story</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>The Bronco Buster</i> by Frederic Remington</li> <li><i>The Rattlesnake</i> by Frederic Remington</li> <li><i>Rio Grande</i> by Tom Lea</li> <li><i>Near San Antonio</i> by Julian Onderdonk</li> <li><i>Chili Queens at the Alamo</i> by Julian Onderdonk</li> <li><i>Cactus Flower</i> by Julian Onderdonk</li> <li><i>A Charge to Keep</i> by Wilhelm Heinrich Detlev Koerner</li> </ul>
Barack Obama	2009-2017	D	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Cobb's Barns, South Truro</i> by Edward Hopper</li> <li><i>Burly Cobb's House, South Truro</i> by Edward Hopper</li> <li><i>Working on the Statue of Liberty</i> by Norman Rockwell</li> <li><i>Avenue in the Rain</i> by Childe Hassam</li> <li><i>George Washington</i> by Rembrandt Peale</li> <li><i>Martin Luther King Jr.</i> by Charles Alston</li> <li><i>Abraham Lincoln</i> by George Henry Story</li> <li><i>The President's House</i> by an unknown artist</li> <li><i>Abraham Lincoln</i> by Augustus Saint</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>The Bronco Buster</i> by Frederic Remington</li> <li><i>The Three Tetons</i> by Thomas Moran</li> </ul>

			Gaudens	
Donald Trump	2017-	R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>George Washington</i> by Rembrandt Peale</li> <li>• <i>Alexander Hamilton</i> by John Trumbull</li> <li>• <i>Andrew Jackson</i> by Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl</li> <li>• <i>Equestrian Statue of Andrew Jackson</i> by Clark Mills</li> <li>• <i>Thomas Jefferson</i> by Matthew Harris Jouett</li> <li>• <i>Martin Luther King Jr.</i> by Charles Alston</li> <li>• <i>Winston Churchill</i> by Jacob Epstein</li> <li>• <i>Abraham Lincoln</i> by George Henry Story</li> <li>• <i>Abraham Lincoln</i> by Augustus Saint Gaudens</li> <li>• <i>New York Harbor and the Battery</i> by Andrew Melrose</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Bronco Buster</i> by Frederic Remington</li> </ul>

The above chart is intended to trace an important continuity and an emphasis on a particular vision of America. We can evaluate the trend towards Western imagery in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century on two levels. First and foremost, the chart highlights something which the above section does not cover: the appeal and comfort of Western narratives holds steady across party lines. Though popular criticism of the Smithsonian’s 1991 exhibition framed the pushback against these images as “politically correct,” a trait more associated with left-leaning politics and rhetoric today, Democrats and Republicans alike share a preference for these artworks.<sup>118</sup> Secondly, the reliance on Western landscapes and symbols to encapsulate a president’s vision for this public-facing space—a visual shorthand for executive leadership— emerged in the 1960s, as the language of the frontier spirit was

---

<sup>118</sup> Kimmelman, “Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian.”



being applied to a new context. In Kennedy's 1960 acceptance of the Democratic nomination, he invoked a memory of the western frontier: "From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers gave up their comfort, their safety and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West."<sup>119</sup> He then pivoted to the present, applying the same language to the circumstances of his nomination; "and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier--the frontier of the 1960's--a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils-- a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats."<sup>120</sup>

Here the parallel trends in rhetoric and image selection might tempt one to suggest a relationship or causality, but that would be sheer speculation. Instead, it is more telling to consider presidential policies, rhetoric and art selections as means to assess the president's vision of the West. The similar uses of the frontier in speeches and artworks should be considered products of the same overly simplified and under-examined Western history that Americans tell themselves—in textbooks, in artworks, in movies and in the Oval Office. It is unsurprising then that the following section will establish that presidents of both party preferences also recognize the appeal of the frontier as a useful device in public addresses. Using *The Bronco Buster* and *The Three Tetons* as entry points to examine our 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century presidents' treatment of the West, the following two sections will

---

<sup>119</sup> John F. Kennedy, "Excerpt, 1960 Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960," July 15, 1960, TNC-191-E5-EX, Columbia Broadcasting System, Historic Speeches, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>120</sup> Kennedy, "Excerpt, 1960 Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960."

explore the simple story which artworks and speeches tell, and how it belies the difficulty of policy-making for Western lands.

### **The Western Metaphor: In Bronze and in Presidential Rhetoric**



Figure 7: Frederic Remington, *The Rattlesnake*, ca. 1908. Bronze, 23 1/8 x 17 3/4 x 14 1/2 in. The Metropolitan



Figure 6: Frederic Remington, *The Bronco Buster*, ca. 1909. Bronze. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

When Louis and Virginia Hatfield from Kentucky gifted *The*

*Bronco Buster* to the White House Collection in 1976, they wrote in their accompanying letter that it “would inspire a feeling of strength and determination of the American spirit.”<sup>121</sup> As recently as 2009, President Barack Obama characterized those “who settled the West,” as “the risk-takers, the doers,” and “the makers of things” in his first inaugural address.<sup>122</sup> This figure, as an American emblem, was ascribed heroic qualities by Easterners who dared go West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and has retained this persuasive power. More remarkable still is how frequently presidents mobilize the West as an idea to provide Americans today with a sense of pride or hope. Broadly, the rhetorical uses of the frontier in presidential speeches fall under the following categories: 1) the frontier as producing distinctly American attributes, 2) the journey Westward as the start of a journey on which we continue today, and 3) the frontier as an analogy for a challenge the American people can overcome. To analyze the relationship between the president’s vision of the West in his speeches, and the vision of the West that *The Bronco Buster*, *Appeal to the American Spirit*, and *The Rattlesnake* uphold, we must focus on notions 1 and 2. The third category, the frontier as a challenge within reach, will be explored in relation to the

---

<sup>121</sup> “President Greets the Hatfield Sister,” *The Kentucky Post*, July 14, 1976, Office of the Curator, the White House in Bolger and Curry, “Art for the President’s House,” 20.

<sup>122</sup> Barack Obama, “Inaugural Address,” speech in Macon Phillips, “President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address,” Blog, The White House: President Barack Obama, last modified January 21, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.

following section, as it overlaps closely with the history of Euro-Americans' changing relationship with nature.

Even in light of critical history which has questioned our frontier story, the presidents' continued uses of the frontier as a metaphor suggests a willful refusal to update our understanding. It seems our presidents still hold beliefs about the West not dissimilar to those constructed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Eastern establishment. Artists and writers alike in that era, noted the phenomenon of Easterners looking upon Western life in awe. The artworks and writings of Frederic Remington, Thomas Moran, and Theodore Roosevelt reveal the Eastern eagerness for visual and written accounts of life in the West. Historians and art historians in time have come to understand this appetite for Western lore as a result of "the degree to which society (or the lack of it) in the wilderness represented an alternative to the social structure of the East," which Easterners felt had quickly settled into a state of elitism and hierarchy.<sup>123</sup> Rhetorically, many of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century presidents have continued to draw on this understanding, suggesting that creating a new frontier, be it in education, industry, or space, is similarly the act of offering new opportunities.

Sometimes joined by *The Rattlesnake*, Frederic Remington's other popular cowboy, *The Bronco Buster* has retained its place as an unspoken signifier of American beliefs for over 46 years, and the most recent 46 years of Oval Office history, no less. In early 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture, the

---

<sup>123</sup> White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience*, 91.

cowboy served as the masculine and independent antithesis to the metropolitan man living in the industrialized and hierarchical East.<sup>124</sup> In praising the qualities of the cowboy for *Century Magazine*, Teddy Roosevelt could not help but contrast them with the conditions of the Eastern businessman. Cowboys and stock raisers had to possess, according to Roosevelt, “personal bravery, hardihood and self-reliance to a degree not demanded in the least by any mercantile occupation in a community long settled.”<sup>125</sup> Writing in admiration of the Mexican cowboys whom Remington encountered in his time in the Southwest, he characterized wild horses as “unbroken broncos—horses that made the toughest vaqueros throw down their hats, tighten their belts, and grin with fear.”<sup>126</sup> It is no wonder that *The Bronco Buster* has endured in the Oval Office inventory as the highest representation of Western grit. In the hierarchy of Western figures—cowboys, stock raisers, cow thieves and marauders—Roosevelt excitedly distinguished “the flash riders, or horse-breakers, always called ‘bronco-busters’ for their “perform[ance] of really marvelous feats, riding with ease the most vicious and unbroken beasts, that no ordinary cowboy would dare to tackle” for *Century Magazine* in 1888.<sup>127</sup>

Critical history has found the cowboy to perhaps be less independent than Eastern men would have liked to think. Billington argues that “cowboys as well as ranchers recognized the value of group activity” and that “the lone

---

<sup>124</sup> White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience*, 31.

<sup>125</sup> Roosevelt, “Ranch Life in The Far West. In *Cattle Country*,” 500.

<sup>126</sup> Frederic Remington, *Crooked Trails* (Project Gutenberg Press Ebook, 1898).

<sup>127</sup> Roosevelt, “Ranch Life in The Far West. In *Cattle Country*,” 507.

prospector is a figure from fiction rather than reality, for no single man could live long in the rugged mountain country of the early West.”<sup>128</sup> Recent scholarship has also found that the West was not, in fact, a land free of industrial development and government intervention but rather a territory and population with a “dependence on natural resource extraction, and the federal control of so much of its land.”<sup>129</sup> Still, this myth of the distinctly American man that the frontier produced is so appealing that it is consistently confirmed in a space of art display supposedly dedicated to representing strictly “American history.”<sup>130</sup>

Presidential speeches provide further material for assessing a president’s ideal imaging of the United States and its people. For pithy and inspiring soundbites, they treat frontier history formed partially of true history and partially of Eastern men taking liberties with story-telling to turn a profit, simply as our origin story. In the selected period of presidencies, from 1961 through the present, references to the frontier call forth old values of self-reliance and grit. There is great overlap, here, between the meaning with which the cowboy was imbued in his day and the way that the president uses this American archetype, from which we descended. In fact, we can compare the prose of Teddy Roosevelt, writing about the bronco buster for his Eastern audience in 1895, to rhetoric Presidents Kennedy and Obama used decades later to remind the American public of their Western

---

<sup>128</sup> Billington, *America’s Frontier Heritage*, 146.

<sup>129</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 103.

<sup>130</sup> “First Meeting of the Painting Committee of the Fine Arts Committee for the White House,” Subject files: White House: Special Committee for White House Paintings, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.

origin story. The most frequently mentioned qualities which presidential speeches connect with the frontier, generally speaking, are self-reliance, bravery, self-sacrifice and independence. In the face of technological and ideological competition with the Soviet Union in the sixties, Kennedy's 1960 acceptance of the Democratic nomination, given in California, asked Americans to reflect on their Western heritage and the inherent qualities with which it provided them. He declared: "I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West."<sup>131</sup> He framed these Western settlers as those who valued and protected freedom at the expense of their own sacrifice and highlighted the notion that their "motto was not 'every man for himself'—but 'all for the common cause.'"<sup>132</sup> We can trace this kind of characterization directly back to Roosevelt's articles for which Remington illustrated and painted—out of which came early renderings of *The Bronco Buster* (see Figures 8 and 9 below). In the words of Roosevelt, the path to becoming a cowboy, in line with the modern assessment of self-sacrifice, entailed "endurance of rough fare, hard living,

---

<sup>131</sup> John F. Kennedy, "Acceptance of Democratic Nomination for President, Excerpt, 1960 Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960," Speech, Democratic National Convention, The Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960, TNC-191-E5-EX, Columbia Broadcasting System, Historic Speeches, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/acceptance-of-democratic-nomination-for-president>.

<sup>132</sup> Kennedy, "Acceptance of Democratic Nomination for President, Excerpt, 1960 Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960."



dirt, exposure of every kind, no little toil and month after month of the dullest monotony.”<sup>133</sup>



Figure 8: Frederic Remington. *Bronco Buster*, ca. 1895. Oil on canvas. Peter Newark's Western Americana, Bath, England. Frederic Remington and Emerson Hough. *Remington* (New York: Parkstone



Figure 9: Frederic Remington. *Bronco Buster*, date unknown. Colored engraving. Peter Newark's Western Americana, Bath, England. Frederic Remington and Emerson Hough, *Remington* (New York: Parkstone Press International, 2012), 73

Yet, even after the intervention of critical scholars like Patricia Limerick taking the East to West narrative of American progress to task, the uses of the frontier and the frontiersman in presidential rhetoric have remained unapologetically Turnerian. While President Kennedy borrowed this kind of frontier logic before the 1980s wave of critical New Western history,

<sup>133</sup> Roosevelt, "Ranch Life in The Far West. In Cattle Country," 500.

President Obama's use of the frontier as a shorthand for American qualities must be seen as a refusal to adjust to new understandings of our past. Neither speeches nor artworks have undergone the close re-thinking and broadening of voices and perspectives which Limerick has attempted to bring to Western academia, pushing back against the frontier-oriented history of Turner and Billington.<sup>134</sup> Like Kennedy, Obama invoked the notion that the frontier, and by extension, this nation was built on self-sacrifice. Those who "toiled in sweatshops, settled the West, endured the lash of the whip and plowed the hard earth," according to his inaugural address, "struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might have a better life."<sup>135</sup> Most recently, in his State of the Union Address, and mentioned in the introduction of this paper, Donald Trump described our movement westward as the act of "tam[ing] the wilderness," accomplished "by the toughest, strongest, fiercest, and most determined men and women ever to walk the face of the Earth."<sup>136</sup> To speak of the slow and complicated process of settling Western territory as simply "tam[ing] the wilderness" is a convenient oversimplification, and a denial of the more nuanced history we study today. In 1966 Billington wrote "the legend of frontier individualism rested on what people thought should be true, rather than what was true."<sup>137</sup> The same ought to be said for the image of frontier individualism that presidential speeches and the display of *The Bronco Buster* impart today.

<sup>134</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 102.

<sup>135</sup> Obama, "Inaugural Address," speech in Macon Phillips, "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address."

<sup>136</sup> Transcript of President Donald Trump's State of the Union Address. *Vox*.

<sup>137</sup> Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*, 143.

When evaluating the artworks selected and speeches given by 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century presidents as two means of American storytelling, another notable narrative overlap is the suggestion that the journey Westward is one that we continue on today. In the body of artwork, this continuity is expressed by the selection of heroes—their placement in the Oval Office suggest that they still hold cultural roles to which we aspire. Examples of framing new challenges as part of this continued journey exist in the rhetoric of Presidents Reagan, Clinton and Obama. At the same time, the suggestion that entering new metaphorical, intellectual, or geographical terrain is simply a continuation of settling the frontier reinforces the whitewashed notion that Western settlement was the act of discovering this land for the first time. Limerick would suggest that is merely a myth produced when history is told from East to West.

I would like to add that when accounts of Native American people's lives made by white writers and painters are put on display, they are incorporated into a narrative of discovering the West and claiming the West anew, rather than co-existing with a pre-established West. These artworks, selected by Kennedy and Clinton for display are Figure 10, George Catlin's *Buffalo Hunt Under the Wolf-skin Mask*, and Figure 11, Cyrus Edwin Dallin's *Appeal to the Great Spirit*. This supposed "discovery" of free land, which is so often celebrated in presidential rhetoric, cannot be framed as heroic without the erasure of those who were pushed out. This is done in speeches with a complete lack of nuance or willingness to address the violence which frontier

settlement enacted against the Native American peoples inhabiting the Great Plains, Central Plains and Western coastal territories. It is also done by artworks which prize modes of representing Native American peoples through a Euro-American lens over those produced by individuals from the depicted tribes—Souix in the case of Dallin’s work and of an unspecified tribe in the case of Catlin’s work.<sup>138</sup> In speeches, we do not see presidents trying to broach this complex aspect of the frontier origin story. The cultural authority that Catlin was given, which one can see infer from letters written by Catlin to his eager Eastern audience, contributes to the historical dehumanization of Native Americans as simply another aspect of the Western territory which was previously unknown and discovered by American frontiersmen.<sup>139</sup>



Figure 10: George Catlin. *Buffalo Hunt under the Wolf-skin Mask*, 1832-1833. Oil on canvas, 29 x 24 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.

<sup>138</sup> John C. Ewers, "Cyrus E. Dallin: Master Sculptor of the Plains Indian," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 18, no. 1 (1968): 35, JSTOR.

<sup>139</sup> George Catlin, *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians* (London: Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly, 1876), 1, HathiTrust.



Figure 11: Cyrus Edwin Dallin. *Appeal to the Great Spirit*, cast ca. 1916. Bronze, 21 3/8 × 14 1/2 × 21 3/4 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

Yet it seems the cultural trend towards re-evaluating frontier history has not lessened the persuasive appeal of suggesting that our destiny is simply a continuation of the journey the cowboys, miners and pioneers started. The following speeches given by Reagan, Clinton and Obama, give us permission to look upon a hero like Remington's *The Bronco Buster*, sitting in their respective offices, and believe that we follow in his footsteps. In some ways, the notion of continuity on the same journey that the pioneers started is mirrored by the continuity of the cowboy figure's display. It suggests that American leadership must still draw on the same repertoire of

skills and values that this frontier icon represents in his office. Reagan drew on this journey analogy in both his State of the Union address in 1984 and his second inaugural address in 1985. In the former, he suggested that this continuation would be a pivot of now channeling frontier momentum to spur economic progress: “Our second great goal is to build on America's pioneer spirit -- [laughter] -- I said something funny? [Laughter] I said America's next frontier -- and that's to develop that frontier.”<sup>140</sup> This frontier development would take the form of spurring “initiatives,” “sunrise industries” and competition.<sup>141</sup> In the latter he stated that “history is a journey. And as we continue on that journey today, we think of those who traveled before us.”<sup>142</sup> He went on to give examples of moments along this journey including: “a settler push[ing] West,” and “sing[ing] a song.” His speech concluded as he stated that this is “our heritage” and “our song” and most importantly that “We sing it still.”<sup>143</sup>

Clinton’s use of the American pioneer’s journey was instead a means of suggesting one step in our long journey of making bold and brave choices as a nation. Giving his second inaugural address at the turn of a new century, he recalled the act of settling the West and told the American public that they faced a similarly defining moment of choice, an extension of the same

---

<sup>140</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” speech, State of the Union Address, Washington D.C., January 25, 1984, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/12584e>.

<sup>141</sup> Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union.”

<sup>142</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Second Inaugural Address of Ronald Reagan,” speech, Inaugural Address, Washington, D.C., January 21, 1985, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/reagan2.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/reagan2.asp).

<sup>143</sup> Reagan, “Second Inaugural Address.”

values. He argued: “Now, for the third time, a new century is upon us, and another time to choose. We began the 19th century with a choice, to spread our nation from coast to coast. We began the 20th century with a choice, to harness the Industrial Revolution to our values of free enterprise, conservation, and human decency...At the dawn of the 21st century a free people must now choose to shape the forces of the Information Age and the global society, to unleash the limitless potential of all our people.”<sup>144</sup> Recall now that President Clinton displayed in his Oval office both *The Bronco Buster* and *Appeal to the American Spirit*, a work which was intended to be honorific but partakes in the cultural practice of allowing white artists to represent Native American individuals for a white audience. To place these figures side by side in his Oval Office nearly displays the same denial or lack of nuance present in his speech, which did not acknowledge the consequences of “spread[ing] our nation from coast to coast.”<sup>145</sup> This narrative of continuity then, must be seen as being generated by and appealing to the Euro-American perspective. His speech aimed to persuade the Americans of the late 1990s that they were, in many ways, still the same Americans who performed these great feats of prior centuries. But these feats can only be seen as great from a particular and privileged point of view.

---

<sup>144</sup> William J. Clinton, “Second Inaugural Address,” speech, Second Inauguration of President William J. Clinton, U.S. Capitol Building, Washington D.C., January 20, 1997, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/clinton2.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/clinton2.asp).

<sup>145</sup> Clinton, “Second Inaugural Address.”

Nine years into this new century, President Obama used his inauguration to set the American Public once again, on the path once trodden by those “who settled the West.”<sup>146</sup> His speech leveraged the language of the continued journey more directly than that of Clinton or Reagan. According to his address, early American settlers “packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life... For us, they fought and died in places like Concord and Gettysburg, Normandy and Khe Sahn.”<sup>147</sup> Shortly thereafter he connected this to our present trajectory. “This is the journey we continue today. We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth. Our workers are no less productive than when this crisis began,” he stated. The 21<sup>st</sup> century president whose campaign slogan was “Hope” looked to none other than our national heritage of going West centuries ago, to offer a hopeful outlook for the future. Speeches like these, seemingly untouched by the conversations that unfolded around a popular text like Patricia Limerick’s *The Legacy of Conquest* or a cultural moment like *The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* exhibition at the Smithsonian speak to the continued desire to engage with a notion of the West which is planted firmly in the past.

Perhaps the cultural refusal to update our abstracted understanding of frontier history is due to the fact that the concrete reality would rob of us values we consider core to the American spirit. As scholar Rick Ewig wrote

---

<sup>146</sup> Obama, “Inaugural Address.”

<sup>147</sup> Obama, “Inaugural Address.”



for an article in the *Organization of American Historians Magazine of History*, “such an impressive feat of conquering so vast an area in a relatively short space of time, could not have occurred without a reliable and efficient means of transportation—the railroad.”<sup>148</sup> Instead, our presidents’ speeches lead us to imagine only the rough forging of first-wave pioneer trails like that of “Daniel Boone’s Trace,” or those which “evolved from buffalo and Indian trails.”<sup>149</sup> They do not acknowledge the less romantic aspects of industrializing the West in order to move people and resources. Nor do these speeches and the values ascribed to the frontiersmen acknowledge the immense role of federal government aid and management in the settlement of the West. Congress assisted in the development of Western territory with the passage of the 1862 Pacific Railway Act and further incentivized Western settlers with free acres of land to prospective farmers under the Homestead Act signed the very same year.<sup>150</sup> It is not to say that frontier life did not require great resilience once settled in the arid territories west of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian. However, it is worth considering, amidst laudatory statements of self-reliance and independence, certain aspects of frontier development which were dependent on the work of the federal government.

The conditions under which these artworks were made, their subject matter, and the way that presidents have employed the frontier narrative

---

<sup>148</sup> Rick Ewig, “The Railroad and the Frontier West,” *OAH Magazine of History* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1988): 9. JSTOR.

<sup>149</sup> Karl B. Raitz, Jeffrey E. Levy and Richard A. Gilbreath, “Mapping Kentucky’s Frontier Trails through Geographical Information and Cartographic Applications,” *Geographical Review* 100, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 312. JSTOR.

<sup>150</sup> Ewig, “The Railroad and the Frontier West,” 2.

certainly draw on elements of American history. But they also contain a story that was necessarily shaped by the teller. If the frontier narrative were simply a matter of straight-forward objective history, there could not have been a framing of the same facts which caused the American public to balk as they did, at the Smithsonian's *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*. If on the frontier, cowboys and stock raisers considered themselves to be businessmen doing their jobs, as Ray Allen Billington suggests, then a Westerner himself may not have ascribed the same values to frontier living that appeared in the prose of Frederic Remington and Teddy Roosevelt.<sup>151</sup> Limerick describes this phenomenon in frontier history as the limited telling of history from East to West, but stated more directly it is indicative of the Euro-American monopoly on cultural storytelling. Beauty but also meaning, may be in the eye of the beholder when it comes to Americans' cultural grappling with the settling of the West. This still rings true as the ultimate Eastern authority figure, the American president co-opts stories and images of the Western frontier. For the making of the cowboy at his outset, required an Eastern unfamiliarity with his role and a painting of the Grand Tetons meant something different to preservationists lobbying for the expansion of national parks than it would to a Native American citizen whose people were removed from that territory. Still, contemporary American presidents can't tell us where we're going without this simplified version of where we've been, and they can't help but

---

<sup>151</sup> Ray Allen Billington quoted in Robert Lindsey, "A Cowboy Hero, Myth and Reality," *The New York Times*, January 21, 1981. TimesMachine.

admire American mythology spun by artists like Remington and Moran who ventured into the American West. That we continue to consider these images positive representations of our past confirms that the same voices and perspectives continue to control the dominant culture over a century later.

### **The Western Landscape: The Image that Betrays the Reality**



Figure 12: Thomas Moran, *The Three Tetons*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 20 5/8 x 30 1/2 in. Washington Historical Association, Washington D.C. (White House Collection).



Figure 13: George Catlin, *Buffalo Bull, Grazing on the Prairie*, 1832-1833. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.

Naturally, depictions of people, as they are associated with what they did and stood for in their lifetime, accrue more complicated cultural criticisms and nuanced cultural reception with time. In this body of research alone, we have seen this to be true of former president Andrew Jackson and of the glorified cowboy, due to a broadening of voices and perspectives included in academic and cultural spheres. But as stated in the introduction, this paper aims to view both portraits and landscapes in light of the complex and varied understandings of frontier history which have emerged in the last 40 years.<sup>152</sup> Images like Figure 12, Thomas Moran's *The Three Tetons*, or

---

<sup>152</sup> For more on the changing conversation around Western history see Patricia Limerick, "Introduction," in *Something in the Soil* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000).

Figure 13, George Catlin's *Buffalo Bull* participate in two important processes this section will investigate. On the one hand, they perpetuate a linear notion of the conquest of the West that Limerick would like to challenge. She calls this "the three-part story" of "American attitudes towards the physical environment."<sup>153</sup> On the other hand, they partake in the process of erasing the peaceful coexistence of man and nature before European arrival.

If a common thread in frontier history (and in its current use in presidential rhetoric) is the tendency towards oversimplification, this "three-part story" is a case in point. Limerick explains these three phases to her reader as the common historical understanding of Americans' relationship to nature that she was taught, and that she in turn, met with skepticism. Briefly, the phases entailed a fear of being overpowered by nature, an urge to tame or eliminate that which posed a threat, and finally to admire what was left of nature once phases one and two were complete.<sup>154</sup> George Catlin's *Buffalo Bull*, is a product of phase two or the hunting and harnessing of natural resources, as Catlin painted the buffalo knowing that the species would meet its fateful end against advancing industrialization.<sup>155</sup> Thomas Moran's romantic Western landscapes participated directly in phase three, the construction of wilderness as a place to be admired and preserved. The drawings he made on his trip to Yellowstone in 1871 were leveraged in the

---

<sup>153</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 172.

<sup>154</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 172.

<sup>155</sup> Exhibition Label, "Buffalo Bull, Grazing on the Prairie," Art + Artists, Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/buffalo-bull-grazing-prairie-3948>.

congressional debates that ultimately landed Yellowstone the title of “the world’s first national park.”<sup>156</sup>

Yet, if the West’s relationship with nature were really as simple this three step history suggests, we would find ourselves firmly in phase three today, dealing only with the oversight of preserved territory in national parks. Instead, when we hold up presidential rhetoric, selected paintings, and presidential policies effecting public land in the West and view them side by side, we arrive at the same conclusion as Limerick. She argues that these three phases “do more in the way of coexisting and coinciding than they do in the way of preceding and following each other in proper numerical and chronological sequence.”<sup>157</sup> The following overview of presidential statements and environmental policies reveals a hazy mixture of appreciation for Western wilderness and simultaneous decisions to exploit some elements of the West’s natural geography while protecting others. We find our set of presidents tangled in a complex web of fearing, harnessing and setting aside wilderness, to be admired.

This third notion of admiration, which the display of Moran’s romantic landscapes captures in the Oval Office, brings us to the other Western myth and oversimplification worth investigating. Thomas Moran’s artworks, depictions of the West through an Eastern lens in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were used in the crusade to designate lands that would remain protected and unaltered in their supposedly natural state. The result is that as a nation, we tout our

<sup>156</sup> Peter Boag, “Thomas Moran and Western Landscapes: An inquiry into an Artist’s Environmental Values,” *Pacific Historical Review* 67, no. 1, (Winter 1998): 42, JSTOR.

<sup>157</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 174.

national parks system as doing just that. But American historian Mark David Spence would argue that “uninhabited wilderness had to be created before it could be preserved,” that this process involved destroying the Native American societal model of coexisting with nature, and that “this type of landscape became reified in the first national parks.”<sup>158</sup> He suggests that an unnatural process of “dispossession” from the original inhabitants had to occur for the construction of nature by Euro-American standards.<sup>159</sup> Ultimately what results is a proliferation of images of the West which suppose that our parks reflect the natural state in which Western land was found, and continue to project a much simpler image of the West than the president oversees in reality.

As mentioned in the previous section, the third common use of the frontier in presidential rhetoric is to equate a present challenge with that of the frontier. This allows our leader to say that we, as a unified American people can surmount a given challenge, and that the proof is in our history. While an image like *The Three Tetons* was not made with the notion of geographical conquest in mind, it is a product of this Euro-American attitude. As such, the appeal of this painting to an American audience, and the way in which presidents’ speeches applaud the task of conquering Western wilderness, time after time, can be understood as products of the “three-part story” of Euro-Americans’ engagement with nature. The first phase, as Limerick lays out in her critique of this model, was the fear of nature, that

---

<sup>158</sup> Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 15.

<sup>159</sup> Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 64.

came with “moving into unfamiliar and disorienting turf.”<sup>160</sup> The notion that nature was something to fear encourages the characterization, that we saw in the rhetoric discussed in the previous section, of white settlers who braved the wilderness, as “the toughest, strongest and fiercest” breed.<sup>161</sup> The next phase, “the struggle for mastery,” was a matter of “finding out what was economically useful in nature.”<sup>162</sup> The third phase corresponds with the success of preservationists who saw nature as a space in which to experience beauty and even spirituality, and insisted that land should be set aside and inhabited only temporarily by tourists and visitors.<sup>163</sup> This is the phase Limerick characterizes as “appreciation” of nature—that which informed the desire to paint these geographic sights for an Eastern audience, once comfortable with their mastery of nature.<sup>164</sup>

This linear notion of the changing Euro-American relationship with nature is exactly the myth of progress which is reproduced in presidential speeches. These speeches must consider the taming of wilderness as a completed task in order to liken a new challenge to this task in a hopeful way. Presidents Kennedy, Reagan and Trump are guilty of using this metaphor. Among the challenges our presidents have presented under the guise of a “new frontier,” the voyage into space has often been compared to that of our ancestors into the American West. Of course, Kennedy was the

---

<sup>160</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 174.

<sup>161</sup> Transcript of President Donald Trump’s State of the Union Address. *Vox*.

<sup>162</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 172.

<sup>163</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 173; Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, 14.

<sup>164</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 173.



first to coin the term “New Frontier,” in his 1960 acceptance of the Democratic nomination. In the face of the Cold War, he believed America to be “on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of the 1960’s—a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats.”<sup>165</sup> He specified what was left to be explored on this New Frontier: “Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus.”<sup>166</sup> Despite the circumstances in which he invoked the frontier analogy, he ended the speech on a hopeful note. Asking his audience “to be pioneers on that New Frontier,” he suggested that they essentially move from “fear” of the unknown, through “mastery” of this unknown and into a state of “appreciation” for what would soon become American terrain.<sup>167</sup>

Thus began the treatment of any form of uncharted territory, literal or figurative as a “new frontier” in presidential speeches. After invoking the need for Americans’ “pioneer spirit” in his State of the Union, Reagan went on to say “Nowhere is this more important than our next frontier: space.”<sup>168</sup> Still in 2020, the president attempts to persuade the American public with the very same comparison. As President Trump presented his plan to have Congress fund the Artemis space program, he reminded his audience that

---

<sup>165</sup> Kennedy, “Acceptance of Democratic Nomination.”

<sup>166</sup> Kennedy, “Acceptance of Democratic Nomination.”

<sup>167</sup> Kennedy, “Acceptance of Democratic Nomination;” Here I have placed “fear,” “mastery” and “appreciation” in quotation marks to recall Limerick’s terms for the three-part story of Euro-American conquest of Western territory in *Something in the Soil*, pages 172-174.

<sup>168</sup> Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union.”

“America has always been a frontier nation. Now we must embrace the next frontier, America’s manifest destiny in the stars.”<sup>169</sup> The appeal of such a comparison is that a future unknown risk is neatly compared to a past risk which was met with success: the settlement, mapping and harnessing of Western land and resources. This linear story is appealing and easy to present to the American public in the face of a new challenge. Yet more importantly this linear notion is misleading. The difficulty the very same set of presidents have had making policy for the management of Western land, in contrast to their rhetoric, reveals that they must respond to these three different attitudes towards Western wilderness existing contemporaneously.

By way of reminder, President Kennedy displayed George Catlin’s landscapes of the Great Plains buffalo, President H. W. Bush and President Obama displayed *The Three Tetons* and President W. Bush displayed Texan landscapes *Rio Grande* and *Near San Antonio*, Figures 14 and 15 below. These displays are evidence of the American spirit of appreciation towards nature and its preservation. The history of Moran’s artwork particularly speaks to how romantic landscapes helped to guide this American perception of nature when they were made. Thomas Moran was credited in his lifetime for bringing attention to the most scenic and beautiful sites on the American continent.<sup>170</sup> By 1936, members of the National Parks Service deemed him the “Father of the National Park system.”<sup>171</sup> However, it is not as if these

---

<sup>169</sup> Transcript of President Donald Trump’s State of the Union Address. Vox.

<sup>170</sup> Boag, “Thomas Moran and Western Landscapes,” 42.

<sup>171</sup> Boag “Thomas Moran and Western Landscapes,” 42.

images, indicating an appreciation of nature among the given set of presidents, corresponds with a preservationist agenda or love of Western lands. In fact, When Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall begged President John F. Kennedy to make a tour of Western states after winning only four Western states in 1960, he replied simply “I don’t know that I’ll enjoy it, but I’ll go.”<sup>172</sup> Echoing Limerick, their varying sympathies to regions of the West where nature is preserved, versus those where natural resources are used in industrial processes, tell us that it is not that simple.



Figure 14: Tom Lea, *Rio Grande*, ca. 1954. Oil on canvas. El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas.

---

<sup>172</sup> John F. Kennedy, quoted in Otis L. Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 193.



Figure 15: Julian Onderdonk, *Near San Antonio*, ca. 1918. Oil on canvas, 30  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 41 in. San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas.

If we treat policies, rhetoric and art selections as different means to assess our presidents' visions of the West, they can reveal to us the overlapping Euro-American attitudes toward nature they serve. The fact that evidence of different presidents engaging with these different attitudes cannot be organized chronologically speaks to Limerick's argument. Though, as *New York Times* journalist Molly Ivins put it, the federal government acts, as "the landlord" of the West, owning "huge chunks of the West," the recent environmental record suggests it's easier for the president to engage with the territory as a story-telling aide.<sup>173</sup> A park like Grand Teton National Park becomes merely a beautiful image in a series of paintings, rather than an indication of the role a president takes on with the power to add to, expand upon, or cut funding to national parks and forests.

---

<sup>173</sup> Molly Ivins, "Carter's Water Project 'Hit List' Didn't Help," *The New York Times*, May 14, 1978, E4. TimesMachine.

To illustrate Limerick's point about the complex and interconnected attitudes towards the West, this paper will briefly survey the environmental policies of the handful of presidents who displayed paintings of romanticized Western landscapes: Kennedy, H. W. Bush, W. Bush and Obama. This is not to suggest that there is any relationship between the display of Western landscapes and policies which protect these lands. Rather, these presidencies will provide us with a small window into the various attitudes towards Western nature that our leaders may entertain over the course of their presidency. Surveying only the policies affecting public spaces in the West, this section will consider Kennedy a weak conservationist, H. W. Bush as showing some preservationist inclinations, and George W. Bush as a negligent "landlord" of the West.<sup>174</sup> That Obama's policies do not fit neatly within one of these categories only underscores Limerick's argument. We can find policies governed by fear or appreciation, or aimed at mastery of nature among this set of four presidents alone. Further research about environmental policies that could not be included in this paper suggests that these presidents were not unique in their struggle to adequately oversee the West's care.

It will be useful to briefly mention some factors in the West's environmental history before delving into the complexity of appreciating, fearing and exploiting natural resources simultaneously. In *Presidents and The American Environment*, historian Otis L. Graham Jr. notes an important

---

<sup>174</sup> Ivins, "Carter's Water Project "Hit List" Didn't Help."

change in language that will be useful to the contemporary reader. He speaks of a term which arose at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in regards to the treatment and use of wilderness in Western states. In 1872, Yellowstone was declared a national park, placing it under the ownership and care of the federal government and in turn a group which called themselves “conservationists” pushed for “the establishment of a system of national forests carved out of public lands in the West.”<sup>175</sup> The story, he writes, “goes on today more than a century later, originally called *conservation*, then *environmentalism*, as social movement and government policy activity expanded beyond national forests, parks, and wildlife refuges to include a vast pollution-control effort at all governmental levels.”<sup>176</sup> Conservationism, at its outset, was not intended to protect lands that would remain untouched swaths of nature for recreation, but rather to protect and regenerate resources like timber for human consumption. The impulse to create parks where all natural resources would be protected from industry was deemed *preservationism*. These competing needs in the West, over the course of the last two hundred years have necessitated an immense expansion of the federal apparatus, or of the managerial roles the federal government would oversee. For those preservationists who historically subscribed to the 20<sup>th</sup> century notion that Western land ought to be protected, for its beauty, the solution was national parks.

---

<sup>175</sup> Otis L. Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 1

<sup>176</sup> Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment*, 1.

However, the role of the modern “environmentalist” president is no longer so simple as expanding national parks territory—this was a common contribution by early 20<sup>th</sup> century presidents like Teddy Roosevelt and later Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>177</sup> Acting as custodian of the West has become more nuanced than that. This is due, in part to a fact about the West that Limerick raises in the introduction to her work *Something in the Soil*. The West, she wrote in 2000, “is prone to aridity and semi-aridity, and this is a fact full of consequences, because most of what Anglo-Americans considered and consider normal in a landscape requires much more water than the West would provide.”<sup>178</sup> The issues surrounding strip-mining, federal water projects, and the channelization and redirection of water are emblematic of the West’s regional distinctiveness and ultimately reinforce Limerick’s argument that we find ourselves amidst the overlap and coexistence of various sentiments towards nature.

To consider President John F. Kennedy a conservationist, one must use the term loosely. That is to say, Kennedy did enact policies to protect public lands in which logging was a primary activity, but with negative impacts on the environment. While he pushed to funnel more funding into the “routine” management of national forests, the conservationist community did not take kindly to “his recommendation of more roads into public forestlands to increase timber harvesting.”<sup>179</sup> Similarly, in his treatment of grazing lands in

---

<sup>177</sup> Kenneth Pletcher, “National Parks Service,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/National-Park-Service>.

<sup>178</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 23.

<sup>179</sup> Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment*, 191.

the West, Kennedy and his appointed head of the Department of the Interior, Stewart Udall, raised the fee for grazing on “severely deteriorating high grassland” in order to better protect these lands, only to be met with upset from struggling cattle raisers.<sup>180</sup> There is an obvious tension between his inability to meet the needs of Western territory, and the simple use of the West as a morale booster both in his chosen artworks and his speeches. According to the White House Historical Association’s history of national parks, he did not create any new parks nor expand upon any existing parks, confirming his role as a conservationist, and an imperfect one at that.<sup>181</sup> This conservationist impulse lands him squarely in the second phase of Limerick’s “three-part story.” Meanwhile in Kennedy’s 1962 message to Congress, his sentiments echo those associated with phase three: “The concept of wilderness that has been cherished by Americans is the idea of lands where man and his works do not dominate the landscape, where the earth and its whole community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”<sup>182</sup>

President George H. W. Bush is the closest we have, among this set of presidents, to a preservationist. Despite having made a career in the Texas oil business and serving as vice president under a decidedly non-environmentalist administration, he also made contributions to the National

---

<sup>180</sup> Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment*, 191-192.

<sup>181</sup> Gary Scott. “The Presidents and the National Parks.” The White House Historical Association, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-presidents-and-the-national-parks>.

<sup>182</sup> John F. Kennedy quoted in Thomas G. Smith, “John Kennedy, Stewart Udall, and New Frontier Conservation,” *Pacific Historical Review* 64, no. 3 (August 1995): 340, JSTOR.



Parks System. Following the slew of Reagan's industry-oriented appointees, he instead tightened the enforcement of the Endangered Species Act and appointed William Reilly, an environmentalist who had previously led the World Wildlife Fund to head of the EPA.<sup>183</sup> Reading between the lines, the need for such an act to protect species that have been over-hunted is a consequence of phase two: the mastery of nature, or the elimination of species that were considered more useful to man dead than alive. At the same time, President Bush's suggestion during his presidency that "Our natural heritage must be recovered and restored" reinforces the phase three conception of nature, and upholds the myth that our national parks are the product of a "natural heritage" or process.<sup>184</sup>

President George W. Bush' scattered statements, art selections and policies embody all three phases at once. Bush's upbringing in the West prompted him to invest in the oil-related aspects of his homeland, rather than the natural features he so proudly displayed in the paintings on his walls. The extraction of oil is one of the many expressions of the desire to master nature and harness its potential to man's benefit. At the end of his term, his staff utilized this disregard for the protection of public land in Utah, spending their final months in office auctioning off oil leases for drilling in territories near Utah's national parks.<sup>185</sup> In his survey of presidential policies, Graham emphasized the fact that Bush's "early presidency coincided with

---

<sup>183</sup> Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment*, 305-306.

<sup>184</sup> George H. W. Bush quoted in *Presidents and the American Environment*, 306.

<sup>185</sup> Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment*, 333.

damaging wildfires stretching across a drought-stricken belt of states from New Mexico to Colorado to southern Oregon, blackened landscapes he visited in July 2002.”<sup>186</sup> Even so, he remained uninterested in politics surrounding water management in the Southwest. Capturing our on-going fear of natural processes, George W. Bush expressed a desire to protect “millions of acres of treasured forests” from seasonal forest fires with his “healthy forest initiative” in his 2003 State of the Union Address.<sup>187</sup> This initiative quickly came under scrutiny by environmental organizations like the Sierra Forest Legacy, as an act which would benefit loggers at the expense of forests, due to the misconception that increased logging would lower the risk of wildfires.<sup>188</sup> At the same time, the rhetoric of “treasured” forests and his abundant display of uninhabited landscapes in his Oval Office confirm his superficial appreciation of the constructed American wilderness.

The ambivalence present under the administration of President Barack Obama speaks to the fact that economic concerns have often guided the decision to fear, control or protect nature. President Obama’s policies are not a clear snapshot of his understanding of the West either, as his brand of environmentalism was geared towards the national issues of climate change and carbon emissions.<sup>189</sup> On the verge of re-election, President Obama

---

<sup>186</sup> Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment*, 333.

<sup>187</sup> George W. Bush, Transcript of President Bush's 2003 State of the Union Address, on January 28, 2003, transcribed in *eMediaMillWorks*, “Text of President Bush’s 2003 State of the Union Address,” *The Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushtext\\_012803.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushtext_012803.html).

<sup>188</sup> “Healthy Forests Initiative,” Sierra Forest Legacy, accessed April 6, 2020, [https://www.sierraforestlegacy.org/FC\\_LawsPolicyRegulations/KFSP\\_HealthyForests.php](https://www.sierraforestlegacy.org/FC_LawsPolicyRegulations/KFSP_HealthyForests.php).

<sup>189</sup> Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment*, 343.

refused to respond to a proposal for the Keystone XL Pipeline, which would run through Western states stretching from Canada to the Gulf Mexico and permanently disrupt the landscape along the way.<sup>190</sup> When he did finally announce that would not allow the construction of the pipeline in 2013, it was not for the sake of the land it would alter, but because it would “significantly exacerbate the problem of carbon pollution.”<sup>191</sup> In this sense, his presidency serves as an example where his speeches and display of *The Three Tetons* suggest an appreciation for the West that was not mirrored in his policies.

Ultimately, the Western artworks selected in the Oval Office serve two popular Western myths. On the one hand, they preserve the image of a natural West, in the state that Euro-American supposedly found it. Indeed, when Thomas Moran went West on trips with surveyor John Wesley Powell in the 1870s, he was seen as discovering and recording these lands for an Eastern audience for the first time. These images obscured the reality, of Native removal and government intervention “resembl[ing] that of a small western military installation” which was required to construct western wilderness sites. These paintings did this kind of cultural work in the period in which they were painted, and continue to carry forward the same palatable misconception about Western wilderness today. They offer what most perceive to be an earnest depiction of the virgin land upon which Euro-American settlers stumbled. This romanticization goes hand-in-hand with

<sup>190</sup> Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment*, 348.

<sup>191</sup> Barack Obama, speech, 2003, Georgetown University in Graham Jr., *Presidents and the American Environment*, 355.

oversimplification in Western history, a trend which Limerick takes to task. Having little correlation with a commitment to protect beloved Western public spaces, these images of the West are, then, as out of touch with the present West as the symbolic meaning assigned in frontier speeches. While this section examines the ways in which these paintings participate in myths about the West's past, the oversimplification of the West's history has repercussions in the present. It is not as if the paintings have a relationship with the present treatment of the West, but they are a product of the historical and continued tendency to simplify and flatten the West into convenient narrative arcs. Perhaps the most important takeaway then is that this myth of linear progress in Western conquest leaves the American public susceptible to accepting simple stories about the West and more urgently, simple responses to the West's exploited environment.

## **Conclusion**

As I write this conclusion, it is May of 2020, President Donald Trump addresses the American public from a room where Andrew Jackson hangs on the wall, and the Navajo Nation has just filed a lawsuit against the federal government for adequate and proportionate Coronavirus relief aid.<sup>192</sup> In responding to the president's particular choice of portrait, *Time* journalist Olivia Waxman's response is underwhelming. Hidden among four other "Things to Know About the President Whose Portrait Donald Trump Chose for

---

<sup>192</sup> Laurel Morales, "Navajo Nation Sees High Rate of COVID-19 and Contact Tracing is a Challenge," *NPR*, April 24, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/24/842945050/navajo-nation-sees-high-rate-of-covid-19-and-contact-tracing-is-a-challenge>.

the Oval Office,” she states in watered-down language that Jackson “was less interested in helping Native Americans.”<sup>193</sup> Similarly, a 2017 *New York Times* article about the president’s choice of hero suggested that Trump selected his portrait due to his role as a leader of the populist movement.<sup>194</sup> To me, this choice of portrait and the responses from mainstream journals suggests two things. On the one hand, it confirms that which was examined in sections three and four of this paper: that the absence of the Native American perspective in the formation of our Western heroes and landscapes is not a stand-alone oversight. Rather it is a product of a series of whitewashed myths about the frontier which allow the majority of Americans to continually ignore the consequences of this history of conquest today. The romantic experience of looking at a painting like *The Three Tetons* makes the story of Native American dispossession, required to create national parks, invisible. And this is not simply because the painting was made in 1895 and we know better now. The present shrugging off of the presidents’ choice to hang Andrew Jackson’s portrait perpetuates a system of written and visual cultural dominance that keeps this American population invisible today. In fact, “invisible” is the very word the director of Infectious Disease Programs at the Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health used to explain the lack of consideration Native American reservations are granted in the

---

<sup>193</sup> Olivia Waxman, “5 Things to Know About the President Whose Portrait Donald Trump Chose for the Oval Office,” *TIME*, January 25, 2017, <https://time.com/4649081/andrew-jackson-donald-trump-portrait/>.

<sup>194</sup> Jennifer Schuessler, “A History of Presidents, Mostly Democrats, Paying Homage to Jackson,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/us/politics/trump-andrew-jackson-grave.html>.

distribution of federal funding for health care, more apparent now than ever.<sup>195</sup>

More broadly, Trump's selection of the American president responsible for the Trail of Tears and the very mild reprimand he received for it, suggest that we continue to allow our leaders to hide behind the notion that there are "two-sides to every story." But the story told, the vision of America frequently delivered to Americans, in presidential rhetoric and Oval Office decoration continues to evade revision and criticism. How can we continue to accept this when efforts to debunk the myths of frontier history continue to rise in other cultural arenas? After all, the year 2020 has also seen the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction awarded to Greg Grandin for his book entitled *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall*. That President Donald Trump would continue to hang a portrait of Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office in 2020 is telling. It speaks to the fact that for many Americans, there is still a choice to believe in American historical folklore rather than historical fact. But to be able to see *The Three Tetons* as a painting of the discovery of beautiful untouched land by a European settler is a privilege. To continue to collectively hold what Patricia Limerick describes as "strong, unexamined emotions about the West" that presidents can harness in their hopeful speeches, is a privilege.<sup>196</sup> These are privileges of the dominant culture because they could not possibly be experienced as such by someone whose claim to their homeland was taken, and whose family members were

<sup>195</sup> Morales, "Navajo Nation Sees High Rate of COVID-19 and Contract Tracing is a Challenge."

<sup>196</sup> Limerick, *Something in the Soil*, 17.

lost to violent removal to make space for cowboys and national parks. In this sense, this paper is not about paintings in the Oval Office. It is about pulling apart that threads of history, myth and denial in which these paintings are tangled.

In this paper, I've assembled a body of artworks that have historically received little attention, despite gracing the walls of the most important political residence in the country. After assessing the kinds of heroes and motifs to which our leaders gravitate most often, I have examined simply one major pillar of American folklore—one story we tell ourselves. What I found was that deceitful simplifications of complicated realities run rampant in records of frontier history, whether written or painted. Further, I found that the American folklore which *The Bronco Buster* and *The Three Tetons* helped to construct in their day, is the very same folklore American presidents rely on today. This is not only because a re-evaluation of our frontier origin story would entail giving up the qualities of grit and freedom with which Billington, Remington and Roosevelt have credited our frontier experience. More importantly, it would entail addressing a much more complicated Western landscape, including the voices of a much broader American public, and ultimately allowing people to ask for the consequences of this complex history to be addressed in the present.

All that is to say, my work here is not done. Here, I have brought attention to a handful of frontier heroes who have been displayed in the Oval Office without a question being raised about their involvement in the history

of Native American genocide. But parallel critiques could and should be made for portraits of American presidents who have contributed to a myriad of violent laws, tactics, and discriminatory practices throughout our history, that have silenced the voices of many Americans. I have no doubt that other artworks, not investigated in this paper, are suspended in their own dangerous webs of American mythology and history. Our myths find manifestations in every corner of our culture and guide decisions in the present. The portrait of Andrew Jackson in Trump's office and continued federal neglect of Native Americans are a product of the same system.<sup>197</sup> So while it is often said that one must not judge a book by its cover, I suggest we ought to judge a site of national leadership by the paintings on the walls.

### **Bibliography**

Allman, William G. "New Additions to the Oval Office." Blog. Home. The White House: President Barack Obama. Last modified February 10, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/02/10/new-additions-oval-office>.

Associated Press. "Trump administration expands hunting and fishing in wildlife refuges." *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/kidspost/trump->

---

<sup>197</sup> For more on the inadequate federal funding put towards "health care, education, public safety, housing, and rural development," on Native American reservations see The United States Commission on Civil Rights, *A Quiet Crisis: Federal Funding and Unmet Needs in Indian Country*, by Mary Frances Berry and Cruz Reynoso, Washington D.C.: 2003, <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/na0703/na0204.pdf>; For an evaluation of the consequences of these unmet needs in the present day, see the discussion of health disparities on reservations in Dana Hedgpeth, Darryl Fears and Gregory Scruggs, "Indian Country, where residents suffer disproportionately from disease, is bracing for coronavirus," *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/04/04/native-american-coronavirus/>.



[administration-expands-hunting-and-fishing-in-wildlife-refuges/2019/09/11/37593d0c-ca7f-11e9-a1fe-ca46e8d573c0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/energy-environment/wp/2019/09/11/37593d0c-ca7f-11e9-a1fe-ca46e8d573c0_story.html).

Baker, Frank W. *Political Campaigns and Political Advertising: A Media Literacy Guide: A Media Literacy Guide*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009.

Ballinger, James K. *Frederic Remington's Southwest*. Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1992.

Berry, Mary Frances and Cruz Reynoso. *A Quiet Crisis: Federal Funding and Unmet Needs in Indian Country*. The United States Commission on Civil Rights. Washington D.C., 2003, <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/na0703/na0204.pdf>.

Billington, Ray Allen. *America's Frontier Heritage*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

Boag, Peter. "Thomas Moran and Western Landscapes: An inquiry into an Artist's Environmental Values." *Pacific Historical Review* 67, no. 1, (Winter 1998): 40-66. JSTOR.

Boyd, Gerald M. "Reagan Vacation Begins at Ranch." *The New York Times*, November 27, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/27/us/reagan-vacation-begins-at-ranch.html>.

Brand, Heather. Texas Highways. "Painting the Wild Blue Yonder." Last modified March 15, 2020, <https://texashighways.com/wildflowers/painting-the-wild-blue-yonder/>.

Brown, Jeffrey and Sam Lane. "How the Trump administration is shaping the future of America's public lands." *PBS News Hour*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-the-trump-administration-is-shaping-the-future-of-americas-public-lands>.

Bush, George H. W. "Acceptance Speech." Speech, Republican National Convention, Louisiana Superdome, New Orleans, August 18, 1988, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/august-18-1988-acceptance-speech-republican-national>.

Bush, George W. "State of the Union Address." Speech, The 2003 State of the Union Address, U.S. Capitol Building, Washington D.C., January 28, 2003. *The Washington Post*,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushtext\\_012803.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/transcripts/bushtext_012803.html).

Cain, Áine. “Trump decorated the Oval Office with hand-me-downs from past presidents — here's exactly what he's used, from which of his predecessors.” *Business Insider*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/oval-office-donald-trump-president-2018-2>.

Cain, Áine. “Trump insisted on hanging bright gold drapes in the Oval Office — here are past presidents' offices for comparison.” *Business Insider*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trump-oval-office-white-house-design-2018-1>.

Carter, Jimmy. “Acceptance Speech: Our Nation’s Past and Future.” Speech, Democratic National Convention, Madison Square Garden, New York, July 15, 1976,

[https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/acceptance\\_speech.pdf](https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/acceptance_speech.pdf).

Carter, Jimmy. “Inaugural Address of President Jimmy Carter.” Speech, Inauguration of President Jimmy Carter, U.S. Capitol Building, Washington D.C., January 20, 1977, [https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/inaug\\_add.phtml](https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/inaug_add.phtml).

Catlin, George. *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs and Condition of the North American Indians*. London: Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly, 1876. HathiTrust.

Clinton Presidential Library & Museum. “Confronting Conflicts, Making Peace.” Accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.clintonlibrary.gov/museum/permanentexhibits/conflictspeace/>.

Clinton, William J. “Second Inaugural Address.” Speech, Second Inauguration of President William J. Clinton, U.S. Capitol Building, Washington D.C., January 20, 1997, [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/clinton2.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/clinton2.asp).

Coaston, Jane. “Jackson and Ourselves.” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/opinion/trump-andrew-jackson-and-ourselves.html>.

Committee on House Administration. *Hearings, Reports and Prints of the House Committee on House Administration*. Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971. Google Books.

Dangremond, Sam. "The Oval Office Through the Years, in Photos." *Town & Country*, August 24, 2017, <https://www.townandcountrymag.com/society/politics/g12090469/oval-office-pictures-through-the-years/?slide=14>.

Ewers, John C. "Cyrus E. Dallin: Master Sculptor of the Plains Indian." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 18, no. 1 (1968): 34-43. JSTOR.

Ewig, Rick. "The Railroad and the Frontier West." *OAH Magazine of History* 3, no. 2 (1988): 9- 10. JSTOR.

Featherman, Hannah. National Forest Foundation. "What are the differences between National Parks and National Forests?" Last modified March 12, 2013, <https://www.nationalforests.org/blog/what-are-the-differences-between-national-parks-and-national-forests>.

Fuchs, James R. "Oval Office Replica at the Harry S. Truman Library." September 1957. Photograph. Accession Number 58-259-2. Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/photograph-records/58-259-2>.

Gaddis, John Lewis. *The Cold War: A New History*. New York: Penguin Group, 2005.

Glanz, Dawn. *How the West was Drawn: American Art and the Settling of the Frontier*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982.

Goddard, Dan R. "Re-examining the Legacy of Early San Antonio Painter Julian Onderdonk." *San Antonio Current*, February 1, 2017, <https://www.sacurrent.com/ArtSlut/archives/2017/02/01/re-examining-the-legacy-of-early-san-antonio-painter-julian-onderdonk>.

Gonsalves, Kelly. "The President and the Press." *The Week*, accessed February 22, 2020, <https://theweek.com/captured/735643/president-press>.

Graham, Otis L., Jr. *Presidents and the American Environment*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015.

Guardian staff and agencies. "Trump finalizes plans to open Utah monuments for mining and drilling." February 6, 2020,

<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/feb/06/trump-utah-national-parks-energy-development-drilling>.

Gulliford, Andrew. "The West As America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920." *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 1 (1992): 199-208. Accessed February 28, 2020. doi:10.2307/2078477.

Haberman, Maggie. "A Homebody Finds the Ultimate Home Office." *The New York Times*. January 25, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/us/politics/president-trump-white-house.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=a-lede-package-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/25/us/politics/president-trump-white-house.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=a-lede-package-region&region=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0)

Harris & Ewing. "Warren G. Harding." No date. Photograph. WWPL0873. Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library Photo Collection, Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library & Museum, Staunton, Virginia. <http://presidentwilson.org/items/show/23139>.

Harry S. Truman Library. "*The replica of the Oval Office in the Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.*" May 3, 1960. Photograph, 8 inches by 10 inches. Accession Number 60-426. Oval Office Replica, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/photograph-records/60-426>.

Hassrick, Peter H., Arthur Amiotte, Emily C. Burns, Bruce B. Eldridge, Dan L. Flores, Laura F. Fry, Karen B McWhorter, and Melissa W. Speidel. *Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West*. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2018.

Hedgpeth, Dana, Darryl Fears and Gregory Scruggs. "Indian Country, where residents suffer disproportionately from disease, is bracing for coronavirus." *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2020/04/04/native-american-coronavirus/>.

Hendricks, Gordon. *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of The American West*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974.

Hoss, Mary Louise. *Winterthur Portfolio* 28, no. 4 (1993): 293-96. Accessed April 10, 2020. JSTOR.

Hurlburt, Virgil. "The Taylor Grazing Act." *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 11, no. 2 (1935): 203-06. Accessed April 6, 2020. JSTOR.

Ivins, Molly. "Carter's Water Project "Hit List" Didn't Help." *The New York Times*, May 14, 1978, E4. TimesMachine.

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis Personal Papers. Biographies of Members of the Special Committee for White House Paintings. August 3, 1959- November 28, 1962. JBKOPP-SF036-009, Subject files: White House: Special Committee for White House Paintings: [General], Document 35, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis Personal Papers. "First Meeting of the Painting Committee of the Fine Arts Committee for the White House." December 6, 1961. JBKOPP-SF036-009-p0029, Subject files: White House: Special Committee for White House Paintings: [General], Document 49, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis Personal Papers. Interview with James W. Fosburgh by unknown interviewer due to redacted files listing interview introduction. August 3, 1959- November 28, 1962. JBKOPP-SF036-009-p0078, Subject files: White House: Special Committee for White House Paintings: [General], Documents 78-83, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis Personal Papers. Press Release regarding the Special Committee for White House Paintings. November 21, 1962. JBKOPP-SF036-009-p0029, Subject files: White House: Special Committee for White House Paintings: [General], Document 29, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts.

Jonas, Frank H. *Politics in the American West*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1969.

Jones, Johnathan. "Norman Rockwell's Statue of Liberty can point Trump towards decency." *The Guardian*, November 23, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2016/nov/23/norman-rockwell-statue-of-liberty-can-point-trump-towards-decency>.

Jussim, Estelle. *Frederic Remington, the Camera and the Old West*. Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1983.

Kennedy, John F. "Acceptance of Democratic Nomination for President, Excerpt, 1960 Democratic National Convention, 15 July 1960." Speech, Democratic National Convention, The Coliseum, Los Angeles, July 15, 1960. Identification number TNC-191-E5-EX, Kennedy Presidential

Library and Museum, Boston, Massachusetts,  
<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/historic-speeches/acceptance-of-democratic-nomination-for-president>.

Kilian, Michael. "Wild, Wild West: The Smithsonian Circles the Wagon Over its latest Exhibit." *Chicago Tribune*. May 26, 1991, Proquest Historical Newspapers.

Kimmelman, Michael. "Old West, New Twist at the Smithsonian." *The New York Times*. May 26, 1991. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Kinsey, Joni Louise "Creating a Sense of Place: Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West." Ph.D. Dissertation, Washington University, St. Louis, 1989.

Kloss, William. "Selected Works From the Collection." In *Art in the White House: A Nation's Pride*, edited by Donald J. Crump, 51-249. Washington D.C.: The White House Historical Association, 1992.

Levy, Michael and Forrest McDonald. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. "Presidency of the United States of America." Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., January 14, 2020. Accessed March 24, 2020,  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/presidency-of-the-United-States-of-America>.

Licata, Anthony. Interview with Donald Trump. Transcript, The Venetian, Las Vegas, January 21, 2016, *Field & Stream*,  
<https://www.fieldandstream.com/articles/hunting/2016/01/qadonald-trump-on-guns-hunting-and-conservation/>.

Limerick, Patricia Nelson. *Something in the Soil*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2000.

Limerick, Nelson Patricia. *The Legacy of Conquest*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1987.

Lindsey, Robert. "A Cowboy Hero, Myth and Reality." *The New York Times*, January 21, 1981. TimesMachine.

Madley, Benjamin. "Understanding Genocide in California Under United States' Rule 1846-1873." *Western Historical Quarterly* (Winter 2016): 449-461.

Masters, Kim. "They Went Thataway: At the NMAA, Revising the Revisionism of 'The West as America'." *The Washington Post*, June 2, 1991. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Monkman, Betty C. "Catalogue of the White House Collection of Paintings, Sculpture, and Works on Paper." In *Art in the White House: A Nation's Pride*, edited by Donald J. Crump, 291-366. Washington D.C.: The White House Historical Association, 1992.

Morales, Laurel. "Navajo Nation Sees High Rate of COVID-19 and Contact Tracing is a Challenge." *NPR*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/24/842945050/navajo-nation-sees-high-rate-of-covid-19-and-contact-tracing-is-a-challenge>.

Narea, Nicole and Catherine Kim, "Read the full text of Trump's State of the Union speech." *Vox*, last modified February 5, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/2/4/21123394/state-of-the-union-full-transcript-trump>.

National Parks Service. "History of Bison Management in Yellowstone." Last modified April 4, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/bison-history-yellowstone.htm>.

Naval History and Heritage Command. "USS Constitution in the War of 1812." Constitution. Last modified January 29, 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/ships/ships-of-sail/uss-constitution-americas-ship-of-state/history.html>.

Nelson, Lyle Emerson. *American Presidents Year by Year*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Nester, William. "The Texas Revolution." In *The Age of Jackson and the Art of American Power 1815-1848*, 166-178. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. JSTOR.

Nicholson, Larry and J. E. Tetirick. "Oval Office Replica at the Harry S. Truman Library." Circa 1959. Photograph. Accession Number 59-467. Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri. <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/photograph-records/59-467>.

Office of the Curator. "IMPORTANT OBJECTS IN THE OVAL OFFICE DURING THE ADMINISTRATION OF PRESIDENT GERALD R. FORD." November 23, 1974. Box 14, folder "Oval Office Objects," Robert T Hartmann Files, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum, Ann Arbor, Michigan,

<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0011/1683406.pdf>

Phelps, Jordan. "President Obama Explains Why Winston Churchill's Bust was Removed from the Oval Office." *ABC News*, April 22, 2016, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/president-obama-explains-winston-churchills-bust-removed-oval/story?id=38602120>.

Phillips, Macon. "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address." Blog, The White House: President Barack Obama, last modified January 21, 2009. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2009/01/21/president-barack-obamas-inaugural-address>.

Phillips-Schrock, Patrick. *The Nixon White House Redecoration and Acquisition Program*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2016.

Pollard, James E. "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Press." *Journalism Quarterly*, 22 no. 3 (Fall 1945): 197-206. Sage Journals. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769904502200302>.

Prine Pauls, Elizabeth. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. "Trail of Tears." Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., November 11, 2019. Accessed May 4, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Trail-of-Tears>.

*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Gerald R. Ford*, (Washington D.C.: Office of the Federal Register National Archives and Records Service, 1977), 1475-1476.

Raitz, Kerl B., Jeffrey E. Levy and Richard A. Gilbreath. "Mapping Kentucky's Frontier Trails through Geographical Information and Cartographic Applications." *Geographical Review* 100, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 312-335. JSTOR.

Randol, Shaun. *The Mantle: Smart Content for the Global Citizen*. "The Outsider Artist." Accessed March 20, 2020. <https://www.themantle.com/arts-and-culture/outsider-artist>.

Reagan, Ronald. "Acceptance Speech." Speech, Republican National Convention, Joe Loius Arena, Detroit, July 17, 1980. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/7-17-80>.

Reagan, Ronald. "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union." Speech, State of the Union Address, Washington D.C., January 25, 1984. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/12584e>.



Reagan, Ronald. "Inaugural Address." The Second Inauguration of President Ronald Reagan, U.S. Capitol Building, Washington D.C., January 21, 1985. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/12185a>.

Reichhardt, Tony. "A Note from Ho Chi Minh," Air and Space Magazine. Last modified December 23, 2012, <https://www.airspacemag.com/daily-planet/a-note-from-ho-chi-minh-171112548/>.

Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute. "Inside the Reagan Library- The Oval Office." Videocasts. Accessed March 17, 2020. <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/programs-events/webcasts-and-podcasts/podcasts/videocasts/inside-the-reagan-library-the-oval-office/>.

Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute. "Oval Office." Permanent Exhibitions. Accessed March 17, 2020, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/library-museum/permanent-exhibitions/oval-office/>.

Roosevelt, Theodore. "Ranch Life in The Far West. In Cattle Country." Illustrated by Frederic Remington. *Century Illustrated Magazine* XXXIV, no. 13 (Winter 1888): 495-655. HathiTrust.

Samuels, Peggy and Harold Samuels. *Frederic Remington: A Biography*. New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1982.

Scheele, Paul E. "President Carter and the Water Projects: A Case Study in Presidential and Congressional Decision-Making." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1978): 348-364. JSTOR.

Schuessler, Jennifer. "A History of Presidents, Mostly Democrats, Paying Homage to Jackson." *The New York Times*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/us/politics/trump-andrew-jackson-grave.html>.

Scott, Gary. The White House Historical Association. "The Presidents and the National Parks." Accessed April 7, 2020. <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-presidents-and-the-national-parks>

Scudder, Charles. "Who wore it best? Cowboy hat photo ops are a presidential tradition." *The Dallas Morning News*, February 19, 2018. <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/texana/2018/02/19/who-wore-it-best-cowboy-hat-photo-ops-are-a-presidential-tradition/>.

Shabecoff, Philip. "Reagan and the Environment: To Many, a Stalemate." *The New York Times*, January 2, 1989,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/02/us/reagan-and-environment-to-many-a-stalemate.html>.

Sierra Forest Legacy. "Healthy Forests Initiative." Accessed April 6, 2020.  
[https://www.sierraforestlegacy.org/FC\\_LawsPolicyRegulations/KFSP\\_HealthyForests.php](https://www.sierraforestlegacy.org/FC_LawsPolicyRegulations/KFSP_HealthyForests.php)

Smith, Thomas G. "John Kennedy, Stewart Udall, and New Frontier Conservation." *Pacific Historical Review* 64, no. 3 (August 1995): 329-362. JSTOR.

Smithsonian American Art Museum. "Buffalo Bull, Grazing on the Prairie." Art + Artists. Accessed March 9, 2020,  
<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/buffalo-bull-grazing-prairie-3948>.

Snyder, Christina. "Andrew Jackson's Indian Son: Native Captives and American Empire." In *The Native South: New Histories and Enduring Legacies*, edited by Tim Alan Garrison and Greg O'Brien, 84-106. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017. JSTOR.

"Speaking of Pictures: The President's Desk is Covered with Gimracks." *Life Magazine*, August 10, 1942, Google Books.

Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. ProQuest EBook Central.

The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum. "The Oval Office." Museum. Accessed February 23, 2020,  
[https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/museum/the\\_oval\\_office](https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/museum/the_oval_office).

The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. "Items in President Kennedy's Oval Office." About JFK. Accessed February 24, 2020,  
<https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/life-of-john-f-kennedy/fast-facts-john-f-kennedy/items-in-president-kennedys-oval-office>.

The Met Museum. "The Constitution and the Guerriere." Browse the Collection. Accessed March 8, 2020,  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/10431>.

The Met Museum. "The Rattlesnake." Browse the Collection. Accessed March 8, 2020, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11869>.

The White House Historical Association. "Decorating the White House: Fact Sheet." Accessed April 6, 2020,

<https://www.whitehousehistory.org/press-room-old/press-collection/decorating-the-white-house>

The White House Historical Association. *First West Wing Oval Office*. 1909, Photograph, Washington D.C., <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/first-west-wing-oval-office>.

The White House Historical Association. "Painting." Digital Library. Accessed March 8, 2020, <https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/?603=Painting>.

The White House Historical Association. "Portrait." Digital Library. Accessed March 20, 2020, <https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/?603=Portrait>.

The White House Historical Association. "Sculpture." Digital Library. Accessed March 8, 2020, <https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/?603=Sculpture>.

The White House Museum. "Oval Office." Accessed March 20, 2020, <http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/west-wing/oval-office.htm>.

The White House Museum. "Oval Office History." Accessed February 24, 2020, <http://www.whitehousemuseum.org/west-wing/oval-office-history.htm>.

Tijerina, Edmund. "Chili Queens once Ruled Alamo Plaza." *San Antonio Express News*, January 28, 2015, <https://www.expressnews.com/150years/culture/article/Chili-Queens-romanticized-sometimes-shunned-6047507.php>.

Tom Lea Institute. "Laura & George Bush, Dallas." Accessed March 20, 2020. <https://tomlea.com/about-us/12-travelers/laura-george-bush/>.

Trinka, Irma Zena. *Out Where the West Begins, Being the Early and Romantic History of North Dakota*. St. Paul: Pioneer Co., 1920.

Trump, Donald (@realdonaldtrump). "Congratulations to Eddie DeBartolo Jr. and your wonderful family of friends!" Twitter, February 18, 2020. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1229921804992446464/photo/4>

U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service. "Former President Carter Speaks on Alaska." National Wildlife Refuge Service. Last modified January 21, 2011.

[https://www.fws.gov/refuges/news/FormerPresidentCarterSpeaksAlaska\\_01192011.html](https://www.fws.gov/refuges/news/FormerPresidentCarterSpeaksAlaska_01192011.html).

Waxman, Olivia. "5 Things to Know About the President Whose Portrait Donald Trump Chose for the Oval Office." *TIME*, January 25, 2017. <https://time.com/4649081/andrew-jackson-donald-trump-portrait/>.

White, G. Edward. *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1989. Project MUSE.

Wister, Owen and Frederic Remington. *Drawing by Frederic Remington*. New York: R. H Russell, 1897. HathiTrust.

"Who's who cast in a whodunit," *LIFE Magazine*, July 7, 1961, Google Books, 44.