

# **AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS**

**ART, HISTORY, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

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*Frontispiece: Max Weber, Rush Hour, New York, 1915. Oil on canvas, 36¼ x 30¼ in (92 x 76.8 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Gift of the Avalon Foundation.*

## Living Traditions and Icons of Defeat

The Indian Removal policies set in place by Andrew Jackson, president from 1828 to 1836—culminating in the notorious ethnic cleansing of settled agrarian Cherokee people from Georgia (the 1838 “Trail of Tears”)—forced Native groups westward from their homelands in the southeast and the so-called “Old Northwest” (the upper Great Lakes). One result of these uprootings was that during the decades before the Civil War, formerly separate Native societies now shared with one another a limited territory and a loss of sovereignty. Having created new lives for themselves in the southeast, they adapted once again to restricted quarters, as they struggled to preserve cultural identity. In their new homes, they mingled traditions and integrated new trade materials into traditional arts. Migration brought displacement from ancestral grounds, and trade meant a shift from a self-sufficient subsistence economy to growing dependence on the market for hides and skins, furthered by reliance on guns and horses. To these challenges was added the growing volume of white settlement as the century wore on. Yet, as we have seen, Native artistic traditions throughout these decades paradoxically flourished, showing a technical and artistic inventiveness born of new threats to their cultural identity.

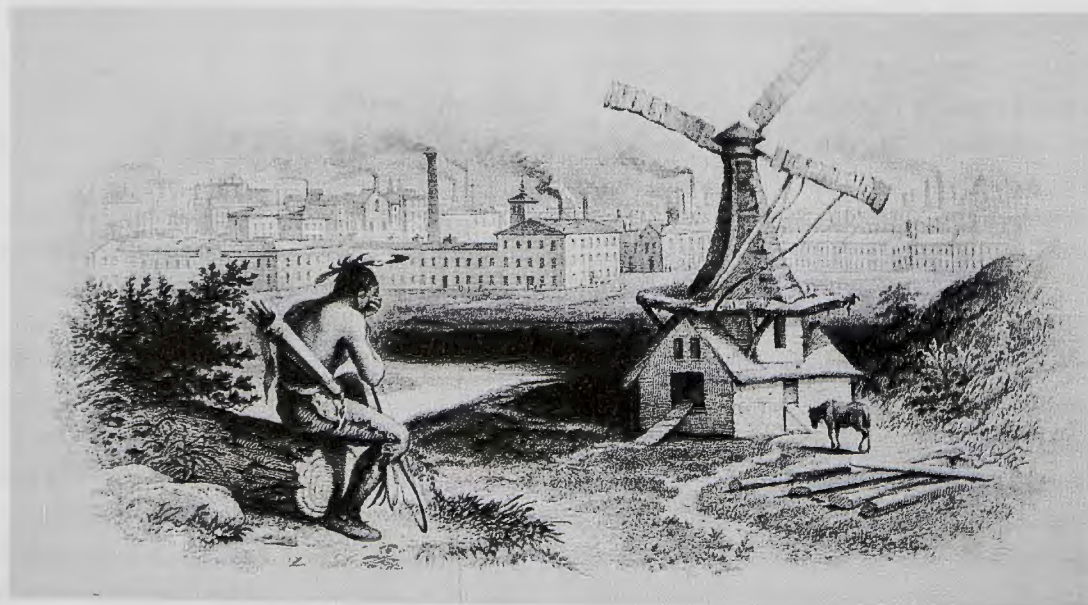
For many Easterners looking westward, coexistence with Indians was out of the question. Unable, or perhaps unwilling, to confront the historical dilemmas of westward expansion, many in the East, including artists and image-makers, consigned Native cultures—very much alive though struggling—to the historical margins. Central to

the ideology of white expansion into the West was the idea of wilderness: an image of the West as a space void of culture, empty and ready to receive civilization. The idea of wilderness was actively promoted by those who invested in the future of the West as a region that would replicate the institutions and middle-class domesticity of the East. Wilderness had no human past; it nullified the possibility of a middle ground, premised on an encounter between cultures. In the context of these deeply rooted cultural ideas, Native people of the West were confronted as obstacle, or as threatening other. Images of westward expansion as an inevitable tide of civilizing institutions in this sense went hand-in-hand with the political program of Indian removal, and a more general dehumanization of Native cultures.

### The “Vanishing” American Indian

As the balance of power in the West shifted toward the claims of white settlers, Eastern Americans began to view Indian cultures as tragically doomed by history itself. Along with Catlin, many were able to imagine only one future for Native societies: to move progressively westward toward the setting sun, and inevitably toward extinction. These beliefs were shaped and encouraged by widely circulated images of Native people in postures of noble resignation and tragic defeat. Through constant repetition, the phrase “vanishing American Indian” acquired the aura of truth, in the face of the fierce persistence of real Indians.

**THE “GOOD” INDIAN.** Eastern audiences, themselves more than a century removed from conflict with Native cultures, dealt with their own moral misgivings about their



7.11 Bank note, n.d. Paper engraving. New York Public Library, Prints Division. Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

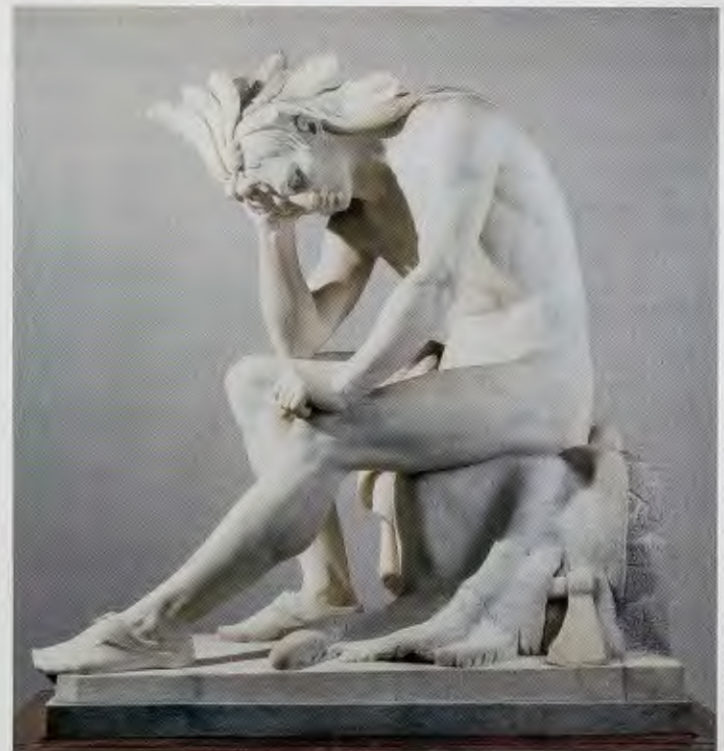


7.12 ASHER B. DURAND, *Progress, or The Advance of Civilization*, 1853. Oil on canvas, 48 × 72 in (121.9 × 182.8 cm). Westervelt Warner Museum of American Art, North River, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

7.13 (below) THOMAS CRAWFORD, *The Indian: Dying Chief Contemplating the Progress of Civilization*, 1856. Marble, 55 in (139.7 cm) high. New York Historical Society.

government's destructive Indian policy by sentimentalizing the whole idea of the Indian. The "sentimental" version—appearing in painting and sculpture, theater, poetry, and fiction—took its place beside the abused slave as an object of humane pity. Yet unlike the humane reaction to slavery, the figure of the idealized Indian did not produce any significant protest until nearly half a century later. According to the myth of the "vanishing" American Indian, to protest his fate was to protest the course of nature itself, and equally pointless. The figure of the vanishing Indian also offered a measure of American progress; in a standard juxtaposition, the Indian gazes out from his wilderness prospect at factories, farms, and tilled fields—a vision of rising empire repeated everywhere from bank note engravings (fig. 7.11) to ambitious exhibition works such as *Progress or The Advance of Civilization* (fig. 7.12) by Asher B. Durand (1796–1886). In the most extreme expression of the theme, an Indian family stands on the western edge of the continent, contemplating the sun as it sinks below the horizon, the emblem of their defeat. There is nowhere else to go.

The "vanishing" American Indian in art reveals a nation torn between alternative identities: symbolically allied to nature and yet committed to its agrarian and industrial transformation. An emblem of America's difference from Europe, and its virtuous attachment to nature, the Indian in the arts also came to symbolize the nation's past—the subject of nostalgic regret for what had been lost in the rise to continental empire. The arts expressed a cultural ambiva-



lence regarding change and the pace of progress, even as the national commitment to development drew generations of Americans toward an unstable future.

Thomas Crawford's (1813–57) *The Indian: Dying Chief Contemplating the Progress of Civilization* (fig. 7.13) embodied this ambivalence. The sculpture looks back to classical representations of the conquered barbarians of ancient Rome

(such as the *Dying Gaul*), whose nobility is evident in the language of the idealized male nude. A version of the *Dying Chief* was located within a series of emblematic figures on the east pediment of the U.S. Capitol (Senate) in Washington (fig. 7.14). A female allegory of the Republic anchors the sequence, which moves from soldier to merchant, schoolmaster, mechanic, and axe-wielding frontiersman, tracing a story of the nation's rise to power. The defeated Native cultures are wedged into the corners of the pediment, symbolically and literally pushed to the margins of history.

**THE "BAD" INDIAN.** The theme of the noble but doomed American Indian was, however, only one face of a dual image of Native cultures in the antebellum years. The heroic mission of establishing civilization required savage antagonists. From the Captivity narratives of the early colonial period, in which white women were abducted and held captive by Indians, the "bad" Indian was a fixture of American culture—a brutish enemy that furnished a convenient target for the regenerative violence of frontiersmen. Richard Slotkin has argued that violence against Indians was a ritualized act through which colonists gained control over their own most savage impulses. As white trappers and then settlers struggled to establish a foothold

in the West of these years, what they feared in Indian cultures was often what they most feared in themselves—a descent into barbarism.

In Charles Deas's *Death Struggle* of c. 1845 (fig. 7.15) the intertwined bodies of Indian foe and bearded white trapper suggest a confusion of identities. The painting is a study in cliff-hanging sensationalism—the stuff of popular literature, tall tales, and Western almanacs. The outcome is in little doubt. Astride their steeds, Indian and trapper plummet headlong into a gulf whose obscurity intensifies the horror. The Indian clutches onto the trapper in one final effort to plunge his knife into his foe, even as the embrace suggests as well a desperate desire to save himself. Neither white nor Indian will come out alive.

Physically linking their fates is the small body of the beaver—the animal at the center of the international fur trade, whose economic value shaped the early phases of expansion into the West. Its paws still caught in the steel trap, it is the reason for the death struggle between white and Indian. Painted after the passing of the "trapper's frontier," *Death Struggle* imagines the West as a place of elemental violence and conflict between cultures over diminishing resources. Despite the symbolism of white and dark, with its moral imputation of good and bad, the helix-like



7.14 THOMAS CRAWFORD, *Progress of Civilization*, US Capitol, Senate, East Pediment, Washington, D.C., 1855–63. Marble, 960 ft (292.6 m) long. Architect of the Capitol, Washington, D.C.



7.15 CHARLES DEAS, *Death Struggle*, c. 1845. Oil on canvas, 30 × 25 in (76.2 × 63.5 cm). Shelburne Museum, Vermont.

formation of Indian, trapper, and beaver suggests that the identity of the white trapper on the frontier could never remain separate from those who shared the environment with him. Both Indian and white participated in the same system of international trade in animal pelts that was drawing the West into a market economy. Though exploiting the popular appeal of Western frontier violence, Deas's work looks beyond the frame to a wider world of violent economic and social competition.

The presence of the Indian in American arts and literature of the antebellum period invariably carried within it a narrative about the rise of the republic that framed both the "good" Indian—pure but doomed—and the "bad" Indian—the embodiment of nature's darkest aspects, who needed to be mastered in order to establish a new culture in the West. This West of settlement was a place of moral absolutes, offering little in the way of a middle ground. Following the collapse of the trapper's frontier, which had seen the first artistic representations of Plains people,

the next phase of expansion into the West would be driven by settler colonialism.

## George Bingham and the Domestication of the West

In the decades following the passing of the explorer's and trapper's frontier, the literary and artistic figure of the pioneer emerged as one of the founding myths of the young nation-state in its transition to continental empire. Unlike the explorer's frontier, which looked to the West as a place of exotic difference and wondrous curiosities requiring documentation and preservation, the settler's frontier saw the West as an extension of the East. Here lay the nation's future, appointed by destiny to receive civilization through the heroic acts of its citizens.

**DANIEL BOONE ESCORTING SETTLERS THROUGH THE CUMBERLAND GAP.** George Caleb Bingham's painting of 1851–2 (fig. 7.16) distilled these beliefs for later generations. Beginning in the 1840s, nation-builders looked to Boone's pioneering qualities at a period in the nation's history when many felt the country was falling away from the revolutionary values of independence, stalwart individuality, and sacrificial courage. In the terms of the Boone myth which Bingham helped to shape, the settlement of the West was nothing less than a religious mission. But this was a vision that obscured the contentious politics of expansion: slave versus free; settler versus Indian; rancher versus farmer.

Dressed in buckskin, Boone strides toward the viewer, illuminated from above, the very type of the independent Westerner as the advance guard of civilization settling the wilderness. He is framed by a pyramid of settlers; at the apex is Rebecca Boone riding a white horse. According to popular accounts, Rebecca was the first white woman west of the Allegheny Mountains. Her appearance here is fittingly sanctified, the prototype of the "pioneer Madonna," whose pacifying and uplifting influence promised a new domestic stability to a region known for its rowdy men. Her thematic importance here is underscored by Bingham's dedication of the painting "To the Mothers and Daughters of the West." The deep space of the painting carries us through the stages of frontier settlement, from hunting, herding, and clearing the land to farming and domestication. The pioneer myth embedded in Bingham's work emphasized the sacrifices and difficulties of settling a wilderness—dramatized in the storm-riven and foreboding landscape. The biblical concept of wilderness served expansionists well, for it conveniently dispensed with all prior claims to the land.

a buffalo robe and cradling a gun in his arm, encounters a voiceless technology. Leaning against a telegraph pole, he strains to hear the mysterious codes transmitted along the lines—an image of two cultures unable to communicate. Pictured against a bleak wintry landscape, the old man gazes toward the viewer with a pained expression. To the left of the telegraph poles is a buffalo skull, a *memento mori* marking the demise of the animal on which Plains cultures depended for survival. Like the earlier expressions of the “vanishing American” theme, these later works mingle regret over the plight of Native people in an era of technological progress with a sense of fatalism regarding their inability to adapt to the direction of history.

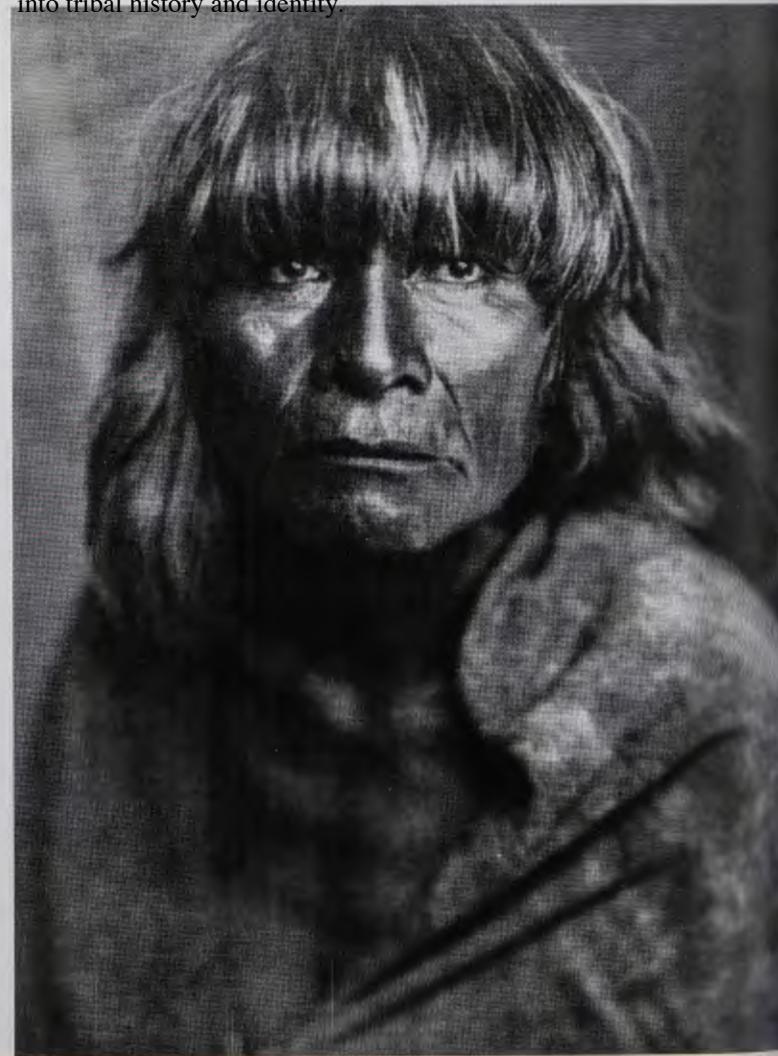
#### **THE NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN BY EDWARD CURTIS.**

Beginning in the Centennial years, the new technology of the camera was put to the service of documenting Indian culture. Over a quarter-century after the Centennial, the photographer Edward Curtis began a project that would eventually become his twenty-volume *The North American Indian*. Begun in 1907 and completed in 1930, nearly a century after Catlin, *The North American Indian* resembled the earlier artist’s project in many respects. Compelled by a desire to preserve in photographs the threatened traditions, knowledge, and sacred rites of Native people throughout the West, Curtis devoted his life to completing this vast project, comprised of some twenty-two hundred photo-engravings (photogravures) taken from eighty Indian nations (fig. 9.43). Earning the trust of sympathetic elders and medicine men through “weeks of patient endeavor,” in his words, he also won the support of some of the wealthiest men in America, including J. P. Morgan.

*The North American Indian* surveyed Native peoples at a time when they were living on reservations and struggling to maintain their ceremonial life and art forms. In many cases—as for instance in his images of Plains war parties—Curtis asked his subjects to reenact traditional cultural practices. Like Catlin one hundred years earlier, Curtis wished to preserve the image of Native culture in a pristine condition, as he imagined it, prior to clocks, blue jeans, generators, and sewing machines. The velvety **chiaroscuro** of his portraits suggests a world already transformed into art. Curtis’s work shared in the **pictorialist aesthetics** of his generation, aesthetics that distanced his subjects from the present. He saw his project as a form of what is called today “salvage anthropology”—involving the collection and cataloguing of detailed observations about everything from music, dance, and dress, to food preparation, language, religion, and burial customs—an archive of knowledge that framed the individual Indian subject.

From the beginning, Native people had viewed photography warily. Was the photographer robbing Native subjects of their inner lives by pinioning them to a photographic archive, or did the camera capture the fleeting spirit on film? The photographic image, associated with death and memorialization from the mid-nineteenth century on, helped entrench the idea that Native societies were threatened with extinction. On the other hand, photography also served Native cultures’ desires for images of their traditions. Native Americans themselves used the camera for purposes of self-documentation. Each party to the photographic encounter played an active role.

In meticulously documenting reenactments of vanishing ways, Curtis furnished what proved to be a vital record, enriching cultural memory for later generations of Indians. George P. Horse Capture, for example, first came across his great-grandfather, a Gros Ventre tribal leader from Montana, in 1969, through a Curtis photograph he was shown in a historical archive. Seeing Curtis’s photograph of the tribal elder launched his great-grandson on a journey into tribal history and identity.



9.43 EDWARD CURTIS, Hopi Man from *The North American Indian*, vol 12, plate 420, 1907–30. Photo-engraving. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.