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exhibition review of

Art of the American West: The Haub Family Collection

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Art of the American West: The Haub Family Collection

Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma

November 15, 2014–October 18, 2015

This past year, the Tacoma Art Museum (TAM) concluded its nine-month long inaugural installation of the Haub Family collection of Western American art, spanning more than 200 years of work by historic and contemporary artists. The show featured 133 pieces of the 295-piece group (about one third of which date to the long nineteenth century, the primary focus of this review), the biggest gift the institution has ever received, and one of the world's largest of the genre. Iconic American artists in the assembly are Frederic Remington, Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, Charles M. Russell, and Georgia O'Keeffe. The quality of the paintings and sculpture is high and the chronology is broad, dating from ca. 1797 to 2009, unusual for a private collection. Yet the scope is limited to the donors' interests, including many nineteenth-century pieces that stereotype and romanticize Native American culture and mask a history of land theft, colonialism, racism, and genocide. As children, the Haubs were enamored by German author Karl May's thrilling adventure novels of the American frontier.^[1] Beginning in 1984, they consciously bought art that celebrates the people and cultures of the West and avoided images of violence and conflict. Art dealers Christine Mollring (Trailside Galleries in Jackson, Wyoming, and Scottsdale, Arizona) and Gerald Peters (whose eponymous galleries are in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and New York City) advised the Haubs on their purchases. For some, the donation is also controversial because the focus of the museum, established in 1935, had been on Northwest coast art, with more than 4,450 works. Now the TAM is the Pacific Northwest's only major museum for Western art as well, expanding the regional narrative to one of continental significance. (The closest fellow institution is nearly 1,000 miles east at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming.) Yet, of the 140 artists represented in the collection, only three are Native. Eight are women.

German supermarket billionaires Erivan and Helga Haub honeymooned in Tacoma in 1958, then spent summers on their Puget Sound property thereafter, supporting Tacoma's renaissance and donating annually to the museum. Each of their three sons was born in the "City of Destiny" (the western terminus of the Northern Pacific Railway) and carry dual citizenship. As part of their nature conservation efforts, the Haubs bought a ranch in Wyoming in 1982 and now nurture a herd of over 400 buffalo there. In 2011 TAM Director Stephanie Stebich approached John Barline, the Haub's family attorney, about the museum's campaign to raise funds for the redesign of a plaza, and learned that the family was interested in giving \$20 million to house and endow their extensive Western art collection. The TAM announced the gift in July 2012. The Haub wing, completed in October 2014, encompasses four new galleries and a sculpture hall, doubling the existing gallery space. The museum's \$15.5 million expansion of the 2003 Antoine Predock designed building also includes new landscape features, a free art studio, and improved amenities for visitors, all of which were designed to be sustainable. In addition to contributing to the building fund, the Haub donation also underwrote an elegant catalogue with 320 color reproductions published by Yale University Press in 2014, the Haub Fellow program, and the position of the Haub Curator of Western American Art.

Laura F. Fry, Curator of Art at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, since December 2015, became the inaugural Haub Curator at TAM in April 2013. She installed the collection in the 16,000-square-foot addition to the museum, about 10,000 square feet of which is new gallery space (fig. 1). Each of the Haub Family Galleries, collectively u-shaped, is named after one of the Haub's sons and organized around themes of portraiture, narrative, and landscape. Ivory cut-out pocket walls balance feature walls in deep teal, brick red, and pale blue between white ceilings and maple floors. The space concludes with twelve works of horses behind glass in the Sally and John Barline Study Gallery; this mini-exhibition was called "Horsing Around."



Fig. 1, Entrance to the Haub Family Galleries.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

An orientation space with eight benches allows visitors to sit and watch a brief video about the collection (fig. 2). Among the speakers in the piece are Fry, Stebich, the Haubs, TAM Chief Curator Rock Hushka, historian Michael Sullivan, and community leader Lyle Quasim. The overview follows a chronological approach with a timeline near the bottom of the screen addressing broad, benign concepts and decades of time not tied to specific events: "Migrations, 1800–1850"; "A Changing Land, 1850–1890"; "Invention, 1890–1950"; "Vision" (no dates given); "On the Horizon, 1950–2000"; and "Looking Ahead." Visitors seemed to appreciate seeing and hearing museum staff, the donors, and external commentators, but the sweeping approach to Western history and art left much to be desired.



Fig. 2, Still from video about the Haub Family Collection.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Opposite the orientation area is a locked "gizmo" (so-called by the museum director), a large, steel hand-wheel connected to the sliding screens/sun louvers outside by cables and chains (see fig. 1). The 17' x 16' richlite screens, made of recycled paper, organic fiber and phenolic

resin, filter natural light into the glass walled sculpture hall on one side and allow visitors to see a city street beyond (fig. 3). Architect Tom Kundig combined aspects of Native American longhouses and railway boxcars, two components of westward territorial expansion, into his design. The louvers roll like railroad boxcar doors across the façade and interlace with a set of fixed screens.



Fig. 3, Pamela Mayer Sculpture Hall.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The Pamela Mayer Sculpture Hall hosted an eclectic group of eleven bronzes of Native American leaders, cowboys, Pony Express riders, mountain men, artists at work, and wild animals, such as bighorn sheep and caribou. A rather weak pun in the wall text title called the assembly “A Cast of Characters.” One followed a winding path around clustered rectangular pedestals of sculptures into the main three galleries. Fittingly, the galleries as a whole began and ended with the buffalo. Henry Merwin Shrady’s *Elk Buffalo (The Monarch of the Plains)*, ca. 1900, with its thick, shaggy fur, is an astonishing technical feat as one of the earliest lost-wax bronze castings in the United States (fig. 4). Shrady never saw American bison (commonly called buffalo) in the west; the self-taught sculptor observed live bison at the Bronx Zoo. At the conclusion of the galleries is John Nieto’s *Buffalo at Sunset* (1996), an appropriate bookend to Shrady’s *Elk Buffalo* at the beginning. One of the iconic Western images of a stone-faced cowboy here is Alexander Phimister Proctor’s *Buckaroo* (1915) (fig. 5). Proctor modeled the piece after Bill “Slim” Ridings at the Pendleton Round-Up in Oregon in 1914, capturing the power of the bucking horse standing on its forelegs with its head tucked between them and the control of the rodeo star, secure in his saddle. The title refers to cowboys of the Northwest and Great Basin regions and may be an Anglicization of the Spanish word *vaquero* (cattle driver or cowboy).



Fig. 4, Sculpture Hall; at left: Henry Merwin Shrady, *Elk Buffalo (The Monarch of the Plains)* (ca. 1900).

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 5, Alexander Phimister Proctor, *Buckaroo*, 1915.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The sculptors represented in this gallery hailed from the East coast to the West coast, inspired variously by Italian craftsmen, ancient Assyrian art, or nineteenth-century Parisian trends. What they shared in common was the notion that the American West extends far beyond its geographic borders. One of the most effective educational aspects of this exhibition, located after the sculpture hall, was a black-and-white wall map identifying twenty-five artists' studio locations in the U.S. and four of them abroad (figs. 6, 7). Color reproductions of works in the installation appeared on the periphery of America and Europe with arrows indicating points of origin, such as Henry Farny's *Indian Encampment* (1893) from Cincinnati and Rosa Bonheur's *Rocky Bear and Chief Red Shirt* (1889) from Paris. Clearly, the artists who created evocative images of the American West were not necessarily familiar with daily life in the region. The display made apparent the countrywide and even international attraction of Western subjects to artists for centuries.



Fig. 6, Wall map of artists' studios in the U.S.

Photograph by the author.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 7, Map of artists' studios in Europe.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The transitional image at the end of the sculpture hall, against a green wall, is one of the collection's oldest works—an arresting portrait, *Wanata (The Charger)*, *Grand Chief of the Sioux* (1826) by Charles Bird King (fig. 8). A half-length reproduction of this oil painting graces the catalogue's cover. King was one of those artists who never travelled West, nor did he ever meet

the revered Yankton Sioux leader from present-day Minnesota. King's studio was in Washington, DC, where Thomas L. McKenney, then Superintendent of the Indian Trade, hired him to paint portraits of Native American delegates visiting the capitol; King's Indian Gallery numbered nearly 100. He worked primarily from life, but had to rely on a rough field sketches by James Otto Lewis as a guide. King depicted Wanata like an English nobleman, in fine clothing outdoors, right hand grasping the barrel of a feathered shotgun like a walking stick. With his steady gaze, waist-long red hair, and bear claw necklace, the chief is an imposing figure. Fry paired this image with one of the newest works in the collection, Clyde Aspveig's *White Cliffs of the Missouri* (2009) at the entrance of the Liliane and Christian Haub Gallery (fig. 9). Here, the theme was "The West Across Time," concerning the creation of an identity for a new country distinct from Europe with a focus on the people and landscapes of the West, whether real or imagined. The challenges of modernity, such as new industries and growing cities, prompted some artists to seek escape with historic recreations while others saw unique locations in the West as inspiration for new approaches to American art. Contemporary artists question ingrained assumptions about the American West and highlight the diversity of cultures there.



Fig. 8, Charles Bird King, *Wanata (The Charger), Grand Chief of the Sioux*, 1826.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 9, Installation of "The West Across Time."
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Another pairing in this section was that of a Native American celebrity with a white one, in this case Paul Kane's *Portrait of Maungwudaus* (ca. 1851) and Gilbert Stuart's *Portrait of George Washington* (ca. 1797) (fig. 10). Both are bust-length renderings of famous men in three-quarter poses wearing formal clothing against dark backgrounds. Maungwudaus, an Ojibwe dance troupe leader and speaker, staged performances alongside painter George Catlin's Indian Gallery in Europe in the 1840s and posed for numerous daguerreotypes, thus becoming one of the most widely depicted Native Americans of his time. While a portrait of America's first president (raised in colonial Virginia) might seem out of place in a collection of Western art, Fry argues that the western expansion of the United States started in the East, even before the country's founding.



Fig. 10, Installation of Paul Kane, *Portrait of Maungwudaus* (ca. 1851) with Gilbert Stuart's *Portrait of George Washington* (ca. 1797).
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Also in this space is Thomas Moran's cloud swept *Green River, Wyoming* (1907), with its golden sandstone cliffs in crisp contours, one of the painter's favorite subjects (fig. 11). The tiny band of horseback riders in the left foreground emphasizes the grand scale of the panoramic scene. This was an idealized image; Moran deliberately left out the town and rail lines then in the river valley.



Fig. 11, Thomas Moran, *Green River, Wyoming*, 1907.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

In the Katrin and Karl-Evian Haub Gallery, the emphasis is on narrative; the theme is “Stories, Icons, and Legends” (fig. 12). Influenced by European history painting, photography, and early cinema, illustrators created an imaginative American folklore around the idea of the West. Works in the gallery examine tensions between history and myth. One of the stories depicted in this section is George Catlin's *Archery of the Mandan* (1855–65) (fig. 13). Catlin first sketched the “Game of the Arrow” in the early 1830s at a Mandan village along the Missouri River in present-day North Dakota. The game's purpose was to determine who could discharge the greatest number of arrows from his bow before the first one fell to the ground. Catlin created this oil on board composition from memory years later. In her label and in the catalogue, Fry writes that “a warrior smoothly raised his bow, string stretched taut.” A close-up however, reveals that the string is slack; the warrior has already released the arrow. He and his rivals watch its ascent with eyes raised upward (fig. 14).



Fig. 12, Installation of “Stories, Icons, and Legends.”

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 13, George Catlin, *Archery of the Mandan*, 1855–65.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 14, Detail of Catlin, *Archery of the Mandan*.

[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Works in the George Haub Gallery/Alice and Paul Kaltinick Gallery are visual responses to dramatic landscapes and changing environments of the American West entitled “Artists and the Land” (fig. 15). Artists have mourned environmental destruction and produced both realist and abstract interpretations that helped prompt early ideas about conservation and influenced the formation of the national park system. One of the compelling images in this section was Frederic Remington’s painting, *Conjuring Back the Buffalo* (ca. 1889) depicting a bare-chested Indian lifting a bison skull above his head while standing on an arid hillside littered with half a dozen more bleached skulls (fig. 16). While famous for his images of cowboys and Native Americans that seem to hail from the Dakotas, Remington indicated the location of this scene in a corner of the finished composition as “Bow River-Can. Far North West.” As an artist correspondent for *Harper’s* magazine in 1887, he had observed members of the Blackfoot Confederacy along the Bow River near Calgary and collected several items, including a pair of beaded, fringed leggings. Back in his New York studio, Remington included those leggings in this painting. The work conveys Remington’s lament for the vanished bison herds on the brink of extinction and suggests that Native Americans would meet a similar fate. The TAM invited a contemporary Blackfoot member, Debora Juarez, to comment on this image and her thoughts appeared on a separate label beneath the interpretive one. She said: “This is a beautiful piece but it is not realistic. We don’t worship towards the sky . . . we worship in medicine lodges and

through ceremony.” This is but one example of the ways in which the TAM has invited Native America—scholars, artists, performers, and others—to respond to the recent acquisitions in writing and in multiple public programs.



Fig. 15, Installation of “Artists and the Land.”
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 16, Frederic Remington, *Conjuring Back the Buffalo*, ca. 1889.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

To further address the problematic issues presented by the largely rosy images in the Haub Family Collection, the TAM also has been funding new research through the Haub fellows program, and it hosted a national symposium on the collection in April 2015. Related current exhibitions at the TAM are *(Re)Presenting Native Americans* (through 2016) and *Artists Drawn to the West* (closing in 2017).

Scholarship about depictions of the American West is growing. This year (February 19–August 13, 2016), the Brigham Young Museum of Art is hosting the exhibition, *Branding the American West: Paintings and Films, 1900–1950*, and a related symposium in early March. Developed in collaboration with the Stark Museum of Art (Orange, Texas), this is the first exhibition of its kind, collectively imaging the American West by the New Mexican Taos Society of Artists and the California-based painter, Maynard Dixon (1875–1946), artists whose work is also featured in the Haub Family Collection.

Art of the American West was an attractive installation of a unique collection of paintings and sculpture, many of which had not been published previously or widely seen. With its thematic groupings of portraits, narratives, and landscapes, as well as brief wall labels, the exhibition was a worthy presentation that mostly offers a fictional, romantic West that has intrigued generations of Americans through text and images. The TAM did an admirable job of introducing a cache of previously understudied works to the public, both with the accessible display and the coffee table publication, in just one and a half years. It is impossible to convey the whole of a genre or the history of an area with a single show. Yet the exhibition and catalogue did not appreciably advance our understanding of art history, as did *The West as America* show and publication at the National Museum of American Art (now the Smithsonian Museum of American Art) in 1990. Visitors and scholars in search of a frank presentation that urges realization of genocide, environmental exploitation, and land grabs no doubt came away disappointed. Such a narrative would be ungenerous on the part of a museum that is

celebrating a gift of stellar art of the American West. No doubt more in-depth delving, aligned with current scholarship and interpretive approaches, will come.

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Notes

[1] Karl May (1842–1912) was the author of numerous adventure novels including a series of stories for young readers that were set in the American “wild west” and published between 1887 and 1897. His books defined the American West for generations of German readers, even though May himself never visited the United States. For a recent profile of May’s work, see Rivka Galchen, “Wild West Germany, Why do cowboys and Indians so captivate the country?,” *The New Yorker*, April 9, 2012, 40–45.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Entrance to the Haub Family Galleries. Photograph by Rodolfo Sanchez, Solstream Studios.
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Fig. 2, Still from video about the Haub Family Collection. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Pamela Mayer Sculpture Hall. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Sculpture Hall; at left: Henry Merwin Shrady, *Elk Buffalo (The Monarch of the Plains)* (ca. 1900).
Photograph by Rodolfo Sanchez, Solstream Studios. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Alexander Phimister Proctor, *Buckaroo*, 1915. Bronze. Tacoma Art Museum, Haub Family Collection. Photograph by Rodolfo Sanchez, Solstream Studios. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Wall map of artists' studios in the U.S. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



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Fig. 8, Charles Bird King, *Wanata (The Charger)*, *Grand Chief of the Sioux*, 1826. Oil on canvas. Tacoma Art Museum, Haub Family Collection. Photograph by Rodolfo Sanchez, Solstream Studios. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Installation of “The West Across Time.” Photograph by Rodolfo Sanchez, Solstream Studios.
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Fig. 10, Installation of Paul Kane, *Portrait of Maungwudaus* (ca. 1851) with Gilbert Stuart’s *Portrait of George Washington* (ca. 1797). Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Thomas Moran, *Green River, Wyoming*, 1907. Oil on canvas. Tacoma Art Museum, Haub Family Collection. Photograph by Rodolfo Sanchez, Solstream Studios. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, Installation of “Stories, Icons, and Legends.” Photograph by Rodolfo Sanchez, Solstream Studios. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 13, George Catlin, *Archery of the Mandan*, 1855–65. Oil on board. Tacoma Art Museum, Haub Family Collection. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 14, Detail of Catlin, *Archery of the Mandan*. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



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