

Northwest in the West: Exploring Our Roots

The Northwest has a distinct identity composed from a unique blend of cultural, environmental, and historical influences. Though not always obvious, a number of the characteristics that define this region have their origin in the broader story of the American West. *Northwest in the West* draws from the museum's collection to look at how the complex and ever-evolving character of the West has shaped and continues to inspire regional artistic responses.

The maps to the left illustrate how the boundaries of the territory defined as the West have shifted as the United States expanded throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, ending in the group of 12 states now defined as the nation's western region. It encompasses a wide variety of landscapes and lifestyles that share a history shaped by exploration, immigration, displacement, settlement, tradition, and rapid change.

The story of the West is not complete without the Northwest's contributions: the lure of its lush landscapes and abundant resources; the new life it symbolized as the Eden at the endpoint of every immigrant trail; and the last piece of the puzzle that tied the United States together from ocean to ocean. In contemporary times, it is a region still defined by its connections to the land, restlessness, lack of conformity, and complicated relationship to its own history.

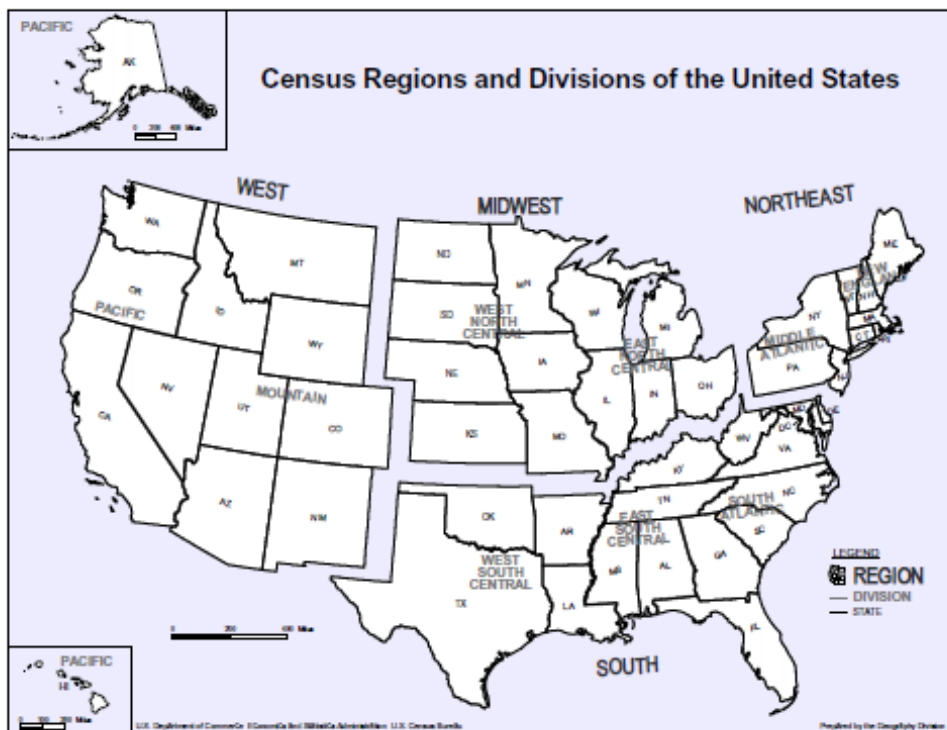
The gift to Tacoma Art Museum of the Haub Family Collection of Western American Art enables the museum to continue to explore Northwest art's relationship to the broader context of art of the American West. This exhibition is the first of many opportunities to look at this complex interweaving of influences and how the Northwest's artists have adopted, adapted, or reacted against them.

Organized by Tacoma Art Museum.

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Territories added to the United States during the westward expansion.



Census map of the United States, 2014 (western states highlighted).

The Land

The land is a constant and critical theme in the history and art of the American West. Since the first expeditions into the new western territories of the United States in the late 1700s, the scale and unique beauty of the West's landscapes have fascinated and beckoned. The ownership and uses of those vast stretches of land and the abundant resources they contain have been at the heart of most major cultural occurrences in the West.

The Northwest's varied and visually dramatic settings and constantly shifting light and weather have been the subject of numerous artworks ranging from grand, detailed panoramas to the edge of abstraction. Even for many Northwest artists whose work is non-representational, the Northwest environment subtly influences their light, palette, mood, or structure. On a broader level, human interactions with the environment of this region—from specific uses to psychological responses—also are central to much work created in and about the Northwest.

Claiming and Reclaiming

All regions of the West were environmentally and culturally transformed by the westward expansion across the American continent in the 19th century impacting natural resources, the landscape, and its inhabitants. In addition to the physical evidence of these changes, the intellectual and emotional echoes continue to reverberate today as histories are revisited and debated; perceptions of place, self, and community evolve; and opinions about land and resource use shift.

For Northwest artists, the histories and issues around use of the region's resources have been fertile ground. Images range from the early timber industry to works that address contemporary environmental concerns. The stories and voices of the many cultures that have shaped this region also are key sources. Historical works celebrate the pioneer experience and development of the Northwest. Some Native American artists confront the violence and displacement inflicted on them by settlement of the region while others draw upon Native viewpoints and aesthetics in their work. The complicated, often painful, and still evolving histories of the many immigrant groups who came to the Northwest—from Asia, Nordic countries, and throughout the United States, among other locations—inform a significant body of Northwest works.

Movement and Restlessness

Movement is an abiding theme in the West as it has long been a destination for exploration and immigration. Early settlers often had a rootless mindset, picking up and moving at a moment's notice if a location didn't suit them since land was plentiful and varied. Routes into and across the West were critical and inspired further movement—first trails, then railroad tracks and shipping routes, then highways. A restless spirit is still often listed as a characteristic of westerners. The western states are known for their

highly mobile populations, and their national parks and other attractions are popular destinations for sightseeing and other personal experiences.

For Northwest artists, some of them immigrants themselves, the experiences of the many groups that have come to or moved through the Northwest are central themes in their work. The physical evidence of the changes worked on this region by these shifting interests and populations also serve as inspiration. Another common interest is the physical act of moving through and interacting with the Northwest environment from everyday encounters to road trips and recreation.

Identity

The definition of the American West is a constantly changing construct based on geographical, cultural, and intellectual factors. As a new nation the United States strove to create an identity separate and distinct from Europe. The western half of the country offered a number of contrasts to build upon. Once established, regions of the larger West began to differentiate for social, religious, and political reasons, first against “the East” and then from their neighbors. For many people, moving west also was a chance to start a new life and often to rewrite their own histories.

Defining what is Northwest and whether there is a distinctly Northwest aesthetic is a core concern of many Northwest artists. Earlier historical works primarily focused on the unique scenic qualities of the Northwest environment. In the 1920s and 1930s, the push to create a distinctly American art that reflected the nation’s breadth and diversity inspired the art movement known as regionalism that focused on scenes and qualities specific to particular areas of the country. Since that time, the question of how to define Northwest art has offered a rich source of debate and inspiration for artists of this region.

Psychological Constructs

Two emotions are commonly identified with the West: nostalgia and grief. Both are responses to things that have changed, are passing away, or have been lost. Mourning the “West that was” has long been a part of its story and has been integral to the emotional response around such disparate events as the attempts to remove Native American populations, the near-extinction of the bison, and human alteration of what were once seen as untouched Edens. These psychological states are further complicated by the myths and misinformation in western history, literature, art, and Hollywood films. Conversely, the western landscape has long been seen as a place of escape, respite, and rebirth.

Perhaps the most obvious manifestations of these emotional themes in Northwest art are the works about environmental issues. The changing landscape—actual and social—as a result of settlement, development, and resource extraction are all common subjects. The landscape also features as a place for contemplation, a catalyst for self discovery, or a site for restoration. Northwest artists also are drawn to the auras of nostalgia and grief and how those are echoed or expressed both physically and culturally.