Scouts along the Teton River,circa 1855

Oil on canvas

Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma

For his composition and color choices, Stanley was inspired by the genre paintings of Alfred Jacob Miller, William T. Ranney, and Charles Deas. These artists painted romantic idealizations of western characters using rich colors and dramatic light and shadow.

Here, Stanley is thought to be honoring Isaac Stevens, leader of the northern transcontinental railroad survey, and his scouts. Stevens (in the red shirt) and his men gaze out at America’s new domain, metaphorically taking possession of everything they see.

Wagon Train: Break in the Journey,circa 1855 Oil on canvas American Museum of Western Art—

The Anschutz Collection, Denver, Colorado

Including this work, Stanley painted at least two studio oils based on his trip along the Santa Fe Trail in 1846. Although the painting is also known as Betrothal on the PlainsandCourtship on the Plains, this is neither a courtship nor a betrothal scene. Rather, it portrays Stanley’s traveling companions Samuel Magoffin (a veteran Santa Fe trader) and his wife Susan, who had been married for about eight months when their journey began. This painting presents Susan as a prairie Madonna—pure on her white horse, demure, and receptive to Samuel’s attentions.

The Trapper’s Cabin,1858  
Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

More than a simple genre scene showing three hunters and their game, The Trapper’s Cabinis regarded as a painting about both sportsmanship and politics. At this time in Washington, D.C., opinions were divided on the subject of slavery. This painting offered a hopeful metaphor of the West as a place for compromise between contending regional factions. Just as the hunters’ disputed shot is peacefully resolved, so too might sectional conflicts be alleviated in the West.

The Last of Their Race, 1857   
Oil on canvas

Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming

This painting depicts a Native American family on the shores of the Pacific Ocean before a vibrant sunset. The subjects include the prominent Blood chief Seen From Afar and his sister Natawista, wife of Alexander Culbertson, a devoted friend of Stanley’s. This painting reveals a veiled symbolic message. Its title and composition echo the common sentiment that Native peoples were doomed to disappear in the face of Euro-Americans’ westward expansion. In Stanley’s depiction, the group has quite literally been pushed to the brink of extinction on America’s westernmost shore.

Ko-rak-koo-kiss, a Towoccono Warrior,1844 Oil on canvas Smithsonian American Art Museum

This is one of the first known equestrian portraits of a Native American warrior. This format dates back to ancient Greek art. However, artists before Stanley used the static bust or, less frequently, full figure presentation.

Stanley sketched Ko-rak-koo-kiss in winter 1843 at the Cache Creek peace council in Indian Territory, present-day Oklahoma. Stanley later painted this finished portrait and seventeen others, all intended for his Indian Gallery. This was the only one of the group to survive the 1865 fire that destroyed all but seven paintings hung at the Smithsonian Institution.

Black Knife, An Apache Chief on Horse Back, Reconnoitering Gen. Kearney’s Command,   
Version I,1850 Oil on canvas Smithsonian American Art Museum

In 1846, Stanley traveled with General Stephen Kearny through territory that was home to the Apache people. Here, Stanley depicts the formidable leader Black Knife and his men scrutinizing General Kearny and his troops, barely visible in the far left distance. In this painting, he portrays Black Knife as an intimidating fighter to appeal to his audience. Stanley also lends an element of formality to his subject by using a traditional equestrian portrait format popular for depicting military leaders.

Group of Piegan Indians,1867   
Oil on canvas Denver Public Library, Western History Department

Ceremonial use of tobacco among the Plains people was a traditional practice. In this painting, Stanley used smoking as a cultural curiosity to attract the interest of his Euro-American audience. He has dressed all the men in their finest apparel and has presented the act of smoking as a special communal activity. These figures appear to be warriors who are gathering after a military encounter.

A Family Group,circa 1856 Oil on canvas Diplomatic Reception Rooms, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C.

This painting has several interpretations. Stanley may have portrayed a marriage negotiation or a representation of the vitality and continuance of America’s Native American cultures. In contrast to The Last of Their Race, this painting depicts a family group as present and prominent, not doomed to disappear. Natawista and Seen From Afar are again Stanley’s subjects. He suggests a healthy relationship between Native peoples and Euro-Americans by using the wife and brother-in-law of Alexander Culbertson, founder of Fort Benton, as models.

Chinook Burial Grounds, 1869   
Oil on canvas Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit Michigan

After the 1865 Smithsonian fire that destroyed most of Stanley’s collection, he decided to create an illustrated “Indian Portfolio” of approximately one hundred images of Native American traditions, lifestyles, and ceremonies. This was one of three paintings intended for the portfolio. It depicts a burial site on the shore of the Columbia River. The various scaffolds bearing the bodies of Chinook tribal members indicated the stature of the deceased. The scaffold with the standing woman was for a poor man. His family couldnot supply a canoe for his coffin or ornaments to decorate the site.

Oregon City on the Willamette River, circa 1852 Oil on canvas Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas

Stanley made at least two trips to Oregon City at the end of the Oregon Trail. Oregon City was a rapidly growing community at the time of Stanley’s visits.Stanley’s rendition of the town is a complex metaphor for the changes on the frontier that were unfolding before his eyes. The artist cast the two Native Americans in the foreground of the painting in shadow. This suggests that they are not part of the scene of expansion behind them. The sunny town and the Willamette Falls speak to Euro-American aspirations to take advantage of the surrounding forests and the falls for industrial power.

Chain of Spires along the Gila, 1855  
Oil on canvas

Collection of Phoenix Art Museum

Stanley passed by the Gila River in November 1846 while traveling with General Kearny’s army from Santa Fe to southern California. He completed a more accurate depiction of the scene for the official report on the expedition, but his field sketch became the genesis of this—one of his most renowned western landscapes. Painted years later for an Eastern audience looking to the West for new opportunities, Stanley’s painting countered common perceptions of the West as a great desert. Instead, he painted the region as a Garden of Eden, with golden light, plentiful water, and exotic flora and fauna.

Butte on the Del Norte, 1847  
Oil on academy board

Courtesy of the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis

Stanley stopped to paint this unique rock formation at the base of the Fra Cristobal Mountains while traveling with General Kearny along the Rio Grande.The figures in the painting may be William H. Emory, a lieutenant in the Corps of Topographical Engineers, and the artist, Stanley. Emory appears to be holding a specimen, which Stanley is drawing—officer and artist united in the cause of science.

Ruins of the Casa Grande, 1847  
Oil on academy board Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming

One of the most interesting sights witnessed by the Kearny expedition was this three-story adobe ruin of an ancient Sonoran Desert people. This exciting archaeological discovery was referred to as the Casa Grande. No one on the expedition was certain about the history of the buildings, with Stanley inscribing on the back of his painting, “The founders of which are unknown.”

The ruins today are a National Monument. Archaeological exploration has dated the building of Casa Grande to 1100–1450 C.E. and uncovered evidence it was once part of a larger complex of buildings.

Fort Benton, 1854–1855   
Watercolor and pencil on paper Yale University Art Gallery

Fort Benton in present-day Montana was an extraordinary place for Stanley. His friend Alexander Culbertson, one of the most celebrated leaders of the western fur trade, had established the fort several years before Stanley arrived. In 1853, Isaac Stevens sent Stanley to meet with members of the Piegan tribe. Eleven days later, Stanley returned to the fort triumphantly with thirty chiefs and their families. Over the years,

he proved himself as a valuable diplomat to Native tribes.

The Williamson Family, circa 1842   
Oil on canvas

Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Stanley was a portrait painter in the Midwest during the late 1830s. Later, he moved east to try his luck along the Atlantic Coast. In addition to Philadelphia and Baltimore, Stanley painted portraits in New York City, where the young Williamson family enthusiastically agreed to pose for him. James Williamson was a merchant. He stands behind his small family in a room filled with the furnishings of a prosperous Manhattan couple.

John Golden Ross, 1844 Oil on canvas Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma

John Golden Ross asked Stanley to paint half a dozen portraits of him and his family in 1844. Ross was of Scottish descent and a trader by profession. He married the sister of the principal Cherokee chief and was therefore prominent in the Cherokee Nation.The year before Stanley painted his portrait, Ross had organized a large peace gathering at Tahlequah, in present-day Oklahoma. His connection to the Cherokee tribe is made clear by the newspaper in his hand, a copy of the Cherokee Advocate.

Buffalo Hunt, 1854 Oil on canvas Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma

This painting was completed at about the same time as Stanley’s Western Wilds panorama, shortly after his return from his second transcontinental expedition. One of the panels in the panorama was titled A Grand Buffalo Hunt. It, like the painting here, pictured Stanley and a group of Blackfeet hunters engaged in a buffalo surround. Stanley is seen on the left side of the composition. He had befriended the Blackfeet for strategic diplomatic purposes, organized the hunt as a matter of diversion and was an active and successful participant. It portrays Stanley not just as a pictorial recorder of the Northern Plains people but as an inveterate adventurer as well.

The Buffalo Hunt, 1855 Oil on canvas Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

This scene, picturing Blackfeet hunters in a test of courage and cooperation, was a masterpiece of Stanley’s mid-career. Inspired by scenes he had witnessed during his expedition west with Isaac Stevens in 1853, this work pictures a dramatic encounter and employs Stanley’s finest technical and stylistic method. The fine drawing, vivid human narrative, sophisticated compositional structure and poignant symbolism about the supposed impending mutual demise of Native culture and bison as a species, make this one of Stanley’s most complex and compelling works.

Major Alexander Culbertson, 1856   
Oil on canvas,

Fort Benton Museums, Fort Benton, Montana

Major Culbertson was one of the most celebrated leaders of the western fur trade. When Stanley met him in 1853, he commanded both Fort Union and Fort Benton, the latter of which he had founded in 1847. Isaac Stevens employed Culbertson to serve as diplomat and negotiator among the northern Missouri tribes, especially the Blackfeet. He was masterful in both pursuits. He was, in later years, also an important patron for Stanley, purchasing several major paintings from the artist including this portrait and an undiscovered companion oil of his Blackfeet wife, Natawista.