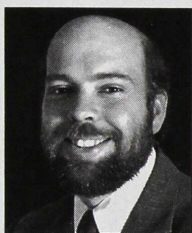


The American West

Traditional and Emblematic Perspectives

By Michael Duty

Michael W. Duty spent the last 18 years working in the fields of western American art, history and culture. He began his museum career at the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, TX, and has directed the only two museums devoted to the American West east of the Mississippi River: the Rockwell Museum, Corning, NY, and the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indian and Western Art, Indianapolis, IN. Duty is an author and lecturer and has organized several museum exhibitions of both contemporary and historic western art. A native of Texas, he currently lives in Walnut Creek, CA, where he is founder and principal of Westways, a firm specializing in the development of museum exhibitions, educational programming and publications.



MICHAEL DUTY

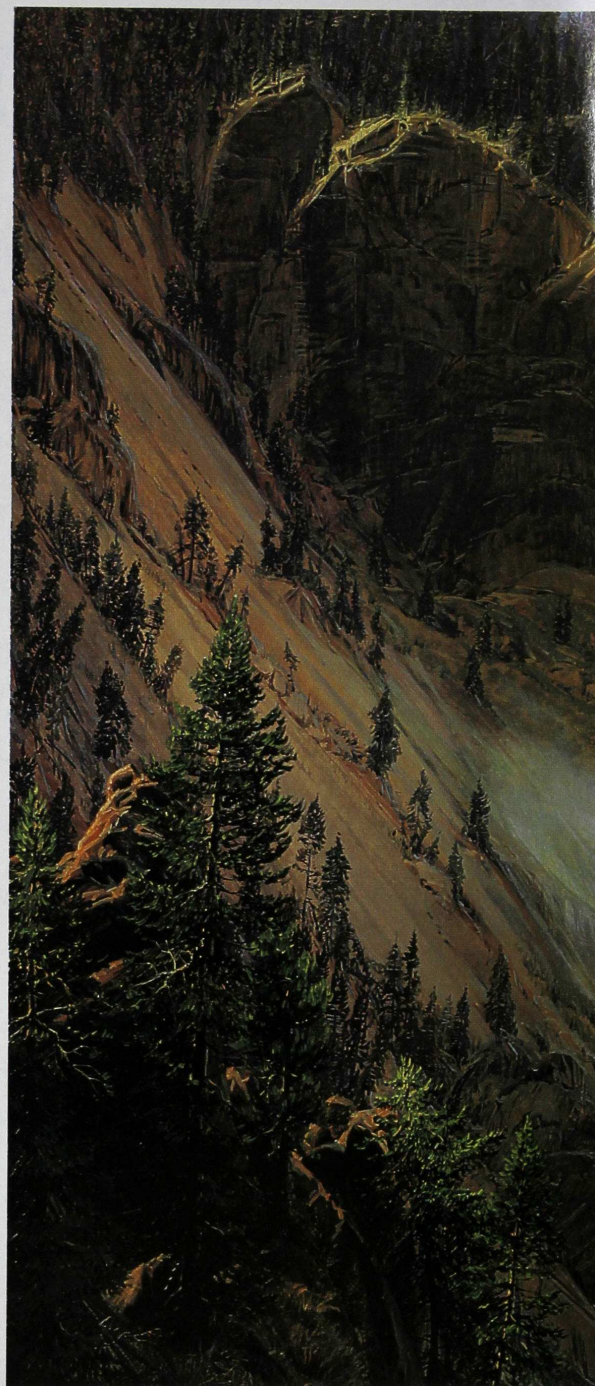
Although its furrows had been plowed for more than 50 years, the American West was still a fertile field for artists at the close of the 19th century. Canvases depicting the romance of the range were populated with heroic figures set in dramatic confrontations against breathtaking landscapes. Such works brought into focus the ideas and ideals that many Americans held at the time. As the nation was set to enter the new century an emerging American mythology was being put into place by writers and artists—a mythology that strikes a deep, resonant chord in the American psyche today.

Much of that 19th-century vision was concerned primarily with the passing of the West. Luminaries of early western art from George Catlin [1796–1872] and John Mix Stanley [1814–1872] to Frederic Remington [1861–1909] and Charles M. Russell [1864–1926]

and even Maynard Dixon [1875–1946] all felt that the stories they told in paint or in bronze would exist only in their art. Catlin, Stanley and later photographer Edward Curtis [1868–1952] were certain that the Native American cultures they documented would disappear completely during their lifetimes. Nostalgia for the end of the “grand adventure” played as much a role in the American mythology as did the heroics of its happening.

True enough. Many of the events portrayed in those earlier artworks have galloped over the horizon not to be seen again. Cattle drives have given way to more efficient, if less picturesque, cattle feed lots, and an increasing number of westerners have been born and raised in urban centers removed from the prairie and the agrarian lifestyle. Still, there are cowboys to be found, and while some may use helicopters to round

up strays and computers to keep track of intricate breeding programs, traditional methods of cattle and ranch work also abound and find their way onto the canvases and into the bronzes of a good many contemporary artists. And far from vanishing, today’s Native American artists are flourishing ... and some believe it is because of their art that they survive.





The West persists both as a real place and as an idea, and its stories are still told by talented artists, thousands of whom have been featured in the pages of *Southwest Art* during the past 25 years. This edition alone testifies to the vitality of the field and its diversity. Remington once said that his West had vanished forever, prompting his vow to never return. But today

there is no paucity of artists who share their visions of the West, no shortage of western imagery on the market. In fact, the past 25 years may well have been the most productive in terms of depicting the West.

The artists showcased in *Covering the West—The Best of Southwest Art* present a wide range of viewpoints and impressions. In many

ABOVE: WILSON HURLEY,
YELLOWSTONE FALLS FROM
RED ROCK POINT [1983], OIL, 72 x 108,
W.D. WEIS TRUST.

“People ask why I never put figures in a landscape. Well, it’s because figures become the psychological center of interest in the painting and dominate the composition no matter the scale relationships. So if the goal is to take your mind away from humanity and into the environment, it defeats your purpose to include a figure contemplating the landscape.”