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In Consideration of Three Works of Art

James C. Schaap

The Last of the Buffalo

“Now, boys, is our time for fun.” That’s what the hoity-toity artist said when he saw a mass of buffalo Comstock, the rancher, had spotted along the Republican River just a few miles east of Red Cloud and west of Superior, the last prime buffalo hunting ground anywhere in the States in 1863. “Our time for fun,” the artist told them.

Albert Bierstadt, whose paintings hang in dozens of American art museums today, was on his way back east from California when he stopped in Nebraska. He and a newspaper man traveling with him stopped at the Oak Grove Ranch when he decided to try his hand—not at hunting buffalo but painting them. Comstock and his men armed themselves with rifles; Bierstadt packed brushes.

What fun? Bierstadt wanted to see an angry buffalo. “I want to see him so mad that he’ll bellow and tear up the ground,” Bierstadt told Comstock. That kind of rage might take some doing, Comstock thought, might even get them killed. But the rancher aimed to please his famous guest. He told Bierstadt that for his own benefit, he should put up that easel of his on a knoll east of the herd, a sweet spot for him to sit and create the long-drawn prairie background Comstock was proud of, his land, the place he’d chosen to live.

Once that landscape was down on canvas, Comstock said he and his son and a neighbor named Eubanks would create the kind of scene Bierstadt wanted. The three of them would pick out a bull and wound him hot-blooded, then get him to pose. That was the plan.

All of 170 years later, this whole business sounds beastly and wasteful; but it is, after all, 170 years later. At the time, killing buffalo was no less rare than killing cattle for Big Macs. Besides, this killing had a lofty mission—this whole thing was being done in the cause of art.

Eubanks, the neighbor, would shoulder his rifle from a draw near Bierstadt and his canvas, should the mad beast decide for some strange reason not to sit still for the portrait. Comstock determined the best way to get the action the artist wanted was for him—for Comstock—to wound that big fellow with a .45, then get him more steamed by waving a red flag right in front of his fat face. Once that bull was on fire, Comstock figured to give him a round with the rifle and steer him out toward that knoll where he’d soon enough attain eternal life as art.

The plan worked perfectly. The wounded buffalo spit and spun and bellowed, just as predicted, and charged Comstock, who was aboard a horse so expert he eluded the mad charge, all the while circling the bloody animal and aiming him toward the artist.

But the story goes that Comstock played it out just a bit too close and, a good 300 yards away from that knoll, got himself beside the buffalo where that angry old bull couldn’t see him. Just like that, that buffalo raised his huge shaggy head like a dying king and looked straight up the rise at Alfred Bierstadt, whereupon he started pawing and bellowing—the buffalo that is.

Bierstadt cried out for help and took off running faster than he himself ever thought he was able, and that insane bull made short work of the easel, bits and pieces flying all over the prairie. A couple of seconds later, he took off after the artist.

Now nobody can prove this part, but what
Comstock remembered, he used to say, was Bierstadt the artist running so fast his swallow-tail coat flowed out behind him so straight and hard the whole gang could have played a couple hands of euchre right there on the table that fancy coat became.

But why Eubanks didn’t shoot that big fellow was something Comstock couldn’t help wondering. Then, finally, with that bull right there taking aim at that artist’s behind, that rifle cracked, and the buffalo met his end and fell in his tracks. For years, Comstock told people who’d listen to his storytelling that Bierstadt fell over himself, wiped out, but was saved from “a fearful death.”

Several days it took for him to recover, during which time he started on another canvas, that ferocious image in front of him, in his mind and heart. He did everything he could to get it right. He was an artist, after all.

And that’s the end of story, at least the Lost Creek part. But there’s more.

In 1998, the U. S. Postal Service created a series of commemorative stamps to celebrate American art. One of them featured a massive painting (six feet tall and ten feet wide), wide as the prairie itself, by an artist named Albert Bierstadt, a truly American epic painting titled *The Last of the Buffalo*. You may have seen the stamp, may even remember it.

There’s more. Already a century before, Bierstadt’s painting, *The Last of the Buffalo*, was put up for sale at the Chicago Exposition. It sold—hold your breath—for $75,000.

And no, that’s not Comstock riding the majestic white horse; it’s something like a bare-naked cigar-store Indian deliberately chosen and outfitted to make rich Easterners drool.

If you look close, that landscape’s not Nebraska either. No Cornhuskers can claim anything close to mountains like those in the background.

Albert Bierstadt knew how to paint sprawling landscapes, and he also knew how to sell what he committed to canvas.

But Comstock, the rancher? That man knew the real story and was more than happy to tell it, right up to his grave.

Albert Bierstadt, *The Last of the Buffalo*, 1888
(Housed in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), from Wikimedia Commons.
Michelangelo’s Pietà

The story goes that Michelangelo used to come by St. Peter’s Basilica at night, and just stand before his sculpture, not because he was so proud of what he’d done but because he’d grown to this Mary, mother of Christ, he’d created. Some say the woman he’d crafted so wondrously from marble had become the mother he’d lost when he was a boy, just five years old. Others, I’m sure, see something other.

I don’t know if those stories are true, nor does anyone else, but I know the sheer beauty of Michelangelo’s Pietà is remarkable enough to create stories. It was commissioned by a rich person who wanted something beautiful to adorn his tomb and finished in two years, when Michelangelo was just 24 years old. Today, 500 years later, the Pietà is as famous as anything you will stand in line to see in Rome. In St. Peter’s, it stands where it has since the 18th century, but it’s been in Rome since he finished it in 1499.

Because there’s so much else to gather your attention in the basilica, the Pietà, oddly enough, is easy to miss when you walk in. But it’s there to your right, bathed in a light so soft it composes a perfect picture. I’d like to tell you it took me an hour to set up this shot, but Michelangelo’s masterpiece sits in a beautiful frame lit so gloriously you can’t miss.

What everyone sees when they look closely is a Mary who is far too young to have a thirty-year crucified son. She seems a child herself. That’s no mistake. Like no one else, Michelangelo might say, she is the mother of our Lord.

Christ’s limp body is muscled and veined to make clear he is not a boy. Yet, he somehow needs to be held. With her right hand, she holds his limp body, even though her fingers don’t touch his cold flesh. Pietà (“the pity”) is a child-mom holding her dead adult-son. Age is of no concern.

Long ago already, observers speculated that if Michelangelo’s Mary could step out of the marble, she’d be seven feet tall. But so much of her is hidden beneath her flowing robes that you barely notice. Somehow, as this entire scene emerged from the marble, Michelangelo opened his own vision of mother and child.

Mary’s left hand is open in some gesture. To us? To God? In defiance maybe? Maybe in acceptance. After all, look at the serenity in her face. She spent her lifetime somehow knowing. Had to. The child was, after all, a savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Spend two weeks in Italy, tour a half-dozen basilicas, and you’ll see a couple hundred Madonnas, Byzantine Madonnas, fleshy classical Madonnas, big and bouncy baroques—all kinds of Madonnas, babes in tow. In a city where the Virgin will always be queen, there are

Michelangelo, Pietà, 1498-1499.
(Housed in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, where it was photographed by James Calvin Schaap).
hundreds of Mother Marys, in all shapes and sizes.

By definition and design, Michelangelo’s Pietà isn’t just another version. And yet, I’d like to think it is: the Virgin of Bethlehem and her boy, a man struck dead for us, Madonna and child shaped into beauty from marble. Pity.

Mary’s face reminds me of “Mary’s Song,” a poem by Luci Shaw, a poem that’s graced with paradox: “His breath (so slight it seems/no breath at all) once ruffled the dark deeps/to sprout a world....

Luci Shaw’s “Mary’s Song” is a Nativity poem, a poem for the Christmas season. I hear “Mary’s Song” because there is paradox in a mother’s love so big it really couldn’t be, and a beautiful boy, the Son of God Almighty, a man so seemingly finished.

Here’s the lingering, final thoughts of Shaw’s poem:

Older than eternity now he is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed to my poor planet, caught that I might be free, blind in my womb to know my darkness ended, brought to this birth for me to be new-born, and then finally this tangled mystery: and for him to see me mended I must see him torn.

That’s what I see here in Mary’s face.

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**Fur Traders Descending the Missouri**

It’s morning, mid-summer. A haze lies over everything. The river valley seems veiled, the horizon indiscernible. What shrouds everything isn’t fog, but a glowing wet glaze you can feel against your face. Likely as not, it’s July. George Caleb Bingham’s style of painting is called luminist, the landscape ever so tranquil, yellowy in the generous morning light.

Bingham’s painting is famous. Two men aboard a cottonwood canoe in no particular hurry, that canoe toting a bundle of furs down the Missouri River. The slightest breeze carries smoke from the man’s pipe in a silver ribbon out behind.

His flouncy pink blouse makes him look more of a dandy than a mountain man—and that odd stocking cap would be a joke if history didn’t tell us it had a name and a story. It’s “a freedom hat”—a *toque*, this Frenchman would call it, that back then proclaimed his assertion of liberty. It’s a “liberty hat,” circa 1820, its legendary roots in rebellious Paree, and it’s worn with pride right here by an American fur trapper.

That thin canoe rides low because the bulky catch is a burden. A kid is hanging over the bundle, smiling, and why wouldn’t he be? It’s a buttery summer morning, their trek into the wilds has been wildly successful, and the two of them are homeward bound to sell their furs, all of it on a perfectly calm Missouri.

**Fur Traders Descending the Missouri** is George Caleb Bingham’s most famous painting. It catches river trapping lore as fittingly as a coonskin cap. Bingham’s famous work rode the back cover of the American literature anthology I used through twenty years of teaching. Always loved it because it seemed so, well, home—two fur trappers on our Missouri River.

It wasn’t always titled that way. Bingham called it *Fur Trader, Half-breed Son*, a title thought by some to be embarrassingly un-p.c., the word *half-breed* not ever to be used. *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* feels more heroic than *Fur Trader, Half-breed Son*, and vastly less shameful.

But Bingham the artist wanted you to know that the kid in the middle was the son of a Native American woman, the Frenchman’s wife. While the word *half-breed* in the original title risks offense, it also defines the moment in 19th-century history when Euro- and Native Americans got along in almost every human way—royally, if I can use that word in a painting about liberty.

And then there’s the third canoe character, a black cat, ears perked, watching the artist maybe, but not in the least nervous about being aboard that canoe. A cat. I wish you could see it. A black cat on a Missouri river canoe.

Now you might think—I did—that there was no earthly reason for George Caleb Bingham to put a haughty black cat on that canoe, no reason...
but one: the guy loved cats.

Whether or not he did is immaterial. Back then, Sioux City, Iowa, had thousands of cats because everything that went up and down the river needed a mouser. River vessels of all sizes were attacked by mice and rats by the dozen, even hundreds, an army big enough to chew through cargo as if everything in the hold were popcorn.

Even fur trappers needed cats. Mice in indiscernible cracks could destroy a year’s furs without breaking a sweat. Even canoe cats found ready employment—no handouts either, no gourmet salmon. Bingham’s jet-black feline looks arrogant up there in front, but then he knows his worth, as all cats do.

But river cats especially had a right to be arrogant. If those two guys were all about liberty, someone had to remind them that “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” Wasn’t that Jefferson? The cat knows somebody has to tend the bounty to be sure the goods get home.

It’s all there in a famous old painting that feels very much at home right here, despite all the years and so much change. The quiet summer morning on the river is neither unique nor rare.

They’re still here, still ours to see and to love.