

THE ILLUSION OF THE AMERICAN FRONTIER

From 3 November 2015 to 7 February 2016

Curator: Miguel Ángel Blanco

This autumn the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is presenting an exhibition which, for the first time in Spain, sets out to trace the footsteps of the artists who explored the American West in the nineteenth century, taking up the challenge of showing its unknown and exotic scenery and depicting the American Indians' ways of life that were disappearing before their eyes as a result of an ideological, political, military and colonising effort. These artists very soon helped create an 'illusion' of the Wild West, combining Romantic enthusiasm and genuine admiration with the clichés, prejudice and expectations that clouded the white man's gaze. This image shaped the myth of the savage Indian living on the prairies in communion with nature – a far cry from the vision that was popularised years later by movies, which focused on showing the point of view of the colonisers and the hardship and dangers they had to contend with.

Through a selection of paintings and photographs by artists such as Karl Bodmer, George Catlin, Henry Lewis, Albert Bierstadt, Edward S. Curtis and Carleton E. Watkins, among others, the exhibition explores this fascinating chapter in art history, which is little known in this country. A few of the canvases belong to the permanent collection of the Museum – the only one in Spain that owns works by these painters – and reflect Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza's love of stories of the West in literature, films and art.

The show begins with an introduction on the Spanish explorers who first came into contact with the tribes back in the sixteenth century and includes a number of ethnographic objects which are distributed throughout the layout, as well as books, comics, film posters and other

Images from left to right: Charles Wimar. *The Last Trail*, c. 1856. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza; George Catlin. *Shón-ka-ki-he-ga, Horse Chief. Grand Pawnee Head Chief*, 1832. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.. Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr

More information and images: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza – Press Office.

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Anonymous. Map of the Mississippi River, dedicated to the Duke of Jovenazo by Don Armando de Arce, Baron of Lahontan, 1699. Archivo General de Indias. Seville

items that attest to the dissemination of legends of the Wild West in the twentieth century. Lastly, the exhibition's curator, the artist Miguel Angel Blanco, who has been interested in American Indian culture for years, presents a selection of book-boxes from his *Library of the Forest* crafted from materials collected during his travels across the plains and canyons of the United States.

Mapping fantasy

The United States' colonisation of the Wild West in the nineteenth century was preceded by the Spanish expeditions from Florida and New Mexico between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. These expeditions were initially guided by the wish to find imaginary riches and resulted in a precarious but long-lasting presence in the southwest and, for several decades, throughout the Mississippi basin. Few artistic testimonies of this period remain, but there are maps that allow us to trace the routes, settlements, missions and garrisons, as well as the contact and friction points with the Indian tribes. The maps selected for the exhibition are furthermore of great aesthetic interest and some include drawings of figures and tepees.

Towards the Wild West: the American Sublime

The trails to the West were blazed by trappers and fur trading companies and later on by scientists and soldiers, who were accompanied on their long journeys by artists from very early on. These artists illustrated their discoveries or, more ambitiously, painted or photographed the landscapes and their original settlers. The railroad facilitated access to a 'paradisiac' nature – soon to become a tourist attraction – which, with the great help of artists, came to be protected through the innovative system of national parks. Yosemite, Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon are some of the landscapes shown in the exhibition.



Thomas Hill. *View of the Yosemite Valley*, 1865. Courtesy of The New York Historical Society, New York. Gift of Charles T. Harbeck

Depicting this boundless, magnificent nature setting required a conceptual and visual framework that befitted its vastness and lack of human references. Painters such as Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Hill, using a markedly Romantic language, created works that enjoyed great significance in art history; and photographers such as Carleton E. Watkins, Timothy O'Sullivan and William Henry Jackson established a model for landscape photography that remains valid to this day and hugely influenced the image Americans had of the West in their time.

The artistic exploits of Bodmer and Catlin / Cowboys and Indians. A genre of painting

The first artists who set foot in the West in the 1830s were not landscapists but portraitists and – with varying degrees of scientific rigour – ethnographers. George Catlin, with his extraordinary Indian Gallery, and Karl Bodmer, with the precise graphic documentation of anthropologist Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied's *Travels in the Interior of North America*, provide in-depth knowledge of Indian camps, buffalo hunting and the rituals of many tribes, as well as

their physical appearance and dress. They gave way to an idealised but melancholic vision of Indian life that is a blend of landscape and figures, fantasy and ethnography. By the second half of the century, these themes had become a subgenre of painting with great popular appeal, associated with history or genre painting and found in the output of artists such as Charles M. Russell, Charles Wimar and Frederic Remington, among others.



Tompkins Harrison Matteson. *The Last of the Race*, 1847. Courtesy of The New York Historical Society, New York. Gift of Edwin W. Orvis

The figure of the Indian chief fascinated all the painters and photographers who had the chance to observe these leaders. These paintings and photographs show in detail the headdresses, body paint and objects of power they each bear. For the first time in Spain, visitors can see the famous portraits made by Bodmer and Catlin and the photographs of legendary chiefs taken years later by Adolph Muhr and Edward S. Curtis.



Edward S. Curtis. *Joseph. Nez Percé*, 1903. Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

In these last decades of the nineteenth century the chiefs themselves were even concerned with immortalising their image, such as Sitting Bull, Geronimo and Joseph during their travels around the eastern United States to attend meetings and negotiations, by which time their tribes had been confined to reserves.

Dating from this period is Curtis's monumental photographic and publishing venture entitled *The North American Indian*, a controversial yet highly valuable artistic and ethnographic series, much of it no longer extant, from which several images have been selected.

Ethnography

Colonisation had a violent impact on Indian cultures and was a very fast process that drove them to the verge of extinction. Some people attempted to salvage their remnants as far as possible by starting collections that have survived to this day. A selection of clothing, everyday and ritual objects, weapons and adornments from the native cultures is displayed throughout the exhibition layout to illustrate certain details of the tribes' way of life.



Popular culture

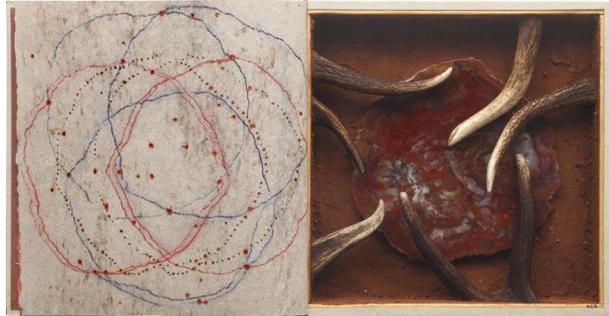
Furthermore, as a testament to their widespread dissemination and the fascination that the legends of the Wild West continue to hold to this day all over the world, the exhibition features a group of books, comics, movie posters and films from the graphic archives of the Filmoteca Nacional and the private collection of the publisher Alfredo Lara, as well as a large number of objects lent by Baroness Thyssen-Bornemisza.

Kachina doll, Hopi, c. 1900-1940. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Madrid.

Beneath the Comanche moon

As a nature artist, the exhibition's curator, Miguel Ángel Blanco, has been interested for years in the art and culture of tribes, which has strengthened his 'admiration for their ability to interpret the signs of nature and their attention to supernatural forces'. He has embraced the Indian ideal of life of 'walking in beauty, harmonising land and sky, body and spirit'.

The exhibition ends with a selection of 13 book-boxes related to the American West that are part of his *Library of the Forest*. Begun in 1985 and currently consisting of 1,148 book-boxes, this library is a lifelong sculptural project that recreates landscapes, experiences and visions, which are expressed in drawings, images and compositions using elements or materials from nature. The artist has also produced an installation from skulls of animals of symbolic value to the Indians and a sound piece that evokes the galloping of herds of buffalo.



Miguel Ángel Blanco. *Red Sequoia*, 2015 (above) and *Library of the Forest* (1985-2015). Artist's collection

DETAILS OF THE EXHIBITION:

Title: *The Illusion of the American Frontier*

Organised by: Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

Venue and dates: Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, from 3 November 2015 to 7 February 2016

Curator: Miguel Ángel Blanco, artist. <http://www.bibliotecadelbosque.net/>

Coordinator: Marta Ruiz del Árbol, department of modern painting, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

Number of works: 86 in the catalogue plus a large number of objects

Publications: Catalogue with texts by Miguel Ángel Blanco and Alfredo Lara; educational app and digital publication in the 'Quiosco Thyssen' app.

Side events: Art conference, Film cycle, Workshop visits for families, Interactive guided tours for groups and Drawing and photography workshops for adults.

INFORMATION FOR VISITORS:

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza

Address: Paseo del Prado, 8. 28014, Madrid. Salas Moneo, planta -1

Opening hours: Tuesday to Friday and Sundays from 10am to 7pm; Saturdays from 10am to 9pm

Temporary exhibition *The Illusion of the American Frontier*:

- General admission: €9
- Reduced admission: €6.50 for over 65s, pensioners, students with valid ID and large families
- Free admission: children under 12 and people officially unemployed

Temporary exhibition *The Illusion of the American Frontier* + Permanent Collection:

- General admission: €13.50
- Reduced admission: €8.50 for over 65s, pensioners, students with valid ID and large families
- Free admission: children under 12 and people officially unemployed

Combined admission *The Illusion of the American Frontier* + *Edvard Munch. Archetypes*:

- General admission: €14
- Reduced admission: €9 for over 65s, pensioners, students with valid ID and large families
- Free admission: children under 12 and people officially unemployed

Advance ticket sales at the ticket offices, on the Museum's website and by calling 902 760 511

More information: www.museothyssen.org

Audio-guides, available in several languages

INFORMATION FOR THE PRESS:

<http://www.museothyssen.org/microsites/prensa/2015/Oeste/index.html>