

UVic knowl**EDGE**

“Draw, Pardner”: Art in the Wild West

by Kristi Skebo

Think of the Wild West: it's not facts and figures that leap to mind, but images—a shoot-out in a saloon or a cowboy ambling by on his horse. “Popular knowledge of the Wild West is defined by images that were captured by artists at the turn of the century,” explains Dr. Brian Dippie, a UVic historian specializing in western American art.

Dippie's interest in the West started when he was a boy growing up in Alberta in the 1950s. “I was passionate about the Wild West. I've just never lost that interest.”

He studies the dates and facts and the fiction, poetry, letters and paintings of the time in order to create a more complete picture of western life in the late 1800s. “Artists played a key role in the perpetuation of western myths,” explains Dippie.

Dippie has studied Frederic Remington and Charles Russell, two of the most influential turn-of-the-century artists. Remington's art celebrates the transition of the West; how the West was tamed and won. Russell had a different focus. “His art mourns the loss of the carefree and open West, the loss of the traditional cultures of the American Indian,” says Dippie.

Together, they helped to shape visions of the Wild West. “Like Emily Carr did for the West Coast, Remington and Russell captured a vision of the old West that continues to resonate—a time when life was exciting and romantic,” explains Dippie.

Dippie's first book, *Custer's Last Stand: Anatomy of an American Myth*, delved into the lore surrounding Custer's defeat on the Little Bighorn River in Montana. In 1876, General George Armstrong Custer led his regiment into a losing battle against the Sioux. No white man lived to tell the tale of what happened that day. So how did the story not only survive, but also become so ingrained in the American psyche?

Artists portrayed the event, focusing on the heroism of the conflict. Their perspective influenced other cultural forms: poetry, fiction, plays, then films, extending the impact of the legend.

Dippie's current work focuses on Sacagwea, a Shosone Indian, a mother of a newborn and the lone female who accompanied the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific in 1804–06. “Sacagwea really came into prominence in the early 1900s

during the 100th anniversary of the trek. This coincided with the suffrage movement in the U.S.; women were looking for important historical figures to hold up as role models.”

While Sacagwea is seldom mentioned in the expedition journals, she is immortalized in early 20th-century paintings and statues. “Sacagwea is usually shown with Lewis and Clark, pointing the way to their destination, and portrayed as the expedition's guide,” says Dippie. “With her, as with many of the important figures in the history of the American West, I am looking at how artistic portrayals create the mythical figure. I am particularly interested in the interaction between imagery and the event it captures, imagery and the collective memory, the fusion of reality and legend. As John Ford put it in ‘The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance’, ‘This is the West. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.’”



Dippie

Facts from the **EDGE**

- Dippie has appeared in numerous documentaries featuring biographies on: Remington (PBS), George Catlin (Smithsonian) and Custer's Last Stand (A&E's Biography).
- In October 2002, Dippie was elected president of the Western History Association. He is the first Canadian to lead the organization.

Sharpen your knowl**EDGE**

Other books by Brian Dippie include:

- *The Vanishing American* (1982) – a look at how American Indians were visually represented in art from 1776 to the 1960s and how these images shaped public policy.
- *Catlin and his Contemporaries* (1990) – the personal quest of artist George Catlin to document a “vanishing” race and how he influenced other Wild West artists of the time.
- *Looking at Russell* (1987) – the myth of Charles Russell, cowboy and artist.

For a complete listing of Dippie's literary works, check out his website at web.uvic.ca/history/faculty/dippie.html.

Kristi Skebo wrote this as a participant in the SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge), funded by UVic and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.



TIMES COLONIST Supporting education in our community

www.uvic.ca



University of Victoria