The “Cruel Slaughter”: Environmentalism and Fortress Conservation in Albert Bierstadt’s *The Last of the Buffalo*

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Albert Bierstadt and his monumental late work, *The Last of the Buffalo,* both reflected and shaped late nineteenth-century American environmental attitudes and conservation policy. While Bierstadt and his painting helped generate public support for the protection of the American bison (*Bison bison*), it simultaneously promoted a model of “fortress conservation,” or preservation focused on separating humans from protected landscapes. Through analysis of the painting's visual strategies, exhibition history, and cultural context, this thesis demonstrates how nineteenth-century visual culture influenced both the successful protection of endangered species and the establishment of conservation approaches that separated humans from protected landscapes and reinforced displacement of Indigenous communities. By depicting Native Americans, rather than federal hunters, as those responsible for the bison’s extermination, *The Last of the Buffalo* absolved government agencies of culpability while enabling them to later position themselves as champions of the species’ conservation. An ecocritical analysis of this legacy can inform both interpretation of historic American landscape art as well as future environmental attitudes and natural resource policy.

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I. Introduction

Few animal species have experienced a population recovery in American history as significant as that of the American bison (*Bison bison)* between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When Albert Bierstadt completed his monumental late work, *The Last of the Buffalo* (fig. 1), in 1889, only a few hundred bison remained in the Plains region of the western United States, decreased from an estimated thirty million prior to European contact. Yet by 1928, nearly 12,000 roamed North America, protected by federal conservation legislation enacted in the 1890s (fig. 2). In a relatively short period of time, the bison became a beacon of American identity and needed to be protected from extinction. This population recovery raises questions about the role of visual culture in shaping environmental policy and attitudes in nineteenth-century American history. This thesis critically examines the role of *The Last of the Buffalo* in advocating for bison conservation while influencing federal natural resource management policy in subsequent decades.

To examine these themes, I present several related questions: How did the visual strategies and historical context of *The Last of the Buffalo* reflect environmental attitudes and conservation policy? What particular types of attitudes and policies did these strategies engender? How did the painting's depiction of hunting and the American West shape public understanding of bison extinction? And more broadly, what were the persisting effects of the visual narratives constructed in *The Last of the Buffalo* and related depictions of the nineteenth-century American West on federal conservation policy throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries?

In exploring these questions, several key terms require definition. Although the title of Bierstadt's painting uses the term buffalo, I use the word bison in this paper to acknowledge that

the American bison (*Bison bison*) is biologically distinct from "Old World" buffalo (*Bubalus spp*.). The species depicted in Bierstadt's composition can be identified as an American bison, and so I use the term "bison" to sustain focus on this particular species and its conservation history throughout the nineteenth century. Secondly, I use the term "American" because I aim to refer to the tradition of American landscape painting as it has been historicized. My study of art is geographically and ecologically bounded to a particular region of the western United States, but I by no means consider this to be an exhaustive representation of "American" art as it should be understood in a decolonized context. I use the term "American West" to refer both to the geographic region west of the Mississippi River and to the cultural construct of "the West" that emerged in nineteenth-century visual culture. Lastly, my discussion of fortress conservation takes the definition presented in the Sage Encyclopedia of Environment and Society, which is "a conservation model based on the belief that biodiversity protection is best achieved by creating protected areas where ecosystems can function in isolation from human disturbance."[1]

This paper aims to join a recent body of scholarship which foregrounds the agency of journalism and visual culture in shifting environmental attitudes in nineteenth-century America. Michael Punke's seminal work on the near extinction of the bison, *Last Stand*, largely credits

[1] Amy A. Doolittle, "Fortress Conservation," in *Encyclopedia of Environment and Society,* ed. Paul Robbins (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 705. The colonial legacies and devastating consequences of this practice has been scrutinized in the literature. For critiques of fortress conservation, see, for example, Bram Büscher and Webster Whande, "Whims of the Winds of Time? Emerging Trends in Biodiversity Conservation and Protected Area Management," *Conservation and Society* 1, no. 5 (2007): 23; Lara Domínguez and Colin Luoma, "Decolonising Conservation Policy: How Colonial Land and Conservation Ideologies Persist and Perpetuate Indigenous Injustices at the Expense of the Environment," *Land* 3, no. 9 (2020): 1-2, https://doi.org/10.3390/land9030065. For alternative approaches to resource management, see, for example, Val Plumwood, "Decolonizing Relationships with Nature," in *Decolonizing Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era*, eds. William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan (London: Earthscan Publications, 2003), 51, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781849770927-9; Emmanuel Freudenthal et al., "The Whakatane Mechanism: Promoting Justice in Protected Areas," *Nomadic Peoples* 16, no. 2 (2012): 84, https://doi.org/10.3167/np.2012.160207.

journalist George Bird Grinnell with saving the bison from the destruction caused by railroad companies, hide traders, and poachers. While Punke's history primarily fixates on the battles waged by Grinnell in the media and literature, a portion of his writing also credits the work of Thomas Moran, whose paintings such as *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* were "significant not only because they helped to convince Congress to create Yellowstone National Park but more broadly because Moran and other Romantic painters helped a generation of Americans to see in nature something inherently beautiful."[2] Meanwhile, in his 2009 article "Poaching Pictures," ecocritical art historian Alan Braddock investigates the connection between Emerson Hough's illustrated article in *Forest and Stream* magazine and the subsequent passage of environmental legislation to suggest that "visual imagery… played a central role in mediating environmental attitudes" of the era.[3]

Beyond the role of painting and journalism in reflecting and shifting environmental attitudes, Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo also underscore the agency of photography in transporting vistas of distant landscapes in the American West - and an awareness of need for their protection - to a broader American audience.[4] In particular, the authors highlight the works of landscape photographer Carleton Watkins, whose "vision of nature institutionalized through [his] lens" constitute, the authors argue, "the photographer's most lasting legacy to American environmentalism."[5] Most recently, Peter Hassrick's 2018 book, *Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West* and its accompanying exhibition augments Punke's work on Grinnell's conservation efforts by "revealing the supporting roles of several important American artists,"

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[2] Michael Punke, *Last Stand: George Bird Grinnell, the Battle to Save the Buffalo, and the Birth of the New West* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2007), 104.
[3] Alan Braddock, "Poaching Pictures: Yellowstone, Buffalo, and the Art of Wildlife Conservation," *American Art* 23, no. 3 (2009): 40, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1086/649775.40.
[4] Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo, "Imagining Nature and Erasing Class and Race: Carleton Watkins, John Muir, and the Construction of Wilderness," *Environmental History* 6, no. 4 (2001): 546.
[5] DeLuca and Demo, "Imagining Nature," 546.

most notably Bierstadt.[6] Hassrick's focused discussion of *Last of the Buffalo* considers the composition as Bierstadt's final great work, which "captured national and international attention, helping to make the public aware that the Indian and the bison were on the verge of disappearing."[7]

This study also draws from Roger Stein and Alexander Nemerov's theoretical works on nineteenth-century regional art and its role in constructing notions of the American West. Stein argues that regional artists faced the challenge of making unfamiliar landscapes "habitable" to distant viewers by balancing authentic regional content with familiar artistic conventions.[8] Meanwhile, Nemerov demonstrates how this process of visual translation often resulted in what he terms a "duality of iconography," wherein depictions of the West became reified as reality itself, naturalizing chosen historical narratives while suppressing others.[9] Together, these authors' frameworks help demonstrate how Bierstadt's painting could simultaneously introduce eastern American and European audiences to western landscapes while reinforcing specific interpretations of extinction, conservation, and environmental management.

It is with these voices in mind that I revisit *The Last of the Buffalo* to explore Bierstadt's role, like that of Grinnell, Moran, and Watkins, in influencing the conservation of the bison as the species was on the precipice of extinction. While bison were selectively hunted *en masse* by white hunters throughout the 1870s, the species and its habitat were conserved through a series of protections by the turn of the century. I argue that this transition was aided by the visual

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[6] Peter Hassrick, *Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West*, vol. 30 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 29.
[7] Hassrick, *Albert Bierstadt,* 30.
[8] Roger B. Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains: The Role of the Visual Arts," *Great Plains Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1985): 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23530571.
[9] Alexander Nemerov, "Doing the 'Old America': The Image of the American West, 1880-1920," *in The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, ed. William H. Truettner (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 329.

depiction of the megafauna including *The Last of the Buffalo*, which centered the bison as a quintessential symbol of the American West in dire need of salvation. Bierstadt's visual depiction of the bison's tragic near-extinction garnered public support for bison conservation not just in the world of politics and environmental management, but also in the art world. Specifically, I will argue, the pictorial narratives Bierstadt chose to display in his work advocated for a particular *type* of conservation which centers the Anglo-American conservationist as the arbiter of salvation and absolves them from responsibility for overextraction.

I also draw from scholarship on *The Last of the Buffalo* that has discussed the painting as a depiction of a mythic past, in which bison roamed freely and were hunted by Native Americans. This reading of the painting, presented by scholars such as Roger Stein, Nancy Anderson et al., and Matthew Baigell, contends that Bierstadt's painting "put a palatable romantic gloss" over the extermination of the bison by depicting its slaughter as a practice performed by Native Americans, rather than portraying the more contemporary – and environmentally detrimental – methods of hunting conducted by federal agencies and Euro-American sportsmen.[10] I build upon these scholars' claims by shifting focus from its contribution to a mythic past to its role in shaping future policy by advocating for particular approaches to conservation. I argue that the visual narrative constructed in *The Last of the Buffalo* promoted a model of conservation centered on excluding human activity from protected wilderness areas. By depicting Native Americans as the primary hunters, Bierstadt's painting obscured federal culpability in bison population decline and helped establish a conservation model that positioned federal agencies as champions of the bison.

[10] Roger B. Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 76; Nancy Anderson et al., *Discovered Lands, Invented Pasts: Transforming Visions of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 24. Matthew Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1988), 19.

The following sections examine how *The Last of the Buffalo* both reflected and shaped attitudes toward bison conservation in the late nineteenth century. "Extinction" analyzes how Bierstadt's visual strategies naturalized the decline of both bison and Native American populations while absolving federal hunters of responsibility for environmental degradation. This section also explores Indigenous perspectives on bison decline through an examination of hide robes, winter counts, and ledger books, which offer alternative narratives to Euro-American depictions of the hunt. "Conservation" investigates how the painting's exhibition history and pictorial conventions helped establish the bison as an iconic symbol of the American West, generating international support for conservation legislation while simultaneously promoting a model of environmental protection predicated on human exclusion from protected landscapes. The visual strategies employed in *The Last of the Buffalo* helped establish notions of wilderness preservation that required human exclusion during the nineteenth century, and these narratives often continue to shape environmental policy and approaches to human-environment relationships today. A close analysis of *The Last of the Buffalo* can provide insight into a larger exploration of these ideas and how they are rooted in nineteenth-century visual culture. In turn, exploring the origins of these ideas can inform current understandings of environmental conservation and future directions for natural resource management.

II. Extinction

In the century before Albert Bierstadt completed his monumental late work, *The Last of the Buffalo*, bison roamed the plains in seemingly endless numbers. Thirty million bison were estimated to inhabit the Plains prior to European contact, in such great magnitude that their herds were said to resemble vast "seas" extending through the grasslands of the American West.[11] Reports from early explorers of the American West demonstrate their awe at the magnitude of herds: "A few miles brought us into the midst of the buffalo, swarming in immense numbers over the plains," wrote explorer and military officer John C. Fremont on one of his five expeditions to the American West. "In the sight of such a mass of life," he continued, "the traveler feels a strange emotion of grandeur."[12] Artists and explorers alike were inspired by the ostensibly endless herds of the species, as William Jacob Hayes spoke of his painting of a bison herd: "The canvass [sic.] [cannot] adequately cover the width and breadth of these imnumerable [sic.] hordes of bison… As far as the eye can reach, wild herds are discernible."[13]

The unending seas of bison that extended across the western American grasslands were likewise an inspiration to Bierstadt, who was exposed to such a sight both through his own sketching trips in the West as well as representations by contemporary artists like Hayes. Bierstadt's composition visually suggests this effect: the broad canvas confronts the viewer with an image of rolling grasslands, its extensive size making the viewer feel as though he or she could step directly into the scene.[14] Before the viewer spreads an open valley, its few trees

[11] Punke, *Last Stand,* 68. 30 million is on the low end of recent population estimates. 60 million has been the most common population estimate, with some estimates as high as 100 million.
[12] John C. Fremont, *Narrative of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1842: And to Oregon and North California in the Years 1843-44* (New York: D. Appleton, 1849), 17.
[13] "The Herd on the Move," in *Kansas Historical Quarterly,* eds. Kirke Mechem, James Malin, and Nyle Miller (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1946), 160. The description is taken from an exhibition catalogue of the early 1860s.
[14] The painting is 71 inches tall and 118 ¾ inches wide.

providing a sense of scale for the bison that far outnumber the landscape's sporadic displays of vegetation. The viewer is positioned at a slightly higher elevation than the valley's basin, a vantage point which makes visible the bison below. Herds of bison run from the right to left side of the composition. While animal bodies near the foreground are distinct, their bodies blend together into streaks of brown brushstrokes in the background and margins of the canvas. Individual figures in these areas are imperceptible, smeared together into flat swatches of color like the seas of grass that surround the animals. These muddy, indistinct brushstrokes recall the metaphor of a sea of bison, the water analogy enforced by the animals' placement around water as a river winds through the valley. Like the stream of water and blades of grass that run together in endless numbers, so too do Bierstadt's bison appear in such large quantities that they are no more than unbroken patches of color across the landscape.

Despite the seemingly infinite seas of bison that appeared to artists and explorers of the American West during the first half of the nineteenth century, only a few hundred bison roamed the Plains region by the time *The Last of the Buffalo* was completed in 1888.[15] The cause of such a decline is a topic that will be revisited later in this paper, although it remains an important point that bison populations decreased significantly throughout the nineteenth century. *Buffalo Bones Stacked at Michigan Carbon Works* demonstrates the immense scale of extinction, a sea of skulls replacing the sea of living bodies that fills Bierstadt's canvas (fig. 3). Taken outside a charcoal processing plant in Rougeville, Michigan in 1892, the photograph depicts a mountain of bison skulls that synecdochally represent the extermination of numerous bodies from the Plains. The image replaces Bierstadt's vast, rolling grasslands with an industrial processing facility, further communicating the passage of the bison and their habitat in favor of a new industrial terrain.

[15] John S. Nishi, "A Review of Best Practices and Principles for Bison Disease Issues: Greater Yellowstone and Wood Buffalo Areas," American Bison Society Working Paper Series (2010): Fig. 3.

Given this rate of population change, paired with *The Last of the Buffalo*'s own fatalistic title, the bison's extermination seemed all but inevitable by the end of the nineteenth century. Speaking to this sense of tragedy conveyed in his own work, Bierstadt stated that the purpose of this painting was "to show the buffalo in all his aspects and depict the cruel slaughter of a noble animal now almost extinct."[16]

Linked Fates

As bison populations diminished throughout the American West, connections were made in literature, art, and popular culture that linked the fate of the bison to the fate of Native Americans. It was believed by many that bison, like Native Americans, were also doomed to extinction. Military officer Fremont expanded in his 1845 diary: "Like the Indians themselves, [the buffalo] have been a characteristic of the great West; and… like them, they are visibly diminishing."[17] Similarly, American artist and author George Catlin wrote in his book, *North American Indians, Being Letters and Notes on Their Manners, Customs and Conditions*: "it is a subject of curious significance," that the buffalo, "like the history of the poor savage; and from the same consideration… are both wasting away at the approach of civilized man… in a very few years to live only in books or on canvas."[18]

Components of this connection between the lives of the bison and Native Americans can be traced to *The Last of the Buffalo*. In its title alone, *The Last of the Buffalo* closely parallels that of James Fenimore Cooper's second novel in his *Leatherstocking Tales* series, titled *The Last of*

[16] Henry Guy Carleton, "The Last of the Buffalo; an Entrancing View of Bierstadt's Great Painting," *New York World*, March 10, 1889, 22.
[17] John Fremont, *Narratives of Exploration and Adventure*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1956): 232-3.
[18] George Catlin, *North American Indians, Being Letters and Notes on Their Manners, Customs and Conditions* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1841), 27.

the Mohicans. Written in 1826, Cooper's novel takes place during the French and Indian War and recounts the adventures of Chingachgook and Uncas, the only two surviving members of the Mohican tribe. Chingachook and Uncas meet a tragic end during the novel's final climactic battle, and the reader is left to mourn the end of the Mohican bloodline. Through the tragic fates of two of the novel's protagonists, *The Last of the Mohicans* underscores popular nineteenth-century thoughts about the disappearance, and seemingly inevitable extinction, of Native Americans. Both the wilderness and Native Americans, wrote historian Francis Parkman in 1851, were "at the period when both received their final doom" due to the rapid forces of colonization and industrialization.[19] It is these anxieties surrounding the presumed extinction of Native Americans that were familiar to contemporary audiences of Bierstadt's *The Last of the Buffalo,* which plays off Cooper's title to similarly lament the extermination of the American bison.

Beyond literary references, this interspecies connection was communicated through a range of visual motifs as well. For instance, the "allegorical connection between the vanishing buffalo and the vanishing Indian," states Rena Coen on *The Last of the Buffalo,* "may be inferred in the arch-typical representation of the Indian buffalo hunt."[20] More synecdochally, the buffalo skull was also a motif used to represent this connection. The skull represented both the disappearance of the bison and the Native American, serving as a "code for the fate of a race" (or species, in the case of the bison).[21] This motif appeared in the works of other nineteenth-century painters such as Charles M. Russell, whose *The Last of His Race* likewise enforces this narrative

[19] Francis Parkman, "Autobiography of Francis Parkman," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 8 (1894): 351-2.
[20] Rena Coen, "The Last of the Buffalo," *The American Art Journal* 5, no. 2 (1973): 84.
[21] Brian Dippie, "Photographic Allegories and Indian Destiny." *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 42, no. 3 (1992): 50.

association between the fates of the bison and Native Americans. The symbol of the buffalo skull was also employed by Hildore C. Eklund, a photographer whose image of a Cree boy depicts the figure staring contemplatively at a buffalo skull as an omen for his own community's presumed extinction. Thus, viewers of Bierstadt's work likely understood the human-bison connection through similar images like Eklund's.

Further, Bierstadt compositionally links dead and dying bison with a similarly fated Native American figure in his painting. Two dead bison lie directly in the center of the foreground: while most of the animals' bodies in the painting do not face the viewer, these two do, their deaths immediately confronting the viewer. Blood spills from their noses and eyes and rings the tips of their horns while arrows protrude from their sides, blood pooling around the puncture wounds. Their eyes are clouded over with a translucent white film, suggesting a lack of life behind their pupils. To their right, a third bison lies in the grass in the lower right foreground. Its back is turned away from the viewer, yet its head is pivoted to facilitate eye contact with the viewer. Although it is presumably alive, owing to the lack of a muddy film over the pupil that clouds the eyes of the other two, its final moments seem to be fast approaching. Blood rings the bison's horn and spills from its mouth, pooling in the grass below. An arrow is seen protruding from the bison's left rear flank and more blood falls from the impaled object.

Importantly, these are the only bison in the composition with whom the viewer can conceivably make eye contact. The dying figure stares pleadingly at the viewer, and he stares back. By contrast, a sign of life is missing from behind the glossy eyes of the other two figures. As such, these bison do not appear to stare at the viewer, yet their direct placement in the center foreground nevertheless compels the viewer to make eye contact with them. The viewer cannot establish eye contact with any living bison, only the select three who are dead or fatally

wounded. Bierstadt's selective utilization of the animal gaze serves to underscore the bison's death, foregrounding their extinction as a key event for the viewer to experience through their eyes.

Bierstadt connects the bison's ostensibly looming extinction to that of the Native Americans as well. Between the fatally wounded bison and its deceased counterparts, a Native American figure lies with his fallen horse, both of which exhibit apparent wounds. Blood pools from the horse's side and an open wound is visible on the crown of the Native American's head, which echoes the wounds visible on the bison closest to him. Bierstadt's pairing of these dead and dying figures, so centrally placed in the foreground, calls upon the narrative connection between the fates of the bison and Native Americans to signal a tragic demise for both.

Darwinian Ideologies

By the late nineteenth century, the Euro-American assumption that bison and Native Americans were doomed to perish – established, among other avenues, through the artistic and literary works discussed above - naturalized the settler-colonial processes of extinction and forced removal. Rather than revealing the socio-political decisions and activities that engendered a decline in both populations, this decline was perceived as an inevitable outcome, the natural order of things. It was believed that Indigenous peoples' inability to adapt to colonial occupation evolutionarily determined their demise, a notion which art historian Sarah Thomas describes as "profoundly Darwinian" for its assumption that "adaptation was essential to survival, and that species which do not change will become extinct."[22]

[22] Sarah Thomas, "Allegorizing Extinction: Humboldt, Darwin and the Valedictory Image," in *Picturing Evolution and Extinction*, ed. Fae Brauer and Serena Keshavjee (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 1.

The work of nineteenth-century American photographer Edward Curtis poignantly illustrates these social beliefs of the time. Curtis's early works, particularly *The Vanishing Race – Navajo*, depicts Native Americans as a "vanishing race" facing inevitable decline (fig. 4). Curtis's caption for the image details his intent: "The thought which this picture is meant to convey is that the Indians as a race, already shorn in their tribal strength and stripped of their primitive dress, are passing into the darkness of an unknown future."[23] This notion is reinforced through the pictorialist aesthetics Curtis employs, such as the use of a blurred focus; capturing the figures as anonymous silhouettes; and their posing headed away from the camera, which cumulatively reinforce the notion of an entire race passively disappearing into the distance. Art historian Mick Gidley underscores Curtis's pictorial techniques, such as a blurred focus and soft lighting, as key components of the photographer's "artistic romanticism" that "tended to disguise, even deny, what was, in fact and effect, a seemingly almost endless series of damaging political and economic decisions made by human beings."[24] Supporting the argument that the "vanishing race" theory is founded on Darwinian principles, Gidley notes that Curtis's pictorialist conventions naturalized the eradication of Native Americans as an inevitable, almost romantic part of the natural order.[25]

Like Curtis's photography, Bierstadt's composition does not explicitly claim that both populations' demise was the outcome of a failure to adapt; however, its visual strategies do support the notion that such carnage was a natural process, rather than one constructed by the conscious act of settling the western frontier. Of the living bison present in the foreground, the

[23] This caption appears with the opening photograph for the first volume of Curtis's *The North American Indian, Being a Series of Volumes Picturing and Describing the Indians of the United States and Alaska*, ed. Frederick Webb Hodge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), unpaginated. It is also seen in in Shannon Egan, "Yet in a Primitive Condition: Edward S. Curtis's North American Indian," *American Art* 20, no. 3 (2006): 59.
[24] Mick Gidley, "Pictorialist Elements in Edward S. Curtis's Photographic Representation of American Indians," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 24 (1994): 192.
[25] Gidley, "Pictorialist Elements," 192.

central figure charges at a hunter seated on horseback. The hunter's body faces away from the viewer, his face obscured as an anonymous silhouette much like those captured by Curtis's photography. The bison's head is tilted downward, aiming to dismount its foe. Despite the bison's powerful charge, however, indications of its losing battle are etched into its body: blood rims its nose and pours out from the three arrows impaled in its right flank. The hunter's spear is aimed at its other side, and although the point of contact is obstructed by the horse's body, it can be assumed from the hunter's outstretched arm and from such close range that the spear is or will soon contact the bison's body. These various wounds suggest that the bison's death is inevitable, while the Native American's positioning facing away from the viewer and his compositional connection to the bison recalls Curtis's strategies employed in his *Vanishing* Race image to suggest that his fate is likewise inevitable.

A second living bison stands further in the foreground, watching the hunt. Like the bison discussed above, this figure, too, has blood pooling around its mouth, nose, and from arrows that are impaled in its right flank. From its various injuries, its death also seems inevitable or naturalized. Its body faces directly toward the viewer, although its head is turned to the right and its gaze is directed toward the sun-bleached skulls that litter the ground. As the bison looks toward the spray of bones, its contemplation sends a clear message: it is inevitably doomed to the same fate as that which met the bones scattered across the desolate plains.

Hunting Culpability

The Darwinian notion that the lives of the bison were evolutionarily predetermined removes culpability from federal agencies and Euro-American settlers of the western frontier, whose tactics of selective extermination considerably reduced herd populations during the

nineteenth century. The widespread hunting of bison was an effort encouraged by many members of the U.S. government to suppress Indigenous populations by eliminating their primary food source.[26] For example, Secretary of the Interior Columbus Delano suggested to President Grant that the buffalo's complete disappearance was the best means to encourage Indigenous groups to adopt the agricultural lifestyle desired by frontier reformers.[27] Similarly, Grant's chief advisors on Indian Policy, Generals William Sherman and Philip Sheridan, posited that Native Americans would be forced to surrender to the army once the bison were gone.[28] The effects of these recommendations can be seen in an account written by the nineteenth-century sheriff and hunter Wyatt Earp, who stated: "An examination of the record will show that, as a whole, the bad Indians were subdued into good Indians almost concurrently with the slaughter of the buffaloes, their one source of livelihood on the open range."[29]

Federal officers often deployed a variety of tactics to encourage selective extermination. At times this mission was made explicit in military orders: for instance, General Sheridan appointed Lieutenant Colonel Luter P. Bradley to control the southern plains Native Americans in 1868, and Bradley wrote of his mission that he was "ordered to the forks of the Republican to make permanent camp: to kill all the buffalo we find."[30] Similarly, several Army Commanders, including George Custer, John Gibbon, and Colonels Benjamin Brierson and George Ames ordered their pony soldiers to hunt running bison to teach their troops how to shoot on

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[26] Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt*, 19; Braddock, "Poaching Pictures," 52; Punke, *Last Stand*, 73.
[27] Robert Kennedy, "On This Day: June 6, 1874," *The New York Times,* https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/harp/0606.html.
[28] Kennedy, "On this Day."
[29] Stuart N. Lake, "The Buffalo Hunters," *The Saturday Evening Post*, October 25, 1930, 12. As seen in Punke, *Last Stand*, 73.
[30] September 13, 1868 entry in Luther P. Bradley's "Private Journal," Box 1, Luther P. Bradley Papers, United States Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA. As seen in David Smits, "The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883," *Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1994): 323, https://doi.org/10.2307/971110.

horseback.[31] Other commanders ordered their officers to take hunting leaves, leveraging the bison hunt to produce maps of the terrain traversed.[32]

At other times, federal endorsement of the bison's destruction took more covert forms. The army effectively disguised mass killing with a need to supply troops with food and clothing. For instance, the Quartermaster Department issued new bison coats to all soldiers in the 1880s, and the army provided bison meat not just to its troops but also to Northern Pacific Railroad crews, sometimes in such large quantities that the meat filled six four-mule team wagons.[33] Additionally, the Army's high command frequently sponsored, outfitted, and provided letters of introduction for influential American and foreign hunters, which enabled the sportsmen "to obtain supplies, equipment, military escorts, knowledgeable scouts," and other types of military assistance which aided their bison hunt.[34] When military officers weren't assisting influential sportsmen, they could also be found participating in contests to determine which individual or team could kill the most bison within a given time, or firing cannons into herds to keep them out of the army post. For example, Major General Stanley recalled that "cannon [at Fort Cobb] were fired, [and] men foolishly shot the poor beasts by the hundreds."[35]

Federally endorsed tactics of selective extermination also involved still-hunting, a technique in which a hunter conceals himself or herself in wait, then shoots bison one-by-one to take advantage of a herd's inability to notice individual deaths.[36] James Henry Moser captures this technique in *The Still Hunt,* a painting that was reproduced in William T. Hornaday's Smithsonian annual report of 1887 (fig. 5). *The Still Hunt* depicts a hunter lying prone against a

[31] Smits, "The Frontier Army," 318.
[32] Smits, "The Frontier Army," 318.
[33] Smits, "The Frontier Army," 336-7.
[34] Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 245-6.
[35] David Stanley, *Personal Memoirs of Major General D. S. Stanley*, *U. S. A.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917): 55.
[36] Braddock, "Poaching Pictures," 52.

bluff in the right foreground while a herd of bison gather in the field below. The hunter aims a shotgun toward the herd and is poised to efficiently target the bison one-by-one with just a slight pivot of the gun. Several bison have already fallen lifelessly to the ground, while the remaining members of the herd stand motionless, as if to emphasize the bison's perceptual limitations in noticing the deaths of the other herd members.

Compared to Moser's *The Still Hunt*, Bierstadt's painting conceals the slaughter conducted by federal soldier and Euro-American hunters, instead depicting Native Americans as the sole drivers of bison decline. [37] The central hunter in the foreground is engaged in a highly dynamic position. His right arm is outstretched far behind his head, muscles taut as he winds up to spear the animal, while his left arm forcefully pulls back on the horse's reins to steady himself for the impact. His upper body leans backward while his hips shift forward, further positioning himself to maximize the force between the spear and the bison's body. Whereas a more passive pose may have left the hunter's intent or impact more ambiguous, his dynamic stance clearly expresses his resolve and agency in killing the bison. In turn, this depiction visually absolves federal policymakers, hunters, and soldiers from the responsibility for population decline. Writing about this transference of culpability, Roger Stein writes that Bierstadt's painting "placed the responsibility for the decimation of buffalo herds upon Native Americans, rather than the white American and European sportsmen… who were in fact the culprits."[38]

Animal Agency

While Bierstadt shifts focus away from the role of federal hunters in this work, he instead places greater emphasis on the individual agency of the bison. Bierstadt highlights the bison as a

[37] Stein, *John Ruskin*, 76; Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt*, 19.
[38] Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains," 13.

subject, rather than merely an object of the hunt, to cultivate in the viewer a greater sense of empathy for the charismatic megafauna. Relative to many other images of the bison hunt which depict the species fleeing from hunters, Bierstadt places his bison in a more confrontational stance. For instance, George Catlin's 1844 colored lithograph, *Buffalo Hunt*, follows a strong left-to-right direction of movement across the composition (fig. 6). Catlin's bison race toward the edge of the composition, as if to run off the page - or, metaphorically, out of the environment. In *Buffalo Hunt*, the bison's directional certainty implies their disappearance not just from the composition, but from their actual geographic habitat. By contrast, Bierstadt's central bison takes a more confrontational stance. Rather than fleeing from the scene, as with Catlin's bison, Bierstadt's bison charges directly toward the equestrian figure. This bison faces the hunter head-on, charging against the efforts of its extermination. Meanwhile, the bison left of center faces toward the viewer as if to plead with the viewer more directly in saving it from its fate.

To center the bison as a subject, Bierstadt also uses what art historian Peter Hassrick describes as the "returned gaze."[39] This technique was often used by Bierstadt's contemporary, William Jacob Hays, to establish an interspecies connection through the animal gaze. For example, in Hays' *The Herd on the Move,* a group of bison migrate toward the viewer while those in the foreground gaze expectantly at the viewer (fig. 7). But in Bierstadt's painting, rather than the bison looking back at the viewer, the animal gaze is obscured through the "vacant black orbs" of the dead bison in the foreground.[40] These bison look toward the viewer, but the returned gaze feels unsettling through the animals' clouded, lifeless eyes.

Bierstadt, like Hays, also employs the animal gaze to point toward symbols of death. In both works, a living bison stares toward a bleached skull on the ground (figs. 8 & 9). The skull

[39] Hassrick, *Albert Bierstadt*, 75.
[40] Hassrick, *Albert Bierstadt,* 75.

serves as a *memento mori*, foreshadowing the surviving bison's fate. Through this exchange of gazes – the living viewer with the dead bison, the living bison with its dead ancestors – Bierstadt uses the animal gaze to center the bison as a subject that is quickly vanishing from the Plains.

Through these visual strategies, *Last of the Buffalo* communicates to its viewer that the bison is in grave danger of extinction. Bierstadt uses the bison and their hunters to underscore their death at the hands of the seemingly inevitable force of natural selection, while the landscape itself seems to foreshadow a version of the Great Plains in which bison are now extinct. A cloud of dust rolls in from the righthand margin of the scene, leaving a hazy terrain in its wake. The dust travels in the same direction as the bison herd, as if to suggest that once the bison have crossed the landscape, dust will eclipse the scene. Once the dust literally and proverbially settles, the background seems to foreshadow that a barren landscape, depleted of both bison and Native Americans, will be left behind.

While clouds of dust emerge along the right side of the landscape, the remainder of the valley is shrouded in patches of sunlight and shadow. Sun dapples the valley's foreground and background while the midground is covered in shade. The two parts of the landscape that are illuminated contain scenes of death and emptiness: a foreground of bison being killed, corpses and bones littering the ground, and a background where no bison roam the grasslands. Meanwhile, the section of the composition where bison roam the plains in great numbers is cast in shadow, as if suggesting that the sun is setting on this period in history and illuminating alternative realities in which bison are hunted and, later, extinct. Paired with the linked fates of the bison and Native Americans; the Darwinian outlook on extinction; and the occlusion of federally endorsed selective extermination and its impact on herd populations, *The Last of the Buffalo* constructs a scene in which bison populations are in grave danger and must be saved

from extermination at the hands of Native Americans by federal policymakers. In concealing culpability of federal hunters, the painting shifts responsibility to Native American hunters and allows federal agencies to return to the problem of extinction a few decades later as champions of America's iconic megafauna through the enaction of conservation legislation.

Comparative Attitudes about Hunting and Materiality

Not all artwork created during the nineteenth century concealed, whether willfully or unintentionally, the effects of selective extermination on the lifeways, artistic traditions, and ecosystems of the Great Plains. Works created by Indigenous Plains artists, including hide robes, winter counts, and ledger books, offer an alternative perspective from which to view the decline in bison populations in the nineteenth century. Federal efforts to exterminate the bison and assimilate Indigenous people into Euro-American culture affected Indigenous material culture, as evidenced in the evolution of hide robes, winter counts, and ledger books throughout the mid to late nineteenth century.

This section examines three interrelated art forms – robe art, winter counts, and ledger books – as material indications of the cultural significance of the bison and the impact of its population decline. I will explore the pictographic content of hide robes and winter counts as representing an alternative attitude toward the bison hunt as well as representing concern over their population decline throughout the century. Further, I will explore the materiality of all three art forms as representing adaption to declining bison populations and resilience of Indigenous culture.

Hide Robes and Hunting Practices

First documented in the late eighteenth century, robe art consisted of paintings on bison hide and other textiles. These robes were worn with the animal's head over the left shoulder, with the hide draped lengthwise across the back.[41] The broad expanse of hide across one's back and shoulders made for a fitting canvas upon which the wearer's personal exploits could be painted and viewed by others. Traditionally, male artists of the Great Plains painted narrative scenes of their personal and wartime feats on bison hides to serve as both a personal adornment in battle and as protective talismans. Painted scenes often included achievements in hunting, battle, and riding and served as a public testament to the wearer's valor.[42] One of the earliest robes was a hide collected by Lewis and Clark in 1805, which may date as early as 1797, while other early robe art from the Plains region dates to the early 1800s.

In both its pictographic content and materiality, the hide robe underscores the importance of the bison to Indigenous cultures. For example, a Hidatsa hide in the collection of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West depicts several figures on horseback, each hunting a bison across the length of the hide (fig. 10). While seas of bison far outnumber the hunters in *The Last of the Buffalo*, each bison is accompanied by a hunter on the Hidatsa robe. The ratio of bison to hunters in Bierstadt's composition suggests a sense of bounty and tremendous hunting potential, whereas the Hidatsa robe indicates the conventionality of a type of hunting that is more scaled to the hunter's population and need, rather than one of untrammeled bounty. Toward the edge of the hide, a bison's body is collapsed before its accompanying hunter. The hunter wields a knife in

[41] James D. Keyser, "Painted Bison Robes: The Missing Link in the Biographic Art Style Lexicon," *Plains Anthropologist* 41, no. 155 (1996): 34, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25669375.
[42] Linda C. Margolin, "A Lakota Sioux Ledger Book," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 68, no. 3: 36, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41504891.

each hand while the bison's hide peels off its yellow body, indicating the hunter's ongoing efforts in removing the hide from his game. The viewer may begin speculate about the future uses for the depicted hide: it was a key material in a variety of Indigenous lifeways and artifacts including clothing, shelter, and ceremony.[43]

By contrast, images of the bison hunt produced by Euro-American artists, such as Bierstadt and Moser, do not indicate an intended use for the animal. These images emphasize the act of killing while ignoring the animal's practical uses, establishing its value as game to be exterminated. Meanwhile, the Hidatsa hide emphasizes the bison's value as a resource to be used by portraying hunting as a necessary means to achieve the utility of the animal's meat and hide. In this way, the images depicted on the Hidatsa robe demonstrate the importance and utility of bison to Indigenous communities, particularly in the use of bison hide to create items such as the robe upon which the scene is painted. This imagery presents an alternative perspective on the bison hunt, centered around utility rather than exploitation, to the attitudes on hunting presented in Euro-American images like Bierstadt's and Moser's.

Winter Counts and Population Tracking

Like robe art, winter counts reflect the importance of bison to Indigenous communities. Winter counts served as visual calendars, initially painted on hide before transitioning to muslin and paper. Each annual cycle, marked from first snowfall to first snowfall, was represented by a single image depicting that year's most significant event.[44] Winter counts were made and used by

[43] Darienne Turner, "Transformation on the Plains: The Extermination of the Buffalo and a Way of Life," in "When and Where Does Colonial America End?" Colloquium, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 2 (2021), https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.12727.
[44] Jenny Tone-Pah-Hote, "Introduction to the MIA Long Soldier Winter Count," (museum guide, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2004), 1, http://www.ipevolunteers.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Lakota-Winter-Count-Additional-Information.pdf; Turner, "Transformation on the Plains."

the Lakota and Nakota, who refer to a year as both *waniyetu* (winter) and *omaka* (year).[45] As a mnemonic device, they served two key functions in Lakota and Nakota communities: they helped to recount historic events that shaped Indigenous life, and they placed events into time, which enabled individuals to calculate their age by counting back to the year they were born.[46] Because only a single image was selected to represent a year, winter counts are a lens into how Lakota and Nakota people thought about their history. They lend an understanding of what single event was considered significant enough to remember a year, and they reflect the history of a community over several decades.[47]

One of the most replicated winter counts, the Lone Dog Count, underscores the cultural significance of bison to the Lakota and Nakota and concern about the animal's fluctuating populations in a given year. The Lone Dog Count (fig. 11) was created by a Nakota man named Lone Dog spanning the years 1800 to 1870. It was duplicated by several artists, including a trader- interpreter named Basil Clément, with at least 15 versions currently in museum collections around the world.[48] Lone Dog permitted Clément to copy his calendar onto a second bison hide, which was obtained near Fort Sully, South Dakota, in 1876 by lieutenant Hugh T. Reed.[49] Clément provided some interpretation of the events depicted to Reed, who then continued to glean information about the winter count from interpreters in Lakota Territory during the spring of 1877.[50] Reed's interpreters worked with local Blackfoot Lakota, including

[45] Tone-Pah-Hote, "Introduction," 1.
[46] Tone-Pah-Hote, "Introduction," 1; Turner, "Transformation on the Plains."
[47] Tone-Pah-Hote, "Introduction," 4.
[48] Christine E. Burke, "Winter Counts in the Smithsonian," in *The Year the Stars Fell: Winter Counts in the Smithsonian,* ed. Candace Greene and Russell Thornton (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 15.
[49] Burke, "Winter Counts," 16.
[50] Burke, "Winter Counts," 16.

Good Wood, who was able to describe many of the events depicted and corroborate Clément's interpretations.[51]

From these interpretations, several calendar entries on the Lone Dog Count focus on bison.[52] The illustrations for 1816-7 and 1845-6 represent that buffalo belly was plentiful those years, as extra meat was hung on poles to dry (Table 1). Images for 1843-4 and 1858-9 show the creation of medicine to bring about the bison, likely due to scarcity in that year. By contrast, 1861-2 shows that bison were so plentiful that year that their tracks came up to the perimeter of the tipis. The fact that five of the seventy years depicted on the Lone Dog Count feature bison as the defining event of that year demonstrates how important the species was to Indigenous culture.[53] Further, the fact that all these images focused on the quantity of bison in some way – whether celebrating abundance or responding to scarcity through the production of buffalo medicine – demonstrates a close attention to, and concern for, fluctuations in bison populations.

The Lone Dog Count was not the only winter count to highlight bison hunting as the defining feature of a given year. Nearly all winter counts from the Standing Rock Reservation represent the year 1883-1884 through the reservation's final bison hunt.[54] The year is often depicted via a figure named White Beard, who appears, for example, on the Long Soldier Winter Count. White Beard organized and hunted in the Standing Rock Reservation's last bison hunt, where 5000 bison were killed. That this final hunt was selected as the single event to define a year demonstrates both the historical significance of the bison hunt as well as concern over declining bison populations for Indigenous people of the Great Plains.

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[51] Burke, "Winter Counts," 16.
[52] The following interpretations are from "Lone Dog's Winter Count," Museum of Native American History, accessed November 11, 2024, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a60f55d29f18717fce46ab8/t/5fad75d036358572f1fad261/1605203428181/Lone+Dog%27s+Winter+Count+Final+.pdf.
[53] Turner, "Transformation on the Plains."
[54] Burke, "Winter Counts," 5; Tone-Pah-Hote, "Introduction," 34.

Ledger Books and Material Adaptation

Hide art, including the hide robe and winter count, slightly predates the ledger book, which was another art form that underwent changes in its materiality in response to the decline in bison populations between ca. 1850 to 1900.[55] Like deer hide or canvas robes, ledger books were a modern adaptation to the bison hide robe; but whereas the former displays the wearer's personal exploits on wearable textiles, ledger drawings do so in small paper books. The ledger book was originally a bound catalogue used for inventory by traders and military officers. Indigenous artists repurposed ledger books as bison hides grew scarce under government-sponsored eradication efforts. These books became the new medium for documenting one's personal and wartime achievements.[56]

Ledger books proved a choice alternative to hide due to their availability, portability, and formal similarities to bison hide. The smooth, white surface of the paper was formally similar to buffalo hides, which allowed draftsmen to approach the use of space and composition in a similar manner. For example, ledger pages could be aligned horizontally, with action moving from right to left as if progressing from the tail to the head of the hide, and figures could float on the page amidst no background or ground line just as were the stylistic conventions of the hide robe. In these ways, both the availability of the ledger books and the formal similarities possible between books and bison hides - which enabled a continuation of stylistic conventions between mediums - encouraged the adaption to new mediums as bison became scarcer toward the end of the century.

[55] Margolin, "A Lakota Sioux Ledger Book," 37.
[56] Janet Berlo, "Portraits of Dispossession in Plains Indian and Inuit Graphic Arts," *Art Journal* 49, no. 2 (1990): 133-34.

Robes were generally made of bison hide, although their medium shifted throughout the nineteenth century before the robes gradually phased out of production between 1860 and 1880.[57] As bison populations dwindled, Indigenous artists adapted by creating robes from deer, elk, or cow hide, and later canvas or muslin. Similarly, winter counts transitioned from bison hide to other animal hides, muslin, and paper. This parallel transition across art forms reflects the broader environmental and cultural changes that emerged in response to declining bison populations. This material transition both reflected the decimation of bison populations and demonstrated Indigenous artists' determination to preserve their cultural traditions despite resource constraints.

Ledger books also emerged as an adaptation to material scarcity. Books and their accompanying pens and colored pencils were readily available and easily acquired through trade, gift, or purchase from federal traders and officers. In particular, red and blue pencils were readily available because of their use in account books, and consequently, red and blue are the two most common colors that appear in ledger books.[58] The availability, portability, and formal similarities between hide and the ledger books made the book a choice material for the adaptation of traditional robe art.

As Janet Berlo argues, “Indigenous people expose imperialist activities,” rather than conceal the social, cultural, and environmental disruption that federal agencies enacted through the attempted extermination of the bison.[59] Through this transition in materiality, from bison hides to those of other game animals, canvas, muslin, and ledger books, Indigenous artist “found inventive ways to carry on their cultural and artistic traditions” in the midst of settler expansion

[57] Keyser, “Painted Bison Robes,” 34.
[58] Margolin, “A Lakota Sioux Ledger Book,” 37.
[59] Berlo, “Portraits of Dispossession,” 133.

in the American West. In this way, "the evidence of this perseverance can be found in enduring image and symbols of lifeways" as represented in robe art, winter counts, and ledger books.[60] The materiality of hide art and ledger books expresses both the environmental and cultural devastation caused by the U.S. government's forced eradication of the bison, as well as the longstanding endurance of Indigenous art forms and lifeways amidst colonial suppression.

Alternative Perspectives on Bison Decline

The pictographic content and material evolution of hide robes, winter counts, and ledger books offer insight into Indigenous perspectives on bison decline in the American West during the nineteenth century. Unlike Euro-American depictions of the bison hunt, such as those of Bierstadt and Moser, which emphasized unrestrained hunting and ignored the bison's utility, Indigenous art forms present alternative attitudes centered on use and cultural significance of the bison. The Hidatsa robe's balanced ratio of hunters to bison, the Lone Dog Count's attention to tracking bison populations, and the adaptation of traditional imagery to ledger books all demonstrate concern for and connection to the bison's fate.

Furthermore, the material transitions across these art forms - from bison hide to alternative materials - reveal both the impact of federal extermination policies on Indigenous art and the resilience of Indigenous artistic traditions. As curator of Indigenous art and Yurok tribal member Darienne Turner writes, Indigenous art's ability to "[change] rapidly in response to the conditions surrounding it" enabled artists to preserve their cultural practices despite environmental change.[61] Rather than concealing imperialist activities, as Berlo argues, these material adaptations expose the profound disruption of Indigenous lifeways while simultaneously

[60] Turner, "Transformation on the Plains."
[61] Turner, "Transformation on the Plains."

demonstrating their endurance. Through both their pictographic content and materiality, these art forms stand as testament to both the brutal impact of federal hunting policies and the resilience of Indigenous artists and communities in maintaining their cultural traditions.

III. Conservation

Three key components generated public support for the passage of conservation legislation at the turn of the century: the international popularity of *The Last of the Buffalo;* the bison's iconographic status as a symbol of the American West, reinforced through the concurrent exhibitions of the painting and the Buffalo Bill shows; and Bierstadt's own involvement in conservation issues. Here I will explore how the painting garnered international popularity and supported the association of the bison with the American West through its display and reception at both domestic and international venues. In discussing the painting's display of a western landscape to an international audience, this chapter draws particularly from the scholarship of Roger Stein and Alexander Nemerov, who suggest that regional art strategically instructs foreign viewers on a strange world by making the world visually "habitable" or familiar to them, and that artists matched significant cultural phenomena to their subject matter, including western subjects like bison.[62] As such, *The Last of the Buffalo* drew from visual conventions that were familiar to a European audience to communicate the identity of an American West, and those western tropes acted as vehicles through which the social milieu of the time could be exhibited at an international scale. Both of these processes enabled the matter of bison conservation to become a concern at an international scale, which helped facilitate the passage of conservation legislation in the subsequent years. This idea will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections, but these processes of display and reception set the stage for the successful passage of conservation legislation.

[62] Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains," 7; Nemerov, "Doing the 'Old America,'" 303.

Display and Reception

Large audiences viewed *The Last of the Buffalo* as the painting gained great attention with its exhibition in 1889. It was first shown in New York City at the Union Club League in January of that year. Bierstadt then submitted the work for exhibition in the American art pavilion at the Paris Exposition Universelle, where it was rejected in a very controversial decision on the grounds that the work was too large and did not reflect current European aesthetic trends. Leveraging his status as a chevalier of the Legion of Honor, an award conferred by Napoleon III in the late 1860s, Bierstadt was able to exhibit his work at the Paris Salon instead. The painting was then moved to the distinguished French art gallery Boussod, Valadon, & Cie before returning to the artist's studio in New York.

The Last of the Buffalo drew considerable attention at its exhibitions abroad, often receiving positive commentary in contemporary art periodicals. For instance, *The New York Times* highlighted the painting in its discussion of the "Gems of the Paris Salon," stating that the work "hangs conspicuously, and its immensity of horizon, with thoroughly well-treated animation of foreground, is as novel as it is interesting."[63] *New York Evangelist* wrote that the painting "fixes its own time; it embodies a period and becomes historical, deriving thus an importance and permanency even aside from its high merits as a work of art… [Bierstadt's] work will live as a part of the history of the country."[64] A correspondent of the *Christian Union* also recognized the historic nature of the work in its time, noting that "[the picture] would gladden the heart of every patriotic American."[65] Lastly, the piece was featured several times in the

[63] "Gems of the Paris Salon," *New York Times,* April 30, 1889, 1.
[64] "Current Events: The Last of the Buffaloes," *New York Evangelist*, June 12, 1890, 8.
[65] "Outlook in Art," *Christian Union*, January 30, 1892, 201.

World's spring issues, including "The Last of the Buffalo; an Entrancing View of Bierstadt's Great Painting," "American Artists in Luck," and "Real American Art."[66]

A second, smaller version of the painting, now in the collection of the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming, was created the same year and displayed in at the Hanover Gallery in London in 1891. It was promptly purchased by the English railroad baron Colonel John Thomas North for his art gallery in southeast London. North purchased the painting for a record sum of $50,000, the highest price ever recorded for a work of art in the nineteenth century.[67] Adjusted for inflation, North's sum is equivalent to paying $1.73 million for the work in 2023.[68] As demonstrated by both the extensive and largely positive media reviews and the record sum for which the smaller painting was sold, *The Last of the Buffalo* was received at its time as a landmark work on an international scale.

The painting's exhibition in Paris coincided with a tour of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show in the same city. Born William Frederick Cody in 1846, Buffalo Bill was a hunter- turned entertainer who became a personification of the American Wild West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[69] Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show began in Omaha, Nebraska in 1883, where it was initially called "W. F. Cody and Dr. W. F. Carver's Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition." The exhibition featured shooting competitions, races, battles between Native Americans and cowboys, and a grand finale of the "Grand Hunt on the Plains," which involved chasing live buffalo, wild horses, longhorns, deer, elk, and other various prey around the arena.[70]

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[66] Carleton, "The Last of the Buffalo," 22; "American Artists in Luck," *New York World,* March 17, 1889, 4; "Real American Art," *New York World*, March 31, 1889, 4.
[67] "Chicago and the West," *Forest and Stream*, November 12, 1891, 331; Peter Hassrick, "Art, Agency, and Conservation," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 68, no. 1 (2018): 25.
[68] Ian Webster, "Inflation Calculator," Official Inflation Data, Alioth Finance, accessed March 16, 2023, https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1855?amount=50000.
[69] Brian W. Dippie, "'Flying Buffaloes': Artists and the Buffalo Hunt," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 51, no. 2 (2001): 12.
[70] Dippie, "Flying Buffaloes," 12.

During its first four years of operation, the show gained great popularity at the national level, which prompted its first of several European tours in 1887.[71] Buffalo Bill continued to parade his showmanship of live cowboys, horses, bison, and Native Americans throughout western Europe, where Buffalo Bill's persona became inextricably linked to the bison; and, in turn, the bison became an iconic symbol of the American West, both nationally and abroad.[72] Notably, at the same time that Bierstadt was exhibiting his image of the American West and bison's looming extinction to an international audience, the same themes were presented through the performance art of Buffalo Bill. Through these concurrent spectacles, the topic of the American West became popular in Paris.

Art historian Grant Hamming notes that the two spectacles share a similar "visual vocabulary," wherein the advertising posters for Buffalo Bill's Wild West utilize a similar compositional formula to that which is used in *The Last of the Buffalo* to create a sense of nostalgia for the "Wild West."[73] Several of Buffalo Bill's posters for his Wild West shows depict an expansive prairie landscape, like that in *The Last of the Buffalo*, populated by figures riding on horseback. The figures frequently, though not always, engage in some form of conflict or general dynamism, such as shooting or wrangling.

One poster that departs from this compositional theme typical of Buffalo Bill's advertisements but shares visual similarities with Bierstadt's painting is *Je Viens* (I am Coming), which portrays a herd of bison as they stampede across the poster's prairie background from right to left (fig. 12). A single bison commands most of the poster's space. Imposed over its body

[71] Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains," 15.
[72] Dippie, "Flying Buffaloes," 13.
[73] Grant Hamming, "Amerikanischer Malkasten: American Art and Düsseldorf" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2016), 145; Spencer Wigmore, "Albert Bierstadt and the Speculative Terrain of American Landscape Painting, 1866-1877" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2020), 88.

is a portrait of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, adorned in his signature cowboy hat and head turned in three-quarter view. Like Bierstadt's painting, this poster depicts a herd of buffalo traveling across the prairie, though Bierstadt's bison take a more oppositional stance relative to the dynamic passing of Buffalo Bill's ungulates. Additionally, both images utilize the "returned gaze" of the central bison. To visitors and residents of Paris at the turn of the century, these visual materials would have likely conferred a heightened awareness of the bison as a key icon of the American West at an international scale. The intersection of these two displays – both the visual similarity of Bierstadt's composition and Cody's advertisements, and the concurrent displays of the two spectacles in Paris – fortified the connection between the bison and the identity of the American West.

Regional Art

The regional art of both Bierstadt and Buffalo Bill embodied the spirit of the American West for a nonlocal audience using strategies that made the unknown feel familiar. The term "regional art" relates to Roger Stein's discussion of the topic in "Packaging the Great Plains," although it should be noted that Bierstadt is not usually described as a regional artist owing to his theatrical landscapes ranging from Lucerne, Switzerland to Nassau in the Bahamas. Nevertheless, the relationship between Bierstadt and regional art holds relevance, as art historians have associated the artist with the Rocky Mountain School and highlighted his sustained interest in capturing the land-use changes that unfolded in the American West during his lifetime.[74]

[74] For discussion of Bierstadt's role in the Rocky Mountain School, see William S. Talbot, "American Visions of Wilderness," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 56, no. 4 (1969): 165 and Daniel Sage, "Framing Space: A Popular Geopolitics of American Manifest Destiny in Outer Space," *Geopolitics* 13, no. 1 (2008): 30. For

As Roger Stein argues, regional artists navigated a challenging cultural and intellectual terrain by striving to accurately map the contours of a landscape while appealing to the ideas and images that are familiar to an audience that lives beyond that region.[75] In other words, the regional artist endeavors to represent a strange new world while preventing estrangement of the viewer. The regional artist achieves this by making that world feel visually "habitable" or familiar relative to the viewer's own world.[76] In this view, regional art balances communication of a regional landscape with catering to an audience who sees "in terms of the 'Old World," or in a different set of historical, cultural, and environmental baselines. Building upon this understanding of regional art as a type of communication to non-local audiences, the visual tactics of *The Last of the Buffalo* garnered public appeal at an international level precisely because they communicate a strange new landscape – the Wild West – using cues that are familiar to an audience that lives beyond this region. Bierstadt's imagery of the hunt serves as a key example of this process.

Historian Brian Dippie writes that American artists treated the bison hunt as their native equivalent to European hunting scenes. Providing "a uniquely American twist on a venerable European tradition," the bison hunt appealed to a romantic sentiment of awe and magnificence, the terror and emotional charge lending the subject a "distinguished pedigree."[77] Operating under Stein's conception of regional art, the bison hunt excelled at regional art's purpose: it communicated a distinctly native tradition – hunting bison across the Great Plains – within the frameworks that are familiar to a nonlocal audience – that of the European hunting scene.

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discussion of Bierstadt's interest in capturing land-use changes in the American West during the nineteenth century, see Hassrick, *Albert Bierstadt*, 30.

[75] Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains," 7.

[76] Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains," 7.

[77] Dippie, "Flying Buffaloes," 5.

Bierstadt's scene of the hunt evokes similar encounters between wild beasts and human forces expressed in European hunting scenes, such as Peter Paul Rubens's *Lion Hunt,* John Singleton Copley's *Watson and the Shark,* and various images of spear-wielding figures on horseback, including several renditions of St. George and the Dragon.[78] In both *The Last of the Buffalo* and *Lion Hunt*, for example, a mounted figure drives a spear through a wild animal in the center of the composition. Both paintings depict a white horse, rearing with its front legs airborne, while its rider impales the beast from a close range. The beast, be it bison or lion, fights against its hunter: the former charges headfirst at its foe, while the latter sinks its teeth and claws into its adversaries. At the bottom of both paintings, a dead human body lies across the ground and indicates the carnage that has resulted from such an encounter. By borrowing the thematic and stylistic conventions of European hunting scenes such as *Lion Hunt*, Bierstadt arranges regional content – the image of American West, replete with Indigenous hunters, seas of bison, and vast expanses of wilderness – within an established system of forms to a European audience. By presenting a tantalizing "new world" to audiences in Europe and the eastern U.S. using pictorial traditions that appeal to these audiences' own aesthetic fields, the painting achieved great attention and praise both within the U.S. and abroad.

Naturalizing Extinction

In addition to achieving both the awe of the unfamiliar and the comfort of the familiar, a second outcome resulted from Bierstadt's depiction of regional themes using established pictorial traditions: the naturalization of the historical narrative constructed in the painting. Bierstadt deployed several iconographic images in his landscape: namely, these include the

[78] See, for example, Raphael's *Saint George and the Dragon*, c. 1506. Oil on panel. National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection (1937.1.26).

imagery of a horseback figure engaged in the hunt, which recalls the European hunting scenes just noted*;* the image of a sun-bleached animal skull, which serves as a *memento mori* and recalls the use of the skull in other images of the American West, such as William Jacob Hays's *The Herd on the Move*; and the image of an anonymous Native American hunter, face turned away from the viewer as a silhouette, which recalls the pictorialist aesthetics of Edward Curtis's *The Vanishing Race – Navajo.*

Taken together, *The Last of the Buffalo* utilizes culturally significant images – the hunt, the skull, the anonymous Native American hunter – to construct an image of the American West and communicate that image to an audience who, for the most part, does not reside in the region depicted in the painting. This creates what Alexander Nemerov describes as a "duality of iconography," in which the painting seems to represent a "real West," but the iconographic references "make it seem like the West can only be known in relation to other images."[79] In other words, the painting "[claims] to depict a real West," yet it "[relies] surreptitiously on other images for this reality."[80] This constructed depiction of the West becomes conflated with the true identity of the West, particularly for distant audiences such as those at the Paris Salon. When this occurs, Nemerov writes, the image "becomes reified, or mistaken for what it represents. The image of the West becomes the West."[81]

In effect, Bierstadt's image of the bison hunt becomes conflated with the bison hunts that occurred on the Great Plains in the nineteenth century. The style of hunting depicted in Bierstadt's painting becomes mistaken for the *only* style of hunting that occurred, to the exclusion of Indigenous hunting practices, and conceals the mass slaughtering led by federal

[79] Nemerov, "Doing the 'Old America,'" 329.
[80] Nemerov, "Doing the 'Old America,'" 329.
[81] Nemerov, "Doing the 'Old America,'" 290.

extermination efforts. As Roger Stein writes, "Bierstadt's success within this pictorial tradition…implicitly places the responsibility for the decimation of the herds of bison upon the Native Americans, rather than the white American and European sportsman-slaughterers and commercial exploiters who in fact were the culprits."[82] More broadly, Stein continues, these strategies "mask the racial conflict, the land-grabbing, the buffalo-slaughtering, and the responsibility for genocide" that is implicit in this period of American history.[83]

Through these visual strategies, Bierstadt naturalizes the bison's extinction and suppresses the lived social conflict that underlies the decline in bison populations during the nineteenth century. The painting suppresses relationships of federal power and selective extermination and offers a constructed landscape that appears "'natural,' what 'everybody' believes, and not a subject for debate, struggle, or conflict."[84] In doing so, it joined a body of texts and images concerned with the bison's extinction at the turn of the century, which cumulatively generated concern for the fate of the bison as a symbol of the American West using techniques that naturalized the process of extinction and placed responsibility for the bison's extinction in the hands of Native American hunters, rather than federal hunters. In turn, this set the stage for broad public support for the passage of conservation legislation, allowed federal agencies to be absolved from their own responsibility for population decline, and enabled the identification of federal agencies as conservationists and champions of the bison by the beginning of the twentieth century.

[82] Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains," 13.
[83] Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains," 13-15.
[84] Stein, "Packaging the Great Plains," 15.

Conservation Legislation

Bierstadt was a member of the Boone and Crockett Club, a men's hunting and wildlife protection organization co-founded by Theodore Roosevelt and George Grinnell. The club originated out of its founders' desire to protect the nation's declining wildlife populations for recreational hunting amid unrestricted market hunting and industrial expansion. It held its first meeting in December 1887 at Roosevelt's home in Manhattan, then adopted a constitution the following year which outlined the club's mission to "work for the preservation of the large game of this country, and so far as possible to further legislation for that purpose, and to assist in enforcing the existing laws."[85] Operating under this constitution, the club leveraged its members' diverse professional skills to advocate for legislative measures to conserve the nation's natural resources, particularly the protection of Yellowstone National Park and the American bison.[86] For example, Bierstadt, who had been involved in the club since its inception in 1887, contributed to the effort through his art; Grinnell, editor of the popular magazine *Forest and Stream*, raised public interest in hunting and awareness of conservation issues through the periodical; and politician John F. Lacey proposed bills to Congress to obtain legal protections over the country's natural resources. Taken together, the visual, literary, and political efforts of the club helped generate public interest in the bison's conservation and the legal provisions that protected the species.

The Last of the Buffalo provided an aesthetic statement in support of the Boone and Crockett Club's goals and melded with related efforts undergone by club members. For instance, the painting shared a title with a *Forest and Stream* column that reported bison disappearances

[85] The Boone and Crockett Club's founding principles are listed in George Bird Grinnell, *Brief History of the Boone and Crockett Club: With Officers, Constitution, and List of Members for the Year 1910* (New York: Forest and Stream Publishing Company, 1910), 4.
[86] Hassrick, "Art, Agency, and Conservation," 22.

and advocated for the species' legal protection. An 1892 edition of the column, written by Boone and Crockett member Emerson Hough, stated: "The paper… ought to be the first stepping stone in a plan for national legislation for the protection and increase of our animal… It may be that after a time we shall not concern ourselves about finding news of the 'Last of the Buffalo,' but shall say that there never is going to be any last buffalo at all."[87]

The club also carried its conservation interests to the public arena through a book series. The series, comprised of members' essays recounting expeditions ranging from bear hunting in the Sierras to bison hunting in the Plains, were intended for anyone interested in wildlife, from wilderness enthusiast to frontier politicians.[88] Contemporary critics applauded the publications. One reviewer claimed that the club's *Hunting in Many Lands* was "incomparably the best book ever written on the large animals of America."[89]

A watershed moment occurred for the club in 1894, when an infamous bison poacher named Edgar Howell was caught in Yellowstone National Park by park scout Felix Burgess. Emerson Hough happened to be visiting the park at the time, was made aware of Howell's arrest, and promptly telegraphed *Forest and Stream* editor Grinnell with the news. The arrest became nationally publicized in the March 24 edition of *Forest and Stream*, followed by a series of commentary about the arrest and need for wildlife protection in the magazine's subsequent issues. The article was accompanied by photos of Howell's slaughtered buffalo captured by F. Jay Haynes, which art historian Alan Braddock suggests were significant because "for the first time, Americans could actually see the gory handiwork of poaching."[90] Haynes's photos joined

[87] Emerson Hough, "Chicago and the West," *Forest and Stream*, March 3, 1892, 196.
[88] Alexandra Mogan, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Boone and Crockett Club: The Saving of America's Buffalo," *Global Tides* 6, no. 7 (2012): 8.
[89] C. H. M., "Hunting in Many Lands: The Book of the Boone and Crocket Club," *Science* 3, no. 59 (1896): 246.
[90] Braddock, "Poaching Pictures," 39.

Bierstadt's painting in portraying America's bison as "besieged national icons facing a critical last stand," and they were widely disseminated to a broad audience interested in the wildlife issues discussed in *Forest and Stream's* pages.[91]

Following these artistic, literary, and journalistic outputs from club members, the public tide began to turn. Contemporary viewers of *The Last of the Buffalo* recognized the painting's role in stirring public interest in the bison's disappearance, as a writer for the *New York Evangelist* proclaimed in his review of the painting: "That [the buffalo] should now cease to be encountered in his old haunts, and so suddenly, much stirs and offends that in each one of us which craves the permanent."[92] Meanwhile, a literary critic wrote of the Boone and Crockett Club's book series that "such a club should have the best wishes and the support of every sportsman in the United States."[93] Such support was garnered when, following *Forest and Stream*'s article on Howell's arrest, an anonymous note signed "A Friend to the Buffalo" reassured Yellowstone park authorities, "I will drop you a few lines as a favor for the Buffalos as they are about extinct" and disclosed the illegal capture of several bison calves in the Park.[94] Taken together, the media produced by members of the Boone and Crockett Club – including but not limited to *The Last of the Buffalo* – brought the issue of the bison's near-extinction to the public arena and generated public support for the bison's legal protection.

Two months after *Forest and Stream* published the gruesome reality of Howell's illegal bison poaching, the Lacey Act was signed into law. The act, proposed by U.S. Senator and Boone and Crockett member John Lacey, increased Yellowstone's size by 3,444 square miles

[91] Braddock, "Poaching Pictures," 38.
[92] "The Last of the Buffaloes," 8.
[93] "Wild Animals of the Far West: American Big-Game Hunting, The Book of the Boone and Crockett Club," *New York Times*, December 17, 1893, 3.
[94] Anonymous, n.d., Document 696, "A-E, January 1, 1882- December 31, 1894," Item 4, Yellowstone National Park Archives. As seen in Mogan, "Theodore Roosevelt," 21.

and created the first concrete means for federal wildlife protection by allowing the government to prosecute poachers for killing bison in the park.[95] The Lacey act provided actionable measures to protect the dwindling bison populations in Yellowstone and set the precedent for protection of future national parks. Furthermore, it initiated a systematic effort to unite federal and state level management for wildlife protection. The Lacey Act of 1894 was later augmented with the passage of a second Lacey Act in 1900, which included even more comprehensive environmental protections. The later act broadened interstate commerce prohibitions to protect game illegally poached from public land; barred the import of invasive species without a government-issued permit; and authorized federal aid in the conservation of game and wild bird populations.[96] Due in large part to the protections conferred by the Lacey Act, bison populations in Yellowstone increased from 25 in 1901 to 1,500 by the mid-1950s.[97] Bison were found to reoccupy their historic range beginning in 1940, and at their peak in the late twentieth century, Yellowstone bison numbered approximately 4,000 (fig. 13).[98]

Bierstadt's and other Boone and Crockett members' artistic and journalistic campaigns contributed to the early establishment of repopulation efforts by raising public awareness of the issue, but it is also important to note that the success of conservation efforts was tied to the government gaining greater exclusionary control over wilderness and wildlife areas. The protections outlined in the 1894 and 1900 Lacey Acts shared a greater allocation of power to federal and state governments in creating and enforcing natural resource protections. They joined

[95] Theodore Cart, "The Lacey Act: America's First Nationwide Wildlife Statute," *Forest History Newsletter* 17, no. 3 (1973): 8, https://doi.org/10.2307/4004266.
[96] G. Parks Gilbert, "The Lacey Act: A Vintage Conservation Tool Still Vital in Today's Global Economy," *Natural Resources & Environment* 29, no. 3 (2015): 3.
[97] Dean Lueck, "The Extermination and Conservation of the American Bison," *The Journal of Legal Studies* 31 (2002): S609–52, https://doi.org/10.1086/340410.
[98] John Nishi, "A Review of Best Practices and Principles for Bison Disease Issues: Greater Yellowstone and Wood Buffalo Areas," *American Bison Society Working Paper Series* (2010): 29.

a surge of new political developments during the early twentieth century which increased federal responsibility for conservation, including: the creation of nine new national parks between 1899 and 1909; the expansion of a federal refuge system for bird and big game mammals in 1903; and the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, the first federal bureau exclusively dedicated to wilderness and wildlife conservation.[99]

These organizations and legal provisions have been instrumental in protecting and preserving key ecosystems and species populations in the U.S. At the same time, however, they depart significantly from traditional systems of local and community-based ecological management that have been practiced in the U.S. for centuries prior to European settlement. Whereas traditional community-based conservation models generally emphasize an interconnected relationship between humans and the environment, the Lacey Acts and other early twentieth-century conservation policies enforced a model of "fortress conservation" wherein protection of ecosystems required isolation from human disturbance.[100]

Models of fortress conservation traditionally advantage federal enforcement and often militarization of protected areas while displacing and removing sovereignty from local inhabitants.[101] For instance, the protection of Yellowstone National Park was managed by the U.S. military prior to the establishment of the National Park Service in 1916. During this time, Indigenous communities, including the Crow, Blackfeet, and Shoshone Tribes, were displaced from their native lands and forcibly moved to reservations, separating people from the environment in order to preserve the park's supposed untrammeled wilderness.

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[99] Theodore Cart, "The Lacey Act: America's First Nationwide Wildlife Statute," *Forest History Newsletter* 17, no. 3 (1973): 13, https://doi.org/10.2307/4004266.

[100] Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart, *Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 149; Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, first edit. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 96; Paul Robbins, *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction*, second edit., (Chichester: J. Wiley & Sons, 2012), 18-19.

[101] See, in particular, Robbins, *Political Ecology,* ch. 9: "Conservation and Control," 176-98.

Traditional Ecological Stewardship

Fortress conservation enforces the presumption that human interaction with the landscape inherently damages the environment by asserting that if there are no beneficial relationships between people and the environment, then the best way to protect the environment is to separate people from it.[102] The pictorial narratives displayed in *The Last of the Buffalo* advocated for conservation of the American bison yet ultimately led to a fortress conservation model, which centers federal agencies as the executioners of environmental management decisions and excludes local populations from interacting with the landscapes they had stewarded for millennia.

By contrast, the Indigenous perspective on the *wakhán* offers an alternative model of bison conservation that is not based upon the separation of humans from the environmental problem, but in their involvement as part of the solution. Anthropologist David Posthumus highlights the Lakota belief that bison are a non-human spirit, or *wakhán* being, that "could not die out." In this perspective, writes Posthumus, "bison decline was not irreversible but could be resolved through the proper rituals," including the propitious Ghost Dance.[103] The Ghost Dance is a ceremonial revitalization effort that was embraced by Indigenous Plains communities around 1890 to reverse bison decline by dancing their populations back to the landscape. Both the Ghost Dance and federal conservation legislation are similar in that their aim is to restore declining bison populations: however, whereas federal legislative measures endeavored to achieve this goal through the separation of humans from bison and their habitat, the Ghost Dance endeavored

[102] Robbins, *Political Ecology*, 178.
[103] David C. Posthumus, "A Lakota View of Pté Oyáte (Buffalo Nation)," in *Bison and People on the North American Great Plains: A Deep Environmental History*, ed. Geoff Cunfer and Bill Waiser (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2016): 294-5.

to achieve this goal through direct action of humans upon the bison's habitat in an effort to make the bison return to their migratory homelands.

The idea that environmental wellbeing inherently requires a separation from human habitation has roots in both Euro-American environmental attitudes in the nineteenth century and in the visual traditions of contemporary painters like Bierstadt and photographers such as Carleton Watkins. In his seminal text, "The Trouble with Wilderness," William Cronon writes that the concept of wilderness as an untouched land is a cultural invention that required the forced removal of Native Americans from their traditional homelands.[104] In this way, there is nothing "natural" about wilderness, Cronon argues, as it separates humanity and nature as opposites. This presents a paradox: wilderness "leaves no place for human beings," and it "by definition can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us."[105] This notion of wilderness found visual parallels in the work of Carleton Watkins, whose photographs of the Yosemite Valley, devoid of human presence, celebrate the landscape as a pristine wilderness that erased the presence and impact of Native Americans on the environment.

DeLuca and Demo write that Watkins's images present nature "as spectacular object" rather than habitable space, and Getty curator Weston Naef notes that Watkins's one hundred stereographs of Yosemite are devoid of human figures, or even indications of habitation such as structures or roads: a compositional decision whose greatest effect is the legacy that defines wilderness as a space necessarily devoid of human habitation.[106] Like Watkins, Bierstadt's *The Last of the Buffalo* occludes indication of Euro-American habitation. Cabins, railroads, wagons, mines, and other indices of colonial expansion and industrialization that populated the American

[104] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996): 17.
[105] Cronon, 17.
[106] DeLuca and Demo, "Imagining Nature," 547.

West during the late nineteenth century are absent from Bierstadt's landscape. Instead, the artist creates an uninhabited prairie, a vast expanse of wilderness which extends to the horizon and margins of the canvas. Human figures occupy only the right side of the foreground and midground, yielding to an otherwise desolate expanse of mountains and river basins. The figures that are present are not Euro-American settlers, federal hunters, or surveyors, but Native Americans whose presence further signifies a landscape undisturbed by colonial expansion. These visual strategies consequently absolve federal hunters from the overexploitation of bison and implicitly suggest that preservation of the species requires a fortress conservation model which separates humans from the environments they seek to protect.

IV. Conclusion

Examination of this topic is animated by current issues in natural resource management. Contemporary environmental challenges (spanning from drought to flooding, megafire, habitat fragmentation, insect blights, and increasing land-use demands), paired with an ongoing reckoning with the complex origins of American preservationism, require a critical examination of these inherited approaches to conservation. To return to the moment in history where these approaches originated is to better understand how the nation has arrived at its contemporary natural resource issues and to begin to uncover pathways toward improved management decisions.

This reckoning with America's conservationist history has been undertaken by scholars like Mark Spence, whose chapter in *Dispossessing the Wilderness* highlights the forced removal of the Blackfeet Tribe and protracted battle over land rights for the protection of Glacier National Park.[107] Krupar's "Eagle Memorandum" critically examines how the conversion of military sites into wildlife refuges obscures violent histories of forced removal while presenting a façade of environmental redemption.[108] Tuck and Yang's "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor" echoes the "sanitization" of toxic military histories described in Krupar's memorandum by identifying six "settler moves to innocence," or "positionings that attempt to relieve the settler feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege."[109] As these authors note, a reckoning with the nation's environmentalist origins, paired with contemporary natural resource

[107] Mark Spence, "Crowning the Continent: The American Wilderness Ideal and Blackfeet Exclusion from Glacier NP," in Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.
[108] Shiloh Krupar, "Where Eagles Dare," in *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*, eds. Emily Scott and Kirsten Swenson (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015): 131-3.
[109] Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 10.

issues, call into question the viability of separating humans from protected landscapes. Meanwhile, a recognition of traditional ecological knowledge and management practices suggests alternative models for human-environment relationships.[110]

Bierstadt's *The Last of the Buffalo* demonstrates the role of visual culture in both reflecting environmental attitudes and shaping conservation policy and during the nineteenth century. By depicting the bison as a keystone species in danger of extinction, Bierstadt's painting contributed to the creation of environmental protections for the preservation of the American bison. At the same time, Bierstadt's exclusion of white hunters from the composition, whether explicitly or implicitly, absolved federal policymakers, hunters, and soldiers from the responsibility of environmental degradation. In being released from the responsibility, federal policymakers were then able to enter the problem of ecosystem degradation at the turn of the century as the solution to the near-extinct bison population through the implementation of fortress conservation measures. Through the painting's strategic visual choices, including the depiction of Native Americans rather than white hunters, the use of familiar European hunting scene conventions, and the employment of the animal gaze to foster empathy, the painting helped generate public support for bison conservation while simultaneously advocating for a particular model of environmental protection that found its way into the policies of federal land management agencies in the creation of national parks, wildlife refuges, and federal conservation aid in the early twentieth century. Bierstadt's painting and environmental advocacy supported a

[110] For a discussion of traditional ecological knowledge and its relevance to contemporary natural resource management, see Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 6-7; Fikret Berkes et al., "Rediscovery of Traditional Ecological Knowledge as Adaptive Management," *Ecological Applications* 10, no. 5 (2000): 1251; M. Kat Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005): 334.

conservation model predicated on the separation of humans from the environment in order to preserve natural resources, rather than a conservation model that views humans as integral stewards of the environment.

The influence of visual culture on environmental attitudes and policy in nineteenth-century America extends beyond Bierstadt and the bison. Similar visual strategies appear in the work of other artists who shaped early conservation movements. For example, the naturalization of Indigenous displacement achieved by Edward Curtis's photography promoted the idea of an "untouched" American West that should remain uninhabited; the association of the bison with American identity, achieved through the performance art of Buffalo Bill, centered the "Wild West" and its associated species as a foundational component of American national identity; and the erasure of human presence, evidenced in Watkins's photographs in Yosemite, helped establish the concept of wilderness as necessarily separate from human presence.

These artistic choices had lasting consequences for American environmental policy and management throughout the following century. The fortress conservation model promoted by works like *The Last of the Buffalo,* predicated on separating humans from wild landscapes, became embedded in American conservation philosophy in the early twentieth century. This conservation model manifested in the creation of national parks, wildlife preserves, and the continuation of Indigenous displacement in the name of federal environmental preservation. While these policies helped to preserve key species, including the American bison, they also reinforced an environmental perspective in which ecosystems could only be preserved by isolating humans from the environment, rather than integrating humans into the environment as stewards of the land. These assumptions about human-environment relationships continued to

influence land management throughout the twentieth century as preservation became a popular model of land management for federal agencies.[111]

Just as visual culture played a role in shaping environmental policy and attitudes in the nineteenth century, it remains vital in contemporary considerations of land management. In considering the influence of visual culture in shaping environmental attitudes, both at the end of the nineteenth century and today, it remains an important task to consider the types of attitudes and policies promoted by such imagery. Bierstadt's *The Last of the Buffalo* demonstrates how landscape art can simultaneously advocate for environmental protection while supporting policies focused on settler-colonial approaches to environmental management. As environmental resilience is challenged by climate change and increasing land-use demands, analysis of historical examples such as Bierstadt's can help build an understanding of the role of visual culture in shaping both an American perception of nature and national approaches to protecting it.

Rather than singularly celebrating *The Last of the Buffalo*'s historical conservation successes or condemning its shortcomings, this thesis suggests that visual traditions influence environmental thinking and policy in both effective and counterproductive ways. While nineteenth-century artists like Bierstadt helped save species from extinction, they also promoted conservation models that continue to shape, and sometimes limit, national ability to address current and future environmental challenges. Understanding this history may impact both art

[111] See, for example, the USDA Forest Service's approach to forest management in the American West during the early twentieth century, wherein a conceptual separation of people from nature manifested as fire exclusion. Although Indigenous people used fire to alter the forested landscape for millennia, the Forest Service instituted a policy of fire exclusion which separated people and their traditional land management practices from the landscape. Full discussion of this topic extends beyond the scope of this paper but is reviewed in Stephen Pyne, *The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire*, *and What Happens Next* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021) and Andrew Scott et al., *Fire on Earth: An Introduction* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013).

historical interpretation of landscape images of the American West, as well as policy approaches to natural resource conservation in the future.

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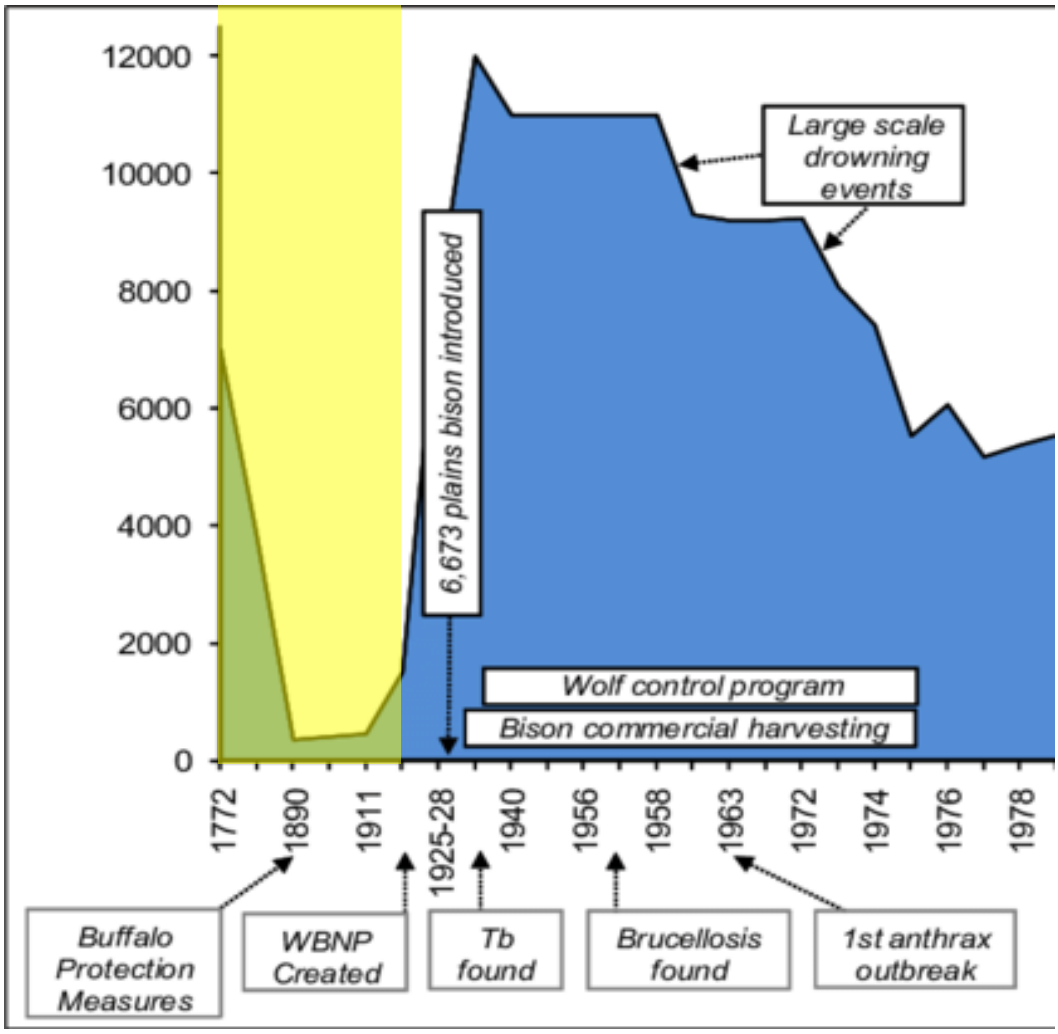

Figure 2 Bison abundance in North America, 1772 – 1978. From Nishi, "A Review of Best Practices and Principles for Bison Disease Issues: Greater Yellowstone and Wood Buffalo Areas," American Bison Society Working Paper Series (2010), fig. 3.

Figure 3 *Buffalo Bones Stacked at Michigan Carbon Works*, n.d. Photographic print mounted on mat board, 7.5 x 9.5 in. (19.1 x 24.1 cm). Detroit Public Library, Burton Historical Collection (DPA4901).

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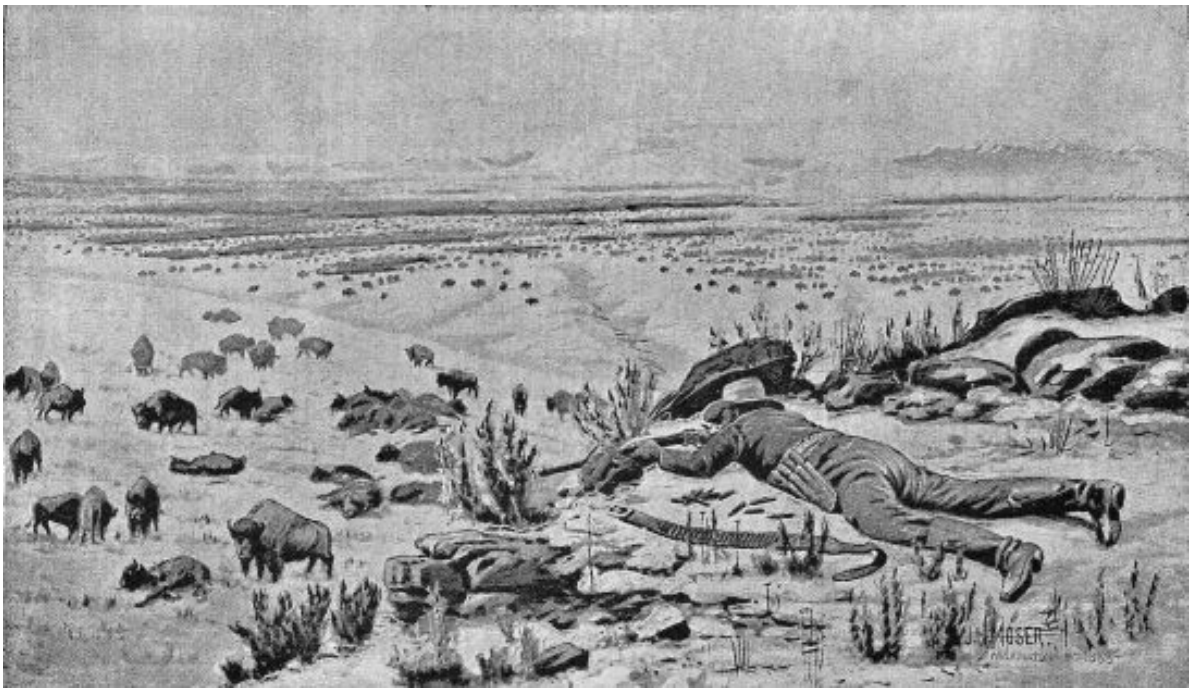


Figure 5 After James Henry Moser, "The Still Hunt," 1888. From William T. Hornaday. "The Extermination of the American Bison," *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year Ending June 30, 1887* (Government Printing Office, 1889), pl. xiv.

Figure 6 George Catlin (American, 1796-1872). *No. 6, Buffalo Hunt, Chase*, 1844. Lithograph with applied watercolor, 12 13/16 x 18 1/2 in. (32.5 x 47 cm). Amon Carter Museum of American Art (1964.96).

Figure 7 William Jacob Hays (American, 1830-1875). *The Herd on the Move*, ca. 1862. Color lithograph, 17 13/16 x 35 5/16 in. (45.2 x 89.7 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection (1946.9.2135).

Figure 8 (left) Detail of *The Herd on the Move* (fig. 9)
Figure 9 (right) Detail of *The Last of the Buffalo* (fig. 1)

Figure 10 Northern Plains Hidatsa. *Buffalo Robe*, ca. 1875. Pigment and porcupine quills on tanned buffalo hide. Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Plains Indian Museum Collection, gift of William L. Cone (NA.702.30).

Figure 11 Sioux. Replica of *Lone Dog Winter Count*, ca. 1900s. Paint on muslin. Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Plains Indian Museum Collection (NA 702.5).

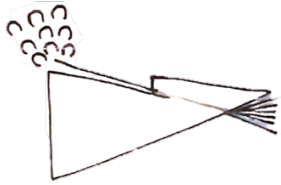
Image	Year	Interpretation
	1816-1817	Buffalo meat was plenty.
	1843-1844	The Sans Arcs made medicine to bring the buffalo.
	1845-1846	Buffalo meat was plenty.
	1858-1859	Lone Horn made medicine to bring the buffalo.
	1861-1862	Buffalo were so plentiful that their tracks came near the tipis.

Table 1 Details of the *Lone Dog Winter Count* (fig. 11) and their respective interpretations, from Museum of Native American History, n.d. "Lone Dog's Winter Count." Accessed 11/11/24. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a60f55d29f18717fce46ab8/t/5fad75d036358572f1fad261/1605203428181/Lone+Dog%27s+Winter+Count+Final+.pdf.

Figure 12 *Je Viens*, 1889. From Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show in Paris, 1889. Buffalo Bill Center of the West (1.69.442d).

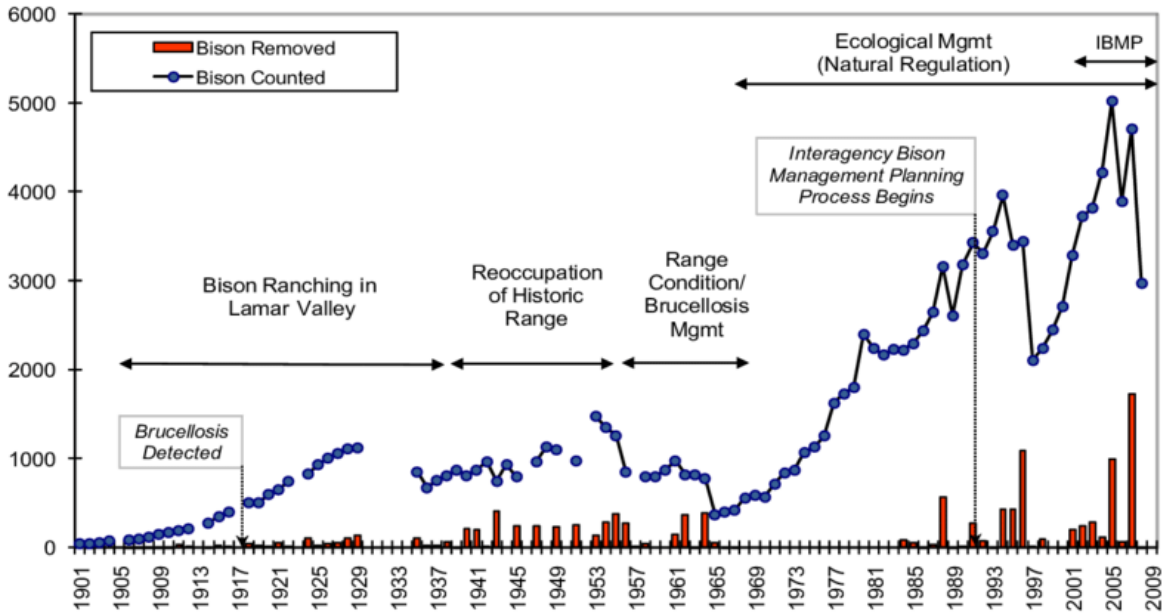


Figure 13 Trend of bison population size and removals within Yellowstone National Park, 1901-2008. From Nishi, "A Review of Best Practices," fig. 2.