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Knights of the Round Table Mesa: A Brief Study in the Paintings and Books on the American West

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Abstract

This article investigates how printed material and visual arts helped create the image of the cowboy in American popular culture. This perception did much to influence the popular memory of the American West and had significant consequences for the development of American identity.

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Memory is a powerful thing. It influences how people make their future decisions, and how they view their past. The tricky thing about memory is that it is not always true. How a person remembers the play out of events from the past is not always accurate, and this is as true for individuals as it is for nations. The past is often cast in specific lights, good or bad, that do not always match up with the reality of the situation. The Battle of Agincourt is remembered as the triumph of the longbow over the armored knight, and the English arrow storm is depicted in movies and television shows as mowing down countless knights. This picture of the battle retains its hold despite the actual historical fact that most of the French knights at Agincourt would reach the English battle lines in spite the longbow's arrows, and most of the casualties on the French side came from Henry V's order to kill all but the most valuable of captives lest the prisoners overwhelm the English. These facts are usually only known, or, indeed, matter, to the historian. However, despite historians' constant work in the past, they rarely shape memory.

The title of memory shapers, in the modern age, often falls to the television executive and the movie director, because they create images of the past that are easier to identify with, to place oneself in the shoes of, and because people usually prefer what they see on the silver screen than what they see in a history book. Such is the case with the American cowboy. Nothing has latched itself onto the American image like the cowboy. Americans like to see themselves as the stern gunslingers, keeping law and justice alive wherever they go, as they have seen depicted by John Wayne and Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, or *Fort Apache*. Indeed, this is not an image that only Americans hold of themselves as cowboys. Nerin Gun, a prisoner of the Dachau concentration camp, described his first glimpse of the American G.I. coming to liberate him in a similar way, "He comes cautiously, yes, but upright, stalwart, unafraid. At that moment, for me as for all of us…he was like the cowboy of my youth, the one out of my favorite books

and films."[1] Books and films shaped Gun's conception of the cowboy, and he equated him with the young American soldier who was delivering his justice by freeing him. However, this image of the cowboy as a golden standard for nobility did not emerge naturally, nor is it purely American in its influence. The modern conception of the cowboy-hero was the product of artistic and literary efforts that began at the turn of the 19th century and has continued into this century. This effort, consciously and unconsciously, married the new classic hero, the cowboy, with the one of ages past, the knight. Through the illustrative and literary influences of Howard Pyle, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and Pyle's pupils like NC Wyeth, as well as the conscious word choice of popular magazine writers like Owen Wister, the cowboy myth borrowed from the medieval knight of the Arthurian legend, and in doing so the cowboy became America's knight.

This paper seeks to follow and explain that trend, and to explore some of the various influences in the Western myth making process, and as such it will be spending little time trying to explain what cowboys, or knights, were really like in their own time, as that is beyond the scope of this study. It is less an exploration of all the primary sources, as they are many and diverse, but an attempt to tie together the wealth of theories and ideas that have been developed over the past century. If one wishes to read for themselves the first of the popular cowboy stories, *Harper's Weekly* and *Scribner's* magazines, as well as Wister's *The Virginian,* are the places to start. Secondly, this paper is focused on books and paintings, and as such will be spending little time covering the Western film genre. The importance of this medium in shaping the cowboy myth cannot be overstated, however, to attempt to cover all of the history of the Western genre of film would turn this into a weighty tome, and, unfortunately, movies have been set aside.

[1] John C. McManus, *Hell Before Their Very Eyes: American Soldiers Liberate Concentration Camps in Germany, April 1945*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 106.

In the beginning, there were two major mediums which helped to form the popular history of the West. Edward Buscombe of the British Film Institute recognized them as the penny or dime novel, and paintings, the latter of which would later be replaced by films.[2] Perhaps the best known of these two influences are the books. Writers like Wister, Frederic Remington, and even President Theodore Roosevelt, all played a part in bring the stories of the West to eager readers of books and magazines in the East. Books and magazine articles could come in one of two forms, fictionalized accounts of a fictional hero or a real hero, like Wister's *The Virginian* or a variety of penny dreadfuls of Wild Bill Hickok, or the recounting of truthful accounts of the West by those who were actually there. These novels and magazine articles affected the popular reckoning of what a cowboy was in two major ways: vocabulary and their narrative.

Narratively, most cowboy stories followed a basic formula. In essence, the ideal cowboy fought for justice, and risked his life to protect the peaceful and law-abiding citizens of little cowtowns from those who would seek to visit harm and lawlessness upon them.[3] The cowboy hero would operate on a code of honor, avoid evil actions, and find himself pitted against a "man in black" villain, as Stephen King would put it, ultimately assisting justice to prevail.[4] Quite often there was also some form of "damsel in distress," a Southern belle in need of rescue from desperados, and in many early works these rescued women would end up engaged or married to the cowboy-hero.[5]

[2] Edward Buscombe, "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 4 (1984), 12-13.

[3] David B Davis, "Ten-Gallon Hero," *American Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1954), 113.

[4] Ibid., 114-115.

[5] Kirsten H Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas American Illustrations Of The Plains And PreRaphaelite Art", *Great Plains Quarterly* (1985), 50-51.

Where then did many of these themes come from? In a broad sense, certain core elements came from works of those who had actually spent time in the West, living long enough to write about it. WB Masterson, widely remembered as Bat Masterson, a famous lawman and gunslinger in his own right, wrote a series of articles for *Human Life Magazine* in 1907 that would later be turned into a book which would carry the seed for many cowboy stories later on. The book itself, titled *Famous Gunfighters of the Western Frontier*, is relatively simple. Broken up into five parts, it briefly covers the lives and careers of famous gunfighters like Doc Holliday, Luke Short, and Wyatt Earp. Masterson had the benefit of being a lawman himself, and of personally knowing many of the characters of his book, and so one would assume that much of his work holds more onto truth than some other stories of the time. However, Masterson was also a skilled writer, and his coverage of four of his five characters, Doc Holliday being the exception, follow the common "cowboy story" pattern. Masterson's coverage of Luke Short will serve as a case study.

Masterson's story of the life of Short is, essentially, a testament to his character, portraying Short as an example to be followed. He depicts Luke as a skilled gunman who made a name for himself killing "bad men" in mine camps and protecting gambling halls.[6] Later on, he would be involved in an effort, along with Wyatt Earp and a few other gunslingers of the West, in removing a corrupt and aggressive mayor from the control of Dodge City.[7] Throughout the story of his life, Masterson describes Short as a diffident, courteous gentleman, indeed, these terms would be used to describe all of the gunmen except for Holliday.[8] Cowboys in general were a rough sort of gentleman, willing to kill for their honor or that of their wives, open and

[6] W.B. Masterson, *Famous Gunfighters of the Western Frontier* (Houston, Texas: Frontier Press of Texas, 1957), 13.
[7] Ibid., 18-21.
[8] Ibid., 24.

manly, and containing the three characteristics of skill with arms, courage, and diplomacy.[9] In all cases, Masterson portrayed his cowboy gunfighters as men that should be emulated, men who should be examples for his readers. They are the very picture of the values, courage, manliness, honor, and a willingness to stand up to wrongdoers, that Masterson seems to rate very highly.

This practice is not something that is rare for those who seek to create readable stories. As Thomas Grigsby notes in his study of modern cowboy culture in the United States and how it compares to the common image of a cowboy, myths elucidate values, these popular stories emulate what a society wants each member to espouse in their daily conduct.[10] Indeed, Masterson's story of Luke Short, written during the time that the pop culture around cowboys began to form, matches the common core of what now constitutes a cowboy story that was noted earlier. He defends the Western city of Dodge City by driving out the corrupt mayor, thus ensuring justice thrives in a desolate land, but he also defends his own honor by righting wrongs that this mayor had perpetrated against Short himself. The only missing connection between Short's story and an idyllic modern cowboy myth is a woman to save and woo, but due to Masterson's desire to provide brief descriptions of his subjects' lives, perhaps there was not room.

Where then is the connection between the rather black and white depiction of cowboys in modern media, and with knights? The answer to this lies within the time that these pulp novels and stories were being written, the late 1870s to the 1910s. The late 19th century was a time of tremendous economic and social flux.[11] Urbanization, industrialization, and a greedier society, in

[9] Ibid., 25, 27, 30.

[10] Thomas L Grigsby, "Today's Riders of the Purple Sage: Symbols, Values, and the Cowboy Myth," *Rangelands* 2, no. 3 (1980), 95.

[11] G. Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1989), 185.

which the individual was controlled by the corporation, loomed on the horizon. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" had been released in 1893, which spoke of the idea that America had lost an integral part of its character with the closing of the frontier in 1892.[12]

In such troubled and shifting times, it could seem to someone that the very collapse of traditional society was on the way. Something would be needed to hold the line of traditional, timeless values. The rapid development of American society placed immense stress on individualism and older understandings of Americanism, which in turn led people to immortalize the cowboy as a man better than themselves, individual without being greedy, chivalrous, and full of courage.[13] At the turn of the 19th century in the United States, few things stood ready for the monumental task of girding public morality by becoming entertainment than the cowboy, and writers, as well as readers, were willing to forgive historical inaccuracies or anachronisms for this to become a reality. This is the reason that the darker sides of so many historical lawmen, like Wyatt Earp, who was a horse thief at least once in his life and who tore a bloody path of revenge following the death of his brother Morgan Earp, are forgotten, so they may better fit the mold of the myth.[14] Indeed, to the East, and to most Americans following the close of the frontier in 1892, accuracy was not needed, as they had no experience with what the West was truly like. "Innate nobility, heroism, and devotion," to either a woman or to higher ideals, were all that was asked for from cowboy heroes, as well as some sort of villain, in either a black hat and duster or the buckskin of a brave, to compete with them.[15]

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[12] Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 300-309.

[13] Grigsby, "Today's Riders of the Purple Sage: Symbols, Values, and the Cowboy Myth", 94.

[14] Allen Barra, *Inventing Wyatt Earp: His Life & Many Legends* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Bison Books, 2008), 248-249.

[15] White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister*, 193.

This framework for instilling a popular symbol with values and virtues of a society and then foisting these symbolic characters into stories that looked at them in a very heroic, if one dimensional and non-factual, light was not new or unique to America, or the writers of the West like Wister or Remington. Such an effort, so successful that its fruits exist even now, was begun in Victorian England in the 1830s, and continued throughout the next thirty years to the 1860s, though the ripple begun in these years would only slow, not stop. Victorian England in the mid-century was in a similar position to the United States at the turn of the century. There was a rapid development of technology and corporate business, such that society was turned on its head; cities were larger and dirtier, there were more of the middle class and poor, both on the streets and in the halls of power, than ever before.[16] Victorian society valued the ideas of personal philanthropy, honesty, responsibility, thrift, honor and decorum, and these hallowed virtues did not seem likely to survive the brave new world, and a figure would be needed to bolster what James Tuttleton describes as a "spiritual fiction".[17]

Luckily, the Victorians, like the Americans who turned to the West for their heroism, had a readymade figurehead for their mission of placing their timeless values in a vessel that would survive the rigors of the world: knights. More specifically, the Knights of the Round Table, headed by the wise King Arthur, and full of such wonderful characters as Sirs Kay and Gawaine. The stories of this troop of knights was in a plethora of, either as the primary focus or a chapter of, children books in the Edwardian and Victorian period.[18] Thus these knights were ideal to instill with the more modern sensibilities of the Victorian period, and the Pentecostal Oath, in which Arthur charged his knights to flee treason, avoid unlawful murder, to be merciful, and to

[16] James W Tuttleton, "Rehabilitating Victorian Values," *The Hudson Review* 48, no. 3 (1995), 390-393.
[17] Ibid., 389-391.
[18] Velma Bourgeois Richmond, "King Arthur and His Knights for Edwardian Children." *Arthuriana* 23, no. 3 (2013), 59.

always assist women to the utmost of their abilities, provided a solid base.[19] It was a good start, and in schoolbooks and penny novels, Victorian and Edwardian authors needed only to pick and choose certain Arthurian tales, or rewrite those that already existed, to provide young boys with examples of humility, modesty, self-discipline, and piety.[20]

That was all well and good for the effort of romanticizing and co-opting knights in general, and King Arthur specifically, as a vehicle for values, but there were attempts to reshape the Middle Ages made by those with adults and academics in mind. The most notable of groups which attempted this was called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The Pre-Raphaelites were formed in 1848 by English painters and writers who felt that the current depictions of the medieval past were lacking moral sensibilities and were uncreative.[21] The Pre-Raphaelites believed that a close marriage should exist between art and literature, and so many would become involved in a practice that was common to the American illustrators and writers Remington and Pyle in which they would either illustrate a famous work of prose, usually Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, or they would illustrate their own writing, as well as individual artistic and literary works.[22]

All of these Pre-Raphaelites sought to retreat from the modern mechanizing world into an earlier age.[23] Or, what they liked to think of as an earlier age. Many of the Brotherhood's members, perhaps the most guilty being Dante Gabriel Rossetti, idealized and glamorized their favorite stories of the Middle Ages, or focused on the stories of King Arthur which were already lacking of the reality of medieval life, causing some members to say that they "did not look

[19] Thomas Malory and John Rhys. *Le Morte D'Arthur* (London: Dent, 1906), 115-116.
[20] Richmond, "King Arthur and His Knights for Edwardian Children", 59-60.
[21] Helen Osterman Borowitz, "The Paint Beneath the Prose: Ford Madox Ford's Pre-Raphaelite Ancestry," *Modern Fiction Studies* 21, no. 4 (1975), 483-484.
[22] Ibid., 486.
[23] Ibid., 493.

medievalism in the face."[24] It was all well and good to have the stories and pictures of knights in their own time, but what if a reader desired something more up to date, a story of the modern era? There did exist a few members of the Brotherhood and those influenced by them who took a different tact than their fellows, who just placed medieval heroes in an idyllic version of the past. One of these was Ford Madox Ford, grandson of Ford Madox Brown, a founder of the Brotherhood. Ford, instead of keeping the supposed values of the medieval hero in the Middle Ages, brought his heroes to the present, and depicted them as men who held values like honor and chivalry that rode on trains instead of warhorses, and in doing so made these heroes and values timeless.[25] Ford sought to make the values and mindset of the medieval hero, not the setting or the hero himself, timeless.

One can see then a similarity in method between what the American writers at the turn of the century did with the cowboy and what the Victorians and Edwardians did with knights and King Arthur. Both took a character from their past, immediate for the Americans and relatively distant for the Englishman, instilled them with values they felt important in the face of a changing society, and foisted them up in popular literature. The timelessness that Ford sought is something that can be noticed in the American cowboy myth as well. It does not matter if a Western hero rides a horse or in a beaten-up pickup truck, a cowboy is a cowboy.[26] This extends beyond the props of the cowboy as well, he may treat a woman with a kind of gentility that has not existed in generations, or use vocabulary that has long since left common use, but he will always be a cowboy. In the same way, depictions of knights in popular literature, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* for example, an Arthurian tale that is as definitive as it is

[24] Ibid., 495.
[25] Ibid., 496.
[26] Davis, "Ten-Gallon Hero", 113.

anachronistic, is not undermined by the way that the actual historic period the story happens in is in flux. King Arthur and his knights, as well as what they stand for, is the core of the knight myth.

However, one could easily say that the similarities in the reason for the construction of the cowboy myth and the myth of the knight, as well as the fact that they hold similar chivalric values, is mere coincidence. After all, Masterson and Wister are separated from the Pre-Raphaelites by almost half a century, and from England in general by an ocean. Indeed, the cultures themselves were starkly different. Victorian England remained aristocratic, whereas the United States was vocally democratic. While there was some sort of background cultural exchange, there cannot be any definitive connection between the English knight and the cowboy myth. In fact, a bridge between American and English mythmaking did exist, and in his day, he was as famous due to *Harper's Weekly* and other magazines as Remington was, or Wister with his *The Virginian* would become. His name was Howard Pyle.

Pyle was a self-taught artist from Delaware, and in 1894 he would begin teaching illustration at the Drexel Department of Fine and Applied Arts.[27] As an artist, Pyle fell along a similar line as the Pre-Raphaelites, believing one should illustrate and write stories, so that an image always had a purpose or story behind it and he became famous for his illustrated stories of *Otto of the Silver Hand*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, and four volumes of stories on King Arthur.[28] As one can guess, Pyle was enamored with medieval stories, and they became the focal point of his art and writing as well as some of his methods for teaching. His favor for the Pre-

[27] Richard Wayne Lykes, "Howard Pyle Teacher of Illustration," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 80, no. 3 (1956) 339, 344.

[28] Ibid., 340.

Raphaelites is shown by his insistence that his art students study several paintings by Pre-Raphaelites.[29]

Pyle's book on King Arthur, *The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*, is similar in some respects to the Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite renderings of the Knights of the Round Table. It is incredibly optimistic and portrays the court of a medieval king as a wonderful place, a much better place than the modern world, and it likewise seeks to show Arthur's court as a model for honor, courteousness, and chivalric actions.[30] However, there are some noticeable differences to Pyle's rendering of Arthur, and they have a very American tinge to them, as academics like Alan and Barbara Lupack claim he sought to democratize medieval legends.[31] Throughout his tales of Arthur, Pyle seeks to show that success was attainable for all of those who were traditionally moral and hardworking, lacking all of the aristocratic "birthright" language of his English muses.[32] This transformation of a subject from a European form, one that focuses heavily on nobility, not as a characteristic but as a fact of birth, and turning it into a more American subject focused on hard work and moral fiber, is stereotypical of Pyle's philosophy when it came to creating art and prose for his American audience. To his students he taught that, "American illustrators need not confine themselves to American subjects, but they must treat them in a way that appeals to Americans."[33]

Pyle would impart many other things to his students. He did not believe in teaching his students techniques, as being self-taught he claimed to either not know how to "really" paint, or

[29] Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas American Illustrations Of The Plains And Pre-Raphaelite Art", 47-49.

[30] Alan Lupack, and Barbara Tepa Lupack, *King Arthur in America* (Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 86.

[31] Ibid., 83.

[32] Ibid., 84-85.

[33] Lykes, "Howard Pyle Teacher of Illustration", 363.

he would say that it was unimportant.[34] Rather, he stressed that his students learn how to develop a connection with their subjects, a kinship, and that they always have a purpose for what they were working on, whether it be art or prose, the product should be trying to say something.[35]

Was Pyle, an artist and a writer who was enamored with medieval stories, able to in some way instill within the American mythos his ideas of a democratized chivalry? It seems likely. Under his tutelage as a teacher of art were NC Wyeth and Frank Schoonover, two prolific artists and writers of both Western stories and art as well as medieval forms of the same.[36] His idea of taking things that were not American made, so to speak, and giving them an American flavor to make them more marketable is not out of place in the way that some historians view the development of the cowboy myth. The chivalric code that many cowboys live by in popular stories, protecting woman and fighting for justice and their own honor, originally a very feudal and noble thing, would seem somewhat strange if they were explained by a hero with a heavy Southern drawl.

Indeed, chivalry as a hard system and not as an ideology, seems incompatible with the rather individualistic and democratic American society of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, many historians have noted that this noble gentility and chivalry may have been rooted by American authors, or even subconsciously in the minds of readers, in the popular idea of "Southern gentility."[37] The way that the two worked in the story of the hero, whether his chivalrous manner and code of ethics was rooted in Southern philosophy or European tradition, was unchanged by root. However, it may have been easier to explain the actions and reasons of a

[34] Ibid., 346.
[35] Ibid., 355.
[36] Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas American Illustrations Of The Plains And Pre-Raphaelite Art", 44.
[37] Davis, "Ten-Gallon Hero", 114.

cowboy by making allusion to Southern gentility, which most Americans would be familiar with, rather than ancient medieval practices, though this likely influenced both Southern gentility and the "cowboy code."

Outside of just taking knightly themes from classic stories and wrapping them in a Western theme that would be welcoming and inoffensive to American readers, there were other things that Western writers borrowed from medieval stories. In many cases, this came in the form of borrowed words or phrases. For example, in a classic recounting of travelling in the West, "Section Hand on the Union Pacific Railway", the author compares a cowboy he had met in his travels with a Knight Templar, and later calls a group of young men and women who climbed Pikes Peak a "band of knights errant and ladies fair."[38] Even incredibly normal portrayals of Western life in writing could have terms or images lifted directly from Medieval Europe. In the poem "In Quiet Ways" by Beatrice Hansem, Hansem is seeking to describe life in an idyllic frontier homestead. In one passage she writes, "By one small trader; And just now outside, in the morning light, long rows of milk pans shone as bright as armor worn by a parfit knight or bold crusader."[39] Powell also notes the wealth of titles for many Western heroes that hold some form of hierarchical language within them, Buck Taylor was "the King", Deadwood Dick "The Black Prince of the Black Hills", an allusion to the English Black Prince, and few could forget John Wayne, the Duke, not a cowboy himself, but he represented many throughout his career.[40]

[38] Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas American Illustrations Of The Plains And Pre-Raphaelite Art", 42.

[39] Beatrice Hanscom, "In Quiet Ways," Scribner's Magazine 34 (1903): 201.

[40] Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas American Illustrations Of The Plains And Pre-Raphaelite Art", 42-43.

Powell believes that this borrowing of language and, most especially, titles, reflects the desire of many writers to set their subjects, real or imagined, as something apart from the regular American.[41] This desire was hampered by the very egalitarian society that is so loved in America, there are few titles that truly encapsulate what writers and poets, even some painters when they titled their paintings, were trying to show their subjects as. After all, "mister" lacks the punch of "the knight errant of the plains." In Powell's mind, due to the lack of suitable terms in the American lexicon, writers borrowed from the more hierarchical and medieval European models.[42] Of course, it is difficult to prove this in any meaningful way, but, interestingly, Grigsby notes that even now many modern cowboys hold a hierarchy amongst themselves, and are very serious about the titles that are used to describe them.[43]

While stories and paintings were one of the ways that the cowboys of the West were combined with characteristics of classic knight stories to make something unique, they were not wholly responsible. The West has always been at the mercy of the medium that people chose to represent it through, and painting was one of those mediums. Indeed, in the minds of some historians, it was paintings more so than anything else that affected the way the people from the East imagined the West.[44] As with stories and books, paintings of the West were widely available, not only in the popular sale of commissioned art, but in magazines readily available to the common person, like *Scribner's*, *Harper's Weekly*, and even Theodore Roosevelt's *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*.[45] With such ease of access, it is no small wonder that the works of artists like Remington, Wyeth, and others so affected the common image of the West, and like

[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Grigsby, "Today's Riders of the Purple Sage: Symbols, Values, and the Cowboy Myth," 94.
[44] White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister*, 187.
[45] J. Frank Dobie, "Tracks of Frederic Remington." *Southwest Review* 46, no. 4 (1961): 281.

the popular penny novels that borrowed language and themes from European legends, so too did Western artists borrow, consciously and unconsciously, from artists from across the sea.

There are two ways that European influences leeched into Western art. The first and least surprising is European training, as in the mid-to-late 19th century many artists who would later become very influential in Western imagery trained in Europe themselves.[46] The second was more incidental and that is through instruction that was received in art school itself, or by borrowing from previously established tropes in art, similar to what Powell describes with the borrowing of terms and titles. Tropes that made the jump from paintings of knights to cowboys will be covered later, the problem of instruction will be dealt with first. Obviously, it would be too difficult to recount the entirety of art education that each famous artist that ever rendered a picture of the West received, and then to connect it to knightly or medieval art. Luckily, there is a figure that has already been covered who is responsible for the instruction of many turn of the century artists who undoubtedly affected many depictions of the West: Howard Pyle.

As already mentioned, Pyle taught both at the Drexel art school, as well as at his own painting studio for graduates.[47] Unlike many, Pyle did not focus on teaching techniques, but rather creativity, he sought to have his students learn how to depict a story with their paintings, and he pushed his students to use their work to show values they held dear.[48] What is also known is that Pyle loved the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, his predecessors of romantic portrayals of medieval themes, and he often had his students practice using Pre-Raphaelite works as reference, and he himself was most famous for illustrating medieval stories.[49] It does seem that Pyle's love

[46] Edward Buscombe, "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western." *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 4 (1984): 16.

[47] Lykes, "Howard Pyle Teacher of Illustration", 342-343.

[48] Ibid., 346.

[49] Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas American Illustrations Of The Plains And Pre-Raphaelite Art", 47-49.

for the medieval affected many of his students, as the works of some of them, Clyde Osmer Deland, Elizabeth Shippen Green, and NC Wyeth, to name a few, would all include both Western and medieval themes. Wyeth himself would have paintings that would include subjects so diverse as to include both William Wallace and a simple mountaineer sporting a revolver.[50]

Considering that many of Pyle's students found themselves depicting subjects both medieval and Western, it is safe to say that he had some hand in shaping this outcome. However, just because an artist is known for covering two themes does not necessarily imply that there is some form of link between the two. Wyeth's rendering of Sir Lancelot may have been completely distinct, not just in topic but in the way it was rendered, from his depiction of buffalo hunters, for example. However, there did exist a crossing over of tropes from medieval paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite era and Western paintings.

To understand these tropes, consider the stereotypical depiction of a knight in modern (1800 to the present) art, an example of which is figure #3.[51] In summary, the knightly subject, in this case Sir Lancelot, is astride a large white horse, racing across a large plain, purple hued mountains in the distance, and a beautiful woman riding behind him. In most cases, the knight would be either by himself on the horse, or in the company of several other riders, all carrying tall lances and a sword as a sidearm. There are also plenty of depictions of knights which pit the chivalrous subject against some sort of foul beast, most often a dragon. Of course, no lover of modern depictions of knights, especially in television or movies, could forget the image of two knights meeting for a joust, or a duel with cold steel. Modern "medieval" paintings include more

[50] Figure #1, NC Wyeth, *Wallace Draws the King's Sword*, Oil on Canvas, 1921.; Figure #2, NC Wyeth, *The Prospector*, Oil on Canvas, 1906.

[51] Figure #3, NC Wyeth, *Lancelot and Guinevere*, Oil on Canvas, 1920.

than just knights, they also focus on landscapes with a castle placed somewhere in the background, refer to figure #4 for a common example.[52]

All of these are common themes and motifs found in many famous depictions of knights or medieval subjects, and yet one will rarely see a cowboy riding in full armor and carrying a lance or taking on a dragon. And, while there was a wealth of forts on the Western frontier, there was a distinct lack of castles. Yet the images that artists like Wyeth or Pyle rendered of a more romantic and approachable knight were compelling, and they did make their transition into cowboy art, but they needed changes. As previously noted, Pyle encouraged his students to freely change things to be more inviting to their American audiences.[53]

The knightly subject in battle with a ferocious beast and castle landscapes are perhaps the easiest to explain, and so castles will be covered first, and a fantastic example exists to show how European styles influenced the American West. Consider figure #5, Thomas Moran's *The Glory of the Canyon* and compare it to figure #4.[54] One notices an almost startling similarity between the depiction of Tantallon Castle and the sheer rockface in the background of Moran's painting. The shape of it is reminiscent of a castle, curtain walls and crenellations can almost be seen in the towering cliff that Moran painted. One could be convinced rather easily that some sort of fortification is the subject of Moran's work. What sets Moran and Nasymth's work apart is that Moran has chosen to paint a thing of nature. Yes, the rock looks like a castle, so much so that a few historians have noted the similarity as well, but it is not a manmade structure, it is an imposing piece of the landscape.[55] In many cases in the West, there was no need for fortresses, as

[52] Figure #4, Alexander Nasmyth, *A View of Tantallon Castle*, Oil on Canvas, 1816.
[53] Lykes, "Howard Pyle Teacher of Illustration", 363.
[54] Figure #5, Thomas Moran, *The Glory of the Canyon*, Oil on Canvas, 1875.
[55] Buscombe, "Painting the Legend: Frederic Remington and the Western." *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 4 (1984): 16.

the very earth itself formed into towering structures that only a few could defend, an example would be the Modocs use of a lava rock structure called the Stronghold in the Modoc War.[56]

In the case of Moran's painting, the subject of the castle is "Americanized" by turning the fortress of Europeans into the land itself. Americans were used to formidable terrain, and there was historic precedent of the West fighting back against civilizing forces. This use of nature to make a painting more American while keeping a core theme of knightly paintings translates into the common motif of a knight fighting a dragon. In the case of the American West, however, these beasts are not supernatural, fire-breathing lizards, but rather everyday beasts, like a bear, see figure #6.[57] In this painting, the cowboy that Russell makes his focus combats a furious beast indeed, astride his trusty stallion and bearing his weapon in hand, though instead of the cowboy's quarry being something from another world, it is something natural to the wilds of the frontier. Again, the motif portrayed in many paintings, even stories, of knights is repeated in the painting, but it is made American by portraying the fight of man versus nature, not man versus evil.

Finally, there is the portrayal of the cowboy himself. As already mentioned, the image of the knight usually involves him being astride a brilliant horse, bearing his weapons proudly, either galloping to war or at rest in the saddle. This is very common in American depictions of cowboys as well, the cowboy is almost always shown in the saddle, or with his horse close at hand, and the knight's shield and lance are traded in for a six-shooter and a lariat (see figure #7), though some depictions of Native Americans bear a striking resemblance to Pre-Raphaelite knights.[58] This connection between cowboy and knight was not lost on artists and writers in the West, Owen Wister, a famous Western author in his own day claimed that there was little

[56] Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1984), 198-201.
[57] Figure #6, Charles Marion Russell, *The Disputed Trail*, Oil on Canvas, 1908.
[58] Figure #7, Frederic Remington, *A Cold Morning on the Range*, Oil on Canvas, 1904.

difference between the cowboy and knight, merely a change in environment.[59] Some painters intentionally tried to show this connection, as the painting *The Last Cavalier* by Remington (figure #8) shows a cowboy trotting along with a spectral herd of famous horsemen of history, including knights of many different eras of the Middle Ages.[60] Indeed, even the titles of some paintings were blatant attempts to evoke the idea of cowboys merely being a relative of the knight, like P.V.E. Ivory's painting titled *The Knight Errant of the Plains*. The themes were maintained from many European paintings of knights into depictions of cowboys and the West, but they were made rougher, with a heavier focus on nature, and thus, more recognizable to Americans.

The United States is often described as a melting pot, so much so that the cliché has almost become a meaningless turn of phrase. In many respects, this description holds true. Countless people from various walks of life, from the Native Americans who originally inhabited the continent, to Europeans who came seeking a new life, to African slaves who had no choice in coming, have made a diverse and rich American culture. More so than almost anything else, it is the common stories or icons that a people or nation hold that helps to unify, and no character or trope in American iconography is quite so strong and as far-reaching as the cowboy. A cowboy can be anything, gender or skin color is not something that dictates whether or not someone is a cowboy, and a cowboy fits into the modern era just as much as it does in the 1890s. Anyone can identify with a cowboy because it is what a cowboy is, what it represents, that is important, not who it is. The cowboy is a bastion of values and honor, protecting the weak, defying those who would seek to make might equal right, and the cowboy looks good doing it.

[59] Powell, "Cowboy Knights and Prairie Madonnas American Illustrations Of The Plains And Pre-Raphaelite Art", 42.

[60] Figure #8, Frederic Remington, *The Last Cavalier*, Oil on Canvas, 1895.

The cowboy is America's hero, perhaps not as flashy as Superman, but it is an image that has seeped itself into the nation's psyche. But, as with the nation itself, this hero mythology did not form in a vacuum. There were templates that existed in the form of European stories of knights, especially Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite renderings of King Arthur and his court, which provided a framework of how to build a spiritual fiction around a larger than life hero. A hero should operate by a code of honor, save damsels in distress, fight against black knights, battle dragons, and, in the case of many Pre-Raphaelite heroes of a later period, be heroes that almost seem out of place in time, representing a set of values from an older age.

However, it would not do to simply have knights as America's folk hero, Americans were too democratic, too individual to want a feudal warrior to represent them. Under the careful hand of those like Howard Pyle, famous stories like those of King Arthur were democratized and further Westernized. The knight traded in his golden spurs for the more beaten up variant of the buckaroo, and the sword and lance were exchanged for a Colt and Winchester. The code of honor and ethics in which the cowboy hero operated under was kept, but instead of being the ancient code of chivalry like the knight, it was changed to the more recognizable Southern gentleman's honor.

In famous paintings of cowboys and the West, there were no castles to be seen, but rather rearing ramparts of rock which loomed like any fortress in the distance. Instead of battling with demonic dragons as his European cousin did, the cowboy pitted himself against the wild creatures of the harsh landscape of the West, like a growling black bear. The cowboy and his environs were made more natural, rougher, with less of the fantasy polish that coated Europe's tales of knights. The cowboy as it is remembered in American popular culture, however, is still very much a fantasy, a fondly remembered knight of the sagebrush prairies, but truthfulness is

not necessary in mythmaking, and just like the stories of the Knights of the Round Table, Western stories and paintings continue to draw people in, and continue to shape the United States' perception of itself.

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Figure #1

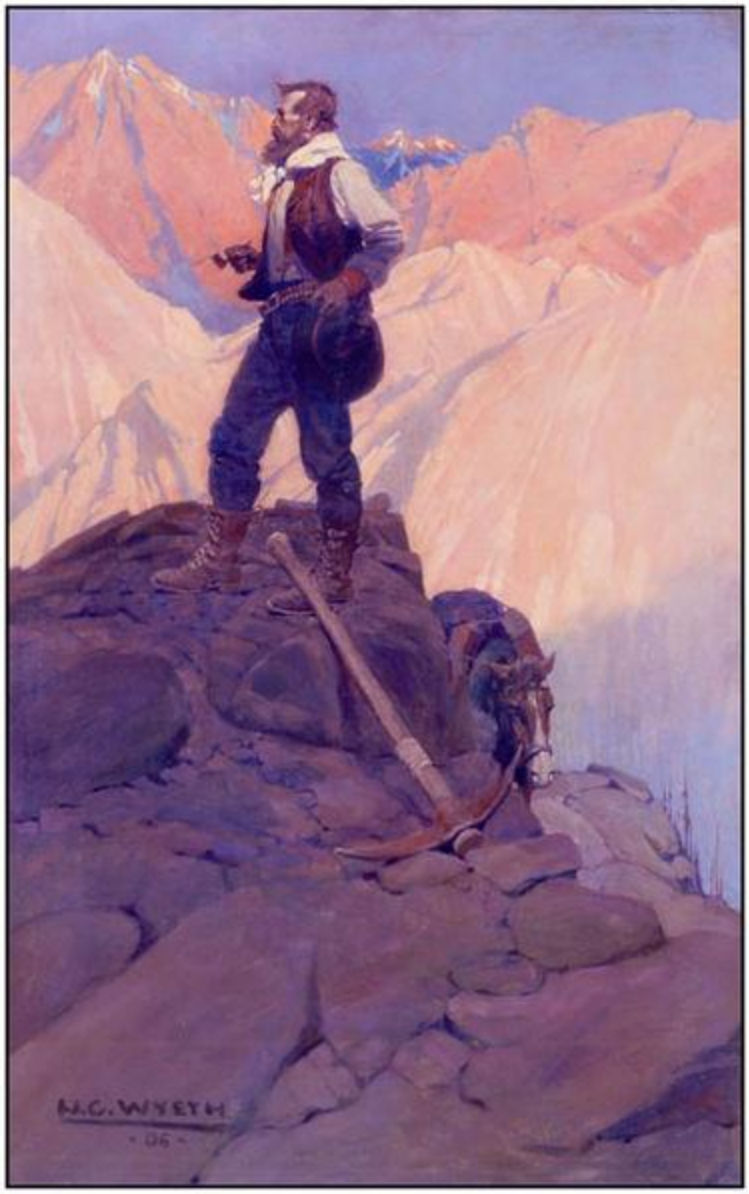

Figure #2

Figure #3

Figure #4

Figure #5

Figure #6

Figure #7

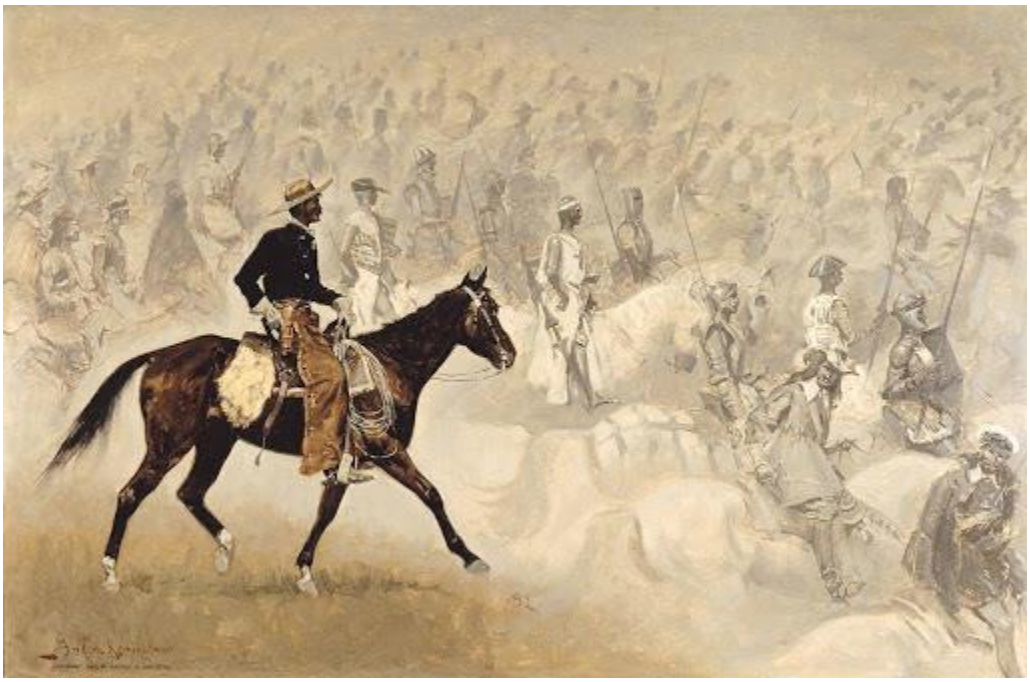

Figure #8