

Two points in common: (a) pictured with Indians on the Great Plains and (b) being hunted by Indians, usually on horseback, and **in act of shooting or spearing their prey**. Became distinctively American visual cliché.

Why? Repetition demands explanation.

Coincided with emergence of national identity, attempts to define this nation apart from England and the old world. Declaration of Identity.

Coincided with (a) explorations that gave easterners their first glimpses of the far West (Rockies, Plains, Sierra, California) and (b) the floodtide of Romanticism, with emphasis on nature's purifying power, corruptions of civilization, innocence of the primitive.

Europe had history. We had magnificent wilderness and unique American character, the free-roaming, independent, inherently noble American Indian.

Thus the cliché:

The animal: long associated with the exotic wilderness.

The hunter: another romantic favorite, dressed in exotic garb, showing courage and wilderness skills

The setting: vast open terrain synonymous with wilderness

And the moment of the chase, just before the kill:

Partly the action, of course.

But more: the frozen moment expresses belief that an exotic, wild America would always be there.

Lewis Garrard, 1846:

**I thought with envy of the free and happy life [the hunters] were leading on the untamed plains, with fat buffalo for food, fine horses to ride, living and dying in a state of blissful ignorance...What more invigorating, enlivening pleasure is there than traversing the grand prairies, admiring the beauties of unkempt, wild and lovely nature, and chasing the fleet-footed buffalo.**

A national reverie: A need to believe: Grand sights always waiting, wild people, bows eternally drawn would forever be in violent marriage with strange and powerful beasts.

This need, part of a national identity, surfaces during those years and it is still with us.

But there has always been a problem...

West has a **double** meaning in national identity: (a) escape and (b) place to be subdued, conquered, transformed, developed. Americans were (a) people blessed

Animals talk. Cultures select certain creatures to speak for them-their values, beliefs, anxieties. Like ventriloquist dummy: we attribute to it certain traits, meanings, tell certain stories about it-all of it really comments we are making about ourselves and the world around us.

Eagle: US, Chaldeans, Zunis, Nazis. Wolves: Rome, others.

Bison: distinct to Euro-America (and Native America: acknowledge)

A window into what Euro-Americans have been saying about themselves and their experience. Nearly a 500-year commentary on meaning of America.

First Accounts: Bewilderment.

**Onate: Its shape and form are marvelous and laughable, or frightful...No one could be so melancholy that if he were to see it a hundred times a day he could keep from laughing...or could fail to marvel at the sight of so ferocious an animal.**

David Ingram: 16th century: 20 ft long, drooping ears of bloodhound, hair like a goat.

**Fernando del Bosque: ...hips and haunches are like those of a hog, the size of cattle but hair like goats, fierce expression of wild boar.**

**Another Spaniard: horse-like, tail tufted like lion, with hump like camel. Another: wool like sheep, tail held aloft when in flight, like scorpion, and shed hair annually, like snakes.**

No wonder confusion: terrifyingly comic pig-goat, camel-humped sheepish, lion-like scorpion-cow.

Human expressions: bashful and coy, arch and offended, open and genial, petulant.

**Anthropomorphism:** when unsure of what it is, project human characteristics onto it.

One point in common: Available for a profit

Spanish: "Wild cattle, wild oxen. French: *le boeuf sauvage*. English: "shag-haired oxen, wild cattle, prairie beeves."

**Early observer: Their flesh is good and their hides make good leather. Another: the hides of these beasts are sold very dear...**

Bizarre commodity.

Next stage: early 19th century.

Bison emerges, as central symbol of American West.

Artistic rendering, 1820s-midcentury: Titian Ramsey Pealse, Peter Rindisbacher, George Catlin, Alfred Jacob Miller, Karl Bodmer, Paul Kane, others.