Visions of what once was and may be again

Montana's wildlife art legacy captures the state's untamed heritage and inspires contemporary audiences to recover what has been lost. **By Todd Wilkinson**

Swift Fox, 1844, by John James Audubon
WATERCOLOR, AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

Think of picture postcards you've mailed to friends from travels to wild, faraway places. What message were you hoping to communicate?

In 1832 renowned American West artist George Catlin created what are likely the first portable paintings of what later became Montana. The artwork depicted wildlife and landscapes Catlin observed beyond Fort Union near the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers. These oil "postcards" the artist carried home to Pennsylvania expressed much more than "Having a great time" (though by all accounts Catlin immensely enjoyed his western travels). They documented a landscape and its inhabitants that Americans to the east had only read about and could hardly imagine.

Catlin saw the essence of what Thomas Jefferson had described as the "undiscovered country." In eastern Montana he recorded prairie species ranging from elk and bighorn sheep to grizzly bears and wolves. He observed Native Americans engaged in the hunt. His portrayals, now housed in America's finest museums, were dispatches sent to citizens of a young country eager to know what lay beyond the western horizon.

Portraits of Grizzly Bear and Mouse, 1846–48, by George Catlin
OIL ON CANVAS. SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

Catlin wasn't the first wildlife artist to set foot in today's Montana. Pictographs and petroglyphs left behind in caves and alcoves, such as those still visible at Pictograph Caves State Park, speak to the reverence that aboriginal artists held for the region's fauna going back 10,000 years, maybe longer.

Dan Flores, professor of western history at the University of Montana, makes a strong case for why the state's art legacy matters. The author of *Visions of the Big Sky: Painting and Photographing the Northern Rocky Mountain West*, Flores says art functions as a portal for peering into the past, providing us with a way to make sense of who we are as a civilization and people. Art also acts as a gauge for taking stock of what we have lost—and what we might work to recover. Flores views those early artistic interpretations as a challenge laid at our feet, imploring us to be stewards of the wildlife, land, and other subject matter.

I had similar thoughts years ago during a canoe trip along the Missouri River's White Cliffs Area while clutching a hardbound book containing the historic hand-colored etchings of Karl Bodmer, the mid–19th-century Swiss painter of the American West. I was in the company of George Horse Capture and Herman J. Viola, who had invited me along that day to witness the connection between art and history. Horse Capture is a native-born Montanan and distinguished elder of the Gros Ventre tribe whose ancestors may have made contact with Catlin, Bodmer, and, before them, Lewis and Clark. His great-grandfather had been an acquaintance of Charles M. Russell's and once posed for a black-and-white photograph taken by the famous photographer of American Indians, Edward S. Curtis.

Herds of Bisons and Elks on the Upper Missouri, 1840-1843, by Karl Bodmer
HAND-COLORED AQUATINT. RARE BOOKS DIVISION, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, ASTOR, LENOX AND TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

A Rocky Mountain Sheep, Ovis, Montana, 1879, by Albert Bierstadt
OIL ON PAPER MOUNTED ON BOARD. PRIVATE COLLECTION, IMAGE FROM WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

A professional anthropologist and an art lover, Horse Capture was the first curator of the Plains Indian Museum at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming. He also helped establish the National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall in Washington. Viola, a scholar of the American West, is curator emeritus at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History.

Todd Wilkinson, of Bozeman, is the editor of the on-line magazine Wildlife Art Journal *and a reporter for the* Christian Science Monitor *and other publications.*

At one point in the journey, we climbed to a flat knoll peppered with ancient teepee rings above the river. Horse Capture and Viola opened the Bodmer book to an 1833 etching of a massive herd of bison moving down from the bluffs and crossing the river. They motioned toward the same spot on the Missouri as depicted in Bodmer's image, still pastoral and beautiful, yet quiet and lacking the iconic buffalo. Horse Capture's voice trembled as he spoke of his ancestral ties to the scene. The painting had transported him into a temporal space once known by his own kin.

While Montana's story is eloquently written in words, the spirit of the region is reflected in oil, ink, and watercolor. Mid–19th-century artists such as Catlin, Bodmer, and John James Audubon each made a journey up the Missouri River in large part to document what, a few decades earlier, Lewis and Clark had seen but could describe only in writing. The painters were products of the Romantic Era, an artistic movement in which artists aimed to capture the grandeur of untamed nature and evoke emotions such as awe that the natural world inspired.

"In their works," writes Flores in *Visions of the Big Sky*, "this country was most of all a great Edenic wilderness of romantic scenery and animals."

More than mere decorative objects, Viola says, the paintings possessed the power to shape public attitudes. "Without art created on the doorstep of Montana, national parks might not exist as they do today," he says. Viola explains that during Catlin's trips across the high plains, the artist conceived the notion that wildlife and the Native American way of life needed to be protected in a special preserve. It was the origin of the national park concept. A few decades later, in 1871, Thomas Moran entered Yellowstone with photographer William Henry Jackson and recorded images of geysers, travertine terraces at Mammoth Hot Springs, and waterfalls in the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. The paintings and photographs inspired Congress to set aside that wondrous terrain as the world's first national park.

While encouraging some Americans to protect parts of the West as national sanctuaries, paintings depicting the region as an unspoiled Eden may also have hastened the mass removal of its wildlife. Fur companies had once boasted there were enough beaver in the Upper Missouri to keep hundreds of trappers dutifully employed for a century. Similar unfounded pronouncements about the number of bison—seemingly substantiated by paintings of endless herds flowing across the Great Plains—proved catastrophically false. In 1863 William Jacob Hays famously portrayed the massive bison herds on canvas with *A Herd of Bison Crossing the Missouri River*. Within a decade such sights existed only in memories and on canvas. "Even if artists didn't intend to be, they

Home of the Blackfeet, 1938, by Maynard Dixon

OIL ON MASONITE. NATIONAL COWBOY AND WESTERN HERITAGE MUSEUM, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA, 1998.072.03

Mule Deer in the Bad Lands, Dawson County, Montana, 1914, by Carl Rungius

OIL ON CANVAS. BUFFALO BILL HISTORICAL CENTER, CODY, WYOMING, 16.93.2, GIFT OF JACKSON HOLE PRESERVE, INC.

were chroniclers of what once was," says Anne Morand, former curator at the C.M. Russell Museum in Great Falls and today director of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. During her tenure at the C.M. Russell Museum, Morand led the research work for a major exhibition on bison. She pored over photographs of hide yards and bone piles as tall as snowbanks. "When those photographs were taken, they were boastful expressions of harvest, and were not viewed with the horror we have today," Morand says. "Wildlife was gone, but they hadn't yet processed the impact of what their generation had done."

At the turn of the 20th century, observers worried that America's frontier era, which so defined the nation's character, was over. Vast regions of cheap, easily obtainable land had been claimed, and the expansive wildlands were no more. Some artists responded with nostalgic renderings of cowboy life and wildlife scenes from days gone by. Others, like Maynard Dixon, sought to depict remnants of traditional Indian culture such as what he found while visiting Montana's Blackfeet Reservation. His 1938 *Home of the Blackfeet* seeks not to recapture olden days of abundance. The plains and mountains are as devoid of wildlife as paintings a century before were filled with it.

Artistic depictions continue to shape our relationships with the natural world. One of the most popular examples is wildlife art. For decades conservationists have used paintings to raise funds—from the federal Duck Stamp that generates millions of dollars for wetland habitat acquisition, to prints auctioned at fund-raising banquets held by Pheasants Forever, the Mule Deer Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, and other conservation groups.

Art makes conservation tangible, says Lauren Hummel, who oversees the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation's (RMEF) national art program from her office in Missoula. The RMEF has used the sale of original wildlife paintings and lithographs to raise millions of dollars to purchase and restore elk habitat. The foundation's featured artist in 2012 is Montana's Larry Zabel, whose work, *Satellite Bull*, portrays Treasure State wapiti. "People see a piece like that and it reminds them of the hunting experience they had growing up," Hummel says. "They get a piece of great art and have the satisfaction of knowing their money is making a difference on the ground."

Zabel is one of a new generation of Montana artists who are continuing the tradition of depicting scenes that inspire stewardship. Two others, born on the high plains, are Monte Dolack, who lives in Missoula, and Clyde Aspevig, a resident of rural Clyde Park near the southern flanks of the Crazy Mountains. "As an artist you try to reconcile the beauty of what you see and what you're hoping to save with the ever-expanding footprint of humanity that's continually being asserted on the landscape," Dolack says. "I want to convey some of that dynamic tension that exists between contradictions."

An avid fly-fisherman, Dolack has for years created special limited-edition lithographs for causes ranging from open space protection to conservation focused on elk, wolves, grizzlies, and native trout. Thousands of people around the globe own his often-whimsical posters—such as *Mirage*, which depicts dolphin-sized rainbow trout rising from sagebrush prairie to feed on flying magpies.

Aspevig is considered one of America's premier contemporary landscape painters. "What I do, and a lot of what I choose to paint, is based on the foundation of what's known as the Savannah Hypothesis," he

When The Land Belonged To God, 1914, by Charles M. Russell

OIL ON CANVAS. MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY RESEARCH CENTER, HELENA. X1977.01.01 (PHOTOGRAPHER: JOHN REDDY, 1998)

Mirage, 1993, by Monte Dolack

LITHOGRAPH. MONTE DOLACK ART GALLERY, MISSOULA, MONTANA

says. "It deals with our innate desire to immerse ourselves in savannah-like settings, where we have water and widely spaced trees and can see out over long distances and are surrounded by animals." Such longings, Aspevig says, are deeply ingrained in the human psyche, dating to a time when early humans first roamed the African plains.

Because much of Montana's grassland landscape has the same characteristics as African savannah, Aspevig isn't surprised that those who live here are so deeply connected to the state's big, open country.

It was in large part his love of Montana's open plains that attracted the state's most famous artist to Big Sky Country. Charles M. Russell's paintings and watercolors chronicled a rapidly vanishing West at a time when interest in the disappearing frontier was at its zenith. His 1914 oil *When The Land Belonged To God* is considered the greatest masterpiece of homegrown wildlife art in Montana. The painting rests in the permanent collection of the Montana Historical Society (MHS). "Landscape is so much a part of our culture, and Russell's work epitomizes it," says Jennifer Bottomly-O'Looney, senior curator at the MHS. Another of her Russell favorites is *Lewis and Clark Meeting the Flatheads in Ross' Hole*, which, as in many of his paintings, includes several gray wolves watching from the sidelines. Painted in 1912, it is Russell's largest work, stretching nearly 25 feet across a wall in the chamber of the House of Representatives in the Montana state capitol.

Flores says Russell once wrote that settlers of the West had "marred its beauty," and he denounced those who killed off its wildlife and overexploited its forests and grasslands. With this knowledge, says Flores, Russell's art can be viewed as a "painterly environmental history of the West." Restoring that landscape and its inhabitants, he says, is something to be embraced by all who appreciate Russell's paintings. "What was Charlie Russell trying to tell us?" asks Flores. "I argue that what he really did was prepare us for the modern world of possibility, where we have wolves back on the landscape, and healthy populations of grizzly bears, and Indians reaffirming their cultural heritage. If you have a sense of what once was, you can try to get there again."

Whether that is in fact what the Cowboy Artist hoped to convey is open to speculation. But Horse Capture, the Gros Ventre elder and museum curator, says there can be no argument that paintings by Russell and other great artists of Montana still resonate with people today. "It's all a matter of perspective," he says of painted images depicting Indian communities, cowboy life, and wildlife scenes that no longer exist. "They can make you sad and want to give up, or inspire you with a determination to make a positive difference. To me, art pulls us in the direction where we need to go."

To see modern renderings of traditional wildlife art, visit "Yellowstone to Yukon: The Journey of Wildlife and Art" at the Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies in Banff National Park, Alberta. The new exhibit of more than three dozen major oil paintings features portrayals of wildlife in Montana and Canada that include bighorn sheep, mountain goats, grizzly bears, elk, and wolves painted by Wyoming artist Dwayne Harty. Like expedition painters of old, Harty traveled for three years in the backcountry of the Northern Rockies. "I love Montana," Harty says. "Here you can still catch a glimpse of the truly wild West."