

**American Environmental History HIS 207**  
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# **ART AND CONSERVATION**

## **HOW ART INFLUENCES THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE UNITED STATES**

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“...a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.”

— Michel Foucault

Often in the United States, there are few things valued less than art and conserving nature.

American capitalist culture easily forgets its starving artists and its delicate wilderness. Yet both of these things are important not only to our history, but also to the modern era. We rely on art for entertainment and as a way to express passion; we rely on the health of the natural world to inspire us and to provide us with the things that give us life, like clean water, breathable air, and food. Although they might not seem very similar, art and conservation are interconnected in a way that unbelievers will never be able to understand. While they both depend on each other, environmental conservation in the United States especially owes its success to the artistic contributions found along the way.

In 1871; Ulysses S. Grant was the president and there were only 37 states in the Union. The American West wasn't American yet, but it was more wild than it will ever be again. Somewhere in New York, two artists pack their tools, one his camera and the other his paints and brushes. They both received last minute invitations for a trip to the lands inhabited by the Tsésthó'e peoples and the Apsaalooké peoples, better known to us as the Cheyenne and the Crow. This trip was a survey expedition led by Ferdinand Vandever Hayden, a man known to the federal government as a competent geologist and known to the Sioux as “man-who-picks-up-stones-running” (Shambaugh-Miller, 2011). Hayden had been leading expeditions like this for nearly two decades, and although this was his first time visiting that particular part of the land, it was the third expedition in the area. Writings from the two previous expeditions were practically discredited; the public didn't believe the fantastic tales of massive geysers and rainbow canyons, one journalist even saying that it “reads like the realization of a child's fairy tale.” (1870) Perhaps this is why

Hayden felt the need to invite both a photographer and a painter on the expedition. Even so, Moran was still hesitant to paint as he wanted to, fearing that people might not believe the intensity of his colors were honest.

While accurate mapping and geographical studies were the main focus of the trip (Pritchard, 1999), the true success of Hayden's expedition was due to the artists he brought with him. Moran and Jackson worked closely together, the former using his brushes to paint sweeping landscapes full of color and intricate details, the latter using his camera to paint with light; documenting not just the landscapes but the expedition itself. While both of them made valuable contributions, Thomas Moran's work stood out as an exceptional portrayal of the land and its beauty. His painting *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* [Fig. 1] was purchased by congress for \$10,000. This price equals about a quarter of a million dollars in today's money.



Figure 1. Thomas Moran, *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone*, 1872, oil on canvas mounted on aluminum

Without the photographic and artistic depictions of the area, lawmakers and future tourists never would have believed in the true grandeur there. We owe these artists our thanks for their essential influence in the creation of the conservationist movement and the world's first national park: Yellowstone.

In order to care about something, we need to have a connection to it, a personal relationship. While it is in the best interest of Yellowstone and other parks not to be constantly inundated with as many tourists as possible, conservationists are still faced with the challenge of how to guide the population as a whole towards developing an environmental ethic. Nature writer E.O. Wilson suggests that “only through an unusual amount of education and reflective thought, do people come to respond emotionally to far-off events”. What better catalyst for reflective thought than an astounding work of art? Artists who look towards nature for inspiration understand art as a tool to mediate between the wild places they love and those who have not visited them. This gives people the opportunity to form a personal connection to nature, or, as Wilson would say, the ability to “respond to far-off events”. In this way, art can undoubtedly inspire an individual to develop an environmental ethic.

Although this only strengthens the conservation movement, we cannot rely on art to be a person's only relationship with nature. When someone sees nature as artwork, they will treat it as such. Jack Turner might call this a “diminished personal experience of nature”; something that he sees as a symptom of “mediated experience” (Turner, 1996). As mentioned previously, art is a mediator, and perhaps the most effective one. This is the failing of art as a human-made construct: it can only define things in human-made terms. Turner also mentions the overwhelming preference for the “copy, simulation and surrogate, for the engineered and managed instead of the natural”. He never could have imagined how right he was before the invention of virtual reality and the popularization of social media. Many members of our society rely on screens to guide



them towards nature; where to go and what to do. Still others are perfectly content with their sole experience of the natural world being through a screen. According to philosopher Walter Benjamin, the quintessence of beauty relies on “its presence in time in space”, he calls this uniqueness “the aura” (Benjamin, 1936). In his essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin also talks about “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction”. Turner references this aura after an ethereal visit to The Maze in Utah’s Canyonlands. He is transfixed by ancient petroglyphs deep in a canyon. Upon his various returns, he found that it might as well have been a different place. It had been altered for tourism, photographed for publicity, adapted for management. This is how the aura of nature’s wonder is diminished.

The question then becomes, what role does art have to play in the world of conservation? Clearly, it inspires and influences the viewer. Decisions people make based on these emotional reactions tend to help them build values around their personal relationship with nature and environmental awareness. Yet art is also an imperfect representation of something that possesses “wildness, spirit, enchantment, the sacred, holiness, magic, and soul.” (Turner, 1996), in other words, that which can be experienced but never translated. We will always rely on the skill and creativity of artists to point us in the right direction. We must also always take responsibility for our own connections to the natural world. National park or not, we are called to seek out the truth of places like Yellowstone or The Maze, and the aura of our world’s insurmountable sanctity.

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