Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Lost Art Of The Santa Fe Trail

Leslie VonHolten

Follow this and additional works at: https://newprairiepress.org/sfh

Recommended Citation

VonHolten, Leslie (2021). "Lost Art Of The Santa Fe Trail," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2021/indigenousamericans/6

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Daguerreotype of a Cheyenne Village at Big Timbers
Solomon Nunes Carvalho

LOST ART OF THE SANTA FE TRAIL

In 1846, Susan Shelby Magoffin, 18 years old, newly married and a rare woman on the Santa Fe Trail, found herself awestruck by the beauty of the Flint Hills.

She wrote in her diary: "The scenery is truly magnificent. At one view we have stretched before us lofty hills entirely destitute of shrubbery; at their base gurgled along in quiet solitude a pearlly stream laving the feet of giant trees that looked down with scorn upon the diminutive creature man. ... To our backs lay other and similar scenes, beautiful alike for the artists pencil. We have one in our Company, Mr. Stanley rather celebrated for his Indian sketches."

The artist she refers to is John Mix Stanley, a skilled painter, adventurer and the most famous artist who traveled the trail. He was working to add portraits to his Indian Gallery, a collection of loosely ethnographic paintings that recorded the varied cultures of the Indigenous American nations. Stanley hoped his paintings would rival George Catlin's in the annals of art history. Considering his professional training and sophistication compared with the clumsy studies by the self-taught Catlin, he likely would have succeeded; however, most of these works perished in a fire in 1865. Only eight of Stanley's Indian Gallery paintings survive.

Painter Solomon Nunes Carvalho learned daguerreotype photography sometime around 1840, at a time when most Jewish people still rejected depiction of the human form; he is now widely considered the first Jewish photographer in history. Entrepreneurial, hardworking and curious, Carvalho set off on the Santa Fe Trail in 1853 with John C. Fremont's Fifth

Expedition. We know from his journals that he took photos of bison near Great Bend, Kansas; the river country at Pawnee Fork (near present-day Larned, Kansas); and the mountain panoramas and Utah scenes west of the Rockies. Sadly, only one photo of his Santa Fe Trail journey survives: a ghosty image of a Cheyenne village in western Kansas Territory at Big Timbers along the Arkansas River west of present-day Lamar, Colorado. Like Stanley's work, nearly 300 photos of Carvalho's travels were lost in a fire.

Another artist on the trail traveled for purposes other than experience or images. Vincent Colyer, an accomplished artist trained at the National Academy, was an English Quaker who devoted himself to humanitarian work for the U.S. Indian Commission. He worked to resolve hostilities between Indigenous Americans, the U.S. military and white settlers. ("Resolution" at the time meant assimilation and negotiation for reservation land.) Although his official work was diplomatic, he was known to sketch and paint watercolors in the evenings. Two known works on his Santa Fe Trail travels in 1869 bracket the Flint Hills: a landscape at Fort Leavenworth and an Osage horse race scene in southwestern Kansas.

What to make of this lack of Flint Hills art by these artists? Like the diarist Magoffin, today we are moved by the subtle beauty of the hills. Were Stanley and other artists of his time immune? Is it because they were men? Unlikely, given the fondness exhibited for the Flint Hills today. The answer is simple: Stanley and Carvalho were working for the marketplace, and audiences then were quite different from audiences today. Put simply: Tastes change.

The Flint Hills, though beautiful, likely provided an intimidating quietude, even an emptiness, for artists who knew what their patrons wanted: drama, and loads of it.

That's why art from the Santa Fe Trail reflected the purposes of American art of its day — to document the new lands being explored, to promote the ideas of Manifest Destiny, and to ease the apprehension or guilt of claiming more land. Stanley and Carvalho were artists of their time, laborers within a profession, and they needed to create items that the public would buy. These were the days before self-expression or art for art's sake. They needed to appeal to buyers, and what those buyers wanted was a sense of drama, beauty and a future-looking America that could stretch and expand beyond its borders.

One of Stanley's most celebrated works is "The Last of Their Race" (c. 1859). The narrative of Indians on the brink of extinction appealed to a time

Buffalo Hunt on the Southwestern Prairies
John Mix Stanley

period prone to tragic romance and also bolstered a feeling of inevitability. Stanley's painting is similar in spirit to James Fenimore Cooper's novel "The Last of the Mohicans." Critics have noted that the narrative of a soon extinct Indigenous culture reinforced a feeling of racial superiority and sense of entitlement to the land.

This supposed documentation would often spill over into fake news. Stanley's dramatic "historical" painting, "Osage Scalp Dance," 1845, demonstrates the appetite for drama over truth. The painting depicts threatening Osage men in shadow and places a distressed white woman and child in the center, terrified, with benevolent light upon her. It's ridiculous — such a scene never took place, and critics cringe at the vast historical inaccuracies. Rather than reveal Indigenous culture to white Easterners, the painting seems to be more a communication of Stanley's desire to ascend to European modes of art-making. That this work is today in the Smithsonian collection (although not on view in 2020) attests to the racism that art patronage of the time propagated.

These artists looked upon their subjects as the Other. The paintings and photographs documenting life on the Plains were presented as reportage; although wholly American in training and content, the artists and their works operated as wholly European in composition and delivery. Did Stanley or Carvalho see the intricate beadwork of the Plains Indians, or the graphic pottery designs of the Pueblo peoples, or the breathtaking baskets of the Apaches? If so, did they perceive these with the fascination for craftsmanship they deserved? Did they accept them as more North American, more unique than their own styles? Were they, for example, compelled to paint a stylized antelope onto the canvas?

We know that Pueblo, Apache and Plains Indian goods traveled back East on the Santa Fe Trail. At the time, however, they were received as curiosities and ethnographic samples for study. It would not be until the 1920s — 40 years after the end of the Santa Fe Trail route — that a collectors' market in Indian visual art would blossom. Whereas the sweeping historical narratives of the mid-19th century have waned in popular interest, the Santa Fe art market, and its Indigenous American artists, thrive today.

Leslie VonHolten is the former executive director of Symphony in the Flint Hills.

Sketch of a Prairie Flower
Vincent Colyer