

# The Western Hero: Who is That Masked Man?

Images of the Western hero have appeared in multiple forms of art: from printed dime novels and pulp magazines, television to film, and comic books to cartoons. Traditionally, artists and illustrators depicted these heroes as Euro-American, hyper-masculine, square-jawed, thick-shouldered, and handsome male characters considered rescuers and protectors; symbols of peace and lone justice in the face of evil. However, there are many kinds of heroic characters from all backgrounds and experiences. Anyone can be a Western hero!

In dime novels of the mid to late nineteenth century, the wild West captivated imaginations and built legends. Characters were often dramatized, but the tales contained lessons for the real world. Issues of race and gender stood blatantly in society at that time, and this was reflected in the publications. Native American peoples were dramatically affected with the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Reservation Period, and the Indian Wars. During this time, an early version of Western hero emerged with Buffalo Bill and Deadwood Dick, frontiersmen and adventurers, fighting Native Americans in death-defying battles and conquests. By the end of the 1800s, however, the cowboy seized the limelight as the prevailing hero.

During the First World War, the Great Depression, and Second World War, dramatic stories became a form of escapism from everyday life. Pulp magazines and comic books expanded on the look and attitude of the brazen hero of the West. Illustrators created paintings for hundreds of publications. These images portrayed idealized versions of Native Americans, cowboys, gunslingers, outlaws, and women. Comic books took prevalence among young readers, telling exciting tales of masked riders, barroom brawls, and intense combat.

By the mid-twentieth century, film and television brought the West as a moving image to theaters and television sets. The classic hero evolved from a clean cut, moral figure to include the grotesque antihero focused on revenge. Sergio Leone concentrated on this idea in his Spaghetti Western films, including *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). DC Comics created Jonah Hex, a scarred bounty hunter in a popular comic book *Weird Western Tales*.

At the same time, modern and contemporary artists utilized the idea of the Western hero. Some artists rebelled from images of mass-consumerism, looking upon it as superficial. Others embraced its wide appeal. Artists began to look at the established stereotypes and sought to break or redefine them. Today, new works of art of the West are produced by artists looking at the past and combining it with themes of the present.

Throughout this exhibition are examples of images that focus on the idea of the Western hero and the mythologies of the West. How have they changed? What has stayed the same? Who is the Western hero?

# The Western Dime Novel; or, The Journey of the Hero

The Western hero's image hangs suspended between truthful history and the popular stories and myths of the West invented for mainstream audiences. In the mid-nineteenth century, media outlets fed the public ideas about the West. The publishers shaped views for the public who knew little of the region, blurring fact and fiction in dime novel publications.

Named for their cost of ten cents, these cheaply printed pamphlets fed readers information about men with herculean abilities defeating enemies in the Western Frontier. Beginning in 1860 and into the next century, images of Buffalo Bill, Deadwood Dick, Frank Merriwell, Young Wild West, Kit Carson, and other Western heroes appeared on the covers of dime novels. They were often posed in a scene of action and suspense to allure potential buyers.

The height of the dime novel era lasted from 1860 to 1880, with a second generation which spanned until roughly the pre-World War I era. Though hundreds of artists worked for dime novels in the mid to late 1800s, during the heyday of print media, many did not sign their work and remained anonymous. Some attribute this to the stigma of being employed for "low brow" or working class publications. With the turn of the twentieth century, the era of the dime novel soon faded, replaced with grandiose stories of the West in pulp magazines and comic books.

# Western Pulp Art: The Epic Myth

Pulp magazines began to develop as the preferred entertainment medium of print material among working class audiences. The “classic era” of the pulps lasted about twenty years, 1920s—1940s. The term “pulp magazines” or “the pulps” derived from the cheap wood pulp paper on which they were printed. Innovative photo-mechanical productions in the 1880s enabled publishing companies to lower costs, which ranged from 10 to 15 cents, with some up to 20 cents or more.

Western pulps almost always included an action-oriented and energetic cover. Horses were bucking, cowboy guns were blazing, and fists were frozen in mid-punch. The slick magazines, or “the slicks,” a main competitor, published stories on glossy, expensive paper. However, they were not as accessible to the full spectrum of readers because of higher prices. Artists competed to work for the slicks because they paid more than the pulps.

Typically, artists painted the cover scenes with limited colors, usually red, yellow, blue, and sometimes green, and left open spaces for the printer to insert titles and other story information. After its use, the stretchers and canvas were reused and the original destroyed or left abandoned in warehouses. Because of this, a small fraction of original pulp paintings still exist today.

There were almost 200 Western related pulp magazine titles that were once in existence. Subgenres among these included action and adventure, romance, and “spicy” pulps, as well as crossovers with horror and science fiction genres. Stereotypes were well established in these stories. Native Americans were often portrayed as savage or less intelligent. Women, scantily clad and curvaceous, frequently found themselves kidnapped or tortured. Artists depicted the heroes, mostly Euro-American (white) males, as muscular and attractive, while villains were ugly with exaggerated features.

The age of the pulp magazines took literary ideas to new understanding in visual arts. The cover images became so developed that many provided a false sense of the authentic West, and could stand independently from their accompanying text. Many characters transcended into new media over time, particularly in the forms of comic books, movies, and television.

# The Toughest of the West: The Comic Book Western

As technology and media developed in the mid-twentieth century, comic books disbursed Western stories and characters to wide audiences. Marvel, DC Comics, and Dell Comics, along with other comic book giants, produced dozens of series dedicated to Western characters. The Rawhide Kid, Jonah Hex, Red Ryder, and The Lone Ranger were sold at newsstands across the country.

Comic books not only have ancestry in dime novels and pulps, but also in the Sunday Funnies, the newspaper comic strips. Within a comic book, generally the narrative is presented in a series of illustrated panels with dialogue delivered by word balloons drawn above each character's head. Comic books were first marketed to children, but over time older audiences became avid readers. When the United States entered World War II, young soldiers took comic books with them or shipped these materials to their posts.

The most common conventions of Western comic book heroes incorporated strong masculine standards. Predominantly male, Euro-American, and unmarried, artists customized each character with a trademark look. A distinctive hat, shirt, face, or even horse proved ultimate triumph or failure of a series. Without that bold, key trait that drove customers to buy the publication, it would not be able to survive.

When first marketed to young boys and men, a comic book could be purchased for 10 to 20 cents, but today customers could spend about four dollars per issue. Though there are not as many contemporary Western titles, comic books continue to attract new age groups and different locales. Western heroes are not as limited as they have been in the past, and several emerged that are women or come from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

# The Transforming West: Modern and Contemporary Perspectives

Due to the often overwhelming stimuli from popular culture, artists took advantage of the immeasurable possibilities found within Western imagery and narratives. Some stayed within traditional methods, and their works of art told powerful stories without words. Some artists became attuned to political, religious, and biased ideas and used them in their work by using nontraditional source material. A number of modern artists created powerful images using commercial and graphic concepts, commenting upon mass consumerism and cultural myths of the West.

Western illustrators continued to work throughout the 1950s and 1960s, creating paintings for cover art of magazines, novels, film posters, and all sorts of printed materials using traditional artistic techniques. Established views of the Western hero persisted throughout this era of artistic experimentation, but the look and persona of the ideal hero slowly transformed. Countless artists looked at the idea of the celebrity and merged it with the Western hero to create an unrealistic symbol of the West, while others examined concepts of violence, racism, and sexism.

Art of the West has been frequently restructured in the last half of the twentieth century through present day. Not only do artists seek inspiration from the past, often utilizing dime novels, pulp magazines, comic books, and film in their work, but they also provide their own individual commentary on daily Western life. Men and women artists of all backgrounds have the opportunity to develop work based on their own identities and perceptions. Native American artists contribute personal interpretations about popular culture contrasting stereotypes founded a century ago. Women artists may create work focusing on their perspective of Western society and consumer culture.

In this gallery are works of art that have been created from the later twentieth century through today. These artists looked directly at print materials, film, and Western subjects and are influenced by them. Many comment upon the misconceptions of the West and its negative stereotypes, while other artists look upon it with a sense of nostalgia and humor.

# Mass Media, Hollywood, and the Modern Ideal

**“This is the West, sir. When legend becomes fact, print the legend.”**

—*Who Shot Liberty Valance*, 1962

At the end of the Second World War, the era of baby boomers soon came into full swing. Countless families dedicated time each week to listening to *The Lone Ranger*, *Hopalong Cassidy*, *Gunsmoke*, and *The Cisco Kid* radio programs, and over time televisions became fixtures in their living rooms. About every month another Western film graced the silver screen. Images of celebrities who were representatives of popular culture inadvertently defined what was Western through costume, physical appearance, and the roles they played. Actors like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, in their showy and colorful cowboy Western attire, promoted a West of “Hollywoodian” style, heroics, and spectacle, while actor John Wayne brought vibrato to the stalwart cowboy in the movies.

Western popular imagery flourished in the War and post-War eras, with stories and characters promoting virtue, righteousness, and the need to be “quick on the trigger.” As film and television media grew in popularity, so did the Western genre. Western stories used masculine characters: outlaws, lawmen, gunfighters, cavalry officers, ranchers, and even Native American warriors, just as in the pulp magazines and dime novels, but with more emphasis on cowboy life.

The Golden Age of the Western movie lasted until about 1960, declining each year after. Directors John Ford and Sergio Leone left indelible marks on the film industry in their Western adaptations. Television’s Westerns held on differently: in the 1950s and 1960s the variety of programming available to watch added to over 50 hours a week. Programs like *Bonanza*, *The Rifleman*, *The Big Valley*, and *The High Chaparral* flooded the airwaves into the 1970s. Cartoons touched upon Western themes and their prominent stereotypes, creating humor out of the idealized cowboy, from *Merry Melodies*’ Yosemite Sam in the 1940s to Filmation’s *Bravestarr* cartoon in the 1980s.

Though the height of Western film and television is long gone, Western movies and television programs continue to be produced on occasion, sparking imaginations of the next generation. New ideas of the West, blending science fiction, horror, steampunk, and other genres continually bring fresh takes to stories and characters of the Old Frontier. Western entertainment extends beyond the screen, as artists apply new technology and cultural trends in digital media, virtual and tabletop games, and cosplay.