

Heritage, Progress, and Prosperity: American Identity in Arthur Covey's *The Spirit of Kansas*

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Arthur Sinclair Covey's *The Spirit of Kansas*, a three-part, oil-on-canvas mural completed in 1915, hangs in the lobby of Southwestern Bank in downtown Wichita, Kansas [Fig. 1]. Situated roughly halfway up the beige wall behind the tellers' window, it has spent four decades worth of its impressive lifespan supervising a daily parade of loan-seekers and deposit-makers, many of whom take little notice of the century-old artwork. Originally, each of the mural's panels—entitled “Promise,” “Fruition,” and “Afterglow”—measured thirty feet wide by seven feet tall, but their relocation to Southwestern Bank in 1976 resulted in “Promise” and “Afterglow” losing significant swatches of canvas on their left- and right-hand sides.¹

Though born in Illinois in 1877 and living in New York City when he painted this work, Arthur Covey spent a significant portion of his formative years in south-central Kansas. His Civil-War-veteran father trekked the family through a series of small Missouri towns before settling them for roughly eight years in El Dorado, Kansas; they pulled up roots once again to participate in the 1893 Cherokee Strip land grab in modern-day Oklahoma, but Covey gravitated back to the Sunflower State at age eighteen, enrolling in Southwestern College in Winfield. There, his raw artistic talent soon won him a spot at the Art Institute of Chicago, and after earning his degree he meandered between teaching, producing illustrations for advertisements and periodicals, and serving as a pupil-apprentice to Karl Harr in Munich, Frank Brangwyn in London, and Robert Reid in the United States. *The Spirit of Kansas* represented Covey's first major independent commission, a big break that set the stage for a journeyman's career creating

¹ Lara Jost and Dave Lowenstein, *Kansas Murals: A Traveler's Guide* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 174; Bob Curtwright, “No Plans to Save It: Time's Running Out Fast for Historic Covey Mural,” *The Wichita Eagle*, June 30, 1975.

large-scale public art.²

Before moving to its current residence, *The Spirit of Kansas* occupied a handsome, Beaux-Arts-style building only a few blocks distant; although today it too houses a bank, this structure began its life as Wichita's Carnegie Library, which the eponymous tycoon-philanthropist funded with a \$75,000 grant to the city.³ Covey's assignment, received in 1914 and completed for the facility's opening the following year, entailed decorating one second-story wall under the library's glass dome—however, upon studying the venue, the thirty-seven-year-old artist took the initiative to produce three separate but interconnected panels, forming in aggregate a single pictorial narrative about the state he had once called home.⁴ Later in the library's history, when the open well beneath the dome became a public reading room, Wichitans would have sat virtually encircled by Covey's brightly-colored vision of Kansas, their literary pursuits overseen by a cast of plucky pioneers, industrious settlers, and defeated but dignified Indians [Fig. 2]. With light filtering through a clerestory of stained-glass sunflowers above, and perhaps the rustling of turned pages mimicking the whisper of wind through prairie grass, one can easily imagine the affective power Covey's mural might possess in this space.⁵

Contemporary critics on a local, regional, and national scale certainly seemed eager to trumpet Covey's accomplishment, offering praise that often centered on the perceived authenticity of his images. The *Woman's Home Journal* called the paintings “native and true to the soil,” while a writer for the *Kansas City Star* opined that Covey had “been able to seize on

² Arthur Covey and the Southwestern Collection (Winfield, KS: Southwestern College, 1960), [1-7]; Pamela S. Thompson, ed., *Arthur Covey: The Spirit of Kansas Exhibition April 20-May 13 2017* (Winfield, KS: Southwestern College, 2017), 2-4, 34.

³ Craig Miner, *Wichita: The Magic City* (Wichita: The Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum Association, 1988), 142; George S. Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries: Their History and Impact on American Public Library Development* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1969), 241.

⁴ Curtwright, “No Plans to Save It.”

⁵ Jost and Lowenstein, *Kansas Murals*, 174; “When a Wichita Woman Said ‘I Will’ She Inspired the Kansas Town to a Splendid Achievement,” *The Ladies' Home Journal*, March 1916.

the fresh, clean, adventuring spirit of the West and to give it actual life”; the mural, he declared, embodied “Kansas itself, its history, its present and its future hopes.”⁶ Not to be outdone in the field of laudatory excess, the *Philadelphia Record* added patriotic and didactic value to the list of the murals’ merits, headlining its story on *The Spirit of Kansas* “New Movement in Art Distinctively American: Frescoes in the Library at Wichita, Kansas, Show the Birth of a Movement Toward a National School.” Below this sweeping pronouncement, the article continued:

“The three canvases are wholly American and painted by an artist who knows his subjects and feels them. No more inspired or inspiring set of paintings has ever been done in this land, and the Middle West has given it...Each detail is painstakingly accurate—the pictures are as valuable sources of information and instruction to the student at the library as are the books themselves that line the shelves.”⁷

Kansan pride or journalistic zeal aside, what, one might ask, explains the apparent intensity of feeling aroused by *The Spirit of Kansas*—a nostalgic work by a then-unknown, New York-based artist, in an industrialized city more associated with real estate speculation than frontier bona fides? Unpacking the early twentieth-century resonance of *The Spirit of Kansas* shows that the mural represents the confluence of multiple strands of Progressive-era thought, particularly in regard to the American character, civic engagement, and social evolution. In his decorative program for Wichita’s Carnegie Library, Covey presents the Kansas public with an

6 “Kansas, Her Past and Future Painted for the Wichita Library,” *Woman’s Home Companion*, May 1915, 38; “The Spirit of Kansas in a Mural Painting,” *Kansas City Star*, June 6, 1915.

7 “New Movement in Art Distinctively American: Frescoes in the Library at Wichita, Kansas, Show the Birth of a Movement Toward a National School,” *The Philadelphia Record*, May 30, 1915.

idyllic version of its past that also serves to prophesize its bright future, as well as assert an indelible Kansan identity beyond the reach of modernity's relentless flux. For all its backwards-looking wistfulness, *The Spirit of Kansas* exists as a decidedly of-its-moment document in the popular imagery it employs, the beliefs it expresses, and the story it unspools across the length of its three panels, a factually dubious but affectively powerful narrative coupling motifs of prosperity and potential with a picturesque Great Plains backdrop. Even "Afterglow," the lone dissonant note in an otherwise triumphal tableau, reflects turn-of-the-century attitudes about American Indians, giving artistic form to widespread "vanishing race" rhetoric. Celebratory and elegiac, deeply invested in history yet fixated on forward movement, *The Spirit of Kansas* encompasses many of the contradictions of a nation grappling with its sense of self after the symbolic "closure" of the Western frontier.

In "Promise," the first of Covey's sequence of images, a quintet of human figures stands in the foreground, their arrangement almost frieze-like in its intimate proximity to the picture plane [Fig. 3]. Beyond them a sandy brown prairie landscape, its broad expanse punctuated by pockets of olive green shadow, stretches towards a low-slung horizon line. In the middle distance, a team of oxen pull a covered wagon with a woman seated inside towards the right. The bulky beasts lumber along at a steady pace, eyes forward and heads down, flat backs echoing the evenness of the surrounding environment. A navy ribbon of river runs behind them, and from its opposite bank grasslands sprawl to the far-off point where land meets sky, uninterrupted by trees or man-made structures. Large, cottony cloudbanks occupy the sky itself, their bulbous forms growing progressively thicker, darker, and more closely-set moving towards the right side of the panel, where a semi-translucent rainbow descends in a gentle curve from one threatening thunderhead down to earth. Covey's use of short, linear brushstrokes set at sloping angles

activates the surface of the canvas, lending a sense of animation to the sky and to the clouds as they advance in the same direction as the animals and humans below. His saturated palette heightens the feeling of vitality created by this flickering brushwork, resulting in a style that blends the high-keyed color of London mentor Frank Brangwyn with the painterly, Impressionistic quality of American mentor Robert Reid. Like Brangwyn, whose works reveal a strong emphasis on draftsmanship, Covey too uses crisp line to define form, although not so heavily as to detract from the painting's overall luminous appearance.⁸

The dual masses of clouds in the panel's background, white on the left and stormy grey on the right, mirror the configuration of its foreground, where two main figure groupings cluster on each short side of the canvas. On the left, his feet swallowed up by a patch of blooming flowers, stands a young man or perhaps a teenage boy, one hand tucked casually in the pocket of his brown slacks while the other holds a rifle vertically against his leg. His blonde head turns to the right as he gazes past a nearby pair of thin-trunked, white-barked trees with spindly branches and leaves blowing in the same direction. Slightly behind the trees, two horses, fully equipped with tack, stride forward into the scene. Due to their mid-torso cropping in the painting's present-day condition, the horses' traces lead to an unseen load just outside of the frame; Covey's preparatory maquette for "Promise" suggests their phantom freight consists of yet another covered wagon [**Fig. 4**].

On the opposite end of the picture plane, three humans and one animal—in in this case, a lanky, spotted dog—tread through additional flora towards the panel's right-hand boundary. A bearded older fellow—outfitted, bizarrely enough, like a mid-nineteenth-century gold prospector,

⁸ Eugen Neuhaus, *The Art of the Exposition: Personal Impressions of the Architecture, Sculpture, Mural Decorations, Color Scheme & Other Aesthetic Aspects of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition* (San Francisco: Paul Elder & Company, 1915), 56-57, 65-67; Effie Seachrest, "Frank Brangwyn's Exposition Murals," *Fine Arts Journal* 33, no. 1 (July 1915), 321-330.

complete with knee-length boots, jeans, wide-brimmed hat, and what looks suspiciously like a pickaxe⁹—lags behind two companions, another man and a flaxen-haired, white-dressed woman; wedged beneath the arc of the rainbow, the duo, who carry bundles of supplies, fall partly into shadow as they prepare to exit the scene, diverting attention onto the forty-niner lingering in their wake. He marks the lone stationary note in the composition's otherwise unified sweep of movement towards the right, stopping and craning his neck to peer back at the blonde youth. In a way, these two travelers form mirror images: both don long-sleeved shirts and unbuttoned vests, pose with one hip thrust slightly to the side, and place a hand on or in a pocket while the other grasps a tool. As with the majority of characters in *The Spirit of Kansas*, whether adolescent, aged, or in-between, Covey renders the men's facial features in a style of generalized semi-abstraction, leaving the viewer to speculate as to their emotional states. Perhaps with these figures the artist meant to create a pictorial metaphor for an older instance of westward migration, represented by the grizzled prospector, paling before the more recent, post-Civil War exodus of citizens seeking gold of their own, albeit waves of grain rather than glittering minerals. Interestingly, in the "Promise" maquette, the would-be prospector emphasizes and underscores rather than contradicts the image's overall visual trajectory, raising a hand to shield his eyes against the sun as he stares intently to the right.

Covey's portrayal of pioneers setting forth across the prairie speaks to a nostalgic impulse with myriad manifestations in U.S. popular culture during the years before World War I.¹⁰ With the wind at their backs, the settlers press forward on foot or in their iconic Conestoga

⁹ For earlier examples of this character type, see E.Hall Martin's *Mountain Jack and a Wandering Miner* (ca. 1851); Albertus D.O. Browere's *The Lone Prospector* (1853); and the red-shirted figure at bottom center of John Gast's *American Progress* (1872), as well as the Currier and Ives print *Gold Mining In California* (1871).

¹⁰ William H. Truettner, ed., *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 20-22.

schooners, sailors on a vast sea of grass. Though the ominous clouds overhead suggest impending hardship, the rainbow—that perennial emblem of divine providence—betokens a fated deliverance to new lands and a fresh start. These individuals, then, become a chosen people, forging courageously ahead despite difficulty, drawing strength from their faith in the titular American “Promise”: that of an untapped bounty of natural resources and territory for the taking in the trans-Mississippi West, only awaiting the arrival of enduring, industrious souls to bring it to “Fruition.” Covey’s benefactor at *The Philadelphia Record* described the scene in such Biblical terms, writing, “[It] made me think of the vision of the promised land, when Jehovah took Moses up into the mountain and told him to ‘behold the land of Canaan which I give unto the children of Israel for a possession.’”¹¹

Kansas as depicted by Covey differs wildly from characterizations of the Great Plains region by pre-Civil War explorers, who dubbed the broad swath of flat, mostly featureless land spanning the continent’s midsection “The Great American Desert.”¹² The idyllic agrarian picture he paints in “Promise” would likely seem unfamiliar to many of the area’s first white settlers as well. Unlike later limners of Kansas history, namely John Steuart Curry, Covey omits any reference to the state’s unsavory legacy of coercive Indian removal and pro- and anti-slavery violence, nor does he allude to the punishing struggle for survival faced by homesteaders beset by crop failures, extreme weather, and the occasional disastrous grasshopper plague.¹³ Knowing the backstory of the community that received *The Spirit of Kansas* draws the highly sanitized and romanticized nature of its contents into still sharper focus: Wichita grew from an encampment,

11 “New Movement in Art Distinctively American”; Truettner, *The West as America*, 40; Joni L. Kinsey, *Plain Pictures: Images of the American Prairie* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 4-5, 24.

12 Truettner, *The West as America*, 5-6.

13 On Indian removal and slavery-related conflict in nineteenth-century Kansas, see Craig H. Miner and William E. Unrau, *The End of Indian Kansas: A Study of Cultural Revolution, 1854-1871* (Lawrence, KS: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1978); Kinsey, *Plain Pictures*, 82-83, 85.

established in 1861, of displaced Wichita Indians, who were immortalized on the map when a town sprung up around businesses built by white entrepreneurs eager to monetize the natives' misfortune.¹⁴ For almost a decade following its incorporation in 1870, the city's economy chugged along primarily on the profits of the cattle trade, or, more specifically, on the debauched hijinks of cowboys who patronized Wichita's saloons, gambling dens, and brothels—in fact, between approximately 1873 and 1877, licensing revenues from these establishments alone filled the municipal coffers enough that city taxes were dropped for all other permanent businesses. Far from salt-of-the-earth farmers, rugged hunters and traders, or heroic frontiersmen, Wichita's influential early citizens consisted primarily of an elite cadre of wealthy bankers and merchants who promoted industrial development. During the 1880s, as Covey's father led his family from town to Midwest town looking for work, Wichita underwent a veritable urban boom, complete with government expansion, infrastructure building, and an exploding population; in 1887, by which time the Coveys had hitched their wagon in El Dorado, Kansas, about 30 miles northeast, Wichita ranked third in the country in absolute volume of real estate operations and had gained national attention.¹⁵

Ironically, the rapid modernization of cities like Wichita during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries helps account for the effacement of modernity evident in *The Spirit of Kansas*. Anxieties about the dizzying rate of change and its social ramifications prompted literary and artistic flights to the fantasy of the “Old West,” an idea whose allure grew as the vestiges of its real-world inspirations shrank.¹⁶ By the time Covey set brush to canvas, most of

¹⁴ *The Gale Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes*, ed. Sharon Malinowski and Anna Sheets, vol. 3, *Arctic, Subarctic, Great Plains, Plateau* (Detroit: Gale, 1998), 372-377.

¹⁵ Miner, *Magic City*, 9-10, 13-16, 21-22, 31-46, 56-57.

¹⁶ Truettner, *The West as America*, 49; Bailey van Hook, “From the Lyrical to the Epic: Images of Women in American Murals at the Turn of the Century,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 72-73; David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 281-283.

the continent's supposedly inexhaustible supply of arable land had been duly apportioned to farmers; railroad lines stitched the Union together from Atlantic to Pacific, and advancements in communications technology seemed to similarly contract the country's size.¹⁷ If, as historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared in a speech at the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893, "The frontier experience was the dynamic factor in molding a distinctive national character," then the transformation of former frontier territory into settled lands posed an existential threat to American identity.¹⁸ High rates of international immigration and the burgeoning—if still severely circumscribed—public visibility of women and racial minorities served to further rattle the nation's sense of stability.¹⁹ In response to this, as well as mounting dissatisfaction with the impacts of industrialism, citizens gravitated towards imagery of pioneers, homesteaders, and cowboys, investing these figures and their accoutrements with symbolic significance. Characters such as those painted by Covey accrued cultural capital and proliferated across American media as they came to embody quintessential national virtues like adventurousness, industriousness, and perseverance.²⁰ The comparatively featureless Midwestern landscape, once so befuddling to artists weaned on mountains, forests, and waterways, had previously gained esteem for its ability to emblemize boundless possibility—now it also represented the site of America's mythical youth, a simpler, purer time far removed from the complex present.²¹ This rose-tinted, longing-tinged take on the past comes across clearly in the wistful words of the *Philadelphia Record* critic, who wrote admiringly of Covey, "[His] life has been as picturesque as that of any pioneer who rode the pony express or fought the plains Indians...we can imagine him with charcoal and

¹⁷ Truettner, *The West as America*, 27-28.

¹⁸ Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1982), 203.

¹⁹ Miner, *Magic City*, 93-102.

²⁰ Truettner, *The West as America*, 19, 28.

²¹ Kinsey, *Plain Pictures*, 4-6, 13, 17.

pencil, reproducing highly-edifying copies of the types of people about him—the real pioneers, the ‘near’ pioneers, adventurers, [and] soldiers of peaceful fortunes.”²² Enshrined in the national imaginary, its importance underscored by each new iteration in print or paint, the Old West offered an anchor to which Americans could proudly affix their sense of self.

In another instance of paradox, Covey’s pictorial paean to the rural past stands as a testament to urban Wichita’s engagement with Progressive-era ideals and the social reformer mindset. Its home, the Wichita Carnegie Library, counts as one among a slew of public libraries that sprang up in America’s cities in the decades bracketing the turn of the twentieth century.²³ Wichita hadn’t always shown eagerness to foster such institutions: although a city library of some kind had existed since the 1870s, it limped along on volunteer service, sheltering its eclectic collection of secondhand books in a sequence of hard-to-find adopted spaces—in 1886, a city councilman’s proposal to gauge civic support for building “a fine library” foundered when the motion failed to secure a second. Kansas historian Craig Miner attributes this apparent disinterest in non-essential public amenities to Wichita’s single-minded focus on business and commercial pursuits during its famed 1880s boom period.²⁴ However, in the early 1900s, as the city emerged from the inevitable post-boom bust, a fresh ethos took hold, and municipal dollars began being channeled toward projects intended to instruct, provide outlets for wholesome recreation, and cultivate popular taste. A handful of new or enhanced parks facilitated healthful outdoor activities like cycling, golf, tennis, and baseball, while the Forum auditorium, opened in 1911, served as a venue for the performance arts. Although the city commission form of government installed in 1909 fell short of its idealistic goal to end corrupt cronyism and partisan

²² “New Movement in Art Distinctly American.”

²³ Samuel Swett Green, *The Public Library Movement in the United States 1853-1893* (Boston: The Boston Book Company, 1913), 11-13.

²⁴ “When a Wichita Woman Said ‘I Will’”; Miner, *Magic City*, 47-48, 66.

political wrangling, it did prefigure further Progressive policies: by 1914, when Covey began *The Spirit of Kansas*, Wichita had doubled down on street cleaning and beautification efforts, launched a sanitation campaign, approved all-night lighting for crime deterrence, funded a house “for the disabled, transient, and unemployed,” and issued a much-needed dog control ordinance.²⁵ In this atmosphere of optimism about man’s capacity for self-improvement and the power of state actors to nurture that growth, the Wichita Carnegie Library represented more than a repository for texts. Libraries, it was believed, functioned as broadly-accessible acculturating agents, secular temples to education that could instill American values and elevate morals among the increasingly diverse masses.²⁶ Where better, then, to place a work of art valorizing the nation’s supposed shared past and tacitly espousing admiration of frontier-style fortitude and community cohesion? Along with conveying a positive message, Covey’s mural provided the public with an example of aesthetic achievement that might nurture and refine their artistic sensibilities. Its use of by-then familiar visual tropes and its appellation as a depiction of Kansas could draw library visitors in, and once so enticed their interest in the subject matter would blossom into deeper appreciation for art itself.²⁷ In this way, the animating impetus of *The Spirit of Kansas* stems as much from the Progressive, social reformer mindset of its 1914 nascence as it does reverence for the state’s nineteenth-century past.

“Fruition,” today the mural’s largest piece, stages a colorful, densely-packed display of the rewards of the pioneers’ journeys and toil [Fig. 5]. The assembled figures, who range in age from babes-in-arms to wizened elders, all wear old-fashioned clothing akin to that seen in “Promise”: men in the crowd wear trousers or overalls, bandanas, and shirts with sleeves rolled

²⁵ Miner, *Magic City*, 93-107.

²⁶ Arthur E. Bostwick, *The American Public Library* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1910), 51-52; Bobinski, *Carnegie Libraries*, 6-7.

²⁷ Bostwick, *The American Public Library*, 313-314.

up to the elbow, while all of the women save one don pristine, modest white dresses. Unlike “Promise,” however, the human element here dominates the composition, effectively obscuring the prairie vista beyond: barely discernible in the small glimpse of terrestrial background is a boxy factory with three smokestacks jettisoning plumes of steam. At the center of the scene sits a massive globe supported by a stout plinth and encircling wooden armature. The globe’s surface, a startling shade of saturated red-orange rather than the expected motley of blue, green, and brown, contrasts with the daubs of cool turquoise and violet that compose the stippled sky above; it seems to almost glow with an inner light and heat. A pair of incongruously nude boys flank the globe on the left and right, each staring as if mesmerized into the oversized orb. One boy, seated and blonde, props his chin on his hands as he grasps the globe’s wooden frame, lending him a pensive air. His standing counterpart tilts forward at the waist so that reflected light off the globe’s surface gives his face a ruddy glow and his brown hair a coppery sheen. The individuals occupying the rest of the canvas also, to varying degrees, orient their bodies, gazes, or both towards its horizontal midpoint, and Covey further emphasizes this area by making colors purer, contours sharper, and details more precisely defined with proximity to the globe. Tall men balancing hefty woven baskets atop their heads stand at a slight remove on either side of the globe, their columnar forms stretching towards the top of the image to create an additional framing device for the central cluster of bodies and objects. As the lone undressed individuals, the naked boys seem set apart from the group at large, stripped of any accessories that could more definitely locate them in the mural’s imagined prairie past. Held at a remove from this specific moment and place, the boys assume a timeless, allegorical function as symbols of youth and futurity; they embody the unsoiled next generation whose limitless prospects, signified by the globe, stem from the labors of those who came before.

Covey's country folk come bearing abundant natural gifts: skirt-, platter-, and basketfuls of the fruits of the earth threaten to spill from their respective containers. Some of the offerings, which include flowers, eggs, and produce, have already done so and now lie scattered on the ground, small moons pulled into the orbit of the fiery globe. Two tawny shocks of wheat, slumping under their own weight, seem to bow reverently to it. On the left, a bonneted woman in white balances a pudgy, similarly clad infant on one hip while a second child, a little girl in the same type of garment, clutches meekly to the woman's skirt. Across the way stands an identically-dressed mother-baby pair, although here the child plays in the grass at the woman's feet, his or her plump, diminutive form protectively bracketed by what looks like an older brother to the right and a basket-toting adult male to the left. In terms of atmosphere, "Fruition" straddles the line between celebratory and contemplative, landing somewhere in the sentimental neighborhood of typical "First Thanksgiving" tableaux—one can almost imagine Squanto lurking just outside the frame. Had "Promise" and "Afterglow" not undergone their 1976 trimming, the vertical edge that abutted "Fruition" on each would have included yet more individuals gravitating towards this sizable group.²⁸ Despite the high number of figures and Covey's characteristically energetic brushwork, "Fruition" feels calm and still, its action (or lack thereof) firmly anchored in the emphatic visual presence of the globe. The degree of human crowding also effectively negates two oft-mentioned sources of distress among settlers on the Great Plains, social isolation and a kind of inverted claustrophobia aroused by observing huge, empty swaths of prairie.²⁹

Though Covey omits the trappings of modernity within the confines of his canvases, *The*

²⁸ For "Promise," this would be the far right edge of the canvas; for "Afterglow," the far left one—see Figs. 4 and 13.

²⁹ Robert Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 147-149.

Spirit of Kansas cannot help but speak in the language of its contemporary milieu. In “Fruition,” the artist employs Western character types—the strapping, broad-shouldered young farmer, the world-weary old man, the bun-wearing woman garbed in pristine white—propagated by fellow illustrators such as N.C. Wyeth, Maynard Dixon, and Harvey Dunn, to name only a few [Fig. 6].³⁰ Looking beyond the commercial field, Covey’s women, who radiate a sense of both virginal purity and maternal wisdom, could easily share a frame with some of the demure, gauzily-gowned beauties painted by his stateside mentor, Robert Reid, and other veterans of the turn-of-the-century American Renaissance movement; indeed, prior to beginning work on *The Spirit of Kansas*, Covey served as Reid’s assistant at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, helping him prepare eight massive murals for the rotunda of the Palace of Fine Arts.³¹ Covey’s use of nudity as a visual shorthand for allegory, as seen in the panel’s central youths, also harkens to the work of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists like Abbott Thayer and Kenyon Cox, whose oeuvres include images of nude children representing innocence to be protected and intelligence to be sculpted [Fig. 7]. In perhaps its most tellingly modern aspect, Covey’s mural exemplifies the idea of progress, a concept that inspired fervent enough belief among Americans of the era as to become a sort of national idiom, complete with its own visual vocabulary.³² Public desire to see history portrayed as a succession of evolutionary stages leading inexorably toward the triumphs of the present manifested in large-scale world’s fairs and Wild West shows, and, on a local level, in community-organized pageantry. Pageant producers crafted theatrical retellings of the development of American cities

³⁰ Walt Reed, *Great American Illustrators* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1979), 40-41, 52-53, 90, 156-157.

³¹ Deborah F. Pokinski, “Reid, Robert,” *Grove Art Online*, last modified Oct. 27, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T2214195>; Stella G.S. Perry, *The Sculpture and Mural Decorations of the Exposition: A Pictorial Survey of the Art of the Panama-Pacific International Exposition* (San Francisco: Paul Elder and Company, 1915), 101; van Hook, “From the Lyrical to the Epic,” 64, 70-71.

³² Truettner, *The West as America*, 30-31.

using predetermined narrative formulas, episodic breakdowns with stock stages like “First Settlers,” “Colonial,” and “Civil War [Figs. 8-9].”³³ Wild West shows like the one famously spearheaded by “Buffalo” Bill Cody offered audiences a chance to safely watch thrilling reenactments of Indian Wars battles, performances that condensed decades’ worth of complex, bloody conflict into a matter of minutes—secure knowledge of the white man’s ultimate victory came with the price of admission.³⁴ At grand to-dos such as the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, displays of “less civilized” peoples occupied the same premises as building-sized shrines to the latest advanced technologies, the latter spectacle working in conjunction with the former to conjure an edifying impression of how far man had come.³⁵ Covey’s mural, with its tripartite division and sequence-suggesting nomenclature (“Promise” is fulfilled in “Fruition,” which then generates an “Afterglow”) operates in an analogous fashion to these paeans to progress. Significantly, Covey elides over the toughest rigors of homesteading, claiming, breaking, and living off of formerly virgin soil, and instead emphasizes the happier moments that must bracket this grueling interlude: his viewer can appreciate the inherent optimism of the settlers’ journey and bask in the satisfaction of their success, never needing to confront the wide gulf of hard work, setbacks, and uncertainty that would separate the two.³⁶ By pruning the mercurial course of Kansas history into a linear, coherent plot, *The Spirit of Kansas* presents its audience with a panoramic view of history that implicitly suggests a future of similarly smooth, beneficial transitions—surely a comforting prospect at a time of rapid social change and instability.³⁷ The globe in “Fruition,” on first glance so brazenly out of place amid the humble

³³ Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 122-123.

³⁴ Alison Fields, “Circuits of Spectacle: The Miller Brothers’ 101 Ranch Real Wild West,” *American Indian Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (Fall 2012), 445-448.

³⁵ Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 83-114; Truettner, *The West as America*, 172-173.

³⁶ Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*, 147-149.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40; Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, 1-2, 4.

stuff of farm life, becomes less of an oddity when considered within this progress-obsessed framework. Globes appeared frequently in promotional imagery for world's fairs held in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, an epoch when U.S. expansionist tendencies played out in the annexations of Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii; with the North American continent conquered, attention started to shift towards external settings for exerting imperialist power [Figs. 10-11].³⁸ Considered in this light, the arresting central image of "Fruition" comes into clearer focus as a totem of its times, intimating not only the extent of what Kansas' children can comprehend through education, but also what they may expect to inherit through their birthright as white Americans.

In a similar fashion as "Promise," the upper right-hand reaches of the sky in "Afterglow," the mural's culminating piece, have darkened to a bruise-like shade of purple as swollen clouds amass menacingly [Fig. 12]. The low position of the horizon line and relative amount of pictorial space dedicated to man, beast, and landscape also bear a strong resemblance to "Promise," making the mural's two side panels—its "wings," in triptych terms—conceivable as mirror images. In "Afterglow," however, no rainbow carves an auspicious channel from the heavens to the earth, and no flowers pepper the grass. A copper-skinned Native American couple in the foreground form the most eye-catching part of the composition. The Indian man, bare-chested and wearing a voluminous feathered war bonnet, tilts his face skyward as he holds a medicine shield aloft; his elevated shoulders cover the lower half of his face, masking his features so that the viewer can only guess as to whether he smiles, screams, or scowls. Beside the man, whose entire body seems oriented upwards, the Indian woman acts as a visual foil, hanging her head and slumping her shoulders, gaze directed at the ground. The patterned blanket she grasps limply

³⁸ Truettner, *The West as America*, 170-171

in one hand droops down to puddle at her feet, echoing her sad, defeated posture. To the left of this duo, in another conspicuous echo of “Promise,” the front third of an idly grazing white horse projects into the scene from outside the frame. Its stewards present something of a puzzle: a man dressed in clothing more akin to tribal garb, complete with fringed sleeves and furry, horned cap, sits on the side of the horse closest to the viewer, while behind the horse stands a man wearing a broad-brimmed tan hat. Whatever their identities, both figures appear in profile, looking in the direction of the native couple to their right—perhaps with the benign interest of cultural voyeurs, perhaps with the barely stifled impatience of soon-to-be-usurpers.

Covey creates a symbolic divide between foreground and background in “Afterglow” with an undulating line of deep violet shadow cast by a series of spiky green plants. Snaking across the ground from lower right to upper left, the line separates the four figures pressed up against the picture plane from a larger assembly of Native Americans set farther back in the space. Directly behind the hungry white steed, a few individuals, including one on horseback, gather in the shade of a wooden arbor from which a column of campfire smoke rises; outside and to their right, a company of Native American men stand in neat rows several men deep, holding up pole-mounted flags whose potential triumphal connotations are undermined by the way they sag flaccidly to the side. Finally, forming a sort of equine bookend for the scene, a dusky-colored horse and rider dragging a loaded travois plod towards whatever waits beyond the edge of the frame, with two additional, unmanned mounts following suit. It is as if this dark horse and its attendant human have very literally receded into the distance and begun the process of exiting stage right, while, on the panel’s opposite side and an opposing trajectory, the white horse and its companions rest, fuel up, and await their cue to fully enter.

Compared to “Promise” or “Fruition,” “Afterglow” exhibits the most numerous and

curious divergences from Covey's initial set of maquettes [Fig. 13]. In addition to substituting the arbor for a triangular tepee and altering the central man's pose, the finished version omits certain elements that add a touch of vitality to the scene, or at least serve to undercut its vaguely funeral aura. In the maquette, a young child crouches where the Indian woman's skirt meets the ground, and a tightly-bundled, brown-skinned baby occupies her cradleboard backpack. Moreover, rather than standing in precisely arrayed, uniformly front-facing rows, the Indians to the right of the tepee appear to casually converse amongst themselves in small groups. One especially outstanding difference concerns the two men in the left foreground, who here, even in their loosely defined, sketchy state, obviously represent Indians, unlike the somewhat ambiguous pair Covey ended up painting. Finally, a small but striking detail present in the maquette, if transferred to the final mural, must have been lost when "Afterglow" was cropped down: a sun-bleached cow skull sitting in the near foreground on the far right.

The title "Afterglow," with its connotations of the warm, lingering satisfaction following a pleasurable event, strikes an odd note coupled with the melancholy mood of the panel, and the resulting sense of ambivalence speaks to contemporary beliefs about Native Americans. Covey's imagery suggests the artist's awareness of the ubiquitous "vanishing race" rhetoric that peaked in the early twentieth century. Whereas at an earlier moment reform-minded individuals had vouched that Indians could adapt and assimilate into white culture, by 1914 this hope had soured into cynicism about natives' capacity to overcome their innate racial handicap. Prognosticators of various stripes, including members of the newly professionalized field of anthropology, declared the Indian doomed to extinction by dint of the intractable otherness that kept them mired in a pre-civilized past. As the Anglo-American majority rode the surging tide of progress into modernity and beyond, the theory held, Native Americans would pass into the annals of

history.³⁹ This widespread belief manifested in texts that took the impending disappearance of Indians as a foregone conclusion, including Edward Curtis' forty-volume *The North American Indian*, a sort of pre-mortem photographic memorial first published in 1907, and Joseph K. Dixon's 1913 *The Vanishing Race*, in which the author wrote, "Annihilation is not a pleasant word, but it is coined from the alphabet of Indian life."⁴⁰

"Afterglow" attests to the prevalence of this mindset in both what it includes and, as the maquette makes apparent, what it excludes. While the determinedly upright deportment of the central Indian man gives him an air of self-possessed stoicism, his female companion exudes sorrowful resignation. The full ensemble of Native Americans, whether standing, seated or saddled up, appear sapped of vital energy, with none except the departing horseman shown in active motion. Their state of stasis visually invokes the alleged entrenchment of Indians in an older time steadily losing ground to the forces of change. By removing the infant and child seen in the "Afterglow" maquette, Covey further denies the natives' futurity; this alteration, in conjunction with the stripping of clear ethnic identity from the two left-hand figures, hints at population decline and possibly the pernicious effects of intermarriage, which many whites assumed would eventually eradicate Indians as a distinct people.⁴¹ Had the lonely cow skull of the maquette remained in place, it would have seemed a sort of Western *memento mori*, underscoring the image's fatalistic attitude.

Even as it forecasts their ruin, however, "Afterglow" participates in the romanticizing of Native Americans that went hand in hand with "vanishing race" orthodoxy. A multitude of early twentieth-century books, films, and artworks, including *The Spirit of Kansas*, manifest how the

³⁹ Hoxie, *A Final Promise*, 22, 93-98, 101; Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, 205-219, 222-223.

⁴⁰ Joseph K. Dixon, *The Vanishing Race: The Last Great Indian Council* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1913), 3.

⁴¹ Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, 248-249.

American mind could simultaneously accommodate an abstract admiration for Indians and acceptance of their supposed fate.⁴² Once a solid buffer of historical distance separated citizens from the Indian Wars, and federal policy had long since split up the bulk of tribal lands, Anglo-Americans saw their native neighbors as effectively defanged, no longer a potential source of danger or an impediment to western expansion.⁴³ If, as William Truettner has argued, the despicability of Indians in American art waxed and waned depending on the need to seize native lands, then the sympathetic lot portrayed in “Afterglow” reflect this endeavor being a *fait accompli*.⁴⁴ Rendered unthreatening, Indians thus became a palatable locus for the same strain of turn-of-the-century white nostalgia that canonized the pioneer as America embodied and the Great Plains as a forge of national character. Within this worldview, Native Americans—for whom the horse tribes of the Mid- and Southwest became a synecdochic stand-in—accrued symbolic baggage as emblems of the untamed wilderness of yesteryear: of a vigorous life of communal values and earthy integrity.⁴⁵ Painters like Charles Marion Russell, sculptors like Cyrus E. Dallin, and multi-media artists like Frederic Remington cashed in on the new sentimental cachet of Indians, all pulling from a common well of imagery and stereotypes; in *The North Wind*, a cover illustration for the March 1909 issue of *The American Magazine*, Covey too dipped into this font, drawing the same equation between natives and nature that would prompt Joseph K. Dixon to describe the Indian four years later as “a child of the mountains and the plains—a faithful worshipper in the great world cathedral.”⁴⁶ [Fig. 14]

The Native Americans portrayed in “Afterglow” likewise conformed to an accepted set of

⁴² Ibid., 216-219; Robert F. Berkhofer, *White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 98-102.

⁴³ Hoxie, *A Final Promise*, 85.

⁴⁴ Truettner, *The West as America*, 44-45.

⁴⁵ Truettner, *The West as America*, 44, 311; Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, 199-200, 210-211, 213, 222-225; Robert F. Berkhofer, *White Man’s Indian*, 96-97.

⁴⁶ Dixon, *The Vanishing Race*, v; Reed, *Great American Illustrators*, 124-125, 134-135.

white expectations for what constituted “Indian,” if not necessarily “Kansas Indian.” Elements such as the horses and open-air arbor align with actual customs of the Kansa (Kaw) and Wichita peoples indigenous to the area, but otherwise Covey’s subjects seem to represent a pastiche of generic, well-known Indian iconography: exposed male skin, feathered headdress, wrapped pigtail braids, beaded and fringed buckskin dress, and so forth.⁴⁷ Interestingly, one of Covey’s critics found the accuracy of his Native Americans especially praiseworthy, writing, “His Indians are real Indians, and not the stage variety, born of grease paint, Jesse James novels, or the ‘movies...He sketched his Indians for the Wichita painting while on the famous 101 Ranch, which is a part of a big Indian reservation.”⁴⁸ Located not ten miles north of the Covey homestead in Red Rock, Oklahoma, on land leased from the Ponca tribe, the Miller brothers’ 101 Ranch, its associated Wild West show, and its Western-themed adult “summer camp” may hold a key to interpreting the imagery of “Afterglow.”⁴⁹ During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Ponca, like other indigenous groups around the country, experienced increased governmental scrutiny of cultural practices viewed as retardants to their full assimilation into white society. Among these traditions, the Sun Dance, a ritual of renewal common across the Great Plains, came under heavy fire for its length and overall abhorrent “primitivism,” including, in some of the ceremony’s tribal variations, self-torture.⁵⁰ White interference led the Ponca to fore swear the Sun Dance following a final performance in 1905, but the following year the Millers parlayed their positive relationship with the tribe into an arrangement wherein the Indians could retain their sacred rite—by holding it on the brothers’ property for the

⁴⁷ *The Gale Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes*, 3: 267-271, 372-377.

⁴⁸ “New Movement in Art Distinctly American.”

⁴⁹ Fields, “Circuits of Spectacle,” 444-446; “Training Tenderfeet on the Largest Ranch in the West,” *The Houston Post*, April 8, 1906, The Portal to Texas History.

⁵⁰ Thomas Mark Holm, “Indians and Progressives: From Vanishing Policy to the Indian New Deal” (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1978), 67-68, 72-74, 79-80; “101 Ranch Show,” *The Houston Post*, November 23, 1908, The Portal to Texas History.

entertainment of their visitors.⁵¹ Considered in relation to “Afterglow,” photographs and articles covering the Ponca’s 1905 Sun Dance suggest that Covey witnessed and drew inspiration from one of the tribe’s later ceremonies at 101 Ranch: in these documents, one sees and reads about “long trimmed” poles topped by “long piece[s] of calico or cloth,” as well as skirt-wearing Ponca men forming east-facing lines and dancing as they “waved towards the sun...the wreaths or shields or whatever else they held in their hands” [Figs. 15-18].⁵² The fact that Covey possibly sought models for his Kansas natives on an Oklahoma ranch and had the results received as wholly “real” speaks to the flattening of tribal diversity that attended the American Indian’s appropriation as a symbolic figure.

Despite its pall of sadness, the fictive surrender scenario that Covey visualizes still lends dignity, gravitas, and unity of purpose to the Indians of Kansas, rejecting historical fact in favor of something more flattering for both sides of the conflict. By emphasizing the volition of the Indians in relinquishing their claim to the plains, “Afterglow” downplays the critical role that white belligerence, as well as federal deceit, corruption, and neglect, had in gradually eroding Native rights and forcing their departure from the state. It also obfuscates the compounding issue of intertribal disagreement about the Native community’s best interests, along with the existence of Indians who collaborated with white leaders in order to secure land for settlers and speculators. Such messy, multifaceted realities could only pollute and confuse the attractively tidy narrative put forth by Covey and contemporaries. So too would acknowledgement that Native Americans had not actually remained set in their ways, frozen like so many specimens in

⁵¹ “Training Tenderfeet”; Holm, “Indians and Progressives,” 80; Fred D. Pfening, “The Romance of Ranch Life,” *Bandwagon* (Columbus, OH) 49, no. 5 (September 2005): 20. The Sun Dance also became a component of the 101 Ranch’s touring show when it launched in 1907—see “101 Ranch Show.”

⁵² George A. Dorsey, “The Ponca Sun Dance,” *Publications of the Field Columbian Museum, Anthropological Series* 7, no. 2 (December 1905): 77-79.

amber: Indians, though marginalized, had an ongoing presence in twentieth-century society. This included in Kansas, where in 1914 groups like the Potawatomis, Kickapoos, Iowas, and Missouri Sacs still endured, preserving cherished tribal traditions while accepting enough elements of the majority culture to ingratiate themselves among their white countrymen. Ultimately, though, the verisimilitude that Covey's critics hailed derived not so much from fidelity to facts as from the way *The Spirit of Kansas* successfully and beautifully reified an accepted myth of Western expansion, one that had attained its own type of "truthfulness" by means of sheer popular repetition. Covey's identification as a Midwesterner-by-birth with personal ties to Kansas helped solidify his mural's status as the genuine article.

Today, *The Spirit of Kansas*, like so many works of American public art, has undergone changes in setting and format, most notably by having its three panels arranged in a staggered horizontal sequence across one wall, well above eye level and thus much less intimate to the beholder. For unknown reasons, "Afterglow" and "Promise" have had their positions illogically reshuffled, so that a typical viewer reading from left to right sees Covey's elegy for the Indian before proceeding to "Fruition" and, finally, "Promise," turning the genesis of the frontier saga into its coda. Instead of the generally hushed, reverent environs of a library or a municipal courthouse, which the Carnegie building served as between 1963 and 1975, the mural now competes for attention with the soundtrack of twenty-first-century office life.⁵³ While the combined forces of these changes temper the affective potency of Covey's work, as does our modern inundation in imagery, they cannot muddle its meaning beyond comprehension or diminish its importance as a window into national beliefs, fears, and aspirations in the Progressive Era. Like the fertile earth Covey portrays in "Fruition," *The Spirit of Kansas* yields

⁵³ Curtwright, "No Plans to Save It."

its own valuable harvest by offering means to examine the motives for American self-mythologizing in the early 1900s.

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Illustrations



Figure 1. Arthur Sinclair Covey, *The Spirit of Kansas*, 1915, oil on canvas; photographed in 2017 at Southwest National Bank, Wichita, KS.



Figure 2. Wichita City Library reading room, ca.1949; Wichita Public Library Photograph Collection, wpl1414.



Figure 3. Arthur Sinclair Covey, *The Spirit of Kansas*, Panel 1: “Promise,” 1914-15; oil on canvas, Southwest National Bank, Wichita, KS.



Figure 4. Arthur Sinclair Covey, *The Spirit of Kansas*, preparatory maquette for “Promise,” 1914; oil on canvas, collection of Southwest College, Winfield, KS.



Figure 5. Arthur Sinclair Covey, *The Spirit of Kansas*, Panel 2: “Fruition,” 1914-15; oil on canvas, Southwest National Bank, Wichita, KS.



Figure 6. N.C. Wyeth, cover for *The Popular Magazine*, September 1914; image from Menges, *N.C. Wyeth: Great Illustrations*, p. 53.



Figure 7. Abbott Handerson Thayer, *Caritas*, 1894-95; oil on canvas, 85.25 x 55.25 in., Museum of Fine Arts Boston.



Figure 8. Program cover, *An Historical Pageant of Illinois* (Evanston, IN), 1909; courtesy of Brown University Library.



Figure 9. Program cover, *A Pageant of Progress* (Lawrence, MA), 1915; courtesy of Brown University Library.



Figure 10. Postcard from “California Welcomes the World” series, Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 1915; image from Moore, *Empire on Display*, p. 137.



Figure 11. Postcard from “California Welcomes the World” series, Panama-Pacific International Exposition, 1915; image from Moore, *Empire on Display*, p. 137.



Figure 12. Arthur Sinclair Covey, *The Spirit of Kansas*, Panel 3: “Afterglow,” 1914-15; oil on canvas, Southwest National Bank, Wichita, KS.



Figure 13. Arthur Sinclair Covey, *The Spirit of Kansas*, preparatory maquette for “Afterglow,” 1914; oil on canvas, collection of Southwest College, Winfield, KS.



Figure 14. Arthur Sinclair Covey, *The North Wind*, cover for *The American Magazine*, March 1909; image from HathiTrust.



Figure 15. George Amos Dorsey, "Beginning of dance, outside the lodge," 1905; silver nitrate negative, Photo Lot 89-8 OPSS NEG T1635, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 16. George Amos Dorsey, “The dance to the setting sun, third day,” 1905 (detail, with red frame added around men holding medicine shields); silver nitrate negative, Photo Lot 89-8 OPSS NEG 1650, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 17. George Amos Dorsey, “The dance to the setting sun, third day,” 1905 (detail, with red frame added around men raising medicine shields); silver nitrate negative, Photo Lot 89-8 OPSS NEG T1622, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution.



Figure 18. George Amos Dorsey, “General view of camp and Sun dance lodge, fourth day,” 1905; from Dorsey, “The Ponca Sun Dance,” plate XXX.

