

Searching for Community in the American West: Arnold Friberg's Exploration of Western Genre Painting

BY ALEXANDER STARR

"I came to realize that the 'Old West' didn't just one fine day suddenly die. It gradually changed... Yet even now after all these years, you can still see it in some places. Boulders and wild cows and mesquite can still be awfully mean, and if you are caught in the desert without water, your tongue can still swell, and horses are still horses."

-Arnold Friberg

This Arnold Friberg quote encapsulates the artist's unique method of looking at the world, which he utilized to form a bridge between viewer and subject across cultures and time through the universality of human interaction with nature. Friberg shared the above thoughts in a letter to a friend regarding a 1948 commission from the Dow Calendar Company to produce scenes of the American West. The paintings created for this project would spur a lifelong pursuit of capturing the dramatic moments and stunning glory of the rugged Western landscape and the people who called it home. At that time, however, Friberg had yet to focus on this particular subject matter and was concerned he lacked the authentic experiences that informed the exceptional sculptures and paintings produced by the likes of Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell.

Friberg was born to Swedish immigrant parents in the suburbs of Chicago in 1913. Three years later his parents would move the family to the Arizona desert, where Arnold would form his first memories as a child in the vast expanse of the American Southwest. This was a time when automobiles were scarcely seen outside of major cities and the amenities of modern life were slow to develop due to the harsh nature of the landscape. Friberg may have missed the pioneer wagon trains and outlaw gunslingers of legend but he did experience the bitter struggles and awe-inspiring spectacles intrinsic to life in the West. As a result, Friberg's sentiments ring true throughout his Western paintings. Careful observations from his early life coupled with a deep knowledge of anatomy prepared him to create a series of paintings that cut to the heart of the Western experience. Friberg depicted individuals from disparate cultures coming together and, at times, conflicting, all while striving to flourish in one of the most mesmerizing yet harsh environments the natural world had to offer.

Given their direct experiences on the frontier, Remington and Russell, among others, were instrumental in creating the conceptual understanding of the 'Old West' that persisted throughout the twentieth century. Their depictions of lone cowboys, violent clashes with Native communities, and heroic lawmen formed the basis for future recreations of



The Old Dragoons of 1850 by Frederic Remington



In Without Knocking by Charles Russell

this turbulent time. In *His First Ride*, Friberg shows an often-neglected aspect of the American West's rich history. While lone riders and hermetic mountain men certainly existed in this landscape, most pioneers were members of family groups searching for a better life. Friberg depicts just such a family in a moment of serene leisure, as a father rides alongside his young son for the first time while the rest of the family provides playful encouragement. The scene is bathed in a rich golden glow illuminating the subjects completely and highlighting the brilliance of the verdant grazing area at their feet. Friberg captures the landscape in its most abundant and providing state, a scarcely depicted aspect of this territory that is so often associated with the degradation and decay caused by an unforgiving heat and dryness. Just like the family depicted in this painting, Friberg provides the viewer with a moment of respite while still including the dry, rocky mountain range in the background as a reminder of the dangers just beyond this pastoral scene.



His First Ride

With this composition in mind, it is easier to understand the archetypal “noble posses” riding out to face down the wanton criminals often depicted in the filmography of John Wayne or the later spaghetti westerns that dominated much of the action genre in Hollywood's early years. The men who inspired these films may have been willing to risk their lives for the lofty principles of morality but, more likely, they understood they were the only line of defense to protect their newfound communities from harm. Friberg uses this composition to betray convention and confront the viewer's preconceptions about this time, while offering an idyllic depiction of the importance of community and finding joy despite what troubles arise.



When the Land Was His

Friberg examines this idea of community through a different lens in *When the Land Was His*, a striking portrait of a Native chieftain and his mount set against a brooding and tumultuous natural landscape. While the composition only figuratively depicts a single person, the artist includes the subject's rich community through the meticulously rendered garments and ornaments that adorn him. Friberg displays a profound appreciation for the careful workmanship and long hours needed to source, refine, and assemble the raw materials of these radiant cultural objects. He spent significant time with these artifacts, studying every bead and recording every delicate

pattern to faithfully reproduce them as an homage to the community that gave them life. In the same way that a Stetson hat or a paisley bandana were signifiers of the larger community behind the pioneers, these items, to a greater degree, are imbued with the history and tradition of the Native population that speaks volumes about their storied cultures. During his lifetime Friberg was humbled that Native Americans who visited his studio remarked that his paintings contained ‘strong medicine’. When contemplating Friberg’s body of work, especially his Western scenes, it is evident that his foremost concern was communicating to the soul by reminding the viewer to take time to appreciate the natural and cultural wonders of the world as well as our unique relationship to them. Inscribed on the wall of the artist’s studio was a quote from Adolf Hungry Wolf that perfectly captures the ideals Friberg worked tirelessly to achieve in his paintings:

“As the winds that blow, here, let my mind wander. As the tree that stands here, give me strength and old age. Let me bend, and mold, to stronger forces. Let solid ground, forever, hold my feet.”