



The Art of the Panorama

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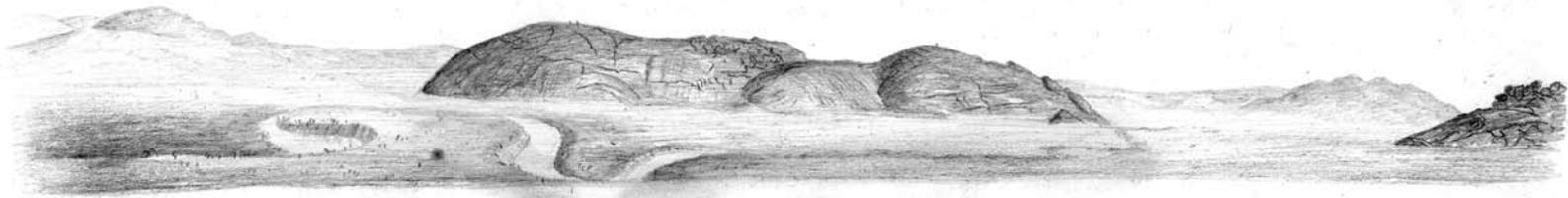
Article Summary: Panoramic art came to Omaha in the 1880s, but it had earlier connections to Nebraska and the Great Plains.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Robert Barker, William Winstanley, John Banvard, J Goldsborough Bruff, James Wilkins, John Wesley Jones, William Quesenbury

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Photographs / Images: Independence Rock, present-day Wyoming, from the William Quesenbury Overland Trails Sketchbook, 1850-1851 (*Omaha World-Herald*)



Independence Rock from the S.

Above: Independence Rock, present-day Wyoming. From the *Omaha World-Herald* William Quesenbury Overland Trails Sketchbook, 1850-1851.

The Art of the Panorama

The term “panorama” (see p. 21) was originally coined to describe a new form of landscape painting, an all-around view of a scene that sought to mimic the experience of being in the midst of an actual scene. These panoramas were painted on long canvases that were mounted as circular murals within specially designed buildings called rotundas. The audience would enter at street level, then climb an enclosed staircase up to a viewing platform that suddenly placed them at the center of the circumferential painting. The platform was free of the sidewalls, so the painting extended below the viewer’s feet and above eye level, replicating the idea of an elevated prospect in real space. Viewers engaged the painting by moving around the platform at their leisure. The first of such paintings was exhibited as a “View of London,” by Robert Barker, in 1792. Three years later the first opened in America, another view of London by English artist William Winstanley.¹

Circumferential panoramas were artistic responses to a perceptual revolution that had grown from the global European explorations of the eighteenth century. Founded upon the experiences of explorers, the notion of wide views of landscape began to challenge conventional pictorial views based upon single-point Renaissance perspective. The term “panorama” developed other technical and descriptive meanings almost immediately, including reference to the less-than-circumferential wide-angle view and to other types of paintings that were not in the round. This mode of perception affected American art throughout the nineteenth century, both in field explorations and in the fine arts, as space itself became a central concern of landscape painting. The panoramic perspectives of landscape painters such as Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt were

no longer narrow pictorial views, and their paintings were celebrations of natural space as much as they were depictions of scenery.

A significant variant of the panorama was developed as a theatrical art. These were paintings that could be moved from place to place and shown to large audiences without the need for special buildings. The most popular form involved very long backdrops, mounted on spools, with scenes that moved across the stage from one spool to another. These linear, extended, or moving panoramas “played” in conventional theatres, using wing and border curtains above and to the side. Front drop curtains were used between “acts” while the “reels” were changed. Productions of this kind would typically use three or four spools of painting. A narrator on stage expounded on the scenes as they passed in front of the audience. The first American version of this type of precursor to motion pictures was staged in New York in 1828. Moving panoramas, with their built-in narrative potential, were wildly popular through the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

The moving format was also perfectly suited to the notion of a vicarious scenic tour, and by mid-century the American West had become one of the form’s most popular subjects. Artists moved into the trans-Appalachian frontier during the 1840s to focus their pencils and watercolors on the newer lands of the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, and the great frontier settlements of St. Louis and New Orleans. Significantly, most of these used their sketches to produce moving panoramas. New York artist John Banvard was in the vanguard with his famous 1846 panorama of the Mississippi River. Several other Mississippi or Ohio River panoramas were produced before mid-century.²

By 1850 artists were poised to bring the Far West into “production.” The launch of major overland sketching tours, in fact, began in 1849 as the gold rush increased traffic on the overland trails. Topographic artist J. Goldsborough Bruff made extensive landscape sketches in addition to his narrative and scientific travel account on his way to California that year.³ James Wilkins took the lead among panoramacists with his 1849 sketching trip to California, which culminated in a production he called his “Moving Mirror.” It opened in St. Louis in 1850.⁴

Others followed suit, including an entrepreneur from Illinois named John Wesley Jones.

The Jones “Pantoscope of California, Nebraska & Kansas, Salt Lake & the Mormons” rivals Wilkins’s “Moving Mirror” as the most famous of the early Western panoramas. While Wilkins worked alone, Jones hired an entire troupe of artists and daguerreotypists to accompany him back to the states from California in 1851. Their charge was to record aspects of the West for use in producing his 1852 Pantoscope, which played for two years to Boston and New York area audiences. Prominent among his field artists was William Quesenbury, whose sketchbooks are full of pencil drawings of all the “scenery, curiosities, and stupendous rocks” of the American West. His Platte River Road and Cherokee Trail landscapes are now in the collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society, courtesy of the *Omaha World-Herald*.

—adapted from David Royce Murphy, *Scenery, Curiosities, and Stupendous Rocks: The William Quesenbury Overland Sketches, 1850-1851*, forthcoming in 2011 from the University of Oklahoma Press. 

NOTES

¹ The most extensive discussion of panoramas and the many variants is found in Stephen Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997). Other key sources for this sidebar include Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 47-86; Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993); Lee Parry, “Landscape Theater in America,” *Art in America* 59 (Nov-Dec 1971): 52-61; John Francis McDermott, “Gold Rush Movies,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 33 (March 1954): 29-38.

² Most of the panoramacists were popular artists whose work—whether because of lesser talent or the disappearance of their works—are less well known and less revered than the prominent painters of the period. See Robert Taft, *Artists and Illustrators of the Old West, 1850-1900* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 252-53n3a; John Francis McDermott, *An Artist on the Overland Trail: The 1849 Diary and Sketches of James F. Wilkins*, (San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1968), 29-30, 32n2.

³ J. Goldsborough Bruff, *Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings, and Other Papers of J. Goldsborough Bruff*, ed. Georgia Willis Read and Ruth Gaines, Vol. 1, Washington City to Bruff’s Camp (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

⁴ McDermott, *An Artist on the Overland Trail*, 20-22.