

# An Exception in European Collecting. Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza and Nineteenth-century American Painting<sup>1</sup>

Marta Ruiz del Árbol



Fig. 1  
View of room 30 of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, where some of the nineteenth-century American paintings in the permanent collection are on show



Fig.2  
Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza at Villa Favorita, Lugano, in the 1980s



Fig. 3  
Albert Bierstadt  
*Sunset at Yosemite*, c. 1863  
Oil on canvas, 30.5 x 40.6 cm  
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection on deposit at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)

When dealing, as in this case, with a museum that originated from a private collection, the figure of the collector – the person who assembled for posterity all the works of art that surround us – is of paramount importance. What drove him to choose a particular painting? What prompted him to take interest in a particular artist, movement or period and ignore others?

*The Illusion of the American Frontier* exhibition provided us with an opportunity to focus on an artistic period in Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza's collection that has always attracted historians' attention. What led a European to start collecting nineteenth-century American art when no one on the Old Continent was interested in it? What concerns and passions spurred him to develop an interest in artists who were completely unknown in Europe at the time and with whom people are still largely unfamiliar even today?

This was, no doubt, one of the rarities of the baron's taste and made him a *rara avis* in European collecting. He began acquiring nineteenth-century American painting at a time when America itself was only just becoming aware of its value. By embracing this revival movement that aimed to enhance appreciation for an art that was previously overlooked because it was considered inferior to its European counterparts, Hans Heinrich became a pioneer with an even more significant role on account of his European origin. His decision to acquire American artworks for his collection of western art made it possible to "to be perceived and studied with the context of Western art history".<sup>2</sup>

## Keys to understanding a passion: nature

"I am very attracted by all American artists, maybe because I am a quarter American, but also mainly because of the artists' profound love for nature, space and perfection."<sup>3</sup> With these words, written for the catalogue of the exhibition of a selection of his American collection that travelled to seven cities between 1984 and 1986,<sup>4</sup> the baron provides some of the keys to understanding his particular attachment to this art.

First, Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza pointed out that his family ties to the United States may have influenced his feeling drawn to the artists in question. His maternal grandmother, Mathilde Louise Price, came from Delaware. However, in his memoirs the baron always spoke of growing up alone and having little contact with his parents and other relatives. Could this absence have spawned his later interest in the art produced in his grandmother's country?

But more interesting still is the end of the sentence, where he states that "these artists' profound love for nature" was undoubtedly the main reason for his fascination with them. This assertion provides

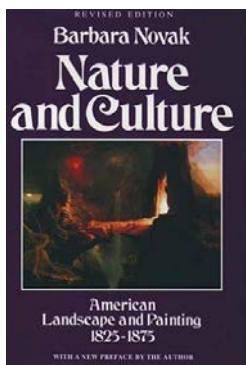


Fig. 4  
Barbara Novak's book *Nature and Culture* featuring *Expulsion. Moon and Firelight* by Thomas Cole on the cover



Fig. 5  
Thomas Cole  
*Expulsion. Moon and Firelight*, c. 1828  
Oil on canvas, 91.4 x 122 cm  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)

an insight into part of Baron Thyssen's personal taste, which can be seen in the importance granted to landscape in the museum galleries. Above all it relates to the ideas upheld by the American historians who had begun showing an interest in their country's nineteenth-century art.

Turning once again to the baron's own words, we realise that these parallels with art historical studies are no coincidence, as Baron Thyssen had first-hand knowledge of the latter: "I visited art galleries and museums, but what made the biggest impression on me was a book by Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture*. All this encouraged me, in 1979, to start purchasing works by nineteenth-century American artists too."<sup>5</sup>

Barbara Novak's book *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting (1825-1875)*<sup>6</sup> was therefore fundamental reading matter in shaping our collection. Novak argues that one of the main features that distinguish American art from its European counterparts is precisely the strong influence of nature in its broadest sense. Unlike their European colleagues who had a whole tradition and culture behind them, the Americans approached a nature apparently untouched by man.

For American artists nature was imbued with the most deep-seated principles of the new nation: the concepts of homeland (brimming with possibilities owing to the abundance that surrounded them), religion (they saw themselves facing a new Eden in which the mark of the divine creator was still palpable) and science (the desire to record all the new species) were embodied in its mountains and valleys. By capturing it in their works, nineteenth-century artists in a sense became patriots, priests and scientists.

### Nature as a connection between American artists

But American artists' special bond with nature did not disappear in the nineteenth century. Literature of the second half of the twentieth century viewed it as a timeless national characteristic that continued to thrive in the string of avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. A fundamental exhibition in disseminating this idea was *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950* organised by the MoMA to mark the bicentenary of the United States in 1976.<sup>7</sup> It analysed the lingering Romantic concept of the sublime in contemporary American art<sup>8</sup> and presented nineteenth-century American artists as forerunners of abstract expressionism.

And it was precisely the emergence of the abstract expressionist movement, with internationally acclaimed figures such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, that made it possible to reinstate generations of forgotten artists. Nature as a link helped establish a genuine Americanness, a brand that distinguished and set them apart from European masters.



Fig. 6  
Jackson Pollock  
*Brown and Silver I*,  
c. 1951  
Enamel and silver  
paint on canvas,  
144.7 x 107.9 cm  
Museo Thyssen-  
Bornemisza, Madrid  
[\[+ info\]](#)



Fig. 7  
View of the second room of the exhibition *The Illusion of the American Frontier*, showing prints after Karl Bodmer from the Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection



Fig. 8  
After Karl Bodmer  
*Indians Hunting Buffalo*. Print from the series *Travels in the Interior of North America*, 1839–43, 1839  
Aquatint with traces of etching and mezzotint illuminated by hand on paper, 39.3 x 57.3 cm  
Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection

Did Baron Thyssen see this famous exhibition? Or did he allow himself to be caught up in the enthusiasm generated by American society on rediscovering this hitherto little appreciated art? Both hypotheses are possible, as from the early 1970s onwards he spent many periods in the United States on business.

What we do know for certain is that Hans Heinrich Thyssen came into contact with American art through the works of the abstract expressionists. Even before his frequent business trips to the United States, Hans Heinrich had already acquired paintings such as Jackson Pollock's *Brown and Silver I*, c. 1951 (in 1963) and Mark Tobey's *Earth Rhythm*, 1961 (in 1968). As with the revealing exhibition at the MoMA, his discovery of the paintings on the other side of the Atlantic had apparently begun with more recent painting and later extended back into the past towards the twentieth-century artists' American forebears.

#### A folder of Karl Bodmer engravings

However, before he began purchasing in 1979 the Thomas Cole, George Catlin and Albert Bierstadt paintings now in the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, and perhaps even before he bought the abovementioned Jackson Pollock in 1963, it seems that Hans Heinrich already owned one American artwork: the folder of engravings made by the artist Karl Bodmer after travelling to the American West between 1832 and 1834.

Karl Bodmer, a Swiss national, travelled with the German prince Maximilian Wied-Neuwied, a Prussian naturalist. Inspired by Alexander von Humboldt, Maximilian was eager to catalogue the geology, plants, animals and native tribes of the American West. His thirteen-month trip was captured in Bodmer's sketches, on which the series of engravings was later based, and also summed up in the aristocrat's diaries. Both were landmark contributions to the study of America and its first settlers.

Although it is not known for certain when the folder was acquired, Simon de Pury, chief curator of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection from 1979 to 1986, claimed that Baron Thyssen bought it at a charity auction in Germany 15 years before the rest of his nineteenth-century American collection.<sup>9</sup> This would mean that he had owned the Bodmer engravings since the early 1960s.

The first American artwork to enter the Thyssen collection was therefore a series of engravings designed to immortalise these unexplored lands of the Wild West. The lack of documentation on this folder is probably due to the fact that the baron viewed it as a personal possession rather than as a piece belonging to his collection. The acquisition of these engravings furthermore provides





Fig. 9  
Karl May as Old  
Shatterhand



Fig. 10  
Poster of *Winnetou II*, a Harald  
Reinl film of 1964 reflecting  
the passion for the stories of  
Winnetou and Old Shatterhand  
in the cinema



Fig. 11  
Charles Wimar  
*The Lost Trail*, c. 1856  
Oil on canvas, 49.5 x 77.5 cm  
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

[\[+ info\]](#)

another insight into his fondness for nineteenth-century American artists, as it speaks of one of Hans Heinrich's childhood passions: his fascination for the Far West.

### The baron and Karl May's American West

"As a youngster I was always especially fond of May's books – in fact I still have them", recalled Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza in his memoirs.<sup>10</sup> Despite being born in the Netherlands, he belonged to a German family and had his roots in his ancestors' country. This is why Karl May, the famous writer of adventure books, played an essential role in shaping his earliest imagination.

May's novels were read by generation after generation and the fame he enjoyed in Germany was comparable to that of Emilio Salgari in Italy and Jules Verne in France. And although his novels were set all over the world, his most celebrated tales took place in the Far West. In a country from which some four million people are estimated to have emigrated to the United States during the writer's lifetime, the adventures of Apache chief Winnetou and Old Shatterhand, a German émigré, soon became part of a powerful popular culture.<sup>11</sup> May's novels held the same fascination that had been aroused by the translations of James Fenimore Cooper's tales and numerous articles published in magazines like *Globus* and *Petermanns Mitteilungen*. In addition to literature there were shows featuring Native Americans that began travelling around various German cities, as well as many more scientific initiatives such as that of Prince Maximilian with Karl Bodmer.

The illusion of the American Frontier was fully consolidated in Germany by the time Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza was born in 1921. Like so many others of his generation, he was caught up in this enthusiasm for the American lands and their early settlers. The great Apache chief and his blood brother Old Shatterhand not only symbolised the Romantic desire for a simpler life in communion with nature. Speaking of brotherhood between racer and steeped in pacifism, their adventures were also the counterpoint to Germany's most recent past.<sup>12</sup>

As stated earlier, America's nature and its native tribes must have already occupied an important place in Baron Thyssen's imagination when he discovered nineteenth-century American painting. To what extent did those works spur him to relive the heroic stories of cowboys and Indians he had read as a young man? Did his fascination for the Wild West influence his acquisition first of Karl Bodmer's engravings and subsequently of works by Thomas Cole, Albert Bierstadt, George Catlin and so many others? By acquiring these works was Hans Heinrich not perhaps carrying out his own private conquest of the West?

## Notes

- 1 This text is a modified version of a lecture with the same title delivered on 16 January 2016 in the auditorium of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza (<http://www.museothyssen.org/thyssen/videoplayer/2064>).
- 2 Barbara Novak: "Introducción". In Tomàs Llorens (curator): *Explorar el Edén. Paisaje americano del siglo XIX*. [exh. cat.]. Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2000, p. 203.
- 3 Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza in John I. H. Baur (intr.): *American Masters. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection* [cat. exp. organised and circulated by the International Exhibitions Foundation, Washington, D. C., 1984–86]. Milan, Electa, 1984, p. 11.
- 4 The exhibition was shown at The Baltimore Museum of Art, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Denver Art Museum, Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute de San Antonio, IBM Gallery of Arts and Sciences in New York, San Diego Museum of Art and The Society of the Four Arts in Palm Beach.
- 5 Heinrich Thyssen: *Yo, el barón Thyssen. Memorias*. Carmen Thyssen (ed.) and Luis María Ansón (intr.). Barcelona, Planeta, 2014, p. 215.
- 6 Although Hans Heinrich recalls having read Novak in 1979, her book was not actually published until the following year. Barbara Novak: *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875*. New York – Oxford, University Press, 1980.
- 7 Kynaston McShine (ed.): *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America 1800-1950* [exh. cat.]. Barbara Novak, Robert Rosenblum and John Wilmerding. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1976.
- 8 A key to understanding the argument of this exhibition is Robert Rosenblum: *Northern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, published in 1975, a year before the show in question.
- 9 Simon de Pury: "The Thyssen-Bornemisza. Nineteenth Century American Collection". In Warren, David B.: *Nineteenth-Century American Landscape. Selections from the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection* [exh. cat.]. Houston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1982.
- 10 Heinrich Thyssen: *Yo, el barón Thyssen. Memorias*. Carmen Thyssen (ed.) and Luis María Ansón (intr.). Barcelona, Planeta, 2014, p. 186.
- 11 A recent exhibition analysed the figure of Karl May: Sabine Beneke and Johannes Zeilinger (eds.): *Karl May. Imaginäre Reisen* [exh. cat.] Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2007.
- 12 Karl-Heinz Kohl: "Kulturelle Camouflagen. Der Orient und Nordamerika als Fluchträume deutscher Phantasie". In Sabine Beneke and Johannes Zeilinger (eds.): *Karl May. Imaginäre Reisen* [exh. cat.] Berlin, Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2007, p. 95.