



- TITLE** American Progress
- ARTIST** John Gast
- PERIOD/PLACE OF IMAGE** 19th Century Brooklyn, NY America
- MEDIUM** Painting: oil
- MEASUREMENT** 12 ¾" x 16 ¾"
- DATE** 1872
- COUNTRY/SITE** USA
- LOCATION** Museum of the American West, Griffith Park, LA no. 92.126.1 Library of Congress Control no. 975.075.47
- SUMMARY** The spirit of America heads Westward accompanied by prospectors, farmers, and settlers while Native North Americans and creatures of the land move away before her advancements.

DESCRIPTION

A large, luminous, ethereal, feminine figure of “American Progress” with the “star of the empire” on her forehead and long, light, wavy hair leads miners, settlers, and travelers from East to West. As she advances, she suspends telegraph cable. She holds the excess wire in her right hand where she also carries a schoolbook. With her progression, the darkness fades as she ushers in new light. Men of various trades accompany her on foot and by various methods of transportation: horseback, covered wagon, carriage, steam engine, and ships. The Mississippi river flows in the background in the upper right quadrant. In the lower right, farmers cultivate the land and there is a stone house with a boundary marked by trees and a split-rail fence. Three men in the central bottom portion walk next to a rider. One man carries a lowered shotgun at the ready and another, wearing a red shirt and smoking a pipe, props a miner’s shovel on his right shoulder.

In the left of the image, beneath the peaks of snow-topped mountains, wild bison and a bear retreat into the darkness into which the water of a river also flows. Several Native Americans look back as they move accompanied by dogs towards the darkness at the left. A bare-chested male raises a tomahawk and another carries a bow and arrow. A horse draws a travois carrying a mother and a child and another woman walks as a member of the Native tribe, bare-breasted and looking over her left shoulder.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

George Crofutt, publisher of a fashionable western travel guide series,

commissioned the creation of “American Progress” by the Brooklyn resident, painter, and lithographer, John Gast. Crofutt reproduced the petite painting, done in 1872, as a color lithograph poster and also engraved the image in the guidebooks he published widely circulating the image. The painting depicts a sense of technological development’s advancement upon the untamed land like the coming of an impenetrable, inevitable militia with one uncharacteristic exception--the company is led by a feminine figure.

In the wake of four years of Civil War, the creation of the promotional material of “American Progress” portrays a spiritualized feminine that provides nurturing, protective guidance and fortitude for the extension of civilization over wilderness and the “uncivilized,” the enigmatic, and the primal. Disembodied, the idealized feminine portrays the evolution of the split of spirit from daily life as well as the sanctified superiority of the immigrants above human beings who lived in harmony with the spirit of the land.

The dominating and centralized angelic being’s paradoxical innocence and sensually alluring presence has the effect of distracting and softening the reality and the violence of this movement to “win the west” where Native Americans depart the frame as non- natives stake claims in the form of prospectors, as settlers: farmers, homesteaders, and travelers. One of the popular artists of the times, Maynard Dixon speaks of the untruth of the romanticized representation of facts as he complained he was being paid to lie in his artwork and portrayals of life on the wild prairie (Dixon).

Fueled by an underlying desire to be free from tyrannical government and the prospect of a new life and livelihood in a world new to them, Euro-Americans

manifested suffering and persecution similar to the very situation they sought to escape.

CULTURAL COMPLEX

“American Progress” is bound to the concept of “Manifest Destiny” first found in print under the authorship of newspaper editor John O’Sullivan in 1845 who claimed America had been chosen to carry out the task of expansionism to drive out the wilderness and bring the light of civilization upon the continent. This concept defined the rapid expansion in the 1800s of the New World from East to West and continues to be an influential, American way of thinking. America’s westward expansion and colonization included territorial acquisition and, though not initially part of government policy, eventually influenced the passage of future legislation, such as the Homestead Act.

What is “accepted” in the complex?

The idea of progress coming from the East to the West, and the notion that the frontier would be developed by sequential waves of people (here [...] always men) was deeply rooted in American thought. (Sandweiss)

Gast’s painting of progress refers to modernization, to the concept of advancement and improvement in areas: technological, social, political, economic, scientific, and personal. An influential marketing piece and symbol of the times, the story the painting tells equates progress with achievement, development, mechanization, speed, distance, and expansion; with acquisition and possession in a civilization dependent upon technology and with a social

order that values striving, conquering, staking claims, and establishing ownership. Euro-American men were actively, heroically participating in what they saw as a God-granted right, a historical destiny they were helping to manifest, as they moved forward across the plains towards the Rockies and beyond. The painting conveys the idea that what comes from the right side or rational *logos* has power and direct connection to the light or what is enlightened. In the image, the dominant intention presents itself as a movement of the right or consciousness to illumine the darkness of the left. The dominant intention also presents itself as a movement forwards and upwards away from harmony with the earth. Transportation bellows forward in the whistles and mechanized poundings of the transcontinental railroad and communication moves upwards strung on poles above ground level. Even the particular model of education and thinking evidences itself as elevated, as heightened, carried as a book in the arms of the angelic being. The veneration of the book devalues Nature's inherent wisdom and generosity. What silently evidences itself is an attitude of entitlement, privilege, and superiority of one race over and above another, of power that includes power over another. This separation includes the division of spirit from earthly life and from matter and places it in the realm above.

What is rejected in the complex?

In viewing the peripheral areas in the left side of "American Progress," the details reveal the devaluation and rejection of what is simple, wild, mysterious, and dark asserting a need to tame what is wild, viewing what is wild as "other," what is not understood as savage. The dark, creative potential of the feminine

that understands what Carl Gustav Jung called the *lumen naturae* or the light in nature is demonized. The image shows the natural world of the frontier and its inhabitants as something to be conquered and tamed. Human beings and animals indigenous to the land are being driven out to make way for animals that were in service to man. “Uncultured” people living close with the earth, with matter and the Great Spirit are displaced to make room for the structure of progress.

ARCHETYPAL CONTEXT

The image of “American Progress” advances a virginal, domestic, yet indomitable feminine presence distanced from her connection with the earth while validating the take over of American wilderness.

“It is the benign domestic influence of our allegorical figure, [...] Gast seems to indicate, that is responsible for the smooth and uplifting transformation of wilderness into civilization”
(Greenberg 2).

The image as a whole promotes a myth of separation as progress relates to the Apollonic and Athenian conceptualizations of a civilization based on a more masculine principle intending to define, harness, and tame life, set in opposition, rather than integrated with the indigenous understanding of life’s interconnectivity, mystery, and magic.

In the painting, right and left, heaven above and earth below, are divided into positive, powerful, superior, conscious, spiritual light and negative, weak, unconscious, undeveloped, primal darkness. The idea portrays a polarization of a transcendent divinity and the purely material world thus removing the sacred

from daily life and establishing a hierarchical system sustained by a hunger for achievement as well as promises of materialism. Coupled with this greed was a sense of entitlement in the exploitation of the de-spiritualized earth and her inhabitants.

The feminine figure and focus of Gast's 1872-commissioned painting recalls the classical folds of another famous feminine figure's garments and her message of liberty. Two years before the completion of Gast's "American Progress," the first small model of the benevolent grace of Liberty Island's welcoming *Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World* was created. A widely recognized symbol, the lady of the New York Harbor indicated a successful journey for immigrants and visitors the world over. Viktor Frankl, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, proposed the need on the shores of the Pacific coast, for a *Statue of Responsibility* to balance the liberty of the Atlantic coast and remind people that freedom requires a maturity that includes responsibility. The statue of two joined hands each reaching across and cradling the wrist of the other is to be completed in July of 2010. The sculpture intends to express an empowered connection of all human beings and to serve as an inspiration that crosses the imposed boundaries of difference and celebrates the potential within human beings and conscious interaction with life's diverse presence.

In the spirit of renewing some indigenous wisdom, Chief Seattle in 1845 shared how human beings are only strands in the web of life and asks of those who come to lay claim to the earth:

[...] this land is sacred to us. How can you buy or sell the sky, the rain, and the wind? That idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you

buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every sandy shore, shining pine needle, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. I know the sap that courses through the trees as I know the blood that flows in my own veins. [...] We are part of the earth and it is part of us.

The indigenous people foresaw the occurrences and the immanent shift of progress in America through dreams and visions. The transition of life for human beings led to the development and integration of modern conveniences in the way people reside with the land. Houses built with foundations now come equipped with heat and electricity and clean running water; with stoves for cooking and refrigerators for keeping food fresh and edible for a longer period of time. Transportation, such as planes and automobiles, allows people and goods to travel great distances in a short amount of time providing further conveniences. Readily available food from grocery stores and restaurants graces the tables of people across the nation without the need for each family to take on the labor involved in tilling soil and planting and tending crops or animals. Farmers have equipment that assists in their work.

Scientific advancements have taken the imaginations of human beings into the heavens and given an altered perspective of the solar system and the planet earth in her splendor. Satellites and fiber-optic cable transmit information globally. Communication advancements in telephones and cell phones and the Internet mean human beings can connect with loved ones or work on projects together even when they are at great physical distances from one another. Researching information has become much simpler as has accessing local and

global news and weather. Educational programs, videos and books, music and artwork are all readily available with a computer and an Internet connection. Progress is being made in the ways human beings work with one another and also with energy having transitioned from mainly burning coal and wood to utilizing petroleum products and electricity, and now exploring nuclear as well as alternative possibilities with water, wind, and solar power.

Medical advancements have altered the infant mortality rate, eradicated smallpox, diminished the instances of polio and diphtheria, and raised the average life expectancy. In 1840, life expectancy at birth ranged from the late twenties to around forty years of age. Individuals now live to be in their eighties and nineties and some even into the hundreds.

Progress socially reveals its bounty where freedom of thought and freedom of opinion are heralded as basic human rights in a culture moving towards a celebration of diversity in a unity with a return to an understanding of the oneness of life.

QUESTIONS RAISED

What does progress serve? What role and responsibility do human beings have in what is being made manifest? Is the true destiny of America being lived? What needs to be reclaimed?

PHOTO SOURCE

Central Pacific Railroad Photographic History Museum 5 May 2010. 3 Oct. 2002.

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