



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Constructing National Identity: Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Representations of First Contact

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Throughout the nineteenth-century American artists were concerned with the creation of a national identity for young America. As previous scholars have noted, many artists turned to landscape and genre painting in this endeavor. However, artists also turned to history painting in extraordinary numbers. Among the historical images created during this period, “First Contact” subjects depicting indigenous peoples’ initial encounters with white explorers and settlers appear time and again. This dissertation explores the prevalence of the First Contact subject in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American art in order to understand how those images were part of the process of constructing a sense of history and national identity for young America.

My study focuses on images of First Contact from the 1830s to the first decades of the twentieth century and asks how each of these historical scenes was used by artists, patrons, and audiences to understand and rationalize the present moment. Ranging from the academic history paintings of Robert Walter Weir to the popular imagery of Charles Russell and Frederic Remington, the works demonstrate that the First Contact subject was important to Americans defining themselves by creating an epic history worthy of the grand ambitions of the young country. But the subject also proved to be extremely mutable and was repeatedly called upon to communicate specific ideas at different points in U.S. history, explaining, for instance, the proper handling of Native Americans, illustrating the importance of westward expansion, or justifying American imperialism.