

# ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE VERSUS AUTHENTICITY

Sales of contemporary and traditional Western art ring true

WRITTEN BY Laura Zuckerman

At a time when a debate rages over the value and the meaning of a painting generated by artificial intelligence — or as international auction house Christie's described *Portrait of Edmond Belamy*, “an algorithm defined by that algebraic formula with its many parentheses” — it is reassuring to return to the themes and figures of the American West and its art-makers.

For those images and artists speak of authenticity, which can only be experienced through human endeavor and faith that whatever is formed by sentient beings has intrinsic worth. And, fortunately for those Western painters and sculptors who saw their works hailed and sold in the autumn of 2018, art collectors appeared to agree.

## Cowboy Crossings October 4-6, 2018

Opening weekend for Cowboy Crossings, the yearly art sale and exhibit by the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, brought in excess of \$875,000 in proceeds that partly benefit the storied institution's educational programs.

The Cowboy Artists of America (CAA) — producing paintings, sculptures, and drawings — and the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association (TCAA) — representing the disciplines of bit and spur making, rawhide braiding, saddle making, and silversmithing — both celebrated milestones with their 53rd and 20th shows respectively.

A standout was Texas painter Martin Grelle's *Memories of Horses and Men*, which went for \$96,000, the highest sum



Martin Grelle, *Memories of Horses and Men*

Oil | 44 x 44 inches

Sold: \$96,000

for the event's weekend kickoff. And artist John Willemsma, of Colorado, led sales among TCAA artists with a saddle priced at \$36,000.

Awards for CAA exhibitors included Best of Show and Gold Medal for Sculpture, which went to Paul Moore of Norman, Oklahoma. His bronze of a Native American, titled *The Rawhide Sun Visor*, sold for \$5,400. Moore also received the Ray Swanson Memorial Award for *Navajo Country*, which sold for \$6,300.

Artist Grant Redden swept several painting categories with scenes that ranged from a cowboy astride a horse in



evening light — *Nocturne* — to a farmer driving a team of horses in *Mowing the Meadow*, which brought the Gold Medal for Oil and Acrylic Painting as well as the Stetson CAA Award.

The TCAA gives scholarships to up-and-coming talents instead of awards to its members. Chosen this year were saddle makers Carol Gessell of Washington and Dusty Smith of Wyoming, both of whom received the CAA Fellowship for Cowboy Craftsmen. And Arizona-based silversmith Thor Peterson gained the group's Emerging Artist Competition Award.

"Every year, artists from both the CAA and TCAA expand the definition of what Western art is and can be," says Natalie Shirley, the National Cowboy Museum president and CEO, in a statement. "To see the audience react with such enthusiasm reaffirms the notion that the values of the West are alive and well today."

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## Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale

### September 21-22, 2018

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Gross revenues from Cody, Wyoming's Buffalo Bill Art Show and Sale, sponsored by the local Chamber of Commerce and the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, totaled an estimated \$1.3 million, as 750 people gathered for a live auction and dinner on September 21 and a quick draw the following day.

For the second consecutive year, Michael Ome Untiedt, the creator of a painting depicting cattle stampeding to slake their thirst, *The Scent of Water — Turning the Bell Lead*, garnered the top amount at \$31,000.

Santiago Michalek, *Winter Pass*  
Oil | 48 x 96 inches  
Sold: \$30,000

The second-highest seller was *Winter Pass*, depicting a freight train chugging across a narrow bridge against a backdrop

of rugged, snow-covered mountains, created by native Argentinian Santiago Michalek. That outsized oil went for \$30,000 and won the Spirit of the Buffalo Bill Show & Sale Award, an honor that brings \$20,000. Naoma Tate, art patron, collector, and a judge for the competition, noted that the work underscored westward expansion and marked the 150-year history of the train in the American West, even as Laura Fry, curator of art at the Gilcrease Museum and another judge, credited the train's movement from right to left across the canvas for symbolizing the movement of industrial development from East to West through the ages.

Not to be dismissed for its fast turnaround amid the event's quick draw was painter John Potter's *Splash of Color*, which brought a handsome \$10,500 to lead those sales. And, in a happy development for three-dimensional artists, Chris Navarro sold five castings of his sculpture, *If We Can't Get Along, Let's Get It On*, at \$1,800 each.

Greg Woodward, a largely self-taught artist from Prescott, Arizona, won the Barron Collier II Three-Dimensional Sculpture Award and \$10,000 for *Cornered*, a bronze depicting the impact of increasing modernization on the once wild American West and one of its iconic animals, the bison.

The Wells Fargo Two-Dimensional Award and \$10,000 went to Mark Eberhard for *While Visions of Warm Summer Days Danced in their Heads*, featuring a buffalo in a snow-strewn field with trees that had been laid bare early by fire.

Jackson Hole Art Auction  
September 14-15, 2018

Norman Rockwell's portrait of John Wayne, the film star who made Westerns worth watching, stoked enthusiasm and a flurry of bids to lead sales at the Jackson Hole Art Auction in mid-September. The colorful oil achieved \$1,496,000 in a two-day event that topped \$8.4 million.

The sale set records for Jerry Jordan and 14 other artists, with Jordan's rendition of Native Americans beneath towering mountains and lofty sky — *Spirit Welcome* — bringing \$55,750, compared to pre-sale expectations of \$10,000 to \$15,000.

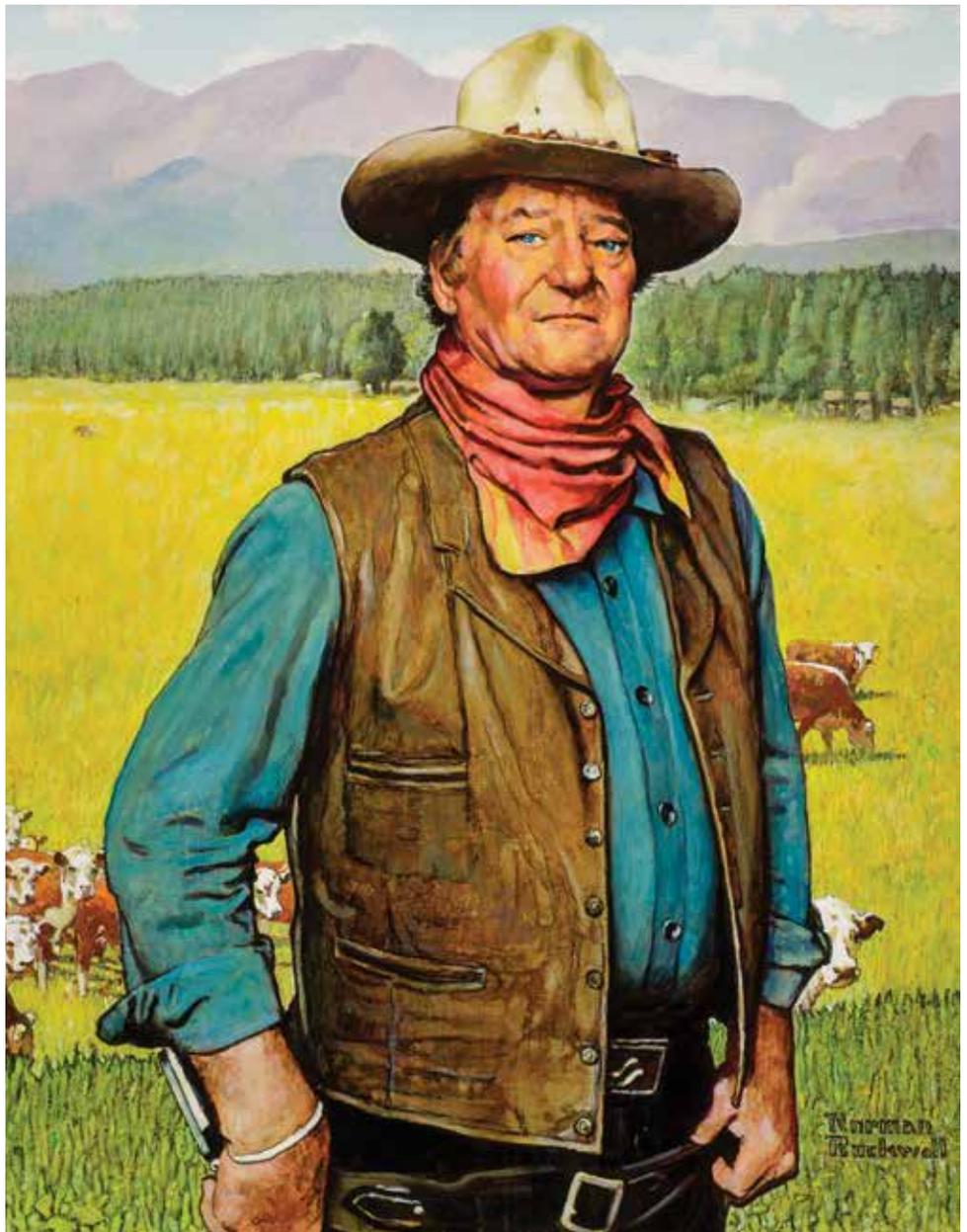
Not to be bested, John Clymer's *Territorial Dispute*, an action-packed piece in which a bull bison takes on a grizzly, climbed to \$339,300, far higher than a top estimate of \$250,000.

A pleasant interlude in the auction was marked by the sale of a quiet Laguna, New Mexico, landscape in watercolor, gouache, and pencil by Thomas Moran. The small work on paper brought an out-sized price, with *Laguna, New Mexico Looking from the East* selling for \$339,300, nearly triple its high estimate.

And a work by the painter, muralist, and printmaker, Thomas Hart Benton, realized \$239,850 in another higher-than-anticipated exchange, with *Study for the Pathfinder*, bearing pre-sale estimates of \$175,000 to \$225,000.

Acrylics on masonite by Bob Kuhn, one of the foremost painters of wildlife, arced above expectations. *Basic Training*, featuring a mountain lioness in motion, eyes intent as cubs look on, achieved \$175,000 compared to estimates of \$90,000 to \$120,000. Kuhn's talents were globally celebrated during his lifetime and, more than a decade since his death, his works are a living legacy.

Collectors showed strong interest in American illustrators, and an oil by one of the nation's most widely recognized, Dean Cornwell, brought more than twice its low estimate. Illustration for *The Enchanted Hill*, an alluring



Norman Rockwell [1894–1978], *John Wayne*  
Oil on Canvas | 38 x 31 inches  
Sold: \$1,496,000



John Seerey-Lester, *Ice Pack*  
Oil on Belgium Linen | 24 x 36 inches

tableau of girl, books, and vessel decorated in Southwestern style, climbed to \$128,700.

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## Western Visions Show & Sale September 13-14, 2018

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Jackson Hole is one of Wyoming's top destinations for artists and travelers from around the world, and there is arguably no better way to celebrate that convergence than at the National Museum of Wildlife Art's hallmark event, Western Visions Show & Sale. The annual showcase and sale of works by leading wildlife painters and sculptors coincides with the Jackson Hole Fall Arts Festival, which sees thousands flock to the picturesque mountain town where art exhibits and sales abound. The crowds that gathered for Western Visions grew to 1,300 from 1,200 last year, and revenues likewise rose — for the third time in three years — to more than \$700,000. And while price is not the pivotal factor when it comes to creating art and enchanting observers, a hefty share of these funds fuel the museum each year.

The 2018 event featured 175 works by 107 artists, including Kenneth Bunn, Ken Carlson, Michael Coleman, Daniel Smith, Tucker Smith, Lee Stroncek, and Jim Wilcox, who were all at the founding event in 1988.

For the first time, the auction spanned two evenings, with sketches from the show for bid during the evening of September 13 at the Artist Party, and larger works sold the following night. "This year's Western Visions has been tremendous," the event's co-chair, Kavar Kerr, said in a statement.

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“The quality of the art is excellent and the attendance at our events has exceeded our expectations.”

Artists achieving special honors were: Robert Glen, who received the Trustee’s Purchase Award for his charming tabletop bronze, *Three Greater Kudu*, which will be added to the museum’s collection; William Alther, winner of the Red Smith Award for an evocative depiction of a grizzly entitled *Forage Interrupted*; John Seerey-Lester, recipient of the People’s Choice Award for his stirring wolf painting, *Ice Pack*; and George Boorujy, whose work, *African Wild Dogs* (drawing for the Wildlife Conservation Society [Bronx Zoo]) led him to gain the Bob Kuhn Sketch Award.

**John Clymer** [1907–1989], *Territorial Dispute*  
Oil on Board | 24 x 40 inches  
Sold: \$339,300

the disrepair of a once beloved building. The oil-acrylic category saw John Buxton gain the gold medal and \$1,000

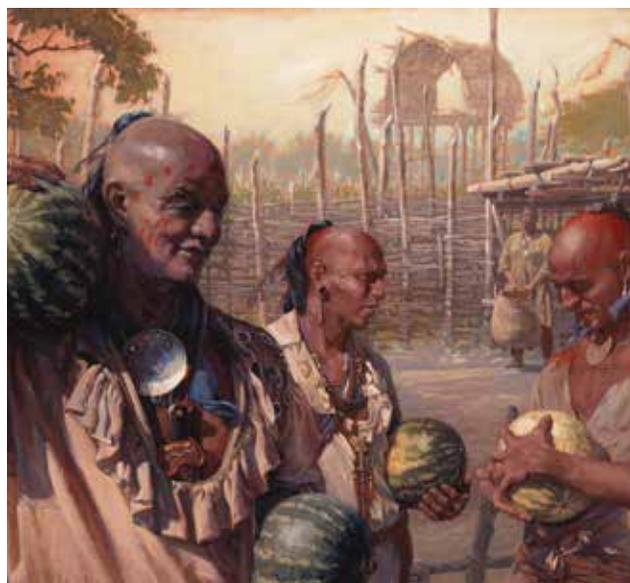
for *At the Gardens*, *The Melon Gang*, a striking depiction of bedecked Native Americans hoisting or holding melons. The figures show a degree of animation that brings both the activity and their expressions into focus, mesmerizing the observer.

Tanja Gant was awarded \$1,000 and the gold medal for drawing with *Promises*, a quiet piece speaking volumes with the spare image of a woman’s hands. The gold medal and a

## Bosque Art Classic September 6-22, 2018

Kathy Tate took to her paintbrush to evoke a sense of nostalgia mixed with an air of regret in the artwork that received the John Stevens Jones Purchase Award — and \$5,000 — at the Bosque Arts Center in September, during its yearly show and sale in Clifton, Texas. The event is hosted by the Bosque Arts Center Art Council.

Tate’s *Once Someone’s Dream*, also awarded a silver medal in the oil-acrylic competition, shows an aged dwelling nestled among trees and grasses, with the idyllic setting emphasizing



**John Buxton**, *At the Gardens, The Melon Gang*  
Oil | 28 x 26 inches



Robert Glen, *Three Greater Kudu*  
Bronze | 25 x 28 x 26 inches

prize of \$1,000 went to Jody Martin in the pastel category for her portrait of a sailor boy in *Just like Dad*.

Jeff Rechin led the sculpture competition, receiving gold and \$1,000, for *Spring*, a delicately rendered piece

featuring a pair of songbirds. *Spring* also brought the Art Patrons Purchase Award and another \$1,000. In water media, Don Weller garnered the gold medal and \$1,000 for a thoughtful rendering of a rider on horseback against red canyon walls while Brenda Driggers earned the New Entrant Award and \$1,000 for her water media work, *Anni*, a charming portrait of a woman in shades of blue.

And the Boren-Selvidge Award went to Sarah Webber for a portrait of a horse in *An Old Friend*.

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## Quest for the West

September 7-8, 2018

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The Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis, Indiana, brought in close to \$1 million during Quest for the West in September. The event featured a luck-of-the-draw sale, awards gala, and, in its second year, a miniature art sale. Quest for the West is the museum's major fundraiser, drawing 50 top Western artists and several hundred collectors.

Krystii Melaine captured two of the coveted honors

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Krystii Melaine, *Within Life's Circle*  
 Oil on Linen | 36 x 18 inches | Sold: \$9,900  
 Image courtesy of the Eiteljorg Museum

awarded at the nighttime gala on September 8, with a lyrical portrait of a Native American woman in a style that, were it literature, would be likened to magical realism. *Within Life's Circle* brought \$9,900, and gained the Harrison Eiteljorg Purchase Award. The Washington artist didn't stop there. *Spirit of the Wolf*, showing the animal and a human counterpart, was named patrons' choice and sold for \$19,500.

Montana painter Josh Elliott garnered the Victor Higgins Award of Distinction for works including *Under a Full Moon*, a poetic depiction of that astronomical body's blanching of snow, haystacks, and hills. And Scott Rogers of Logan, Utah, broke out of the huddle of sculptors to achieve the Cyrus Dallin Award for *Football, circa 1890*.

The top honor for painting, the Henry Farny Award, went to Glenn Dean for *In the Balance*, an oil on linen that evokes the style of Andrew Wyeth, if Wyeth had placed his female subjects in Western landscapes as Dean so adroitly does.

H. David Wright wowed patrons with a portrait of a painted Native American wearing a horned head-dress. The small piece packed a big punch, gaining its creator the 2018 Artist of Distinction Award and ultimately going for \$3,400. And, *Riverdance*, Mark Kelso's clever illustration of a grizzly bear seeking fish in a river, replete with rapids and rocks, was rewarded with the Artists' Choice Award and a sale price of \$15,000.

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## Western Design Conference

September 6-9, 2018

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The Western Design Conference marked its 26th year in September by drawing items from 100 juried artisans to highlight top-notch contemporary and traditional Western art with the added feature of function. The four-day extravaganza at the Snow King Events Center in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, saw the conference and its sponsors distribute a total of \$20,250 in awards.

North Carolina craftsman John Hollifield was awarded Best of Show for his beautifully rendered angling equipment known as Hollifield Bamboo Fly Rods. European fashion designer Jenny Hill was awarded Best Artist for Art to Wear Fashion for apparel crafted from felt. And Rebecca Gilberto of Colorado earned Best Collection Award for a stunning line featuring a Southwestern flair.

In other categories, Texas artist Scott Wayne received Best Artist in the leather segment for handcrafted boots under his Tres Outlaws brand, and, for the second time in two years, Wyoming-based artist Jenny Booth evoked excitement and



Artist John Hollifield from North Carolina took home the Best of Show award for his handmade, custom bamboo fly rods.

honors for a carved antler entry. Best Artist in the Art to Wear Jewelry category was Kelly Charveaux.

“It was an outstanding year for artists,” event owner and director Allison Merritt said in a statement. “We had many new exhibitors and the feedback has been extremely positive about connections made between exhibitors and guests.” ■

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**Laura Zuckerman** lives and writes in Salmon, Idaho. Her work has appeared in such publications as *The New York Times Magazine*.



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