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*Meriwether
Lewis—
heroic hunter
and
naturalist,
and an
instrument
of empire*

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HUNTING for EMPIRE

By Daniel Herman

IN THE FIRST years of the 19th century a small party of American explorers labored up the Missouri River, en route to the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean. In the Far West, much of which had come under American dominion with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, members of this expedition found adventure, excitement, and landscapes “beatifull in the extreme.” More often, however, the men, led by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, found hard work, privation, and monotony. The trials and tedium of the journey made the occasional respite in hunting all the more satisfying. Thus Meriwether Lewis, having been confined to his boat for several days, resolved on September 17, 1804, “to devote this day to amuse myself on shore with my gun and view the interior of the country.”

Setting out with six of his best hunters in what is today South Dakota, Lewis found a countryside composed of “irregular hills of 100 to 200 feet high,” at the top of which “the country breakes off[f] as usual into a fine leavel plain extending as far as the eye can reach.” Atop this plain grew lush grass, the result of a burn that had occurred, Lewis figured, a month earlier, while to the west stretched “a high range of hills” from north to south. “This scenery already rich pleasing and beautiful,” wrote Lewis, “was still farther hightened by the immense herds of Buffaloe deer Elk and Antelopes which we saw in every direction feeding on the hills and plains.”

The object of the day’s excursion was not to appreciate scenery but to kill a female pronghorn antelope as a scientific

specimen, a male having been taken earlier. Observing “several herds,” the hunters walked eight miles from camp to pursue them but found the pronghorns “extreemly shy and watchfull insomuch that we had been unable to get a shot at them.” The pronghorns “seelect the most elivated point in the neighbourhood,” reported Lewis, “and as they are watchfull and extreemly quick of sight and their sense of smelling very accute it is almost impossible to approach them within gunshot;...they will frequently discover and flee from you at the distance of three miles.”

Having singled out a herd of seven, Lewis followed his quarry as they ran up a low hill that gave them visual command of three directions. The one direction that they could not see, noted Lewis, was the direction from which the wind blew. The pronghorns would smell him even if they did not see him. Eager to obtain a specimen for President Jefferson, Lewis continued to stalk the animals, hiding behind a shallow ridge as he moved uphill.

The sole male in the group, Lewis observed, “frequently incircled the summit of the hill on which the females stood in a group, as if to look out for the approach of danger.” When Lewis came to within 200 paces of the animals, they fled, and Lewis proceeded to the top of the hill where they had stood. The pronghorns, having run into a ravine, reemerged some three miles away. “I doubted at ferst,” wrote Lewis, “that they were the same that I had just surprised, but my doubts soon vanished when I beheld the rapidity of their flight along the ridge before me[.] [I]t appeared reather the rappid flight of birds than the motion of quadrupeds. I think I

can safely venture to ascertainment that the speed of this animal is equal if not superior to that of the finest blooded courser.”

Even without taking a female pronghorn, Lewis had made an important discovery: he had observed the fastest quadruped in North America.

There would be more discoveries that day. When Lewis returned to camp he brought buffalo meat for his men and a black-billed magpie for science, the first of its species known to Americans. The party’s other hunters had killed what Clark described as a “Curious kind of Deer, a Darker grey than Common,” with “hair longer & finer, the ears verry large



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& long... its tail round and white to near the end which is black & like a Cow." In other respects, wrote Clark, it was "like a Deer, except it runs like a goat." "Large," he added. That animal was a mule deer, another species new to American science. Finally, wrote Clark, the party had seen "a Small wolf with a large bushey tail," an animal Americans would soon know as the coyote.

Thus on September 17, 1804, three new species—the black-billed magpie, the mule deer, and the coyote—were either collected or described by Lewis and Clark while another, the pronghorn antelope, was observed in the exercise of its greatest talent, running from danger. The scope of what was American was permanently changed by the observation of these creatures. Though the public would be made aware of these discoveries

Meriwether Lewis expressed astonishment at the speed of the pronghorn, an animal unfamiliar to those who lived east of the Mississippi. In describing and cataloging the pronghorn and other species in the Louisiana Territory, Lewis changed what it meant to be "American."



only months or even years later, they became part of the legacy bequeathed to the nation by its "pioneering naturalists," as Paul Russell Cutright calls Lewis and Clark.

These discoveries also became part of the legacy bequeathed to the nation by another pioneering naturalist—Thomas Jefferson. Through his Corps of Discovery, and through Meriwether Lewis in particular, Jefferson sought to complete the catalog of the nation's fauna, flora, and geography that he had begun in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Accordingly, before the expedition Jefferson enlisted the nation's most eminent scholars to refine Lewis's knowledge of botany, zoology, and ethnology, the infant sciences that would enable him to comprehend the continent.

Even as Americans lionized farmers as guarantors of republican virtue and heirs to the land they cultivated, Lewis, as a naturalist, was more than an agrarian agent of civilization. Though Lewis's mission was a step toward the agrarian settlement of the Far West, it represented an attempt to tie together the continent in a unified, scientific whole long before it could be appropriated by men with plows. Lewis took possession of the continent not through planting but through science.

He also took possession of the land by hunting. "We eat an emensity of meat," wrote Lewis on July 13, 1805. "It requires 4 deer, an Elk and a deer, or one buffalo, to supply us plentifully for 24 hours." Though this was a large order, it was one the hunters could usually fill. Like the earliest American colonists, Lewis and Clark found a hunter's paradise in the West. On the banks of the Missouri River the explorers could "kill whatever we wish," wrote Lewis, enabling them to dine on "fine veal and fat beef" from buffalo as well as "venison and beaver tails." So numerous and tame were buffalo and elk in May 1805 that "the men frequently throw sticks and stones at them in order to drive them out of the way."

At other times game was scarce, yet few Americans remember the privations endured by the explorers; Americans instead remember the bounty. As Richard White reminds us, Lewis and Clark were

(and are) portrayed as the "first white men" to enter the "untouched paradise" of the Far West. That this paradise was not untouched and that Lewis and Clark were not the first to enter it are beside the point. Americans look upon Lewis and Clark as the first Americans in the Far West because they, not Indians or Métis, represent a chosen people come to claim the promised land beyond the Mississippi. Lewis and Clark are remembered as the first Americans, moreover, because they entered the wilderness without despoiling it. In the American imagination, Lewis and Clark remain innocents in a state of natural virtue, men who delivered a message of goodwill to Indians while absorbing the austere beauty of the landscape.

AS HEROIC HUNTERS Lewis and Clark were something new in American history. Though settlers had always hunted for subsistence and to clear the land of pests and predators, they identified agriculture as the basis for civilization. According to the Enlightenment precepts of colonial Americans, only men with plows—men who rejected hunting as a way of life—had the right to claim the continent. Full-time hunters, unlike farmers who happened to hunt, were thought to exist in a Hobbesian state of nature, observing neither the authority of the state nor the sanctity of property and life. Though Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and the fictive Natty Bumppo would become American culture heroes in the Jacksonian and antebellum decades, backwoods hunters held the lowest rank on the colonial social scale.

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur spoke for many Americans when he declared in *Letters from an American Farmer* (which was published in 1782 but written before and during the Revolutionary War) that backwoodsmen became "ferocious, gloomy, and unsocial" because of their dependence on game. "Once hunters," warned de Crèvecoeur, "farewell to the plough." Even in the early 19th century, Americans often considered full-time hunters to be barbaric and backwards men who, like Indians, could make no legitimate claim to the land. As



Courtesy Sid Richardson Collection of Western Art, Fort Worth

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries Americans recalled the amity between Lewis and Clark and the Indians they had encountered during the 1804-06 expedition. Here, William Clark reaches out to shake hands with an Indian. Charles M. Russell painting, "Captain William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Expedition Meeting with the Indians of the Northwest," 1897.

Indians—was the ideal. In this stage, contended Rousseau, men were not smitten by self-love and pride ("amour-propre"); they had not learned to elevate themselves over others, which was the disease of developed societies. In this earlier, ideal stage, men retained an instinctual empathy for one another, a hatred for suffering and cruelty, and an egalitarian camaraderie.

by reason and goodwill. With this purpose in mind, Jefferson equipped the expedition with medallions bearing the legend "peace and friendship" for distribution among Indian leaders, as well as sundry trade goods and a quantity of smallpox vaccine with which to inoculate Indians. Brute conquest of the Far West was beyond the power of the American government, but it was also contrary to Jefferson's ethical vision.

president, Jefferson himself sustained this logic by declaring the farmer to be the backbone of the republic and by insisting that Indians cease hunting and take up the plow in order to become "civilized."

Lewis and Clark, however, despite subsisting on game throughout their two-year expedition, seemed to remain virtuous. At no time did they descend into a Hobbesian state of nature, becoming forces and empires unto themselves. Though hunters, they seemed to remain representatives of republican civilization and Enlightenment science. Insofar as Lewis and Clark entered any state of nature, it seemed more akin to that described by Rousseau than Hobbes.

Rousseau, in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, posited four stages of pre-political society, the third of which—that of the hunting societies of American

COUPLED WITH ROUSSEAU'S concept of ideal hunting societies—preceding it, in fact—was the logic of Deism. Having done away with the idea of original sin, Deists envisioned humans in a state of nature as virtuous and pure, uncontaminated by civilization. Jefferson, himself a Deist, jested that he was "savage enough to prefer the woods, the wilds and independence of Monticello, to all the brilliant pleasures" of a European metropolis. For Deists, knowledge and virtue were to be gleaned not from the Bible but from a different holy text—Nature.

Though Jefferson did not consciously mold Lewis and Clark to any Rousseauian or Deist standard, he did not envision them as arrogant conquerors either. In Jefferson's view, American Indians were to be won over to farming and civilization

Following Jefferson's lead, Americans recalled the explorers' innocence—their friendship and goodwill toward Indian peoples—rather than the uneasy peace (or active hostility) that often prevailed during the expedition. The first statue of Lewis, a wax figure sculpted in 1807 by Charles Willson Peale for display in his American Museum in Philadelphia, thus showed a buckskin-clad Lewis holding a calumet (peace pipe). Over Lewis's shoulder was draped an ermine-skin tippet (a long scarf) given him by the Shoshone chief Cameahwait when the explorers were encamped at the headwaters of the Salmon River in 1805. A placard emphasized the benevolence of the expedition; Lewis had supposedly accepted the tippet with a speech about his people's desire to bring peace and to teach the Indians the arts of civilization.

When Indian delegations visited Philadelphia, as they often did in the early national years, Peale conducted them to his waxen Lewis, hoping to show them the peaceful nature of American expansion.

For much of the 19th century, artists ignored Lewis and Clark as subjects. Perhaps because of the ignominy attached to Lewis's suicide, artists found other explorers and hunters to glorify. When Lewis and Clark did reappear in late 19th-century and early 20th-century painting, sculpture, and coinage (triggered partly by centennial commemorations of the expedition in St. Louis and Portland), they appeared in scenes of amity and goodwill. In paintings by Charles M. Russell and Edward Samuel Paxson, the buckskin-clad explorers shake hands, sit in councils, and trade with Indian peoples, often accompanied by their Shoshone interpreter, Sacagawea. The idea of white hunters as vicious and corrupt had been exchanged for a Rousseauian idea of hunters as humane and virtuous. When sport hunters of the antebellum and postbellum decades sought out nature, they sought to reenter a state of natural virtue like that of Lewis and Clark.

In dressing men of science in Indian costume, American artists cast Lewis and Clark as American natives, representatives of a race destined to replace the Indian as heir to the continent. The friendly interactions portrayed between explorers and Indians disguised the bitter contest that followed, making it seem almost as if Indians approved Lewis and Clark as worthy successors.

The American fascination with Lewis and Clark had begun almost as soon as the explorers departed. "Never did a similar event excite more joy thro' the United States," wrote Jefferson in 1813 as he recalled the expedition. "The humblest of it's [sic] citizens had taken a lively interest in the issue of this journey, and looked forward with impatience for the information it would furnish." Upon their return from the West, Lewis and Clark were congratulated and feted in Washington and in Virginia for having "extended the knowledge of the Geography of your country," enriching science, and opening the West for commercial

development. Lewis, speaking to citizens of Charlottesville who had gathered to honor him, spoke of "the merit of having added to the world of science, and of liberty, a large portion of the immense unknown wilds of North America." Quibbling Federalists might argue that the explorers had discovered a "great waste" suitable for game, not farmers, but most Americans regarded Lewis and Clark as heroes who had linked a burgeoning people with a great realm.

The fate of Meriwether Lewis, however, was not what Jefferson had hoped. Appointed governor of Louisiana Territory in 1807, Lewis found that he possessed few of the skills necessary to succeed as an administrator and a politician. Nor could he succeed as an author. Though he hoped to fulfill Jefferson's expectation that he produce the most thorough compendium of American geography and natural history yet published, Lewis found himself unable to put pen to paper. Here, at last, was an expedition too arduous. Depressed and drinking heavily, Lewis committed suicide in 1809 on his return to Washington, D.C., to respond to criticism of his actions as governor.

THE OFFICIAL REPORT of the Lewis and Clark expedition would not appear until five years after Lewis's death. When it did appear in 1814—written by lawyer Nicholas Biddle rather than Lewis—the public found in its first pages a letter from Thomas Jefferson giving an account of the life of Captain Meriwether Lewis. Addressing a nation that mourned Lewis's suicide, Jefferson discussed Lewis's distinguished ancestry, his father's death in the Revolutionary War, and his early life in Virginia's Albemarle County. When he spoke of Lewis's youth, Jefferson noted that although Lewis's "talent for observation" and "accurate knolege [sic] of the plants & animals of his own country, would have distinguished him as a farmer," he had elected to join the army instead.

For Jefferson, who had spent a lifetime lauding the farmer as guarantor of republican virtue, the assertion that his protégé would have made an excellent farmer was

obligatory. Yet Jefferson's words called attention to the fact that Lewis, although he had managed his family's plantation as a young man, had elected not to remain a farmer nor to become a producer of any sort. Lewis became a soldier, a private secretary, an explorer, and a bureaucrat. He did not occupy a neat place in the ideal republic of small farmers, yet Jefferson had mentored Lewis, and Jefferson still endorsed him.

In identifying the germ of Lewis's greatness, Jefferson emphasized the naturalist, frontiersman, and hunter in Lewis rather than the farmer. "When only 8 years of age," wrote Jefferson, Lewis habitually went out in the dead of night alone with his dogs, into the forest to hunt the raccoon & opossum, which, seeking their food in the night, can then only be taken. In this exercise no season or circumstance could obstruct his purpose, plunging thro' the winter's snows and frozen streams in pursuit of his object."

In what appears to have been an earlier draft, Jefferson had displayed an even greater flourish of melodrama, writing that young Lewis "might be tracked through the snow to his traps by the blood which trickled from his bare feet."

Continuing in this vein, Jefferson appended to the litany of good character (courage, perseverance, leadership) the fact that Lewis was "intimate with the Indian character, customs & principles, habituated to the hunting life, [and] guarded by exact observations of the vegetables & animals of his own country, against losing time in the description of objects already possessed." Together with scrupulous honesty, these qualities made Lewis's reports "as certain as if seen by ourselves" and appeared to Jefferson to have been "implanted by nature in one body" for the "express purpose" of the transcontinental expedition.

Jefferson had supplanted the sturdy farmer with the adventurous hunter and naturalist as the instrument of empire. Lewis was anointed by nature to take charge of the Louisiana wilderness not by cultivating it with a plow like Jefferson's farmer-hero but by cultivating it with his scientific reports, his aboriginal persona, and his acumen as a hunter. In his eulogy

Jefferson reiterated the idea of Lewis as an American native, a man who was as virtuous as the farmer but whose claim to the continent and whose worth as a citizen were not based on planting.

AFTER LEWIS'S DEATH in 1809 his place in the American imagination lost its luster. Even if Lewis was neglected for a time, however, the trophies he had obtained were remembered, at least until the grander collections of later explorers replaced them. Jefferson kept many of the expedition's specimens, displaying them in his Indian Hall, the entrance hall at Monticello. Upon entering, visitors could gaze at a fascinating collection of Indian bows and arrows, peace pipes, weapons, clothing, wampum belts, and paintings on buffalo hides (one depicted a battle between the Osage and Pawnee, and another diagrammed the Missouri River and its tributaries). Across the hall from these ethnographic artifacts appeared crystals, shells, fossils, preserved reptiles, mammoth bones, a bear claw, the antlers of deer, elk, and moose, and what must have been the crown gem of the collection, the head of an American bighorn sheep.

The lesson taught by Jefferson's Indian Hall was that hunting and scientific collecting were not such different enterprises; both were means of taking possession of the continent. As the century progressed they would become more closely related. Drawing on the legacy of Jefferson and Lewis, American hunters of the 19th century would define themselves not merely as sportsmen but as hunter-naturalists. They, like Lewis, would take possession of the continent by hunting, collecting, and displaying their trophies in cabinets of natural history.

The greatest trophy of all, however, a living American mammoth, eluded Jefferson. Since the discovery of fossil mammoth bones in America in the 18th century, Jefferson had believed that the mammoth—a creature he took to be a massive carnivore—must survive in the dim mists of the West. The Creator would hardly have contrived a species only to extinguish it; the Creator did not make mistakes in the Great Chain of Being, an

immutable chain composed of a hierarchy of beings from the simplest organism to the most complex and intelligent.

Jefferson employed the mammoth in his famous refutation of the French naturalist George Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, who had claimed that the New World produced smaller, less vigorous fauna than the Old. The mammoth, wrote Jefferson, "should have sufficed to have rescued the earth it inhabited, and the atmosphere it breathed, from the imputation of impotence in the conception and nourishment of animal life." Indeed, after Charles Willson Peale displayed a virtually complete skeleton of a mammoth in his museum in 1801, the word "mammoth" became an adjective for any American natural production of enormous proportion.

Jefferson was so fascinated by the mammoth that in *Notes on the State of Virginia* he had related an Indian belief that the mammoth still survived. During the Revolution, recalled Jefferson, the governor of Virginia had entertained a delegation of Delaware Indians who recounted an ancient story of a herd of "big buffalo" (Jefferson took these to be mammoths) that congregated at the Big-Bone Licks in Kentucky, where fossil mammalian bones were continuously turning up. This herd devoured bear, deer, and buffalo until the Delaware Indians' culture hero, "Great Man," perched himself atop a mountain and killed the mammoths with lightning bolts. Only one animal, a gargantuan male, escaped to the West and there lived to the present day. According to the Delawares, the Great Man's footprints could still be seen on the mountain, making this one of the myths that explicated the Delawares' tribal landscape.

Like the Delaware Indians, Jefferson was eager to find evidence of titanic creatures and epic struggles in his own tribal landscape. In 1793 Jefferson instructed the French botanist François-André Michaux to hunt for the living mammoth as well as the megalonyx (literally, great claw), a giant, extinct sloth that Jefferson took to be a monstrous lion, based on fossil claws he had seen. Michaux's transcontinental expedition

did not materialize (he reached Kentucky before being recalled after his implication in a French plot to wrest Louisiana from Spain), but Jefferson got a second chance with Meriwether Lewis.

Jefferson did not explicitly tell Lewis to hunt the mammoth, yet to claim an animal for science one had to take a specimen. But what would Lewis have done had he come upon a mammoth? One imagines Lewis gathering his men for a joint assault yet retreating in the face of the mammoth's overwhelming superiority. The grizzly—which sometimes absorbed ten balls before giving up a fight—was foe enough for the party's rifles. "I do not like the gentleman," wrote Lewis, "and had rather fight two Indians than one bear." If the party had trouble dispatching the grizzly, how could it—short of employing a cannon—take a mammoth?

Lewis's search for the mammoth proved fruitless, much to the pleasure of Federalists. In a poem lampooning the expedition, young John Quincy Adams wrote of Lewis:

*He never with a Mammoth met,
However you may wonder;
Nor even with a Mammoth's bone,
Above the ground or under.*

Instead of a mammoth, Jefferson employed other trophies to refute Buffon, requisitioning for him, at great expense, the horns, skeleton, and skin of a Vermont moose. This animal, Jefferson claimed, could accommodate the Lapland deer (the animal Buffon took to be the European analog of the moose) under its belly.

More interesting is the memory of this event in folk culture. According to Reverend E. P. Wild's 1871 history of Brookfield, Vermont, it was Vermont settlers (not Jefferson) who, having heard that the English (not the French) spoke contemptuously of America, "stuffed the skin of an elk [not a moose] of gigantic dimensions and sent it to England as a specimen of what Vermont could produce, with an intimation that her men, also, were hard to beat." The story had become confused over many



These two woodcuts from Patrick Gass's journal illustrate encounters with another species new to Lewis and Clark—the grizzly bear. The low-velocity firearms of the time made it difficult to stop an enraged grizzly, some of which absorbed ten balls before quitting a fight. "I...had reather fight two Indians than one bear," wrote Lewis.

generations, yet the legend and the actual event were not so different. The potency of American fauna illustrated the potency of American people.

MOST OF THE faunal trophies collected by Jefferson's explorers ended up not in Europe, nor in Jefferson's Indian Hall, but in Charles Willson Peale's American Museum (also called Peale's Museum), the republic's preeminent natural history museum. Insisting that Americans must comprehend

the natural productions of their own country "to distinguish the peculiarities of other countries," Peale set about in 1786 to collect and display "every thing that is curious to this Country, but particularly its 'natural forms.'" Peale proclaimed in 1799, "Natural history is not only interesting to the individual, it ought to become a NATIONAL CONCERN, since it is a NATIONAL GOOD."

Through the scientific display of American fauna and flora, Peale—artist, Revolutionary War veteran, pacifist, Deist, and member of Jefferson's Republican party—transformed the disorderly wilderness of the colonial imagination into a school of republican reason. By using his museum to show that the diverse constituents of the natural world actually composed a harmonious, purposeful whole, Peale hoped to show diverse members of the American body politic that they, too, composed a harmonious, purposeful whole. Outside

Peale's museum Americans might be divided by politics and religion, but inside his museum they would find "concordance of sentiment in admiring the wonderful works of creation." Peale maintained, "Political squabbles cease in the divine admiration of the infinite wisdom, and wonderful order of the Creator!" Peale made his "Great School of Nature" into a source of American identity, substituting a temple of reason for a state-sponsored church.

After Lewis and Clark and Zebulon Pike had forwarded their specimens to Peale (via Jefferson)—including the American bighorn, grizzly, and pronghorn—Peale's Great School of Nature extended its scientific empire to the Rockies. Praising "Capt. Lewis for his endeavors to increase our knowledge of the Animals of that new acquired Territory," Peale wrote in 1805 that "every thing" from the Louisiana Territory "must now become interesting to the Public." Peale even volunteered to make drawings for the engravings that would appear in Lewis's account of the expedition. Like Meriwether Lewis, those who visited Peale's Museum became American natives; their ties to the Creator, to republican virtue, science, and nature were commensurate with their ties to the continent.

In displaying the wax figure of Lewis alongside the stuffed and mounted animals he had captured on his expedition, Peale discarded the Rousseauian opposition between hunting and republican rationality. For Peale, the hunter—as epitomized in Lewis—was rational and republican. The hunter killed animals not for sport but for knowledge and progress. In fact, Peale actively sought out American hunters to provide him specimens for his museum. In later decades Peale's own son, Titian Ramsay Peale, would hunt and paint big game in the Far West while serving as naturalist for Major Stephen Long's scientific expedition to the Rocky Mountains in 1819-20.

Peale's other sons, encouraged by their father's success, opened museums in Baltimore in 1814, New York City in 1825, and Utica in 1828, each of which combined natural history with less didactic forms of entertainment. William

Clark, as governor of Missouri Territory, also established a museum of natural history in St. Louis in 1816. There he displayed hunting trophies alongside ethnographic artifacts, petrified wood, crystals, agates, and portraits of Indian chiefs. Explorer and ethnographer Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, one of many travelers to visit the museum, commented that Clark had arranged his exhibits “with great taste and effect.”

Peale and his sons, with Jefferson and Clark, cloaked hunters in the robes of republican dignity, pointing the way toward the 19th-century celebration of the hunter-naturalist. These men also pointed the way toward the great faunal and ethnographic collections assembled in the mid 19th century by the National Institution and its successor, the United States National Museum of the Smithsonian Institution. Through these institutions hunter-naturalists—and thousands of ordinary Americans who viewed the specimens displayed there—became American natives.

WE TEND TO think of Jefferson, Peale, and the hunters who assisted them as heirs of the Enlightenment, men engaged in a scientific effort to know the world, and that is what they were. Yet, having placed these men within the Western scientific tradition, we should consider other ramifications of their work. Their project was not solely scientific; it was an attempt to link Americans to a tribal landscape. How different were the antlers, heads, and hides displayed by Jefferson from the faunal totems, icons, and costumes displayed by Indians?

For American Indians, antler head-dresses and hundreds of other faunal totems were pieces of a larger body of myth, legend, and folk tale—an entire cosmography. This cosmography defined the history of each animal, its usefulness and relationship to humans, and the place of humans in the universe. Together with myths that inscribed tribal geography, faunal totems affirmed tribal cosmography, identified tribal members as a group, and attached them to specific lands. In these processes, the hunter was



Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 95, Box 41, Neg. #20001312.

The conspicuous antlers in the interior of the Smithsonian Institution building (c. 1860s) seem to testify to the chivalrous conquest of the North American continent.

instrumental; he took possession of the land and its faunal spirits, guaranteeing the tribe’s survival.

The faunal specimens collected by another sort of hunter, Meriwether Lewis, affirmed not mythology but the seemingly superior discourse of science, rationality, and utility. Yet the specimens taken by Lewis and displayed by Jefferson and Peale were no less symbolic of a sacred wisdom than were the totems of American Indians. For Lewis, Jefferson, and Peale, natural history was the surest way humans had to discern the logic of the Creator; nature was a perfect school of republicanism; and to study nature was to follow the path toward the fulfillment of the Creator’s plan for the perfection of America through the utilization of its natural resources.

In a sense, Lewis, Jefferson, and Peale made their countrymen more truly American natives than the aboriginal peoples who have come to be called Native Americans. American Indians tended to see themselves as native to

particular tribal realms rather than to the continent as a whole. They did not conceive of geography in continental units before the arrival of Europeans, and they did not choose to have themselves and the lands they inhabited named for Amerigo Vespucci.

Ironic though it may seem, to call Lewis, Jefferson, Peale, and their post-Revolutionary countrymen American natives is justified. Their progenitors had given the name of an Italian navigator to the continent; they comprehended America as a zoological, geological, and geographical entity, and they called themselves American to identify themselves with the continent they inhabited. Finally, they associated their cultural and political values with American nature and, through natural history, scientific exploration, agriculture, art, and hunting, came to see themselves as divinely appointed custodians of the continent.

*Daniel Herman is assistant professor of history at Central Washington University. This article is excerpted from his book, *Hunting and the American Imagination* (published by the Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.; copyright © 2001 by the Smithsonian Institution), with permission of the publisher.*

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FRONT COVER: In colonial America, to call a man "buckskins" was to call him an oaf; hence colonists wore their finest clothing when they sat for a portrait. This image, however, breaks with colonial tradition by depicting Meriwether Lewis in buckskins and wearing the ermine tippet given him by Shoshone chief Cameahwait, thus making Lewis into a white indigene. Charles Willson Peale created a wax likeness of Captain Lewis in similar attire for display in his American Museum in Philadelphia. Lewis, along with Daniel Boone, served as a prototype for the ubiquitous image of the hunter hero in 19th-century America. (Charles Balthazar Julien Févret de Saint-Mémin, "Captain Meriwether Lewis," 1807, watercolor over graphite, 6¹/₈"x3³/₄", #1971.125, collection of The New York Historical Society.)