

## **Painting a Settler Nation: Frederick Verner and the Canadian West**

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The late nineteenth-century in Canada was a period of vigorous nation building. It was also a time during which institutions in the new country set about establishing a distinct Canadian identity while also extending the territory of the Dominion by expanding westward. As a result, Indigenous peoples already living on the land found their needs and identities subjugated to those of the new nation. Within this political climate, artists found inspiration in both the landscape and Indigenous peoples living there, representing their subjects through a romantic aesthetic. Such representations encouraged an existing myth of the unsettled West and the endangered Aboriginal. One such artist was the Canadian painter Frederick Arthur Verner, a European trained artist who gained a reputation as an authoritative painter of the unsettled West despite his limited travels and lacking significant first-hand experience of the new nation's expanding western border. This paper will argue that Verner's art, within the institutional context of the Ontario Society of Artists, perpetuated this myth and contributed to a culture that validated and encouraged westward expansion in Canada at the expense of Indigenous peoples.

My analysis of Verner's work will be contextualized through a discussion of existing myths about Indigenous peoples and culture already circulating in various publications in the United States and Canada when he began his career. These primary sources were a significant source of inspiration for Verner's art, sometimes taking precedence over his own first-hand experiences of his subjects. However, as an adept

painter with an important role in the artistic institutions that helped disseminate his work, Verner earned a reputation as an authoritative painter of Canadian landscapes and Indigenous peoples. He therefore contributed to and perpetuated the very myths and stereotypes that were his initial source of inspiration. The cultural and political ideologies that his work promoted in turn took concrete shape in the form of government legislation regarding land ownership and westward expansion and in the mandates of newly founded artistic institutions. Though my intention is not to propose a direct causal link between Verner's work and new government legislation at the time, I do wish to highlight the role of cultural institutions in promoting the idea of an authentically Canadian settler identity at the expense of Indigenous culture.

Frederick Arthur Verner (1836-1928) was born in Halton County, Ontario. An early admirer of artist Paul Kane and his documentary paintings of Indigenous peoples, Verner showed aptitude as an artist from a young age.<sup>1</sup> His only formal artistic education occurred in London, England, beginning in 1856 where he attended Leigh's School in South Kensington. Subsequently, Verner was employed for a short period of time at the British Museum, though neither of these experiences proved satisfying for the young artist.<sup>2</sup> Seeking a new kind of experience, Verner joined the British military during which time he travelled to Italy to fight alongside Giuseppe Garibaldi. The environment of nationalistic fervor surrounding their campaign, which sought the unification of Italy, likely made a lasting impression on the young Verner. He returned to England in 1861. Though his art school experience was unsatisfactory, biographer Joan Murray suggests

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<sup>1</sup> Joan Murray, *The Last Buffalo: The Story of Frederick Arthur Verner, Painter of the Canadian*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

that the artist likely received some instruction from a colleague in his regiment since a notable improvement in his sketches is apparent after his period abroad.<sup>3</sup>

Verner's practice of learning informally through the examples of other artists would continue throughout his early career. The artist returned to Toronto in 1862 and continued to improve his artistic skills by studying images in books and magazines such as *The Illustrated London News*. In the 1860s John Mix Stanley's *Indian Telegraph* (1860) [Fig. 1] was made into a lithograph and widely disseminated; Verner's own *Indian Signal* (c. 1862) [Fig. 2] was likely copied from Stanley's lithograph. Verner also drew inspiration from the work of other artists who he encountered at various exhibitions. In 1865, Verner travelled to New York where he became familiar with the work of Albert Bierstadt at the National Academy of Design. One of America's most prominent landscape painters, Bierstadt was known for his romanticized representations of the American wilderness and his dramatized renderings of light and mountain vistas. Bierstadt was one of a large number of American landscape painters working throughout the nineteenth century who promoted the idea of landscape as intimately connected to national identity, a notion that extended north of the border as well. Though Verner was painting and exhibiting his own work throughout this period as well, he was not yet established as an artist. Until 1874, Verner was listed as a photographer on the city of Toronto census, indicating that his paintings were not his primary source of income.<sup>4</sup> However, the artist's trip to Lake of the Woods in 1873, where he completed a series of sketches, marks a turning point in his career. As this paper will demonstrate, these

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 63.

sketches would serve as source material for much of the art produced throughout his mature career.

After the Ontario Society of Artists' first exhibition in the spring of 1873, to which Verner submitted sixteen paintings, the artist travelled to Winnipeg. Murray posits that while in Winnipeg, Verner heard of Lieutenant Alexander Morris' trip to the North West Territories to negotiate treaty with the Indians at North-West Angle, Lake of the Woods and decided to join the expedition. Verner witnessed the signing of this treaty on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1873.<sup>5</sup> During this trip, he completed a series of sketches, which he would turn to as inspiration for much of the work in his later career. Murray suggests a chronology to Verner's Lake of the Woods sketches that, though not crucial to the present argument, I will adopt in my own analysis of the works for the sake of clarity. According to this chronology, Verner's first sketch was created at Lake of the Woods and he completed subsequent sketches on his journey back home after the treaty signing.

The first of these sketches depicts an Indian encampment by a lake or river, presumably Lake of the Woods. Titled *North West-Angle of the Lake of the Woods* [Fig. 3] and dated September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1873, it was sketched three days prior to the signing of Treaty No. 3. Verner wrote "evening looking east" on the bottom left corner of the image, indicating the meticulousness with which he documented the particular perspective he was depicting. Compositionally, the sketch is fairly simple. A straight tree line across the horizon separates the foreground from the background. The lake's curved shore balances the composition by separating the encampment vertically into two groupings—a hut and two teepees on the right, and a grouping of teepees and wigwams set slightly farther back

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 54.

on the left. Various canoes are interspersed throughout the sketch, including several overturned ones, a motif Verner included in many of his later compositions.

The second sketch according to Murray's chronology is titled *On Rainy River at Long Sault* [Fig. 4] and dated October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1873. The shoreline and horizon of trees echo Verner's earlier sketch, though the main focal point is a single wigwam and canoes rather than an entire encampment. There are no figures present, giving the impression of an ambiguous time and place. Though presumably sketched from life, Verner's framing techniques are very deliberate. The shoreline and overturned canoe direct the viewer's eye from the lower left edge into the composition to settle on the wigwam in the middle ground where the horizontal tree line also meets the shore. The sketch can therefore be viewed as a study of the wigwam itself. Though uninhabited, it is the focal point of the composition and is depicted in two stages of completion—the frame and the completed wigwam. This suggests that Verner was concerned with the accurate depiction of a motif that he would be able to re-use later rather than illustrating the life of a particular Indigenous family.

The third sketch, *Morning, Fort Frances* [Fig.5], completed at Fort Frances at the south end of Rainy River is once again composed along a horizontal plane. As with Verner's first sketch, the tree line divides the background from the foreground, though no water is visible in this sketch. In a variation of his earlier composition, Verner appears to have positioned himself behind the camp as evidenced by the central teepee which is depicted from the back. The lone figure in the composition is also turned away from the viewer. Verner again positions an overturned canoe to guide the viewer's eye. In this case, the canoe is positioned along the back of the central teepee, directing the viewer's

gaze horizontally away from the centre of the sketch; the viewer is not invited into the camp but remains on the periphery instead.

Recurring motifs illustrated in these three foundational sketches, such as the long teepee, the wigwam, and overturned canoe as a directional device, become the basis for a large number of canvases that Verner produced throughout the rest of his career. He “mined them increasingly in passing years, copying, and, in the process, transforming them into paintings many times in the years that followed.”<sup>6</sup> This technique is reminiscent of his earlier habit of copying the work of other artists in order to improve his skills, but is also indicative of the industriousness of Verner’s artistic production, which was characterized by his ability to combine his stock of motifs into a myriad of different compositions. In this sense, Verner’s working process diverges from that of earlier artists such as Kane whose depictions of Indigenous peoples was driven by a documentary impulse to preserve what was perceived as a disappearing culture. These acts of ‘salvage’, to borrow the term from James Clifford, was based on the notion that Indigenous cultures were incapable of becoming ‘civilized’ and were therefore bound to become extinct as a result of the colonial process.<sup>7</sup> It was therefore the artist and anthropologist’s duty to record and preserve said culture in museums and history books. Verner’s relationship to Indigenous peoples is much more abstract; his interest appears to stem from a desire to find ideal subjects and motifs to serve his artistic ambitions rather than a genuine interest in Indigenous culture.

In addition to his continued reference to stock motifs such as those found in his Lake of the Woods sketches, Verner’s artistic process was largely informed by existing

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>7</sup> James Clifford, “Of Other Peoples: Beyond the Salvage Paradigm,” in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987), 121.

myths about the cultures that he depicted on his canvases. By the mid-1870s when Verner's career had begun to flourish, two major streams of discourse had emerged regarding the nature of Indigenous cultures—that of the noble savage on the one hand, and that of the degenerate native on the other, typified by such writers as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Daniel Defoe.<sup>8</sup> It would be impossible to say whether or not Verner actually engaged directly with the texts that typified these discourses during his studies in Europe; however, North American counterparts to these discourses would also have been circulating throughout Verner's career. The works of George Catlin and Lord Garnet Worsley, both of whom wrote extensively about their first-hand experiences with Aborigines in North America, would likely have served as more direct sources of inspiration for the artist.<sup>9</sup>

Catlin travelled throughout the United States in order to document and illustrate different tribes of Indians. His goal was to compile a directory, which he would come to call his "Indian Gallery."<sup>10</sup> In *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indian*, Catlin provides detailed descriptions of the tribes he encountered on his trips, accompanied by sketches. Generally, his remarks are positive. He describes the "dignity of manner" of the Assiniboine and Ojibway; of the Cree, he writes that they

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau is generally associated with the "noble savage" discourse. His *Discourse on Inequalities* is a treatise describing man in a state of nature, with the intention of establishing the source of inequalities among civilized men. He writes that civilization makes men weak because they become dependent on things other than their own bodies. In his descriptions, Rousseau admittedly uses terms such as "barbarous peoples," and "savages;" however, he imbues his natural man with a nobility and strength which is lost when man becomes civilized. Daniel Defoe represents the "degenerate native" discourse. His descriptions display none of the nobility or nostalgia of Rousseau. In *Robinson Crusoe* for example, Indigenous peoples are portrayed as degenerate, less intelligent, and inherently less human than European men. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984). Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Kane was also a source of inspiration for Verner. However, since Kane's work was modelled on Catlin's and since both can be characterized as part of the noble savage discourse, I have chosen to refer only specifically to Catlin in the interest of space.

<sup>10</sup> George Catlin, *Illustrations of the Manner and Customs of the North American Indian* (London: H.G. Bohn, 1866), 1:4.

are “a very daring and adventurous tribe.”<sup>11</sup> Though Catlin’s descriptions convey approbation, he maintains an ethnographic stance of observing a savage community, completely separate from civilized society. In a general description of travelling west into “savage society,” Catlin describes finding inspiration “in a state of original nature, beyond the reach of civilized contamination,” where “one finds much to fix his enthusiasm upon, and much to admire.”<sup>12</sup> While Catlin adopts a nostalgic tone he makes clear the distinction between the Indigenous peoples of savage society and the European settler of civilized society. The two are by no means homogenous. The former is positioned in the historical past while the latter embodies the present and the future. For Verner, Indigenous peoples are depicted as historical figures; the setting sun and coloured leaves in *Ojibway Camp* can both be interpreted as signs of transience and the passage of time.

In comparison to Catlin’s text, Worseley’s *Narrative of the Red River Expedition* offers a divergent viewpoint—that Indigenous peoples are degenerate and that they are in fact an impediment to the progress of the civilized white man. The Red River Expedition was a British military operation organized in 1870 to document resources in the newly acquired Rupert’s Land before the Dominion government was to officially take control of the area from the Hudson’s Bay Company.<sup>13</sup> The expedition was also tasked with improving navigation to Fort Garry and the Red River settlement while also ensuring the safety of the area following the Red River rebellion of 1869.<sup>14</sup> Lord Worseley, who at the time was a colonel in the British military, led the expedition and documented its efforts in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 57-58.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>13</sup> S.J. Dawson, *The Red River Expedition of 1870* (Toronto: Canadiana Library Services, 1969), 1.

<sup>14</sup> George F.G. Stanley, *Toil and Trouble Military Expeditions to Red River* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1989), 71.



an account that was later published in *Blackwood's Magazine*.<sup>15</sup> Throughout his narrative, Worseley offers descriptions of the Indigenous peoples encountered along the way. He describes the Chippewah tribe as an “extremely dirty race,” also stating, “the men are lazy,” but also “trustworthy and honorable.”<sup>16</sup> These seemingly contradictory descriptions illustrate that Worseley and his men believed the natives to be simple-minded enough that, though they were considered a degenerate race, they could be manipulated in such a way as to be beneficial to the expedition. In the context of the expedition, Indigenous peoples were viewed merely as means to an end. These two sources, widely circulated to the general public, were surely influential in shaping Verner's own prejudices in the early stages of his career and continued to be a source of inspiration as his artistic practice developed. Despite the differences between Catlin and Worseley's view, their opinions overlap in their lack of recognition of Indigenous agency and denial of any active role for these peoples in Canada's future. Verner's treatment of his Indigenous subjects as historical motifs to be manipulated for artistic purposes promotes a similar erasure.

Verner's mature career also coincided with the founding of the Ontario Society of Artists (OSA) in 1872 by seven artists, including Verner, at the home of John A. Fraser in Toronto.<sup>17</sup> His Excellency the Earl of Dufferin and the Honorable John Crawford, Lieutenant Governor of Canada are cited as patrons to the new institution, indicating that

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<sup>15</sup> While *Blackwood's Magazine* was a British publication, it had a wide readership in the colonies as well. Stanley, *Toil and Trouble*, 251.

<sup>16</sup> Lord Garnet Worseley, *Narrative of the Red River Expedition* (New York: White and Allen, 1871), 231.

<sup>17</sup> Though Verner is listed as a founding member of the institution, he was not actually present at Fraser's house when the constitution was drafted. Murray, *The Last Buffalo*, 45.

it had federal support despite being provincially organized.<sup>18</sup> One of the objectives of the institution outlined in its constitution was “the fostering of original Art in the province.”<sup>19</sup> In addition to its annual exhibition, the OSA held shows at the Toronto Industrial Exhibition as well as travelling exhibitions where artists would often accompany their work “to proselytize for the cause.” The main goal of these exhibitions was to promote the opening of smaller local galleries, presumably with similar mandates as the OSA.<sup>20</sup> The Government of the Province of Ontario was a significant presence at the annual exhibition purchasing as much as \$1,000 of art every year between 1873 and 1912.<sup>21</sup> While this amount may seem insignificant, it is worth noting that the price of an oil painting averaged approximately \$50 to \$150 according to the institution’s exhibition catalogues.<sup>22</sup> The new organization found immediate success with both government institutions and the public in general; following its first exhibition in 1873, the *Daily Globe* described it as “The Ontario Academy.”<sup>23</sup>

In an 1898 amendment to the constitution, the first objective, cited above, was modified to read “native” art instead of “original.”<sup>24</sup> Evidenced in this change is the institution’s focus on creating a national identity through art that positioned settler, rather than Indigenous, culture as “native” to the land. As a member of the OSA, Verner was required to submit work to the yearly exhibitions, which he did in mass volumes, thus

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<sup>18</sup> Ontario Society of Artists- The Archive Project, *A Brief Historical Outline*, CCCA database, accessed November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014, <http://ccca.concordia.ca/history/osa/english/references/history.html?languagePref=en&o>.

<sup>19</sup> The other objectives listed include holding an Annual Exhibition, the foundation of an art library and museum, and of a new School of Art to formally train artists. Joan Murray, *Ontario Society of Artists: 100 years 1872-1972*, (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1972), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Murray, *Ontario Society of Artists*, 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Exhibition catalogues were accessed through the CCCA Canadian Art Database, <http://ccca.concordia.ca/>

<sup>23</sup> *The Daily Globe*, Toronto, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1873. Cited in Murray, *The Last Buffalo*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> Murray, *Ontario Society of Artists*, 5.

participating in and perpetuating the institution's mandate.<sup>25</sup> The institution therefore became a regular source of public exposure for Verner's work and his commitment to the organization was both demonstrated by, and likely the cause of, his commercial-style output of artwork. A reflection of his commercialized practice and habit of recycling common motifs under the guise of authentic representation can be seen in a case of mistaken identity in his *Encampment of Blackfoot Indians; Crowfoot watching a gambling party before moving teepees* (n.d). Though Verner identifies the Indians in his painting as Blackfoot, Hugh Dempsey, a "leading Canadian authority on the Indian," has identified them as Cree.<sup>26</sup> The discrepancy likely went unnoticed when the work was exhibited.

Each year throughout his career, Verner continued to submit an unusually large number of paintings to both the OSA and Toronto Industrial Exhibitions. In 1879 for example, in addition to exhibiting nine oil paintings and a series of watercolours at the OSA exhibition,<sup>27</sup> he also submitted twelve oil paintings to the Toronto Industrial exhibition. Three of these canvases were titled *Indian Chief*.<sup>28</sup> Verner's frequent use of the same title for presumably different works implies his technique of recycling subjects and motifs into a variety of different compositions. These paintings were likely based on a select few sketches from life, such as the ones made at Lake of the Woods. There is an

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<sup>25</sup> Ontario Society of Artists, *Constitutions and bylaws of the Ontario Society of Artists*, revised and adopted April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1916 (Toronto, 1916), Article VI. Early versions of the Constitution were not available for consultation, though in her discussion of amendments to said constitution, Murray does not mention any changes to Article VI. Presumably then, the bylaw regarding member participation in annual exhibition as cited in the 1916 constitution is the same as in the original 1872 version. Murray, *Ontario Society of Artists*, 5-7.

<sup>26</sup> Murray, *The Last Buffalo*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Ontario Society of Artists- The Archive Project, *Catalogue [of the] 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition, 1879* CCCA database, accessed November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014, <http://ccca.concordia.ca/OSA/advancedSearch.html?languagePref=en&osa=true>.

<sup>28</sup> *Toronto Industrial Exhibition 1879 Catalogue* (Toronto: Copp, Clark & Co., 1879), 5-7.

industriousness to Verner's practice, promoted by artistic institutions that allowed his art to become a form of commerce, circulating ideologies along with material goods. The institutions provided a more regulated way for artists to showcase and sell their work, exposing them to the general public with the added prestige of being associated with an institution that was supported by the government.

In the same year that the OSA was founded, the Dominion government passed legislation that offered free land to any settler willing to create a homestead on a given tract of land. Known officially as *An Act respecting the Public Lands of the Dominion*, the *Dominion Lands Act*, as it came to be known, outlined a plan for surveying and mapping Rupert's Land. While the Act secured territories for government use such as military activities, to build schools, and to access natural resources, "unappropriated Dominion lands" were made available for "any person who [was] the head of a family, or [had] attained the age of 21 years old...for the purpose of securing a homestead."<sup>29</sup> Though an article of the Act states "none of the provisions of this Act...shall be held to apply to territory the Indian title to which shall not at the time have been extinguished,"<sup>30</sup> the first two Numbered Treaties had already been signed, ceding Indigenous lands to the government.<sup>31</sup> Between 1873, when the treaty witnessed by Verner was signed, and 1877 five additional treaties culminated in the cessation of territories from Manitoba to the

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<sup>29</sup> *An Act Respecting the Public Lands of the Dominion*, 1872, Library and Archives Canada, accessed November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014, <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/immigrants/>, 65.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>31</sup> The Numbered Treaties are a series of eleven land treaties concluded between 1871 and 1921, ceding land between Manitoba and British Columbia to the Dominion government. This paper is concerned with the first seven of these treaties, concluded between 1871 and 1877, known as the early Numbered Treaties. *The Number Treaties (1871-1921)*, Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, last modified June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013, <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1360948213124/1360948312708>.

Rocky Mountains. This effectively opened the entire southern portion of the North West Territories to the Dominion Lands Act.<sup>32</sup>

The Act and the ensuing land treaties is characteristic of a vigorous immigration campaign to settle Dominion lands. Part of that campaign was the development of a visual culture promoting Canada as a wild, romantic territory inhabited by a vanishing race of Indigenous peoples, a campaign in which the OSA and artists like Verner took part. While it is impossible to draw a direct link between Verner's paintings and government officials who were directly involved in this legislation, his career and involvement with the OSA are indicative of a widespread commercialization of artistic practice. Artists, intentionally or not, were perpetuating existing myths regarding the culture of Indigenous peoples and their role, or lack thereof, in creating a Canadian identity. Figures such as George Catlin, Paul Kane, and Lord Garnet Worsley were considered authoritative sources on the topic of native identity and culture. Through their references to these sources, artists like Verner themselves become authoritative voices by creating representations of the West and the Indigenous peoples living there.

In 1880, Verner moved to England. He would remain there for the rest of his life with the exception of three trips to Canada to visit his family. Though he began exhibiting his work in England, he continued to submit paintings to the OSA exhibitions and to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, which was founded the year the artist left Canada and also held annual exhibitions.<sup>33</sup> These paintings continue to echo the themes

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<sup>32</sup> The North West Territories includes land as far south as the American border, between Manitoba and British Columbia until Saskatchewan and Alberta become provinces in 1905.

<sup>33</sup> Murray, *The Last Buffalo*, 89.

and motifs apparent in his Lake of the Woods sketches.<sup>34</sup> Verner's reputation preceded him; he was widely recognized as an authoritative source of representations of the Canadian West. His reputation allowed him to continue reworking his stock of images without raising an unusual amount of criticism. A notice published in *The Dominion Illustrated* in 1888 offers an account of Verner's status to the Canadian public even though he no longer lived in the country. The notice announces a sale of Verner's works to be held by one Mr. Hicks, possibly a private collector. It is presented to the public as a unique opportunity for collectors to purchase depictions of "Indian life," which was quickly becoming extinct as "the red men [learned] to settle down and till the soil." Verner himself is described as "a conscientious artist, depicting objects as he sees them." The author goes on to say that Verner's "pictures are reliable" accounts of this disappearing culture, yet another expression of Clifford's salvage paradigm.<sup>35</sup>

Verner's success abroad was predicated on yet another myth regarding the artist's actual involvement with the "West." The term itself is ambiguous, used not as an indication of direction, but as a concrete, though exceedingly vague, location without any specific geographic references. The settled Dominion of Canada however, through most of Verner's career in Canada, did not extend past Manitoba.<sup>36</sup> The term "West" therefore, denoted a huge geographic area from Manitoba to the Rocky Mountains. A similar

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<sup>34</sup> *Indian Encampment with Wigwams and Canoes*, painted in 1887, bears striking resemblance to Verner's Lake of the Woods sketches, completed more than a decade earlier. The watercolour painting is composed along a horizontal plane divided by a shoreline with trees. Two canoes on the left side, one of which is overturned, frame the camp in the foreground. The scene has domestic echoes of the conversation style discussed earlier in this paper and the cool purple light infusing the scene is also reminiscent of the Lake of the Woods sketches.

<sup>35</sup> *The Dominion Illustrated*, 1888, 1: 259, in *Frederick A. Verner Documentation Book*, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives.

<sup>36</sup> British Columbia joined confederation in 1871; however, it remained separate from the remainder of the Dominion until the early twentieth century when Saskatchewan and Alberta became provinces.

ambiguity existed in the United States, an issue that Catlin addressed in his commentary on his Indian illustrations. He writes that “there is scarcely any subject on which the *knowing* peoples of the East, are yet less informed and instructed than on the characters and amusements of the West...few peoples even know the true definition of the term “West;” and where is its location?”<sup>37</sup> The unsettled West was identified as an exotic other, imbuing those who visited it, wherever it was, with an eccentricity and authority of having travelled to a foreign place. The Indigenous peoples who lived in this foreign place were likewise imbued with an exoticism that further differentiated them from their settler contemporaries. Catlin, aware of this dynamic, was amused by the generic use of the term as he encountered it throughout his travels:

In the commencement of my Tour, several of my travelling companions from the city of New York, found themselves at a frightful distance to the West, when we arrived at Niagara Falls; and hastened back to amuse their friends with tales and scenes of the West. At Buffalo a steam-boat was landing with 400 passengers, and twelve days out—“Where from?” “From the West.” In the rich state of Ohio, hundreds were selling their farms and going—to the West...In St. Louis, 1400 miles west of New York, my landlady assured me that I would be pleased with her boarders, for they were nearly all merchants from the “West.” I there asked, — “Whence come those steamboats, laden with pork, honey, hides, &c.?” From the West.<sup>38</sup>

Much of this ambiguity comes to the fore throughout Verner’s career in the form of exhibition reviews and newspaper articles commending his ability to “picture...Canada’s western districts,”<sup>39</sup> without specifying the exact parameters of his direct interaction with any particular geographic location.

As Joan Murray explains in her biography of Verner, the only documented trip West he made was to Lake of the Woods for the signing of Treaty No. 3. His seeming

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<sup>37</sup> Catlin, *Illustrations*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>39</sup> *The Daily Globe*, Toronto, 1876.

wealth of knowledge of different Indian tribes and of the buffalo he painted frequently in his later career were based largely on what Verner would have considered primary source material: the works of George Catlin and Lord Worsley for example. Nevertheless, abridged versions of Verner's biography circulated with exhibitions of his work, even up to his first major retrospective in 1976, cite him as having "frequently" visited the West, sometimes as far as the Rocky Mountains. These biographies sometimes even claim he had settled there.<sup>40</sup> Despite the fact that his artistic practice was centred primarily in Ontario, the authority with which he painted encouraged popular assumptions of a much deeper engagement with the areas represented in his paintings.

The result of artworks by artists like Verner, within the institutional context of the Ontario Artists Society and the political climate of the new Dominion government, was a positioning of Indigenous culture as historic and stagnant, near extinction and in need of preservation. In comparison, immigration and settler culture was being promoted while Canada expanded its borders through land treaties. An article in *The Globe*, published in 1908, three years after Canada had become a country that stretched from coast to coast, illustrates this positioning as it discusses Canadian art:

If Canada is to have a national art it must be an art that takes cognizance of some of our peculiarly Canadian subjects. An art which represents the present should portray the railway-builder, the settler, the woodsman and the miner. It is just as important that an art which represents the past should preserve for us the bison and the roving Indians, which were the forerunners of the busy wheat farmers of the present and the future.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> A biography accompanying Verner's work in an exhibition featuring depictions of the Windsor area reads, "after his return to Canada in 1862, [Verner] travelled West and is thought to have reached the Pacific Coast." Art Gallery of Windsor "Local Images: Depictions of the Windsor Area," (Windsor: The Gallery, 1990), in *Frederick A. Verner Documentation Book*, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives. See also, *The Windsor Star*, Feb. 22 1979, *The Leamington Post and News*, Jan 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1969, and *The Calgary Albertan*, May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1969.

<sup>41</sup> *The Globe*, Toronto, Saturday April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1908.



It is apparent in this description that by 1908, still within Verner's lifetime and not two full generations after the Numbered Treaties, Canada's Indigenous population had been relegated to a position in the country's past, while being omitted as a part of the present, or the future of Canadian art and identity.

### List of Images

Fig. 1 John Mix Stanley, *Indian Telegraph*, 1860, oil on canvas (50.8 x 39.37 cm).

Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit.

[http://www.dia.org/object-info/27551e38-9630-43c6-9dd6-](http://www.dia.org/object-info/27551e38-9630-43c6-9dd6-836b62bf9e16.aspx?position=1)

[836b62bf9e16.aspx?position=1](http://www.dia.org/object-info/27551e38-9630-43c6-9dd6-836b62bf9e16.aspx?position=1)

Fig. 2 Frederick A. Verner, *Indian Signal*, c. 1862, watercolour on graphite over woven paper (16.8 x 14 cm), National Gallery of Canada

<https://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=8823>

Fig. 3 Frederick A. Verner, *North-West Angle of the Lake of the Woods*, 1873, watercolour on graphite over woven paper (14.3 x 30 cm). The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=5345>

Fig. 4 Frederick A. Verner, *On Rainy River at Long Sault*, 1873, watercolour on graphite over woven paper (16.1 x 33.6 cm). The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=5343>

Fig. 5 Frederick A. Verner, *Morning- Fort France*, 1873, watercolour on graphite over woven paper (8.9 x 21 cm). The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=8825>

Fig. 6 Frederick A. Verner, *Ojibway Camp, Northern Shore of Lake Huron*, 1873, oil on canvas (40.7 x 68.7 cm). The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

<http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=6950>

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