



The Price of Progress: How John Gast's *American Progress* Envisions Environmental Ruin

With every dream achieved, there is a sacrifice that follows; in the case of pursuing mass industrialization to achieve the American Dream, we lost our natural beauty and Native American identities. In the 1800s, colonization and industrialization swept across the nation in an era known as "Manifest Destiny." Towards the end of the century, John Gast placed his oiled brush onto a canvas with a purpose of showcasing the multi-faceted experience that would forever change the topography of the US—with consequences to our environment that have officially crept up on Modern America. Gast's *American Progress* depicts both Western and

Eastern America in the 1800s using composition, color, and chiaroscuro to highlight the detrimental effects presented by westward expansion: the destruction of the natural world and the individuals who properly valued Mother Nature.

The painting's nearly symmetrical, two-sided composition creates a harshly contrasting landscape that demonstrates how the beginnings of industrialization also marked the end of human-to-nature equilibrium. Gast depicts two different Americas on each half of the painting, with the "East" representing Industrial America and the "West" representing Pre-Industrial America. The "West" side of the painting depicts the untouched natural landscape and the fear felt by its inhabitants who anticipate the loss of their natural lifestyle. We first see mountains in the upper left, darker patches of grass, and an unscathed coastline. However, we then see wild animals like bison and bears panic—the bison frantically flee and the bear growls at the eastern colonizers. One group of Native Americans on the far left bolt, while another group in the upper-left dance around a teepee, unaware of the destruction to come. The "East" side highlights the industrialization that has destroyed this once pristine landscape, showcasing the future the west now faces. The trees have become a log cabin coupled with a fence, the lighter grass has been stripped to dirt to create farms and train tracks, and the coastline is filled with bridges and boats. Moreover, the animals painted are domesticated, tied directly to their owners with some being used to pull carriages. Gast also uses the eastside to break the landscape's symmetry by placing a large female slightly off-center as she flies westward with the white travelers. Thus, the symmetrical imbalance of the painting furthers the sense of impending doom for the west's landscape and inhabitants. Understanding the painting's asymmetrical composition and the geographical features highlighted on each side allows us to explore the color palette and chiaroscuro Gast uses to emphasize the stark reality of industrialization.

Gast's neutral color palette represents the Pastoral art movement, which allows him to subtly make a political statement about the nearing destruction of our once untouched land within an artistic form known to romanticize natural beauty. By using neutral tones like paler greens and browns, light yellows and blues, and creamy whites to depict nature, the piece molds within the idealized genre. Many classify *American Progress* as a part of Pastoralism, placing the painting side-by-side with serene, unscathed landscapes. But even within the color palette, Gast begins to place the Pastoral movement in the past and show the reality we face using the painting's duality. The west primarily has hues of dark brown, green, and gray, while the east has lighter hues of red, yellow, green, and blue. The east side's bright color palette immediately strikes the viewer, inviting them into the world Gast creates. But the west side's ambiguous color palette keeps viewers engaged as they try to unveil the actions hidden beneath the dark hues. As a result, *American Progress*' Pastoral colors and aesthetic gives Gast the platform to properly inform viewers on the harm being done to our natural world—a world we once properly appreciated for its beauty.

How Gast employs light throughout his piece unveils the dark execution behind westward expansion: the opportunity that gives White Americans a hopeful future completely shadows the present existence of Native Americans and the natural world. Following the dual perspective piece, the sun lay on the east side of the painting, casting a golden haze across only the right side of the piece. The light makes the clouds a beautiful light pink and white that also makes travelers' faces visible to the viewer. Although the hazy appearance on the right evokes a sense of hope for industrialization and resembles the idea of a "brighter future," Gast's natural light only makes the left side even darker. Unlike its counterpart, the west's clouds are a harrowing shade of gray, anticipating the destruction the environment soon faces. Moreover, the darkness

on the westside shadows many of the key details of animals and tribes suffering at the hands of westward expansion. You struggle to see the frantically fleeing bison or the faces of the Native Americans; thus, viewers can not lock eyes with the individuals we harmed in our pursuit of modernity. The chiaroscuro choices conceal the harsh reality of our actions and brighten the superficiality behind Manifest Destiny. Furthermore, the light brilliantly resembles how the American Government hid Native Americans and natural living from mainstream culture through legislation that championed industrialization.

American Progress' asymmetrical composition, pastoral color palette, and chiaroscuro demonstrate the double-edged sword to mass industrialization, painting a voice and perspective for those never considered. Gast reminds us that his singular log cabin on the bottom right started as a forest that once supplied oxygen. And the dirt patch inside the fenced cabin was likely once filled with teepees that gently touched the soil—home to Native Americans who gently danced alongside their surroundings. The expansion that we began in the early 1800s marked the beginning of the end for the relationship between humans and nature, plagued by the pure greed that drives the industrialist lifestyle. Although humans once underestimated how much of the environment we used to industrialize, society faces the consequence of overexploiting of our natural resources. We lack clean air, the endangered species list never ends, and the countryside feels foreign to most Americans. Thus, as we look back at the painting Gast created almost two centuries ago, we are forced to face the lives and natural beauty we bulldozed over.

Works Cited

Gast, John, "American Progress." Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles. 1872.