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Landscape and Imagery Help MOWA Celebrate the Country's 250th Birthday

The new exhibit highlights the role Wisconsin artists have played in capturing images and retelling stories of the state's contributions to the development of the United States on the eve of the country's birthday.

The very first image in the new exhibit mounted by the Museum of Wisconsin Art (MOWA) in West Bend may be one of its most striking, less so for its content and simplicity and more for its age and intention.

A taxidermy of an American bald eagle looks out from a 19th century black-and-white photograph by Charles van Schaick as only eagles can, challenging the viewers' interest and intentions. Old Abe, as he was known, was mascot for the 8th Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry Regiment, which marched in 1861 from Madison and into the American Civil War, including the siege of Vicksburg and dozens of other skirmishes. The regiment mustered out at the end of the war in 1865, but Old Abe's image lives on today as the unit patch for the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne Division, known today as the "Screaming Eagles."

In many ways Old Abe is emblematic of "The American Landscape: Beyond the Horizon." The new MOWA exhibit celebrates the role Wisconsin artists have played in capturing images and retelling stories of the state's contributions to the development of the United States on the eve of the country's birthday. The

Classic canvases by well-known artists like John Stuart Curry, Lois Ireland and Georgia O'Keeffe are joined by Native American arts, including baskets by Helen Lonetree and Lila Greengrass Blackdeer and a sculpture by Truman Lowe to round out the exhibit.

by Michael Muckian

Visual Arts

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Detail of 'Parade (Dusk)' by Rafael Francisco Salas, 2025

There are also more contemporary works, including miniature landscapes by M. Winston, an artist currently incarcerated in the Fox Lake Correctional Institution that he constructed in his prison cell.

Green pastures and blue horizons abound, but the exhibit is more than just a feel-good tour of the 'Badger State' bucolic past, according to Rafael Salas, professor of art at Ripon College and guest curator for the exhibit, which also features three of his own works.

"The landscape has always been a vessel for meaning. It is the ground we stand on, but it is also a metaphor," Salas says. "We make the land stand 'for' something—a nation or a religious symbol, for example.

The landscape helps us distinguish who we are from where we are.”

Food for Thought

In the case of Wisconsin, that landscape is often rural and the subject of significant development since it gained statehood on May 29, 1848. But there is more than time and place to these pieces, and image content offers food for thought about the state’s history and the roles we play in it today, Salas says.

“There is a good share of what we call ‘man with an ax’ images,” Salas explains in describing rural scenes of people clearing the land as part of the state’s expansion efforts. “But art can be a vehicle for all emotions. A landscape is a metaphor, an idea. We put meaning on the land. We give it its role. We worked hard to give viewers expansive experiences.”

The exhibit also stretches boundaries of media with the incorporation of clothing, including a Native American tunic, a Harley Davidson black leather jacket, and even a blue corduroy coat that once belonged to a Future Farmers of America member. All of these help support the exhibit’s emotional underpinnings.

The exhibit ends with a 2017 photograph by Milwaukee photographer Asher Imtiaz of several Yazidi girls watching a fireworks display, a clear collision of an American tradition with the newly emerging immigrant groups, this one from Kurdistan. Both elements together represent the continued evolution, blended with tradition, that will help America move forward, Salas says.

“As Walt Whitman once said of our country, ‘I am large, I contain multitudes,’” the curator adds, “and this very much elevates the American experience.”

“The American Landscape: Beyond the Horizon” runs through July 19, 2026, at the Museum of Wisconsin Art, 205 Veterans Ave., West Bend. For more information, visit wisconsinart.org.