

# The Merging of Sport, Art, and Conservation in Late Nineteenth-Century America

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During the latter half of the nineteenth century, American “sportsmen,” those who hunted and fished for pleasure, rather than commerce or necessity, began to emerge as a “special interest” group. For this minority, who looked to the British Isles for their example, “correct” hunting and fishing became, increasingly, a chief means of distinguishing the “gentlemen” in an America replete with Philistinism and commercialism. Possessing a “code” of behaviour that defined all the do’s and don’ts in the field, a “true sportsman” had an appreciation of the quarry and its habitat, *and* a commitment to the perpetuation of both. This paper examines how art helped to enhance, and extend, what I term the “code of the sportsman,” including its implicit commitment to conservation. Art relating to both hunting and fishing will be emphasized.

Through an analysis of twenty (20) illustrations, mainly drawings and paintings, the writer identifies several themes about the sporting life that this art work reveals. The first of these themes is that sportsmen were conscious of being part of an elite group; invariably, they thought of themselves as members of the upper classes. A related idea is that gentlemen-sportsmen appreciated the “beauties of nature” and were not supposed to be simply interested in capturing the quarry.

Another theme of sporting art was that hunting and fishing encouraged certain important skills, and built up stamina and how one practised “field sports” supposedly revealed one’s character. Breaking the code of the sportsman by shooting ducks on the water or grouse on the ground was the manifestation of a character flaw akin to “backsliding” by devout Christians.

Other themes in hunting and fishing art from this period are what I call “instructional art;” attacks on commercial, or “market,” hunters and fishermen; the commemoration of vanished species, Particularly the bison; and the appreciation of new and/ or rare species. Regardless of the medium involved, art works of the late nineteenth-century reveal the value, practices, and objectives of sportsmen and allow us a clearer vision back into their world