

### SESSION 3.3: READ: “SPIRIT OF THE PIONEERS” PANEL (FRIEZE)

Read this excerpt “The Scout and Buffalo Bill” about the sculptor Lee Lawrie in Lincoln and the discussion about Buffalo Bill.

“Spirit of the Pioneers” panel by Lee Lawrie is located immediately over the North entrance. More than an inventory of Nebraska imagery, the panel is a carefully composed selection of images, calculated to convey a strong sense of place. Lawrie fixed the geographic location by reference to the historically important position of Nebraska on the famous Oregon Trail. A pioneer family trudges across the open prairie with Conestoga wagon, oxen, dog and scout; traveling left to right above the north facade of the Capitol, their westward direction is unmistakable.

The imagery and detail also refer to regions beyond Nebraska. The entire panel represents movement from one region to another, and these small details contribute to an understanding of that movement. These details provide a sense of inter-regional movement.

The inscription over the main entrance of the Capitol was inspired by Alexander’s father, who had taught him, “The Salvation of the State is Watchfulness of the Citizen.” Watchfulness, and our responsibility as citizens to work for a more noble life guided Alexander’s thoughts.

#### The Scout and Buffalo Bill

On July 9, 1924, Lee Lawrie was guest at a dinner at the Lincoln Country Club. Although he had been working on the sculpture for the Capitol for over four years by that time, this was his first visit to Lincoln and several citizens convened at the club to discuss his work. The major topic of conversation was his newly completed model for the Pioneer Panel. Of special interest was the identity of the scout. Lawrie later recalled that “when the suggestion of Buffalo Bill as the scout was discussed. . . I saw Dr. Alexander shake his head in disapproval, but most of them liked the idea, and although it isn’t a portrait, the suggestion of Buffalo Bill was kept.”

Alexander may have believed Buffalo Bill Cody too disreputable a character for inclusion in an important panel on the new Capitol. Cody, newly elected to the Nebraska Legislature in 1872, deserted that office without even taking his seat when Ned Buntline dangled promises of the bright lights and cheering crowds of the Chicago stage before him! In any case, other citizens at the country club that night did believe Buffalo Bill to be an important Nebraskan, and Lawrie, acquainted with the famous scout from the Columbian Exposition, shared their opinion. Regardless of Alexander’s possible objections, it was fitting that Buffalo Bill be included in the Pioneer Panel, for he was much more than a former Nebraska scout.

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Buffalo Bill is exactly centered in the panel, his hat in direct line with the vertical axis of the building. Instead of heading the procession, as might be expected of a scout, he remains apparently distracted by something to the rear. Whether looking back at the source of encroaching civilization with apprehension or looking toward the scene of his triumph as an entertainer, Cody’s eastward gaze and position midway between deciduous bush and cactus plant underscore his transitional role.

“A Pioneer Panel is a great opportunity, and I think I’m going to get something good. I’ve taken out the heavy drag that you and the others criticized in the smaller models, putting into it some of the buoyancy that Mrs. Hall wanted. Still, I’m keeping it grim enough to convey to the young the courage and determination that went into the making of the state, and remind them that their inheritance came perhaps none too easily.”

Source: Lawrie to Alexander, August 25, 1924, quoted in Lawrie, “The Nebraska Sculpture,” *Shelter: T-Square Club Journal* (October, 1931), 15.

Discuss as a class:

- What would you think if you were the artist being told that the scout should be Buffalo Bill? Would you just have it be a suggestion of Buffalo Bill instead of making it exact? Why or why not?
- Does it matter if the man on the horse is Buffalo Bill? Why or why not?
- Why is Buffalo Bill a symbol of the Midwest?
- Discuss if the words of Alexander (“The Salvation of the State is Watchfulness of the Citizen”) align with the symbolism and meaning of the frieze. Were they meant to?