

★★★ SPECIAL ISSUE: PAINTING THE NATIONAL PARKS ★★★

Previews of Works For Sale at Upcoming Shows

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WESTERN ART

COLLECTOR



Symbol of the West

National Bison Legacy Act officially makes the American bison the national mammal of the United States.



Dustin Van Wechel, *The Passersby*, 2012, oil on linen, 24 x 36". Courtesy the artist, and Donna L. Poulton and James L. Poulton.

On May 9, President Obama signed the National Bison Legacy Act into law, making the bison the official national mammal of the country. The bison joins an exclusive club that also includes the bald eagle, which is the official national symbol.

The bison once numbered in the millions, with territory from Alaska to Mexico and Nevada's Great Basin to the eastern Appalachian Mountains. The massive creatures, that can stand as tall as 6 feet and weigh up to 2,000 pounds, date back to prehistoric times, but they were

nearly wiped out by settlers who pushed West in the 1800s. The population collapse also severely impacted many Native American tribes that had lived in harmony with the animals for centuries. After nearly a century of hunting, pushing the animal to near extinction, the bison population did rebound thanks to private individuals working with tribes, states and the Department of the Interior. Today more 300,000 bison thrive around the continent, including 4,900 in Yellowstone National Park, the only place in the United States where bison

have continuously lived since prehistoric times.

After the announcement of the bison act, the Department of the Interior released a fact sheet that helps clear up one enduring question about the animal: bison or buffalo? Both can be used interchangeably, although in North America the scientific name is bison. Or, if you want to get really specific, its scientific name is *Bison bison bison*—its genus, species and subspecies all share the name.

The bison in artwork, particularly Western art, has endured almost as long as

settlers have known about the animal. Early artists, and art explorers, such as Karl Bodmer, George Catlin, Thomas Moran, Albert Bierstadt, Alfred Jacob Miller, and many others have painted the iconic creature. It was further mythologized as a subject matter with Charles M. Russell, William R. Leigh, Frederic Remington, and others. Even today the bison is a key figure in the artwork of the West, be it the Native American scenes of Howard Terpning, the pop imagery of Billy Schenck or the wildlife work of Dustin Van Wechel. 🦏