

# AMERICAN MUSEUM OF WESTERN ART

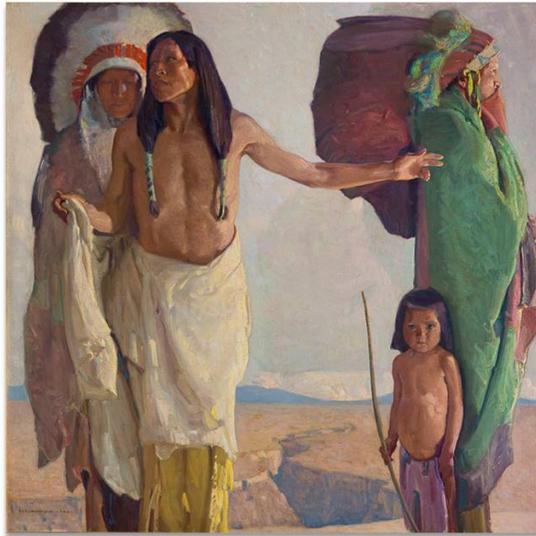
THE ANSCHUTZ COLLECTION

## American Museum of Western Art—The Anschutz Collection **Writing the West: Hidden Symbols**



### **Warm-Up: William Jacob Hays, *The Gathering of the Herds*, 1866:**

In this painting we are witness to a sea of life. Hays was a known documentarian, so we can trust the accuracy of the depiction of the massiveness of this herd. Yet, amidst all this life we are forced to deal with a lone buffalo skull. Its symbol cannot be denied: death. We know from history that the death of this herd was likely death by massacre, and the skull becomes even more poignant. Write a scene where the majority of the action, conflict, or characterization seems to be heading one way, but on account of one simple symbol—a house, a mirror, an empty bottle—is meant to be understood in another.



**Ernest L. Blumenschein, *The Peacemaker*, 1913:**

Make a list of possible symbols in this painting by Blumenschein. What force or forces are at work in the painting that helped us deduce its symbolic meaning? For this exercise, pick another painting in the museum and repeat this process of creating a list of symbols followed by thoughts and meditations about how the painting seen as a whole helped you locate and then make meaning from its hidden symbols.



**Valentin Walter Bromley, *Crow Indian Burial*, 1876:**

Let's use *Crow Indian Burial* to talk about the technique of applying hidden symbols to a painting's compositional line. Is there such thing as a western compositional line—horizon, river, storms, animals, mountain ranges? If so, can this be related to western syntax, a writing technique whose accompanying prompt guide is available online and at the front desk? Write a scene where all the subjects and objects of the compositional line double as hidden symbols.