

American Museum of Western Art – The Anschutz Collection

Writing the West: Season 6, March 2025

Western Wayfinding – No GPS, No Problem

There are many different types of wayfinding. Some methods are based on technology, others on night sky observances. We'll focus on wayfinding techniques rooted in the following relationships: humans and animals, humans and humans, and humans and cosmology.



Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait, *Trappers at Fault – Looking for the Trail*, 1852

In the Western frontier's "sea of grass" even a buffalo herd can be difficult to locate. As the sun sets these fur traders must find their way from this depression in the grass to fresh tracks. Reading animal signs is an ancient skill. Write a poem or story about what it's like to read animal signs correctly, or like in the painting, to misread them.

Daniel Boone became a folk hero by attempting multiple crossings over the Appalachian Mountains, becoming a land surveyor, and trailblazing paths that would eventually become roads for settlers. Along the way, *he* had guides. Lots of them. Whether from the red-shirted man in the painting who had Native allies in the Kentucky region, or by simply following Native trails hundreds of years old, Boone had human help to get where he needed to go. Describe a relationship of Boone's where he defers to others while pathfinding. Who are these people? Where is their legacy?



William Tylee Ranney, *Boone's First View of Kentucky*, 1849



George deForest Brush, *The Picture Writer's Story*, 1884

The cosmos is so big it cannot be conceptualized. It can only be imagined. Storytelling is a tool humans possess to teach one another our cosmological beliefs. These stories like the one being taught in the painting—perhaps of a cosmic battle—can be larger than life. Or they can be more precise, such as a dance and a song performed on a specific day that will appease the spirits of the rain. All people are in relationship with the cosmos. The only question is one of connection through ritual. Wayfinding amongst the cosmos can start on a hide painting and end up taking over a young hunter's destiny. Describe this cosmic interpretation from hide to elder and from elder to youth