

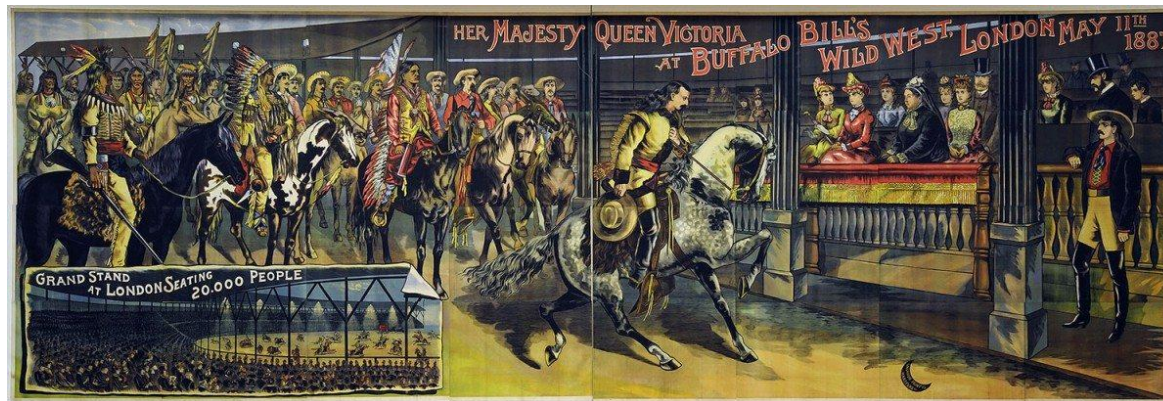
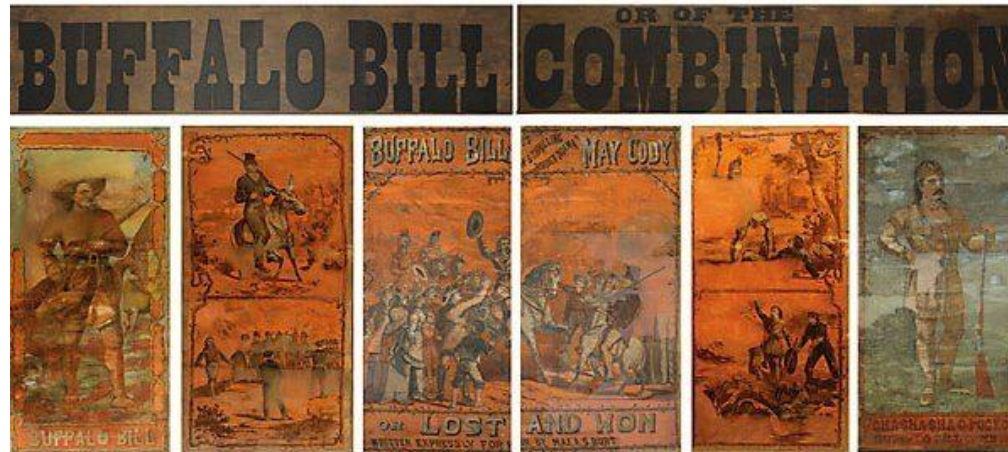
“Explorations”  
Nineteenth Century Studies Association Conference  
March 7-10, 2019, Kansas City, MO  
Travel to Present Research

**Panel Abstract:**

**Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Its Legacy**

William F. “Buffalo Bill” Cody parlayed his renown as a Western figure into a successful stage career and an extremely popular international theatrical exhibition from the 1870s through the first decade of the twentieth century. Buffalo Bill's Wild West, as it later was called, featured buffalo hunts, frontier stunts, reenactments of famous military battles, Native American performers, and sharpshooters. The show toured America and Europe, exploring popular themes associated with the West and naturalizing the region's mythologies, while also popularizing America's unique form of imperialism. While he was the headliner for the show, there were many others who helped to create and shape it, including artists, publicists, and performers.

The popularity of Buffalo Bill's Wild West had a direct impact on both popular and elite American culture. His explorations into the West, as well as the western genre, affected a wide range of forms of entertainment that were emerging or evolving at the end of the nineteenth century, such as dime store novels, visual art, theater, vaudeville, and early Western films. This session seeks to explore the ways in which Buffalo Bill's Wild West directly influenced popular forms of entertainment at the turn-of-the-century, as well as the way the show affected conceptions of the American West both at home or abroad. The three panelists each explore a different cultural form: posters and visual art, stage drama, and silent films. Together, they illustrate the broad and lasting impact of Cody's Wild West.



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**Paper Abstract:**

**Performing Nostalgia in Wood  
Type: Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild  
West Posters**

Buffalo Bill's Wild West pioneered American graphic design in several arenas. Through hundreds of posters, broadsides, brochures, programs, tickets, stationery, and other ephemera, Buffalo Bill Cody and his crafty marketing team created a corporate identity based on text and image for the Wild West during the years 1883 to 1917. Considering formal elements as well as technical developments, this paper examines two wood engraved posters from 1878 and 1888 in comparison to later works to demonstrate how technology and style merged to create the lasting image of the American West. Using period images, I consider how the physicality of the objects acted as a pre-performance, whetting the public's appetite in anticipation for the actual event. The works demonstrate how the show's advertising capitalized on nineteenth-century American tropes, which persisted into the twentieth century and still inform our ideas of a mythological West, as seen in 20<sup>th</sup> century films and even 21<sup>st</sup> century HBO series. A century later, it is estimated that there are between three hundred and four hundred extant examples of distinct Buffalo Bill's Wild West poster designs.