

Charles Marion Russell

a biography



Charles Marion Russell, c. 1900, black and white photographic print, unidentified photographer, c. 1865–1957, Archives of American Art, aaa_charscrs_4343

During the harsh winter of 1886–1887, Russell worked on a ranch in central Montana's Judith Basin. The owner wrote a letter to the ranch foreman asking how the cattle had fared in the devastating conditions. The foreman responded by sending a watercolor Russell created called *Waiting for a Chinook* (a warm front). The sketch depicted a starving cow on the verge of collapsing in the snow while hungry wolves looked on, and it accurately summed up many Montana residents' experience that winter. The ranch owner, impressed by the postcard, showed it to acquaintances and it was displayed in a shop window in Helena. The artwork on view captured a familiar and fresh memory for locals and brought attention to Russell, who began to receive commissions at a steady rate. He also started to work with oil paint around this time and used small models made out of beeswax to help him better understand the forms he wanted to compose on canvases.

In 1888 Russell rode into Alberta, Canada, to live near three branches of the Blackfoot Tribe (Blackfoot, Blood, and Piegan) for six months. He became close with many tribe members, and they gave him the name Ah-Wah-Cous (antelope). Russell observed their customs and documented them accurately in his sketches,



Charles Marion Russell, *Waiting for a Chinook* (to Lewis E. Kaufman, 1887), watercolor on paper, 3 x 4 1/2 in., Montana Stockgrowers Association, Photograph courtesy the Montana Historical Society, Helena

illustrations, and paintings. He also learned to communicate with them using their unique sign language. The artist's rare experience with American Indians allowed him to portray them with empathy, respect, and special attention to anthropological details.

When Russell returned to Montana, he found the Judith Basin area filled with homesteaders—the signs of Westward expansion creeping up on the last open ranges. He moved to the Milk River area in search of open land, but gave up, moving to Great Falls to become an artist full-time. Russell lacked a business sense and did not know how to promote his work, which resulted in working on small local commissions barely making enough money to live. In 1895 he met and, eleven months later, married Nancy Cooper, who served as his business manager and secured regular commissions to sustain the couple.

They traveled to St. Louis in 1903 to try to get his paintings exhibited at the World's Fair, then continued on to New York, where the two met with editors, publishers, and artists. Russell shared a studio with other illustrators where he learned skills and experimented with tools that he had not been exposed to as a self-taught artist. Russell always said, "Nature has been my teacher; I'll leave it to you whether she was a good one or not." However, much of his artistic development and prolific later career could be attributed to artists he met such as John Marchand (1875–1921) and Will Crawford (1869–1944).

Russell started to create epic-size paintings by 1911 when the state of Montana commissioned him to paint an artwork for the capitol building—*Lewis and Clark Meeting the Flatheads at Ross' Hole*. With the help of Nancy's management, his large-scale artworks sometimes brought in more than \$10,000, which he called "dead-man's prices." In 1920, his health began to fail, and Russell died of a heart attack on October 24, 1926, at his home in Great Falls.



Charles Marion Russell, *Lewis and Clark Meeting Indians at Ross' Hole*, 1912, oil on canvas, 144 x 300 in., Montana State Capitol Building, Helena Photograph courtesy of the Montana Historical Society, Helena (X1912.06.01)

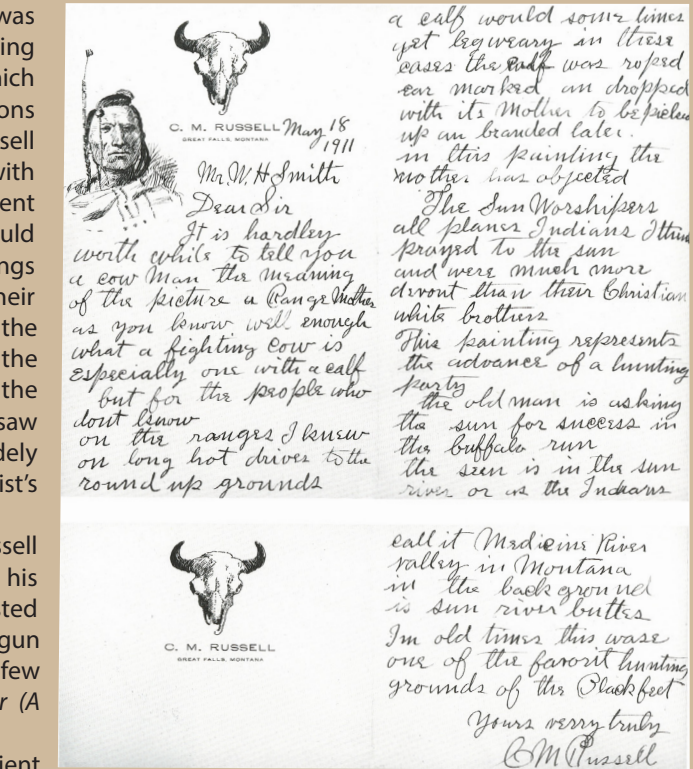
Charles Marion Russell's art was in high demand due to growing popular interest in the West, which drove magazines to seek illustrations by "Western artists." In 1908 Russell signed a five year contract with Brown & Bigelow, a prominent calendar company. Russell would send in a selection of paintings and Brown & Bigelow picked their favorites. They paid \$500 for the exclusive rights to reproduce the images, but Russell could keep the originals and sell them as he saw fit. The publications were widely circulated and increased the artist's exposure.

The company typically gave Russell complete freedom to choose his own subject matter, but requested a "cattle" piece and possibly a "gun fight." He obliged and created a few scenes including *"Range Mother (A Serious Predicament)"*.

Open ranges provided sufficient space to sustain massive herds of cattle, but the absence of fences made it difficult to locate and claim ownership of individual animals. In order to avoid this, ranchers branded their property with unique designs that were recorded in books published by livestock associations. Russell understood this well as he was a "rep" or an employee who rode from camp to camp rounding up calves and stray cattle for branding. He found the job enjoyable because it was more social than the lonely life of a cowboy, but in *Range Mother (A Serious Predicament)* he documents some of the perils of the work. In a 1911 letter to Mr. W. Hinkle Smith, the businessman who owned the painting, Russell described the subject:

It is hardley worth while to tell you a cow man the meaning of the picture a Range Mother as you know well enough what a fighting cow is especially one with a calf but for the people who don't know on the ranges I knew on long hot drives to the round up grounds a calf would some times get leg weary in these cases the calf was roped ear marked an dropped with its Mother to be picked up an branded later. In this painting the mother has objected. [sic]

The exciting and dangerous action scene is one that helped establish Russell's reputation as the "cowboy artist" who accurately recorded the vanishing spirit of the West on canvases.



Letter to Mr. W.H. Smith, May 18, 1911, Buffalo Bill Historical Center

Discussion Questions

Why is Charles Marion Russell known as the "Cowboy Artist?"



Which tells a story better – words or illustrations? Why?

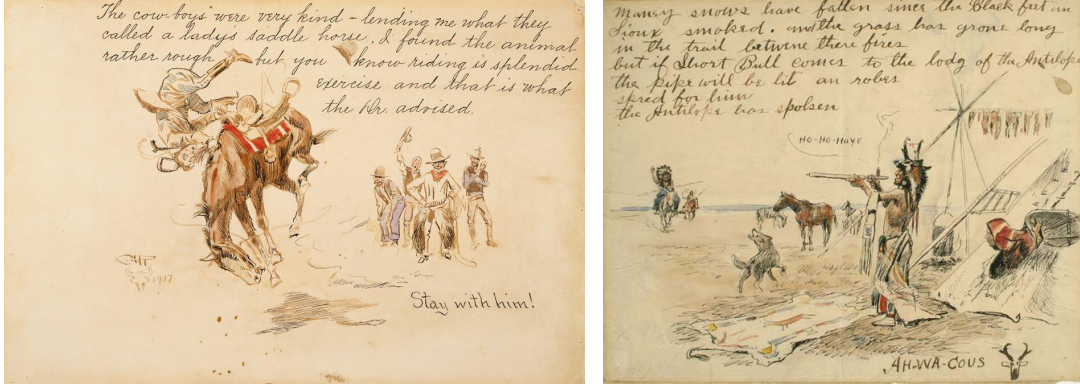


Why do you think Russell painted so many versions of the "Buffalo Hunt" though he never saw one?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.

“Paper Talk”

Charles Marion Russell could paint a picture with his words almost as well as he could with a paintbrush. His letters, which combine sketches and illustrations with sentimental tales of the West and life as an artist, give scholars a fascinating and multidimensional view into the world of the artist.



While drawing and painting came relatively easy for Russell, writing, which he called "paper talk," was a challenge. He spent most of his schooling years either being punished for not paying attention or failing to answer teachers correctly. When he wasn't being disciplined, Russell was ignored, so he struggled with writing for many years. He once wrote, "You wont have to go far in this letter to find that writing is no pass time with me it's WORK." [sic] He often sent pictures in place of letters and on one occasion, in order to announce a visit home, he sent his family a drawing of a cowboy entering his childhood house, with no written explanation.

Because he traveled frequently, Russell found that he needed more than just pictures to stay in touch with friends from small towns in Montana that he met while working as a cowboy. He came to realize that grammar, punctuation, and proper spelling did not impede on his ability to tell a good story or get his point across. Over time, and as his artistic fame rose, Russell's confidence in his writing abilities increased and his letters grew in length. The artist spent hours on each letter, sometimes writing a first draft before laboriously copying and illustrating a final version. His efforts were much appreciated by the recipients of these works of art, and the letters are prized for their humor, down-to-earth-philosophy, and nostalgic tales of the past. Russell's unique writing style contributed to a genre today known as "cowboy vernacular."

IMAGES (ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT): Charles Marion Russell, *Stay with Him*, 1907, watercolor and ink on paper, 7 1/2 x 11 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 1961.291; Charles Marion Russell, *Many Snows Have Fallen... (Letter from Ah-Wah-Cous (Charles Russell) to Short Bull)*, c. 1909 - 1910, watercolor, pen and ink on paper, 8 x 10 in., Sid Richardson Museum, Fort Worth, TX

Wax, Plaster & Bronze



Charles Marion Russell, *Smoking Up*, 1904, bronze, 12 x 7 1/4 x 4 1/2 in., Frederic G. and Ginger K. Renner Collection, Paradise Valley, Arizona

The figures in Russell's sculptures are often similar to those featured in his paintings, showing the relationship that the artist had between his media. Although Russell preferred working in wax or plaster, with bronze he achieved more detail and continued to create large-scale and long-lasting sculptures.

Acquaintances recall that Charles Marion Russell began modeling at a very young age using clay he dug up from the earth, or collected scraps of wax, to create miniature horses and other animals. He practiced modeling and constantly kept his hands busy. His nephew Austin Russell recalled, "In his pants pocket Charlie always had a lump of beeswax, mottled black from handling and while he was talking he would take it out and work it soft and model a pig or a buffalo or what not, and look at it in an inquiring way and then mash it out with his thumb and make something else."

Observing animals helped Russell improve his accuracy and he developed the talent of modeling perfectly accurate bears and other figures without even looking at his hands. He was so confident in his sculptural abilities that he used plaster and clay in place of live models. A family member recalled that he "used to keep a little hunk of plasticene on his painting stand, and when he'd get stuck on the painting of a face, he'd model the head and then paint from the little clay model-holding it in the position that would light it as he wanted it."

Unfortunately, he was told that there was no market for his models, and Russell was advised to stick with painting. His wife and manager, Nancy, however, decided that bronze castings would result in higher income based on the success of other Western bronze sculptures she saw. In 1904 Russell made his first foray into the new technique with *Smoking Up*. A wild cowboy points a gun into the air while his horse rears back on its hind legs, creating a complex and dynamic pose.

The Great American Bison

The American bison, commonly known as the buffalo, once roamed the North American plains in massive herds. It is estimated that the population once numbered 20 to 30 million, but by the time that Charles Marion Russell moved to Montana they had been hunted to near-extinction and in 1889 there were only 1,091 left alive.

Although Russell never witnessed these enormous herds firsthand, he returned to the theme of the buffalo more than almost any other subject in his sketches, paintings, and sculptures. He was particularly fascinated by scenes of American Indians carrying out traditional buffalo hunts on horseback, and *Buffalo Hunt* illustrates an early example this. The colors are relatively muted and the buffalo seem two-dimensional because they are all facing in the same direction. As Russell honed his painting skills, he added more detail and compositional variety. His palette also became much richer, emphasizing the vast horizon and open sky to produce a nostalgic idea of the West.

Russell held buffalo in high regard. To him the animal represented the very spirit of the open range areas of the United States that were quickly falling to modern technology and urban civilization. As railroads snaked towards the Pacific Ocean and automobiles drove into the hills of Montana, Russell became increasingly insistent upon his love for "unspoiled" land and created paintings in which buffalo dominate vast landscapes containing no signs of human life.



Charles Marion Russell (American, 1864–1926), *Buffalo Hunt*, 1902, watercolor on paper adhered to archival mat board adhered to particle board, 21 x 14 in., Gift of B. J. Birmingham, Joslyn Art Museum, 2009.56

Timeline

1860

1864 Charles Marion Russell is born on March 19 in St. Louis, Missouri

1870

1879 Attends Burlington College, New Jersey

1880

1880 Travels to Montana; works briefly at a sheep camp in Judith Basin

1881 Develops the nickname "Kid Russell"

1882 Works as a night wrangler; paints with watercolor for the first time

1885 Begins painting in oil

1890

1888 receives his first national exposure when *Harper's Weekly* publishes *Caught in the Act*; spends the summer with the Blackfoot Tribe in Alberta, Canada

1893 Abandons cowboy life; paints full-time; displays two artworks in Montana Pavilion at World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago

1897 Moves to Great Falls, Montana; illustrations published in Emerson Hough's *The Story of a Cowboy*

1900

1903 Travels to St. Louis; first one-man show at Noonan-Kocian Galleries

1908 Signs a contract with Brown & Bigelow

1910

1911 Receives commission to paint a mural at the Montana state capitol

1920



IMAGES (COUNTERCLOCKWISE): Charles Marion Russell, *Caught in the Act*, 1888, oil on canvas, 20 1/2 x 28 1/4 in., Mackay Collection, Montana Historical Society, Helena, X1952.03.03; Charles Marion Russell, *When the Plains Were His*, 1906, Private collection; *Portrait, Russell (Cowboy Artist)*, 1905, gelatin silver print, photograph by Byron Company (New York, NY) Museum of the City of New York, 91.1.1.9225

1926 Dies in Great Falls on October 24

BACKGROUND: Charles Marion Russell, Detail, *A Bad Hoss*, c. 1905, color lithograph of 1904 painting in private collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, 94502258



CHARLES MARION RUSSELL
American, 1864–1926

RANGE MOTHER (A SERIOUS PREDICAMENT)
1908, OIL ON CANVAS

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Gift of Foxley & Co., 2000.27