

# OBSERVATIONS

The best part of trying to raise \$1.1 million to purchase C.M. Russell's painting *The Exalted Ruler* is the personal contact and the stories related to the donations. Every day, people come to the Museum to donate an inch and often share their reasons with us.

For instance, one individual who had her left knee replaced, together with her orthopedic surgeon, donated the two inches covering the left knee of *The Exalted Ruler*; an ophthalmologist bought an eye of the elk; and the river was selected because of a special childhood experience. Every part of the painting holds a story. Gifts have been given in memory of a relative or friend, to honor a grandchild, for Father's Day, and to honor a 50th wedding anniversary. Some have given because they have said the painting must not leave Montana, others because of a great affection for Charlie Russell, and others because the painting has a special personal memory.

Businesses such as Penthouse Hair Design, First Bank and First Bank West are holding raffles and other activities to raise money while the College of Great Falls had a pay-a-fine day for inappropriate dress to raise funds. The Russell Postal Station in Great Falls raised \$250 and then (successfully) challenged the Main Post Office. Lumber Yard Supply employees pooled their funds for two square inches. The Retired Montana Police Officers Association selected one upper corner of the painting; not to be outdone, the Retired Great Falls Police Officers Association selected the other upper corner.

In addition, the in-kind support of businesses and individuals has been remarkable. Free print advertising in the Great Falls Tribune and specialty publications like the *Ag Almanac*, statewide billboards from Myhre Advertising, statewide broadcast time from the Montana Broadcasters Association, printed materials such as brochures, envelopes, certificates and limited edition art prints from Advanced Litho, space for displays from Holiday Village Mall and the State Fair, plus many other in-kind contributions have willingly been offered. Bob Scriver has created as his contribution a bronze of *The Exalted Ruler* to raise funds for the project. Sculptor Ott Jones has done a bronze of the grouse in the painting, and Jensen Jewelers has made a limited-edition elk tooth platinum ring. Governor Marc Racicot and Jack Russell have lent their names as Honorary Chairmen and Governor Racicot has done a television and radio advertisement.

Why is there such interest? The painting represents and is very much a part of the fabric of our broad community. It represents the enormous western landscape, the majesty of western wildlife and also the deep respect and friendship Russell often demonstrated. Russell gave this painting to his "brothers" in the Great Falls Elks Lodge simply because he was asked to do a painting for their new building, and also as acknowledgement of their gift to him of an honorary life membership. It is this spirit of giving we now see from so many individuals, families and businesses.



Lorne E. Render  
Executive Director

## Errata

In the last issue of *Russell's West* (Volume 2, No.1), "The Browning Firearms Collection" article (page 17), inaccurately listed the members of the Four B's, a well-known trap shooting team in Ogden, Utah, as "Bigelow, Browning, Browning and Browning." The actual members were: Gus L. Becker, A.P. Bigelow, John M. Browning and Matthew S. Browning.

# Russell's WEST

THE C.M. RUSSELL MUSEUM MAGAZINE

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# CHARLES M. RUSSELL, SCULPTOR

By Rick Stewart



"Smoking Up," bronze, 12 3/4" x 9 3/4" x 6 1/4", c. 1903, cast 1904.  
Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

In November 1936 James B. Rankin, who was preparing a biography and catalogue of the work of Charles M. Russell, wrote the famous American sculptor John Gutzon Borglum for an assessment of the Montana artist's work. Borglum replied that there were three artists "deserving of great place" in their portrayal of the American West: his brother Solon H. Borglum, Frederic Remington, and Charles M. Russell. "Of the three Russell unquestionably drew action as no one else," Borglum responded, but he was quick to add that the work of all three men exemplified different aspects of the frontier. "In Remington you feel the presence of law, order, creeping in, just on the edge of wild adventure. In Solon Borglum you feel always the inner soul . . . the poetry and grief belong to Solon's work; the life in all its freedom to Russell; to Remington — even the smell, a little, of the studio — artificial — has crept in; none of this in the other two." Like many of Russell's

contemporaries, Borglum was struck by an element of genius in the Montana artist's work, unfettered by the constraints of artistic convention. "I think him the least sophisticated and most naturally unspoiled by academic influences of any one of our few great artists," he wrote.<sup>1</sup>

Solon Borglum, Frederic Remington, and Charles M. Russell were all sculptors of the American West, but the differences in their work reflected, in part, their varied backgrounds and artistic training. Like Remington, Russell created his first sculptures in bronze after his career was already well underway, and both men succeeded with little or no formal training in sculpture. Indeed, Russell began to develop his natural abilities as a sculptor while in childhood.

"When I was a little kid girls ust to make wax flowers," Russell scrawled many years later in a note to his protégé, Joe De Yong. "I would steel wax and mak toy hosses green and red ones."<sup>2</sup> The artist's wife, Nancy Cooper Russell, recorded one amusing incident that had been

1. John Gutzon Borglum to James B. Rankin, November 20, 1936, James Brownlee Rankin papers, Montana Historical Society.

2. Charles M. Russell, conversational note to Joe De Yong, c. 1917, Flood Collection, C. M. Russell Museum.

related to her by family members. "While looking at pictures, he found a cut of an American eagle he liked but wanted him to have a rabbit in his claws for the little eagles that could not get out of the nest," she wrote. "When the model was finished he printed the words that were under the picture—'copyright reserved.' His mother said 'What's that, Charlie?' And Charlie said, 'Oh don't you know? That's his name.'"<sup>3</sup> Stories of Russell's prowess in modeling became more common once he arrived as a young man on the Montana frontier. William Korell, an early rancher in the Judith Basin, once recalled that Russell was more interested in making sculpture than doing work. "While we were sitting by the fire, he took from his pocket a ball of beeswax about the size of a goose-egg; after warming it, [he] moulded the head of a horse, then an elk's head," he wrote. "I remember he used to keep the fingernail on his right hand little finger longer than the rest and with this he would carve out the necessary lines on the animals he was modeling."<sup>4</sup>

By the time he married Nancy Cooper and gained a measure of fame as Montana's "Cowboy Artist,"

many of Russell's contemporaries considered him more gifted as a sculptor than in any other medium. Indeed, his natural ability as a sculptor aided his development as a painter. "By modeling one learns unconsciously to draw," the American sculptor William Ordway Partridge observed in a treatise on sculpture techniques published in 1895. "Modeling should be undertaken before drawing, as it is useful to the painter almost as to the sculptor."<sup>5</sup> Russell unwittingly followed this advice. Throughout his career, he made three-dimensional models to work out problems in his pictures. Joe De Yong noted that Russell often made "small, rough model groups in beeswax, modeling clay, or plasticene" which were set under direct light and shifted for the best arrangement of light and shadow.<sup>6</sup> Once the Russells began visiting New York, the artist's sculptural achievements were singled out for special praise. "He has a remarkable facility for seizing upon the instantaneous movement of animals in action and nailing it down, and he gets character in everything he touches," noted the artist's close friend, the painter Philip Goodwin. "He very often models his figures before painting them, and this, I believe, accounts for their exceptional vitality."<sup>7</sup>



"Buffalo Hunt," bronze, 10" x 19" x 12 3/4", c. 1905, cast 1905. Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

3. Nancy C. Russell, "Father's Reading Room," unpublished biographical typescript, undated, Helen and Homer Britzman Collection, Taylor Museum for Southwestern Studies, Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.

4. Quoted in Dan R. Conway, "A Child of the Frontier," unpublished biographical typescript, c. 1927. Montana Historical Society.

5. William Ordway Partridge, *The Technique of Sculpture* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1895), p. 55.

6. Joe De Yong, unpublished biographical fragment, undated, Flood Collection, C. M. Russell Museum.

7. Quoted in Conway, "A Child of the Frontier."

In fact, apart from his fame as an artist of cowboys and Indians, Russell was regarded as one of the finest wildlife artists of his day. Daniel Carter Beard, who first met Russell while he was editor of *Recreation*, an outdoor magazine, was stunned to see the artist casually model a skillful representation of an antelope during their conversation. "I think this side of Charles Russell has not been emphasized in the biographical sketches of him," Beard told James Rankin ten years after the artist's death. "His ability to model an animal like this from memory means more than skill; it means genius of a high order."<sup>8</sup>

Nancy Russell, who became an active manager and tireless champion of her husband's art, was among the first to realize the potential of his sculpture in bronze. In New York, friends had told them there was not an established market for the painted wax or plaster models, but bronzes were another story. During his initial visit to the city, Russell modeled *Smoking Up*, the first of his works to be cast in bronze. While it is likely the Russells visited Tiffany's on Fifth Avenue to view the bronze sculptures by Frederic Remington and others on display in the salesrooms there, the real catalyst for Russell's career as a sculptor in bronze occurred in Saint Louis. In 1904 the Russells attended the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, where an extraordinary amount of sculpture was on display. Covering more than twelve hundred acres with broad prospects more than a mile in length, the fair featured over a thousand outdoor sculptures dedicated to the theme of the Louisiana Purchase and westward expansion. Here Russell saw enlarged versions of western subjects by Solon Borglum, Remington, and many others. In the vast Art Palace (now the Saint Louis Art Museum), more than 350 works by 93 sculptors represented a full range of

styles and techniques. Many were small in scale, and many depicted western or wildlife subjects by nearly every noted sculptor of the era. The display included a special section of small bronzes of animals by Edward Kemeys, who was then regarded as the premier American sculptor of wildlife. Although Russell quickly succeeded Kemeys in this respect, the initial impetus for the artist's small-scale bronzes of wildlife and other subjects which were to follow derived in part from the Russells' experiences at the Exposition.<sup>9</sup>

From 1904 until Russell's death in October 1926, bronze sculpture played an important role in his artistic oeuvre. While he created the models for approximately 46 subjects in his lifetime, his wife oversaw the process of the casting, exhibition, and sale of the bronzes—a role that would continue until her own death in May 1940. Initially, Russell created ambitious compositions, such as *The Buffalo Hunt*, *Counting Coup*, or *The Scalp Dance*, that rivaled his paintings for their fineness of detail. Although these were consigned to Tiffany's, sales were disappointingly few and far between. However, things improved when Russell began modeling smaller and more refined subjects that included wildlife. His new compositions were less detailed, but no less powerful as sculpture. Some of these sculptures were also decorative and utilitarian, modeled in the form of ash trays or bookends. Throughout the period Russell's sculpture was at the cutting edge of developments in the field of American sculpture in general. The National Sculpture Society, fresh from its triumph at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, had urged American sculptors to produce small, more inexpensive bronzes that would appeal to a broader audience. At the same time, works that emphasized utility and function were encouraged. Russell's bronzes were very much a part of this trend, and his works found enthusiastic buyers. During the Russells' lifetimes, the most significant collections of the artist's bronzes were amassed by Philip G. Cole, George D. Sack, and Nancy Russell herself. Cole's collection is now at the Gilcrease Museum, while Sack's important collection has been largely dispersed. The complete set of bronzes that belonged to Nancy Russell is now at the Amon Carter Museum.

In the intervening half century following the dispersal of Nancy Russell's estate, posthumous casting activity has more than quadrupled the number


8. Daniel Carter Beard to James B. Rankin, November 10, 1936, Rankin papers, Montana Historical Society.

9. Information on the art exhibits can be found in the *Official Catalogue of Exhibits, Department of Art, Universal Exposition of 1904* (Saint Louis: Official Catalogue Company, 1904), copy in the Missouri Historical Society.

"He has a remarkable facility for seizing upon the instantaneous movement of animals in action and nailing it down..."

of bronzes attributed to Russell's hand. Despite his well-deserved fame in the annals of American art, there have been no extended studies of Russell's contribution as a sculptor. Moreover, there is misunderstanding and confusion regarding Russell's actual work in bronze. In some respects, this lack of knowledge also extends to the artist's own contemporaries. Few of the American sculptors at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition have been accorded serious study. To remedy this, the Amon Carter Museum is publishing *Charles M. Russell, Sculptor*, a 400-page study accompanied by more than 750 illustrations, due out in November 1994. The book is based in part on an examination of the complete collection of the bronzes in the Museum's collection that were originally part of the Nancy Russell estate. The book traces the artist's overall career as a sculptor, comparing his works with those produced by his contemporaries. Many of Russell's notable models in painted wax and plaster will be examined, and Nancy Russell's own collection of more than 110 of these works — which she kept in glass cases at her home, "Trail's End" in Pasadena — have been completely reconstructed. In addition, Russell's lifetime subjects in bronze are arranged chronologically and presented in a catalogue section comprising approximately 250 pages, accompanied by illustrations showing multiple views, inscriptions, and

comparative details. To address the issue of questionable castings, *Charles M. Russell, Sculptor* includes an appendix that identifies these subjects, the majority of which were cast from the painted wax and plaster models in the Nancy Russell estate.

"For thirty years, I saw every picture from the blank canvas to the finished product and Charlie talked to me about each subject as he worked on it and the bronzes also," Nancy Russell wrote James Rankin less than four years before her death. "To have a fine book of these things will be a great service to the public for generations to come. . . ."<sup>10</sup> Although nearly sixty years have passed since Mrs. Russell expressed her wishes, it is hoped that this study of Charles M. Russell's sculpture will serve as a proper testament to her undying faith in her husband's art. 

*Rick Stewart is the curator at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. He is also the author of numerous publications, catalogs, and studies, including Charles M. Russell, Sculptor, published by the Amon Carter Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., and scheduled for release just this month. The book, which contains 400 pages and 764 illustrations, is available in The Museum Shop.*



"Mountain Mother," bronze, 6 3/4" x 14 1/8" x 3 3/4", c. 1924, cast 1928. Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

10. Nancy C. Russell to James B. Rankin, December 1, 1936, Rankin papers, Montana Historical Society.