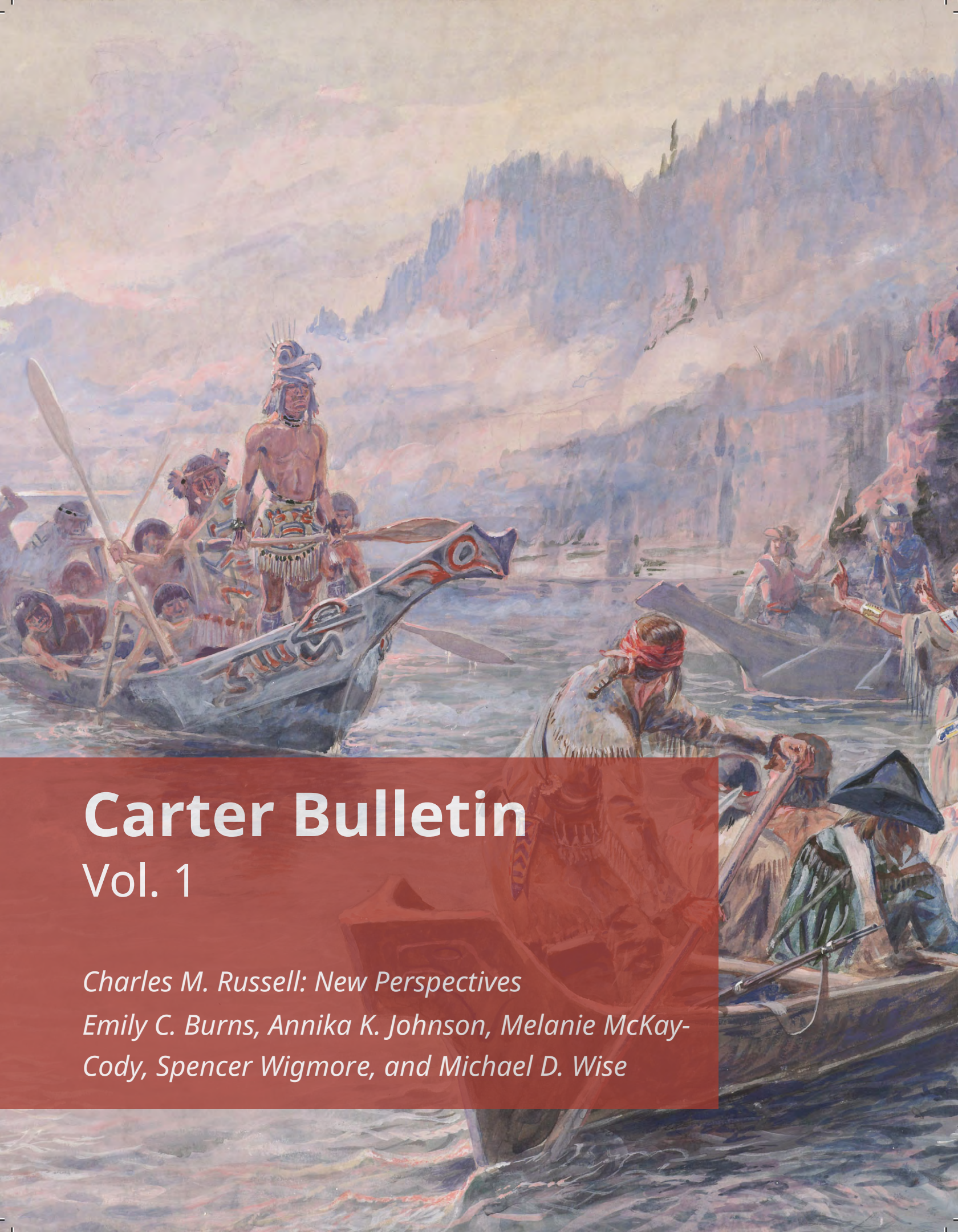

Carter Bulletin

Vol. 1

Charles M. Russell: New Perspectives

Emily C. Burns, Annika K. Johnson, Melanie McKay-Cody, Spencer Wigmore, and Michael D. Wise

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Contents

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AMON CARTER MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, FORT WORTH,
TEXAS

Foreword

Scott Wilcox

The *Carter Bulletin* underscores the Amon Carter Museum of American Art's commitment to knowledge creation through independent scholarship relating to the Museum's collection. This new initiative is rooted in the Carter's history, an institution that has long enlisted both young and established scholars writing on new topics related to American art.

This inaugural volume manifests a return to that impetus, to use our remarkable collection to inspire new scholarship and critical perspectives independent of any exhibition. And no artist is more appropriate for this first issue than Charles Marion Russell (1864–1926), the artist whose work defines in large measure the foundational collection at the Museum. Amon G. Carter Sr., the Museum's namesake, amassed an in-depth collection of paintings, sculpture, and works on paper by both Russell and Frederic Remington, making the Museum a prime resource for any study of their mythologizing of the American West. That romantic vision, however, has been challenged by the real experiences of Indigenous communities who vied for power on the frontier. The essays contained in these pages consider that gap between romanticism and reality with fresh perspectives toward making Russell a fully realized artist.

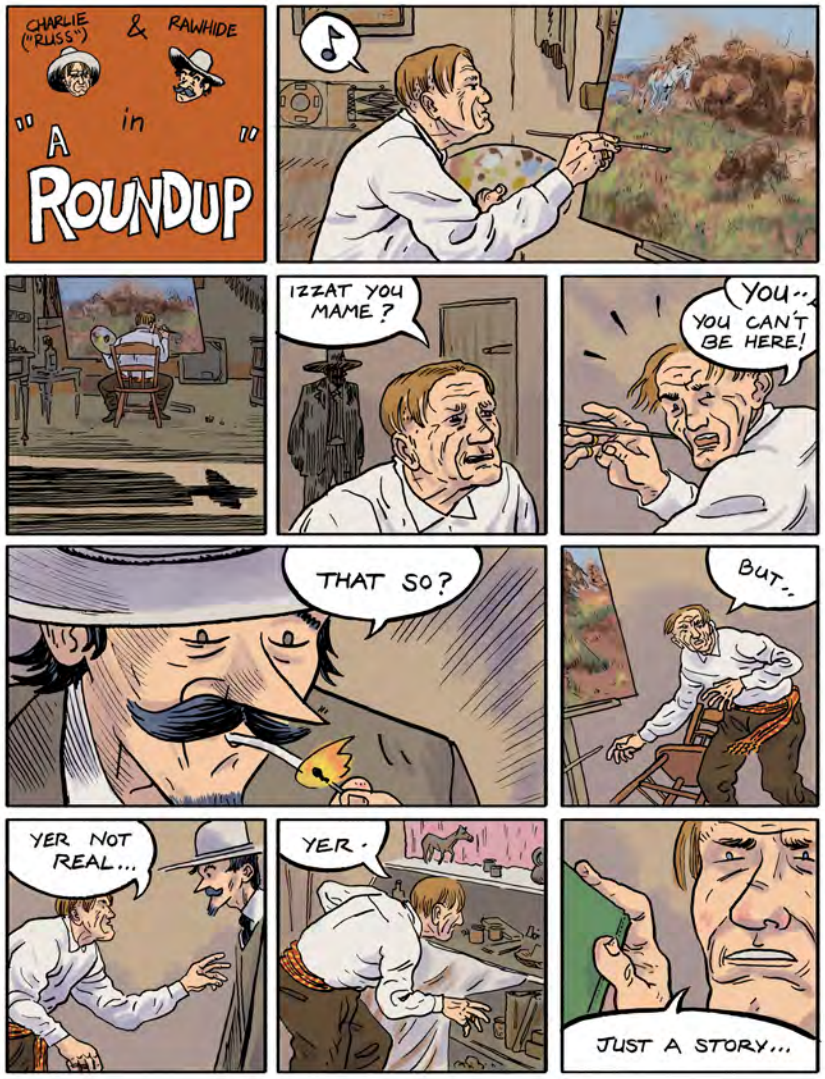
Andrew Eschelbacher, Director of Collections and Exhibitions at the Carter, developed the idea for this series of occasional digital journals as he realized that so much of the Museum's research value attracts visitors, fellows, and scholars to Fort Worth every year. Additionally, the Carter operates an art study room that allows access to all the Museum's works on paper, including photographs, to any visitor. All these resources generate interpretative opportunities to explore a familiar subject through new lenses of understanding. This newly conceived journal holds as its main principle that insight into our collective history should be open to everyone, enabling diverse voices to be heard, challenged, and expanded.

Scott Wilcox
Interim Director and Chief Operating Officer, Amon Carter Museum of American Art

A Roundup

Ian Sampson, Cartoonist, Printmaker, and Interdisciplinary Educator, West Virginia University

Panel 1/2


CHARLIE ("RUSS")
&
RAWHIDE
"A in"
ROUNDUP
IZZAT YOU MAME?
YOU... YOU CAN'T BE HERE!
THAT SO?
BUT...
YER NOT REAL...
YER.
JUST A STORY...

A Roundup

Panel 2/2


Rawhide Rawlins Stories
I MADE YOU UP!
GUESS I'LL FIT RIGHT IN THEN
NOW LISTEN HERE YOU
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WE OUGHTA TALK ABOUT -
WHAT YER LEAVIN BEHIND

Charles M. Russell: New Perspectives

Spencer Wigmore, Patrick and Aimee Butler Associate Curator of American Paintings, Minneapolis Institute of Art

In 1912, on a warm spring day in Great Falls, Montana, Charles Russell experienced a moment of crisis. According to the author Frank Bird Linderman, who was present at the scene, Russell had been painting quietly for several hours in his log cabin studio (fig. 1.1), working on a commission for the Montana Legislature. After a time, the two men heard a noise from outside: the clanging blows of a laborer's pickaxe. With this, Russell stopped painting. "Things ain't fair by a damn sight," he muttered, rolling a cigarette. "That poor devil out there in the hot sun with the sweat runnin' down his back can't save as much as I'm gettin' for this picture in his whole lifetime." Mulling over this inequity, Russell reflected on his own work: "Here I am sittin' in the shade with an electric fan blowin' on my neck gettin' five thousand dollars for this thing. An' I didn't make the canvas, an' I didn't make the paint, an' I didn't make the brushes. I didn't make a damn thing I'm usin' to make that money with. I just bought 'em with money I made by usin' stuff that other men made for wages—an' damn poor wages, too." He became increasingly upset. "By God," he exclaimed, "that man out there ought to hate me. I wouldn't blame him a damn bit if he walked in here an' killed me with his pick." Troubled, he sat silently. Eventually, his mood softened. "But I plumb had to paint," he mused. "I'd have been dead long ago if I couldn't have painted. An' that's sure as hell." He then began to relax, and a moment later, he returned to work.[1]

Figure 1-1 Unknown, Charles M. Russell and Nancy C. Russell's Montana home, ca. 1903, digital positive of a gelatin silver negative, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.256.7a

Linderman's account offers a striking picture of Russell as he navigates a crisis of conscience. Few of Russell's contemporaries ever commented on the wages of those who made art supplies, so his remarks on the topic are compelling. But Russell does not pursue this point any further; instead, he retreats inward, searching for an explanation that will alleviate his discomfort. Even though Linderman highlights Russell's sympathy

toward wage laborers, inequality isn't really the point; the purpose of his story is to remind readers of the salvational importance of Russell's creativity. Russell had an innate need to make art. He *had* to paint. Without art, he would have fallen prey to his own demons "sure as hell." Read in this light, Linderman's account harbors an argument for how to properly interpret Russell: To truly understand Russell's art and how it was made, one must understand what art meant to Russell. If his commercial art supplies, his custom-built log-cabin studio, or the high prices that he obtained for his pictures invite fraught comparisons to certain forms of underpaid labor, Linderman suggests that we should not make much of this, because the artist's motivations are pure. Indeed, the laborer and his pickaxe are never mentioned again, and the story ends with Russell jokingly inviting his friend to finish the foreground of his picture. "Here," he tells Linderman, "grab a brush an' help me make this hay."[2]

I have to admit, I find stories like this unsatisfying. To be clear, I am not trying to imply that Russell should be viewed as a hypocrite just because he used certain types of art supplies or because he experienced commercial success. Nor am I interested in dismissing Russell as insincere in his moral commitments or in framing Linderman, one of the more insightful chroniclers of Russell's life, as a poor judge of his friend's character. I simply want to call attention to the interpretive maneuver that is taking place here, and to reflect on its implications. Creative intentions and inner motivations can be useful forms of historical evidence (to the extent that they can ever be truthfully reconstructed), and art clearly meant a great deal to Russell. But interpretations that focus only on these points can also function as an interpretive detour, as a means of avoiding a direct confrontation with the complex, difficult, and at times painful realities contained within the historical archive. In this case, they also culminate in a frustratingly tautological reading: Russell's art is meaningful because it was meaningful to Russell.

In its effort to valorize Russell's creative motivations, Linderman's tale also foreshadows a leitmotif of Russell scholarship, particularly when it comes to the artist's nostalgic portrayals of pre-reservation Plains Native American life. Over successive generations of writing on the artist, scholars have disagreed about how to best approach these works. This debate is too expansive to summarize here in depth, but one recurring thread stands out: While some have pointed to Russell's use of crude racial stereotypes in his work as evidence of his "patronizing contempt" for Indigenous peoples and "smug sense of superiority" toward minorities, a counter-reading has emerged that works to position Russell in a more positive light.[3] This reading centers on Russell's sincerity; on his apparent admiration, respect, and sympathy for dispossessed Native Americans; and on certain public remarks, personal anecdotes, and statements made in private correspondence. Read in this light, Russell's artworks are interpreted as *subversions* of harmful period stereotypes, or at least complications of them, with some even proposing that his paintings actually portray the West from an identifiably Native American point of view.[4] While this framework still leaves some room to acknowledge the presence of negative stereotypes and cultural misrepresentations in Russell's art, often with the exculpatory rationale that Russell was a "man of his times," it considers these elements secondary to Russell's own positive feelings about Native peoples.[5] In other words, what matters is that Russell cared deeply about Native Americans, and any interpretation of his art should keep this point in sight, even when confronted with overtly stereotyped imagery. In fact, some have gone so far as to suggest that the problem is not with Russell but with present-day audiences who are too easily offended to appreciate his views, a provocative claim that shows how culture-war grievances can inform this discussion.[6]

However, interpretations that give such outsize weight to Russell's alleged intentions fail to encompass the full complexity of his relationships and encounters with Native peoples, the evolution of these relationships over time, or the ways that he chose to characterize these relationships in his art. Over the course of his career, Russell refined a popular persona as a plainspoken, rough-and-tumble cowboy, someone who had rejected the comforts of upper-class urban society to pursue a lost era of open-range ranching

and pre-reservation life. In the course of this self-fashioning, Russell sought to associate himself with Plains Native American cultures. Through letters, public performances, press interviews, storytelling, and even sign language, he presented himself as someone who had been granted privileged access to Montana's Indigenous communities, particularly those that retained a strong generational connection to pre-reservation life. As one New York journalist put it, Russell "lived among Indians until they have looked upon him as a 'white brother,' and to him they have told many of their stories and legends, which the tourist might in vain attempt to gather."[7]

The problem, though, is that much of what Russell said about his early encounters with Plains Native Americans was not actually true. He frequently claimed that he had wintered with the Kainai tribe in Alberta in 1888, and that he had been invited to marry into the community.[8] However, Phil Weinard, Russell's traveling companion during the Alberta trip, maintained that the artist had made up the tale, and historian Hugh Dempsey subsequently pointed out that the tribal members whom Russell named as friends, particularly Medicine Whip and Sleeping Thunder, are absent from tribal rolls and oral histories.[9] Put simply, Russell's story is fiction. He exaggerated and embellished his biography to bolster his credibility as a witness of Indigenous life, and he went so far as to invent characters who aligned with this narrative.

Figure 1-2 Unknown, Charles M. Russell in Indian costume, ca. 1911, gelatin silver print, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.7651.129

Compounding matters, Russell freely appropriated Indigenous art and material culture. Through trade and gifts, he amassed a sizable collection of reservation-era Plains art, clothing, and regalia, which he displayed in his Great Falls studio and frequently used as props when painting. Family snapshots indicate that Russell regularly wore these garments and posed and performed in redface, often with friends and family (fig. 1.2). In addition to "playing Indian," as this practice has come to be known, he created facsimiles of Native American artworks, gave friends faux-Indian names, and wrote correspondence using a stereotyped vernacular.[10] In turn, his finished paintings and sculptures often portray Native-made items in historically anachronistic and culturally

misrepresentative settings, such as including items that were created on reservations in pre-reservation scenes, or presenting ceremonial items in ways that deviate from their culturally specific functions. On occasion, he also posed as an Indian in photographic studies for his own pictures, raising the question of whether his depictions of Native people involved an exoticizing form of projective self-portraiture (fig. 1.3). Is it really enough to contextualize these actions merely as well-intentioned expressions of sincere cultural appreciation? Russell biographer John Taliaferro offers a more cautioned reading, concluding that "grown men who darkened their faces, dressed up like braves, and struck cigar-store poses, as Charlie did regularly . . . were paying tribute more to the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon house party than that of a dignified and complex indigenous people."[11] As Taliaferro's reading suggests, even if Russell did mean well, this still seems an unsatisfying conclusion to repeatedly try to end on, and it may well be a painful one for many. The pictures still exist, after all, and they continue to occupy pride of place within museums, regardless of whether they offer a truthful accounting of the communities and cultures that they claim to represent.

Figure 1-3 Unknown, Charles M. Russell, ca. 1900–10, gelatin silver print, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.7473

Efforts to divine Russell's intentions also risk overlooking the significance of Russell's Native interlocutors as well as the visual and material cultures that they created. The Indigenous items that Russell collected, repurposed, represented, and misrepresented in his art are components of a rich and complex social life in reservation-era Montana. When Russell donned regalia from his collection or used a Native item as a prop for a painting, he was using something made by someone else, someone with their own inherited cultural traditions, their own creative agency, and their own sense of that object's purpose and significance. Yet the histories of these makers and their creations—their origins, their meanings, and the ways in which they circulated within turn-of-the-century Montana—have received comparatively little attention within scholarship on the artist, save for observations about tribal attribution and cultural function sourced

primarily from mid-twentieth-century Euro-American ethnographic literature. This is a missed opportunity.

Broadly construed, the Indigenous belongings that Russell collected and incorporated into his paintings evidence efforts by A'aninin (Gros Ventre), Apsáalooke (Crow), Nakoda (Assiniboine), Piikani (Blackfeet), Métis, and other Plains communities to maintain cultural continuity in the face of state-sanctioned dispossession, unequal markets, forced confinement, and frequently violent attempts at assimilation. They also evidence some of the strategies, both visual and commercial, that Indigenous makers used to represent themselves and their communities to curious outsiders such as Russell.[12] Might Russell's artworks retain recognizable traces of these strategies, even in the instances when he, whether knowingly or not, portrayed Indigenous life in culturally misrepresentative ways? In turn, might his works serve as a useful resource for recovering fragments of the lives, perspectives, and experiences of his Native counterparts who had been displaced and confined to reservations? In other words, can we read Russell's art in such a way that it enriches our understanding of the broader cross-cultural landscape of reservation-era Montana, as well as Russell's own place within it? Such questions are at the heart of this volume.

CARTER BULLETIN

In this inaugural issue of the *Carter Bulletin*, which represents a new publication initiative dedicated to advancing scholarship on the Carter's collection, four short essays as well as a serial cartoon offer a new assessment of Russell's life and work. Specifically, this project reframes Russell's creative practice as an attempt to craft a nostalgic, celebratory vision of the Old West from sources that evidence Indigenous efforts to navigate the harsh realities of Montana's colonization. In developing this framework, the essays that follow consider a range of topics, including Russell's collection of Indigenous art and material culture, his fascination with reservation-era beadwork, his portrayals of Plains Indian Sign Language, and his ambivalence toward the domestication of wildlife. Much like the aforementioned laborer's pickaxe, these subjects announce themselves in unexpected, sometimes jarring ways. They interrupt established narratives, prompting critical reflection on the mythologies and assumptions that burnish Russell's legacy. Yet in doing so, they make a case for the continued relevance of Russell's art as an object of study and appreciation.

The opening essay in this volume, by Dr. Annika K. Johnson, Stacy and Bruce Simon Curator of Native American Art at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, introduces this new lens by considering Russell's personal collection of Indigenous art and material culture, which he acquired over several decades and kept in his studio in Great Falls (fig. 1.4).[13] This collection, she stresses, sheds important light on how Russell's Indigenous counterparts chose to engage with the artist. Through a focused discussion of several belongings—including a capote presented to Russell by Buffalo Coat, a nêhiyaw (Cree) man who often visited Russell in Great Falls, and a shirt and leggings given to the artist by Big Bear, an A'aninin man at Fort Belknap—Johnson underscores how Native values of reciprocity and gift giving informed Russell's access to Native-made goods, though not necessarily how he chose to use or portray them. In developing her insights, Johnson also attends to notable gaps in Russell's collection, namely the absence of ceremonial belongings associated with manhood and warfare, which were typically not made available to outsiders via trade or gift giving. Russell was fascinated with such items, so he manufactured his own facsimiles as substitutes, including a fur-and-wool-wrapped wooden staff resembling a coup stick. In charting the paths that various belongings took on their way to Russell's possession, Johnson's essay reveals an instructive tension between how Russell chose to portray Native material cultures in his paintings and how he actually encountered and engaged with such items during the reservation era.

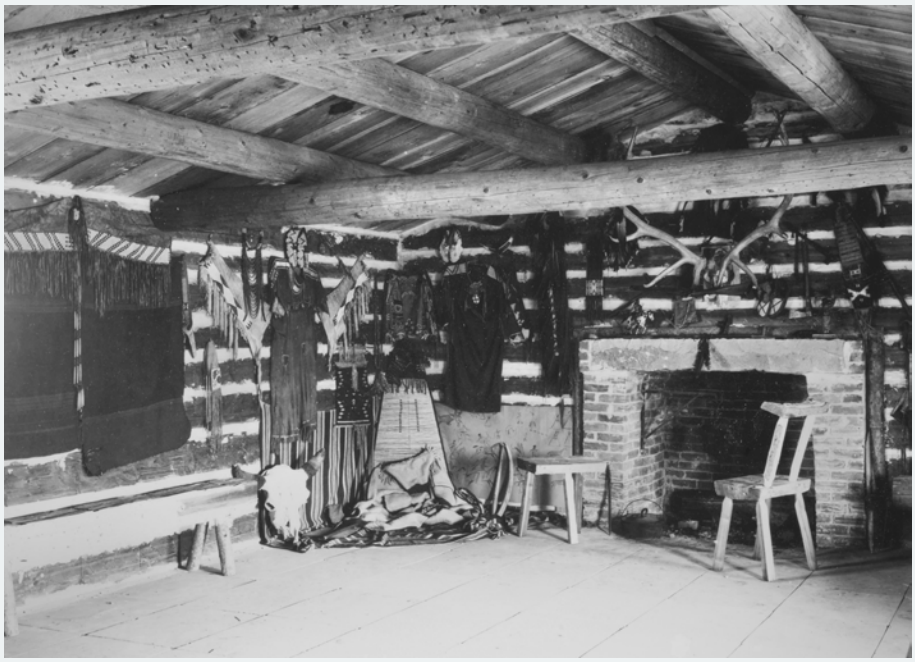


Figure 1-4 Unknown, Inside of Charles M. Russell's studio, ca. 1903–05, gelatin silver print, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.262.152

The subsequent essay, by Dr. Emily C. Burns, Charles Marion Russell Chair at the University of Oklahoma, continues this focus on Russell's collection. Burns centers on the Blackfeet dress that Russell portrayed in his well-known watercolor *Sun Worship in Montana*. She reminds us that the meaning of this dress, which was sourced from Russell's studio collection, is not limited to Russell's interest in the garment, his knowledge of it, or the ways that he incorporated it into his art. Rather, a substantive understanding of the dress must center on its significance within Blackfeet culture. Blackfeet concepts of relationality and reciprocity are inextricable components of the dress's form, materiality, and circulation, even when such concepts are distorted, suppressed, or marginalized by Euro-American modes of collecting and representation. In the course of her analysis, Burns calls attention to scholarly neglect of Josephine Wright, a Blackfeet woman who befriended the Russell family, worked for them, and posed for a number of Russell's paintings. She highlights Wright's significant role in shaping the artist's access to and knowledge of Blackfeet cultural traditions. Building on this discussion, she highlights certain unacknowledged affinities between Russell's pictorial style and the forms and patterns created by Native women makers, particularly beaders. She suggests that Russell may have drawn inspiration from Indigenous traditions of abstraction even as he disparaged emerging trends in European abstract art. Through her analysis of the manifold meanings contained within the dress, Burns emphasizes aspects of Russell's life and art that resist, counter, or disrupt his efforts to appropriate Indigenous objects and cultural traditions for his own ends, and she encourages other scholars to do the same.

The third essay, by Dr. Melanie McKay-Cody, Assistant Professor in the Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies at the University of Arizona, pivots from a consideration of material culture to a discussion of language. In his art, Russell frequently portrayed figures using Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL), but he was attentive to the limits of painting and sculpture as a medium for portraying PISL signs.[14] In a letter to William Tomkins, an early twentieth-century ethnographer and the author of *Universal Indian Sign Language of the Plains Indians of North America* (1926), Russell wrote: "I have tryed [*sic*] sometimes in my pictures to make Indians talk sign but it is

hard to make signs with out motion."[15] With such limits in mind, McKay-Cody considers Russell's portrayals of individual signs as well as their contextual usage. She notes that Russell's pictures are limited in their ability to capture the nuances of individual signs as well as the linguistic diversity of PISL within Plains communities. Nonetheless, Russell's work stands out within the genre of western American art for its attentiveness to the rich and diverse social life of sign language across the Native cultures of the Plains, including not only contexts of trade, warfare, and hunting but also cross-cultural communication and intergenerational storytelling.

The closing essay, by Dr. Michael D. Wise, Professor of History at the University of North Texas, examines Russell's place in early twentieth-century Montana through the lens of his anti-modern sentiments. Russell, as is widely known, had little affection for industrialized and urbanized modernity. He preferred forms of experience that retained a direct connection to the open range. He disliked the crowds, noise, and density of cities, lamented new forms of communication technology (with the exception of Hollywood films), and disdained automobiles.[16] Wise revisits Russell's anti-modern views, correlating them with an emerging technological transformation in U.S. society: the shift from equestrian "muscle power" to automotive power driven by fossil fuels.[17] Wise proposes that Russell's artworks valorize muscle power as a reassertion of a heroic, muscular vision of human-animal relationships, one in which masculinity is premised on a physical, often violent struggle for dominance and mastery of nature. This worldview, Wise notes, also included a pronounced distaste for pets and petkeeping, a form of relationality that short-circuited Russell's conception of manliness and self-sufficiency. By revisiting the role of human-animal encounters in Russell's art, Wise's essay invites us to revisit the broader technological and industrial transformations underway in turn-of-the-century Montana. Not only did such transformations dramatically reorganize human-nonhuman relationships, particularly in ways that worked to suppress Indigenous ways of living alongside animals, they also complicated Russell's own conception of how colonized lands should be enjoyed and appreciated.

Russell's legacy stems in large part from his renowned skills as a storyteller. Not only did he craft dramatic portrayals of the Old West in oil, watercolor, and bronze, but he was also accomplished in prose and in illustration. In recognition of Russell's multimedia sensibility, this inaugural issue of the *Carter Bulletin* is illustrated with a serial cartoon by Philadelphia artist Ian Sampson. Over the course of the volume, Sampson takes readers on a journey through Russell's art led by Rawhide Rawlins, one of Russell's best-known protagonists from his prose fiction. In a tale reminiscent of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Rawlins appears in Russell's studio to converse with the artist and discuss his legacy. Placed at the start of each essay, the cartoon panels draw inspiration from the arguments and ideas of the authors, giving new dimension and depth to Russell's engagement with histories of collecting, sign language, automobiles, and animals. Richly illustrated and thoughtfully narrated, Sampson's cartoons offer a lively and accessible entry point into the core ideas of this volume. In turn, Sampson underscores both the complexity of Russell's character and the challenge of distilling the artist's persona down to a straightforward narrative of heroic intentions or, conversely, total capitulation to stereotype and trope.

Presented together in this volume, these contributions are meant to spark renewed interest in Russell's art within art history. Rather than offering exhaustive and authoritative declarations, the authors present their findings as invitations for further inquiry. Together, they argue for the enduring relevance of Russell's art as an object of study.

However, such work harbors within it a larger and as yet unfulfilled commitment. While I believe firmly in the continued utility and importance of Russell's art, I have been able to study these pictures from a position of relative comfort. While at times I have struggled to relate to the boisterous world that Russell depicts, I have never felt

misrepresented by it. This is a significant difference, and one that museums must grapple with if they hope to make a robust case for Russell's enduring cultural prominence. Over successive generations, Russell scholarship has proceeded with minimal input from the Native communities whose cultures appear in his artworks, a criticism that could be directed at this volume as well. A richer, more fulsome, and more truthful understanding of Russell will require a sustained commitment to relationship building and an embrace of shared expertise and interpretive authority. As Johnson writes in her essay, "The next phase of research must adopt a more reciprocal approach. . . . This collaborative effort is vital for developing a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Russell's legacy and ensuring that the interpretations of his work are informed by those who are most connected to the stories he depicted." Inclusive and collaborative forms of scholarship, rooted in concerted efforts toward relationship building, will help institutions address key questions surrounding Russell's legacy. It is our hope that this volume will contribute to further conversation on these issues.

ENDNOTES

1. Frank Bird Linderman, *Recollections of Charley Russell*, ed. H. G. Merriam (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 99.
2. Linderman, *Recollections of Charley Russell*, 99.
3. J. Gray Sweeney, "Racism, Nationalism, and Nostalgia," in *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, ed. Kymberly N. Pinder (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2002), 160.
4. James P. Ronda, "Charlie Russell Discovers Lewis and Clark," in *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell: A Retrospective of Paintings and Sculpture*, ed. Joan Carpenter Troccoli (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 197–209. Similarly, Rick Stewart asserts that "in many of his finest watercolors man and nature are inseparable within a spiritual world that—according to the Native American way of seeing—must first be 'believed' in order to be 'seen.'" Rick Stewart, *Charles M. Russell Watercolors, 1887–1926* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 2015), 16.
5. Brian W. Dippie, "'What a Pair to Draw To': Charles M. Russell and the Art of Storytelling Art," in Troccoli, *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell*, 169.
6. Raphael James Cristy, *Charles M. Russell: The Storyteller's Art* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 63.
7. "Smart Set Lionizing a Cowboy Artist," *New York Press*, January 31, 1904.
8. See, for instance, "Cowboy Vividly Paints the Passing Life of the Plains," *New York Times*, March 19, 1911.
9. Hugh A. Dempsey, "Tracking C. M. Russell in Canada, 1888–1889," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 4–6. Dempsey did confirm that Russell had spent time with the family of Apskinas, a Kainai and Sarcee man who lived independently outside of the reserve, but the extent of his contacts with the Kainai in Alberta remains undocumented within Euro-American sources.
10. For a characteristic example, see Charles M. Russell to William Crawford, in *Charles M. Russell, Word Painter: Letters 1887–1926*, ed. Brian W. Dippie (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 124–25.
11. John Taliaferro, *Charles M. Russell: The Life and Legend of America's Cowboy Artist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 186. Taliaferro's assessment echoes the insights of Philip J. Deloria, who highlights how White Americans during the Gilded Age often played Indian to invent and temporarily inhabit an identity that seemed more authentic than what was available within urbanized society. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
12. In this sense, such belongings might be characterized as a form of what Mary Louise Pratt describes as "autoethnography," in which colonized subjects represent themselves—through art, writing, speech, or other forms of cultural communication—in ways that confront or engage with

how colonizers see them. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1992), 7.

13. The collection is now housed in the C. M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana.

14. Russell's portrayals of sign language are also discussed in detail in Mark Andrew White's insightful essay "'I Heap Savvy You': Charles M. Russell, Joe De Yong, and the Pictorial Value of Hand-Talk," in *Charlie Russell and Friends* (Denver: Petrie Institute of Western American Art, Denver Art Museum, 2010), 45–56. Additional useful context can be found in Brian Hochman, *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 35–72; and Kay Yandell, "The Moccasin Telegraph: Sign-Talk Autobiography and Pretty-shield, Medicine Woman of the Crows," *American Literature* 84, no. 3 (September 2012): 533–61.

15. Charles Russell to William Tomkins, May 27, 1926, in Dippie, *Charles M. Russell, Word Painter*, 392.

16. On Russell's love for Hollywood, see Alexander Nemerov, "Projecting the Future: Film and Race in the Art of Charles Russell," *American Art* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 70–89.

17. Elsewhere, Wise has documented how the emergence of the stock-raising industry profoundly reshaped cultural attitudes toward animals in Montana. Michael D. Wise, *Producing Predators: Wolves, Work, and Conquest in the Northern Rockies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

The Collector

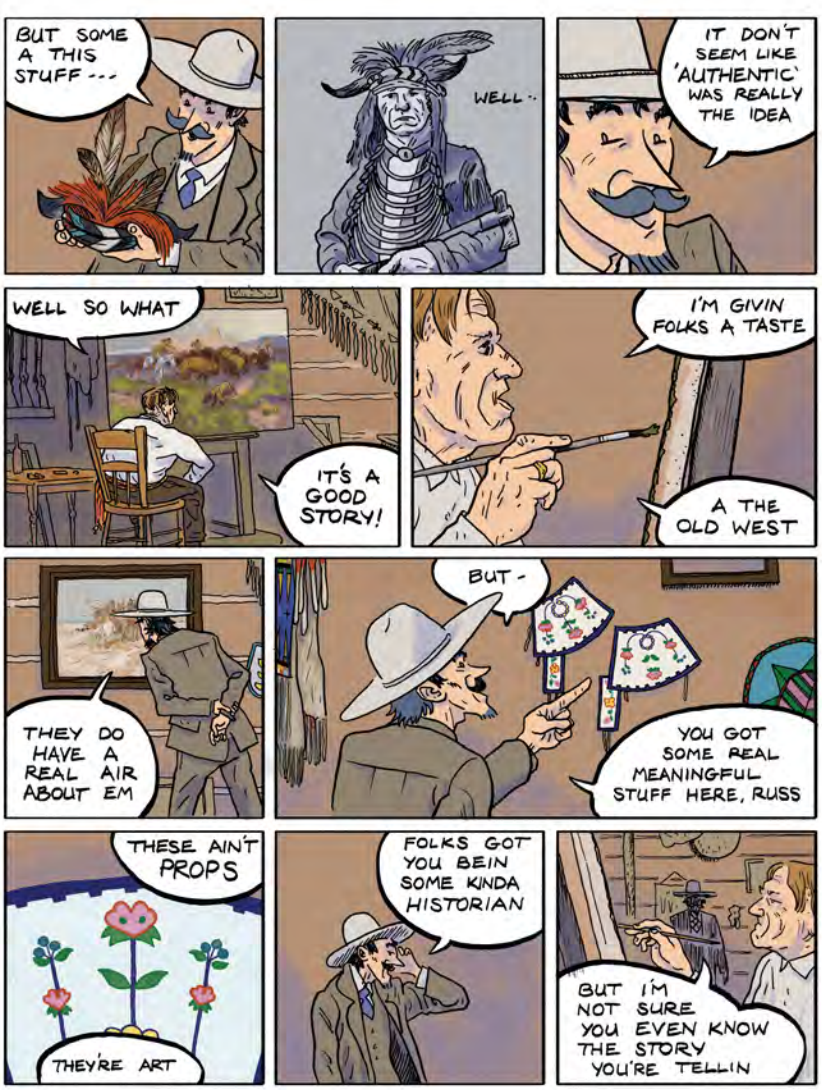
Ian Sampson, Cartoonist, Printmaker, and Interdisciplinary Educator, West Virginia University

Panel 1/2


CHARLIE ("RUSS") & RAWHIDE
in
"THE COLLECTOR"
QUITE A COLLECTION
BUT-- WHERE'D YOU GET ALL THIS STUFF?
HERE AND THERE
GIFTS, SOME OF THEM
HELPS ME SET THE STAGE--
MAKE THE PICTURES AUTHENTIC

The Collector

Panel 2/2


BUT SOME A THIS STUFF ---
WELL ..
IT DON'T SEEM LIKE 'AUTHENTIC' WAS REALLY THE IDEA
WELL SO WHAT
IT'S A GOOD STORY!
I'M GIVIN FOLKS A TASTE
A THE OLD WEST
THEY DO HAVE A REAL AIR ABOUT EM
BUT -
YOU GOT SOME REAL MEANINGFUL STUFF HERE, RUSS
THESE AIN'T PROPS
THEY'RE ART
FOLKS GOT YOU BEIN SOME KINDA HISTORIAN
BUT I'M NOT SURE YOU EVEN KNOW THE STORY YOU'RE TELLIN

I

Cultural Intersections in Charles M. Russell's Studio Collection

Annika K. Johnson, Stacy and Bruce Simon Curator of Native American Art, Joslyn Art Museum

Over the past decade, curators and historians of American art have begun to turn their attention to the rich history of Indigenous artistic production. As the field continues in this vital new direction, it is essential to highlight the contemporaneous works of both Native and non-Native creators. Toward this end, the collections of Indigenous art owned by such well-known painters as Karl Bodmer, George Catlin, Benjamin West, and N. C. Wyeth can provide invaluable starting points for deeper investigation, illumining previously unexamined signs of cross-cultural exchange.[1] Such artists' depictions of Indigenous subjects invite a critique often centered on representational accuracy that, while significant, oversimplifies the inherent tensions of the artist's role as a participant in cultural exchange.

In this context, Charles M. Russell, renowned for his depictions of the American West, emerges as a distinctive figure. Russell not only painted vivid scenes of Indigenous American life but also amassed a significant collection of Native American cultural belongings—an aspect of his artistic practice that has remained relatively unexamined by scholars. This collection presents a fascinating window into Russell's studio practice, providing important insights into his encounters with Native peoples, both in his artistic imagination and throughout his life in Montana.[2] It also provides us with a unique opportunity to move beyond the identification of stereotypes in Russell's art and to instead contextualize his career within the era of U.S. allotment and assimilation policies, which had a dramatic impact on Indigenous creative production. This essay aims to provide an introduction to Russell's collection of Native American cultural belongings, both those he acquired and those he created, while also suggesting avenues for future research into Russell's art, his studio practice, and his relationships with Indigenous peoples.

RUSSELL'S STUDIO COLLECTION

Numerous photographs illustrate how Russell filled his studio with Native American cultural belongings, cowboy gear, and objects reminiscent of the Old West (fig. 2.1). His "Indian curios," as they were called in Russell's time, range from men's fringed buckskin shirts and leggings, beaded dresses, gauntlets, and saddles to household items from camp life. After the artist's death in 1926, much of his studio collection remained intact; today, it forms part of the C. M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana. In 1927 Joe De Yong, Russell's protégé, created a detailed inventory of the artist's collection that offers crucial insights into the eclectic mix of items that Russell left behind. De Yong's inventory list includes art supplies such as chisels, modeling clay, varnish, and several paint tubes; personal effects, keepsakes, and photographs; and half-finished paintings, western art prints,

Stetson hats, and cigarette rolling papers. In addition, the inventory reveals over 100 items that are either of Native American manufacture or related to Native American culture.[3] These encompass beaded regalia and household items from the Northern Plains. Additionally, there are several Diné (Navajo) and Hopi moccasins and ceramics Russell collected during his trip to Arizona in 1916, as well as several facsimile items that were made by Russell.

Figure 2-1 Unknown, Charles M. Russell studio, ca. 1900, gelatin silver print, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.7471a-b

Most of the Indigenous items in Russell's collection reflect his surroundings in the Hi-Line region of the Northern Great Plains, with cultural belongings primarily originating from Salish (Flathead), Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Kainai (Blood), Nakoda (Assiniboine), A'aninin (Gros Ventre), nêhiyaw (Cree), and Anishinaabe (Chippewa) communities. De Yong occasionally added annotations to his inventory entries, offering valuable information about the cultural significance, tribal attribution, and history of Russell's Native collection. This information, along with photographs, letters, and a visual analysis of the remaining Native items in the studio collection, suggests that most of these works were created on reservations between the 1880s and the early 1920s.

Figure 2-2 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), *York*, 1908, watercolor, 19 x 25 1/2 in., Montana Historical Society Collection, Gift of the artist, X1909.01.01

Figure 2-3 Karl Bodmer (1809-1893), *The Interior of the Hut of a Mandan Chief.*, ca. 1840-44, mezzotint and etching, 11 1/16 x 16 5/16 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, 1965.169.50

Many of these items made their way into Russell's paintings and watercolors. These artworks, which include scenes of war parties, buffalo hunts, and daily camp life, reinterpret the items in his collection. Namely, they transpose these materials into the pre-reservation West in ways that complicate our understanding of the artist's relationship to Native art. Russell often included culturally incongruous items in his work, collapsing decades of changes in Native artistic practice. For example, his painting *York* reimagines a historical encounter between Hidatsa people and Captain William Clark's enslaved attendant, York (fig. 2.2). However, the picture includes an abundance of cultural materials from the wrong tribe. Russell based his rendition of this scene on the print version of Karl Bodmer's *The Interior of the Hut of a Mandan Chief*, the original of which was created near Fort Clark in the winter of 1833 (fig. 2.3).[4] In his adaptation, Russell substituted the Mandan society gear, burden basket, and bullboat paddle featured in Bodmer's rendering with items manufactured several decades later by Piikani (Blackfeet) people. These include a beaded blanket strip, a knife case, a beaded buckskin dress, a pictorial painted shield and tipi liner, and a willow-branch backrest, items that were modeled after objects in Russell's studio collection.[5] Notably, the bold geometric designs painted in primary colors on the buffalo rawhide container in the foreground directly replicate an example of the sturdy storage container Russell acquired around 1901 (fig. 2.4).[6] These items certainly would not have been present in an earth-lodge village in 1804, or even during Bodmer's visit to the Knife River Indian Villages three decades later.

Figure 2-4 Plains artist, Buffalo parfleche, ca. 1901, rawhide and paint, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, S991.19.364

Rather than explaining these anachronisms away as artistic indulgence or evidence of Russell's limited understanding of the past, they are an invitation to seek a fuller understanding of the cultural landscape at the turn of the century. The artist's career unfolded during the era marked by the 1883 Religious Crimes Code, which banned customary dances until 1933 and ceremonies until the act was repealed in 1978. Russell was aware of the profound shifts in Native American material culture that resulted from U.S. policies of displacement and dispossession that took place during his lifetime. Despite his preference for painting what he saw as the authentic Old West, his collection primarily comprises Indigenous art made after the establishment of reservations and decimation of the buffalo. Seen in this light, his collection offers invaluable evidence of the resilience of Native peoples during this transformative era.

COLLECTING NATIVE ART ON THE HI-LINE

Russell's first meaningful encounter with Native American people occurred in the late 1880s, when he journeyed through the Kainai lands in present-day Alberta, Canada. During this trip, Russell spent three summer months in a cabin near Fort Macleod and could have obtained a few items from Kainai communities. However, De Yong's inventory documents only one object, a buckskin sash, as having been obtained from Fort Macleod in the late 1880s.[7] While there could have been more that did not remain in Russell's studio at the time of his death, it is more likely that at that point in Russell's career, he lacked the rapport with Native peoples and the financial resources needed to collect in abundance or systematically.[8]

Russell began collecting Native art predominantly from northern Montana in the early 1890s, coinciding with the consolidation of various rail lines into the intercontinental Great Northern Railway. The main rail line through Montana, called the Hi-Line, borders the Fort Peck, Fort Belknap, Rocky Boy's, and Blackfeet Reservations, where tribes with distinct languages, lifeways, and artistic styles were forced to permanently settle together in the late nineteenth century. The Hi-Line came to define a regional style of beadwork, which Dr. Jessa Rae Growing Thunder characterizes as featuring "clear moments of distinct tribal styles, but there are also moments when those lines become blurred, and we see the intertribal inspiration contribute to the overarching aesthetics of the region."[9] The prominent use of Sioux-blue and Cheyenne-pink glass seed beads, the flat-stitch beading technique, and the experimentation with bold geometric and floral designs are all Hi-Line characteristics prominent in Russell's collection of Native beadwork. In turn, they offer evidence of the ways that artists created new visual forms amid a rapidly changing environment shaped by the near extinction of buffalo, the economic dominance of cattle ranching, and the emergence of the cultural tourism industry in Montana. As artists shifted to using materials like cowhide and wool, gained access to a broader range of bead colors at a lower cost, and spent extended periods on reservations, their beadwork became more elaborate. These conditions set the stage for the creation of non-ceremonial garments and objects intended for cultural outsiders that diverged from earlier, community-specific needs and traditions.

The Fourth of July gathering held on the Fort Belknap Reservation in 1905 was the kind of federally sanctioned social event at which Russell could acquire beadwork from this region. Native families adopted the U.S. holiday to honor their tribal veterans and socialize through mock battles, horse racing, hand games, and traditional meals. Local newspapers promoted these multiday gatherings, which were attended by hundreds of families from reservations across northern Montana as well as non-Native visitors who traveled to reservations by rail.[10] At the time of the 1905 gathering, Fort Belknap was home to two distinct, previously opposing nations of A'aninin and Nakoda people, both of whom were facing substantial pressure to cede additional lands to White settlers, this time opening some 40,000 acres of tribal lands along the Milk River. The *Great Falls Tribune* expressed the patronizing attitude that the Indians had "entirely too much land for them to handle . . . they must secure more money or work like white men."[11] Congress would approve the cession later that year, diminishing the tribes' land holdings and challenging their water rights.[12] Despite these assaults on Native sovereignty and traditions at the turn of the century, families continued to practice the Sun Dance, Grass Dance, and other summertime ceremonies in secret as well as under the guise of American patriotism.

Figure 2-5 A'aninin (Gros Ventre) maker, Man's shirt (front/back), ca. 1900, buckskin, glass beads, wool, and ermine tails, Given to Charles M. Russell by Big Bear (A'aninin), C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, Montana, S991.19.373

According to De Yong's inventory, Russell received a shirt and a pair of leggings from an A'aninin man named Big Bear on the Fort Belknap Reservation during what the artist referred to as a Medicine Dance. Both items show signs of wear that indicate they were made for tribal use rather than for sale to non-Natives. The shirt, made of cropped deer hide, features wool-wrapped ermine fringes adorning the shoulders and arms—decoration characteristic of the Northern Plains. Two wide strips of flat-stitch beadwork extend from the front of the shirt, over each shoulder, to the middle of the shirt's back (fig. 2.5). De Yong identified the shirt as being from the Fort Belknap Reservation, an assessment supported by the geometric checkered and elongated diamond patterns; the color combination of forest green, pumpkin orange, greasy yellow, and navy blue; and the incorporation of white hearts and steel-cut beads, all set against a dark periwinkle beaded background.[13] Unlike the flat-stitch beaded shirt strips, the geometric lodge designs on the legging strips were beaded using a technique called the "lane stitch," comprised of parallel rows of six to eight beads per stitch (fig. 2.6). The coexistence of Northern and Central Plains beading techniques reflects the diversity of traditions that coexisted on the reservation and may even indicate that the shirt and leggings were created by different artists from different tribes.

Figure 2-6 A'aninin (Gros Ventre) maker, Man's leggings, ca. 1900, glass beads, buckskin, and ermine tails, Given to Charles M. Russell by Big Bear (A'aninin), C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, S991.19.372a,b

This shirt and leggings appear in several photographs taken by Sumner W. Matteson, an itinerant photographer from Iowa who traveled to Fort Belknap in the company of Charles Russell and his wife, Nancy. During the visit, Matteson documented the dances, battle reenactments, feasts, and giveaways that occurred over several days, and he published his findings in the *Pacific Monthly* in 1906.[14] Several of his photographs show a man wearing the shirt and leggings that Russell had acquired (fig. 2.7). While research has not conclusively identified the sitter, it is believed to be Big Bear himself, who had corresponded with Russell and received numerous photographs, drawings, and carvings from the artist.[15] Perhaps the artist received the garments as a token of friendship, or during a giveaway, a traditional practice of gifting blankets, regalia, and even horses to the community in honor of an individual. George P. Horse Capture, reflecting on Russell's time with the A'aninin people, recounted that "the Indian people gave beautiful gifts to Russell as well; exchanging gifts is a custom among us."[16] Even if we do not know the exact circumstances of the exchange, Russell was a familiar presence on the reservation and had developed friendships with individuals like Big Bear and the well-known A'aninin elder Bill Jones.[17]

Figure 2-7 Sumner W. Matteson (1867-1920), *Indians at Fort Belknap Reservation*, 1905, gelatin silver print, Milwaukee Public Museum, 43757

Russell prominently displayed the shirt and leggings from Big Bear in his Great Falls studio, and these garments were also worn and used, including by people from different tribes. In a 1916 photograph, an Anishinaabe elder and spiritual leader named Chief Big Rock donned the Fort Belknap regalia and posed with Russell and the writer Frank Bird Linderman in front of a tipi (fig. 2.8). The photograph was taken to commemorate Big Rock's trip to Great Falls to share traditional stories with his longtime acquaintance Linderman for the book *Indian Old-Man Stories: More Sparks from War Eagle's Lodge-Fire* (1920). Russell, who was to illustrate the publication, made an elaborate production of the four-day visit, erecting a tipi in his neighbor's backyard and furnishing it with domestic items from his collection.[18] The meeting garnered the attention of the press, and Russell possibly lent the outfit for Big Rock to model in an effort to maintain a more "authentic" appearance. The three well-known men were also advocates for the landless Anishinaabe, nêhiyaw, and Métis refugees who had suffered years of forced relocation and broken promises. Linderman had led the effort to raise awareness of the mistreatment of the landless families among White Montanans, garnering the support of colleagues like Russell.[19] In 1916, Congress passed legislation establishing Rocky Boy's Reservation in northern Montana, west of Fort Belknap.

Figure 2-8 Unknown, Frank Bird Linderman, Chippewa Chief Big Rock, and Charles M. Russell in front of a lodge, 1916, Archives & Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana, 007.VIII.441

This moment of public advocacy emerged from personal relationships that involved the exchange of stories, support, and gifts. In Northern Plains communities, reciprocity is a core value, grounded in kinship, mutual obligation, and the ongoing care of relationships. These principles shaped the ties between Russell and his Native acquaintances and find clear resonance in Russell's collections. Two brothers named John Young Boy and Buffalo Coat, both members of Little Bear's landless band of nêhiyaw people, exemplified this tradition. They often visited Great Falls and exchanged gifts with Russell, marking a friendship that began in the 1880s and continued after the establishment of Rocky Boy's Reservation.[20] In 1900, Buffalo Coat presented Russell with a capote, an iconic style of Northern Plains hooded coat crafted from a Hudson's Bay blanket, which Russell often wore and incorporated into many of his paintings (fig. 2.9).[21] In commemoration of this gift and their friendship, Russell depicted Buffalo Coat with a capote draped over his left shoulder in a portrait dating to 1908 (fig. 2.10). Young Boy also modeled for the artist, and the two exchanged many gifts. In a 1902 letter to Young Boy, Russell expressed gratitude for a painted shield that, though currently unlocated, is illustrated in Russell's letter as an object adorned with eagle-feather ornaments and pictorial scenes.[22] In the later years of their friendship, Young Boy presented Russell with an exquisite set of contemporary cuffs and matching armbands, adorned with intricate contour beaded floral designs set against a solid white, flat-stitch beaded background bordered by a distinctive Hi-Line parapet design (fig. 2.11).[23] Eye-catching cuffs in this style became popular rodeo attire in the early twentieth century, ultimately evolving into a hallmark of

powwow regalia. Beaded gauntlets in Russell's collection showcase a related style of trade accessory that was fashionable among Native and non-Native individuals during his era. Intricate floral motifs appliquéd on two examples of beaded gauntlets in Russell's collection were likely made by the same woman, whose name, unfortunately, remains unrecorded.[24]

Figure 2-9 nêhiyaw (Cree) maker, Hudson Bay wool blanket, ca. 1900, wool, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, S991.19.462

Figure 2-10 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), *Buffalo Coat*, 1908, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 15 1/2 in., Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 01.1621

Figure 2-11 nêhiyaw (Cree) maker, Beaded armbands and cuffs, ca. 1910, beads, fabric, and rawhide, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, S991.19.393a,b

Russell's collection of Native art was shaped by personal relationships and historical conditions specific to the Hi-Line region. The forced consolidation of Native communities on reservations, emergence of a distinctive beadwork style, and reservation gatherings created opportunities for exchange during a period of intense political pressure on Native sovereignty. Gift giving, correspondence, and collaboration with individuals like Big Bear, Young Boy, and Buffalo Coat contributed to a collection that reflects enduring practices of reciprocity.

REPLICATING NATIVE ART IN THE STUDIO

It is especially curious, then, that very few of the contemporary Native-made gifts received by Russell made their way into the artist's paintings. Instead, he preferred to incorporate objects that, in the eyes of Euro-American audiences, functioned as quintessential emblems of Native American male identity, such as eagle-feather war bonnets, shields, coup sticks, and lances. However, as Russell would soon come to find, accessing and obtaining these objects, many of which carried deep individual significance, proved much more difficult than securing objects created for commercial or reciprocal use. Russell's ability to acquire these personal items during his brief visits to reservations was limited, presenting a challenge for an artist who relied heavily on studio props.

Figure 2-12 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), Coup stick / society lance, ca. 1890s, iron, fur, and flannel, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, S991.19.287

Russell's solution was to make his own men's ceremonial and leadership items. The existing studio collection includes various items altered or wholly fabricated by the artist in the 1890s, including a woman's cotton dress, a red pipestone tobacco pipe bearing painted designs, and several hide paintings. One of the studio props fabricated by Russell and featured in many of his Native warfare paintings is a fur-and-wool-wrapped wooden staff that De Yong called a "coupe stick," a rod used to touch, or count coup on, enemies in warfare or to symbolize this act during ceremonies (fig. 2.12). Russell fitted the wooden staff with a sharp steel blade at one end and decorated it with eagle feathers and an imitation scalp made of horsehair toward the opposite, curved end.[25] He may have modeled this object after a woodcut illustration of a hooked staff published in Prince Maximilian zu Wied's *Reise in das innere Nord-America in den Jahren 1832 bis 1834 (Travels in the Interior of North America, 1832 to 1834)*, which identified the staff as belonging to a member of the men's Siksika Kit Fox Society.[26] Russell could have also seen an example of a much smaller coup stick collected by his contemporary George Bird Grinnell from the widow of the Piikani chief Three Suns. [27] Russell's imaginative amalgamation of a coup stick and a society lance rendered this object rather ambiguous, capable of serving multiple purposes in the artist's studio, none of which bore any meaningful relationship to actual ceremonial practices. In *The Medicine Man* the staff emblematizes the spiritual power and leadership of the central rider (fig. 2.13). Russell wrote of this painting, "The Medicine man among the Plains Indians often had more to do with the movements of his people than the chief and is supposed to have the power to speak with spirits and animals."[28] The staff plays a similar role in his painting *War Council*, in which it is one of several prominently placed objects signifying leadership (fig. 2.14).

Figure 2-13 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), *The Medicine Man*, 1908, oil on canvas, 30 x 48 1/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.171

Figure 2-14 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), *War Council*, ca. 1896, transparent and opaque watercolor and graphite on paper, 14 1/4 x 21 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.177

One especially perplexing creation of Russell's is a composite buffalo-horn war bonnet featuring elements reminiscent of Northern Plains–style feather headdresses and horned

bonnets with imaginative embellishments (fig. 2.15).[29] Russell attached the tail feathers of an immature bald eagle, the traditional choice of feathers for such headdresses, to a yellow cotton trailer designed to hang vertically down the wearer's back. The headdress's cap was crafted from the body of a golden eagle, to which Russell loosely affixed two powder horns to resemble the distinctive Northern Plains split-horned bonnets. A crest of red-dyed horsehair juts out from a striped beaded headband. Russell could have repurposed the bonnet's components from other Native-made objects so that, in a highly stylized sense, it resembles an object of great power. Russell conveyed this effect in his 1897 watercolor *Approach of the White Men*(fig. 2.16). The central figure wears the extravagant headgear inspired by Russell's studio prop, which sways in the wind as the warrior turns his gaze toward the viewer and the approaching group of White men. Russell's painterly brushwork softens the ethnographic incongruities of the physical artifact, drawing the viewer's attention to the bonnet's purpose within the unfolding narrative: an accomplished war leader assessing the impending danger of the encounter.

Figure 2-15 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), War bonnet, n.d., bison horn, eagle feathers, horsehair, and beads, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, S991.19.367

Russell, like many artists rooted in European painting traditions, relied on costumes, props, and staged settings to produce paintings at a steady pace in his studio. But when he made garments and headdresses for this purpose, even wearing this regalia himself, his practice became entangled with a longer history of cultural appropriation. This behavior was part of what Philip J. Deloria has described as "playing Indian," a still-common, disrespectful act of adopting Native American culture by dressing up in customary garments.[30] Numerous photographs document the overlap between Russell's Indian persona and his painting practice, such as

one in which he confidently sports the headdress (fig. 2.17), but in fact only a select few individuals are entitled to wear such a prestigious item. Headdresses are steeped in symbolism, recounting a specific person's war honors or society memberships, and must be earned. Proper protocols govern the care of these powerful instruments of protection, and elaborate ceremonies facilitate the transfer of these objects from one individual to another.[31] A war bonnet was not the kind of personal item that would have been given away or sold to an infrequent visitor like Russell.[32] The artist's casual appropriation of Native cultural items is particularly problematic in light of the cultural oppression faced by Native peoples during the same era. While Russell and friends playfully and performatively donned Native garments, outright ceremonial bans forced the making and wearing of customary garments underground, and many Native people sold their cultural belongings simply to survive. The communal and spiritual harms caused by this severance from cultural belongings continue to impact Native peoples today.

Figure 2-16 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), *Approach of the White Men*, 1897, transparent and opaque watercolor over graphite underdrawing on paper, 17 3/4 x 23 5/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.152

Figure 2-17 Unknown, C. M. Russell in Native American regalia, ca. 1905, gelatin silver print, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, 975-12-849.3

CONCLUSION

Charles Russell's art and personal collection embody a profound tension between the social life of reciprocity, expressed through material culture, and his portrayal of Indigenous people and their cultural belongings in his paintings. In a condolence letter to Nancy Russell upon her husband's death, Young Boy expressed his deep affection for Charles, remarking, "I sure think of him and feel sorry for him just like my own relation."[33] Nearly a century later, Pearl Raining Bird Whitford reflected on her grandfather Young Boy's connection with Russell. She noted that the artist displayed genuine kindness and understanding of Indigenous cultures during summertime visits to Native communities in Montana.[34] These relationships suggest that Russell's interpersonal respect may have exceeded that of many of his contemporaries. But personal rapport is not the same as cultural understanding, and these personal ties did not necessarily manifest in Russell's paintings. His artistic representations of Native culture often flatten Native experiences, strip cultural belongings of their meanings, and evince generalized, romanticized visions of Indigenous life.

Despite this, by nature of collecting, picturing, and creating Native art, Russell emerged as a trusted interpreter of Native culture to the wider public. He even served as the judge for the "Indian Wardrobe and Equipment" competition category at the 1919 Calgary Stampede, a celebrated rodeo and exhibition of western culture.[35] His role in shaping public perceptions was amplified by his success in popularizing western Montana as a destination for picturing Native people and collecting their belongings.[36]

How do we reconcile this contradictory legacy? A crucial insight lies in understanding that within Native art, kinship and creativity are inherently intertwined. This perspective is vital when examining the Native-made cultural belongings in Russell's collection, especially those gifts that Russell chose not to depict. The cultural belongings in his collection, when considered on their own terms, can highlight Native artistic transformations within a context marked by complex and often unexpected circumstances. This essay marks an initial step toward a fuller understanding of the Native artists who were contemporaries of Russell. The next phase of research must adopt a more reciprocal approach, involving contemporary Native artists and the descendants of Russell's Native acquaintances directly in the scholarship. This collaborative effort is vital for developing a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Russell's legacy and ensuring that the interpretations of his work are informed by those who are most connected to the stories he depicted.

ENDNOTES

1. I am incredibly grateful for the generosity and insights into Russell's practice and relationship to Native people shared by Sarah Adcock, Renee Bear Medicine, Heather Caverhill, David Dragonfly, Aaron LaFromboise, Dana Turvey, Louis Still Smoking, and Cheryle Zwang.

2. Jodie Utter, "Russell's Studio Practice: The Flood Collection," in *The C. M. Russell House and Studio* (Great Falls, MT: C. M. Russell Museum, 2019), digital publication, accessed January 14, 2025.

3. A few Asian- and African-made objects are also listed. Curiously, several items that appear in photographs of Russell's studio taken before the artist's death do not appear in the De Yong inventory or the C. M. Russell Museum's digital database.

4. On the influence of Karl Bodmer and George Catlin on Russell, see John C. Ewers, "Russell's Indians," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 37, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 36–53; and Anne Morand, "Charles M. Russell: Creative Sources of a Young Artist Painting the Old West," in *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell: A*

Retrospective of Paintings and Sculpture, ed. Joan Carpenter Troccoli (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 129–51.

5. Items of this kind appear in photographs of Russell's studio. The Piikani backrest could be no. 27 in De Yong's inventory, "back rest of willow poles," and the beaded buckskin dress is likely no. 69 in the inventory.

6. The C. M. Russell Museum's records credit Russell as the maker of this object, but it appears to be authentic and made during the late nineteenth century when buffalo hide was still accessible. De Yong called the container a "medicine bag" in his inventory (no. 78), though rectangular containers of this size did not have a ceremonial use.

7. While some have claimed that Russell resided in a tipi for six months and was adopted into the tribe during this period, Hugh A. Dempsey, after meticulously examining historical records and Kainai oral histories, dispelled these myths. Hugh A. Dempsey, "Tracking C. M. Russell in Canada, 1888–1889," *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1989): 2–15.

8. It is possible that Russell met the Methodist minister Reverend John Maclean, who established a Christian mission at Fort Macleod in 1880 and worked extensively with Kainai bands. MacLean's efforts to build relationships with Kainai elders and learn their language over the course of a decade drew the attention of ethnologists in England, Canada, and the United States, who encouraged him to collect artifacts. See Arni Brownstone, "Reverend John Maclean and the Bloods," *American Indian Art Magazine* (Summer 2008): 44–107.

9. Jessa Rae Growing Thunder, "Hi-Line Treasures," *Native American Art Magazine* 38 (April/May 2022): 92–97.

10. "Sun Dance Fort Belknap," *Great Falls Tribune*, July 2, 1904.

11. "To Open Many Acres to Settlement by Whites," *Great Falls Tribune*, September 4, 1905, p. 5.

12. The Fort Belknap tribes' battle over Milk River water rights in 1905 received wide coverage in Montana newspapers. In 1908, the United States Supreme Court case *Winters v. United States* recognized the water rights of Native people on the reservation.

13. Joe D. Horse Capture, conversation with the author, September 25, 2023. See also Joe D. Horse Capture, George P. Horse Capture, and Sean Chandler, *From Our Ancestors: Art of the White Clay People* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2009).

14. Sumner W. Matteson, "The Fourth of July Celebration at Fort Belknap," *Pacific Monthly* 16, no. 1 (July 1906): 94–103.

15. Mitchell A. Wilder to Mrs. J. Lee Johnson III, September 30, 1964, Big Bear File, Charles M. Russell Research Collection, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

16. George P. Horse Capture, "Memories of Charles M. Russell among My Indian Relatives," in Troccoli, *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell*, 127.

17. John G. Carter, "Fort Belknap Notes, Atsina Indians, Book 5" (typescript, 1909), 302–3, box 1, John G. Carter Papers, Montana State University Library, Bozeman; also mentioned in Horse Capture, "Memories," 125.

18. Celeste River, "Mountain in His Memory: Frank Bird Linderman, His Role in Acquiring the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation for the Montana Chippewa and Cree, and the Importance of the Experience in the Development of His Literary Career" (master's thesis, University of Montana, 1990), 118–19.

19. Larry Burt, "Nowhere Left to Go: Montana's Crees, Metis, and Chippewas and the Creation of Rocky Boy's Reservation," *Great Plains Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 195–209.

20. De Yong gave Russell nêhiyaw items that he collected after the establishment of Rocky Boy's Reservation, including a dog travois made by Billie Small (no. 32) and a wooden horse-head mirror made by Flying Bird (no. 51).

21. De Yong also noted a gift from Buffalo Coat of "Eagle Medicine," no. 11 in the inventory, though he did not specify what this item was.

22. *Friend Young Boy*, March 1, 1902, Gilcrease Museum, 02.1584, accessed December 17, 2024.

23. De Yong inventory, no. 87.

24. De Yong inventory, nos. 43 and 67.

25. De Yong inventory, no. 140.

26. Maximilian zu Wied, *Reise in das innere Nord-America in den Jahren 1832 bis 1834* (Koblenz: J. Hoelscher, 1839), 577.

27. Currently in the collection of the National Museum of the American Indian.

28. C. M. Russell to Willis Sharpe Kilmer, April 24, 1911, Rick Stewart: Personal Research Collection, CMR: Letters, E–K, Amon Carter Museum of American Art Archives.

29. This object is likely no. 68, "Eagle and Buffalo Horn War Bonnet," in De Yong's inventory. De Yong did not indicate whether Russell made this item, as he did with other objects fabricated by Russell.

30. Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

31. Clark Wissler, "Ceremonial Bundles of the Blackfoot Indians," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 7, pt. 2 (New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1912), 114–16.

32. Frank Bird Linderman, an author and ethnologist who worked extensively with Hi-Line communities, collected war bonnets, eagle-wing feather fans, and numerous examples of beadwork. Linderman documented the provenance of these items, especially those with sacred or societal symbolism. See Billie G. Kelly, "Frank Bird Linderman Collection: A Study in Historic Material Culture" (master's thesis, University of Montana, 1984).

33. Mr. John Young Boy to Nancy Russell, December 5, 1926 [C.7.12], folder CMR/BC/C.7.10–C.7.19, Rick Stewart: Charles M. Russell Projects—Britzman Collection Photocopies, Amon Carter Museum of American Art Archives.

34. C. M. Russell Museum, "Russell in Perspective—Young Boy," educational video, September 21, 2022, accessed December 17, 2024.

35. “World’s Greatest Stampede Began This Afternoon,” *Calgary Herald*, August 25, 1919, p. 16.

36. Joe Scheuerle and Maynard Dixon were among the many artists who visited Russell’s Bull Head Lodge on Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park and painted Piikani subjects. See Jennifer Bottomly-O’looney, “Sitting Proud: The Indian Portraits of Joseph Scheuerle,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 58, no. 3 (Autumn 2008): 64–72; and Donald J. Hagerty, “Where the Prairie Ends and the Sky Begins: Maynard Dixon in Montana,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 60, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 24–41, 94–95.

Passing Through

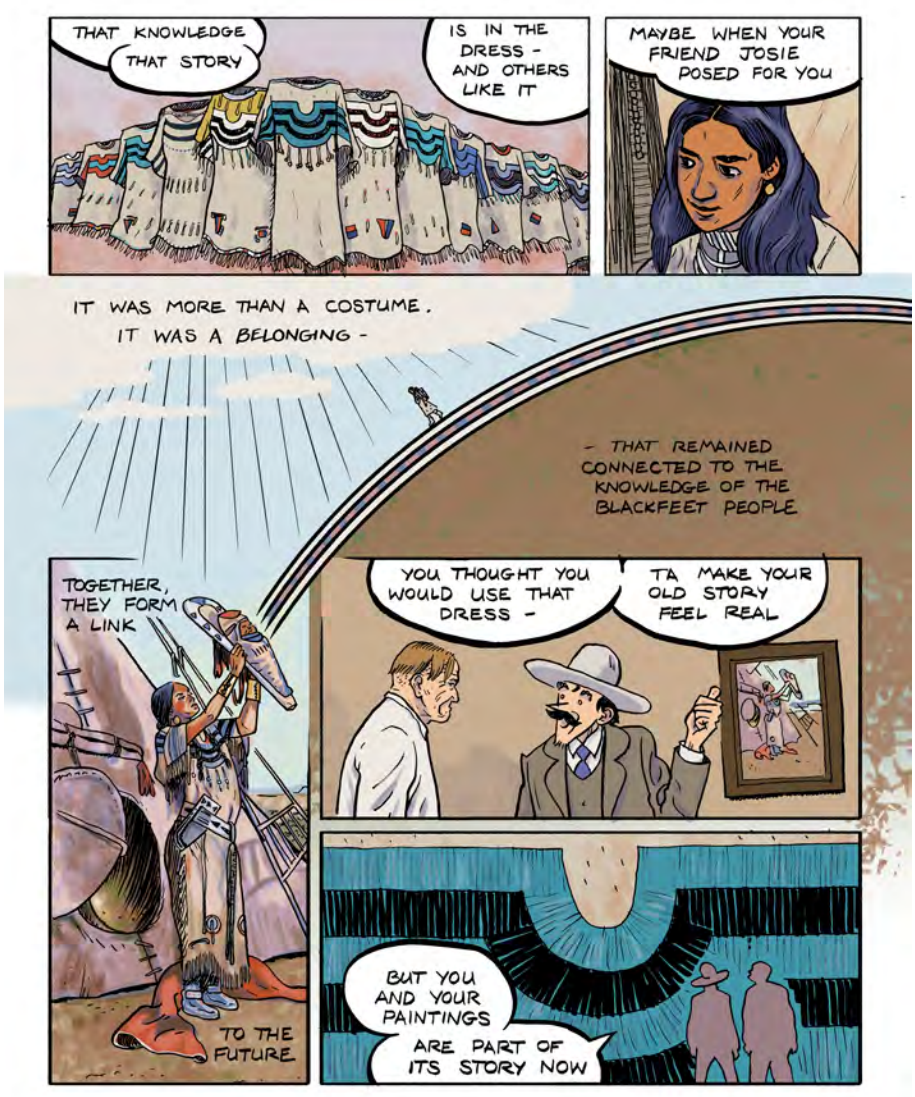
Ian Sampson, Cartoonist, Printmaker, and Interdisciplinary Educator, West Virginia University

Panel 1/2


CHARLIE ("RUSS")
&
RAWHIDE
in
"PASSING THROUGH"
THERE'S MORE TO THESE OBJECTS THAN YOU CAN SEE, RUSS
THIS AIN'T JUST A TRINKET YOU BUY
I--
I KNOW THAT!
YOU DON'T KNOW NOTHIN
THE WOMEN WHO MADE THESE PUT EVERYTHING IN 'EM
THEIR FEELINGS, THEIR KNOWLEDGE
THE MOKAKSSINI OF THE BLACKFEET
IT IS THE COMMUNITY

Passing Through

Panel 2/2


THAT KNOWLEDGE
THAT STORY
IS IN THE DRESS - AND OTHERS LIKE IT
MAYBE WHEN YOUR FRIEND JOSIE POSED FOR YOU
IT WAS MORE THAN A COSTUME. IT WAS A BELONGING -
- THAT REMAINED CONNECTED TO THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE BLACKFEET PEOPLE
TOGETHER, THEY FORM A LINK
TO THE FUTURE
YOU THOUGHT YOU WOULD USE THAT DRESS -
TA MAKE YOUR OLD STORY FEEL REAL
BUT YOU AND YOUR PAINTINGS ARE PART OF ITS STORY NOW

II

Charles M. Russell's *Sun Worship in Montana*: Painting Blackfeet People, Artistry, and *Mokakssini*

Emily C. Burns, Charles Marion Russell Memorial Chair, Associate Professor of Art History, and Director, Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West, University of Oklahoma

In 1907, Charles M. Russell painted the watercolor *Sun Worship in Montana* (fig. 3.1) to be reproduced on the cover of *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* popular magazine, where it was titled "A Blackfeet Indian Mother Holding Up Her Babe to Be Blessed by the Rising Sun." No other description appears in the magazine, but Russell's detailed style in the painting heightens visual attention on Native American belongings placed throughout the work—a tipi with a medicine bundle over the door; the figure's dress, moccasins, knife sheath, and belt—even as he loosely painted the surrounding landscape and the glowing, colorful light emanating from inside the tipi.

Figure 3-1 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), *Sun Worship in Montana*, 1907, opaque and transparent watercolor over graphite underdrawing on paper, 22 3/8 x 17 1/2 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.150

For many viewers, such details offer evidence of Russell's unique access to the culture of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Niitsitapi, meaning "the real people"), enabled by his living near the Blackfeet (Southern Piikani) Reservation in northern Montana.[1] Russell displayed the materials he collected on the walls of his studio, as seen in a photograph of the artist at work beneath a warrior shirt, the Blackfeet dress depicted in *Sun Worship in Montana*, and other Native American belongings (fig. 3.2). Discussing Russell's collection, Peter H. Hassrick observed that Russell "draped the walls with Indian and cowboy gear collected on area reservations and during his range years, and these artifacts were used liberally as props in his paintings, drawings, and sculptures."[2] While accurate in a broad sense, this statement does not account for the complexity of the transnational exchange that occurred in the making, acquisition, and translation of the belongings into painted motifs. The terms "artifacts" and "props" are misleading and undercut the epistemologies, or worldviews and knowledge systems, that travel through these material forms.

Figure 3-2 Unknown, Russell working on *Whose Meat?* in studio with Indigenous belongings, ca. 1914, gelatin silver print, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.273.35a-b

In analyzing *Sun Worship in Montana*, this essay focuses on these Indigenous epistemologies, embedded by Native American makers in the belongings that Russell collected and painted.[3] Taking up the term "belonging" from Native American and Indigenous studies scholars, as well as curators, introduces a vocabulary that distinguishes these material forms from their reframing in settler spaces. Paintings of them enact appropriation, violence, and desire in affirming White artists' fantasies of western experience for non-Native viewers and collecting of Native American belongings in asymmetrical power contexts. Discussions of art of the American West by White settler artists and their depictions of Native American belongings often perpetuate this violence by treating these materials as mere "props," "artifacts," or even "objects," which implies inanimacy. Imposing a western settler ontology, this framing denies the animacy, relationality, and meanings that Native American makers, often women, imbued in the materials they produced. Made belongings solidify entwinements between material and spiritual realms; bind communities relationally, both among people and with nonhuman entities; and perpetuate cultural continuity through metaphysical animacy.[4] For Russell, these belongings are "relics," but for Blackfoot people, they are relatives.

Scholars often reinforce hierarchies from the Western academy and the field of art history that elevate painting and sculpture over craft. Analyzing Blackfeet and other Native American material forms in Russell's collection and paintings as belongings points toward a capacious framing of art that includes expressive culture, a more expansive system of aesthetic practice than Western art history, which traditionally overlooks regalia, adornment, figural art, and dance.[5] The concept of expressive culture central to Northern Plains lifeways and the expression of Blackfoot knowledge, or

Mokakssini, particularly its emphasis on relationality between human and non-human realms, fundamentally differs from Russell's use of the belongings in his cultural practice.[6]

Whether or not Russell was aware of the significance of many of the belongings he collected, his paintings speak to these suppressed histories. Perceiving Native American aesthetic and knowledge systems traveling in these paintings through the depiction of these agentic beings opens new methodological frameworks for thinking about the art of the American West and dialogues between White settler and Native American makers. This reading decenters artist intentionality and instead foregrounds the work of scholars from Native American and Indigenous studies and Native American art history, as well as Indigenous knowledge-sharers, to encourage the rethinking of archives and belongings against the grain of settler-colonial possession and histories of repression. This framing encourages an emic methodology, one based on a culture's internal systems and meanings rather than imposed external frames of reference. An emic method takes seriously Indigenous meanings embedded in the belongings in Russell's collections by focusing on them in analysis. This approach encourages scholars of art of the American West to study not only American art or the medium of painting but also Native American art history. It enables layered readings of the transnational dialogues between U.S. and Native American artists that are sublimated into painted forms, as opposed to focusing only on settler perspectives, which parse painting as art and material culture as artifact.

The belongings that western artists like Russell acquired do not acquiesce to their appropriation; relatives and animate relations do not succumb to objectification as relics, artifacts, or props. Rather, belongings offer knowledge and truths beyond Russell's awareness or grasp; Indigenous meanings cannot be effaced in Russell's re-presentation of them. Focusing on the material forms and their resonance for their makers invites new interpretations of Russell's pictures. This essay presents Russell's *Sun Worship in Montana* as a contest of epistemologies and an unacknowledged collaboration between multiple makers. It does so by bringing to the foreground the role of Josephine Wright, a friend of the Russells and a model in the artist's practice; taking a close look at some of the Native American belongings that appear in the watercolor; and considering Russell's debt to beading as a possible point of entry to abstraction.

POSING

Josephine Wright was a Blackfeet model who posed for Native American female figures in a large number of Russell's paintings in oil and watercolor, as well as sculptures. Wright is scantly mentioned in the scholarship, but once her visage is recognized, it becomes clear that she circulates through much of Russell's work, as Wright's granddaughter, Nancy Josephine Clark, showed in a talk at the C. M. Russell Museum in 2018.[7] Wright became involved with Russell's art practice through her friendship with Nancy Cooper, who married Russell in 1896. Wright and Cooper met as live-in household help, cleaning and raising children at the home of Ben and Lela Roberts in Cascade, Montana. In 1900, Wright began living with the Russells and was listed on the census as a boarder and student.[8] When Wright married Northern Pacific Railroad worker Fred Tharp in 1903, the Russells acted as witnesses. Charles Russell decorated the back of the wedding certificate with drawings of the bouquet.[9]

On the side of her mother, Angeline Gobert, Wright was Blackfeet; some census records identify her as White, but she also appears on the Blackfeet Reservation census in 1936.[10] We have few details about Wright and Russell's conversations about Blackfeet life, but she often appears in photographs in Russell's studio, situated visibly as an interface between the painter and his ever-growing collection of Native American belongings. In one, they sit on the floor among Hudson's Bay trading blankets in an alcove in the Russells' home in Great Falls (fig. 3.3). Wright wears a bead necklace over a hide dress lined with beadwork. The alcove is filled with Native belongings, including two painted hides, a tobacco bag, a shield, a medicine bundle, a buffalo-horn bonnet, a backrest, and more. Wright sits adjacent to a bison skull, an ominous symbol of Native American declension, but she is active, alert, and leans into conversation with Russell holding a calumet, or peace pipe. Later photographs taken outside Russell's log cabin studio depict Wright with her long brown hair in braids, wearing the Blackfeet dress that often hung in the studio (fig. 3.4).

Figure 3-3 Unknown, Charles Russell with model Josephine Wright, ca. 1900, gelatin silver print, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, 975.12.213

Figure 3-4 Unknown, Josephine Wright and Charles M. Russell, ca. 1907, gelatin silver print, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.5849a

Wright's presence circulates throughout Russell's work, including in *Sun Worship in Montana*. Russell flexibly adapted her visage, so his paintings are more genre scenes built on Wright as a model rather than portraits of her. For example, Rick Stewart and Jodie Utter have observed how Russell anglicized an initial sketch of Wright in the translation from life sketch to watercolor to magazine illustration.[11] Yet we can trace, as James Moore did for Taos Society of Artists painter Ernest Blumenschein's long-term relationship with one of his models, how Wright, as a Blackfeet woman working in Russell's studio, operates simultaneously in two worlds amid tremendous change for her nation and the repression of her community's right to practice religion, culture, and custom.[12] As a model, we might assume she is playing herself, but as Judith Butler observes, an unknowable gap exists between interior selves and exterior projections, as in the subjective self and the performative, intersocial self we present, a distinction Wright might have leveraged to navigate assimilation policies and to affirm her Blackfeet identity in performance through Russell's paintings.[13] In *Sun Worship in Montana*, the figure partakes in Russell's imagining of ancestral Blackfeet practices then discouraged by the U.S. government. She holds a beaded cradleboard up toward the sun, flanked by a Blackfeet tipi with a medicine bundle over the door and a travois to aid with moving camp. The scene centers women's roles in Blackfeet society in managing the lodge, childrearing, and the intergenerational transmission of spiritual life, though it does not show any known Blackfeet practice of sunbathing a child in a cradleboard.

For non-Native viewers of *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly*, a representation of sun worship might register as the Sun Dance, a practice outlawed by Canada and the United States that continued in a modified version syncretically along with Fourth of July events, as also discussed by Annika K. Johnson in this volume.[14] Annually, bands within the Blackfoot Confederacy gathered during the *Ako-katssin*, or "time of all people camping together," to affirm kinship ties and perform Sun Dance rituals. The giveaways, in which people would offer fine belongings to show generosity and affirm kinship ties, represent how, in historian Blanca Tovías's words, "every Blackfoot activity can be linked to a wider realm wherein animate and inanimate beings impart knowledge and share their power with humans."[15] This practice continued in more localized and syncretic contexts after settler colonialism. Even posing for a painting relating to Blackfeet cultural practices then forbidden might have affirmed Wright's connection with Blackfeet culture, and the red, white, and blue touches on the watercolor for a late June issue of the magazine speak to both celebrations.

Figure 3-5 Unknown, Josephine Wright Tharp and Russell Tharp, 1917, gelatin silver print, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.6173

Census reports and newspaper articles show that Wright and her husband had moved to Missoula by 1910.[16] By about 1913, the Tharps had moved to the Flathead Reservation, where both of their children were born.[17] The couples' friendship continued; later photographs show the Tharps with the Russells, and Wright's visage appears in many of Russell's later artworks. The couple named their son Russell; a photograph from about 1917 depicts Wright and her son, Russell Tharp, on the porch of Charles Russell's Great Falls studio (fig. 3.5). The baby is nestled inside a Flathead beaded cradleboard. Wright sits proudly beside her offspring, the cradleboard symbolizing their intergenerational connection, filtered through a design imbued with love. As Oglala Lakota curator Emil Her Many Horses notes, "Considered gifts from the Creator . . . the construction, beading technique, designs, and colors on each of these cradleboards are meant to physically and spiritually protect a child."[18] Every bit of its back surface is covered with brightly colored beads in greens, pinks, reds, and blues, along with red wool embossed with sinuous flowering stems. Its symmetrical design prescribes a sense of order and balance in the universe. Its floral motifs signify growth, flourishing, and the transfer of relational knowledge embedded in the Native American belongings that were often depicted in Russell's pictures.

CIRCULATING

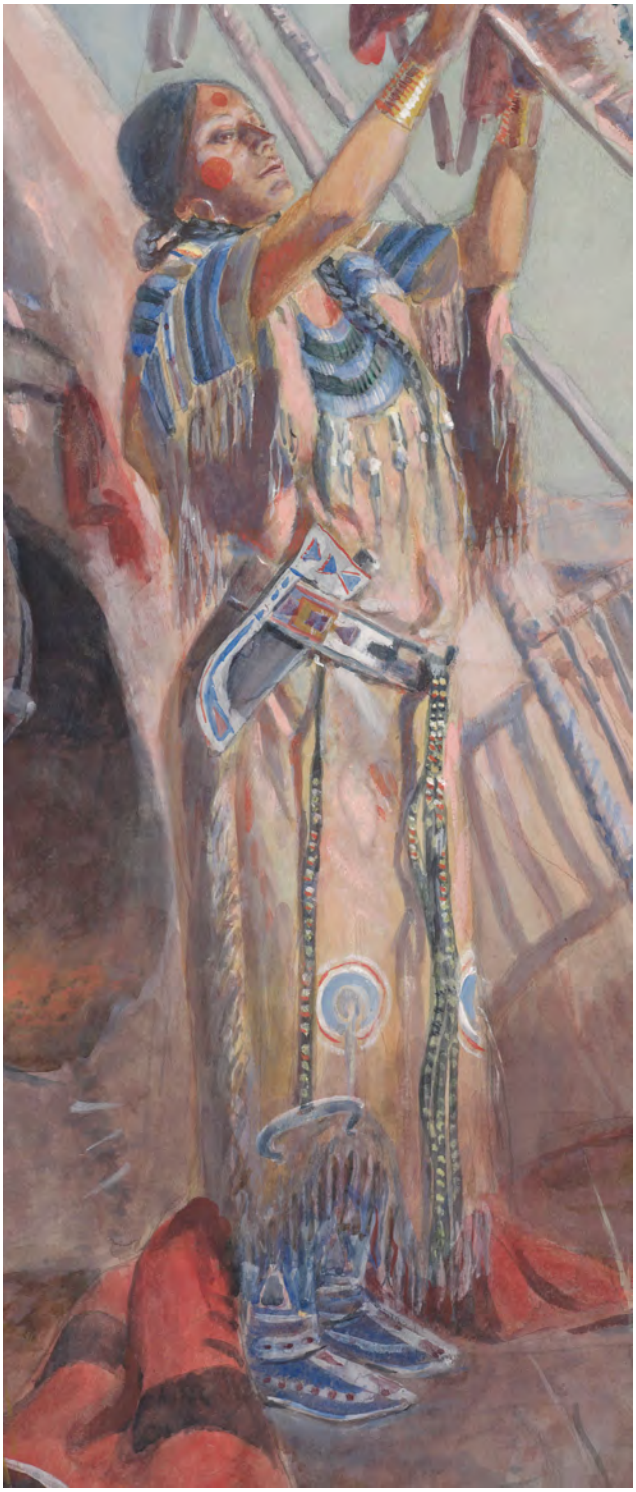


Figure 3-6 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), *Sun Worship in Montana* (detail), 1907, opaque and transparent watercolor over graphite underdrawing on paper, 22 3/8 x 17 1/2 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.150

Russell's imagined West was fundamentally shaped not only by Wright's labor but also by the artistry and labor embedded in belongings, such as the Blackfeet dress she wears in the aforementioned photograph (see fig. 3.4) and that is painted into *Sun Worship in Montana* (fig. 3.6). The ability to make through adapting animal materials and trade goods, as well as social protocols, was customarily given to Blackfoot women as a spiritual gift from Elk Woman to strengthen kinship ties within all human relational realms.[19] Much more than a costume worn in a studio, the dress is a belonging that speaks to Blackfoot *Mokakssini*, affirming relationality between human, natural, and spiritual worlds. As D. Richard West points out, "Dresses are much more than simple articles of clothing for Native women—they are complex expressions of culture and identity."[20] Kiowa curator and beader Teri Greeves notes broadly of Native American beadworkers, "Each woman was working on multiple levels, not just in terms of knowing how to work with the medium technically, but also how to work symbolically" through the language of beading.[21] These ontologies are embedded in Blackfeet dresses, which are typically a two-hide garment made from tanned bighorn sheep hide adorned along the yoke with beaded line stitching, also referred to as lane stitching, in deep blue and emerald-green pony beads and with a seed-bead trim along the dress's base (fig. 3.7). The dress worn by Wright would have been tanned, sewn, and beaded by a Blackfeet woman, and it follows community convention based on "origin stories [that] explain the ideologies encoded in dress and define the prerequisites for wearing certain markers of distinction."[22] The design of the yoke dips at center to make space for the deer tail, which articulates the human-animal relationship.[23] Ornamental jingles, mainly thimbles, which glint in the light of the painting, would have enhanced the dynamism of the dress and produced sound to let others anticipate the woman entering the space.[24] The beading includes deliberately interposed beads of alternate colors that interrupt color continuity. As tribal member Nítsitaipoyaaki (Only Girl; Cheryle "Cookie" Cobell Zwang, Blackfeet Nation, Aamskapi Piikani) shared with me (with generous permission to share further), as a child, she learned from elders that the placement of an alternate color bead within a sea of a single color introduced contingencies found in the imperfections of the natural world; this detail indicates an example of how epistemologies become entwined with material form.[25] On this dress, an occasional clear bead on an otherwise colored string articulates this maker's deliberate nod to cultural practices and articulation of the lessons of nature (fig. 3.8).

Figure 3-7 Blackfeet maker, Two-hide beaded dress, ca. 1890, brain-tanned leather, sinew, glass and metal beads, pigment, and metal, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, 991.19.374

Figure 3-8 Blackfeet maker, Two-hide beaded dress (detail), ca. 1890, brain-tanned leather, sinew, glass and metal beads, pigment, and metal, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, 991.19.374, Photograph by the author

Figure 3-9 Mrs. Running Rabbit, *Woman's Dress*, ca. 1860, hide, glass pony beads, glass bead/beads, wool cloth, pigment/pigments, and sinew, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 13/2381, Photograph by NMAI Photo Services

Many examples of Blackfoot dresses include triangular and oblong designs on their lower part, as seen in a garment made in about 1860 by Siksika Blackfoot Mrs. Running Rabbit (fig. 3.9).[26] Referring to the head and kidneys of the animal whose organs softened the hide, these motifs affirm relationality between human and animal realms. The dress that Russell collected does not include these details, which may suggest that he acquired a dress intended for sale or trade rather than for community use. Given that Blackfeet women's beading collectives—which were formalized in the 1930s and still operate today—long controlled the sale of belongings in trading posts, such as the one in Glacier National Park, it is possible that Russell's access to dresses of this type was controlled or limited.[27] Furthermore, in *Sun Worship in Montana*, he added forms to this part of the dress that are not present on the dress itself. Rather than the animal head and organ shapes in the dress by Running Rabbit, he applied concentric circles in red, white, and blue, a form not typically found on Blackfoot dresses but not uncommon in quillwork or beadwork disk forms at the center of Blackfoot men's warrior shirts.[28] Russell may have

adapted or invented motifs to stand in for the forms he knew would conventionally be present.

Irrespective of whether Russell's dress is a guarded or adapted version of a Blackfeet dress, along with his alterations to its design in his translation of it, its ability to express embedded Blackfoot Mokakssini is not diluted. Its re-presentation in his paintings does not necessarily occlude or suppress its originary contexts. When Wright wears the dress and it is rendered, why would we imagine such layered meanings would disappear? Would the belongings not retain their epistemological links to Blackfeet culture? Though Russell's collecting and painting of Blackfoot belongings takes them out of circulation in explicitly Native American contexts, rooted meanings and relational makings inhere in them and coexist with the western fantasy scene he frames around them. Observation of this continued articulation does not redress the histories of genocide and violent dispossession incited by settler colonialism; the dispossession of land and divestment of Native American material forms by the settler state are simultaneous and entwined acts. In their re-presentation by settler artists, scenes like *Sun Worship in Montana* enact what Chickasaw literary scholar Jodi A. Byrd has called "the transit of empire."[29] But as belongings also travel in these pictures, initiated community members would recognize cultural knowledge there in ways that exceed Russell's role or interpretation.

Sun Worship in Montana pairs the Blackfeet dress with a key belonging in Native lifeways: the cradleboard. The wood frame of this cradleboard is modeled in the Plateau style, which includes a wooden backboard with a rounded top decorated with geometric patterning and with a malleable buckskin cradle attached, as exemplified by a Ute cradleboard (fig. 3.10). As noted of the Flathead cradleboard the Tharps acquired for their children (see fig. 3.5), the function of such special belongings is consistent across Native American communities. Love, wishes, energies, and prayers are embedded in beaded cradleboards, which operate, in Sicangu Lakota artist Mitchell Zephier's words, as "an extension of the mother's womb . . . [and] an extension of the extended family."[30] Family and close community produce the boards and beading, "imbuing [them] with meaning and protective ornaments. They work together, with the baby in mind and in heart, to create the exquisite and durable first earthly bed for their beloved child, their *ah-day*."[31] For community members who understand these belongings, such representations of multigenerational and community relations retain their signification and significance even as painted and circulated in the mass media.

Figure 3-10 Ute maker, Cradleboard, ca. 1890, wood, tanned leather, pigment, glass beads, wool cloth, metal cones, feathers, and bone, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Charles and Valerie Diker Collection of Native American Art, Gift of Charles and Valerie Diker, 2019, 2019.456.25

The designs on the beaded belongings in Russell's studio bear motifs with meanings that would likely have been unavailable to him, known only to the beader and initiated members of her community. For Russell, for his non-Native contemporaries, and for uninitiated observers today, opacity surrounds the meanings and messages in Native beadwork abstractions, productively protecting Indigenous knowledge.[32] As argued by Nítsitaipoyaaki, Ponokaakii (Elk Woman; Marjie Crop Eared Wolf, Blood Tribe [Káinaa]), and art historian Heather Caverhill, regarding Blackfoot responses to German American painter Winold Reiss's portraits of community members made in Glacier National Park in the 1930s, descendants recognize their ancestors not only in the people depicted, but also in the belongings they wear and hold within the portraits.[33] Likewise, as articulated by Apsáalooke (Crow) artist Wendy Red Star through her re-presentations of late nineteenth-century portraits of her ancestors negotiating to retain sovereignty in Washington, D.C., regalia and belongings signify deeply within their communities across generations.[34]

Regardless of what Russell did or did not understand about these meanings, they are embedded; as Blackfeet historian Rosalyn LaPier has argued about the Blackfeet stories shared with anthropologists contemporaneous with Russell, their misrepresentation and distortion of what stories meant about Blackfeet epistemology do not erase the beliefs implanted there.[35] Rooted meanings do not need to be legible to all to be legible to some, a concept that carries over when reading Russell's scenes. As curator Jill Ahlberg Yohe reminds us, even in the context in which artists' names are disassociated from their production, "the object's agency is intermingled with the maker's intentions; the maker remains present."[36] Discussing Native American meanings and messages within the belongings in Russell's painting and restoring them to the conversation encourages us to understand these now anonymized women makers as subtle and unacknowledged co-producers of meaning.

Figure 3-11 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Friend Bill* (William G. Krieghoff), May 4, 1914, watercolor and ink on paper, Location unknown

ABSTRACTION

Native American women makers of abstract imagery may have subtly influenced Russell's practice. Spencer Wigmore has observed scholars' tendency to run headlong into finding the stories in Russell's pictures, often overlooking the complex materiality and selective moderating between naturalism and abstraction in parts of his pictures.[37] What happens when we retune our perception to center his handling of his media? Around the representations of Native American people and belongings, which are often made with precise ethnographic detail, the settings in Russell's works often dissipate into loose and washy brushstrokes. In *Sun Worship in Montana*, the foreground modulates between flat-washed areas and gestural strokes that do not always mimetically produce foliage. In the interior of the tipi visible through a palette-shaped door, Russell utilized impasto and abstract passages of color mixing. Such material engagements align with artists' experiments with modernism in Europe and the United States in the early twentieth century, but Russell often denied an interest in modernism.

In an infamous letter written after a visit to an exhibition of Italian Futurism taking place alongside Russell's show at the Doré Galleries in London in 1914, Russell lambasted modernist abstraction (fig. 3.11).[38] To a reviewer, Russell joked that if he put his liquored-up friends "in a room with these pictures," it would "make them swear off [alcohol] for evermore." He also commented that his "remedy for the women-anarchists would be to shut them in this Futurist gallery" with works that appeared to him as akin to a "child's kaleidoscope."[39] While mocking modernism, Russell's facture suggests that he toyed with abstraction via an alternative point of entry: the beaded belongings in his collection. Might we consider the possibility that Russell was, as with many of his contemporaries, turning to artwork from various so-called primitive societies for inspiration, responding to the aesthetic system of beading? Or that he took up the rendering of Native American designs as permission to play with an abstraction that interested him, though he mocked it? In Russell's engagement, Indigenous designs became abstractions divorced from the stories and symbols emplaced within belongings by their makers, and his free-form appropriation does not suggest understanding of the epistemologies operating around him. Rather, they became aesthetic experiment.

Jodie Utter, a conservator at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, has observed how Russell tended to employ occasional impasto, or buildup of paint, on his surfaces in both oil and watercolor. She notes that Russell often "shaped paint with bright color to convey decoration."[40] In *Sun Worship in Montana*, Russell included regular dabs of paint along the sash that drapes from the belt (see fig. 3.6). Was Russell treating painting like beading, in the same way that the graphics in Reiss's portraits of Blackfeet sitters often drew on Blackfeet patterns?[41] Russell deliberately flattens the scene and delights in shapes, parceling color in unmixed

layers of media. Beading and painting both parcel color, especially in the artist's rendering of the strong shadows. Might we see an ambivalent modernism emerging, instead of from scorned Futurist painting, from unspoken dialogues with the intricate patterns of Native American belongings? Where else in the pre-World War I era can art historians trace appropriations of Native American design in paintings by White settler artists? Russell's re-presentations of beadwork, and its possible influence on his own style, are more about surface texture, rather than a deliberate synergy with Blackfoot beliefs in animacy and relationality articulated by the belongings. Perhaps Russell's attention to beadwork as color and design results from his lack of access to the deeper meanings embedded in the operations of pattern, geometry, emotion, and visual flux between positive and negative space in designs in the broader Blackfoot functions of beadwork.[42]

Addressing the aesthetic influence beaded surfaces may have had on Russell's art practice helps to rebalance histories of abstraction, which typically omit the multigenerational abstractions of women beaders from the study of modernism. As Métis artist Jason Baerg argues, "It is important to reclaim the process of Abstraction from Modernist acculturation and legitimize it as a vital Indigenous space of creative inquiry."[43] To Blackfoot makers and community members, these motifs are not abstract but rather part of an interwoven, "invisible reality," to draw on LaPier's term. Baerg critiques art history's omission of Indigenous abstraction in its historiography, which valorizes flatness and material experimentation largely in the context of Europeans' "discovery" of abstraction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "Indigenous abstraction is still recovering from the colonial absorption of appropriation into Western art history."[44] Art historians Ruth B. Phillips and Janet Catherine Berlo are rightly critical of the complete erasure of Native women's "achievements in abstraction" in multiple media.[45] Because of this unjust approach, Native American women artists' engagements with and contributions to aesthetic abstraction since time immemorial have been suppressed, along with the meanings traveling through their belongings.

CONCLUSION

Inupiaq artist Stephen Foster and Snohomish leader Mike Evans note that the objectification of Native American belongings in new contexts centers "surveying" rather than "relationships," placing them in a "fiction of non-relational reality."[46] This powerful phrase speaks to how Russell repurposed the Native American belongings in his collection as artifacts, yanking them out of their relational context and inserting them into his framing of an "Old West." They operate as salvage ethnography, predicated on the demise and assimilation of Native American people. Russell positioned himself as a cultural broker for Blackfoot people, and there is appropriation and erasure in that power imbalance, especially in rendering a nostalgic pre-contact history that elides the realities of cultural suppression, political repression, and dispossession.

Present-day viewers risk reasserting that colonial perspective by continuing to understand belongings as "props." Reading Native American art in settler contexts in this way, in other words, reifies settler intent as the definitive interpretation that outweighs all others. Western painters like Russell occupy a position of representational power that allows them to putatively own the objects and their meanings. As Foster and Evans put it, "The imposition of colonial ontological frames of representation is fundamentally colonizing."[47] This focus forecloses the agency, art practices, and politics of Native American artists and objects by implying that they yield and bend to settler intentions, flattened metaphorically as they are translated by settler artists like Russell into two dimensions. Russell's paintings depend on these belongings to substantiate their own claims, but that relationship is not reciprocal; rather, the Native American belongings supersede the painting. Native American art is trafficked through *Sun Worship in Montana* and its mass circulation in a popular magazine, but these belongings are also traveling through it. The painting becomes only a stopover on their larger journey, which anthropologist Rosemary A. Joyce frames as "object itineraries." Tracing belongings' significations in a variety of contexts can affirm spatial and temporal mobilities and focus attention on "the relationality of things."[48] Recognizing the uneasy coexistence of contingent perspectives and re-centering Native American ontologies, epistemologies, and knowledge systems in Russell's studio and paintings recuperates sublimated but ongoing challenges to settler colonialism through visual sovereignty.

Since the operations of Native American societies' worldviews and cultural belongings are incommensurable with Western epistemologies and the visual practices of a settler-colonial society, this essay proposes the need to engage new tools to build mutually coextensive expertise crossing the art of the American West and Native American art histories and to accommodate multiple modes of looking and interpretation simultaneously. This essay offers an intellectual intervention to point to Russell's dependence on Indigenous knowledge as conveyed by his model and by the belongings in his collection, as well as on Blackfoot art and design. Re-storying Russell's *Sun Worship in Montana* to focus on its intersections with Blackfeet and other Native American beliefs, practices, and belongings decenters Russell's ambitions for his pictures to consider the ways in which other meanings are articulated, even unexpectedly, by the Native American belongings in the scene.

Figure 3-12 Plateau maker, Cradleboard, ca. 1900, flannel, beads, board, and buckskin, C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT, S991.19.366a,b

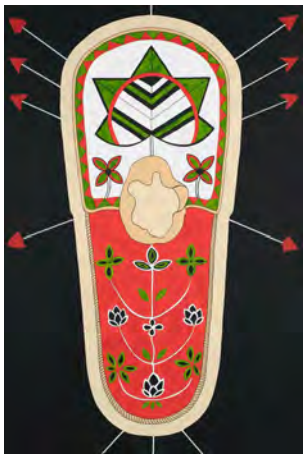


Figure 3-13 Nancy Josephine Clark (b. 1944), *Choices*, 2023, acrylic, gouache, and pens on canvas, 36 x 24 in., Collection of the artist

Never painted by Russell, the Flathead cradleboard acquired and used for the Tharps' children (see fig. 3.5) is now in Russell's studio collection (fig. 3.12).[49] As with the clear bead in the Blackfeet dress worn by Wright (see figs. 3.7, 3.8), this cradleboard bears a single alternate color bead of deep blue within a green field placed directly at the child's eyeline. Its importance for family and community histories is articulated by the inclusion of the photograph of Wright and baby Russell (see fig. 3.5) in a family album now in the possession of the Tharps' granddaughter, Nancy Josephine Clark, who is named after both Nancy Russell and Josephine Wright and who presently lives in Seattle. Based on this black-and-white photograph, Clark, who is an artist, recently painted the board's fecund motifs, surrounding them with protruding arrows that represent, in her words, a "moving forward, strength, protection, and positive life transitions," moving from an origin point in multiple directions as a metaphor of human life (fig. 3.13).[50] In her artistic dialogue with her grandmother and with the Russells, Clark highlights both ancestry and futurity. Her artwork articulates how Native American belongings operate as a connective tissue between generations, a sinew between past, present, and future, with their animacy and relationality still traveling if scholars and viewers look for them.

ENDNOTES

Thanks to Spencer Wigmore and Will Gillham for editorial feedback and discussion. I am grateful for conversations with and/or access to artworks facilitated by Sarah Adcock, Maggie Adler, Sharon Burchett, Heather Caverhill, Nancy and Ron Clark, Olivia Cotterman, Meagan Evans, Alicia Harris, Jennifer R. Henneman, Annika K. Johnson, Ian Sampson, Jodie Utter, Cookie Cobell Zwang, and Kim Wilson, who provided genealogical research on Josephine Wright. I benefited from presenting this research with the Paper Forum at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art on March 27, 2024.

1. The term "Blackfoot" refers to the wider confederacy, while "Blackfeet" refers to the Southern Piikani who were based nearest to Russell's home, studio, and log cabin in Glacier National Park.

2. Peter H. Hassrick, *Charles M. Russell* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1989), 85. Published lists include *The Log Cabin Studio of Charles M. Russell: Montana's Cowboy Artist* (Great Falls, MT: C. M. Russell Museum, 1931; undated reprint), 15–29; and Elizabeth A. Dear, *C. M. Russell's Log Studio* (Great Falls, MT: C. M. Russell Museum, 1995), 23–51.

3. Sources that gloss this distinction include heather ahtone, "Considering Indigenous Aesthetics: A Non-Western Paradigm," *Newsletter for the American Society for Aesthetics* 39, no. 3 (Winter 2019): 3–5; ahtone, "Shifting the Paradigm of Art History: A Multi-sited Indigenous Approach," in *The Routledge Comp edanion to Indigenous Art Histories in the United States and Canada,* ed. Heather Igloliorte and Carla Taunton (New York: Routledge, 2022), 42–52; Carolyn Smith, "Northwestern California Baskets and Weaving the Roots of Home," presentation at Native American Art Studies Association, October 12, 2023; Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Teri Greeves, introduction to *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* ed. Jill Ahlberg Yohe and Terri Greeves (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2019), 22; Maureen Matthews, *Naamiwan's Drum: The Story of a Contested Repatriation of Anishinaabe Artefacts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 20–21, 49–79, 103–38; and Tim Ingold, "Rethinking the Animate, Re-animating Thought," *Ethnos* 71, no. 2 (2006): 9–20. The digitally archived 2025 symposium "Belonging: Native American Art in Settler Contexts" at the Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West at the University of Oklahoma also probed this concept; see "Welcome and Session 1: Defining Belongings," March 7, 2025, accessed April 11, 2025.

4. heather ahtone, "The Animacy of Objects," *American Art* 38, no. 3 (2024): 3. On the concept of belongings, see Lorén Spears and Amanda Thompson, "'As We Have Always Done': Decolonizing the Tomaquag Museum's Collection Management Policy," *Collections: A Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals* 18, no. 1 (2022): 31–41.

5. Jenny Tone-Pah-Hote, *Crafting an Indigenous Nation: Kiowa Expressive Culture in the Progressive Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 5.

6. On *Mokakssini*, see Rosalyn LaPier, *Invisible Reality: Storytellers, Storytakers, and the Supernatural World of the Blackfeet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017); Nimachia Hernandez, "Mokakssini: A Blackfoot Theory of Knowledge" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1999); Audrey Weasel Traveller, "A Shining Trail to the Sun's Lodge: Renewal through Blackfoot Ways of Knowing" (master's thesis, University of Lethbridge, 1997); Betty Bastien, *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing: The Worldview of the Siksikaitsitapi*

(Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2004); Blackfoot Gallery Committee, *Nitsitapiisinni: The Story of the Blackfoot People* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 2001); and Blanca Tovías, *Colonialism on the Prairies: Blackfoot Settlement and Cultural Transformation*, 1870–1920 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

7. Nancy Clark, "Josie: The Blackfeet Woman in Charles M. Russell's Life," C. M. Russell Museum, June 15, 2018, accessed January 7, 2025. See also Joan Carpenter Troccoli, ed., "Charles M. Russell's Women: Reality, Convention, and Imagination," in *Charles M. Russell: The Women in His Life and Art* (Great Falls, MT: C. M. Russell Museum, 2018), 23; Anne Morand, *Your Friend, C. M. Russell: The C. M. Russell Museum Collection of Illustrated Letters* (Great Falls, MT: C. M. Russell Museum, 2008), 28–29; and Raphael James Cristy, *Charles M. Russell: The Storyteller's Art* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 58. Wright's life dates are 1883–1938.

8. 1900 U.S. Census, Great Falls, Cascade Co., Montana. The *Great Falls Leader* charted Wright's camping jaunts with the Russells on August 20 and 27, 1901, p. 5. Thanks to Kim Wilson for scouting and sharing sources. Wright is discussed in Joan Stauffer, *Behind Every Man: The Story of Nancy Cooper Russell* (Tulsa, OK: Daljo, 1990), 54–56, 74; Brian W. Dippie, "'It Is a Real Business': The Shaping and Selling of Charles M. Russell's Art," in *Charles M. Russell: A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. B. Byron Price (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 6–7; Ronald H. Clark, *Charles M. Russell Legacies: The Amazing Tales of Charles and Nancy Russell, Josephine Wright, and Nancy Josephine Clark* (self-published, 2025), 6–7, 19–21, 24–25, 34-36; and blog posts by Josephine Wright's great-grandson, Clancy J. Clark, posted May 30, 2018, accessed August 8, 2025.

9. Marriage records list the Great Falls wedding on January 27, 1903. Montana, U.S., County Marriages, 1865–1987. See also "Thorp [*sic*]-Wright," *Great Falls Tribune*, January 28, 1903, p. 8. The decorated back of the certificate resides in a private collection, CR.DR276.

10. The 1900 U.S. Census and the marriage records list Wright as White. She appears as one-quarter Blackfeet in the Indian Census, Montana, Blackfeet Indian Reservation Agency, December 31, 1936, p. 345.

11. Rick Stewart, *Charles M. Russell Watercolors*, 1887–1926 (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 2015), 319. My thanks to Jodie Utter for discussing this evolution with me.

12. James Moore, "Ernest Blumenschein's Long Journey with Star Road," *American Art* 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 6–27. On settler impositions on Blackfoot lifeways, see LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 10–22; and Gerald A. Oetelaar, "Entanglements of the Blackfoot: Relationships with the Spiritual and Material Worlds," in *Tracing the Relational: The Archaeology of Worlds, Spirits and Temporalities*, ed. B. Jacob Skousen and Meghan E. Buchanan (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015), 131–45.

13. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 185, 192. See also Ruth B. Phillips, "Performing the Native Woman: Primitivism and Mimicry in Early Twentieth-Century Visual Culture," in *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience: Policing the Boundaries of Modernity*, ed. Lynda Jessup (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 26–49.

14. The Russells attended one such event in 1905. See Sumner W. Matteson, "The Fourth of July Ceremony at Fort Belknap," *Pacific Monthly* 16, no. 1 (July 1906): 102; Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, revised ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 370; and Joan Carpenter Troccoli, ed., *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell: A Retrospective of Paintings and Sculpture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 120–21, 124.

15. Tovías, *Colonialism on the Prairies*, 17. See also LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, 28; and William E. Farr, *The Reservation Blackfeet, 1882–1945: A Photographic History of Cultural Survival* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 69–96.

16. The 1910 U.S. Census in Missoula lists the couple at 518 N. Third Street. See also "Elect Officers," *Missoulan*, December 5, 1912, p. 10. The 1936 Blackfeet Agency Census cited in note 10 locates her farther west, in Wallace, Idaho.

17. Nancy Josephine Clark, correspondence with the author, April 6, 2025.

18. Emil Her Many Horses, ed., "Portraits of Native Women and Their Dresses," in *Identity by Design: Tradition, Change, and Celebration in Native Women's Dresses* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2007), 79.

19. Tovías, *Colonialism on the Prairies*, 17, 73–¬74; Weasel Traveller, "A Shining Trail," 94. See also Rebecca Many Grey Horses, "Blackfoot Women: Keepers of the Ways and Pillars of the Nation," lecture, Galt Museum & Archives, June 22, 2020, accessed June 13, 2025; and Jessa Rae Growing Thunder, "Hi-Line Treasures: Bold Colors and Geometric Designs Exemplify Beadwork from Montana's Northern Plains," *Native American Art Magazine* 38 (April/May 2022): 92–97.

20. D. Richard West, "The Story the Dress Might Tell," in Her Many Horses, *Identity by Design*, 11.

21. Greeves, "Beadwork Conversations: Dyani White Hawk and Graci Horne," in Yohe and Greeves, *Hearts of Our People*, 206.

22. Tovías, *Colonialism on the Prairies*, 82.

23. Her Many Horses, *Identity by Design*, 33.

24. Her Many Horses, *Identity by Design*, 62.

25. Cookie Cobell Zwang, conversation with the author, Kalispell, Montana, September 20, 2024.

26. Her Many Horses, *Identity by Design*, 33–35.

27. Heather Caverhill, "Mutable Modernisms: An Art Colony in Niitsitapi Territory and the Lives of Its Works" (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2024), 81–85.

28. Joseph D. Horse Capture and George P. Horse Capture, *Beauty, Honor and Tradition: The Legacy of Plains Indian Shirts* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2001), 27, 47, 51.

29. Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

30. Lois Sherr Dubin, *North American Indian Jewelry and Adornment from Prehistory to Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 266. See also MaryAnn Guoladdle Parker, "Vessels That Carried Us: Kiowa Cradleboards," First Americans Museum, accessed January 13, 2025; Deanna Tidwell Broughton, *Hide, Wood, and Willow: Cradles of the Great Plains Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 4–6, 21–23; and Christina E. Burke, "Growing Up on the Plains," in *Tipi: Heritage of the Great Plains*, ed. Nancy B. Rosoff and Susan Kennedy Zeller (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 170–73.

31. Yohe and Greeves, introduction to *Hearts of Our People*, 25.

32. ahtone, "Considering Indigenous Aesthetics," 4. On the right to opacity, see Sascha T. Scott, "Ana-ethnographic Representation: Early Modern Pueblo Painters, Scientific Colonialism, and Tactics of Refusal," *Arts* 9, no. 1 (2020), accessed January 13, 2025.

33. Nítsitaipoyaaki "(Only Girl; Cheryle "Cookie" Cobell Zwang)", Ponokaakii (Elk Woman; Marjie Crop Eared Wolf), and Heather Caverhill, "'We Know Who They Are': Connecting with the Niitsitapi in the Portraits of Winold Reiss," in [BNSF Railway Catalog], BNSF Railway, ed. Joni Wilson-Bigornia (forthcoming), 28–41.

34. Wendy Red Star and Shannon Vittoria, "Apsáalooke Bacheeítuuk in Washington, DC: A Case Study in Re-reading Nineteenth-Century Delegation Photography," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2020), accessed April 29, 2025.

35. LaPier, *Invisible Reality*, xxxviii.

36. Jill Ahlberg Yohe, "Animate Matters: Thoughts on Native American Art Theory, Curation and Practice," in Yohe and Greeves, *Hearts of Our People*, 177.

37. Spencer Wigmore, "New Perspectives on Charles Russell," lecture, Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West, University of Oklahoma, March 21, 2023.

38. Brian W. Dippie, *The 100 Best Illustrated Letters of Charles M. Russell* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 2008), 102–3, 111.

39. H. T., London Notes, *The Cornishman*, June 8, 1914, CMR Newspapers, Charles M. Russell Research Collection, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

40. Jodie Utter, "The Unconventional Genius of Charles M. Russell: His Watercolor Techniques and Materials," in Stewart, *Charles M. Russell Watercolors*, 444.

41. Nítsitaipoyaaki, Ponokaakii, and Caverhill, "'We Know Who They Are'"; Heather Caverhill, "Niitsitapi Belonging(s) in Portraits by Winold Reiss," third talk in panel, at symposium "Belonging: Native American Art in Settler Contexts," March 7, 2025, accessed April 29, 2025.

42. On this powerful abstraction, see Teri Greeves, "The Women Were Busy Abstracting the World," in Yohe and Greeves, *Hearts of Our People*, 99–101.

43. Jason Baerg, "Indigenous Abstraction: A Vehicle for Visioning," in Igloliorte and Taunton, *The Routledge Companion*, 371.

44. Baerg, "Indigenous Abstraction," 375.

45. Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, "'Encircles Everything': A Transformative History of Native Women's Arts," in Yohe and Greeves, *Hearts of Our People*, 63.

46. Stephen Foster and Mike Evans, "Decolonizing Representation: Ontological Transformations through Re-mediation of Indigenous Representation in Popular Culture and Indigenous Interventions," in Igloliorte and Taunton, *The Routledge Companion*, 276.

47. Foster and Evans, "Decolonizing Representation," 282.

48. Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie, "Making Things out of Objects That Move," in *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice*, ed. Rosemary A. Joyce and Susan D. Gillespie (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2015), 5.

49. The belonging was acquired by sale or gift between 1917 and 1930; it appears in a 1930 photograph of the interior of the memorial studio, accessed September 15, 2025.

50. Clark, *Charles M. Russell Legacies*, 93.

Hand Talk

Ian Sampson, Cartoonist, Printmaker, and Interdisciplinary Educator, West Virginia University

Panel 1/2


CHARLIE ("RUSS")
&
RAWHIDE
in
"HAND" TALK
YOU MADE IT RUSS!
YER AT THE TOP A YER GAME
WELL, FOLKS LIKE SEEING THE OLD TIMES, THAT'S ALL
DON'T YA WORRY ABOUT..
GIVIN EM THE WRONG IDEA?
THIS AIN'T WHAT REALLY HAPPENED
YOU KNOW I WAS OUT THERE!
I SEEN THINGS FOR MYSELF!
OH RUSS
IT AIN'T ALWAYS ABOUT YOU
COME ON, LET'S LOOK AT SOME PICTURES
YOU DO ALL RIGHT
BUT NO "PUNCHER" EVER SAW THIS

Hand Talk

Panel 2/2


PAY ATTENTION RUSS! THIS IS YOUR BIG SCENE!
NOW WHAT'S SHE SAYIN?
I DON'T KNOW!
HUH?
WELL - PAINTINGS DON'T MOVE
ANYWAY, I ONLY KNOW A LITTLE
SHE'S SAYING
APPROACH
BUT IT COULD BE APPROACH ... PEACEFULLY
(WAR NOT)
OR APPROACH ...
IN FRIENDSHIP
YOU REALLY HAVETA BE THERE, HUH?
IT'S HOW FOLKS TALK
CAN'T PUT THAT IN A PAINTING!

III

The Inclusive Work of Charles M. Russell and Hand Talk

Melanie McKay-Cody, Assistant Professor in the Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies, University of Arizona

Early in his career as an artist, Charles Russell visited the A'aninin elder Horse Capture at the Fort Belknap Reservation. According to Horse Capture's great-grandson George P. Horse Capture Sr., Russell "would visit in the hot summer and they would sit together on the northern side of the house where it is coolest, and sign-talk with each other. Russell was quite good at sign-talking. They would spend hours there smoking, talking, laughing and telling old stories."[1] Horse Capture Sr. also recounted a story about another Gros Ventre elder, Ice, known as Bill Jones Son of a Bitch. It was common knowledge in the area that Russell frequented Gros Ventre and Blackfeet country. One day when Russell was riding on the reservation, it began to rain, so he stopped at a lodge, announcing himself at the door. Bill, the owner of the lodge, welcomed Russell in, and the two men greeted one another. Russell had brought with him a box of art supplies and started painting to pass the time during the rain. He created a portrait of Bill, and once he'd finished it, Bill examined the painting. He signed to Russell about his braided hair on the left side in the painting, where Russell had depicted only three beads. Bill then signed and showed Russell that his braided hair actually had five beads on the left side. Russell fixed the painting and gifted it to the elder. When the rain stopped, Russell mounted his horse and departed. A year later, when Russell came to visit again, Bill presented the artist with a gift to show his gratitude.[2]

As Horse Capture Sr.'s stories indicate, Hand Talk, now referred to as Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL), played a significant role in Plains Native Americans' communication systems when Russell resided in Montana.[3] The tribes Russell interacted with in Montana included bands of the Blackfeet Confederacy, including Blackfeet (Aamskapi Piikani), Blackfoot (Niitsitapi or Siksikaitsitapi), Blood (Káínaa), and Piegan (Piikani), as well as the Assiniboine/Nakoda (əˈsnɪbɔɪnz or Asiniibwaan), Cree (nêhiraw, nêhiyaw, or nêhirawisiw), Crow (Apsáalooke), Gros Ventre (A'aninin), Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa, Sarcee (Tsúùtínà), and Stoney (Îyârhe Nakoda). Russell learned Hand Talk from these peoples and used it to communicate with them when he visited their reservations in the United States and Canada.[4] Sign language had by then been intergenerationally transmitted within tribes for centuries. While the Plains Indians of the past faithfully preserved it, PISL is rarely seen in use today. Recent generations are not as fluent as their elders were, and the last of the fluent signers are in their late sixties and older. PISL was commonly used among tribes for communication and other purposes, especially as many Native elders did not know English.

Although several artists from Russell's era, including Winold Reiss, incorporated PISL into their pictures, Russell was unique among artists of the American West in the attention he gave to the language. Not only did he portray individual signs, but he also offered a glimpse of the social world of PISL—the many ways that it was used within Plains communities. His artwork—a combination of sign-language documentation, landscape, action, and storytelling—fascinates me for how it

presents the world of PISL within Russell's time. PISL, it is important to note, is not a universal language. It is a regional language variety of North American Indian Sign Language (other varieties include Southwest Indian Sign Language and Northwest Indian Sign Language). Additionally, while certain signs are shared across communities, individual tribes have their own culturally specific signs, which they use within their communities but not outside of them. Two tribes may live on neighboring reservations but use different signs to communicate the same idea. For instance, Blood signers of the Northern Plains have different signs for certain concepts when compared to the Kiowa of the Southern Plains. Such differences are based on specific cultural contexts related to ceremonial practices, foods, clothes, culturally designed beadwork, and things that are used in traditional ways. Those who have studied PISL and its language varieties have provided evidence that it is not a universal sign language, as previously claimed in much PISL literature, which often has been written by non-linguists, non-Native authors, and tourists, many of whom have at best a limited understanding of PISL signs sourced from secondary and tertiary sources, and who rarely socialized with actual Hand Talkers to fully understand their signs, way of communication, and culture. Some PISL signs, though, are shared across multiple communities of Hand Talkers. These shared signs are the ones that appear predominantly in Russell's paintings.

LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION OF PISL

When researching PISL signs, I conduct phonological documentation. This type of analysis is based not on sound but instead on signs and movement. Specifically, I study the five phonological parameters of signed languages: handshape, location, movement, palm orientation, and non-manual markers (such as facial expressions). I document these features as they appear in images of signs, and then I share them with fluent PISL signers. There are limits to this approach, however, when studying Russell's depictions of sign language. When analyzing paintings, it is hard to identify signs because of the lack of movement of the hands when displaying a sign, which in the field are called "common signs in the immovable movement." Put another way, imagine seeing a drawing or a painting of a person making an "E" sound. This could signify different words, like escape, exciting, or eager. But how would you know which word is being uttered in the picture? The same principle is at play with the signs in most of Russell's paintings. Russell himself was aware of this fact. He once explained, "I have tryed [*sic*] sometimes in my pictures to make Indians talk sign, but it is hard to make signs with out [*sic*] motion." Some signs are identifiable, but others are vague. To further complicate matters, there is also the possibility that a depicted sign belongs to a specific tribe and is not necessarily within the known lexical list of PISL.

For example, consider the sign LOOK, which is represented by a V handshape pointing to where the eyes are looking.[6] Depending on the direction in which the hands move, it would be interpreted as LOOK-right or LOOK-left, and so on. It could mean "look over in this direction." The sign for LOOK-direction can differ; for clear understanding, it is critical to see the direction of the hands to tell which cardinal direction the sign is pointing to. Furthermore, with the same V handshape, if the sign is dragging sideways, it can mean DOG instead of LOOK. Take a few examples of the same V handshape: It could mean LOOK, DOG, LIE DOWN, FALL DOWN, or LOOK-over-there, but the hand movements are all slightly different. In a static representation in a painting, such hand movements are nonexistent. With this in mind, the PISL signers I engaged studied with me the story or description of each drawing and painting I selected, including landscape, materials, props, and clothes, to gain contextual information that would help us identify the signs Russell employed. Even if a depicted sign is impossible to definitively identify, Russell's paintings still tell us useful things about PISL in Plains communities.

According to Russell's student and close friend, the painter Joe De Yong, Russell frequently performed PISL for friends and colleagues, as well as with Native Americans. In one instance, he performed a PISL skit for Howard Eaton and his ranch hands at Bull Head Lodge, Russell's residence in what is today Glacier National Park. Such audiences were led to believe Russell was fluent in sign language, but in fact these performances were prepared beforehand in order to entertain visitors. Russell would typically memorize signs, and his wife, Nancy, would translate the performance. Their routine was "scripted and rehearsed," according to Russell biographer John Taliaferro, copied from "hotel-lobby Indians."[7] I came to this conclusion as well after I observed the only existing original film, housed at the Montana Historical Society, showing Russell signing in PISL. He does not have accurate movements when signing, like fluent PISL signers usually do, and he holds his hands after each sign, which is uncommon among historical traditional signers. Given that Russell was a late learner of PISL, he was not fluent in sign-language movements and handshapes like those used by PISL signers. While he was clearly able to carry on normal conversations in PISL, the old film shows the selective signs that he knew.[8] That said, one film is not necessarily enough to confirm his lack of fluency in signing; he may have been nervous or uncomfortable signing in front of the camera. But there is no substantial evidence that Russell could converse fluently with the ability of authentic Hand Talkers.

Many accounts of Russell's knowledge and use of PISL come from De Yong, who was Russell's protégé. At age eighteen, De Yong lost his hearing from spinal meningitis, a common cause

of deafness. De Yong did not learn American Sign Language from any deaf person, and he made no mention in his journals of meeting another non-Native deaf person; instead, De Yong had early exposure to PISL while living in Dewey, Oklahoma, where he learned it from the Delaware, Cherokee, and Osage residing there after the territory became a state.[9] De Yong had a collection of 900 signs he learned when he was in Oklahoma, commenting that he used Hand Talk in a "day-by-day way" such that "thinking in signs became second nature."[10]

De Yong's knowledge of Hand Talk became still more useful once he moved to Montana and interacted with tribal elders in Great Falls and while traveling with the Piegan and Blackfeet tribes; he called those who taught him more signs "Reservation Indians."[11] He became close with Russell's friend John L. Clarke, a well-known deaf Blackfeet woodcarver and painter based just outside of Glacier National Park; they remained friends for over fifty years.[12] Clarke and De Yong bonded because of their shared interest in Hand Talk, with the latter writing that they not only used what he called Sign Talk but also communicated "either by word-of-mouth or Sign Talk or, sometimes if I failed to get his exact meaning, by writing."[13]

HAND TALK IN RUSSELL'S ART

Figure 4-1 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), [Hand studies], ca. 1912, graphite on paper, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Gift of C.R. Smith, 1964.193.18.B

For Russell, Hand Talk and the Native characters in his paintings had to go together to understand the true meaning of the American West. This is what fascinates me; his works give a contextualized whole, not just parts, as in PISL dictionaries. Turning to Russell's artworks, I begin with Russell's V handshape, which appears in one of the many sketches of hands that he drew as a way of practicing his depiction of signs (fig. 4.1). This V handshape, pointing sideways and downward, is the sign for LOOK. The fist handshape is a sign meaning SIT and HERE.

Russell used the sign for LOOK in several of his paintings, including *The Medicine Man* (fig. 4.2). The painting shows numerous Native Americans on horseback, and the rider at the far left, his arm silhouetted against the sky, makes a LOOK sign, which could mean "look over there in the distance" or "look at that" or "watch." A similar LOOK sign is depicted in *The Silk Robe* (fig. 4.3). In this instance, the man seated at center is using the sign, perhaps while telling a story about the dog in the left middle ground or directing someone to look at the work of the woman who toils over a bison hide to produce a robe.[14]

Figure 4-2 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *The Medicine Man*, 1908, oil on canvas, 30 x 40 1/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.171

Figure 4-3 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *The Silk Robe*, ca. 1890, oil on canvas, 27 5/8 x 39 1/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.135

In *Lost in a Snowstorm – We Are Friends* (fig. 4.4), the sign for HORSE is featured prominently near the center of the canvas. This HORSE sign can represent a verb, like RIDE, or a noun, such as HORSE, so the signing figure could be communicating "I am on a horse" or "I need a horse." As a verb, the sign could mean "I have been riding for days or hours" or "he rode that way." A letter in the Amon Carter Museum of American Art's archives written by L. H. Floyd-Jones, a Montanan who was the original owner of this painting, speaks to the sign in this work. He addressed the letter to T. M. Markley of St. Louis, the second owner of the painting. Floyd-Jones explained, "I am informed by Miss Helen P. Clarke who is of Indian blood—is a descendent [*sic*] of the explorer Clark of the famous expedition of Lewis and Clark that this county is named after."[15] He continued: "The sign means, 'on horseback crossing the divide, or back-bone of a range of mountains.' The cow-boys are lost from their party and have asked the indians [*sic*] the whereabouts of their party, and this is the indians reply."[16] While Floyd-Jones's letter provides a possible explanation for the painting's Hand Talk, it does not fully reflect the specifics of the sign HORSE.

Figure 4-4 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Lost in a Snowstorm – We Are Friends*, 1888, oil on canvas, 24 x 43 1/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.144

Figure 4-5 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Indians Meet First Wagon Train West of Mississippi*, ca. 1922, ink and graphite on paper mounted on cardboard, 15 1/4 x 22 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.125

Russell's drawing *Indians Meet First Wagon Train West of Mississippi* (fig. 4.5) captures a male Native American in an interesting pose—the Hand Talker appears to be looking directly at the viewer, while all the other subjects' heads are turned toward the newcomers in a long train of covered wagons and horses. One wonders if Russell drew this figure to make it appear as if he were conversing with the viewer in sign. Or perhaps the subject is signing to an unidentified companion somewhere outside the composition. To learn more about this sign, I consulted a Northern Cheyenne signer, who agreed that the sign appears to be the Cheyenne (as well as Kiowa) sign for BRAVE, WOW, or TOUGH. Another possibility, per a Pawnee signer I consulted, is that the sign could mean SCALP or "wow, many scalps to collect." But we can't be certain which sign is being used as it depends on the context of the conversation the Hand Talker is having, either with Russell or with someone else. We are also limited in discerning the full meaning of the scene due to the lack of movement of the signer's hands. The best educated guess is the idea of "wow, there are many wagons" or "they are brave to come to Indian Country." Here, Russell's portrayal does not allow for a definitive identification of the sign.

Figure 4-6 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Bent's Fort on Arkansas River*, ca. 1922, ink and graphite on paper, 14 x 22 1/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.320

In another of Russell's drawings from around the same time, *Bent's Fort on Arkansas River* (fig. 4.6), the artist depicted a fort that belonged to William Bent, Russell's grandmother Lucy Bent's brother. William and his brother Charles were famous traders who traveled and wintered with other trappers and traders in Wyoming. In 1833, the two brothers built Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River in collaboration with the French trader Ceran St. Vrain; the historian James P. Ronda notes that "building Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River made the brothers powerful players in a complex world of trade, diplomacy, and imperial expansion."[17] Their adobe fort was a stronghold for trading. In Russell's drawing, a male Native sits astride his horse at the front gate of the fort and signs BUY/SELL to the fort's watchman. He is accompanied by his wife and son on horseback, along with packhorses laden with fur goods intended for sale to the trading-post owner at the fort.

Figure 4-7 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *The Wolfer's Camp*, 1906, transparent and opaque watercolor over graphite on paperboard, 14 3/4 x 20 7/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.151

Russell's painting *The Wolfer's Camp* (fig. 4.7) depicts a business that was very popular across the United States and Canada in the late 1800s. Wolfers made a great deal of money, with one skinned wolf pelt selling for as much as two dollars.[18] Wolfers were called upon to hunt and bait wolves in the Midwest and the Great Plains. They used strychnine-poisoned carcasses of bison, elk, deer, and other animals, leaving them on the plains for the wolves to eat. The wolfers would return the next day, or after winter was over, to find dead wolves ready for skinning. From 1870 to 1877, an estimated 55,000 wolves were killed for bounty money in Montana, and by 1911, the Montana wolf was nearing extinction except in the northern parts of the state.[19] According to historian Doris Jeanne MacKinnon, people of the time "judged wolfers to be a grade lower than the whiskey and Indian traders . . . not a very outstanding class of men in the history of Alberta," adding that 90 percent of buffalo hunters became wolfers for the income.[20] Russell must have met wolfers during his Montana residency, as wolfers and buffalo hunters were everywhere in Montana. In this snowy landscape, Russell depicted wolfers communicating with a Native man whose family stands behind him. Just to the left of the burning campfire, somewhat occluded by smoke, sits a white sack marked "XXX," likely strychnine; wolf pelts hang on a line behind the seated figure, identifying the campers as wolfers. According to a Blackfeet Hand Talker I consulted, it appears the Blackfeet man is making a compound sign (two signs combined for one concept), in this case CAPTURE and GIVE.

Figure 4-8 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Crow Indians Hunting Elk*, ca. 1890, oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 24 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.136

Russell's painting *Crow Indians Hunting Elk* (fig. 4.8) depicts another sign: a hand held out, meaning WAIT. It is well known that Hand Talk was and is used during hunting and war because it allows for silent communication. This painting shows two Crow warriors hunting for elk, waiting quietly before taking their shot. Today, the sign WAIT remains in use, though for different purposes, like WAIT-for-me, WAIT-in-line, or WAIT-here. This same sign is employed in Russell's oil paintings *Indian Scouting Party* (fig. 4.9) and *Crees Meeting Traders* (fig. 4.10). In Euro-American ideologies, there is a common misconception involving Native people holding up a hand and saying, "How." This erroneous interpretation was bolstered during the early days of Hollywood, when westerns did not accurately reflect the usage of this sign. According to practicing Hand Talkers, a sign like this carries multiple possible meanings: to indicate that a group should stop riding and stand side by side or in a line; as a greeting; to indicate to others to slow down; to say "I come in peace" or "good to see you"; or to inform an opponent that they are arriving to the location of a meeting place. In Russell's pictures, seemingly simple gestures contain a wealth of complexity.

Figure 4-9 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Indian Scouting Party*, 1900, transparent and opaque watercolor over graphite underdrawing on paper, 28 1/8 x 12 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.169

Figure 4-10 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Crees Meeting Traders*, ca. 1896, watercolor, opaque watercolor, and graphite on paper, 16 1/4 x 23 5/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.154

Figure 4-11 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Lewis and Clark on the Lower Columbia*, 1905, opaque and transparent watercolor over graphite underdrawing on paper, 18 3/4 x 23 7/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.195

Although it is not always possible to identify specific signs in Russell's pictures, his attentiveness to the importance of Hand Talk is apparent, as in his wonderful watercolor *Lewis and Clark on the Lower Columbia* (fig. 4.11). Russell's portrayal is exceptional in that it features a Native woman Hand Talker so prominently. Many have unfairly dismissed Sacajawea, the Lemhi Shoshone woman who was a guide for Lewis and Clark; such writers fail to recognize that Sacajawea played multiple important roles during the expedition: serving as a guide, interpreter, and nurse; gathering food and securing horses; and allaying suspicions of approaching Native Americans through her presence—a woman and child (Sacajawea's son, Jean Baptiste) accompanying a party of men indicated peaceful intentions. When one of the expedition's pirogues nearly capsized, it was Sacajawea who managed to save many valuable supplies, "almost every article indispensably necessary to . . . insure [*sic*] the success of the enterprise," according to William Clark's journal entry for that day.[21] Russell, perhaps in recognition of Sacajawea's immense value to the expedition, placed her in the center of this composition. His painting focuses largely on her. All the males in the surrounding canoes remain silent and motionless as they give full attention to Sacajawea.

Most western artists do not give Native female interpreters the praise or recognition they deserve. Ronda observes of this picture, "Sacagawea stands in the bow of a crude expedition canoe offering signs of peace and friendship," though he also points out that "if Sacagawea played any role in the meeting, it went unrecorded" in Lewis and Clark's journals. Yet Russell's painting depicts her as a pivotal mediator between the two cultures, her presence confirming that the group was not a war party.[22] She appears to be signing APPROACH, meaning "we are approaching by canoe." Again, though, one sign is not enough to convey her full message; it could mean "we are approaching you in a very peaceful way," or "we are approaching your territory." These are the most likely potential meanings based on PISL signers' observations and contextual clues within the painting.

Charles Russell created many impressive depictions of PISL over the course of his career. Indeed, his contribution to preserving the language is remarkable. One will not find many cowboy artists who depicted Hand Talk so extensively. Most authors of PISL dictionaries used only sketches or pictures, or even no pictures at all, with English descriptions of the signs. In my mind, Russell preserved PISL far better, crafting his documentation with stories, landscapes, and other images. As the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words—or, in this case, signs.

ENDNOTES

1. George P. Horse Capture Sr., "Memories of Charles M. Russell among My Indian Relatives," in *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell: A Retrospective of Paintings and Sculpture*, ed. Joan Carpenter Troccoli (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 123.

2. Horse Capture Sr., “Memories of Charles M. Russell among My Indian Relatives,” 124–25.

3. The term “Hand Talk” was used commonly during Russell’s time. “Plains Indian Sign Language,” or “PISL,” is the term now used within the field of linguistics, and this updated terminology has spread in Native communities today. The terms “Hand Talk” and “Plains Indian Sign Language” are used interchangeably, and both are acceptable.

4. Biographer John Taliaferro notes that Phil Weinard, a cowboy and part-time vaudevillian who traveled with Russell, taught the artist some Hand Talk, but “his vocabulary was still rudimentary, at best.” John Taliaferro, *Charles M. Russell: The Life and Legend of America’s Cowboy Artist* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), 78. George P. Horse Capture Sr. notes, though, that when Russell visited Horse Capture on the reservation, “Russell was quite good at sign-talking.” Horse Capture Sr., “Memories of Charles M. Russell among My Indian Relatives,” 123.

5. Charles Russell to William Tomkins, May 27, 1926, in *Charles M. Russell, Word Painter: Letters 1887–1926*, ed. Brian W. Dippie (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 392.

6. Signs in the linguistics of sign language are documented in capitalized letters.

7. Taliaferro, *Charles M. Russell*, 211–12. Today, playing or imitating “Indians,” including the use of Hand Talk, is considered a disrespectful offense by many Native peoples. Hand Talk is considered sacred by most Native practitioners, and its use and imitation by non-Natives is considered cultural appropriation.

8. Horse Capture Sr., “Memories of Charles M. Russell among My Indian Relatives,” 123.

9. J. A. G., ed., “Joe De Yong, Artist,” *Volta Review* 24, no. 2 (February 1922): 39–44.

10. Brian W. Dippie et al., *Charlie Russell and Friends* (Denver: Petrie Institute of Western American Art, Denver Art Museum, 2010), 49.

11. J. A. G., “Joe De Yong, Artist,” 40.

12. Larry Len Peterson, *Blackfeet John L. Cutapuis Clarke and the Silent Call of Glacier National Park: America’s Wood Sculptor* (Helena, MT: Sweetgrass Books, 2020), 97.

13. Joe De Yong, “Charlie and Me . . . We Run Together Fine,” *Remembering Russell’s West* 1, no. 2 (1993), accessed April 12, 2024.

14. With most tribes, storytelling happened between the first and last frost, during winter and inside tipis, so this painting does not match the culture of the Plains Indians. However, Russell’s painting may portray a more casual visit between two elderly men rather than a formal storytelling.

15. Helen Piotopowaka Clarke (1846–1923) was an actress, educator, and bureaucrat who had a mixed heritage of Piegan Blackfeet and Scottish American. Contrary to what Floyd-Jones wrote in his letter, she was not related to Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

16. L. H. Floyd-Jones to T. M. Markley, June 1, 1900, *Lost in a Snowstorm – We Are Friends* object file, Charles M. Russell Research Collection, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

17. James P. Ronda, “Charlie Russell Discovers Lewis and Clark,” in Troccoli, *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell*, 197.

18. For more on the wolfing business, see Jim Yuskavitch, *In Wolf Country: The Power and Politics in Reintroduction* (Guildford, CT: Lyon Press, 2015); Michael Wise, “Killing Montana’s Wolves: Stockgrowers, Bounty Bills, and the Uncertain Distinction between Predators and Producers,” *Montana The Magazine of Western History* 63, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 51–67, 95–96; and Phyllis Smith, “Killing Fields,” *Outside Bozeman* (Winter 2000–01), accessed September 18, 2024.

19. Smith, “Killing Fields.”

20. Doris Jeanne MacKinnon, *Metis Pioneers: Marie Rose Delorme Smith and Isabella Clark Hardisty Lougheed* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2018), 294.

21. Grace Raymond Hebard, *Sacajawea: Guide of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Glendale, CA: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1933), 52.

22. Ronda, “Charlie Russell Discovers Lewis and Clark,” 201.

A Kept Man

Ian Sampson, Cartoonist, Printmaker, and Interdisciplinary Educator, West Virginia University

Panel 1/2


CHARLIE ("RUSS") & RAWHIDE in "A KEPT MAN"
THIS IS THE LIFE, RAWHIDE
OUT HERE WITH A HORSE BETWEEN YER LEGS
YOU CAN FEEL THE WILD RHYTHM OF NATURE
YESSIR, ME AN MONTE, WE USETA
HOOOOOOOONNKK!
WHAT THE --?
!
IS-
IZZAT--
HONK
GRRGRRGRRGRRGRRG
rattle
CLANG!
MAME!
AND JACK!
AND--
AND--
I BIN REPLACED!
BY A MUTT!
IT'S A COCKER SPANIEL, MATTERAFACT

A Kept Man

Panel 2/2


NANCY EARNED IT THOUGH, DIDN'T SHE?
COURSE SHE DID!
TWICE OVER!
I WANT MAME TO HAVE NICE THINGS--
I JUST PREFER SIMPLE!
NATURAL!
HOW IT USED TA BE
RUSS, AIN'T IT ALL -
TWO SIDES A THE SAME COIN?
YOU CAN'T LIVE LIKE THAT ANYMORE
YOU NEED ALL THIS
JUST AS MUCH AS NANCY
YOU OUGHTA KNOW BETTER RAWHIDE
MEN ARE MEANT TA SLEEP UNDER THE BIG ROOF!
THAT'S WHAT THESE PICTURES ARE ABOUT!
LIVIN' FREE...

IV

Autos and Animals: Mobility and Muscle in the Life and Work of Charles M. Russell

Michael D. Wise, Professor of History, University of North Texas

Among the things that Charles Russell hated, cars were near the top of the list. Trains, too. Anything not powered by muscle roused his ire, which he freely expressed in correspondence with family and friends, and only a bit guardedly in public forums. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he fumed, "If I had my way I'd put steam out of business," unaware that in a scant few years steam would, in fact, be supplanted by something he disliked more—the gasoline engine.[1] Many ironies accompanied his torment, of course. His career relied on the seamless transitions provided by a modern rail network to transport him and his work to exhibitions around the country. He steamed across the Atlantic on the *Lusitania* a year before its sinking, and the luxury cars that his wife, Nancy, owned carried the family between their homes in Great Falls and Lake McDonald and, eventually, the beaches, orange groves, and film lots of Southern California, where they resettled a year before Russell's passing.

Moreover, the fortunes that funded his endeavors largely emerged from these revolutions in mobility. Money from industrial oil, steel, and rubber exchanged for paintings and sculptures of sinew and flesh provided a material basis for Russell's pieces alongside his ink, paint, and bronze. But a luddite nostalgia effacing the industrial origins of this wealth became Russell's brand, and he trucked this imagery to a new generation of western art collectors, for whom depictions of animals, particularly buffalo and horses, took on symbolic importance as expressions of muscle power (fig. 5.1).

Figure 5-1 Unknown, Charles M. Russell in His studio painting His famous picture *The Buffaloes ["When the Land Belonged to God"]*, ca. 1914, 9 ½ x 12 3/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, P1979.66

Throughout Russell's career, the taut, unpredictable bodies of animals provided aesthetic counterpoints to the sleek lines of the machines remaking modern transportation. For example,

in contrast to inanimate, standardized vehicles bolted together by factory workers, horses are individuals, made mobile by their individual owners with unique variations of tack and saddlery, which Russell committed himself to documenting in detail, as in his iconic painting *In Without Knocking*(fig. 5.2). For Russell, horses were companion animals, but unlike the household pets taking America by storm during his lifetime (the dogs and cats that Russell also despised), the horse was a partner in work, a domestic but not necessarily a dependent, a representation of self-reliance and distance from the emerging economic interdependencies of modern America. In Russell's hunting and ranching works, the discrete bodies of individual bison, range cattle, and other animals celebrate a self-reliant and direct form of meat-making estranged from the stockyards, slaughterhouses, and shop counters that increasingly provisioned Americans with food from truck-borne cans and refrigerated railcars. Russell's animal artwork is best understood within the context of his concerns over the Machine Age's diminution of muscle, notably in terms of transportation but also in relation to the parallel expansions of domestic petkeeping and industrial meat production (fig. 5.3).

Figure 5-2 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *In Without Knocking*, 1909, oil on canvas, 20 1/8 x 29 7/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.201

Figure 5-3 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *A Tight Dally and a Loose Latigo*, 1920, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 48 1/4 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.196

Russell's reliance on animals to assert his reluctance to these modern changes fits within larger patterns of behavior that marked the economic and ecological transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2] In one sense, Russell's perspectives on these modern transformations fit largely within the patterns of nostalgia established by other men of means during his generation, and Russell scholars have commonly situated the artist and his work within this context. As Brian W. Dippie observes, Russell's own background as scion of a prominent St. Louis family produced a "contemporary impression of Russell . . . that was akin to that of an English remittance man, spoiled for work by indulgent parents back in the Old Country."[3] As with Theodore Roosevelt, who left Oyster Bay in the 1880s to play cowboy with his aristocratic French friend the Marquis de Morès, Russell's youthful labors—while not exactly leisurable—were nevertheless optional. At any point he could quit and take a boat back downriver, an alternative not generally available to the working-class men in whose culture he immersed himself. But stopping with an analysis of Russell as another historical example of a bourgeois male seeking out an experience of "authentic" labor on the open range misses a vital economic and social transformation that informed his work: the transformation from horse-drawn to motorized transportation. It also overlooks the genuine affinities (and prejudices) Russell held toward animals, elements of his life that suffused his work.

MANHOOD, MUSCLE, AND THE WILDERNESS

Russell's depictions of animals situated his work at the forefront of an emerging tension between automobiles and masculine ideals of how nature should be properly experienced. For those who shared Russell's sentiments, cars and roads were an unwelcome and emasculating presence in society. They were seen as the main obstacles to the preservation of public lands for "primitive recreation," a set of activities premised on the expenditure of human and animal muscle power to restore one's soul in an era of nervous depletion. As Robert Marshall wrote in 1930, just four years after Russell's death, revitalizing natural spaces required a landscape "possess[ing] no possibility of conveyance by any mechanical means and sufficiently spacious that a person in crossing it must have the experience of sleeping out."[4]

By the time the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964, Marshall's proclamations had become sacrosanct. In the hallowed halls of the U.S. Capitol, Senator Frank Church proclaimed that "wilderness begins where the road ends; and if the roads never end, there never will be any wilderness."[5] Midcentury wilderness advocates who were known for their irreverence, such as Edward Abbey, were nevertheless high-handed when it came to the harms allegedly wrought by roads and cars. As the historian Jon T. Coleman aptly described: "According to Abbey, the internal combustion engine was robbing American males of their love of freedom as well as their connection to 'Mother Earth.' He advocated banning cars in national parks and forcing tourists to walk, even if this led to them getting lost and perishing. For him, dying bewildered was preferable to living in the sterile confines of an automobile interior."[6] Created a half-century prior, Russell's visceral paintings and sculptures of horses and other beasts provided an artistic foundation for both contemporary and future expressions of this wilderness ideal as well as the de-machining tendencies of twentieth-century American environmentalism.

For Russell, wilderness was a place where muscle power marked not only the limits of mobility but also the limits of survivability, a place where one had to kill animals to subsist on their flesh as food. His hunting images often depict these contests between man and beast in ways that showcase

muscle as a precious resource. *Buffalo Hunt [No. 39]*(fig. 5.4), for example, depicts Native hunters astride galloping horses circling a herd of bison, the most visible man in the foreground with an arrow drawn and aimed. The musculature of horse and rider is caught in a play of shadows, emphasizing the lean yet well-developed shoulder of the hunter and his mount's powerful flank.

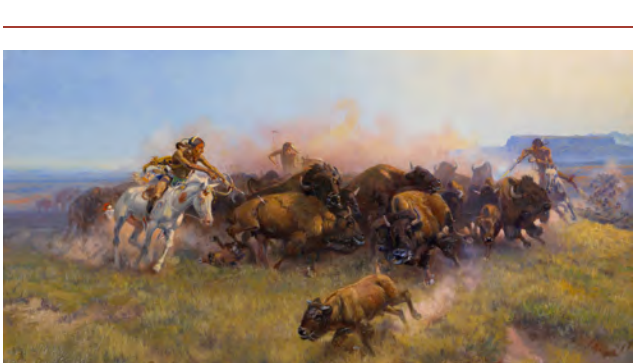


Figure 5-4 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Buffalo Hunt [No. 39]*, 1919, oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 48 1/8 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.146

The scene also evokes tensions between wildness and domestication. The horses belong to the riders, but to whom do the bison belong? In a midcareer masterwork reproduced several times, Russell seemingly answered the question for us. The title of the piece, *When the Land Belonged to God*, gestures toward its fundamental message: that even in the absence of human ownership, the beasts still belong to *someone* (fig. 5.5). When one of the canvases served as the centerpiece of Russell patron Malcolm Mackay's "Charlie Russell Room," it suggested a view that nature was a convertible asset, a divinely sanctioned form of property, ownership of which God would eventually transfer to settlers.

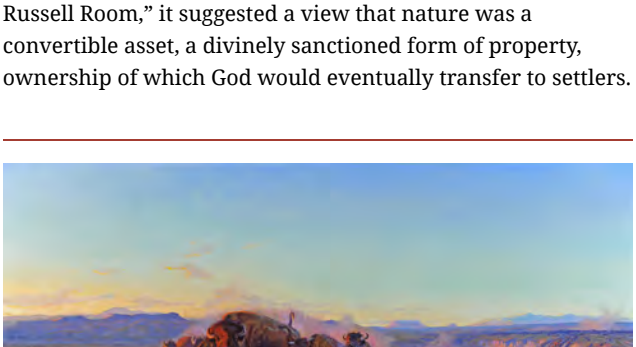


Figure 5-5 Charles M. Russell (1864-1926), *When the Land Belonged to God*, 1914, oil on canvas, 42 ½ x 72 in., Montana Historical Society Collection, X1977.01.01

In fact, it was Russell's participation in the 1908 roundup and sale of the Flathead Reservation's bison herd on the eve of the reservation's allotment that Nancy described as the inspiration for the buffalo-hunt paintings. From 1891 until 1928, efforts to force the privatization of Native landownership guided federal Indian policy in the United States. During these years, approximately two-thirds of tribally owned reservation lands passed into the hands of non-Native landowners, predominantly through sales by the federal government of so-called "surplus un-alloted lands," the portions of reservations remaining after enrolled tribal members received provisional title to their individual land allotments. A Salish Kootenai man named Michel Pablo had maintained a herd of several hundred bison on the Flathead lands, but the reservation's privatization threatened his access to sufficient grazing land, and he sold the animals to the Canadian government to form the nucleus herd for Buffalo National Park, established near Wainwright, Alberta, in 1909. By the coming of the Second World War, the animals had perished, and the park was converted into a bombing range.[7] Russell's patrons wished to see him as an authentic visionary of the northern front-country's roadless wild past, yet the Flathead bison he saw rounded up departed Montana for Alberta by rail.

MEAT AND COMPANIONSHIP

Russell's hunting images also emphasize muscle as a symbol of sustenance. While galloping horses provided muscular mobility, herds of bison and cattle provided muscular meat on the hoof. They also suggest the ultimate status of nature as property and animals as livestock, whether companion animals, like horses to be ridden, or bison and cattle to be sold or slaughtered.

Russell was a storyteller who supplemented illustrations with irreverent short stories he recounted in letters to friends, many of which eventually appeared in his posthumous collection of tales, *Trails Plowed Under*. One notable example recounts a story about a tailless dog named Friendship who lived with an old man by the name of Dog Eatin' Jack. The dog eater nearly starved to death while frozen in the mountains. During these hungry months, Jack's famished hallucinations brought him near to murdering and eating his canine companion, an urge from which he managed to retreat. Later, though, a fever dream of oxtail soup convinced Jack of a compromise: He whacked off Friendship's tail while the dog slept, planning to cook it. The dog ran off, yelping in pain, but both man and dog survived, and they eventually reconciled after the spring thaw.[8]

Transgressing the sacred boundary between livestock and companion animal, Russell's matter-of-fact presentation heightens the story's moralistic ambiguities in ways that open space for reflecting on several forms of animal-human relations, particularly the fraught proximities of petkeeping

and meat eating. The late stages of Russell's career witnessed major transformations in both practices. For one thing, Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century were eating more animals than ever before, thanks to an enormous amount of unprecedentedly cheap beef slaughtered and packaged in industrial facilities. These "disassembly plants" centralized American meat production and removed it from the barns, homes, streets, and myriad other intimate places where workers had killed, bled, and butchered animals in previous centuries, relocating them to industrialized sites outside the public view. Legislative passage of the Meat Inspection Act in 1906 also marked sanitation as a rising priority for the first time in American history. In fact, for the rest of the twentieth century, subsequent regulatory additions effectively criminalized as a menace to public health most informal animal slaughter and meat production outside of certified industrial packing plants. This resulted in a curious paradox, where the more meat that Americans produced and consumed, the fewer animals they tended to encounter. Blood, guts, feces, and rubbish of meat animals were once widely strewn elements of the American landscape, but now they were out of sight. The industrial centralization of slaughter that occurred during Russell's lifetime had fundamentally estranged most Americans from the animals they ate.

Alongside this transformation occurred a rise in American petkeeping, correlated so closely to the rise in meat consumption that the cumulative sum of money spent on both rose in tandem throughout the first half of the twentieth century. A multitude of historical circumstances made pets—particularly dogs and cats—the solution to modern Americans' emerging anxieties about animals. For one thing, as period commentators noted, modernity's social alienations drove men and women to seek solace in companion animals, fulfilling a need for "fidelity" in an era of upheaval.[9] Likewise, the replacement of horse-drawn transportation with automobiles in both urban and rural regions transformed the equine-dominated veterinary profession. As clinicians actively diversified their practices to include a larger portfolio of customers, they found pet owners to be among the most lucrative, and the sudden availability and modest expense of small-animal medical expertise established a new infrastructure of pet care that broadened the petkeeping tradition to the American middle classes.[10] No longer a symbol of affluence, companion dogs and cats may have remained welcome members of wealthy households, but the elite sought other animals to domesticate.

PATRONAGE AND PETKEEPING

Russell, by all accounts, disliked pets. He seemed unsettled by the historical transformations that put puppies in children's laps, and his work remarked on the irony of Americans' embrace of pets at a time when meat animals were kept out of sight in slaughterhouses and stockyards. He placed pets within the modern household that served as the foil for his nostalgic angst and desire for the open range. His nephew remarked, "When Charlie chose he could tell [a] story in a way that would make a dog lover grind his teeth. For Charlie was sometimes perverse, and anyhow, his animal affections were for horses."[11]

Aside from horses, Russell's family kept no pets, at least while Russell was alive. According to Frank Bird Linderman's daughter Wilda, in the years before Russell's death, when her family spent the winter in Santa Barbara, California, leasing a house next door to the Russells, Charlie and Frank walked the beach together routinely with Frank's dog, a collie named Kim.[12] After Russell's death in 1926, several photographs from family albums show a cocker spaniel, posed most often with an adolescent Jack, the Russells' son, whom they adopted in 1916 (fig. 5.6). In one of these photos, Jack is disembarking with the dog from a motorboat on Lake McDonald; all the others were taken at Trail's End, the house in Pasadena that the Russells were building when the artist died (fig. 5.7). A less ubiquitous breed in the twenty-first century, the cocker spaniel epitomized American bourgeois petkeeping a hundred years ago. It was one of the most popular breeds of household dogs from the 1920s through the 1950s. Whether Nancy and Jack acquired the dog in California, Montana, or elsewhere is unclear. But given his loud aspersions about both cars and pets, one can only imagine Charlie rolling in his grave at the thought of them chauffeured across the American West in a Lincoln, cocker spaniel perched across their laps.

Figure 5-6 Unknown, Jack Russell, ca. 1926, gelatin silver print, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.5938a-b

Figure 5-7 Unknown, Small dog, ca. 1926, gelatin silver print, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, TU2009.39.6355

Russell's dislike of household pets extended to small barnyard animals, which he considered undignified aberrations of nature. Linderman's recollections of Russell include several accounts of an incident at Lake McDonald that concerned some hens Nancy had bought as chicks in Great Falls and raised in an electric incubator. The Russells brought the hens to Bull Head Lodge, and one of them hatched a chick. The hens and the chick apparently aggravated Charlie by imprinting on him and continually following him around the property. Frank observed Charlie throw a stick at the flock in

frustration after failing to shoo them away. Frightened, the birds scattered, and one of the hens in the melee appeared to peck at the chick. "'Get out of here, you unnatural bitch,' he cried hotly, hurling a stone at the hen." Linderman continued that Charlie then turned to him and exclaimed: "'If these smart fellers don't quit foolin' with things tryin' to beat God Almighty at His own game,' he declared bitterly, 'we'll all be tryin' to eat each other one of these days just like that damned incubator hen.'" Charlie's consternation fell on Nancy, too, for bringing the birds to Bull Head Lodge in the first place; their idyllic summer retreat was "gettin' more like a farm every day," he declared, undercutting his desire to escape to a wilderness setting unfettered by human alteration.[13]

Russell's desire for a "vacation house in nature" was not unique during his time, an era marked by a post-frontier wilderness fetish that drove deskbound and anxious settler-colonial White men crazy in their pursuit of the so-called strenuous life. However, the vehemence of his reaction to the pecking hen at his summer place, as well as his overall aversion to pets in contrast to wildlife, indicated that Russell was bedeviled by a more extreme kind of fragility, one stemming from his own status as a kept pet. His livelihood depended on the affections of his patrons, a fact he understood uncomfortably. Joking in a letter sent from an exhibition in New York to his friend Sid Willis, the owner of the Mint Tavern in Great Falls, Russell reported, in his rustic prose, that "I intended leaving here sevra [*sic*] weeks ago but I cant brak away from Rockyfeller an his bunch every time I try and make a git-away he invites me up to have crackers an milk with him he shure hates to see me leave" (fig. 5.8). In short, Russell's recognition that he and his art had become a plaything for the rich demonstrated his own domestication. Like a household kitten stroked and mollycoddled, Russell relied for his professional life on the wealthy's affections in ways that communicated class dominance. In a reflection of the cultural theorist Yi-Fu Tuan's observations about the relationships of petkeeping, Russell, as the pet, lived as a mutual object of dominance and affection in the eyes of his patrons.[14]

Figure 5-8 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *Friend Sid [Sid A. Willis], May 3, 1907*, ink, transparent watercolor, and graphite on paper, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.309.1

The wealth of Russell's patrons in many cases also derived from the dominating forces of change against which Russell purported to array his persona. Philip G. Cole provides a good example. Twenty years Russell's junior, Cole was raised in Montana and headed east—rather than west—as a young man. Son of the Speaker of the Montana Territorial Senate, Cole went to boarding school at Phillips Academy, Andover, and graduated from Princeton in 1906, the same year Charles and Nancy purchased Bull Head Lodge. In the meantime, one of his father's successful investments in the nascent automotive industry elevated the family further when he acquired the patent for the Schrader tire valve (the same valve used to air up car tires today, as well as many bicycle tires and other inflatables). Cole took over directorship of the company and moved to New York to manage the business, built an estate overlooking the Hudson River, and spent the next three decades filling it with one of the nation's largest collections of western-themed paintings and sculptures, some of which are now held at the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In short, the scion of the automotive pneumatic tire became one of horse-loving Russell's most reliable and necessary customers.

One way, of course, that Charlie avoided reconciling his anti-automative performances with the relative financial largesse that industrialist art collectors like Cole afforded his family was that his wife famously handled his business affairs. Nancy set up the exhibitions, arranged travel, negotiated sales, mediated press contacts, and corresponded with clientele. She excelled at these challenging tasks, and her years of hard work were evident in her extensive papers that came to William Britzman when he purchased her home, Trail's End, with all its contents following her death in 1940.

Nancy's functioning as the intermediary between Russell and his patrons allowed Charlie to maintain a fictive independence from the forces of automobility, money, and power funding his life and his work. "Should a genius

marry?" asked a feature on Russell's exhibition in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* in 1919. "Should the man who can give the world a masterpiece be chained to the domestic commonplaces of everyday life—shaking down the furnace, shoveling snow from the walk, beating the carpets and doing the hundred and one other things that married life calls for?" Charlie answered with a simple "yes," going on to describe the complementary life he shared with Nancy as "a fifty-fifty game":

> *I wouldn't drive one of those pesky cars for love or money. My favorite is still the horse. But just the same, I let Mrs. Russell have two automobiles and she lets me keep two horses. It's a fifty-fifty game with us and I have never felt that domestic relations were in any way a hindrance to a career.*

In fact, the Russells' marriage was vital to Charlie's career. Only with Nancy's assistance could Charlie participate fully in the emergence of modern America while maintaining his popular persona as a wilderness-loving outsider. Thanks to Nancy, it could be that when the Minneapolis press repeated the phrase "straight out of the 1880s," they were remarking on Russell himself, not on his art.[15]

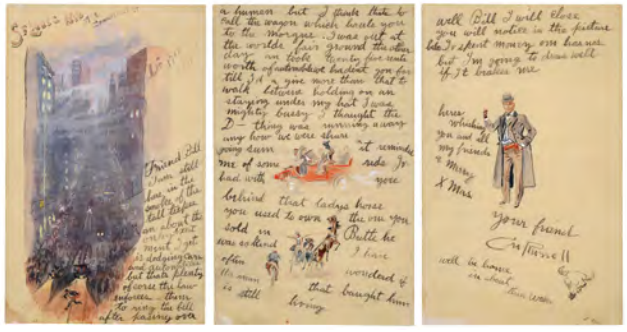


Figure 5-9 Charles M. Russell (1864–1926), *I Am Still Here in the Smoke of the Tall Teepees*, 1903, watercolor, Montana Historical Society Collection, 1986.06.10 a-d

The shift to automotive transportation that occurred during Russell's lifetime irrevocably altered animal-human relationships in ways that have still not been fully understood. Predictably, Russell groused about this dynamic change in a 1903 letter from St. Louis to his friend William H. Rance back in Great Falls: The "onley excitment [*sic*] I get [here] is dodging cars and automobiles" (fig. 5.9). Russell's western art represented not only a nostalgic, masculinist throwback to the "frontier era" but also an expression of angst at revolutions in mobility that threatened conventional notions of dominance, affection, metabolism, and property. As a historical source, Russell's work suggests the significance of a great divide in American history constituted around these reorganizations of animal and human muscle power, and interpreting Russell's expressions from this perspective provides new opportunities to consider the significance of his work.

ENDNOTES

1. "Cowboy Vividly Paints the Passing Life of the Plains," *New York Times*, March 19, 1911, Magazine, p. 5.

2. A number of works of animal history have attended to these patterns of animal-human relationships near the turn of the twentieth century, including Sarah Amato, *Beastly Possessions: Animals in Victorian Consumer Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); Matthew Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Susan D. Jones, *Valuing Animals: Veterinarians and Their Patients in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Jennifer Mason, *Civilized Creatures: Urban Animals, Sentimental Culture, and American Literature, 1850–1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); and Michael D. Wise, *Producing Predators: Wolves, Work, and Conquest in the Northern Rockies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

3. Brian W. Dippie, "'It Is a Real Business': The Shaping and Selling of Charles M. Russell's Art," in *Charles M. Russell: A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. B. Byron Price (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 7.

4. Robert Marshall, "The Problem of the Wilderness," *Scientific Monthly* 30, no. 2 (February 1930): 141–48. For broader discussions about the history of roads and wilderness activism, see David Louter, *Windshield Wilderness: Cars, Roads, and Nature in Washington's National Parks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009); and Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).

5. Sara Dant Ewert, *The Conversion of Senator Frank Church: Evolution of an Environmentalist* (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 2000), 35.

6. Jon T. Coleman, *Nature Shock: Getting Lost in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 242.

7. For greater discussion of the Pablo herd sale and the allotment of the Flathead Reservation, see Wise, *Producing Predators*, 105–7.

8. Charles M. Russell, "Dog Eater," in *Trails Plowed Under* (New York: Doubleday, 1927), 129–32.

9. Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022).

10. Susan D. Jones, "Pricing the Priceless Pet," in *Valuing Animals*, 115–40.

11. Austin Russell, *C. M. R.: Charles M. Russell: Cowboy Artist, a Biography* (New York: Twayne, 1957), 125, cited in Raphael James Cristy, *Charles M. Russell: The Storyteller's Art* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004), 294.

12. Wilda Linderman, "As We Remember Mr. Russell," in Frank Bird Linderman, *Recollections of Charley Russell*, ed. H. G. Merriam

(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 117–28.

13. Linderman, *Recollections of Charley Russell*, 89–90.

14. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

15. "Minneapolis Views Wild West through Eyes of Montana Cowboy Artist," *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, December 14, 1919. See also John Taliaferro, *Charles M. Russell: The Life and Legend of America's Cowboy Artist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 117–18.

The Writing on the Wall

Ian Sampson, Cartoonist, Printmaker, and Interdisciplinary Educator, West Virginia University

Panel 1/2


CHARLIE ("RUSS")
&
RAWHIDE
in
"The WRITING on the WALL"
TIMES CHANGE
AND YET, HERE WE ARE
THE STORY CAN'T STAY THE SAME--
coff
CAN IT?

The Writing on the Wall

Panel 2/2


WILL WE LISTEN TO DIFFERENT IDEAS?
TIGHT
MOVE THROUGH NEW SPACES?
WHO WILL TELL THE STORY
IN ANOTHER FIFTY YEARS?
AND WHAT WILL IT SAY?

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Scott Wilcox

- Foreword

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