

## “MEN WITH THE BARK ON”: FREDERIC REMINGTON’S DENOUEMENT\*

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**Abstract:** Frederic Remington is one of the most popular artists associated with the heyday of the American West. His detailed paintings thrill his fans, but sometimes his impressionistic style muddles the details, and sometimes they are clearly mistaken. This is the story of how Remington made the transition from being a reporter to an artist, from being a historical illustrator to being a painter.

**Keywords:** the Old West, impressionism, illustrator, Indians, cowboys, trappers, U.S. soldiers, Theodore Roosevelt, Francis Parkman, Owen Wister.

Frederic Remington (Fig. 1) has long been something of a puzzle for admirers of Western art. His knowledge of the West and his ability to capture the “real thing,” as editor and friend Poultney Bigelow phrased it, was exceptional.<sup>1</sup> By the time of his death in 1909, he had produced more than 3,000 illustrations for *Harper’s Weekly*, *Century*, *Scribner’s*, and most of the other illustrated magazines of the day (“Mr. Remington ... supports five or six large magazines and keeps them living well,” wrote Richard Harding Davis, editor of *Harper’s*<sup>2</sup>), meanwhile turning out easel-sized-paintings of extraordinary quality, bronzes that the critics hailed as among the best of their day, and writings that were as widely published as his pictures. Historian Francis Parkman called his pictures “as full of truth as of spirit,” and the critic William A. Coffin wrote that Remington’s pictures “always [contain] a general look of truth and life and dash” and that “Eastern people have formed their conceptions of what the Far-Western life is like more from what they have seen in Mr. Remington’s pictures than from any other source.”<sup>3</sup> But in many of his best pictures the backgrounds are fuzzy and look unfinished. In other instances, such as the woman’s saddle on a warrior’s horse in *The Smoke Signal* (Fig. 2), some of the details are clearly



Fig. 1. Frederic Remington, early 1890s.

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<sup>1</sup> Poultney Bigelow, *Seventy Summers*, 2 vols.; New York: Longmans, Green & Co.; London: E. Arnold & Co., 1925 I: 304.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Harding Davis letter in *Army and Navy Journal*, quoted in Peggy and Harold Samuels (eds.), *The Collected Writings of Frederic Remington*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1979, 605.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1892, preface; William A. Coffin, *American Illustrators Today: Third Paper*, in: *Scribner’s Magazine*, 11, March 1892, 348.

incorrect.<sup>4</sup> And late in life he adopted an impressionistic style that he admitted was informed by the work of French artist Claude Monet that confounded many of his admirers and obscured even further the details for which he is often touted.<sup>5</sup>

Remington's story is one of a search. He probably did not think of his life in such epic terms when he headed to Yale as a young man to study art, but it was there that he groomed the militaristic instincts bred into him as a youngster. He was born October 4, 1861, just a few months after the Civil War began, and was accustomed to hearing of his father's wartime exploits as he grew up. He developed a love of action and spent his most enjoyable hours on the Yale football field rather than under the tutelage of John Henry Niemeyer, his drawing professor. Perhaps it was the activity and physical competition of football that made him like the game, but he also appreciated its sanguinary aspects. Preparing for a game with Princeton, he reportedly splattered his jersey with animal blood "to make it look more businesslike."<sup>6</sup> When Remington learned that critics had attacked the game's roughness, he defended it, hoping that football would "not be emasculated and robbed of its Heroic qualities, which is its charm and its distinctive quality."<sup>7</sup> Football and Remington's love of the military were so closely associated that Stephen Crane, author of *The Red Badge of Courage*, might well have written of Remington (as he had of himself) that he had "never smelled even the powder of a sham battle" but had learned his "sense of the rage of conflict on the football field."<sup>8</sup>

Uninspired by his academic assignments at Yale, unsure of what to do with his life, and probably lacking financial resources because of his father's death in February 1880, Remington did not return to school the next spring, instead taking a clerking job in the governor's office at Albany. He changed positions several times, finding diversion from the boring paperwork in his art, horseback riding, boxing, and other outdoor pursuits, and in the courtship of Eva Caten of Gloversville, whom he had met in the fall of 1879. Remington made his first trip west in 1881 probably because Lawton Caten, Eva's father, had rejected his proposal to marry Eva, although the local newspaper reported that he had gone west because "he intends to make trial of life on a ranche [sic]."<sup>9</sup>

Remington arrived near the conclusion of the Indian wars, as the U. S. Army struggled to control the remaining Sioux, Apache, and other tribes on reservations. More than half of the approximately 25,000 troops were stationed in the West, a fact that many of the national publications downplayed, perhaps because several of their friends were trying to convince Europeans to invest in the West, and Indian wars were not conducive to investment. After a short visit to Montana, he returned home to celebrate his twenty-first birthday and to receive his patrimony, which he quickly invested in a small ranch in Kansas. He sold an illustration to *Harper's Weekly* while in New York, then left for Kansas again, where he sold the ranch and invested in a hardware store and saloon in Kansas City.<sup>10</sup> He went back to marry Missie, as he called Eva, and brought her to their new home in Pendleton Heights. When she found out that he was an investor in a saloon, she dolefully returned to her family, and Remington followed a few months later, after his business partners had cheated him out of his investment. He sold a few pictures in the meantime, then reunited with Missie and settled in Brooklyn in September 1885, taking a job as a commercial artist with *Harper's Weekly*. He attended classes at the Art Students League, then, in June, *Harper's* sent him on a trip to New Mexico, Arizona, and Mexico.

Remington arrived at just the right time. Geronimo and his Apache band had stirred new interest in the West, leading many Americans to believe that it was the most "American" region of the country. He got his first experience with the cavalry that summer following General George Crook in his pursuit of the Apaches who had fled confinement on the reservation and had taken to the mountains of Arizona and Sonora (Fig. 3). Although he never saw Geronimo and took part in no battles, Remington gained an admiration for the military: "Let anyone who wonders why the troops do not catch Geronimo but travel through a part of Arizona and Sonora and then he will wonder that they even try."<sup>11</sup> His drawings that summer bespoke "genius... and I loved them for their very

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<sup>4</sup> Rick Stewart, *The Grand Frontier: Remington and Russell in the Amon Carter Museum*, Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 2001, 43; Rick Stewart, *Frederic Remington: Masterpieces from the Amon Carter Museum*, Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1992, [53].

<sup>5</sup> See Emily Ballew Neff, *Frederic Remington: The Hogg Brothers Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, 90. See also Joan Carpenter, *Was Frederic Remington an Impressionist*, in: *Gilcrease, Magazine of American History and Art*, 10, Jan. 1988, inside front cover-19.

<sup>6</sup> Peter H. Hassrick, *Frederic Remington: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture in the Amon Carter Museum and the Sid W. Richardson Foundation Collections*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1973, 19, 101.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Peggy and Harold Samuels, *Frederic Remington: A Biography*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Robert Wooster Stallman (ed.), *Stephen Crane: Stories and Tales*, New York: Vintage, 1955, xvii.

<sup>9</sup> *St. Lawrence Plaindealer*, Aug. 10, 1881, quoted in Peggy and Harold Samuels, *Frederic Remington: A Biography*, New York: Doubleday, 1982, 33.

<sup>10</sup> W. A. Rogers after Frederic Remington, *Cow-Boys of Arizona—Roused by a Scout*, in: *Harpers Weekly*, Feb. 25, 1882, p. 118.

<sup>11</sup> From Remington's Journal, 1886, quoted in Hassrick, *Frederic Remington*, 22.

roughness,” according to Bigelow, who owned and edited *Outing* magazine, and although Remington was a virtual unknown, he purchased the whole lot to accompany a series of stories on the Apache campaign.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 2. *The Smoke Signal*, 1905, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 3. *Cavalry in an Arizona Sands-Storm*, 1889, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

Struggling for commercial success, Remington had only begun his search for personal expression. He had now sold a number of illustrations to *Harper's*, *Outing*, and *The Illustrated Graphic News*. Editors had come to think of him as an expert on the military and the West and sought him out for specific stories. His friend and collaborator Owen Wister concluded that Remington had virtually defined the U.S. Army for his contemporaries: "...Remington with his piercing and yet imaginative eye has taken the likeness of the modern American soldier and stamped it upon our minds with a blow as clean-cut as is the impression of the American Eagle upon our coins in the Mint."<sup>13</sup> Historian Francis Parkman was delighted to have him do the pictures for a new edition of his classic, *The Oregon Trail*, in 1892, (Fig. 4, 5) and future president Theodore Roosevelt expressly requested that he illustrate his *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail* in 1896<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 6, 7, 8). "Fred has as firm a grip on *Harper's* and the *Century* as any artist in this country," wrote Missie. "He has all he can do."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Bigelow, *Seventy Summers*, I, 305.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Dippie, *Frederic Remington's Wild West*, in: *American Heritage*, 26, no. 3, Apr. 1975, 6–23, 76–79.

<sup>14</sup> For the relationship between Remington and Roosevelt, see G. Edward White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederic Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.

<sup>15</sup> Eva to Horace Sackrider, Dec. 12, 1888, quoted in Hassrick, *Frederic Remington*, 23.

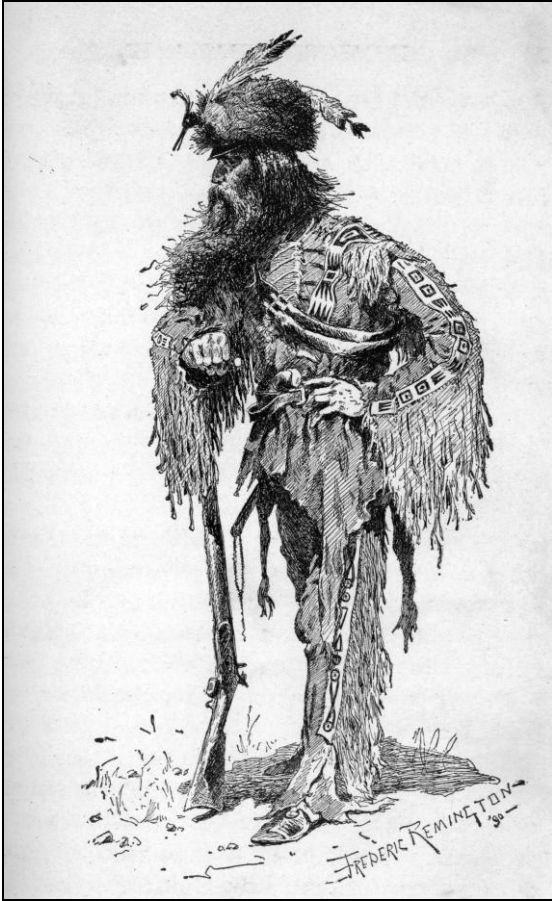


Fig. 4. *The Backwoodsman*, 1890, pen and ink on paper, in Theodore Roosevelt, *Stories of the Great West*, The Century Co., New York, 1909.



Fig. 5. *An old-time mountain man with his ponies*, pen and ink on paper, in Theodore Roosevelt, *Stories of the Great West*, The Century Co., New York, 1909.

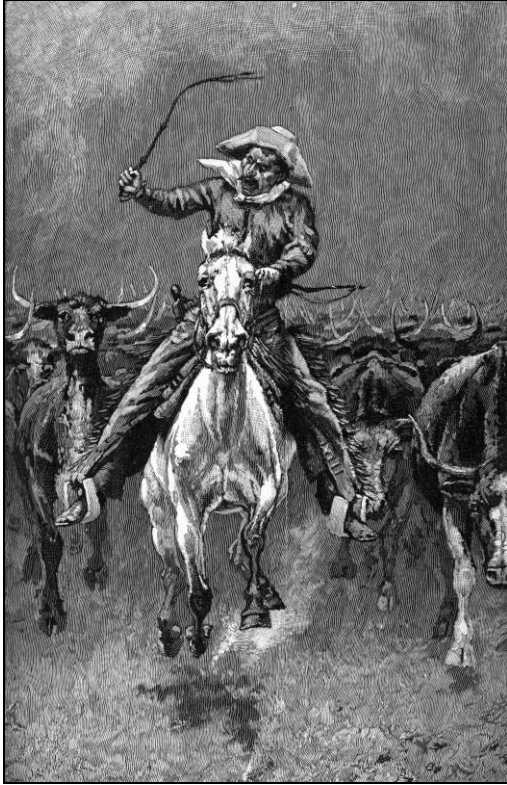


Fig. 6. *In a stampede*, in Theodore Roosevelt, *Stories of the Great West*, The Century Co., New York, 1909.

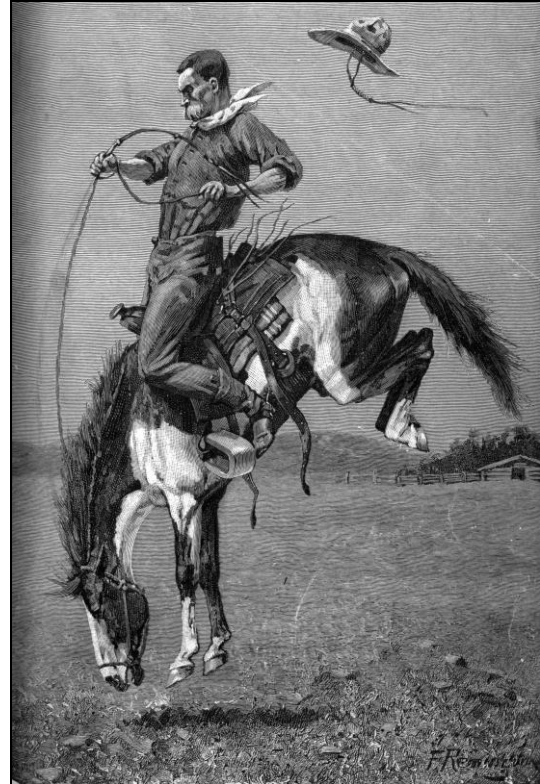


Fig. 7. *A bucking bronco*, in Theodore Roosevelt, *Stories of the Great West*, The Century Co., New York, 1909.

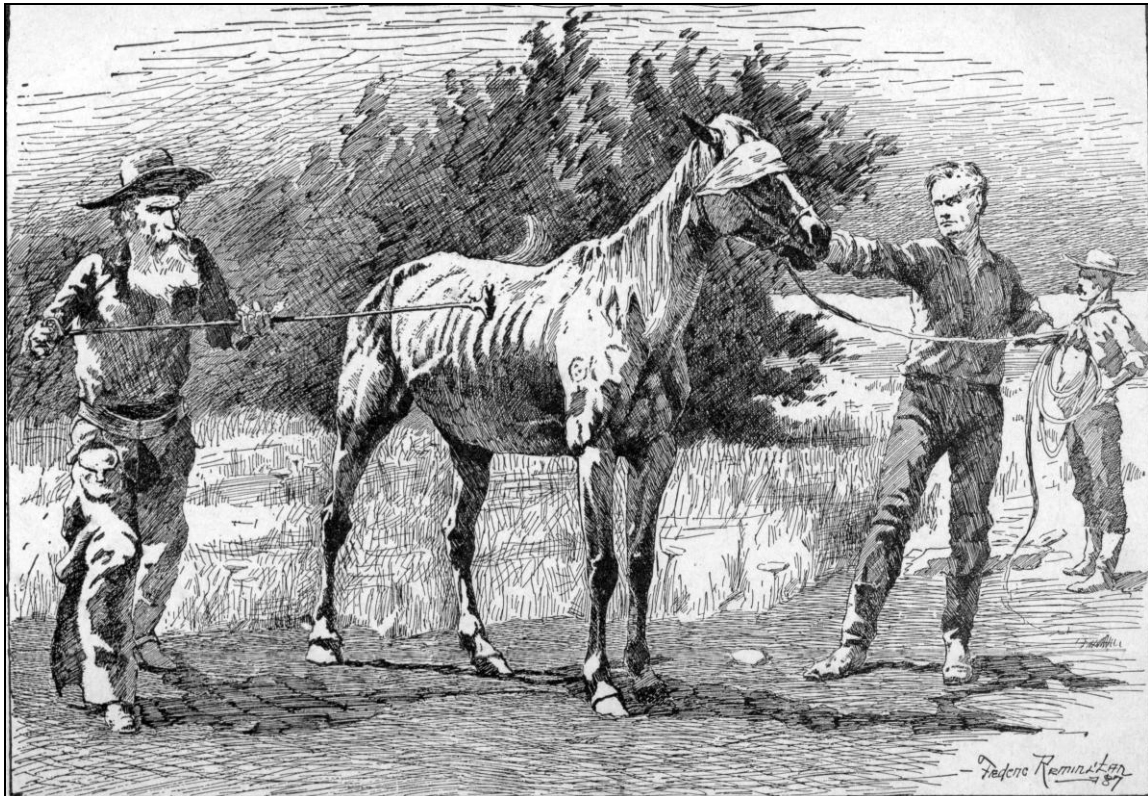


Fig. 8. *Branding a horse*, 1887, in Theodore Roosevelt, *Stories of the Great West*, The Century Co., New York, 1909.

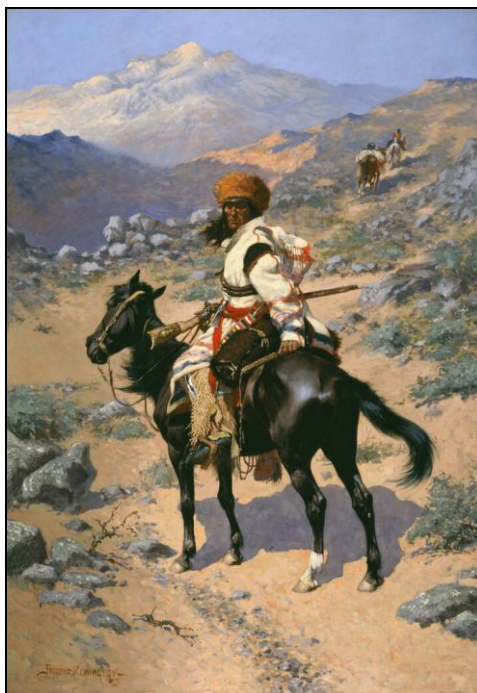


Fig. 9. *An Indian Trapper*, 1889, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

In the midst of his success, three factors combined to enable Remington to achieve the painterly levels that had thus far escaped him: his beginning disillusionment with the military, one of his primary subject sources; his recognition that for him the West was the backdrop for his creativity, rather than the main character; and his frustration at the public's concept of him as only an illustrator and not a painter. All three greatly affected his work. During the 1890s, his paintings seemed to become more static, as in *An Indian Trapper* (Fig. 9) and *A Cavalryman's Breakfast on the Plains* (Fig. 10), not in the sense of illustration, for his painterly abilities continued to improve, and he was selling more pictures than ever to the magazines, but he appeared to lose some of the spiritedness that had characterized such early work as *Dash for the Timber* (Fig. 11, 12, 13).<sup>16</sup>

Custer's spectacular defeat at the Little Big Horn gave the army's relentless march against all Indians the aspect of a national crusade, and soon thereafter Remington had ridden with the cavalry and visited Indian reservations. The Apache wars in the Southwest and the Sioux uprisings in Dakota Territory provided good material for an artist who believed that the military approach to civilizing the West was appropriate and whose deft pen and ink sketches and watercolors caught the energy and vitality of the effort (Fig. 14, 15). He even advocated that Indians be transferred from a civilian bureau to the military and organized into a force to assist in pacifying the West. All Indians "like to be enlisted in the service, universally obey orders, and are never disloyal," he asserted in a series of articles that appeared in *Century* and *Harper's*. They were "made of soldier stuff" and could "ride around the world without leaving a piece of bacon, or a cartridge, or a horse issued by [the Government]." He concluded his articles cynically by saying that he need not develop his idea further because nothing would be done by the bureaucracy.<sup>17</sup> Remington was not the only critic of the government's Indian policy.

Disillusionment had to have set in after he visited the site of the Wounded Knee massacre in December, 1890, where his ideal men of the army, motivated by an intense hand-to-hand encounter as well as revenge for Custer's 1876 defeat, had attacked the Indian camp with rapid-firing Hotchkiss guns. More than 150 Indians were killed, including forty-four women and eighteen children<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 16). Seeing the work of his heroic army, even at a distance – he declined to accompany the burial party back to the campsite – might have planted the seed of doubt in Remington's mind, but he still yearned for a *real* war. "We are

<sup>16</sup> Ben Merchant Vorpahl, *Frederic Remington and the West*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978, 124–125.

<sup>17</sup> Frederic Remington, *Artist Wanderings Among the Cheyennes*, in: *Century*, 38, Aug. 1889, 542. Portions of this story were also reprinted in the *New York Times*, Aug. 11, 1889.

<sup>18</sup> Robert M. Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux Nation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963, 200–203.

getting old,” he wrote Wister in 1897, “and one cannot *get* old without having seen a war.”<sup>19</sup> According to author Ben Merchant Vorpahl, he subsequently turned to nostalgic and sentimental scenes that noticeably lacked the spirit of his earlier efforts.<sup>20</sup> It was as if the reporter-artist had run out of mythic events to document, as if he had exhausted the West as a subject.



Fig. 10. *A Cavalryman's Breakfast on the Plains*, ca. 1892, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

Sensing that Remington needed fresh material and knowing that articles on Europe were popular, Henry Harper convinced the artist to make a European tour in 1892. Remington undertook the trip with his good friend Bigelow but was never comfortable outside his own element and felt that the trip was “a fatal embarkation” almost as soon as he had sailed for Russia. Once in Russia, he and Bigelow were taken for German spies and were “fired bodily” out of the country, as Remington explained to a friend. England he found a bit more hospitable and produced two articles, one on “Buffalo Bill in London” and the other on British army athletics, but he cut the trip short. He still longed for the blues and browns of the American desert and booked passage back to America, where he promptly set out on another western trip to renew his spirits. To Bigelow he wrote, “To-morrow – to morrow I start for ‘my people’... I go to the simple men. – men with the bark on – the big mountains – the great deserts and the scrawny ponies – I’m happy.”<sup>21</sup>

As a thoroughgoing adventurer, Remington was among those Americans who wanted a war with Spain in 1898. This was his chance for a real war. “There is bound to be a lovely scrap around Havana,” he wrote Wister in June, 1898. “A big murdering – sure – ”<sup>22</sup> This would be even better than the Civil War, he predicted, because “... we will kill a few Spaniards instead of Anglo Saxons, which will be proper and nice.”<sup>23</sup> With his chauvinism and romantic instincts still intact, and contracts with Hearst’s *New York Journal* and *Harper’s* in his pocket, Remington sailed for Cuba, slogged through a few trenches, and missed Teddy Roosevelt’s charge up San Juan Hill because he had taken cover in a ditch – although he later did a painting of

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Ben Merchant Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister: The Frederic Remington-Owen Wister Letters*, Palo Alto: American West Publishing Co., 1977, 215, 229; Peter H. Hassrick, *Remington, the Painter*, in Michael Edward Shapiro and Peter H. Hassrick, *Frederic Remington: The Masterworks*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1988, 113, 118.

<sup>20</sup> Brian Dippie, *Remington & Russell: The Sid Richardson Collection*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994, 18; Vorpahl, *Frederic Remington and the West*, 124–125.

<sup>21</sup> For information on the European trip, see Samuels and Samuels, *Frederic Remington*, 168–179, 204, 179–180; Remington to Bigelow, Jan. 29, 1893, quoted in Samuels and Samuels (eds.), *Collected Writings of Frederic Remington*, 606. According to Ramon F. Adams, *Western Words: A Dictionary of the American West*, Rev. Ed.; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968, p. 13, “bark” is an old trapper’s term for “to scalp.” Thus, “men with the bark on” had not been scalped.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister*, 233.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Samuels and Samuels, *Frederic Remington*, 245.

it (*Charge of the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill*, 1898, oil on canvas, 35 × 60 in. Frederic Remington Art Museum, Ogdensburg, New York). The actuality of war raised additional questions in his mind with regard to the military. He quickly realized what a deadly game it was to fight snipers who were firing smokeless gun powder from within the impenetrable, dense Caribbean jungles. Cuba showed him that supposedly heroic soldiers died lonely and agonizing deaths in the swamps, more often from disease than from enemy bullets – deaths devoid of symbolism or patriotic significance. He requested transportation back home.<sup>24</sup> The Cuban experience did not turn Remington into a pacifist, but it did diminish his exuberance for the military and, combined with the lessons of Wounded Knee, left him still searching for meaning for his prototypical characters.



Fig. 11. *A Dash for the Timber*, 1889, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 12. *A Dash for the Timber*, Detail, 1889, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>24</sup> Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister*, 233–234.



Fig. 13. *A Dash for the Timber*, Detail, 1889, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 14. *Lieutenant S.C. Robertson, Chief of the Crow Scouts*, 1890, transparent and opaque watercolor and graphite on paper, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 15. *Through the Smoke Sprang the Daring Soldier*, 1897, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

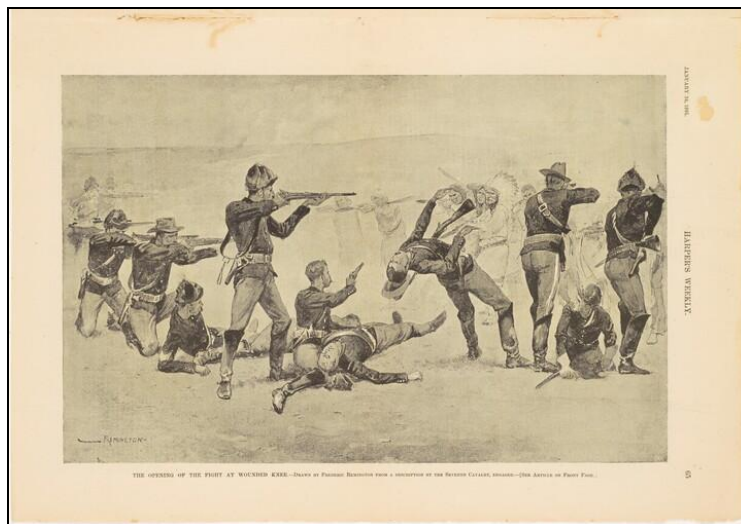


Fig. 16. *The Opening of the Fight at Wounded Knee*, 1891, halftone, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

The war experience served only to compound the frustration Remington had felt after his first one-man show in New York following his return from Europe in 1893. He displayed approximately 100 paintings in the American Art Association galleries, then held an auction. The sale was a popular success. Theodore Roosevelt wrote that, “I have never so wished to be a millionaire as when you have pictures to sell,” and Remington had netted \$7,299 in cash.<sup>25</sup> But he was disappointed. Despite the fact that he exhibited what he considered to be his best work, including *Cavalryman’s Breakfast on the Plains*, which later became the basis of a scene in John Ford’s classic western, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), the buyers were more attracted to what he considered his illustrations than to his paintings<sup>26</sup> (See Fig. 10). The same thing occurred in 1895, when he again offered a large selection of paintings at auction, confirming the critic George W. Shelton’s observation that Remington’s “splendid reputation as an illustrator for the magazines has failed to satisfy the ambition of an artist who bids fair to become equally established as a professional painter.”<sup>27</sup> Remington’s inner struggles had not yet produced the superb impressionistic studies that highlighted his later career, but he was painting mature pictures such as *The Fall of the Cowboy* that did bring him some satisfaction (Fig. 17).

<sup>25</sup> Samuels and Samuels, *Frederic Remington*, 235.

<sup>26</sup> Peter H. Hassrick and Melissa J. Webster, *Frederic Remington: A Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings, Watercolors and Drawings*, 2 vols.; Cody, WY: Buffalo Bill Historical Center, 1996, II, 862.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Hassrick, *Remington, the Painter*, 92.



Fig. 17. *The Fall of the Cowboy*, 1895, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

Rather than his usual, action-filled composition, *The Fall of the Cowboy* is a much calmer work in muted shades of brown, grey, and white – reminiscent of some of the work of his contemporaries James McNeill Whistler and Winslow Homer. It is a peon to the American cowboy, whose glory days of the open range, which Remington had celebrated in *A Dash for the Timber* (See Fig. 11) and other paintings, had passed. The painting was one of several illustrations that Remington did for Wister’s article, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,”<sup>28</sup> and it eloquently combines two of the factors that brought an end to the open range and the cattle drives. One was barbed wire, which inexpensively and effectively provided a way of fencing the range; the other was the blizzard of 1885–86 that killed thousands of head of cattle in the northern ranges. The somber mood of the painting seems to summarize perfectly the puncher’s dilemma. The freedom of the open plains has been banished, and he has been reduced from riding and roping and branding to fixing fence and opening gates. “The West is all played out in its romantic aspects,” he wrote in 1894.<sup>29</sup> Still, the buyers apparently did not fully appreciate his work, and the sales were modest; nor were the paintings well reviewed.<sup>30</sup>

Remington was increasingly frustrated that the market and critical reception did not initially keep pace with his maturation as an artist. Yet, he could find no setting – either in Europe or the East Coast – that energized his work like the West. He returned there after both Europe and Cuba, hoping to regain that inspiration. “This is the war I am going to put in the rest of my time at,” he wrote Wister in 1899.<sup>31</sup> But the West had changed, and he was disappointed. Settlement had increased to the point that the Census Bureau declared in 1890 that there could no longer be said to be a frontier. The Indians were safely on their reservations, and the army was fully occupied in Cuba and the Philippines. In January, 1896, Remington was in San Antonio on his way to a hunting and sketching trip in Mexico when he met the old Ranger John S. “Rip” Ford, someone who “will tell you stories that will make your eyes hang out on your shirt front,” he wrote. Truly one of the “men with the bark on,” Ford was a bent but spirited eighty-one year old veteran of the Texas Revolution, the war with Mexico, the Civil War, the Indian wars, and the border wars, and the two men lit cigars and settled down in the comfortable confines of the San Antonio Club, talking for hours. But, instead of featuring Ford’s many stories of Indian fights, Remington titled his essay “How the Law Got into the Chaparral,” and concluded, “Texas is to-day the only State in the Union where pistol-carrying is attended with great chances of arrest and fine. The law is supreme even in the lonely *jacails* [*sic*] out in the rolling waste of chaparral, and it was made so by the tireless riding, the deadly shooting, and the indomitable courage of the Texas Rangers.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, XCI (Sept. 1895), 602–17.

<sup>29</sup> *New York Herald*, Jan. 14, 1894, quoted in *Remington, the Painter*, in Hassrick and Shapiro, *Frederic Remington: The Masterworks*, 118.

<sup>30</sup> Hassrick, *Frederic Remington*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> Remington to Wister, Sept. 1, 1899, quoted in Hassrick, *Frederic Remington*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> “How the Law Got into the Chaparral,” in Samuels and Samuels (eds.), *Collected Writings of Frederic Remington*, pp. 241–247. The story was originally published in *Harper’s Monthly*, December 1896. See also Richard B. McCaslin, *Fighting Stock: John S. “Rip” Ford of Texas*, Fort Worth: TCU Press, 2011, p. 266.

The winning of the West was over, something that Remington had sensed earlier but was finally forced to admit: “My West ... put on its hat, took up its blankets, and marched off the board,” he concluded.<sup>33</sup> “Shall never come west again,” he wrote his wife from Santa Fe in November, 1900. “It is all brick buildings – derby hats and blue overalls – it spoils my early illusions – and they are *my* capital.”<sup>34</sup> Had he been only an illustrator, content to report what he saw, his feelings might not have mattered so much in his work. To Remington the West had always been a region of romance and adventure that had revitalized him. Now, that was no longer true. Civilization had arrived, and he was forced to a deeper understanding of the significance of the West in his work.

Remington’s ideas of his “men with the bark on” had been forming for some time. In 1895 he had published a gathering of his articles called *Pony Tracks*, in which his characters confront the difficulties of the Western environment: nature, in the form of the “tangled masses of the famous Badlands,” or the “treacherous mazes” of Yellowstone; rough characters, as in the Brulé Sioux that he saw in Dakota, “a perfect animal”; constant danger, as in the “instant and awful death [that] overtakes the puncher – a horse in a gopher hole, a mad steer...” These men are untainted by the “enfeebling” influences and luxuries of modern life. In 1900 he put together another collection of his writings entitled *Men With the Bark On*, which he dedicated to the “Men with the bark on [who] die like the wild animals, unnaturally – unmourned, and even unthought of mostly.”<sup>35</sup>

Remington found his meaning in the heroic past of the West – not the events of the Gold Rush, Custer’s defeat, the cattle drives, or the pursuit of Geronimo, but the freedom and space that permitted the character that he came to call his “men with the bark on” to survive and excel. He was one of the best known and most successful painters in the country in 1905 when he recalled (or, some would say, invented) his epiphany in a few autobiographical remarks for *Collier’s*. He remembered the “grand silent country” of his first trip West in 1881 when he had followed his “own inclinations.” But something was not right. There was “a heavy feel in the atmosphere. I did not immediately see what it portended, but it gradually obtruded itself.” The times had changed. An old wagon driver who shared his camp one evening gave expression to the feeling. “And now, there is no West,” the old man had concluded. “In a few years the railroad will come along the Yellowstone and a poor man can not make a living at all.” Remington was stunned: “The old man had closed my very entrancing book almost at the first chapter ... I knew the wild riders and the vacant lands were about to vanish forever.” Thus he began his artistic search as a nineteen-year-old artist who had never before seen the West. “Without knowing exactly how to do it, I began to try to record some facts around me.”<sup>36</sup>

Those facts, it turned out, were not the details of the historical record that he had witnessed, as his early illustrations would lead one to believe, but even then were documents of his “men with the bark on”, the brave men who, like Remington, realized that their West – their war – no longer existed and that the West of their imagination was their last refuge.<sup>37</sup> Although Remington might not have realized the place his imaginary West played in his work until later in life, it had been evident in his mature paintings for years. Because he had a reputation as a painter of extreme accuracy and detail – some even claimed that his work was superior to a photograph – critics ignored the fact that most of his paintings could be anywhere on the Great Plains, the Southwestern desert, or the Rocky Mountains, for the landscape almost always was reduced to two broad stripes of desert-colored paint: one light blue for the sky, the other an adobe brown for the ground. There are exceptions, such as *An Indian Trapper* (See Fig. 9), where the mountains form an

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Emily Ballew Neff, *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890–1950*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, 54; and in Dippie, ‘Flying Buffaloes’: Artists and the Buffalo Hunt, in: *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Summer 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Remington to Missie, [Nov. 18, 1900], quoted in Hassrick, *Frederic Remington*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> White, *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience*, pp. 104–107; Remington, *Men with the Bark On*, New York: Harper & Bros., Publishers, 1900, dedication page.

<sup>36</sup> “A Few Words from Mr. Remington,” *Collier’s*, Mar. 18, 1904, quoted in Peggy and Harold Samuels (eds.), *The Collected Writings of Frederic Remington*, New York: Doubleday, 1979, 551.

<sup>37</sup> Frederic Remington, *Men with the Bark On*, London: Harper & Bros., 1900. See also Samuels and Samuels, *Frederic Remington*, 269–297.

important part of the composition, but even there the background is sketchy while the figure in the center of the picture is painted in full and colorful detail, even down to the easily recognizable Hudson's Bay Company blanket coat.

In the search for expression, Remington moved away from narrative, action pictures such as *A Dash for the Timber* to concentrate on the universal elements of life in the West.<sup>38</sup> *Ridden Down* (Fig. 18) is one of the best examples of this motif. A Crow brave has been "ridden down" by a bunch of Sioux warriors who are obviously intent upon his death. The Crow stoically stands at the edge of a bluff, war club in hand. His pony stands uselessly by, exhausted; there is not even a tree to hide behind. But that is the point. He is one of Remington's "men with the bark on" and would not hide even if he could. In reality, he is not a Crow brave, nor are his pursuers a Sioux war party. He is every brave man preparing to meet his inevitable end; the war party only hastens that doom, regardless of its current identity. The barren land is any place. Remington used this western setting and the guise of Indian braves, because it was the West that he understood and that inspired him. It was his theater of expression, just as Winslow Homer used the Maine seacoast and sailors and the hunters of the Adirondacks for his depiction of man against the elements, just as Thomas Eakins used the parlors and doyens of Philadelphia. The painting further personifies Remington's point in that the Crow warrior also represents the demise of the Old West.

Now that Remington had discovered the combination that would nourish his genius, he produced some of his most appealing and significant pictures in which a seemingly historic scene is imbued with symbolic and moral themes. Most are genre scenes so believable and trivial in nature that one might look to the story rather than the moral. *His First Lesson* (Fig. 19), painted in 1903, is a good example. The picture brings a chuckle to veteran horsemen who have suffered kicked shins or worse while training a wild pony, but a close look at the terror of the horse changes the mood of the picture from humorous to one deeply sympathetic with nature's wild creatures, then to understanding as it becomes clear that this bronc, about to be broken to the saddle, is representative of wildness that Remington had glimpsed in the West in 1881, and of the West itself.<sup>39</sup> Both had been tamed and civilized.



Fig. 18. *Ridden Down*, 1905–1906, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>38</sup> It is true, of course, that Remington continued to do large, narrative pictures on commission, such as *The Charge*, or *A Cavalry Scrap*, 1906, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, which was hung in the grill room of the Knickerbocker Hotel in New York City.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Nemerov, *Frederic Remington & Turn-of-the-Century America*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 48–49. Hassrick, in Hassrick and Webster, *Frederic Remington*, I, 57, discusses how one critic badly misinterpreted this painting.



Fig. 19. *His First Lesson*, 1903, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

One of Remington's early efforts to resolve this intellectual dilemma – perhaps before he fully understood it – was his resort to a medium free of time and geography: bronze. His dynamic *Bronco Buster* (Fig. 20, 21), copyrighted in 1895, embodies his message without the compromising baggage of the Western landscape or an accompanying story. In his paintings the landscapes in the backgrounds had become increasingly sketchy; in the bronze there was no background at all. The rider is a cowboy, but he could be any man; the urgency of the situation would be the same. He stands alone, reminiscent of an era but not dependent on it or an accompanying story. He is a man that “every man sees with his own eyes,” wrote Remington, attempting to explain his excitement over the accomplishment. The critics also were pleased. One wrote that Remington had “struck his gait.” Remington was even happier: “All paper is pulp now. My oils will all get old wasting ... my watercolors will fade – but I am to endure in bronze...” “I am going to rattle down through all the ages,” he wrote to Wister. “I am d – near eternal.”<sup>40</sup> His bronzes would not even rust, he said. His statement would endure. He excelled in sculptures with men on horseback at full speed, be it an Indian, a cowboy or a soldier. A cavalryman charging, gun in hand (*Trooper on the Plains* 1868, Fig. 22) seems to confront an Indian brave who mercilessly whips his pony (*The Cheyenne*, Fig. 23). A cowboy tries to keep together his herd of longhorns (*Stampede*, Fig. 24) while four jolly cowboys return from a night spent in town, firing their guns and gaily shouting (*Coming Through the Rye*, Fig 25). There are also some compositions with calmer attitudes such as *The Mountain Man* (Fig. 26) who cautiously guides his mule on a dangerous declivity. Or the Indian warrior who gloriously exhibits his trophy over his head in a gesture of victory and pride (*The Scalp*, Fig. 27). Remington also tried his hand in portraiture even though he had not excelled. At least two portraits are worth of mention: *The Savage* (Fig. 28) and *The Sergeant* (Fig. 29).

In May, 1903, Robert Collier, editor of *Collier's*, gave Remington a chance to elaborate on his new understanding in a series of pictures – one a month for four years. Collier promised to publish them in color and as works of art, rather than as illustrations accompanying a story. Remington was delighted. It was a financially attractive offer – \$1,000 per picture – and he would be able to choose his own subject. He decided to paint groups of pictures that would be thematically related: a Louisiana Purchase series, a Great Explorers series. Also included in the pictures were *His First Lesson*, *The Grass Fire* (Fig. 30), *The Long Horn Cattle Sign* (Fig. 31), and *Pony Tracks in the Buffalo Trails* (1904. Oil on canvas, 30 ¼ × 51 ¼ in., Canajoharie Library and Art Gallery, Canajoharie, New York), several of his best paintings. These pictures linked Remington's hard-line, realistic style to the impressionistic palette that characterized his later work; critics either did not understand the change that was taking place in his work or did not appreciate it. Much to Remington's chagrin, those used to his hard-edge style attacked him for lack of accuracy, both in his

<sup>40</sup> Quotations in Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister*, 158, 165.

research for the paintings and in the paintings themselves. “There was hardly one of the series of Explorer pictures which wouldn’t quite as well have been substituted for any other under a different name,” one reader wrote. “He is not giving you (*Collier’s*) what you, and we, have a right to demand – his best work.”<sup>41</sup> They still looked for the illustrative qualities of his earlier work. This might have been one reason that Remington’s destroying large numbers of paintings in 1907 and again in 1908.<sup>42</sup>



Fig. 20. *The Bronco Buster*, 1895, bronze, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 21. *The Bronco Buster*, Detail, 1895, bronze, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Hassrick, *Frederic Remington*, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Samuels and Samuels, *Frederic Remington*, 380–381.



Fig. 22. *The Trooper on the Plains* 1868, 1909, bronze, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 23. *The Cheyenne*, 1901, bronze, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 24. *Stampede*, 1903, bronze, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 25. *Coming Through the Rye*, 1902, bronze, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 26. *The Mountain Man*, 1903, bronze, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

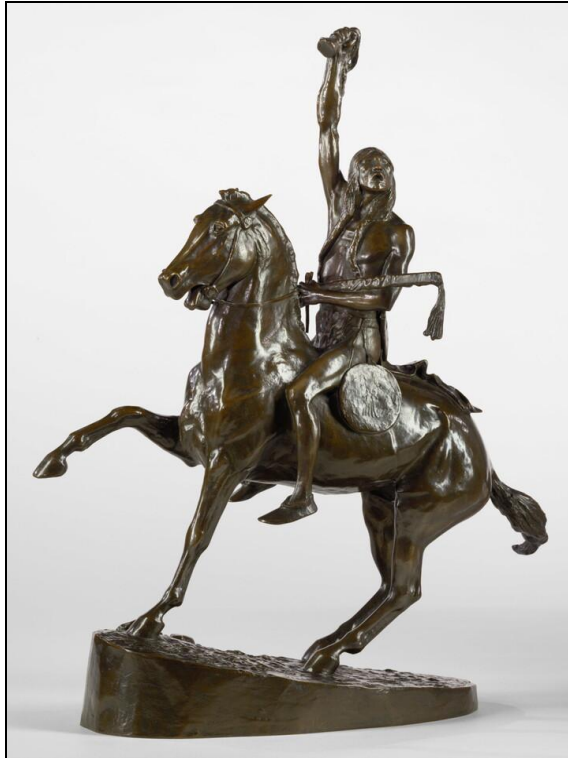


Fig. 27. *The Scalp*, 1898, bronze,  
Amon Carter Museum of American Art,  
Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 28. *The Savage*, 1908, bronze,  
Amon Carter Museum of American Art,  
Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 29. *The Sergeant*, 1904, bronze,  
Amon Carter Museum of American Art,  
Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 30. *The Grass Fire*, 1908, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.



Fig. 31. *The Long-Horn Cattle Sign*, 1908, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

The *Collier's* commission, however, gave Remington a chance to further explore color, which had troubled him for some time. “For ten years I’ve been trying to get color in my things and I still don’t get it,” he had confided to friend and illustrator Charles S. Chapman.<sup>43</sup> Just a few years before, he had begun to paint nocturnes, first as illustrations for his second novel, *The Way of an Indian*, which was published serially in *Cosmopolitan* in 1905 and in book form the following year, then as images not necessarily associated with

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Samuels and Samuels, *Frederic Remington*, 363.

stories.<sup>44</sup> In 1902 he painted *Indian Scouts in the Moonlight* (private collection), one of his most successful early nocturnes. It recalled the artist's contention that, in order to make a successful picture, most of the hard work had to be done outside the canvas. These night pictures (*A Reconnaissance*, 1902, oil on canvas, 27 ¼ × 40 1/8 in., Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, Minnesota; *Old Stage Coach of the Plains* (Fig. 32) 1901, oil on canvas, 40 ¼ × 27 ¼ in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth) pose questions rather than answer them, as many of Remington's illustrations did. What is going on in the picture? (Fig. 33) Who are the scouts? What danger are they facing? He is once again dealing with the universal situation of man and nature, and it was with obvious pleasure that he read the excellent reviews of his work.<sup>45</sup> Critic Royal Cortissoz observed a change in Remington's work, "beginning with his exhibition of night scenes, where a painter took the place of the illustrator's brittle pen drawings and blaring reds and yellows."<sup>46</sup> The reviewer for the *New York Times* wrote:

*The exhibition is not wholly without its new note, however, and this in the most difficult and unexpected quarter: the painting of night, in which he has made great progress, revealing genuine painter-like qualities. In these night scenes there is a marked forward stride in the rendering of atmosphere, the color is more expressive, and less painty, the brush work is looser, even the drawing is better, and the whole has a breadth and freedom of execution that may presage great things for Mr. Remington if he chooses to follow this path seriously. Unquestionably the most impressive of these is the painting called "the Sentinel," with its single figure cloaked, as it were, in silence, and very expressive of the spirit of night.*<sup>47</sup>

Remington fitted smoothly into the evolving cultural context of his time. He thought of himself as an artist, just as Walt Whitman and Homer did, and searched in the style of the romantic, because the search itself is noble. The solutions were individual: subject matter, style, personality. It is an artistic approach still honored. But for those who still seemed not to comprehend, like the buyers at his first two auctions and his peers at the National Academy of Design who had thus far withheld an invitation to membership, Remington produced two novels, *John Ermine of the Yellowstone* (1902) and *The Way of an Indian* (1907), which he said were written "to introduce people to the subjects I was trying to draw, paint, and sculpt ..., with the deliberate view of educating men and women, who knew not the West, up to a certain standard of appreciation for its beauties, its fascinations, its intrinsic worth." To be sure that they did not miss the "intrinsic worth" he intended, Remington chose pictures for *The Way of an Indian* that would illustrate the various stages of the hero's life rather than pictures that one might be able to identify and view as an illustration. Like his paintings, the two novels dealt with heroic characters who lived and died in Remington's historic and idealized West. But the setting could have been anyplace, anytime; Remington intended a universal message. He set it in the West because that is what he understood and loved.

That he was never accepted into the National Academy bothered Remington, for it meant that his fellow artists also did not understand or appreciate the nature of his expression, or rejected it entirely. He could take some solace in his popularity, of course, but if the buyers still preferred his illustrations to his most expressive paintings, they purchased only a chunk of the Old West rather than understood his more universal and most essential statements. He became one of the best paid artists of his day but received little emotional support or complement from his fellow artists. Perhaps it was the unusual nature of his subjects, as he suggested in writing about his novels. Perhaps it was because he did not produce the stupendous mountain landscapes that Bierstadt and Moran had led Easterners to expect of the West. But even if he could have determined that the problem was choice of subject, there is no guarantee he would have changed. "My art requires me to go down ... the road where the human beings are..., in the landscape which to me is overpowered by their presence," he wrote in *Men With the Bark On*.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Samuels and Samuels, *Frederic Remington*, 297, 361. See also Nancy K. Anderson, *Frederic Remington: The Color of Night*, Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Nancy K. Anderson, *Dark Disquiet: Remington's Late Nocturnes*, in Anderson, *Frederic Remington*, 69.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in Samuels and Samuels, *Frederic Remington*, 340.

<sup>47</sup> *New York Times*, Dec. 5, 1907.

<sup>48</sup> Frederic Remington, *Men with the Bark On*, New York: Harper & Bros., 1900, 191.



Fig. 32. *The Old Stage-Coach of the Plains*, 1901, oil on canvas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

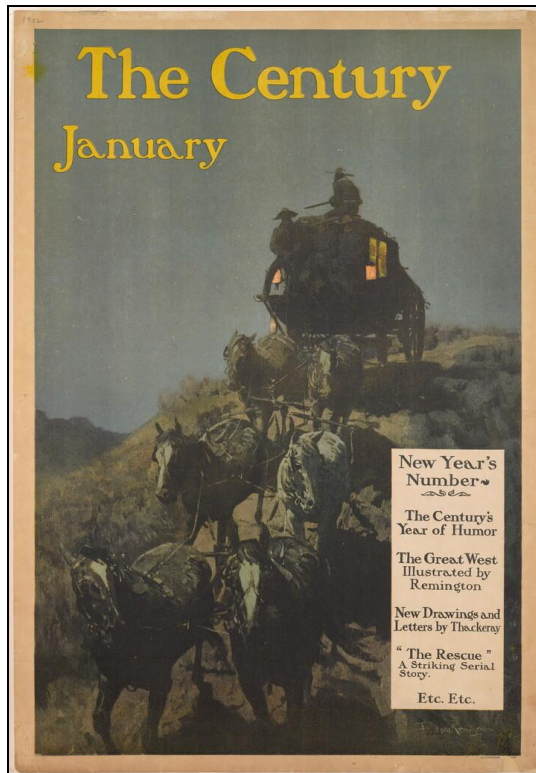


Fig. 33. Cover of *The Century*, January 1902, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

One critic finally provided a measure of the understanding that Remington craved, and the artist gloated in the recognition. The reviewer for the *New York Evening Mail* observed in 1909 that, “No American artist interests the people more than Remington does, and none is really better worth going to see.”<sup>49</sup> In his diary Remington noted that, “The art critics have all ‘come down – I have received belated but splendid notices from all the papers. The[y] ungrudgingly give me a high place as a ‘mere painter.’ I have been on their trail a long while and they never surrendered while they had a leg to stand on. The ‘Illustrator’ phase has become a background.”<sup>50</sup> (Fig. 34) To a certain extent, Remington might have been right. After his death in December, 1909, Royal Cortissoz, writing in *Scribner’s Magazine*, agreed that Remington had “worked out an impressionism of his own... In past times he has made it shriek, and, even now, he finds it impossible to lend suavity to so high a key. But that, of course, is precisely what no one would ask him to do.”<sup>51</sup>

In analyzing Remington’s complex and brilliant career, many biographers have relied on an 1892 statement by William A. Coffin, made in a series of articles on American illustrators: “The cavalryman, the Indian, the scout, the miner and the ranchman have furnished Frederic Remington with subjects that he illustrates with much vigor of line and striking effect.... It is a fact that admits of no question that Eastern people have formed their conceptions of what the Far-Western life is like, more from what they have seen in Mr. Remington’s pictures than from any other source.”<sup>52</sup> While this statement is reasonably true, it does not consider that “conceptions of Far-Western life” were not Remington’s primary subjects. His subject was a legitimate and universal one for artists: the brave life. He believed that the ideal man could have reached his apex during the few decades that we have now come to call the Old West – before the end of the frontier and the invasion of civilization and mechanization. Like the Romantic Rousseau, Remington had his “noble savage” in these frontier types. Finding the West most hospitable to this kind of nobility made him the epitome of the American Western painter. Remington would have appreciated the irony of the fact that we cannot really understand the point of his great body of work until we cease to see him as that Western painter and see him in the context of American painting and culture – a context with which he was much more familiar.

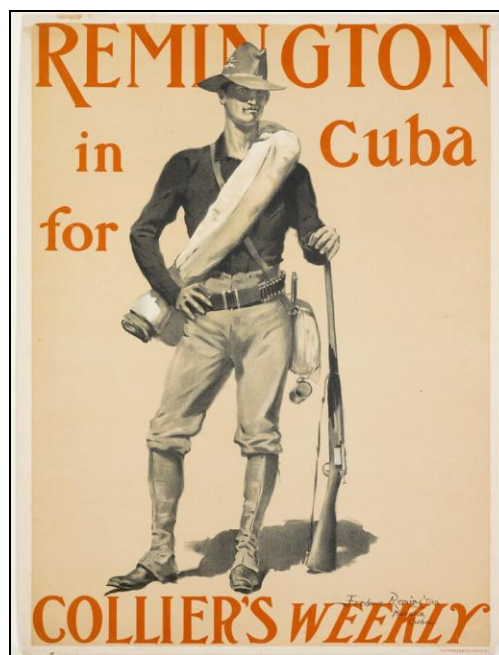


Fig. 34. *Cover of Collier's Weekly*, 1898, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas.

<sup>49</sup> Newspaper quote taken from Remington's journal, December 11, 1909, quoted on the website <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/7aa/7aa129.htm>.

<sup>50</sup> Remington's Diary, entry for December 9, 1909, quoted in Dippie, *Remington & Russell*, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Royal Cortissoz, *Frederic Remington: A Painter of American Life*, in: *Scribner's Magazine*, 47 (Feb. 1910), 195.

<sup>52</sup> Coffin, *American Illustrators Today: Third Paper*, p. 348.

