



Trail Boss

Date: ca. 1897

Artist: Charles Marion Russell, American, 1864-1926

Culture: American

Medium: watercolor and graphite underdrawing on paper

Aesthetic Summary

We are immediately drawn to the figure of the cowboy, a bright red bandana tied around his neck and an impassive expression on his face. His clothing and accessories are drawn in great detail and clearly identify his occupation. His stance is somewhat tense: with a lasso in the crook of one arm and the other arm half-raised, it seems as if he is getting ready to move toward us. The muted colors of the dry, arid plains behind him are in marked contrast to his colorful attire and convey a sense of distance. There is a rhythm in the curves of the hills, the rounded top of the chuck wagon, and the brim of the cowboy's hat. Smoke rises into the air from a campfire and clouds of dust rise from the cattle, conveying a sense of events in motion.

Interestingly, the action seems primarily in the background; the cattle seem to be kicking up the dust as they move away, and the herd line becomes more abstract as it fades in the distance. The cowboy's horse and the chuck wagon scene directly to his right are tonally lighter and less detailed than the figure in the foreground. The size of the cowboy in proportion to the background elements, as well as the detail applied to his clothing and features in comparison to the landscape behind him, suggest a dream-like quality to the scene. It is almost as if he is not present "in the moment", but instead representing a memory of times gone by.

About the Artist

Personal History:

Charles Marion Russell was born in 1864 in St. Louis, Missouri to a prosperous, business-minded family. Although his parents hoped he would follow into the family business, Russell was a poor student, and it was soon clear his interests lay elsewhere. From an early age, he showed great skill in drawing and modeling and a

voracious interest in the history and lore of the Western frontier. His longing to see the Western frontier first hand was fulfilled when, at the age of 16, he finally arrived in Montana to begin work on a sheep farm. Although his father predicted that he would not enjoy this type of work (spoiler alert – he did not!), his assumption that young Charles would satisfy his “itch” to see the West and return home to settle down was not correct. Instead, Russell was entranced by the landscape and fascinated by the range of characters he encountered, and he quickly decided that Montana was the place he would spend the rest of his days.

As a young man, Charles first worked a 2-year apprenticeship as a hunter and trapper, but eventually settled into the cowboy life as a night horse wrangler. This allowed him plenty of time during the day for his other pastime – sketching and painting. His experiences on the open range, coupled with his keen observations of the parade of colorful characters to be found there, would provide a lifetime of artistic inspiration. He would continue to draw on his personal recollections of this time long after he left the cowboy life and become a full-time artist.

Career Highlights:

By the mid-1880's, painting provided a small but useful addition to the seasonal income of wrangling for Russell. However, it was a small watercolor sketch of a starving cow surrounded by wolves, entitled *Waiting for a Chinook*, that brought him his first real recognition as an artist. Russell produced the sketch to include in a friend's letter to the ranch boss detailing how the herd was faring during the devastating winter of 1886-87. The range boss was greatly impressed and shared the image widely, eventually capturing the notice of the local papers. Eventually, interest in his work began to spread outside of Montana, with the exhibit of his painting “Breaking Camp” at the 1886 St. Louis Art Exposition and printing of his first lithograph in 1887. In 1893, Russell received his first sizeable patron commission and finally left the cowboy life behind to focus full-time on his art.

With his wife Nancy handling the business and marketing end of the endeavor, Charles' artistic success flourished in the early 1900's. With the “Old West “ already becoming a distant memory, the public was nostalgic for images documenting an earlier, and simpler, time. Russell was in great demand as an illustrator, sculptor and painter during the early 1900's, culminating in 1911 with a highly successful one-man show at New York's Folsom Galleries. Soon after, he was awarded a commission by the State of Montana to paint a mural for display in the State Capitol. Depicting the meeting between Lewis and Clark and the Ootlashot tribe, it was considered by many to be his masterpiece.

Throughout his career, Russell's personal characteristics informed his painting style. He was gifted with a keen wit and was a natural storyteller; he had a genuine love of people. He was extremely tolerant of differences and possessed a deep insight into human nature. These traits are most notably on display in the meticulously illustrated correspondence that Charles sent to family, friends, and acquaintances. Whether recounting a humorous anecdote, thanking his host for a pleasant meal, or

simply commenting on the news of the day, these letters were prized and often saved by their recipients. Eventually finding their way into many museum collections, Russell is today as well known for his letters or, in his own words, “paper talk” as for his paintings and sculpture.

By the time of his death in 1926, Charles Russell had created more than 2500 paintings, sketches and drawings that fondly portrayed the West of his childhood imagination and early adult years.

Artistic Style:

The early work of Russell was very documentary in nature, portraying characters, scenes, and landscapes that were very much a part of his everyday life. His work experiences on the open range and brief time spent living with the Native Americans in the late 1880's lent a unique authenticity to his work. In fact, historians have used his paintings of domestic scenes as a guide to Native American dress and customs of the time period.

Most of his paintings pre-1897 used a narrow somewhat dark color palette, emphasizing dull shades of brown. Effects were achieved primarily through meticulous draftsmanship, and many individual figures were included in the composition of a single scene.

Post 1897, his paintings began to display a lighter and more varied color palette. Russell became more skilled at using color and brushstroke to achieve a desired effect, and the composition of his paintings was improved by reducing the number of major figures displayed and arranging them for better effect. Further removed from his youthful experiences, his work took on a more reflective quality.

Interestingly, the work *Trail Boss* falls very neatly into Russell's later aesthetic. From the focus on a singular figure, the colorful rendering of the clothing, the use of brushstrokes to simulate the spiky plants and grass of the plains, and the wistful feeling invoked by the faded, dusty environs of the background, this painting seems somewhat nostalgic and contemplative.

References

Charles M. Russell: Painting, Drawings & Sculpture in the Amon G. Carter Collection (1966). Frederic G. Renner, University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.

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