

The Cowboy Artist: A View of Montana History



Amazing Montanans—Biographies

Charles Marion Russell

A sculptor, a painter, and always a storyteller of great reputation, Charles Marion Russell (1864-1926) achieved fame during his lifetime as a leading artist of the American West. His depictions of Native Americans, cowboys, the frontier, and the wilderness were assembled from his own experience and his romantic view of the West. His observations of western life took the form of watercolors, drawings, paintings, sculpture, illustrated letters, and endless tall tales and stories. Without the aid of formal artistic training, Russell was influenced in his art by the environment around him; he was a keen observer of life.

Born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, Russell knew the thrill and excitement of living in a city that served as the gateway to the western frontier for adventurers, explorers, and artists. Although he progressed rapidly in his artwork, winning blue ribbons in two consecutive years, 1876 and 1877, for artwork submitted to the St. Louis Agricultural and Mechanical Fair, his family could not persuade Charlie—as his closest friends ever knew him—to pursue formal artistic training. His artistic skill was recognized and encouraged by his parents. His mother was an artist, his maternal grandfather a silversmith, and several of his siblings displayed artistic talent.

Shortly before his sixteenth birthday, Russell ventured to the Montana Territory, where he would spend the rest of his life. Inspired by dime-novel adventures, actual accounts of life in the West, a love of horses, and with his artistic aptitude and determination to overcome the shortfalls of modern civilization, Russell felt equipped for this endeavor. Within a few years, he was working as a cowhand on the open range, and he became widely known for his ability to model life-like figures of men and animals. “I remember he used to keep the fingernail on his right hand little finger longer than the rest and with this he would carve out the necessary lines on the animals he was modeling,” an early rancher recalled.



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Charlie painting “When the Land Belonged to God.”

Indeed, Russell became so skilled as an artist/observer that he regularly amazed onlookers by casually modeling a realistic figure behind his back or in his pocket, without looking at it. A naturally gifted sculptor, he had powers of observation that were as much tactile as visual, and he inherently understood objects in three dimensions. His innate ability as a sculptor allowed Russell to develop his skills as a painter. Russell would carefully arrange small-modeled figures in controlled light in order to transfer the effects to a two-dimensional canvas.

Charlie met his wife Nancy at the home of his friends Ben Roberts. Both Nancy and Charlie were natural flirts. They courted and, much to the dismay of Charlie’s cowboy-bachelor friends, married on September 9, 1895. In order to ensure that food remained on the table, Nancy took charge of the business end of Charlie’s artwork and began exhibiting his works in galleries. Through her tenacity, his work became more well known and sold for high prices.

Shortly after Russell’s death in 1926, his good friend, the cowboy humorist and stage performer Will Rogers, wrote: “He was the greatest artist the West has ever produced.... He didn’t go there to study the West, just to paint it. He loved it, lived it, and painted it because he loved it.”*

* Excerpted from the Amon Carter Museum’s Teacher’s Guide to Charles M. Russell.