

## 29: Frederic Remington *The Broncho Buster* (1895) *The Cheyenne* (1901)

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In 1894, Frederic Remington took up sculpting—just that casually by every indication—and within a year produced a Western masterpiece. He had watched an established sculptor, Frederick W. Ruckstull, working at a neighbor's house on a model for an equestrian monument. The neighbor, observing how Remington could turn figures around and reposition them in his drawings, commented that at heart he was a sculptor himself. The idea caught Remington's fancy, and, with Ruckstull's encouragement, he set about creating an equestrian model of his own.<sup>1</sup>

The audacity of his decision and of the astonishing bronze he created, *The Broncho Buster*, can only be gauged by remembering that Remington was, at the time, America's leading Western illustrator working principally in black and white wash and oils to produce linear, detailed pictures with clear



Frederic Remington,  
1861–1909  
*The Broncho Buster*, 1895  
Bronze, 22½ x 20 in.  
Cast 1898  
Gift of a friend of the Gallery,  
55.3

tonal variations that lent themselves readily to the engraver's art. He had done pen and ink drawings, but recognized his limitations in the medium. He also painted in colors, but black-and-white illustration was his bread and butter, and its requirements pounded into him the preeminence of form.<sup>2</sup>

Remington rapidly mastered what he needed to know in order to be a successful illustrator. The editor of *Outing* remembered that his work in 1886 was like "an electric shock," combining, as another put it in 1895, "a photographic realism" with "a vivid strength that is at times nothing less than startling." His best drawings hummed on the page, making his version of the West irresistible to contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> Remington's West—"my West," as he liked to call it—was a man's domain, replete with danger, conflict, and death. It was barren of refinement, which was precisely its appeal for his audience of refined Easterners. His confidence in expressing a way of thinking about the material at hand gave his illustrations ideological heft. The West, for him, was a testing ground—an extension of the battlefields of the Civil War as he imagined them growing up in the shadow of a father who had served in the war. Remington's generation would dwell in that shadow, but in the deserts of the Southwest and on the western plains he had found new fields of glory in the full glare of the sun.

Remington's West was a theater in which the figures he portrayed were all playing parts in the national drama of the "winning of the West." The setting for him in his major paintings was often a bare stage, reduced to horizontal bands of sky and earth. His actors were frontier "types"—"men with the bark on."<sup>4</sup> Illustration permitted, indeed mandated, the repetition that stamped his "types" on the public's mind. "We almost forget," an admirer wrote in 1895, "that we did not always know...the whole little army of the rough riders of the plains, the sturdy lumbermen of the forest, the half-breed canoe-men, the unshorn prospectors, the dare-devil scouts, the befringed and be-feathered red men, and all the rest of the Remingtoniana that must be collected some day to feast the eye."<sup>5</sup>

Through the 1890s Remington was prodigiously prolific; readers encountered his illustrations on an almost monthly basis in the leading American periodicals of the day, frequently as accompaniments to his own essays and stories, written in a savory prose describing what his pictures showed. He tossed out "theories" and prejudices and telling anecdotes that drove home the lessons his art imparted. As a writer, he was at once bellicose and sentimental, stating his views in a properly gruff, "manly" style. He wore his Americanism on his sleeve, and his art mirrored his thinking. The final phase in the winning of the West was his generation's great adventure, and he was its "pictorial historian."

As Remington prepared for his first one-man exhibition and public auction of "paintings, drawings and water-colors" in January 1893, a press report observed, "His career has been as remarkable as it has been brief."<sup>6</sup> In short, he was already a recognized phenomenon when, at the end of 1894, he turned his hand to sculpture.

Frederic Remington was born in the town of Canton in upstate New York in 1861, the year the nation plunged into civil war. His father's service as an officer of the cavalry explains the son's fascination with soldiers and horses, just as growing up in a land of rivers and lakes and wilderness explains his lifelong love affair with the outdoors. His artistic propensities led him to a stint at Yale's School of Fine Arts, which ended with his father's death in February 1880. The next year he made a trip to Montana that changed his life. Only one illustration resulted—a cowboy sketch that was redrawn and published in *Harper's Weekly* in February 1882—and he was back in New York after two months. But he had found his master theme, the "Grand Frontier" as he would call it, where the forces of past and present were locked in a death struggle. "I knew the wild riders and the vacant land were about to vanish forever," he recalled, and, "without knowing exactly how to do it, I began

to try to record some facts around me.”<sup>7</sup> Going west became his substitute for war, and he was a frequent visitor as an artist/correspondent; apart from a year’s residence on a sheep ranch in Kansas in 1883–84 and an even shorter sojourn in Kansas City in 1884–85, New York remained his home.

Remington’s career took off when he covered the Geronimo campaign in Arizona for *Harper’s Weekly* in 1886. He was also on assignment for the last, pathetic chapter of Plains Indian resistance at the battle of Wounded Knee in December 1890. By then he was illustrating regularly in *Harper’s Weekly*, *Outing*, *Century*, and *Harper’s Monthly* and his name had become synonymous with the West. No assignment along the way had been more important than the commission to illustrate a series of six essays on ranching and hunting life in Dakota written by another New Yorker, Theodore Roosevelt, and published in *Century* in 1888. Together writer and artist gave shape to a new American hero who oozed physical appeal. Cowboys are “as hardy and self-reliant as any men who ever breathed,” Roosevelt wrote, “with bronzed, set faces, and keen eyes that look all the world straight in the face without flinching as they flash out from under the broad-brimmed hats....[T]heir appearance is striking...with their jingling spurs, the big revolvers stuck in their belts, and bright silk handkerchiefs knotted loosely round their necks....”<sup>8</sup> Such was the cowboy’s popularity as a subject of fiction and romance by 1895, the year *The Broncho Buster* was cast, that Remington could write, “with me cowboys are what gems and porcelains are to some others.”<sup>9</sup> Cowboys were a regular, paying proposition in his art.



Frederic Remington,  
1861–1909  
*The Broncho Buster*, 1895 (detail)  
Bronze, 22½ x 20 in.  
Cast 1898  
Gift of a friend of the Gallery,  
55.3

Still, his venture into the three-dimensional was a daring departure. Since 1888 he had exhibited some of his major works in watercolor and oil in what would prove to be a continuing battle for critical acceptance as a “pure painter,” to adopt his language, not a mere illustrator.<sup>10</sup> But painting raised the issue of color, which may have been a factor in his attraction to sculpture. “I am modeling,” he told Owen Wister: “I find I do well—I am doing a cow boy on a bucking broncho.... I have simply been fooling my time away—I can’t tell a red blanket from a grey overcoat for color but when you get right down to facts—and thats what you have got to sure establish when you monkey with the plastic clay, I am there....”<sup>11</sup>

Remington described *The Broncho Buster* matter-of-factly in his copyright application: “Equestrian statue of cowboy mounted upon and breaking in wild horse standing on hind feet.”<sup>12</sup> What is astonishing is the skill with which he had translated one of his most popular two-dimensional subjects into three dimensions. *The Broncho Buster* was an impressive achievement on aesthetic and narrative grounds, epitomizing the ideal of the “hardy and self-reliant” man. And it was a technical marvel. A cowboy, one stirrup flying free, one hand pulling on the reins while grabbing for the mane, clings to a plunging horse rising on its rear legs. The group soars with a “lift” that defies the nature of metal: How can an object made of copper, tin, zinc, and a trace of lead appear airborne? Today it is hard to recapture a sense of wonder commensurate with Remington’s achievement, so many Western artists since having followed his lead in sculpting bronzes showing furious man-animal action.

Though *The Broncho Buster* appears an effortless creation, Remington admitted that it was “a long work attended with great difficulties on my part.”<sup>13</sup> He followed it through the exacting process of sand casting at the Henry-Bonnard Bronze Co. in New York with the nervous excitement of an expectant father. In late October *The Broncho Buster* made its debut. The critics, stand-offish where Remington’s paintings were concerned, rushed to embrace the new arrival. Their response was

Frederic Remington,  
1861–1909  
*The Cheyenne*, 1901  
Bronze, 19¼ x 21 x 7½ in.  
Cast after 1907  
Bequest of Mrs. Merritt  
Cleveland, 2003.104



summed up by the painter and art critic Arthur Hoeber: "Breaking away from the narrow limits and restraints of pen and ink on flat surface, Remington...in a single experiment has demonstrated his ability adequately to convey his ideas in a new and more effective medium of expression."<sup>14</sup>

Remington loved the idea of bronze. Its solidity and durability promised immortality. "I propose to do some more," he told another critic, "to put the wild life of our West into something that burglar won't have, moth eat, or time blacken. It is a great art and satisfying to me, for my whole feeling is for form."<sup>15</sup> Remington had done the cowboy; other "types" beckoned—notably, the soldier and the Indian.<sup>16</sup> His "purpose in art" never changed. It was "to perpetuate the wild life of our American conquest of this great continent," he told a journalist while finishing *The Broncho Buster*.<sup>17</sup> He modeled *The Wounded Bunkie* in 1896 and *The Scalp* in 1898. In one, a soldier rescues a comrade shot in battle, in the other a warrior holds aloft his gory trophy, exulting in a momentary victory in the long struggle for mastery of "this great continent." *The Broncho Buster* and *The Cheyenne*, cast in 1901, pair up to tell the same story. Classic adversaries in the game of "cowboys and Indians," they provide a summary in bronze of Remington's overriding theme.

The copyright application for *The Cheyenne* offered another succinct description of the bronze's most challenging technical feature: "Indian on pony galloping with all four feet off the ground."<sup>18</sup> A trailing buffalo robe supports the entire weight of horse and rider; they skim the earth's surface, "burning the air."<sup>19</sup> Armed with lance and shield, this is a warrior grimly determined to resist civilization's advance; Remington portrays him as pure savage, but with a sneaking admiration. The Indians "were fighting for their land," he wrote in 1899; "they fought to the death—they never gave quarter, and they never asked it. There was a nobility of purpose about their resistance which commends itself now that it is passed."<sup>20</sup>

About 1900 Remington switched loyalties from the Henry-Bonnard foundry to the Roman Bronze Works in New York, which specialized in the *cire perdue*, or lost-wax process. The company took over production of *The Broncho Buster*, while *The Cheyenne* was one of Remington's first new bronzes cast by this method, and he took advantage of the flexibility it offered the artist to freely rework details. In 1907, after the edition reached twenty, he broke the original mold in the belief that the group had already lost definition, but Roman Bronze Works produced sixty-seven additional castings from another model, including MAG's cast number 53 which in 1919 was presented to William G. Stuber "from his Kodak Park Associates."<sup>21</sup>

As for *The Broncho Buster*, its popularity never waned, sales never slackened, and production never stopped until 1920 when Roman Bronze Works finally honored the provision in Eva Remington's will that casting end with her death, which occurred in November 1918.<sup>22</sup> By then nearly 340 bronzes had been cast, including the sixty-four sand casts by Henry-Bonnard, making *The Broncho Buster* "the most popular American bronze statuette of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."<sup>23</sup> The edition had reached 154 in Remington's lifetime, and perhaps in recognition of the place it had come to occupy in American art, he decided in the middle of October 1909 to create a new one-and-a-half-size version. So Remington's first model became his last model as well. He labored on the enlargement from November 20 to December 9 before declaring it "finished."

It was a cold day, but he had been warmed by good notices of his annual December exhibition at Knoedler's Gallery in New York. "The art critics have all 'come down,'" he crowed in his diary: "They ungrudgingly give me a high place as a 'pure 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>24</sup> By then the issue was moot. Those who admired his bronzes had already forgotten the original basis of his fame. Indeed, writing in 1908 in praise of America's younger generation of sculptors, a critic cited as an example Remington, who went West "to model Indians and cowboys."<sup>25</sup>

Eleven days after finishing the new *Broncho Buster*, Frederic Remington took ill. He died on December 26, 1909, at the age of forty-eight. For him, the West was won.

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