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Review of *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell: A Retrospective of Paintings and Sculpture* edited by Joan Carpenter Troccoli

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell: A Retrospective of Paintings and Sculpture. Edited by Joan Carpenter Troccoli. Foreword by Lewis I. Sharp and Duane H. King. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009. xvii + 269 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$65.00 cloth, \$39.95 paper.

Charles M. Russell (1864–1926) has long been celebrated as America’s “Cowboy Artist,” beloved as much for his charismatic personality as for his authentic portrayal of the Old West. The magnitude of Russell’s celebrity may have, at times, overshadowed his artistic achievement, and thus the complexity of cultural themes reflected in his work, the iconographic richness of his art, and the evolving sophistication of his technique may come as revelations to some. These qualities emerge, perhaps more comprehensibly than ever, in *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell*, a superb catalogue of the excellent retrospective exhibition organized jointly by the Denver Art Museum and the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Both museums were venues for the exhibition in 2009–10, as was the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

As an art historian trained in so-called “mainstream” American art, I admit to an initial reticence toward Russell. The recent spate of Russell scholarship, however, including this book, has hastened my growing admiration. *The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell* provides a companion volume to the 2007 Russell catalogue raisonné edited by B. Byron Price, which featured six essays by Russell experts on selected topics. *Masterworks* exhibits a

similar format, presenting nine essays by eminent Russell scholars who focus on significant, sometimes very specific, aspects of the artist’s career.

Both catalogues represent surprisingly late arrivals on the scene of Russell scholarship, given the artist’s stature and long-term popularity. Price’s catalogue raisonné is the first comprehensive documentation of the artist’s oeuvre, while *Masterworks* accompanies the first large-scale retrospective of Russell’s best work in all media (every object in the exhibition is illustrated here in color). The two catalogues together provide compelling evidence for Russell’s artistic and thematic depth, but *Masterworks* presents more clearly the overall trajectory of his work. *Masterworks* editor and exhibition curator Joan Troccoli identifies that trajectory as the artist’s “increasing alienation from modern American society and growing devotion to nature,” which, she further states, was the principal unifying concept of the exhibition.

The catalogue essays by Troccoli, George Horse Capture Sr., Anne Morand, Mindy Besaw, Brian W. Dippie, James P. Ronda, Emily Ballew Neff, Kirby Lambert, and Peter H. Hassrick underscore this general progression in Russell’s art from early anecdotal action images of cowboys, outlaws, and Indians to later contemplations of an idyllic natural realm before white men came (Russell famously dubbed it “the West that has passed”). In these later works, Russell celebrates the halcyon days of Montana when Indians and bison ruled the Northern Plains. Russell’s devotion to and advocacy of Northern Plains Indians is

especially revealing: the Plains Indian culture embodied his ideals about the authentic life and provided a contrast to all that he perceived in modern urban civilization as hypocritical and spiritually empty. Such sentiments place Russell squarely among artists, writers, and thinkers of his era who rejected the values of an increasingly materialistic and artificial society and sought redemption in nature and the Indigenous cultures of the Great Plains, West, and Southwest.

This is a beautiful book and a fascinating read. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in the art and culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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