

The Storytelling of Charles M. Russell

By Dennis Payton Knight

The scene is of winter, a craggy mountain ridge high in the Montana Rockies, sun low on the horizon reflecting brightly on the snow but casting canyon walls in deep shadow. Braced against gravity, the hunter lifts his hat, scratches his head, and gazes over the edge, perplexed, rifle resting in the crook of his left elbow, butt forward. It had felled the big horn, but the confounded animal had tumbled to a precipice below, out of reach. Two horses wait in place, fighting for traction on the snowy slope, the white one saddled, the chestnut packing gear. An eagle rises, interested in the sheep's precarious landing, but not nearly large enough to seize the quarry for himself.

It is C.M. Russell's 1915 masterpiece entitled, "Meat's Not Meat 'Till It's in the Pan." Russell tells a story in oil that could not be told as well in words, dabbing it with his cowboy poet sense of humor.

We writers often fool ourselves that, with words, we can evoke profound images, aromas, textures and sounds. But then we encounter the works of wizards like Michelangelo, da Vinci, van Gogh, Rockwell and O'Keefe who have created novels on canvas without a single word.

Among them is Charles M. Russell, who captured the skies and crevices of the American West in masterpieces that put us in awe and make us laugh in the doing. Born to comfortable circumstances in St. Louis in 1864 but, hard to control, his parents sent him to a military school in New Jersey. In 1880, at sixteen, he bolted to Montana and spent the next twelve years as a shepherd and cowpuncher, painting and sculpting when he could, self-taught. In 1888 he spent six months living among the Blood Indians in the Northwest Territory, an experience that gave him knowledge, respect and affinity for the indigenous tribes of America.

In 1890 in Lewistown, Montana Russell began selling his paintings and sculptures, including a mural for which a bank paid twenty-five dollars, the most he had ever earned for a single work. By 1891 a Great Falls barkeeper contracted for his works, and soon he ceased being a rider of the range.

He portrayed Indians with reverence to their way of life and reserved his sense of humor for the white citizenry for whom he had less regard, saying, "A pioneer is a man who turned all the grass upside down, strung bob-wire over the dust that was left, poisoned the water, cut down the trees, killed the Indian who owned the land and called it progress."

Russell established a studio in Great Falls, married, and in 1896 traveled to New York, sold some paintings, got good reviews, and became famous. By the early 1920's a single Russell painting might fetch ten-thousand dollars.

Charles Marion Russell died October 24, 1926 in Great Falls, but his work lives on forever, telling stories and getting smiles in museums around the world.