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## Art Review

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# Frederic Remington's Little Dark Age

by Steven Carr

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**Frederic Remington: The Color of Night  
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The racist and xenophobic bigot Frederic Remington (1861-1909) may have done more damage to the American character and self-image than any other U.S. artist. Some of his late works are now on display at the National Gallery of Art. The “Ugly American” that he portrays in all of his cowboy paintings brings to the viewer’s mind an image of John Ashcroft announcing his U.S.A. Patriot Act. It is a scene of the rugged individualist, all alone, against a threatening world, in a bitter struggle—and there is no limit to his use of violence. Both our recent domestic policy, and our bloodthirsty turn in foreign policy, are scarred by this ideology. It should be no surprise that Remington was the favorite painter and close friend of President Teddy Roosevelt (Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s idol), who promoted a similar “masculine” code.

The characters Remington portrays are like wild beasts, operating only on animal instinct, always just one step ahead of death. This shadow of death is a pervasive theme. Survival is always in question, whether the threat be from actual combat, hunger, or exposure to the elements. Very few women intrude into Remington’s virile world of roughhewn characters, or, as he was fond of saying, “men with their bark on.” For him, this was the Anglo-Saxon male ideal, and he was determined to make it the American ideal as well. Hollywood tried to burn this Remington image of the rugged individualist into the soul of America as a permanent icon, with its endless “Western” movies, just as Hollywood achieved long-lasting results with D.W. Griffith’s racist *Birth of a Nation*, extolling the Ku Klux Klan.

For Remington, not all cowboys were created equal. The true cowboy had to be a nomad—homeless, with no family, and not much more than a saddle blanket to call his own. After the Civil War there were many displaced men who sought work on the great cattle drives, taking cattle hundreds of miles

to the rail hubs in Kansas. Remington would never forgive the “Yankee ingenuity” that created barbed wire fences, which he saw as ending this nomadic existence. People could now establish ranches and have a much more settled, domesticated life, which Remington thought would destroy society. (Remington, the “great outdoorsman,” tried to run a ranch, but after a few months of hard work he abandoned it to run a saloon instead.)

His frontier was an austere, stoic, existential world of his imagination. His heroes never built railroads or even homesteads. Instead of depicting progress and development in the West, he glorified a degraded man in a “natural” state.

### Conflicting Views of America

Great artists throughout history have always depicted human beings with dignity, no matter what their station in life. But Remington would never permit dignity or humanity in any of his subjects. Other 19th-Century American frontier artists, on the contrary, viewed the West as the most “American” of subjects, for they believed it was there that the true historic mission of America would be played out. They thought that it was in the West that slavery and other injustices would be pushed aside, helping to improve the entire nation. Many of President Lincoln’s best supporters came from this tradition. Several American artists, such as the painters Frederick Church and George Catlin, worked with the German scientist Alexander von Humboldt on scientific exploration, and used their travels to bring about a greater understanding of different cultures. Such artists and others brought their work to bear to try to stop the extermination of the Native American Indians, and to promote cooperation with them. The soldier, artist, and graduate of West Point, Seth Eastman, for example, spent his life studying and recording every aspect of Indian life and languages, to bridge the gap of the two cultures.

Generals George Crook and G.K. Warren found that the anti-Indian hysteria from both Washington politicians and local hotheads was often the cause of conflict. Even though both generals were sent to kill the Indians, they ended up as champions and protectors of their would-be adversaries. Many Indian leaders demanded to negotiate with General Crook, since he never lied. The Lakota Chief Red Cloud said, “His word gave [my] people hope.”

It was precisely those Indians who wanted to negotiate, who were hated by Remington. He complained that they were “too tame.” (It is for this reason that Remington had a special hatred for the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest.) And any soldier deemed too humane would be ridiculed by Remington, who demanded the image of a ruthless, trigger-happy cavalier.

Remington violently opposed the idea that America would be the beacon of hope for the world, or an engine of progress. His only “historic mission” was to keep the Anglo-Saxon race “pure”—and the only safe place for this Anglo-

Saxon ideal was in the cowboy world of the Old West. While the East was teaming with immigrants, and the South had a large African-American population, he saw the West as the last bastion for the white man. He referred to immigrants as “debased and mongrel hordes of encroaching alien vermin.” He once said, “I have some Winchesters, and when the massacring begins, I can get my share, and what’s more, I will.” Like his admirer Teddy Roosevelt, he wanted U.S. soil reserved for Anglo-Saxons. He actively promoted war with Cuba saying, “We will kill a few Spaniards instead of Anglo-Saxons [as in the U.S. Civil War] which will be proper and nice.”

War, Remington believed, was the ultimate test of manliness. He tirelessly promoted war in Europe, Chile, and Cuba. He found a co-thinker in the media tycoon William Randolph Hearst, who told him, “Give me the pictures and I will give you the war.” Remington helped to make the Spanish-American War a reality by drawing an American woman being strip-searched by male Spanish guards. Hearst’s *New York Journal* published the illustration, and before long, they got what Secretary of War John Hays called their “splendid little war.”

Teddy Roosevelt would be forever grateful for Remington’s work as a war correspondent in Cuba, where he created the myth of TR’s Rough Riders as gallant cavaliers charging up San Juan Hill. But these battles in Cuba dramatically changed Remington: After all of his chest-thumping for war, he requested to be sent home when confronted by the brutal scenes of actual bloodshed. He would no longer work as an illustrator, and instead, took up painting in an impressionistic style. While never changing his outlook on humanity, war made him a bit more mellow.

### The Standoff

Of all his paintings, Remington most cherished his dozen scenes of desperate standoffs. Some showed Indians confronted by tribal enemies, or a bear surrounded by hunters; but most typical was his portrayal of the white pioneers, under siege by Indians. Remington made these pioneers a symbol of civilization: outnumbered, surrounded, caught in the open, and very vulnerable.

In the “Fight for the Waterhole” (Figure 1), Remington turns history upside down by showing the cowboy’s territory being invaded by the Indians. In this work, he adds the element of the small pool of water as a limited resource, contributing to this clash of civilizations. Although a bloodbath is about to

FIGURE 1



In “Fight for the Waterhole,” Remington portrays the cowboy’s territory being invaded by hostile Indians, in a clash of civilizations.

begin, there is a sense of calm. The cowboys are not firing their weapons to ward off a distant enemy, but rather conserving their ammunition, waiting for the enemy to approach, in order to deliver a lethal shot.

Remington was so proud of his supposed ability to depict the anatomy and movements of the horse, that he chose as his own epitaph: “He knew the horse.” Starting in 1890, he covered the annual horse show in Madison Square Garden in New York City for *Harper’s Weekly*. But in fact, Remington’s equine anatomy was always a copy of a photograph. He rarely went into the field without a camera, and even asked friends (including Teddy Roosevelt) to bring him photos that could be useful. Remington believed that his greatest contribution in art would be to serve as an intermediary between the camera and the canvas. (To study the anatomy of the buffalo, our intrepid macho Westerner trekked to the Bronx Zoo, armed with his camera!) He extensively copied from Eadweard Muybridge’s classic work “Animal Locomotion.” The horse in Remington’s “Stampede by Lightning” (Figure 2) was virtually traced from a Muybridge photo (inset).

Remington’s use of these photographs is in sharp contrast to the scientific anatomy studies of Remington’s contemporary, the artist Thomas Eakins, then a lecturer on anatomy at the Art Students League. Eakins, a former medical student, approached the challenge of depicting horse anatomy with the thoroughness of a scientist working in his laboratory. Like Leonardo da Vinci, who made hundreds of anatomical drawings, Eakins believed that no artist could honestly render the horse without understanding the muscular and skeletal struc-

ture. He and his students would dissect horse carcasses, and cast models of horses. In his lifelong science project, Eakins would even build a machine, the zoetrope, that would give the effect of a motion picture, in order to study the movement of the horse.

### The ‘Nocturnals’

The inspiration for Remington’s nocturnals—which are featured in the National Gallery’s exhibit—came from his two favorite drinking companions and fellow artists, Charles Rollo Peters and Childe Hassam. Remington was frustrated with his treatment of color and thought that it would be a hindrance for his transition from illustrator to painter. They convinced him to try the less demanding form of the nocturnal. With its muted palette and more subtle tonal variations, they said the nocturnal was just what he needed to get his new career in painting off the ground. These works would be less narrative and instead contain more mood and emotion.

In the “Nocturnals,” the theme is man locked in a struggle with mortal danger. The subjects, now handicapped by the darkness, are put into an even more terrifying and helpless situation. In some of these works, the threat comes from outside the canvas, where the viewer becomes just as handicapped as the blinded subject. Remington freezes the subject at the height of alarm and panic, where the crisis is never resolved.

Some artists have made the cattle stampede a part of cowboy lore, or treated an advancing storm as a natural work of beauty. But stampedes at night were always dreaded, and in Remington’s “Stampede by Lightning,” the scene is gripped by panic, as the longhorns charge blindly through the driving rain. The human figure is overwhelmed by the vast power of nature. Terrified, the “heroic” rider tries to flee from danger, but Remington freezes him at the climax of frenzy, never to escape.

In “Moonlight Wolf” (Figure 3) the viewer is confronted personally with terror. The tension stems not from action, but rather anticipation. One’s sense of safety is lost, as the menacing stare of the wolf engages the viewer, who realizes that he or she is the potential prey.

FIGURE 2



In “Stampede by Lightning,” Remington’s subject is frozen in mid-motion, in a frenzy of panic. The inset shows the photograph from Eadweard Muybridge’s “Animal Locomotion,” which Remington apparently traced.

FIGURE 3



In “Moonlight Wolf,” the viewer realizes with horror that he or she is the potential prey.

What a strange time in history to choose to portray darkness, penetrated only by the light from candles, fire, or the Moon! As the rest of the world was leaping ahead with flash photography, and Thomas Edison’s electric light bulb, Remington was ushering in his own “Dark Age.”