

## BRONCO BUSTER



Frederic Remington  
American  
Sculpture, bronze  
Acc: 91.120.2  
G301

Frederic Remington's bronze sculpture of a so-called "bronco buster" (a cowboy that "breaks" a horse so it can be ridden) highlights the inherent conflict at the heart of the idea of the American West. The weathered cowboy astride the tense and anguished body of the rearing horse serves as a metaphor for the struggle between those Americans who felt the West represented the United States "manifest destiny," and the people who actually lived there, and already had suffered at the hands of a foreign government willing to take possession of their land and redistribute it to official citizens. For some Americans, the West represented wild, untamed opportunity and freedom, but for others it meant an infringement on their liberty, encroachment on their land, and unparalleled suffering.

### QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. What is the artist telling us about the horse in this sculpture?
2. What does he seem to be saying about the cowboy "breaking" the horse?

3. How does this sculpture compare with other images of “bronco busting” in this gallery?

#### KEY IDEAS

1. Remington was the most successful Western illustrator in the “Golden Age” of illustration at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, so much so that the other Western artists such as Charles Russell and Charles Schreyvogel were known during Remington’s life as members of the “School of Remington”. His style was naturalistic and veered away from the ethnographic realism of earlier Western artists such as George Catlin. His focus was firmly on the people and animals of the West, with landscape usually of secondary importance unlike the Hudson River School (Church, Bierstadt, and Moran) who glorified the vastness of the west and the dominance of nature over man.
2. Frederic Sackrider Remington (1861-1909) was born in Canton, New York. His father was a colonel in the Civil War and a newspaper editor. His mother’s family owned hardware stores. The Remington family had a tradition of horsemanship that influenced him and his art. (Remington was the first to depict the true gait of a horse in motion). He was an only child, large and strong for his age, and a poor student. He attended Yale University where he indulged his passion for football and took a drawing class.
3. When his father died, he dropped out of Yale after three semesters, and in 1881 traveled to Montana which began his lifelong interest in the American West. Two years later he bought a quarter-share in a sheep ranch in Kansas which failed. He moved to Kansas City and went into business (hardware, saloon) but failed at those endeavors also. Even though he had had minimal art training at Yale he began to draw and paint. In 1882 *Harper’s* published his first sketch—a Wyoming cowboy.
4. In 1885, following travels to the Southwest, he moved back East. Living in Brooklyn, and married to Eva Caten, he began studies at the Art Students League of New York which improved his technique and began submitting work to periodicals. His timing was excellent—newspaper interest in the dying West was escalating. He began selling illustrations, sketches and other works to *Collier’s* and *Harper’s Weekly*. (His first full page cover appeared in *Harper’s* in 1886 when he was 25). Between 1885 and 1913, his drawings were published in 41 periodicals and cemented his reputation as a raconteur of frontier life.
5. His subject matter offered a nostalgic, even mythic, look at a rapidly disappearing western frontier, which underwent dramatic transformation in the face of transcontinental transportation, Indian confinement to reservation land, immigration, and industrialization. Theodore Roosevelt, a close friend whose book *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* that Remington supplemented with 83 illustrations, wrote in *Pearson’s Magazine* in 1907 “He is, of course, one of the most typical American artists we have ever had, and he has portrayed a most characteristic and yet vanishing type of American life. The soldier, the cowboy and rancher, the Indian, the horses and the cattle of the plains will live (in his work) for all time.”

6. In 1890 he moved his studio to New Rochelle, New York where he remained the rest of his life. Gradually painting, not illustration, became his focus. His career took an unexpected turn when he learned the basics of clay modeling from the sculptor, Frederick Ruckstull. His first sculpture, *Bronco Buster*, was copyrighted in 1895 and was an instant success. Over 300 authorized bronze casts were produced and exhibited and sold at Tiffany's. He went on to produce 21 other small scale sculpture groups, almost all of western subjects. They were distinguished by his technical derring-do (textural detail and innovative patination), lifelike and vigorous movement, and his predilection for storytelling detail. His only full size sculpture was the *Bronco Buster* installed in a park in Philadelphia. (Note: an edition of the *Bronco Buster* was presented to Theodore Roosevelt by the "Rough Riders" which also enhanced its--and Remington's--reputation.)
7. Remington—though an associate member--was never accepted into regular membership by the Academy of Arts probably due to his image as a popular, cocky, and ostentatious artist. (For example, some critics referred to his bronze work as "illustrated sculpture"). However, he did receive numerous honors and recognition such as: a second class medal at the 1888 Paris Exhibition, a one-man show in New York at the American Art Gallery (1890) followed by others at other galleries (1893, 1895, 1905, 1906), reproduction of his work on two US postal stamps (1888), and a *Collier* edition devoted entirely to showcasing his work (1905), purchase of his work by the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the Metropolitan Museum (1907) and the establishment of the Frederic Remington Art Museum in Ogdensburg, New York
8. Remington was also an excellent businessman and skilled in promoting his work. His personality, his "pseudo-cowboy" speaking manner, and "Wild West" reputation were strong social attractions. He was a regular at celebrity banquets and stag dinners known as "a man among men, a deuce of a good fellow". He became an expert in reproduction methods which earned him a strong working relationship with editors and printers, and carefully regulated his output to maximize his income. He kept detailed records of his works and his sales. (Quote: "Cowboys are cash for me.")
9. He died in 1909 at the age of 48 from complications of an appendectomy. Contributing to his death was chronic obesity the result of lifetime of celebrity eating and drinking.