



TITLE: VOYAGEURS

ARTIST: Charles M. Russell

DATE: 1898

MEDIUM: Painting/ Oil on board in grisaille

SIZE: 18 1/2 x 24 1/2 in.

CREATION PLACE: United States

STYLE: 19th century

ARTIST:

Charles Marion Russell was born in St. Louis, Missouri on March 19, 1864. Charles' father was a partner in a brick manufacturing firm and the family was socially prominent. From an early age, the boy, who struggled in school, dreamed of going west to follow in the footsteps of his grandmother's brothers Charles and William Bent, pioneer western fur traders. In 1880, just before his 16th birthday, his parents let him accompany a sheepman of their acquaintance to Montana Territory. This was his first job and he was terrible at it. Fired from that job, he helped a professional meat hunter, Jake Hoover, spending about two years learning about Indians, wildlife, and Montana's past.

In 1882, he went to work as a cowboy, working as night wrangler on cattle drives and round-ups. During the bitter cold winter of 1886-87, Charles was staying on the O.H.Ranch. In a reply to the owners of the ranch who asked about the condition of their herd, Charlie drew a sketch of a gaunt, starving cow surrounded by wolves



and titled it, “Waiting for a Chinook”. The sketch was reproduced in the Montana newspaper and is still today one of Charlie’s best-known pictures.

During his days on the range, Charles always had a sketch pad and some brushes with him, and occasionally he tried to make his living as an artist. But he always went back to working as a cowboy, saying he’d “rather be a poor cow puncher than a poor artist.” But in 1896 his situation turned around. He married a pretty young girl named Nancy Cooper, and as soon as she took over the business end of his art career, things began to look up.

He painted and sculpted in his log studio adjacent to their home, filling it with his collection of Indian clothing, utilitarian objects, weapons, cowboy gear, and other western props useful in accurately depicting the scenes of the Old West of which he was so fond. Within just a few years Nancy was charging collectors what Charlie always called “dead man’s prices”.

Nancy was her husband’s business manager. In 1904 she had persuaded him to make the first in a series of trips to New York. His paintings were already widely familiar through postcards and colour reproductions, and he had his first bronze cast that year. Commissions for illustrations and a major calendar contract followed, contributing to the view that, after Frederic Remington’s death in 1909, Russell was North America’s premier western artist.

Charles Russell died on October 24, 1926, of heart failure and he was deeply mourned by the entire state of Montana. He was a consummate Westerner, historian, advocate of the Northern Plains Indians, cowboy, outdoorsman, writer, environmentalist, and not the least, artist.

OUR PIECE:

The Voyageurs was done just shortly after Charles Russell was married.

The origin of the *voyageur* goes far back into the days when the French settlers about Montreal and Quebec followed the redskin farther and farther up the lakes and streams into the distant West hundreds of miles away, hunting the beaver. For many years the chief wealth of the North America continent lay in its furs and skins. At first the Indians from the West came to the eastern seaboard, bringing their pelts. The French settlers could not long remain content with this arrangement and soon would be accompanying or following the Indian up the Great Lakes and beyond into the plains of the West. They searched out new routes; they became expert in building and handling canoes, Indian fashion; they learned the best methods of eliciting furs from Indians; they gave French names to physical features of the country through which they passed; in a word, they originated the system which fur-hunters were to use for over a hundred years.

The term grisaille (gri - **zahy**) refers to a painting done entirely in monochrome or near-monochrome, usually in shades of grey. Thus making it appear similar to a black and white photograph.

TOUR IDEAS

People of the past
How did they get here?
AOA
Let's be friends
Of the spirit

