



WHAT KEEPS COWBOY ART COLLECTIBLE?

MORE THAN 100 YEARS AFTER
GAINING WIDESPREAD POPULARITY,
WESTERN-THEMED PAINTING AND
SCULPTURE IS STILL RIDING TALL

BY HEATHER SETKA

"Nostalgia plays a role when people collect Western art," says Robin Schlaht, a Saskatchewan-based filmmaker who's been a passionate art collector for a decade. "There's a deliberate exclusion of the modern. It's not cowboys talking on their cellphones, sitting in their trucks."

He adds that Western art exists on a continuum, with romanticized representation at one end — "cowboys and indians" in their most stereotypical form — and Western landscape, wildlife, possibly works produced by Aboriginal artists at the other end. But Western art by its most stringent definition originated with two men, now still considered masters of the style.

American artist Frederic Remington is largely credited with popularizing what we think of today as the classic Western painting style. After he died in 1909, St. Louis-born Charles Russell (1864 - 1926) inherited Remington's legacy. Lorain Lounsberry is senior cultural curator at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary. She says Russell's work was well-known in southern Alberta when he was alive. But even during his own time, Russell's paintings — outlaws running from good guys, a cowboy fending off a bear, or a chief leading his people on the range — already conveyed a life people no longer lived.



OPPOSITE: **Charles M. Russell, *At Rope's End***, 1909. Private collection.
 LEFT: **Kevin Sonmor, *150 Portraits: Museum Painters***, oil on linen, 2011, 70" X 80".

This inherent nostalgia made Russell's work perfect for an art exhibition at the inaugural Calgary Stampede rodeo in 1912. Twenty works, with titles like *The Smoke of a 45*, *Stolen Horses* and *Call of the Law*, showed at the event. There's even a photo of Russell standing with the contingent of Alberta cattlemen, known as the Big Four, responsible for the Stampede's inception. Russell's contemporary Edward Borein, a Californian illustrator, is also there — Stampede organizers put Borein's etching of a man on a bucking horse on the event's first poster in 1923.

With the Stampede celebrating its centennial this year, it's 100 years since Russell's Calgary show as well, so the Glenbow will recreate the exhibition with their summer show, *Charlie Russell and the First Calgary Stampede*. Lounsberry, working alongside art experts and historians, tracked down 19 originals from the 1912 exhibition — all but one. Four private collectors owned the bulk of these original paintings, and they've changed hands several times over the years.

Today, Russell's works fetch a price worthy of the nostalgia. In mid-March this year, the annual art auction to benefit the C.M. Russell museum in Great Falls, Montana sold some of his pieces for more than \$400,000. When he was alive, Russell's patrons were millionaires and businessmen, Lounsberry says. Likely, she adds, these early collectors experienced his paintings of rustic Western life as a metaphor for their own lives (with rugged and macho

overtones). "They could see themselves in a world that they had to conquer."

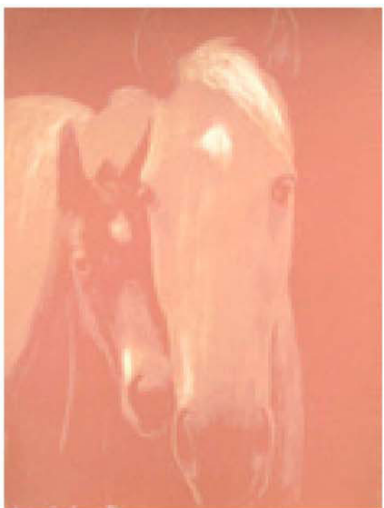
It's possible this holds true for modern collectors of Western art as well. Calgary artist Paul Van Ginkel says his own collectors can range from "students on payment plans to billionaires", but they're primarily business executives and people working in the oil and gas industry.

Van Ginkel says his focus on Western art (it's not his only subject matter) can be traced back to his first Stampede at 13 years old. "I was enthralled with it," he says. "I wish I could be a cowboy. It's in my soul." Although Van Ginkel's often-fevered brush strokes are much different from Russell's staunch realism, their subject matter is similar. Van Ginkel paints horses running wild, stagecoaches kicking up dust and cowboys pausing by the fire for a smoke (one of his paintings, *Loyal Friends*, was used on the 2007 Calgary Stampede poster).

Their similarity suggests Western art hasn't changed much in the 100 years since Russell. Chris Willard, Alberta College of Art and Design's head of painting, says compared to contemporary art, Western art has only changed "incrementally" over the years. And much like those early collectors of Russell's work, people collecting Van Ginkel's art generally see their own desires reflected back at them. He says they feel a connection with the Stampede and the legend of the cowboy, and they want to take it home with them. Often, that emotional connection can build an avid col-

lector. "It morphs into something massive," Van Ginkel says.

It can be lucrative too. Van Ginkel no longer shows in galleries but holds private parties several times a year, where guests view and buy his work. Lounsberry cites another Alberta-based artist, bronze sculptor Rich Roenisch, who sells his work in a price range up to \$18,000.




If times are changing at all, they're changing at the annual Calgary Stampede Western Art Showcase and Auction. One of the most popular venues for traditional Western artists (Van Ginkel launched his career at the Showcase), it's also begun to draw a strong showing from contemporary and abstract artists with tangential ties to Western tradition. Billy Rae Busby is a Saskatchewan-raised artist based in Calgary, whose hard-edged abstract landscapes emphasize colour and shape. It's not traditional Western art, but her work has been chosen for this year's Showcase.

Busby says she's honoured to be included, and emphasizes her respect for the skill it takes to recreate reality, but she wonders if collectors of traditional Western painting and sculpture don't see other forms of art. "That's not the only thing you can buy in Alberta," Busby says. "Do they love the work, or do they just feel they're supporting a Western Canadian artist?"

An interesting point, given that outside cities and regions with a strong "cowboy" mentality, Western art doesn't have strong or consistent patronage. Lounsberry says this is common for a regional art form, pointing to the Ash Can School that depicted early 1900s life in New York, which had strong but limited attraction for collectors. "You could use any comparison," she says.

But a few artists are playing with the tradition, capitalizing on the built-in value and recognition factor in Western themes and legends. Chris Willard cites Richard Prince, who has worked with photos of the Marlboro man to deconstruct the myth (work that set an auction record in 2007 for highest-selling single photograph). Calgary's Newzones Gallery showcases contemporary takes on Western art during its annual Stampede-themed exhibition, *G'ddy Up*. This year, New York artist Joe Andoe's pop imagery appears alongside the still life studies by Kevin Sommor, a Calgary-born artist — and former bronc rider, no less — now living in Quebec.

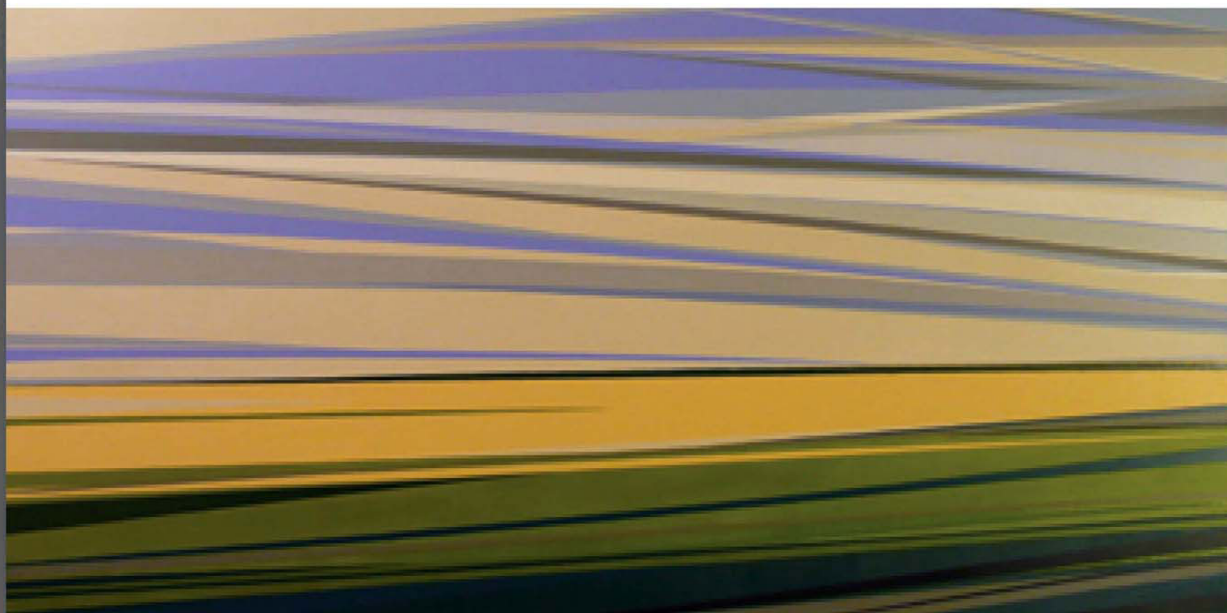
As a collector (he created a professional group called the Saskatchewan Network for Art Collecting), Schlaht says more traditional forms of Western art are likely better investments in the long run, and in fact the genre may have more staying power than many other forms. "There's always a risk with art that the style will go completely out of fashion," he says. "Western style has already proven itself to have staying power." 

LEFT: **Joe Andoe**, *Cherokee Village* (pink), serigraph, ed. of 10, 2004, 37" X 31".

BELOW: **Billie Rae Busby**, *Nearby*, acrylic on canvas, 2009, 48" X 24".

OPPOSITE TOP: **Paul Van Ginkel**, *Stagecoach*, oil on canvas, 2011, 40" X 60".

OPPOSITE BELOW: **Roland Gissing**, *Horse Study*.





THE RETURN OF ROLAND GISSING

For an artist who painted popular scenes of the Canadian west for more than 40 years, for much of that time making a living solely by selling art, it's incredible that there has never been a solo retrospective show anywhere in Alberta of Roland Gissing's work since his death in 1967. Allan Boss, director of the Okotoks Art Gallery south of Calgary, and Kori Gregory, who manages the Gissing estate, will put an end to that this summer with a show called *Roland Gissing: Trains, Travels, and Western Traditions* at OAG from June 15 to July 29.

Born in England in 1895, Gissing emigrated to Canada in 1913, taking jobs across the Canadian and American west as a cowhand before he started his painting practice in the mid-1920s. He settled for most of his painting life in a house and studio on the bank of the Ghost River west of Calgary, prolifically painting landscapes, activities, and people of the foothills and Canadian Rockies. He spent the last ten years of his life living and working in Okotoks, which was another draw for the OAG. Canmore, Alberta-based curator and writer Mary-Beth Laviolette has curated the show.

The exhibition will include work from the collection of the Glenbow Museum and the Alberta Foundation of the Arts, as well as extensive corporate collections in Southern Alberta. "When Gissing started to paint in the 1920s, he was completely self-taught," Boss says. "When he was younger, he travelled a fair bit, and in exchange for his stay, he'd do pencil sketches." The work is wide-ranging, and reflects the artist's singular focus on subjects popular at the time — often painting the same scene many times over. Boss says the repetition was in part what allowed Gissing to support himself through a lifetime of art-making.

— Jill Sawyer

