

**"Bronco Buster," Frederic Remington, American, 19<sup>th</sup> century, #91.120.2 - G301**



Gallery label: 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 an 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.

*"Only those who have ridden a bronco the first time it was saddled, or have lived through a railroad accident, can form any conception of the solemnity of such experiences. Few Eastern people appreciate the sky-rocket bounds, grunts, and stiff-legged striking."*

**Frederic Remington**

## Questions:

1. How would you describe the movement of the cowboy and horse in this sculpture? Are they working together or are they at odds? WDYSTMYST?
2. Does this sculpture fit your idea of how a cowboy looks and acts? What about him, his dress and actions tell you that?
3. Where do you see images of cowboys today? How are they similar to Remington's sculpture? How are they different?
4. This is the first sculpture that Remington ever made. He was an illustrator and painter. So he had to teach himself how to make a sculpture. Bronco Buster took him a year to complete. What parts of this sculpture would have been especially challenging to make?
5. This is one of the most popular images of a cowboy known today. What is it about this image that you think especially appeals to people?
6. Lots of mythology has grown up around the work and ruggedness of the American cowboy. How does this image fit that myth?

## Key Points:

1. Frederic Sackrider Remington (1861–1909) depicted the life of the cowboy during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century perhaps better than any other artist of his time. In paintings, prints, and sculpture, he portrayed the complexity of a vanishing frontier at a critical time in history— resolute cowboys, the stamina and ferocity of horses, and the proud defiance of Native Americans. His work in bronze helped revolutionize American sculpture, creating a new genre of “cowboy” sculpture. *The Bronco Buster* (1895), became the most popular – and likely the most profitable – small American bronze sculpture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It solidified Remington's reputation as a premiere producer of fine art of the American West and, more importantly, set a precedent for a powerful icon that would remain ubiquitous in American culture up to the present day.
2. ***Bronco Buster, 1895*** was the first sculpture that Frederic Remington ever made. In 1895, when he created the first version of the sculpture, he was an illustrator and painter of the American West. But he had no training in sculpture and didn't consider it as a possibility until a chance remark by his friend, playwright Augustus Thomas, who noticed how easily Remington repositioned figures in his drawings and suggested that he had “the sculptor's degree of vision” (that is, the ability to visualize in 360 degrees). Remington spent an intensive year on this project, experimenting and using his own published drawings and photographs of riders on horseback as inspiration for the clay model. His first version of the sculpture was sand casted.

3. The Bronco Buster is a technical triumph with its intricately finished surface and its depiction of dynamic action, achieved by balancing the statuette on the horse's rear legs. This sculpture embodies many characteristics that made Remington's subsequent sculptures famous: controlled movement, capturing a fluid sequence of actions, concentrated rapport between man and animal and detailed articulation of costume and anatomy. These would be emulated by other artists depicting the American West.
4. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, America's western frontier was an extremely popular subject among easterners who were nostalgic for a "lost" American past. Remington's sculptural figures-in-motion became icons of the West, influencing notions of the frontier, the American spirit and how western art should look decades after cowboys ceased their dusty cattle drives. In it, Remington invented "cowboy" sculpture and through his other western sculptures created an American art form still very popular among collectors of Western art today. He and his contemporaries contributed to the proliferation of the image of the bronco buster in entertainment, mass media, and popular culture as coarsely masculine but noble, unschooled but wise, primitive and civilized.

### **The Bronco Buster, 1895; revised 1909:**

1. *The Bronco Buster* is a sculpture made of bronze, a copper alloy. It portrays a rugged Western frontier cowboy dressed in a long-sleeved shirt, pants, chaps, hat, bandana and holster with a gun at his back. He is fighting to stay on a rearing, plunging bronco, with one stirrup swinging free, a quirt (a short whip with strips of leather attached) in one hand and a fistful of mane and reigns in the other. There is a **brand** on the horse's left rear flank of a triangle inscribed with a circle. The surface of the base resembles a flat, rocky terrain.
2. As in all his work, Remington strives to capture the essence of moment. He discovered that he could most effectively express in sculpture what he had observed first-hand. For *The Bronco Buster*, he started with one of his own pen and ink wash illustrations, "A Pitching Bronco," which was published in the April 30, 1892, issue of Harper's Weekly," but ultimately arrived at a different stance. The artist's reference file for the sculpture included a **photograph** of a cowboy that very closely resembled the 1892 illustration. Remington did lots of preparatory drawings to create this final design. He focused on the cowboy's figure – removing it from its

context and isolating it into a grounded, free-floating form. This gives the piece a lifelike quality and vigorous movement.

3. *The Bronco Buster* is a technical triumph with its intricately finished surface and its conveyance of dynamic action, which was achieved by balancing the statuette on the horse's rear legs. Achieving that position was technically daunting. Remington worked intensively for nearly a year, experimenting to get it right. With help from friend and sculptor Frederick Ruckstuhl, he constructed his first armature and clay model in the summer of 1895 and it copyrighted that fall.
4. The finished work embodies many characteristics typical of Remington's subsequent statues: "controlled movement, capturing a fluid sequence of action, concentrated rapport between man and animal, and detailed articulation of costume and anatomy."
5. Remington ended up remaking the sculpture in several sizes, using different bronze casting methods. The first piece was about 22 inches high and was made using the sand casting technique of the Henry-Bonnard Bronze Company. After the Henry-Bonnard foundry burned down in 1898, Remington shifted to the Roman Bronze Works and produced *The Bronco Buster* using the lost-wax process, to produce a higher quality statue. In 1909, he created a larger version, measuring 32 inches in height. The MIA's version is smaller: 24 x 19 x 12 in. He signed the piece - "Frederic Remington" was cast into the top surface of the base. You can see the bronze caster's mark - Roman Bronze Work N.Y. - stamped on the top edge of the base. Even if it were not, two other clues point to the fact that the MIA's version was cast with the lost-wax method:
  - The stirrups fly up in the air on the MIA version, as the horse is coming down. This more expressive variation was possible because of the greater control in lost-wax castings, in which the entire figure was cast at once. Sand-casting is a flat process in which the molten bronze is poured into indentations in very fine sand. Sections of the sand-cast statue were individually cast and then assembled.
  - The knuckles of the hand holding the quirt on the lost-wax cast versions are pointed down.
6. The first copies of *The Bronco Buster* were sold at Tiffany's. Some critics labeled it negatively as "illustrated sculpture." But Remington was ecstatic about his new line of work, with first effort earning him \$6,000 over three years.

7. In his quest for perfection, Remington worked on an enlarged version of his *The Broncho Buster* during the last year of his life. The enlarged version was modeled completely from scratch, in a much looser and broader style. In his new model, Remington succeeded in creating a sense of monumental grandeur not present in the smaller work. The sculptor died in December 1909, after casting the plaster of the enlarged version, but before any bronzes were produced. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's cast, number 2, was one of nineteen authorized by Remington's widow, Eva, and her estate.

### **The Era:**

By 1890, the landscape of the American West was so disfigured by mining, clear-cutting, damming, railroad construction and pollution that it was but a shadow of its former self.

The great cattle drives out of Texas along the Chisholm Trail to the railhead in Kansas had created the cowboy as a mythic American figure – hard-living, noble, straight-shooting and resourceful. But after 1890 most cattle ranching ceased to be open-range. Feed was farmed, pastures were fenced and it was cheaper to ship livestock to market by rail.

The cowboy had joined the Indian in the vivid shadowland of American myth. Both still existed, but not as they once had. Cowboys no longer were at “home, home on the range.” And Indians were uprooted and shunted into life on reservations, where it was impossible to follow their traditional ways.

In 1890, the U.S. government declared the western frontier closed. Cities, with their crowds, rapid change, machinery, vast inequalities between rich and poor and competition for scarce resources became America's new frontier. People longed for that old notion of unlimited resources and a place ‘Out There’ where they could always find adventure and quick fortune.

Popular culture fed this nostalgia with Wild West reenactment shows, memoirs, illustrations and novels. The Battle of the Little Bighorn, in which Gen. George Custer and his cavalymen were wiped out by Sioux warriors in 1876, was restaged by showman Buffalo Bill Cody a year later, using Indians who had actually fought there. Zane Grey wrote more than 60 western novels that sold 13 million copies.

In the visual arts, Frederic Remington's work most obviously repackaged the image of a bygone “real” West for an urban public. His work inadvertently has as

much to say about the expectations and anxieties of his turn-of-the-century American audience as it does about the West. Not only would his work influence the work of other artists, it was the model for decades of western movies to come. Especially powerful were the stereotypes he minted – particularly that of the good cowboy versus traitorous and savage Indians. [“American Visions,” Hughes]



**Frederic Remington** (1861-1909) – Best known for his art depicting cowboys, soldiers and Native Americans of the Old West. His romanticized vision of the heroic nature of American settlers defined America’s frontier character as independent, individualistic and stoically heroic. His immensely popular images helped define the myth of the American West.

- Born Canton, N.Y. Great grandfather, Samuel Bascom, was a saddle maker by trade. Remingtons were fine horsemen. Frederic was related to the Indian portrait artist George Catlin and to cowboy sculptor Earl W. Bascom.
- Left Yale at 19. First trip west.
- Saw vast prairies, shrinking buffalo herds, unfenced cattle and last confrontations of U.S. cavalry and Native Americans tribes. Hunted grizzly bears. More authentic view of the West than N.C. Wyeth, Zane Grey and other artists and writers who arrived 25 years after Ol’ West was mere history.
- Set out to be artist/journalist in West. Admired rough, heroic cowboys/soldiers he met. Loved their stories. Personally disliked discomforts of frontier life – poor “grub,” long saddle ride, extended time between baths.
- Failed at ranching briefly in Kansas before settling back in New York.

- Used notes, sketches, photos, memory from trips west to create illustrations/paintings.
- Frequent trips to the West. Collected tons of material that he used in his studio.
- Cultivated image of himself as westerner who had fought in "Indian Wars" with the U.S. Cavalry. This was entirely a myth.
- Artistic style: naturalistic, sometimes impressionistic.
- Galloping horse – Remington's signature subject, often copied. Remington one of first to illustrate horse's true gait in motion. Validated by later photos by Muybridge's photographs.
- Career took off because of friendship with future president Theodore Roosevelt. Hired Remington to illustrate his book, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail*. Introduced Remington to editors.
- Mid-1880s, created western illustrations for *Harper's Weekly*, *Harper's Monthly*, *Century*, *Collier's*, *Outing*, *Boys' Life*, and *Cosmopolitan*. and other widely read New York magazines. His pictures and stories – fiction & nonfiction – gave readers ideas of Old West. Praised for accuracy of details. Many readers assumed – incorrectly – that he was a westerner.
- Earned \$1,200 first year as commercial artist – triple that of typical teacher. Bragged to a friend, "That's a pretty good break **for an ex-cow-puncher** to come to New York with \$30 and catch on as 'art.' "
- American craze for Wild West stories made Remington magazines' top illustrator.
- Authored tales of high adventure. Articles collected into books. Wrote eight books of fiction, two historical novels, over 100 articles and a Broadway play.
- Remington fit the American **Zeitgeist** with "manliness" a talisman in his work and his vision of the West – filled with noble violence - a black-and-white world of frontier conflict, displacement and loss.
- "Last stand" one of his favorite themes: the defense of white man's values against all odds. In art, he reversed reality, making Indians the cruel invaders and whites the West's true owners.
- Arrived on the scene just after 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, S.D., in which 150 Sioux, mostly women and children, were killed. Reported the event as "**The Sioux Outbreak in South Dakota," hailing he Army's 'heroic' actions toward the Indians.**
- His obsessive sense of doom fit turn-of-the-century America's anxiety about immigration. Sense of beleaguered white society holding out against invasion.
- Remington was outspokenly xenophobic, even racist: "**Jews, Injuns, Chinamen, Italians, Huns!**" he declared in a letter, "**rubbish of the earth...I've got some Winchesters and when the massacring begins I can get my share of them, and what's more, I will.**"

- Filled his eastern studio with props from the West to create convincing details. Used camera to document West, using his photographs for notes, rather than as art. Bought hundreds of western landscapes and portraits of Native Americans. Carried notebooks. Sketched details from distant horizons to leather boot creases.
- Produced over 3,000 signed paintings/drawing. Magazine work shaped world's perception of American west.
- Best known today for bronze sculptures, begun in 1895 with **The Bronco Buster**. Created art form still popular. Created 22 different subjects in bronze.
- Most successful Western illustrator during "Golden Age" – 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other Western artists – Charles Russell and Charles Schreyvogel – called members of "School of Remington."
- Financial panic of 1907 caused slow down in his sales. Fantasy artists, such as Maxfield Parrish popular with public and commercial sponsor. Remington tried to sell his home in New Rochelle to get further away from urbanization. One night he made a bonfire in his yard and burned dozens of his oil paintings used for magazine illustration (worth millions of dollars today), making an emphatic statement that he was done with illustration forever. He wrote, "there is nothing left but my landscape studies".
- Died at 48.

### **The Basics of Bronco Busting**

Horses were essential to everyday life in the West, as cowboys rode them while herding cattle, so "breaking" or "busting" wild horses was a difficult but necessary. To "bust a bronco" meant to rope a horse so that he couldn't run away, throw him to the ground, tie up his legs, put a saddle on his back, and then mount and spar with him. Having roamed free for the first years of their lives, the untamed ponies were usually rounded up in a late spring and subjected to traumatic training. The process was appropriately named as the end result was to break the animal's wild spirit, making him more docile for riding. The rougher a horse behaved, the rougher the treatment he received in retaliation from the rider's quirt, spurs, and rope end.

The "buster" was a specialist who traveled from ranch to ranch working generally for \$5 a head to break new mounts for the year's needs. More handling time per horse (ensuring more humane treatment) was costly to ranch bosses who refused to pay extra hours of training.

Today, the old style of bronco busting is almost non-existent. Gentler, more humane methods prevail today.

### **Cowboy Basics**

Cowboys ride horses in order to herd cattle. The cows were allowed to stay out on the open range grazing on grass for most of the year. Usually a round-up was held



in the spring, when cowboys on horseback would gather the cattle and bring them to the ranch. Each rancher had a unique symbol or brand that would mark their cattle. Different herds of cattle might graze together, so the cows needed to be sorted by brand mark. Then the cowboys had to sort out any new cows that needed training and branding, and any older cows that were ready to be sold.

Cowboys entertained one another with their skills, and this past-time developed into the rodeo, which is still entertains people today. Here are some basic cowboy terms:

- Bronco a wild horse Bronco buster a cowboy who specializes in “breaking” or training broncos
- Chaps leg coverings or leggings, usually made of leather, which are worn to protect legs from brush and from inclement weather
- Lariat a braided rope (also called a lasso) Quirt a short whip with strips of leather at the end
- Saddle a leather seat strapped to the horse’s back for the rider to sit upon
- Bit the metal mouthpiece that the horse bites down onto. It is attached to the other straps of the bridle that fit over the horse’s head.
- Bridle leather straps that fit over the horses’ head. The bridle includes the reins, which the rider can use to steer the horse.
- Spurs a piece of metal attached to the rider’s boot used to encourage the horse to go faster or to pay attention
- Stirrup the strap that hangs down from each side of the saddle where the rider can place his or her feet

### **Sources:**

“American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America,” Robert Hughes, Knopf. 1997, pp. 201-205.

Interview with Sue Canterbury, March 5, 2012. Canterbury did a study authenticating a sand-cast Bronco Buster at the Williams College Museum, comparing it to known lost-wax and sand-cast versions.

Teacher’s Guide on the Bronco Buster from Williams College:  
<http://wcma.williams.edu/files/2011/01/Bronco-Buster-Ed-Guide.pdf>

Decorative Arts, Sculpture and Textiles Department curatorial files.

Heilbrunn: [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/remi/hd\\_remi.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/remi/hd_remi.htm)

Remington Museum, Ogdensburg, New York - <http://www.fredericremington.org/>