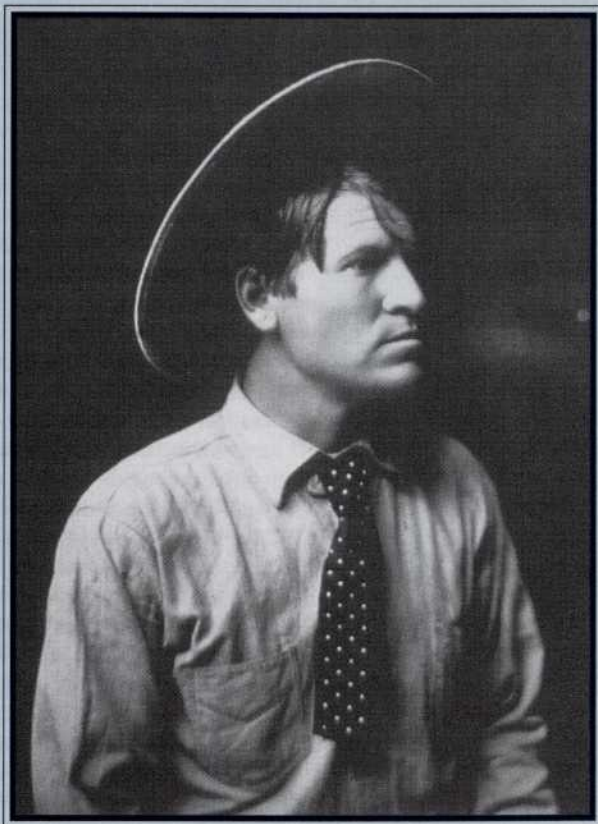


BLAZING NEW TRAILS:

**Peter Hassrick and OU's Charles M. Russell Center
for the Study of Art of the American West**



C. M. Russell Museum, Great Falls, MT

Charles M. Russell

Building on the Norman campus, will provide treasures for scholars and Western buffs. Its possessions will include reference books, museum and exhibition catalogues, monographs, periodicals, theses and dissertations, slides and prints of 19th and 20th century works by American Western artists, and notebooks containing contemporary newspaper clippings, diaries, letters, and other primary source materials. Some 124 color prints of Russell's works are among the holdings.

Andrew Phelan, director of the OU School of Art, says that these acquisitions will "bring attention to the strengths that the University has in Western art," including the Western History Collections, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and the new Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History. Winning the opportunity to establish the Russell Chair, he adds, was "a validation of the quality of our work."

The opportunity first surfaced in 1996 when the officers of the Nancy Russell Trust announced that, in liquidating the estate, they would contribute \$500,000 to an institution of their choice to set up a permanent memorial to promote the art

I BY MICHAEL WATERS

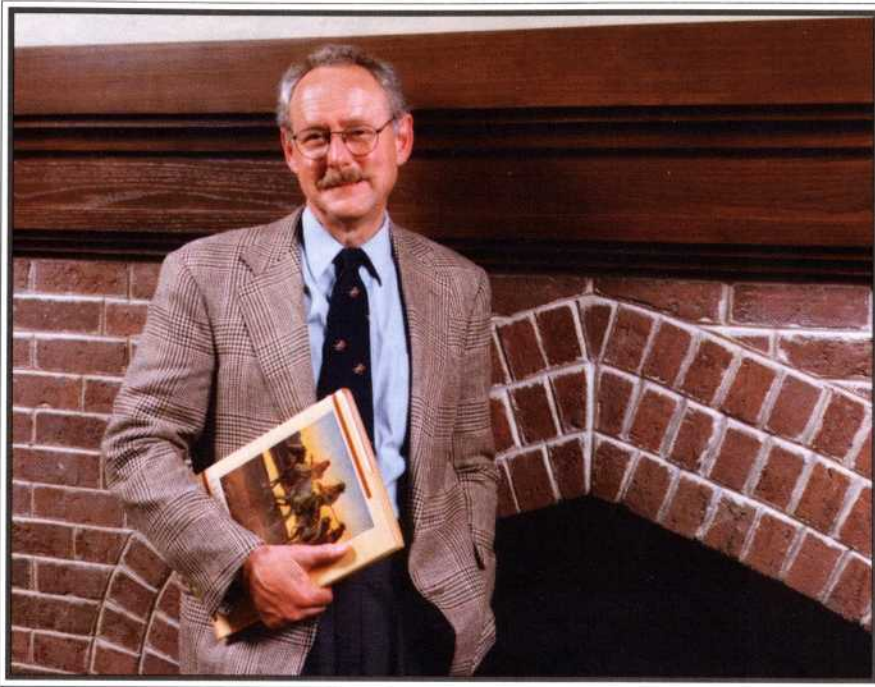
n 1912, Charles M. Russell painted what critics have called his masterpiece, a mural titled *Lewis and Clark Meeting the Flathead Indians at Ross' Hole*. The expansive work is dominated by a group of Indian braves on horseback, presenting arms to the explorers' party under a brooding and seemingly infinite Montana sky. For the white and native camps in the painting, the day is one of discovery.

The American West portrayed by Russell in more than 2,500 artworks was explored, then vanquished, by time and the steady tramp of settlers' boots. But at the University of Oklahoma, another journey of discovery has begun—through the founding of the Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West and the selection of Peter H. Hassrick as the center's director and the first holder of the Russell Chair in Western Art.

Hassrick, whose career boasts 27 years' experience in museums with a Western art focus, notes that the Russell Center is the first academic research facility of its kind in the nation.

"It's exciting to me," he says, "that finally somebody in the academy has realized that this is a significant discipline. The tremendous contribution of the University of Oklahoma to the study of Western history and Native American history has been recognized."

Hassrick adds that the center, which will open in fall 1999 in the completely renovated and expanded Old Faculty Club



Peter Hassrick, holder of the new Russell chair, will guide the fortunes of OU's Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West in the newly renovated Old Faculty Club Building, just northwest of Boyd House.



and legacy of her husband, Charles M. Russell.

Russell and Frederic Remington were the best known of the American artists whose work commemorated the West in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Though lacking in formal training, Russell created paintings and sculpture that carried a ring of authenticity—he was a Westerner himself who lived the cowboy life for much of his 62 years. Many Westerners preferred his work, with its accuracy of detail, over that of Remington, the Easterner who took more artistic license with his renderings.

"Russell was reticent, not boastful and felt he was average," Hassrick says. "But he had formidable skills as a sculptor and a painter. He thought of the West as an experience, a place unequaled in anything that had ever existed in America. So he spent his life being 'the cowboy artist.'"

When, seven decades after Russell's death in 1926, the funds for a Russell program were made available, OU submitted a proposal. However, prestigious entities with impressive holdings in Western art, such as the Charles

M. Russell Museum in Great Falls, Montana, the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa and the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, also were interested in the endowment.

"I didn't think we had much of a chance getting the endowment for the University Libraries," admits Donald DeWitt, curator of the Western History Collections, "but I did believe we could prepare a strong proposal for a teaching chair. Dean of Libraries Sul H. Lee agreed; we felt we should propose an endowed chair as a memorial."

In consultation with Dean Lee and then-Dean David Woods of the College of Fine Arts, DeWitt and Phelan crafted a formal proposal in April 1996 for an endowed chair, a center, a biennial conference and multimedia dissemination of information. DeWitt says that one strong selling point of the proposal was the promise that the state of Oklahoma would contribute matching funds to the chair's endowment.

Phelan adds, "We did not own a single Charles Russell piece at that point. We made it clear that we didn't own any, and we argued that we could be

impartial—that we wouldn't be bound to promote our own collection over others."

The proposal, Phelan and DeWitt say, pointed out OU's geographical advantage in having close proximity to other top-name institutions in the realm of Western art, such as Gilcrease, Amon Carter and the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. They noted as well the presence of the University's own museum and art library.

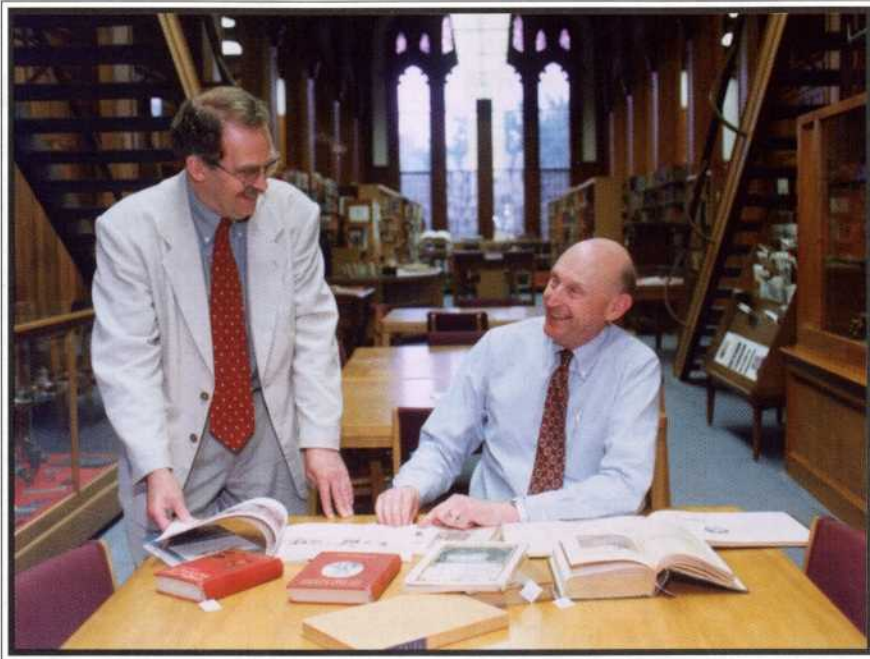
The proposal drew a June 1996 visit to OU from Charles Cale, principal trustee for the Russell estate. Cale visited first with DeWitt at Western History, then separately with David Maloney, vice president for University Development, Dean Woods, presidential assistant James (Tripp) Hall, Ronald C. Winkler at the University of Oklahoma Foundation and Dean Lee.

The University's efforts paid off. Later that summer, the Russell trustees decided that OU's plan would be the best way to perpetuate the renowned artist's memory. In the meantime, the estate's endowment had grown to \$640,000.

Phelan adds that "the fact that our proposal was selected over some prestigious institutions, that we were able to make a case for our strengths, speaks highly of the caliber of our institution."

When the time came to locate a suitable candidate for the endowed chair, DeWitt says that Hassrick emerged as the obvious choice. "His background in art history and museum work was exactly what the search committee was looking for. He's well known to all the institutions that are large holders of Russell art."

For his part, Hassrick recalls that "I was in the middle of a couple of writing projects and heard that this



Announcement of the Nancy Russell Foundation endowment spurred a gift to the OU Western History

Collections of 26 books related to the work of Charles M. Russell from James McDowell Sr. of Jenks. Inspecting the new acquisitions are School of Art Director Andrew Phelan, left, and Western History Collections Curator Donald DeWitt, who collaborated on the original proposal for the Russell Center.



position had been funded. It sounded like an exciting opportunity.

"I'm not really an academic, although I have written and curated a lot," Hassrick adds. "I've been primarily interested in trying to say something intelligent to a public audience through museum work.

"This is a new 'take' for me as an academic, but I don't feel uncomfortable. My own experience has been respected, and I feel like I've been made part of a new family."

Hassrick's experience could be described as a lifelong romance with the American West, which began in his early years.

Born in Philadelphia in 1941, Hassrick moved westward with his family during his early years and lived for a three-year period in Anadarko, Oklahoma. "I grew up in a ranching family," he recounts. "My father, Royal Hassrick, was both a rancher and an anthropologist and had a serious interest in American Indians."

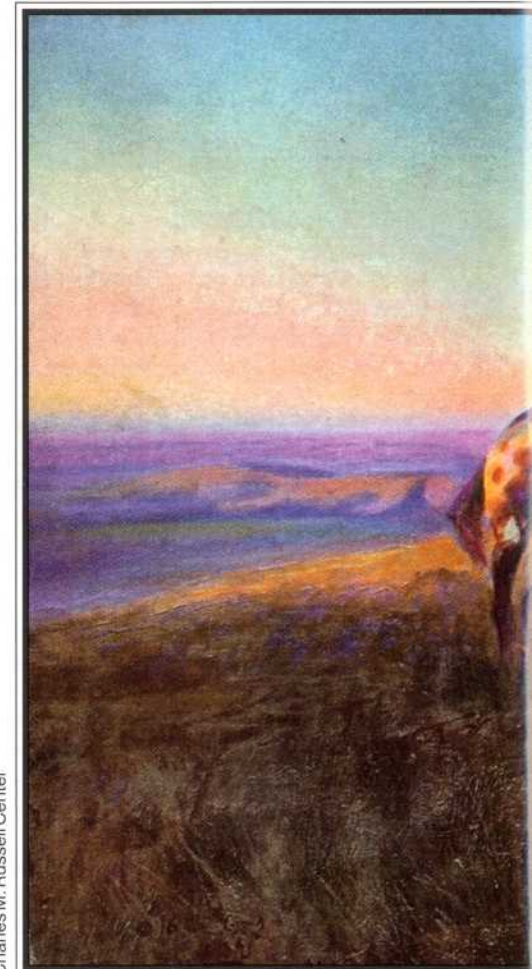
The elder Hassrick wrote several books on Native American topics, including *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society*, published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1964. The younger Hassrick says the book is still one of the definitive works in the field.

"My mother was a harpsichordist and played classical music," Hassrick says. "Together my parents collected American antiques and American 19th-century paintings. I grew up in a world that mixed all these things together and picked up snatches from them to craft a life mission for myself."

After serving for six years as curator of collections at the Amon Carter Museum from 1969-75, Hassrick was named director of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming. There, he oversaw the work of 75 full-time employees at a 240,000-square-foot facility with an annual budget of \$6 million. He also curated one of the center's subdivisions, the Whitney Gallery of Western Art.

Hassrick left that position in 1996 to spend two years on what he calls a "from-scratch" operation to help bring into being the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico. As director, he designed and supervised construction of the \$7 million facility, led the assemblage of its collections and steered its inaugural exhibition.

During his career, he has authored and edited several books and articles on Western art, including works on Russell, Remington, George Catlin and Georgia O'Keeffe. His 1996 *Frederic Remington: A Catalogue*



Charles M. Russell Center

Raisonne, co-authored with Melissa Webster and published in two volumes with CD-ROM, won the Director's Award for Special Literary Achievement from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame and the Joan Patterson Kerr Award from the Western History Association. A 1992 article on Western art museums for *Montana* magazine won the Cowboy Hall of Fame's award for best article of the year.

Wherever he has worked, and whatever his medium, Hassrick is animated by a desire to stimulate popular and scholarly appreciation for Russell, Remington and others as artists who created works with below-the-surface messages that are still meaningful today.

Furthermore, "one of the biggest challenges concerning Western art is to have it recognized as not just a

regional form, as 'aw-shucks' cowboy art, but as a field of work that fits in the mainstream of American art history."

Phelan agrees, and adds that "artists such as Remington and Russell were strong contributors to developing the mythology, or self-image if you will, of America in the last century."

Getting across these messages, Hassrick says, involves "making collections relevant, accessible, intelligible and interesting. You want to make a gallery full of paintings or Indian artifacts as compelling to a public audience as Disney World."

He adds that another challenge is that of "looking into the art for messages as to how the past interpreted itself—what kind of agendas these artworks had.

"Many of the pictures tend to be narrative, such as a big landscape painting of Yellowstone Falls or a sculpture

of a cowboy riding across the prairies," he notes. "They seem so matter-of-fact in their presentation that they're often too easily read and then either dismissed or incorporated into a pre-existing opinion of what the West meant. But I want to search for these subtexts, gently and cautiously, and to reveal some of them—to get people interested in other dimensions of this work."

For example, he says, take the most popular of Frederic Remington's sculptures, an 1895 bronze titled *The Bronco Buster*. This image of a leathery cowboy clinging determinedly to the back of a bucking horse, its front legs held crooked and high in the air, seems "matter-of-fact" indeed. Or is it?

"There are biographical dimensions to this little piece of sculpture that you don't see," Hassrick explains. "There's the way in which he's trying to broaden his expanses. (Remington) was pi-



The Red Man's Wireless, 1916—photomechanical reproduction—gift of Peggy and Harold Samuels

geonholed as an illustrator and wants to become known as an artist—and his paintings aren't doing the job for him.

"Then, there's the image itself. The cowboy is breaking a bronco—pretty generic stuff, but it's copyrighted in 1895, and 1895 is a significant year. That's just two years after Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his paper at the World's Fair in Chicago on the significance of the frontier in American history, and people are realizing that the frontier has died. So the cowboy taming that horse is in a sense taming the West.

"And there's the title. The word 'buster' has all sorts of implications. There's the idea of a 'sodbuster,' there's the idea of 'busting' or 'breaking' something. And when you break something, you impair it. So in a sense, by conquering the West, this cowboy is becoming part of its defeat. And by doing so, he too is passing out of existence," Hassrick adds.

"At just the moment when the cowboy is becoming an icon, Remington's making a statement that his day is over."



*"He left us . . .
but he left us
much."*

Will Rogers

Hassrick's talents for stimulating interpretive analysis of Western art have found a new and different audience at OU. Where once his skills were called upon to conjure adult and family programs for museums, he now tailors his message to a student-age audience in classes on Western art history. He likes the challenge.

"I'm enjoying being reinserted into a milieu that is made up of a younger generation," he says. "Here, at the end of the 20th century, a lot of young

people are *not* thinking about the kinds of things my generation grew up thinking about—cowboy-and-Indian movies, for example. The Western, as a movie genre, is pretty much defunct, so it's interesting to hear their take on the West."

But whether in classroom education or public education, the goal is "to get 'em to get it," he said. "You have to craft it in a way that they want to learn more about it."

Meanwhile, other interesting "takes" on the West certainly will be provided by the top-name scholars drawn to OU to participate in the Russell Center's biennial conferences. The center's inaugural symposium will take place September 10 on the theme, "Don't Fence Me In! Awakened Relevance, Mainstream Possibilities and Changing Perceptions in Western and Native American Art." Preceding the symposium will be a banquet September 9, featuring former Senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming as keynote speaker.

Speaking at the symposium itself will be Arthur D. Amiotte, artist, writer

Charles M. Russell Center



Sagebrush Sport, 1912—photomechanical reproduction—gift of Peggy and Harold Samuels

and consultant on Indian cultures of the Northern Plains; Nancy Anderson of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; Janet Berlo of the University of Rochester; Erika Doss of the University of Colorado at Boulder; Charles Eldredge from the University of Kansas; William H. Goetzmann of the University of Texas, Austin; Howard Lamar of Yale University; Lloyd Kiva New, director emeritus of the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe; Janine Pease Pretty on Top, president of Little Big Horn College, Crow Agency, Montana; B. Byron Price, executive director of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center; W. Jackson Rushing III of the University of Missouri, St. Louis; Martha A. Sandweiss of Amherst College; Rick Stuart, director of the Amon Carter Museum; and Martin Sullivan, former director of the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona.

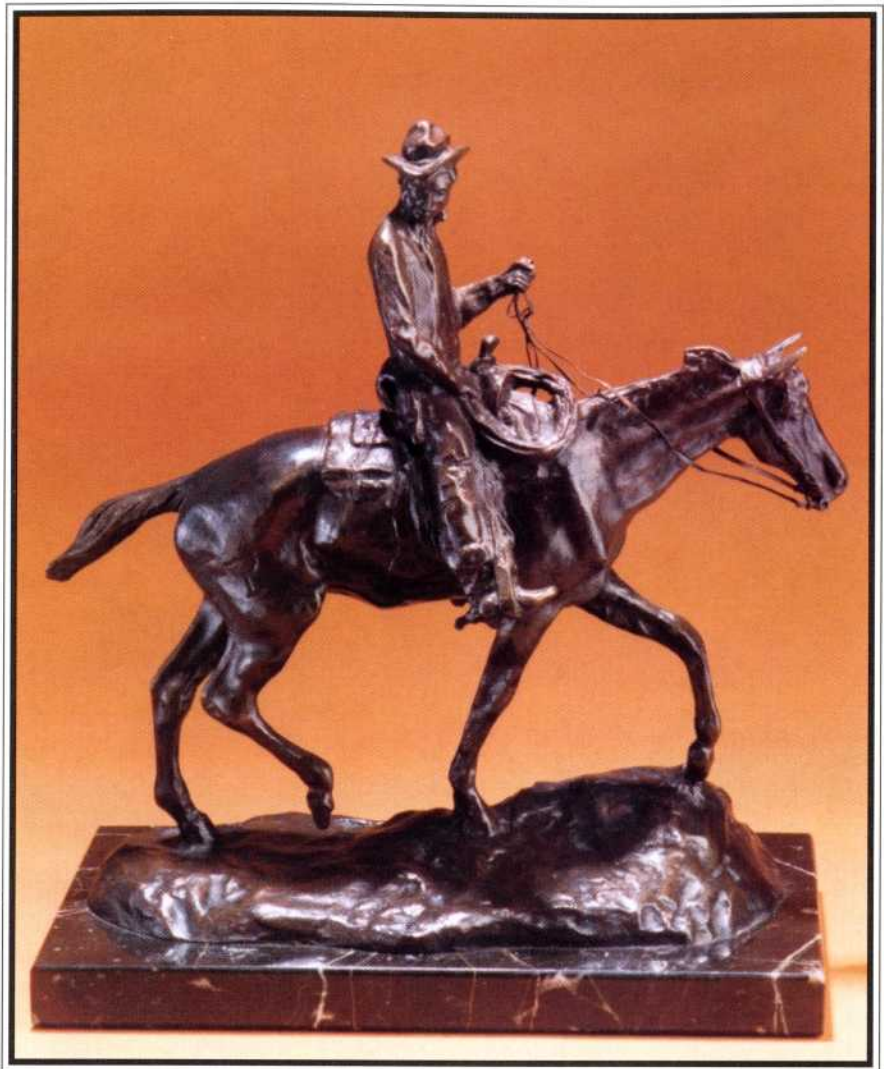
After the opening, the center will settle down to day-to-day business in its new quarters, located northwest of Boyd House. A reading room/library, a seminar room and office space will occupy the first and second floors of the Old Faculty Club Building. (The basement and a northside addition will house artist-in-residence Paul Moore and his figurative sculpture program.)

Looking beyond its initial efforts, both Phelan and DeWitt say that the Russell Center, and Hassrick's work as chair, will have benefits for other University programs in the years to come.

Phelan expects the establishment of the Russell Chair to lead to creation of a Ph.D. program in art history, with emphases on art of the American West and Native American art. "If we didn't have the resources to bring in a noted scholar like Peter Hassrick into this position, we wouldn't have the scholarly depth to promote a Ph.D.," he says.

DeWitt adds that "the Russell Center is going to be a very valuable partner to the Western History Collections" in teaching and providing research materials. He anticipates that the presence of the center eventually will enhance Western History's holdings as well—which now stand at 65,000 published volumes, 2,500 sound recordings, 2,000 oral histories and 500,000 photographs.

Hassrick also notes that the center



Courtesy Nancy Mergler

Charles M. Russell's *Will Rogers on Horseback*

©Nancy C. Russell Estate 1928

will create interdisciplinary programs with other campus departments.

An internet web site is planned to function as an online national newsletter on Western art happenings around the nation. The web site will provide data on exhibitions, acquisitions, publishing activity, dissertations and theses in progress, plans for symposia at schools and museums and course offerings at colleges and universities. "Nobody offers that kind of comprehensive information right now," Hassrick says.

Now beginning his fourth decade in stimulating analysis of the American West's culture and history, Hassrick's "regional romance" is as strong as ever. He loves its climate,

its topography and the evolution of its art and cultures. He seems to see his work at OU as sort of a culmination of his past efforts. "It's a nice cap to a career," he says.

It also may be a culmination of sorts for the legacy of Charles M. Russell. Hassrick's 1989 book on Russell quotes a private comment made by Will Rogers after the artist's death: "He left us . . . but he left us much." In giving Russell's time-honored name a new prominence in academia—in promising to inspire a new era of research into the West to which he devoted his life—OU's Russell Center and Russell Chair will, in years to come, invest much—and create much more.