The ironical fate which decrees that a prophet shall be without honor in his own country has permitted the high achievement of the American sculptor, Solon H. Borglum, to be more loudly heralded and widely recognized in Europe than in America. Such is not to be wondered at in the instance of those of our artists whose study abroad causes their work to be dominated by French and Classical influences to such a degree that it loses its American character, but in the case of Mr. Borglum the circumstance is somewhat extraordinary. For he stands pre-eminent as a sculptor of American life in one of its most distinctive phases, and the spirit and form of his art have remained essentially American. His groups embody in marble and bronze the free, primitive life of the great West, and in the freshness of their inspiration show no trace even of the despotic influence of Rodin’s genius, or of aught that is alien to America.

“We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye which knew the value of our incomparable materials,” wrote Emerson.

As Mr. Borglum talked to me recently of the ideal which has been the guiding principle of his work, it seemed to me that here, after many years, was the answer to Emerson’s words.

“I set out for Paris,” said Borglum, “but when I got there I was suddenly dismayed. I saw that the most any artist can do is to live and work with nature, and I said to myself, ‘that is what I must do at home. Why have I come?’ And the whole time I stayed, I struggled not to let my work lose its stamp of American life. That is what our artists fail to prevent. They go to Europe and become Europeans. They absorb the mythology and classicism which in Europe are the true thing, but which in America are not true. I wish I could tell you how deep in me lies this American idea; how sacred to me is the ambition to make my work typically American, to have it express the democracy, the splendid youth, the crudeness, too, if you will, of my native country. Such ambition in us all is the only basis for a great national life!”

Although as a child and youth Solon Borglum seems to have been unaware of the genius latent within him, his entire life experience was an unconscious preparation for his destined work. He was born in
From a Photograph by A. B. Bogart.

"EVENING." BY
SOLON BORGLUM.
From a Photograph by A. B. Bogart.

"SIOUX INDIAN BUFFALO DANCE."
BY SOLOMN BORGLOM.
“NIGHT HAWKING.”

“BUCKING BRONCHO.”

BY SOLON BORGLUM.

From Photographs by A. B. Bogart.
From a Photograph by A. B. Bogart.
Ogden, Utah, in eighteen hundred and sixty-eight, of Danish parents, who later settled in Omaha. The boy Solon was a timid, quiet child, of lively imagination; an acknowledged failure at his books, delighting in nothing so much as the companionship of his father’s horses and the freedom of the prairie. At the age of fifteen he went with an elder brother to California to stock a ranch, and here he was initiated for the first time into the full round of activities which make up the cowboy’s life. He soon became inured to the primitiveness of it all, and his heart opened to the wild, free messages of the plains as it had never opened to the influences of the schoolroom and the progressive prairie city. When, at the end of a year on the California ranch, his brother decided to return to civilization, Solon determined definitely upon the profession of a ranchman. He took charge of his father’s ranch at Loop River, Nebraska, threw up his “shack” there, and was soon absorbed in the responsibilities of “boss.” The régime at Loop River, however, was a model of democracy, for Borglum was one with the boys, eating, sleeping with them, and performing the same tasks which fell to the crudest of them. The horses and cattle, too, were his constant companions, and his love and sympathy for them taught him the secrets of their every mood. Sun, wind, rain and blizzard went also plentifully into the making of life at Loop River. And like the child in the poem who went forth every day with open heart and receptive consciousness, so it was with Solon Borglum. “These things became a part of him,”—the close comradeship of the cowboys, the dumb love of animals, the desolation of the plains, the fury of the stampede, the prairie sun’s fierce heat, and the stinging cold of the blizzard. They entered his soul as silent forces, to become articulate later in his work.

Young Borglum was twenty-four, when, influenced largely by the advice of his brother, who was a successful painter, he determined to become an artist. He sold the ranch for an indifferent sum, and a year later we find him struggling against poverty in Los Angeles and Santa Ana, and trying to learn to paint. The art journals which he read spurred his ambition, and on the meager proceeds from a sale of the pictures he had painted, he went to Cincinnati to enter the Art School there. The passion for art, which had been latent in him so long, was now fully aroused, and he worked incessantly.

Both because he yearned for the companionship of his old friends, the horses, and because modeling would give him an anatomical
knowledge of the animal that would be helpful in painting, he obtained admission to the United States stables in Cincinnati, and began to model his first group. This represented a horse pawing the body of a dead horse on the plains, and, if weak technically, showed such unusual boldness of conception and depth of feeling, that when it was exhibited in the annual school exhibition Borglum was awarded a special prize of fifty dollars.

The winning of a larger award, and of a scholarship during his second year at the Cincinnati school, fired his determination to go to Paris. He was soon established in a poor, bare room in the Latin Quarter there, and after some difficulty succeeded in obtaining admission to the city stables. With the Louvre and Luxembourg easily accessible, surrounded as it were by the most glorious examples of Old World art, he heard still the call of the wild, and it was largely as a panacea for homesickness for the prairie that he began the group “Lassoing Wild Horses.” In this, a cowboy has lassoed a wild horse by the neck, and his partner, on a plunging pony, leans forward with arm upraised in the act of lassoing the legs. The tense figures of the cowboys, and the spirited grace and fierce resistance of the animals, are executed with a realism that epitomizes the thrilling action of Western life. To the delight of the young sculptor the group was accepted by that year’s Salon, and was highly praised by the critics.

Encouraged by words of approval from Fremiet, the French sculptor, and from other artists who had become interested, and rejoicing that he had found in sculpture the medium of his truest self expression, Borglum set to work with renewed energy. The famous “Stampede of Wild Horses,” exhibited at the Paris Exposition and now owned by the Cincinnati Museum, was speedily completed. This is a life-size group in which the frenzy and terror of animals plunging on the brink of an abyss are depicted with that passionate abandon of the artist to his subject which is an aspect of genius.

It is also interesting, and not surprising, to note the warm human sentiment with which the sculptor endows his animal groups. As an illustration of this let us take the infinitely pathetic and tender piece “Snowdrift.” Could anything be more humanly eloquent than its appeal of maternity and infantile helplessness?—the mother filled with anxiety for the safety of her young, the foal wholly unconscious of the danger of the storm, and happily nestling close for warmth.
Mr. Borglum has sounded another note of Western life in his virile and dramatic treatment of the Indian. These people he knows, not casually or professionally, but as one who has lived amongst them, with the insight born of passionate sympathy. This perhaps is why his Indian groups are so vastly suggestive that the specific story which each tells is often lost sight of in the large symbolism of the work. Thus in the group called "Desolation," the prostrate figure of the Indian woman who weeps at her husband's grave on the plains seems to be invested with a something larger and more tragic than personal grief, and to symbolize rather the mourning of a dying race conscious of its doom. Its appeal is that of a sorrowing people rather than of an individual. "On the Border of White Man's Land" is a group representing an Indian and horse peering over a cliff at the approach of a train of paleface emigrants.

"These people are my dear, dear friends," Mr. Borglum told me. "At Christmas they send my little daughter, Monica, strings of beads, wondrously woven baskets, and gay belts, with messages of love for us all."

At present Mr. Borglum is at work upon an equestrian statue of the Western hero, Captain O'Neil, for the city of Prescott, Arizona, and upon a portrait statue of the beloved Southerner, General John B. Gordon, C. S. A., which will be unveiled in Atlanta, Georgia, in June.

The greatness of man and artist is most strikingly evident in the spirit which animates his work. This is intensely American, and intensely democratic. He has recognized the value of our "incomparable materials," and has drawn his inspiration solely from the life of the frontier,—a life in which man's worth is measured by his native strength, energy and resourcefulness rather than by his possessions; a life primitive, dauntless, clean. There is that in his work which challenges the shams and insincerities of our drawing rooms, and which makes the money-getting occupations of our trammeled lives seem suddenly trite. His art is not the expression of his personality, but of that part of the Universe by which he was environed, and is therefore as untrammeled as nature. To what measure of greatness it will rise when the ego of the man becomes articulate, it is interesting to speculate. He is in sculpture what Walt Whitman is in literature, a force as virile, elemental, and un-selfconscious as wind or rain. To study his art sympathetically is to thrill to the rugged truth and beauty of primal things.