WHEN Frederic Remington left Yale, in eighteen hundred and eighty, his art heroes were de Neuville and Détaille and his college record largely important as a triumphant forward in some of the greatest football games Yale has ever played for a record. And mere art prizes did not then seem nearly so significant as being lifted on the shoulders of yelling youngsters and borne aloft across college campus with music and cheers.

In those wonderful days of real success, Remington’s interest in a national development was muscular rather than artistic. For, after all, there were still men in Paris who could conduct the business of painting soldiers and heroes for some years longer, but when it came to college athletics and the right forward on the spot and a blue pennant always floating around victory there was indeed work to be done for the nation to the accomplishment of which a national art must for the moment be subservient.

And then, just at a time when these vital matters were being adjusted to the satisfaction of Yale and the universe, quite unexpectedly the problem of earning a living presented itself, abruptly and determinedly. This was solved temporarily by a political desk at Albany; but clerking, figures and dull repetition in an office had not so great an appeal to a lad whose days had been spent in joyous sport or with imagination thrilling at an easel. Discontent stalked in at this juncture; the one release that seemed to offer was along art lines, and it was at this time that Remington planned a trip to the West and began the first steps in the development of his career.

Though Remington’s earliest work was technically wholly imitative, born of hero-worship and absolutely without individuality or permanent value, the human side of the artist was from the start restless with old-world ideals and unconsciously struggling toward a more natural art expression. Tradition had enveloped him at the art school, as nearly all of art training at that time took for its standard of excellence the Beaux Arts and Julian’s; and yet, somehow, even in the earliest days, Remington’s natural bent was toward the expression of a simpler, more definite condition of life, and he longed from his first dream of the West to get at those extraordinary picturesque phases of existence which were then in full flower on our plains and mountain tops.

Remington’s attitude toward life was always, from the time that he first put on a uniform at the Worcester Military Academy, that
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"THE CEREMONY OF THE SCALPS": FREDERIC REMINGTON, PAINTER.
of unqualifiedly an American citizen. He had the temperament which makes for hotheaded patriotism, definitely chivalrous, insular; an imagination that fired readily and loyally for that stretch of land, the greatest in his geography, which was set compactly down between the Atlantic and Pacific, bounded on the north by Canada and on the south by Mexico, Lower California and the Gulfs,—a new land with a young history, redolent with a fresh kind of beauty, all color and vividness, and as yet unexpressed in art.

And thus, while pictures most flattering to de Neuville and Detaille were produced, they really grew out of a supersoil and were quite unrelated to the actual fundamental quality of the youth, which was eventually to override early training and develop an individuality of such virility and honesty that it could only satisfactorily achieve by breaking new ground, doing pioneer work in the art history of America. Not intentional pioneer work, for the self-constituted pioneer, as a self-appointed reformer, does not achieve much beyond a picturesque pose enjoyed by an immediate family and a friendly biographer, but rather the opening of new trails, the opportunity for which is occasionally given to a man in religion or art or science because of the pressure of his own creative personality—that mysterious human dynamic force which, not understanding, we have labeled genius.

And so young Mr. Lochinvar hurried out of the art schools, which were essaying to make a tidy mural decorator of his burning, blundering, unformulated gift, and sought the West, palette in hand. As far from the beaten track as possible he traveled on a broncho pony. He herded cattle with cowboys, shot antelope and buffalo on the trail for the provender necessary for his life. He camped with the Indians, with the real red men who did not speak English and make pottery decorated with the American flag. The Indians of the plains that Remington knew,—learned actually to know,—and which he painted, were men of fine religious ideals, dignity of life, with decency of social intercourse and often of great personal beauty and serenity of character, men with the reserve of philosophers, which they were, great chiefs over a clean people. This pioneer artist stayed in the West long enough to learn to appreciate these people, all their ways of thinking and working, all the environment of their vast inspiring country, their legends and their customs. And he lived there, not as a sightseer or as one prying into their lives, but because he liked it; he wanted to see it all, to realize it as one of the nation to whom it belonged. The Indian character of those days.
was something worth striving to understand, to absorb, to glory in, and eventually to express in art.

Slowly the artist side of Remington’s nature began to apprehend the great final fact that this wonderful enchanted land of limitless undulating prairies, of strange sudden blazing daybreak and slow ineffable twilight trailing off to the dawn of all creation, of opalescent mists and purple nights of abounding mystery, of a people serene, simple, loyal, moving silently, perhaps unconsciously, in picturesque accouterment, to oblivion,—all this stupendous romantic appeal was his to express on canvas for a world as yet blind to the marvels of the life which he was living.

And then all that quality of national pride and devotion which might, under other circumstances, have welled up into patriotism, the making of a soldier, went once and for all into an enthusiasm for the country itself, and the purpose to express that country in an art which should become a part of our national achievement. For it is just as true that to achieve in art men must paint with a purpose as that purpose must stand back of scientific attainment, financial success, or the literature that locks hands with fame. Mere technique, however excellent, must be ephemeral in either art or literature when regarded as the end as well as the means to high accomplishment. Paris has proved this truth in later years, Germany is now busy at work proving it, and L’Art Nouveau stands as the testimony of all Europe to the futility and tragedy of art for art’s sake.

Of course, there is always danger of confusing purpose with sentiment in art, of painting stories rather than conditions, a very different matter indeed. A sentimental rehash of a universal emotional tendency is not significant to art; but the presentation of general or specific instances of definite conditions inherent in a civilization, that is vital, for it is putting on record the peculiar personality of a nation which is of interest to future generations of all nations. It is from an apprehension of this fact that we come to a fuller understanding of Remington’s significance to American art history. For it is not only as a painter of exceptional interest that posterity will seek his work, but as a pioneer worker in the presentation of phases of American civilization. And from one point of view at least his work will be valued in proportion as he succeeded in portraying existing conditions with a fresh open mind and with a right gift for their expression. Just as England will sum up and place the work of Rudyard Kipling and France that of Auguste Rodin.

When Remington finally returned to New York from the West he found an indifferent public. The one magazine which would consent to consider his detour out into a country without a precedent
FREDERIC REMINGTON, PIONEER IN AMERICAN ART

was Harper’s Weekly, and the editor there turned his virile work over to a home-grown artist to smooth out his too individual note, conform its technique to at least a semblance of the prevailing style in art, and so, humble and chastened, this first pioneer work appeared. And no one seemed to care at all. There was no enthusiasm; scarcely enough response even for the daily bread problem.

Of opportunity for painting or sculpture there was none at all. The beauty of the great West, its marvelous desert colors, its mystery and strangeness, found no audience. But there was occasionally a daring writer who saw in the West dramatic and venturesome opportunities, and these stories required illustration, which could be done just as well by a man familiar with the country as by the staff artist. And so for the time being Remington became an illustrator of stories of Western life, and having purpose in his work and that courage which we have already attested as being of a soldier-like quality, he became a particularly good illustrator, not only of the Indians and aboriginal life of the West, but of the cowboys and their environment, of the Chinese crawling stealthily in on the Northwestern frontier, of the Western miner, of every phase of life which appealed to his interest in America and to the settled purpose of his art. Yet, although it is essential that a good illustrator should equally be a great artist, it is also a fact that a great artist may not forever remain an illustrator. He must give his individuality a chance once in a while or perish. Thus it came about that abruptly Remington ceased to appear in the magazines. One or two small exhibits of his paintings were held. Schaus had the courage for this. But the public was not ready, and perhaps in the main Remington himself was not ready for the public. For although he had accomplished freedom for himself in his choice of material, he had not yet wholly achieved a final method of handling this material. He still suggested the ways of Paris occasionally in color and brush work, and if no longer imitating his beloved Frenchmen, he was still at least not wholly free from their influence.

THEN these tentative exhibits of his work were withdrawn and Remington turned his back upon his native land for a while, traveling the world well over, studying the significant conditions of existence wherever they had interest or appeal for him. He ceased to paint entirely; he even lost confidence, or thought he did, in his own purpose to present America in his art. He sketched Russia’s peasants,—most valuable and extraordinary documents, these sketches. There was in them that which might have been a warning to the high authorities of that land had they seen them and chosen
to understand. There were other sketches of the laborers, the busy people, the sufferers of each land which held a genuine interest for him. It was at this time that he also did a certain vivid, convincing, essentially American series of articles. There was a long period of this desultory roaming about, testing his skill and his impulse toward art, of uncertainty, of restless seeking after satisfaction in new channels. At the end of ten years of Wanderlust he just as abruptly turned back to his own country and to his old purpose of the presenting of America, of the great picturesque West, that and that alone, in all that he might have to say on canvas or in bronze.

During the unsettled years of roaming and tentative efforts along new lines, Remington devoted some time to modeling, and for this work he used only the West as his inspiration. And through that creative quality which wrested him from the art schools, he made it possible with the help of Signor Bertelli to cast his own statues in the cire perdue process, an achievement which had never been accomplished in this country. It was very typical of Remington’s pioneer point of view that he should thus produce for himself the very best possible channels of expression, recreating where necessary the finest methods of Europe in her greatest days of bronze work, accepting nothing less than the best for himself or as a medium of expression. Thus, Remington’s bronzes will have a threefold interest to the student of American art: first, because of the subject which he has selected; second, because of the development of a technique which was suited to these subjects, and third, because he insisted that the artisan’s side of the work should be done better than it had ever been done before in America.

Since Remington’s return to painting, seven years ago, he has worked only for what he considered the very best that he could achieve along those lines which he has found essential for his development as an artist, regardless of the magazines, the public or the dealer. Having made this decision, he has achieved the fullest and freest expression for his individual ideas, choosing only those subjects which he feels are vastly significant to us as a nation and suiting his technique with infinite variety to the most sympathetic expression of these ideas.

What more complete justification for such a course could an artist ask than Mr. Remington’s exhibit this winter at Knoedler’s? No advertising canvass of the country to bring people to look at his pictures; no play in any subject for popular approval; no swerving to the smallest degree from his original purpose or from the development of that purpose along lines most satisfactory to himself, an artist without fear and with much reproach, yet, a result of success
SKETCHES OF AMERICAN INDIAN TYPES BY FREDERIC REMINGTON.
beyond the greatest hopes of the student of years ago. In all his later work Mr. Remington has portrayed the Indians of the West as they existed to each other, and the cowboy and the scout and the traveler, each as typical as the characters in Bret Harte’s stories, and as individual; all vivid, alive, illustrating the full flower and the approaching death of a certain phase of our civilization. And above and beyond all his extraordinary presentation of the people and their picturesque existence is the absolute quality of the West itself,—the bronze of the day, the green of the twilight, the wind that stifles, the sun that blinds, the prairies that glisten and quiver with thirst, water that is a mockery, and storms that are born and vanish in the sky. And each phase of this marvelous country expressed through a medium so fluid, so flexible, so finally sympathetic that you become as unconscious of it as was the artist himself when he painted.

The one influence which Remington acknowledges frankly as of value to him in these later years of work is Monet; not his subjects or his individual technique, but his theory of light in relation to his art, which much simplified is nothing more nor less than that all a man needs to see, study, and bring to his canvas is light; that paint is merely the means of transferring the suggestion of light to a picture, a medium which should be used almost unconsciously, through which a man’s expression of light becomes so fixed that a picture glows and quivers until it seems to exude the very palpitating quality which light itself holds, which is one of the mysterious suggestions of sentient life.

And in these later pictures, those recently exhibited, for instance, there was a most extraordinary variation of this quality of light flooding canvas after canvas. In one, a harsh bronze light glittered over parched prairies and alkaline waters; in another there was the silver radiance of a sparkling winter high noon; again, the tender ineffable light of a gray-green early night with stars glistening through the thick soft atmosphere. And perhaps the most extraordinary suggestion of light streamed out of a painting in which the flaunting wind-blown camp fire breaks the blackness of night and opens spaces in the dark for fear, or sorrow, or revenge to show on the faces of the men about the fire. Until one grows,—almost always in Remington’s more recent pictures,—to look first for the light over the canvas, not for the detail or the color or the outline, although these also are presented with the utmost understanding of good craftsmanship; for Remington learned to paint, or rather largely taught himself to paint, from the ground up, as one of his cowboys would say, and the intricacies of careful drawing, the subtleties of well-related
color, and the values of balanced composition he knows, as a great pianist first understands his scales and his keyboard, and it is to a perfected knowledge of all these details that he has added the extraordinary and intangible quality which suggests the actual mystery of life itself. And thus while Remington is utterly remote from Monet in type and subject and manner of technique, theoretically they are most closely allied in understanding and inspiration.

And now to account for the final entire acceptance of Remington's work by the American public after years of indifference, of misunderstanding and academic uncertainty. Is it because the seed that he sowed at the start was slowly taking root, pushing up through the soil of a certain national stupidity, or is it a more general awakening of the nation toward all her art possibilities? Most likely it is both of these conditions.

Remington believes with all the enthusiasm possible in this present awakening in art matters, and that we are just now at the beginning of a development along art lines such as few nations have experienced. But as for himself, he feels that his art found recognition as he withdrew from limitations of any description, and with all the growth and experience of years added to his early formed purpose of a definite national feeling in his work, permitted himself to express fully and freely his own individual point of view, saying what he had to say frankly and as personally as he chose. Absolute freedom of mind and expression—these he achieved, and then the public response was immediate. And permanent? Assuredly permanent, if we are making the progress in art development which Frederic Remington so enthusiastically prophesies for us as a nation.