

Cite this article: Mark Thistlethwaite, review of *Mythmakers: The Art of Winslow Homer and Frederic Remington*, Amon Carter Museum of American Art, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2021), doi.org/10.24926/24716839.11889.

Mythmakers: The Art of Winslow Homer and Frederic Remington

Curated by: Margaret C. Adler, Diana Jocelyn Greenwold, Jennifer R. Henneman, and Thomas Brent Smith

Exhibition schedule: Denver Art Museum, June 26–September 7, 2020; Portland Museum of Art, September 25–November 29, 2020; Amon Carter Museum of American Art, December 22, 2020–February 28, 2021

Exhibition catalogue: Margaret C. Adler, Claire M. Barry, Adam Gopnik, Diana Jocelyn Greenwold, Jennifer R. Henneman, Janelle Montgomery, Thomas Brent Smith, and Peter G. M. Van de Moortel, *Homer | Remington*, exh. cat. Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum of American Art; Denver: Denver Art Museum; Portland, ME: Portland Museum of Art, in association with Yale University Press, 2020. 224 pp.; 179 color illus.; Cloth: \$50.00 (ISBN: 9780300246100)

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Surprisingly, given the popular appeal of the art it presents, *Mythmakers: The Art of Winslow Homer and Frederic Remington* offers the first major museum exhibition to explore the similarities and differences in work by these “American Titans” (as an early working exhibition title styled them).¹ Were it not for the pandemic, the exhibition, consisting of more than sixty artworks in a variety of media, would have undoubtedly attracted large, enthusiastic crowds to each of its three venues. I viewed the exhibition at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art (the Carter) under COVID-19 protocol mandates. Although the buzz of a crowd responding to this impressive presentation of artworks was missing, the precautions did result in a quiet environment conducive to close study and contemplation of the objects.

While scholars of American art have focused more attention on the art of Winslow Homer (1836–1910) than that of Frederic Remington (1861–1909), the idea of organizing this side-by-side exhibition is clever and logical. Both Homer and Remington had little formal artistic training and chose not to study abroad; both began their artistic careers as illustrators; both strove to be taken seriously as painters; both moved from depicting obvious narratives to ones more allusive; both produced art deemed by their contemporaries as “original,” “vigorous,” and “virile”; and both fashioned artwork lauded as authentic images of regional subject matter that achieved the mythic status of being regarded as national:

You cannot glance at [Homer’s] art so rich in rugged sincerity, so disdainful of mere aesthetic amenity, without being brought face to face with certain of

those qualities which Americanism at its best is supposed to typify. . . . [His art] evinces no hint of timidity and hesitation . . . [and] displays that fidelity to the essential aspect of things.²

The ardent climate, the arid soil, the dazzling rock color, the fantastic vegetation, and the wild, hard daring life of the plains and hills are denoted in these unmistakably American pictures. Mr. Remington has an audacity in his art, almost a rudeness, that gives, the greater force and veracity to these disclosures.³

The exhibition provides an occasion to reflect upon why and how these two artists and their art embodied mythologies considered American, a perception still held by many people today.



Fig. 1. *Mythmakers: The Art of Winslow Homer and Frederic Remington*, December 22, 2020–February 28, 2021 at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art

Museum visitors are drawn in to the exhibition by mural-sized signage with the title set in white sans-serif display typeface with “makers” bolded for emphasis (fig. 1). The letterforms float over gigantically enlarged conjoined details of Homer’s *Weatherbeaten* (1894; Portland Museum of Art) and Remington’s *Ridden Down* (1905–6; Amon Carter Museum of American Art) to generate an eye-catching, almost abstract composition of icy water and baked earth. The introductory space includes a timeline and an informational wall text acknowledging that the two artists may have never met despite both being Easterners and having art dealers and patrons in common. This text further informs visitors that the two men cultivated “larger-than-life personas as they presented often romanticized images” during “an era of massive and destabilizing social, environmental, and cultural change for the country.” Attention is called to the impact of European immigration on American cities and the killing and uprooting of Native communities as Anglo-Americans marched the course of empire westward. The text concludes: “Homer’s and Remington’s depictions of strength, struggle, and anxiety resonated for the audiences of their moment, and their art continues to shape how Americans visualize masculinity, wilderness, and the frontier.” The perspectives of eight individuals outside the field of art history have been incorporated into selected object labels and dial-in recording stops throughout the galleries. The commenters

include two painters, a photographer, a master Maine guide, members of the Mi'kmaq and Comanche Nations, an educator, and a musician-historian. With the inclusion of these diverse voices and the content expressed in the introductory wall text, the Carter makes clear that the exhibition aims to advance a more nuanced, complicated, and expansive understanding of Homer and Remington and their artwork than that probably held by most museum visitors.

Moving into the first gallery, a visitor encounters Remington's bronze *The Broncho Buster* (1895/1902; Amon Carter Museum of American Art) and the commanding presence of Homer's dynamic painting *Weatherbeaten* in the middle of the space. A gray wall is hung with a line of paintings that includes Remington's *The Old Stagecoach of the Plains* (1901; Amon Carter Museum of American Art) and Homer's *Artists Sketching in the White Mountains* (1868; Portland Museum of Art). Opposite this arrangement is a striking strawberry-red wall presenting an array of objects—oil paintings, a pastel, wood engravings, lithographs, an open volume of *Harper's Weekly*—that illuminate the theme The Artists as Illustrators. Three other sections comprise the exhibition: Up North, Opposing Forces, and Finale. Each thematic area is accompanied by a text panel that imparts a clear and succinct sense of the artistic and historical contexts in which these works of art were produced.

The exhibition presents works of art that are surely recognizable to many visitors, such as the paintings by Homer, *Snap the Whip* (1872; fig. 2) and Remington, *Fight for the Waterhole* (1903; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston). But surprises might be Homer's *Below Zero* (1894; Yale University Art Gallery) and *Cape Trinity, Saguenay River, Moonlight* (c. 1904; Myron Kunin Collection of American Art), and Remington's *Hauling the Gill Net* (1905; Frederic Remington Art Museum) and any of his late impressionistic North Country landscapes. The well-installed exhibition does credit to a body of work that is visually enticing and often stunning. Juxtapositions of the artists' work allows visitors to discover similarities and differences in the compositions.



Fig. 2. Winslow Homer, *Snap the Whip*, 1872. Oil on canvas, 22 × 36 in. Collection of The Butler Museum of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio, Museum. Purchase, 1919. Photo: Bridgeman Images

One particularly successful pairing emphasizes the resonant solemnity and desolateness coloring both Homer's *The West Wind* (1891; Addison Gallery of American Art) and Remington's *The Fall of the Cowboy* (1895; Amon Carter Museum of American Art). A label

points out the “lack of defined narrative and restricted palette” in each, then subtly encourages visitors to consider how these traits “counter the common perception that Remington and Homer were only preoccupied with vibrant colors and action.” Placed between these two paintings is the text panel, *A Conservator’s View: Technique Comparison*. This one-to-one examination may stimulate visitors to approach other works in their own compare-and-contrast manner. Also reinforcing individual agency in engaging with the art may be the remarks by the commenters. I found this to be true of Matt Kleberg’s response to Remington’s *The Stampede* (1908; Gilcrease Museum). Kleberg, an artist and former rancher, certifies that:

A lightning bolt is a real reason for panic because any sense of control unravels. . . . As herd animals, once a few cows start to freak out, the whole herd freaks out—and a stampede is a real thing. Even though the cowboy is still on top of his horse, he’s being carried along in this riptide of stampeding cattle.

His description of Remington’s rousing picture echoes the *New York Times*’s 1908 praise for the composition as “a vigorous study of confused motion.”⁴ Kleberg’s use of the word riptide triggered my recollection of the tradition of the prairie/Plains-as-ocean metaphor, such as one occurring in Washington Irving’s account of his 1832 visit to the West: “A thunder storm [*sic*] upon a prairie as upon the ocean, derives grandeur and sublimity from the wild and boundless waste over which it rages and bellows.”⁵ This led me to seek the prairie-ocean trope in other paintings. Seeing, for instance, the landscape of Remington’s *The Buffalo Hunters—Big Horn Basin* (1909; fig. 3) hanging next to Homer’s *Watching the Breakers* (1891; Gilcrease Museum) as an “unending prairie ocean” opened another way of associating the two artists.⁶



Fig. 3. Frederic Remington, *The Buffalo Runners—Big Horn Basin*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 30 1/8 × 51 1/8 in. Courtesy of the Sid Richardson Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 1950.3.1.30

The label commentaries by the outside voices do add an engaging personal and often provocative dimension to the exhibition experience, especially with regard to Remington’s art. This is not unexpected, since Remington, more than Homer, is tied to mythmaking in the popular imagination. Samantha Appleton, a photographer and human rights and social

justice activist, says of Remington's illustration, *The Apache War—Indian Scouts on Geronimo's Trail*, which appeared on an 1886 cover of *Harper's Weekly*:

The average person on the East Coast would have relied on these images as truth. There was no understanding or attempt to understand the other side of the conflict in news media such as *Harper's Weekly*. The brutality of what was happening in the Apache Wars was watered down. The white men on the horses are completely clothed, whereas the Indigenous figures are unclothed "savages." This type of propaganda was used to reinforce ideas that justified the genocide happening out West.

In another label, Jennifer Pictou, a historian and member of the Mi'kmaq Nation, observes that Remington's *The Cheyenne* (1901; Amon Carter Museum of American Art): "has a barely concealed violence. The violence of colonialism against Native cultures, the violence of the West, the violence of economic stratification, the violence of putting Natives on reservations. The violence of representing the idea of the savage or noble Indian, naked and barely differentiated from an animal." Pictou also observes that Remington freezes the action, "which allows us to create our own myth about what is going on." Her use of the word myth is noteworthy because, as far as I can tell, this is the only place (other than in the exhibition title) where the word occurs throughout the exhibition.

The absence of the word myth is perplexing. It would seem incumbent for an exhibition with mythmakers as part of its title to define myth and how it differs from nostalgia, how it can sustain itself even when people recognize it as fable-like, and how it specifically relates to these artists and manifests itself in the art on view. The Carter's object labels and wall panels hint at myth and mythmaking but need to explicate and employ the term more directly. To cite one example, *The Fight for the Waterhole's* label includes this passage: "Remington felt that the West of the kind he conjured in his imagination was largely a thing of the past by the time he was depicting: 'My West passed utterly out of existence so long ago as if to make it merely a dream.'" This is the stuff of mythmaking, and the exhibition could have addressed it more explicitly.

While the Carter exhibition does not quite fulfill the expectations its title promises, it does succeed in presenting visitors an opportunity to immerse themselves in an extraordinary assemblage of art and to consider in new ways these two illustrious American artists. It would be fascinating to know if visitors come away from the exhibition with a sense of American mythology reimagined, or reinforced.

Notes

One of the co-curators for *Mythmakers*, Margaret Adler, sits on the Advisory Board of *Panorama*. Another, Diana Jocelyn Greenwold, serves as Membership Coordinator for the journal's parent organization, the Association of Historians of American Art.

¹ The exhibition opened in Denver as *Natural Forces: Winslow Homer and Frederic Remington*. In Portland and Fort Worth, the mythmakers title was used.

² Christian Brinton, "Winslow Homer," *Scribner's Magazine* 49 (January 11, 1911): 10.

³ "Fine Arts. Illustrative Drawings at American Galleries," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 4, 1905.

⁴ “Gallery Notes,” *New York Times*, December 2, 1908.

⁵ Washington Irving, *A Tour of the Prairies* (New York: John W. Lovell, 1883), 64. This book was first published in 1835.

⁶ Samuel Bowles, *Our New West* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Publishing Company, 1869), 86. Remington owned this book.