

Charles M. Russell Depictions of the Metis

Charles M. Russell (1864-1926)

The “Cowboy Artist” Charlie Russell associated with Metis in his work as a cowboy was known for wearing a Metis sash and for his artistic depictions of the Metis of Montana. For a biography on Charlie Russell and his relationship with the Plains Metis and Indians, the interested reader should see the Nicholas Vrooman article “Charlie's Sash, the Metis, & Montana Cattle Culture.” Available on his blog at:

http://infinitynation.blogspot.com/2007_04_01_archive.html



The Charlie Russell artwork shown below and accompanying narratives are from the Amon Carter Museum website.

<http://www.cartermuseum.org/remington-and-russell>

<http://www.cartermuseum.org/store/archival-reproductions/flintlock-days-when-guns-were-slow>

<http://www.cartermuseum.org/store/archival-reproductions/crees-meeting-traders>

<http://www.cartermuseum.org/store/archival-reproductions/early-day-white-buffalo-hunters>

Flintlock Days--When Guns Were Slow, 1925



Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
1961.101

Late in his life, Russell returned to a series of large watercolors that depicted historical scenes from the western frontier prior to the coming of the settlements. Here, a buckskin-clad mountain man pauses to quickly reload his long rifle while a wounded buffalo, no longer able to run but its tail erect in defiance, prepares to stand its ground. In the background, another animal lies dead, while the rest of the herd flees with other hunters in pursuit. In the distance the Missouri River courses its way through a broad valley. In the foreground, a bleached buffalo scapula (shoulder blade) lies in a wallow. As the hunter reloads his rifle, his horse stands warily, just in case the wounded buffalo decides to charge. The man wears half leggings, designed to be worn over the pants legs to protect them. His fringed jacket appears to be cut in the “white man’s” fashion. He wears a scarf around his head, which indicates he is likely a Métis—a half breed descended from French and Indian forebears. The floral beadwork of his dress is interesting and could have antecedents in eastern Canada. However, the geometric style of his knife sheath seems to be Assiniboine. John Palliser, a young Englishman who visited the Far West in 1847, noted: “In running the buffalo you never bring your gun to your shoulder in firing, but present it across the pommel of the saddle, calculating the angle with your eye and steadying yourself, momentarily, by standing in the stirrups as you take aim.” Hunting the bison with single-shot weapons must have required enormous skill, to say nothing of fortitude.

Crees Meeting Traders, ca. 1896



Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
1961.154

The Crees originated on the plains of central Canada, and at the end of the nineteenth century a number of them migrated southward into Montana. Russell depicts a group of them hailing some Métis, who are shown traveling with two-wheeled carts. The Métis—a racial mixture of Cree, Chippewa, Assiniboine, and French who developed their own language—had staged an unsuccessful rebellion against the Canadian government in 1885, and some of them left Saskatchewan to take refuge in northeastern Montana. Once there, both the Cree and Métis became landless outcasts. Russell and others were part of a concerted drive to improve their dismal situation, and their efforts eventually proved successful.

In this loosely washed transparent watercolor, the Indian raising his arm wears a Hudson's Bay Company blanket coat, and panel leggings—so named for the “panels” of decorated beadwork that adorn them. Some of the other Indians wrap themselves in brightly colored trade blankets. These elements are skillfully rendered in transparent layers of pigment, down to very fine details applied with tiny brushes. In some places Russell employed touches of opaque white to create highlights in the snow, as in the area around the horses' feet. A group of Indian women with travois can be seen approaching

from the left background, while on the right—faintly washed in transparent colors—a group of Métis pause with their characteristic two-wheeled “Red River” carts.

Early Day White Buffalo Hunters, ca. 1922



Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
1961.323

In the early 1920s a group of Charles M. Russell’s closest friends in Great Falls, Montana, were partners in the Montana Newspaper Association, a venture that published advertising supplements in the state’s daily newspapers. They hit upon the idea to publish a series of entertaining stories chronicling the history of the Old West, and they prevailed on Russell to provide pen-and-ink illustrations for each one. These stories appeared nearly every Sunday for a year, from March 5, 1922, through February 18, 1923. Most of Montana’s 170 newspapers carried this popular series. For his part, Russell was glad to participate; he loved the history of the American West and avidly read many books on the subject. Today these wonderfully narrative drawings stand apart from the articles they once accompanied. The original ink drawing pictured here was originally in the estate of the artist’s widow, Nancy C. Russell. It is part of the largest selection of them to be found anywhere—almost half the number that the artist eventually produced for the series. In each of them, Russell’s fluid and dexterous lines create a vivid picture of truly historic events—elevating them to the power of epic and myth.

It is estimated that all of the buffalo east of the Mississippi were killed off by the 1830s, but to the west the great herds on the open plains numbered in the millions. Although the Native Americans used nearly every part of the animal to sustain their way of life, the early-day white hunters valued the buffalo for its hide, meat, and tongue. Even the Indians began to kill more animals for their robes and tongues, because they were able to trade them for European-American goods. By 1835—the period shown in this drawing—more buffalo robes than beaver pelts were being shipped down the Missouri River from

Fort Union. Russell shows the rider with a pad saddle having beaded floral motifs at the corners in the manner of the Canadian Métis or Plains Ojibwa. He wears half leggings, with a “beaver-tail” knife (blade on both sides) hanging from his belt. Indians who hunted with muzzle-loading weapons developed the technique of loading without benefit of a ramrod, holding the gun aloft until the moment of firing so the ball wouldn’t roll out. In this way, multiple shots could be made while on the run.

The Metis Sash

(Also called the Voyageur Sash and the Assumption Sash.)

From the C.M. Russell Museum website: www.cmrussell.org/meet

From his earliest days in Montana, Charlie Russell wore a multicolored woven sash instead of a belt, and this Metis (pronounced “may-tee”) sash came to be identified with Charlie. The only known reason for him wearing it, is simply because he liked the sash. Over the years, he had several variations of it made. However, the history of the Metis sash began long before Russell. For example, the Hudson Bay Company was the first to sell these sashes; the name “Assumption Sash” derives from the town of L’Assumption in Quebec, Canada where the sashes were made for trading with the Indians. The name “Voyageur” refers to the early French explorers who often traveled the Canadian waterways by canoe and commonly wore these sashes. The term “Metis” is a French word for “mixed-blood,” meaning people of French Canadian and American Indian ancestry. The name was given to the people living along the Red River on the Canadian/Minnesota border, and these people wore a sash to identify themselves as Metis.

Charlie said about his wearing of a sash (The spelling and grammar errors are the way Charlie wrote it.), “I have all ways worn one and like them better than a belt. I believe they keep me from having a big belly all breeds us to ware them Mex french lots of people in Quebeck ware them I saw men in france waring them all that I saw [were] all sick Italions ware.”



*A young Charlie wearing his trademark
Metis sash.*

MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute