

art & man

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FREDERIC REMINGTON
THE ART OF
REALISTIC PAINTING



FREDERIC REMINGTON'S OLD WEST

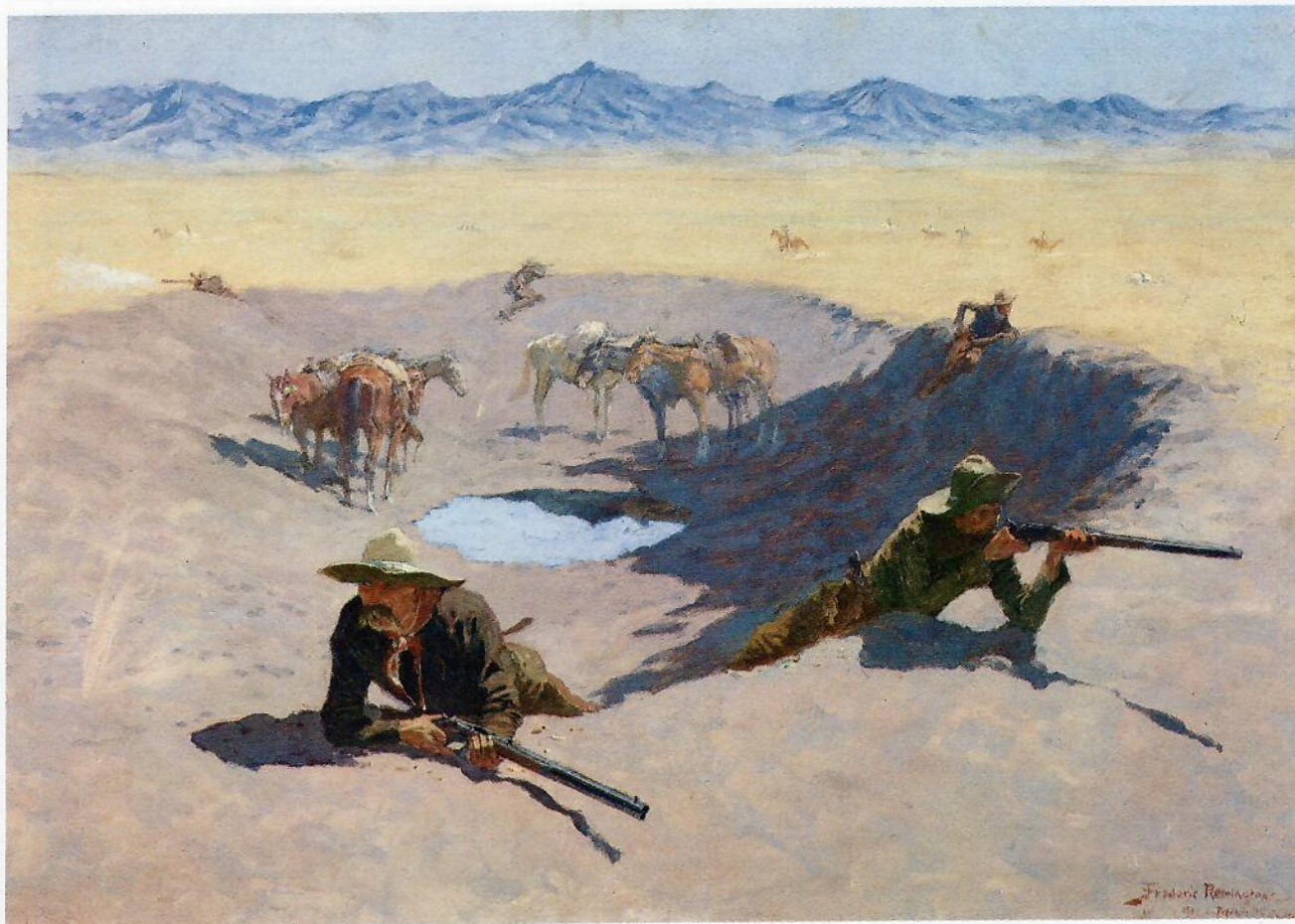
*Frederic Remington
created a lost world
that millions of
people recognized*

TIME: SUMMER, 1881.

PLACE: SOMEWHERE IN THE
MONTANA TERRITORY.

As the last red gleam of the sunset fell behind the jagged mountains and the long shadows overtook me, I began to realize I was all alone in this vast, bleak country. Far away, I saw a red glow and soon came to the campfire of an old wagon freighter, who shared his supper with me. I was 19, and he was a very old man. All his life, he had followed the receding frontier — always further and further west. ‘And, any day now,’ he said, ‘the railroad will come and there will be no more West.’ At that moment, I knew the wild riders and the vacant prairie were about to vanish forever. . . . Without knowing exactly how to do it, I began to try to record some facts around me, so people wouldn’t forget.”

All his life, Frederic Remington had been interested in the West. And when, as a teenager, he finally went there and saw that the land was rapidly being settled, he decided to recreate the “Wild West” of his dreams in paint. Remington was born in 1861 in a small town in upper New York state. His father was a journalist but trained horses as a hobby, and when he went to farms and fairs, he took young Frederic along. At 14, Remington was sent to a military school. When he graduated, he went to Yale, where he divided his time between art and football. In college, Remington met a girl and



The Fight for the Waterhole, c. 1895-1902. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX. Hogg Brothers Collection.

asked her to marry him. But he was rejected, so he left school and went west. He traveled for two months sketching, and upon returning to the East, took some of his drawings to *Harper's Weekly*, one of the most popular magazines of the time. Remington's sketch was published, which launched his career as an illustrator of Western scenes.

Afterwards, the artist bought a sheep ranch in Kansas, but moved back east—to Brooklyn, NY.—within a year. As he began getting more magazine assignments, Remington would travel west each year to get material for his illustrations. By 1890, Remington was one of the best-known illustrators in the country. Paintings such as *The Fight for the Waterhole* (above), filled with realistic details, told the story of the heroic cowboy as he struggled against his hostile surroundings. As one critic said, "Eastern people have formed their idea of what the Far West is like, more from Mr. Remington's pictures than any other source."

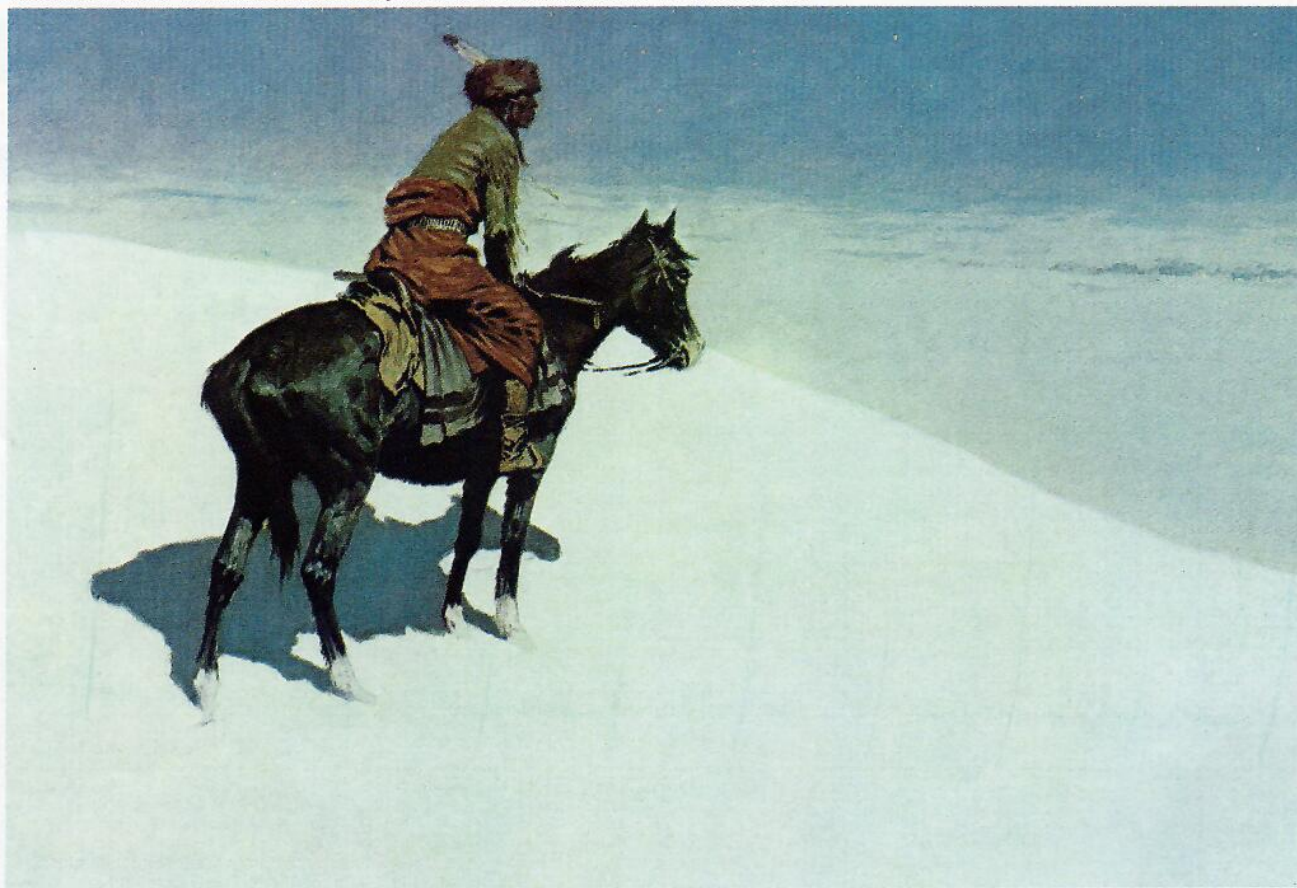
Working comfortably in his New York studio (left), Remington painted action-packed Western scenes like this group of cowboys fighting for their lives.

In 1900, Remington made his last western trip. He said, "Now it is all brick buildings, derby hats, and blue overalls. I shall never go west again." Later, he tried to break away from western themes but he found, "They want horses and cowboys from me — won't believe me if I paint anything else." Toward the end of his life, Remington began sculpting and slowly started receiving recognition as a fine artist as well as an illustrator. Unfortunately, in 1909 the artist's career was cut short. Remington died unexpectedly of appendicitis at the age of 48.

In this issue, you'll learn more about Remington and other realistic Western artists, you'll meet a young painter who works from nature and, finally, you'll use some of Remington's techniques to create a realistic painting of your own.

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“Being able to capture the precise moment which tells the story lies at the heart of wild Western art.”

A WORLD OF ACTION

Frederic Remington’s West was a vast, hostile space inhabited by only two kinds of people — cowboys and Indians

When you look at Remington’s paintings in this issue, you’ll see that most of them are made up of a single figure, placed in the center of the painting. Since, as we’ve seen in previous issues, this is a fairly static way to compose a work, why is it that Remington’s paintings seem so exciting and full of action?

All of Remington’s paintings were done from the eye-level of the viewer. We are not looking down or up at the central figure, so we are more involved with the hero and see things from his point of view. The artist has chosen exactly the right moment to capture the action — just as the scout (above) spots figures in the distance, or the split-second in which lightning strikes the herd of cattle (above, right), or the moment just before the cowboy is thrown from a bucking horse (cover). Although the central figures are very detailed, the backgrounds are quite simplified. A few rocks or a cactus stand for desert — a branch or



two equals a group of trees. Even though Remington's paintings are realistic, look at the shadows, the sand, and the sky in many of them. Are the colors always real-looking? Many illustrators use black outlines to show the edges of objects. Can you find any in Remington's paintings? How would outlines affect the feeling of realism in these works?

Which of the subjects in the two paintings above looks more active? But which one will be just as active in a minute? In *Stampeded by Lightning*, the *focal point* is right in the center of the canvas. A *centralized* composition like this usually isn't very active, but if you look closely, you'll see that every line in the horse and rider is an *active diagonal*. The horse's head, legs, tail, the reins, the cowboy's legs, arms, hat, follow the diagonal line of the lightning bolt as well as the motion of the rain. *The Scout*, however, is not as active — he sits straight up and his horse's legs are vertical. But he is placed at the far left side of the canvas, and the composition indicates the possibility of furious action at any moment. Can you find any diagonals in the background of this painting? And what about the scout's shadow? What do these "passive diagonals" suggest?

*"I want to paint running horses
so you can feel the details
instead of just seeing them."*



Luis Jimenez b. 1948. *The Sodbuster*. 1982. Fargo, ND. Photo, Phyllis Kind Gallery, NY., NY.

TODAY'S WEST

Today's Western artists are expressing a reality that Remington never saw.

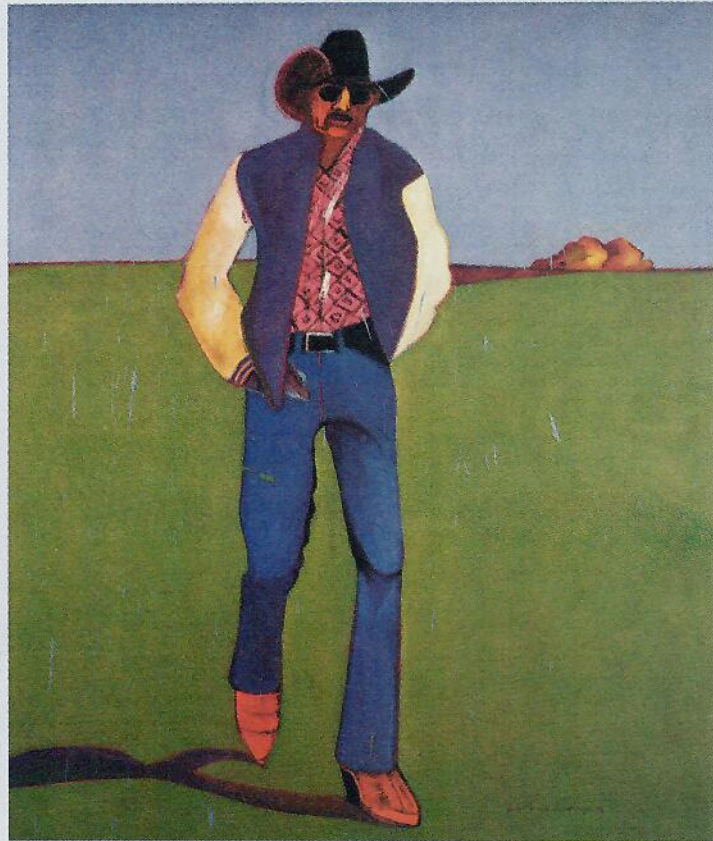
IMAGES OF SATIRE

Young Texas artist Luis Jimenez does large, outdoor sculptures that, in photos, look something like Remington's paintings of the Old West. *The Sodbuster* (above), seems to be a realistic representation of a western pioneer, plowing through wind-blown prairie grass behind his team of giant, muscular oxen. But where Remington's paintings are very straight-forward, Jimenez' sculpture *The Sod-*

buster is 24-feet long, made of shiny fiberglass, and has electric bulbs inside it that light up the whole sculpture like a giant neon sign. What do you think the artist is saying about the legend of the vanishing frontier, the heroes of the Old West, and artists such as Remington who painted these themes? And what do you think Jimenez means when he says: "Think of words connected with cowboys — rodeo, corral, lariat. *Spaniards* brought the cows and horses to this country, and it was *Mexicans* who became the cowboys. It wasn't John Wayne who was the original cowboy. That's a myth that's grown up."

BITTER STORIES

In what ways does Minnesota artist Fritz Scholder's painting, right, remind you of those of Remington? The figure in the center of the canvas, emphasized by the diagonal of its dark, purple shadow, is obviously the *focal point* of the work. We view the cowboy at eye level, so we can see things from his point of view, and he is painted realistically in contrast to the simple, flat background behind him. At first this painting looks almost like an updated Remington. It's when you read the title of the work — *Indian Cowboy with High School Jacket* — that you start to wonder what is going on. What do you think that Fritz Scholder, himself a Mission Indian, is saying in this work? What does the figure's outfit — cowboy hat and boots, jeans, sunglasses, and official school jacket — suggest about the heritage of the American Indian? What might Remington or his cowboy heroes have thought about this painting and its creator?



Fritz Scholder b. 1937. *Indian Cowboy with High School Jacket*, 1984. Elaine Horwicz Gallery, Scottsdale, AZ.

TALL TALES

As they do in Remington's art, Gaylen Hansen's western adventurers battle the ever-threatening forces of nature. A native of Washington state, Hansen has created a cowboy hero called "The Kernal" (who looks like legendary figures such as Buffalo Bill or General Custer). The Kernal, like Remington's characters, appears small when confronted by hostile enemies. A giant trout jumps from a stream to attack him, mountain peaks which turn out to be gigantic wolves' heads threaten him and, at the right, he is menaced by huge grasshoppers. Compare *The Kernal with Four Grasshoppers* to Remington's *Fight for the Waterhole* on page 3. Both show cowboys surrounded by enemies, but which looks "real?" Which artist uses flat colors, black outlines, proportion, or perspective? Which artist paints a dream-like world where anything can happen?



Gaylen Hansen b. 1954. *Kernal with Four Grasshoppers*, 1981. Monique Knowlton Gallery, NY., NY.



"At that moment, I knew that the wild riders and the vacant prairie were about to vanish forever. The more I looked the more I saw the living, breathing end of three centuries of smoke and dust and sweat."

—Frederic Remington



Frederic Remington (1861-1909). *A Dash for the Timber*, 1889. Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, TX.

A DASH FOR THE TIMBER
BY
FREDERIC REMINGTON

ART AND MAN MASTERPIECE OF THE MONTH #4

HOW REMINGTON CREATED

“If I sat around the house all the time I couldn’t work. I have to go somewhere, see something new, and get my idea. The rest is nothing.” — Frederic Remington

Although Remington lived and worked in the East, he went west each year for several months and lived among the people he painted. He roamed the cowboys’ cattle trails, from the Canadian to the Mexican borders; he went on military expeditions with soldiers; he traveled among the Navaho, Apache, Cheyenne, and Comanche tribes. On these trips, the artist made many sketches and took along a camera for snapshots. Even then, his research wasn’t always easy.

“I arrived at the San Carlos Reservation, a vast tract of desert and mountain, and explained my plans to the Army officer. He looked at me and said, ‘Young man, if you wish to live much longer, you must not act as if you are in Venice.’ I remembered that last year, a Blackfoot had shown a desire to tomahawk me, because I was trying to immortalize him. After much work, it is sometimes possible to get an Apache to gaze defiantly down the mouth of a camera. But to stay still until a man draws his picture, is something no brave will stand. That day, I was able to make rapid sketches of a few scenes, but soon I aroused suspicion, and my subjects vanished instantly.”

Although Remington lived among his subjects, he didn’t exactly blend in. One of the artist’s guides described what the soldiers saw, “He weighed 230 pounds, wore a huge red coat, a little,



Remington brought back sketches, photos, and souvenirs from his western trips and put them all together in his New York studio.

round hat, tight riding breeches, and hunting boots with English spurs. As he waddled toward us, his round face was hidden behind the smoke of an ample cigar. A big, good-natured, overgrown boy, who you couldn't fail to like the first time you saw him."

When Remington went back East, he brought much of the west he had seen with him. A friend described his studio, "Props hang on walls and litter the floor — axes, clubs, saddles, bows and arrows, shields, moccasins, head-dresses, lariats — even a small Indian canoe." In painting *Dash for the Timber* (pages 8-9) and *An Indian Trapper* (far right), you can see how Remington used his souvenirs to paint the details of his characters' costumes,

In doing his paintings, Remington began with sketches and photos, then carefully composed his canvas. In the original drawing for *An Indian Trapper* (below, left), the trapper carries his gun, there are several ponies in back, and the mountains appear to be resting on the trapper's head. The background looks as if it had been drawn around the figure. In the painting (right), the background sets the figure off *naturally*. His gun points to, and emphasizes, the *active diagonal* line of the trail. By only suggesting his backgrounds, Remington could focus attention on the many details he used to create his figures.

A Dash for the Timber was one of Remington's most popular pictures. He worked on it for months, using all his models, props, photos, and sketches. Eight men are shown escaping from the enemy behind them, but the one large shadow below ties them into a single unit. The active diagonals of the guns, horses, reins, etc., give a feeling of action, even though the composition is *symmetrical* (both sides are visually equal). The *repetition* of similar figures moves your eye from one side of the composition to the other, yet the detail and variety of the painting tech-



An Indian Trapper, 1889, Amos Carter, Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, TX.

nique keeps the same-sized figures from becoming monotonous.

Remington said, "I can beat a Kodak because it has no brains — no discrimination. The artist must know more than the camera." *Dash for the Timber* looks very realistic, but what kind of reality is it? What kinds of things are also real about the West that Remington has left out? The artist immortalized the cowboy, but he saw the "conquest" of the West from only one point of view. Remington's West *looks* real, but in his paintings, there is only one kind of hero and one kind of enemy. What do you think this indicates about the nature of *reality*?

"In Western painting, knowing the important detail from the unimportant detail is the mark of a true artist."

ARTIST OF THE MONTH

Rick Noll: Painter



Photo by Janet Soderberg.

At first glance, 19-year-old Rick Noll's seascape (shown below) looks "real." But, when you take a second look, it may seem more like a fantasy. What do you see in this painting? Is it the same thing the person sitting next to you sees? And if you look again, can you find the biggest mystery in the whole work?

We discovered this seascape at the Scholastic Art Awards exhibition in Washington, DC, then we visited Rick at his home in Billerica, Massachusetts to find out more about it.

Were you always interested in art?

Yes, even in first grade, I realized I could draw. I'd be trying to draw real people and the other kids were drawing stick figures. My desk was always the messiest. I guess it was in 11th grade that I decided I would be an artist.

How did you get the idea to do this painting?

My goal as a kid was to be able to paint something so real it looked like a photograph. That's what I was trying to do.

The subject was natural for me. I like the beach. I've always been a big collector of shells. When my friend saw this painting, he said, 'Not another one with sand in it.' I was born in the Mojave Desert in California. Maybe that has something to do with it.

Did you do this painting at the beach?

No, I drew it mostly from my imagination. I made a detailed drawing of the shell first. Then I transferred it to a piece of illustration board. Using tempera and acrylic, I painted the top blue and the bottom a sand color, then I started working on the details.

Why did you put the shell in the very middle of the picture?

It's the most important. But to keep the whole picture interesting, I wanted to have a lot of things moving around it. Waves are breaking. Grass is blowing over the shell. Even the sand is changing its shape around it and creating a small drift on one side. I wanted to make it look like the shell had been there for awhile — like it was half-buried. There's no people on the beach, just the shell. That's what stays the same.

Which was the hardest part?

I had a hard time with the clouds. Whenever I did clouds before, they were always the stylized, round variety, and that isn't realis-

tic. I wanted them to be wind-blown, the way I remembered at the beach.

The water was also hard. I used a lot of coats of paint — thin layers of tempera you can see through, in different colors. Maybe the hardest part of all was the color of the shadows. Things on the beach turn funny colors. I'd done a lot of experimenting before I did this piece. On the way things reflect light. And how they can let light pass through them, like the thin, see-through corner of the shell at the top.

This painting looks realistic, but there's something very strange about it. Can you explain?

I think if you only want to paint something so realistic it looks like a photograph, maybe you should take a photograph. I did want people to look at the painting and say, wow, that looks real. But when they look at it up close, I wanted them to see something else — the face hidden sideways in the shell. In fact, that's how I got the idea to do the painting. I had done a drawing of a person looking through some venetian blinds, and my mind went to the idea of a shell. I think it fits. This is a lonely beach. It's supposed to

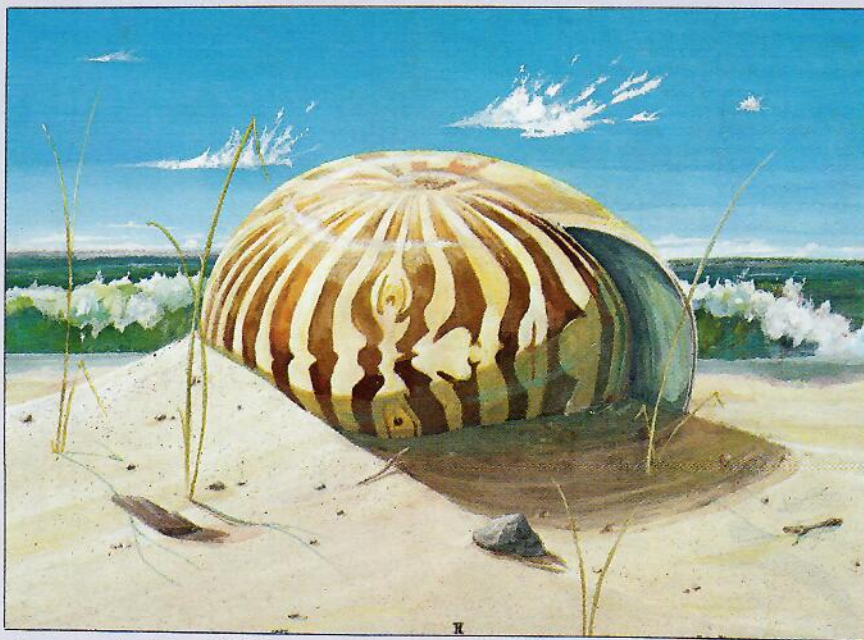
give you an uneasy feeling — maybe the way you feel around someone who's lonely, who's in a kind of shell.

Are you planning to go to art school or college?

I tried college for a semester. I was learning, but not what I wanted to learn. Also I tend to be the kind who likes to joke around during class. I'm better off when I'm on my own. I've always read a lot. I'll do five or six surrealist paintings and then at the end, I finally understand what surrealism is. It may be a slower way to go about it though. As my art teacher said, you don't have to go to school, but you'll probably spend more time learning because nobody will be there to guide you.

Is there any advice you could offer to our readers about learning art?

Don't limit yourself to realism. If realism was the ultimate, you'd just have life as it is — you wouldn't need a painting of it. After you learn realism, start exploring abstraction. It helps you to design things better. You learn how to simplify things. You learn what's important to *you*. Then if you go back to realism, you'll be better at it.



Can you find the "hidden reality" in Rick Noll's seascape?

*How do you paint an object
so realistically you can almost touch it?*

Painting Reality

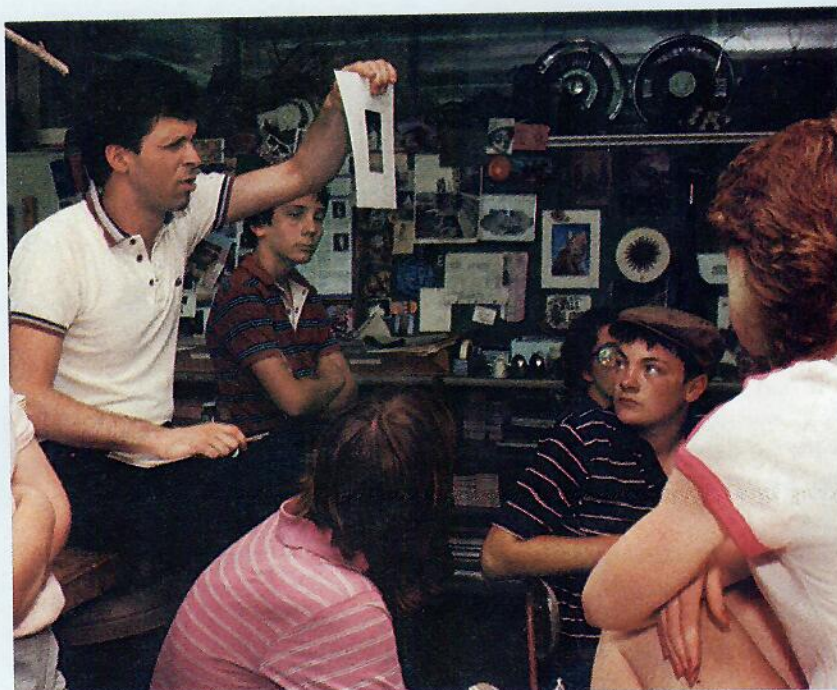
Why do you think Frederic Remington's paintings are still so popular? How was the artist able to so effectively convey the feeling of a world that most people have never seen? Remington's composition —the way he focused attention on one central figure — was probably one reason. Another may have been the skillful way in which he painted the small details that give a work its sense of reality. In this workshop, you will learn some of Remington's techniques to help you create paintings with great accuracy and realism.

STARTING OUT

1 After arranging a still life containing a variety of large and small objects with interesting shapes, review the use of a paper frame to crop composition (see Nov. '84 Workshop).

MATERIALS

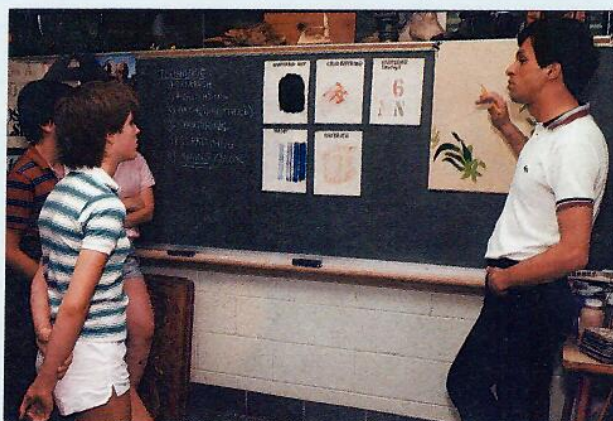
- 8" x 10" Oak tag with 2" x 4" window cut in center
- 18" x 24" 80 lb. sulfite paper
- Ebony pencil
- Primary (red, blue, yellow), secondary (orange, green, purple), brown, black, and white tempera or acrylic paint
- Containers to hold paint (soft margarine containers work well)
- Assortment of round/flat acrylic brushes in a variety of widths
- Containers to hold water for cleaning brushes
- Plastic lids for mixing paint
- Paper towels
- Color wheel



2 Frame composition, emphasizing one object. Subject doesn't have to be centered, but could be at the top, bottom, one side, or tightly cropped.



3 When you have lightly drawn your composition, you could use one of several painting techniques to focus attention on your main subject.



4 You can *model* your subject, making it more detailed and three-dimensional than the rest. Try to *balance* it with the negative background space.



5 You might begin by putting down a wash of color, then painting the highlights and shadows, using drybrush, crosshatching, or a combination.



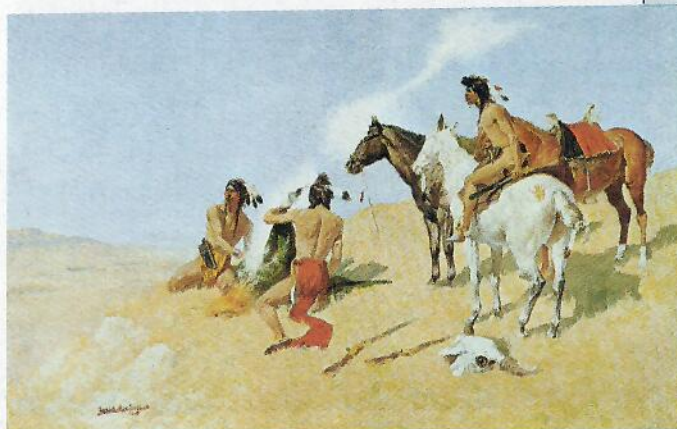
SOME SOLUTIONS

Can you pick out the object which is the *focal point* of each painting? Which compositions are *symmetrical* and which *asymmetrical*? Which artists have used *diagonals* — leaves, spokes, bicycle parts, skulls — to create more *active* compositions? Which compositions are based more on horizontal and vertical elements? Can you pick out the various *modeling* techniques used by each artist — wash, spattering, drybrush, crosshatching, scratching into wet paint, overpainting on dry paint, putting wet paint over paint of another color that is already wet? Which paintings look most realistic? Which least?



REMINGTON'S WEST

If you are interested in seeing most of the paintings in this issue (including the wall-sized *Dash for the Timber* seen on pages 8-9), as well as many other examples of Frederic Remington's art, there are two places in the country to visit. The Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, 3501 Camp Bowie Blvd., Fort Worth, TX, has the largest collection of Remington's work (including paintings like *The Smoke Signal*, right) in the West. In the East, you can see many Remington paintings, drawings, and prints displayed in the artist's actual studio, at the Remington Art Museum, 303 Washington St., Ogdensburg, NY.



Frederic Remington (1861-1909). *The Smoke Signal*, 1905. Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, TX.

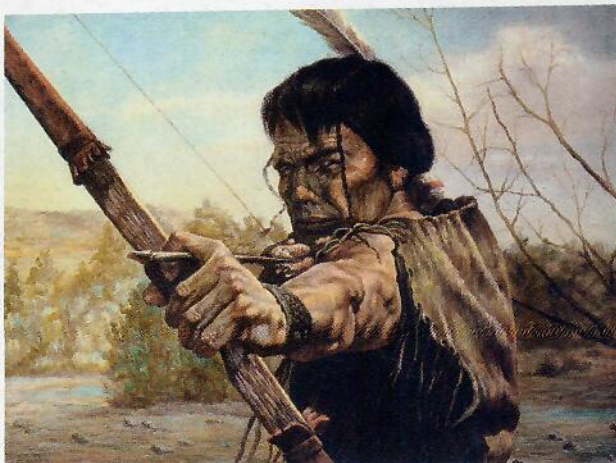
TRUE WEST

Before Remington and Buffalo Bill and John Wayne came to the western United States, another group of people had been living there for thousands of years. As the European settlers moved west, the first Americans — the various Indian tribes — were forced off the land. A current show, *Views of a Vanishing Frontier*, is a record made in 1832, of the landscape, wildlife, and Indian tribes (such as this mask from the Onondaga tribe in Pennsylvania) found along the frontier of that time. The exhibition is currently at the Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian, Washington, DC, until March 31. It will then go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, July 17-Oct. 6.



"THE WEST OF THE IMAGINATION"

In this issue, we have looked at the art of Frederic Remington. During the coming year, you'll get a chance to further explore the still-popular myth of the Old West by watching a new television series, *The West of the Imagination*. These six programs will look at the American West through the eyes of its photographers, filmmakers, and artists (like contemporary painter Gregory Perillo, right) to discover just what qualities make this world so fascinating to so many people. This new series will air nationwide on PBS sometime this season; check listings for exact time and station.



Gregory Perillo b. 1932. *Dead Aim*, 1969. Prudential Collection.