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Review of "*Paper Talk*": *Charlie Russell's American West* By Brian W. Dippie

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"Paper Talk": Charlie Russell's American West.

By Brian W. Dippie. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979. Illustrations and bibliography. 224 pp. \$17.95.

After much too long a wait, we have now a second volume of Charles M. Russell's inimitable "paper talk"—as he called his illustrated letters, verses, Christmas greetings, and similar personalia. The first was assembled by Frederic Renner in 1962 for the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth, and has long been out of print.

Russell (1864–1926), the self-taught cowboy artist of the northern plains frontier, had a wide circle of friends and he was characteristically loyal to them. His correspondence is surprisingly extensive (despite his disclaimer that "writing aint my strong holt"). Brian Dippie has performed a valuable service in rounding up yet another pungent selection from sundry public and private collections.

Dippie, a historian best known for his work on Custer, is a Russell fan, and he introduces his hero in a gracefully written, brief introduction that establishes the man in his habit, as he lived. Russell was an unlettered earthy type, egalitarian and pragmatic, not much given to abstract thought or philosophical rumination. He was also a romantic, and the West that he related to and described in his art is the pre-1893 West of mountain men, Indians, cowboys, and the open range. In words and especially in pictures he is one of its best interpreters.

This beautifully crafted book (printed in brown ink on buff paper, with plates of unusually fine color discrimination) follows Russell's

lead in blending verbal and visual material. Holograph specimens are reproduced in whole or in part to demonstrate Charlie's matchless gift for inserting vignettes (mainly watercolor sketches keyed to content) into his text, and to display his rather inventive grammar and spelling. Autonomous pictures (oils and watercolors) are interspersed to highlight milestones in his career and to sustain the narrative thread.

The narrative thread is there, on facing pages, as Dippie unobtrusively ties together this miscellany of material, identifying people and places and leading us with colloquial ease through the career of a remarkable man. Probably he does not tell us much about Russell that we did not know or suspect, but he tells it with skill, insight, and affection. Charlie was not the greatest of the western artists, but he has his place. In his nostalgic later years he liked to believe that he knew the West in its "golden, early days," that he had enjoyed the "cream" while the "come latelys" will get only the skim milk. This delightful little volume allows us to share the cream.

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