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Review of *Frederic Remington and the West: With the Eye of the Mind* By Ben Merchant Vorpahl

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Frederic Remington and the West: With the Eye of the Mind. By Ben Merchant Vorpahl. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978. Illustrations and index. 284 pp. \$15.95.

This book, by the editor of the Frederic Remington-Owen Wister letters, is a strangely disappointing work on a promising subject. It is not the usual picture book of Remington paintings, nor is it really a biography. Rather it is an attempt to recreate Remington's intellectual, emotional, and artistic perceptions as they changed through his life. This is a laudable attempt. Unfortunately, the author is most often cryptic, confused, and much given to the jargon of abstraction. As a consequence any reader must bring a good deal of information to the book or it will be virtually meaningless. Possibly a good editor could have made the prose more readable and aided the author in bringing out his points more clearly.

If one digs hard enough one can find some intriguing material in this book. Vorpahl is perhaps the first person to look very hard at Remington paintings in an analytical way. He does note Remington's preoccupation with violence and quite rightly sees a linkage with some of the themes of the novelist Frank Norris. He also sees Remington emerging from a conventional illustrator to a man who becomes increasingly aware of the paradoxes of his time. In one memorable scene he juxtaposes the New York Horse Show, Remington's exhibit that accompanies it, and Theodore Roosevelt's observations. But then he reverts to comments on *The Bronco Buster* as a symbol of Remington's own confusion and that of the paradoxes inherent in American society. The connection between the horse show, the exhibit, Theodore Roosevelt, and *The Bronco Buster* is never made really explicit. One feels there is something there but that it is not on the author's page. This is characteristic of virtually every chapter in the book. One never quite grasps the significance of Remington's appearance at Wounded Knee just after the battle, though the author suggests it had great

significance. On another occasion the author alludes to Remington's adoption of the idea of vortex in his later paintings, but then he drops this subject just as it becomes interesting. Examples such as this could be multiplied many times. This is most unfortunate, because the author has a main point that is clearly valid and that is that Remington was by no means a literal recorder of the western scene. He did indeed see things through "the eye of the mind." Art historians have become accustomed to reading that statement about painters like Moran and Bierstadt, but rarely have they thought of Remington in this way. They should, and perhaps this is the best reason for reading Vorpahl's book.

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