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Review of *Frederic Remington and Turn-of-the-Century America* By Alexander Nemerov

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Frederic Remington and Turn-of-the-Century America. By Alexander Nemerov. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. Illustrations, notes, select bibliography, index. 264 pp. \$45.00.

Readers of this book will learn a great deal about contemporary art criticism, a modest although unquantifiable (and mostly unverifiable) amount about Frederic Remington, and very little about the American West. The author, an art historian, applies a postmodernist, Freudian analysis to the work of the popular painter, sculptor, and illustrator. He concedes that the multiple meanings he reads into Remington's work probably escaped the consciousness of the artist himself. But not to worry: "The meanings of which the artist is not conscious are often those that are most powerfully revelatory of the work's historical moment."

Readers who can get past this premise will have a fine time. Nemerov has a flair for drawing connections between works of art (Remington's and other artists'), between art and literature (Jack London's, Owen Wister's, and others', in addition to Remington's), and between art and what he takes to be the collective unconscious of turn-of-the-century America. That collective unconscious, according to the author, was obsessed with sex. Thus the waterhole in Remington's *Fight for the Water Hole* is really a vagina, the club in the hand of *Paleolithic Man* is a phallus, and the clams that old fellow is cracking open are miniature wombs.

Some of Nemerov's inferences are downright ingenious. Who would have guessed that the African American trooper in *The Charge of the Rough Riders at San Juan Hill* is there as a reminder of the battle of Gettysburg, which began thirty-five years to the day before the signal engagement of the Spanish-American War? (The obvious reason for his presence—that black soldiers played a critical part in the battle—doesn't satisfy Nemerov.) Or that that suggestive waterhole, besides being a vagina, also signifies both imperialism (the water lies

at the bottom of a depression resembling the crater of a volcano, of which Hawaii, recently annexed to the United States, has several outstanding examples) and outer space (the crater also looks as though it might have been formed by a meteor).

Although Nemerov grants that most of his conjectures can't be proved, some of them can be disproved. Theodore Roosevelt was an imperialist, but he wasn't the missionary type and almost never referred to imperialism in terms of "Christianizing" the heathen; consequently when he saw the Southern Cross over the Caribbean, it didn't have the connotations Nemerov imputes to him. Nemerov contends that Americans went into the Spanish-American War in 1898 seeking to avenge Spanish treachery at the Alamo in 1836; perhaps so, but only if, like him, they forgot that the Mexicans had sent Spain packing a decade-and-a-half before Santa Anna headed for San Antonio. Nemerov again makes too much of the Spanish connection when he calls the massacre of an American garrison at Balangiga in the Philippines in 1901 the worst slaughter of the Spanish-American War—which had ended three years earlier.

Justifying his approach to Remington's works, Nemerov explains that it is his desire "not to describe with immaculate clarity, giving the works a cold life, but to reinscribe the darkness in which they lie: to let my readers, like me, see Remington's art with closed eyes." Students of art might be happy negotiating history with eyes closed; students of history will probably prefer a peek now and then.

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