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Review of *The Frederic Remington Studio* By Peter H. Hassrick

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The Frederic Remington Studio. By Peter H. Hassrick. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995. Photographs, notes, bibliography. 64 pp. \$17.50 paper.

· This short book concerns the Remington Studio Collection—a permanent installation at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, featuring the artifacts Remington displayed in his New Rochelle studio, as well as some of the paintings he made late in his career. The author, noted Remington scholar Peter Hassrick, discusses the studio and argues that the Studio Collection paintings, many of them small landscapes, transcend Remington's time and place to achieve a universal

significance. In making this argument, however, Hassrick neglects to consider how the very category of the universal, insofar as it refers to American art, is itself a historical and political phenomenon.

The Frederic Remington Studio is a second edition of the book written by Hassrick in 1981. The new volume includes new photography, much of it in color, and an expanded and sometimes illuminating text. For example, Hassrick makes an instructive comparison between Remington's studio and that of the cosmopolitan New York painter William Merritt Chase, using Chase's studio to exemplify the "feminized" art space against which Remington—his studio full of snowshoes, guns, and swords, among other rugged objects—sought to react.

For the most part, however, Hassrick writes of Remington's career, seeing it as a progression towards the artist's ultimate achievement: the "impressionist and post-impressionist" paintings of his last few years. About these late paintings, many of them in the Studio Collection, Hassrick argues that "only the universals remained—the land, the light and the colors." These works, he argues, transcend their time. Such an argument demonstrates Hassrick's Modernist aesthetic. So too does his praise of pictorial design at the expense of subject matter. Remington's small painting entitled *Taos Pueblo*, for example, shows the artist's "interest in the abstract shapes and interlocking planes of the adobe structure."

The formal qualities of Remington's art are important, as Hassrick was the first to demonstrate. Yet, by holding uncritically to a Modernist position, Hassrick fails to consider the historical specificity of his own line of argument. Hassrick's aesthetic is ultimately traceable to the writing of Clement Greenberg, the art critic whose defense of abstract painting became enormously influential in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Among American art critics, it was Greenberg who first successfully argued that the best art concentrated solely on its own formal properties. In holding uncritically to this Greenbergian aesthetic,

Hassrick produces a twofold irony in his writing on Remington. First, as the art historian Elizabeth Johns has noted, he endorses the viewpoint of precisely those Modernist critics who have disparaged Remington's great realist paintings as bad art.

Second, Hassrick reproduces the Cold War political sensibility out of which Greenberg's ideas emerged. The art historian Serge Guilbaut has demonstrated how Greenberg championed a pictorial language of abstract formalism partly as a reaction to Soviet ideology and its propagandistic art forms. In this Cold War context, Guilbaut points out, the claim of abstract painting to be an apolitical, universal, and humanist language, expressive of individual freedom, helped to symbolize democratic liberties in the free world. Many differences separate Greenberg and Hassrick, of course; yet at the heart of Hassrick's assumptions about Remington is the Greenbergian idea that Remington's formally self-conscious late works, in which subject matter becomes less important, constitute an apolitical humanist vision. In this sense, Hassrick's view of Remington's "universal" late art reproduces a Cold War political position.

My purpose here is not to disparage Hassrick's work. Elsewhere he has written perceptively about the politics informing the first major wave of Remington scholarship in the late 1940s: "The United States had just won World War II, and American scholars sought to establish an unprecedented place for the American experience in world history and culture. The West and its artists found welcome places in these expanding national investigations, and a number of western artists were 'discovered' in the process." In such a passage, Hassrick is himself Guilbaut to Harold McCracken's Greenberg. What I encourage Hassrick to do—in keeping with his own line of inquiry—is to consider the Cold War roots of his own approach to Remington.

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