

Carl Rungius: Artist, Sportsman

by Elaine Adams

Two of mankind's most innate drives are hunting and creating art. By painting animals and hunting scenes on cave walls, primitive man engendered a powerful belief system. He believed that by capturing an animal's spirit as an image the animal could be overpowered.

By the Middle Ages, civilized European nations applied rules of etiquette to the hunt. In Germany deer and game birds were reserved for Royal hunters as "Hochwild" (high game). Non-royals were permitted to hunt "Niederwild" (low game), which included hare, fox, and non-game birds. As dichotomous as it may seem, dedicated hunters are quick to defend their activities as catalysts for land preservation and

environmental balance. Their opportunities to closely study nature and the characteristics of wild animals in their surroundings instill in hunters a deeper appreciation for the wilderness. This could explain why artist Carl Rungius recreated accurate depictions of wildlife by studying their habits at close range—as a hunter.

The first of nine children, Karl Clemens Moritz Rungius, named after three of his uncles, was born in 1869 in Rixdorf, now part of Berlin, Germany. (He later used the English spelling of "Carl.") The boy was raised in a religious home where his father, Heinrich Rungius, was an evangelical Lutheran minister, and his mother, Magdalene Fulda, was the daughter of a Lutheran pastor. In 1870 the family moved to the town of Potzlow in northern Germany to

Carl Rungius: Artist, Sportsman is on view through June 15, 2003, at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage, 4700 Western Heritage Way, Los Angeles, California, 90027, 323-667-2000, www.autry-museum.org. The exhibition is accompanied by a 172-page hardcover book published by Warwick Publishing, Toronto and Chicago, www.warwickgp.com.

be near Heinrich's aging father, who was also a minister and whose parish needed tending. While his parents looked after the parish, Carl spent the next four years with his grandfather, learning about art, nature, and taxidermy. These were intriguing subjects to an impressionable boy who would soon express his ambitions of being a hunter and a painter of big game.





All illustrations are by Carl Rungius and from the Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

ABOVE: *No Trespassing (Hunting Marmots)*, o/c, 25 x 30.

LEFT: *On Yukon Waters (On the Lakeshore)*, 1907, o/c, 46 1/4 x 30 1/8.

When Carl was five, the family moved to the village of Britz, near Rixdorf, to accept a ministry that offered a larger house, an essential promotion to a family that would grow to consist of seven girls and two boys. As the eldest, Carl relished being the dominant brother. He had his own will and believed that his younger siblings should look up to him and respect his authority. Carl was a spirited boy with a sense of adventure. One of his favorite books in

the family's extensive library was a German translation of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mobicans*, a novel recounting stories of an untamed North America with uncharted hunting grounds.

It was expected that Carl would follow his father in the ministry, but he was determined to be an artist. A major influence and role model to Carl was Richard Friese, who also rebelled against his father's wishes that Richard would be a customs official. Friese would eventually become the personal animal painter to Emperor Wilhelm II.

Heinrich Rungius agreed to allow his son to study art if he would begin by apprenticing as a house painter. For the next three summers, Carl painted walls and occasionally created elaborate mural decorations; during the winters he attended the

Berlin Art School. Following his preparatory education, Carl enrolled at the Berlin Art Academy where he studied for the next three winters under the renowned professor of animal drawing and painting, Paul Meyerheim. On his free time he would go to the Berlin Zoo to sketch and study the animals, particularly the big cats. In his zeal to learn more about animal anatomy, Carl obtained permission to study horse cadavers in his glue factory. Much to his parent's horror, Carl would occasionally bring home animal tissues and skulls. The practice of studying cadavers to improve an artist's knowledge of both animal and human anatomy was part of classical training, though not widely practiced by the late nineteenth century.

At the academy, Carl made friends with



artists of similar interests, including August Gaul, who eventually became Germany's foremost animal sculptor, and Wilhelm Kuhnert, who was highly praised for his skills as a draughtsman and painter.

While fulfilling his one-year service in the Prussian military, he kept up with his artwork by sketching fellow soldiers and their sweethearts or an officer's favorite horse. As an infantryman, Carl became an accurate marksman. After he completed his military service, he spent the following two years living with his parents in Britz where Paster Rungius arranged permission for his son to hunt the abundant small game and bird inhabitants found on the local farms. As a different mode of hunting, Carl and his brother, Heinrich, collected and scientifically studied butterflies. The hobby later grew into a profession for Heinrich, who would earn a doctorate in entomology. Their sister Elizabeth showed excellent skills as an observer and artist. With the



guidance of her big brother, Elizabeth would grow up to become a successful natural history illustrator in America. She would always recall her brother's strict but invaluable advice for self improvement,

ABOVE: *Caribou North of Jasper*, 1955, o/c, 30 x 40.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Crossing the Stream*, c. 1920, o/c, 25 x 30.

RIGHT: *Studio Sketch for "Caribou North of Jasper,"* c. 1955, o/board, 12 1/8 x 15 3/8, gift of Mrs. Ruth Wacker.

LEFT: *Old Bull*, 1926, drypoint etching on cream paper, 10 7/8 x 8 7/8.

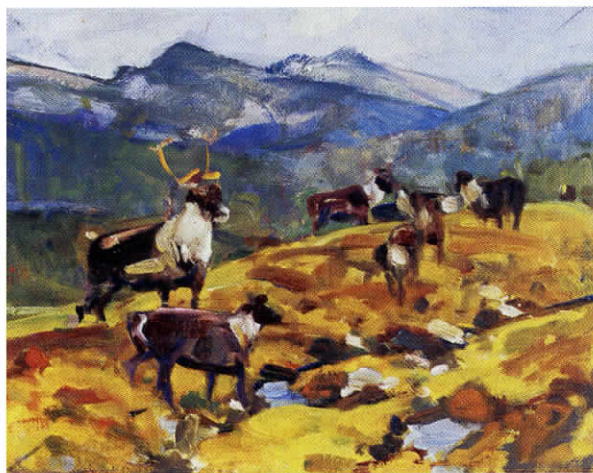
"Never praise your own work!"

In 1894, at age twenty-four, Carl was invited by one of his namesake uncles, Clemens Fulda, to join him in the United State for a moose hunt. It was an invitation he could not resist. As a young man Clemens had a rebellious nature, too. He ran away from home at age twenty-one and sailed the seas for two years before settling in New York where he survived as a roving street vendor selling shoelaces. Eventually, he worked as a delivery boy for a drugstore and discovered his interest in



pharmacy and chemistry. By the time his nephew Carl joined him in New York, Uncle Clemens had become a respected physician with a successful practice.

In September Clemens and Carl left for Maine where big moose were ostensibly in abundance. However, their hired guide was not a moose expert but a trout aficionado. Although the hunters never saw a single moose, they did manage to catch some excellent trout. The hunt was not a total loss as they each bagged a white-tailed deer. This type of free hunting was not available in Germany where a field guard would have very likely arrested the hunters for trespassing. When Uncle Clemens asked Carl to stay for another year so that they



could try for a moose again next season, it was an easy decision. In addition to having a hunting partner, Clemens liked the idea of Carl's German influence over his three chil-

dren, Carl, Harry and Louise. His nephew was happy to oblige and was not interested in learning how to speak English anyway, "that terrible language!"

To hone his skills painting North American wildlife, Carl practiced at the local zoo. He was also given permission to set up his easel at Sauter's Taxidermy Shop in New York City where he sketched and painted studies of the stuffed trophies. In 1895 the first Annual Sportsmen's Show was held at Madison Square Garden. There, Carl met a real, rugged cowboy, Ira Dodge. Dodge was entirely dressed in buckskin and topped his frontier look with a broad-brimmed Stetson. His face and much of his body were horribly disfigured.



LEFT: *Morning on the Ram (At the Head of Ranger Creek)*, c. 1940, o/c, 30 1/8 x 40 7/8.

BELOW LEFT: *The Old Billy*, 1911, o/c, 30 1/8 x 40.

RIGHT: *Alaskan Moose, Kenai Peninsula, Alaska*, 1915, o/c, 60 x 90, gift of the Devonian Foundation.



The legend was that Dodge was pursuing the infamous outlaw Sundance Kid when he spotted a grizzly bear, but when he took aim, his rifle failed to shoot. The grizzly attacked and mauled him. While he lay dying, the Sundance Kid saved his life. The local Indians showed their respect by naming Dodge "Bear Face."

The romantic Rungius was compelled to meet this bigger-than-life Western hero. With the help of his English-speaking cousins, Rungius was introduced to Dodge

and his wife, Sarah. Mrs. Dodge spoke German and described their ranch and surroundings near Jackson Hole, Wyoming. These visions of the west appealed to Carl's boyhood fantasies. When the Dodges invited him to visit their ranch the following summer, it was again an invitation the young artist-adventurer could not refuse.

With rifles in tow, a thousand cartridges, and plenty of art supplies, Carl and his American-born teenage cousin Carl Fulda set out by train for Wyoming. Upon

their arrival Rungius was fascinated with the unusual shapes and colors of the landscape, as he described in his diary, "...grey high plains interrupted by strange formations of rock and mountain range," and continued to comment on the reds, greys, and yellows of the nearly treeless plain. Dodge completed the perfect western image by meeting the boys at the train station looking like a cowboy right out of a Remington painting. Together, the three drove in a horse-drawn wagon for four days, eating freshly caught rabbits and small game birds along the way. As they drove the plains, Rungius was amazed at the abundance of wild animals freely roaming the plains and was particularly enthralled by the pronghorn antelope (at this time there were hundreds of thousands of antelopes that within three decades would be reduced to near extinction). Here, unlike his studies at the zoos, he could paint animals running free and in their natural habitats.

They arrived on August 23 at the Dodge's Box-R Ranch on the lowest slopes of the Wind River Range. The blue-white glacier peaks rising up from the sage green plains created dramatic landscape subjects, and Rungius described the region as "a hunter's paradise." He soon learned how to speak some English under the tutelage of Mrs. Dodge, and both cousins learned how to hunt and ride the range in western style "on a cowboy saddle." Rungius learned how to shoot from horseback, and would bring his trophies back to the ranch, where, as he described:

The animals were strung up as naturally as possible and I made pencil and colour sketches. Afterwards they went into the frying-pan as we lived on the game.

After their adventures in Wyoming, the two cousins returned to New York in December bringing with them an array of animal trophies, souvenirs, and sketches. One afternoon, William T. Hornaday, then Secretary of the Union Land Exchange, spotted a striking painting of a moose head in the window of Knoedler's Galleries. He in-



quired about the painting and learned that it was by a relatively unknown artist by the name of Carl Rungius. The following year Hornaday became the first Director of the New York Zoological Society and as one of his first duties, he selected a 261-acre site in Bronx Park for what would become the Bronx Zoo. He never forgot Rungius's moose painting and sought to locate him. The two became good friends, and Hornaday hung several of Rungius's paintings in his office and in the Zoological Society's Gallery of Wild Animals. The exposure helped promote the young artist's work and resulted in his receiving several important commissions.

Rungius soon became a recognized illustrator for popular sporting magazines such as *Recreation*, *Forest and Stream*, and *Outing*. In addition, he illustrated images for several books on wildlife and hunting.

Theodore Roosevelt, a founder of both the North American Conservation Movement and the influential Boone and Crockett Club, was given a Rungius moose painting by a friend. Roosevelt wasn't entirely impressed with this particular rendition and decided to exchange the painting for another. One day he appeared at Rungius's door and asked if he could trade the painting. He was shown a new moose painting in progress that greatly pleased the future President of the United States. Upon completion Rungius delivered the painting and was invited to stay for lunch with the family. The two got along famously and discussed hunting and nature. Rungius tried to join Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, but his editor, George Bird Grinnell of the magazines *Recreation* and *Forest and Stream*, was not willing to lose a good

artist. Grinnell discouraged Roosevelt from accepting Rungius on his campaign. Nevertheless, Theodore Roosevelt became one of Rungius's earliest collectors and the two maintained a lasting friendship.

Spending time at his uncle's home, Carl became infatuated with his cousin Louise. However, she was quite different from what one would expect as Carl's ideal mate. He was a rigid, military man with traditional beliefs, while Louise was out-going, out-spoken and modern for the time. In addition, Louise served as a suffragette in the women's right-to-vote movement, which greatly disturbed members of her traditional family. After she received her bachelor's degree from Adelphi College and her master's degree from Columbia University with a major in teaching, she and Carl were married on June 15, 1907. As first cousins, the two decided from the



LEFT: *White Mountain Goat*, 1919, o/c, 60 x 75, gift of the Devonian Foundation.

BELOW LEFT: *A Camp in the Rockies*, 1925, o/c, 49 3/8 x 39 7/16.

RIGHT: *At the Head of Ranger Creek*, o/c, 30 1/8 x 40 1/8.



beginning not to have any children.

Also in 1907 Rungius was invited to join New York's esteemed Salmagundi Club. Established in 1871, the club was the oldest professional art club in the country. There, he met fellow artists Frank Tenney

Johnson, Louis Betts, and Ben Foster. He and western artist Johnson, who would later serve as President of the California Art Club, developed a close friendship. The couple visited Johnson in southern California during the fall and winter of 1934 and

again the following year. Rungius exhibited with the California Art Club in 1938; it may be assumed that he had also become a member, as the club reserved exhibition rights to members only.

In 1908 Rungius held his first major solo exhibition at the Salmagundi Club's fashionable brownstone mansion clubhouse on Fifth Avenue. Frederic Remington visited the exhibition and was highly impressed with the quality of the work. Remington personally called on Rungius at his studio, but he was not there; Louise was available to show the studio. After his visit, Remington wrote to Rungius:

I mean to own a Rungius. There is not likely to be another fellow who will have the opportunity to study big game as you are doing, and I think records of us fellows who are doing the "Old America" which is so fast passing will have an audience in posterity, whether we do so at present or not.

Unfortunately, the two artists never met in person; Remington died that year from complications following an appendectomy.

Early in his career Rungius's work was based on a muted palette and the detailed animal imagery that was the standard of nineteenth-century German wildlife artists. Later, he developed a style that was more free and painterly with the use of broken colors and broad brushes. He credited artist George Gardner Symons for teaching him Impressionist color theories. Up close, areas in Rungius's paintings may appear abstract, but his complete interpretation expresses a boldness that is truer to the mood of his untamed subjects and their natural surroundings.

Rungius's lifelong friend and hunting guide Jimmy Simpson of Banff, Canada, wrote of their September 1910 hunting excursion when the two travelled to a 10,000 foot ridge in the North Saskatchewan region of the Rockies. Simpson described the artist's long awaited encounter with the impressive Rocky Mountain goat, the world's largest of the species. When one was finally spotted, Rungius took aim, but his gun jammed. Simpson quoted the German's



frustrated expletives in his journal:

Py shingo, if dat dem set trigger had-
n't been froze up, dat billy would be
dead. Sure. Dat is too bad. He vas a
granddad villiam & stood dare on legs
four feet high. Dem it, it's no shoke.

In his mid-career, Rungius painted a variety of subjects, including landscapes and working cowboys that garnered him peer-recognition and numerous awards. He was producing an average of twelve large canvases a year. In 1913 Rungius was elected an associate member of the National Academy of Design, and the following year he held an exhibition of his landscape paintings at the Philadelphia Art Academy. In 1916 Symons nominated Rungius for life membership in the National Arts Club. Rungius's stature as an important artist was confirmed when in 1920 he was accepted as a full academician to the National Academy of Design with his diploma painting, *On the Range*. Although much of his suc-

cess in the art world was based on his frontier-theme paintings, by this time, the ways of the Wild West were rapidly dying. The nostalgic images of life on the rugged range that were exemplified through the paintings of Charles M. Russell and Frederic Remington were now memories of a by-gone era.

Carl Rungius went back to his original love, animals in wilderness, but, these paintings did not receive the rightful attention they deserved. A New York journalist reported the artist as saying:

For me, my pictures are simply pictures...and I can't help deploring the insistence with which the general public looks upon animal pictures as illustrations of natural history. A picture of a mountain elk is just as purely a picture as a landscape painting; but most people are absorbed in finding its "scientific significance," rather than its artistic quality.

During Rungius's ninety years, he saw

the comings and goings of a variety of artistic styles, including French and German Academics, Impressionism, Post Impressionism, Expressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism. However, in his work there is a sense of timelessness that is not burdened by any passing trend. He certainly hunted and killed big game, and he and many of his fellow hunters may have contributed to the demise of much of North American wildlife, but Carl Rungius succeeded in capturing these animals' eternal spirit on canvas.

Research for this article was gathered from the following sources: *Carl Rungius: Artist and Sportsman* published in 2001 by Warwick Publishing Inc., Toronto, Canada and Chicago for The Glenbow Museum, essay by Dr. Karen Wonders; and *Carl Rungius: Painter of the Western Wilderness* by Jon Whyte and E.J. Hart, Foreword by Robert Bateman, published in 1985 in conjunction with the Glenbow Museum exhibition of the same title.

Authors

Elaine Adams is a writer and public speaker on topics relating to visual art and aesthetic standards. Currently, she is Executive Director of the California Art Club, Editor-in-Chief of the *California Art Club Newsletter*, and Director of the California Art Club Gallery. In 1997 Elaine and her husband artist Peter Adams co-founded the California Art Academy and Museum, a learning institution dedicated to California's fine art heritage. Ms. Adams holds a duobachelor's degree in mathematics and economics from USC.

Tritobia Hayes Benjamin is an associate dean at Howard University and the director of the Howard University Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. She is the author of *The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones* and has contributed to catalogues on African-American art, such as *Alma W. Thomas: A Retrospective of the Paintings* and *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists*. She was the co-curator of the nationally touring exhibition *Three Generations of African-American Women Sculptors: A Study in Paradox*.

Herbert L. Cooper is assistant to the curator of Prints and Drawings at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. He is a print collector and long-time member of the Washington Print Club. He was, for fifteen years, Editor of *The Washington Print Club Quarterly* and writes regularly for that publication.

Eric Denker received his Bachelors from Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and his doctorate from the University of Virginia, writing on James Whistler. His dissertation was the subject of a book and an exhibition that he curated for the National Portrait Gallery in 1995, *In Pursuit of the Butterfly: Portraits of James McNeill Whistler*. Denker currently has a joint appointment, sharing time between the National Gallery of Art and The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington.

Susan Grace Galassi is Curator at The Frick Collection, where she has organized several in-focus exhibitions and contributed to many Frick publications. Her article "Rearranging Rosa Corder" appeared in

Apollo (March 2001). She is also the author of *Picasso's Variations on the Masters: Confrontations with the Past* (1996). She is a co-curator of the exhibition *Whistler, Women and Fashion* and a co-author of the accompanying book.

Evelyn C. Hankins is the Assistant Curator of Prewar Art and Special Projects at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She curated *The New York Scene: Selections from the Whitney Museum of American Art at City Hall* and co-organized the traveling exhibition *Edward Hopper: The Paris Years*. She received her Ph.D. in art history from Stanford University in 1999 and wrote the dissertation, "Homes for the Modern: En/Gendering Modern Art Display in New York City, 1913-1939."

Maura Heffner is the Director of Exhibitions and Programs at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. Previously, she was the assistant curator and manager of Whitney on Tour, the traveling exhibition program of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. There she was also the administrator and coordinator of the 2000 Biennial Exhibition, the project director of *Mies of America*, and organized *Meaning, Medium, and Method: American Sculpture, 1940-1960* and *Edward Hopper and Urban Realism*. Heffner is a graduate of Vassar College and will receive her postgraduate degree from New York University.

David Hunt, director of the Stark Museum, has spent more than thirty-five years in the museum field. Before moving to Texas in 1996 he was a curator with the Center for Western Studies at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska, for fourteen years. Hunt is currently represented by essays in *The New Encyclopedia of the American West* (Yale University Press, 1998).

Elizabeth Ives Hunter is an art historian and Guest Curator for the Frederick Judd Waugh exhibition at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts, Dennis, Massachusetts. She has been the Advisor and Curatorial Advisor to the R. H. Ives Gammell Studios Trust and Visiting Curator at the Maryhill Museum of Art, Goldendale, Washington. She co-authored *Transcending Vision—R. H. Ives Gammell 1893-1981*. Ms. Hunter has contributed articles to *American Art Review* in April 2002 and March 1996.

William H. Robinson is Associate Curator of Paintings at the Cleveland Museum of Art and Adjunct Associate Professor of Art History at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) in Cleveland. He received his art history doctorate from CWRU in 1988. He wrote "Native Sons: Charles Burchfield and the Cleveland School of Art," in *The Paintings of Charles Burchfield; North by Midwest* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1997), *Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution* (1998), and co-authored *Transformations in Cleveland Art, 1796-1946* (Cleveland Museum of Art, 1996).

Martha R. Severens has been the curator of the Greenville County Museum of Art since 1992. She has a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University. Previously, Severens was Curator at the Portland (Maine) Museum of Art and the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston. Severens is the author of *The Greenville County Museum of Art: The Southern Collection* (1995), *The Charleston Renaissance*, and *William Halsey*, the late Charleston artist.

Peter E. Spooner is Curator at the Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota Duluth. He holds a B.S. in Art Education from the University of Wisconsin-Stout and a M.A. and M.F.A. from Illinois State University, where he served as Curator and Assistant Director of University Galleries from 1988 to 1992. He curated and wrote catalogue essays for exhibitions including *Discontinuum: Photographs by Jane Calvin* (2002) and *Botanica: Contemporary Art and the World of Plants* (1999-2001). He is curator of a traveling exhibition of the paintings of Gilbert Davis Munger (1837-1903).

Ann Smith has been studying historic landscape painting in Connecticut for thirty years, first as Director/Curator of the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme and then as Director/Curator of the Matatuck Museum in Waterbury. She is co-curator of *Picture Perfect: Images of Northwest Connecticut*. She has written about landscape painting in Connecticut, including Alexander Van Laer and John Frederick Kensett. Smith did graduate work in museum studies at the Cooperstown Graduate Program (SUNY) and earned a law degree from the University of Connecticut. She has been an adjunct art history faculty member at the University of Connecticut.