

# Peter Heyl Hassrick IN MEMORIAM

On October 25, 2019, western American art lost its greatest champion, Peter H. Hassrick. One of the most important American art historians of his time, no one worked more passionately to bring international attention to western American art. This unparalleled passion combined with a singular intellect inspired a multitude of influential exhibitions, lectures, and publications, all of which Hassrick produced while leading some of the nation's top museums and institutions to financial and programmatic success.

Hassrick quite literally “wrote the book” – in his case, *books* (more than 50) – on many western American artists including Frederic Remington, Charles M. Russell, Alexander Phimister Proctor, Ernest L. Blumenschein, John Mix Stanley, and others. Known for decades as the authority on the life and art of Frederic Remington, Hassrick developed a catalogue raisonné of the artist's known oils, watercolors, and drawings in 1996. The original publication and the updated 2016 edition remain the most useful and relevant texts on the artist. Hassrick's research for the first Remington catalogue raisonné inspired the 1988 retrospective exhibition and publication, *Frederic Remington: The Masterworks*. The exhibition was presented at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming, the Saint Louis Art Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The project set a new course for considering Remington less as a chronicler of history and more as a fine artist and principal contributor to American art.

In 1970, Hassrick became the Amon Carter Museum's first curator of collections. While there, he published his first book, *Frederic Remington*. An important early text on the artist, it highlighted the Ft. Worth collections of the Amon Carter and Sid Richardson museums. Hassrick went on to serve as director of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center (now the Buffalo Bill Center of the West) in Cody, Wyoming, from 1976 to 1996. During his tenure, he catapulted the Center of the West into the national spotlight, shored up the institution's finances, oversaw impressive improvement of the museum's campus, and fostered growth among the collections and staff. Importantly, he oversaw the founding of the Plains Indian Museum in 1979, working hand-in-hand with an advisory board comprised of representatives from tribes around the Plains to create an award-winning facility. All the while, he continued to develop original scholarship on western American art, often researching and writing late into the evenings after work.

In 1996, Hassrick became founding director of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, leading the institution through its construction and opening. Likewise, he became founding director of the Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, which opened in 1999 as the first such university-based academic program dedicated to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge in the field of American art history as it relates to the western United States. That same year, Hassrick published his first book on Charles M. Russell and began work on *Wildlife and Western Heroes: Alexander Phimister Proctor, Sculptor*.

After a short retirement, Hassrick became curator and director of the Institute of Western American Art (now the Petrie Institute of Western American Art) at the Denver Art Museum in 2005. His great success at the Petrie Institute can be measured by the exhibitions and publications he helped produce while there: *In Contemporary Rhythm: The*

*Art of Ernest L. Blumenschein, Allen True's West, and The Masterworks of Charles M. Russell: a Retrospective of Painting and Sculpture*, among others. His vision still guides the activities of the Petrie Institute today.

When he fully retired in 2009, Hassrick accepted the role of director emeritus of the Petrie Institute and, following his return to Cody in 2011, he served as director emeritus and senior scholar of the Center of the West. “Retirement,” however, looked a bit different for Hassrick than it does for most; he kept an office at the Center of the West and worked long hours on projects inspired by the institution's western art collection. He published articles, essays, books, and online resources and organized groundbreaking exhibitions including *Painted Journeys: The Art of John Mix Stanley* (2015) and *Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West* (2018).

As his accomplishments illustrate, Hassrick was a savvy and talented leader of many institutions who worked to ensure financial stability; promote excellence in collections care, exhibition, and interpretation; and advance educational programming. Though he might be best remembered for his scholarly contributions and his achievements as a museum curator and director, he should also be recognized for his quieter work of mentoring a legion of younger scholars, a fortunate group in which the authors of this memorial are lucky enough to be included. When others might have justifiably rested on their laurels, Peter worked tirelessly to encourage the next generation of western American art professionals. He was a busy man, but always offered generously of his time and counsel and supplied good advice and important connections to many at critical junctures in their careers.

Though he was a serious scholar, Hassrick never took himself too seriously; he had a mischievous smile and a quick wit which he often deployed in public talks (increasingly so in the last several years). He was full of ideas and was never without an exciting project. He was an honest, respectful, and kind man of strong convictions. He could easily inspire a roomful of people to join him in any endeavor and when he spoke, people listened with rapt attention.

The field of western American art will sorely miss the contributions of Peter H. Hassrick, our mentor, colleague, and friend. His incredible impact will be felt far into the future, and the example he set will continue to inspire many to carry on his good work.

Karen B. McWhorter  
Scarlett Curator of Western American Art  
Whitney Western Art Museum

Thomas Brent Smith  
Curator and Director, Petrie Institute  
of Western American Art  
Denver Art Museum





