Shaping the West: American Sculptors of the 19th Century. (Western passages).
Denver Art Museum, dist. by the University of Oklahoma Press, January 2011. 96 p. col. ill.
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I highly recommend this low-cost title for any library that supports the study of nineteenth-century American Art. While the explicit scope of this book is sculpture with a western theme, Alice Duncan’s introduction and the five skillfully written essays on Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Solon Borglum, Hermon Atkins MacNeil, Frederic Remington, and Charles Marion Russell tell a broader tale of American art and artists during the late 1800s. As Duncan highlights, the concept of “being made in America, by Americans, [sic] using American materials,” and illustrating subjects unique to America, was adopted by these artists and embraced by the public.

Shaping the West is the sixth publication from the Western Passages series, produced by the Denver Art Museum’s Petrie Institute for Western American Art, and is comprised of papers originally presented at the Petrie Institute’s annual symposium one year prior to the publication of this title.

Thayer Tolles’ essay on Saint-Gaudens clearly establishes the artist’s role as mentor to sculptors of western subjects. Peter Hassrick’s chapter on Solon Borglum is well documented and illuminates the story of “le Sculpteur de la Praire” which hasn’t been thoroughly revisited since the A. Mervyn Davies’ 1974 biography of the artist. Andrew Walker’s “Herman Atkins MacNeil and the 1904 World’s Fair” touches on poignant contradictions: the universal versus ethnographic reality, authenticity versus theatricality, old versus new, classic versus modern, the masculine versus the feminine approach to art, and the celebration of manifest destiny versus the shame of decimating a race of native peoples. Peter Hassrick and Sarah Boehme both present new ideas and research for two of the best-known sculptors of this genre: Frederic Remington and Charles Marion Russell respectively. Boehme details the conservation of Russell’s lesser-known wax pieces.

Several of the essays stress the importance of international exhibitions, such the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 and the St. Louis Fair of 1904, touching on broader themes that will appeal to any nineteenth-century American art scholar. Overall the papers are extremely complimentary and all have insightful illustrations and footnotes; the authors successfully contextualize the artwork and capture the artistic milieu of the era.

Kim Collins, Art History Librarian, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, kcoli2@emory.edu

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