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## Opening of Charles M. Russell Art Exhibit

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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Speech of Senator Mike Mansfield  
Opening of Charles M. Russell Art Exhibit  
National Museum of Fine Arts  
Washington, D. C.

October 12, 1958

It is indeed an honor and pleasure to be here today at the opening of what is undoubtedly the largest collection of oils, watercolors, sketches and sculpture by America's finest western artist that has ever been assembled in one gallery. It is indeed fitting that Montana's Charles Russell should be so honored in the Nation's Capital.

Charles Russell's talent and technique with a brush and palette has long been recognized by the art critics and those educated in the arts. However, only recently has Russell's fame begun to spread. Paintings that used to be given away by the artist as tokens of his friendship are now priceless. It is virtually impossible to buy an original Russell on the open market today. Charles Russell is probably more to blame for this than anyone. He was happy just to be known as Charley, a good guy who liked people and just happened to know how to paint.

There are a number of talented western artists who were contemporaries of Russell's, but I doubt that any of them lived and knew the West as he was able to portray it on canvas or in a small piece of sculpture. The paintings and other objects of art on display here today have recorded the old West during its transition to civilization. Russell's West has long since vanished.

Today is truly a great day for Montanans, a day when we are honoring one of our great heroes.

Russell was an adopted Montanan who came to Helena in 1880, when the population of the Montana Territory was less than 40,000. He lived the West; he worked as a trapper and wrangler. He lived with the Indians; and it was during these years, as a young man, that he was painting and modeling more and more of the experiences he was living. On roundups, they tell of how he carried a box of water colors in his bedroll. He sketched and painted on most anything that was available. He gave away his pictures or traded them for drinks. He had an almost irresponsible attitude toward money and success.

Despite the reckless scattering of his early work, there are some 2,500 of his paintings in existence, plus 70 bronze subjects, a large number of pen-and-ink drawings, letters and a few very precious clay figures. The works you see here today are undoubtedly the best sampling of Russell's works available at the present time.

In 1892, Russell moved to Great Falls, Montana and settled down as an artist. Four years later, he married Nancy Cooper, who was to exercise a most helpful and beneficial influence during their life together. Then he built a studio in Great Falls and his work as an illustrator became in greater demand and his paintings, which were very popular locally, were beginning to draw attention from far away places.

No artist, in my estimation, captured the West with such devotion and fidelity as did Russell; and he continued to do so until his death in 1926.

The District of Columbia Chapter of the Montana State Society is to be highly commended for their efforts in arranging for this exhibition in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institution. This exhibit is a step forward in letting people know about Montana and its wonderful people and its abundant resources.

Of course, this large showing of Russell art would not have been possible without the fine cooperation of the Montana State Historical Society, the Hammer Galleries of New York and Fred Renner's private collection here in Washington.

In the next few months, Charles Russell will again be honored by the people of Montana. After many years of consultation and deliberation, the Treasure State will be represented in Statuary Hall for the first time when they install a bronze statue of Charles Russell, one of Montana's most gifted and colorful citizens.

My remarks here today are intentionally brief, we are gathered here to honor a great Montanan and a great artist. Our purpose is to gather with our friends and share in the appreciation of the collection of original works by a truly fine artist, illustrator and sculpturer, Charles Marion Russell.