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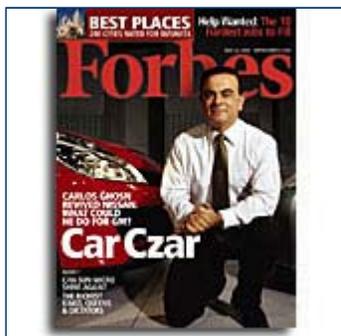
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Forbes Life

Bronco Bunco

Phyllis Berman, 05.22.06



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Ease up there, pardner, before you buy that Remington. Could be some varmint is trying to hornswoggle you.

My heart started to beat faster," recalls special effects artist Allen Hall. He was in Malta a few years back making the movie *Cutthroat Island*. In an antique shop he'd found a 5-foot statue of an Indian holding a Winchester in one hand and a knife in the other. On the box was a note that read "Remington." Hall paid \$2,100.

Next, he phoned the Remington museum in Ogdensburg, N.Y. to see if the sculpture was legit. "Bronze calls" the museum dubs these--and it gets them, sometimes by the dozen, every week. Usually curator Laura Foster can tell a fake by asking a few questions and looking at a photograph. But Hall's find intrigued her. It sounded like it might be the model for a giant statue Remington had planned for New York Harbor. Hall asked if he could show it to her.

"Stop right there," said Foster, even before the statue had been fully uncrated. She'd seen such Indians before. Hall's statue--like countless other purported Remingtons currently on the market--was 9 gallons short of a full hat.

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Michigan appraiser and *Antiques Roadshow* regular Caroline Ashleigh has seen buyers burned far worse than Hall: "I remember sitting in a local auction house and watching an art connoisseur pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for a piece that clearly wasn't made during [Remington's] lifetime. But the buyer didn't ask me or anyone else for an appraisal. It still sits in his collection, and he still thinks he's got the real thing."

For fraudsters, Frederic Remington (1861--1909) is an uncommonly attractive target. The real thing brings top dollar--**Sotheby's** (nyse: BID - news - people) auctioned a Remington bronze ten years ago for \$3.6 million. Also, Remington captured more successfully than any other sculptor Americans' romantic ideal of the Old West. Thus his work appeals not just to aesthetes and academics but to the public at large. A gas station attendant who wouldn't look twice at a Kandinsky, even if they were given away free with every fill-up, would pay cash for a Remington. Ross Perot, President Bush and Phillip Anschutz own Remington sculptures, as have former heads of Exxon, Hearst and AIG William I. Koch owns 11.

Problem is, the copyright on Remington's work expired in 1966, making it legal to make knockoffs. "I have 50 artists that make the sculptures," says Anthony Giannini. He is president of Everything Metal Imaginable, a California foundry that turns out Remingtons by the gross. EMI's reproductions, which are sold as such, can be found everywhere. At **Wal-Mart** (nyse: WMT - news - people)'s Sam's Club, \$13,900 gets you EMI's giant, 750-pound version of Remington's most famous bronze, "The Broncho [Remington's spelling] Buster," shipping included.

Reproductions aren't always represented as such. In a gift shop in New York City's Marriott Marquis Hotel, Caroline Ashleigh came upon a Broncho repro. "This Remington," declared the store's owner, "is more than 100 years old." Ashleigh's take? "The piece had the quality of what I would call a chocolate-bunny mold." Among authentic Remingtons the most valuable are the most detailed. That piece at Sotheby's, "The Norther," showing a cowboy on horseback in a snowstorm, has fine, sharp particulars: the fur on the pony stiffened by the cold, the individual filaments defined. A hat string tied underneath the cowboy's chin is plainly visible. The more casts struck from the same mold, the more such details are likely to become blurred.

Compare different iterations of the Broncho sculpture. Remington oversaw the striking of 60 casts of it at one foundry; then, using a different casting process, called lost-wax, he struck another 90 at a second. A good example of this second batch is the sculpture President Bush has on his desk in the Oval Office. A comparable piece, number 19 in this same series, sold last December at Christie's for \$520,000. Says Christopher Whiding, Christie's specialist in American art: "From the horse's tail to the cowboy's mustache, the detail on this piece was extraordinary."

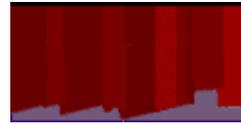
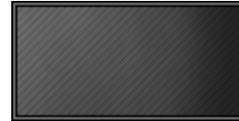
At the time of Remington's death there were only 300 castings of his sculptures. His widow authorized another 500. Consider "Broncho Buster" number 269, made posthumously. Little of the fine detail seen in number 19 remains. Appraiser Ashleigh puts its value at no more than \$75,000.

To distinguish real Remingtons from the most persuasive fakes, experts turn to Michael D. Greenbaum. Besides writing the definitive work on the artist, *Icons of the West*, Greenbaum came up with the idea of testing scrapings from the bottom of a piece to determine whether it contains silicon. If it does, it was made after 1960. The bronze can be scanned with an electron microscope to determine how closely its elemental composition conforms to bronze produced by the

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two foundries Remington used. If the lead content exceeds 3%, the work is not original.

If you can't wait to get an appraisal before buying a purported original, be sure your invoice gives you the right to return the piece if it is found by an expert to be a reproduction.

There's nothing wrong with buying reproductions, so long as you know they're not investments. "It's often very sad to do it, but I have to tell those who inquire that the only value [in a sculpture] is in their enjoyment of the purchase," says Greenbaum. That's true even for the 100 silver Broncho Busters sold for up to \$30,000 each by the Remington Library. Handy though they may be as paperweights, their investment value is nil. Each is worth only as much as its 1,000 troy ounces of silver--\$13,678.

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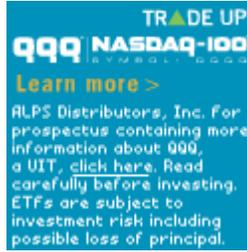
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