



Montana's Charlie Russell

PowerPoint Script – Grades 7-12

1. Cover slide [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
2. Although Charlie Russell was born a century and a half ago, he is still one of Montana's best-loved artists. During his lifetime, people admired him not only because he was a gifted artist, but also because he was an entertaining storyteller and a true friend. Today his paintings serve as valuable documents that provide a pictorial record of what life in Montana was like during an earlier time period. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
3. Charlie was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 19, 1864. St. Louis was then known as the “gateway to the frontier” because most people leaving the settled parts of the country in the east and traveling west started their trip in St. Louis. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
4. During the first half of the nineteenth century, people often left St. Louis and headed west on steamboats, like this one. They traveled up the Missouri River to get to Montana and other frontier areas along the way. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
5. Charlie's family owned a number of businesses in St. Louis, including fruit orchards, a clay quarry, and a fire-brick and fire-tile manufacturing firm. They lived on what had originally been a large plantation, but by Russell's time was evolving into a suburb as the city developed. Charlie grew up playing with his four brothers, one sister, and many cousins. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#) And Charlie always loved horses and owned at least one. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
6. Even as a young boy Charlie liked to draw and make models. He drew on everything—including the steps of his house—and he even got in trouble for drawing in his books at school. He also made small horses and other animals out of clay that he found in his family's quarry and wax that he took from his sister's flower-making kit. His father entered some of Charlie's models in the local fair and the models were so good that Charlie won ribbons for them. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
7. Charlie also loved to read, especially stories about frontier adventurers. When he was very young, he thought that he wanted to be a pirate when he grew up. But then he read books about mountain men living in the Rocky Mountains and decided that is what he wanted to be instead. *How have books you've read influenced your thoughts about what you want to do after you graduate? Why do you think that Charlie was so influenced by the books that he read?* [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
8. While Charlie loved reading stories of western adventure, he didn't like school. He never learned to write very well and he frequently got in trouble with his teachers. Today we think that Charlie had a learning disability [dysgraphia—a disability that causes difficulty with written expression], but they didn't know about such conditions back then. Charlie would skip school every chance he got, and often, when he “played hooky,” he would go down to the waterfront to listen to the stories told by boatmen, dockworkers, and travelers. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
9. At some point, Charlie decided that Montana was where he wanted to live.

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At that time, Montana wasn't even a state yet. It became a territory in 1864, the same year Charlie was born. Before that, very few non-Indian people lived in, or even visited, Montana, but Native American peoples—different tribes, each with their own distinct culture, history, and language—had lived in the area for thousands of years. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

10. Charlie's parents grew frustrated with him because he wouldn't go to school and study like he was supposed to. They tried sending him to art school in St. Louis, but he didn't like that. They even sent him to a military boarding school in New Jersey hoping it would teach him discipline. That didn't work either. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 11. In 1880, when Charlie was fifteen, his mom and dad finally agreed to let him come to Montana. His parents knew that life on the frontier could be very hard, so they thought that learning about it firsthand might cure Charlie of his dream to become a mountain man. They hoped he would return home to work in the family businesses, but he didn't. Never again would Charlie call any place but Montana home. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 12. Charlie traveled west with a friend of his father's named Pike Miller. He didn't get to take a steamboat like he always thought he would. Instead, Charlie and Pike traveled by train and stagecoach. When they reached the Judith Basin in the central part of Montana Territory, Charlie learned that his first job would be herding sheep. It was a job he didn't like and, as Russell later put it, "I lost those sheep quicker 'n Miller could replace 'em." After he'd been there only a short time, Charlie got mad and quit, leaving Miller's ranch with only his bedroll, mare, and packhorse. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 13. Fortunately for Charlie, he was soon befriended by a mountain man named Jake Hoover. Hoover had already lived in Montana for a number of years and was well versed in the ways of the frontier.
- Charlie loved living with Hoover, and the older man taught him many things he needed to know about surviving in a sparsely settled territory. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
14. Two years later Charlie got his first job as a cowboy, working as a night wrangler. It was the night wrangler's job to watch the horse herd at night while the other cowboys slept. This meant that Charlie worked all night and slept during the day. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 15. The Judith Basin, where Russell worked as a cowboy, was home to many Métis people, descendants of French and Scottish fur traders and Indian women, who developed a distinct culture and language that combined features of both their Indian and non-Indian heritage. The Métis were known for wearing multicolored, finger-woven bands called L'Assomption, or Métis, sashes. Enamored with everything relating to the Old West, Russell adopted the Métis sash as a personal trademark. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 16. Because Russell was a night wrangler, when he wasn't sleeping he had time to watch the other cowboys working and draw pictures of what they were doing. He always carried a sock that held pencils, watercolors, and paintbrushes. He used whatever paper he could find. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 17. In addition to drawing and painting, Charlie was always making small sculptures like this pig, which is no bigger than a pair of dice. His nephew, Austin Russell, recalled that "In his pants pocket Charlie always had a lump of bees-wax, mottled black from handling, and while he was talking he would take it out and work it soft and model a pig or buffalo or what not." Sometimes Charlie would give these little figures to friends who admired

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his work, but most often he would “mash it out with his thumb,” as Austin said, then reuse the wax to make another one. *How do you think a small, extremely fragile sculpture like this has survived for ninety years or more?* [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

18. Charlie also loved to tell jokes and stories and pull pranks. His friends liked his sense of humor even better than they liked his art. As one cowboy reminisced, “For when all is done and said . . . [even if Charlie] could not have painted any kind of a picture he would have been just as popular for he was a good mixer & could reel all kinds of yarns and that was something need[ed] in a cow country.” *Think for a minute about all the forms of entertainment you have available to you—music, games, tv shows, and social media. Now imagine you didn’t have any of those and you were working a hard job in an isolated area far away from your friends and family. Why might you appreciate having someone who could make you laugh?* [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 19. The men who rode the range with Charlie also liked him because they knew he was a true friend—they could count on him to help if they ever got in trouble or needed anything. They maintained that “if he liked a friend there was nothing he would not do for them.” And Nancy Russell, Charlie’s wife, later wrote that “any one who knew him at all loved him and I don’t know any one who has as many friends as he had.” [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 20. Charlie worked as a cowboy for ten years, but he really wasn’t very good at it. When he was twenty-nine years old he decided to quit cowboying and devote all of his attention to his art. While he was already better than average, at this point in his career he was not yet a great artist. It would take him many years of practice and lots of hard work... [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 21. Before he could paint masterpieces like this. Charlie was self-taught as an artist.
22. Although he was self-taught, Charlie also had help. Once he started to become famous, he became friends with other artists who gave him advice on how to become better. And, most importantly, his wife Nancy helped him by working as his business manager. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 23. Charlie liked to draw and paint and entertain his friends. But he didn’t like to ask people to pay money for his paintings. And he didn’t like to make arrangements to hang his paintings in art galleries where they could be sold. Nancy became very good at these jobs. Nancy made Charlie travel to, and have exhibits in, places like Calgary, New York City, and even London. Because she handled all of Charlie’s business for him, he became much more famous than he ever would have on his own. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 24. Charlie painted and sculpted Montana scenes for forty-six years. While his art shows many different subjects, mostly he is famous for three things. First, pictures of cowboys. Charlie’s paintings tell stories about cowboy life on the open range, before farmers and homesteaders fenced off their land with barbed wire. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 25. Sometimes Charlie’s paintings reflect the same sense of humor that his stories did. Here’s one example called *Bronc to Breakfast*. *What do you think might have caused the bronc to buck so wildly? Russell painted himself into this picture. Can you find him?* [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
 26. Even though Charlie painted many, many pictures of cowboys, he produced even

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more paintings of Native Americans. He had great respect for Indians, whom he called “the only true Americans.” *Why do you think he would describe them that way?* [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

27. Charlie liked to show all aspects of Indian life ranging from men hunting and fighting to women moving camp and cooking food. This painting shows a typical camp scene. The man is seated on the ground, smoking a pipe. The woman bending over is cleaning a buffalo hide. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

28. And, Charlie spent time carefully watching Montana's wildlife and drawing pictures and making models of what he saw. He believed that the natural world was more beautiful than those things made by humans. Or as he termed it, “when it comes to making the beautiful Ma Nature has man beat all ways from the ace.” [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

29. The Russells owned a cabin, called Bull Head Lodge, located on the shores of Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park. You can see the cabin—with Charlie and Nancy and some friends standing on the porch—in the photograph on the left. While they were staying at Bull Head Lodge, Charlie worked and both he and Nancy entertained the large amount of company they always hosted. But one of Charlie's favorite things about spending time in Glacier was watching wildlife, like these playful bears, in their natural habitat. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

30. No matter what the subject of his art was—cowboys, Native Americans, or wildlife—Russell's paintings, drawings, and sculptures were often characterized by action. Even as young artist, before he achieved full mastery of his craft, he was good at showing action. *In this painting, called The Herd Quitter, what do you see that indicates motion (steer running, horses running, lariats looping, horses' tails and manes blowing back, cowboys'*

neckerchiefs blowing back). *How does this compare to the three cowboys and the cattle depicted in the background? How does the inclusion of these still figures increase the sense of movement in the foreground?* [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

31. Many times Russell painted scenes in which the outcome is unclear. He left it up to the viewer to determine what was going to happen next. Sometimes these pictures are called “predicament paintings.” *Here we see a cowboy trying to maintain his seat on a bucking bronc while a group of Indians are fast approaching. How do you think the cowboy got into this predicament? What do think will happen next? Russell uses the term “Injuns” in the title. Today, we consider that term derogatory. Given what you've learned about Russell's beliefs about and depictions of Native Americans, do you think he felt that the term was disrespectful? Why or why not? How should museums respond to today's predicament: should they always use Russell's original titles or should they change words that some people might find offensive?* [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

32. People loved Charlie's paintings for their narrative—or storytelling—quality. Those lucky enough to receive one, loved his letters for the same reason. Writing was a real chore for the Cowboy Artist (remember he probably suffered from a learning disability that made the act of writing difficult), so his messages were brief, but they almost always included an illustration. Often, these illustrations were humorous, providing the recipient not only with a treasured picture to keep, but also a good laugh. This letter shows Charlie in his own predicament. “I have just returned from the glasier Bill,” he wrote his friend. “They say the trail has been improved a lot since you were up. That may be but it will need sum more fixen before the goats are

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troubled with autoes.” To illustrate his adventure, Charlie pictured himself in a precarious spot, scrambling up a rocky precipice with a bemused mountain goat looking on. “They have a rope on the last clime now,” he continued, “an when I got a holt it was mine all right and Kid Curry are [or] no other hold up culd take it with all the guns in the state. This is the nerest hevon ever I was.” [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

33. As in the preceding example, Charlie often illustrated his letters with self-portraits that poked fun at himself. Here, the written message is extremely short but the image fully captures the comedy that would have been found in such a situation. “Riding the Goat” was a ritual commonly used to initiate a member into an Elks lodge, as well as many other fraternal organizations. While some groups used a mechanical “goat,” the Elks are believed to have used an actual animal for their ceremony. *What do you see in the illustration to make you think that Charlie’s ride might have been a tough one? (Charlie’s hair and clothing are disheveled, his Métis sash has fallen awry, and the goat has trodden on his hat.)* [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
34. Although Charlie’s family always hoped he would move back to St. Louis, and Nancy

made him travel to sell his art, he always liked Montana better than anywhere else. What he really loved best, however, was Montana the way it was when he first moved to the territory as a young man. As he grew older, he disliked modern changes, like telephones and cars, or “skunk wagons” as he called them. In Charlie’s terminology, his heart lived back on “trails that had been plowed under.” [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)

35. As Charlie grew older, he became more nostalgic, and his paintings became more romantic. Because he focused mostly on happy memories of his youth, his paintings featured the positive aspects of life on the frontier the way he liked to remember it, and left out some of its harsher aspects. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
36. Charlie died in 1926. He lived a long time ago, but because he loved Montana so much, Montanans still love him. In 1959 we proved our respect for him by putting a statue of him in our national capitol in Washington, D.C., where he stands tall with heroes from all the other states. [ADVANCE SLIDE](#)
- 37 The End.