

# Grand Master of Reconstruction

Mary A. Parrish

**R**ichard Milner's *Charles R. Knight* surveys the life and work of the first and best-known American mural painter of prehistoric life. The beautifully illustrated volume documents why he is also often the most admired.

Knight (born in 1874) grew up in Brooklyn, New York, during the heyday of 19th-century American vertebrate paleontology. In their "bone wars," Othniel Charles Marsh and Edward Drinker Cope amassed hundreds of fossils new to science (e.g., *Stegosaurus*, *Triceratops*, and *Camarasaurus*) from the western United States. Young natural history museums around the country vied for material to display and explain to the public. Knight, a freelance artist, created reconstructions for many of these museums (including the Smithsonian's U.S. National Museum, Chicago's Field Museum, and the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County), but his primary association was with the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH).

While Knight's skills as an animal art-

The reviewer is at the Department of Paleobiology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20013-7012, USA. E-mail: parrishm@si.edu

ist were maturing, vertebrate paleontology at AMNH was gaining strength. In 1891, the museum hired Henry Fairfield Osborn to build its new department of vertebrate paleontology. Beginning in 1896, Osborn repeatedly turned to Knight for "beautiful, scientifically accurate paintings and sculptures of extinct animals." Osborn (AMNH president from 1908 to 1933) not only promoted Knight as his protégé, he was the artist's patron and friend for life. Through his efforts, AMNH introduced spectacular dioramas and murals (many by Knight) into its exhibit halls.

Interestingly, when Knight was meticulously studying live animals, dissections, and fossil material and collaborating with some of the best paleontologists of the day in

order to achieve scientific accuracy in his work, the art world was rapidly developing in different directions, often leaving traditional realism and aesthetics behind altogether. Knight became an outspoken critic of modern art, describing it as "monstrous and inexplicable creations masquerading in the name of art."

Milner's lively text incorporates excerpts from and letters by Knight, wife Annie,

daughter Lucy, Osborn, and others. The book offers insight into Knight's artistic processes, reprinting extracts from his own accounts, and reproduces many rough sketches as well as finished paintings and sculptures. Stretching far and wide, this work includes decorative sculptures of elephant, zebra, and rhinoceros heads at the Bronx Zoo; a bas-relief of ancient and modern pachyderms at the Smithsonian's National Zoological Park; and a drawing of a buffalo that graced both a 10-dollar bill (1901) and a 30-cent postage stamp (1923).

Although legally blind for much of his life, Knight's restorations of fabulous extinct vertebrates in their environments ignited the imagination of all who saw them. They are forever cemented into our collective vision of these ancient worlds. Milner's book shows why Knight retains a prominent place in the worlds of modern wildlife art and, even more so, paleoart.



**Charles R. Knight**  
The Artist Who Saw  
Through Time

by Richard Milner

Abrams, New York, 2012.  
180 pp., illus. \$40, CS\$45,  
£24.99. ISBN 9780810984790.

10.1126/science.1220073