Charles R Knight: The Artist Who Saw Through Time

by Richard Milner

reviewed by Brian Switek

There has never been a more influential paleoartist than Charles R Knight. He wasn't the first to illustrate prehistoric life, and he certainly was not the last to do so, but, for a time, he envisioned dinosaurs and other ancient creatures with such loving detail that he seemed to be sending back snapshots from lost eras only he could visit. His illustrations of snowbound mammoths and “Leaping Laelaps” were odes to a distant, fiercer past, and even now his works continue to spark the imaginations of scientists, artists, and prehistory fans alike.

Science writer Richard Milner recounts Knight's story in his visual and textual mix-tape of the artist's work, Charles R Knight: The Artist Who Saw Through Time. As the large format of the book hints, the tribute is not a straight biography. Even though Milner composed a detailed summary of Knight's life for the book's introductory section, the bulk of the glossy volume is a showroom of Knight's art and quotes from his books and articles. A set of closing chapters covers Knight's legacy, from efforts to restore cracking murals to the artist's dream of a scientifically accurate dinosaur theme park, but the greater portion of the volume is a portfolio of Knight's range and skill.

I did not know much about Knight before reading Milner's biographical sketch. I imagined that Knight was simply a passionate observer of nature who committed his imagination to canvas and paper. As Milner ably demonstrates, however, Knight's staggering body of work is the fruit of multiple struggles, both physical and vocational, from the time of his birth in 1874. Born with severe nearsightedness, a playtime accident when Knight was young further impaired his vision and virtually robbed him of sight in his right eye. His condition continued to deteriorate during his entire life. Knight was legally blind by the end of his career, and he had to hold his face only inches from the canvas to see what he was painting.

Knight was also a finicky and often cantankerous artist who had a difficult relationship with his primary sponsor, the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). The relationship started off on a high note. Although Knight's initial love was illustrating living animals—he designed a bison for a 30-cent stamp and created sculptured visages of animals for the Bronx Zoo that can still be seen on some of the old buildings—in 1894 he was asked to restore the fossil mammal Entelodon for AMNH scientist Jacob Wortman. Wortman and his colleagues were thrilled with the result. It was a triumph for Knight, who had learned a great deal of anatomy from taxidermists at the museum, and paleontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn desperately wanted Knight to be the museum's chief restorer of prehistoric creatures.
Neither Knight nor Osborn was easy to work with. Knight refused to have collaborators and rejected almost all criticism. He wanted to hear only scientific corrections from Osborn, and he frequently argued with Osborn about critiques others made of his paintings. And, despite Osborn’s wishes, Knight repeatedly refused to become a museum employee. He wanted to stay a freelance artist, and this created new problems.

Osborn had to raise additional funding for Knight’s work, and to do this he often wanted sketches or samples to convince patrons. Knight, however, would not budge on the work until funding was secured and his terms regarding criticism were agreed upon. Knight needed Osborn because the artist was almost perpetually broke or in debt due to poor money-handling, and Osborn needed Knight because there was no finer animal artist anywhere. This was a tense alliance that almost completely broke down when Knight created a series of prehistoric murals for the better-funded Field Museum—a project similar to one Osborn had been planning to execute with Knight for the AMNH dinosaur halls. Still, the two eventually overcame their pride and remained friends, albeit ones frequently frustrated by each other.

Knight also showed off his sometimes irritable nature in numerous editorials. He hated news and magazine articles that made animals seem overly cute or especially vicious, although Knight probably reserved most of his hatred for modern art. Knight loathed the popularity of artists such as Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. Knight thought their works were “monstrous and inexplicable creations masquerading in the name of art.” Matisse, according to Knight, couldn’t even accurately draw a bird. Knight believed that the modern art movement was primarily the product of savvy art dealers and advertisers. There was a bit of sour grapes about this. As modern art gained in popularity, Knight had an increasingly difficult time selling his own work. People were just not interested in realistic paintings of animals.

Knight’s successes were hard-won, but, as Milner’s biography illustrates, the artist could not have done anything else. Knight’s undeniable passion was painting prehistory into life. A few snippets in the book provide some insights into Knight’s process. For dinosaurs, at least, Knight would often study the mounted skeletons of the animals and then, on the basis of this framework, create a sculpture. He could then study this three-dimensional representation for the play of shadow across the body under different conditions, and from this model Knight would then begin painting. In the case of his murals, though, Knight designed the art but did not paint the actual, full-size pieces himself as Rudolph Zallinger did with *The Age of Reptiles*. Instead, Knight created a smaller version of the mural which was then expanded according to a grid system by painters. Knight added only touch-up details to the murals.

Those murals and various other paintings continued to inspire artists and scientists after Knight’s death in 1953. And the artist’s legacy extended beyond the canvas. After seeing images of absolutely atrocious, cut-rate dinosaur sculptures at a park in South Dakota, Knight wanted to create his own scientifically accurate garden of dinosaurs and appropriate Mesozoic-type flora somewhere in Florida. Knight never attracted the investors necessary to create the park, but the idea was carried on by his friend Louis Paul Jones in the form of Sinclair Dinoland at the 1964 World’s Fair in New York. Likewise, Knight’s cutting comments about prehistoric mammal sculptures at the La Brea asphalt seeps in Los Ange-
les led the institution eventually to commission new, better sculptures after Knight’s style. Even ripoffs of Knight’s work influenced culture. When Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* initially ran in serial form, illustrations based heavily on Knight’s paintings accompanied the text, and the film version of the story featured a now-defunct horned dinosaur genus, *Agathaumas*, that was clearly based on a painting Knight created with some tips from an ailing Edward Drinker Cope.

Knight was a brilliant and taciturn artist. He constantly battled his boss, artistic society, and his own eyesight to create intricate scenes inspired by old bones. In doing so, he elevated realistic, scientific representations of life through the ages into a lovely artistic hybrid. Even as new discoveries about dinosaurs, prehistoric mammals, and other creatures make some of Knight’s illustrations seem dated, his paintings still carry the reflection of someone who joyfully reveled in the story of life. Milner’s bound gallery is a fitting sampling of Knight’s life and work, itself a time capsule that records scenes of history, science, and art from some of the most epochal moments of American paleontology.

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