



UNTOLD TALES OF FALMOUTH

from the archives of Museums on the Green

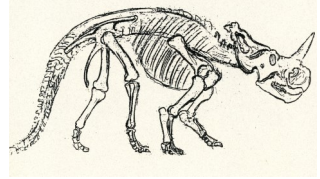
Knight of the Dinosaurs

If dinosaurs have ever captured your imagination, you owe a debt of thanks to Quissett summer resident Charles Knight (1874-1953). According to Stephen Jay Gould, the noted paleontologist and science historian, Knight was the person most responsible for our widely shared sense of how prehistoric life looked and felt. He drew the pictures of dinosaurs that we now carry inside our minds. Because of his huge influence on science textbooks, movies, and popular culture, Knight could arguably be considered one of the most important artists of the twentieth century.

The Brooklyn native's career was almost over before it began. Young Charles discovered his life's passion for drawing animals at age 5. At age 6, he was struck in the right eye by a stone thrown by a playmate. The damage to his cornea left him legally blind in that eye. The other eye was afflicted by severe astigmatism. All his life, Charles wore thick glasses, and usually had to paint with his face just inches away from his canvas.

Undeterred, he studied his craft at Brooklyn Collegiate, the Polytechnic Institute, and the Art School of the Metropolitan Museum. By age 16, he was supporting himself by making designs for a stained glass factory. In his free time, he went on sketching trips to the Central Park Zoo, and haunted the taxidermy department at the American Museum of Natural History.

While freelancing for McClure's magazine, Knight was sent to Europe, where he studied the works of *Les Animaliers*, and had a chance to view prehistoric cave paintings in France and Spain.



Top: Three charcoal drawings, reproduced in the Charles R. Knight Sketchbook (vol. 1), by William Stout, Terra Nova Press, 2002. A copy is in the archives.

Middle: Brontosaurus, 1897. At the Field Museum of Natural History. New research suggests this image is inaccurate.

Bottom: Rancho La Brea Tar Pit, 1925. At the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

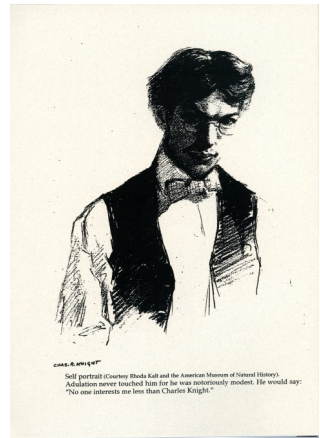
All images by Charles R. Knight.

Back at the American Museum of Natural History, paleontologist Henry Fairfield Osborn had a longtime dream of making prehistory visually exciting to the public. Who could better help with that project than the young artist who was always hanging around the museum? Osborn and Knight's exhibits were extremely popular, persuading J.P. Morgan to finance their efforts. From 1898, Knight's career took off and never faltered. His credits would eventually include murals for the American Museum of Natural History's Hall of Man; the mural "Rancho La Brea Tar Pit" for the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County; and 28 panels for Chicago's Field Museum.

Virtually all books on dinosaurs published between 1900 and 1960 included Knight's work. His vision formed the basis for how dinosaurs were portrayed in movies such as *The Lost World* (1925), *King Kong* (1933), and *Fantasia* (1940). Ray Harryhausen, the legendary master of special effects, credited Knight as an inspiration for his own work on films including *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1975).

Knight's success can partly be explained by his rigorous attention to scientific detail. His dinosaurs' forms were based not on imagination run wild, but on fossil evidence, and on inferences drawn from modern animals' anatomy. Some of his dinosaurs' features have been rendered erroneous by recent scholarship, but many of his portrayals are still surprisingly accurate.

The other key to his success lies in his sympathy for his subjects. He imagined how a dinosaur would feel in a given situation, and used that feeling to create drama. In an unpublished memoir found in our archives, Knight's granddaughter Rhoda recalled a trip to the American Museum of Natural History, where he showed her a baby mammoth preserved in a freezer. Knight lingered over the body, noting its small trunk and tiny toenails. "The idea of an animal dying so young depressed him," Rhoda realized. To her grandfather, the



Self portrait (Courtesy Rhoda Knight and the American Museum of Natural History).
Adaptations never touched him for he was exceptionally modest. He would say: "No one interests me less than Charles Knight."



Top: Self-portrait in charcoal, ca. 1900. Reproduced in William Stout's Charles R. Knight Sketchbook, vol. 1.

Middle: Charles R. Knight, Leaping Laelaps [Dryptosaurus], 1896. Owned by the American Museum of Natural History.

Bottom: Charcoal drawing reproduced in William Stout's Charles R. Knight Sketchbook, vol. 3, Terra Nova Press, 2003. Knight said cats were his favorite animals to draw.

Stout's 3 volume book is in the Museums' archives.

mammoth was as real as Rhoda's fox terrier.

Knight's connection to Falmouth began in 1899 when he was commissioned by the U.S. Fisheries to paint the "living bright colored fish" at their facility in Woods Hole. He liked the town so well that he came back in 1904 with his wife, Annie. Soon the whole family was coming every year, to their place on Quisset Avenue that was formerly owned by Vinal Edwards. Rhoda remembered it as "a house of aged beauty, history, mystery, and love," with masses of red rambler roses on either side of its front door. She and "Topsy" (her name for her grandfather) enjoyed many outings at Nobska Beach, and its unspoiled views of "God's magnificent creation." The first grown-up event Rhoda was allowed to attend was a lecture her grandfather gave at the Marine Biological Laboratory, to an audience of scientists who knew his work and respected it.

Charles Knight died in Manhattan's Polyclinic hospital on April 15, 1953. His last words were, "Don't let anything happen to my drawings." The drawings, and his legacy, are secure. By making dinosaurs come alive for us, Knight forever changed our view of the earth, and of ourselves.

Meg Costello

Learn more:

Get an [overview of Knight's career](#).

See Knight's bison used on [the 1930 buffalo stamp](#).

View the scene of [Brontosaurus fighting T. Rex](#) from *The Lost World* (1925), or watch the whole movie [here](#).

See Ray Harryhausen's [many-headed hydra](#) in action in this clip from *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963).



Top: Photo of the Knight summer home on Quisset Avenue, ca. 1950. From the Charles R. Knight collection in the Museums' archives.

Bottom: Charles R. Knight, Lightship "Relief" at Woods Hole. Oil on canvas. Knight occasionally ventured beyond the animal world for his subject matter. This painting is in the Museums' collection.