PUBLIC SCULPTURE

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AMERICA'S LEGACY

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FROM THE SERIES

AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT

COWBOYS: Vaquero
Texas was a Spanish province from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century and became part of Mexico in 1821. Wrested from Mexico by Americans from nearby territories, Texas became an independent republic in 1836 and joined the Union in 1845. After the Civil War, many American veterans moved to the state.

New arrivals hoped to make their fortunes by raising cattle on the plains, where the Spanish and then the Mexicans had established cattle ranches. Because of nutritious grasses covering the semi-arid land, millions of wild cattle known as longhorns thrived untended across the plains. The cattle, however, could not be transported to distant markets until railroads arrived on the Great Plains. Even then, the closest railroads lay more than one thousand miles north. So, Texans took their cattle on long drives across prairie country, first to Abilene, Kansas, in 1867, and then during the next decade to new cattle centers in Ellsworth and Dodge City, Kansas. The period from 1875 to 1885 was the heyday of the long drive. Four main trails to rail centers north of Texas were the Goodnight-Loving Trail, ending in Wyoming, at Cheyenne; the Western Trail, ending in Kansas, at Dodge City, or in Nebraska, at Ogallala; the Chisholm Trail, ending in Kansas, at Ellsworth, Abilene, or Wichita; and the Sedalia and Baxter Springs Trail, ending in Missouri, at Sedalia, or in Kansas, at Baxter Springs.

Cowboys who drove the cattle north became heroes in American folklore. Although movies and magazines have depicted these first cowboys as Anglo-Americans (Americans of English descent), they owed many of their skills and customs to the earlier Mexican cowboy, called vaquero (from the Spanish word vaca, meaning cow). Anglo-American cowboys adopted much of the dress, equipment, language, and values of the vaquero. Some of the many Spanish-derived names used in the world of cowboys are listed in the Glossary.

Cattle Trails and Cow Towns

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*Vaquero* by Luis Jiménez.
**Glossary**

**bronco** (BRONG ko) (from Mexican Spanish broncho, wild horse, from Spanish patero bronco colt, untamed), range pony or mustang that is not broken or is only imperfectly broken.

**broncobuster**, one who breaks broncos to the saddle.

**buckaroo** (BUCK uh roo), alteration of vaquero. Cowboy.

**chaparral** (chap PUH rowl) (from chaparr(o), evergreen oak), close growth of low evergreen oaks or any dense thicket.

**chaps** (chaps, shaps), leather leggings worn over jeans or the like to protect cowboys from burs, rope burns, etc., while on horseback.

**corral**, enclosure or pen for horses or cattle.

**dally** (from dar la vuelta, to make the turn), taking quick turns of the lariat around the saddle horn to bring an animal to a stop.

**lariat** (LAIR e ut) (from la reata), long, noosed rope used to catch horses, cattle, or other livestock.

**quirt** (KWFERT) (from cuerda, whip), short-handled riding whip.

**rodeo** (from rodear, to go round), roundup of cattle; public exhibition of cowboy skills.

**stereotype** (STEHR e uh TYPE), an oversimplified view of a person or issue as conforming to an unvarying type without any individuality.

**stampede** (from estampida, uproar), sudden headlong rush of startled animals.

**vaquero** (vah KEHR oh) (from vaca, cow), cowboy.

**LOOKING AT THE SCULPTURE**

*It wasn’t John Wayne who was the original cowboy. That’s the myth. This contribution that the Mexican community made to Texas and the image of the United States has been totally overlooked.*

LUIS JIMÉNEZ

The monumental Vaquero, created by Luis Jiménez (born 1940), confronts popular stereotypes of the cowboy and affirms the significance of Mexican contributions to United States history.

In a highly dramatic image focusing on tension and movement, the vaquero holds onto a bucking bronco while pointing his pistol skyward, perhaps from the thrill of still being in the saddle. He wears a sombrero for protection from the hot sun and leather chaps to guard his legs against thorny chaparral bushes. Stirrups gripping his boots keep him from slipping off the frenzied horse, whose forelegs are stuck in a prickly pear cactus.

The horse’s front hooves and cactus balance the entire weight of the sculpture, supporting the powerful composition of horse and rider united at an instant of utmost extension. While the horse lunges forward with its bucking hind legs suspended in mid air, the vaquero maintains his balance by rearing backward and extending his arm up and forward. Horse and rider are inseparable—robust extensions of a dramatic curve and countercurve.

The sculpture is constructed of fiberglass, an industrial material associated with boats and cars and used often by the artist because “[it] carries the same baggage as the images. It’s not a ‘high art’ material.” Fiberglass also allows the color and fluid form admired by Jiménez. The Vaquero’s bright colors and glossy finish recall movie marquees, a reminder of how much movies have influenced what we know about the American cowboy.
3. Compare and contrast Jiménez’s sculpture with an equestrian statue depicting a leader. Are action and physical conflict equally important in both monuments? How do you account for differences?

4. Though the Vaquero is not an image of a bronco-buster, it resembles that of cowboys breaking wild horses. What are similarities and differences?

5. It has been said that the breaking of wild horses symbolizes the settling of the American West. In your judgment, is the symbolism apt?

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**The Bronco Buster**, 1895, cast 1895, bronze, 60.96 cm (24 inches) high, by Frederic Remington (1861–1909). Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth. Like many artists of his time, Remington was fascinated by the drama of a cowboy breaking a wild horse.

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3. View film clips from Westerns (for example, Howard Hawks’ *Red River* [1948]; John Ford’s *The Searchers* [1956]; Sam Peckinpah’s *Ride the High Country* [1962]; or Simon Wincer’s *Lonesome Dove* [1989] [an eight-hour television mini-series adapted from the novel by Larry McMurtry]. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast Jiménez’s *Vaquero* with cowboys presented by one film. Analyze clips (particularly codes of conduct displayed) to determine why cowboys became heroes in American folklore.

4. Cowboys are a favorite theme in many country-and-western and popular songs. Some examples are:

   - Jimmy Buffett, “Cowboy in the Jungle”
   - John Denver, “Cowboy’s Delight” and “The Country and the Lady”
   - Waylon Jennings, “My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys”
   - Elton John, “Brown Dirt Cowboy”
   - Michael Martin Murphey, “Texas Morning,” “Another Cheap Western,” “Geronimo’s Cadillac,” and “Cosmic Cowboy”
   - Carly Simon, “Cowtown”
   - Sonny and Cher, “A Cowboy’s Work Is Never Done”

Prepare an oral report discussing how cowboys are presented in three songs performed by different artists.
Artist Biography

Luis Jiménez (born 1940)

Luis Jiménez was born in El Paso, Texas. His father, paternal grandmother, and his mother’s parents were immigrants from Mexico. At age six, Jiménez began to help in the workshop of his father, an accomplished neon-sign maker, and there learned to weld and work with large figures. Jiménez received a bachelor’s degree from the University of Texas in 1964. After traveling to Mexico and then teaching art at an El Paso junior high school, in 1966 he moved to New York City, where he apprenticed himself to sculptor Seymour Lipton and worked for the federal government’s Head Start program and the city’s Youth Board. In 1972 Jiménez returned to the Southwest, moving to Roswell, New Mexico. He currently lives close to Roswell, in Hondo, New Mexico. Among the artist’s important public sculptures are Sodbuster: San Isidro (1981) (Fargo, North Dakota), Southwest Pietà (1984) (Albuquerque, New Mexico).

Further Reading

Vaquero