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AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT

COWBOYS: Vaquero





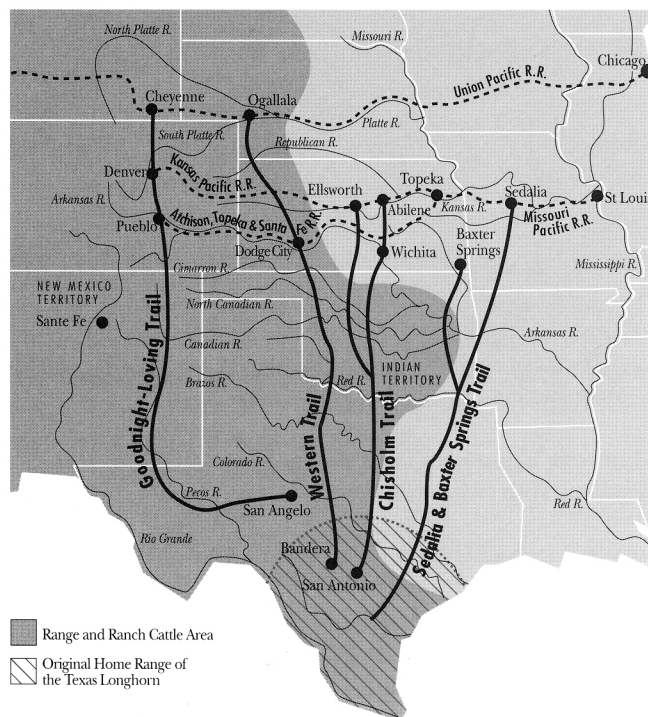
# COWBOYS: Vaquero

**T**exas 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



*Vaquero* by Luis Jiménez.

# Glossary

**bronco** (BRONG ko) (from Mexican Spanish *broncho*, wild horse, from Spanish *potro 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 utt) (from *la reata*), long, noosed rope used to catch horses, cattle, or other livestock.

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

**rodeo** (from *rode[ar]*, 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

## FACT FILE

### VAQUERO

Modeled 1980, cast 1990

### ARTIST

Luis Jiménez  
(born 1940)

### MEDIUM

Fiberglass, steel armature, and acrylic urethane paint

### DIMENSIONS

505.5 cm (16½ feet) high

### FUNDING SOURCE

Gift of Judith and Wilbur L. Ross, Jr., Anne and Ronald Abramson, Thelma and Melvin Lenkin

### LOCATION

Washington, D.C.:  
In front of the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 8th and G Streets, NW

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.



## THINKING CRITICALLY

1. When a cast of Jiménez's *Vaquero* was installed in Houston's Moody Park, some public figures criticized the sculpture as advocating violence. The sculptor responded, "You wouldn't think of taking the gun away from a statue of Robert E. Lee, but a gun in the hand of a Mexican becomes dangerous." Do you agree with his assumption?

2. Many critics view the *Vaquero* as a stereotyped characterization of Mexican Americans. Yet Luis Jiménez, who is Mexican American, intended the sculpture to confront stereotypes of the American cowboy. What factors might account for the misreading?

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?

*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.

## PROJECTS

1. Working in teams or groups, select a set of five depictions of cowboys from newspapers or magazines. Prepare an exhibit showing how these depictions portray activities, dress, and stance of their subjects. Exhibits should be mounted so that viewers understand the extent to which images convey an accurate picture of the daily life and work of the cowboy.

2. Write letters home about your imaginary work on a cattle drive from Texas (choose a specific place in Texas) to Abilene, Kansas, in 1867. Describe your life and work on the drive. If you are not a cowboy, discuss cowboys with whom you come into contact. Include pencil or pen and ink sketches of your own character or people met on the trail.

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**

See *Man on Fire: Luis Jiménez/El Hombre en Llamas* (catalogue for exhibition) (Albuquerque: The Albuquerque Museum, 1994). Jiménez's *Vaquero* is featured in *Mexican-American Art: Teachers Guide* (Santa Monica: Getty Center for Education in the Arts, 1992), with an extensive set of discussion questions and activities for elementary, middle, and high school students. Useful works about cowboys include David Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1981); Arnold R. Rojas, *The Vaquero* (Charlotte, N.C.: McNally and Lofton, 1964); Richard W. Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990); Lonn Taylor and Ingrid Maar, *The American Cowboy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983) (catalogue for a major cowboy exhibition sponsored by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress); Jack Weston, *The Real American Cowboy* (New York: New Amsterdam, 1985); and William D. Wittliff, *Vaquero: Genesis of the Texas Cowboy* (San Antonio: Institute of Texan Cultures, 1972). Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), shows how popular novels and films about the American West have shaped the emotional lives of people in our time.