

## Bullock Museum exhibit celebrates rodeo's roots in the pageantry and horsemanship of Mexico's charrería

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Clothing worn by Mexico's charros and charras (horsemen and horsewomen) can be plain and practical or elaborately decorated. But as seen at the 'Arte en la Charrería' exhibit, the sombrero is indispensable to provide shade, dissipate heat and protect riders in case of a fall.

On any given weekend through fall, a centuries-old sporting event takes place across the state. It's steeped in ritual, pageantry and tradition. Thirty-five men's teams and a dozen women's compete. Yet many Texans have never even heard its name charrería.

The special exhibit at the Bullock Texas State History Museum could change that. "Arte en la Charrería: The Artisanry of Mexican Equestrian Culture" spotlights the showy history, art and sport of the charro (horseman) and charra (horsewoman) on both sides of the border.

Here are the eye-catching suits, fancy dresses and artfully crafted accessories and tack — saddles inlaid with silver, sombreros that act as shock absorbers, spurs with 3-inch rowels, hand-braided reatas (lariats), fringed rebozos (shawls) and patterned serapes (blankets).

And because the charro is considered the father of our cowboy and the charreada the forerunner of our rodeo, Bullock media relations and marketing director Timothy Dillon says, "We've added some pieces to drive home the Texas connection."

These include blowups of photos taken at Texas charreadas (rodeos), talks on vaquero culture, chili queens and charrería today as well as programs on charro art, vaqueros vs. cowboys and music of the charrería.

The collection — begun in the late 1800s by Gumaro González, a landowner and charro in Northern Mexico, much added to by son Robert and grandson Luis and administered by great-granddaughter Marisú González and husband, Gabriel Caballo — showcases the craft and design of Mexico's finest charrería artisans.

In the Texas Folklore Society book "Charreada: Mexican Rodeo in Texas," illustrated with San Antonio photographer Al Rendon's sepia-tone prints, F.E. Abernethy explains that the charro is to Mexico what the cowboy is to Texas, only more so.

Charrería dates back five centuries to Spain's introduction of horses and cattle to the New World. At first, the conquistadors forbade Mexican Indian ranch hands to ride horses under penalty of death. But by 1609, the horse population had grown, and indigenous people had begun to saddle up to work the cattle.

And by the 1800s, hacienda owners were hosting rodeo (round-up) celebrations, where charros vied with those from neighboring haciendas to show off their riding and roping skills.

But the Mexican revolution broke up the haciendas, and charros, faced with a vanishing lifestyle, organized to preserve it in 1921. In 1933, they created a body to govern the charro associations (teams) emerging in Mexico and later the U.S.

Today the horsemanship and roping skills of Texas charro teams from Denton to Del Rio typically can be seen weekends at charreadas held in lienzos (keyhole-shaped arenas) with food, music and family-filled bleachers.

Wearing working (faena) attire, charros ride horses and bulls, rope horses and steers, bring down a bull by its tail, and in the charreada's 10th and final competition, leap from their unbridled horse to an unbridled, unbroken galloping mare — the daring paso de la muerte, or death pass.

Unlike the American cowboy, the charro competes as a team member, not as an individual, and for honor or a trophy, not prizes or money. He cannot wear brand names or logos on his clothing or saddle.

"There are events within Mexico that offer cash and important prizes," collector Marisú González says. "But we don't like them very much because charrería was born as a way to bring the haciendas together and not as a sporting event that distorts the original spirit."

Also unlike the cowboy, the charro wins points for style and execution, not speed. He loses points for infractions, such as improper attire or tack, his sombrero falling off or not landing on his feet after a bull ride.

For years, the charreada was a strictly machismo affair. Today the escaramuza (skirmish) brings spectators to their feet as eight full-skirted and crinolined charras, riding sidesaddle, put their mounts through dazzling precision drills at a gallop.

"The escaramuza often gets more applause than the charros," Marisú González says. "But please don't tell them because they always have a little envy."