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Charrería exhibit corrals traditions Mexican culture, artisanship

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A lasso lilts gracefully around an ornate sombrero, undulating in elegant cadence before falling and tightening around the horns of a loping steer. A mounted charro winds the rope masterfully around a large saddle horn.

Horse and rider are resplendent in Mexican finery — fabric embroidered with gold bullion thread, etched silver buttons and conchos and high-relief, tooled leather.

It's a scene that plays continuously, emanating from a small screen on a wall at the National Cowboy & [Western Heritage Museum](#). The video is part of the museum's new exhibition "Arte en la Charrería: The Artisanship of the Mexican Equestrian Culture."

On display through Jan. 3, this bilingual exhibition provides a rare look into Charrería, its events, traditional attire and history. The timing of this traveling exhibition is designed to coincide with [Mexico's](#) 200th anniversary of independence and 100th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution.

"Very few people have been exposed to these Mexican traditions. It is our hope that people will gain a greater appreciation and understanding of this culture," said [Don Reeves](#), curator of the exhibition.

"Most of these items were loaned from the private collections of Mexican families."

Few traditions are as innately Mexican as the charreada, Reeves said. Much like the American rodeo, the charreada features nine equestrian and roping events.

Not to be mistaken with a working cowboy, or vaquero, a charro's skills typically are not used in everyday ranching. Literally translated, charro means "gentleman rider."

"The charreada has two elements," Reeves said. "Elaborate horsemanship and roping skills."

Events comprising the charreada are derived from three centuries of ranching culture.

Ranching came from [Spain](#) to New Spain, or modern-day Mexico, in the early 18th century. As an important part of the Spanish economy, it necessitated a hacienda system with skilled horsemen to handle cattle. That job typically fell to the native workers who lived on the hacienda.

"Over time, indigenous Mexican ranch workers adapted their own saddle style and riding techniques. ... By the 19th century, people from the haciendas were organizing celebrations for charros to show their skills and compete. This marked the birth of La Charrería, a tradition represented now by more than 900 equestrian societies in Mexico alone," according to exhibition material.

Today, Charrería societies compete in competitions that often are held weekly. Many of these societies were started in the 1920s to keep the tradition alive after the Mexican civil war.

"There was such devastation after the war," Reeves said. "All the haciendas were burned. The wealthy people who (remained in Mexico) were worried that the craftsmanship and artistry of this culture would disappear."

As a result, Charrería organizations began springing up throughout Mexico and the southern [United States](#).

"Arte en la Charrería: The Artisanry of the Mexican Equestrian Culture" is a traveling exhibition sponsored by International Arts and Artists of [Washington, D.C.](#) The collection will make stops in [Kentucky](#), [Oregon](#), [Indiana](#) and [Texas](#) throughout 2010.