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Traditional Arts of the Rancher and Cowboy

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Traditional Arts of the Rancher and Cowboy

"I think it takes an artist to build a saddle...You need to know horse training, the anatomy of the body, whether it's the human body or the horse's body...you need to know what kind of riding is to be done, how heavy the rider is, what kind of horse he is riding, is he using it to cut cattle, is he using it in the arena where he's only going to be on it just a short time, or is he going to be in it all day long--I think a lot of people don't know that. I think we need to educate them...It is nothing to spend \$1,500 for a good horse and then throw a cheap saddle on him. That will ruin a horse." (Bill Gomer, master Kansas saddlemaker.)

At first, it may be somewhat perplexing to put art and the rancher or cowboy in the same sentence. But, if you ask a rancher about his personal "gear," he will readily show you his treasured tools: the favorite saddle, his boots, the weathered lariat, the bit, the spurs, the chaps, and the buckles. All these objects provide their value first through function, and second, through expression of personal style.



Museums, such as the National Cowboy Museum in Oklahoma City, or the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming, collect and preserve

the finest examples of these traditional arts and offer a glimpse into the culture of the American rancher and cowboy. Our own Kansas Museum of History

in Topeka has examples of this “gear” related to Kansas history or personalities. The Kansas Historical Society provides additional insight into the history of their use with thousands of photographs.

Today, there is a renaissance in the honored professions of the making of this personal gear. The Traditional Cowboy Arts Association, a nonprofit educational cooperative formed in 1999 and headquartered in Wyoming, was founded by elder craftsmen who were concerned that the talent and expertise of the previous generation needed to

be passed on or would surely risk being lost. Their mission statement is: “The Traditional Cowboy Arts Association is dedicated to preserving and promoting the skills of saddlemaking, bit and spur making, silversmithing and rawhide braiding, and the role of these traditional crafts in the cowboy culture of the American West.”

How do we define this traditional art? It is predominantly functional and decorative, more than aesthetic. Think tools. They have a purpose, a use, a practical value. However, they also give clues as to the



SADDLE MAKING TOOLS FROM JOHN'S SADDLERY SHOP, WAMEGO, KANSAS.

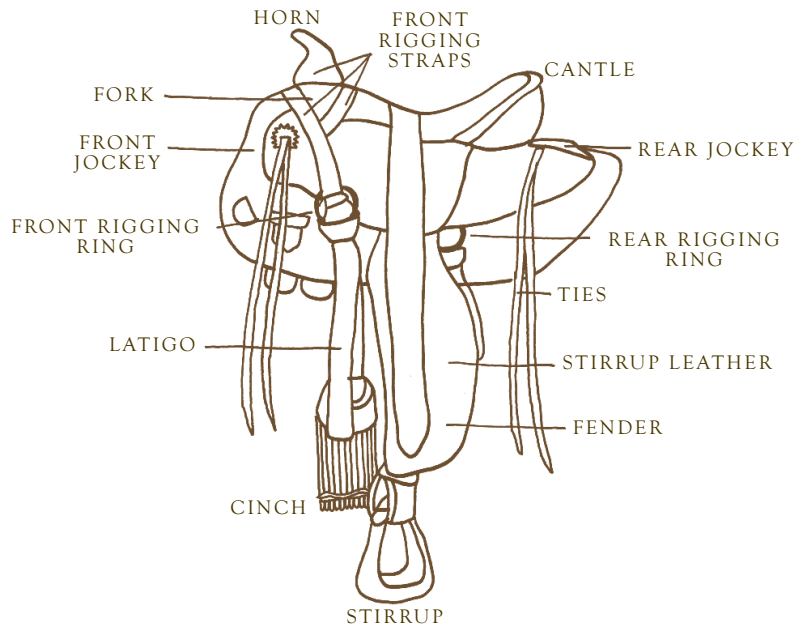
historical development of the geographical region, which reaches back , in part, to Coronado and the Spanish explorers on horseback who brought their traditions to the New World. Subsequently, these arts were influenced by the Mexican vaqueros. They were professional horsemen whose traditions and techniques were largely adopted by cowboys, their American counterparts. Their “gear” was typically recognized by the vibrant, decorative style that evolved from Spanish design elements.

These traditional arts are part of the material culture of the American ranch and may be included under the larger umbrella of American folkways. The “materials,” or objects, that a culture produces can tell a great deal about its priorities and expectations. (Simon J. Bronner, Ed., *Consuming Visions*, 1989.) For instance, the emphasis on function becomes evident. In fact, function was expected out of the gear the rancher and cowboy used, and was of greater value than any resulting aesthetic quality. Tools are extensions of their users.

Pairing the best craftsman with the best tools often generated the best work.

Many craftspeople take offense at the term “functional art,” regarding it as pejorative. In contrast, cowboy craftsmen take offense if their work is not considered functional. Their goal is to make working tools that are also beautiful. In this, they share many ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement that flourished earlier this century. Their work is part of a philosophy of life stressing commitment to the quest for excellence, a bond between maker and user, and the belief that good tools contribute to good work. (Casey Beard, author of Tools of the Cowboy Trade, 1997.)

The artistry of the “gear,” and even of the tools used to produce it, is apparent. Gear and tools, part of the material culture of the ranch, offer evidence of values, ability, creativity and ingenuity of both the maker and the culture. (Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture*, 1990.) It seems almost inescapable for a talented and skilled craftsman to abandon the tendency to embellish or decorate the work created. This



Kelly O'Brien

tendency is responsible for the aesthetics found in some of the most prized of these traditional arts. By incorporating aesthetics and beauty into his work, a craftsman enhanced and solidified his identity.

The essential item uniting the horse and horseman into a working team is the saddle. The basic material is leather either oak tanned or vegetable tanned. The experienced saddlemaker cuts,

shaves, and shapes the leather hide to mold precisely to the curves and planes of the saddle—including the horn, fork, seat and cantle. The history of the saddle is specific to the time period, the cultural influence (Spanish or Mexican), and the region (Texas or Plains or California). Variants continued to develop with travel, communication, style preference, and use.

Artistic expression is clearly visible on the leather worked over by an expert



The Kansas State Historical Society

saddlemaker with designs and often a flash of silver. The botanical patterns that resonate with Spanish heritage have colorful names such as Oak Leaf or Wild Rose—often punctuated by the geometric pattern, Basket Weave. And yet, each artist had imagination and license to place skulls, horns, initials, words, and personal motifs for a purchaser who would commission a saddle and then wait patiently.

Purchasing a saddle was and remains

an investment for the rider to be taken quite seriously. Cost was high, and a poorly made saddle could potentially wreak havoc on the rider, his stability, and even on the horse. The reputation of an excellent and experienced saddlemaker was built by word-of-mouth from the cowboys who knew firsthand that his work provided years of service, comfort, resilience, and plain hard use.



HYER BOOTS
Jim Arndt

"To a cowman and a cowboy, a western stock saddle constituted a cherished possession and was bought with the same care one would buy a bed or an easy chair. For the working cowboy who works several months each year from his saddle cinched to a horse, a saddle is a piece of personal property, an item included in most cowboys' wills. An object to be formally disposed of." (Dean Krakel, former Executive Vice-President, National Cowboy Hall of Fame, quoted in Beattie's Saddles, 1981)

Another key piece of gear is the cowboy boot. Tradition credits Charles Hyer, who with his brother Edward founded The Hyer Boot Company circa

1880, as one of the first inventors of the modern cowboy boot. Their father began practicing bootmaking in the mid-1800s when he emigrated to the U.S. from Germany. Charles moved to Olathe in 1872 and found work at the Olathe School for the Deaf teaching shoe and harness making. Charles opened a side business working with his brother.

Their designed boots were innovative: each foot (left and right) was designed uniquely as opposed to identical. The toes were pointed, the high, slanted heel would hold a stirrup, and the front and back tops sported a scalloped design.

These design elements increased the functionality for the horse-riding rancher or cowboy and provided an opportunity for the purchaser to select from expressive designs. The pair of Hyer boots at the Kansas Historical Museum features wheat, sunflowers, and jayhawks.

It's hard to discuss boots without mentioning spurs. The use of spurs stretches back to the Celts in the 5th Century, B.C. Spurs became an art form in Europe during the 15th Century. They act as a rider's aid in giving accurate directions to the horse, not to make it go faster or inflict pain. Spurs also present another medium of metal for craftsmen to express their creative and technical talent while simultaneously providing function and style.

A handsome pair of spurs is a badge of identification. Anyone can wear a cowboy hat and boots, but you had better be a real hand if you are going about sporting a pair of "buzz saws." They mark membership in an exclusive brotherhood. Like the Tibetan prayer wheel, the rowels' gentle jangling constantly reminds the

wearer of who and what he is. (Casey Beard, Tools of the Trade, 1997)

Additional cowboy "gear" includes the braided rawhide lariats for roping and guiding; the leather chaps for the protection of riding through brush; and other metalwork, such as bridles, bits, and branding irons. Again, these tools were functional, but provided opportunities for decoration and personalization for the rancher and cowboy. Vintage "gear," a part of American material culture, is highly collectible, evoking iconic images of the cowboy and rancher lifestyle that helped build our country.

Laurie Hamilton is a businesswoman, family business owner, actor, and art collector, splitting her time between Kansas City and Santa Fe. She has been actively involved as a volunteer for four years with Symphony in the Flint Hills in a variety of roles.

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