When Craft Becomes Art

THE GEAR OF THE TRADITIONAL COWBOYS ARTS ASSOCIATION TELLS THE STORY OF THE WEST.

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Courtesy of National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum
Author, playwright and critic Anthony Burgess once said, “Art begins with craft, and there is no art until the craft has been mastered.” Since men like Russell and Remington started coming west more than 150 years ago, paint and clay have depicted the life of the North American cowboy and his surroundings. However, in the shadows was another breed of artist: the saddle maker, rawhide braider, silversmith and bit and spur maker. This work was rarely recognized by anyone other than the working cowboy as a work of art.

The pieces that are in the annual Traditional Cowboy Arts Exhibition and Sale, which is hosted each fall by the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, are examples of both craft and art. Each work is a brilliantly made, one-of-a-kind tool of the cowboy’s trade, expertly engineered for unmatched functionality. But each piece also represents, for its maker, an artistic journey that begins, as all such journeys do, with inspiration—that spontaneous recognition of a story that needs telling.

For the artists of the TCAA, that story is drawn from a wide range of influences and sources of inspiration: their own experiences as working cowboys, making a living on horseback; and the work of the saddle makers, rawhide braidiers, silversmiths and bit and spur makers who have come before them. But they are also guided by classical architecture, sculpture, graphic design and Old World craftsmanship carried to the North American frontier.

The story then unfolds over hundreds of hours at a drawing board and in the workshop. As the creative puzzles of design, architecture and narrative are solved, ideas are brought to life through the meticulous carvings, engravings and sculpting of leather and metal. At the journey’s end, raw materials are given life and are transformed into an original product, to be interpreted, to be pondered, to be appreciated not just for its functionality but also for its beauty and its meaning. Those raw materials have been transformed into an exceptional class of work—that of functional art.

Note Wald crafted this traditional California full bridle set of all-natural, handmade and hand-cut rawhide. To enhance their craftsmanship, TCAA artists use pieces crafted by other TCAA artists, such as this Ernie Marsh bit.
“Art begins with craft, and there is no art until the craft has been mastered,” said Anthony Burgess.

Members of this group also draw from a shared values system, one that emphasizes honoring the traditions of the West while reflecting our contemporary world, a world that dictates that standards in these disciplines be continually raised and that knowledge, once carefully guarded, be brought into the open and shared freely with peers and protégés alike. Most important of all is preserving these precious arts that were once no more than a single generation away from being lost, pushed aside by the mass production of inferior but widely available work.

This ethos demands of a devotee an unmatched understanding of his or her discipline, its tools, its techniques and its correct function, as well as a never-ending commitment to education and self improvement. That’s the craft.

But the creative expression through the media of leather and metal, the making of statements and sharing of narratives through the finest examples of working saddles, bits, spurs, rawhide and silver—that’s art.

Twenty-three years ago, a small group of the West’s leading saddle makers, silversmiths, rawhide braiders and bit and spur makers recognized a fourfold crisis: First, there was an aging class of master artists in these disciplines; second, a shortage of newcomers entering these fields; third, there were fewer and fewer opportunities for apprentices to find willing, qualified mentors; and finally, the ongoing threat to these traditional arts posed by mass production.

In response, these artists in 1998 formed the Traditional Cowboy Arts Association, with the idea of preserving the time-honored art of the West, continually elevating the standards for craftsmanship within these disciplines and creating accessible educational programs for students. Two men shared that vision, the late Ken Townsend, who at the time was the executive director of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, and Don Reeves, the curator for cowboy culture at the museum. In sharing that vision, they
provided the venue to showcase this art, not only to the West but also to the rest of the world. Thankfully, the museum’s board of directors continues to support TCAA by providing the stage for the group’s annual sale and exhibit, with the next one scheduled for October 1-2.

Since those first informal discussions, the museum has hosted 21 TCAA shows, which have featured works valued in excess of $8 million. Each year, the artists of TCAA raise the standards of quality and creativity in their disciplines. They don’t just push the envelope, they reinvent these traditional western arts. Through innovation and unmatched creativity, they breathe new life into the age-old media of leather and metal.

More importantly, each year’s show other craftsmen, men and women who see what is possible in their disciplines and find in these works of art, the motivation to elevate their own work and, in turn, become artists themselves.

TCAA’s mission, though, is centered on the preservation of these arts through education. Each member of TCAA offers one-on-one instruction in his respective field. In addition, the group holds two annual workshops at the museum. TCAA has also created scholarship programs to help students cover costs. So far, these programs have paid out more than $200,000.

Like great painters and sculptors of the North American West, the members of TCAA have a desire to capture and preserve the culture of the cowboy and the West. These artists all start with, an inspiration that leads them to pick up a pencil and start sketching an idea. Eventually, that inspiration is brought to life through paint, leather, clay or metal—and becomes a beautiful work of art.

In the past 22 years, it has become more common to find a set of Wilson Capron’s spurs displayed on a collector’s mantel next to a Martin Grell painting or a Chuck Stormes saddle prominently in a corporate board room.

Simple, functional craft has indeed become collectible art.

Above: In 2019, Pablo Lozano celebrated four decades in his profession. Born in Buenos Aires, he began at age 15 studying rawhide braiding with his mentor, the late Don Luis Alberto Flores. Pablo believes in apprenticeship as a means to educate and preserve traditional arts.