**From *Vaquero* to Cowboy**

**Grades 3-5**

This lesson incorporates text and images from the online exhibition *Mexican America* at the National Museum of American History (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/group_detail.cfm?key=1253&gkey=100&page=2>) and artworks held by the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which can be found using the search collections feature at <http://americanart.si.edu/> The Mexican America text is in both English and Spanish.

**Learning Standards**

These standards are achieved through guided work with the teacher.

**Language Arts** (from the National Council of Teachers of English)

* **Standard 9** Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

**Objectives**

* To recognize the Hispanic heritage of the cowboy culture of the American West
* To understand aspects of cowboy life, especially the Hispanic sources of clothing, equipment, and words

**Background**

Much of the technique and craftsmanship of [horse] riding culture that was found in the American West among both Native Americans and later U.S. settlers was introduced by the Spanish in Mexico within the first century of colonization (1500s). During this period, huge herds of cattle and sheep (both newly introduced species, like horses) flooded the dry grasslands of northern Mexico and were tended by men who would later be called vaqueros—cowboys. The ranching culture that they developed, as well as the ecological destruction that grazing produced, stretched from Texas to California. This economy of raising livestock on the open range was embraced by settlers coming overland from the American east along routes like the Santa Fe, Old Spanish, and Gila trails. To this day, ranching remains a vital economic and cultural force in both the American west and northern Mexico.

**Background on Objects**

**Spur**

This spur, worn over a riding boot, was made in Mexico in the mid-1800s. Rubbed against the animal’s side, spurs are one of the instruments that riders use to direct horses. The spikes on this spur are set on a small wheel called a rowel, making this a rowel spur.

**Buckaroo’s Hat**

This tan felt hat was worn by a 1970s “buckaroo,” as working cowboys are known in Paradise valley, Nevada. A buckaroo usually has two hats, both expensive. One is worn almost every day, all day, indoors and out. The second is kept in a box at home and taken out for special occasions, like a cattleman’s association meeting, a birthday party, or a big dance. Every man’s hat is given a particular pinch, roll, or wrinkle to make it his own.

**Saddle**

The Spaniards who invaded Mexico brought to North America a well-developed equestrian tradition. Over the centuries, horses, saddles, and other riding gear were altered by the landscape and the lifestyles of both Spanish and indigenous riders. Accompanied by mariachi music, *la charrería* is the elaborate and spectacle-driven tradition of horsemanship in Mexico. As a national sport rooted in the everyday demands of ranching, the crafts and techniques of *charrería* were adopted and modified by American settlers in the 19th century. They in turn developed their own rodeo tradition. This elaborate saddle with embossed silver medallions was given to General Philip Sheridan by a Mexican friend in 1866.

**Cowboy Boots** by William Wilhelmi

1980 William Wilhelmi Born: Garwin, Iowa 1939 slip-cast, airbrushed-underglaze and glazed porcelain with gold lusters left boot: 14 1/4 x 10 1/4 x 4 in. (36.2 x 26.0 x 10.2 cm) right boot: 14 1/4 x 10 1/4 x 4 1/8 in. (36.2 x 26.0 x 10.5 cm) Smithsonian American Art Museum Gift of the artist 1981.107A-B Smithsonian American Art Museum  
4th Floor, Luce Foundation Center

Bill Wilhelmi designed this pair of porcelain cowboy boots specifically for the Renwick Gallery show, *American Porcelain: New Expressions in an Ancient Art*. The artist was inspired to begin casting ceramic cowboy boots after seeing a collection of authentic footwear. This pair of boots is unique because it was the first that Wilhelmi modeled in porcelain. They were cast from an actual pair and as a result exhibit signs of aging in the creased porcelain at the ankles. The wing tips on the toes of the shoes, as well as the heels, are glazed with a gold luster, and the boots are airbrushed with an evening desert landscape.

***Vaquero*** by Luis Jiménez

Luis Jimenez, Vaquero, modeled 1980/cast 1990; acrylic urethane, fiberglass, steel armature, 199 x 114 x 67 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Judith and Wilbur L. Ross, Jr., Anne and Ronald Abramson, Thelma and Melvin Lenkin.

Read/listen: <http://americanart.si.edu/multimedia/tours/directors/jimenez/>

There are many equestrian monuments in the federal city of Washington, D.C., but the one in front of the National Museum of American Art [now called Smithsonian American Art Museum] is special.

Standing sixteen and a half feet high and made of fiberglass, it shows a Mexican American cowboy on a bright blue high-kicking horse. The figure is so energized that it almost looks like an animated cartoon. Part hero, part Zorro, this sculpture has one foot in the old traditions of equestrian sculpture and another in popular culture.

**Duration**

One 45-minute class

**Materials and Reproducibles**

Handout 1: Cowboy Gear

(includes hat, saddle, spur, boots) Note: the boots are porcelain, cast from real boots by the artist.

Handout 2: *Vaquero* by Luis Jiménez

**Directions**

**Step I**

Show students the pictures of the cowboy gear. Ask them to identify the items (some may be unfamiliar). Then ask: *Who would use or wear these things? What sort of work would he do?* If there are many answers you might record them on the board.

Hand out the picture of *Vaquero.* Ask students to see how many of the cowboy gear objects they can see in the sculpture. Explain that Mexican vaqueros were the first cowboys. American cowboys learned the many skills of herding and taking care of cattle from them, and many cowboy words come from the Spanish words the vaqueros used.

**Step II**

Learn more about the life and work of cowboys by having students read one or more of the many excellent books widely available. For younger students *B is for Buckaroo: A Cowboy Alphabet,* explains the Spanish origin of many cowboy words and includes watercolors of cowboys in action (authors: Louise Doak Whitney and Greaves Whitney). For more advanced students, *In the Days of the Vaquero*s: *America’s First True Cowboys*, by Russell Freedman, tells the vaquero story in depth, with helpful illustrations.

**Step III**

Ask students to try saying the American cowboy words and say the Spanish words they came from, so they can hear the connection. Then ask them to try using them in a sentence. If some of your students speak Spanish you may ask them if they would like to serve as “advisors” on pronunciation.

* Bronco: From a shortening of the Mexican-Spanish *potro bronco*, meaning wild horse of half-tamed horse. In English, we use bronco as a noun, the horse itself.
* Dude: From lo dudo (a doubtful person), in this case one coming from the East
* Spurs: Espuelas
* Lariat: From la reata, a throw rope
* Lasso: From “lazo” (rope)
* Poncho: English speakers use the Spanish word for a covering made from a wool blanket. See the other lesson for examples of ponchos.)
* Ranch : Rancho (land for raising cattle)
* Rodeo: Rodear (circling the herd; today these are contents of cowboy skill)
* Saddle: Silla (pronounced “see ya”)
* Spurs: Espuelas (pronounced ess pway las)

**Extension**

Explore more cowboy art and culture. Have students use their new vocabulary in discussing these works.

You may want to compare this sculpture to *Vaquero*, noting similarities and differences: [http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=11244](https://webaccess.si.edu/OWA/redir.aspx?C=e1858241ab4140bd8a249645e14c572b&URL=http%3a%2f%2famericanart.si.edu%2fcollections%2fsearch%2fartwork%2f%3fid%3d11244" \t "_blank)  (trail boss bronze sculpture)

This mural study has details showing cowboy gear: [http://americanart.si.edu/images/1965/1965.18.33\_1a.jpg](https://webaccess.si.edu/OWA/redir.aspx?C=e1858241ab4140bd8a249645e14c572b&URL=http%3a%2f%2famericanart.si.edu%2fimages%2f1965%2f1965.18.33_1a.jpg" \t "_blank)  (cowboy riding)