

*Arte en la*

# Charrería

Educational Program  
for the Exhibition



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# Arte en la Charrería:

## The Artisanry of Mexican Equestrian Culture

Educational Program by International Arts & Artists

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## I. What is *Charrería*?

*Charrería* is a Mexican cultural tradition that stems from the Spanish-inspired *charreada*. The *charreada* is a festive event that is similar to an American rodeo in its variety of competitive equestrian activities. Like the American “rodeo culture,” *Charrería* extends beyond horses and riders to include aspects such as costume, music, and food that bring a uniquely Latino culture to a sport that has its roots in Spain.

The *charreada* began in Mexico in the 16th century when horses were introduced by the Spanish. As the Spanish tried to develop Central America for their own economic gain, they created an entire culture centered around agriculture and ranching in the haciendas they constructed. This is the culture that is reflected in *Charrería*. Although the main event is foreign-inspired, the culture reflected in the clothing, saddles, belts, hats, and spurs is largely inspired by traditional indigenous art. The *Charrería* has endured over five centuries because of the strength of the skills, sensibilities, and traditions that transcend regional and generational differences. Fearing the eventual loss of the *Charrería* culture, a group of *charros*, or the “cowboys,” who participate in the *charreadas*, united and formed various associations to preserve and promote this national culture. The Federación Mexicana de *Charrería* was founded in Mexico City in 1933 to govern the different *charros* associations that emerged. In the same year, President Abelardo L. Rodríguez gave *Charrería* the title of the National Sport of Mexico.

## II. Events of the Charreada

The actual charreada is the main event of the Charrería culture and it consists of various activities called *suertes* for both men and women. Overall, there are nine men's events and one women's event. During these events spectators can eat, drink, cheer, and otherwise enjoy the festive sport. The events of the charreada are as follows:

### ***Charro Parade (Desfile de Charro)***

The charreada begins with an opening ceremony, during which the charros parade their horses around the arena to salute the judge and spectators. The procession is usually accompanied by a band playing the Zacatecas March, a patriotic Mexican song.

### ***Roping of the feet (Piales en el lienzo)***

This suerte consists of lassoing a mare by the hind legs and wrapping the end of the rope around the saddlehorn to completely stop the animal. The rider will have three chances to successfully stop the horse's movement.

### ***Arena bull tailing (Coleadero)***

This challenge consists of catching a bull by its tail and pulling it to the ground. The bull is released from the gate and the charro rides alongside at full gallop. He must grab the bull's tail and use it to cause the bull to fall to the ground all within a distance of 60 meters in order to score points.

### ***Test of the horse (Cala de Caballo)***

The charro puts his horse through various commands to demonstrate his ability and the horse's training. Movements such as a controlled slide, left and right half, full, and triple turns, mount and dismount, and reverse walk are performed.

### ***Skirmish (Escaramuza)***

The only competitive event in which women traditionally participate, a team of charras ride side-saddle and execute intricate equestrian exercises at a full gallop. Performed to music, the escaramuza provides a colorful and exciting show. (There is not a watercolor representing this event in the exhibition)

### ***Bull Riding (Jineteo de Toro)***

This challenge begins with a charro mounting a bull in a closed box outside of the ring. Once the bull is released into the ring, the goal of the challenge is for the charro to remain mounted on the bull until it stops bucking.

### ***Team of Three (La Terna en el Ruedo)***

Three charros work together in the ring in an attempt to rope a bull in this challenge. In order to succeed, one charro must lasso the head and the other two lasso the feet in order to bring the bull completely to the ground.

***Mare Riding (Jineteo de Yegua)***

In this challenge a charro makes every effort to stay mounted on an untrained mare until it ceases bucking. A charros achieves this typically by holding on to the mane of the horse or a collar.

***Roping on foot (Manganas a Pie)*** In this challenge, a charro on foot has three opportunities to rope a wild mare by its front legs and cause it to fall and roll once. The wild mare is chased around the ring by three charros on horseback. (There is not a watercolor representing this event in the exhibition)

***Roping from horseback (Manganas a caballo)***

This object of this challenge is for a single charro on horseback to lasso a mare within a time limit. While three other charros chase the mare around the ring, the competing *charro* throws his lariat to form a loop on the ground for trapping the animal's front feet.

***The Pass of Death (Paso de la Muerte)***

In this challenge a charro riding bareback, with reins, attempts to leap from his horse to the bare back of a wild horse without reins and ride it until it stops bucking.

### III. The Origins of the Charreada

Although the Charrería culture incorporates indigenous art and tradition, a significant part of the charreada comes from Spain. During the period of Spanish colonization, from 1535 to 1821, a number of Spanish traits and practices permanently shaped Mexican culture, including in within Charrería culture.

The Spanish conquest of Mexico began with the arrival of the conquistador Hernán Cortés in Veracruz, about 200 miles from the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. Cortés' original goal was not to colonize the Aztec empire, but rather to seize gold to bring back to Spain. His success with relatively few men was due in part to the belief of the Aztec ruler, Montezuma II, that Cortés was a god.

After Cortés established a strong Spanish presence in Mexico, (then called New Spain) it was not long before the government in Madrid realized the valuable economic resource it had acquired. By 1535, the Spanish had established their imperial power and Spain began to promote the migration of Spanish settlers to New Spain. Many willingly went with economic and religious motives. Much of the indigenous population was enslaved by the settlers. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1548, the native people were exploited to enrich the Spanish treasury. One of the largest imprints left on Mexico by the Spanish was the hacienda system, which ultimately promoted strong agricultural and ranching economies that still exist today.

Under the hacienda system, indigenous people were housed and employed by a hacienda owner. The workers were treated poorly in some cases and better in others. Their accommodations were modest at best and they worked long hours of strenuous labor. With the exception of religion, the native people were mostly allowed to retain the traditions of their culture, and these are largely apparent in Mexican art. The introduction of ranching, which became a large sector of the Spanish economy in New Spain, promoted an equestrian culture that had roots in Spain, but was localized by the indigenous people who worked on the ranches. Charrería culture and the events of the charreada stem from these ranching practices.

The *hacienda* system of ranching, established by the Spanish, promoted an equestrian culture rooted in Spain. Over time, indigenous Mexican ranch workers adapted their own saddle style and riding techniques and emerged as highly skilled horsemen. 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.

## IV. About the Exhibition

*Arte en la Charrería* showcases art of different media that pertain to the Charrería culture. In particular, the exhibition contains saddles, spurs, bits, ropes and clothing from various private collections in Mexico. These items provide examples of the precise work of Charrería artisans:

- **Saddles**

Saddles are made for both men and women and are classified according to their function and level of intricacy. There are four different levels of formality:

- **Work Saddle:** This type of saddle has minimal detailing, and is used for practical purposes.
- **Semi-Gala Saddle:** This type of saddle has intricate leather work and minimal embroidery. It is used to functions and special events
- **Gala Saddle:** This type of saddle features several intricate details such as ornate leatherwork and embroidery from a cactus fiber called *pita*. This saddle is used for formal events.
- **Grand Gala Saddle:** This type of saddle includes high relief leather work and embroidery. It also can include embossed and engraved silver on all of the ironwork. This saddle is used for the most important events in Charrería culture.

❖ **Embroidery:** The quality and volume of the embroidery denotes the formality of each saddle. The motifs most commonly used are **roses** to symbolize the Virgin of Guadalupe; **snakes** and **eagles** to symbolize Mexico's coat of arms; and **pre-Hispanic border designs**. At times the saddles are adorned with silver or gold thread for increased formality.

- **Ropes**

Training horses on haciendas during the colonization of Mexico required tools designed specifically for the terrain and conditions of Mexico. In the pre-Hispanic world, indigenous people used ropes called *mecates*, which refers to the thread processed from a Maguey cactus that provides an excellent, strong final product. This was the origin of the Mexican ropes and lassos that helped distinguish Mexican Charrería from other equestrian traditions. Today these ropes are still made from Maguey, as well as Agave, cotton, or henequen.

Today, charros handle their ropes with such majestic control that they have converted roping to a form of joyous artistic expression, especially when they perform what is known as the “flowering of the lasso,” or the spins and revolutions executed to show their knowledge and technique.

- **Spurs & Bits**

Spurs and bits are one of the most attractive elements of the charros' attire and a valuable example of art from the Charrería. Artisans display their skills by crafting beautiful and original designs, decorating the spurs with minute fretwork and adorning them profusely with silver inlay and other decorative metals, creating a look of elegance. While spurs and bits serve a functional purpose, their role in the charreada is as much a reflection of pride in the Charrería culture as it is a part of the equestrian activities.

- **Clothing**

Both men and women participating in the charreada wear beautiful and detailed costumes that relate to their Mexican roots. Like the saddles, different outfits are worn depending on the work that charro/charro will perform or the function he/she will attend. The outfits include:

- **Work Suit:** This suite contains the components of the other, more formal suits, however is much sturdier and simpler in design for practical work purposes.
- **Semi-Gala Suit:** The Semi-Formal Suit is worn on horseback during parades and other civic events. It features some adornment such as embroidery and silver buttons.
- **Gala Suit:** The Gala suit features more adornment and is worn while on horseback during formal occasions.
- **Grand Gala Suit:** The grand gala suit is the most adorned suit that is worn while on horseback. It is worn for parades or other civic events as well as formal occasions.
- **Etiquette Suit:** The etiquette suit is not worn on horseback or during the charreada activities, but for special ceremonies such as weddings and funerals.
- **Adelita Dress:** The Adelita dress is a work outfit for the charra named after a folkloric female fighter in the Mexican Revolution. It consists of a wide-ruffled dress with a circular skirt that falls to mid-boot. It is worn during the Ezcaramuza (the ladies activity in the Charrería).
  - ❖ **The Legend of the Adelita:** The term Adelita stems from a song written about a female fighter in the Mexican Revolutionary War. The original identity of the woman is unknown and the folkloric term is now used to represent any woman who contributed to the Mexican Revolution and all other brave women of that time period.
- **China Poblana Dress:** The China Poblana dress most distinctly identifies women of the Charrería culture. It is worn at social events, but not in competition.



❖ **The Legend of the China Poblana:** A popular legend surrounding the origins of the China Poblana dress centers around a girl named Mirrha from India who was brought to Puebla, Mexico as a slave in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There, she was baptized with the Christian name Catarina de San Juan and married the Chinese servant of a local priest. She received the nickname “China” because of her husband’s nationality. Her distinctive style of dress arose from incorporating elements of style from her homeland with that of Puebla natives.

- **Sarape:** Sarapes are a functional and decorative blanket-like shawl made of wool or cotton.
- **Rebozo:** The rebozo is a shawl made of silk that is dyed in many different colors. The shawl has many uses and is still worn today.
- **Sombrero:** The sombrero is a hat consisting of a wide brim, vivid colors, vibrant adornment and four distinct dimples in its crown. It is identified around the world as distinctly Mexican. As the elegance of the outfit increases, the adornments of the sombrero become more intricate and lavish and usually include woven cord and gold and silver embroidery.

## V. Discussion Topics

1. How is Charrería similar to American rodeo culture? What are some of the differences?
2. Why is the equipment used in the charreada decorated? Does this art have any cultural significance?
3. What effects did Spanish colonial rule have on present-day Mexico? How did these affect the indigenous population? Were these effects good or bad?
4. What traditions of the native peoples of Latin America, such as the Aztecs, endured even in modern times? How were these traditions challenged?
5. Why is culture-specific art important? Does it change over time?
6. Does history impact art? How?

## VI. Resource List

### Reference for Educators/Adult Reading Levels:

#### Books:

1. *Charreada: Mexican Rodeo in Texas* by Al Rendon. 2002. Available at Amazon.com.
2. *Charrería Mexicana: An Equestrian Folk Tradition* by Kathleen M. Sands. 1993. Available at Amazon.com.
3. *Men and Horses of Mexico; History and Practice of Charrería* by José Alvarez del Villar. 1979. Available at Amazon.com.

#### Websites:

##### Wikipedia:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charrería>

##### MexConnect:

[http://www.mexconnect.com/mex\\_/travel/dpalfrey/dpcharreada.html](http://www.mexconnect.com/mex_/travel/dpalfrey/dpcharreada.html)

##### Tales of Lienzos Virtual Gallery

[http://latino.si.edu/virtualgallery/TalesofLienzos/Lienzo\\_research.html](http://latino.si.edu/virtualgallery/TalesofLienzos/Lienzo_research.html).

### Reference for Children:

*Charro: The Mexican Cowboy* by George Ancona. 1999. Children's book, available at Amazon.com.

## VII. Glossary

**Adelita Dresses:** The Adelita dress is a work outfit for the charra named after a folkloric female fighter in the Mexican Revolution. It consists of a wide-ruffled dress with a circular skirt that falls to mid-boot.

**China Poblana Dress-** The China Poblana dress most distinctly identifies women of the Charrería culture. It is worn at social events, but not in competition.

**Artifact-** An object produced by humans, usually a sort of craft. Many times artifacts are considered to be rudimentary art objects and crafts.

**Artisan-** A person who is skilled at making a specific art or craft, such as the saddles, spurs, or clothing of the Charrería culture.

**Bridle-** A harness used in the charreada consisting of a headstall that goes on the horse's head, a bit that goes in its mouth, and reins by which the rider can control the horse. These are often decorated in the Charrería style.

**Charreada-** A rodeo-like event in Mexico that involves competitive equestrian events that have their roots in Spain.

**Charrería-** The culture that stems from the charreada, including the costume, music, food, and tools found at the event.

**Charros/Charras-** Participants in the charreada that can be seen as Mexican equivalents to American cowboys/cowgirls.

**Craft-** A technical and usually manual technique or object that is considered to be in a different realm than fine art. Crafts are often functional items that have purposes beyond the purely aesthetic.

**Folk Art-** Traditional art made by people who have had no formal art training but who practice art styles and techniques that have been handed down through generations.

**Lariat-** A long rope with a noosed knot at the end used in ranching for catching grazing or roaming animals.

**El Lienzo:** A keyhole shaped arena where the charreada takes place. It includes a central ring and an enclosed passage facing the stands that leads to the central ring

**Pita Fiber-** A fiber (thread) that comes from the Maguey and Agave plants found in Mexico

**Quirt-** A riding whip made with a short handle and a lash of braided leather.

**Rebozo-** a long scarf used to cover the head or shoulders that is traditionally worn by Latin American women.

**Serape-** A brightly colored woven shawl with fringed ends traditionally worn by charros and charras.

**Textile-** Cloth that is made by weaving or knitting thread or yarn together.