



Smithsonian American Art Museum

December 2011



Vaquero

modeled 1980/cast 1990

Luis Jiménez

Born: El Paso, Texas 1940

Died: Hondo, New Mexico 2006

acrylic urethane, fiberglass, steel armature
199 x 114 x 67 in.

(505.5 x 289.6 x 170.2 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

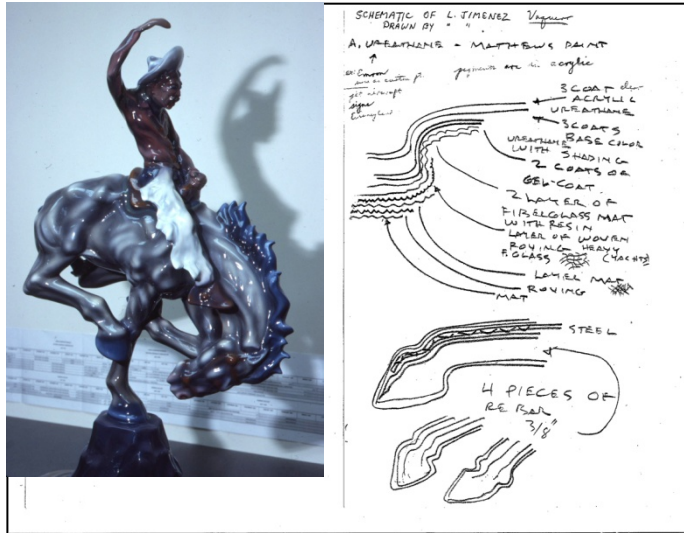
Gift of Judith and Wilbur L. Ross, Jr.,
Anne and Ronald Abramson, Thelma and
Melvin Lenkin

1990.44

[Collection page and high resolution image](#)

Bucking Tradition – A Wild Ride with the *Vaquero*

[Luis Jiménez](#)'s fiberglass sculpture, *Vaquero*, greets visitors to the Smithsonian American Art Museum at its north entrance. Jiménez intended his sculpture to be an unconventional take on the equestrian monument. In the course of uncovering our mysterious *Vaquero*, researcher Liz talked to a conservator, a vaquero rider and historian, and searched museum collections and bibliographic databases.



In his 1985 interview with the [Archives of American Art](#), Luis Jiménez recalled visiting Washington and making measurements of its equestrian sculptures. He decided to make the *Vaquero*, “in a way that you would look at the form all over again.” Washington is full of equestrian monuments commemorating military leaders, such as Civil War General John Logan at [Logan Circle](#). Since the ancient Roman bronze of [Emperor Marcus Aurelius](#), the horse in the equestrian monument is usually shown walking, standing, or rearing onto its hind legs. But the *Vaquero*’s horse

literally “bucks” tradition with its two front feet planted on the base and his hind legs in the air. Jiménez must have also recognized the symbolism of bucking horse as synonymous with the American West and with liberty. The bucking horse appears on the cover of a [saddle catalog](#) which I found in the [Autry National Center](#)’s () online database. Fine artists like Frederic Remington (1861-1909) depicted bucking horses; Remington sculpted the small bronzes [The Outlaw](#) and [Bronco Buster](#), and his engraving, [A Bucking Bronco](#) is in SAAM’s collections.

Why did Jiménez make the *Vaquero* of fiberglass rather than the traditional bronze?

I asked this question of Helen, a conservator at SAAM who has worked on *Vaquero* and had met Jiménez. She answered that it would certainly be possible to make the *Vaquero* of bronze or metal if the sculpture were properly balanced and hollow inside. Jiménez probably chose fiberglass because it is less expensive and lighter than bronze. Fiberglass, Helen explained, is a woven glass fabric that serves as a matrix for a resin – in this case, the resin used was acrylic urethane. Jiménez had worked with fiberglass as an apprentice in his father’s sign-making shop in El Paso. Jiménez explained his process of making fiberglass sculpture in an essay in the catalog of his 1994 exhibition, *Man on Fire*. To make the fiberglass *Vaquero*, Jiménez modeled the figure of oil-based plasticene clay over a steel armature. From the clay model, he made a fiberglass piece mold into which the acrylic urethane/fiberglass was applied. Five casts were produced, and the finished sculpture is not solid, but hollow inside. Helen explained the disadvantages and dangers of working in fiberglass and with the acrylic urethane paint that gives the *Vaquero* its colorful glossy finish. Both materials are manufactured for use on cars and boats and therefore have “intended obsolescence,” lasting 8-15 years, the average lifespan for a car. These materials are extremely toxic, and Jiménez wore a Tyvek suit and breathed supplied air while working on *Vaquero*. Fiberglass is lighter than bronze but is still heavy. Tragically, Jiménez was killed in 2006 in a studio accident while completing the fiberglass sculpture, [Mustang](#), for Denver International Airport.

Acid rain, car exhaust, bird droppings, and pollen bombard *Vaquero*’s surface. Therefore, it requires [periodic cleaning](#). Changes in temperature cause condensation of water to collect inside the sculpture, which rusts the steel support and base. Helen drilled small weep holes in one of the

horse's hooves to allow the water to drain. Temperature and sunlight causes the acrylic urethane paint layer to expand and shrink, creating small cracks.

Jiménez came to the museum years ago and worked with Helen in repairing the sculpture's base. While he was here, he drew a diagram of the steel support inside the sculpture. Anchored to the metal base is a 6-inch diameter steel post inside the lower part of the horse. An I-beam attached to the post supports the horse's upper body, and a pipe extends from the I-beam into the rider's body. Jiménez inserted four pieces of steel re-bar in areas that needed extra support, such as in the horse's legs. He also strengthened the sculpture by including alternating layers of fiberglass mat and woven fiberglass roving (used in building yachts). Jiménez applied multiple layers of acrylic urethane paint and gloss containing ultraviolet light-absorbers which help reduce color fading.

Helen also showed me two slides of a maquette that *Jiménez made of Vaquero*. Usually, an artist makes a maquette at the beginning of the art-making process so he or she can test out ideas in three-dimensions. In the maquette, Jiménez balanced the entire composition upon the horse's right foreleg. In the finished piece, the artist placed both of the horse's forelegs on the base and added the prickly pear cactus. These changes allowed greater space for an internal support structure. The *Vaquero's* gun is a later addition to the composition, since it is absent from the maquette.

In addition to learning about the sculpture's construction, I wished to learn more about the vaquero tradition and its Mexican roots. *Vaquero* derives from the Spanish word *vaca* ("cow") and means "cowboy." *Jiménez, who was raised in a Mexican-American community in El Paso and whose parents were born in Mexico, was proud of his heritage and wished to pay homage to the contributions of the Mexican vaquero, the first "cowboy" of North America.*

As researchers, the questions we ask are often shaped by our own interests. Horses have been a longtime personal interest and scholarly interest of mine. I knew about a California horsewoman [Sheila Varian](#) who trains her Arabian horses using *vaquero* methods. I contacted Sheila, and she referred me to [Bill Reynolds](#), an authority on the *vaquero* tradition and author of *Art of the Western Saddle*. Bill was enormously helpful in giving me an overview of *vaquero* history and horsemanship. Bill recommended [Man Made Mobile](#), a Smithsonian scholarly work (based upon an exhibition at the Renwick Gallery) on the history of the Western saddle. Through online searching, I found out about a documentary on *vaquero* horsemanship, [Los Primeros: The First Vaqueros](#), which I ordered and watched.

Through my horse-related research, I knew about the [National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum](#) and the [Autry National Center](#). By searching the websites and databases of both museums, I found several *vaquero* and cowboy-related artworks and artifacts. The Spanish *conquistadores* brought horses and cattle to Mexico in 1519 and soon after established cattle ranches or *estancias*. Originally, they forbade native peoples to ride, but later realized they needed horsemen to manage their cattle. Thus, the *vaquero* tradition was born.

By the seventeenth century, the cattle ranches expanded into the arid northern territories of Sonora and Chihuahua and priests established missions in areas in present-day Texas, Arizona,



New Mexico, and later, in California. Many missions raised cattle for hides and tallow (used in candle-making) for shipment to the Eastern U.S. and to Europe. In the 1790's, the Spanish colonial governors began secularizing the missions and replaced them with a land grant system. The [Californios](#) (California *vaqueros*), were especially renowned for their horsemanship, known as *doma vaquero*. From my previous Project 100 research on California nineteenth-century painter [Miners in the Sierras](#), I remembered that Charles Christian Nahl and his brother, [Hugo Wilhelm Nahl](#), portrayed the *Californios* (California *vaqueros*) in many of their works. I found some of [Charles Nahl](#)'s *vaquero* images through the [Online Archive of California](#).

The *vaquero* saddle evolved from its Spanish ancestors to suit the rugged conditions on the *rancheros* of northern Mexico, southern Texas, the Southwest, and California. Like the Spanish [silla estradiota](#), the *vaquero* saddle had a high pommel and cantle to keep the rider secure in the saddle. Bill Reynolds commented that Jiménez (a horse-owner himself) depicted the *vaquero*'s accessories accurately, except for the gun. The *tapaderos* (leather stirrup covers) and leather *chapperas* (chaps) on the rider's legs shielded him from the prickly pear cactus. The wide, oval-shaped *cabeza* or saddle horn (visible in this [painting](#) by Augusto Ferran, located through the Online Archive of California) anchored the *vaquero*'s *reata* or *lazo*, a braided horsehair rope. In our sculpture, the looped *reata* is on the horse's right side and the *cantinas* (saddle bag) on the left. The National Museum of American History has a [Mexican saddle](#) with the enlarged *cabeza* (although this saddle was made for use in the [charrería](#), or Mexican rodeo, not for everyday use). Helen showed me a detailed photo of the *Vaquero* in which I could discern the wide lip of the *cabeza*, nearly obscured by the horse's mane.

How did the vaqueros influence the American cowboy, and are there any vaqueros left today?

The *vaquero* tradition influenced the development of the **cowboy** and the **buckaroo traditions**. *Vaqueros, Cowboys, and Buckaroos* (found via WorldCat) explained this evolution. With the construction of railroads in the nineteenth century, it became possible to ship beef to cities in the Eastern and Midwest. Cowboys drove cattle on multiple-day cattle drives across the Great Plains to stockyards located at railheads such as Kansas City, Missouri. The [Western stock saddle](#) used by these cowboys evolved from the *vaquero* saddle but had a different horn for roping on the open range. The *buckaroo* tradition developed in the Great Basin (northern California, Pacific Northwest, and parts of Utah and Nevada) beginning in the 1860's. Many "cowboy" words derive from the *vaquero* vocabulary, including lariat (*la riata*), lasso (*lazo*), rodeo, chaps (*chapperas*), and mustang (*mesteño*). I learned about some of these *vaquero* terms from *Vocabulario Vaquero: Cowboy Talk: A Dictionary of Spanish Terms from the American West*. *Vaqueros* still work on some ranches in Mexico and the U.S. including the [kineños](#), or King Ranch *vaqueros*, on Texas' largest cattle ranches. You can watch an example of Nevada *vaqueros* [roping and branding calves](#) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3A9WIs03n2c&feature=related>).

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