



Deborah Martin/San Antonio Express-News

The impact of the return of the horse to North America is explored in "Splendor on the Range: American Indians and the Horse" at the Witte Museum.

Transformative horses

Witte exhibit shows what they meant to American Indians

By Deborah Martin
STAFF WRITER

The horse's first go-round on this continent did not end well. "It became extinct probably 10,000 to 12,000 years ago," said Bruce Shackelford, South Texas Heritage Curator for the Witte Museum. "They were a prey creature, so they were eaten. They were probably eaten by humans and animals." Things have gone much better since the Spanish brought the horse back to these shores in the 16th century. The transformative power of the animal's return on the lives of native people is explored in "Splendor on the Range: American Indians and the Horse," an exhibit Shackelford curated for the museum.

As the exhibit explains, the horse's arrival in North America aboard the Spaniards' ships did not immedi-

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Courtesy photo

A diorama captures the return of the horse to North America courtesy of the Spanish conquistadors.



"Tasura: A Comanche Remembers" is a gallery theater piece presented by Isaac Cardenas in conjunction with the exhibit.

Expressnews.com/ Entertainment



Video: Watch an excerpt from "Tasura: A Comanche Remembers"

At a glance

What: "Splendor on the Range: American Indians and the Horse"

When: Through Aug. 21

Where: Witte Museum, 3801 Broadway

Admission: \$3 to \$5 in addition to the regular museum admission of \$7 to \$10.

Information: 210-357-1910; witte museum.org

Special programs

» "The Fort Parker Raid Revisited":

Discussion of the Fort Parker Raid, a violent encounter between American Indians and white settlers. 6:30 p.m. March 30. \$5 to \$10. Reservations, 210-357-1910.

» Time Travel Saturday: Additional programming includes food samples, bead crafts, music and dancing. Noon to 4 p.m. April 9. Included with museum and exhibit admission.

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ately bring the animal into the American Indians' lives. That's because the Spanish kept the valuable creatures for themselves. That changed in 1680, when New Mexico tribes rose up against the Spanish. Many Spaniards were killed in the revolt. Survivors left nearly everything behind, including their horses and the gear required to ride them. And the tribes put it all to use.

"It changed everything," Shackelford said. "Horses became power. Horses became the way you got more food, the way you got more goods, the way you got guns — you traded horses. And the more horses you had, the more powerful and important you were. And the better you could take care of your family."

The show, which is on display through Aug. 21, was drawn entirely from the Witte's vast collections. There are more than 250 objects on display, including clothing, tools, weapons and jewelry. One of the pieces that stands out for Shackelford is a Navajo cradle made from an Arbuckles' Coffee crate. He's also partial to a buffalo headdress, which he called "fantastic."

"It came in the collection in the '90s, but we've never exhibited it," he said. "I'd forgotten it was there. I was looking for something else and found that."

It's one of several pieces in the show that have never been displayed before. Others haven't been shown in decades. As the Witte continues to expand — the Mays Family Center, the latest new addition, opens in April — there will be more opportunities for meaty exhibits created by its in-house curators, said Marise McDermott, president and CEO of the museum.

"We have a stunning collection," she said. "And to get it out in the public is so important to us."

The exhibit brings back "Tasura: A Comanche Remembers," a gallery theater piece



Deborah Martin / San Antonio Express-News

Items used to carry American Indians' belongings on horseback are displayed as part of "Splendor on the Range: American Indians and the Horse" at the Witte Museum.



A Comanche saddle and stirrups are among the 250 items drawn from the Witte's collection for the exhibit.

that's an audience fave. Tasura, played by actor Isaac Cardenas, is a fictional character, though the story is rooted in historic fact about the lives of the Comanches. In the piece, the ghost of Tasura talks about his life, including how he and his people cared for their horses.

"It's very moving," McDermott said.

One of the most haunting sections in the exhibit deals with the Wounded Knee Creek massacre in South Dakota in 1890.

"A band of Lakota led by Big Foot decided to have a ghost

dance to pray to the spirits to bring back the buffalo, make their life more like it had been without all the conflict, and they camped on Wounded Knee Creek and the soldiers were told to get 'em out of there," Shackelford said. "The soldiers went out early, and with Hotchkiss guns, which are basically automatic cannons. When the people lined up to start doing the ghost dance, (the soldiers) went in to arrest them and they pushed them into a group and a gun went off."

A battle followed. When the smoke cleared, more than 150



Photos courtesy Witte Museum

A shield embellished with feathers is part of "Splendor on the Range."

Lakota men, women and children were dead, as were 25 soldiers.

The exhibit includes clothing worn by a few of the slain American Indians, including a baby's tiny moccasins.

After the items came into the Witte collection, Shackelford met with Oliver Red Cloud, who led the Sioux nation for more than 30 years, to discuss what the museum should do with them.

"And he said, 'I want you to keep it and I want you to put it out so that people don't forget about this.' So that's what we're doing," he said. "It's a

very tragic story, so we kept it in a room by itself. This is not a 'ha, ha, cowboys and Indians' kind of thing. This is the belongings of a man and a woman and a baby who were all shot down."

Shackelford hopes that people who come to the exhibit leave with "a better understanding of these cultures, because they're not gone. And I hope (people from) those cultures can come see this material and see what came out of their past."

dldmartin@express-news.net
Twitter: @DeborahMartinEN