

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA GRADUATE COLLEGE

KNIGHTS OF THE PLAINS, DECOR FOR THE HOME: CONCEPTUALIZING THE  
COWBOY IN TABLETOP BRONZES AND WESTERN NOVELS OF TURN-OF-THE-  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

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KNIGHTS OF THE PLAINS, DECOR FOR THE HOME: CONCEPTUALIZING THE  
COWBOY IN TABLETOP BRONZES AND WESTERN NOVELS OF TURN-OF-THE-  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE  
SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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*“For a moment, at the frontier, the bonds of custom are broken  
and unrestraint is triumphant.”*

— FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER

“THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FRONTIER IN AMERICAN HISTORY”

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the development of Frederic Remington and Owen Wister's conceptions of the American cowboy by placing key cultural works in historical context. The first chapter centers on a discussion of Wister's 1895 article, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," with illustrations by Remington, notably, *The Last Cavalier*. This chapter considers how Remington and Wister's idea of the cowboy in this moment draws on narratives of a knightly past and questions if Remington's sculpture, *The Broncho Buster*, created the same year, can also be viewed as a knightly figure. The second chapter examines how Remington and Wister's depictions of the cowboy changed from 1895 to 1902, through an analysis of two works by created the artist and author in the later year: Wister's *The Virginian* and Remington's *Coming Through the Rye*.

This thesis argues that Remington and Wister worked concurrently to construct the ideal of the cowboy as an integral part of U. S. national identity. At certain points, artists and authors rooted the cowboy in a European cultural past as a version of the medieval knight or chivalrous cavalier. In capitalizing on this relationship, the cowboy becomes positioned as heir to European warriors of the past, a narrative which filled a gap for the young American nation seeking to form its own sense of cultural heritage. The means by which these artists and authors conveyed the idea of the cowboy – through tabletop bronzes and novels – shows how culture cultivated in private informs public culture at large.

## INTRODUCTION

In January 1895, aspiring American author Owen Wister received a letter from close friend and colleague, Frederic Remington. Mostly detailing the artist's upcoming vacation to Florida, the letter included a sketch of a sculpture that would become one of the most prolific and iconic images in American art: *The Broncho Buster* (Fig. 1.1). Until 1895, Remington's art practice consisted exclusively of painting and drawing, with a focus on scenes from the American West. As the legend goes, Remington's friend, the American playwright Augustus Thomas, convinced the artist to try his hand at sculpting, claiming he had a "sculptor's degree of vision."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the draftsman and painter broke from his own two-dimensional tradition and created a novel sculpture in the history of art — the first three-dimensional sculpture of a rider on a bucking bronco.<sup>2</sup>

*The Broncho Buster* depicts a cowboy on a horse that stands on its hind legs, with its front legs and head raised into the air. The horse's stance indicates that it will soon change its position by lowering its front legs to the ground and lifting its back legs, preparing to buck. Upon completion, *The Broncho Buster* became wildly popular. Over 275 official casts of the sculpture were made, many of which were displayed in the showrooms of Tiffany and Co. where they

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<sup>1</sup> Brian W. Dippie, *The Frederic Remington Art Museum Collection* (Ogdensburg, NY: Frederic Remington Art Museum, 2001), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Brian W. Dippie, "Western Dreams and Buckskin Fantasies," in *The American West in Bronze, 1850-1925*, ed. Thayer Tolles and Thomas Brent Smith (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013), 5.

were bought by wealthy collectors.<sup>3</sup> In the same letter, Remington wrote “my water colors will fade—but I am to endure in bronze,” and endure he did.<sup>4</sup>

Later that same year, Remington and Wister collaborated on an article for the September 1895 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. Penned by Wister, the article details “the evolution of the cowpuncher.” Five illustrations by Remington accompanied this article, and, as this thesis shows, these illustrations reveal multiple trajectories for framing the cowboy. One key image, *The Last Cavalier* (Fig. 1.2), points to the cowboy as the descendent of the European knight. Other images, however, show a lawlessness in the West that defies medieval codes. Remington's sculptures of horsemen reveal a push and pull tension between these two different models of masculine identity and ethos in the American West.

Wister and Remington's collaboration prompts us to ask: in what ways can the American cowboy be regarded as a modern-day knight? How do representations of cowboys as knightly figures in text compare to representations of cowboys in visual art? Furthermore, how does the commodity status of bronze and textual media point to frameworks of mass culture and constructions of the American West situated in domestic spaces?

This thesis argues that American artists and authors worked concurrently to construct the ideal of the cowboy as an integral part of U. S. national identity. At certain points, artists and authors rooted the cowboy in a European cultural past as a version of the medieval knight or chivalrous cavalier. In capitalizing on this relationship, the cowboy becomes positioned as heir to

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<sup>3</sup> Peter H. Hassrick, “Cowboys in Bronze,” in Tolles and Smith, *American West in Bronze*, 91; and Peter H. Hassrick, “Frederic Remington and His Cowboy Competition,” in *Shaping the West: American Sculptors of the 19th Century* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2010), 76.

<sup>4</sup> Frederic Remington to Owen Wister, January 1895, in Ben Merchant Vorpal, *My Dear Wister: The Frederic Remington - Owen Wister Letters* (Palo Alto, CA: American West Publishing Company, 1972), 158.

European warriors of the past, a narrative which filled a gap for the young American nation seeking to form its own sense of cultural heritage. The means by which these artists and authors conveyed the idea of the cowboy – through tabletop bronzes and novels – shows how culture cultivated in private informs public culture at large.

### **State of the Literature: Historiography of the Cowboy and Theories of Mass Culture**

The recent *Cowboy* exhibition organized by the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art encompasses the latest art historical scholarship on the concept of the cowboy. Pointing to the continued relevance of this longstanding trope, the exhibition and accompanying catalog highlight multicultural cowboys and consider how contemporary artists call into question fictitious narratives interwoven in histories of the American West.<sup>5</sup> While I, too, am interested in probing the concept of the cowboy, my project instead situates the cowboy within a broader cultural lineage that spans from medieval Europe to turn-of-the-twentieth-century America. This thesis analyzes how this concept fueled cultural ideas that informed U. S. national identity, particularly through the dispersion of these ideas through mass-produced goods intended for display and use in the home. While shows like *Cowboy* foreground a multi-ethnic cowboy in contemporary art, in the late nineteenth century, writers like Wister and Remington foreground an Anglo-Saxon legacy for the cowboy.

The concept of the cowboy as knight is not infrequently referenced in the academic literature on art of the American West. Yet, to date, no scholarly work has thoroughly probed this topic. Instead, most references are noted only in passing. For instance, in “Frederic Remington and his Cowboy Competition,” Peter H. Hassrick includes a brief discussion of

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<sup>5</sup> Nora Burnett Abrams, “From Fact to Myth and Back Again: The Cowboy and Contemporary Art,” in *Cowboy* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2023), 11.

Remington and Wister's collaboration in "The Evolution of the Cowpuncher." Hassrick mentions that Remington's *The Last Cavalier* illustrated Wister's argument that the cowboy was "a descendant of British, Anglo-Saxon medieval troubadours."<sup>6</sup> However, the author concludes without further exploring the implications of the cowboy as situated in a longer Euro-American lineage.

A similar incident occurs in the chapter "Western Dreams and Buckskin Fantasies," by art historian Brian W. Dippie. Following shortly after his mention of *The Broncho Buster*, Dippie writes that while the American West was viewed in the nineteenth century as "unburdened by the past," it was "deeply rooted in European culture."<sup>7</sup> Like Hassrick, Dippie's investigation stops short, turning instead to a discussion of the allure of the unsettled wilderness of the West, rather than probing how the American cowboy participates in a larger cultural legacy stemming from Europe.

Considerations of the cowboy as knight also appear in texts marketed towards broad, public audiences. For instance, in *How the Wild West was Won*, Bruce Wexler draws a comparison between "cowboy code" and the "chivalric code" of the medieval period. He writes that the cowboy code was a "blend of Victorian and frontier values" that "even retained a nod to the chivalric code of the Middle Ages."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in *The Mythical West: An Encyclopedia of Legend, Lore, and Popular Culture*, Richard W. Slatta writes that Owen Wister's *The Virginian*

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<sup>6</sup> Hassrick, "Frederic Remington and His Cowboy Competition," 74.

<sup>7</sup> Dippie, "Western Dreams and Buckskin Fantasies," 5.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Wexler, *How the Wild West was Won* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013), 464-469.

“viewed the cowboy as a modern medieval knight,” where he was described as “chivalrous and bold.”<sup>9</sup>

Exemplified by these authors, this trend is nothing new. A booklet from the 1920s featuring the Miller Brother’s 101 Ranch, labels cowboys as “true knights of the plains.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, a 1902 book recounting the life of Pawnee Bill boasts that the American cowboy “has been and still is the perfect embodiment of natural chivalry.”<sup>11</sup> Despite the fact that this trope has spanned over a century, scholars of art of the American West have not probed this topic thoroughly in any existing work of academic literature.

The most extensive discussion of this subject, albeit only a few pages, is in *Frederic Remington & Turn-of-the-Century America*, by art historian Alexander Nemerov. In the third chapter, Nemerov describes Anglo-Saxon heritage while discussing Remington’s *The Last Cavalier* and *The Last Stand*, as well as the artist’s novel, *John Ermine of the Yellowstone*. First, Nemerov argues that the central figure in *The Last Stand*, depicted standing upright, looking outward, and reloading his gun, “is not just a calvaryman, but a cavalier.” The author then draws a comparison between this figure and the “King Charles cavalier” referenced in *John Ermine of Yellowstone*. Nemerov argues that the “cavalier” figure in *The Last Stand* and mentioned in *John Ermine*, were likely modeled after Anthony Van Dyck’s portrait of *James Stuart, Duke of Lennox and Richmond*, which was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1889. Furthermore, Nemerov mentions that in “The Evolution of the Cowpuncher,” Wister labels the

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<sup>9</sup> Richard W. Slatta, *The Mythical West: An Encyclopedia of Legend, Lore, and Popular Culture* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2001), 373-375.

<sup>10</sup> *Miller Brother’s 101 Ranch: Real Wild West & Great Far East, Magazine and Review* (New York: Miller Bros. 101 Ranch, Pub. Dept., 1920).

<sup>11</sup> J. H. DeWolff, *Pawnee Bill: Experience and Adventures on the Western Plains* (NP: Pawnee Bill’s historic Wild West Company, 1902), 68.

cowboy and European aristocrat as “the same Saxon of different environments.” Thus, Nemerov draws parallels between the European aristocrat, James Stuart, and the American man in *The Last Stand* and acknowledges the “evolutionary line” present in *The Last Cavalier*.<sup>12</sup> However, Nemerov’s discussion is brief and quickly tapers off into deliberations over race relations and immigration, rather than analyzing the implications of this cultural legacy stemming from Europe and manifesting in the American West. The consistent pattern of scholars raising and dropping the issue of trajectory from medieval knight to American cowboy may result from boundaries between American and European art histories. Perhaps because U.S. exceptionalism insists on independence from Europe, reluctance persists to pursue the possibility of non-U.S. roots for a region not infrequently labeled as “uniquely American.”

Among the literature devoted to depictions of cowboys in art of the American West, another gap is the mass-produced nature of tabletop bronzes. Similar to discussions of the cowboy-knight, mentions of Western bronze mass-production are brief and passing. For instance, of bronzes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Patrick Elliott describes “the mass production of bronze multiples,” but only in a broader discussion about the casting process.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, in *Bronzes of the American West*, Patricia Janis Broder argues that one appeal of the American West to nineteenth century audiences was the assumption that the region was “unfettered by the problems of an industrialized world.”<sup>14</sup> However, Broder does not connect the lack of industrialization the American West to the industrial processes needed to make multiple

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander Nemerov, *Frederic Remington & Turn-of-the-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 95-98.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Elliott, “The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” in *Bronze*, ed. David Ekserdigan (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2012), 95.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Janis Broder, *Bronzes of the American West* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974), 14.

bronze casts depicting Western subject matter. Similarly, in her chapter “Indians on the Mantel and in the Park,” art historian Carol Clark writes that “affordable editions of small bronzes... put sculpture within the reach of middle-class Americans.”<sup>15</sup> Yet, the author does not delve into the mass-produced qualities of these works, nor does she discuss their positioning in homes or “on the mantel.” Instead, she focuses on iconography, leaving open a need for scholarship discussing tabletop bronzes as items of mass culture intended for display within domestic spaces, which this project centers.

To analyze mass-produced tabletop bronzes, Jean Baudrillard’s *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* offers useful frameworks. In a chapter on mass media culture, he includes a section on kitsch. Unlike Clement Greenberg who holds contempt for kitsch in comparison to works of art created by the avant-garde, Baudrillard treats kitsch with seriousness.<sup>16</sup> In *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard defines kitsch “as a pseudo-object or, in other words, as a simulation, a copy, an imitation, a stereotype, as a dearth of real signification and a superabundance of signs, of allegorical references, disparate connotations, as a glorification of the detail and a saturation by details.” He proposes that mass-production, or industrial reproduction, is a key characteristic of kitsch. The author also argues that kitsch arises from cultural demand, proposing that as members of a mobile society climb the social ladder, they find “the need to manifest that status in signs.” In other words, without social mobility, there would be no kitsch.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Carol Clark, “Indians on the Mantel and in the Park,” in Tolles and Smith, *American West in Bronze*, 26.

<sup>16</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

<sup>17</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 110-111.

This thesis engages Baudrillard's theory. Tabletop bronzes and novels fit within Baudrillard's definition of kitsch. Both objects are copies of an original work that has been reproduced and sold to the public. Likewise, both objects are simultaneously an imitation and stereotype. Tabletop bronzes of cowboys and Western novels "imitate" the American West in artistic and literary form, while also acting as a stereotype of the West designed to fit the creator's, as well as the audience's, expectations of the region. Lastly, both tabletop bronzes and novels are comprised of a "superabundance of signs." For example, these objects reinforce the chivalric or cowboy code by presenting the standard in a culturally digestible format that is intended to be copied and sold on a mass scale. By signifying concepts beyond themselves that indicate placement within a larger cultural legacy, these objects work to situate the cowboy, and thus the United States, as heirs to a European cultural past, ultimately influencing perceptions of "Americanness" and U. S. national identity.

Baudrillard's proposal that kitsch is a byproduct of social mobility can also be applied to tabletop bronzes and novels on a much larger scale. Instead of viewing these objects as a result of social mobility by individual participants within American society, perhaps the rise of bronze cowboys and Western novels indicates the aspirational upward mobility of the United States on the global stage. In other words, as the United States began a climb towards global dominance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tabletop bronzes and novels could indicate "the need to manifest that status in signs," as both functioned as conveyors of culture.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to European nations, whose inherited cultural pasts often span for centuries on the European continent, the United States established itself in a place largely devoid of European presence, and

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<sup>18</sup> Paul T. McCartney, *Power and Progress: American National Identity, the War of 1898, and the Rise of American Imperialism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 2.

thus imagined itself as without a collective cultural past.<sup>19</sup> Anchored in medieval courtly culture, cowboy bronzes and Western novels thus rooted the young nation's national identity in a long-standing cultural past stemming from Europe, participating in claims of cultural exceptionalism seeking parity with European imperial superpowers.

Patricia Johnston's introduction to *Seeing High & Low: Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture* echo Baudrillard's ideas. Johnston identifies four categories of cultural production: folk, popular, mass, and high. As suggested by its delineation from the "high" category, works of mass culture, such as tabletop bronzes and novels, fall within the "low" category of cultural production. In her discussion of mass-produced objects, Johnston quotes cultural critic Dwight MacDonald, who writes, "Mass Culture is imposed from above" and "Mass Culture breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of political domination."<sup>20</sup> MacDonald's argument about the top-down nature of mass-produced items reinforces my project's claims that tabletop bronzes and novels filled a cultural gap, especially in their use as "instrument[s] of political domination," in which they played a role in forming U.S. national identity.

Unlike public works of art, tabletop bronzes, as well as novels, communicate culture first to small groups within domestic spaces, instead of directly to the public at large. Yet, messages received in private, intimate setting also shape broader public consciousness. In a 1878 book titled *Art Decoration Applied to Furniture*, interior decorator Harriet Spofford writes, "for the

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<sup>19</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Francis Bowen, trans. Henry Reeve, Esq. (Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1862), 33.

<sup>20</sup> Dwight MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 60. Cited in Patricia Johnston, "Introduction: A Critical Overview of Cultural Studies," in *Seeing High & Low Representing Social Conflict in American Visual Culture*, ed. Patricia Johnston (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 10-12.

private home is at the foundation of the public state, subtly and unimagined influences moulding the men who mould the state; and the history of furniture itself, involves the history of nations.”<sup>21</sup> This sentiment expressed by Spofford gives credence to the serious study of so-called “low” forms of art, in the recognition of these objects as powerful purveyors of culture. Noting that tabletop bronzes and novels were situated in domestic environments, their statuses as mass-produced objects makes them culture-builders for U. S. imperial identity.

In this sense, mass production can be viewed as a powerful tool used to further the notion of a European past as integral to U. S. national identity. If the cowboys represented in mass produced goods, such as tabletop bronzes or Western novels, are situated within a longer lineage of European warriors, and are available for purchase by American buyers with the intention of display and use within the home, then these goods work to shape American national identity from the inside out, beginning in the home and filtering into the broader society.

## **Methodologies**

In analyzing the cowboy in mass culture and in tracing evidence of medievalist cultural legacy present in tabletop bronzes and Western novels as well as explorations of alternative constructions of the cowboy, the crux of my thesis hinges on iconographical analysis. In particular, I seek to explore how the cowboy is visually depicted in bronzes in comparison to how the cowboy is characterized by descriptive language employed in Western novels. By placing bronzes in conversation with literary works, I interpret how the iconography present within these two media contributes to the conceptualization of the American cowboy as knight,

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<sup>21</sup> Harriet Elizabeth Prescott Spofford, *Art Decoration Applied to Furniture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1878), 232.

some departures from that framework, and the implications of the cowboy's positioning within a broader cultural legacy.

In addition to iconography, I also employ mass culture studies, as well as social art history. As a portion of my thesis considers the position of tabletop bronzes and novels within the home, I will utilize mass culture studies to examine how mass-produced objects intended for display and use within domestic spaces contribute to national culture at large. Furthermore, I use social art history to consider the broader conversation occurring in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century in regard to national identity and cultural legacy. Particularly, I will consider how discussions around social Darwinism played into the idea of the United States as part of an evolutionary trajectory stemming from Europe. Moreover, I will analyze how this broader cultural context informs the understanding of both tabletop bronzes and Western novels as purveyors of a Euro-American cultural heritage that would come to characterize American national identity.

Literary theory will also prove to be an important methodological framework present in my thesis. In particular, I will employ historical criticism, which, similar to social art history, considers the broader historical context in which a literary work was created. In "Introduction to the Paratext," Gérard Genette argues that literary works consist not only of the text of the work itself, but also of a paratext, which signals productions of meaning that surround and inform resonance for a literary work.<sup>22</sup> In employing a methodology similar to the one proposed by Genette, I intend to highlight how Western novels of the time are indicative of a broader cultural conversation taking place in America at the time, revolving around questions of cultural heritage and national identity.

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<sup>22</sup> Gérard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext," *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 261.

## Chapter Organization

This thesis comprises two chapters tracing the development of Remington and Wister's conceptions of the American cowboy and placing key cultural works in historical context. My first chapter centers on a discussion of Wister's 1895 article, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," with illustrations by Remington, notably, *The Last Cavalier*. I will consider how Remington and Wister's idea of the cowboy in this moment draws on narratives of a knightly past and if Remington's sculpture, *The Broncho Buster*, created the same year, can also be viewed as a knightly figure. In my second chapter, I examine how Remington and Wister's depictions of the cowboy changed from 1895 to 1902, through an analysis of two works by the men that year: Wister's *The Virginian* and Remington's *Coming Through the Rye* (Fig. 2.2). Using *What an Unbranded Cow Has Cost* (Fig. 2.1) from "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," I show how the seeds for their distinctive perspectives of the cowboy's source are visible even in the earlier publication.

## Conclusion

This thesis contributes to the conversation on the art of the American West. In recognizing the cultural legacy conveyed by cowboy bronzes, as well as analyzing the placement of these works within intimate, domestic settings, the research contributes a deeper understanding of Euro-American dialogues and mass production. Addressing the label of "uniquely American," so often associated with subject matter of the American West, the project points to how this claim ignores past cultural influences and heritages derived from European nations. Thus, the project shows the transnational and cosmopolitan sources for cowboy culture. At the same time, it shows how Remington's move to craft alternate trajectories for the cowboys

contributes to an American exceptionalism. Finally, to interpret tabletop bronzes as mass-produced objects that were placed in the home points to how American Western bronzes operated as conveyors of culture and contributors to U. S. national identity at the turn of the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER 1

### “The Same Saxon of Different Environments”

In September 1893, at North’s Inn at Geyser Basin, Frederic Remington and Owen Wister met for the first time.<sup>23</sup> Taking a liking to one another, Remington, a relatively well-known Western illustrator, and Wister, an emerging Western writer, would collaborate in the following years on a series of Western articles in *Harper’s Monthly*. From April 1894 to September 1895, the pair would write and illustrate eight essays about the American West, beginning with “The Promised Land” and ending with “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher.”<sup>24</sup>

In this chapter, I will discuss the final article published by Wister and Remington and analyze the text in conversation with an illustration included in the essay—*The Last Cavalier* (Fig. 1.2)—as well as a sculptural work created by Remington in the same year, *The Broncho Buster* (Fig. 1.1). I will begin by defining the cultural context in which “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” *The Last Cavalier*, and *The Broncho Buster* were created, with focus on the influences of social Darwinism and Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis,” given the evolutionary trajectory perpetuated in Wister’s article. I will then discuss “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher” and *The Last Cavalier* in depth, considering the central ideas communicated in each as it pertains to a Euro-American evolutionary line. I end with a section on *The Broncho Buster*, in which I argue that the sculpture should be read alongside “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher” and *The Last Cavalier*. All of these artworks affirm the idea that the American cowboy is the heir to the British knight.

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<sup>23</sup> Ben Merchant Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister: The Frederic Remington-Owen Wister Letters* (Palo Alto, CA: American West Publishing Company, 1972), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Allen P. and Marilyn D. Splete, *Frederic Remington-Selected Letters* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 238.

## Defining the Cultural Context: Social Darwinism, The Frontier Thesis, & The Anglo-Saxon Question

In the 1890s, the ideas of social Darwinism began to take hold within U.S. society.<sup>25</sup> Americans began to latch on to the idea that mankind was destined to evolve into a “higher state of being” and that this evolution was on display in the United States.<sup>26</sup> Stemming from the second book published by English scientist Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1871), social Darwinism argues for the natural progression of the human race from “primitive” to “civilized,” in a manner than can occur “either from within [a society], through natural evolutionary development, or from without, through conquest.”<sup>27</sup> In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin uses the United States as an example of social evolution. Framing America as evidence of the “remarkable success of the English as colonists, compared to other European nations,” he writes, “There is apparently much truth in the belief that the wonderful progress of the United States, as well as the character of the people, are the results of natural selection; for the more energetic, restless, and courageous men from all parts of Europe have emigrated during the last ten years or twelve generations to that great country, and have there succeeded best.”<sup>28</sup>

In his example, Darwin suggests a progression from European to American through the process of natural selection, occurring both from “within” and from “without” broader Euro-

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<sup>25</sup> Paul T. McCartney, *Power and Progress: American National Identity, the War of 1898, and the Rise of American Imperialism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 50.

<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>27</sup> McCartney, *Power and Progress*, 47.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1909), 144.

American society.<sup>29</sup> In regard to a social evolution taking place from “within,” Darwin proposes that the United States was formed through the immigration of the best-of-the-best European men to the American continent. In this sense, Europe underwent the process of natural selection within itself, as it selected the “more energetic, restless, and courageous men” to establish a new civilization (the United States) that evolved from the previous one (Europe). Yet, Darwin goes further and suggests that a social evolution occurred from “without” or outside the Euro-American society as well, through conquest. He writes, “Obscure as is the problem of the advance of civilisation, we can at least see that a nation which produced during a lengthened period the greatest number of highly intellectual, energetic, brave, patriotic, and benevolent men, would generally prevail over less favoured nations.”<sup>30</sup> This statement could be read as a type of social evolution occurring within Euro-American society at large, as the United States began to claim global dominance and prevalence over some European nations in the late nineteenth century, such as Spain.<sup>31</sup> However, I think that the statement might be read as a type of social evolution occurring outside of Euro-American civilization itself, referring to the U.S. conquest of Native American nations. Either way, the statement, alongside Darwin’s broader argument, positions the United States as an evolutionary descendent of Europe. By framing the United States as an advanced civilization, Darwin suggests that the nation advanced from something, which would logically progress from Europe. The nature of U.S. society as advanced would

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<sup>29</sup> McCartney, *Power and Progress*, 47. I have adopted the terms “within” and “without” from McCartney who uses these terms in his discussion of social Darwinism. He writes that Americans in the 1890s “often described the historical process in quasi-Hegelian terms, wherein the human race progresses as ‘enlightened’ civilizations replace their more ‘primitive’ precursors, either from within, through natural evolutionary development, or from without, through conquest.”

<sup>30</sup> Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 145.

<sup>31</sup> McCartney, *Power and Progress*, 3; specifically referring to the Spanish-American War (1898).

allow the nation to prevail over others, whether that be a triumph from “within” or a triumph from “without.”

Similar to Darwin, American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, in his 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” presents the United States as an evolutionary heir to Europe. Turner argues that it was the frontier experience that transformed European settlers into something distinctly American. He writes,

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, or perish, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe... The fact is, that here is a new product that is American.<sup>32</sup>

Here, drawing on the ideas of Darwin, Turner outlines a step-by-step evolutionary process by which the European colonist becomes American. Like Darwin, who suggests that societies evolve from a “primitive” to a “civilized” state, Turner contends that the European colonist likewise undergoes a transformation from “primitive” to “civilized” through his interaction with the frontier. First, the colonist arrives on the North American continent as a European. He is then stripped of his European attributes and essentially becomes a Native American. Finally, he conquers the frontier and emerges as something distinctly American. In Turner’s framework, a social evolution from “within” occurs: the European transforms into an American.

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<sup>32</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier American History,” in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998), 33-34.

In Turner's formulation, this evolutionary process occurs on the frontier. While in contemporary American thought, the frontier might only be considered the region west of the Mississippi River, Turner asserts that the Atlantic coast was the first frontier in American history. He argues that this "was the frontier of Europe in a very real sense," as this was the first place of European contact on the land that would eventually become the United States.<sup>33</sup> However, Turner explains that "the true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West."<sup>34</sup> He goes on to state that upon "moving westward, the frontier became more and more American."<sup>35</sup> This is evident geographically, as the further west one moves in North America, the further away from Europe one becomes. But, referring back to the evolutionary process laid out by Turner, the frontier does more to transform the European into an American than by physically placing him farther away from Europe. Turner describes the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization," where "a recurrence of the process of evolution" occurs.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, Turner's argument suggests this cultural evolutionary process culminates in the American West, where the continuous encounter between civilization and the frontier environment forged a distinctly American identity.

There remains a lingering question as what is to be meant by "Europe" and "European" for these authors. Both Turner and Darwin use the terms in the most general sense in their essays at large. Yet, Darwin begins his initial discussion of the United States by characterizing the nation as the result of the "remarkable success of the English as colonists." In fact, during the

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<sup>33</sup> Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 34.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 32.

late nineteenth century, there seemed to be a general consensus among many Americans that the United States descended from a distinctly English past.<sup>37</sup> In the late nineteenth century, Spain was essentially sidelined in the history of the U.S., as Plymouth Rock became heralded as the nation's place of origin, as opposed to other regions of the country where the Spanish preceded English arrival. Art historian M. Elizabeth Boone suggests that the U.S.'s quieting of its Spanish past came in large part from an attempt to separate the nation from its Latin hemispheric counterparts during an age of developing U.S. imperialism.<sup>38</sup> "The United States," Boone writes, "in defining itself as an English-speaking Protestant nation, became the antithesis of Spanish-speaking and Catholic Latin America."<sup>39</sup> While the nation rooted its national identity in an English past, "the United States became more powerful and potentially threatening," taking on imperialistic endeavors in Latin America, such as the Spanish-American War.<sup>40</sup>

An example of this sentiment communicated at the time can be found in the work of John Fiske, who in his 1885 lecture, "Manifest Destiny," situates the United States as heir to an Anglo-Saxon civilization that has prevailed through the ages. He writes:

It was for Spain, France, and England to contend for the possession of this vast region, and to prove by the result of the struggle which kind of civilization was endowed with the higher and sturdier political life. The race which here should gain the victory was clearly destined hereafter to take the lead in the world, though the rival powers could not in those days fully appreciate this fact.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Pyne, *Art and the Higher Life*, 32; specifically referring to Northeastern elites or "descendants of the 'Puritans.'"

<sup>38</sup> M. Elizabeth Boone, *The Spanish Element in Our Nationality: Spain and America at the World's Fairs and Centennial Celebrations, 1876-1915* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 4-5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> John Fiske, "Manifest Destiny," *Harper's Monthly* 70 (March 1885): 584.

Here, Fiske echoes the concepts of social Darwinism by suggesting an evolutionary trajectory from European to America. But, unlike Darwin, Fiske identifies America's predecessors as explicitly Anglo-Saxon, as opposed to Spanish or generally European, by positioning the United States as a direct result of English victory in North America. In other words, Fiske engages with the "within" type of social evolution as he speaks of Anglo-Saxon superiority within European society at large, as well as among Anglo-Saxons themselves, as the English transformed into Americans.

In 1895, after months of collaboration, Remington and Wister adopt the ideas of Darwin, Turner, and Fiske in their article "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," which was released in the September issue of *Harper's Monthly*. Written by Wister, the text of the article engages with both the idea of social evolution, as propagated by Darwin, as well as Turner's concept of the frontier as a place of Euro-American transformation and Fiske's framing of the American as Anglo-Saxon.

### **The (Social) Evolution of the Cow-Puncher**

Wister begins his article with a first-person, perceived autobiographical, anecdote. On a train heading to London, Wister finds himself seated across from two distinctly different men. Although they do not know one another, the two men hold a contempt for each other based on physical appearance, as "neither liked the other's outward man."<sup>42</sup> Wister characterizes the first man as proper English gentleman. Obviously wealthy, the man carried with him "good rugs, a good umbrella, several newspapers" and a "travelling bag" containing "cut-glass bottles with

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<sup>42</sup> Owen Wister, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 91 (September 1895): 602.

stoppers” sporting engraved monograms.<sup>43</sup> During the train ride, in a state of “greater comfort” than his companions, the Englishman drank brandy and paid the other two men no attention.<sup>44</sup> According to Wister, this man “had understood life’s upholstery and trapping for several hundred years, getting the best to be had in each generation of his noble descent.”<sup>45</sup> The second man, in stark contrast to the first, was an American cowboy who wore “a shiny silk hat, smooth new lean black trousers, with high boots stiff and swelling to stove-pipe symmetry beneath, and a tie devoid of interest.”<sup>46</sup> Wister remarks that he could not ascertain if the man carried a pistol in his hip pocket, yet was very aware of the man’s habit of spitting out the window in intervals throughout the journey. Despite the man’s rough character, he found himself seated in first class alongside Wister and the English gentleman. Wister notes that the cowboy “was a male who could take care of himself, and had done so.”<sup>47</sup> As opposed to the Englishman, whose wealth and social status Wister attributes to his “noble descent,” the cowboy is a self-made man who “had wrestled success from this world somehow, somewhere.”<sup>48</sup>

After describing both men, Wister remarks that he would never meet the two again once the train journey concluded. But, as omniscient author, Wister assumes the third person and imagines the story of the Englishman from London to Texas. Despite the Englishman’s disdain towards the cowboy on the train, once he stepped foot onto Texas soil, he instantly transformed

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<sup>43</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 602.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 602.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 603.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

into the cowboy. Wister notes that the Englishman “vaulted into the saddle” and “quickly learned how to rope a steer.”<sup>49</sup> He was “already acquainted” with pistols, possessed the “card habit,” “could sleep on the ground and rough it with the best of them,” and “could drink and help make the town clamorous.”<sup>50</sup> Miraculously, the wealthy glass cutter of “noble descent” who drank monogram-engraved brandy on the train to London, evolved in an instance into the hardened cowboy that sat beside him on that train. Wister writes, “Directly the English nobleman smelt Texas, the slumbering untamed Saxon awoke in him, and mindful of the tournament, mindful of the hunting-field, galloped howling after wild cattle, a born horseman, a perfect athlete, and spite of the peerage and gules and argent, fundamentally kin with the drifting vagabonds who swore and galloped by his side.”<sup>51</sup> Despite the outward differences between the Englishman and the cowboy, Wister makes the argument that, at heart, they are “one and the same.”<sup>52</sup>

Wister’s anecdote and subsequent story of the Englishman in Texas, coupled with the title of the article (“The *Evolution* of the Cow-Puncher”), allude to the broader ideas of social Darwinism taking hold in the United States in the 1890s.<sup>53</sup> In Wister’s article, the transformation of the nobleman into a rugged outdoorsman appears natural, if not inevitable. The evolution appears as a process of relative ease. The Englishman “*vaulted* into the saddle.” He was “*already* acquainted” with pistols. He “*quickly* learned how to rope a steer.”<sup>54</sup> Similar to Darwin, who

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<sup>49</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 603.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> McCartney, *Power and Progress*, 50.

<sup>54</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 603; italics added for emphasis.

positions the United States as the natural outcome of English colonists, Wister attributes this instantaneous evolution to the Anglo-Saxon blood shared between the nobleman and the cowboy that stirred within the Englishman once he stepped foot onto Texas soil. A social evolution occurred “within” Anglo-Saxon society that fostered the transformation of the Englishman into the cowboy.

Like Turner, Wister stages the evolutionary process in the American West. In Wister’s story, the Englishman is instantly Americanized as he interacts with the frontier. Although the evolutionary process described by Wister skips Turner’s intermediary step of becoming a Native American and is carried out with much more ease than the process described by Turner, the overarching sentiment of the “Frontier Thesis” carries over into Wister’s article: “the frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization.”<sup>55</sup> Wister deliberately chose to set his story in the American West, as opposed to any other region in the United States. Furthermore, Wister recounts the transformation of the Englishman into a cowboy, rather than another American trope, such as a Northeastern elite, who might be more closely acquainted with British nobility. In doing so, Wister conveys the Turnerian idea of the frontier as crucial to the formation of an identity that spanned from Europe, but that is now distinctly American.

While the article begins in the present day, Wister’s evolutionary account spans further back than the modern Englishman or the American cowboy. The American cowboy is not merely an evolutionary descendant of the modern Englishman, but, rather, Wister formulates him as a descendant of strong men found throughout Anglo-Saxon history, specifically knights. Wister writes,

And he has ruled the waves with his ship from that Viking time until yesterday at Samoa, when approaching death could extract no sound from him save American cheers and

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<sup>55</sup> Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier,” 33.

music, so upon land has the horse been his foster-brother, his ally, his playfellow, from the tournament at Camelot to the round-up at Abilene. The blood and the sweat of his jousting, and all the dirt and stains, have faded in the long sunlight of tradition... No doubt Sir Lancelot bore himself with a grace and breeding of which our unpolished fellow of the cattle trail has only the latent possibility; but in personal daring and in skill as to the horse, the knight and the cowboy are nothing but the same Saxon of different environments, the nobleman in London and the nobleman in Texas...<sup>56</sup>

Although not heroicized in the same way, Wister positions the cowboy as the “direct lineal offspring” to the Anglo-Saxon knight and as heir to his heroic past. In order to do so, the author draws comparisons between the knight and the cowboy, citing common attributes, such as the horse, as well as evidence of his hard labor, such the “blood and sweat” attained through jousting or triumphs over savages, snow, and loneliness. In this way, Wister echoes the social Darwinist idea that an evolution can occur “within” a civilization. Over the ages, “within” Anglo-Saxon society, an evolution took place in which the European knight became the American cowboy. Similar to Darwin’s statement that America is the successful result of English colonization, Wister positions the American cowboy as the next logical step in the evolutionary trajectory from European to American.

### ***The Last Cavalier***

Remington’s illustration, *The Last Cavalier*, appears within Wister’s discussion of the American cowboy as heir to the European knight. According to American West scholar Ben Merchant Vorpahl, *The Last Cavalier* encompasses the central argument of Wister’s article by capturing the defining feature of a cowboy, “his spirit.”<sup>57</sup> Remington’s illustration depicts an American cowboy trailing behind a ghostly army of past European knights on horseback. The

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<sup>56</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 604-606.

<sup>57</sup> Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister*, 76.

cowboy, depicted on the left side of the composition, stands out amidst the crowd of mounted noblemen that fills the composition. The mass of cavaliers, overlapping and melding into one another, stretches from the foreground to the background, taking up the space from the bottom right corner to the ambiguous background, in which the figures devolve from well-defined forms into quick brushstrokes, suggesting a large, continuous army. Despite the group, Remington gives the cowboy his own space. He is the only figure who can be seen in his, including his horse that trots along behind the knights. As opposed to the white cloud-like fog in which the army of knights ride, which can be best seen on the outer edge of the crowd in front of the cowboy, the cowboy is positioned on solid, grassy ground. Although he follows the group of cavaliers, he remains distinctly separate, as the space around him remains open and solid.

Further markers of distinction separate the American cowboy from the European army of centuries past that surrounds him. First, the cowboy is larger than the other figures in the painting. While he is similar in size to the other figures in the foreground, he is painted on a slightly bigger scale and given a position of higher elevation, allowing him to tower over the figures going before him. Second, the cowboy is painted in bold, saturated colors that contrast heavily against the muted, gray-toned army. Continuing with the foggy sentiment, Remington depicts the European cavaliers as faded remnants of the past. While many of the knights are depicted in detail, the army is devoid of color and rendered only in shades of gray, ranging from white to a dark gray, but not quite black, color. In contrast, Remington depicts the cowboy in full color. He wears a beige hat, black shirt, light brown pants, white or gray boots, and a white bandana and gloves. His face is well tanned, and he sports a black mustache that matches his black hair that peaks out from under his hat. His horse is dark brown with white hooves and bears a dark brown saddle, white saddle pad, and a silvery bridle and reins. Most of the colors

Remington uses to paint the cowboy are much darker than even the darkest color used to render the European knights. Given the stark contrast in colors, the American cowboy stands out greatly against the ghostly army. The distinct space given to the cowboy, coupled with his size and the saturated colors in which he is painted, mark him as the focal point of the image and root him in the present.

In *The Last Cavalier*, Remington visually represents Wister's assertion that that cowboy is the "direct lineal offspring" of the European knight.<sup>58</sup> Remington conveys this in several ways. First, the artist positions the cowboy as following behind the crowd of knights. By physically placing the cowboy as trailing the army, Remington suggests some sort of lineal descent starting with the knight and ending with the cowboy. Furthermore, while the knight follows and partially rides in the midst of the crowd, he is not quite a part of the historic army. This is most noticeable through the color difference, as Remington depicts the cowboy as bold and vibrant, as opposed to the ghostly was in which he depicts the Europeans. The contrast between the two parties indicate that the knights are of the past and precede the cowboy, whereas the cowboy is of the present and descends from the knights. Lastly, as Wister compares the knight and the cowboy in the written text, Remington compares the two visually. Aside from the differences in color and scale, both the knights and the cowboy are positioned similarly and given similar attributes. Remington positions each figure, except for two, in side profile on horseback. As indicated by Wister, the horse has been the "foster-brother" of the Anglo-Saxon throughout the ages, from the time of knighthood to that of the American cowboy. Furthermore, each figure holds a weapon of some sort and wears his respective "armor." In the article, Wister notes that "as the knights of Camelot prized their armor and were particular about their swords, so these dusty successors

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<sup>58</sup> Wister, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," 606.

[cowboys] had an extreme pride of equipment.”<sup>59</sup> In the illustration, whereas the knights hold swords and lances, the cowboy places his hand on the pistol at his hip. Additionally, as each knight is dressed in the armor that corresponds with his time period, the cowboy wears his own “armor”—boots, a hat, and chaps, which Wister characterizes as “next door to armor.”<sup>60</sup> Through these visual elements, Remington clearly conveys Wister’s central idea of an evolution and cultural continuity: the horse remains the same, but the lance becomes the pistol, the chainmail becomes the chaps, and the knight becomes the cowboy.<sup>61</sup>

Remington’s illustration also raises the Anglo-Saxon question. Not all of the knights Remington represents are distinctly English. Take for example the fully armored knight directly in front of the cowboy. While he can be dated to the sixteenth century, his nationality is unknown. The feather or *panache* protruding from the back of his helmet indicates the date.<sup>62</sup> However, since this was a common feature of knight costumes throughout Europe, he cannot be attributed to any specific country. Yet, in the article, Wister does reference Anglo-Saxon knights of this type by mentioning “the tournament at Camelot.” While the Arthurian legends in which Camelot appears predates the sixteenth century, the knight in the image is linked to these stories by the *panache*, which was commonly worn by knights at tournaments.<sup>63</sup> Thus, while not explicitly signified as Anglo-Saxon, the knight depicted in front of the cowboy could be considered Anglo-Saxon given the characterization of knights in the article and the strong

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<sup>59</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 606.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 610.

<sup>61</sup> Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister*, 76.

<sup>62</sup> Katie Antonsson, “Sparring with Panache,” Art Institute of Chicago, May 10, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Antonsson, “Sparring with Panache.”

Anglo-Saxon sentiment that Wister communicates. Similar reasoning can be applied to other knights in the image, such as the crusader, represented wearing white attire with a central cross, or the knight in the central background wearing a domed helmet, not un-similar to those worn by the knights of William the Conqueror's army, as seen in the Bayeux Tapestry.

The Anglo-Saxon uncertainty continues when considering the two figures in the lower right corner. Unlike the cowboy and the other knights, these two figures break from the side profile view and stare directly at the viewer. In this way, the viewer is implicated in that they are made witness to the evolution that unfolds. However, again the question is raised: evolution from *what*? In considering the first figure—the one closest to the cowboy—I initially thought this man could be a Spanish conquistador. The *Tercios* of the Spanish army under the Habsburgs wore a similar style of large flat hat with a feather.<sup>64</sup> Yet, upon further research, I concluded that this man is in fact Anglo-Saxon, as he is a King Charles cavalier. Cavaliers, who emerged under the rule of Charles I in England, wore a type of hat similar to those of the *Tercios* and that depicted in Remington's illustration. Furthermore, cavaliers are characterized by long hair and a prominent mustache, both of which are sported by the man in Remington's illustration (Fig. 1.3).<sup>65</sup> Additionally, given the title of the illustration, it would make sense for the man to be an English cavalier. Turning to the second man, depicted in the corner below the first, I again initially thought him to be Spanish, as he looks similar to portraits of Charles V of Spain, who oversaw the continued colonization of America. However, the man may refer to Sir Walter

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<sup>64</sup> Eduardo de Mesa, *The Irish in the Spanish Armies in the Seventeenth Century* (Martlesham, U.K.: Boydell Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>65</sup> Anna Reynolds, *In Fine Style: The Art of Tudor and Stuart Fashion* (London: Royal Collection Trust, 2013), 110. Reference Sir Anthony Van Dyk's portrait of Charles I (1635-6) for a seventeenth century example of a cavalier.

Raleigh, whom Wister explicitly names in the article.<sup>66</sup> Upon comparing portraits of Raleigh to the man in the illustration, both figures wear noticeably similar attire and exhibit comparable facial hair (Fig. 1.4). Although the article greatly aids in the identification of these figures as Anglo-Saxon, it seems as though Remington, too, positions the cowboy as heir to an English past.

### ***The Broncho Buster as Evolved Knight of the Plains***

While Wister worked to complete “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” Remington undertook a new project in early 1895. Encouraged to try his hand at sculpting by the artist Frederick W. Ruckstull, who he witnessed modeling an equestrian monument while staying at a neighbor’s house, Remington began to model his first sculpture, titled *The Broncho Buster*, in January.<sup>67</sup> Despite the popularity of the trope, Remington was the first artist to model a three-dimensional cowboy on a bucking horse.<sup>68</sup> The sculpture depicts a cowboy breaking a horse. The horse rears upward, with two feet planted on the ground and two in the air. The cowboy on the horse’s back hangs on with one hand, preparing for the horse to return its front feet to the ground, in an attempt to throw the rider off. The title and position of the horse suggest that, moments later, the horse will reverse its position, putting its front legs on the ground and raising its hind legs, in a bucking position. The ferocity of the bucking motion of the horse attests to the

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<sup>66</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 604. The full quotation reads, “Let us see if the stranger could play the peer as completely as the nobleman played the cowboy. Sir Francis Drake was such one; and Raleigh, the fine essence of Anglo-Saxon, with his fashionable gallant cloak, his adventure upon new seas, and his immediate appreciation of tobacco.”

<sup>67</sup> Brian W. Dippie, *The Frederic Remington Art Museum Collection* (New York: Frederic Remington Art Museum, 2001), 112.

<sup>68</sup> Peggy and Harold Samuels, *Frederic Remington: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), 222.

strength of the cowboy. Though the not yet domesticated animal tries to rid itself of its rider, the cowboy remains composed and focused. He wears a serious expression, and though he hangs on with only one hand, it is evident that he will remain firmly planted on the back of the horse.

Some historians read *The Broncho Buster* as Remington's response to Wister and the trope of the Anglo-Saxon knight pushed in "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher." Biographers Peggy and Harold Samuels write, "The bronze was part of the evolution of the cowpuncher, like the essay had been, but Remington's bronze 'The Broncho Buster' was taken from the real old Texas rider, not some fantasied Saxon knight."<sup>69</sup> Yet, Remington's letters to Wister reveal that the artist firmly positioned the cowboy in an evolutionary lineage sprung from Spain or Mexico. In an October 1894 letter to Wister, Remington writes, "Mexican Tree—dont know how (the cowboy) was affected by the Mex. war—he did not exist as an American type—[illegible] was later a combination of the Kentucky or Tennessee man with the Spanish."<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, in February 1895, after reading a draft of "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," Remington writes to Wister, "Strikes me there is a good deal of English in the thing—I never saw an English cowboy... You want to credit the Mexican with inventing the whole business—he was the majority of the 'boys' who just ran the steers to Abilene Kansas."<sup>71</sup>

Taking Remington's advice, Wister acknowledges the influence of Mexico on the American cowboy in the final draft of "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," yet, with Anglo-Saxons at the center. Wister writes,

The adventurous sons of Kentucky and Tennessee, former following the native bent to roam, and having no longer a war to give them life they preferred, came into a new

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<sup>69</sup> Samuels, *Frederic Remington*, 224.

<sup>70</sup> Splete, *Frederic Remington-Selected Letters*, 258.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

country full of grass and cattle. Here they found Mexicans by the hundred, all on horses and at large over the flat of the world. This sight must have stirred memories in the rail-splitter's blood, for he joined the sport upon the instant. I do not think he rode with bolder skill than the Mexican's, but he brought other and grittier qualities to bear upon that wild life, and also the Saxon contempt for the foreigner. Soon he had taken what was good from this small, deceitful alien, including his name, *Vaquero*, which he translated into Cowboy.<sup>72</sup>

Here, Wister appeases Remington by placing the *vaquero*—who is a product of his own evolutionary trajectory from North Africa, to Spain, to North America—as tangentially relevant in the longer evolutionary line leading to the cowboy.<sup>73</sup> However, instead of positioning the *vaquero* as a predecessor of the cowboy, Wister instead grants more agency to the Anglo-Saxon Southerner who travelled West and adopts aspects of the Mexican horsemen. According to Wister, the American cowboy is not a “direct lineal offspring” of the *vaquero* in the same way he is a descendant of the English knight.

These dialogues express tension between Wister and Remington's ideas of the evolution of the American cowboy. If Wister acknowledged the *vaquero* as a means to appease Remington, could *The Last Cavalier* be read as Remington's attempt to appease Wister, by creating an Anglo-Saxon centered image? Was the creation of *The Broncho Buster* a way for Remington to convey his idea of the cowboy, as a Texan of Mexican influence? In what respect is *The Broncho Buster* a *vaquero*?

In looking at some of Remington's earlier works, it is evident that the artist was not completely dissuaded by the idea of the American cowboy evolving from a knightly past. In the January 1889 edition of *Century* magazine, Remington wrote and illustrated an article titled

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<sup>72</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 608.

<sup>73</sup> Lawrence Clayton, James F. Hoy, and Jerald Underwood, *Vaqueros, Cowboys, and Buckaroos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 5

“Horses of the Plains,” an essay on American broncos.<sup>74</sup> Included in this article is an illustration titled “The First of the Race” (Fig. 1.5), in which Remington depicts a fully-armored Spanish conquistador on horseback. In the illustration and article, Remington traces the American bronco to the Barbary horses first introduced to the American continent by Spanish conquistadors. In essence, Remington acknowledges a knightly past, but one that is Spanish, instead of English, and thus more closely related to the *vaquero*.

However, Remington also remained aware of his close and personal ties to an Anglo-Saxon past. The artist was conscious of the seventeenth-century English roots that he possessed. The first Remington to emigrate to the colonies was Lieutenant John Remington, who arrived in Massachusetts in 1637. With this ancestor in mind, Remington claimed that “every Remington a heraldic fiend can trace was a British soldier.”<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, Remington referred to himself as an English American and frequently used English expressions, such as *bloody*, *bully*, and *old chap*, in his letters.<sup>76</sup> Remington’s full awareness and acknowledgment of his ancestry should be coupled with his ideal vision of himself as a cowboy. In his *Self-Portrait on a Horse* (Fig. 1.6, c. 1890), for instance, the artist depicts himself on horseback in full cowboy attire, appearing not dissimilar to the cowboy in *The Last Cavalier* or the one in *The Broncho Buster*. By representing himself in such a way, Remington places himself in the evolutionary line set out by Wister, as a modern American cowboy who descended from an Anglo-Saxon military past.

Whether or not the cowboy depicted in *The Broncho Buster* should be read as more Spanish or more British influenced, in the context of the period discussion that framed “The

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<sup>74</sup> Vorpahl, *My Dear Wister*, 57.

<sup>75</sup> Alexander Nemerov, *Frederic Remington & Turn-of-the-Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 98.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

Evolution of the Cowpuncher,” he can be read in a similar manner to the cowboy depicted in *The Last Cavalier*: as heir to the European knight. In the “Introduction to the Paratext,” Gérard Genette speaks of the concept of the paratext, defined as all other texts surrounding a main text. In the case of *The Broncho Buster*, which would be the main text, the paratext would include both “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” as well as *The Last Cavalier*. In his introduction, Genette quotes Philippe Lejeune, who says, “the fringe of the printed text... controls the whole reading.” In other words, the paratext is always the “bearer of an authorial commentary” of the main work.<sup>77</sup> As Remington sculpted *The Broncho Buster*, he actively engaged with the idea of the cowboy as descending from a knightly past. During the same year he sculpted this work, he read drafts of “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher” and painted *The Last Cavalier*. The ideals and stoic imagery of the knightly cowboy appearing in his collaboration with Wister seems to be present in *The Broncho Buster*. Thus, I do not believe that *The Broncho Buster* should be read as totally disparate or in total opposition to the two other works that Remington was intimately acquainted with at the time. Rather, I argue that *The Broncho Buster* should be read as promoting the same social Darwinist argument that Wister presents in “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” of an ages long evolution from European warrior to American cowboy. Yet, the question as to whether that warrior is a British knight or Spanish conquistador turned *vaquero* remains unanswered by Remington as he attempts to conceptualize his idea of the cowboy in his sculpture.

## **Conclusion: Decor for the Home**

In 1939, the Metropolitan Museum of Art received the art collection of New York

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<sup>77</sup> Gérard Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 261.

politician and owner of the New York Yankees, Jacob Ruppert (1867-1939), upon his death.<sup>78</sup>

Along with European oil paintings and Chinese pottery, the donated collection included ten bronze statuettes by Remington, of which one was *The Broncho Buster*. At the turn of the twentieth century, the market for small scale bronze sculptures, such as those created by Remington, primarily consisted of East Coast men who, through these statuettes, could “romantically imagine the by-now faded, mythologized frontier from the comfort of an armchair.”<sup>79</sup> Ruppert likely displayed his art collection in his private estate in Garrison, New York.<sup>80</sup> Because no high-quality photos of the interior of the home at the time when it was owned by Ruppert exist, it cannot be said for certain how Ruppert chose to display the Remington statuettes.<sup>81</sup> However, Ruppert’s domestic collection raises an important point about where culture is consumed.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Remington’s bronze statuettes fall neatly within Jean Baudrillard’s definition of “kitsch”—“a pseudo-object or, in other words, as a simulation, a copy, an imitation, a stereotype, as a dearth of real signification and a superabundance of signs, of allegorical references, disparate connotations, as a glorification of the detail and a saturation by details.”<sup>82</sup> Though buyers of the time, who were mostly from the

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<sup>78</sup> “Jacob Ruppert,” Baseball Hall, National Baseball Hall of Fame, accessed April 7, 2024, <https://baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/ruppert-jacob>.

<sup>79</sup> Molly Medakovich, “Shaping the Old West in Bronze,” in *The American West in Art*, ed. Thomas Brent Smith and Jennifer R. Henneman (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2020), 97.

<sup>80</sup> “Jacob Ruppert,” Baseball Hall, National Baseball Hall of Fame, accessed April 26, 2024, <https://baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/ruppert-jacob>.

<sup>81</sup> I came across two photos of the interior of the estate under Ruppert’s ownership. However, because the quality of the photos was so low, I could not determine how the art was arranged.

<sup>82</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 110-111.

Northeast, would have likely rejected the notion of Remington's bronzes as kitsch, the mass-produced nature of the statuettes aligns with Baudrillard's characterization of kitsch as a "copy" or "imitation."

Beyond physical reproduction, Baudrillard's definition of kitsch suggests that the ideas present in works like *The Broncho Buster* are also copied again and again and disseminated into private spaces, such as Ruppert's New York home. According to decorative arts historian Candace M. Volz, "the home is a stage upon which so much of daily life is lived" and "has always been an accurate reflection of the lifestyles, technology, and cultural and social influences of its time."<sup>83</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, furnishings of the home articulated and shaped the age in which the United States began to emerge as a world power. In this case, Remington's *Broncho Buster* not only situates the cowboy as heir to the European knight, but also the United States as heir to a European past. Here, geopolitics and the defining of US culture are played out in the domestic sphere. Coupled with other works consumed in private, such as "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," with its *Last Cavalier*, *The Broncho Buster* prompted consumers of culture to consider America's cultural heritage and go alongside Remington as he, too, struggled to define the nation's lineage as distinctly English, or indebted to Spain.

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<sup>83</sup> Candace M. Volz, "The Modern Look of the Early-Twentieth-Century House: A Mirror of Changing Lifestyles," in *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services*, ed. Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 46.

## CHAPTER 2

### “The Creature We Call a Gentleman”

While Remington’s *Last Cavalier* (Fig. 1.2) best encapsulates Wister’s argument, Remington created a total of five illustrations for “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” four of which are not discussed until the final two pages of the text. One image, *What an Unbranded Cow Has Cost* (Fig. 2.1), alludes to an underlying tension between Remington and Wister regarding each man’s perception of the cowboy trope that would manifest in full form seven years later in 1902.

While the majority of the article positions the cowboy as a knight-like figure, *What an Unbranded Cow Has Cost* illustrates Remington’s conception of the cowboy as a product of the lawless West. The painting depicts an open field littered with wounded men and horses following a conflict over an unbranded steer, with only one man left standing.

Wister details the episode in “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher.” He writes,

One high noon upon the plains by the Rio Grande the long irons lay hot in the fire. The young cattle were being branded, and the gathered herd covered the plain. Two owners claimed one animal. They talked at first quietly round the fire, then dispute quickened. One roped the animal, throwing it to the ground to burn his mark upon it. A third came, saying the steer was his. The friends of each drew close to hear, and a claimant thrust his red hot iron against the hide of the animal timed on the ground. Another seized it from him, and as they fell struggling, their adherents flung themselves upon their horses, and massing into clans, volleyed with their guns across the fire. In a few minutes fourteen riders lay dead on the plain, and the tied animal over which they had quarreled bawled and bleated in the silence.<sup>84</sup>

Remington’s illustration depicts the aftermath of this quarrel, with a few adjustments. Instead of fourteen riders lying dead in the field, ten riders, some dead, some injured, and some attempting to stand, are scattered over the plain. An additional eleventh man stands amidst these riders and

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<sup>84</sup> Owen Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 91 (September 1895): 615.

the three horses on the ground, pistol still in hand, as a tentative victor. One of the ten men on the ground, positioned on the far left of the canvas, points his gun at the standing man, perhaps signaling that the fight is not over, and that Wister's ending will soon come to fruition. As Wister writes, onlookers on horses watch the unfolding scene from a distance. But, no cow is present, nor is a central fire. Remington's illustration signals a departure from a chivalric code based on law and order. In the West pictured by Remington, "justice" is served through lawless violence.

By 1902, the divide between Wister's chivalrous cowboy and Remington's unruly rustler reaches its full extent in two diverging works produced by the former collaborators that year. Whereas Wister continues to communicate the trope of a noble cowboy that aligns with his conception of the cowboy as a descendant of the European knight in his novel *The Virginian*, Remington fully abandons courtly propositions, opting to present a cowboy unbound by a European past and epitomizing the "Wild West" in his sculpture, *Coming Through the Rye* (Fig. 2.2).

### **Defining the Cultural Context: Masculinity, Chivalry, & The Cowboy Code**

For many Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, the West symbolized a preservation of traditional American values, such as honor and courage. According to art historian Patricia Janis Broder, in the West, a rapidly fading mythic "bygone world," there was "an absolute definition of basic values."<sup>85</sup> Cultural historian Bruce Wexler expands on this point in his discussion of the "cowboy code"—unwritten rules of proper cowboy behavior, orally transmitted to future generations. The code blended both frontier and Victorian values of

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<sup>85</sup> Patricia Janis Broder, *Bronzes of the American West* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974), 14.

strength, independence, tenacity, and stoicism.<sup>86</sup> A few lines of the code, as identified by Wexler, include “always be courageous,” “a cowboy always helps those in need, even stranger and enemies,” and “real cowboys are modest.”<sup>87</sup>

But beyond a blend of traditional and Victorian values, Wexler points out that the cowboy code also “retained a nod to the chivalric code of the Middle Ages.”<sup>88</sup> As defined by British historian David Crouch, chivalry is “a shared explanation of superior behaviour which emerged into the full consciousness of medieval people around the beginning of the thirteenth century.”<sup>89</sup> Crouch points out that moral excellence, or chivalry, was synonymous with knighthood by 1210.<sup>90</sup> He references the author of an early thirteenth-century poem who captures the moral qualities expected of knights:

Right from the start he mustn't be present at a corrupt trial nor witness any act of treason but distance himself from it at once; if he can't prevent evil he should promptly turn his back on it. The second thing is very pleasant, he must on no account forsake a lady or young woman in trouble if they need his abilities he must help them with all power if he wishes to earn praise and reputation; for he needs must honour women and undertake great deeds on their behalf.<sup>91</sup>

The model character of a knight highlighted in the *Ordene de Chevalrie* makes apparent the influence of chivalric standards on the “cowboy code.” In comparing the poem with lines of the

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<sup>86</sup> Michael Allen, “‘I Just Want to Be a Cosmic Cowboy:’ Hippies, Cowboy Code, and the Culture of a Counterculture,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 276-277.

<sup>87</sup> Bruce Wexler, *How the Wild West was Won* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013), 464-69.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> David Crouch, *The Chivalric Turn: Conduct and Hegemony in Europe before 1300* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 301.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>91</sup> The *Ordene de Chevalrie* (c. 1220). Quoted in Crouch, *The Chivalric Turn*, 273-74.

code identified by Wexler, overlap appears, as the qualities of justice, courage, honor, and a willingness to lend a helping hand are emphasized in both.

The American attraction to medievalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries further illuminates the connection between the “cowboy code” and the chivalric code of the Middle Ages. In “‘The Books We All Read:’ The Golden Age of Children’s Book Illustration and American Soldiers in the Great War,” Vanessa Meikle Schulman discusses the influence of Arthurian books on young American men at the turn of the twentieth century. She writes that these books “had a powerful impact on those boys’ socialization into manhood, their understanding of male bonding, and their interpretation of a shared Anglo-Saxon past inspired by myths and tales from British history,” in addition to “reinforc[ing] an ethos of masculine chivalry.”<sup>92</sup> For example, the introduction of *Lancelot*, published in 1488, reads, “in this book you will learn of things delectable and worthy to be remembered for the exaltation of *noblesse* and chivalry, and to the edification and example of all men; and above all of those whose will it is to achieve in arms the highest honour.”<sup>93</sup> The introduction positions the story not as a form of entertainment, but as handbook of proper male behavior, hinged on chivalry.

As Schulman’s reveals, America’s search for a cultural past was gendered in that the United States laid claim to European histories through displays of manhood. By placing Schulman’s article alongside discourse that positioned the cowboy as “the knight of the plains,” the American cowboy can be viewed as a version of the European knight and the “cowboy code” as a rendition of the chivalric code of the Middle Ages. In this sense, as young men were taught

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<sup>92</sup> Vanessa Meikle Schulman, “‘The Books We All Read:’ The Golden Age of Children’s Book Illustration and American Soldiers in the Great War,” *Lion and the Unicorn* 41, no. 2 (April 2017): 204. Medieval revival was also underway in the United Kingdom and in Europe during this time period.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in Maurice Hugh Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 2.

to be chivalrous, through references to contemporary cowboys and past cultural histories, they were taught how to be “proper” masculine American citizens in narratives that entwined national and gender identities.

### ***The Virginian***

According to Wister, he wrote *The Virginian* to tell a tale of the cowboy, a figure he labeled as the “last romantic figure” in America.<sup>94</sup> Wister seems to have sought to commemorate the cowboy in a work of literature, similar to how European knights and cavaliers have been celebrated in poems and legends over the ages. In “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” Wister writes that while knights have been lauded in “the chronicles of romance,”

his direct offspring among our Western mountains has had no poet to connect him with the eternal, no distance to lend him enchantment; though he as fought single-handed with savages, and through skill and daring prevailed, though he has made his nightly bed in a thousand miles of snow and loneliness, he has not, and never will have, the ‘consecration of memory.’<sup>95</sup>

Yet, through his novel published seven years later, Wister provides the cowboy with a type of “consecration of memory.”

Though written seven years apart, both “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher” and *The Virginian* begin in a similar manner: the narrator is on a train. While in the 1895 article, the narrator rides a train to London accompanied by two men, an Englishman and an American cowboy, the east-coast narrator in *The Virginian* rides a train alone, westward, to Wyoming territory. He only encounters the cowboy—the Virginian—upon arriving in Medicine Bow.

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<sup>94</sup> John Jennings, *The Cowboy Legend: Owen Wister’s Virginian and the Canadian-American Ranching Frontier* (Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 2015), 303.

<sup>95</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 606.

The narrator first observes the Virginian from the train window before formally meeting him. After witnessing the cowboy effortlessly rope an unruly horse, Wister makes note of his appearance. Wister portrays the Virginian as “a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures,” wearing a “broad, soft hat,” a “loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief,” and a “cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips.” Though visibly seasoned and “weather-beaten,” the narrator emphasizes the dust on his boots and overalls, marking him as a man who has traveled from “somewhere across the vast horizon.” Yet, despite the signs of hardship, Wister characterizes the Virginian with a sense of nobleness, writing, “no dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength.”<sup>96</sup>

Though not as polished as the cowboy on the train to London, the Virginian retains a similar quality as the man does, as he too “could take care of himself, and had done so.”<sup>97</sup> In “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” while Wister props up the Englishman by virtue of his “noble descent,” he justifies the cowboy via his hard work, writing that he “had wrestled success from this world somehow, somewhere,” enough so to land him in first class alongside the Englishman. In other words, through his hard work and strife, the cowboy on the train made himself noble. Yet, if Wister makes the argument that the cowboy and the Englishman are one and the same and part of the same evolutionary trajectory, then the “noble descent” of the Englishman belongs to the cowboy as well. In this sense, if the cowboy is the “direct lineal offspring” of an Anglo-Saxon knight, a lineage that would include the Englishman, then he retains the nobleness passed down through generations, as well as creates his own through his labor.

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<sup>96</sup> Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York, Tom Doherty Associates, Inc., 1998), 3.

<sup>97</sup> Wister, “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher,” 603.

Likewise, in *The Virginian*, Wister implies the cowboy also maintains noble qualities as, while he is rugged and hard-labored, he radiates a sense of splendor. The splendor the narrator witnesses in the Virginian arises from how the cowboy carries himself. Wister's recognition of the Virginian as honorable aligns with thirteenth-century perceptions of knights as noble. As explained by Crouch, knights were historically considered to be nobles, although claims to noble descent were unverifiable or nonexistent. Instead, Couch clarifies that knights were viewed as possessing "nobility of the mind."<sup>98</sup> Wister characterizes the Virginian in the same way— in terms of an upstanding inner quality, as opposed to aristocratic blood or outward appearance. Wister writes, "This handsome, ungrammatical son of the soil had set between us the bar of his cold and perfect civility. No polished person could have done it better. ... Here in flesh and blood was a truth which I had long believed in words, but never met before. The creature we call a gentleman lies deep in the hearts of thousands that are born without chance to master the outward graces of the type."<sup>99</sup>

Historian John Jennings suggests the publication of *The Virginian* brought about a radical transformation of the trope of the cowboy. Jennings writes that before the novel's publication, "the image of the cowboy was essentially that of the dime novel – a rough, violent, one-dimensional drifter, or the stage cowboy of Buffalo Bill's Wild West variety."<sup>100</sup> In contrast, the cowboy in *The Virginian* was "soft-spoken and gentle with horses and women, but terrible in his righteous fury."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Crouch, *The Chivalric Turn*, 273.

<sup>99</sup> Wister, *The Virginian*, 9.

<sup>100</sup> Jennings, *The Cowboy Legend*, 267.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

Throughout the novel, the Virginian encounters a series of moral dilemmas, requiring him to make decisions based on a moral code. One such instance occurs toward the end of the book, in which the narrator reunites with the Virginian at a stable one night. Unbeknownst to the narrator, in the stable, the Virginian holds two horse thieves captive to be executed in the morning. Upon being made aware of the situation, the narrator expresses a deep sense of discomfort. He writes, “dead men I have seen not a few times, even some lying pale and terrible after violent ends, and the edge of this wears off; but I hope I shall never again have to be in the company with men waiting to be killed.”<sup>102</sup> The Virginian picks up on the narrator’s unease, saying, “I am right sorry for your annoyance.”<sup>103</sup> Unlike the Virginian, the narrator enjoys an ordered system of law and order on the east-coast which allows him to maintain a firm distance from unsightly executions or sharing rooms with the soon-to-be executed. In the West, however, a different system of law and order prevails, in which the common people, such as the Virginian, must implement a moral code of right and wrong and uphold that standard. Even the Virginian highlights the difference between the two regions as it pertains to law and order. He says,

Now back East you can be middling and get along. But if you go to try a thing on in this Western country, you've got to do it *well*. You've got to deal cyards *well*; you've got to steal *well*; and if you claim to be quick with your gun, you must be quick, for you're a public temptation, and some man will not resist trying to prove he is the quicker. You must break all the Commandments *well* in this Western country...<sup>104</sup>

In other words, if one is to commit a crime in the West, the perpetrator must be sure that he can get away with it. Otherwise, if he is caught, men like the Virginian will enact justice, as the moral obligation to do so is in their hands.

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<sup>102</sup> Wister, *The Virginian*, 307.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Wister, *The Virginian*, 320-21.

However, upholding moral order becomes much more difficult when personal relationships become involved. Upon entering the stable, the narrator quickly realizes that one of the thieves happens to be Steve, a friend of the Virginian's from Medicine Bow. Despite this friendship, the Virginian moves forward to hang Steve as a punishment for his crimes. Following the execution, although solemn and mourning, the Virginian remains steadfast in his decision in an exchange with the narrator:

"You never did this before," I said.

"No. I never had it to do." He was riding beside me, looking down at his saddle-horn.

"I do not think I should ever be able," I pursued.

Defiance sounded in his answer. "I would do it again this morning."

"Oh, I don't mean that. It's all right here. There's no other way."

"I would do it all over again the same this morning. Just the same."<sup>105</sup>

According to the narrator, the Virginian "knew passionately, that he had done right."<sup>106</sup> To maintain a sense of order in the otherwise "lawless West," the Virginian had to become the vanguard for justice, punishing those who broke the moral code, despite losing his friend.

Coming from an upper-class Victorian background, it is not a surprise that Wister took to the concept of a cowboy who exemplified traditional values as expressed in the cowboy code.<sup>107</sup> His character, the Virginian, fits many of the rules of the code identified by Wexler. For instance, the overarching narrative of *The Virginian* revolved around the love story between the Virginian and Molly, a plot point that is sparked by the Virginian rescuing Molly from a carriage crash in a river. The Virginian's willingness to rescue Molly, a stranger to him at the time, illustrates an adherence to a guiding moral code that praises courage and lending a helping hand.

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<sup>105</sup> Wister, *The Virginian*, 315.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>107</sup> Jennings, *The Cowboy Legend*, 267.

By the end of the book, the Virginian and Molly are married, much to the dismay of Molly's wealthy east coast family, who are less than impressed with the "rustler." But, according to Jennings, the Virginian "was America's true aristocrat, capable of rising from humble roots to marry into one of America's most revered families."<sup>108</sup> Here is the appeal for Wister, who comes from a background similar to Molly's. While Wister possessed a fascination with the West, he clung to an idea of the West that was defined by his east coast frame of thinking. Thus, he wrote a novel centered on a hero that is palatable for an east coast audience; his cowboy appeals to the mythos of the frontier, while also retaining a strong sense of traditional values.

Though I found no evidence that Wister consulted medieval codes of chivalry to inform his cowboy character, the similarities between the guidelines set forth by the thirteenth-century poet referenced by Couch and the plot of the Virginian are uncanny. First, as if keeping the statute, "mustn't be present at a corrupt trial," the Virginian treats Steve justly under the law, even if it means the death of his friend, as it would be corrupt of the cowboy to let the perpetrator go. Furthermore, the Virginian adheres to the rule of not "forsak[ing] a lady or young woman in trouble" when he rescues Molly from the river.

While Wister may or may not have consulted with this specific chivalric code, or any rendition of the code for that matter, the author did engage with texts that carry through the vision of a chivalrous European knight that could have set a precedent for his treatment of the Virginian as a quasi-knightly figure. In 1892, Wister published a parody of a King Arthur legend: *The Dragon of Wantley*. A work of satire, the book tells the tale of Sir Godfrey Disseisin, the Baron of Wantley, who attempts to solve the issue of a dragon in the land. According to legend, the terror of the dragon would not be extinguished until "a female lineal descendant of

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<sup>108</sup> Jennings, *The Cowboy Legend*, 308.

the first Sir Godfrey... should go out in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve, all by herself, and encounter the Dragon single handed.”<sup>109</sup> This legend spurs Sir Godfrey’s eighteen-year-old daughter, Miss Elaine, to seek to confront the dragon, against her father’s wishes. Although an angry and bumbling figure, Sir Godfrey’s desire to protect his daughter from the dragon by dealing with the monster himself is reminiscent of the thirteenth-century chivalric code, specifically a knight’s requirement to “honour women and undertake great deeds on their behalf.” Wister’s rewrite of an Arthurian legend demonstrates that the author was not merely familiar with chivalric themes, but rather explicitly incorporated them into his work. I argue that Wister did not embrace these chivalric themes in *The Dragon of Wantley* alone, but also integrated them into his later work, *The Virginian*, thereby positioning the cowboy as a knightly figure.

### ***Coming Through the Rye***

Unlike Wister, by 1902 Remington made a dramatic departure from the austere cowboy conveyed in “The Evolution of the Cowpuncher.” Instead of creating a work centered on a noble depiction of the cowboy, Remington leans into the stereotype of the “Wild West” in a display of riotous cowboy behavior in his sculpture, *Coming Through the Rye* (Fig. 2.2).

In his sculpture, Remington depicts four cowboys on horseback, pistols drawn, charging forward with reckless abandon. Riding side-by-side, the four cowboys exhibit a gleeful and rambunctious demeanor. At far left, the first cowboy leans forward, arms outstretched, on his fully airborne horse. Like the other three riders, he wears typical cowboy attire—complete with a

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<sup>109</sup> Owen Wister, *The Dragon of Wantley: His Tale* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1892). Accessed via [gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org).

cowboy hat, button up shirt, bandana, chaps, and boots—and a wide mouthed smile on his face. Unlike his companions, who all fire their pistols upward, the first rider aims his firearm outward, to the viewer's left. The position of his pistol, coupled with his unstable forward lean, suggests that the man is in a drunken state. Riding next to him, the second cowboy mimics the blissful character of the first, although the second man appears to retain more control over his mental faculties. Unlike the first cowboy, who leans into his space, the second cowboy sits stable and upright on his horse. He throws his head back in a joyous expression with his mouth open wide, presumably cheering or hollering. Like his two companions on the viewer's right, he fires his pistol upward, as opposed to recklessly to the side. The final two cowboys are positioned similar to the first, in that they both sit upright on their horses. However, the third cowboy looks forward and the fourth looks to the side. Like the second cowboy, the third and the fourth are also depicted with open mouths, suggesting a cheer, yell, or holler.

The open mouths of the four cowboys, in addition to the presumed gunfire and stampeding of the horses, contributes to a sense of noise and auditory commotion in the sculpture. Although these sonics are implied, they are immediate and clearly seen. First, Remington mirrors the open-mouthed expression in all four cowboys. Instead of portraying just one cowboy in this way, Remington represents all four as yelling, which draws attention to verbal noise of the group. Additionally, as opposed to a single yell, the line of open mouths suggests various voices overlapping in a cacophonous symphony of cheers and hollers. Second, the clamorous noise of the sculpture is heightened by the presence of the pistols and the presumed gunfire. While the central portion of the sculpture is cramped and busy, the pistols are given their own space as they are held high in the air or to the side. In this way, the firearms and their implied noise stands out. Furthermore, the cowboys' gesture of raising their pistols in the

air suggest that the weapons are in use and making noise. Lastly, the high-speed charge of the four horses contributes to the sonic commotion of the sculpture. Of the sixteen hooves present in the sculpture, only seven touch the ground, suggesting that the horses are travelling quickly. Additionally, Remington depicts the horses as elongated, with their heads stretching forward and tails flying backwards, implying a sense of high speed or charging. This in turn suggests noise, as the hooves quickly, repeatedly, and harshly hit the ground.

The sense of control and restraint that characterizes *The Broncho Buster* (Fig. 1.1) is let go in *Coming Through the Rye* in favor of reckless abandon, seen through the implied noise of the sculpture and the postures of the four cowboys. First, in terms of an auditory element, *The Broncho Buster*, while not completely devoid of sound, does not center on noise. Although the whine of the horse or the animal's hooves hitting the ground can be deduced, these noises do not jump out at the viewer in the same way as the noises communicated in *Coming Through the Rye*. Instead, in *The Broncho Buster*, Remington places focus on the skill of the cowboy. Unlike the cowboys in *Coming Through the Rye*, the cowboy in *The Broncho Buster* sits firmly on his horse—there is no doubt that he will stay on his steed despite the harsh bucking motion. In contrast, the four men in Remington's later sculpture loosely hold the reins in one hand while firing their pistols with the other. Coupled with the high-speed charge of the horses and the presumed drunken state of the men, this casts a doubt that all four cowboys will remain on their horses throughout the duration of their parade.

*Coming Through the Rye* radically departs from the stoic nature of the cowboy Remington depicts in *The Broncho Buster* and opts for an image of the lawless West. The cowboy in *The Broncho Buster* does not stir up commotion. He does not charge through the streets yelling and firing his pistol. Rather, he retains his composure and focuses his energy on

his work—breaking a wild horse. Instead of partaking in rowdy fun, he diligently does his job as a cowboy. In contrast, the men in *Coming Through the Rye* put aside their formal duties as cowboys in an escapade of drunken fun. Their gleeful expressions and carefree postures suggest a sense of freedom. In this moment, the men are not bound by any chivalric code or law dictating proper behavior. They ride through the streets with reckless abandon, not caring if the charge of the horses or shots fired inflict any harm. This is the Wild West.

Remington's representation of cowboys in *Coming Through the Rye* fits into period east coast audience conceptions of the West as wild.<sup>110</sup> For instance, in 1882 President Chester Arthur condemned the rowdiness of cowboys in an address to Congress, stating that “a band of armed desperadoes known as ‘Cowboys’... have been engaged for months in committing acts of lawlessness and brutality which the local authorities have been unable to repress.”<sup>111</sup> However, some cowboys, such as Texas cowboy John Fletcher, defended themselves, in an attempt to end the stereotype of the rebellious cowboy. Fletcher writes, “After five months of rough life on the trail, we Texas cowboys, deprived as we have been of all the conveniences and comforts of civilization, were a picturesque squad as we rode into Cheyenne. Our neglected and dilapidated clothes were worn and patched, our hair was uncut, and our faces unshaven.”<sup>112</sup> However, despite the attempts of Fletcher and other cowboys, public perception of cowboys as untamed persisted on the east coast.

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<sup>110</sup> Peter H. Hassrick, *Remington, Russell and the Language of Western Art* (Washington, DC: Trust for Museum Exhibitions, 2000), 126.

<sup>111</sup> Chester A. Arthur, “Annual Message to Congress” (1881). Accessed April 21, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/first-annual-message-to-congress-1881/>.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Hassrick, *Remington, Russell and the Language of the West*, 126.

Travelling to the West for the first time, Remington, too, expected the region to be wild. Accompanied by other likeminded bachelors, seeking youthful, rowdy fun, Remington landed in jail in a small town in Kansas in 1883. After this humiliating event, Remington realized that the West was much tamer than he initially believed it to be. In 1884, Remington returned to New York and began to produce art that matched his conception of what the West should be – wild and untamed – instead of how he experienced the West in practice.<sup>113</sup>

Part of the appeal of the mythic West to men like Remington and the patrons of his art is that, in the late nineteenth century, frustrations began to arise around the idea of the “industrial man,” who was regarded as “physical and morally enfeebled.”<sup>114</sup> As a result, men of the period sought sources of manly inspiration, and vigor associated with the American West made it an attractive subject. President Theodore Roosevelt contributed to the association of the West with ideals of manhood, especially among east coast audiences. Roosevelt argued that men should “boldly face the life of strife, resolute to our duty well and manfully.”<sup>115</sup> He expressed that,

The men who with ax in the forests and pick in the mountains and plow on the prairies pushed to completion the dominion of our people over the American wilderness have given the definite shape to our nation. They have shown the qualities of daring, endurance, and far-sightedness of eager desire for victory and stubborn refusal to accept defeat, which go to make up the essential manliness of the American character.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Brian W. Dippie, *The Frederic Remington Art Museum Collection* (New York: Frederic Remington Art Museum, 2001), 16.

<sup>114</sup> T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 56.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Dippie, *The Frederic Remington Art Museum Collection*, 20.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Dippie, *The Frederic Remington Art Museum Collection*, 13.

Roosevelt links the West with “the essential manliness of American character,” which prompted young men, such as Remington, to look to the West for examples of manhood.<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusion

While in their pursuit of manhood, Remington and Wister arrived in the same place—the American West—their approaches to the subject and the figure of the cowboy diverge in the way they represent masculinity in their works. In contrast to Remington, Wister, like many young men of the period, first sought out examples of manliness in Arthurian legends, riddled with chivalrous Anglo-Saxon knights.<sup>118</sup> As Tison Pugh and Susan Aronstein write, “for nineteenth-century medieval enthusiasts,” such as Wister, “the Middle Ages was American—proto-democratic, youthful, vigorous, natural” and “manly.”<sup>119</sup> In “The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher” and *The Virginian*, Wister draws upon his interactions with European legends to impart chivalric traits onto his version of the cowboy. This is unlike Remington, who turned to the West in search of a manhood characterized by unrestrained freedom, not a set of rules, made apparent in works such as *Coming Through the Rye*.

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<sup>117</sup> Dippie, *The Frederic Remington Art Museum Collection*, 13.

<sup>118</sup> Vanessa Meikle Schulman, ““The Books We All Read:” The Golden Age of Children’s Book Illustration and American Soldiers in the Great War,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 41, no. 2 (April 2017): 204.

<sup>119</sup> Tison Pugh and Susan Aronstein, “Introduction: Theorizing America’s Medievalisms,” in *The United States of Medievalism*, ed. Tison Pugh and Susan Aronstein (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 10.

## CONCLUSION

According to Turner, the frontier acts as “a gate from the bondage of the past.”<sup>120</sup> But, as this thesis has argued, European cultural histories informed conceptualizations of the cowboy in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America. So often framed as an inherently “uniquely American” figure, the American cowboy is the product of a transatlantic cultural construction. Through an analysis of his Western prose, this project has revealed that Wister carefully crafted the cowboy as a cultural heir to the European knight. Drawing on the ideological framework of social Darwinism, Wister presented the American West as place where Anglo-Saxon knighthood found modern expression in the cowboy.

Remington, too, in his 1895 works, *The Last Cavalier* and *The Broncho Buster* subscribed to the ideas presented by Wister, but not without a degree of tension. Wister’s portrayal of the chivalric cowboy clashed with Remington’s of the cowboy as outlaw and stemming from a Spanish past, rather than British. By 1902, the divergence between the artist and author becomes apparent in the stark contrast between the ideal of the cowboy communicated in Wister’s *The Virginian*, as gentlemanly and just, and in Remington’s *Coming Through the Rye*, as lawless and unruly.

In addition to cultural heritage, this thesis has sought to frame the conversation between Remington and Wister in a broader discussion of cultural transmission. Mass-produced works, such as articles, novels, and tabletop bronzes, were not confined to institutions, but were rather consumed in private homes, where they participated in shaping everyday understandings of national identity, masculinity, and cultural heritage. As Baudrillard’s theory of kitsch points out,

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<sup>120</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier American History,” in *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner: “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” and Other Essays*, ed. John Mack Faragher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 59.

a “superabundance of signs” characterizes objects of mass-production.<sup>121</sup> Remington’s bronzes and Wister’s writings are not neutral agents. Rather, they communicate each of their ideals of the American cowboy, whether explicitly or implicitly, to viewers in their own domestic space. In this sense, culture cultivated in private shapes public culture at large. At the turn of the century and still today, both Remington and Wister’s differing conceptions of the cowboy coexist in the collective American imagination, despite their writings and artworks being made for consumption in private.

This thesis contributes a more nuanced understanding of how Remington’s tabletop bronzes and Wister’s Western writings shaped the American cowboy as both heir to and departed from a courtly European legacy as well as a departure from it. In doing so, it reframes the cowboy as a cosmopolitan figure in a broader Euro-American context. Far from kitschy decor or a leisurely afternoon read, conceptions of the cowboy at the turn of the twentieth century negotiated definitions of U.S. national identity and masculine ideals, teasing out noble chivalry from lawless independence, all from the comfort of the parlor.

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<sup>121</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), 110-111.

## Illustrations



Figure 1.1: Frederic Remington, *The Broncho Buster*, 1895, cast 1918. Bronze, 22 3/4 x 18 3/4 x 14 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 1.2: Frederic Remington, *The Last Cavalier*, 1895. Oil on board, 23 x 35 in.  
Private Collection.



Figure 1.3: Anthony van Dyck, *Charles I in Three Positions*, 1635-36.  
Oil on canvas, 39.1 x 33.2 in., Windsor Castle, Berkshire.



Figure 1.4: Unknown English artist, *Sir Walter Raleigh (Raleigh)*, 1588. Oil on panel, 36 x 29 3.8 in., National Portrait Gallery, London.



Figure 1.5: Frederic Remington, "The First of the Race," 1889.  
Illustration in Frederic Remington, "Horses of the Plains," *Century* (January 1889).



Figure 1.6: Frederic Remington, *Self-Portrait on a Horse*, c. 1890. Oil on canvas, 29.19 x 19.38 in., Sid Richardson Museum, Fort Worth.



Figure 2.1: Frederic Remington, *What an Unbranded Cow Has Cost*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 28 1/16 × 35 1/8 in., Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.



Figure 2.2: Frederic Remington, *Coming Through the Rye*, 1902, cast before 1939.  
Bronze, 27 1/4 x 30 x 26 1/4 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

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