

Traditions, like women in Mexico's *charreadas*; everyday objects changed by a visual artist; social phenomena like migration expressed through art; the cultural heritage of Mexicans in the United States and children's testimony about crossing the border; a visit to the El Triunfo biosphere reserve: this is what this issue's cultural sections bring our readers. All together, they are one more example of the splendor of Mexico.



# Charrería's Feminine Side

Leslie Mazoch \*

The charro mounted high on a horse, shaded by a broad sombrero, and swinging a lasso, is a Mexican icon. It's no surprise that Mexican rodeo riding, or *charrería*, is the country's official sport, and for many the national pastime. But most people are taken by surprise when they hear about *charrería*'s flourishing feminine side: the *escaramuza*.

Impossible to miss, the women riders wear colorful Revolution-era dresses over petticoats and wide sombreros with braids hanging past their shoulders. Balancing on sidesaddles, they gallop their horses into the arena to wow the audience with a choreographed routine set to music bellowing over the sound system.

"It's like rain on a field that's been dry. When the *escaramuza* comes, it refreshes," reflected Guadalupe "Coco" Caramuza macho Elorriaga, one of the riders from the first *escaramuza* team, formed in 1953 in Mexico City. She was 10 years old then, and is now in her early 70s.

Teams of eight women on horseback, each rider known as an "*amazona*," maneuver their horses with precision. They make patterns across the dirt, much like a drill team, but on horseback. Two *escaramuza* teams compete at each *charreada*, with routines that last 12 minutes.

The female precision equestrian sport does not share its beginnings with *charrería*, rooted in the day-to-day work on the haciendas of colonial Mexico. *Charros* from different haciendas would get together to determine who was the best executing different herding techniques, like roping horses and pulling a cow down to the ground by its tail. The Mexican Revolution broke up the large landed estates in the early twentieth century, prompting the *charros* to formalize their teams into what are today's *charrería* associations, which operate like rodeo clubs. Through these clubs, cowboys across

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Mexico continue to learn and prove their ranching skills, but in a circular arena instead of the countryside. The *escaramuza*, on the other hand, evolved by accident from the horse-riding lessons of six little kids in Mexico's capital city. Three girls and three boys, ages six to twelve, took instruction from well-known charro Luis Ortega Ramos at the arena located in the capital's Polanco neighborhood. The rodeo club later relocated to Constituyentes Avenue, where it still stands today. Ramos decided to show off his students' skills at a *charreada*, or rodeo, by choreographing a routine that featured what he'd taught them. A live military band played the song *Las coronelas* (The Women Coronels) as the children trotted out their slow-paced moves. The crowd loved it. For a few years, the co-ed children's team toured the routine all over Mexico and as far away as Canada.

"The *escaramuza* was not a preconceived idea; it wasn't an idea that any particular person had, who said 'we're going to do this and that,' something planned. The *escaramuza* came about like life," reflected Arturo Ruiz Loredo, who rode on that first children's team with Camacho when he was six years old. He's now in his late 60s and trains horses. Ruiz Loredo remembers that the term *escaramuza* was taken from the Bible. "My father got the name *escaramuza* from a paragraph in the Bible where it mentions a war between Jews and other tribes, where it says that before warring they were '*escaramuzeando*' (skirmishing). The *escaramuza* became an exclusively female endeavor when the three boys left the team to learn the various sports of *charrería*. Other girls quickly took their places, and generations of horsewomen have developed the *escaramuza* into what it is today: a fantastic show of horsemanship that

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unites Mexico's charro families and just may have saved *charrería* from decline.

Female riders who rode on the early *escaramuza* teams, from the 1960s to the 1980s, wanted their sport to be included in *charrería*. Cristina Álvarez Malo remembers when she would wait until the end of a *charreada* to perform with her team, sometimes very late into the night.

But for the women to have a specific slot for competition at a rodeo, the all-male council of the Mexican *Charrería* Federation needed to declare the *escaramuza* an official *charrería* sport. Times were beginning to change for the nation's pastime.

"For us women, it was very important, first to be integrated as athletes, with our families, men, society, with the sport," reflected Álvarez Malo, an *escaramuza* rider since the 1960s and today a team trainer and *escaramuza* judge. "Then to demonstrate to ourselves that we could do it. Little by little we won ground."

One of the strongest supporters of the *escaramuza* who sat on the federation council arrived in the late 1980s: *charro* Enrique Pascual López. He believed his nation's beloved sport was losing ground to sports like soccer and tennis. Pascual wanted arenas full of families instead of half full of "machos" shooting off their guns. "As long as that is going on, no woman was going to come, much less bring her children," Pascual said. He was sure that if women and children were included in the competition, *charrería* would rise to a new level.

Pascual was elected president of the federation in 1988 and used his position to push for a vote on the status of the women's sport. One *charro* was so opposed to the idea that Pascual got a death threat. But most men supported the measure, and one year before his tenure was over, the council



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voted to include the *escaramuza* and assigned it a spot in the rodeo line-up: after *colas*, or tails. The age of the *escaramuza* had come. It was 1991.

"If I hadn't made these changes, first the women and second the children, today the same old men would still be directing their teams, not accepting change, and *charrería* would be in decline," Pacual said.

Today, thousands of female riders from hundreds of *escaramuza* teams perform across Mexico and the southern U.S. The *escaramuza* forever changed the face of Mexico's national sport by uniting men, women, and children in one of the country's oldest traditions. The most impressive time to witness these horsewomen in action is during an *escaramuza* fair, where dozens of teams perform all day. Arenas are packed with families and friends to cheer on the teams, and tasty food and live music are in good supply.

The *escaramuza* just might be the key to raising *charrería*'s visibility within Mexico and abroad. Not only is it good, clean, affordable fun for Mexican families, but foreign tourists are wowed when they see women riding sidesaddle in billowing dresses that hark back to the "Adelita," the icon of Mexico's revolutionary woman soldiers. Watching an *escaramuza* perform feels like a step back in time, but Mexico's women on horseback are pushing *charrería* forward. ♣M



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