



Fort Worth, Texas's Cowboy and Western Art Traditions

[Fort Worth Texas](#) - Images by [Lee Foster](#)

by Lee Foster

Texas occupies an enormous place both on the map and in the popular imagination.

But where does a visitor go today to find the real and true Texas? And how does that Texas fit into a larger vision of the West, as the landscape and its people inform our thinking?

Fort Worth, still affectionately known as Cowtown, presents some answers in this search. Fort Worth was the origin for a defining element in Texas and Western history—the herding of large numbers of longhorn cattle up the Chisholm Trail to Kansas. Today Fort Worth nurtures this heritage in its restored Sundance Square

area downtown, in the Stockyards district where the cattle drives started, and in the reflective perspective of outstanding museums of Western art, named for the collectors, Sid Richardson, Amon Carter, and Kay Kimbell.

A visitor trying to comprehend Texas and the West can divide Fort Worth into three convenient segments, each easily walkable in itself: Sundance Square; the Stockyards; and the Museums.

Sundance Square

Downtown Fort Worth centers around a handsome, restored district, known as Sundance Square. Here the romantic bank robbers Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid carried out some of their capers. Today, the buildings have been enthusiastically restored.

Overlooking the two-square-block area stands a dominating symbol of law and order, the Tarrant County Courthouse, administering justice from its regal pink-granite, Renaissance-revival eminence.

The premier restored building is the round-turreted Knights of Pythias Castle Hall, home of a 19th-century fraternal order.

A trompe l'oeil wall mural, *The Chisholm Trail*, sets the tone of the district by depicting a cattle drive on the Chisholm Trail, which ran through downtown Fort Worth. This mural, by artist Richard Haas, is on the side of the Jett Building.

The Firehouse Number One building contains a museum telling the 150-year-old story of Fort Worth, especially that of citizen Amon Carter, a friend of Franklin Roosevelt. Carter brought numerous aerospace and military contracts to Fort Worth companies.

Several good restaurants and bars occupy the restored buildings. Try Risky's for tasty barbecue.

A major hotel, the Renaissance Worthington, anchors the Sundance project, providing four-star service adjacent to the restored area. The hotel spent \$30,000 to

support the Texas A&M development of a strain of the Bluebonnet wildflower, which hotel employees then seeded along Texas highways as a visual amenity in the spring.

Near Sundance Square the downtown also presents intriguing urban amenities. Occasionally a seasoned traveler happens upon a fresh idea for the use of urban space. One such innovation in Fort Worth is the elaborate five-acre Water Gardens, south of Sundance Square. The Water Gardens are an impressive display of cascading, recirculated water in a mammoth concrete amphitheater and adjacent meditative pools, providing a hospitable outdoor space for lunch on stone terraces.

Every city, as time goes on, faces the need to revitalize its downtown. Fort Worth accomplished this task admirably in its Sundance Square, both in establishing a theme name and in controlling the brick restorations. Public-spirited old-money families, such as the Bass brothers, donated funds to repave the streets in the original brick motif. The early, Texas-Cowtown west of downtown Fort Worth could have been bulldozed rather than restored, but the city fathers possessed the vision to nurture their past.

The Stockyards

The Stockyards, north of Sundance Square, was and still is a center for shipping cattle and other livestock. The oldest pens go back to 1887. Today the number of cattle sold here in the weekly auctions has diminished, but at its peak year, in 1920, millions of cattle went to slaughter from here each year. Prior to the rail era, cowboys paused here for sociable encounters before driving the longhorns north along the Chisholm Trail to Kansas. Be sure to see T. D. Kelsey's bronze sculpture of a longhorn cattle drive, called *Texas Gold*.

The longhorn is a special breed of cattle. Longhorns developed as wild cattle that escaped from early mission herds. Longhorns learned to browse, like deer, and acquired immunities, especially to ticks that cause Texas Fever. However, the longhorn's slim body and lean meat make it less appealing than other breeds to the feedlot cattle producers of today.

On a Friday night the honky-tonks at the Stockyards, such as the White Elephant,

come alive with real and pretend cowboys dressed in their felt hats, pearl-snap shirts, Wrangler jeans, and leather boots. The locals gather to toss back a few chilled, longneck bottles of the national beer of Texas, Lone Star. Crowds kick up their heels to a variety of bands and balladeers.

The most famous honky-tonk of all at the Stockyards, called Billy Bob's Texas, was once locked up in bankruptcy court. Though this largest bar in the U.S. was indeed profitable, some other deals of proprietor Billy Bob Barnett were not, and creditors closed down Billy Bob's. However, the institution could not long be suppressed and it soon reopened.

The Stockyards honors with a bronze statue the famous black cowboy, Bill Pickett. Pickett was an expert bulldogger, who developed a style of (yes!) biting the lip of the steer to immobilize it. Pickett's style of bulldogging was, appropriately, called "lipping."

You can lodge at the Stockyards in the Stockyards Hotel, with rooms decorated according to Cowboy, Native American, Mountain Man, or Victorian motifs. Earlier the Stockyards Hotel was a bunk-style residence for real cowboys, with shared rooms going for \$2.50 per person, with a bath down the hall. Today the lobby sets the mood with its cowhide chairs and deer-antlered mirrors. A visit to the Stockyards Hotel would be incomplete without spending some time sitting in a saddle-barstool at the Booger Red's Saloon, knocking back a couple of chilled brews.

The biggest annual event and party is the Livestock Show each spring. Out of deference to the public's current abhorrence with the word "fat," the name of the show changed from Fat Stock Show to Livestock Show and Rodeo.

All things considered, the Stockyards ranks as one of the important historical points in Texas and the West. On a weekend evening, it is said locally, possibly more people have more fun here than in any comparable three-block area of the country.

A restored rail line, the Tarantula, links the stockyards with other area attractions. You ride in vintage passenger cars, pulled by a 1901 Baldwin steam locomotive.

At the Stockyards or at other locations in Fort Worth, as expected, a steak restaurant is the wise culinary choice. One of the best is The Cattlemen's, where your fillet mignon or strip steak may be served by a career waitress, who will tell you forthrightly not to ruin a steak with steak sauce.

Another notable Fort Worth eatery is the famous several-generations Mexican restaurant, Joe T. Garcia's.

In the best Fort Worth tradition, if you ask a mover and shaker around here what his profession is, you are likely to get the answer, "I make deals."

If a visitor delights in language, the Fort Worth version of the American tongue entertains with some musical nuances. Fort Worth's local name is "Foat Wuth." To the locals, the "I" has been replaced with "Ah", as in "Ahm a friendly Foat Wuth cowboy."

To the outsider, the friendliness and pride of Texans is apparent. Pride can be seen in the way the American Flag and the Texas Flag wave side by side, rather than the former positioned above the latter. Texans are fond of the motto, "Anyone can become an American; but Texans must be born in Texas."

The premier Western-look store in the region, M. L. Leddy's Boots & Saddlery, can be found at the Stockyards. Leddy's and several other Stockyards stores sell the full range of cowboy paraphernalia. At Leddy's a visitor can see bootmakers or hat-creasers at work. To the discerning eye, in former days, the crease in a hat told a man's line of work.

The Richardson, Carter, and Kimbell Museums

The outstanding art museums in Fort Worth, especially their extensive collections of cowboy and Western art, are sufficient reason in themselves for any visitor to put Fort Worth on a future trips list. Fort Worth boasts, in its combined three museums, one of the strongest art collections in an American city.

Downtown, in the Sundance Square area, the extraordinary Sid Richardson Collection of Western Art shows this oilman's 52 Frederic Remington (1861-1909) and Charles Russell (1864-1926) paintings. Richardson focused his considerable resources, between 1942 and 1959, on collecting the finest purchasable works of these two men. Among choice paintings are Remington's luminous *The Buffalo Runners*, capturing the movement of horses and the light on the plains, and Russell's *First Wagon Tracks*, a poignant look at Native Americans wondering about their initial view of wagon ruts. The ruts portend a destruction of their way of life, yet they can't possibly perceive the consequences.

West of downtown, in a designated cultural area, two further museums augment the Fort Worth art story.

The Amon Carter Museum continues the theme of Western art with its priceless collections of Remington, Russell, and others. Here a visitor sees detailed Remington bronzes of horses and cowboys, frozen in minute detail. Although Remington and Russell rank high as interpreters and definers of the western landscape, other important visual documenters figure in the collection. For example, here a viewer can see Albert Bierstadt's magnificent *Sunrise: Yosemite Valley* and Thomas Moran's *Mists in Yellowstone*.

Anyone with a serious interest in American art will eventually want to visit these two museums.

The third, and by no means the least, of the museums is the Kimbell Art Museum, developed by a Fort Worth businessman, Mr. Kay Kimbell. The Kimbell Museum building is itself a monument of architectural art, employing arched concrete walls and extensive natural light. The Kimbell contains some American art, but is stronger in its other collections. Well-chosen pieces of the highest quality in all ages of art were purchased by the Kimbell Museum, whose budget was once said to be second only to the Getty Museum in California. At the Kimbell, be sure to see Francisco Goya's *The Matador Pedro Romero*, a sensitive look at a young man who was one of the greatest matadors of all times, mastering 6,000 bulls without a scratch. The Kimbell purchased Caravaggio's *The Cardsharps* for a reputed \$15 million, making it a Texas-size acquisition.

Fort Worth also boasts some only-in-Texas art works, such as a bronze sculpture outside the Amon Carter Exhibition Hall of the famous bucking horse, Midnight. During Midnight's years on the rodeo circuit (1923-1933), only nine men succeeded in riding this bucking horse.

Near the Carter and Kimbell museums stretches an elaborate botanic garden and greenbelt. The Japanese Garden offers a meditative setting. Many good picnic spots in the parks invite a traveler to enjoy an outdoor lunch.

Fort Worth vs Dallas

Fort Worth, as a travel destination, shares an airport with Dallas, but the two cities differ sharply. Humorist Will Rogers expressed the relationship from a Fort Worth perspective when he said, "Fort Worth is where the West begins; Dallas is where the East peters out."

Fort Worth legend, Amon Carter, used to take a brown paper bag lunch on business trips to Dallas so that he wouldn't spend any money there. Carter reportedly opened all his speeches with, "Texas forever! Fort Worth, now and hereafter!" Today, Fort Worth drives a Ford pickup; Dallas a BMW. In Dallas they drive 10 miles faster and clench their teeth. Fort Worth's archetype is the Cowboy; Dallas' image is that of wheeler-dealer J. R. Ewing of past TV fame. Fort Worth is a down-home, Wrangler-wearing, slow-lane fellow; Dallas is a computerized yuppie in a pink Polo shirt, with a yellow tie, closing big financial deals.

A traveler in search of the real and authentic Texas, as part of a larger exploration of the West, will find some answers in Fort Worth. One well-chosen public relations motto of Fort Worth has been "The way you want Texas to be." Like all states in the West, Texas competes for visitors, perhaps hoping that the cattle drive north up the Chisholm Trail, in the past, will reverse itself as a tourist drive south into Texas.

A cowboy reality in the Stockyards and a reflective look at the West in American art flourish side by side in Fort Worth.

Fort Worth: If You Go

For further information, contact the Fort Worth Convention and Visitors Bureau, www.fortworth.com.