

One Heart

Artists of the gaucho and the buckaroo.

Words by Rod Miller. Art courtesy of Carlos Montefusco and Jeff Wolf.

Carlos Montefusco is an artist, a painter known as “the Charlie Russell of Argentina.” Much of his art depicts, honors, and pays tribute to the gaucho—the cowboy of his country—and what he wears does the same.

“I share the gaucho legacy,” Carlos says, “and the clothing represents the dignity and the freedom of the men.” He was not raised among the gauchos of the Argentine pampas. But during his youth in Avellaneda, near Buenos Aires, Carlos felt an affinity for the life. “Anytime I had the chance, I went to the countryside. Something told me that was where I could find the real culture of my country.”

When he became a man, Carlos found a way to live among the gauchos. “I had never thought of becoming an artist, so I studied to become a technical engineer, similar to an

agricultural engineer, which helped me to move to the countryside. I worked there for many years. I have been in contact with people from the countryside for more than 35 years now. And I am one of them now. My biggest pleasure is to go and ride horses.”

Art eventually won the day, and Carlos’ paintings and illustrations of the gauchos, Indians, livestock, and wildlife in open country earned him a reputation—and a living—in Argentina. His paintings are collected and displayed internationally, and he has illustrated books, including a classic Argentinian work translated into 20 languages. “Martin Fierro,” the story of a legendary gaucho, is written by José Hernández. Carlos wrote and illustrated “*Brochero: arreando almas...al cielo*” (“Brochero: Herding souls...toward heaven”), the life story of the gaucho priest, St. Jose Gabriel del Rosario Brochero.

Despite the acclaim and success earned with a paintbrush, Carlos felt a deeper need. “I feel like there is something inside of me that tells me I have to make sculptures. I feel it is another means to translate the legacy of the gaucho.”

And that desire is what brings Carlos to the United States. He has visited twice. His first trip, a decade ago, was facilitated by C.J. Hadley, editor of *RANGE* magazine. Hearing of Carlos’ desire to learn to sculpt, he arranged his enrollment in a workshop taught by noted buckaroo artist Jeff Wolf at his studio in Utah.

“Ten years ago, I take a trip for the class with Jeff. I arrived to Utah, then we go to the ranch, to the desert,” Carlos says. “I learned this culture, and I learned the legacy of the vaquero, the cowboy, the buckaroo. And then I take a trip to Oklahoma, to the cowboy



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LEFT: A gaucho chouses the herd—and the birds—in a Carlos Montefusco painting. BELOW: A buckaroo goes to work in “Beans for Breakfast, Broncs for Dessert,” a sculpture by Jeff Wolf. OPPOSITE: Gaucho artist Carlos Montefusco (left) and buckaroo sculptor Jeff Wolf.

museum.” At the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, he immersed himself in the bronze sculptures of Charles M. Russell, Frederic Remington, John Coleman, T.D. Kelsey, and others.

“I saw in a room at the museum that was dedicated to the history of the ranch, a map on the floor. It told the same story as in Argentina—but cattle and the cowboy in the United States spread from south to north, out of Mexico. In Argentina, the gaucho was born when the Spanish carried the first cows to the pampas, coming south through Paraguay. The first people who did the work were descendants of the Indians and the Spanish. Those were the first gauchos.”

Carlos visited the United States again recently and spent time with his fast friend, his “brother,” Jeff Wolf. Despite many obstacles, he still pursues his dream of creating works of art in bronze.

Jeff says: “Carlos’ biggest setback is the foundries. There is no foundry in Argentina with the skill and quality to cast bronze sculptures. He’s got the talent and the ability to create the sculpture; the difficulty is getting it produced. Apparently, there just hasn’t been an interest in three-dimensional artwork in Argentina.”

Other difficulties in Carlos’ home country include the absence of education or training in sculpture, a lack of necessary supplies and materials, and the expense of obtaining them.

Still, Carlos pursues the dream, and he and Jeff maintain contact. Despite the distance, there is an affinity between the gaucho artist and the buckaroo sculptor.

“Our work is probably different in a lot of ways, but it’s very similar because we want to capture the movement, the story of the piece, the expression, and knowing the animals,” Jeff says. “We want other people to feel what we

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“I don’t understand English, but I understand Jeff,” Carlos says. “I think that Jeff is a true vaquero, a cowboy, a buckaroo, and that is why he can translate the feelings, and the daily things of life of the cowboy. The little things of day to day.”

Besides art, the gaucho and the cowboy



carry on deep discussions—as deep as translations from language to language allow—on the history and cultures they depict in their work.

Carlos says there is no exact definition of the Argentinian gaucho, owing to regional differences. “We have gauchos who are descendants of Wales and Scotland in Patagonia, who live in snow, and work with the sheep and the horses. In Corrientes, in the north bordering Brazil, it is similar to Florida. They have a lot of water, they have jaguars and crocodiles—*yacarés*—and the language of the gauchos is the Indian language, the Guarani. Also in the north, on the border with Bolivia and Chile, are other gauchos, gauchos of the mountains and high desert. The horses are small. The landscape is different—a lot of brush and trees with thorns. To protect themselves, the gaucho’s clothes are leather. In Buenos Aires Province, in the pampas, the life is soft. The grass is green and there is a lot of grass and a lot of water. There are gauchos with Spanish and Italian blood. And many, many Basques—and for this, the gaucho on the pampas wears the Basque hat, the berét, or *boina*. In each part of Argentina, the gaucho is different—the saddle is different,



ABOVE: Carlos often uses exaggeration to enhance action and add humor to his paintings, as in this depiction of a gaucho in a horseback storm.

the horse is different, and the grandfathers, the ancestors, of the people are different.”

It is much the same in the United States. “From region to region,” Jeff says, “we have different ways of handling cattle, different styles of roping, different saddles, differences in how we dress to do the work. Where I grew up here in Utah, cowboys use tools and techniques gathered from all over. But when I worked on big outfits in Nevada, I was immersed in the buckaroo way of doing things. I learned differences in horsemanship and tack, learned to rope with a rawhide riata, and other ways of doing other things.”

Jeff has also worked cattle in Wyoming, Colorado, Texas, and the Southeastern states. “There are great cowboys and cattlemen in every region. Their gear, horses, and the way they work cattle is conducive to their region. None better than the other, just different in the way they get things done.”

Both countries also face challenges that



LEFT: The indigenous people of their countries are important subjects to both artists. Jeff’s sculpture “Serenade” captures the romance of courtship.

threaten rural life. “In Argentina, and I think in the United States, there is a lack of contact between people from the countryside and people from the city,” Carlos says. “So I found out that through humor in my paintings I could help people from the city know our culture. That is why I always like to tell stories in my paintings. I think people have a deep respect for the cowboy and for the gaucho. But lately, some young people, they want to turn the world upside down and they see the gaucho as an enemy.”



LEFT: The pleasures of keeping company with horses and dogs are part of the stories told in Jeff's sculpture "Good Time, Sunshine and Friends."

BELOW: Carlos' love story, where the dog keeps a wary eye on a capybara and the horse listens with interest to sweet nothings while Mamá looks on from a distance.

He tells of La Rural, an enormous annual exhibition in Argentina where gauchos, horse trainers, cattle raisers, and others display their work, their talents, their lives. There are horsemanship trials, arts and crafts exhibits, music, food—much like the fairs and rodeos here in the United States. “Sadly, one recent exhibition was disrupted by violent protesters,” Carlos says. “These young kids know nothing about this life. They do not know that it is thanks to this work that they live.”

Such attitudes and outbursts are not foreign here in the United States. Through their art, both Carlos and Jeff hope to bridge those gaps, to allay fears born out of ignorance, and to establish connections between urban and rural ways of life. “The world of the gaucho is very rich,” Carlos says. “I need to translate this to the city.”

Jeff agrees: “The cowboy is iconic in our country. But people’s perceptions, their love of the cowboy, are based on romantic myths and don’t always translate to respect for the working cowboy, the rancher. Through art depicting life in the West, whether it’s cowboys or livestock or wildlife, we hope to convey the beauty and the magic of it all to those who may not ever have the chance to experience it firsthand.”

Carlos Montefusco and Jeff Wolf. Two artists. Two cultures. Two countries. One heart. ■

Rod Miller, four-time winner of the Western Writers of America Spur Award, writes fiction, poetry, and history about the West. Visit him online at writerRodMiller.com and writerRodMiller.blogspot.com.

