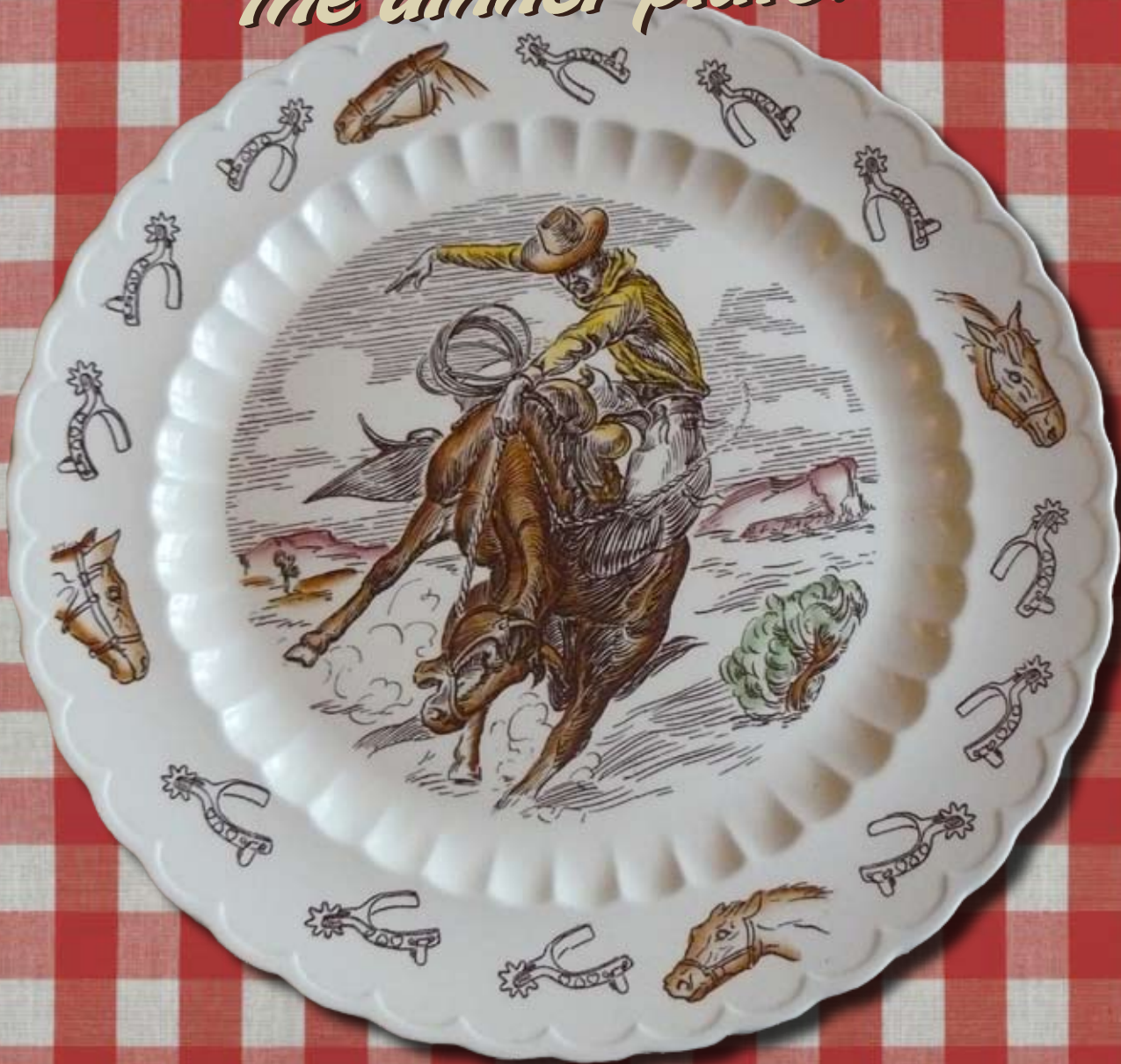


*Out of the chute and onto
the dinner plate!*



THE HORSE IN WESTERN DINNERWARE

By Corinne Joy Brown

As

a collector of Western vintage and modern dinnerware, it's not uncommon to find an eclectic mix of colorful pieces on my dinner table when I entertain. It's especially fun

to mix and match manufacturers at one place setting. Some might be surprised to find images of bucking broncos on a dinner plate, or Trigger, (Roy Rodger's famous steed,) rearing high, with his famous singing cowboy astride. My collection embraces all these images and more, especially more scenes of horses, just one of fifteen repeating motifs that in my opinion, most clearly represent the American West, bringing history and heritage as well as the majesty of the horse, into our homes.

Long before I started to write "Come and Get It! The Saga of Western Dinnerware," recently released by Johnson Books, one of Colorado's premier publishers, I'd already gotten hooked on horses as the subject of two-and three-dimensional art. Part of that passion came from my own background as a student of fine art and art education, with graduate work in art history. Yet another came from my love affair with equines that started when I was just a kid, raised on television Westerns and popular series like "My Friend Flicka."

The first horse I owned came into my life when I was just seven years old and stayed until I was seventeen. My latest just passed away after a twenty-three year relationship. Horses have filled my days and even my dreams.

Over the last two decades, I've been collecting equine art of all kinds, including sculptures and paintings, folk art and photography, drawings, etchings, and more. It's no coincidence that some of the first pieces of dinnerware that caught my eye had horses on them, too.

The history of Western dinnerware, created first for commercial use and later for residential, begins with highly narrative scenes of the old West and has its roots as far back as the 1940s. The designs back then were inspired in part by Western film and its popularity among viewers. Later, in the 1950s, as television brought cowboys into our living room, home cooking moved out of the kitchen and into the backyard with the advent of the mobile barbecue grill. Suddenly, families could share in the cookout and grill their own food almost anywhere. That rustic campfire of cowboys, eating out on the open range, certainly wasn't very far away. Manufacturers answered the call and Western-themed dinnerware was born.

Examples of early ware from this era display numerous versions of that same scene--the camp cook and cowboys gathered round the fire. As the demand for product grew, more and more patterns with these evocative scenes and other were created by various manufacturers to court the restaurant, hotel and dude ranch customer, and eventually, came home to our tables as well.

One manufacturer in particular, Wallace China of California, reigned supreme for a period of some 20 years, from the late Forties through



Opposite page: Superb drawing full of action, this bucking bronco platter is by Vernon Kilns, ca1963, from the collection Winchester '73 (also known as Frontier Days). Artist Paul Davidson; decal is signed and hand-colored under the glaze.

Top plate above: Chuck wagon scene, art by Paul Davidson, also made by Vernon Kilns, Winchester '73 Collection, ca1963.

Middle plate above: "Horse Sale" by Vernon Kilns for Winchester '73 Collection, hand-colored under the glaze.

Bottom plate above: Holman China, made in Frisco Texas, ca1948 Scene of bucking horse and brands; part of a larger line of outdoor cooking utensils made by a small company that lasted just through the Fifties.



the early Sixties and left us a treasure trove of beautiful ware designed by a successful California artist named Till Goodan. He had been a real cowboy at one time and could capture the action of the rodeo like no other. In fact, he was the first illustrator of the American Rodeo Association rules book. Those same drawings later ended up as beautiful decals, hand-colored under the glaze, on Wallace's popular collection called "Rodeo," one of four groups in a series known as "Westward Ho."

Another great artist of the Fifties was Richard Davidson who created a collection of dinnerware for Vernon Kilns, another venerable California pottery, now long out of business. The collection was created to help launch the major motion picture film made in 1950 called "Winchester '73" starring Shelly Winters and James Stewart.

Davidson's work reflects a level of draftsmanship and passion for the old West second to none. No two plates had the same design in a place setting; every serving piece or accessory was different from the other. The decals were all one color, put down in a sepia glaze on a white background, and additional colors were hand painted under the glaze, one design at a time. The artist's very large chop plate, or round serving platter with a bucking horse, is one of my very favorites.

Other designs I cherish are airbrushed images of horses on vintage restaurant ware; multicolored glaze paintings straight out of the Old West on collector plates; hand-thrown, raku-fired airbrush designs by contemporary potters like the Norbys of Wyoming, and the list goes on. My favorite changes daily.

My original interest in amassing what is now over 400 examples of Western dinnerware was primarily to see how an idea evolves and

changes. In this case, that includes the iconography or illustrations that depict the changing view of ourselves and our relationship to the American West, as well as our view of it. Various images reoccur and fade over time.

Many of the plates I own are vintage examples from the Forties and Fifties; some were made in the Seventies and Nineties, and some are being produced today. Between them, the horse prevails as one of the most endearing images of all. Most often, it's shown as a bronco, then as a cowboy's trusted friend and companion, and finally, as the wild embodiment of freedom it once was, and hopefully, will always be.





Opposite left plate: Hand-thrown serving platter with air-brush, wild horse round-up, designed and made by Thom and Kim Norby of Buelah, Wyoming. (Norby Studios Ltd.)

Opposite right plate: Dinner plate from a collection called "Montana Traditions," made by Montana Lifestyles, based on Norby's artwork, part of a 16 piece place setting. "Catch Me If You Can" Exceptional collector's plate with gilded edges made by Royal Cornwall, England, 1982, designed by Rosemary Calder, from the series "Memories of the Western Prairies"

Whether you're a collector of plate ware or Western Americana, few can resist the beauty and integrity of these heartfelt designs, transforming everyday china and pottery into works of art. It's fortunate that a host of new producers see fit to revive the tradition today and not only reproduce some of the classics, but are creating the collectibles of tomorrow.

"Come and Get It" attempts to selectively tell the history of this niche industry and why it matters. It's a brand new view of the West as seen through a medium of material culture. For more information about the book, or how to obtain a copy, please go to www.corinnejoybrown.com or www.Amazon.com. Meanwhile, keep your eyes open. It might be a church bazaar, a flea market, or a Western collectibles show, but I've learned that there's a treasure around every corner. If it's got a horse on it--please let me know.

Colorado native, freelance writer and novelist Corinne Joy Brown has spent 15 years exploring the American West through words. Horses, both in art and on the ground, are her passion. On staff of three Western magazines, she's also the author of two Western novels, one recently optioned for film. Her latest book on Western dinnerware (*Come and Get It!-The Saga of Western Dinnerware*) is an archive of image, history and anecdote that beckons the collector in us all.



Above left: Adobe Ware by Syracuse China, heavy weight tan stoneware made for restaurant and hotel use, circa 1950s.

Above top: Steak platter, White oval platter with cowboy roping a Longhorn, made by Hartstone Pottery, for the collection called Sky Ranch, 1980s.

Above middle: Saddling the Wild Horse, Photo decal transfer to bone china, featuring the work of L.A. Huffman, noted early 20th century American photographer. Image was originally hand-colored by the artist and is part of a larger collection depicting the frontier West. Made by WesternWare, Bozeman, Montana.

Above bottom: Pendleton China "Let Er Buck!" Group shown is part of a commemorative 16 piece place setting featuring the iconic logo of the Pendleton Round Up Rodeo.