

Irving Norman, Redwoods, and *Refugees*

South of San Francisco about thirty miles, nestled between the forested hills and the wide Pacific, sits historic Half Moon Bay. The town retains a surprisingly rural nature today despite its relative proximity to San Francisco and Silicon Valley, which sprawls on the other side of the hills to the east. Visitors are drawn there by the beaches or the legendary waves at Mavericks that challenge intrepid surfers; by whale watching, as stately grays make their annual migration close to shore; by the October Pumpkin Festival, where stupendous specimens attest to the rich soil and the salubrious climate; or simply by the landscape's charms.

Poet Robinson Jeffers, who made his home in a similar landscape farther to the south, outside Carmel, often wrote of nature's charms on the central California coast, where

*heavy with redwood, the slopes drop seaward,
Headlong convexities of forest, drawn in together to the steep ravine.
Below, on the sea-cliff,
A lonely clearing; a little field of corn by the streamside; a roof
under spared trees. Then the ocean
Like a great stone someone has cut to a sharp edge and polished
to shining.*

(“Apology for Bad Dreams”)

In 1960 the painter Irving Norman (1906–1989) and his wife were drawn to such a landscape and moved to a rustic house tucked in a canyon uphill from Half Moon



Bay. Like Jeffers, the Normans were seeking refuge from the complexities of life in the modern metropolis. The aversion to the city developed during the artist's years in New York, Los Angeles, and later San Francisco. The Bay Area had been his home since 1940. Yet, for much of that time, he lived not in the city but in relative isolation in Sausalito, later Lagunitas, before moving to Half Moon Bay.

It was in that bucolic setting that I met Irving and Hela Norman on a 1987 visit arranged by Paul Karlstrom, longtime director of the Archives of American Art's West Coast office. Of the many pleasures a museum career provides, none is greater than the chance to visit with creative artists on their own turf; among these, I particularly treasure recollections of a day in Half Moon Bay enjoying Irving's fine art and Hela's warm hospitality. It was there that I first learned of Irving's remarkable artistic life: of his emigration from Poland to "this golden opportunity country" in 1923; of his service with the fabled Lincoln Brigade, fighting Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War; of his passionate struggle against the multiple injustices he saw in contemporary life, a passion reflected in his art; and of that art, the work of a self-described and largely self-taught "social surrealist."

Robinson Jeffers had used the California landscape as setting and foil for "bad dreams," his dyspeptic view of human nature, urban life, and modern civilization in general. He wrote of "This coast crying out for tragedy like all beautiful places," and many of his poems are punctuated by incidents of violence, of what he called "inhumanism," presented in striking contrast to the stark beauties of coastal headlands and valleys. Irving Norman shared some of Jeffers's dark vision of modern times—of hostile urban life, the cruelties of war, a tragic human condition—although, unlike the poet, the painter rarely incorporated nature into his imagery.

The Normans' rustic home was filled with works created over nearly half a century. Remarkable drawings lay on the worktable or were tacked on the wall in a collage of personal interests: posters from the San Francisco Mime Troupe, photographs, maps, a Bruegel reproduction. The artist obligingly pulled out a number of his paintings, many of them large, taller than their diminutive maker, who wrestled them into favorable positions for us to study and photograph.

One in particular caught my eye, a work from relatively early in the artist's career: *Refugees* of 1950. Together, Irving and Hela carried the canvas to the yard, the better to admire its striking palette and peculiar forms. Across a long, dark plane near the midpoint of the canvas, a procession of grotesques marches behind haloed figures, a tall pale man and a young woman in blue astride a donkey, the Holy Family. More figures, like deformed versions of the nude warriors in the foreground of Michelangelo's *Battle of Cascina*, struggle up from the Stygian depths to join the clamor. Sharp, dark, spiky forms cram the background, an enormous destructive force whose maw threatens the fleeing refugees, a mechanical monster. Like Franco's deadly bombers that rained destruction on Spanish republicans and Lincoln Brigadiers, these instruments of death (as Hemingway wrote in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*) "move like no thing there has ever been. They move like mechanized doom."

A photograph taken on the day of our visit shows the painting flanked by the artist and his wife, each of whom had come to this country escaping war-torn Europe. In 1950 the topical motif of refugees might have taken on added importance for Irving, who

Irving Norman, *War Refugees*, 1950. Oil, 30 ¼ x 90 ¼ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Museum purchase





Irving and Hela Norman with *War Refugees*, at their home in Half Moon Bay, California, 1987

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28, Photo by Charles C. Eldredge

that year had a major painting, *Big City*, banned from exhibition at San Francisco's M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, because the picture included nude prostitutes among many more urban denizens, small details glimpsed through myriad city windows. The resulting brouhaha earned the artist unwelcome local notoriety. By the end of the decade, his suspicion of art officialdom, coupled with distaste for contemporary urban life, led to the Normans' removal to Half Moon Bay, where I encountered *Refugees* beneath the redwoods.

The painting seemed to me then—and seems to me still—an important inclusion in a collection that seeks to represent artistic achievement from across the nation. Norman's

long preoccupation with the human condition complemented that of others already in the SAAM holdings, including a large contingent of New Deal Works Progress Administration (WPA) artists, who were his contemporaries. The museum also takes pride in the strong collection of works it holds by immigrant artists who contributed so much to twentieth-century American culture. For much of his career, however, Norman was by choice not part of a community but an *isolato* whose creativity blossomed distant from urban centers and critical attention. In the SAAM collection, with its unique coverage of a broad creative landscape over generations, his work found its place early in 1988, a treasure in the national collection. And just in time, for later that year the Normans' home and studio burned to the ground, incinerating countless drawings, paintings, and the artist's files.

Following the museum's purchase of *Refugees*, the grateful artist wrote, "My aspiration was clear and simple, and that was to see all my efforts displayed . . . and hopefully they would have a humanizing effect on people." In this, Irving Norman's centennial year, that hope remains.

Katherine Manthorne

Luis Jiménez's *Vaquero* and the Trojan Horse

Vaquero, *llanero*, cowboy, *huaso*, *guaso*, *gaucho*: the terms vary across the Americas, but the man they denote is essentially the same. Cowboys are defined by the task they perform: they work cattle on horseback. Being a vaquero is more than a job; it's a way of life and a mode of expression. His most notable characteristic was restlessness, a reluctance to lay down roots. He never owned land; he seldom owned cattle. In the male-dominated societies of the cowboy or the vaquero, the quality most admired was machismo, based on physical strength, sexual prowess, loyalty, skill with a knife, and the ability to throw cattle and break horses. These men rebelled against the restraints of society and valued their freedom above all else. Their preferred habitat was the frontier that delineated civilization from wilderness.

Luis Jiménez, *Vaquero*, modeled 1980/cast 1990. Acrylic urethane, fiberglass, steel armature, 199 x 114 x 67 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of Judith and Wilbur L. Ross Jr., Anne and Ronald Abramson, Thelma and Melvin Lenkin



The flat expanses of the frontier plains imprinted similar characteristics on the cowboys wherever they were located, from Canada to Argentina. During the late nineteenth century, nations across the Western Hemisphere underwent settlement and industrialization. As the wilderness shrank, these figures rose to prominence and became cultural symbols of national importance, heroes of a lost way of life. Frederic Remington's paintings of cowboys of the United States, Juan Manuel Blanes's of the gaucho in Argentina, or James Walker's of the vaquero in Mexico all came to stand for the individualism and frontier spirit that was associated with the New World.¹

Early historians of cowboy culture emphasized the affinities of these men across the Western Hemisphere, which derived from their mutual sources in Spanish equestrian culture and the wilderness environment. Similar riding techniques and equipment, social roles, use of the horse, and types of labor prompted Edward Larocque Tinker to label the horsemen of North and South America "brothers under the skin":

Not only did they all get their original horses and cattle from Spain, but they learned about superlative horsemanship from the same source, as well as their methods of branding and handling large herds. . . . They were all molded, North and South, by the same conditions of the frontier and the cattle business imposed on them, and naturally developed the same characteristics of pride, daring, and fierce independence.²

This is a matter of historic record. Yet somehow we in the United States just don't get it. Encouraged by illustrators, painters, and filmmakers, we cling to the idea that the frontier and its denizen the cowboy belong exclusively to that imaginary known as "the American West." Enter Luis Jiménez's *Vaquero* (modeled in 1980). A cast of the giant fiberglass sculpture of his pistol-brandishing Mexican cowboy on a bucking Appaloosa was purchased by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and installed prominently at its entrance in 1990. It immediately enjoyed great popularity. And within four short years,

according to the Smithsonian Institution Task Force on Latino Issues, it had "become the symbol of the Museum."³

In his teens, Jiménez (b. 1940) apprenticed with his father, a talented neon sign maker who had entered the United States illegally in 1924 (he would later joke that he just didn't have his papers in order). After studying art at the University of Texas at Austin and in Mexico City, Jiménez moved to New York City in 1966, a time of great social and political unrest. He made a name for himself there before returning in 1971 to the Southwest, to New Mexico, where he continues to live and work. *Vaquero* was executed in his signature medium of urethane-coated fiberglass, large in scale and brash in color, with glistening surfaces. Here, as always in his work, he synthesizes popular and high art so successfully that viewers are barely aware of the merging of such diverse sources as a



Luis Jiménez at work installing *Vaquero* on the portico of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., May 1990

baroque painting by Peter Paul Rubens and a still from a John Wayne movie. Hybridity is the key to his art. So we must ask, Is this blue neo-baroque horse, as some would have it, an updated version of a Remington sculpture? Or does it share more with the Trojan horse?

Life in "El Chuco" (the local nickname for El Paso) was defined by the cross-cultural currents that pervade towns along the border between the United States and Mexico. Growing up there, Luis Jiménez would have learned to negotiate not only the alternation of English and Spanish language and expressions but also the transnational context of everything from economics and politics to clothing and food. His strongest and most characteristic work is informed by this background, which features cross-cultural sagas, heroes, and histories. Early on he addressed universal dilemmas in an Americanist guise in such works as *American Dream* (1969) and *Man on Fire* (1969). Later multigure tableaux such as *Honky Tonk* (1997) and *Fiesta Dancers* (1996) celebrate the joy and pathos of the human condition, cast in a southwestern locale. In between, his social and historic consciousness surfaced more insistently in works such as the poignant, personal *Border Crossing*, which depicts a man, woman, and child making the clandestine journey that hundreds of thousands of Mexicans have made to El Norte. *Southwest Pietà* represents an ancient Mexican myth of Popocatepetl holding his dead love Ixtacihuatl in his lap, an original statement on *mestizaje*, or the mixed race, that populates the Americas, suggested by the Spanish features of the male Popocatepetl and the indigenous appearance of his lover. *Vaquero* cannot be read in such explicit narrative terms.⁴ Instead here Jiménez parallels the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, who subversively integrated elements of his Chinese and African heritage into such avant-garde canvases as *The Jungle* (1943). As Lam explained:

*I wanted with all my heart to paint the drama of my country, but by thoroughly expressing the Negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic arts of the blacks. In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spew forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, disturb the dreams of the exploiters.*⁵

Jiménez set up his cowboy in the nation's capital, where it refuses to be ignored, but insists on a reassessment of the visual and cultural history of the United States within the trans-American spirit embodied in his *Vaquero*. Like him, he is *un hijo de la frontera*, a son of the frontier.

Notes

- 1 Katherine Manthorne, "'Brothers under the Skin': Blanes's Gauchos and the Delineation of the Frontier Types of the American West," in *The Art of Juan Manuel Blanes* (New York: Fundación Bunge y Born, Americas Society, 1994), 151–200.
- 2 Edward Larocque Tinker, "The Centaurs of the Americas," in *Centaurs of Many Lands* (London: J. A. Allen, 1964), 50–51.
- 3 Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art: Inside/Outside the Master's House* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1998), 185.
- 4 Charles Dee Mitchell, "A Baroque Popularism," *Art in America*, March 1999, 100–105.
- 5 Quoted in Valerie Fletcher, *Four Latin American Pioneers: Rivera, Torres-García, Lam, Matta* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum, 1992), 179–81.