

## COWBOY COLLECTIBLES

*A Western antiques dealer tells you how to decorate your home with spurs, saddles, and chaps.*

Everyone knows cowboys ride, rope, and rodeo. But it's pretty rare to find one who decorates.

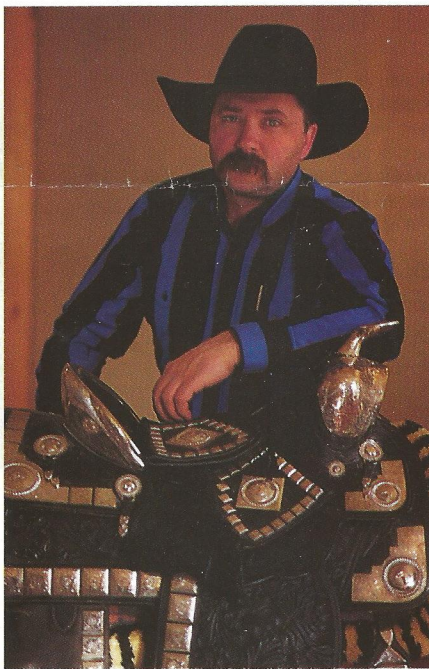
Brian Lebel, one of the top cowboy-collectibles dealers in the country and owner of Old West Antiques in Cody, Wyoming, does just that. By displaying a pair of G.S. Garcia spurs, fuchsia woolly chaps, and a weathered Stetson, Brian can turn modern-day homes into turn-of-the-century bunkhouses.

Since the early 1900s, Westerners have hung their worn-out chaps and sweat-stained cowboy hats on walls, turned old stirrups into napkin holders, converted bridle bits into toilet-paper holders, and used branding irons as candlesticks. Today, designers continue the tradition, adding cowpoke pizzazz with pieces of cowboy gear.

All you need to decorate with cowboy gear is a passion for collecting, an active imagination, and a few finishing nails for hanging your treasures. Whether you fashion curtain tiebacks from spurs or stack bookshelves with old saddle blankets, you'll find dozens of ways to display your cowboy trappings.

Although some collectors fill every niche and cranny with cowboy gear, others decorate only one or two rooms.

A back hall or a mudroom easily converts to a barnlike tack room with bridles, harnesses, and a couple of 10-gallon hats interspersed with your own outdoor gear.



**BRIAN LABEL (ABOVE), ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S TOP COWBOY-COLLECTIBLES DEALERS, STOCKS HIS STORE WITH AN ASSORTMENT OF COWBOY GEAR (LEFT).**

Guest baths easily rope in roundup whimsy with framed Wild West show scarves or covers of dime novels and Western sheet music hung on the walls. Dens and kids' rooms call out for Western romance—secure a saddle to a stand in either room for kid-size seating, run a pegboard around the top of a wall for displaying ropes, or weigh down a set of mismatched cowboy boots for bookends.

Brian suggests beginners start their cowboy decorating projects with spurs. "Hang them on a wall, put them on a pair of boots and throw them on the floor, or use them as paperweights."

Chaps are one of the most decorative cowboy collectibles because of their bright colors and intricate designs. They look great looped on a nail or carefully hung on the wall to show off fancy leatherwork, fringe, or conchos. Some collectors just sling their chaps over a chair or dangle them from a saddle horn.

"And, there's nothing like a saddle to give a Western feel to any place," Brian states. "Saddles look great when they're set on a porch, hung over a loft railing, or propped on a stand."

Try creating a cowboy-collectibles collage. Choose a wall or a corner of a room that's begging for style. Take a pair of chaps, a set of spurs, a snazzy rodeo shirt, and an old lariat and craft a bunkhouse-style wall arrangement.

### COLLECTING THE GEAR

"The nice part about collecting cowboy gear is that anybody can get involved because the merchandise is priced in everyone's range," says Brian. "As long as you buy something you like, you can't go wrong. Cowboy gear is one of the only real things we can collect that is truly American."

In recent years, the demand for early

# Design Elements



cowboy collectibles, dating from 1860 to 1940, has exceeded the supply. High-end items such as early California spurs and Buffalo Bill memorabilia sell for top dollar, but Brian says the beginner can still find a few bargains.

"Even the high-end items aren't unreasonable," he says. "While \$20,000 for a pair of fine California spurs, handmade by an artist between 1890 and 1900, might sound like a lot, compare that to furniture, baseball cards, and pottery from the same era that are selling for four, five, and six times that."

Dealing in cowboy collectibles for 15 years, Brian opened his store in 1988 because there wasn't a place for the average enthusiast to buy real cowboy gear.

Today, reputable dealers and cowboy-collectibles shows market old cowboy gear. Before you buy, research your favorite collectible, work with dealers you trust, and attend auctions and shows.

To give the collector a place to start, Brian put together a list of some of the most popular cowboy collectibles.

## JINGLING SPURS

Buying spurs is a fairly inexpensive way to jump into the cowboy market.

"A person can buy a pair of well-

MOVIE POSTERS AND A RODEO GAL'S GAUNTLETS, FRINGED SKIRT, AND SCARF BRING THE FLAMBOYANCE OF WILD WEST SHOWS TO HOMES ACROSS THE COUNTRY. SHOTGUN, WOOLLY, AND BATWING CHAPS LINE UP ON BRIAN'S WALL (RIGHT).

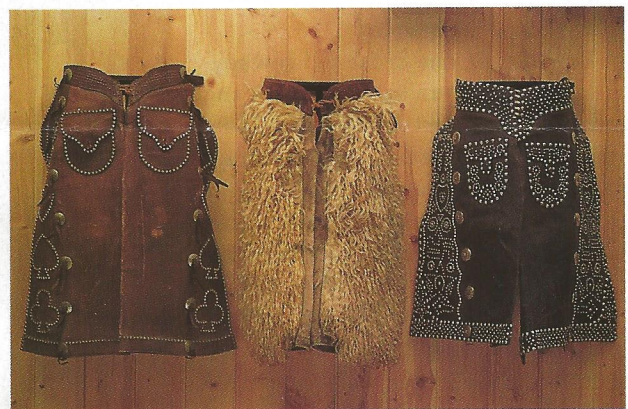
made, unmarked spurs for \$100 or \$200," says Brian. "Five years ago, spurs that sold for \$100 now sell from around \$500 to \$800."

Most spur aficionados try to find spurs crafted between 1890 and 1930. Brian says large 1920s Texas-style spurs such as those by Kelly Brothers and McCheseny are hot collectibles. A pair of Kelly Brothers spurs runs anywhere from \$500 to \$3,000. California-style spurs by companies like G.S. Garcia and L.D. Stone sell for \$1,000 and up.

## BATWINGS, SHOTGUNS, AND WOOLLIES

Cowboys wear chaps to protect their pants and legs from rope burns, barbed wire, and the thorny brush. There are three types of collectible chaps: shotguns, batwings, and woollies.

The plainest of the three, shotgun chaps have straight legs and are the choice of the working cowboy. Batwings are often finely tooled leather adorned



with feathers, conchos, leather, and buckin' broncos painted by C.M. Russell.

But the most extravagant of all the chaps are woollies. Worn by Wild West show performers, orange, pink, gold, and white woollies were made from sheepskin and angora.

"Depending on how you display them, a pair of \$100 chaps can look as intriguing as a pair of \$5,000 chaps," promises Brian.

## RANGE-RIDING GEAR

Many saddles look like they've seen better days, so Brian advises looking for saddles with showy accessories—with luck you might find a saddle accented with orange or purple angora saddlebags.

Flashy parade saddles, covered with elaborate silver conchos, bring a premium

price. But Brian says collectors need spend only \$10 to \$30 for an old saddle to create an authentic look. Avid collectors search for F.A. Meanea and J.S. Collins saddles—in good condition, these saddles bring as much as \$20,000 a piece.

"In 99 percent of the cases, collectibility and price are based on condition, with unused saddles being the most desirable," says Brian.

### COWPOKE CLOTHES

Fancy cowboy clothes were first made for big-screen heroes like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers. Mail-order companies imitated the snazzy designs and sold them to cowboys, cowgirls, and Eastern dudes.

Flamboyant Western clothes such as woollies, flowered shirts, colorful riding skirts, and wide-brimmed hats made up Wild West show performers' wardrobes. Loaded with brilliantly hued fringe, clothing worn by rodeo cowgirls is particularly collectible at the moment.

Brian suggests throwing cowboy hats anywhere they'll stay perched. He says decorators don't need to buy expensive hats—a 10-year-old hat complete with rips and oil stains is about as authentic as you can get.

Wildly patterned and colored Acme boots from the '30s and '40s punch up a cowboy retreat. Brian says the old boots, priced between \$100 and \$150, make great decorating accents. Cheaper than a pair of new custom boots, they can also double as conversation-starting footwear.

Text: Elizabeth Clair Flood  
Photography: Robert Weiglein  
Resource Guide: Page 58



## LESTER H. SANTOS (b.1950)

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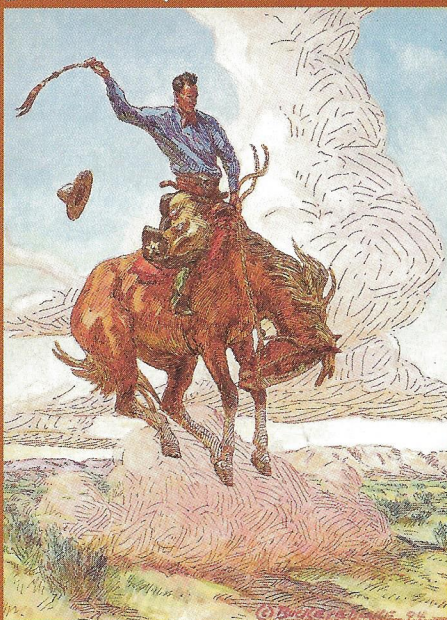
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