

Explore the West Without Leaving the South: The Booth Western Art Museum By Suzanne Wright

Cowboys and Indians are both American icons. Bringing together these two historically interlinked groups is Cartersville's Booth Western Art Museum, opened in August 2003.

When asked about the appeal of Western American art, James Norton, past president of the Cowboy Arts Association (CAA) said, "I think that Western art represents America itself. It represents freedom and wide-open spaces and the things this country was founded on. I think it is America's art." Just 45 minutes north of Atlanta, you can saddle up for a true adventure in western art.

Two massive bronze sculptures flank the entrance to the architecturally magnificent museum located in the charming downtown. Inside the 80,000 square foot building—the state's second largest art museum—are six beautifully curated galleries showcasing more than 250 works of art by 100 artists. One of country's finest collections of western art, the Booth is a museum like no other in the East. Its collection includes original works of art by early Western artists of the Taos School, as well as contemporary creations from the CAA. Featured artists include Oreland C. Joe, Roy Anderson, Howard Terpning, Joe Beeler, Carrie Ballantyne and Nancy Glazier.

The museum's mission is to "educate, entertain and inspire a diverse audience by creating a welcoming place where people find meaning, value and delight in exploring the uniqueness of Western American art and culture." The galleries are arranged topically: American West, featuring first peoples or native American art; American Cowboy; Presidents Gallery, highlighting signed documents; Mythic West, depicting artwork from books and magazines; War is Hell, with artworks from the Civil War; and Reel West, showcasing western movie posters. "Almost every painting tells a story," says Jim Dunham, director of special projects.

The Sagebrush Ranch is an interactive space where youngsters can check out a bunkhouse and corral, sit on a life size horse, ride in a replica stagecoach and learn to brand a cow. There's also a 60-seat multimedia theater that runs an orientation film called "The American West" every 20 minutes, and a fascinating museum shop offering volumes on western arts and culture, jewelry, apparel, prints and home décor items. The café serves coffee, pastries and light lunches to visitors.

Seth Hopkins, executive director of the Booth, says the museum has received a tremendous response locally and regionally. "We are still working on achieving national awareness, but are winning friends everyday. The Museum currently has almost 1,000 members, a large percentage of those living within our area, but we also have members in at least twenty states. Attendance at our monthly lectures, exhibition openings and other events is steadily increasing and reflects the commitment of our supporters within the region. We also have more than 100 volunteers who contribute their time to work with school groups, adult tours and assist with events."

Monthly lunch and learn programs, evening lectures, children's Saturdays and western film features have also attracted visitors. Performances by gunfighters, cowboy poets and western vocalists are held in the nearby, lovingly restored Grand Theatre. "We have had approximately 25 artists represented in our collection, along with a number of important scholars, visit the museum, most of them residing in the West," says Hopkins. "All of them have given the Museum rave reviews and consider it among the best Western art museums in the country."

Two annual festival-type events include the Annual Georgia Cowboy Poetry Gathering held last March and the Southeastern Cowboy Symposium. The third annual Southeastern Cowboy Symposium, which takes place the fourth weekend in October, is a four-day event featuring Western Art, music, cowboy poetry, western vendors, re-enactments of Western gunfights, children's art activities, story telling, Western fashion shows and chuck wagon cooking demonstrations. The highlight of this year's event will be two concerts by internationally acclaimed musicians Riders in the Sky. This group is among the most famous of the Western themed acts and provided the music for the soundtrack to the *Toy Story* movies. The Symposium also includes scholarly presentations by authors, historians and others designed to enhance the understanding of Western art and history. Last year approximately 7,000 people attended this event, according to the Cartersville-Bartow County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

This writer attended the March event, which was hosted by the charismatic Doc Stovall, Georgia's "official cowboy balladeer" and the Booth's "poet lariat" and included a fiddling contest and cowboy church, and can attest that it was, wholesome good fun—as was the discovery of downtown Cartersville's charming restaurants and shops.

The Booth is named in honor of Sam Booth, friend and mentor to several of the founding board members; a portrait by Clyde Burnette, an Atlanta artist, hangs in the Grand Hall of the museum. Located just two miles from I-75, one of the nation's most traveled highways, the area is rich in Civil War and Native American historic sites. Just three miles from the museum is the Etowah Indian Mounds State Historic Site, the most intact Mississippian cultural site in the East. Georgia truly has both cowboys and Indians in abundance and the Booth is a fine introduction to the genre.

Upcoming exhibitions include: Western American Art South of the Sweet Tea Line, seldom-seen western American art from Georgia and other Southern collections, June 16-Sept. 11; Doubleday's Cowgirls, featuring vintage photographs of women rodeo performers from the collection of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Sept. 29-Nov. 20.

If You Go

The Booth Western Art Museum is located at 501 Museum Drive, Cartersville GA 30120; 770-387-1300. Visit online at www.boothmuseum.org. Admission: \$6 adults, \$5 senior citizens, \$4 students, ages 12 & under admitted free. Hours: Tuesday-Wednesday and Friday-Saturday 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday 10 a.m.-8 p.m., Sunday 1-5 p.m.