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# RACE, GENDER, AND IDENTITY IN AMERICAN EQUINE ART

1832 TO THE PRESENT

JESSICA DALLOW



# Race, Gender, and Identity in American Equine Art

This book traces an evolution of equine and equestrian art in the United States over the last two centuries to counter conventional understandings of subjects that are deeply enmeshed in the traditions of elite English and European culture.

In focusing on the construction of identity in painting and photography—of Blacks, women, and the animals themselves involved in horseracing, rodeo, and horse show competition—it illuminates the strategic and varying roles visual artists have played in producing cultural understandings of human–animal relationships. As the first book to offer a history of American equine and equestrian imagery, it shrinks the chasm of literature on the subject and illustrates the significance of the genre to the history of American art. This book further connects American equine and equestrian art to historical, theoretical, and philosophical analyses of animals and attests to how the horse endures as a vital, meaningful subject within the art world as well as culture at large.

This book will be of interest to scholars in art history, American art, gender studies, race and ethnic studies, and animal studies.

**Jessica Dallow** is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

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Jessica Dallow

Cover image: Richard Thorpe McLean, *Draft with Orange Doors*. 1976. Oil on canvas. 48 3/4 × 48 3/4 × 2 in. 2008.19.727. Yale University Art Gallery. Richard Brown Baker, B. A. 1935, Collection. Courtesy of Caitlin McLean for the Estate of Richard McLean.

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# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction: But the Horse Is Much, Much More	1
1 Interspecies Entanglements in Edward Troye's Racehorse Portraits	16
2 Bone, Speed, and Blood: Schreiber & Sons and the Photographic Equine Portrait	50
3 A Girl Who Can Handle a Horse Well: The Rodeo Cowgirl in Early Twentieth-Century Real Photo Postcards	84
4 Richard McLean's Equine Acts	128
<i>Epilogue</i>	172
<i>Index</i>	179

# Figures

- 0.1 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Veronica's Shanghai Duchess*. 1993. Oil on linen. Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York 2
- 0.2 Mark Tansey, *The Innocent Eye Test*. 1981. Oil on canvas. 78 in. × 10 ft. (198.1 × 304.8 cm). © Mark Tansey. Gift of Jan Cowles and Charles Cowles, in honor of William S. Lieberman, 1988 (1988.183). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY 10
- 1.1 Edward Troye, *Tobacconist, with Botts' Manuel and Botts' Ben*. 1833. Oil on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Paul Mellon Collection. Photo: Katherine Wetzel © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts 17
- 1.2 Edward Troye, *Medley and Groom*. 1832. Oil on canvas. Private collection. From Genevieve Baird Lacer, *Edward Troye: Painter of Thoroughbred Stories* (Prospect, KY: Harmony House, 2006), 157 17
- 1.3 Edward Troye, *Trifle*. 1832. Oil on canvas. Collection of Kirk and Palmer Ragsdale, Rockwall, Texas. From Genevieve Baird Lacer, *Edward Troye: Painter of Thoroughbred Stories* (Prospect, KY: Harmony House, 2006), 157 19
- 1.4 Edward Troye, *Richard Singleton with "Viley's Harry, Charles and Lew."* 1834. Oil on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Paul Mellon Collection. Photo: Katherine Wetzel. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts 20
- 1.5 George Stubbs, RA, *Hambletonian, Rubbing Down*. 1800. Oil on canvas. Mount Stewart, The Londonderry Collection (National Trust) 22
- 1.6 Edward Troye, *The "Undefeated" Asteroid, with Ansel (His Trainer) and Brown Dick (Jockey)*. 1864. Oil on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Paul Mellon Collection. Photo: Katherine Wetzel. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts 33
- 1.7 Slave Medallion. 1787–1788. Stoneware (jasperware). Collection of the Birmingham Museum of Art; Gift of Dwight and Lucille Beeson. Photo: Sean Pathasema 35
- 1.8 Wadsworth Jarrell, *Mile and a Quarter #2*. 1993. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Wadsworth Jarrell. Photo: George Whitten 37
- 2.1 Schreiber & Sons, *Lexington*. 1872. Albumen print. 5 1/2 × 8 in. From *Portraits of Noted Horses of America*, 1874. Courtesy Special Collection, Samford University Library 51

- 2.2 Schreiber & Sons, *Hambletonian*. 1873. Albumen print. 5 1/2 × 8 in. From *Portraits of Noted Horses of America*, 1874. Courtesy Special Collection, Samford University Library 52
- 2.3 Schreiber & Sons, *Portrait of a Dog*. Between 1870 and 1880. Albumen on stereograph mount. 3.5 × 7 in. Marian S. Carson Collection at the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division 53
- 2.4 Schreiber & Sons, *Alix*. 1895. 8 3/4 × 7 3/4 in. Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs: Photography Collection. New York Public Library 55
- 2.5 Thomas Eakins, *Clinker*. 1892. Painted plaster, wire armature, muslin. 25 3/4 × 25 3/4 × 4 1/2 in. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the Center for American Art Fund, 2009, 2009-83-1 56
- 2.6 Schreiber & Sons, *Longfellow*. ca. 1874. Albumen on stereograph mount. From series *Animal Studies from Nature*. Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs: Photography Collection. New York Public Library 58
- 2.7 Schreiber & Sons, *Dan Patch*. ca. 1903. 8 3/4 × 7 3/4 in. Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs: Photography Collection. New York Public Library 59
- 2.8 Schreiber & Sons, *Longfellow*. 1874. Albumen print. 5 1/2 × 8 in. From *Portraits of Noted Horses of America*, 1874. Courtesy Special Collection, Samford University Library 60
- 2.9 Edward Troye, *Lexington*. ca. 1866. Salted paper print. 8 3/4 × 11 1/4 in. National Sporting Library & Museum, Harry Worcester Smith Archive 61
- 2.10 Schreiber & Sons, *Flora Temple*. 1874. Albumen print, 5 1/2 × 8 in. From *Portraits of Noted Horses of America*, 1874. Courtesy Special Collection, Samford University Library 63
- 2.11 Schreiber & Sons, *Asteroid*. 1872. Albumen print. 5 1/2 × 8 in. From *Portraits of Noted Horses of America*, 1874. Courtesy Special Collection, Samford University Library 66
- 2.12 Schreiber & Sons, *George Wilkes*. 1874. Albumen print. 5 1/2 × 8 in. From *Portraits of Noted Horses of America*, 1874. Courtesy Special Collection, Samford University Library 73
- 3.1 Unknown photographer, *Vera McGinnis Trick Riding (on white horse)*. Black and white photograph. National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas 85
- 3.2 W.S. Bowman, *Cowgirls Standing Race*. ca. 1914. Photographic postcard. National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas 86
- 3.3 W.S. Bowman, *Bertha Blancett on Eagle, Pendleton Round-Up*. ca. 1920. Photographic postcard. Photographic Study Collection, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. 2005.023.1 91

- 3.4 Ralph R. Doubleday, *Mabel Strickland Sitting on Bench in Studio Pose*. ca. 1925. Dry plate negative. Ralph R. Doubleday Rodeo Photographs Collection, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. 79.026.1966 92
- 3.5 W.S. Bowman, *Princess Red Bird on "Blue Blazes." Riding in the cowgirl's bucking contest—winning 3rd money—Round-Up*. 1915. Photographic postcard. The University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections, and University Archives, Charles Wellington Furlong papers, PH244\_0057 93
- 3.6 John Addison Stryker, *Riding High on Easy Money*. 1920. Photographic postcard. Collection of the author 94
- 3.7 Erwin E. Smith, *Female Bronc Rider [Ruth Roach] at a Texas Rodeo*. ca. 1920–1926. Gelatin dry plate negative. Erwin E. Smith Collection of the Library of Congress on Deposit at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, LC.S6.567 95
- 3.8 Ralph R. Doubleday, *Rose Smith on Jiggs, Pendleton Round-Up*. 1918. Photographic postcard. The Denver Public Library, Western History Collection. Z-638 96
- 3.9 Eadweard Muybridge, "Tom" walking, saddled; female rider nude, Plate 583. From *Animal Locomotion: An Electro-Photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movements, 1872–1885*, published under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania, plates printed by Photo-Gravure Company. Philadelphia, 1887 97
- 3.10 Ralph R. Doubleday, "Billie Buck" Objects to Bonnie McCarroll Riding, Pendleton, Round-Up. 1922. Photographic postcard. Bruce McCarroll Collection, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. RC2006.076.106-1 100
- 3.11 W.S. Bowman, *Bonnie McCarroll Thrown from Silver*. 1915. Miniature photographic postcard. Collection of the author 100
- 3.12 Unknown photographer, *Mable [sic] Strickland Trick Riding*. Pendleton Ore. Association Photo. ca. 1915. Photographic Study Collection, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. 2005.041 103
- 3.13 Charles M. Russell, *Bucking Horse and Cowgirl*. ca. 1925. Ink with transparent and opaque watercolor over graphite underdrawing on paper. 13 3/8 × 11 1/4 in. Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas, Amon G. Carter Collection, 1961.187 109
- 3.14 Mary Bonner, *Les Cowboys*. 1925. Etching with hand coloring. Collection of the McNay Art Museum, Gift of Katy Calogeras. This etching is an artist's proof of the third frame of *Les Cowboys* that Bonner exhibited in 1925 at the Salon d'Automne, Paris 111
- 3.15 Charles Simpson, *The Stable Tent, Showing Sea Chests and Saddlery*. 1925. Crayon on board. National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. 1980.05.07. Illustrated in *El Rodeo* (1925), 88 112
- 3.16 Charles Simpson, *Mounting a Bronk from the Chute*. 1925. Gouache on board. National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. 1980.05.01. Illustrated in *El Rodeo* (1925), 114 114

- 4.1 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Native Diver*. Lithograph on paper [after a 1968 painting]. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. John Barton Payne Fund. Photo: David Stover. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts 129
- 4.2 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Rustler Charger*. 1971. Oil on canvas. Bridgeman Images 130
- 4.3 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Mackey Marie*. 1971. Oil on canvas. Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York 131
- 4.4 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Jack Magill's Bourbon Jet*. 1980. Print [after a 1979 painting]. Collection of the author 131
- 4.5 Unknown photographer (Potter?), *Thunder*, Oklahoma City, OK. 1979. Color photograph 135
- 4.6 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Satin Doll*. 1975. Watercolor on paper. Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York 136
- 4.7 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Dixie Coast*. 1980. Lithograph [after a 1974 painting]. Collection of the author 138
- 4.8 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Draft with Orange Doors*. 1976. Oil on canvas. 48 3/4 × 48 3/4 × 2 in. 2008.19.727. Yale University Art Gallery. Richard Brown Baker, B. A. 1935, Collection. Courtesy of Caitlin McLean for the Estate of Richard McLean 139
- 4.9 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Kahlua Lark*. 1980. Lithograph [after a 1979 painting]. Collection of the author 140
- 4.10 Raphaelle Peale, *Still Life with Apples, Sherry, and Tea Cake*. 1822. Oil on wood. Courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 141
- 4.11 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Whistlejacket*. 2011. Oil on canvas. Collection of Ian McLean. Courtesy of Caitlin McLean for the Estate of Richard McLean 142
- 4.12 George Stubbs, *Whistlejacket*. about 1762. Oil on canvas. 292 × 246.4 cm. NG 6569. © The National Gallery, London 143
- 4.13 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Hertfordshire Morning (Capriccio for Tessa)*. 1998. Oil on canvas. Private collection. Courtesy of Caitlin McLean for the Estate of Richard McLean 144
- 4.14 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Chub's Powderface*. 1969. Oil on canvas. Private collection. Courtesy of Caitlin McLean for the Estate of Richard McLean 147
- 4.15 Frederic Remington, *A Cold Morning on the Range*. ca. 1904. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of American Museum of Western Art—The Anschutz Collection. Photo: William J. O'Connor 148
- 4.16 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Synbad's Mt. Ranier*. 1968. Oil on canvas. Private collection. Courtesy of Caitlin McLean for the Estate of Richard McLean 149
- 4.17 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Foxy Mac*. 1973. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Hallmark Art Collection, Hallmark Cards, Inc., Kansas City Missouri 150
- 4.18 Richard Thorpe McLean, *All American Standard Miss*. 1968. Oil on canvas. Collection of di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art 151

x *Figures*

- 4.19 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Wishing Well Bridge*. 1972. Oil on canvas. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Gift of Sydney and Frances Lewis. Photo: Travis Fullerton. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts 152
- 4.20 Frederic Leighton, *Portrait of May Sartoris*. ca. 1860. Oil on canvas. 59 7/8 × 35 1/2 in. Framed: 71 1/2 × 48 × 5 3/4 in. ACF 1964.03. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas 153
- 4.21 Rob Hess, *Amigo*, Estes Park, CO. ca. 1983. Color photograph 156
- 4.22 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Sacramento Glider*. 1973. Oil on canvas. NASM 2017-02875. National Air and Space Museum. The Stuart M. Speiser Photorealist Collection. Gift of Stuart M. Speiser 157
- 4.23 Deborah Butterfield, *Monekana*. 2001. Bronze. 96 × 129 1/2 × 63 1/2 in. 2002.3. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the American Art Forum, Mr. and Mrs. Frank O. Rushing, Shelby and Frederick Gans and museum purchase. © Deborah Butterfield 161
- 5.1 Ralph R. Doubleday, *Cowgirls Headed for the Roundup*. Triangle Ranch. 1921. Photographic postcard. Ralph R. Doubleday Photographic Postcards, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. Doubleday 066 175

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# Introduction: But the Horse Is Much, Much More

In an interview for the Archives of American Art, the California Bay Area painter Richard McLean (1934–2014) remembered when he first settled on the horse as an artistic theme. Around 1966, he had begun what he called his “animal period,” making paintings of chickens, sheep, and cows based on encyclopedia and magazine reproductions. On a whim, however, he decided to photograph an artist friend—a “weekend cowboy”—astride a horse. One of these photographs became the source for McLean’s first horse painting, with which he knew he’d found the perfect subject: “I mean, a cow’s a cow anywhere, but the horse and its historical significance, its mythology is much, much more.”<sup>1</sup> Though one could take issue with McLean’s hasty dismissal of the cow, his attraction to the horse is understandable, the animal’s very being, and attendant representation, capable of rousing feelings ranging from awe to empathy. By picturing both horses and people with horses in present-day horsey settings, McLean ingeniously exploited the incongruities between contemporary, conceptually driven painting and historical equine and equestrian art and portraiture. His early horse-related canvases, which appropriated equine magazine imagery, depict gallant cowboys astride glistening steeds and victorious jockeys aboard racehorses to reprise familiar artistic tropes of English and European mounted aristocrats and celebrated racehorses, and rugged American cowboys with their faithful equine companions. McLean’s later paintings, reproducing the artist’s own snapshots taken at local and regional horse shows, prominently feature women and horses (*Veronica’s Shanghai Duchess*, 1993; figure 0.1). Relying less on historical allusions and more on what McLean observed, these images capture with greater accuracy the gendered make-up of late twentieth-century equestrianism. They further reflect both the abundant narratives of women and horses and the history of painted and photographic portraits of female equestrians, including those of early modern royalty and, as equestrian pursuits gained popularity and accessibility during the nineteenth century, of modern middle-class women. Yet the fact that McLean’s human subjects remained predominantly white evidences American equine sport’s historical lack of ethnic and racial diversity and equestrianism’s associations with whiteness. How visual imagery has negotiated, contested, and reinforced equestrianism’s and equine sport’s patterns of inclusion and exclusion is the pretext of this book, which examines images of horses and humans in American art from 1832 until the present. By tracing equine and equestrian art’s evolution in the United States, it counters conventional understandings of genres that are still, even with recent scholarly attention to equestrianism’s and equine sport’s global dimensions<sup>2</sup>, deeply enmeshed in traditions of elite European and English culture. By focusing on the construction of identity—of

## 2 Introduction



Figure 0.1 Richard Thorpe McLean, *Veronica's Shanghai Duchess*. 1993. Oil on linen. Louis K. Meisel Gallery, New York.

women, Black men, and the animals themselves involved in horseracing, rodeo, and horse show competitions—it offers an interpretation of equestrian and equine art rooted in the changing relationships between humans and horses, and in the racial and gendered formations of modern American equestrianism and equine sport.

Throughout this book, I use both the terms equestrianism and equine (or equestrian) sport in my discussions of images of horseracing, rodeo, and horse show subjects since they are not mutually exclusive, but inform and inflect each other. As Miriam Adelman and Jorge Knijnik have noted, “equestrian life includes sport and hobby, work, and leisure”; its participants may be at work or play, or some combination of both.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, horseracing began during the seventeenth century as a recreational or leisure activity, with contests arranged by wealthy gentlemen who raced their horses for amusement, status making, and wagers on available land. During the early decades of the nineteenth century, it developed into a commercial enterprise, with formal races, jockey clubs, purses for winners, and of course gambling. This period saw the rise of turf men who, especially in the Chesapeake region, overtook wealthy planters as key players in the Thoroughbred flat racing industry. While some had amassed fortunes as planters, merchants, and politicians (or some combination thereof), turf men also came from the middle and working classes, rising through the industry’s ranks as stable owners, trainers, track managers, and race promoters.<sup>4</sup> Trotting or harness racing followed a similar trajectory, as impromptu races waged on urban thoroughfares and country roads transformed into what Melvin Adelman has called America’s first modern sport, with, by the mid-1850s, over seventy US tracks offering organized races attended by thousands of spectators.<sup>5</sup> Unlike horseracing, which emerged first in the East and South, rodeo developed in the West and Southwest. It too, however, sprung from

informal contests, in this instance staged amongst cow hands whose equestrian and cattle wrangling practices largely developed from Spanish, Mexican, and Latin American ranching traditions. Professional male and female rodeo athletes emerged during the early decades of the twentieth century as purses increased and rodeo promoters began offering contracts to competitors. Rodeo, like the horse show, continues to attract amateur athletes as well as professionals. Horse shows, where participants compete in English and Western riding disciplines including dressage, equitation, reining, jumping, pleasure, and eventing, combine elements of equestrian leisure and sport. Amateurs usually participate for fun, to hone equestrian skills, and for the opportunity to compete. For professionals, equestrian sport is a business centered around training horses and riders in preparation for shows, earning prize money offered in classes, and breeding, selling, and buying horses.

Consequently, within equestrianism and equestrian sport exist multiple divisions of labor, including those of grooms, breeders, riders, trainers, and owners. Often these divisions mirror and reproduce broader entrenched social and racialized class hierarchies, for example, the wealthy white owner and working-class groom of color, but they also generate hierarchies particular to equestrian cultures, such as those based on professional or amateur status, or expertise level (a beginner versus advanced rider).<sup>6</sup> A related politics of class also applies to race and show horses who may in turn reinforce human class formations. As Kendra Coulter explains:

In equestrian culture, horses are socially constructed as a form of capital that reflects relative wealth and status, and, as such, are used to demarcate distinctions among human participants. ... Upper class people with the economic capital to obtain [equine bodies best suited for performance and best trained at it] have heightened chances of success in the show ring and the most opportunities for higher status in the symbolic competitions.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout this book, horses are represented as forms of capital, from Thoroughbred racehorses that symbolize owners' status, to trick riding and bucking horses that facilitate rodeo women's social and economic mobility, to show horses that may represent privilege and partnership within their respective equestrian cultures yet in McLean's hands also become satirical symptoms of the horse's waning visibility in contemporary culture.

This book also draws on the substantial body of scholarship addressing gender in equestrianism and equine sports that, with class, race, and ethnicity, also informs: who rides and on what types and breeds of horses; how one rides—for example, aside (using a sidesaddle) or astride; how one presents oneself on a horse in manner and costume; and in what disciplines one may participate or compete. Women's equestrian pursuits expanded during the eighteenth and especially nineteenth centuries, when, during the Victorian era, bourgeois horsewomen emulating the traditional pursuits of the aristocracy challenged class and gender boundaries.<sup>8</sup> This period also saw the rise of female athletic culture and organized women's sports.<sup>9</sup> Equestrianism, however, often proved even more troubling than other forms of physical exertions because of the contact between women's and animals' animate bodies. Riding styles and dress thus necessitated "strict sartorial codes and rules of deportment," since the "fine line between fair equestrian and the fast woman was not difficult to cross."<sup>10</sup> Rigid guidelines on dress and tack (together known as turnout) are still part and

#### 4 Introduction

parcel of contemporary equestrian sports and showing and are central to its performative aesthetics.<sup>11</sup> Today, at least in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States, women form the majority of riders at stables and shows, contributing to increasing understandings of equestrianism as feminine or feminized.<sup>12</sup> Men, however, continue to dominate the top tiers of equestrian disciplinary competition and organizational leadership positions.<sup>13</sup> Perceptions of horsemanship and equine expertise also continue to be rooted in masculine traditions of animal subjugation and taming, especially in such training techniques and sports as natural horsemanship, Western riding, and rodeo that center the tradition of the cowboy.<sup>14</sup> Yet masculinity also figures prominently in histories of English riding as well. Monica Mattfeld has examined how eighteenth-century English masculinity was shaped on and around the horse through riding manuals that expressed contemporary models of political sovereignty to cartoons that satirized effeminate equestrian theatrical spectacles.<sup>15</sup> Kari Weil has also shown how theories of horsemanship and horses responded to anxieties over modern man's emasculation, with French manhood increasingly projected onto the Thoroughbred horse, a breed that was considered simultaneously pure (aristocratic) and scientifically engineered (bourgeois). In a period when the French race was thought to be in decline the Thoroughbred horse and equestrianism, as symbols of health, morality, progressive scientific management, and "good" colonialism, became means of rejuvenating modern French culture.<sup>16</sup>

If class and gender intersect within the history of the Thoroughbred horse, so too does the modern making of the breed reveal how "the otherwise imprecise, nineteenth-century definition of 'race' was given 'scientific' explanation in its application to the equine population."<sup>17</sup> In western culture, the Thoroughbred breed came to be known as a pure race of blood-horses, an apt mirror of the elite men who owned and raced them, even though the breed developed by crossing English horses with North African and Asian stock.<sup>18</sup> How methods and theories of equine breeding intersect with notions of human race and identity inform my interpretations of nineteenth-century paintings of American Thoroughbreds and Black men—images that make visible the paradox of Black Americans' key roles in shaping an animal so connected to white privilege—and photographic portraits of trotting horses, produced during a period when theorists and breeders, concerned over status and profit, battled over whether bloodlines or performance record would define the Standardbred breed.

This book further contends that equine and equestrian art and portraiture is a worthwhile and unique subject of inquiry because of its inclusion of animal subjects. The representation of animals involves the manipulation of their bodies through artistic mediums, modeling how animal bodies are manipulated in real life through riding, breeding, farming, and pet keeping. Equestrianism and equine sport, centered especially on riding, enact particular encounters between horse and human bodies that involve a range of interspecies sensory experiences which are generated through various communicatory modes, namely touch and proprioception (the perception of the position and movements of the body), but also vision and sound. Equestrian activities may thus produce a radical form of co-embodiment that informs both a human's and animal's experience of self.<sup>19</sup> Though visual art is fundamentally perceptual, this book centralizes the intercorporeal dynamics<sup>20</sup> of riding and training horses to argue that human and animal identity—both real and represented—must always be understood through each other, whether in the relationships between the

human and animal subjects within a painting's or photograph's frame, between viewers and an image's subjects, or between artists and the animals they depict.

### Let Us not Praise Famous Horses

Organized into four chapters, this book presents a series of case studies that span the past two centuries and emerge from different, US geographic centers of artistic production—the South, the East, and the West. It proceeds chronologically beginning in 1832 and covers: Edward Troye's antebellum portraits of racehorses and their Black American jockeys and handlers; the development of American equine portrait photography after the Civil War by the Philadelphia firm Schreiber & Sons, one of the first to specialize in animals; early twentieth-century representations of rodeo cowgirls and their mounts and the rise of the Real Photo Postcard; and Richard McLean's contemporary Photorealist paintings of horse show competitors. Through these examples, I aim to challenge the marginalization of persons of color and women within the history of American equestrianism and equine sport, even within what has been characterized as its increasing feminization, and reveal how animal identity both informs and has been modeled by cultural, gendered, and racialized models of human identity. I realize that my examples are by no means comprehensive or exhaustive and there are many other equine-themed artworks I could have included. Much more, for example, needs to be written about the horse's representation in North American Indigenous art, the critical contributions of Indigenous peoples to the development of equestrianism, and the history of native, Indigenous horse breeds and types.

To do so, however, compels expanding notions of what artworks belong to the genres of equestrian and equine art. Traditionally, these genres are associated with commemorative portraits of military leaders and royalty, or with equine field sports, a subset of the country pursuits of the historically leisured, upper class that include hunting, horse racing, shooting, and fishing. As a result, Malcolm Cormack has explained, sporting art has traditionally been considered a niche subject, generated and consumed by a select class of people, and denigrated by art historians as “mere decoration” and unworthy of intellectual inquiry, evidenced by Sir Ellis Waterhouse's 1953 statement that:

to discuss the Sartorius tribe [a family of sporting artists] and such painters is no business of the historian of art, no matter how bitter the accusations of neglect are wont to be from those specialist writers who sometimes confuse the history of art with praising famous horses.<sup>21</sup>

Cormack's catalog of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts' Mellon Collection of British, French, and American sporting art forms a rejoinder to such past art historical contempt by contextualizing sporting imagery within period politics, cultural mores, social formations, scientific inquiry, and attitudes towards animals. Yet out of over four hundred pages, it devotes only seventy to American sporting art, a result of multiple factors, including the much later development of leisure sports in a young country, settlement patterns, a class structure very different from that of England and Europe, religious opposition to gambling, and Paul Mellon's collecting habits. Its American entries comprise expected “country” subjects such as hunter and racehorse portraits by Alvan Fisher, Edward Troye, and Henry Delattre, water and game fowl

## 6 Introduction

hunting scenes by Thomas Eakins, Charles Deas, and George Catlin, and a Winslow Homer hare coursing canvas, in addition to Albert Bierstadt's more anomalous oil sketches of chestnut and grey horses against plain backgrounds that may have served as studies for his grand Sierra Nevada and Rocky Mountain landscapes.<sup>22</sup> Included because they are part of the Mellon Collection and because they feature horses, Bierstadt's sketches exist on the fringes of what is normally accepted as sporting art. They nonetheless presage a more expansive conception of the genre to encompass artworks that have been previously assigned to art historical categories of landscape or art of the American West. My book builds on this inclination, contending that both rodeo photographs and McLean's Photorealist paintings relate as much to genres of equine and equestrian art as Troye's or the Schreibers' portraits of racehorses do. In so doing, my focus on a diverse range of American material produced over the last two centuries shrinks the chasm of scholarship on American equine and equestrian art by showing how animal representation adapted to and was transformed by cultural and geographic circumstances.

The rise of equine portraiture in the United States coincided with the emerging sport of horseracing. Patrons during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries comprised landowners and merchants on the Eastern seaboard and in the Mid-Atlantic States. Those few artists who painted animals often did so with an amateur hand. The Swiss-born, academically-trained artist Edward Troye (1808–1874) arrived in Philadelphia in 1831 and, after painting his first horse canvas the following year, emerged as America's leading equine painter, pursuing horses and patrons across the country as Thoroughbred racing spread through the South and the then western states of Kentucky and Tennessee.<sup>23</sup> Beyond his main subject matter—the horse—that Troye spent much of his life in Alabama, making his last home at Owens Crossroads, near Madison, has driven my interest in the artist whose career was sustained by slavery. Though some Troye scholars have expressed frustration with my readings of Troye's art as products of slavery, I believe his work cannot be understood outside of this context. Troye emulated the aristocratic sporting pictures of his Old World predecessors; yet he often included the enslaved Black Americans who rode and cared for Thoroughbreds, inventively adapting tradition to suit his context. Chapter 1 examines Troye's paintings created between 1832 and 1874 that depict Thoroughbred racehorses with Black jockeys and handlers. Extending scholarship linking equine breeding to theories of race, it explores how the unique circumstances of the American horse industry with its largely Black, enslaved slave labor force shaped period, culturally specific understandings of the American Thoroughbred horse. It ultimately interprets Troye's paintings as representations of interspecies entanglements and as the products of spaces—the plantation, racetrack, and stables and their connected schemata of power—where animal and human biopower was constituted and employed by and for different factions.

As the nineteenth century progressed, American racing enthusiasts turned their attention to trotting horses as the sport ignited on the East Coast during the 1850s and 1860s, propelled in part by the collapse of the southern Thoroughbred industry during the Civil War. In the 1870s, Schreiber & Sons, a Philadelphia photography studio run by Franz Schreiber (1803–1892) and his children, produced some of the earliest photographs of trotting horses, at a moment in which trotters, originally just common or grade animals able to trot fast, evolved into a new breed: the Standardbred horse.<sup>24</sup> In 1874, the Schreibers published *Portraits of Noted Horses of*

*America*, a book of fifty photographs of the nation's horses. Though the Schreibers were not the first to attempt a comprehensive portfolio of American horses—Troye, himself, had tried—they were the first to successfully publish one. I first became aware of *Portraits of Noted Horses of America* while researching Troye and was lucky enough to find a copy in a nearby library.<sup>25</sup> Troye's documentarian Alexander Mackay-Smith mentions that he stopped painting altogether the year Schreiber & Sons first visited Woodburn Farm, owned by Alexander John Alexander, who, with his brother Robert Aitcheson Alexander, were two of Troye's great patrons.<sup>26</sup> Though age and health factors surely also helped speed the end of Troye's career, photography ushered in a more accurate means of representing animals that proved critical to breeders striving to produce more valuable horses. The medium also offered, through stereographs and other forms of photographic postcards, inexpensive, more easily circulated and consumable images that often served to bolster a horse's renown. Chapter 2 argues that *Portraits of Noted Horses* can be read as another iteration of equine portraiture, from painting to photographs "taken from life," aimed at the same audiences who had in the past collected sporting prints or commissioned equine paintings. Yet the Schreibers' book of photographs signals an important departure from conventional animal picturing in the way it places individual animal identities in tension with collective identity. Borrowing from the visual traditions of natural history illustration and comparative anatomy, it relies on the profile portrait that best enables viewers to compare animals. Drawing on contemporary debates about breeding and heredity, it structures its photographs into unfolding genealogical micronarratives of the trotter and American Thoroughbred. In so doing, *Portraits of Noted Horses of America* reveals the transformation of equine portraiture from its more customary role as a visual emblem of its owner or a memento of its animal subject into something akin to scientific illustration that advances an ideal identity for the emergent American trotting horse.

Equine- and equestrian-themed imagery expanded throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to picture not only Thoroughbred and Standardbred racehorses, but also new types (and later breeds) of American horses. Subsequently, though elite sportsmen played a central role especially in American equine portraiture's early development, its subjects and audiences expanded along a populist line in connection with changes in the horse industry and with the rise of photography. This book examines these differences in patronage, market, and consumption. The settlement of the West and consequent development of the western livestock industry created an increasing need for cowponies and range horses. These horses, which had been developed over the preceding century by crossing Spanish Barbs (introduced by Spanish colonizers and bred by the Chickasaw tribe of the Mississippi Valley as well as Spanish settlers in the Southwest), English stock, Mustangs (another horse introduced by the Spanish and used by Indigenous Plains peoples), and Indigenous Native American horses, proved well suited to range work, with their compact statures, muscle, even demeanors, and speed.<sup>27</sup> They became the primary equine stock used in rodeo, a sport that originated in Spanish and Mexican *vaquero* (cattle driving and ranching) traditions and that grew in popularity throughout the United States after the closing of the frontier because of its associations with a mythic Old West. Rodeo photographic postcards, often sold as souvenirs at rodeos and collected via mailorder by rodeo enthusiasts, captured the feats of rodeo contestants, many of whom were women, aboard both their trained partners and purportedly wild, bucking horses during rodeo's "Golden Age."<sup>28</sup>