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Review of *Spanish Mustangs in the Great American West: Return of the Horse*. By John S. Hockensmith

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BOOK REVIEWS

Spanish Mustangs in the Great American West: Return of the Horse. By John S. Hockensmith. Georgetown, KY: Fine Art Editions Gallery and Press, 2009. 271 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth.

A combination of myth and reality, the American West evokes images that feature the mustang as a central player. By using oral histories, books, and images, Hockensmith provides meaningful insight into how the mustang weaves together history and culture. He acknowledges his book is not a regurgitation of historical facts. Rather, it seeks to capture the essence of how one animal evokes cultural values over time.

Hockensmith begins with the prehistory of the horse and highlights the impact it had on taming the West, changing Native American cultures, and its decline in line with advances in technology. The mustang provides an indicator of how the Great Plains have changed over time. Even today, many imagine the Great Plains as an untouched expanse providing escape from urban realities. The mustang plays a vital role in this imagery, documented here through pictures, stories, and poetry.

The imagery ties past to present. Although reliance on the horse diminished over time, the majesty of the mustang against the backdrop of panoramic images lives in our imaginations and cultural celebrations. In a time of economic austerity, Hockensmith's book reminds us that beauty cannot always be quantified. Mustangs provide a tangible entity echoing American values of freedom and independence; they support our belief in "wide-open spaces."

A clear definition of a Spanish mustang is not plainly provided. On several occasions Hockensmith states there is "pure Spanish blood." However, Andalusians have a separate stud book from Sorraias and are held to different statuses over time. Since much of the mixing of Spanish breeds occurred in the Plains without human oversight, it is difficult to determine how much is based on fact or myth. This is not to say that some mustangs have no Spanish markers, but the mixing of Spanish breeds suggests that the bloodlines are not "pure." Why is this significant?

Over the centuries, the mustang has been manipulated based on human cultural values. The mustang is recognized for its beauty and its ability. That recognition changes, however, depending on how humans determine its worth. An initial focus on endurance, agility, and refined beauty of the Spanish horse first introduced to North America gives way to a "type" of horse defined by bloodlines and phenotype. This transition accompanies the declining reliance on horses for work, war, and transportation.

Spanish Mustangs can also be read as a cautionary tale. Throughout, there is an implied superiority of the Spanish mustang in comparison to the *Others*, the disparate feral horses that currently roam the Great Plains. Hockensmith comes

pictures and stories of both types of mustang whose ultimate survival will be determined by the actions of their human counterparts.

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