



Lawrence Tenney Stevens, "Glassing for Bear," c. 1935, linocut, image 8.5" x 11"



Lawrence Tenney Stevens, "Ram," c. 1935, linocut, image 8.5" x 11"

Art Deco and The American West Rewriting the History of Cowboy Deco: The Overlooked Influence of Lawrence Tenney Stevens

by John Faubion

Linocut prints significant to the evolution of western art and design were highlighted in my recent presentation at "Art Deco and the American West," the 10th biennial symposium of the Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of The American West. The event, held October 12 in Norman, Oklahoma, at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, attracted scholars, students, and other enthusiasts of the art and architecture of the American West. It was my privilege to deliver: *Rewriting the History of Cowboy Deco: The Overlooked Influence of Lawrence Tenney Stevens*.

"Cowboy Deco" is a term I favor for a style of the western arts that includes those that emerged from Cody, Wyoming, beginning with Lawrence Tenney Stevens' first visit in March of 1929. Prior to his arrival, western art and furnishings had resisted the stylistic influences of the Art Deco and Moderne movements. But Stevens brought to Cody a didactic passion to improve the international reputation of the American Arts. He thought this could be achieved, in part, by breaking with tradition and adding greater strength, bravado, sophistication, and modernity—all characteristics of Cowboy Deco—to the motifs of the American West.

Stevens felt the Cody environs were the epitome of the West. He eventually acquired the 2000-acre Double L Bar Ranch there and used it as his part-time home and studio. During travels from the ranch in November 1940, he visited his friend Grant (American Gothic) Wood in Iowa and shared his idea to use the ranch for the good of American Art. He hoped to find a philanthropist to support fifteen artists each year who would live and create there without financial pressures. He saw an opportunity to provide worthy artists with advantages he had been given in 1921 as a recipient of Fellowships at the Tiffany Foundation on Long Island, New York (where Louis Comfort Tiffany had given him personal critiques), and as a Fellow for three years at the American Academy in Rome after winning the 1922 Prix de Rome in sculpture. He wrote: "The painters and sculptors would learn a lot about the horse, cow, sheep, and have all the wildlife they want to know. This simple dynamic living, the very mother's breast of our country, would be a fitting proving ground for the establishment of the true American art in a big way."

Because of his negative experiences with a similar concept, Wood "advised very strongly against" the idea (it never materialized), but by then Stevens had already inspired new ways of thinking about western design. He had produced Cody-inspired Cowboy Deco sculptures that had been exhibited to enthusiastic crowds and critical acclaim in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, beginning in November of 1929. His sculptures had been showcased in major newspapers including the New York Times and the Philadelphia Inquirer; had been the featured art at the first sculpture show held

at Cody's own Buffalo Bill Museum (one-man show); had been used to illustrate the basics of sculpture and style in a textbook for third-graders; and by 1935 had been exhibited coast-to-coast. Newspaper articles reported exhibition attendance by "unusually large crowds." One said: "Among the most admired pieces were Mr. Stevens's recent animal groups and those depicting the horses and cowboys of our west." Some of his sculptures were noted as having "struck a new note in modern decorative treatment." Common among the adjectives used by critics to describe Stevens' work were the words: bold, daring, unconventional, original, and virile.

To this body of work, in the spring of 1935, Stevens added a series of highly regarded linocut prints that I showed attendees of the symposium. They document his hunting expeditions that began in the Wyoming Rockies near Cody in October of 1929, or 1930, and were intended to illustrate a book titled: **Big Game Hunting in The Wyoming Rockies** (currently being readied for first-time publication). Stevens wrote: "I have felt impelled to interpret these experiences, and introduce this hunter's world of mine in clear outline and vivid relief taken from sketches made on the various trips. Through the use of block-cut, a fine medium for getting sharp line and strong contrast, I've tried to fuse the excitement of hunting, the power of the beautiful country, the sincerity of the natives, and the magnificence of the animals themselves."

These linocuts, and the other Cowboy Deco pieces by Stevens, had been long overlooked, but are increasingly being recognized for their significance to Art Deco and The American West.

John Faubion has researched, written and lectured about Lawrence Tenney Stevens since 1995. He was award-winning co-curator of a major 1996 Stevens retrospective exhibition at the Tempe Historical Museum in Arizona. His discoveries in the Stevens archives contributed to the preservation efforts of the 1936 Dallas Centennial Fair site, and led to the re-creation of three of Stevens's monumental sculptures there. He is writing a book about Stevens and is planning related exhibitions for 2019 and beyond. He established the Western column in the Journal of the Print World and welcomes your feedback and suggestions for future articles.

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Clipping, unknown newspaper, 1935 or 1936