

## RESEÑA

### Tom Lea's *Toros Bravos*

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In the world of art and literature, Tom Lea holds a remarkable place. Rarely is an artist who looks at the world to record it in drawing or painting, also able to listen to the world to describe it in words. Tom Lea did both. He mastered the tools of an artist, whether with a piece of charcoal, pen or brush in his hand. He also mastered the written word, teaching himself to say exactly what he meant with vivid expression.

These two different talents came together in his first illustrated novel, *The Brave Bulls*, published in 1948. Placed on the New York Times best seller list and translated into ten foreign editions, the book introduced its protagonist, Luis Bello, and his life as a Mexican matador to the rest of the world. The novel was turned into a Hollywood movie starring Mel Ferrer and the Czechoslovakian-born Mexican film actress Miroslava, which premiered at the Plaza Theater in El Paso, Texas in 1951.

**Figure 1 - The Brave Bulls Movie Poster**



Source: Galeria Tom Lea, 1968.

**Figure 2 - World premiere of the movie The Brave Bulls. 1951. Plaza Theater**



Source: Galeria Tom Lea, 1968.

Tom Lea said that his interest in writing about brave bulls came more from his fascination with the animals than the humans. Bravery and bulls were subjects that had been woven into his life over time, like so many of the other themes he described in his paintings and books. He always said his work was his autobiography.

Born in El Paso on July 11, 1907, Tom Lea knew he wanted to be an artist from the time he was a little boy. He was lucky to have good teachers in the public schools, and felt ready to learn when he arrived at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1924. There he studied with John Warner Norton who was known for his accurate eye and skilled hand. Tom left school to become Norton's apprentice, assisting him in painting murals for new buildings in Chicago and cities across the United States.

The Southwest pulled at Tom while he was away from home, and when he returned to El Paso in 1936, the United States government was employing artists to decorate public buildings during the Great Depression. There was renewed interest in Italian Renaissance frescoes brought about in the 1920's and 30's through the work of the great Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera.

Tom Lea began competing for murals under the U.S. Treasury Department's Section of Fine Arts, winning competitions in cities from Washington, D.C. to Seymour, Texas. In 1938, he painted the Pass of the North in El Paso's federal courthouse, depicting the Indian, Spanish, Mexican and Anglo cultures of the region. In order to get things right, he found appropriate models from El Paso and Juárez to pose in authentic costumes for his thirteen larger than life figures, including the Apache, Conquistador, Mexican vaquero, and Fort Bliss cavalry soldier. He painted an inscription overhead as if chiseled in stone:

**Figure 3 - Pass of the North, mural, 1938**



Source: Galeria Tom Lea, 1968.

Oh Pass of the North  
Now the Old Giants are Gone  
We Little Men Live Where Heroes  
Once Walked the Inviolable Earth.

While working on his mural, he met a friend of his father's – a writer named J. Frank Dobie whose books he had pored over since Dobie somehow seemed to use the voice of the land Tom was trying to paint. Their meeting led to a lifelong friendship, and Dobie asked Tom if he would illustrate his books.

One of them was "The Longhorns," and the request came at the same time Tom was commissioned for another mural in the Odessa Post Office, one of a "Stampede" that was based on the cowboy poem "Little Joe the Wrangler." Odessa was about seventy miles from the Pecos River:

**Figure 4 - Stampede mural, 1940.**



Source: Post Office, Odessa, Texas.

We was camping on the Pecos when the wind began to blow,  
And we doubled up the guard to hold them tight,  
When the storm came roaring from the north with thunder and with rain,  
And the herd stampeded off into the night.

In researching his subject, Tom visited rodeos to familiarize himself with how bulls jumped and steers ran, and local stockyards to look at the cattle coming from

Chihuahua. He and Dobie spent time riding on horseback to see Longhorns, including rare survivors of the “unimproved old Texan breed”.

His time in thick brush, riding into far pastures and jungles of mesquite, made him a better painter, he said. It didn’t improve his technical skill, but it did sharpen his sentience of “things seen, and things beyond seeing” (Lea, 1968:40)

Tom Lea broke away from the Southwest and the painting of cattle when in 1941 - ten months before Pearl Harbor- he received a telegram from LIFE magazine, asking him to make a drawing of a cavalry trooper and his horse at Fort Bliss. That query led to another phase of Tom’s life – one as an accredited artist correspondent for LIFE Magazine. For the next four years, he travelled over 100,000 miles covering United States and Allied troops waging war worldwide.

He didn’t know as he painted the inscription above his Pass of the North mural three years before that he would be an eye-witness to real heroes during the war.

While civilian artists were not required to put themselves into harm’s way - some preferring to paint from news reports out of cafés- Tom Lea insisted on being an eye-witness to the experiences of the troops. He spent time with them aboard an aircraft carrier and in fighter planes. He even landed on the tiny island of Peleliu with the First Marines, knowing he would be a fake if he did not. The battle was a slaughter claiming 1,250 American lives and 13,600 of the Japanese and when Tom returned to the safety of his studio, he painted a trustworthy account.

**Figure 5 - The Price.**



Source: Life Collection of Art WWII, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

His experience of war taught Tom that he could no longer say what he wanted to say about mankind’s living and dying only through what he could draw or paint. He had to find a new mode of communicating and that was to write.

LIFE gave Tom Lea one last assignment before severing him from the payroll. The managing editor, Dan Longwell, asked Tom to travel down to México to do a story on the history of beef cattle in North America. After seeing Tom’s paintings of Peleliu and knowing what he had been through, it was Longwell’s way of transitioning a friend from recording war to returning home.

Tom didn’t think he could begin to tell the story of beef cattle without painting the arrival of the first cattle on the North American continent, something that had never been

painted before. The subject fascinated him, and he read as much as he could about Spanish cattle bred on Santo Domingo debarking offshore at Veracruz in 1521. Everything he read by the early Spanish chroniclers referred to two types of Spanish cattle: the ganado mayor, or plain, common type that were not too different from the common cattle still found in Mexico; and the ganado prieto, the rare black cattle with the esteemed blood of the brave fighting bulls.

Tom Lea had watched bullfights on Sundays in Juarez and seen what four-year-old bulls looked like, but he had never seen a herd like those mentioned in the antique accounts. He wanted to see them, especially young cows like the “contidad de Bezerras” brought by the Conquistador Don Gregorio de Villalobos to Veracruz (Lea, 1968:98). He went to Mexico to find them.

**Figure 6 - Encierro, 1946.**



Source: Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Louis Morrison, Dallas © James D. Lea.

A friend, Ray Bell, with a hacienda in Durango took Tom south into Zacatecas. There they were guests at the Hacienda del Sauz of Don Julian Llaguno who bred brave, fighting bulls. It was a heightened time for bullfighting in Mexico, with the Spaniard, Manolete, making his debut in the plazas of Mexico. Manolete had just left the Hacienda del Sauz when Tom arrived, having watched the bulls he would face.

**Figure 7 – Hacienda del Sauz and Don Julian Llaguno, 1946.**



Source: Taylor Collection.

When Tom walked through the doorway of the main house at Llaguno's hacienda near Sain Alto, he sensed he was walking into the writing of a book. What he experienced there moved him deeply as he witnessed the bulls living in grandeur on quiet grass, and the sharp sunlight and danger in the town bullrings on Sunday afternoons. Tom returned to Mexico often, once painting Manolete's portrait in a suite at the Galicia Hotel in Torreon while an aficionado announced in a Castilian accent that Manolete sat before the artist with the same serenity he displayed when standing in front of a bull (Lea, 1968:104).

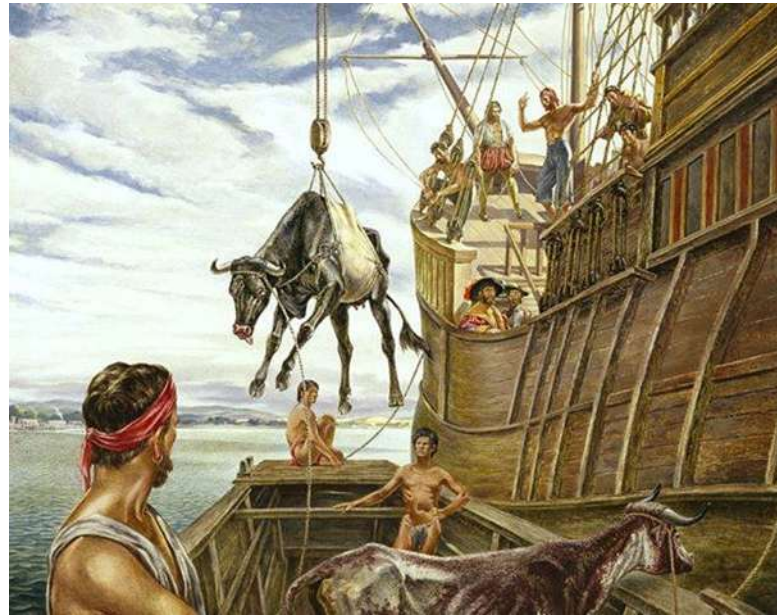
**Figure 8 - The Brave Bulls, cover page, 1949.**



Source: Collection of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. © James D. Lea

Excited to have discovered superior material for his LIFE story, Tom wrote a 7,200-word text piece with sixteen paintings and drawings on Don Julian Llaguno's Toros Bravos. His package was returned by LIFE magazine with a note saying Mexico's cruel sport wasn't the American dish. It asked how the paintings of western beef cattle were coming. After responding "just fine," Tom Lea spent five weeks painting his picture Unloading the First Cattle in North America, Vera Cruz, 1521 with Don Gregorio's black heifer being debarked at the center (Lea, 1968:106).

**Figure 9 - Unloading the First Cattle in North America, Vera Cruz, 1521, 1946**



Source: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

With the severance he received from LIFE after delivering his beef cattle pictures, Tom Lea returned to Don Llaguno's Toros Bravos while teaching himself to write. He attended the bullfights in Ciudad Juárez and befriended the empresario of the bullring, Don Roberto González. He met the bullring help, the toreros that came to town and the bulls themselves. He reported bullfights for El Paso papers that had never before carried bullfight news unless it was a goring, and he provided bullfight action drawings free to Don Roberto to use in the newspaper advertising for his corridas.

**Figure 10 - Chapter Four. Heading for The Brave Bulls (page 41), 1948. Published by Little, Brown & Company.**



Source: Collection of the HRHRC, U.T. Austin.

**Figure 11 - Chapter Eight. Heading for The Brave Bulls (page 98), 1948.  
Published by Little, Brown & Company.**



Source: Collection of the HRHRC, U.T. Austin.

Tom studied José María de Cossío's *Los Toros, Tratado Técnico e Histórico*, as well as pamphlets, periodicals and crónicas of the bull critics in México and Spain. He learned the “swinging flavor” of the bullfighting business, travelling deep into México, following the bulls in places where very few gringos were seen in 1947 (Lea, 1968:110). He wrote the Art Director at Little, Brown & Company in Boston, Arthur Brown, about a trip he made to Aguascalientes and Jalisco:

“I went alone. I spoke no English because there just wasn't anybody to speak it to. I lived in the midst of bullfighters, match-race horse jockeys that race the quarter-mile bareback, rooster handlers, professional gamblers – and bull breeders. It was as violent as Mexican sunlight, raw as new tequila, punchy as a song in a saloon after midnight when they are singing about the moon dripping blood. I was up before dawn many mornings riding a magnificent Spanish mare; some days were filled with the belling of brave bulls, some with the swish of the fighting cape, some with the riotous racket of the fiestas of San Marcos where the Indians danced and the whores all sang and the roosters fought. I went down there to get a more graphic idea of how bullfighters live” (Lea, 1968:110).

It was the first time Tom Lea had traveled without a sketchbook or paintbox. He was there to listen, trying to put his ear “to the beating of that bullfighter's heart and the bull's too” (Lea, 1968:110). The more he listened, the more he knew he had to write a novel. He had already memorized the first line: “The city of Cuenca is rimmed around three sides by blue mountains.” He also knew his bullfighter's name was Luis Bello and the last sentence on the last page would be *Vamos, chico! Viviremos siempre y nos haremos ricos!*

The in between part, the enormous middle part, Tom Lea typed out with his two index fingers on a 1927 Smith-Corona portable typewriter, which he had put front and center on the drawing table in his studio. He typed the manuscript while standing up, neatly dressed in a shirt and tie, just as he had always stood to paint.

Tom Lea was a forty year old painter when he found this new discipline and adventure. Never reading studies on the subject of *How to write*, but refining from his mind all fanciness while searching for the exact words to use in the most economical way, Tom Lea taught himself to write by writing, rewriting and rewriting again. It took



him thirteen months to finish the middle part, writing as the last sentence in English what Luis Bello had spoken in Spanish before the book began. He mailed the completed transcript to Little, Brown and Company of Boston in May of 1948 and, when the response was positive, he opened his table drawer to pull out a bottle of ink.

Tom Lea hadn't drawn a picture in months, nor had he held a paint brush in his hand. Making the chapter-head drawings and a frontispiece painting to enhance his word-shaped bulls, he said was like putting icing on the cake (Lea, 1968:112).

Adair Margo is the President of the Tom Lea Institute and recorded Tom Lea's oral history, which became an award-winning book, *Tom Lea, An Oral History*, El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1995. She was Chairman of the Texas Commission on the Arts and the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, and was awarded the *Águila Azteca* by Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan at the Mexican Cultural Center in Washington, D. C. on behalf of President Felipe Calderon and the Presidential Citizen's Medal by President George W. Bush at the White House for her work in building international relationships from Mexico to China.

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