

Sword of Santa Anna reflects flamboyant personality of its infamous owner

By René A. Guzman | May 22, 2017 | Updated: May 23, 2017 10:36am



Photo: Federica Valabrega For The San Antonio Express-News

IMAGE 1 OF 12

The ornate Santa Anna presentation sword at the Briscoe Western Art Museum in downtown San Antonio once belonged to the infamous victor of the Battle of the Alamo, though he received the sword more than a ... [more](#)

This ostentatious sword of the Alamo's most infamous conqueror never drew blood at the historic siege, yet shines just blocks away from the battle site.

In fact, it missed the entire Texas Revolution by more than a decade, yet was given to that leader of the Mexican forces by an American weapons maker that *wasn't* on the side of the Texians' fight for independence.

That's just part of the provenance surrounding the ornate presentation sword of Antonio López de Santa Anna, on permanent display at the Briscoe Western Art Museum in downtown San Antonio.

Dated 1852, the ceremonial gold and steel sword with dark leather scabbard was a gift to the Mexican general and frequent Mexican president from the Ames Manufacturing Company in Chicopee, Mass.

And it couldn't have been a more befitting gift for a historical figure who embraced the label of "Napoleon of the West."

"I certainly think it complements who he was, or who he perceived himself to be," said

Jenny Chowning, Head of Education & Programs at the Briscoe. "When you're talking about Santa Anna that is really important because of how he saw himself and wanted his legacy to be carried on. There is certainly an element of flattery that would have had to have been in the transaction."

Not to mention good business.

According to the Briscoe, manufacturer James T. Ames gave Santa Anna the 39-inch sword and 32-inch scabbard to secure future sales. Santa Anna was a valued customer, having purchased more than 200 tons of armaments for Mexico. No surprise, the New England company did not support Texas independence from Mexico in 1836.

"This was essentially a lobbying effort to get Santa Anna to secure an order for ammunition," Chowning said. "There was definitely a lot of thought that went into it on behalf of Ames for Santa Anna."

Thought that shows from point to pommel and so many parts in between.

The sword's scabbard alone bears a golden locket around its mouth with a Spanish inscription that roughly translates to read: "To the Hon. Mr. President of the Republic of Mexico: The Ames Company, whose representative is James T. Ames, owners of the arms factory of Chicopee (Massachusetts) present to him this sword made in said factory (1852)."

Yet the sword's most striking feature is its sculpted hilt, a dramatic depiction of Mexico's coat of arms that would look right at home in Santa Anna's hand.

The sword hilt features a golden eagle perched at the pommel or end of the sword's sharkskin grip with gold wire. Its beak is locked around the neck of a hissing rattlesnake, which is coiled around the sword's knuckle guard. That guard flows to a golden pool around the base of the grip, with a roaring lion's head for a quillon jutting out perpendicular to the blade.

The blade itself bears floral-patterned etching on either side, while the sheath also sports a decorative gold emblem of the Mexican eagle and snake at its center and a shiny golden chape at its end.

Father and son art collectors Enrique and José "Che" Guerra lent the sword and other works of art and artifacts to the Briscoe before the museum's October 2013 opening. The sword became a permanent fixture at the Briscoe at the end of 2015, as a gift from Enrique and his wife Lydia Guerra and family, a few months before Che's father died in March last year.

"Dad always took a lot of pride in it," said Che, who owns the Nuevo Santander Gallery in McAllen with his wife Becky. "He had it in a glass case all the time so nobody would play with it. My brother and I did have a habit of doing that, getting into a sword fight or two with his antique swords."

The Briscoe considers the Guerra family's collection of Spanish and Mexican colonial art and antiques one of the finest in the nation. Che said his father likely got the Santa Anna sword from an uncle who was an antique arms dealer.

Che noted it was his father's decision to give the sword to the Briscoe as part of the museum's focus on all facets of the American West, which Che stressed includes the American Indian as well as the Spanish Colonial era.

That also includes a bronze sculpture by Che's brother Enrique "Kiko" Guerra called "El Caporal," a life-size depiction of an early 1800s vaquero with two cattle tied together.

"When you're telling the history of the West," Che said, "it didn't start necessarily after the Alamo battle."

Speaking of the downtown shrine, the Alamo has its own Santa Anna sword, though it's a much simpler presentation blade given to Santa Anna to commemorate his victory over the Spanish at Tampico in 1829.

Alamo curator and historian Bruce Winders said such swords served as mile markers in Santa Anna's career and symbols of his influence. Santa Anna likely wore the 1820s blade as a badge of rank while on duty, Winders said, while the more decorative Ames blade might have been worn for more formal occasions, such as military reviews or greeting dignitaries.

"It really was tied in with the idea of honor and respect," Winders said.

And while that ceremonial sword at the Briscoe may never have seen combat, it probably saw the end of its owner's long and turbulent political career.

When Santa Anna received the 1852 Ames sword, "it's really his last hurrah," Winders said. "By 1854 he will be on his way out and into exile."

Santa Anna served as Mexico's president on 11 non-consecutive occasions, ever hopping between political movements and parties to seize power at any opportunity. That ended in 1855 when liberal forces led by Benito Juárez forced him out of office for good.

For around the next 20 years Santa Anna lived in exile in several countries, including the United States and Cuba. He returned to Mexico in 1874, and died at his home in Mexico City on June 21, 1876, at age 82.

No question the Santa Anna sword at the Briscoe mirrors the personality of its vainglorious owner. But Chowning hopes the blade points visitors to learn more about Santa Anna beyond his victory at the Battle of the Alamo and ignominious defeat at the Battle of San Jacinto.

"I think it's a window into Santa Anna's ego," Chowning said. "And also just the complexity of the power dynamics of the American West, and what became the American West. And what he meant to the United States, Texas and to Mexico. He meant different things to all of those entities at different points in time."

rguzman@express-news.net



René A. Guzman

Staff writer | San Antonio
Express-News