The Museum has garnered public and critical acclaim for its presentation of the chronological history of Texas and the American West with a special emphasis on the Spanish influences in the region.

The Orientation Gallery is where your adventure begins. This room, with a portrait of Stephen F. Austin which morphs into J.P. Bryan for an introductory video, highlights the history of the American West though its indigenous people, Spanish colonization, the Republic of Texas, the Civil War, the Storm of 1900, and the Mexican Revolution. A life-size statue of Bernardo de Galvez, dressed in his Louisiana governor’s uniform, pays tribute in the room, in honor of the man for whom the island is named. Artwork by Julius Stockfleth and Frank Reaugh reinforces that Galveston is truly where the sea meets the West.

Spanish Colonial Era
The story of Texas and the American West goes back thousands of years from the Indigenous Nations, French, Spanish, and Mexican influences. Almost 500 years ago, Cabeza de Vaca documented his travels from this area to Mexico in a book which we have on display. The gallery has a large galleon ship model, which was used employ the Spanish colonization strategy of “gold and souls,” transporting soldiers, missionaries and supplies back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean in the 16th century. Artifacts on display in this gallery are from some of the original inhabitants, and visitors, of Texas: such as the Indigenous Nations that comprised the “First Texans”, as well as the Catholic presence that set up missions and presidios to protect the local populations, French colonists, and the Spanish conquistador’s fluctuating interest in the area.

Texas Frontier
Stephen F. Austin, known as the Father of Anglo-Texas, greets you as you enter the Texas Frontier Gallery. Austin was a successful empresario and entrepreneur who helped settle Texas with the permission of the Mexican government. Over time, many of the new colonists wanted independence from Mexico and fought against Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna and his army beginning in 1835. Santa Anna overwhelmed the Texians at the Alamo and again at Goliad but suffered a devastating defeat at the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836. Texas became independent from Mexico and the Republic of Texas was born with Sam Houston as its president. The room is anchored by a fascinating, hand-crafted diorama with 2000 soldiers, depicting the Battle of San Jacinto.
Statehood & Beyond
After achieving statehood, Texas seceded from the Union in 1861, one of seven states to do so before the first battle of the Civil War. Two major battles were fought in Texas: The Battle of Sabine Pass and the Siege of Galveston – both were losses for the Union army.

As the war subsided and settlers continued their westward migration, violent frontier struggles between Indigenous Nations and the U.S. Cavalry ensued and tens of thousands of wild cattle roamed from the Rio Grande to San Antonio. Eastern cities like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia underwent huge population booms as factories, rail connections, and steamships filled with immigrants transformed America into an industrialized nation. In small towns, cowboys and cowgirls sought work on cattle drives, while outlaws – robbers, cattle rustlers, and murderers — challenged the lawmen of west. Texas’ cowboys fed the nation by walking those cows north, traveling from water hole to water hole until they reached the nearest railroad! The gallery also documents the Mexican Revolution and Galveston’s growth as a center for economic activity and immigration, until the Great Storm of 1900.

Rest of the West
A wide variety of colorful western art dominates the walls of this upstairs gallery. Featured are Western landscapes and cities from New Mexico to California, the Rocky Mountains, and the Great Plains. They depict the landscapes, people, and the action and adventure of the cowboy. Artwork by Andy Warhol, Frederic Remington, and Charles Russell vividly portray the West.

The best and rarest guns, pistols, and rifles ever made are also on display: Colts, Winchesters, Remingtons, Marlins, and Smith & Wessons, used by settlers, cowboys, outlaws, lawmen, and ranchers. Items in this display include rare guns with low serial numbers, prototypes, and antiques. Equally important is a display of spurs and bridles, representing various styles from different historical periods. Some of the spurs were handcrafted, while some were mass produced in shops and even prisons.

Texas Masters
The work of six prominent Texas artists show a vast array of art styles – from portraiture to sculptures to landscapes populated with longhorns and cattle grazing and vast open fields of bluebonnets. The concentration of work by Frank Reaugh, Tom Lea, Jose Arpa y Perea, Elisabet Ney and Robert Jenkins Onderdonk and his son Julian cover a variety of mediums – pastels, oils, clay, watercolors and pen-and-ink illustrations. A glimpse into the life of artist Reaugh documents his work, his studio and itineraries for drawing trips with his students, whose work is also exhibited. Additionally, displayed is artwork by an assortment of other prominent Texas artists depicting scenes, landscapes, rivers and forts, as well as indigenous people and themes of the American West.
In the Texas Frontier Gallery, one of the most iconic displays within the Museum is the Battle of San Jacinto Diorama. The room is anchored by this fascinating, hand-crafted diorama with 2000 soldiers, depicting the 18-minute battle. Each segment of the diorama tells the unique story of the Texian and Mexican war. This depiction encourages visitors to discuss and debate the legends, heroes and historical figures of this decisive battle for Texas independence.