

REMEMBERING SAM SAVITT

The artist's son, **ROGER SAVITT**, recalls life with his beloved father on the centennial of his birth.



The *Guide to Horses*, Savitt's first in a series of horse information charts, is now in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution. Below, he is with his dog, Jenny, in 1978.

You could say that my father, Sam Savitt, took an improbable journey in life. Born exactly 100 years ago to a cash-strapped family in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, there was nothing to suggest that he would someday become this country's preeminent equestrian artist—except perhaps for one thing: his announcement at age 12 that when he grew up, he wanted to paint and draw horses.

To those around him, this revelation must have sounded almost comical. Wilkes-Barre of the 1920s and 1930s was a lot better known for coal-mining than art or horses. And no doubt my father had little exposure to either one. But he stuck to his childhood ambitions, and when he reached high school, his art teacher suggested that if he really wanted to be a professional artist, he should enroll in Brooklyn's Pratt Institute.



On his application to Pratt, he submitted drawings in crayon. I'm not sure whether the selection of medium was naive or inspired, but the artwork got him accepted.

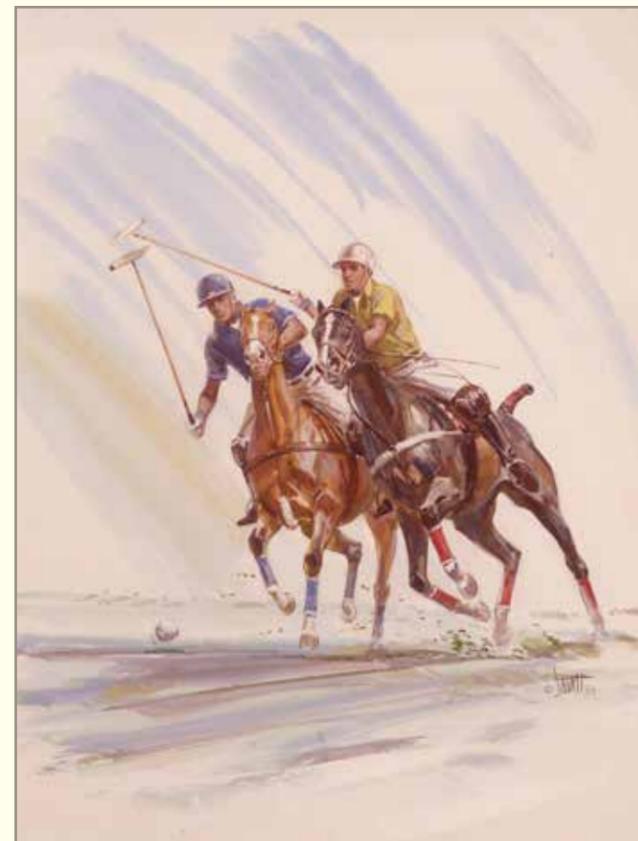
This new student from Wilkes-Barre soon realized that some of his peers were so good he wondered if his acceptance to

Pratt had been a clerical error. No, it was not. And before long he realized that, as good as they were, none of the other students could match his skill at drawing a horse. Why the fascination with horses? My father said he didn't really know, though it's safe to say that for him Hollywood westerns were a childhood attraction that simply never went away.

Given the timing of my father's graduation from Pratt—1941—his career would have to wait. In another year he was in the jungles of south Asia as a first lieutenant for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Lt. Savitt remained with the army until the end of the war, and he kept his artistic skills sharp with sketches of what he saw—everything from exotic animals to quiet villages to soldiers with machine guns.

By the 1950s, he was married with two children (my sister and I) and living in New York state, first in Levittown, then Yorktown Heights, and finally—for the last 44 years of his life—in North

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Left: *Take the Man First* is part of a collection of watercolors on the fast-paced sport of polo.

Below: An oil painting of a mare and foal in *Mother Love* became a limited edition print.



Above: *Last Race of the Day* nicely conveys horse racing's drama and action.



Above: This untitled drawing of a horse being readied for the Irish Grand Prix highlights Savitt's extraordinary skill with a pencil.



Right: With a pen and ink, the wild ride on a bronco is depicted in *Out of the Chute*.

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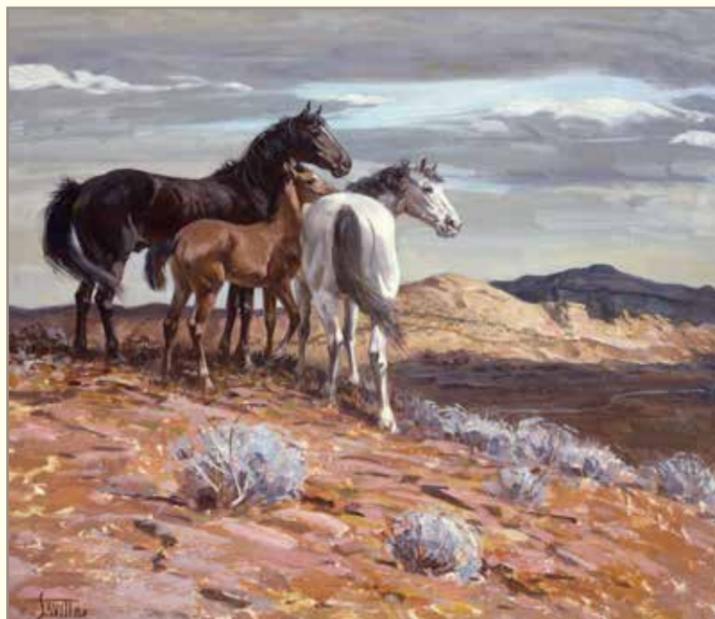
Salem, a rural equestrian oasis 60 miles north of New York City. His career was off to a vigorous start as he began getting assignments illustrating books and magazines. At all points, he was helped mightily by my ever-supportive mother, who also had the business acumen freelancers need but my father lacked.

In 1956, he wrote his first book, *Step-a-Bit: The Story of a Foal*. It had about 60 pages of pencil drawings and just enough text to string them together, tracing the growth of a foal from birth to adulthood. *The New York Times Book Review* lauded its illustrative style for having “spontaneity and charm.”

My father never set out to be an author, yet he would go on to write another 14 books and co-author two more. A sampling of his subjects: the U.S. Equestrian Team (which named him their official artist), wild horses, rodeo, fiction (about horses of course) and, appropriately, the definitive book on how to draw horses. His writing style was conversational and down-to-earth.

Like his books, his artistic pursuits were both diverse and single-minded: fox hunting, polo, horseracing, steeple chasing, rodeo, horses in history, and backyard horses. If there was a horse involved, it was fair game for his pencils, watercolors, acrylics, oils and charcoal.

As far back as I can remember, which is somewhere in the early 1960s, my father was never idle. By that point, his reputation was secure and assignments were usually waiting. There were books to illustrate (more than 100); posters,



In the oil painting *The Mustangs*, Savitt portrayed wild horses amid scrubland of the far west. He was long interested in the plight of wild horses and even wrote a book on the subject.

1:00, followed by another trip to the studio, which he half-jokingly dubbed his “torture chamber”—his nod to the emotion and focus he invested in his work. The work day usually ended by 4:00 with afternoon coffee, a fast-paced walk with his dog, and a second visit to the horses—or a third if he’d ridden one earlier in the day.

prints and charts to create; portraits to paint. His fluid and precise brush strokes imparted remarkable energy and authenticity to his subjects. While his oil and acrylic painting was more complex, I was often most impressed with his pencil sketches, because I could see exactly what he did, how a thousand pencil strokes hit their marks with unerring precision.

His mentor was Harold Von Schmidt, best known for his realistic renderings of the Old West. My father, who hitchhiked out West for two summers during the Great Depression, shared Von Schmidt’s love of the place—even if the Northeast was his home of choice. He was also influenced by the casual but careful drawing style of his friend and fellow illustrator Paul Brown.

The daily Sam Savitt schedule was a comfortable and immensely disciplined routine: He fed his horses and ate breakfast by 8:00 am, then headed for his third-floor studio. By 11:00, he had late-morning tea, and then back to the studio. Lunch fell somewhere between noon and

Suffice it to say, my father was all about horses. He joined in fox hunts and horse shows, and rode on the North Salem trails nearby. If he met other horseback riders he knew, he usually remembered their names, but he always remembered the name of their horse. On occasion, he trained horses (one made it onto the U.S. Equestrian Team), he gave lectures on drawing horses, and spent time with friends who also had horses. At every meal I ever ate with my parents, horses were an inevitable topic of conversation.

My dad once observed that since many people write and paint when they retire, retirement for him would be pointless. And, for him, the work never lost its enduring appeal. Even at the kitchen table he was apt to turn over an old envelope and sketch a couple of horse heads while my mother prepared a meal.

For my father, “equestrian artist” was the career in which he excelled and for which he was honored, but most importantly, it meant doing for a living what he truly loved to do in life.

You can purchase original Savitt artwork directly from the estate of Sam Savitt at SamSavittArt.com 