

A rare gift

As inexplicable as it was persistent, Sam Savitt's fascination with horses gave us a lifetime of beautiful insights into equine nature.

By Emily Kilby

Sam Savitt died on Christmas Day. Maybe the name could pass unrecognized by a good portion of American horsepeople, but not his images. Who among us has not seen at least one of Savitt's illustrations created for more than 100 books, countless horse and outdoor periodicals, educational wall charts, event and advertising posters and even, years

ago, dozens of comic-book covers? Savitt's signature style was spare, but somehow, with minimal pencil lines and charcoal shadings, watercolor washes and brushstrokes, he presented us with the soul of horses.

Even in the most utilitarian of illustrations for how-to riding books, Savitt horses are alive, participating in the learning process. In action scenes, which were his preferred subjects, Savitt's horses positively leap off the page, clashing in polo matches, twisting and

crowhopping in bucking competitions, straining to scale sheer cliff walls and jostling for the lead in races. And every one of those illustrations, no matter how utilitarian or romanticized, is utterly true to the animals we know. Their postures are absolutely accurate, their facial expressions exactly right.

Bette Savitt, Sam's wife of 54 years, says that all the artist did to capture the action while he witnessed these roiling events was to make a few lines on paper. Once back in the studio, Savitt transformed that visual shorthand to the pack of steeplechasers tangling with Becher's Brook, the herd of mustangs cornered in a canyon, the pasture of mares and foals busy with summertime pleasures.

The most natural collaboration between EQUUS and America's best-known horse illustrator was in the two articles that bracketed Savitt's commissioned work for us: in EQUUS 20 in an article simply titled "Body

Language" and 14 years later in EQUUS 191 in "S.O.S.: The Significance of Stance." No great heart-stirring action here: Instead, Savitt rendered the very essence of horseness, sketched out so clearly that captions aren't really required. EQUUS had taken as its mission from the start to be the voice of the horse; Savitt, from his earliest work to his last, was the master observer and translator of the things horses have to tell us.

"One of the reasons Savitt's work is so sought after is that it is so approachable by everyone," says publisher Elizabeth Carnes, whose Half Halt Press recently took over the books and educational charts produced by the Savitts' Black Horse Press since 1963. "And his love of horses comes through in all his work. One of his great joys was in helping other artists, especially young ones. He was a generous man with his talents."

Savitt, the son of immigrants in Pennsylvania coal country, where art and horses were hardly standard career options, shared his understanding of both through seminars, school talks, television appearances and, of course, his images and words themselves. Then last August, he suffered a mild stroke. It was not particularly disabling, says Bette Savitt, but it robbed Savitt of his independence and halted the artistic output that had been his reason for being for the greatest part of his 83 years. "You're no better than your last painting" had been the artist's lifelong measure of worth, and without that, says Bette, he grew depressed, tormented.

So Sam Savitt died on Christmas Day, ending a life that was a gift to all of us who are forever fascinated, comforted, challenged and inspired by these creatures who are our partners in work, sport and everyday being. His wife expects to host a celebration in his honor this spring in their North Salem, New York, hometown. But for as long as there are Savitt books in libraries and on coffee tables, Savitt charts and posters on tack-room walls and Savitt paintings hanging in galleries and homes, his gift will continue to be celebrated. Youngsters just awakening to their yearnings for the horse experience will learn the basic equine vocabulary through Savitt's assured eyes. Horsepeople who have seen it all will experience anew the fresh wonder for the beauty, the vitality, the being of horses. Thank you, Sam Savitt, for sharing your gift so graciously for so long. □



Sam Savitt's signature style was spare but somehow always managed to capture the essence of his equine subjects.

For more information on Savitt's art career and views on horses, see "What Horses Mean to Me," EQUUS 121, and "Horses, Art and Sam Savitt," EQUUS 200.