



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
EQUINE ART



Summer 1996

P. O. Box 1315, Middleburg, Virginia 20118

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A Day with Sam Savitt

by Lynn Wade

If you asked Sam Savitt to draw a picture of a horse parachuting out of the cargo door of a 747, he could do it—without any reference photos. He knows, and could accurately convey, where each of the horse's legs would be what its left ear would be doing and its exact facial expression ... from memory. That is not to say that Sam has ever actually seen a horse parachute out of a 747, but that his stored knowledge about horses is so immense that he is able to depict them, believably, in virtually any given situation. The only thing Sam Savitt absolutely doesn't know (and this is obvious from the moment you meet him) is that he is Sam Savitt. The Sam Savitt whose name is always preceded by "world renowned," the official artist of the USET, most famous illustrator and/or author of the horse books many of us grew up with, Sam Savitt. This highly accomplished man is, in fact, unexpectedly unintimidating ... a remarkably kind and generous teacher who is, to top it off, genuinely humble.

Doesn't he know who he is?

The Savitt farm house is 60 miles from New York City and as many feet from the narrow country road on which it sits. The beautiful 1830 white Federalist (trimmed with black shutters and flowering dogwoods) presides over 10 acres of intertwining horse pastures. The antique furniture which graces the first floor and would be the focal point in anyone else's home, is simply outdone in this one by the stunning array of Savitt artwork adorning the walls. A revolving gallery of sorts, the display changes as various works are called away to shows, or are sold, to be replaced by others.

At 6:30 in the morning, the day is well underway for Sam, who has already swam nearly a mile in laps, and his wife, Bette, who has worked out at the gym. "Everything but the 'Stairmaster,' she says which is understandable as we begin the ascent to their third floor studio/office. (We've opted for the back stairway versus the lovely

circular version, in deference to a small poodle named Spencer who has both an aversion to un-carpeted stairs and a lot of authority.)

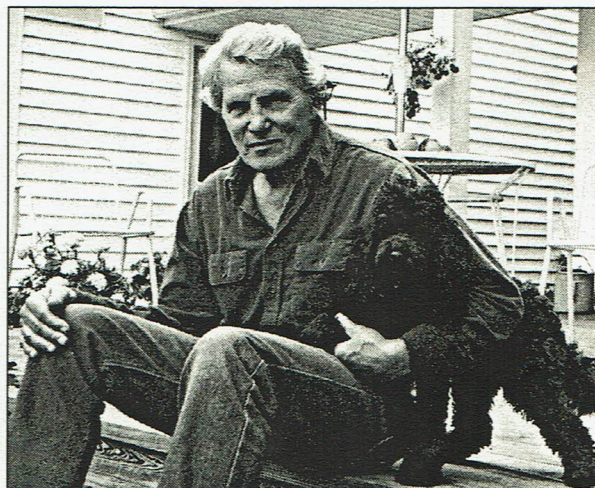
The Savitts' peaked-ceiling work space is a microcosm of their lives. Over 30 feet in length, the walls are covered on one side by Sam's horse show ribbons which date back to the early 50's, and, on the other, by his vast collection of hats which run the gamut from his net-covered army helmet to a black silk topper. The room is divided by the house's large, central chimney into one-half Sam's studio and one-half Bette's office (where she handles every bit of business concerning the work produced in Sam's half under their company name, Black Horse Press).

"There's so much to be done," Sam says, gesturing toward the mountains of paperwork entirely covering her desk, "this place couldn't function without her. And, amazingly, she can find anything you want in those papers!"

Each artifact we pass on the way into Sam's studio has a fascinating story. The western saddle ("requisitioned" from some surplus by army Lieutenant Savitt during a stint in Burma), the fencing gear (from his days as captain of the team at Pratt Institute), the authentic, old Navajo saddle blanket (well, O.K. he just found that on the bridle path one day).

The end of the studio is dominated by a four foot square, north-facing window, which provides Sam's lighting of choice. "Even semi-gray daylight is preferable to artificial lights," he says, adding that, at one time, a large tree which was once outside the window, reflected a green tint into the room for which he had to compensate in his paintings.

The window also offers a nice view of McClaurey, Sam's 16.2 hand, 22 year old chestnut Thoroughbred who, although no longer hunting or showing, still enjoys a good cross country gallop. "The other day, about two miles from



home, I was just dismounting to move a branch from the trail when McClaurey spooked, dumped me and took off. There I was, all by myself, laughing. It was a long walk!"

Several jobs-in-progress fill the shelves behind his desk, the drawing table is one the artist has owned for 50 years and the easel was given to him by his close friend and mentor, Paul Brown.

"Paul was such a great guy—so much humor, so gregarious and very generous. Though he'd never ridden, he introduced me to horses, took me to horse shows and polo matches and always let me see what he was working on and would explain things. He was a volunteer fireman and, if a call came while we were talking, he'd bring me along, continuing the discussion as we careened around with no seat belts—he never lost his concentration!

"He'd drop everything to help me, saying, 'maybe someday you'll be able to help somebody else,'"—a prophetic statement, considering Sam's staggering workshop workload.

It was through Paul's recommendation that Sam landed his first book illustration job. The book was "Learning to Ride, Hunt and Show" by legendary teacher, Gordon Wright, who, subsequently, also became a great friend.

"Gordon showed me that riding was as much of an art as painting, and it was through him that I started catching on to this whole business of horses. We'd buy them from the track to re-school and sell. A great life," he smiles, "with some high moments!" Recently, it was Sam who was chosen to hand the plaque to George Morris for Gordon's

induction into the National Show Hunter Hall of Fame.

Today is one of Sam's "drawing" days; one spent with pencil, paper, eraser and ideas. The pencils are HB, B or F medium (2H for tracing), the paper a 14 x 17" pad of rough or smooth vellum, or tracing paper, the eraser is kneaded rubber—and the ideas . . .

Many come when Bette and I are talking—on a road trip or in a plane—we always have something to talk about and it's easier to be creative when away from the studio and the phone calls. Often when we're in the kitchen (where we spend a lot of time)," he laughs. "The first sketch might be on the back of an envelope. Sometimes I'll jot down a thought while lying in bed—though occasionally these turn out, in the morning, to be nothing!"

Of all the drawings produced in today's session, only two or three, perhaps four, will be kept and put aside to be considered for development at a later time. Sam currently has a backlog of about 20 such sketches from which he pulls one to show us.

"I like this idea of the horses running in front of the storm because it has all the ingredients that could make an interesting painting; the darkening sky and the foal, who's trying to keep up, against the background of its mother's strangely-lit white coat. Interestingly, when I showed the first sketch of this to Bette, she commented that the foal seemed to be 'running easily,' whereas I'd actually wanted it to appear somewhat erratic or frantic in its movements. She has quite a good, critical eye for this stuff; her comments are valid. When she points out a particular area, I know there's something there that'll need changing!"

A painting on the easel depicting a handsome chestnut in a free, extended trot, unencumbered by tack or rider, appears to be a finished piece but is, in fact, merely a color study for a commissioned portrait of a top-grade dressage horse. though the final painting will be done in oil on masonite, this first version is in Sam's favorite medium, gouache. "It took me a long time to get

acquainted, or handy, with gouache. I was afraid of it because of its tendency to get light and chalky, and had to learn to have courage and get bolder with it ... to paint red a *brilliant* red. I could always knock it down later, but, if it was dead, there was nothing I could do with it."

This color study, born of many drawings, has had all the problems of anatomy, composition and values *thrashed out*, as Sam puts it. The next stage—beginning the actual painting—is not the artist's favorite. "The first three days, until everything is covered, are a harrowing experience. A lot of times I think 'What the hell am I doing, here? I don't know anything any more!' You have to keep grinding away, hoping, pulling, literally draining everything out of yourself. when it's finally working out right, nearing the end, you feel like you've come through a long maze and *sometimes*, it's good."

He directs our attention to a piece with which he is satisfied, a loose depic-

"Just as you can't make a word until you know the shapes of the letters, you must know the shapes of the parts of a horse—what they do, how they fit—before you can draw one, and that includes being able to see and correct the distortions and mistakes in a photograph...Sight is a faculty, but seeing is an

tion of a wildly bucking horse unloading its rider. "I've done two or three paintings of this strawberry roan, based on the wonderful old western poem about him. this one was just a 'demo' that took an hour and a half to do, and, maybe because of that—that it didn't matter so much—I was relaxed and bold. My heart was in it and I really got a kick out of it. that's the direction I'd like to go in ... to make it look easy.

"The artists whose work I most admire are all 'painterly.' They don't write it out for me; I don't want to count the hairs. Will James, Alfred Munnings, Lionel Edwards, Paul Brown, Howard Terpning, Robert Bateman ... they all challenge me as a viewer. My favorite, though, is probably Rein Poortvliet. He's a real draftsman who tackles the most difficult subjects.

Although getting this modest man to admit to being proud of anything is like pulling good teeth, he says that he

definitely feels pride when another artist buys his work, but was perhaps most flattered when the city of Wilkes-Barre recently held a banquet in his honor. In the presence of many of his relatives (including his brother, Al, son, Roger, and daughter, Vicki) Sam was given a plaque, signed by the mayor, citing him as a role model and man of achievement.

One subject about which the artist is not reticent, as his students are well aware, is the use, and abuse, of photography in the creation of artwork.

"I've done drawings that might take two hours without using a reference photo, even though I know I have the perfect one in my files. It's just a stubborn streak; I think, 'I should be able to do this, myself.' Well, every man to his own poison!"

"Just as you can't make a word until you know the shapes of the letters, you must know the shapes of the parts of a horse—what they do, how they fit—before you can draw one, and that

includes being able to see and correct the distortions and mistakes in a photograph. A drawing done from life might not be totally accurate, but at

least the student is *looking* and training their eye. Sight is a faculty, but *seeing* is an art. Often, when I ask a student to really look at a subject, then turn away to draw it, the drawing is even better because, in trying to remember what they saw, it somehow gains more importance.

"I do love to teach," Sam smiles. "It's actually a learning experience for me because, when I try to convey an idea to a class, or in writing, it's a challenge to put into words what I only knew, instinctively, before."

Referring to his own learning process as a "neverending" one, Sam says that his association with the AAEA is enhanced by the stimulation of meeting other artists and adds, "I learn from everyone!"

Luckily for us, Sam Savitt really doesn't have a clue who he is. ♦