

Horses, Art And Sam Savitt

By Emily Kilby

A storyteller on canvas, this son of the Pennsylvania coalfields has blended his two life passions to create a unique body of equestrian art.

Sam Savitt has told thousands and thousands of horse stories in his life. A few of them have been written in ink, but most are conveyed in oil, watercolor, charcoal, pencil—every medium but acrylics, which don't forgive. His visual stories have appeared on comic-book covers and posters, in magazines, in books from his own hand and books written by others, as commissioned art for proud horse owners and paintings done purely for his own pleasure. If he's not working on a piece of art, Sam Savitt is not a happy man.

Nor is he content when he's separated from horses. His earliest childhood memories include the neighborhood milk-delivery horse and the games of pretend in which he acted the horse, often the sort of horse who delights in dumping his driver every now and again. He can't account for this passion. No one in his immediate family shared his equestrian interest, and certainly nothing in his experience as a son of a Russian immigrant coal miner in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, prepared him for the worlds of rodeo and polo, of racing and steeplechasing, of hunters and jumpers that he went on to illustrate with such accuracy. But, except for his stint in Burma dur-

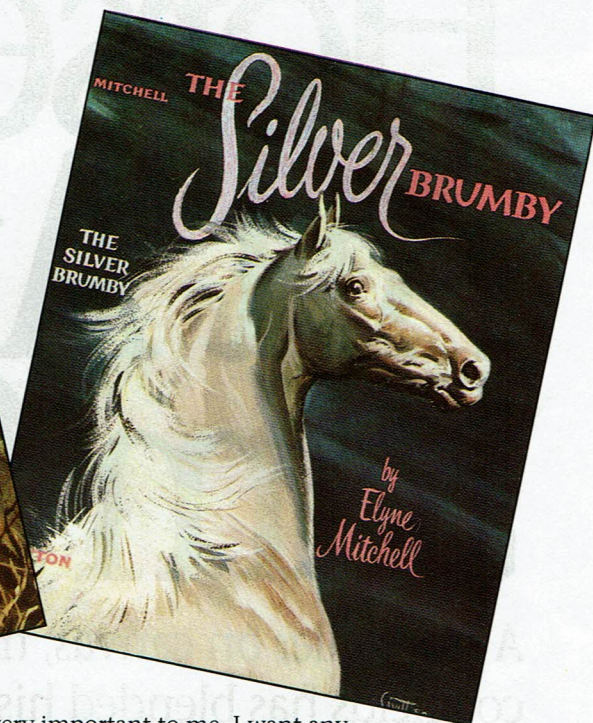
ing World War II, Savitt has always found a way to be around horses. Before the war, as a recent graduate of Pratt Institute living in New York City, he rode at Claremont Riding Academy there and later on Long Island.

Today, two horses, the latest of a continuous line of inhabitants, graze in the pastures of his home in North Salem, New York.

Two Savitt favorites: "The oil painting, 'The Mustangs,' [facing page] represents the plight of the wild horses, who have always been of special interest to me. Three mustangs are bunched together on a barren slope—their last stand. The land reaches way back into the horizon without another living thing in sight. 'The Strawberry Roan,' [below] depicts the Western poem about a wrangler who thought he could ride anything until he met the strawberry roan. I did this watercolor for myself; it has never left my house."



Savitt has illustrated more than 150 books, uncoun- ted magazine articles and approximately 40 comic-book covers, including these samples from early in his career. The black-and-white illustration below is from the 1962 book *Horse In Her Heart*.



Even now, after portraying uncoun- ted horses in every possible activity over his lifetime, Savitt still studies his own horses in their natural surround- ings, watching them for nuances of posture and movement that will make his work more authen- tic. Models aren't part of his creative process: "I

watch and remember." He is driven to paint his trade- mark subject with the utmost accuracy in two ar- eas: realistic depic- tion of equine nature and unerring authen- ticity in all details of tack, attire and com- petition represented in his paintings.

Perhaps Savitt gives his horses on canvas a bit more of a look of nobility, spirit, fire than most real-life horses express, but that's the only artis- tic license he takes.

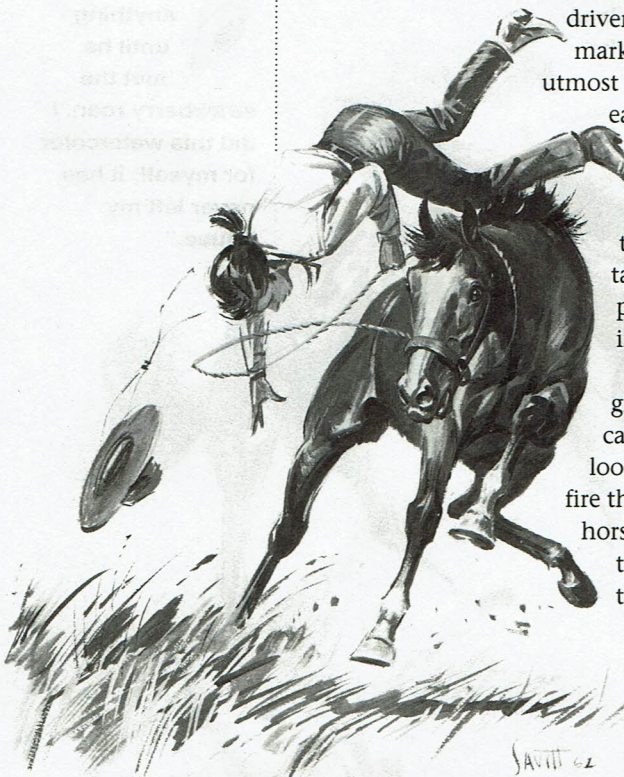
"The artistic thing comes first," he says, "but accuracy is

very important to me. I want any rodeo rider who looks at my paintings of rodeo events to see that all the equipment is right." In fact, one of his most recent paintings is a visual rule book of sorts for saddle-bronc riders, depict- ing seven riders complying with seven require- ments of the rodeo contest.

In the '50s, when he was beginning his career as a free-lance illustrator, Savitt didn't know near- ly so much about the regulations and require- ments of the horse activities he drew, and he did lots of paintings then that, to his exacting stan- dards, were "wrong." But even back in his art- school days at Pratt when he found out he was good at drawing horses, better by far than his classmates, "my paintings always had action."

That vitality is a Savitt characteristic, both in his art work and in his private life. There's no less- ening of his enthusiasm for his craft and no di- minishment of output even as he has passed the standard age for retirement. "I think the same thing holds true for horses as holds true for me: I'd rather wear out than rust out." Eight years ago, a back operation stranded Savitt in a hospital room for five days. He told his wife Bette that he didn't want any visitors, just a sketch pad. "I made a book of drawings I'm still using," he ex- plains. "I sketched all the things that ran through my mind—polo, steeplechase, cowboys, knights in armor."

He continues to stockpile reference work for



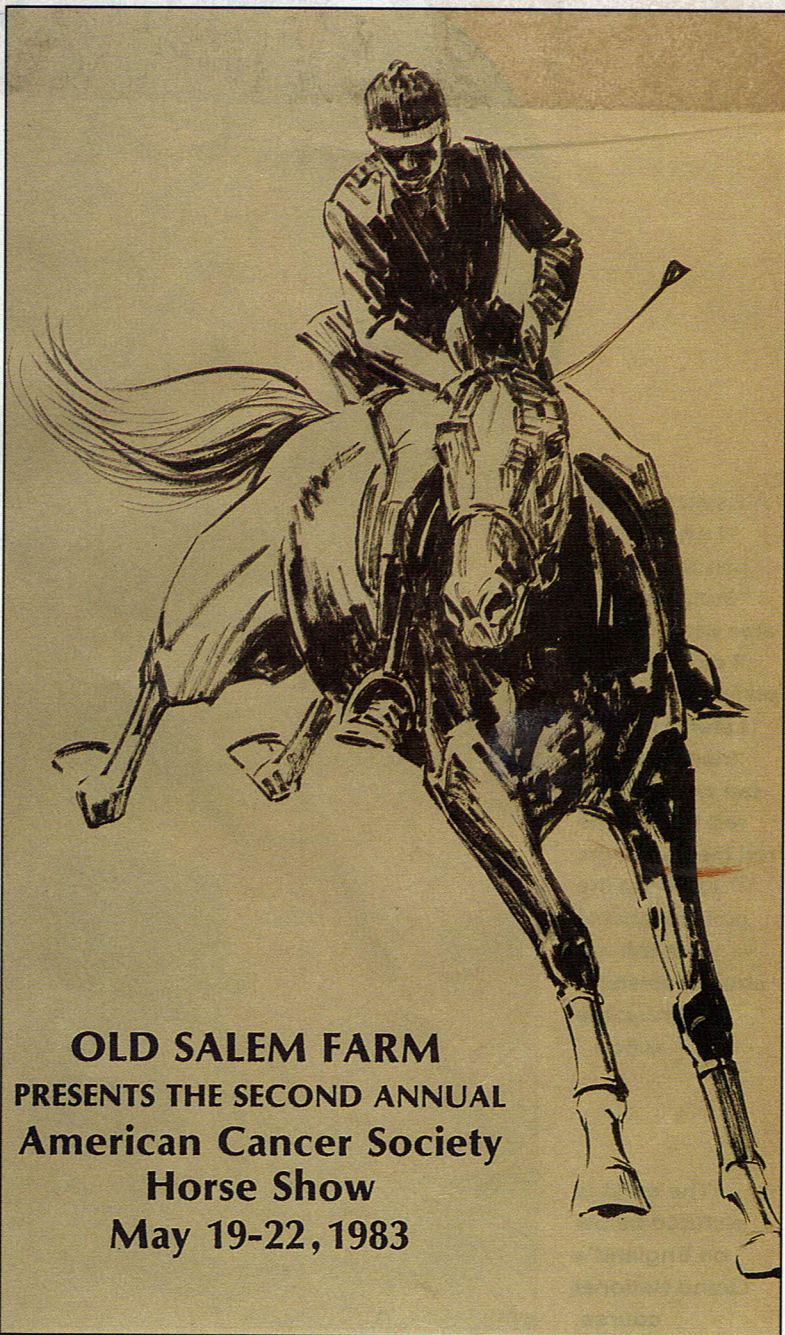
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later execution. "When I feel like drawing, I'll sit down for an afternoon and do scads of drawings on tracing paper and put them aside to do paintings from later," he says. To observers, he seems to work quickly, but the swiftness of his final execution derives from weeks of preliminary work, including producing as many rough drafts as it takes to get the horse's position and expression just so and research into the authenticity of tack, equipment and attire being shown. Savitt says there was time when, in his eagerness to get to the "big work," that he shortcut the groundwork phase, but the final product always suffered.

Sometimes his research is formal; most of the time it's not, gleaned more from experiencing than studying. Twice as a young man, Savitt hitchhiked around the country, spending time on ranches where he became immersed in the Western world he continues to depict so effectively in his East Coast studio. A stint as illustrator for the Miller's catalog of tack and attire gave him a detailed education in all the finer points of fittings and equipment that have stayed with him ever since.

Savitt is after perfection in his paintings, and he recalls one client who commissioned a horse portrait, warning him before he began: "You know I'm a very critical person." To which the artist replied: "Second only to me."

Even with all his unflagging joy in his work,



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A Savitt favorite: " 'Over The Top' [left] pictures a thrilling moment in the race, with horses pouring over the hurdle, sunlight flashing off of the riders' silks. I think this painting captures all the brilliance and excitement of steeplechasing."



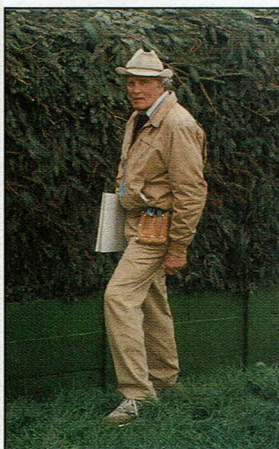
A Savitt favorite:

"I wanted this painting to yell 'foul,' which is also what I call it.

I didn't have a plain board when I started it, so I tried putting a tan wash over a red board. The red bled through.

I painted the picture loosely with the red streaks slashing across the action."

The artist is pictured below on England's Grand National course.



the painter, like most artists, suffers anxieties at the start of each new project. "For the first two days, I have a bellyache," he says. "I don't feel like eating. But once I get into it, it's great. People have suggested that all my preliminary work may take the spontaneity out of my work, but all my little preliminaries give me courage to hit the project with more pizzazz."

With the barest brush strokes, Savitt captures the tension inherent in equestrian challenges. His poster done for an Old Salem Farm show depicts a jumper and rider heading toward landing, already searching for the next takeoff spot, and in remarkably few inked lines conveys the quality of

a winning round as well as a detailed color photograph could. "There's a certain spontaneity to my work," he says. "Although the ink rendering is loose, the drawing behind it is very carefully done." Who would argue?

Savitt has his heroes:

- the British racehorse painters Sir Alfred Munnings (1878-1959) and Lionel Edwards (1878-1966),

- American horse illustrator Paul Brown, whose mentoring got Savitt his first job illustrating a horse book for Gordon Wright in 1948, the "turning point" for both his art career and his horsemanship skills,

• Western author/artist Will James, whose *Smokey* Savitt has recently reread with far greater appreciation than he had as a teenage reader.

Brown was an artist who shared all he knew with the young Savitt, yet the student now recognizes that Brown's technique sometimes produced horses who looked "wooden." James, on the other hand, wins the ultimate accolade: "His horses just breathed." Savitt's at least equal ability to capture the aliveness of horses is partly technical. The hard parts of a Savitt horse will look hard, the soft parts will be rounded and soft. And if a Savitt horse is on grass, there will be a greenish tint on his belly.

But even more, his artistic renderings reflect a visceral understanding of the true nature of horses. He realized the depth of his empathy for his subjects only recently, when he was photographed teaching a class at the Scottsdale (Arizona) Artists' School. He was explaining to his students how, when horses are desperate, they'll do anything to escape, even clamber up sheer rocks. As he was setting the scene for his students, the photographer snapped a picture, and there he was acting out the part, clambering up an imaginary rock just as he knew a horse would do. Maybe his childhood playacting at being a horse was really training for his future as a painter.

Savitt thinks of himself as an illustrator who learned to work fast and from memory when he began his career cranking out black-and-white art for pulp magazines for \$7 per full-page illustration. Having always worked as a free-lancer, "I never held my breath over anything." As pragmatic as his career has been over four decades of tremendous productivity, it is also a continuing source of joy and challenge to an artist who makes no distinction between "easel painters" and illustrators. "Anything can be fine art," he says.

If passion for subject matter and an unwavering pursuit of perfection are marks of the fine artist, Savitt is among

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the finest. The gift flows from his left hand into watercolors, oils, gouache, ink or simple pencil lines, summarizing in a single frame not just what's happening now but also hinting at what's come before and what's likely to happen next. He thinks in pictures, he says, and he's drawn to action, particularly polo and ranch and rodeo scenes.

For every piece of art he does there's an action tale that has taken the horses to this particular frame. Savitt, the creator, may be the only person who knows the story's details, but anyone who looks at his paintings can recognize a certain vitality in his equine forms that's not necessarily present in other technically correct equestrian art. His explanation for his unique ability: "I know horses, and just sort of reconstruct them on canvas." The two passions—the love for an animal of power, beauty and possibly even nobility and the urge for artistic fulfillment—seem to have struck the perfect balance in Savitt, an illustrator who makes art that horse lovers love. □