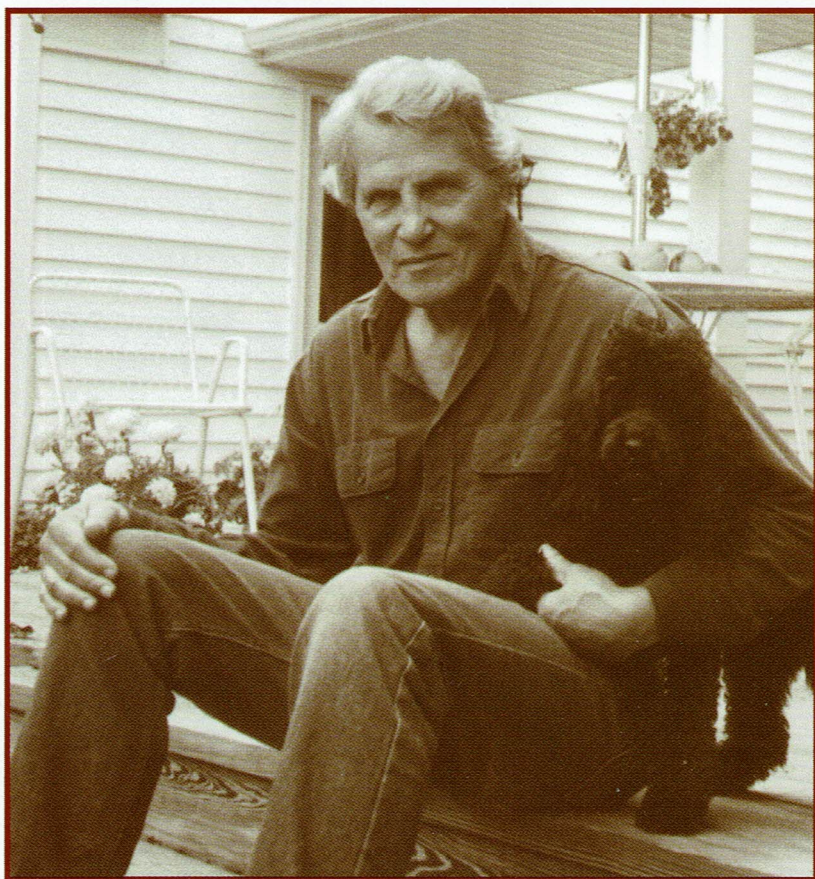


1998 Equine Artist of Distinction & Lifetime Achievement Award Recipient

SAM SAVITT

By Lori Olson

The North American Horsemen's Association is pleased to announce the selection of Sam Savitt as recipient of the 1998 Artist of Distinction Award. In recognition of Savitt's outstanding contributions to the horse industry and the world of equestrian art, the NAHA has chosen also to honor him with the 1998 Lifetime Achievement Award, the first time an artist has received this prestigious award.



The horses of Sam Savitt's childhood in the coal-mining town of Wilkes-Barre, PA, were always in motion. Savitt was fascinated by the cart horse that followed the milk man around, the mules that worked the coal mines, the mount of the law enforcement officer who occasionally patrolled the neighborhoods, and even the larger-than-life horses that galloped across the silver screen at the local cinema. "I just couldn't wait to see a movie with a horse in it!" laughs Savitt. "I remember a movie, 'Sporting Blood', that I saw over and over. I wanted to see if they'd do it the same way every time!"

Following high school, Savitt worked as a window dresser and boy-Friday at a dress shop. "I really had a flair for that sort of thing," he says. "But after about a year and a half, I was ready for something else." Savitt took the advice of his high school art teacher who had encouraged the him to take up formal art training. "I was always uncertain about my talent," recalls Savitt. "And at the time, I didn't really think I could afford art school, but I thought I'd at least try."

Savitt applied to the Pratt Art Institute in Brooklyn, New York. He recalls with a chuckle the sample of his work he submitted with the application: a cowboy scene drawn with kids' crayons!

"I got there and felt certain I'd been misplaced," Savitt remembers. His new classmates were graduates of exclusive private schools and programs for the gifted. That first day he went to the director. "He told me I was where I belonged," says Savitt who resolved then and there to succeed.

Throughout the week, the instructor of our life class would post drawings against the wall, with the best drawings placed at the left and the worst drawings placed at the right. "My whole determination that year was to get left of center," laughs Savitt, and gradually his drawings moved from right of center to left of center but, "I could draw horses better than anyone else in the class," he says. "That was my claim to success."

Success at drawing of horses came early for Savitt in what many artists today might consider an unlikely format in pre-World War II pulp magazines and western novels. "You had to be able to draw like a son-of-a-gun," Savitt laughs. The pulp magazines and westerns required strong black and white drawings completed in record time. For his efforts, Savitt was paid between \$7.00 and \$30.00 for each original drawing.

Following World War II in which he served as an Army First Lieutenant and helped to build a road which allowed American soldiers access to China, Savitt's equestrian art gained two new audiences: his wife, Bette and comic book readers.

"She's the love of my life," says Savitt of his wife of fifty years. Bette's home based business, Black Horse Press, is the marketing arm for some of Savitt's art, but her contributions to her husband's career go much deeper than just business management and marketing, according to Savitt. A horsewoman in her own

right, Bette's knowledge is often reflected in her husband's work. "We've always worked well together," explains Savitt. "She's sort of the art critic when it comes to my work."

The Savitt's have a favorite phrase, "It doesn't look like a bear to me," which they use to critique equestrian art. It all started years back when Savitt had completed a dramatic illustration of a menacing bear complete with curling lips and fierce eyes coming over a hill. When he brought it to the editor, he was told it "doesn't look like a bear to me". Savitt went back to the drawing board, and drew a more realistic bear. "We use that expression all the time," laughs Savitt. "Bette and I don't always agree on my paintings, and she's a good critic!"

As for the other audience, the readers of early 1950's comic books, Savitt admits he never really kept track of his many covers—in fact he owns only three of the highly collectable, and valuable—originals himself. He's been told by a collector in Maine that there were over 140 covers in all, each boldly dramatic and colorful, and all unsigned.

"The covers never really had anything to do with the story inside," Savitt recalls of those early drawings. He'd dream up farfetched scenarios involving horses at the rate of two per month. The covers featured legendary horses with household names like Silver, Trigger and Champion, and showcased what was becoming Savitt's trademark style, his ability to incorporate action, energy and movement into equestrian art. "My drawings always start with the motion, the action," he explains. "I approach painting in an abstract way and then fit the horse into it."

Among Savitt's other early works are individual pieces, which grew into a series of illustrated horse charts. The charts which include a guide to horses, horses of the west, horse information, world of ponies, horses through time, draft horses, a foal's first day and guides to polo, dressage and rodeo, are used by everyone from country vets to encyclopedias, as well as the Smithsonian Institute.

"I try for the most accuracy I can get," Savitt explains. Years of observing and studying horses at rest as well as in motion have given Savitt a great understanding of how horses move, react and look. These details provide the accuracy Savitt continually strives for. He is an avid horseman.

"I start a drawing on tracing paper, which helps to maintain the integrity of the painting." It is a technique which Savitt recommends to the hundreds of art students he teaches each year in workshops at Lexington's American Academy of Arts (where Savitt is Dean of Schools), as well as the Scottsdale Artists School, the Joseph Oregon Art School and the Fechin Institute in San Cristobal, New Mexico.

By turning the drawing over and looking at the action from the other side, Savitt gains new perspective into real movement. "You see all sorts of problems when a drawing is in reverse," he explains. "By flipping the paper back and forth and watching the action, you're able to see what needs to be improved." When Sam feels like drawing he will sit down for an afternoon and do many drawings, putting them aside to do paintings later. He seems to work quickly, but the swiftness of his drawing comes from weeks of preliminary work, which often includes many rough drafts to perfect expression and position, as well as research to assure authenticity. Much of Savitt's art is created through a mind that is gifted with detailed memories from years of observing and being around horses.



Savitt loves to draw, and experiences a thrill each time he sees one of his pieces on display, whether in an art gallery, in a private collection, on a comic book cover or hanging on the wall as a poster. Still, few things have thrilled him professionally like seeing his name listed as both author and illustrator on a book jacket. That happened the first time when the book, "Step-A-Bit, Story Of A Foal" was published.

The picture book follows the life of a foal from birth to weaning, and started out as a series of drawings. "It happened just down the road from me," explains Savitt who would make the trip every other day to draw the developing foal. "In those days, you could call an editor up," says Savitt, "and that's what I

did. I'd previously done some illustrations for her, and called to say I had some drawings of a foal she might be interested in." Much to Savitt's surprise, the editor suggested he write the book himself. Once Savitt started writing, he knew he was hooked. Since then he's written over a dozen books, including several which have won him national recognition.

"Midnight, Champion Bucking Horse" is perhaps his favorite. It follows the life of a real-life rodeo horse named Midnight, who was never ridden for ten seconds and died in 1934.

Savitt did extensive research to complete the book,

reviewing old documents and photos as well as interviewing people who had been close to the famous bucking horse. The attention to detail that Savitt brought to the project paid off when the book won the 1957 Boy's Club of America book award.

Accuracy shows through in all of Savitt's art. Whether he's painting the flaring nostrils of a Kentucky Derby contender, the hard-edged competition of a polo match, or the innocence of a new-born foal, Savitt's uncanny ability to draw the spectator into the action, the emotion of the moment, sets him apart as what art collectors, critics and horse enthusiasts alike have called a legendary talent.