

## HORSE SCENE

### SAM SAVITT

#### An Afternoon with an Artist

BY AMY ROSI

Eastern Horse World has asked me to "catch up with Sam Savitt and find out what he's doing these days." So here I was on assignment driving through the foothills of northern Westchester county searching for a big white house with black shutters, no mailbox, where Sam Savitt lives and works -- aptly sharing space with a town known for its love of horse, North Salem, New York.

It was the first hot day of June, and I wasn't at all sure what I'd find when I finally met one of the nation's most noted equestrian artists and authors. Sam Savitt was a name I first came to know when I fell in love with horses fourteen years ago. In fact, anyone who has toasted with a highball tumbler bearing his huntscene sketches, or visited a child's bedroom and found his horse charts hanging on the closet door, or remembers the summer they read the classic book "Midnight," or has feasted their eyes on his exquisitely rendered prints of horses in action, has a piece of Sam Savitt in his life. It is inescapable if you are a lover of horses.

And here was the man himself, in blue jeans and work shirt gracefully entreating me to sit and talk in the cool front room of a gracious old fashion home. On the floor, propped against the settees and chairs were his latest offerings and his newest fascination -- polo. And Sam Savitt is a fascinated man. "I love to paint horses in action, and polo provides the drama and use of color I like. It is perhaps closest to the action of the western horse, but polo is accessible to me. It is played here in the East. This winter I had a show at Gulf Stream for the benefit of the American Horse Protection Association. These are the paintings, and my printer Mill Pond Press has asked me to select four for a limited edition.

Polo is right now, again, the hot competition sport of the fashionable. High gloss publications are touting its players and sponsors. Everyone flocks to Palm Beach to watch the matches on a Sunday in the winter. But Sam Savitt, with his remarkable painter's eye and pulse on what's current is simply attracted to it as yet another way to paint his favorite subject in action -- horses.

"I was born with this sickness. When I was very little growing up in the coal mining town of Wilkes Barre, PA., I actually believed that I would grow up to be a horse. I used to practice the way they stood and shifted my weight from stifle to stifle and copied the way they ran. I could feel the way a horse moved. And I was born with the desire to be an artist. After high school, I got a job working as a window dresser to earn money for college. My art teacher, Mr Murray, encour-

aged me to become a painter. I was accepted into Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. I actually took my entrance exam in crayon.

After my first few days, as I sat listening to my classmates discuss art I realized I had no idea what they were talking about, and went to the dean and told him they had made a mistake in accepting me. "No, we didn't make a mistake," he said. "You'll just have to work a little harder, that's all." Well, that didn't appeal to me much, but since I painted horses better than anyone, I guess that's how I focused my energies on this subject. I could excel at this. Out of college, after four years in the army, I returned to New York and made the rounds with my portfolio. In those days, you could support yourself, and sometimes a friend or two, by working for the pulps. I don't know how a young person today can get started I worked for the outdoor magazines like "Outdoor Life," doing African animals and hunting and fishing scenes, and western novels doing illustrations. I remember vividly my first encounter with the art director of "Redbook." He flipped through my portfolio a little too quickly and I began to squirm. Then he said, "Good. Well, I'll see you again in ten to twelve years." And he wasn't far wrong either.

There are no real short cuts in this world. My friend and mentor Gordon Wright once said to me "You can't progress too quickly. When a student of mine progresses too fast, I will set him back deliberately." He was talking about riding, but the same holds true with painting. Not only do you have to move slowly, but you need inspiration along the way and a handful of mentors and guides. My art teacher Mr. Murray was one. My wife Bette, who has been my friend, my buddy, for just as long is another. Once I was offered a cushy job with an income that would have been nice, and it was Bette who told me no, I would be short-circuited and stifled if I took it. Paul Brown, the artist, was another terrific friend and counselor. Artists that have influenced me? Will James, Alfred Munnings and Lionel Edwards."

One always thinks of Sam Savitt first as an artist, but I was amazed to find out he has authored some fifteen books, many of them fiction. His fifteenth book has just been published and it is called "A Horse to Remember," complete with illustrations. His first book was called "Step a Bit" and it was the true life story of a foal Sam had sketched and observed from the day it was born until it was weaned some eight months later. He submitted the sketches to a publisher who suggested Sam add some sentences to tie it together. "I never considered myself a writer at that time. But I wrote some stream of consciousness phrases, and it worked." The New York Times gave it a flattering review and Sam was launched as a writer.

Writing the classic "Midnight" was another story. It was based on the true-to-life story of a black bucking horse named Midnight that

none of the rodeo cowboys could ride. Sam wanted to tell the story. But he didn't know how to tackle it. And then he decided to call the ranch that first had Midnight. That's just like Sam, I discovered after listening to him for an afternoon -- go right to the source. The rancher told him "I don't really know what happened with Midnight. He went out in the Spring to work the cattle, and when he came back in the Fall nobody could ride him." And there were the opening sentences of the book. What's especially moving is how it ends, when rodeo cowboy Jim Shoulders claims his seven seconds to become the first man to ride Midnight again. This time, Sam Savitt's sketches tell the story best -- no words were necessary.

One could almost say that Sam Savitt is a renaissance man when it comes to equestrian art and literature -- a man that embraces every discipline and has a child's delight in knowing and experiencing it all. His tastes are catholic. He is as comfortable with a rodeo scene as with a steeplechase. He has covered the Olympics, the Badminton Horse Trials, the Cheyenne Rodeo Days and the polo matches with equal enthusiasm and aplomb. One has the distinct feeling that the memories and experiences of the hundreds of horse events that Sam Savitt has covered as a journalist and artist are more to him than the paintings and books that line his walls. What we talked about during that long, cool afternoon were the people, the ringside stories, the observations and philosophies.

At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico, Sam Savitt was there on assignment for Western Horseman and he produced a distinguished book on the event "The Equestrian Olympics Sketchbook." He recalls seeing Bill Steinkraus after he won the gold medal on Snowbound. Something in the expression on Steinkraus's face told him that the victory was not exhilarating. Sam asked him why. Steinkraus revealed that any horse that day could have got lucky and won, and that it had just happened to him, that he had ridden better over more difficult courses. The win was not a victory for him. The sketchbook is filled with such remembrances and black and white sketches. One shows a rider coming over a jump immersed in water and Sam still remembers the wake as the rider pulled his mount over and through the water.

When Sam Savitt begins a painting, he first produces a color sketch. Why? "This way I make little mistakes. I have tried to go right to the canvas, and then I make an error, and it is a major error. The color sketches are a matter of discipline." I hated to ask him that question most people want to know of artists "How long does it take him to produce a painting? Sam laughed and said he had the answer to that one -- it took him about 35 years.

He is attracted by any surface medium. He once took on an assignment to produce bed sheets with Sam Savitt horse scenes



## HORSE TIDBITS

and he did it, not for the merchandising, but for the challenge of working on a new medium. He seems to love to talk with young people and regularly give "chalk talks" to schools. He can produce thumbnail sketches in five seconds and does it to entertain school kids. He once did it to accompany Cyril Richard on TV for a "Carnival of the Animals" special.

We looked at some of his paintings together, and Sam pointed out how the artist's eye can be truer than the photograph. He showed me a painting titled "The Last Race of the Day," and the horses were in their stride over the finish line. They were reaching with their front legs. In actuality, a horse's front leg would be straight down, but the action of the painting would be destroyed so Sam painted them stretching out for a truer feeling of the race. A lot of equestrian art is actually painted from photographs, and the distortion is amazing. Sam showed me a photograph of a horse coming over a jump and pointed out how the muscle and leg delineation was incorrect. As opposed to working from photographs, when he paints horses, he makes them correct. "The best way to learn to paint a horse is by grooming one."

Sam works every day in his studio located in the inner ramblings of his big colonial home. He also fills his day with horses. His newest project will be a young horse out of a black mare they had years ago on the farm

that Sam plans to train this summer. He has ridden with the Golden Bridge Hunt for years, and loves cross country riding.

As we sat talking he confided that the back acreage was calling him up to mow it on his tractor. But he took the time to sit and chat an afternoon away. "My deadlines are always met. I may work tonight, and mow tomorrow. I walk every day. "Many interesting and famous people have joined Sam on his walks. His wife Bette operates the successful Black Watch Press out of their home. This industry produces the well-known Sam Savitt horse charts and the UPS truck interrupted our serenity several times that afternoon with deliveries.

In addition to selecting four polo paintings for the limited edition of 900 prints Mill Pond Press will produce and merchandise to galleries at a retail cost of about \$75, Sam has umpteen projects on the drawing board. He is commissioned to paint four horse portraits, having just completed two prestigious assignments for Mrs. William Randolph Hearst, a neighbor; and the polo enthusiast George Haas. There is discussion of a handsome coffee table book on "The Horses of San Simeon."

And there is the current interest of this artist and author who has been enamored of lippizans and bucking horses -- the plight of the mustangs. "One day I called up Hope Ryder in New York and she answered the phone herself. I wanted to talk about the fate

of the mustangs which Hope has been totally committed to through her books and projects. The next phase was the art show I did this past winter for George Haas at Gulf Stream for a benefit of the American Horse Protection Association."

He is now at work on a painting depicting the despairing situation of Americas last free breed of horses -- the small and valiant mustangs. Sam disappeared into the mysterious reaches of his studio and brought out the small color sketch he had rendered. And how poignant and true it was. Three mustangs, perhaps in my imagination a stallion, mare and colt, standing on the last cliff in the Badlands -- all starkly, bleakly gray and red with the last light of the day playing out on the far hills and the horses wild-eyed, looking back, yet looking forward. Where to go? How to survive? A sad, but true painting. A Sam Savitt original.

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