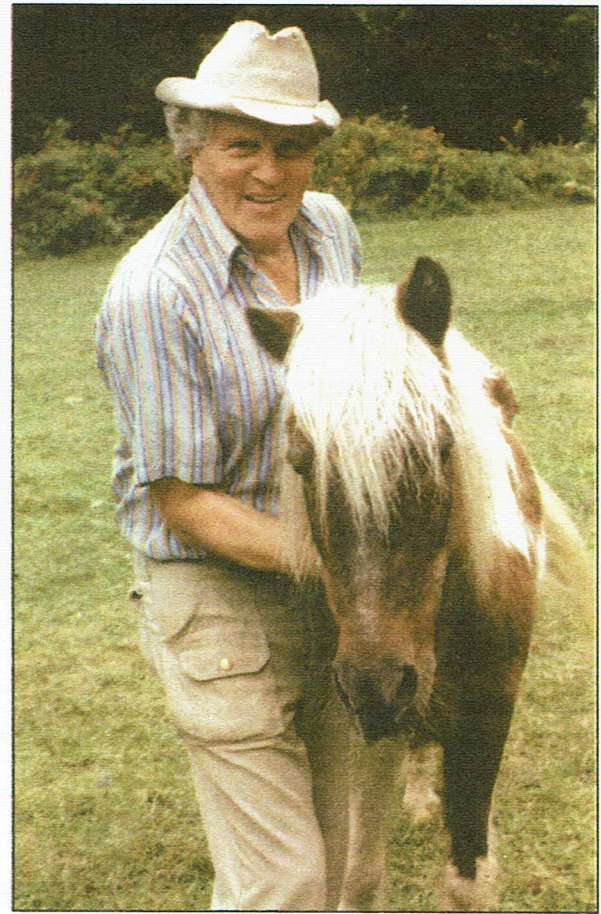


Above, one of Sam Savitt's famous breed drawings of a hunter type. Right, Savitt relaxes with one of his two equines on his farm in North Salem, NY. Cheryl Baker photo.



SAM SAVITT'S ART INSPIRED BY LOVE

By Cheryl Baker

As a young child, Sam Savitt didn't just love horses; he wanted to be one. He imitated the way horses stood, the way they moved, even going so far as to pull the neighborhood children around in a wagon in imitation of a harness horse.

Savitt's fascination with horses was not shared by his family. In the pre-World War II coal-mining town of Wilkes-Barre, PA, says Savitt, "Survival was the name of the game. Who thought of horses?" He did, though, and says those early exercises in "observing and remembering were my first steps in learning to draw horses."

Many people don't know about Savitt's beginnings, but most know that he went on to become arguably America's most renowned equine artist, with a staggering array of accomplishments to his credit. He has written award-winning books of his own and has illustrated over 135 books by other authors. His illustrations have

appeared in comic books and magazines. His famous horse charts are sold all over the world and can be seen everywhere, from the walls of tack shops to the pages of encyclopedias. He has served as the official artist of the U.S. Equestrian Team and is a founder of the American Academy of Equine Art.

In addition, Savitt has donated time and effort to the American Horse Protection Association, the American Cancer Society, and various schools and community centers. He also travels around the country teaching budding artists who dream of following in his footsteps.

Savitt's impressive career began very humbly when he was advised by his high-school art teacher to apply to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY. Savitt was accepted but was bowled over by the sophistication of the other students. "When I went to Pratt, I was so naive I took the entrance exam in crayon! All of the other students were more sophisticated than I was; they had all

studied in New York. The one thing I had that they didn't have was the ability to draw horses. Realizing this gave me the impetus to focus on horses, to work to be the best!"

Savitt's determination to focus on what he did best paid off. By the time he graduated from Pratt, he was already earning a living illustrating "pulp" magazines. Savitt credits Pratt with teaching him the basic foundation of all his work: "how to draw. With any good painting, the base of it is a good drawing."

After graduation, Savitt served as a First Lieutenant in the Army during World War II, then returned to New York and "began work in earnest," doing the color covers for western-themed comic books such as *Trigger*, *Champion*, and *Silver*, named for the horses of famous movie cowboys. Savitt even drew a comic of his own, "Sundown Saunders." The 1950s comic-book covers are brilliantly colored and action packed. Savitt still is proud of his covers: "People always

want to separate commercial art from easel art. They are the same thing. Michelangelo was the biggest commercial artist of his time. The Sistine Chapel was a job. I don't differentiate between one kind of art and another. Any painting is fine art."

Savitt soon began writing and illustrating his own books. His first was *Step-A-Bit, the Story of a Foal*. He second, *Midnight*, won the Boy's Club of America award. As Savitt's fame grew, he became increasingly sought after as an illustrator, had paintings purchased by museums and private galleries, and painted portraits of such notables as Raymond Firestone and William Randolph Hearst II with their horses.

Savitt's style is unique and instantly recognizable. His horses are breathing and vibrantly alive. "I don't consciously [work at a style]," he says. "To me, the eye on a horse is very important. A horse is very expressive.

(Continued on next page)



Savitt's unique style is immediately recognizable in this drawing.

He uses a lot of body English. If I draw a horse jumping a fence, I have him look at the fence. If he spooks, I show the apprehension as he looks at whatever is frightening him."

His own experience with horses stands Savitt in good stead. "I'm very good at action. I've studied the action of a horse. I've foxhunted, shown, done just about every kind of riding. I've been bucked off, stepped on, rolled over." Savitt has a vast store of

knowledge and uses it to create art in which everything from horse to rider to equipment is depicted accurately. He says he believes equine artists must have a comprehensive knowledge of their subjects. As he points out, a horse won't pose for an artist; so the artist must know how a horse would react in any given situation, both physically and psychologically.

Savitt gives art seminars all over the country. A recent one was at the Kentucky Horse Park, where fifteen students came for four days to study with the master. As a teacher, Savitt says, he stresses the value of studying live horses. "In my classes, I encourage the students to put their hands on a real horse, to see where the muscle is, where the bone is. Observe horses constantly and wherever you can." He'll tell his students to "Study any part of the horse—the leg, the head—for three minutes, then look away. Now draw is from memory." Savitt compares this close observation to driving a car. "If you are driven somewhere in the passenger's seat, you may not remember the road. But if you are the driver, you have to pay attention, concentrate, study the road." He encourages his students to "Consider yourself the driver when

you are drawing the horse, and you will remember all the twists and turns of his conformation."

Savitt believes that the ability to draw is actually the ability to see. The ability to be an artist, he says, is harder to define. "On the first day at Pratt the director told us, 'You'll never be more of an artist than you are right now.' The feeling was already there. All you learn is the craft. You can learn the fundamentals, how to draw, [but] that won't make you an artist."

Savitt says he never feels threatened by his students and never views them as possible competitors. "You can't copy another artist. You would have to know what he thought, how he felt, what he ate. An artist is in the feeling, the way you see the world." A generous teacher, Savitt encourages his students to find their own style. "Whatever I know, I'm glad to tell you."

Today Savitt is as busy as ever, riding his big chestnut horse cross-country near his farm in North Salem, NY, and drawing. "When I have a day of drawing I'll draw fifteen or twenty pieces. Then I'll pick out the ones I want to develop," he says.

One of his paintings of the Grand National was recently chosen for inclusion in an upcoming book on the best in British and American equine art. Savitt's wife, Bette, runs Black Horse Press out of their home, which distributes his horse charts and other works worldwide. Savitt is also working on a manuscript entitled *Another Time*, a memoir of the days when, as a young man fascinated by the West, he hitchhiked across the country. He tells funny, illuminating stories of this time, when people were "kinder, less fearful."

Perhaps we respond to Savitt's art because we can tell he genuinely loves horses. As he puts it, "I never tire of looking at a horse. I like to watch them move, to touch them. They eat hay and grain, and their breath is always sweet. Their muzzles feel like silken velvet. I love the redolent smell of horses, the warmth. In the winter when I groom my horse in the barn, he throws off such a warmth of his own, I don't need a jacket.

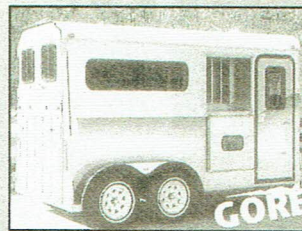
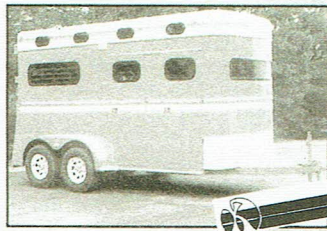
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