

# Equestrian art: Savitt

By Susan Guerrero  
Modern Living staff

Dear Mr. Savitt:

*I am very interested in your drawing technique (or however you spell it!) I love your horse drawings, and I sheepishly admit, I try to copy them like the original ones! Of course, they don't turn out very good,*

*Anyhow, I could have started this letter by saying: "Oh, Mr. Savitt, you are my idol I'd do anything for you!!" But I don't think that would be very satisfactory, do you?!*

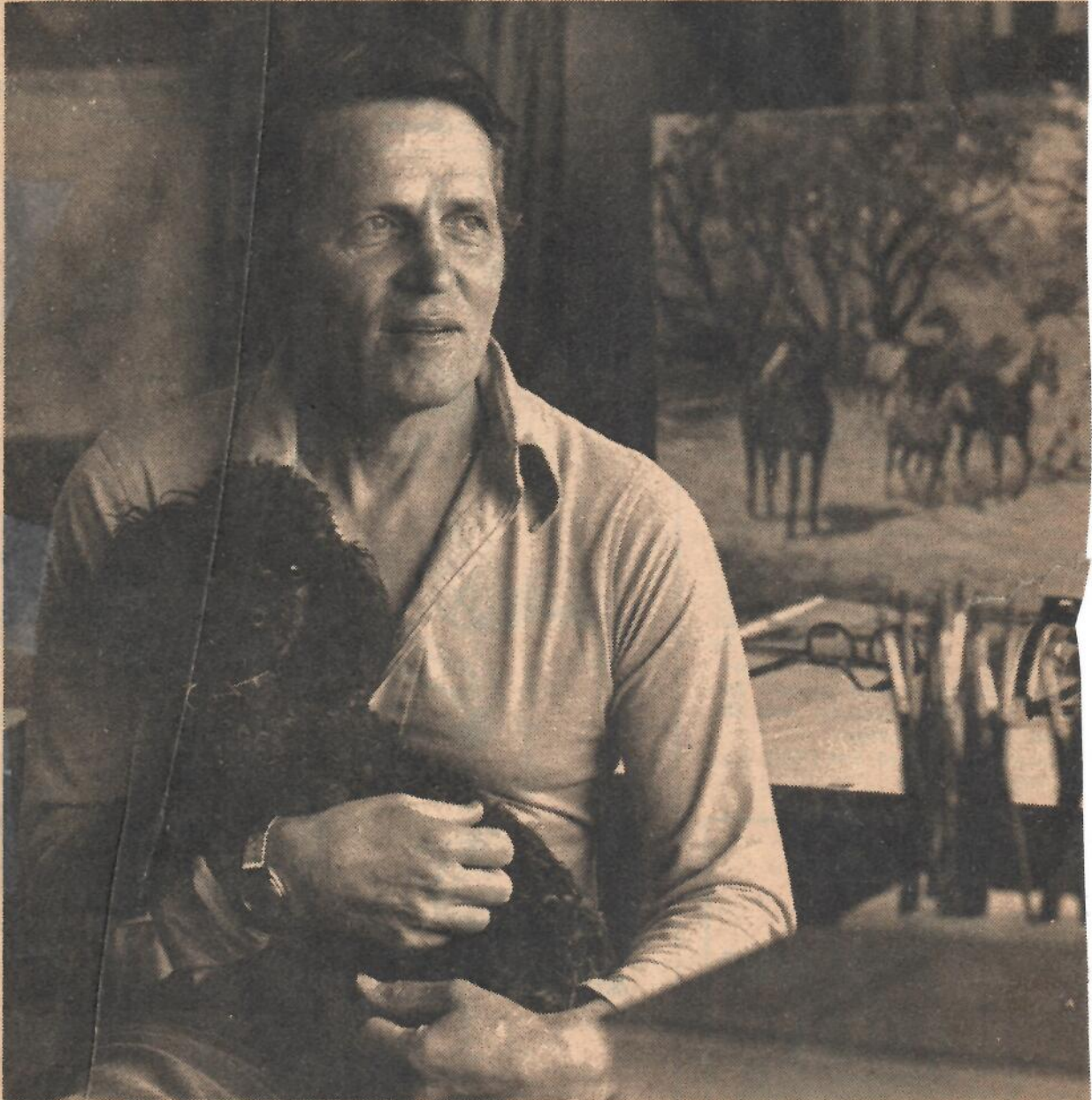
*I am also an avid horse lover, and in spite of my young age (12 3/4 to be precise) plan to own a Riding Academy some day . . .*

Sam Savitt, who gets letters like that all the time, understands.

He, too, has what he describes as a "hang up" about horses, even though when he was 12 3/4 and growing up in a coal mining town in Pennsylvania, he "didn't particularly have any."

Now, of course, Savitt horses trot through the pages of more than 100 books, stand at restless attention on the cover of programs for Fasig-Tipton's

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Above: "I'm interested in everything that's connected to the whole horse bit," says Sam Savitt of North Salem as "Cindy" listens attentively. The official artist of the United States Equestrian Team isn't sure what it is about horses that moves people so: "It's the unattainable in a way, I guess. The guy on the horse is some kind of hero."

Right: Horsemen and would-be horsemen all over the world are familiar with Savitt's drawings. This drawing is from his "Equestrian Olympic Sketch-book."





# stables many winners

glittering thoroughbred sales; model new saddles for the horseman's bible, (otherwise known as the Miller Harness Co. catalog), and hang over the mantels of great country houses. Another Savitt horse is as familiar to equestrians as the late Smokey the Bear was to pedestrians, and serves the same purpose in the nation's stables.

Savitt, who lives in North Salem, N.Y. across the street from a beautiful farm



News-Times photo by Stephen Szurlej

that perhaps fortunately is his to tramp across but not to tend, recently added another horse to his string, Skylark, the brown mare of "Vicki and the Brown Mare." The book, the "14th or 15th" he has written and illustrated, was reviewed in last Sunday's Modern Living magazine, and is, like many of his plots, based on a local horse and rider.

"It's a reverse success story," he explains, quickly falling into the comfortable jargon of the tackroom and horse show rail. The local animal, he says, was "schooled" in shows around the area by a young girl. But, as sometimes happens, the horse became better than she was and finally she realized she had to give it up . . . The horse went on to national laurels.

The same thing, more or less, happens to Vicki, who eventually offers her mare to the United States Equestrian Team and goes to the National Horse Show to watch another girl, a better rider than she could ever hope to be, pilot her old horse into the ribbons.

It's a sad story and not the usual stuff of equestrian fiction. But it's also the way things really happen around the paddock, and if there is one thing that annoys Sam Savitt, it's "all those success horse stories."

"Look at the things horses do on television," he says disgustedly. "Kids could get hurt because they think horses are like dogs, and they're not. I've sold horses and they just walked out of my life, without once looking back — a dog wouldn't do that. But on television, Roy Rogers drowns, he tells the horse to get him a rope, and the horse throws it to him!"

It was irritation with the "ridiculous" and "unworkable" things horses did in the "bang-bang" stories he illustrated for Western pulp magazines after graduation from Pratt Institute in New York City that got Savitt into the saddle.

"I began riding because I was annoyed with the writers," he explains. "They were always making horses do human things."

Savitt, who had gone to Pratt after working in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., for a year after high school — "you knock around for a year, you get motivated" — had ridden before. But until he met Gordon Wright, the well-known horseman and teacher, he "rode with no

knowledge" and was "a seat-of-the-pants rider."

"Gordon showed me that riding was art, it wasn't just sitting up there and booting your way," says Savitt, who went from booting his way to horse show championships under Wright's tutelage and later, illustrating his book, "Learning to Ride, Hunt and Show."

Many of the ribbons Savitt took home to hang from the rafters of his third floor studio were won aboard a mount Savitt speaks affectionately of as "The Black Horse." The Black Horse was a horse his wife Bette owned, a horse the Savitts bought for a proverbial song on the advice of the equally proverbial old horseman who knew more than the vet, who had advised the horse's owner to "put him down." The Savitts had the Black Horse for 15 years and named Bette's Black Horse Press, which publishes charts and other things by Savitt, after the animal.

"You could hunt him on a snaffle, and this horse had run on big tracks!" recalls Savitt admiringly, employing the highest praise a horseman can bestow upon a steed.

The hunt the Black Horse ran with was Golden's Bridge: Vicki also rides with the New York state pack in "The Brown Mare" and one of a collection of six as yet unpublished short stories will feature an animal familiar to the hunt staff, "The Dingle Ridge Fox."

"He's from this area," says Savitt, a member of Golden's Bridge Hunt. "He used to take the hunt in a big circle, 'go to ground' around Eight Bells Farm . . ."

But while many of Savitt's books are based "around places I know," his is a familiar face to horsemen all over the world, and although he personally prefers a hunter, he has drawn or painted almost every kind of horse or horse event there is.

"I love the look of a horse and to watch him in action is one of the greatest thrills I know," he says. Polo, rodeo, racing: There are so many things. If I just painted portraits, or racing, it would be deadening; all thoroughbreds have a certain look. But it's a never ending subject and in a way, I feel I'm unique as an equestrian artist because I don't stay in any one field. The whole scene excites me."

Savitt, who is the official artist of the United States Equestrian Team, went with the team to Mexico in 1968 with a big red sketchbook under his arm. "Conditions were not the best," he wrote in the resulting "Equestrian Olympic Sketchbook," "I was hunched down in the grass, with 20 people hanging over my shoulder . . ."

Conditions were better at the Badminton Horse Trials in England, even if the Duke of Beaufort did serve him leftovers for lunch.

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"The butter," Savitt recalls with a broad smile, "had little crowns on it. Queen Elizabeth had come to lunch the day before."

But always, no matter where he goes, there's that Black Horse. No other horse — and Savitt's had many since and has two now — can supplant the feeling he has for "that son of a gun."

"He was just one of those," explains Savitt. "Geez, what was his official name? He was so sound . . ."

Sam Savitt will give a talk and drawing demonstration Saturday at 10:30 a.m. in the Danbury Public Library. Tickets are free and available in the junior department to adults and children over 10 years old.

Savitt will also appear Friday night at 8 in the North Salem Library, North Salem, N.Y.

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