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In Pursuit of Perfection:
Calvin Roy Kinstler

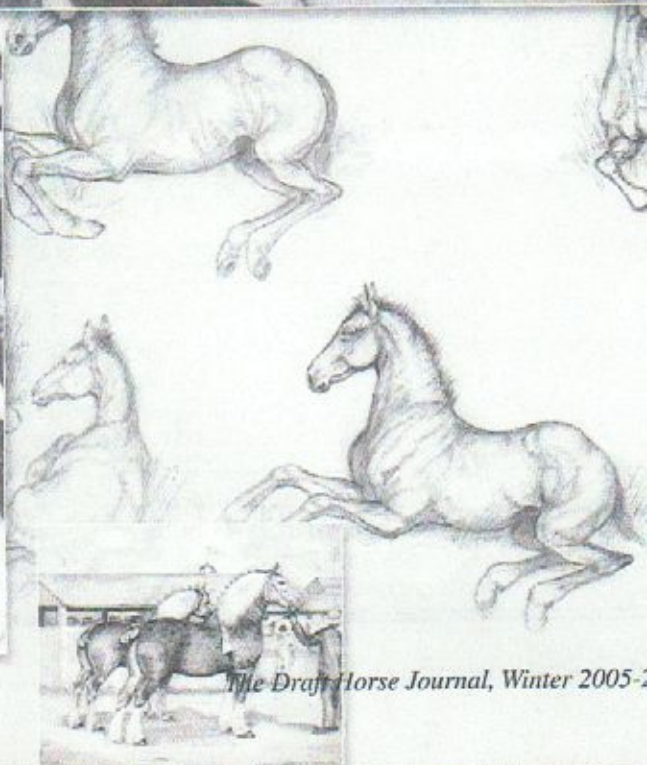
- by Jim Richendollar -

Calvin Roy Kinstler, arguably the most accomplished and adept artist to have ever carved and painted images of horses, turned a boyhood hobby into a fine art. Known both nationally and internationally, Kinstler masterfully combined his innate artistic skills, a consuming passion for horses and an absolute understanding of their structure, to create stunning pieces of equine art that have yet to be equalled. These treasured masterpieces, several of which are on permanent display in the International Museum of the Horse at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, Kentucky, are skillfully sculpted and exquisitely painted wooden statuettes of horses that stand between 9-1/2 and 8-1/2 inches depending on the prototype. These matchless examples of excellence have such fine detail and are so near perfect in form and coloring that they seem to literally "breathe."

At the tender age of six years, Kinstler expressed a passion for horses and an accompanying desire to replicate them. Young Kinstler could not get enough of the sturdy draft horses that he fed, groomed and incessantly studied at his father's dairy farm near Baltimore, Maryland.

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In Pursuit of Perfection continued

On more than one occasion the lad had to be physically removed from the stables to eat and retire for the day. He became a permanent fixture at the dairy—sketching and then using clay or putty to create models of the creatures he loved so dearly. As Kinstler matured, his passion for horses became more intense, as did his desire to render images with exacting detail and accuracy.

The fledgling artist began using wood as the medium for his unique equine artistic expressions. He expanded his scope of subjects to include all members "familiare equorum" irrespective of type, breed, size or color. He soon realized that creating superb, life-like equine images of wood, especially horses other than the sturdy drafters that he knew so well, was a daunting task that would require considerably more skill and a more complete understanding of equine anatomy. Improvement would not be easily realized. The artist had never bred or even owned horses and had no formal schooling in art. Further, Kinstler suffered a partially invalid condition which made it nearly impossible for him to view horses in the flesh.

For the next several years Kinstler spent from twelve to sixteen hours a day honing his woodcarving skills and studying thousands of lithographs, prints, paintings, statues, diagrams, charts, sketches and photos that he might gain a complete understanding of the skeletal and muscular components of every type and breed of horse. The regimen of carving and studying proved to be of great value. His models were highly detailed and anatomically accurate in every respect. However, Kinstler was

not satisfied that his models embodied the pinnacle of perfection that he so fervently sought. He felt that his models did not convey the full beauty that he found in his beloved horses. Consequently, he decided to paint them.

The decision to take up the brush and pallet to enhance his work with knife and file brought dramatic results. This "stroke of genius," proved to either create a new art form or elevate the existing form to an unprecedented level of excellence. Not insignificantly, it brought the artist closer to his goal of creating a perfect equine model.

Combining the art of wood carving with that of painting enabled Kinstler to develop and express the phenomenal artistry latent within him. Using his God-given gifts, he was able to masterfully duplicate the warm, nat-

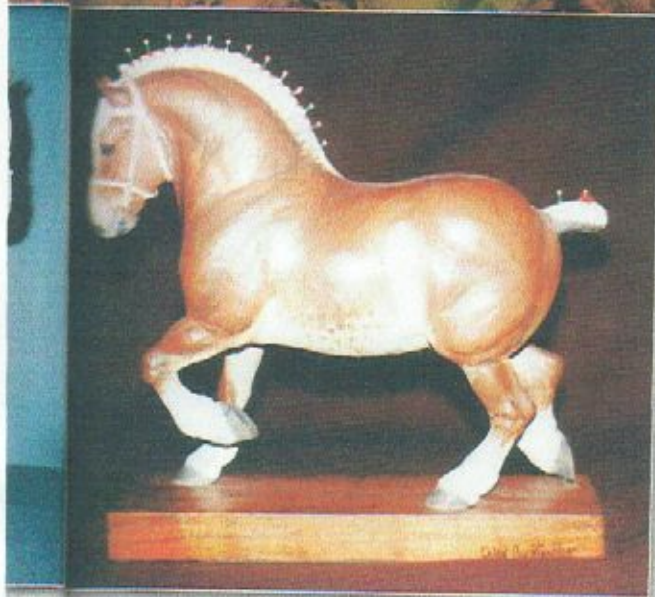


ural tones found in a horse's coat and thus "breathe" more and more resemblances of life into his models. The "woody" appearance of his early models was replaced by the hauntingly realistic, near-life character that would become his defining mark of quality. His persistence and expertise would soon bring him financial rewards, recognition as a master artist and the satisfaction of knowing that people found pleasure in his creations.

During the early years of the Great Depression, J.M. McKinney, the Director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, invited Kinstler to exhibit his pieces at the museum. The exhibit was so popular that it lasted for three weeks. Soon thereafter, in 1933, Kinstler had several models on display at a book fair in New York where they were spotted by an agent for the elite sporting-goods firm of Abercrombie and Fitch. A&F subsequently took the models on what was to be a three month consignment, but they were all sold after the first week. Thus began an amiable relationship that was predicated on mutual trust and would span more than two decades, culminating with the death of the artist in 1954.

Soon after A&F established the line of highly sought after models, the master whittler and dauber entered a few of his pieces in the National Show sponsored by the American Artists Association





and held in conjunction with the Kentucky State Fair. First prize and the coveted Award of Merit was garnered on the delightful model of the Arab mare, Riafla, frolicking with her foal, Mirage, atop the model's walnut base. In 1939, the Baltimorean entered his enchanting Lilliputian look-alikes in competition at the Golden Gate Exposition and won prizes and acclaim from art critics and the general public.

Further evidence of the preeminence of Kinstler's art is found in the fact that the prestigious Bing & Grendahl Porcelain Factory of Copenhagen, Denmark, contacted him in 1945. The firm purchased the rights of the artist for his model of the Arab stallion, Mirage, and an English Shire stallion and copied them in porcelain. As the marvelous miniatures were being prominently exhibited at various events and sold at Abercrombie & Fitch stores in New York and Chicago, the dean of wooden equine design was inundated with letters from the public.

The avalanche of mail was from rich and famous as well as the not so

rich and famous, individuals beseeching Kinstler to create a model of their prized animal or beloved pet. A 1933 letter penned by Samuel Riddle, owner of the famous Man O' War, was sent to Kinstler commissioning the artist to make a model of Riddle astride his favorite hunter. Some of the letters requested more than a single model. Michael B. Mervis, a Chicago industrialist, owned one of the finest collections of miniature horses ever assembled. His business interests took him to all parts of the

world and he took the opportunity to buy the finest miniature horses he could find. The collection of models is comprised of well over 600 pieces, but the most highly prized pieces are the more than one hundred models that bear the Kinstler signature. Speaking about Kinstler, "Mike" Mervis said, "....he has produced the finest woodcarvings of horses of our day." Fortunately for all who love horses, the collection was donated to the Kentucky Horse Park.

While Abercrombie & Fitch would have eagerly taken every model Kinstler created between 1933 and 1954, the humble and thoughtful Kinstler chose to limit the number they would receive that he might address some of the requests he received via mail. Honoring these requests afforded the artist constant feedback indicating that his art was coveted and appreciated for its meaningful beauty. Whether it was the model of the Belgian stallion, Violen de Saintes, for owner-millionaire Richard K. Mellon, the donated model of a Percheron stallion for the winner of equine 4-H competition at the county fair or the model of a grade pony for a youngster, each was given equal attention and effort with respect to

design and detail.

The process used to create models is as interesting and unique as the unrivaled images are enticing and bold. Starting with four or more photographs of a given subject from various angles, Kinstler developed a mental picture of the horse standing in a natural pose. He then sketched the horse based on his mental image and knowledge of equine anatomy. Next, he made beautiful detailed patterns with attendant measurements from which the models were made. The patterns, done in pencil, are outstanding pieces of art.

Blocks of Philippine or Honduran mahogany, known for its lack of burls and knots, were then masterfully carved to match the patterns. This phase of the process entailed the superbly artistic use of knives, file razor blades and sandpaper.

Once having completed the meticulous and painstaking task of carving, the master of miniatures prepared the intricate models for painting. Models that entailed final coats of white or gray were given a soft undercoating. Those destined to be chestnut, bay, sorrel or brown were given an undercoating of shellac which prepared them for a covering that would reflect the lights and shadows that are natural to coats of such colors. Using samples of the mane, tail and coat of the subjects whenever possible, the consummate artist approached painting the remarkable models with infinite care and skill.

Painting on a canvas that casts shadows is difficult enough, but to paint a three-dimensional object with light striking it at various angles presents a challenge for all but the most gifted artist. More than equal to the challenge, Kinstler painted with such deftness that the models bore a frighteningly real and strikingly beautiful resemblance to the subjects. In short, the subjects were "Kinstlercarnated"

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...the master could do. The final step of the process entailed mounting the model on either an oval or rectangular base made of walnut to which the artist added his signature. Working in his studio from early morning until well into the night, Kinstler would complete the process on one piece from start to finish in approximately six days.

...he estimated that between 1,000 and 2,500 equine statues bearing the signature of Calvin Roy Kinstler were created between 1930 and 1954. Roy Webb Kinstler, the only son of Calvin Roy and Leola Kinstler, and an artist in his own right, assisted his father from 1946 until 1954 with various facets of creating the miniatures. Additionally, the devoted father and son duo produced their talents to produce a line of doorstops, door knockers, ash trays, paper holders and banks in horse and dog motif for Virginia Woodcrafters. Following the death of his father in 1954, Roy continued the legacy of his father creating superb equine models for Wenceslambie and Fitch and others for several years until his death in 1979.

Despite the overwhelming demand for his marvelous wooden miniatures and the advent of the use of plaster to copy images, Kinstler flatly refused any notion of a more expedient process that would reap huge

profits but compromise the quality of artistic expression. To the contrary, he constantly sought to achieve an even greater level of sophistication and quality, even at the peril of his own personal health.

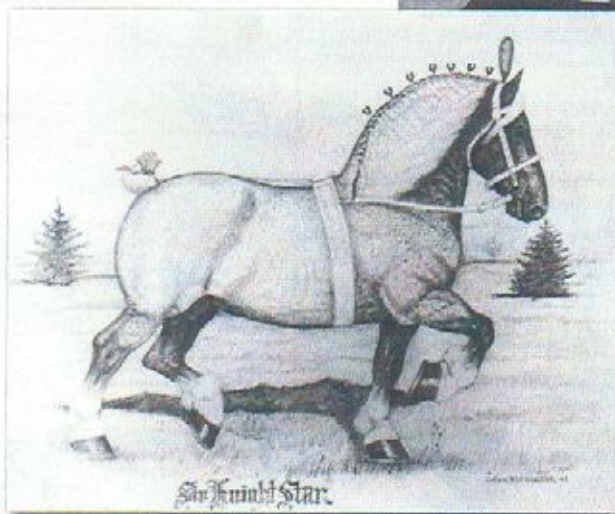
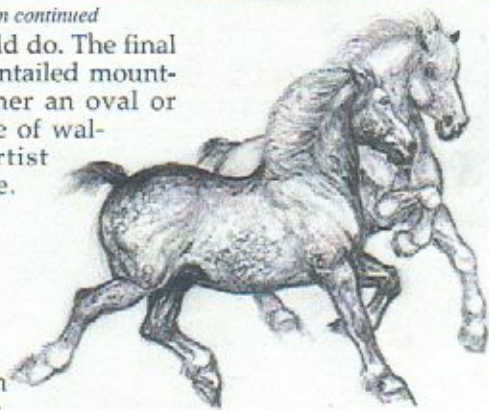
It is tragically sad and ironic, but artistically predictable and fitting, that the artist who most perfectly created resemblances of equine subjects would spend his last days, refusing

to leave his studio and toiling feverishly to the very end to create the perfect image of a horse.

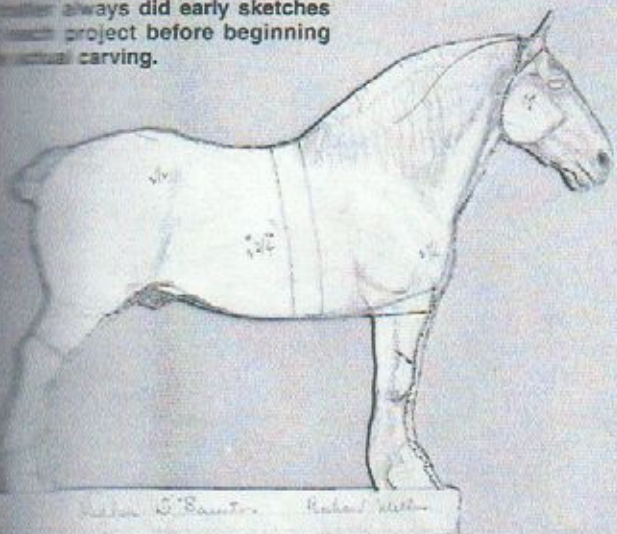
However, the sadness is muted, if not overshadowed by the fact that his models are becoming more widely appreciated as the epitome of excellence in the world of equine art.

Irrespective of any posthumous credit or recognition that may be given him, Kinstler would be elated to know that this art is cherished by horse lovers and that his quest for

perfection was not in vain. Irrefutably one of the most gifted and knowledgeable artists of all time, Calvin Roy Kinstler achieved a level of exacting richness and beauty that may never again be realized. His stunningly delightful and realistic models are heirlooms serving as the hallmark of quality to be emulated and enjoyed.



Weather always did early sketches of each project before beginning the actual carving.



Each progressive step integrated more and more detail.

