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THE

BY L.A. POMEROY

ART

Done well, roping is an art and its horses, honed to peak performance, are no less its masterpieces. That iconic image of a cowboy and his horse, one hand on the reins and the other on a rope, is part of our American heritage. So it's little wonder that it has also served as inspiration for those seeking to express – through such tangible mediums as bronze, graphite, oil, photography, or watercolor – that which resonates within us in such an intangible way.

Roping is the recurrent theme of the following artists, whose backgrounds reflect as broad a spectrum as the colors and mediums they choose to express themselves through. Some are lifelong horsemen. Still others have never had the privilege of spending time in the saddle. But they all share, as do we, that sense of awe and thrill that only roping can awaken from deep in a cowboy heart.

JIM CONNELLY

www.jimconnellystudio.com

Born in Detroit, Michigan, illustrator and painter Jim Connelly earned his Master of Arts degree from Syracuse University, has been an adjunct faculty member at Kendall College of Art and Design, and earned an Addy from the American Advertising Awards.

His interest in another horsepower – motor sports – led to

work in automotive magazines and the chance to drive a Formula Dodge at the Skip Barber Racing School, while his Impressions of the West paintings have been featured in *Western Horseman* magazine and the book by International Artist Publishing, “How Did You Paint That?”

“I’m a city slicker,” Connelly says. “Being a cowboy is a painting fantasy. When I go to rodeos, I always admire the athleticism and ability of the horses. The horse is a special animal, as is its relationship with man. I’ve fallen in love with the subject matter. The more I paint horses, the more I like them.”

Made In The Shade depicts a rope horse Connelly photographed at a rodeo. “I take a photo first because I try to keep tack as accurate as possible. Credibility is important. I love oil because I paint in a very direct style, and finish in one or two sittings. Each sitting takes four or five hours. I usually start a painting in one day, and come back a second time to finish details, like highlighting a rope on a dark horse. I don’t overwork my paint-



Empty Loop
Don Weller

OF ROPING

ings. I like to keep them looking fresh.”

STEVE MILLER

www.montanasilversmiths.com

His name is probably best associated with his position as vice president of marketing for Montana Silversmiths, makers of trophy-quality buckles, jewelry and interior decor, but Steve Miller has also sculpted compelling bronzes of Western and roping life, including *When Cowboys Take A Dare*.

“My love of art and all things cowboy have been my life,” he says. “I’m an active team roper, and spend most of my spare time either on my horse or sculpting, drawing, or doodling, often to the chagrin of my wife. I am extremely blessed that my position here at Montana Silversmiths allows me to do both, while contributing to the Western industry that I love.

Growing up in Montana, Miller had heard stories about cowboys roping bears, coyotes, wolves, or even an elk now and then. One such saga, involving a friend’s

grandfather (said to have roped a black bear on a bet, and who bore the scar to prove it), inspired *Dare*.

“When bored cowboys, tendin’ a herd, spot a grizzly on open prairie, word spreads quickly. You can bet it didn’t take long before the older, seasoned hands loudly questioned the intestinal fortitude of the younger boys, who didn’t have much choice but to meet the dare with a steel eye and a roll of their rowels.

“Now bringing a grizzly, or any other wild animal, to ground with horses and ropes is a guaranteed cowboy thrill precisely because it’s never easy. But cowboy logic says two mounted cowboys can hold and subdue any beast between good cow ponies that have seen most everything at least once from the end of a rope.

“When a bewildered and cornered bear sits down, a young cowhand can deftly settle a neck loop and take his dallies. But a wise old grizzly can use his front paws like hands, and almost as fast as a loop comes tight, he can jerk it off and charge

his tormentor. With six hundred pounds of claws and fangs headed straight at him, a young hand might find he’s in what cowboys call ‘a quandary.’ If he turns to run, as his horse is requesting permission to do, the grizzly will catch him in the first thirty yards or so. His only chance is for one of the other cowboys to take a long throw, at a now very hostile bear, which in reality will only reverse their fortunes, but hey, any cowboy will take those odds.”

As with most of Miller’s pieces, he concludes, “I like to create the story, but just to the point where it could go either way. Then it’s up to the viewer to finish. As cowboys are fond of saying, ‘It’s your story!’”

BRENDA MURPHY

www.brendamurphystudio.com

Texan Brenda Murphy has united her lifelong passion for the West and a flair for working in pencil and graphite to create beautifully orchestrated drawings



When Cowboys Take A Dare
Steve Miller

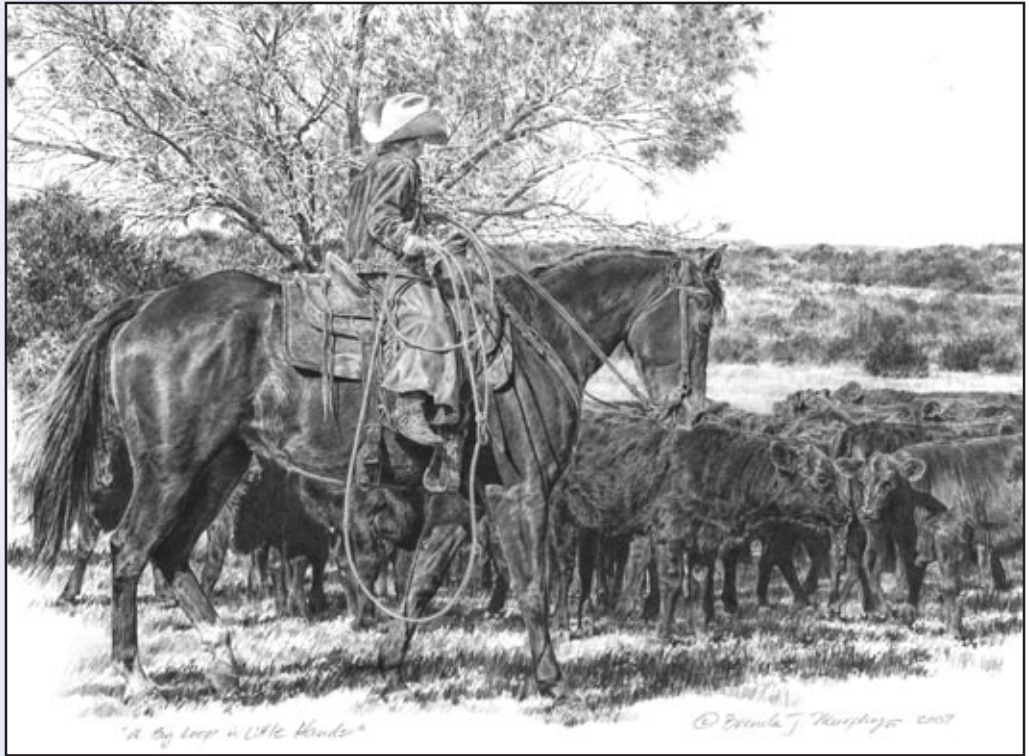
that also tell a good story, typically revolving around ranch life, children, and horses. Her work has been featured in *Art of the West*, *Southwest Art*, and *Western Horseman* magazines, and earned show awards at the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Wyoming, the Desert Caballeros Museum in Arizona, and the National Cowgirl Museum in Texas.

“To me, roping is part of the cowboy tradition and ranching way of life,” says Murphy, a former barrel racer. “Like so much about rodeo and ranch work, roping has also become a great sport. I never rode a rope horse, but understanding horsemanship has kept me fascinated by the communication that has to exist between a horse and rider. I would compare it to ballet: roping a steer is an art.”

Honoring Western tradition is behind Murphy’s heartwarming *Big Loop In Little Hands*. “I start a drawing by shooting photographic references and then downloading the images back in my studio. *Big Loop* was inspired by a real little boy, working at a ranch near Mineral Wells, Texas. What spoke to me about the image is that here was this little kid, learning these ranch traditions early on, and carrying them out. He couldn’t reach his stirrups and yet, there he was, out there with the big boys, in the branding pen.”



Red Shirt
Jim Connelly



Big Loop In Little Hands
Brenda Murphy

KIM RAGSDALE

www.kimragsdale.com

Graphite artist Kim Ragsdale's rendition of a rope horse, *Eye of the Soul*, was featured on the Spring 2008 cover of *Horses in Art* magazine. Ragsdale, who lives on a 480-acre cattle ranch and tree farm in Trail, Oregon, says, "I have witnessed many moments I would like to capture, so I put those in a mental portfolio where I retrieve the idea later." Her high school art teacher, also a portraitist, encouraged her ultra-realistic technique: "I learned to draw what I see, not what I know is there."

She started drawing horses at six years old. "I'd draw horses on my desktop at school until I was persuaded to use paper." She has since graduated from those early yellow No. 2 pencils to high quality graphite in varying degrees of hardness. "The strength and muscle structure of the horse is captured so well with pencil. I draw each individual hair. I don't blend or smudge, so the underlying bone structure is captured with layers and layers of single pencil marks." Working in a monochromatic medium brings its own challenges. "I don't have color to bring my viewer into my work, so I need to use the high

contrast between light and dark to show emotion. It's a striking way to get attention for the story I'm trying to convey."

SONYA SPAZIANI

www.wildwindart.com

Raised on a ranch where she lived a life as a tomboy, self-taught pencil artist Sonya Spaziani of Lebanon, Oregon, finds her muse in the sights and sounds of Western life. Her work has been seen in *Cascade Horseman*, *Western Horseman* magazine and its 2006 calendar, and numerous galleries.

"What inspires me is the simple beauty of the American West, rope horses, and the excitement of roping," she says. "It touches my senses, from the smell of sagebrush to the taste of dust, to the sound of bawling calves, or coyotes in the distance. I feel small and in awe of the open range."

Or the blowzy, high desert "dust devils" that inspire her studio's name, WildWind Art. Another devilish inspiration for Spaziani is roping.

"The adrenaline rush is off the scales, and as every roper knows, that's very addictive," she says. "I enjoy the camaraderie and excitement that roping brings."

Spaziani's piece called *In Training*

depicts renowned roper and trainer Craig Cameron, and her own rope horse is featured in a drawing entitled *Tough As Nails*. "His name was Gus, after my favorite character in my favorite Western, *Lonesome Dove*," she explains. "He was a mahogany bay gelding, full of vim and vigor right down to his last days, and was tough as nails, with a mind of his own that I loved, respected, and most times, fully embraced."

Spaziani still remembers her first time heading a steer. She says that growing up, she gravitated toward everything Western, outdoors, exciting, and fun. Team roping was – and still is – the perfect recipe.

KRISTI USHER

www.kristiusher.com

Northwestern Oregon native and sculptor Kristi Usher has been commissioned for the last several years by the Ellensburg Rodeo in Washington to create a series of bronzes portraying rodeo life. In 2007, the fifth – and largest (36" in length) – sculpture in that series was *Ropes And Hopes*, capturing the dynamic duo of Shain Sproul and Cory Petska.

"Artwork and horses have been my passion for as long as I can remember,"

says Usher, who credits her ability to breathe life into bronze not to formal instruction, but to two decades of ranch work and raising colts.

“Rope horses in particular are powerful and quick and have a lot of heart, which inspires me to portray that in my work,” she says. “I’ve roped a bit and ridden rope horses a lot. Our horses were fast and very competent in the arena, but could turn around and be equally as gentle, and calm enough to stand with my very young sons on their backs.”

Usher’s studio, near Helena, is uniquely situated for her work: the region has four foundries. While she also draws and paints, she says, “Sculpting allows me to portray my subject from all sides. In a team roping bronze, I can show the power and drive in the horses more completely, and the intensity and skill in the riders. You can see and feel those things when you touch bronze. You can almost feel the pounding hearts in the horses, and smell the leather and



Made In The Shade
Jim Connelly

sweat.” Summing it up, she says, “Paintings are for seeing, bronzes are for feeling.”

DON WELLER

www.donweller.com

As a boy, watercolorist Don Weller of Oakley, Utah drew horses and cowboys when he wasn’t horseback exploring the Palouse River and rolling hills of his childhood home near Pullman, Washington. He roped in high school rodeos and sold cartoons to *Western Horseman*, and continued to rope in collegiate and amateur rodeos before graduating from Washington State University with a degree in Fine Art and a concentration in abstract impressionism.

Weller then sold his horses to move to Los Angeles, launching a long career in graphic design and illustration that led to creating five stamps for the U.S. Post Office, covers for *Time Magazine* and *TV Guide*, posters for the 1984 Olympics, National Football League, and National Cutting Horse Association, and publishing *Pride in the Dust*, a collection of illustrations and photography about cutting horses.

“I roped in what were called junior rodeos in the 1950s, similar to today’s high school rodeos. In college, I roped for Washington State. I wasn’t very good, but sometimes I was lucky. We always got beat by Cal Poly, or Colorado, although sometimes we could beat the University of Idaho at Moscow,” he recalls. “It was a little different in those days, before the use of nylon ropes.”

The NCHA book project introduced him to a neighbor who trained cutting horses, and the West of his childhood came flooding back. “It was still there just as I’d left it.” Before long, he was addicted again, and has been ever since, keeping to cutting horses.

“I might be roping today but I never learned to heel,” he says. “I don’t want to lose any fingers



In Training
Sonya Spaziani

at this advanced age. If you thought I was slow in high school, you ought to see me now. Takes an hour just to get going in the morning.”

His watercolors, like *Empty Loop*, document today’s Western horse.

“I paint horses that look like the ones in my barn – smart, athletic, good-looking horses with intelligent eyes, pretty heads, and big hips,” he says. “Someone once said a painting should ask more questions that it answers and I subscribe to that. It always seemed selfish, the wallowing in paint for its own sake, enjoying the creative experience. I think it needs a little more. For me, it needs a subject. Almost always, it needs a horse.”

DIXIE LOU WILSON

www.montanaspirt.com

Photographer Dixie Lou Wilson of Billings, Montana, finds inspiration comes most in a natural setting. The former barrel racer and owner of three horses grew up on a ranch gathering cattle and roping colts.

Two summers ago, using her Nikon digital camera, Wilson was able to take some vivid photographs at a Montana branding after a visit to a 30,000-acre working cattle ranch, where its ropers included cowboy poet Rusty Janzen.

“I ride a lot, and always have my camera with me, which allowed me to capture these images while the roping and branding was going on,” she explains. “I love to watch a good horse at work. It’s amazing what you can see through a camera’s lens, especially when it comes to horses in action. Horses have always captured my heart, and my eye.”

After all, a good horse is surely among nature’s most perfect works of art. Who could resist being “roped in” by such magnificent inspiration?

