

Morgans *in Art:*



Shadows and Light: The Art of Betsey MacDonald

By Ellen F. Feld

With a deep, passionate love for Morgan horses, it was inevitable that the work of Betsey MacDonald be strongly influenced by their beauty, strength, and unique personalities. Throw in a bold interpretation of shadow and the playfulness of light, and you have a distinctive and eye-catching style that has been displayed in the national spotlight.

A Passion for Horses

When asked about her love of horses, Betsey explains that as a child she always wanted a horse. “As with all horse nuts,” she laughs, “my dolls had horses. I made gimp bridles and felt blankets for my model horses and play-cantered around the yard and over jumps. I drove my parents crazy until they bought me my first pony. I made a hay-rope bridle for my first horse and rode him bareback. My friends and I made a corral in

the woods and we’d ride to the corral, put our horses in, and have lunch.”

Realizing Betsey was outgrowing her pony and that her passion for horses was real, her parents purchased a grade Morgan for their daughter when she was 14. His name was Morgan Jim, but Betsey called him “Duddy.” The dark, dappled bay gelding happily put up with Betsey and her friends riding double, and even triple, on him. He won his fair share of trail and pleasure classes in local shows and kept his young owner busy burning up the trails.

At 16, Betsey was given a very green mare named Broadwall Patlyn (Broadwall St Pat x Raymond’s Lyn), whom she called “Patty.” “Oh, how I loved that horse!” recalls Betsey. “I can’t even talk about her now without crying. I didn’t have a trainer or instructor, so I trained her from books I’d read. She won five New England

(Above)
“Kind Faces.”

Editor’s Note: This month we bring you the 11th installment of the series titled, “Morgans in Art,” which features several talented artists who use the Morgan horse as their inspiration. For more information on Betsey MacDonald and her artwork, please visit her website: www.bmacdonald.net



(Clockwise top left) "Reno's Attitude"; "Friends"; "Winter Gallop"; "Autumn Sun."



2006 EQUINE AFFAIRE

(Left to right) The artist with her Morgans and inspiration; This painting of Betsey's Morgans was used to promote the 2006 Equine Affaire.

championships in open trail, Morgan pleasure, and road hack. She was also a reserve champion at the National Morgan Versatility Show. It was a great show held in Northampton, Massachusetts, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. What a challenging show! You had to enter ten classes out of 13. Patty won the running race on a half-mile track, the jumping class which started at three feet and went up, and the trail class which was timed and had a lot of very tough obstacles. She was awesome! We did the trotting race and the pulling contest. She never said no to any of the crazy things I asked. Mabel Owen told me I'd have other horses, but never one like her. Mabel was right, although I now have other wonderful Morgans."

Off to College

While enjoying a childhood full of horse adventures, Betsey also found time to explore another growing interest, her talent for drawing. Animals were her favorite subjects with horses, of course, taking center stage in many of her creations. Her other pets also were frequent subjects and Betsey still has a pastel of the family's big, lovable St. Bernard that she painted when she was just seven years old.

When it was time to head off to college, Betsey knew she wanted to study art, but she was also interested in pursuing a career in the sciences. Unable to decide between the two, she wound up attending the University of Massachusetts, a school with outstanding programs in both. "I have always been torn between science and art," explains Betsey, "which is why I got a BFA from the University of Massachusetts, and then went on and took all my pre-med courses."

The young artist got her teacher's certification in biology, chemistry, general science, and art and then took a teaching job at Westport High School in Westport, Massachusetts, teaching biology and chemistry. She loved teaching and even managed to use her art in the science classroom on numerous occasions.

Betsey taught chemistry and anatomy for 25 years while she continued to pursue her love of art by painting at night and during the summers. It may seem that these interests are polar opposites, with art requiring an innovative, free-flowing style versus the rigid work ethic of the scientist. Betsey disagrees, explaining that, "I don't think science is very far removed from art. Certainly not anatomy, but neither is chemistry. The whole explanation of light and color requires an understanding of chemistry and physics. It

may even be why I don't paint a chestnut horse with brown paint. I use every color, really. Brown is a mixture of all the primary colors and it's much more vibrant when it is painted from colors rather than a tube of brown paint. Another thing is the shades of brown. I had no idea how many colors are in a chestnut until I really looked. I used pink, violet, yellows, orange, and blue in my horses' portraits. Bay highlights are violets and pinks. The colors are fascinating in what appears to be a plain chestnut or bay horse."

From Betsey's love and fascination with chemistry and anatomy arises a special admiration for her favorite artist, Leonardo da Vinci. "Leonardo is my hero for several reasons. One, he was a great scientist, anatomist, and inventor, but also an incredible artist. I've seen *The Last Supper* and the *Mona Lisa* and they are two of the greatest paintings ever done. Plus, his horses were incredible. They were very Morgan-like with huge necks, big bones, large eyes, tons of action, and proud carriage."

Favorite Styles

Although quite busy with a teaching job, husband, and three stepchildren, Betsey found time to do some commissioned work. Her jobs were varied and certainly required some creative thinking as she painted murals for McDonald's; signs for Battleship Cove in Fall River, Massachusetts; bow designs on fishing boats; and, of course, horse paintings.

Watercolor, oil, and pencil are Betsey's trademark mediums. "I enjoy watercolor for its immediacy. I love how the colors move on a dampened sheet of paper. I love to see what happens when colors are dropped into water and allowed to mix. Again, rather than paint a black or a brown, it's exciting and more lively to make that color from others and to just let the color move. I love the light and the transparency of watercolor.

"Oil is demanding in a different way," continues Betsey, "but I love the richness of the color. There is no other way to get such wonderful deep, alive colors. I love the smell and the texture. I love to use my arm to paint in large sweeping strokes that move with a mane or with a shoulder, strokes that imply life and energy. I love thick paint that is painted quickly with knowledge of how the colors will appear next to each other.

"Pencil is for drawing and seeing. Drawing makes me look at

things, I mean really look at things. Look at how round the horse's eye is and what shape the pupil is, where the jaw muscles attach and where they indent, where the blood vessels protrude, how the ears are attached, how the mane falls, and on and on. I could look at horses and draw horses, particularly Morgans, forever!"

Morgans as Inspiration

When asked why Morgans play such an important role in both her life and her art, Betsey brims with enthusiasm. "The book *Justin Morgan Had A Horse* piqued my interest and then my first Morgan experiences convinced me that I would never want another breed. There are so many gorgeous horses, but none have it all like a Morgan. Starting at the head, I love those huge, intelligent, ever alert and interested eyes, the little pointy ears that are always forward, always interested in what's ahead. I love the big jowl, straight profile, the sculptured throat and crested neck along with the long and thick mane. The short straight back, raised full tail, strong leg bones and above all else, the attitude! A happy, willing to go along with anything, smart, energetic, enthusiastic, full of substance, tough, forward, and kind attitude."

Talking about Morgans brings a huge smile to Betsey's face as she sees these traits over and over in the three Morgans she owns and loves: JCP Lionheart (Courage Of Equinox x Bobbin Hollow Mytime), or "Reno," age 11; Whippoorwill Ella G (Serenity March Time x Whippoorwill Eliza), age 26; and Willopond Knight Traveler (Covenant Knight Heir x Misty Mt Nora Belle), or "Travie," age four. "Examples come rushing into my head with my wonderful horses. Reno is so smart that he opens his stall latch which is a bolt, lets himself out, and then lets Travie out. Both horses are so kind and will lick my dogs and gently pull their ears or whiskers. Ella is so energetic that she won a hunter pace in the jumper division this year and is also in first place in a judged pleasure ride series in Connecticut. Plus, all three are so willing because I've trained them all myself and what do I know?"

Listening to Betsey talk about her horses, it is obvious why they play such an important role in her art. But what is it about a certain horse that captures her attention and begs to be painted? "Sometimes," explains Betsey, "it's how the light changes the coat color, sometimes it's just the energy in their motion, sometimes it's an attitude or the gentleness and nurturing of a mare and foal, sometimes it's because they are mine and I love them so much!"

"I also paint a lot of cows and some white horses because I enjoy the colors of the shadows," she continues. "They are never gray. They are blue and violet and the highlights are warm whites and the shadows are cool whites. It's always a challenge to paint white because there are so many different whites; some are warm and some are cool. John Singer Sargent, who was a highly-respected American portrait painter who helped put watercolors in the art category rather than just a preliminary sketch for an oil, could really paint the light on a white building and I try to do that on white animals."

Other Projects

Betsey has several other projects that she has worked on that benefit from both her scientific background and artistic abilities. Several years ago she wrote a children's book about an old lady and a little boy who was afraid of her because she was old. "I became involved with the elderly because I used to take my dogs to nursing homes to

visit. It got me thinking about how we treat our senior citizens and before I knew it, I was writing a book. The Massachusetts Council on Aging saw it and commissioned me to do a poster for a day celebrating the elderly. Shortly after that, the United Nations had a day in celebration of aging and I was asked to paint their poster. Currently, I am working on a book called *The Horse: Bit by Bit*. It has descriptions of every horse part from the nose to the tail with lots of little facts that horse people may not know. For example, I write about how every hair follicle has a muscle attached so that a horse can raise or lower his coat depending on temperature, how the nose hairs are sensory hairs and used for feeding and finding food, and that a horse needs to raise or lower his head to focus sometimes because of the shape of his pupil and location of his retina." Several parts of this book are illustrated in watercolor, a process that certainly takes extra time and effort. Explains Betsey, "I did these paintings to focus myself on every separate little bit of the horse, but also to learn and to teach about the evolution of every trait and how they all developed for the survival of the horse."

Betsey also has illustrated several books including *My Ocean Liner*, a children's chapter book written by Peter Mandel, and *Fish Hawk: The Story of the Osprey* by Gil Fernandez. In addition, she has painted numerous posters advertising events as different as a local marathon to advertising the annual Equine Affaire, for which her own horses were the models. "I loved having my three horses on the Equine Affaire poster. From there, the painting was used on shirts and in advertising the event. I was just in an event where the judge was wearing a sweatshirt with the horses my friend and I were riding. How cool! Plus my portrait of Reno made the *Horsemen's Yankee Pedlar* special edition cover. It was fun to see Reno looking out from a magazine I've always received."

Finally, as if she isn't busy enough, Betsey has a solo show almost every year to showcase her work. "I'll bet I've sold over 400 paintings. It's flattering and moving to think that so many people actually want a painting of mine in their homes or that they purchase them for special gifts."

For the Future

When the art teacher at Betsey's school recently retired, Betsey took the position. "It was time for a change," says Betsey, "and I thought that my genuine passion for art would inspire my students. It was so much fun! I had so many talented kids and it was very inspiring to work with them."

After having a blast in the art classroom, Betsey decided this year, at the age of 56, to go back to school herself. "Cumberland High School granted me a paid sabbatical to pursue a master's degree in studio art," she excitedly explains. "I can't wait to spend a whole year doing art. It will be so exciting to see what direction it will go. I know I want to do big, energetic, bold animals, particularly birds and horses. Already I'm finding my classes challenging and exciting. I hope to return to the classroom with more knowledge and even more energy! I also received a grant from the Westport River Watershed Alliance to paint Ospreys and the river this year."

At a time when most people are comfortably settled into a career and perhaps fall into a rut, Betsey MacDonald is finding new and exciting ways to challenge herself. Whatever she winds up doing, there's no doubt that there will be at least a few Morgans showcased in her art. ■