



Portraits *with* Passion



The authenticity of Shannon Lawlor's artwork, highly regarded as historical documentation of the charro and vaquero horse cultures, reflects years of study. Her sought-after work is found in galleries and private collections around the world.

STORY BY JENNIFER DENISON • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROSS HECOX

Countless hours spent horseback gave Shannon Lawlor the education and inspiration she needed to pursue a Western art career. The artist still enjoys spending time with horses, including Ghost, the horse she's riding in this photo. She also attends equine events and ranch ropings to further her knowledge of horse cultures and to take reference photos.





WHEN YOU PASS BY an equine painting by Shannon Lawlor, you can't help but stop and stare. Dramatic, bold and evocative, the Canadian artist's work exudes an emotion and maturity that seizes your attention and doesn't allow your eye to drift beyond its framed border. Enriched with delicate detail, the paintings offer introspection, while begging you to reach inside and run your fingers through strands of mane hair, feel a prickly horsehair mecate, taste salty sweat, and to look deep into a horse's kind eyes to sense the essence of an unconditional partnership.

One of few Western artists dedicated to acrylic, although she also works in oil and graphite, Shannon relies on a rather narrow color palate. Blending magenta, yellow, phthalo blue, burnt sienna, paynes gray and white, she creates serene color values, from sea greens to rich, leather browns, that elicit passion and accurately portray scenes from the life of a charro and buckaroo, two recurring themes in her work.

Alison Logie, owner of the Gilded Gallery in Didsbury, Alberta, says that Shannon is considered one of the premier bridle-horse illustrators of this era, and her work is becoming highly collectible with ranchers, horsemen and purveyors of Western art.

"Collectors immediately recognize the quality of her work and its authenticity," Logie says. "Her passion for and knowledge of the working horse is her greatest strength."

The painter's realism, heightened by her Rembrandt-like use of light and color, are the effects that come from years of experience with her subject matter, reference images she's taken in her mind and sketched on paper, and a genuine respect for horses and traditional horsemanship practices.

"What makes Shannon's art unique is the background knowledge she brings to it," says Jane Merrill,

owner of Southwest Roundup in San Juan Bautista, California, which represents Shannon's work. "Her knowledge of the equine physique comes from the hundreds of horses she's ridden."

IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE HORSES she had during her childhood, Shannon says she doesn't know what would've become of her as an adult. Born in Kenton, Manitoba, in 1965, the 43-year-old artist says she's "never known life without horses."

The youngest of four children, Shannon has been horseback since she was in diapers and could maintain her own balance. Her mother, Doreen, worked at a local grocery, while her father, Jack, owned an automotive garage. Both were supportive of all their daughters' horse interests, and made sure there were enough mounts in the barn to go around.

"As a little girl, everyone in my world that mattered to me loved horses, so it was without question that I felt the same way," she says. "And when a movie such as *The Black Stallion* came out, well, that's just every girl's dream. The film still resonates with me

when I watch it today."

If Shannon and her sisters weren't riding the hair off their horses at the barn, they were drawing them at home. At the time, nobody, including Shannon, realized those sketches would flourish decades later into an art career. In fact, Shannon never thought seriously of becoming a full-time artist until 2004. Up until that point, she was too busy making her living in the saddle.

Life experiences were the best formal training Shannon could have received on her road to becoming an artist, providing her a deep understanding of her future subject matter. Before committing to her art career, she worked in a renowned equine veterinary practice and on various PMU (pregnant mare urine) lines, wrangled horses for an outfitter, tended cattle in a feedlot, rode for a natural-horsemanship clini-



Cholo, a 36-by-24-inch acrylic on board



Wind in My Reins, 24-by-30-inch acrylic on board

cian and started hundreds of colts. Plus, she bred, raised and trained countless horses of her own for pleasure and show. Along the way, she sought knowledge from great horsemen who had been inspired by the old California stock-horse traditions.

"I've done my time of hard labor, the necessary work of learning everything I possibly could about my chosen subject matter," she says. "I've brought horses into the world, and I've had the unfortunate experience of having to take them out. I've experienced complete and utter peace with them. I've felt their sweat. I've seen their sorrow. I know how they feel, look, hear and smell. I know how they think, which in turn, has been one of my greatest joys and contributes to me feeling as though I truly understand horses. Their contribution to my life has been unequalled by anything else."

THREE YEARS AGO, facing burnout with the only love she's ever truly known, Shannon took a chance on her talent and committed herself to painting. Prior to taking this leap, she'd painted only as a hobby and had taken some informal art lessons.

Today, alone in her quiet home studio in Cayley, Alberta, she sits in front of her two easels, which are illuminated by the natural light coming through a north window. Her feline sidekick, Mouse, is never far from her side.

The artist spends days composing a piece and drawing all the subjects before she ever begins painting. Anatomical accuracy and historical authenticity are her priorities.

Living and working amid the beauty and isolation of Alberta's southern ranch country inspires Shannon to pursue her dream on a daily basis.

"Alberta is a very progressive province, as is the horse industry here," she says. "The influence of the California and vaquero style of bridle horses is quite strong where I live. Having access to this culture and to some of the greatest ranches in Canada has greatly influenced my artwork."

The artist is also motivated by her mentor, and "by far the finest human being" she knows, wildlife artist David Kitler, as well as great horses, horsemanship and gear. She loves seeing horses

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execute maneuvers with only the slightest of cues from their riders. One horse-and-rider team close to Shannon's heart is Tomas Garcilazo, a Mexican charro, and his Azteca horse, Cholo. The pair has been the subject for some of Shannon's best work, and Cholo was Shannon's inspiration for *La Maestria del Charro*, a series of four paintings she did on the charro culture and heritage.

"He's an incredible horse in real life, and moves so fluidly and with such grace," she says. "He was a good introduction to the world of the Mexican charro for me."

AS SHANNON PERFECTS her technique and the detail and historical accuracy of her paintings, the purpose of her content is becoming more clearly defined.

"I realize I'm one of a distinct few painting and preserving the old Spanish ways, vaquero traditions and images of the Great Basin and authentic Western culture," she says.

Both an artistic and business-minded professional, Shannon is praised by the gallery owners with whom she works for her dedication, organization and willingness to do whatever it takes to advance her career. This includes making a concerted effort to expose the public to her work, judiciously entering juried shows in Canada and the United States, and selling her pieces at trade shows throughout the West. She also attends several ranch ropings, or "big loop" events, gathering reference material for her art.

"She's committed to making the long haul to be a successful fine artist," says Merrill. "She works around the clock on her art and does her own administrative work. She bridges the gap well between being an artist and a business-minded woman."

The past year was a pivotal time in Shannon's career. She's was invited to exhibit at such prestigious events as the Californios Ranch Roping and Stock Horse Contest in Red Bluff, California; the Cattleman's Western Art Show in Paso Robles, California; the San Dimas Western Art Show and Sale in San Dimas, California; and the Phippen Museum Western Art Show and Sale in Prescott, Arizona. At the latter, she won the most prestigious honor of her career, Best of Show Acrylic, for one of



Shannon is not only intrigued by her subject matter, but also by the way color combinations and values influence the mood of her work.

"This is my fourth Turnover Ball Hitch."

"I like it because, when I'm not pulling my trailer, I can turn the ball over and have room to do other things with my truck."

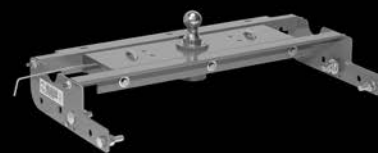
"What other things?"

"Well, I moved my son to college last Fall...I haul feed and hay for my horses... and there's always shopping!"

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Bits of Knowledge, 18-by-24-inch acrylic on board



Jim Orr's Ghost, 13-by-19-inch acrylic on board

her most recognizable and favorite paintings, *Cholo*.

Of all her awards and accolades, however, Shannon considers the fact that she has her own business, Shannon Lawlor Fine Art, and is doing what she loves, her greatest accomplishment.

TRAVELING TO PROMOTE her art has allowed Shannon to broaden her perspective of horse cultures, and painting is not only important to her as a job, but also as a way of preserving the real cow-

boys, vaqueros and horses from past and present.

"It matters to me where these existing cultures came from, how they evolved and why," she says. "The more I learn about the Mexican, California, Great Basin and Western cultures, the more I want to know and endorse in my paintings. To me, this is the good stuff. It's balanced and still alive today."

However, Shannon wants to be known as more than just an equine artist.

"When people look at my art, I hope

they see something that truly resonates within them," she says. "That's when I know I've done my job as an artist. And, when a great horseman, or a fellow making his living cowboying or buckarooing, buys artwork from me, that just confirms I've done it right." 🐾

Jennifer Denison is a Western Horseman senior editor. For more information on Shannon Lawlor, visit shannonlawlor.com. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.

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