



ANDREA HARTMEYER JOHNS:

Portrait of an Artist

BY BETTS COUP

Andrea Hartmeyer Johns is a familiar and friendly face in the show horse world. She and her booth of eye-catching, colorful paintings of horses, pets and their people appear at many prestigious horse shows throughout the season, including Lexington Junior League, the World's Championship Horse Show and the Morgan Grand National and World Championships. Today she is well known for her innate ability to capture the spirit of a show horse and the connection between horse and rider—a talent that comes from both years in the saddle and years in the stands watching shows. While Andy pursued art from her earliest years, it was really after a very important hiatus during which she raised her children that the magnitude of her professional calling was realized. Andy's passion for painting horses and the people who love them is filled with joy and gratitude.

Horses were an important part of the Hartmeyer family for Andy's whole life. Before she was born, her parents relocated to Muncie, Indiana, in the 1940s so her father could run Marhoefer's, a local meatpacking business. It was at this time that her mother and sister, Jane (now Ginther), decided they wanted a horse. Her dad bought them a half-Arabian, half-Welsh pony named Smokey, who started the family's horse craze and lived on their family farm well until his 30s.

It didn't take long for the Hartmeyer women to discover the nearby Whitney Stables, and they became enamored with the Saddlebreds there. They signed up for lessons and without much hesitation entered the show horse sport. In 1953, Andy's mom won a Ladies Three-Gaited class at Madison Square Garden on Stonewall's Squirrel, only a year before Andy's birth; this horse went on to become Andy's mount when she was just 5 or 6 years old. "I never knew life without horses until I married and moved to Texas in 1980," Andy says. She credits her sister Jane for teaching her and countless other local kids to ride. Jane and her daughter Daydn still run Hartmeyer's in Muncie. Charlie Trumbo was also a great teacher.



▲ Andy and her younger sister, Liz, with Smokey at the Delaware County Fairgrounds



Carson Kressley and Andy at the American Saddlebred Museum exhibit ▲

In the early 60s the family still had show horses with Bob Whitney and Jean Berkimer, and later Judy Swan Whitney, by then in Cox's Creek, Kentucky, where Andy remembers riding many horses and walk-trot ponies.

Growing up, there were as many as seven Hartmeyers showing. Eventually, horses were moved from the fairgrounds when the barn was built in 1970. The family had a variety of breeds, many of which were lesson horses for Janes's program. Andy rode whatever was available. For horse shows, sometimes the family would draw names for horses. Andy also catch-roped, and once was asked to show a Morgan park stallion at the Indiana State Fair, which she remembers as one of the most thrilling moments of her show career. In addition, she competed in Equitation at a time when it was both extremely popular and deeply competitive and recalls showing in the then AHSA, now USEF, Medal finals at the American Royal in 1972. "I think there were around 60 of us," she remembers. "I didn't even make the first cut, but I will never forget the awesome competition with whom I showed."

During Andy's high school years, Ellis Waggoner arrived as trainer at Hartmeyer Stables, and he had many very nice client horses. Andy spent as many mornings as possible at the barn, helping ready horses and watching them work. "I bet I can still put on a tail set, harness or biting rig," Andy explains. "Some days I would get to ride five or six horses, often just school horses, but I learned from all."

One of her favorite memories of her youthful riding career was showing the five-gaited gelding Commander Stonewall, who they had purchased at the Crawford-Cooper sale in Tennessee. She was lucky enough to draw him to show at Louisville in 1973, and the pair placed fifth in the Amateur Stallion/Gelding qualifier. "We went back in the Amateur Five-Gaited World's Championship in amazement to even be in the ring. Dang if we weren't called out for the yellow ribbon!" Andy recalls. "It was definitely the most thrilling moment in a very long, fairly inauspicious riding career. When I got to the out-gate, delirious, Dad and Ellis met me—equally incredulous—and whisked me away to the payphone to call Mom." Her friend and webmaster Leslie Reynolds recently tracked down the class archives, and Andy discovered there were 20 entries, including some of the greats of their day. "That class may be my last memory on this earth. It still makes me emotional, and I think it is that emotion I bring to every painting," Andy explains. "One cannot describe the thrill of riding and showing, ribbon or not. It is a great gift to be cherished."

At the same time Andy fell in love with horses, she also fell in love with drawing. "I don't remember not drawing horses," she laughs. Growing up, she would draw portraits of horses and riders based on magazine ads. "I studied photos and drew with a #2 pencil until my right middle finger knuckle was calloused before I was out of 10-and-Under," she chuckles. "I think that's why I

remember today so many of the horses and riders of the 1960s and 70s."

Watching a horse show in person was even better for Andy; she'd study the show ring combinations and try to capture them in her artwork. "Horse shows were my nirvana, whether I showed or not. For me, all senses were fully engaged," Andy states.

By the time she was a teenager, Andy had a small but budding art career thanks to her sister, as Jane would arrange commissions for her to paint. It was sometimes intimidating for Andy, but she always said yes. "George Anne Nash and Ellen Ogletree Brooks showed me paintings of The Superstar on a purse I had painted well over 40 years ago, and yes, indeed, I had reason to lack confidence at that time!" she laughs. "But they'll always have the memory of that wonderful horse that changed and shaped their lives. Just think what that honest bay gelding did for our breed, and I got to paint him."

When it came time for her university education, Andy headed to Ball State University in Indiana. She completed an undergraduate degree in art and a Master's of Arts degree in English, working as a graduate assistant and graduating magna cum laude. While at Ball State, she met Steve Johns, who was studying architecture. After teaching in Indiana, Andy and Steve married and

moved to Texas, where Andy pursued real estate and Steve pursued architecture, opening, with partners, Alliance Architects in 1993. They had two wonderful children, Christy and Matt, and for the 20 years her children were still at home, Andy didn't lift a paintbrush. Instead, she focused on them, and supported them through their many endeavors. She held countless volunteer positions at their schools, including serving on the local school council as historian, volunteer chair, newsletter chair and many other PTA board positions. "It was just volunteer work and seemingly insignificant at the time, but it wasn't," she remarks. Andy says she didn't realize then how every experience contributes to one's next stage in life. "I learned so many skills, and ultimately, raising children is the most important task we have," she explains. Those familiarities were in her future as well.

When her kids went off to college at Baylor University, Andy knew it was time to get back to both horses and art. With the same verve that she took to her duties as a mom, she dove right back into her work and carved out a unique and rewarding career for herself. "I hope that my journey is just another example of a woman who has been fortunate enough to have both family and profession," Andy says. "For me, they were more contiguous than overlapping. I loved raising our kids and privately display my PTA Life Membership and other volunteer recognitions in my studio. Once the kids were in college, I focused on my equine art, which may seem disparate, but I learned so much about communication and marketing to later develop a burgeoning art business. As a volunteer, I was often a spokesperson for our public schools, asked to appear on local television and submitted articles to papers, before social media."

With the skills she acquired while raising her family and a reignited passion for painting, Andy set out to start Andy's Equine Art, which aims to capture the special bond between people and their horses. She attends many horse shows, which is important for sales and for her creative process as well, as she paints both from photographs and her own memories of watching partnerships in the ring. "I watch every class I can. It is wonderful when a visitor will alert me to a class, even if there is just the whim of a future painting. I love to see how the horse moves and the rider handles him," she says. Even if she can see a horse and rider together in the ring, she will gather as many photographs as she can for reference in order to fully understand the conformation and style of the horse. Still, she tries not to get bogged down in the precise detail. "I use my lifetime knowledge to modify and enhance the image. I do not need the 'perfect' photo; in fact, my paintings seldom look like any single photo," she explains. "Every mental resource funnels onto the canvas." It's also the case that many of the photos she gets for reference are from victory passes, and though she takes complete artistic license for the portrayal of the ribbons themselves, she loves the emotion of a victory pass photo. "I think I jump right into that canvas when I paint. I know what it feels like," she says.

Much of Andy's business stems from commissions, which is also one of the greatest challenges of her career, as she never wants to pester anyone about a painting. "I try to follow up with visitors who mention a future painting. I try to always allow



Andy winning the Equitation class at Dayton in 1971 after a rare exchange of horses ▲



Andy with Bob Ruxer and childhood friend and fellow Hoosier equestrian, Joan Todd, in front of Andy's painting of Supreme Sultan ▲





▲ Andy with longtime friend George Ann Nash at Louisville in 2016



▲ Dr. John Huse with a surprise commissioned portrait of himself, his Morgan and his dog, coordinated by his trainer, Shanna Gish, and wife, Dr. Patti Huse

my client to initiate the approach and am grateful for trainers who know my lifelong history with the horses and share this with their clients who may not know of me or what I do," she explains. No matter what, she listens to those who come to her booth to visit, and one of the things that brings people back to Andy is her honest interest in them and their journeys. "I always enjoy listening to my horse friends," she says, and that tends to make people comfortable and happy to chat with her.

Sometimes commissions will take years to come together, but Andy doesn't mind being patient. She takes the conversations she's had with the customer over the years and applies them to the painting, ensuring that the client will end up with a product they love and that truly reflects them, the way they feel about their horses and even the challenges they might have had to handle. Other commissions come after five minutes—and that gives Andy time to get to

know the person, horse and their story afterwards. "The most important part of a commissioned portrait happens before it is sketched. I must understand what is in my client's mind's eye," Andy says. "Once I know that, I can estimate the time it will take, and thus the fee. Every painting is totally different, so I do not have a set fee chart. I try to work with my client's resources as efficiently as possible. We work together." She's also flexible on her schedule, preferring to have several months, but she is willing to work faster if a commissioned work is for someone's birthday, anniversary or other special occasions.

For Andy, receiving a commission is like receiving a gift because of the trust it implies. "My clients place considerable trust in me because they're committing to a product they haven't seen. It's a great leap of faith for which I am forever grateful," she states, and most of Andy's clients do commission multiple portraits. "They are all painted by hand—no digital aids—and never in realistic color unless the client wants that. Each painting is unique, and even I do not know what the final painting will look like!" says Andy. "My goal is always to create—through inventive use of color and design composition—a quality contemporary art painting, regardless of subject. To me, it is not just a portrait for my clients. I hope that they will consider it contemporary art as well."

Part of what makes Andy's artwork so striking is that she doesn't have a strict method, and she allows her work to evolve and change while reflecting the images she is depicting. "I never follow a 'formula.' Every painting is a controlled experiment, primarily in color," Andy explains. "My paintings are not normally photo-realistic. If you look closely, you will see bizarre juxtapositions of unrealistic color that fool the eye at a modest distance."

Even with her distinctive style, she takes particular care with the details when it comes to her commission's faces. "Sometimes, always with human faces, the studio goes totally quiet. Concentration is paramount," she says. "And I do try to make sure the face is structurally accurate before spending a lot of time on the horse. The face must be spot on. On rare occasions I just have to start over on the face. I never allow a painting to leave the studio until the face is structurally correct. It is all light and shadow, really."

To get that perfect look, Andy utilizes clear reference photos of the human face and often takes pictures at her art booth at horse shows. "That's especially fun when the subject doesn't know what I'm doing. Last year I took photos of Caroline Rainbolt-Forbes by the tack room," Andy recalls. "I forget what we told her, but she had no idea I was taking them for a painting. I have watched those adorable twins grow up, and it is astonishing how facial structure changes during teenage years. The challenge of the human face is the lure."

In addition, she always wants a pairing to be completely recognizable, so although the color may be adventurous, the proportions are always accurate. When she's painted the likes of Carson



▲ Andy with the 2016 Junior Judging Contest winner after the Freedom Hall presentation

Kressley, William Shatner or other notable figures, she's wanted to make it clear even to those outside the horse industry who is depicted aboard the horse. "Sometimes that's my test; I ask strangers who they think it is! My paintings must ace the recognizability test," she admits, laughing.

Overall, though, Andy's main goal is for the painting to represent something deeper and less concrete. "There is an emotional element for which I always strive. That must be in the painting," she says. "The details of inanimate elements—tack, for example—come at the very end, and I do not belabor them. Often there are just suggestions of billets or curb chains, for example. We all know what they look like, and they must be accurate, but they are consistent. The living subjects are, however, totally unique, each rendered differently."

As for her trademark style, it's important to Andy to keep it fresh. About 12 years ago, she attended a workshop because she didn't have much experience working with acrylic paint, which dries faster than oil and thus makes the completion and shipping process simpler. However, the Santa Fe-based artist leading the

workshop gave her some unlikely advice: never attend another workshop. "She was afraid I'd lose my edge," Andy says. "I took the advice. Sometimes it's best not to know how things have always been done."

Given her joyous and exuberant personality, it is no surprise that Andy's approach to painting is just as unique as her finished product. "I smile and dance to hip-hop (badly) as I paint. Sometimes I have to stop and just dance. I am old and stodgy only when a mirror intersects, so I avoid them," Andy laughs. "Honestly, I am happiest when I have about five to seven paintings at various stages of completion in the studio. It is like pinball to me, and I am thrilled to run into the person/horse I last tweaked."

Some of the greatest moments of her career are when her paintings are delivered as surprises. "We have a blast from the get-go. Pure joy. The majority of my clients burst into tears when they see their paintings," Andy says, "and so do I. This is why I love what I do." Andy truly cares for her clients, and is thrilled to know that their works of art will be treasured for generations.

Other highlights of her career have included when her works have been used as promotional

materials for events like Lexington Junior League, one of her personal favorite horse shows, and Morgan Grand National. "Oh my, it is really fun!" she says. "I showed my whole riding career at Lexington. Can you imagine my heart when I saw my crazy, colorful image on a billboard in Lexington?" She adds, "While I never competed personally at the Morgan Grand National, it was a thrill to have that gorgeous Morgan stallion all over the Oklahoma State Fairgrounds." Her works have also been on display at and donated to the American Saddlebred Museum and the Museum of the Morgan Horse, and she's proud to be a part of those institutions and to support them in any way she can. She also makes sure that her sales benefit those in need, including Saddlebred Rescue, to which she donates the proceeds from some of her prints.

Although she and her husband have a pair of beloved donkeys, Andy no longer rides, but she still vividly remembers the feeling of being in the ring and enjoys living vicariously through her friends and clients. "I ride every class in my mind. I can feel the curb and snaffle and adjust them with the rider. I see that opportunity to come out of the corner and make that splendid pass. I hold my breath and lean dramatically during every Roadster to Wagon class!" Andy admits. "Not surprisingly, I cluck and whoa and say 'switch' or 'crossed' at the canter. This is the real reason why I sit by myself. Can you imagine having to sit through that with me? I'm an insufferable mess. But yes, I am riding too, and it's still thrilling!"

While she's loved seeing some of her old friends, like Bill Marple, win at Louisville, and she treasures the memory of WGC CH My My winning the gaited stake during her first trip to the World's Grand Championship, the moments that really stand out to her are when she witnesses friends and clients having the rides of their lives—no matter the ribbon. She also enjoys watching new teams come together and grow throughout a season or over the years. She then channels all the emotions she feels when watching these combinations into her art, hoping the joy she feels translates to the canvas.

Although her path to becoming an artist wasn't always conventional, Andy feels she has ended up exactly where she needed to be. "What I did not know was how the painting would fill my soul. Initially I just figured it would simply be a means to pay for my horse addiction," she says. "Now, I cannot imagine my life without painting." That's the future she'd like to see for herself. "Personally, I just aspire to keep doing what I do and sharing my love of this wonderful industry, which has enriched my life beyond imagination. Sometimes it is good to be an outsider, which to a great extent I am, because I meet fellow horse-lovers from all over the world, from all different barns, disciplines, backgrounds, levels of participation and engagement," Andy explains. She adds, "Occasionally, I get to be a part of very private, poignant moments of extreme love that can't really be shared. Sometimes I do videos of reveals, but I cannot share them. They are that powerful, that personal, that private. But I get to be a part of it. How lucky am I?"