



ERIC BOLLAND

CAPTURING MOTION *in*
Bronze

Alexa King reveals
the dynamic beauty
of horses and
other subjects in
her internationally
coveted sculptures



By Kate Savage



Alexa King is best known for her statue of Barbaro but she conveys the uniqueness of every equine subject, including a Hackney pony, left.

Georges Braque, Picasso's colleague and co-founder of the cubist movement, said, "If I could find the right words, I'd have no need to paint." So it is with Alexa King, whose sculptures are, for her, a means of communication and expression.

"I am an artist," King said. "I was born an artist. I've always been an artist. I have never been anything but that." She makes the statement in an indisputable way — as if declaring her age or gender. And, as a successful artist who created the larger-than-life-sized sculpture of Kentucky Derby winner Barbaro, she has reason to be proud of this truth.

Greg Ladd, owner of Cross Gate Gallery in Lexington and a longtime friend who also represents King's work, considers her

among the country's top three bronze sculptors in the field of sporting art, possibly among the top five in the world.

Born in Muncie, Indiana, in 1952, King showed her artistic abilities at an early age. Influenced by her mother, who also was an artist, the young King was taken along to the Art League in Indianapolis on "sketching exercises." Similarly reinforced by her father's skill in the design and construction of private and commercial buildings, King was fortunate to find artistic encouragement and support from both parents.

"I recall in third grade that I drew horses all the time. Lots of just drawing in class at times when I was obviously not supposed to be," King said. "My teacher would say 'you act like you were born in a barn, Alexa.' I was mortified at the time. Now I would consider that to be a compliment, of course."

Her family described her as shy and quiet as a child, some-

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thing King finds hard to believe today. She said she wonders about the creative process and whether “even then what I was doing when I was younger was a way for me to transcribe how I felt about things.”

In 1967 the family moved to Camp Atterbury in south-central Indiana when her father, who was in the military, was appointed post commander. There, King experienced the wonders and freedoms of the natural world. “Thirty-two thousand acres for a kid with a horse was a great thing,” King recalled. “My father used to take us around after work just to look at the lakes and marvel at the wildlife.”

And so against this childhood exposure King developed her keen observation of nature as well as her love for the horse, both of which would influence her life and become her passion.

King discovered the strength and vigor of three-dimensional work during a life-modeling class while studying studio art at Ball State University. “Once I’d worked in clay, that was it for me. There was no going back,” she said. Having made this discovery, King quickly and easily transitioned from clay to the classic medium of bronze. “I think Alexa just has a 3D mind,” said Ladd. “She sees things from all angles and invests minimal time on initial sketches on paper.”

King worked throughout her early career on building a body of creative work, realizing that to attract commissions she would need



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King completes a commission clay model of the Hackney pony WGC Giselle, a world grand champion. Next, a foundry will mold and cast the piece.

a portfolio to demonstrate her technique and style as well as her ability to re-create her assignments in bronze. Her familiarity with animals made the genre of sporting art an easy choice.

Working from real life is King’s preference. She recalls a period when she was creating life-sized gamecocks, and Dr. John Chandler and his wife, Alice, who had a breeding program at the time, lent her a hen and a cock to take back to her studio as life models. King also takes photo-

graphs, mostly candid shots to remind her of the particular way an animal looks or moves. Whatever piques her interest has to be considered in a three-dimensional context, and King readily admits many things that might look good on paper or on canvas don’t translate that well as a sculpture. Having to take out the background and isolate a subject means the object itself has to possess enough excitement and interest to exist independently.

Figuring out how to convey the object in

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King was chosen from 10 finalists to produce the larger-than-life-sized statue of Barbaro. She more than succeeded in capturing his running style as well as his competitive essence.

clay, solve the issue of how it's going to stand, and translate movement into a solid piece while recognizing the constraints of metal and determining how far she can push her ideas are all challenges King is used to facing and overcoming. She distills everything to the form and then works her design around that form.

"I have to work from the inside out," said King. "I have to know everything about the anatomy, how an animal moves."

Husband Eric Bolland concurs: "She really studies the bones. She has horse anatomy books that are full of clay bits that have dropped where she's been working and studying at the same time."

A lot of King's pieces require engineering and geometry to

determine their feasibility, and she works with Art Castings of Colorado — a foundry she has used for the past 16 years — to help incorporate aspects into her works to make them plausible. "We have to figure out how the form is going to be supported and then work my design around that form. If it won't stand up, we have a problem," she said.

Once she starts on a piece, King prefers to see it through rather than work on several at the same time.

She starts at a horse's hip and works toward the head and then keeps the head covered while sculpting the rest of the body so as not to be distracted. It can take up to six months to create a life-sized horse, whereas a tabletop piece might be

completed in a month. It is only in the final stages of honing or “noodling,” as she calls it, when she’s working on the surface, perfecting features, and making the piece look effortless, that she begins to consider her next work.

Despite her impatience to finish, King’s ability to soften and tool her work to the point she brings energy to the surface sets her work apart. “Alexa does her research,” Ladd said. “She knows exactly where she is going when she works on the framework and begins to build her armature. She has gesture in her work. She knows how to get action and movement into her piece, even a sense of sound. There’s nothing stiff or awkward about her bronzes.”

No doubt these enviable attributes helped secure her first commission. Sitting in a 10-by-10-foot booth at her first art show with a few paintings and four bronzes, none of which was selling, King was approached by a “hippy-looking guy with a purse” who complimented her work and gave her a card with the promise of a follow-up call. “I get home with my four sculptures, I haven’t sold a thing, and then this fellow calls and tells me he wants me to do a series of Pony Express

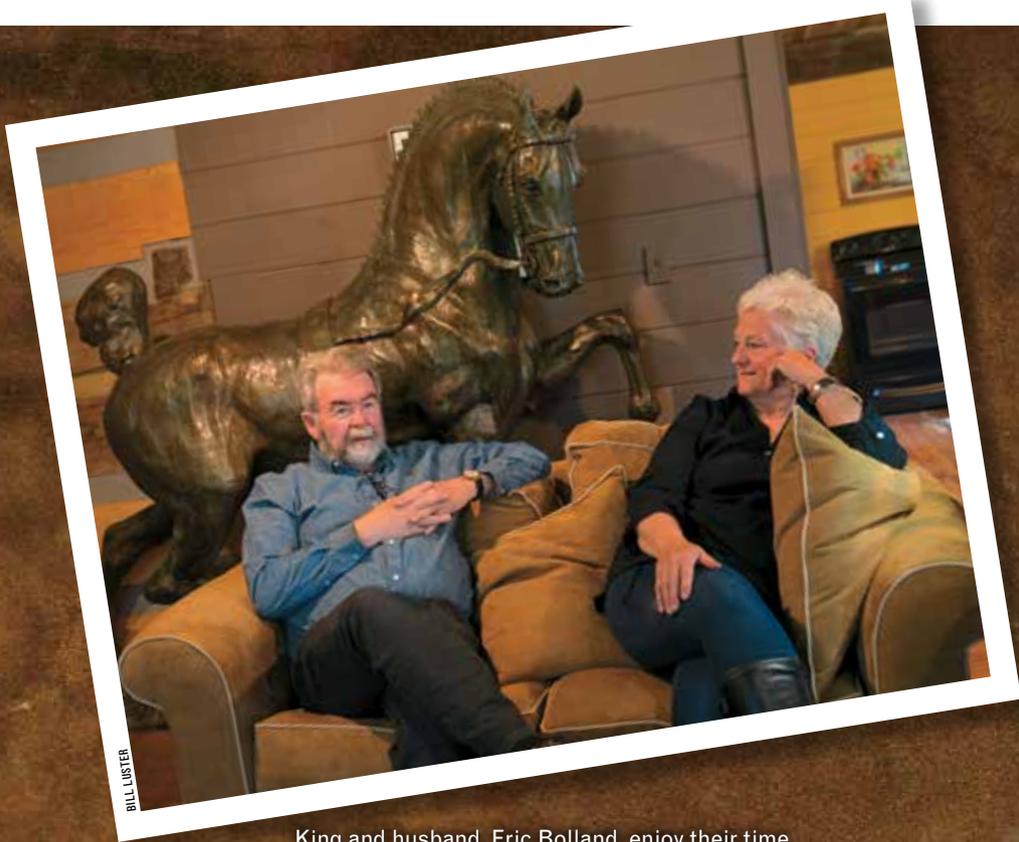
sculptures for the Nelson Rockefeller Collection in New York,” said King. “I bet I hadn’t been sculpting for six months. I was completely wiggled out.”

That was in 1981 when King was 29. More commissions followed. “That project morphed into some other things that I ended up doing through the contacts I made with the Rockefeller people,” King said. “But first I had to learn my craft and how to deal with corporate people who are looking for specific results.”

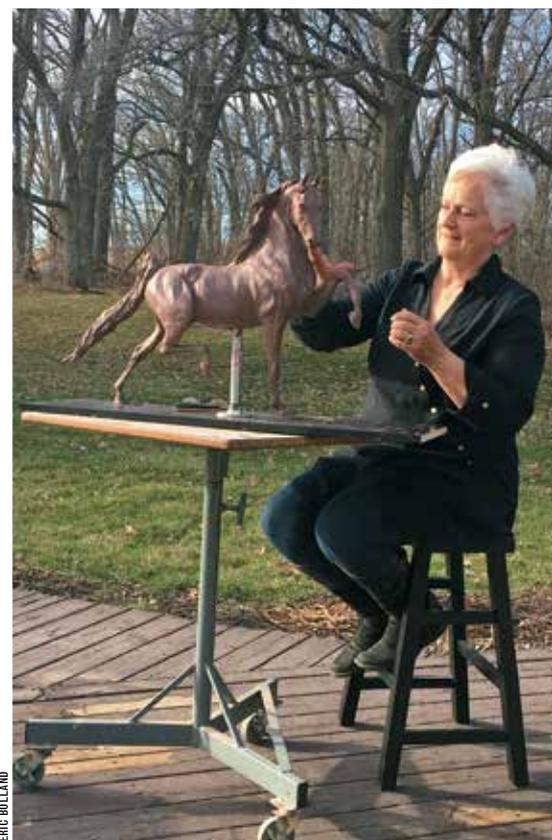
Then in 2008 and many sculptures later, King won the much sought-after commission to produce a larger-than-life-sized memorial statute of the 2006 Derby winner, Barbaro. This she considers to be the apogee of her creative career.

After Barbaro’s tragic death from laminitis, his owners Roy and Gretchen Jackson decided to immortalize him with a sculpture at the entrance to Churchill Downs that would also serve as a crypt for his ashes.

“A great effort was made to find an artist who could capture Barbaro’s spirit and story as well as the essence of how he raced,” said Wendy Treinen, former director of communi-



King and husband, Eric Bolland, enjoy their time in their log cabin near the Kentucky Palisades.



King sculpts on the deck of her Wisconsin home.



ANNE M. EBERHARDT

From center, Gretchen Jackson, trainer Michael Matz, and Roy Jackson joined King at the 2009 unveiling of the Barbaro statue. “It’s perfect,” Gretchen Jackson told King.

cations at the Kentucky Derby Museum. More than 100 artists contacted the Jacksons’ agent, who then whittled the group down to 10 applicants. Each was required to produce a maquette and give a private presentation. “The Jacksons were very definitive about the requirements,” said King. “The horse had to be recognizably Barbaro, [Edgar] Prado was to be riding him in the Kentucky Derby, and all four feet had to be off the ground.” Mounting the piece in the air was going to be a challenge as 2½ tons of metal had never been displayed like this before.

King remembers meeting with an engineer she’d worked with on previous pieces, and taking a book with a photograph of Barbaro, pushing it across his desk, saying, “This is what we have to do.” Though not even remotely a horse person, the engineer took one look and immediately recognized Barbaro. “You take care of the engineering, and I’ll take care of the horse,” she told him. Then and there, he drew up a sketch of the rail system that would support the horse in the air.

When she met the Jacksons, King asked what it was they really wanted her to accomplish. “Show how he loved to run,” replied Gretchen Jackson. That was all King needed to bring Barbaro back to life in her work and retrieve the memory and experience the public had had with this horse.

“Alexa lived and breathed Barbaro in her proposal; you could tell,” said Treinen. “She’d interviewed vets, talked to horse experts, watched racing footage — she really knew her subject. She managed to capture him in motion — truly floating in the air.”

King remembers the first time the Jacksons saw the finished work. “It’s perfect,” said Gretchen Jackson. “You see, she’d never gotten to ride Barbaro and asked me if she could get on the statue. It was a pretty emotional moment as you can imagine,” said King.

Today the statue, unveiled in 2009, is enjoyed by thousands. It is purported to be one of the most photographed landmarks

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To see more of Alexa King's work,
visit her website:
WWW.ALEXAKINGSTUDIOS.COM



BILL LUSTER

Though the Barbaro statue elevated King's reputation, she enjoys working on all breeds of horses. "For me creating a statue is like writing a love letter."

in Kentucky. According to staff at Churchill Downs, day and night alike "people come off the interstate, they drive right up, jump right out, take a photograph, and then they're gone."

"Can you imagine?" said King. "It was a smart move on the part of the Jacksons to put that horse where he's accessible to the public and they don't have to pay to see him."

"My grandmother, who is long gone, lived in Muncie, Indiana, and she went to the Derby every year," said King. "That's back when there was no interstate and she'd have to drive those back roads. She'd be so proud I have a statue in front of Churchill Downs. That would be a big deal."

"That Barbaro statue is Alexa's happy place," her husband said.

King lives and works in Wisconsin, but she maintains a Kentucky home — a restored log cabin dating back to 1840 that she and her husband found on the Internet — in Nonesuch on the

Kentucky River Palisades. The couple also has four dogs: two Bouvier des Flandres, a Bernese Mountain dog, and a Jack Russell terrier.

In addition to developing an ongoing project that will celebrate the relationship between horse and man in a series of unique, emotionally charged bronzes, she's currently finishing a one-third life-sized bronze of the world champion pacer Dan Patch commissioned by the non-profit Dan Patch Project for the city of Savage, Minnesota, to be unveiled June 23, 2018, during Dan Patch Days. Concurrently, she is working on a life-sized bronze commission of a world grand champion Saddlebred for a farm in Paris, Kentucky, to be installed later this year.

"Sculpting is my passion," King said. "For me creating a statue is like writing a love letter."

Her work is surely a testimony to this outpouring. **KM**