

# Capturing Their Essence

*From Secretariat to Zenyatta, artist Jaime Corum brings her equine subjects to life*





“God forbid that I should go to any Heaven in which there are no horses.”

— Scottish writer R.B. Cunninghame Graham, in a letter to Theodore Roosevelt, 1917

By Vicki Byrum Dennis | Photos by Bill Luster

**J**aime Corum can't imagine a world, let alone a heaven, without horses. With all the possible subject matter available to artists, it is the horse that has captured her imagination from the very beginning. “Horses are so visually stunning,” she said. “I love the accidental beauty they give us and their generosity in letting us into their lives. That’s what I want to show in my paintings.”

Primarily using oil, colored pencils, and charcoal, she has created an impressive portfolio of equine art. Sometimes the horses are in action, sometimes majestically still, but whatever the setting or situation, she always infuses her subjects with grace, respect, romance, and her own love for the animals.

Above, Corum's riding horse Sandy, a 22-year-old Thoroughbred, inspires her work.

“More and more I realize I communicate my artistic voice through this animal that I have loved since childhood.”

So which came first, the horse or the art? “Actually, horses brought me to art, not the other way around,” she said. Like so many other women, Corum was a horse-crazy little girl, growing up on a farm in southeastern Kentucky near Pineville, dreaming of *The Black Stallion* and *National Velvet*. Although her parents raised trees, not horses, she spent time riding neighbors' horses all the while begging for her own. One foggy morning when she was very small, she saw a neighbor's horse coming toward her through the mist.

“I thought it was mine, that magically my dream had come true,” she said.

The experience made her more resolute than ever. A riding accident at age 7 resulted in broken bones, a punctured lung, and, understandably, even firmer resistance by her parents. But it didn't dent her determination to keep riding.

When her family moved to Louisville in 1986, the 12-year-old Corum put her foot down. “I told my parents I would only move if they let me have riding lessons,” she said. “They finally relented.” By the time she was 14, Corum was competing in eventing and dressage, inspired in part by her aunt, a respected dressage trainer in Maryland. Despite their initial reluctance, today her parents and her brother are her biggest supporters,



both in her riding and her art.

Because she couldn't have a horse of her own as a child, she began drawing horses obsessively as a way to have access to them, all the while improving her art skills. By high school she realized that she had developed a real talent for art. She majored in art at Bellarmine University in Louisville, studying many different media, including painting in oil and acrylic, drawing, and sculpture. Horses took a back seat in her artistic life until graduation. “With college, then graduate school at the University of Kentucky, I essentially spent eight years not painting horses,” she said. “But I was honing my skills as an artist. After graduation I decided that it was time to once again blend my two loves of horses and art. Now I can't see them as separate things. They are both so much of who I am. More and more I've come to realize that I communicate my artistic voice through this animal that I have loved since childhood.”

A turning point in her decision to focus on painting horses came in 2003 when she bought her own horse. (Yes, she finally got her horse.) “I've had Sandy for 10 years, and he is my joy and main man.” She stables Sandy, a 22-year-old bay Thoroughbred gelding, at Spring Run Farm in Oldham County. “He



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is so much part of my work as a painter. He really is the reason that I came back to equine art in the first place,” she said. “There is nothing like owning your own horse to really understand them as subjects for painting. I don’t think I could paint horses if I couldn’t ride them and be around them.”

Working out of her studio in Louisville, fittingly housed in a converted barn, Corum quietly sets about translating the three-dimensional reality of a horse to the two-dimensional canvas. Blending the traditional, classic style of the 18th-century English equine artists with a contemporary twist, she paints her horses in a realistic yet elegant fashion, emphasizing their strength and beauty with a balance of delicate and strong brush strokes, rich and subtle colors. “Horses are pretty complex in their anatomy and even that varies within breeds,” she said. “I was trained to recognize good conformation and good action, but having my own horse has allowed me to really feel the muscles, feel the ideal movement of a



Corum's subjects include such famous equines as Secretariat, above, and Zenyatta, below.

horse in a particular discipline.”

But Corum’s paintings are much more than exactness of skeletal structure and muscular makeup. She brings her horses to life with a skillful use of dramatic lighting and variations in color.

“You can find great color in the shadows, in the reflected light that shows up on their bellies,” she said. “I love to play with sunlight on their coats, trying to get that liquidy look that is so amazing,” she said. She pulls the viewer in further by incorporating more subtle elements such as the seemingly casual placement of reins across the neck. “Loose reins are a symbol for me, almost inviting the viewer to grab those reins and become part of the scene,” she said.

She also pays special attention to the eye, her favorite part to paint. “The eye tells you so much,” she said. “It can convey so much emotion and depth of character. With my own horse, I can always gauge his mood from his eyes.”

Today, Corum’s portrait work is in private collections in the Unit-

ed States, England, Canada, and South America. She has been commissioned to paint some of the world’s most famous horses including Secretariat, Curlin, Zenyatta, Rachel Alexandra, and Barbaro. One of her most dramatic pieces is a life-sized portrait of Zenyatta, commissioned by the owners of the big, beautiful mare, winner of the 2009 Breeders’ Cup Classic. Painted on a 12-foot by nearly 8-foot canvas that Corum built herself, the portrait is at Santa Anita Park in California, awaiting permanent installation.

Her work also has been chosen for commercial ventures, book illustrations, and fundraising efforts. In 2010 her painting *Secretariat* was chosen as the cover art for Kate Chenery Tweedy’s book, *Secretariat’s Meadow*. Her painting *We Muses Three* was selected last year by Lexington’s Talon Winery as the label for a new wine. Several of her paintings have been made into prints to benefit various equine charities.

When she is not painting a specific portrait, her original compositions for gallery shows come from horses in her imagination or are inspired by her own horse. “I almost always have an image in my mind, usually a chestnut. I love those glorious chestnuts like Secretariat or Affirmed,” she said.

Particularly with show pieces, Corum takes her viewers into the story behind the painting, creating the sense of a dramatic



Corum's knowledge of equine anatomy comes from hands-on experience.

event that has happened or is about to happen. One example is *Her Treasures*, which features a chestnut and an

admiring dog. The horse is wearing a colorful, elaborate tapestry showing a woman and a unicorn. “The tapestry itself has its own story,” she said. “To me, it tells the story of the intense bond between women and horses that usually begins in childhood.”

Corum also serves as an adjunct professor at Bellarmine University where she teaches drawing and painting. In her studio she currently is working on a number of exhibit and commissioned pieces, including one marking the 40th anniversary of Secretariat’s Triple Crown win. “I am so honored to do this painting,” she said. “It is a wonderful way to celebrate his amazing accomplishments.”

This spring Corum will install a show of new work at New Editions Gallery in Lexington. The show opens April 19 and runs through May 31. Called *Chiaroscuro*, the exhibit features only black horses and white horses, but, as with all Corum’s paintings, expect a lot of color hidden there as well. “I love exploring all the color to be found in horses that at first glance appear to be only white or only black,” she said.

Much of the adult Corum and all she has accomplished clearly stem from the little girl dreaming of a horse. “I’m sure I have a more romanticized vision of the horse, probably stemming from my childhood fantasies,” she said. “I know there is another side of horses. They can be dirty and muddy, grumpy and difficult, but no matter the circumstances, their spirit is always there. They are the horses of our fantasies and dreams that come out of the mist, out of nowhere.” And it is that spirit that drives her as an artist, a rider, and an unabashed lover of horses. : 🐾



Check out more of Corum's work at [www.JaimeCorum.com](http://www.JaimeCorum.com)

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