



HAND CRAFTED

Ouisha McKinney Creates Custom, Usable Equine Art

By Robin Roenker / Photos by Keeneland/Z

Most equine artists portray their work on canvas, in bronze, or even jewelry. But Lexington artist Ouisha McKinney creates unique equine art that you can wear or even eat and drink from. “My mediums are wool and earthenware,” explained McKinney, who runs her own knitting and ceramics studio from her home in Lexington’s Palomar Hills subdivision. And while equine themes are a big part of McKinney’s work — she can custom-create clients’ horses and unique racing silks on anything from sweaters and hats to ceramic sink basins, plates, or mugs — it’s not all she does.

Clients often send her photos of their beloved dogs so she can create custom mugs or plates with their likenesses. McKinney’s custom wool headbands and hats sport animals of all types — from cows and corgis to bunnies and sheep for babies. And, recently, a client who works at Claiborne Farm requested a custom set of brightly painted ceramic bowls featuring African animals.

“When I find something I like, I dive into it,” said McKinney, a mostly self-taught artist who took up knitting at age 16. Demand for McKinney’s line of wool hats, headbands, and custom sweaters keeps her and four knitting assistants busy year round.

Despite using a knitting machine, the work is time intensive. “I probably make only about 20 sweaters each year. The work involved is so demanding. Each sweater takes me anywhere from eight to 40 hours, depending on the intricacy of the design,” McKinney said.

“Lots of times clients will ask for equine

sweater patterns that allow me to incorporate their racing colors and the colors of their friends,” McKinney said. “I make so few sweaters each year, so I enjoy adding that level of custom detail. That way they feel like they’re really getting something special.”

In the past few years McKinney’s time and attention have shifted somewhat more heavily to her line of hand-painted ceramic ware, simply because — unlike her woolen ware, which is a winter item — there’s a year-round market for it. She currently employs two part-time assistants who help with the ivy and floral accent work, allowing her to devote her attention to the animal designs on each piece.

“I’ve been painting all of my life, but I didn’t start painting on ceramics until about 24 years ago, when I bought my current house and decided to paint the sink basins and kitchen tiles,” McKinney said. “There’s something useful about ceramics, and creating something useful is very important to me. Also, it’s



From hand-painted ceramics to headbands and hats, McKinney finds many expressions for her art.

Artist, sportswoman, and Thoroughbred breeder Ouisha McKinney, with her pet White Crested Polish chicken

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McKinney and assistant Della Neidig hand-paint ceramic bowls in a studio fashioned from a former sunroom. The artist typically paints three to four hours a day, leaving her time to work on her farm.

something everyone can enjoy. Who doesn't need a mug for their coffee in the morning? And, having one with a hand-painted portrait of your dog on there just makes it even more special."

A family of horse enthusiasts

McKinney first moved to Kentucky from her native Maryland in 1962, when she was just 10, after her stepfather, Hall of Fame steeplechase jockey Rigan McKinney, purchased Lexington's Stony Point Farm.

"My stepfather met my mother in Maryland when she was riding for him, and he convinced her to move. He told us, 'If you build cars, you live in Detroit, and if you raise horses, you live in Kentucky,'" McKinney said.

Still, McKinney's mother, Frances, wasn't sold on Kentucky's gray winters, and she took the family's eight children — including Ouisha and her sisters, Laura and Tamara, and their brother, Steve — to live near Reno, Nev., where the children all grew up skiing competitively. Their stepfather held down the farm in Kentucky, and Ouisha grew up splitting her time between Lexington and the mountains. "It was wonderful," said McKinney, who was primarily homeschooled but also attended Sayre. "I got to have both experiences."

The McKinney children ended up becoming legends in the ski world. Tamara McKinney was a three-time Olympian (1980, 1984, and 1988), held 18 individual World Cup wins, and in 1983 was the first American woman to win the overall World Cup title. Steve McKinney was a world-class speed skier who was the first person to break the 200 km/h (124 mph) barrier. Between 1974 and 1987, he set seven world speed skiing records.

It was in the ski world that Ouisha first started making and marketing her wool hats and headbands. But, eventually, Kentucky called Ouisha and her sister Laura back.

Laura now runs Stony Point Thoroughbred Farm, and the sisters work together to raise and show young jumpers. Laura also does boarding and foaling and sales prep for yearlings and broodmares.

"I have a project horse right now that I'm working on teaching jumping," Ouisha McKinney said. "I'm over at the farm every day, helping out. There are a lot of jobs that can't be done without both of us working together. And, truth be told, I'd go crazy in about two days if I only did my art all day long. I have to have that outside exercise. I need that balance."

In July the sister team enjoyed their first grade I victory as breeders when their horse Tom's Tribute won the Eddie Read Stakes at Del Mar. Ouisha McKinney helped buy Tom's Tribute's granddam On Hand when she was a yearling.

McKinney was hopeful Tom's Tribute would run in the Breeders' Cup World Championships Oct. 31-Nov. 1. "That for us, is like a triple home run," she said.

Crafted with care

When Ouisha McKinney first started selling her wool and chenille hats and wool headbands, she set up at a premier ski trade show and started talking to a nearby vendor. "He said they had received 150,000 orders (for a dozen hats) that weekend, and I remember thinking, 'I have no desire to do that. Absolutely none.' Numbers don't impress me. I want to know my customers and have some sort of personal connection with them. I enjoy knowing that what I'm making for them will touch something in their lives or in their hearts," she said.

Often customers will send heartfelt thank-you notes to tell her how much her creations mean to them. "One lady wrote that her coffee just tastes better in my mug. Another customer wrote to say that she had been going through a tough time, but looking at my mug each morning [with a picture of her dog] was helping to put a smile on her face every day," McKinney said.

"That's what I'm all about — bringing a smile to people's

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McKinney practices a type of folk art known as tole.

faces. That's my job in this life, and getting to do it makes me smile," she said.

McKinney has even dubbed one line of her ceramics, filled with pastel flower accents, her "happy" design — "it just makes you happy when you paint it," she said. McKinney purchases plain ceramic pieces — everything from mugs and plates to vases, pitchers, sink basins, and drawer pulls — from a distributor in Danville. Then, she decorates, glazes, and fires them in her own home kilns.

McKinney's home ceramics studio — fashioned out of her home's former sunroom — is littered with sketches of corgis, foxes, horses, and Jack Russells, some of her more popular motifs. Her drawings are charming and lifelike, and yet her design skills are all self-taught. After high school she enrolled in a nine-week art school program and then never painted again for 10 years.

"We did the live model. We did mountain landscapes. But it was not what I liked," McKinney explained. It wasn't until much later, when McKinney discovered a class for Tole Bridge at a former Dudley Square shop, that the urge to paint again struck her.

"Tole is a style of folk art that is pop-

ular in Europe. It's a way of making art with just a single brush stroke, and you have to have different brushes for each stroke," McKinney explained. The class involved decorative painting on wood, but McKinney transferred the technique to ceramics and launched a new career.

"I'm never afraid to try something new," said McKinney, who also raises chickens, loves to bike and cook, and builds her own horse jumps on the farm.

McKinney typically only paints three to four hours a day so she can devote plenty of time to work on her farm. She sells her wares via word-of-mouth referrals, on her website, and through five or six home-based sales, including one at her own home on the weekend after Thanksgiving.

"I'm very fortunate to have friends in the horse business all over the eastern United States, and several of them host shows for me," McKinney said. Each year, for example, McKinney holds one show in Aiken, S.C., formerly a popular winter stop on the Thoroughbred circuit, and now popular on the three-day eventing circuit. "The soil is sandy there, so it's good for the horses. And it's great for me because there are lots of people there who love horses and art."

In fact, that connection — between horses and art — is something McKinney believes isn't just circumstantial. "If you start to

look around, you see that many horsemen and women are either musically or artistically inclined. I think there's something to that," she said. "We love the beauty in horses, so we appreciate the beauty in art." **KM**

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