

A Tribute in Bronze

It began with pipe-cleaner ponies, crimped and shaped by a horse-crazy tot. Today, dramatic bronzes have long since replaced chenille as Leslie E. Spano's specialty, and her work is owned worldwide.

Helping set her apart are her sculptures of Standardbreds, which are a large percentage of the nearly 500 bronzes that Spano has crafted in the past 12 years.

Since 1991, her bronzes have been awarded at the sport's top level as Harness Tracks of America's Messenger, Nova, and Driver of the Year trophies. Each Nova award since '93 has been modified by Spano to portray the horse that won it. Vernon Downs' bronze Horse of the Year award is also her work. Her latest creations are among the highlights of HTA's annual art show and auction, and she accepts custom commission orders, too.

In Spano's Chariot Bronze Classics studio in the upstate New York town of Pulaski, sculptures of other creatures take shape, too—an array of dogs, llamas, and sport horses of various breeds. But her latest work, "Rambling Willie Checking Out Billy," is a project especially dear to her.

The 3-D portrait of the late champion and his goat pal is the latest expression of the recurring role that Standardbreds have played in Spano's life and career.

"I've always been connected with Standardbreds," she said. "My first date with my husband was at Vernon Downs, and after we married, we'd go out to dinner with friends at Vernon Downs; we had a wonderful time. And at every place that I've boarded my pet horses, there's been a Standardbred."

Spano, who has always loved the work of equine storybook illustrators Paul Brown and C.W. Anderson, earned an associate's degree in art, advertising, and design from Mohawk Valley College in Utica, N.Y., and initially focused on painting. In 1976, she entered the HTA competition for the first time; her watercolor painting "Retired Harness Racer"

captured the \$750 first prize. She's been a regular in the competition ever since.

"The USTA has helped me with reference [photos], and HTA has helped me get more orders and helped me progress," she said.

In 1986, the sculpting bug bit; "I just wanted to, so I sat down and did it," Spano said. From plastiline clay she formed a gangly foal nipping an itch and had it cast in bronze. That first effort, titled "The Right Spot," brought raves and \$1,700 at that year's HTA art auction.

From there, Spano's sculptures passed strict standards to make her an associate member of the American Academy of Equine Art in 1989 and a member of the Society of Animal Artists in 1990.

During a family visit to the

Leslie Spano shows her love of Standardbreds in sculpture

by Ardith Carlton



All photos courtesy Leslie E. Spano

"Way Out Front," bronze, 1988

Kentucky Horse Park in 1995, she met the great Rambling Willie and his goat sidekick, Billy. "Willie" immediately struck Spano as someone special. "He had a kind, caring look in his face," she recalled. "I liked the fact that he was 'the horse that God loved.' And the way him and the goat were buddies, I just thought that was charming. I wanted to do the two together."

An AAEEA summer class on equine anatomy and sculpting at the park was a golden chance to see more of Willie and Billy, and Spano took photos galore. The next month, Rambling Willie passed away. A sad-



Doing some "field research," sculptress Leslie Spano compares her plastiline clay likeness of retired trotter Bud's Girl with the real thing.

dened Spano met with Willie's longtime friend, Kentucky Horse Park Hall of Champions announcer Rosemary Honerkamp, who shared her own Willie memories and photos—including one of a merrily leaping Billy.

Stoked with inspiration, Spano was

soon underway on a Willie and Billy of plastiline clay. "It took around 100 hours to do, about a month off and on," she recalled. "Some [sculptures] take me three years or more, and then some, I'm done in a week; it's all different."

An edition of 10, as are most of her bronzes, the bronze likeness of Willie and his sprightly pal debuted at last year's HTA art auction and was taken by Glenn F. Taylor of Lima, Ohio, for \$1,900. The sculpture is also one of about 85 pieces selected from 400 submissions for the 1997 AAEP Fall Showcase of Equine Art, on display at the Kentucky Horse Park from Sept. 12 to Oct. 26.

Taylor's bid will turn out to be a bargain, as Spano is selling the remaining nine Rambling Willie bronzes for \$1,995 each. However, for a fraction of the cost of a bronze, resin castings of the Rambling Willie and Billy sculptures will also be available from Spano this fall, sold either separately or together on a base.

Spano continues to create works of animal art in a career much like the way she sculpts: "It just unfolds," she said. **HB**



Above left: "Match Against Time," bronze, 1988



Above right: "Chariot Horse," bronze, 1986



Right: "The Right Spot," bronze, 1986

Making It All Come Together

From plumbing pipe to finished bronze, Leslie Spano shares the creative process that brought "Rambling Willie Checks Out Billy" into being.

1



"Life is best to work from, [but] when I can't sculpt from life, I use as many photos as possible. I was lucky enough to see Rambling Willie before he died, and took a lot of photos for reference; if I can see it, I can sculpt it. I [also] borrowed photos from his caretakers, and their memories and comments helped, too.

"To start the sculpture of Willie, I made an armature out of plumbing pipes and wire. Then I sculpted with plastiline clay over the armature. Plastiline clay is very similar to typical modeling clay, but it doesn't dry out. It keeps soft, so you can keep moving it around. Some sculptors do a whole lot of sketches and planning. I don't do any of that; I just start sculpting. It changes as I work on it, and it just appears."

2



"I wanted to have Willie cast as a bronze. To do that, you need a hollow wax copy of your sculpture. To make that wax copy, a mold needs to be made of the sculpture.

"Most people, after they finish a sculpture, they'll take it to a foundry, and the foundry makes the mold. Foundries do make a lot of the molds for my bronzes, but I wanted to make Willie's mold myself; I wanted the experience. I try to do things that are difficult, just to see how they're done—I torture myself sometimes!

"I covered the clay model with a release agent—it's like Crisco or Vaseline—so it would come out of the rubber mold easily. Then you pat or pour the [rubber molding material] on top of the horse. Then you build a plaster 'mother mold' around that for support, a layer at a time, to keep it in shape. It all looks like a big glob!

"It was about a week's work, and when it dried, I cut it all apart, right down the middle, and there was the mold. The original sculpture can get pretty mangled up, but it's not hard to fix."

3

"Once I had the mold, I could make a hollow, wax Willie, and that took some physical work. I heated wax on the stove until it was melted, like water.



Then I put the mold back together, turned it upside down, and poured the wax into it. You've got to pick it up and shake it around to make sure [the wax] gets in all the points. Then you let it rest awhile, to cool just a little, and then pour the wax back out, because you only want a thin layer of wax.

"I did that three more times, to make the wax layer inside [gradually] thicker. After the wax had cooled, I removed the mold. But if the wax is too hollow, the wax copy collapses on itself, so I had to do the whole thing five times before I got one that was good enough.

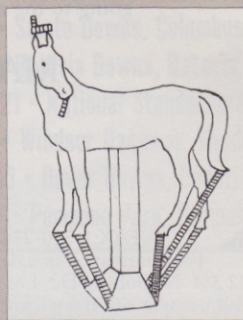
"The sculpture of Willie's little friend, Billy, was a lot smaller, so it was all right to cast solid."

4



"It's clean-up time! The wax is very hard, like china. If you drop it, it smashes into smithereens! For three days, I trimmed all the seams, filled in holes and depressions with a softer wax, and fixed Willie's other little flaws. I have to do most of my work in the studio, but this part I could do outside."

5



"Once I had the wax as good as the original sculpture, I sent it to the foundry, where they cast the bronze using the 'lost wax' system [called that because the wax sculpture is completely melted during the process]. They added what's called a gating system, with a main gate—something like a tree trunk—fused into an opening in Willie's belly, and vents branching off it to attach at different points, like the back of the ears, chin, and hooves.

"Willie was dipped in a silicone slurry and sand that made a ceramic shell around him, inside and out—that's a week's work right there, layer after layer. Then [it] was put in an oven that melted away all the wax. Molten bronze, heated to over 2,000 degrees, was poured into that ceramic shell. After it cooled, they chipped the shell off, and there was the bronze Willie inside!"

6



"When Willie came back from the foundry, I needed to weld the holes, smooth down where the gates and vents were cut off, and sand-blast it. Sometimes the foundry does that, but it's very easy to grind it myself, and that way you get what you want.

"The last step was to give the bronze Willie a bay patina. To do it, I use a blowtorch in my left hand to heat the piece up—it has to be quite hot—and in the other hand I have brushes that I dip in different chemicals to get the right reaction on the bronze. I blended different chemicals to come up with his color. You don't have total control over the patina, they kind of do their own thing, but that's part of what makes doing bronzes so interesting. For Billy, I added [paint] pigments to the patina to make his color lighter.

"Rambling Willie was such a charming horse with such a touching story, I just wanted to capture him in bronze. It kind of keeps his story going."