

The CHRONICLE of the HORSE

# UntACKED

VOL. 3, NO. 1

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2015

JUMP FORWARD TO  
**2015**

*With Confidence*

HELEN KRIEBLE:  
*A Rebel With  
A Cause*

TOUR THE  
HALLOWED  
HALLS *of*  
*Gladstone*

## THE RESOLUTIONS ISSUE

A SUPPLEMENT TO THE CHRONICLE OF THE HORSE

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VOL. 3, NO. 1

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## In This Issue



LAWRENCE J. NAGY PHOTO

### Nancy Jaffer

There's nothing like living practically next door to the headquarters of the U.S. Equestrian Team Foundation in Gladstone, N.J., especially if you're an equestrian photojournalist. Nancy Jaffer has lived most of her life just a short canter from the famed stables, and her stories and photos are seen in publications around the world. She has written several books, including *Life in the Galloping Lane* and *Riding Through*. She rides her own horse when she has the chance between her travels to competitions.



### Tania Evans

A freelance writer and editor for 40 years, Tania Evans is also a lifelong art lover and rider. She has evented through the advanced level, was a rated polo player at Casa de Campo in the Dominican Republic, has foxhunted in several countries and followed the hounds of the Waterloo Hunt, near her home in Ann Arbor, Mich., for years. Tania also serves as a senior appraiser with American Society of Equine Appraisers and enjoys biking, kayaking and golf in her spare time.



AMY DRAGOO PHOTO

### Kristin Carpenter

Kristin juggles running her own company, Linder Educational Coaching, with organizing the Area II Young Rider Advancement Program out of Morningside Training Farm in The Plains, Va., and competing at the FEI levels of eventing. She's also one of our most popular bloggers on *coth.com*. Kristin grew up in Louisiana and competed at the North American Junior and Young Rider Championships and the Bromont CCI\*\* on a green off-track Thoroughbred she bought as a teenager. She's now bringing another OTTB, Lizzie, up the ranks.



SABINE SCHARBERG PHOTO

### Elena Lusenti

Originally from Milan, Italy, Elena is a photographer of horses and riders around the world. She brings her insightful eye to an equestrian culture she knows well, having competed with great success in high amateur-owner show jumping. Her travels around the globe always bring her back to her equestrian roots in Wellington, Fla., where she currently resides.



### Laura St. Clair

Laura is a writer, adult amateur dressage rider, and the fresh voice behind the equestrian style blog SHADBELLY. Raised on her family's farm near Nashville, Laura still holds dear her Middle Tennessee Pony Club pin. She recently returned to her love of all things equestrian after a notable career in commercial real estate. Laura, her husband George, and their two Hanoverians now reside in Litchfield, Conn., and Naples, Fla. Away from the barn, Laura serves as assistant taster for George's Napa-based winery, and she's finishing edits to her first feature screenplay, *Jubilation*.



### Megan Brincks

A former staff reporter for *The Chronicle of the Horse*, Megan now lives with her dog and cat in Fort Worth, Texas, where she works for the American Paint Horse Association. With time spent in almost every kind of saddle over the years, she rides whenever she gets the chance and recently started dipping her toes into the waters of eventing. When she isn't writing about, photographing or riding horses, she enjoys reading, traveling and hiking.

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# HOW DA VINCI'S BRAINCHILD BECAME *The American Horse*

*Planned by a Renaissance master in the 15th century and resurrected by a retired commercial pilot, a Midwest grocery-store magnate and a sculptor from Oklahoma, this equine bronze was five centuries in the making.*

By TANIA EVANS

**T**he year 1482 was a busy one for Leonardo da Vinci. The 30-year-old creative genius had just begun working in Milan, where he would stay until 1499, and his days were filled with inventing, designing and building everything from war devices to air conditioning systems. But one special commission came da Vinci's way that year: to build the largest horse sculpture in the world.

The bronze equestrian monument would commemorate the father of his new patron, Italian Duke Ludovico Sforza (the original design featured the father, Francesco, mounted), and da Vinci theorized and sketched out meticulous plans for this unprecedented feat. The Duke, meanwhile, set about gathering the metal his artist in residence required—lots and lots of it, almost 160,000 pounds. Da Vinci believed he could make a mold of the enormous horse and complete it in one pouring, which would constitute a revolutionary new method in casting at this size.

At long last, da Vinci eventually built a 24-foot clay model of the piece in the Sforza castle vineyard near Milan.

“That site, which is today a dense and noisy urban district, was then a pleasant expanse of open fields, dotted with trees and shrubs, or neatly kept as orchards, vineyards or citrus groves,” scholar Carlo Pedretti described. “One can well imagine the skyline of such a peaceful landscape, bathed in the yellow light of a misty morning of a September day in the Lombard plain... and see that skyline suddenly interrupted by the imposing silhouette of Leonardo's colossal clay model, standing there with the foreboding of a Trojan horse.”

But years passed as da Vinci focused on other projects—some the result of his own passion and others at the insis-



**Measuring 24' tall, *The American Horse* now stands in full access to the public** at the Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Mich.

# THE HORSE IN ART



ROBERT EMPERLEV / FLICKR CREATIVE COMMONS PHOTO

**Three different sized models of the horse** help illustrate the creative process by sculptor Nina Akamu.

tence of his patron—ranging in importance from the famous painting *The Last Supper* to rhymes and puzzles for the ladies of the Duke’s court. He created plans for a flying machine, stage sets for theatrical performances, a city plan for Milan and, according to the Da Vinci Science Center, “a defense system for the castle that the Duke probably should have taken more seriously.” All the while, the clay horse stood on a hilltop, suffering weather damage.

Then, on Sept. 10, 1499, the French invaded Milan. The Gascon archers used the horse for target practice, while Sforza’s stockpile of metal went into cannons for defense.

The invaders quickly conquered the city, the Sforzas and da Vinci fled to Florence, and the artist’s model was reduced to nothing more than a massive mound of clay.

“Leonardo probably saw the original stages of

destruction of his clay horse,” said Joe Becherer, chief curator of the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park. “Leonardo was not one for political chaos and physical risk; Milan was in chaos. I am sure he was crushed, as all accounts tell us, but there was a realist in him too. If they will do this to a major work of art, what else might they do?”


It was said that on his deathbed in May of 1519, da Vinci spoke regretfully about never finishing his challenge. And so, for nearly five centuries, the piece remained “The Horse That Never Was.”

Until 1977, when a retired United Airlines pilot from Allentown, Pa., named Charles Dent changed all that.

## **A Man With A Plan**

Da Vinci’s journals with the plans for the horse were long lost for hundreds of years, but one set, the Codex





Since opening in 1995, the Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park have developed into one of Michigan's most beautiful cultural destinations.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MEIJER GARDENS

Madrid II, eventually surfaced in that city's Biblioteca Nacional in 1966, and another now belongs to the British Royal Collection. About 6,000 sheets of his notes survive from an estimated 13,000.

Dent, an amateur artist, collector and Renaissance aficionado, was instantly enthralled when he read the story of the horse in the Sept. 1977 issue of *National Geographic*, and he set out to devote the remainder of his life to bringing da Vinci's plans to life at last.

The master, Dent believed, had left him an immaculate road map for a process that still hadn't been tackled in the 500 years since; among the drawings and notes in the artist's journal were a full 20 pages of instructions on the casting of such a massive equine shape, standing on only two legs.

Dent was determined: He could present to Milan the 24-foot horse da Vinci had envisioned. And so he spent the next 17 years finding backers, raising money and fostering excitement in the art world for the epic endeavor. Hank Meijer, the son of midwest grocery magnates Fred and Lena Meijer, was among the believers in Dent's goal, and he soon enlisted his parents in the movement as well.

But in 1994, with the project only in mid-swing, Dent died, having not even completed his model. A year later, the members of Dent's fundraising and

## THE PATRON SAINT

A pioneer of one-stop shopping with his family's Meijer hypermarket chain, Frederik Meijer and his wife Lena helped the West Michigan Horticultural Society establish a cultural landmark in Grand Rapids in 1995.

When *The American Horse* was installed at the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park four years later, the landmark was 118 acres of wetlands, woodlands and gardens that contained more than 80 contemporary bronzes. Today the main campus has expanded to 158 acres and is home to works by both internationally renowned names and American and local artists.

"The *Horse* greatly expanded Fred's perspective on art," said Joe Becherer, chief curator of the park. "He was captivated with the story and Leonardo, and he appreciated Nina's process and her point of view, and his personal view of the art world expanded as a result of *The American Horse*."

The same year the *Horse* was unveiled in Grand Rapids, Meijer announced his intentions of curating a world-class sculpture collection.

"From that point in time," Becherer recalled, "the major, major pieces started coming. The Moores, Rodins, di Suveros. They came in very short order."

"There are very few patrons around," said Nina Akamu after completing *The American Horse*. "Fred and his wife Lena are true patrons in the big sense. They are bigger than life as people, and they leave a wonderful legacy in art, in the way they lead their life, in the environment they have created at the Gardens."

# THE HORSE IN ART



PHOTO COURTESY OF MEIJER GARDENS

**The twin of** *The American Horse*, known as *Il Cavallo*, was unveiled just a few days before its continental counterpart in 1999 in Milan, Italy.

organizing committee, Leonardo Da Vinci's Horse, Inc., acknowledged that Dent's version of the model realistically wouldn't have worked anyway, being anatomically inaccurate and apparently based on a Quarter Horse whose characteristics don't resemble horses of the 15th century.

Someone would have to fix it, and there was only one woman for the job.

## THE CHOSEN ONE

Nina Akamu was born in Oklahoma, but as the daughter of an Air Force serviceman, she grew up all around the world. At the age of 10, when her family moved to Japan, she began taking lessons at an international English riding academy, and she carried that passion for horses into her career as an artist.

In 1983, Akamu had become the youngest inductee into the National Sculpture Society. Seven years later she was the youngest artist to advance to Fellow. She'd won awards from the National Academy of Design, the National Sculpture Society, the Allied Artists of America, the National Arts Club and the Society of Animal Artists. And Akamu also



PHOTO COURTESY OF MEIJER GARDENS

**Patrons Fred and Lena Meijer** at the installation of *The American Horse* in 1999.

studied sculpture in Italy for 12 years, working on multiple equestrian pieces during that time. If anyone could complete da Vinci's horse, the committee believed, it was her.

Impressed by what their son had told them of Dent's efforts, Frederik and Lena Meijer planned a visit to Tallix Art Foundry in Beacon, N.Y., one of the best foundries in the United States, where the Dent model had been based and where Akamu had two other sculptures ready for casting.

As soon as they saw her work, Fred said, "We knew she could do it. When we saw her *Pegasus* and her *Fighting Lions*, we were so impressed that we bought them for our Gardens."

With the Meijers' financial support committed (the exact amount they contributed to the project has never been confirmed, but the standardly quoted figure is \$2.5 million), Akamu set to work.

"My job initially was to improve upon Dent's model," said Akamu, who worked on the piece for four months before giving up. She couldn't make the amount of revisions it needed.

"So I started again, entirely again," she said.

“There was a lot of sentiment involved in the Dent model, but ultimately they gave me the permission—brave on their part. It was a big challenge to me. But when you feel you can do your best, and that you thrill at these kinds of challenges, then it’s exciting.

“Then creation becomes, and is, a really exciting mystery,” she continued. “How would I know I could do this statute? I had never even done an 8-foot one before. I didn’t know if the big one was going to look as good as an 8-foot sculpture. But there’s a way of focusing yourself so you don’t get bogged down and limit your creative ability. You allow yourself the freedom to continue to create. You just do it.”

After studying da Vinci’s drawings in more detail and making more of her own meticulous calculations, Akamu had settled on a solid 3-D image in her mind. She didn’t own a computer then, much less know how to use the sophisticated electronic drafting programs artists rely on today.

But she’d ridden enough horses in Italy to know what she was looking for.

“It was riding the Andalusians there that gave me the insight into that sort of horse for Leonardo da Vinci’s,” she said. “There is a history of the Iberian horse, of course—a Lipizzaner/Andalusian/Lusitano type. In the years I rode there, these were the heavier, rounder, Roman-nosed Andalusian stock—big arched necks and heavy heads. But they were so marvelous to ride. They made me look very good!”

Akamu created an 8-foot model of anatomical correctness and great energy, a vibrant Renaissance stallion, in clay, then cast him in bronze. She called it *Homage to Leonardo*.

Then she set to work on the big guy.

## CASTING THE TWINS

How do you shape a 24-foot sculpture? You’re either so far away that you can’t touch it, or so close to it that you can’t see it.

So Akamu made a pantograph—updating with lasers, headphones and audio an age-old projection method for expanding scale—that traced fixed points on the smaller version. From the ground, she directed assistants who stood on platforms around the emerging giant, built on a steel armature.

While much of the model was built again in clay, Akamu also used plaster for broad areas like the flanks.

“The plaster model gives a good idea of what a piece might look like,” said Becherer. “Also, you can still sand down and build up plaster. It’s not flexible like wax or clay, which are malleable. Plaster has its own virtues, too. Rodin loved everything he did in plaster. He was very hands-off after that—he didn’t cast the bronze or carve the marble. He was interested in the plaster.”

Akamu wanted anatomical correctness, but she also wanted to make sure that anatomy would appear real from any angle—to a viewer standing below on the ground or up on a hill. The perspective had to be perfect.

Finally, the giant horse, measuring 24’ by 26’, trotted in the

IF ANYONE  
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HORSE, THE COMMITTEE  
BELIEVED, IT WAS  
NINA AKAMU.

## GROOMING THE BIG HORSE

Though he’s strong enough to withstand wind shear and earthquakes, *The American Horse* still needs some pampering now and then.

“All sculptures that are made of bronze are washed at least once a year in the summer,” said Joe Becherer, chief curator of the Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park. “They’re also waxed—actually a bowling alley wax, so it’s thin and clear. It’s rubbed into the surface of the bronze and buffed out by hand.”

That process can be tricky in Michigan, where weather can change quickly.

“You have to get the temperature right; if it’s too cold, the wax gets cakey and looks like an old, glazed donut. But too hot, the wax gets syrupy and drips,” said Becherer. “You have to move skillfully and quickly.”

It usually takes the park’s crew a week to complete the cleaning, because detailed areas like the mane and tail require slow, methodical work, and everything must be done on hydraulic lifts.

“Maintenance of the Sculpture Park’s bronzes occupies the staff all summer,” Becherer said. “Fred [Meijer, the park’s namesake and founder, who died in 2011] loved it because it was the traditional material, and it was going to last.”

# THE HORSE IN ART

atrium of the Tallix Art Foundry. Appropriate. Anatomically correct. Strong musculature. A bold eye. A Renaissance romantic grandeur. Powerful tension in the pose. Sublime and also ferocious—the combination that so frequently appears in Akamu’s work.

Then Akamu and Tallix faced a daunting puzzle. Perhaps da Vinci knew how he might cast it in one pouring of bronze—and he had noted a new method—but the foundry experts said it could not be done.

The temperature of the molten metal has to be carefully maintained during the pouring process, and this amount of bronze would lose heat as it coursed through the giant horse. There was no way it could be cast all at once. It would have to be done in pieces.

In addition, Akamu said da Vinci had wanted it to be 80 tons, with six inches thick of bronze. “Instead,” she said, “our horse is half-inch thick bronze and 15 tons (including the armature).”

The Tallix crew cast about 60 pieces, most of them around 4’ square, which were sand cast, while much smaller

pieces of mane and tail were lost wax cast.

In 1999, one whole horse was completed, and then it was duplicated. Each twin was then taken apart in seven massive pieces, handled by giant cranes, lifts and hoists. Packaged, the pieces of one were transported by plane to Milan, where it was assembled to stand on a Carrera marble pedestal at the Hippodrome de San Siro and unveiled in September of 1999 as *Il Cavallo*.

Meanwhile the pieces of the second horse traveled by semi-truck to the Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park in Grand Rapids, Mich. Today it stands there proudly within reach of the people, on the ground, as *The American Horse*.

Is this da Vinci’s horse? It doesn’t have a rider (the key component of the commission, if you’d ask the

PERHAPS DA VINCI KNEW HOW HE MIGHT CAST IT IN ONE POURING OF BRONZE—AND HE HAD NOTED A NEW METHOD—BUT THE FOUNDRY EXPERTS SAID IT COULD NOT BE DONE.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MEIJER GARDENS

**While Leonardo da Vinci conceived of this sculpture being built with a single pouring of bronze, experts at the Tallix Foundry in New York recommended a piecemeal approach.**

long-dead Duke of Milan), and even today many Italians don’t look on the statue with fondness. While some love and appreciate the piece—which *The Guardian* referred to at the time as “the most spectacular cultural gift between the Old and New Worlds since France gave America the Statue of Liberty,” some didn’t want it at all, saying it had nothing to do with their beloved da Vinci. Others saw it as an American imposition, and still others found it simply a gift that would be expensive to maintain.

“It’s estimated that the Italian peninsula contains two-thirds of the world’s art; the country has so much art to attend to on their priority list already,” said Becherer.

In reality, the horses belong to no one. They’re da Vinci’s brainchild, Dent’s passion, Akamu’s artistry, the Tallix Foundry’s craftsmanship, and the Meijer family’s generosity.

“Dreams may appear to die,” Fred Meijer announced proudly at the Grand Rapids dedication in 1999, “but they are merely being transformed.” ●