

Capturing a Canadian Icon

Article compliments of

**Canadian
Horse** JOURNAL

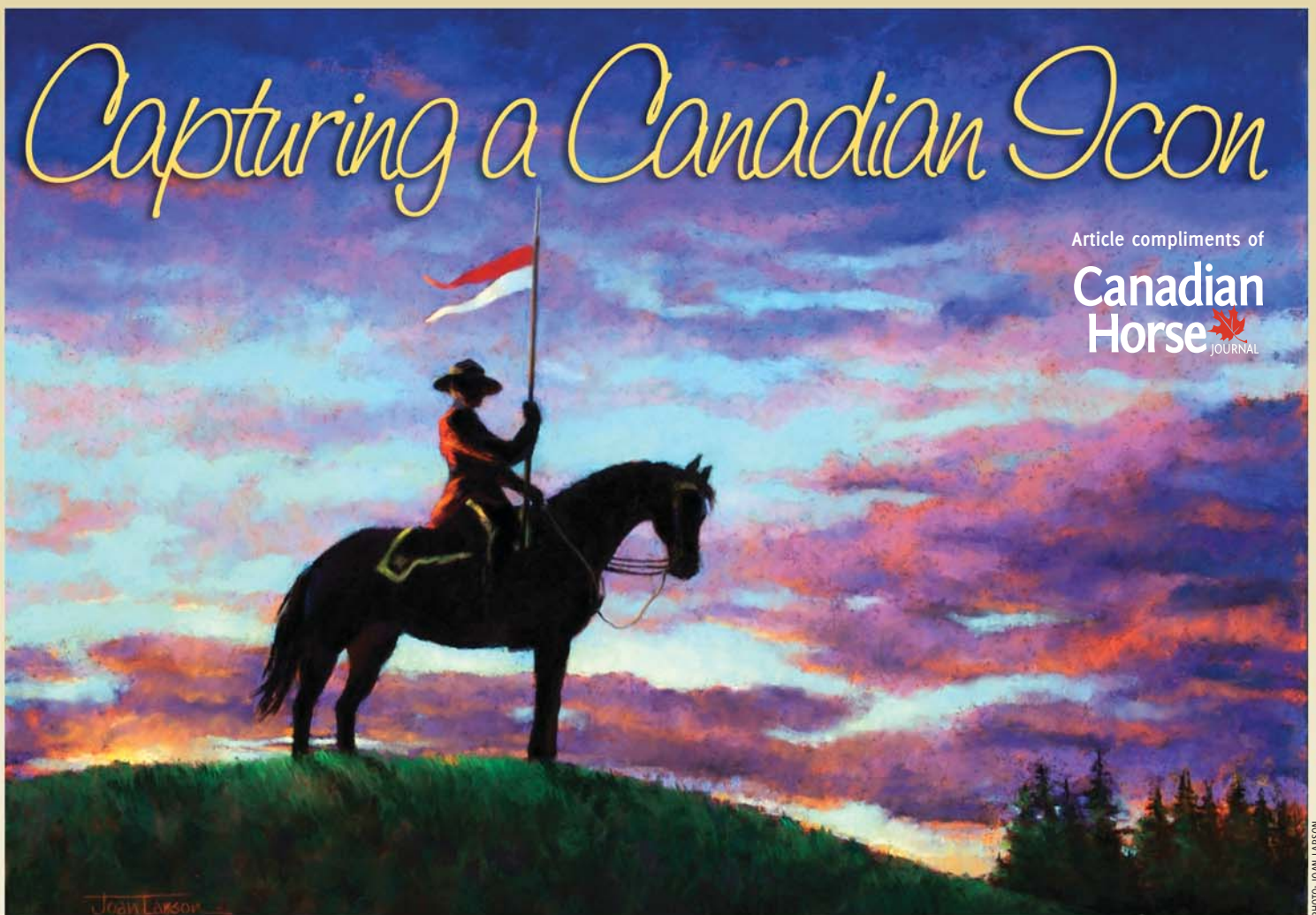


PHOTO: JOAN LARSON

Artist Joan Larson Turns Focus on RCMP Musical Ride

Interviewed by Melanie Huggett

From quiet Qualicum Beach
From quiet Qualicum Beach, BC, artist Joan Larson paints beautiful images with her pastels. Born in Sexsmith, Alberta, Larson has been involved with the arts for her entire life. She has studied at the Banff Centre, the University of Victoria, and the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. Having worked in graphic design, illustration, and framing, Larson now runs her Creekside Studio where her prints and paintings are available to the public.

The subjects of the majority of Larson's paintings are horses, her lifelike portraits and equestrian scenes capturing the sensitive soul of the horse. Her decision to use pastels allows Larson to paint in vibrant colour, adding another unique aspect to her work.

For the past few years Larson has focused on a series depicting the RCMP Musical Ride. As with many of her other works, the images often illustrate the horse-human bond. Recently, Larson sat down with us to discuss her inspiration, methods, and how it feels to be capturing a Canadian icon.

Melanie: What inspired you to do a series of paintings on the Musical Ride?

Joan: The original idea for the series came from my husband Paul after a chance encounter with a woman who managed an

RCMP products store. As soon as Paul suggested the series, I was immediately flooded with ideas! It was like a light bulb coming on and the intensity of it was quite overwhelming.

At the time, I was at a point in my career where I was ready to tackle such a project. I was currently in the midst of completing the illustrations for a children's book *Yetsa's Sweater* (about the making of Cowichan Indian sweaters). Although originally trained as an illustrator, I had never worked as one. What I discovered during this project is that I loved working on a series.

I have spent my entire career painting horses and in the past few years I have also traveled a great deal, having shows in China, New York, and England. Traveling has really cemented my own feelings about how fortunate and proud I am to be Canadian. What could be more iconic and more natural than to paint the RCMP Musical Ride?

M: How do you come up with the idea for each painting?

J: I'm not sure I can easily answer that. Inspiration takes its own way and time. However, I will admit that inspiration often follows long hours of pouring over photos and ideas, and reliving my experiences with the Musical Ride, both as a spectator and also when I was at Rockcliff Stables and the RCMP breeding farm.

FACING PAGE: Joan Larson says she feels honoured to be able to paint a national Canadian icon such as the RCMP Musical Ride.

RIGHT: The “Meet and Greet” at the end of the Musical Ride performance is one of Larson’s favourite parts of the Ride. Larson has captured this moment of connection between humans and horse in paintings such as this one.

Some images simply occur and I know that I have to paint them.

Another thing that I should mention is that I also wish to show people parts of the Musical Ride that they don’t necessarily see — the day-to-day work with the horses and some of the things that happen behind the scenes too. I have some wonderful reference material from inside the barns at Rockcliff and some of the training classes with the new riders. These images will be part of the new series of sketches that will happen in the near future.

M: Could you explain the steps you take to turn an idea into a finished piece?

J: For the most part, there are two different ways that paintings happen. Sometimes a particular photo will spark an idea, and sometimes I see something in my mind that I then set out to get the photo reference for. After I have the necessary bits of information, I start the sketches. This is where I figure out the cropping, placement, size, composition, and design of the finished work. I have agonized for hours over what would seem trivial details, but everything must be worked out to my satisfaction in the sketches before I proceed any further.

After that, the sketches are enlarged to the paper and the actual painting starts. The sketches are by far the most difficult part of the painting; it’s where all the hard decisions are made.

All the works are in pastel and they all start with a red pastel underpainting, which I am always asked about. The red underpainting serves a couple of purposes for me:

Firstly, it harmonizes everything in the painting. The red shows through (somewhat subtly) and gives a warm overall cast to the painting. As well, the colour red gives a bit of dynamic tension to the image, not to mention that it also works well with the RCMP red serge. However, I use this technique on many of my other paintings as well.

I prefer to work on a toned surface and the paper that I have chosen for this series is white. I use this paper because of the particularly aggressive sanded surface which allows me to build multiple layers of pastel. It also allows for a more painterly application of the pastel.

Each piece is very carefully drawn onto the paper and then the colour is applied. Spending a lot of time on the drawing is my way of intimately familiarizing myself with each piece. It doesn’t matter that most of the drawing will be lost when the red pastel is applied overtop — I already know what is there.

M: I think it’s great that you are showing people “behind the scenes” of the Ride. When I was at the Ride performance here in Victoria, everyone seemed very interested in the training and the day-to-day routines of the riders and horses, more so than with other types of performances that I have been to. What do you think it is about the Musical Ride that draws people in?

J: For me (and I think for most people), it’s the horses and the sheer pageantry of it. Let’s face it, if the Musical Ride could be done on motorcycles, it would be far more cost effective. But to say that it wouldn’t have the same appeal is a bit of an understatement. So it’s the horses that draw people.

When I was in Ottawa (Ontario) with author Nikki Tate two years ago, we were invited to travel from Rockcliff Stables with the

RIGHT: Larson estimates the series will include 20 to 24 images and be finished in early 2010.



PHOTO: JOAN LARSON

horses and riders to Parliament Hill in preparation for their performance on July 1. I was so excited that I could barely contain myself. I watched how the crowds parted to allow the Musical Ride to parade through the streets of Ottawa; people clapped and some reached out to touch the horses. Even though they couldn’t touch them, they couldn’t resist the impulse to reach. How wonderful is that! The horses bring an element of magic to it.

Aside from the visual feast of watching 32 magnificent horses performing highly intricate maneuvers, there is also the relationship between horse and rider. In fact we are watching 64 athletes (I have

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PHOTO: JOAN LARSON



PHOTOS: JOAN LARSON

Larson begins a new piece by creating a detailed sketch, such as this one entitled "After the Charge." The finished sketch is then transferred onto paper and a red underpainting is applied before painting with pastel.

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seen the level of dedication and work that the riders must go through). There is a myth that the horses could complete the pattern without the riders to guide them. This is not so. It is a partnership.

Moreover, it is the "horse" that brings the majesty to the Musical Ride and creates this wonderful triangulated relationship between the officers and the public. As people reach out to touch these wonderful animals it creates a connection between them and the officers.

The RCMP Musical Ride is so very quintessentially Canadian and is something that we can all be proud of. I know that every time I see the Musical Ride, I am proud to be Canadian.

M: Can you tell me a little bit about your time at Rockcliff Stables, the Packinham breeding farm, and Musical Ride performances?

J: I spent some time in Ottawa with the "Ride" two years ago, both at Rockcliff Stables and at the breeding farm, and again this summer. When the "Ride" was here [in British Columbia], I was honoured to be able to spend some time with a number of the riders and support personnel as well as meeting Sgt. Len Klimpe (head instructor and trainer for the Ride) and Insp. Marty Chesser.

Rockcliff Stable is a world unto itself. As a horse person visiting one of the most famous stables in Canada or in the world for that matter, it was fascinating to see the level of organization and dedication to the horses. Aside from the actual Musical Ride, there is also the young horses newly arrived from the breeding farm that are ready for their training to begin and the new officers who are in training to go to the Ride the following year. There is a core of truly dedicated horsemen and horsewomen working at Rockcliff and Packinham that make the



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CELEBRATING
THE RCMP MUSICAL RIDE

Artworks By
JOAN LARSON

Published by Creekside Studio



www.joanlarson.com © 2007

PHOTO: JOAN LARSON

Musical Ride Division of the RCMP as successful as it is.

One of the things that impressed me about my time with the Musical Ride is the sense of fellowship among the riders and the obvious pride they have in what they are doing. We interviewed one of the riders, who admitted that, even after two years on the Ride, there was still a thrill with each performance and joy to wear the red serge and represent their country.

M: How has the RCMP reacted to your paintings?

J: Favourably. At this point, there has been a tentative invitation to launch the exhibition at Rockcliff Stables next year during "Sunset Ceremonies."

Sunset Ceremonies happens for one week each year during Canada Day celebrations in Ottawa. No matter where the "Ride" is performing, they return to Ottawa for that week to perform at Rockcliff Stables each evening and then on Parliament Hill on Canada Day.

M: When do you expect the series will be completed?

J: Early in 2010. But I can see that as time passes and this series continues to evolve, I will add pieces as they occur to me. I had originally planned on 20 to 24 images in the series. You can see that I have my work cut out for me in the next few months!

M: Do you have a favourite piece you have done so far?

J: I always get asked that and I have to admit, as a general rule that it is the one I'm working on at the time. There are some pieces, however, that are nearer and dearer to my heart.

Part of what appeals to me most about the Musical Ride is at the end of the performance when they do the "meet and greet." I love seeing the horses surrounded by hands reaching out to touch them and I particularly love seeing the sweet, dopey expressions on the horses. Their eyes go half-lidded, their ears fall back, and they lower their heads to accept their due reward for the job they do. "I work for pats," is the phrase that comes to mind. The riders also say that the meet and greet is one of their favourite parts of the performance.

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PHOTO: JOAN LARSON

BELOW: Larson takes inspiration from various aspects of the Musical Ride, including the performance, the activities behind the scenes, as well as her experiences at the training and breeding facilities.

ABOVE: Larson wants to show people “behind the scenes” with her paintings, such as the day-to-day duties and training of the horses and officers.



PHOTO: JOAN LARSON

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M: Will prints of the series be available to the public?

J: Eventually. We are hoping that when the series is ready to launch next year, there will be limited edition prints. There are already two posters and we will probably do another one to commemorate the first official showing of the series.

M: I also read that you will be illustrating a book about the Ride. Can you tell me about that?

J: There will be a children's illustrated book. The manuscript has already been written by well known local author Nikki Tate and it will be published by Sono Nis Press. However, it will probably be at least another year [before it is published]. Finishing this series is first and foremost before I will have time to dedicate to the book illustrations. 🍁

For more information on Joan Larson or her works, visit www.joanlarson.com.

Visit us online at www.HORSEjournals.com to purchase a Special Edition Commemorative Poster for the RCMP Musical Ride BC Tour, featuring the art of Joan Larson.

