

Artistic Expression

How two artists combine their creative vision with a passion for horses.

By Karen Briggs

Horses inspire us with their beauty. No matter whether the touch of a velvet muzzle is a novelty or an everyday occurrence, their grace, strength, athleticism, and heart still have the power to take our breath away.

Imagine if you could express those qualities through your fingertips — and make a living doing it. Horses inspire many an artist, of course, and

their works inspire many a horse person. But marketing a work of art requires more than just talent and technique. It also demands some market savvy and an understanding of how to make your work stand out as unique. I'd like you to meet two artistic women who share a passion for horses, and have found two very different — but beautiful — ways of expressing it.

Primeval Images

Stones speak to Toronto artist Frances Hallman-Chong.



Photos courtesy of Frances Hallman-Chong



Whenever she visits her rustic property near Owen Sound, Ontario, she goes in search of field stones. "The whole place grows stones," she says. "It's difficult to coax any other crop out of the ground there! There are new stones to discover every year. All my life I've gathered stones, and since I was surrounded by them I eventually decided to turn some of them into art.

"Stone is a material that evokes so much in us," she says. "Its antiquity, its variation from place to place... there are all these possibilities, from the impressionistic to the abstract. You can take it in any number of directions. I hunt around at the woodland edges for stones with interesting textures, especially any with moss or lichen. I tend to shy away from shiny new surfaces; I'm attracted to stones with some weathering or a pattern — rings, lines, or flakes of mica which just add interest and texture to the rock."

But unlike some artists, what Hallman-Chong often sees in the texture of a stone is the shadow of a horse. "Some stones immediately inspire a particular image. Though horses aren't my only subject matter — other animals, landscapes, anything from the natural world engages me — they're certainly a favourite. It's something you can barely articulate, like some vague

form of mental illness!"

Hallman-Chong is a lifelong horsewoman, who now shares a teenaged gelding with her daughter, which explains why stones so often speak to her of flashing hooves and tossing manes. And as is fitting with a canvas as primeval as rock, many of her works evoke ancient cave paintings of prehistoric equines. She uses several different techniques to bring her images to life.

Pigments and stains coax some from the rock, while others are chiselled and brought into relief with the help of added materials including stone clay and cement. "It's all a tinkering process," she says. "The process has been evolving for about four years now. I started with a bit of scratching into the stone, which became engraving, then moved to sculpting in some cases. A lot of the sculptures are really modelling, often with concrete mixed with the stone I'm working with. I chisel under it for a greater sense of depth. I find now I often use a combination of all of these techniques — I'm not much of a purist!"

With a Fine Arts degree from the Ontario College of Art, Hallman-Chong started out as a teacher. However she has now downscaled her teaching to a part-time supply position with the Toronto Public School Board so she can spend more time in the studio. "It was something of a leap of faith to devote more time to my art," she says. "You have to have some sense that someone will like and want what you create. And you have to develop a



thick skin! But I find it's working out quite well. I still have teaching as a source of income to fall back on, but if I'm working on a commission I can just let the school administration know I'll be tied up for a while."

Though she says her formal training at OCA was useful, "it's just a jumping-off place. And one thing they never covered was the marketing end. It was almost never discussed!" Hallman-Chong found

it was one thing to create and another to create a demand. Fortunately, reaching horse people was something she already knew how to do. "I started doing local trade shows, such as the Tournament of Champions jumper show in Palgrave (north of Toronto). And I've also displayed my work in tack shops, libraries, and just about anywhere else I've been asked; I'm in discussion with a hotel right now. I haven't been showing enough because I have trouble collecting enough inventory — which is not completely a bad thing!" she says. "I really have to get my act together and get a proper web site up, but I find that word of mouth does serve me pretty well."

Commissions form a significant portion of Hallman-Chong's work. "Often I'll be contacted by email by someone who's heard about my work from someone else. I'll email some sample images so the client can get an idea of what's possible, and we'll discuss timeframe and price. Most of my materials aren't too costly, so a smaller commissioned piece usually runs at a pretty reasonable \$250 to \$500, with six weeks being average for completion.

"I'm not the greatest salesperson," Hallman-Chong admits. "I prefer people come to me rather than doing the hard sell. I should be a little more aggressive about it, but it's a time issue as well."

The creative process is more familiar territory for Hallman-Chong, though it seldom runs smoothly. "There's often this moment when you're working on a piece and everything's a breeze... and then you run into a problem. I've come to anticipate it. Stone is brittle, but I've found that even when you chip off the wrong piece or a crack develops that you can often salvage it. Even if it's a lost cause, I've learned to treat it

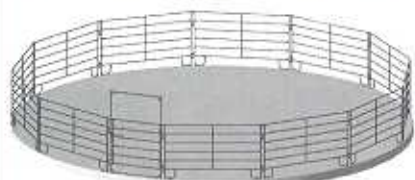


Photos courtesy of Frances Hallman-Chong

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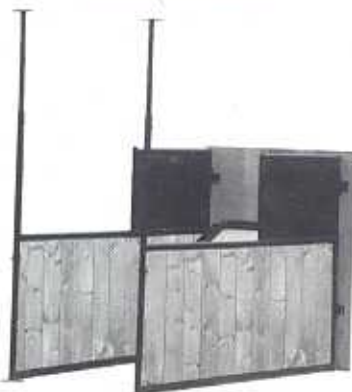
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“All my life I’ve gathered stones, and since I was surrounded by them I eventually decided to turn some of them into art.”

— Frances Hallman-Chong

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with a certain lightness. After all, there will always be another stone!

“The part I love the most is when I’ve gotten past those problems and get to do the detailing as the piece really starts to come

together. Sometimes I find there’s a point at which you have to sit back and give the piece some space. After a few days, when I look again, I can see it very differently and understand what it needs, or doesn’t need, to finish it.”

What advice does she have for those who want to make a career of equine art? “Speak to those whose work you admire — you’ll often find they are more than willing to share. And spend a lot of time observing horses,” she says. “It sounds so obvious, but it’s absolutely essential, especially when working representationally. You have to know your subject. I find that grooming is one of the most useful activities when it comes to understanding a horse’s contours. It helps engrain the forms in your mind.” Hallman-Chong notes, however, that familiarity can breed, well, familiarity. “I find I observe my own horse so much that he can creep into my work sometimes without my knowing it, and every horse starts to look a little like him! After so much exposure your brain seems to get wired that way. I have to guard against that to some extent, especially when I’m doing a portrait of someone else’s horse!”

Hair Artistry

Diamonds may be a girl’s best friend, but if you’re a horse person, there’s nothing quite as special as wearing a sparkling memento of your best friend — namely an exquisite, custom-designed piece of jewellery that incorporates a beautiful braid of hair from your horse.

New Jersey artist Suzanne Storms came by her craft by an unusual route. Though she has had a lifelong passion for horses, she worked for many years as a dental assistant. Later, she serviced electrical equipment for hospitals, making sure EKGs and other sensitive apparatus stayed in good working order. She indulged her creative impulses by participating in Civil War re-enactments. Her interest in the Civil War era led her to sew her own costumes, do her own beadwork... and along the way, she developed an interest in hair jewellery, a peculiarity of the Victorian era.

Hair jewellery — literally, jewellery made from human hair — was once considered a touching way to memorialize family members or dear friends who had passed away. Though it seems a bit macabre today, in a time before photography was widely available it served as a way to keep a small part of a lost loved one close to one’s heart. Women who did “hair-work” created intricately woven wreaths of human hair (which were often framed, and still turn up in antique shops and auctions today), as well as delicate brooches, barrettes, and pins. Storms became intrigued by the apocryphal pieces, and started to collect



Photos courtesy of Suzanne Storms



Diamond horse-shoe earrings with large South Sea pearls. Horsehair is woven into a small spiral weave.

them... but she was reluctant to wear the fragile antique originals when she was in costume, so decided to learn to weave hair jewellery herself. Then, she says, “One day I came across a piece that had been woven not with human hair, but horsehair. And that’s when the lightbulb came on for me.”

Today, Storms designs and fashions custom rings, pendants, stock pins, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and even watch straps which incorporate high-quality gold, platinum, precious stones, and hair from her client’s horses. Some pieces are designed to memorialize a lost equine friend, in the great Victorian tradition, but others are commissioned to celebrate horses still living. “The most complicated piece I’ve done to date,” Storms says, “was for a woman who sent me hair from nine different horses. Now she’s

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— Suzanne Storms



Suzanne can replace your current watchband with one made from hair from your horse(s).

able to wear her entire herd!"

More intricate than braiding, Storms's pieces are woven on a table which resembles a giant spool. Small lead weights of various sizes keep the hairs from twisting or kinking. "The weighting is critical for a nice crisp weave," she says. Learning to create the various woven patterns was a challenge for her because it was something of a lost art. With no mentor to teach her, she sought out some old, out-of-print instruction books, some of which she located on microfiche in a major New York archive, and relied in large part on trial and error. It took her three and a half years to work out the basics. "Some patterns I could weave in human hair," she says, "just didn't work with horsehair, which is much coarser. I wanted something elegant that a person could wear morning till night. It required some experimentation."

She found that another challenge lay in the variability of horsehair. "When I was learning, my girlfriend's horse, Honey, donated a lot of hair to the cause! I learned that Honey's tail hair averaged 0.18 mm per strand. Now when I get a swatch of a client's horse's hair I get out my calipers and compare it to Honey's, so I can calculate how much hair I'll need and how to weight it when I'm weaving."

Before incorporating any hair into her weave, she examines the individual strands under a lighted magnifier and selects only the strongest, most flawless strands. It's not just esthetics Storms is worried about; a weak or flawed hair strand might snap in the middle of a complex weave. "Then you have to start



18k gold horseshoe necklace. Horsehair is woven into a medium spiral weave.



18k gold snaffle bit horsehair necklace or bracelet with a fine spiral weave and working parts. Bit is 2 1/8 inches long.

over; there's no way to add or braid in a new strand without ending up with bristly bits that stick out," she says.

One advantage of horsehair over human is its greater colour range, a quality Storms has made the most of. "I came up with a weave that incorporates two or more different colours and showcases each of them," she says. The result is particularly dramatic when it's used for a bracelet combining tail hair from different animals, highlighted by gold or silver beading and end clasps of white or yellow gold (depending on the hair colour and the client's skin tones).

When a client supplies a sample of her horse's hair (instructions on how much hair is needed, the required length, and how to harvest it can be found on Storms's web site: www.suzannestorms.com), Storms makes suggestions as to how best to display it: in a ring, a bracelet, or a stock pin, for example. Often, clients also send gemstones they'd like incorporated into their

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jewellery — a diamond from their mother's wedding ring, or a black pearl bought on an exotic vacation, for example. Storms works with celebrated jeweller, Tony Paris (who has designed and created fine jewellery for Tiffany's and other high-end clients), to pull the piece together and create something uniquely beautiful for each client. "Tony does the metalwork and then I glue the hairwork into the completed piece," says Storms.

Apart from a few special pieces created for charity (like the necklace containing strands of hair from celebrated racehorses Silver Charm, Point Given, and Smarty Jones, created to benefit the Thoroughbred adoption organization, ReRun), Storms's work is exclusively commissioned. "To begin with, I advertised in some horse magazines, and my husband created a web site for me, but we soon realized that we had to go on the road, because it's really something you have to see for yourself. I started by taking a booth at Equine Affaire in Massachusetts, in 2000, and now I do about 12 equine events and trade shows a year, which keeps me away from home for about three months all told."

Storms's display cases contain more than 70 different examples of her bracelets, rings, and other jewellery pieces, but none of them are for sale. "They're strictly used to show people what's possible," she says. "Every piece I make is custom-made. The jewellery would have no meaning if it wasn't from your own horse."

The irony is that her jewellery trade now keeps Storms so busy that, for the first time in many years, she has no horse of her

own. She gets her dose of equine contact by periodically volunteering with a therapeutic riding program (and wears the hairs of four of her favourite therapy horses in her personal jewellery).

Despite that, Storms says she loves the way her business has grown. "It's the way I get close to horses now. I even love the feel and the smell of the hair as I'm working with it. I love being at the trade shows, especially the ones like Dressage at Devon where I can see the show rings and be in the midst of all the action.

"When someone stops by my booth wearing something I've designed, that's a very special feeling," she adds. "To know it has meaning for them is a very warm and fuzzy thing for me. And especially when I create a piece as a memorial... I really think that expresses the bond between person and horse like nothing else."

Storms recalls a bracelet commissioned for a woman who had been hospitalized with terminal cancer. Being separated from her animals was causing her great distress, so her friends made a video of her three horses playing in the paddock for her to watch, and asked Storms to create a bracelet from their tail hair as a tangible part of them the woman could touch. When the woman died a few months later, she was buried with the bracelet on her wrist. "I still get choked up when I think about that," says Storms.

Being able to celebrate the horse in a creative way, and make a living doing it, must surely be the best of both worlds. It takes a leap of faith, to be sure, but for these two women (and doubtless many other artists), the rewards have been well worth the risk.

"The most complicated piece I've done to date was for a woman who sent me hair from nine different horses. Now she's able to wear her entire herd!"

— Suzanne Storms



18k gold rings showing various stones and horsehair weaves.