



Capturing Their Essence

Equine Sculptress Breathes Life Into Bronze

By Claire Novak

Karen Kasper was in the stallion barn at William S. Farish's Lane's End Farm one soft summer morning in 2002, perfecting an original clay model that would eventually become a bronze sculpture of the farm's foundation sire, Dixieland Band. As she worked, she felt another set of eyes upon her. From his stall, A.P. Indy was watching her like a hawk.

"He had a huge kind of fierceness about

him, this power, a fierceness of focus and will," said Kasper, who would return to Lane's End in 2007 to sculpt a life-sized bronze of the two-time Eclipse Award winner and prominent Thoroughbred sire. "I kept looking through the bars and seeing him intently focused on me, and I felt like he had the spirit of a lion."

Kasper, a 15-year resident of Lexington, is far more than a sculptress. She is

an equine interpreter, conveying the personalities of her subjects with grace and skill. Horses have always been her passion, but she is relatively new to the world of Thoroughbred racing, where she has revealed a reservoir of talent, barely tapped. Her breathtakingly accurate representations offer a glimpse of great sculptures to come.

A foray into the world of horse racing



LEE P. THOMAS

Karen Kasper with A.P. Indy and a smaller version of the life-sized bronze she sculpted of the stallion

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is the logical step for Kasper. Over the years her work has progressed from pencil sketches drawn in the margins of high school textbooks to bronze representations of the Arabian show industry's greatest champions. And while her Thoroughbred portfolio is still developing, she has known since first coming to Kentucky that she was meant to sculpt horses in the heart of the Bluegrass.

Inspirational visit

Kasper first visited Lexington in 1981 when her husband, Ray, brought her to an Arabian horse show (the inaugural Egyptian Event) at the Kentucky Horse Park.

While in Kentucky, she broke away to tour a few Thoroughbred farms, including Claiborne, home of the great Secretariat. The Claiborne visit, which the artist likened to “going to Mecca,” inspired a portrait of the legendary stallion and was ironically apropos considering the future commissions she would undertake in the Thoroughbred industry — including the bronze of A.P. Indy, who is out of the Secretariat mare Week-end Surprise.

That same year the couple opened an art studio on their farm in central Wisconsin, where Kasper — whose love of horses has been intertwined with her natural artistic ability since childhood — raised three children by day and painted equine portraits by night. She was entirely self-taught, her keen eye developed through years of hands-on work with horses on the county fair and bush track circuits of her home state.

“I was a little intimidated as to whether I could maintain a studio as a business because I didn't have an art degree,” Kasper recalled. “I visited an artist in the neigh-



Top, Kasper and William S. Farish with the original clay model of Kingmambo in progress; above, production of the A.P. Indy statue

borhood, a little Italian man, and he's the one who told me, 'You have an advantage over artists who have gone to art school, because your talent was not shaped by the ego of your teachers. Your talent and your eye is uniquely yours.' That gave me the courage to take the next step forward.”

The next step for Kasper came in 1984,

when a recurring dream of her hands creating a clay horse head inspired her attempt at sculpture. She traded her initial effort — a simple bronze of an Arabian head — to longtime friend Robert Waddell as a down payment on an Arabian mare, Malmiri, who was her beloved companion for more than 20 years. The late Waddell was immortalized by Kasper in 2005 aboard his own Arabian, Red, in the artist's striking polo piece, *The Backshot*.

The world of sculpture brought Kasper's career to a new level as word of her prowess spread among owners and aficionados of the Arabian breed. She accepted her first international commission in 1988, and by 1993 her business was flourishing — so much so that she decided to expand her studio in a new location. Lexington was the obvious destination. Her children, Jeremy, Julie, and Jason, now all in their 20s, would complete their high school education in the Bluegrass.

“We had a beautiful farm in Wisconsin with Kentucky-style horse barns and black fence, but we just knew we were supposed to be in Lexington,” she said. “We loved the area, and I always hoped to become a part of the tradition of doing Thoroughbreds in art as well.”

Kasper wasted no time wetting her feet. Arriving in Kentucky and wanting to make a positive impression upon the equine community, she presented Calumet

Farm owner Henryk de Kwiatowski with a bronze statue of Citation and jockey Eddie Arcaro, now on display at the Carnegie Center for Literacy in downtown Lexington. Her next project was a bronze portrait of Nureyev, commissioned at the suggestion of Woodford County veterinarian Ric Redden and crafted mainly at

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the stallion's private barn at Walmac International. Redden, who is also an artist, said he was impressed by the artist's ability to capture the various personalities of the horses she portrays — but her integrity impressed him the most.

"She's a beautiful lady because of her character, standards, and outlook on life," he said.

Farish, meanwhile, took notice of Kasper's undeniable talent and has been the artist's greatest supporter in the Thoroughbred industry thus far. He



Lane's End-commissioned bronzes of Kingmambo, above, and Dixieland Band, right

calls her "the best equine sculptress in the country" and commissioned her to complete a sculpture of Lane's End stallion Kingmambo, now on display in the Lane's End cemetery, in addition to the Dixieland Band and A.P. Indy pieces.

"Of the many people I've been involved with, I'm particularly proud that Mr. Farish appreciates my work, because he has an incredible eye for horses," Kasper said. "I don't mean just to judge if it's a good horse or not a good horse; he has an incredible eye for detail in an individual horse. Some people think (it's good) if the face looks like the horse — they never look past the face — but he sees every particular thing in the horse, and I relish that."

Her legacy

Kasper begins each of her sculptures with an in-depth life study, getting to know her subject through observation and discussion with the horse's owners.

"I like to involve owners," she said. "One of my first questions is, 'How do you want to remember this horse?' Oftentimes, there's a particular movement or posture they think of, so I want to know how they see their horse so I can look through their eyes as

well as my own."

Once Kasper is familiar with her subject, equipped with photos and notes taken during the life-study period, she creates a simple armature, the inner structure upon which the sculpture is built. Made up of thin copper piping, the armature may be shifted throughout the process to mirror the various positions of the horse it comes to represent.

An original clay model is then built upon the armature, at which point Kasper will return to the horse's stall to continue sculpting. She also reviews the sculpture with the owners, making adjustments depending on their feedback.

Finally, the clay model is returned to her studio, where it is painted with rubber and solidified in plaster to create a mold. The rubber pieces, peeled away from the original clay model, form the reproduction mold — which is filled with wax to create the pattern from which the bronze statue will be cast.



LEE P. THOMAS PHOTOS

"I try my best to become increasingly accurate," Kasper said. "That's what keeps you at the top of your game — that whatever piece you do, you do your absolute best — and the moment you finish it, you know for just a brief while that it is your absolute best. You don't know what will top it, but as soon as you pick up your clay for the next sculpture, in a very short order you are already topping it. The best one is always the next one you do, and it's very exciting."

The wax pattern, once examined by

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the artist for subtle flaws, is sent to the foundry of her choice — for smaller projects, Tuska Studio Fine Art Foundry in Lexington; for larger, Bronze Services of Loveland in Loveland, Colo. There, skilled artisans cut the wax into pieces and dip it into liquid ceramic, which is allowed to harden. The ceramic pieces are then fired in a kiln, the melted wax runs out, and ceramic molds — into which the bronze will be poured — remain.

After the bronzes are poured and allowed to cool, the ceramic molds are broken with a hammer, revealing the inner castings. The pieces are welded together, and the patina process begins as the sculpture is sandblasted to remove imperfections. A chemical wash under heat adds to the patina, while a coat of wax creates a protective barrier. Finally, under Kasper's supervision, the sculpture is

polished and delivered to its owner.

"It's important with what I do, with the ability I have, that I do important work and make it my best," said the artist, who is often on site at the foundries to oversee the casting process. "Some day I'm just going to be a little blip in the scheme of things, and my art is what's going to be left to represent what was important to me or what was beautiful to me. I have to take seriously the ability I've been given as a gift."

Kasper has repeated this process more than 80 times, her subjects ranging from the Thoroughbreds mentioned here to great Arabians such as U.S. Arabian racehorse and all-time leading money earner DA Adios, and Arabian show horses Imperial Mashhar (for the Royal Stable of His Majesty King Hassan II of Morocco), El Shaklan, Anaza El Farid, and Imperial Madheen (for Count Federico Zichy

Thyssen of Argentina).

Kasper also is in high demand as a trophy artist, and her work has graced the awards of events such as the FEI and UAE World Endurance Championships; the Salon du Cheval Arabian World Championship in Paris, France; and the All-Nations Cup Breeders' Trophy in Aachen, Germany. She also is the crafter of the trophy for the Darley Awards, Arabian racing's equivalent to the Eclipse Award.

From her studio in Lexington, assisted by husband Ray — who handles heavy work in the studio — she has embraced the Thoroughbred industry as her own.

"I think she's going to be extremely sought after in the Thoroughbred world," said Redden. "She does a brilliant job and is a great asset to the equine industry as a whole." 🐾



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