

An Artist's Perspective



Elaine drives Duke and Diesel while Terry mans the plow during a practice run before a plowing match.

Photo by Mike Monaghan

by Karen L. Kirsch

"I enjoy painting all breeds of horse, but for the past 15 years my specialty has been drafts and harness horses," says artist Elaine Juska Keeley of Cedar Knoll Farm in Lisbon, Connecticut. "Is anything else quite so beautiful? Nothing moves the earth the way a draft horse does."

The recipient of countless awards for her work, Elaine has on-site equine models. Cedar Knoll is home to four Percheron geldings and one trick-performing miniature horse. She depicts her subjects in modes ranging from quiet grazing to elegant carriage hitches, or sometimes doing simple farm tasks. Her partner Terry Joseph has an extensive collection of antique plows, some of which are quite rare, so Elaine has plenty of subject matter for her paintings.

Terry is a founding member of the Eastern Connecticut Draft Horse Association and a current board member who enjoys plowing, logging, and giving demonstrations for 4-H clubs and pony clubs. "The demos are multi-faceted and as diverse as the groups we do them for," says Elaine. "I think it's important that we help promote draft and harness horses to the younger crowd, perhaps more so today than ever. Too few people realize the role draft animals played in the development of this country. We don't plow for crops on our farm, but Terry does a few plow matches and plows neighbors' fields for them—more for practice than out of necessity." Elaine, also an ECDHA member, is herself accomplished at plowing. Last spring at the first plow match held by the ECDHA, Elaine took first place in Women's Plowing and fifth in the Open Sulky division competing against 21 men.

Aside from being her favorite models, and serving as hobby mates for Terry, the Percherons at Cedar Knoll Farm earn their keep as carriage horses for the couple's livery service. All of

their horses are as adept at formal affairs as they are at hay rides, sleigh rides, and farming. How this all came to be is a testament to the endearing qualities of heavy horses.

"In the early '90s, after being laid off from a graphics job, I went to work at a local maritime museum called Mystic Seaport. I was there one day to photograph (for paintings) an event about 19th century transportation, and overheard a gentleman say they were looking for drivers. The rest is proverbial history.

"Although I had grown up riding, I had never driven before then. Some people criticized an art major for taking such a job, but it was a huge turning point in my life. The first horse I drove was a black Percheron named Barney. I worked for this carriage company for about four years and the owner's wife and I became friends. When he divorced her I bought one of their horses."

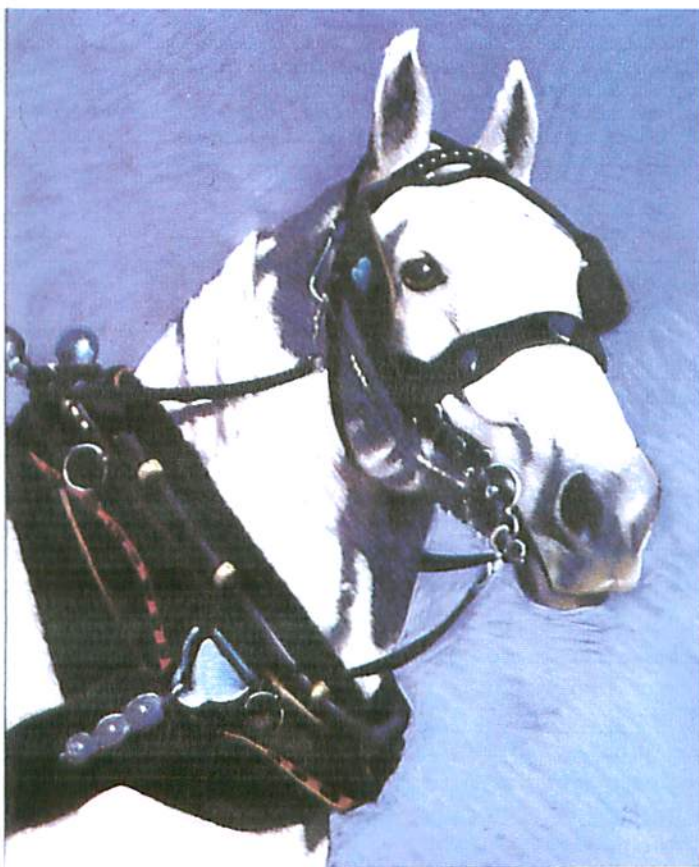
That horse was Gillette, a son of the mare Elaine drove for years at Mystic Seaport. She was working there when Gillette was born, so she's known him all his life. Both Elaine and Terry formerly had Belgians. Terry retired his team to a friend's farm, where the remaining gelding is now 30-plus years old, but it's a mare Elaine sold that still shows up in many of her paintings.

"I had a Belgian mare named Della that was the apple of my eye. She was smart and hot-headed, and had never been well worked (my fault). Time constraints forced us to use horses for the carriage business we could trust, so she became a lovely pink flamingo for our front lawn. Finally, common sense dictated that I trade Della in for another Percheron," Elaine recalls. "Della has probably graced more of my paintings than any other single horse. She appears by herself, in barnyards with other horses, in duplicate and triplicate, in landscapes and imaginary worlds. She hangs on the walls of strangers and on my own walls. She is everywhere but in my own backyard. To this day my heart aches for her."

Elaine has oodles of tales to illustrate why Della is no longer in her backyard and why she never became part of their livery service. "Some things would just set that horse off. She could be the best trail horse, going through rocks and water, up and down steep crevices with me bareback, never trying to rub me off on trees, always doing what was asked of her in traffic, around barking dogs—and then, in places she knew well, she'd freak at the oddest things over and over again."

She recalls one particularly harrowing experience. "Terry was doing a sleigh ride for Blue Slope Farm Museum, a 380-acre working dairy farm, and I was riding Della behind the sleigh. It was a beautiful evening and the customers in the sleigh were having a grand time. We came out of the woods into the field near the calf hutches and Della stopped, looked over at those bulging white hutches, and just wouldn't move."

"Soon enough the sleigh went around the corner to the other side of the cow barn, out into the 120-acre cornfield to head back to the horse barn. When Della realized her companions were no longer visible, she went from 0 to 90 like a Porsche on the German Autobahn, straight through that open hilltop cornfield, snow flying under her feet, corn stalk stubbles snapping with every stride. As she flew passed the sleigh I heard its occupants gasp and Terry yell."



"Gillette," a classical horse portrait that serves as Cedar Knoll's store logo. Most of Elaine's commissioned portraits are done in this style (19.5"x25.5" pastel).



"Four Up at Blue Slope" offers an unusual perspective, with the extreme vanishing point emphasizing the depth of driving four up and heavy strokes conveying movement (18"x24" pastel).



"Fjords" was done as a study of the Fjord breed (9.5"x12.5" pastel).



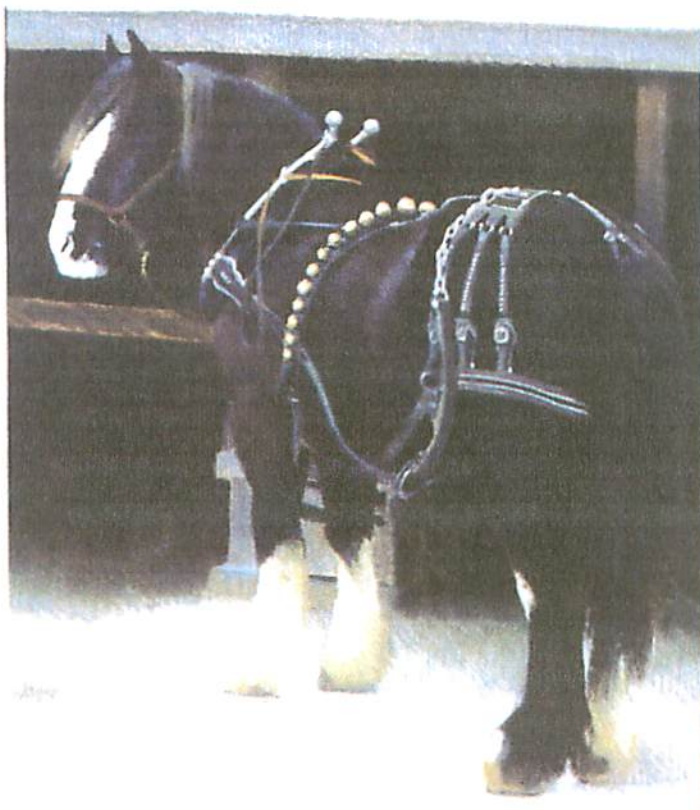
"Walking Plow" depicts a friend of Elaine's competing at an Eastern Connecticut Draft Horse Association plowing match; Elaine was smitten by the dramatic landscape and threatening April sky (18"x24" pastel).

Juska Keeley

Photos by Elaine



"Shoeing Della" uses color contrast to depict Terry working on Elaine's favorite horse (18"x24" pastel).



"Black Horse, White Snow" is a study in contrasts showing the three-quarter perspective favored by draft owners (15"x17" pastel).

"I finally got her head turned into my right foot, which stopped her dead in her tracks. Once I got her to walk over to the sleigh, the passengers all clapped and said, 'Kudos to you. That was amazing.' All I could think of saying was, 'Well, it sure was exhilarating.'"

Alas, Elaine sold her beloved Della. Unlike Della, the farm's four Percherons are quiet and reliable for the carriage business. Three of them were Amish bred and trained. "I love our Amish-bred horses. A well-trained horse is a well-worked horse, or vice versa. Anyone breeding a horse for stamina, good sense, and soundness above everything else is just plain smart."

The artist echoes a common complaint about tail docking. "While I understand the history of docking a working horse, I like knowing my horse can defend himself from vicious flies. And from a purely aesthetic standpoint I think the long flowing tail on a harness horse looks real nice. Gillette is the only horse we now have with a full tail."

As impressive as are Elaine's accomplishments with horses, her professional credentials are even more impressive, beginning with a BFA from Parsons School of Design in New York City. She left a career in book publishing, in-house illustration, and design when her son was born in 1989 and she moved from New York to Connecticut. There she was awarded scholarships to study pastel at the prestigious Lyme Academy of Fine Arts. She has specialized in pastel since 1997, but also works in oils and color pencils.

Elaine is a member of the Pastel Society of America and the Connecticut Pastel Society and was recently juried in as a member of the American Academy of Equine Art (AAEA). With all three of these major societies, applying artists must have their work and credentials juried before being considered for membership—a major achievement. AAEA, for example, requires being juried into a minimum of three National Juried Exhibitions before they will look at a portfolio.

Her award-winning works are in many private and corporate collections and may be seen in numerous galleries, including Cutwater Gallery in Mystic and the Gilded Edge Gallery in Salem. She has been featured at the International Museum of the Horse in Lexington, Kentucky, and the National Arts Club in New York City, and has exhibited for many years at the Draft Horse Classic in California. Several noted art magazines have featured her paintings.

Her uncompromising work always projects her intimate relationship with horses. "All of my paintings have stories, some interesting, some not so. Some paintings are based purely in color theory or line technique—just another excuse to paint more horses," she says with a laugh. "Pastel is a passion, just like the draft horses. It gets into your blood and pretty soon you are transformed into a whole other being. The appeal is the immediacy. Artists working in pastel don't have to physically mix colors the way an oil painter does. Cross-hatching allows colors to blend optically."

For many reasons, draft horses hold special appeal as subjects for her work. "First of all, I have a great emotional attachment to drafts and we artists thrive on emotional attachment to our subjects. And, as every painter is fond of saying, know what you paint and paint what you know."

From her initial experience with driving horses, she was hooked. "The way the hind quarters move under the harness, the way their front feet pivot outward as they trot. The differences in the breeds, too, and the way they move differently from each other. Shires and Clydes tend to swing their hind legs out more than Percherons and Belgians. To this day, even after hours of working behind a team, I'm still mesmerized by the hitch in their hind legs and the way they tend to shuffle their toes a bit as they walk."

To get different perspectives she may photograph horses from atop a stone wall, then create a composite sketch that becomes the basis for a finished painting. While people who are unfamiliar with painting theories and techniques may see Elaine's work as just pretty pictures, the process of creating a painting that works doesn't just happen. It's based on skillful manipulation of a medium and draftsmanship necessary to project the emotion that moved the artist in the first place. Heavy pastel strokes, for example, create movement in a painting.

"I love the way these horses throw their shoulders into the

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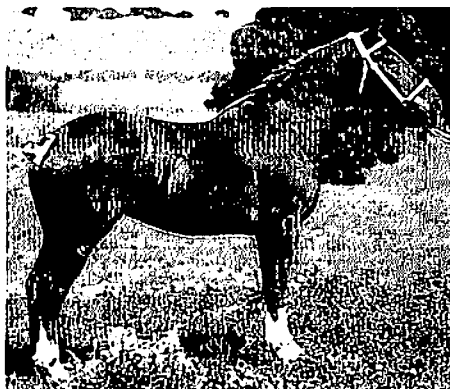
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collars," says Elaine of her painting Belgian Team, purchased by Blue Slope Country Museum. She projected this feeling by leaving a plain complimentary background to enhance the sense of power and the sorrel tones in the horses' coats. "Blue and orange are complementary colors and create a powerful contrast within the painting."

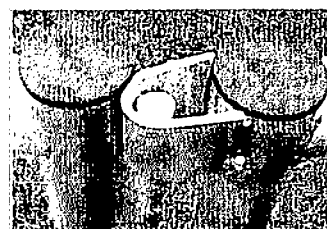
While some admirers don't care *how* a painting is created—they just like what they see—others *do* care. For those discerning individuals Elaine shares her expertise by teaching group classes at the Glastonbury Art Guild and offering private instruction from her art studio in Colchester.

"Although the art market prefers a landscape with farmers in it, I tend to gravitate to the up close and personal with the horses—horses with their shoulders into the collars, horses at rest after hours of work, friends with walking plows or riding sulky plows three and four abreast," says Elaine. Her unique paintings illustrate the varied roles heavy horses play, but from out of the ordinary perspectives that set her work apart from that of other equine artists. "One of my favorite angles of depicting the draft horse is either a three-quarter view or from the driver's seat. I suppose not too many people these days see a horse from the driver's seat."

Karen L. Kirsch lives in Louisville, Ohio. More examples of Elaine Juska Keeley's work may be seen on her web site at www.ejkstudios.net.



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