

Cowboy Style

Your Guide to Craftsmen, the Arts and Traditions of the Western Lifestyle



Moni Heil painted *Rain or Shine*, a 31-by-23-inch oil on canvas, for the 2010 Heart of the West art exhibition at the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame.

WESTERN ART

In the Eyes

Colorado artist Moni Heil depicts the beauty and grace of bridle horses and the wonders of wildlife in her art, the powerful stories unfolding through her subjects' eyes.

By JENNIFER DENISON



From Start to Finish, 26 by 34-inch oil on canvas



Chondellier, 20 by 27-inch oil on canvas

MONI HEIL IS PROOF that artists see their surroundings a little differently than most. While riding on a ranch in Montana with friends, a rainstorm rolled in. As the group took a lunch break, one horseman wasn't going to let the rain deter him from warming up his horse. As the cowboy rode, Heil was drawn to the horse.

"The rain enhanced the big, black, beautiful horse's presence," she recalls. "His wet hide had Prussian-blue and silver highlights, and his mane was wet, which formed heavy clumps of dark, black hair and added to his powerful expression.

"That's what appeared on the outside, but what was important to me was the power he exuded in his eyes."

As is typical of the artist's creative process, she photographed the scene, then took the image and cropped it on her computer until she achieved the perfect composition for the painting.

Once she transferred that image to canvas, she painted a wash (diluted paint) onto the canvas, emphasizing light and dark shades. After that, the painting came to life.

A prolific artist, Heil has a "batch" of paintings in different stages in her Gypsum, Colorado, studio. This enables her to take a break from one to work on another, which keeps her creativity flowing and her job enjoyable.

The artist is inspired by well-trained horses, particularly hackamore and bridle horses, and appreciates the work and refinement that goes into making a bridle horse.

"It's like watching a ballet," she says. "Every rider has his or her own signature, and that's really an art form in itself to me."

Heil was raised outside of Cleveland, Ohio, and always enjoyed family trips to her grandparents' farm. Her mother was an artist and encouraged Heil's creativity.

"She wouldn't buy me coloring books when I was young," Heil says. "She didn't want me coloring inside the lines. She preferred that I draw my own pictures."

After high school, Heil was one of six recipients of a full scholarship to study art at Kent State University. She attended college there for more than a year, then transferred to the Cleveland Institute of Art. When she graduated from there in 1973, with a double major in painting and silversmithing, she gathered her belongings, including her dog, and bought a one-way ticket out of the Midwest.

She landed in Colorado, where she got a job on a ranch near Wolcott riding horses. A devoted horsemanship student, she took every opportunity she had to learn from the horsemen who promoted the methods now referred to as natural horsemanship.

Heil began her art career on Colorado's Western Slope painting murals, many depicting Western scenes. She also was commissioned to paint portraits. The creative restraints of commissions eventually led to burnout, so she took a break to ride horses, train stock dogs and get married.

In 2005, after a 12-year hiatus from her art career, Heil came back rejuvenated and painting stronger than ever. Setting her sights high, she immediately applied to her first art exhibition, the Phippen Western Art Show and Sale in Prescott, Arizona, and was accepted.

Since then she has exhibited in several shows at which her art was acclaimed. In 2006, she received second place in oils at the Draft Horse Classic in Grass Valley, California, for a painting titled *Drug Racing*. At the 2008 Cowgirl Up! show in Wickenburg, Arizona, her painting *In Good Hands*, depicting a man riding a snaffle-bit horse, received the People's Choice Award. Her work has also appeared on regional magazines, such as *Edible Phoenix* and *Rocky Mountain Rider*, as well as on the cover of Martin Black's *Colt-Starting DVD*.

Heil refers to her style as "impressionistic realism." She doesn't let detail or a structured color palette restrict her creativity. She paints what she feels, leaving areas soft, loose and painterly, while adding razor-sharp details to other areas to strengthen a painting. Looking at one of Heil's paintings can be deceptive. From a distance, her work appears almost photographically realistic, but step in a little closer and you'll see loose brushstrokes and dramatic use of color and light to evoke movement and emotion.

"My inspiration for a painting often comes from contrasting light dancing on a dynamic subject," she explains. "When this occurs, I have the basic ingredients needed to create an image."

Through the years, Heil has entertained the idea of pursuing other professions, including silversmithing, but still has so many avenues in her art she wants to explore. She recently has added wildlife paintings to her predominantly equine portfolio.

"[Painting wildlife] has been a breath



Moni Heil strikes a balance between painting, riding horses and training her Border Collies.

of fresh air," she says. "I want to keep growing and doing different things as an artist so I don't become stagnant. But I'll always stay [in the Western genre] because it's where my heart is, and it's what I enjoy."

Besides painting, Heil continues to ride horses and train her Border Collies, and aspires to work her dogs from horseback. For her 60th birthday, she received a colt that she's training. She and her husband, Steve Howard, also help friends and neighbors gather and brand their cattle, which provides inspiration for new paintings.

"I believe horses are the most beautiful, majestic creatures," she says. "To see one at work and the powerful expression in its eyes just chokes me up. I believe art is to be enjoyed, and if I have to think of one motive to paint, it'd be for someone to enjoy a painting and share the emotion I feel for it."

Heil's artwork is represented at Blackhawk Gallery in Saratoga, Wyoming. For more information, visit moniheil.com.

PHOTO BY WILLY MOSE

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