



JILL SOUKUP

# Creative Adventure

*By Myrna Zanetell*

**A**lthough Jill Soukup was born in Buffalo, New York, she could lay claim to the status of Colorado native. Her upbringing, education, and the inspiration for her current paintings have all been influenced by the fact that she has resided in the Centennial State since she was six months old. Soukup (pronounced Soakup) is a Czechoslovakian surname, the equivalent of the name Smith in the United States, but the talented artist and her paintings are by no means common.

Her father was a veterinarian, and her mother was dedicated to saving abandoned pets, so there is little wonder that Soukup has a passion for, and understanding of, animals of all sizes and breeds. Although her parents divorced when she was 8, they continued to support their daughter's inherent love of drawing by buying her art books and other materials to encourage her budding talents. "I loved drawing so much I would fill the blank pages in the front of books with my images, when I ran out of other paper," she says. "Even at that young age I knew my goal was to be an artist.

"Like most girls I also dreamed of having a horse, so they became

*Graydations, oil, 42" by 54"*

*"This is a statement about movement and the transition of light to dark. The bay and the middle gray horses were actually a sorrel and a dark palomino, respectively."*

*Palomino Power, oil, 14" by 7 1/4"*

*"It is such a rush to watch the wranglers and their steeds in action. There certainly is a partnership between animal and person."*

my primary subject. The fact that that dream never came to fruition might actually have been a good thing, because it really fueled my creative imagination. When I drew horses, it almost felt like I was touching them, one on one, so it was the next best thing to actually owning one." Soukup's two-dimensional renderings at times gave way to three-dimensional works, as she also tried her hand at sculpting them, a diversion she continues to enjoy.

When sculpting, rather than building her own armature, Soukup uses a "true form horse skeleton. "It is approximately one-fifth the size of an actual horse, and the wires are very flexible, so I can shape it to achieve the different positions I want," she says. "Once I have the desired composition, I use Pleistocene clay to build up the musculature. It's so adaptable that I frequently take it to the ranch and do my life studies using it. For the present, I am only doing the clay models. However, I almost love sculpting more than painting, so someday I hope to be able to take the next step and cast my clay forms into bronze sculptures."

Taking advantage of her affinity for animals, as a teen Soukup established a small business doing pet portraits in chalk pastel, an endeavor that earned her sufficient funds to join a friend on a trip to Thailand following her graduation from high school. When she returned, she enrolled at Colorado State University in Fort Collins and went on to earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in 1991.

Practical by nature, Soukup says, "Because I didn't want to be struggling for money after graduation, I realized that the field of graphic design was a good option. My first position was working for a firm that specialized in producing logos and other advertising material. It was a good job, but had a little too much corporate structure. Three years later, I was offered a position doing graphic design for the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, which was a much better fit for me, because I had the opportunity to work with a cadre of creative people."

Although she enjoyed the financial





*Tread Lightly, oil, 48" by 48"*



*"This guy was one of about 20 large bulls cruising the land together during one particular visit to Zapata Ranch. I have yet to see so many large and amazing beasts gathered as such, since then. Most often I see them scattered throughout a larger group of cows, calves, and other smaller, younger males."*

security that comes with a permanent job, Soukup soon realized that what she really wanted was to become a professional artist, so she began to take classes in her spare time at the Art Students League in Denver. "The museum was very gracious about allowing me very flexible hours," she says. "At first I worked a three-quarter schedule, but this became less and less until early 2000, when I made the final commitment to becoming a full-time artist."

During that period, three of the four paintings Soukup exhibited at an Art Students League show sold, attracting the attention of repre-

sentatives of a local gallery, who quickly offered to represent her. Not long after, a gallery on the East Coast did likewise. Perhaps a bit of a carryover from her graphic design work, many of Soukup's early paintings had what she calls an architectural theme—rusty pickup trucks, ancient tractors, portions of old trains, and fascinating geometric designs formed by fire escapes on vintage buildings. Combining what she calls abstract realism with an eye for the ethereal, she immortalized those objects, recording a bit of history in her work.

When Soukup signed on with the



*Cuddle, oil, 24" by 18"*

*"This is one of the wranglers pausing for some snuggles while gearing up for a group ride."*

*Johnson*



gallery in Denver, she returned to her passion for drawing animals, especially horses, and also began to focus more on compositions with a Western theme. An ideal connection came when she began to participate in annual artist gatherings sponsored by Ranchlands, a corporation that manages several ranch properties in Colorado. “The two main locations I use for reference material are the Zapata, a working guest ranch that borders the Great Sand Dunes Monument near Alamosa, and Chico Basin, which is closer to Colorado Springs,” she says, adding that 85 to 90 percent of the inspiration for her paintings comes from visits to those two ranches. “Since the Zapata is also home to herds of

approximately 2,500 bison, working there offers me an extended range of subject matter.”

The Zapata employs a core staff of cowhands who undertake typical ranch duties such as roping, branding, and moving herds to different locations. “When I first started painting there, I was primarily interested in the livestock – cattle, horses, and bison—but now I enjoy focusing more on the interaction between the wranglers and the livestock,” Soukup says. “For this reason, I am incorporating more figurative elements in my compositions. Over the years, I have gotten to know several of the regular hands on a more personal basis, which really helps me portray them more accurately.”

*Yellow Headed Blackbird, oil, 12" by 12"*

*“This is a sampling of some of the wildlife of Chico Basin Ranch. It’s a bit of an exaggeration and play on its dark coloring, but the head is brilliant, as seen here.”*

Although she grew up in an eastern Denver suburb, Soukup, her husband, their 11-year-old son, and their dog, currently reside on the western edge of the city. The stunning view of the Red Rocks Park from her back porch, she says, makes up for the fact that she still does not have room to accommodate a horse.

As she does with most aspects of her life, Soukup uses a very systematic approach in creating her art. “Most of my paintings are done from



*Saddled Sorrel, oil, 16" by 20"*

*"This sorrel was taking a break during a Chico Basin cattle branding back in 2015. I had contemplated this piece for a while, not sure this ordinary pose would suffice for a painting, but in the end I just had to paint it, because the gear and animal blended so beautifully."*

the reference photos I have taken," she says. "When I go to the ranch, I spend time doing life studies, which are often very detailed drawings. I include as much information as possible, before I actually transfer the image onto the canvas."

Recently, however, Soukup has given herself permission to loosen up her style a bit. It is, she says, her response to a desire for creative adventure, as she occasionally crops the imagery in her compositions, focusing only on parts of an animal or a building. She is experimenting with contrasting colors, as well,

noting that continuing to grow as an artist is important to her.

Soukup does admit to feeling the pressure that comes with success. "Thinking about how busy I had become, I began to reflect on a comment one of my students made during a workshop last summer," she says. "She shared the perspective that a passion that becomes too strong can actually become a negative, rather than a positive, force. For this reason, I have begun to simplify my life." As a result, Soukup currently is not committing to solo gallery shows.

As fate would have it, however, after deciding to slow down a bit, a new opportunity recently presented itself, one that was too appealing for Soukup to ignore. "I have been invited to be part of a group of founding artists for the inaugural

Masterworks of the West event at the Calgary Stampede on July 4, 2019," she says. The exhibition will mark the centennial of the 1919 Victory Stampede, while highlighting contemporary Western art. Each participating artist, Soukup says, will create a new work that embodies the heritage of the West through depictions of people, lands, and animals.

Exciting, new opportunities are likely to surface well into the future, particularly as young collectors begin to enter the market in search of freer, more colorful interpretations of the West. Portraying her subjects with a sense of immediacy that turns each painting into a firsthand experience, Soukup is sure to be at the forefront of that emerging trend. *AW*

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