



"Red Rock" by Don Weller

A Lifelong Love Affair With HORSES and ART

Don Weller, signature artist for the America's Horse in Art

Show & Sale, returns to his roots.

By Kathy A. Johnson

LOOKING AT DON WELLER'S WATERCOLORS IS LIKE OPENING A window onto scenes of western life. One of his goals as an artist is to draw the viewer into the process to, in his words, "suggest little scenes, start little stories." And he does so beautifully.

Don, an award-winning artist from Oakley, Utah, is the 2018 signature artist for the America's Horse in Art Show & Sale, which opens August 18 at the American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame & Museum in Amarillo. His original watercolor "Red Rock" is the featured artwork, and he has two additional pieces in the show, as well.

Cowboy Dreams

DON GREW UP IN PULLMAN, WASHINGTON, WHERE HE COMBINED his passions for horses and art from a young age.

"When I was a little kid, I copied Will James drawings and Charlie Russell paintings and drew cowboys," Don says. He also roped calves and ran barrels at high school and college rodeos.

After graduating with a degree in fine art from Washington State University, he sold his horses and moved to Los Angeles. For decades, he worked as an illustrator and graphic designer, and forgot about horses — "or tried to forget," he says.

Don's work appeared in advertisements, articles, magazine covers (including *Time* magazine, *TV Guide* and *Western*

Horseman), album covers and posters (including one for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles). He did portraits and paintings for the National Football League, created five postage stamps for the United States Postal Service and illustrated three children's books.

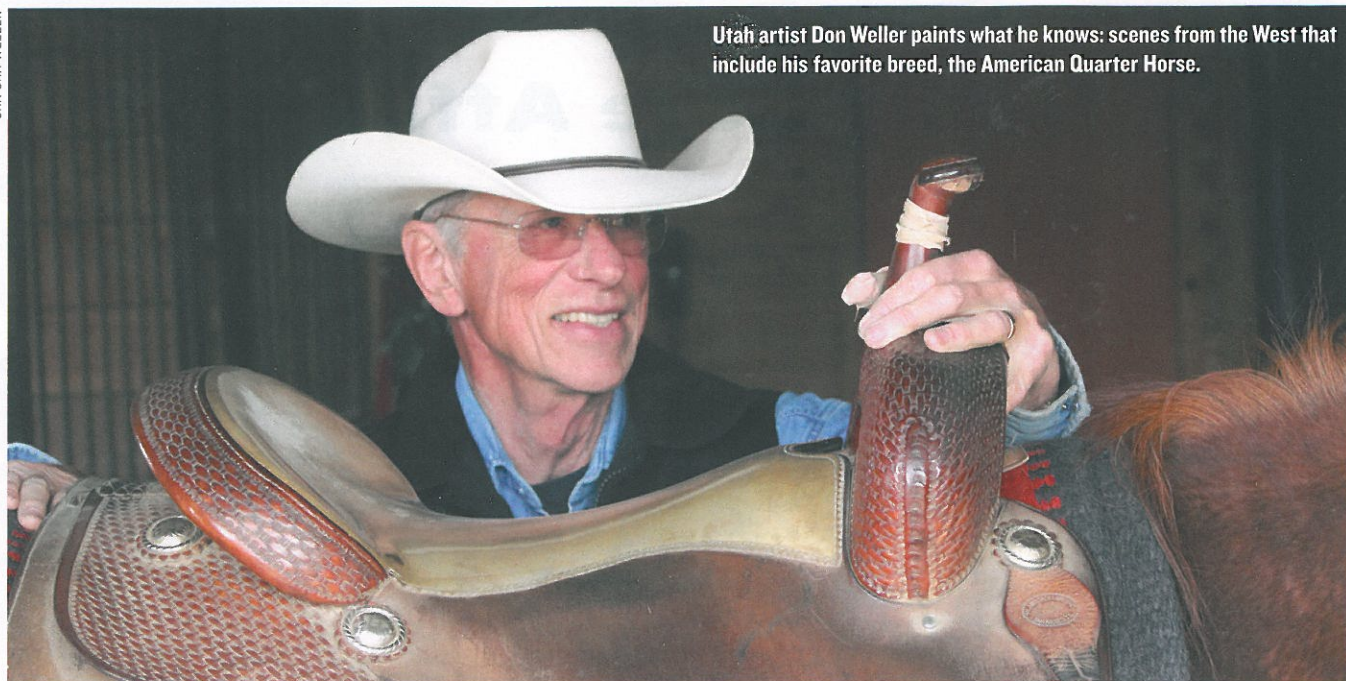
In addition to his work as an illustrator, he taught part time at the University of California-Los Angeles for three years and for 11 years at the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena. He met his wife, Cha Cha, when he was teaching at UCLA, and they've been together for 50 years, married for 45, and have four daughters and two granddaughters.

"We're stuck together by now," he says with a laugh.

Back to the Country

IN THE MID-'80S, DON DECIDED HE'D "SEEN ENOUGH CONCRETE and palm trees," and he and Cha Cha moved to Utah. They settled in Park City because of its nearness to an international airport — and for the great skiing. After Don bought a horse, they decided to build their own place, and they moved to Oakley, about 20 minutes from Park City. The move back to the country reawakened his love for the scenes of western life.

"There were cowboys everywhere, so I started painting cowboys," he says.



Utah artist Don Weller paints what he knows: scenes from the West that include his favorite breed, the American Quarter Horse.

In the 1990s, Don became fascinated with cutting horses when he photographed them for a book produced by the National Cutting Horse Association. He also shot the photos for another book on cutting horses, called "Pride in the Dust."

"After all that time photographing them, pretty soon I started riding them, and here I am," he says.

Don owns three horses, two of which are registered Quarter Horses: the 1994 cutting horse mare All Right Starlight and her daughter, Kitty Kitty Cha Cha Cha, 4, who is in cutting training. Don and "Starlight" have been together since Starlight was 4.

"I would show her (in cutting) for a couple of years when she was young and try to win the area, or whatever. Then I'd stay home, have some cows and practice here for two or three years and rest my wallet, rest the time it takes, then maybe do it for another year or two. So she's still pretty healthy. Not quite as quick as she was, but she loves to cut. We know each other pretty well," he says.

Watercolor Suits Him

DON LIKES WORKING IN WATERCOLOR "BECAUSE I'M VERY IMPATIENT," he says. "It suits me. If I paint oils, I have to put it aside, bring it back, put it aside – a long, slow process for me." Whereas with watercolor, "if it works, it works quick."

Of course, he adds, "with watercolor, you have to be willing to throw it away, because it's hard to correct. It might be four paintings before I find one I want to keep and not put in the bottom drawer or put in the garbage."

He says, "I've always drawn, and that's another reason I like watercolor – the drawing is very careful before I start painting."

For a peek into Don's artistic process, visit his blog at <https://donweller.com/blog>.

When things go smoothly, he can complete a piece like "Red Rock" in a couple of days.

"It depends on how I'm working," he says. "If I'm just making something up, then it happens a little quicker. With 'Red Rock,' it's a friend of ours (Tom Smart), and I shot pictures first. When I get home, I draw and compose. Sometimes it takes an hour or two hours if I'm fooling around and changing stuff. Actually

painting, if it goes smoothly, it probably takes at least a day, or maybe two days. One horse in a simple environment probably takes two days on average."

Don loves American Quarter Horses as a breed.

"All my life, that's the only breed I've paid much attention to. I like that they're so smart, so terribly smart. (Almost) everybody I know rides Quarter Horses.

"All the ones I've had are sensible. Quiet. They're explosive when they need to be, but they're just not dumb, goofy or stupid. They're a really good breed for all kinds of sports and really sensible."

Although Don, who turns 81 in August, could retire, he still works full time as an artist.

"I'm addicted and a workaholic, and it's my hobby," he says. "Generally, in the winter, if I'm not skiing, I'm painting, and in the summer, if I'm not riding, I'm painting."

Don and his wife both enjoy Utah's skiing, and though Cha Cha likes horses, riding isn't her thing. She prefers practicing meditative forms of yoga.

The summer of 2018 has been a busy season for Don. In addition to the America's Horse in Art Show & Sale, his work appeared in Paintbrush Cowboys, a three-artist show at the Wilcox Gallery in Jackson, Wyoming; the annual Phippen Museum's Hold Your Horses! exhibition and sale in Prescott, Arizona; and Art of the Plains, the American Plains Artists' Juried Exhibit and Sale. Also, his 2017 Cheyenne Frontier Days piece "Rodeo Icon" was chosen for reproduction as the official poster for this year's Cheyenne Frontier Days.

Being chosen signature artist is one of a long list of Don's honors. He has won multiple awards in his long career, including the Jones Award from the Bosque Art Center and the 2011 Steel Dust Award from the American Quarter Horse Hall of Fame & Museum. He also received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Los Angeles Society of Illustrators.

Don and Cha Cha plan to attend the opening of the America's Horse in Art show – so stop by and say hello!

Kathy A. Johnson is a freelance writer from the Tampa Bay area in Florida.