

# The Making of a Bridle Horse

ART BY SHANNON LAWLOR  
STORY BY JENNIFER DENISON

The elegance, artistry and historical significance of bridle-horse training traditions are conveyed in this series of paintings by Canadian artist Shannon Lawlor.



Straight Up in the Bridle, 39-by-25-inch acrylic on board

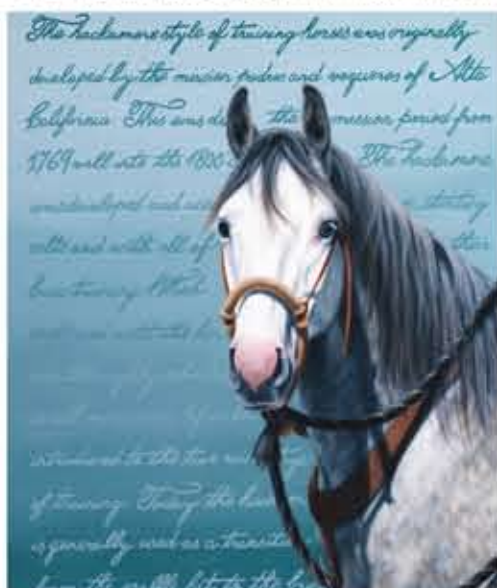
ALBERTA ARTIST SHANNON LAWLOR takes thousands of photos each year to use as reference for her artwork. One particular photo, of a sorrel mare being ridden straight up in the bridle, taken four years ago at a ranch rodeo in Nanton, Alberta, was the catalyst behind Shannon's series of four acrylic paintings collectively titled *The Making of a Bridle Horse*.

Most photographers would have thrown the photograph away because it was taken from a distance, and when enlarged became soft and grainy. Shannon, however, saw something special and saved the image, hoping one day it would inspire a painting.

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Snaffle Bit Stage, 39-by-25-inch acrylic on board



Hackamore Stage, 39-by-25-inch acrylic on board



Two Rein Stage, 39-by-25-inch acrylic on board

"The photo sat in my studio for a year, and I couldn't stop looking at the mare's expression," she says. "She exuded such confidence as she walked, and the movement of the rein chains was captivating."

One year after she took the photo, Shannon was at a ranch-horse competition in High River, Alberta, and photographed an equally attractive mare in the two-rein phase of training. Ironically, the two horses were ridden by brothers Mark and Kyle Elliott of Maple Creek, Saskatchewan.

With two compelling photos representing two stages of bridle-horse training, the idea for a series of paintings emerged. Each piece would depict a horse in a different phase of traditional bridle-horse training. Shannon would have to paint from the final phase to the first.

Wanting the series to be artistically appealing as well as educational, Shannon worked with Alberta horseman Peter Swales to write background text that was concise, yet included all the key points relevant to each training stage.

Shannon transferred the words to the boards on which she paints, using her drawings of the horses as guidelines. The challenge was to make the background stand apart from the horses without detracting from the overall paintings, and to seamlessly wrap the text around the horses in a way that was subtle, yet readable. The artist selected a typeface resembling the calligraphy seen in the Declaration of Independence.

"The vaquero influence on California began during the 18th century, when the Declaration of Independence was formed. I wanted to tie the two together in the paintings," she explains.

Another challenge was capturing the perfect photos of the hackamore and snaffle-bit horses, which took another two years.

"I wanted each horse to be an individual in appearance and express the characteristics common for that particular phase of training," Shannon explains.

The horse depicted in *Snaffle Bit Stage* is an Arabian mare owned by Sheila Varian of Arroyo Grande, California. The mare's alert, unsure expression and sleek physique are typical of a young, green horse.

For the hackamore painting, Shannon chose a gray horse owned by Josh Friessen, a

buckaroo at Douglas Lake Cattle Company in British Columbia, that caught her eye.

"The horse is a little more developed than the snaffle-bit horse, and shows more maturity and confidence," she says.

Known for her intricate, authentic portrayal of vaquero gear and bridle horses, Shannon added three thumbnails focusing on ornate gear and other aspects of vaquero culture to each painting. The focal points, however, are the highly rendered horses, painted with flawless conformational accuracy and intense expressions that reflect the artist's deep connection with horses.

Shannon's interest in vaquero horsemanship began 20 years ago, and she's not only studied it extensively during her travels to California and the Great Basin region where it's been preserved, but she also works with horsemen and gear makers in Western Canada, especially southern Alberta, where the buckaroo culture is prevalent. This past summer, she helped her good friend cowboy singer and songwriter Ian Tyson start the last two colts that will be raised on his ranch in Longview, Alberta, using vaquero-style horsemanship. It was a rewarding experience that inspired Shannon as a horsewoman and an artist.

"I've always appreciated good horsemanship of any style or discipline," she says. "But the more I learn about it, the more I appreciate the making of a bridle horse. The feeling of riding a horse straight up in the bridle is one of the finest things I know."

The series of paintings has impact whether viewed individually or collectively. Part of the paintings' allure comes from Shannon's understanding of her subjects.

The original paintings with thumbnails are available for sale. Fifty limited-edition, 24-by-18-inch giclees of each, without thumbnails, are also available.

While Shannon is best known for her bridle-horse images, the artist will soon show her versatility. She recently visited the Four Sixes Ranch in Guthrie, Texas, where she researched other geographical aspects of stock-horse culture for future paintings.

## FINE POINTS

**ARTIST:** Shannon Lawlor

**HOMETOWN:** Nanton, Alberta, Canada

**MEDIA:** acrylic, graphite, oil

**RECENT RECOGNITIONS:** Best of Show for *Straight Up in the Bridle* at the 2009 Art of the West Art Show & Sale in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada; Acrylic Award Winner for *Wind in My Reins* at the 2008 Phippen Museum Western Art Show in Prescott, Arizona; Best of Show, Acrylic for *Cholo* at the 2007 Phippen Museum Western Art Show

**UPCOMING PROJECT:** Showing her deep connection to bridle-horse training, Shannon has been commissioned by vaquero horseman Richard Caldwell to paint the images for his new DVD series. (For more on Caldwell, see "Handy with a Hackamore," on page 44.)



Horses have shaped Shannon Lawlor as both a horsewoman and an artist. This past summer, she and Ian Tyson started the last two colts that will be raised on Tyson's ranch.

**UPCOMING EXHIBITION:** Calgary Stampede Western Art Show, July 9-18, Calgary Alberta, Canada.

**REPRESENTED BY:** Southwest Roundup, San Juan Bautista, California; [southwestroundup.com](http://southwestroundup.com).

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