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H. Terrio  
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*Harry Jackson.*



# HARRY JACKSON, "THAT'S ART"

by Scott Dial

"Jack-ass-ery," fumed Harry Jackson. "Why it's just plain jack-ass-ery to say that painting my bronzes makes them look like wood."

He turned away and stood staring down at his latest bronze, TWO CHAMPS. Then he selected a paintbrush with his left hand and slowly bent over the statue to add a final touch of brown to the horse's saddle.

As he straightened up, his emotions exploded again, "Hell, nobody complains that painting over canvas detracts from the intrinsic quality of the canvas. But most critics still believe I'm defiling bronze when I paint over it. Damn, don't those miseducated, diploma-papered sonsabitches realize I'm following a tradition that's traceable to the dawn of all sculptural art! Take a look at the Egyptian works, or study Greek and Roman sculpture, and you'll see — they all were painted realistically.

"All I've done is adapt the practices of painting bronzes to my cowboy art. Hell, I'm not the first. Lots of others did and still do it. The original waxes of Charley Russell are a perfect example."

And that's what the 50-year old Harry Jackson is really all about. He's an artist whose successful blending of ancient art techniques with a cowboy philosophy has produced a style that adds a major new dimension to western art. In the course of creating his style, Jackson has rendered an additional service to art that few other artists, cowboy or otherwise, would have even contemplated. In his recent book, **Lost Wax Bronze Casting**, he has produced a major reference source for all students of sculpture. It is the only volume ever written, in any language, that is devoted exclusively to examining every phase of that ancient art in detail. The book was highly acclaimed by many qualified experts including John Walker, director emeritus of the National Gallery of Art, who wrote, "When Harry Jackson's manuscript was sent to me I was delighted to read at last an authoritative description of this technique. It is a much more complicated procedure than I had

dreamt, but this book elucidates it in the only practical way — with photographs and long captions documenting every step in the fabrication of a piece of sculpture. To make a successful cast is a dramatic story, and I found it utterly absorbing."

Harry explains his need to write the book with the same salty honesty that pervades all his work and life. "I had to write it, because everyone was asking me how a bronze was made, and because so many misconceptions existed about it — especially amongst 'experts.' Some even imagine you carve it like stone. For example, I remember the story Henry Moore, the great sculptor, told me. It seems a famous art critic once complimented him by gushing, 'While standing before your most recent bronze, I felt such tremendous force and vigor in your direct, audacious carving of the raw material itself.' Now Moore was too much of a gentleman to tell this 'expert' that all bronzes are cast, not carved, and most of them are produced by the lost wax method.

"Before we go any further, let's get one thing straight, now," Harry demanded. "The term 'lost wax' refers to the casting process itself, and not to some 'lost' ancient art that has just been rediscovered. As a matter of fact, since its inception over 6,000 years ago, the lost wax principle has been continually used by some sculptors, somewhere.

"The whole thing started when one of our cave-dwelling grandpas tripped over the principle of lost wax casting — *wherever there was wax, there will be bronze*. Our first 'wax artisans' probably started with a wad of natural beeswax, which they molded into a small figure of a man, a horse, or an idol. When they finished, they added wax extensions to the top and the bottom of the figure. Next, they enveloped the whole figure with a thick coating of liquid clay. The ends of the wax extensions stuck out from the clay mold to create a gate and vent system. The mold was fired until it was rock hard and, of course, the wax figure and extensions melted. They were burned out. They

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were gone. All the wax was lost. The space left by the 'lost wax' was filled by air.

"Then bronze was melted and poured into the cavity left by the lost wax. It was poured through the upper extension hole, called a gate, forcing the air out through the lower extension, called a vent. When the bronze cooled, the baked clay was chipped off, leaving a rough bronze casting. After the gate and vent extensions, now bronze, were cut away, the figure was smoothed out with finishing tools. This was the first version of the lost wax method.

"Over the centuries, artists learned to add infinite refinements, including casting hollow bronzes of gigantic size; however, despite all the embellishments, the same basic principle exists — *wherever there was wax, there will be bronze.*"

Harry settled back in his chair, paused a moment, and then turned the conversation from lost wax to his reasons for painting sculpture. He approached sculpture painting with the same zeal he expended on lost wax. "The concept of unpainted statues only starts with the Italian Renaissance. Initially, all great civilizations painted their sculpture. It was the natural way. All life is color. However, except for the few painted Egyptian sculptures left unmarred, the major role that color played in all the past great cultures is evident only in a few fragments, today. Greek statues were painted (the experts call it polychroming). All Romanesque and Gothic statues were painted. In Mexico, from the pre-Columbian monuments to the present day Santos, painted surfaces are the rule. Yet, the whole past has reached us colorless. The western world's practice of painting and decorating sculpture fell into disuse and eventually vanished during the barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire. Fine arts in general decayed and the great works of the past were defaced, destroyed or torn down and buried.

"During the early Renaissance, many of these treasures were rediscovered. However, time and nature had altered their appearances — the coats of paint that had given them their colorful, life-like realism were eaten away. The bronze surface was layed bare and the natural chemical reaction in sea, earth, and air discolored their surfaces. These 'nature altered effects' were accepted by their discoverers with unquestioning awe. The reverence they had for this art prompted them to invent chemical means to imitate these nature induced effects, and thus the craft of chemical patination was born. Therefore, the critics, blind and self-deluded as always, believed that pure sculpture was colorless sculpture.

"Anyone who dislikes my painted sculpture as a matter of personal taste is completely within his rights; but, if he doesn't accept my coloring

cowboy art as a matter of principle rather than taste, they are showing the same intelligent insight as the Renaissance scholars — none.

"I learned about this long history only after I began my way of working. I did see Thomas Hart Benton's realistically painted waxes of cowboys and Indians which also impressed me. Russell's original painted waxes also moved me deeply. But I believe I'd have painted my sculptures without any foreknowledge of this technique — just because I want to know the color of a horse, or the shade of the shirt the rider is wearing. I don't really think a man needs any other reason!" Harry steamed.

This fierce independence pervades every aspect of Jackson's life and art. It's an independence forged by the bitter winters and blistering summers cowboying in Wyoming. It has been nurtured by every other cowboy Harry ever met or worked with. And that part of the cowboy philosophy is as much a part of his art as lost wax bronze casting or painting sculpture.

"There are no words to sum up the cowboy's life, but 'lonesome and loyal' could do for a start," he drawled in a graveling voice. "Now, lonesomeness everybody understands to some degree. But a cowboy's loyalty is hard for most people to grasp. He'll fight range fires during tinder-dry summer days, or tend half-froze cows and calves through winter and spring blizzards because he has great pride in his courage and ability to do a job with little or no help. He works that way because he *wants* to, not because he's *made* to. Matter of fact, if anybody tries to *make* him do anything, he'll pack out before morning coffee. A cowboy's brand of loyalty has to be experienced to be appreciated. And that's only one small part of the cowboy I try to capture in my art. The part of his loyalty and lonesomeness in my work helps some people understand the cowboy a little better. Sometimes it even helps cowboys appreciate themselves. I was so proud, one time, when an old stove-up cowboy stepped up during a show of my work in Riverton, Wyoming. He looked me in the eye, pumped my hand, and said, 'The last few years I've felt like I was nobody — just a two-bit piece of cordwood. But your art makes me know I'm somebody.'"

All of Jackson's art is created towards that aim — to show everybody that they're somebody. "I hate the art of despair," he insists. "My work is essentially American genre, a story-telling art about a way of life. I tell in my art of the things I know best about the cowboys, about the values I learned from them when I first worked and earned my wages with them. I can't think of anything more damned valid in the world."

Two of Harry's most important works, STAMPEDE and RANGE BURIAL, provide per-





Harry Jackson, *RANGE BURIAL*, bronze, 15 x 43 x 13. Photo courtesy of Kennedy Galleries, New York.

fect examples of his ability to combine cowboy philosophy and sculpture in "story-telling art." These two major works were originally conceived as a connected, sequential pair. In the first, a stampede of uncontrollable, spooked cattle thunder over the prairie pursued by cowboys. The second, *RANGE BURIAL*, depicts a simple burial of a young cowboy who died in pursuit of them. They are as interdependent as a two-part work of epic literature — and epic they are. Through them, he has attempted to capture, to commemorate, the heroic spirit of the legendary, open-range, trail-driving American cowboy.

Some observers have invested a mystic quality in *RANGE BURIAL* and have termed it "the ultimate visual expression of that famous cowboy ballad, **Bury Me Not On The Lone Prairie.**" But Harry's work communicates more than just mystical experiences. Many find total reality captured in his art. During Harry's early cowboying days, he rode with a man named John Grigg. Grigg probably summed up this feeling of reality best. After studying *STAMPEDE* intensely, he turned to Harry and growled, "That damned statue scared the hell outa me. How did ya do it? Ya never saw a stampede, but I have. How in hell did ya do it when ya never been close to one!"

"That's art," said Harry. Art has its own experiences.

What makes Jackson's art so vital is his ability to take an incident from the past and reproduce it in the present. His latest work, *TWO CHAMPS*, perfectly illustrates this talent. *TWO CHAMPS* is a

bronze of a bucking horse, spinning in the open, with a determined cowboy fighting to stay in the saddle. The statue commemorates the legendary battles between champion cowboy, Clayton Danks, and the world famous bucking horse, Steamboat. Danks achieved World Championships with rides on Steamboat in 1907 and 1909.

While there's no doubt Harry's greatest love lies with cowboys and the American West, he does work with other subjects. He was commissioned to do a life-sized bronze of Sor Capanna, the late Italian folk poet and singer. This statue now stands in Rome's Piazza dei Mercanti.

He has also been commissioned to do a major work for the new Fort Pitt Museum in Pittsburg. This is a large mural depicting the struggles for control of the Ohio Valley during the French and Indian War. This mural will be ready for presentation in time for the commemoration of America's 200th birthday in 1976.

Ironically, work on this mural represents something of a full circle for Jackson's work. He began his art career as a painter and initially took up sculpture to perfect his painting techniques. It was while working on paintings of *RANGE BURIAL* and *STAMPEDE* that he first began to believe that sculpture and painting could fully complement each other. Jackson worked on *RANGE BURIAL* and *STAMPEDE* for eight years. At the end of that time, he was convinced that painting and sculpture were complementary.

The career that's now culminating by blending sculpture and painting began in Chicago art

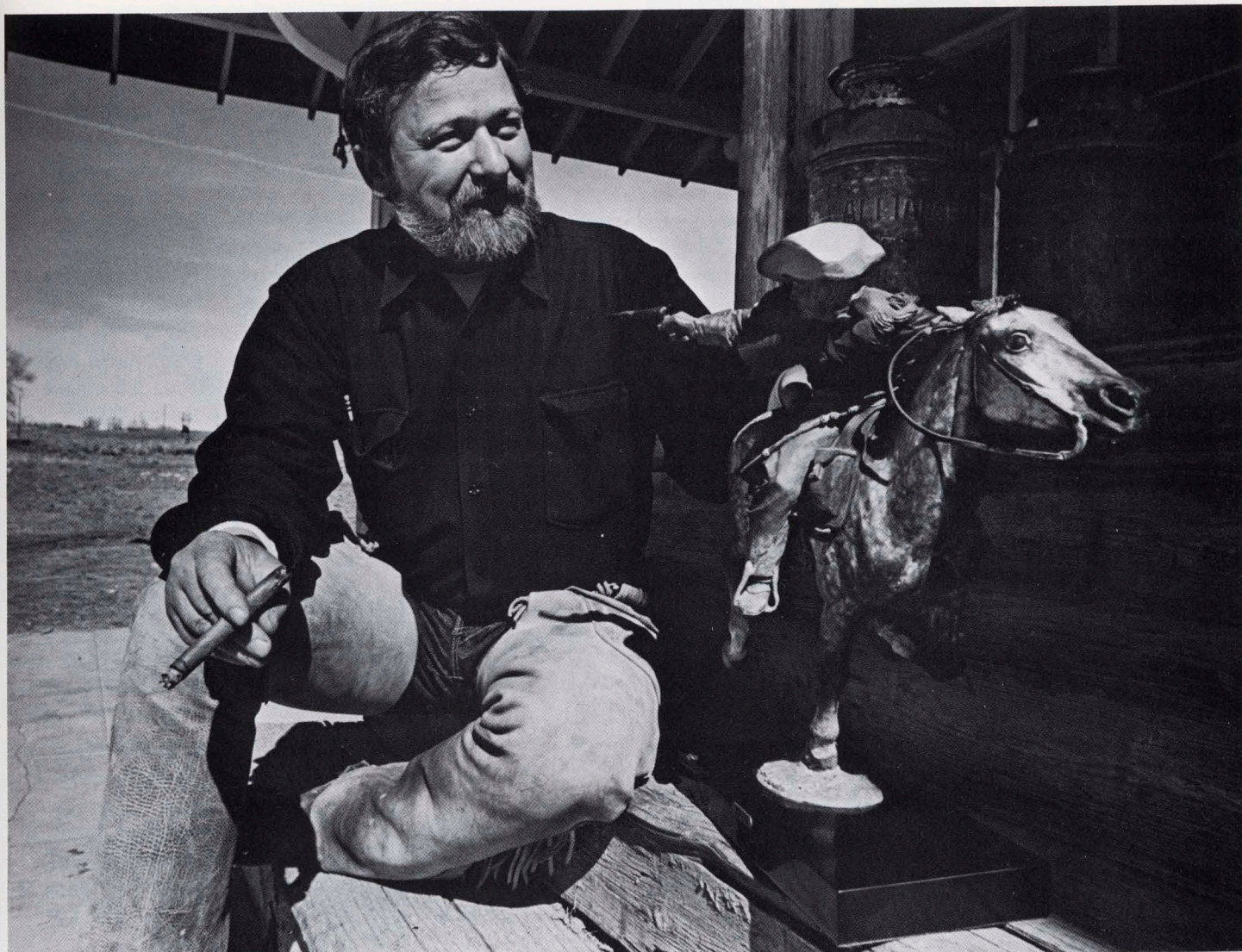
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*Harry Jackson, SALTY DOG, bronze, 10 1/4 x 5 x 4.*





Harry Jackson with PONY EXPRESS.

classes in the sixth grade. But even at that time the West held a fascination for Harry. At 14, this fascination grew into an obsession and he ran away to Wyoming. He found work on a ranch and has been some kind of cowboy ever since. He received some unexpected help in his career from World War II and the U. S. Marines. During the war he served as an Official Combat Artist. The character studies he started on war-weary Marines were perfected in his cowboys.

After his discharge, Harry traveled some and studied art a lot. He eventually settled in New York City and started his friendship with artist Jackson Pollock. During those years, he worked with, and then abandoned, abstract painting. In 1954 he made his first trip to Europe. It was while on this visit that he discovered the overwhelming sculptures and paintings of the old world masters who gave him a new direction.

The influence that Europe, particularly Italy, exerted on his life has never left Harry. But then his love for Wyoming didn't abate either. And since he couldn't choose clearly between the two,

he did what any other naturally determined artist would do, he set up residences in both places.

In order to achieve the caliber of work that he wants in his bronzes, Harry built his own foundry and now combines it with his studio and Italian home, in the manner of Renaissance workshops. He chose Italy for his foundry because it offers the best casting craftsmen in the world. He now has a crew of eleven working in his "Eastern Division" at Camaiore, some 70 miles west of Florence.

Harry's "Western Division" studio, Lost Cabin, Wyoming, is in the middle of some of the best cow range. That means that when Harry's not busy with his art, he's working at being a cowboy. To Harry Jackson, that's the best of two worlds.

And he has managed to blend the best of the two worlds together in his own art style. He has been able to fuse the nobility of the medieval mounted knight with the anonymity of the American mounted workingman and produce his lonesome and loyal cowboy. And in the process he has tied his cowboy art to the 6,000 year old art of lost wax bronze casting. ■