

The Man Who Sculpts Animals

For Francis Eustis, a mature milking Holstein is pure art

Step into Francis W. Eustis' studio, a reconverted barn in back of his house in Indian Hill, and breathe in the aroma of leather and sawdust and plaster. Here is where the nationally known animal sculptor creates his models—the best known, the different breeds of horses—many on exhibit at the Cincinnati Museum of Natural History and the Indiana State Museum.

There is Eustis, putting leather tack on a "Blacksmith's Horse," one of 30 different breeds represented in his "Horses of the World" series. A row of miniature black leather harnesses, replete with lead ropes fitted with tiny buckles, hangs from rails on the edge of a shelf. "One day last week, I made seven of these bridles, and it took me all day," Eustis says.

Creating a breed model involves considerable research, the sculptor admits. In doing the American Saddle Breed, for example, he familiarized himself with the characteristics of the breed, based on information supplied by that breed's association, then made a clay model. "After that, I visited the Dodge stables in Lexington and took my model with me. Their top trainer brought out different stallions—one with the best head, another with a good rump. I changed the clay model here and there until I came as close as possible to representing the breed."

It's no accident that Eustis, who has the stocky muscular physique of a man accustomed to physical work, is at home in the world of horse trainers and breeders. Up until 15 years ago, Eustis

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Francis Eustis at work in the painstaking process of sculpting a breed model for his "Horses of the World" series. This past year, he added the human form to his artistic repertoire, although animals remain his specialty. Lower left, Eustis' "King Tut", a limited edition of the Cincinnati Zoo's prize ape. Proceeds of the edition's sale will go toward construction of the Zoo's new ape complex. Lower right, Eustis' studio, a converted barn on his Indian Hill property



BY JANE HEIMLICH PHOTOGRAPHY BY RON FORTH

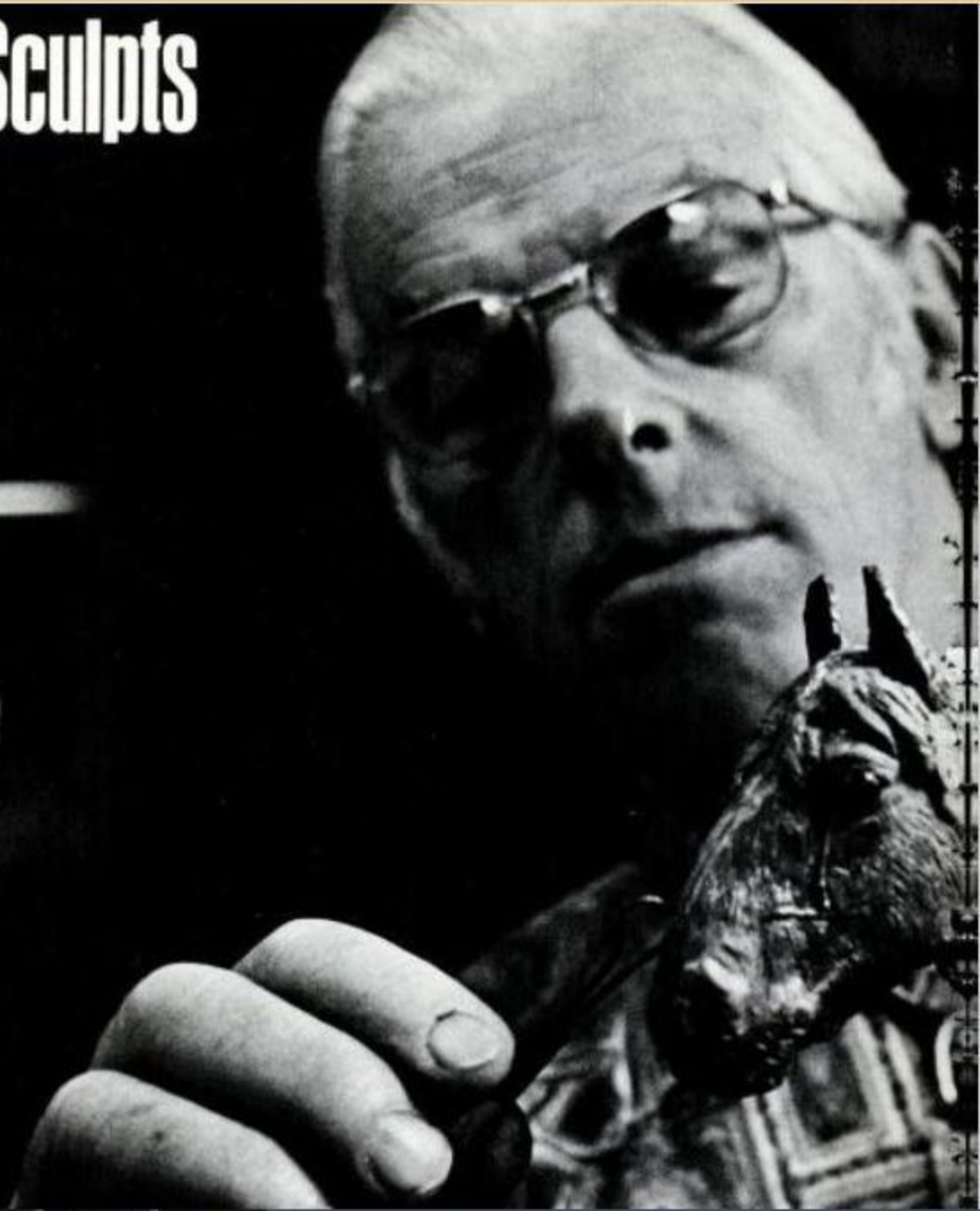


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BY JANE HEIMLICH PHOTOGRAPHS BY RON FORTH



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bred Belgians on his farm in Lebanon — (he's secretary-treasurer of the Ohio Belgian Breeders Association, a position of 30 years' duration). Before that, he raised Arabian horses, and was active in the Ohio Arabian Association.

The way in which Eustis creates an anatomically precise replica of his subject is a painstaking procedure. "First, I draw a rough outline, then, using a separate sheet of tracing paper for each step, I draw the skeleton, then the inner and outer muscles." These overlays are used as reference for the finished drawing which shows all external features of the animal.

Next, an armature (framework) is made to support the body. To assure correct proportions, Eustis cuts each bone out of cardboard and assembles these bones in sequence on wire. This completed, the four legs, bent in the position desired, are inserted into the body mass which has already been built in clay around the armature. A cardboard piece is cut out for the head.

The clay is applied to the model according to the muscular system, then refined to the correct proportions. Preferring the "creative part" of sculpting, Eustis sends his model to a studio where a master mold is made and the original clay is destroyed. From this master mold a casting is made for pouring and the reproductive casts are finished. One hundred and fifty copies of each model are cast and shipped back to Eustis' studio.

All of Eustis' models, turned out on a one-tenth scale, are made of a combination of porcelain clay and latex

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All of Eustis' models, turned out on a one-tenth scale, are made of a combination of porcelain clay and latex which requires no firing. Picking up a figure of a Wild West marshall, Eustis slammed it on the table, then set it back. Besides being light and strong, the material is virtually unbreakable, he said.

Although Eustis has had several one-man shows, the most recent in Santa Fe this past August, "I don't exhibit in art shows." Scowling, his arms folded, "Why should I subject myself to criticism from some jackass from New York who only likes modern stuff? You take a piece of steel with some nuts and bolts —" He shook his head. "I consider abstract art as a selfish expression — only the artist understands it. I believe a piece of art has to relate to the person — a waterfall, a beautiful summer evening, deer in a field."

Eustis receives letters from horse owners all over the world, each requesting a portrait of his horse. Plucking a letter, with snapshots attached, from a file folder, "this man from Vermont has an Appaloosa. I'll send him a picture of my breed model and explain that I'll personalize it in the painting process."

Picking up a model of a thoroughbred with white face markings, "Here's one I'm doing for 'Foss' Hopkins (William F., a lawyer in Indian Hill). I went up to Happy Times Farm (in Morrow, Ohio) and made drawings of his thoroughbred mare and foal. I took these," rifling through color snapshots. To make sure that face markings and colorations are accurate, "I'll run up again and take the model with me."

Although Eustis has done models of individual horses such as Dark Mirage, the thoroughbred filly of 1968, he discourages such requests. "It's too time consuming. I have to do the research, the clay work, the casting, and then I'm stuck with a model that nobody else wants." He smiled, "The price usually scares 'em off." (An individual portrait costs a minimum of \$1000 as compared to \$150 for a breed model.)

Growing up in O'Bryonville, then known as "Dutchtown," — all German and Irish, Eustis recalled — young Francis studied with art critic Mary Alexander, later attended the Yale School of Fine Arts. After working on the family dairy farm that comprised 110 acres in Indian Hill, Eustis and his bride, the former Viola Stevens, moved to Lebanon in 1937, and, within a few years, had a flourishing dairy business.

Eustis' decision, at age 25, to become a full-time farmer was a distinct departure from family tradition. Francis' grandfather, George Eustis, was head of the brokerage firm — then the oldest in the city — that bore his name. His maternal grandfather, Mordecai Morris White, was president of the Fourth National Bank.

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Money happy returns... from the

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"When I moved to Lebanon, I left all the social things," Eustis said, with a wave of his hand for emphasis. (The Eustises, however, remain in the Social Register, Cincinnati and Dayton, along with their son, Francis W. Jr.) "Now when I get together with childhood friends — I'm not interested in the stock market — it's all small talk."

Recalling the years in Lebanon operating "Breezy Ridge Farm", "a small farm was a way of life. We butchered our own animals, had a vegetable garden." Mrs. Eustis, whose father was in the dairy business in Loveland, was allergic to cows. One of his wife's chores, he said, was to wash the cows' udders with chlorine before milking. "She'd swell up."

Farming full time, Eustis had no time for art. "After working in the field, I was too tired — my mind wasn't there." In 1958, the couple sold their farm and cattle, and Eustis resolved to devote himself to art.

"I began painting animal portraits," but having always yearned to do sculpture, he became restless. While puzzling how to begin working in this new medium, he read an article in "Popular

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Science" about a Hungarian-born animal sculptor and taxidermist, Louis Paul Jonas. Eustis shot off a letter to him, and, subsequently visited Jonas at his studio in Hudson, N. Y.

"It was like going into a different world," Eustis said, eyes sparkling behind steel rimmed glasses. "This was an old cowbarn in the middle of the country. I'd never been in a studio before. There were models, taxidermy work — startings of things." Jonas, "the nicest, kindest man," invited Eustis to work with him. "I learned to make an armature, prepare clay." Pointing to a Belgian horse, his first model, "I can see what's wrong — the neck doesn't hook up to the body."

Until Jonas' death several years ago, Eustis visited the veteran sculptor twice a year, observing his work, conferring with him. "He knew wild animals — he didn't know horses." Today, all of Eustis' mold and casting work is done at the Louis Paul Jonas Studio. Here, at his studio in Indian Hill, "I do the finishing touches — grinding down the mold marks, inserting the eyes, painting, making the wood stand."

One of Eustis' current projects, as commissioned by the National Holstein Association, is a portrait of a "mature milking female". Four years ago, the same association commissioned Eustis to paint a "young milking female".

"When the committee came around, they didn't like the eye. I told them — wait til it's finished. They were satisfied."

A recently completed project is a collection of 12 models of odd-toed, hooved animals that the sculptor, vice president of the Zoological Society of Cincinnati, presented as a gift to the Cincinnati Zoo. Proceeds from sale of the models, "limited editions" of 150 copies, will be used for construction

if there were no ground under them. That's the animation I tried to catch."

In preparing his "Horses of the World" series, available at a dozen prestige stores such as Abercrombie & Fitch and Kerr's in Beverly Hills, Eustis' own horses, one a prize stallion, were useful models. "It used to be handy to run down and look at a muscle." Today, the three-stall stable contains only a neighbor's mare and colt. Visiting the stable and observing the horse, "See his hips are tilted down. If he wants to graze, he drops a leg," Eustis said, imitating the action which resembled a curtsy.

"Although there are hundreds of breeds I haven't done," Eustis isn't planning to enlarge his series of popular breeds of horses. "People don't know about them, and they're not saleable." This past year, Eustis created a "first" for him, a model of a woman — a Navajo squaw "going to the Sing", a purification ceremony. "I was a little afraid — you reach a certain perfection in art — but doing people was not as bad as I thought."

Eustis' most ambitious work is a complete model of the Budweiser eight-horse hitch. Although he worked on this for three years, "I had no formal contract." He shrugged. "I wasn't concerned — it was a project I started. I didn't sell it to Budweiser for several years."

Besides the work area in Eustis' studio, an organized clutter, there's a study, furnished with comfortable leather chairs, devoted to horse memorabilia. A bookshelf, festooned with a row of horseshoes, is crammed with books, their faded bindings, titles in graceful script, attesting to their age. Eustis took out a slim volume, read the title, "Practical Treatise on the Break-

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Modeling wild animals presents fewer problems than domestic ones, he said, because people don't know so much about them and have no sentimental attachment. He recalled the time he painted a portrait of Mrs. William Chatfield's Springer Spaniel. "I looked at the dog; he had some hairs on top of his head like a spit curl. I didn't think it was characteristic of the breed so I left it out. She was very upset."

Doing a breed model, "you can't please everybody." Holding up a model of an Arabian horse, "I took this to a State Fair; there was a lot of disagreement." Eyes glistening "If you know you're right, you've got to stick to it. I liked the leg up, bent at the knee." His expression softening, "Sometimes on a cold morning, you let the horses out of the barn. They almost float as

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In a nearby alcove, bridles once used for the sculptor's horses hang in a row, covered with plastic. Eustis pointed to a model of a bobsled and trotting horse. "I copied the miniature harness from the one hanging there."

Across the room, a display of antique brass ornaments for horses; rosettes, the hole for the plume of horse hair. "The English still use them." On another shelf, a collection of gleaming "drops", a circular medal to protect horse and driver from the evil eye, he said; "the swinging catches the light and distracts the Devil."

A print of desert sheiks mounted on Arabian horses prompted me to ask Eustis whether he had done much travelling.

"I never had the time. I'd like to go around the world and look at horses." Looking off, "I'd want to go alone — spend a half hour looking at a horse in a pasture without someone nudging me."