Portrait of a Thoroughbred

BY SHERRY CHAYAT

WHEN IT comes to capturing the beauty and strength of a champion thoroughbred racehorse on canvas, two artists stand out: George Stubbs and Richard Stone Reeves.

Stubbs lived in England during the 18th century. Reeves, a 1941 graduate of the School of Art, is alive today, continuing a commemorative tradition that began centuries ago.

Those who know horses know Richard Stone Reeves. Prominent horse owners in the United States and throughout the world commission Reeves repeatedly to paint their champion thoroughbreds. He travels regularly to places such as England, Italy, France, and Canada to create formal portraits. He has painted more winners of international classics than any artist in the history of the sports art.

Recently Sheik Mohammed of Dubai commissioned Reeves to paint his champion filly Oh So Sharp. Prince Aga Khan is also an avid collector of Reeves's work; he has commissioned the artist to paint 15 portraits, including that of English Derby winner Shah Rastani.

Vincent O'Brien, one of the world's leading trainers of thoroughbreds, is among the many horse owners who regularly commission Reeves. Others include H. J. Joel, whose horse Royal Palace won the 1967 English Derby; Mr. and Mrs. Mickey Taylor, owners of Triple Crown winner Seattle Slew; and Mr. and Mrs. Louis E. Wolfson, owners of Affirmed, the last horse to win the Triple Crown.

Reeves has painted for E. P. Taylor, owner of Northern Dancer, who won the Kentucky Derby, the Preakness, and the Queen's Plate in 1964; and John W. Galbreath, whose stables have produced champions such as Swaps, winner of the 1955 Derby, and Chateaugay, winner of the Derby and the Belmont Stakes in 1963.

Even the Queen of England has a work by Reeves. When President Reagan made a state visit to England in 1982, he presented Queen Elizabeth II with a limited edition of Reeves's book Decade of Champions. On the frontispiece, Reeves painted an original watercolor of the Queen's horse, Dunfermline. It depicted the horse's victory over Alleged in the 1977 St. Leger at Doncaster.

"No more fortunate circumstance could befall a horse's moment in history than that his owner have the taste to commission a portrait by Richard Stone Reeves," writes the editor of The Blood-Horse magazine, Edward L. Bowen.

I WAS BROUGHT UP ON Long Island," says Reeves, "and my mother's family owned trotters. I grew up around the racetrack. I was in love with horses from the beginning.

"In my teens, I'd bring jockeys to our country club in Garden City, much to the dismay of the more stuffy members."

Reeves's specialty as an artist grew naturally from his love of horses, which flourished when his uncle, Edward E. Buhler, brought him to his first horse race. At an auction that same uncle purchased a horse that became the legendary Man O'War.

"This happens in racing all the time," Reeves says. "You may have a seemingly nondescript horse. Then he'll win a race. If youtrace back long enough, you may find a Man O'War in his pedigree."

Reeves's love for art started early too. "I was the third of four children," he says, "and I'm told I was the most active of them all . . . When I was around five or six, my mother got the idea of giving me a pad and pencil to keep me quiet."

His talent may also be linked to his ancestors. Reeves is a direct descendant of Thomas Sully, the celebrated 19th-century portrait painter. Among those whom Sully painted were Queen Victoria and George Washington.

"I grew up knowing about him," Reeves says of his ancestor, "but what talent
there was lay dormant for many generations. I was the first artist in the family, 100 years later.

"Both my parents saw my potential," says Reeves, "and knew the importance of education. It was difficult enough to be a painter, they told me, let alone a painter of racehorses. They said they’d back me up with the best education I could get, and that was at Syracuse University."

Reeves’s career began after he returned from China, where he was stationed during World War II. He showed Lieutenant Commander Robert G. Johnson—his colleague during the war and president of Roosevelt Raceway—a portrait he had painted of a famous trotter. Johnson bought the work and commissioned five more for the director’s room at the racetrack.

Not long afterward, Reeves was commissioned by J. Samuel Perlman, publisher of the Daily Racing Form and Morning Telegraph, to paint the winner of the newspapers’ annual poll for Horse of the Year. It became a tradition for the next 17 years.

After Reeves painted Armed, the 1947 Horse of the Year, Life magazine reproduced the painting on a full page in color. That, of course, brought Reeves to the attention of racehorse owners everywhere.

O DAY REEVES’S WORK is in demand more than ever. He credits his popularity to his ability to capture a horse’s personality in a portrait.

"The first thing I look for is a horse’s overall appearance, his configurations and little idiosyncrasies," Reeves says. "Some horses hold their heads high, while others look lethargic and carry their heads low, even when they run.

"Then I look for specific conformations—whether they’re long or tall and leggy. I make extensive notes and do rough sketches on the spot; I take photographs and do a number of color studies. I want to know all I can about the horse."

The painting doesn’t begin until Reeves returns to his home, a 20-acre farm among the rolling hills of Hunterdon County in western New Jersey.

For every painting Reeves has created, he has a story to tell about the horse. "Some of those horses are really mean," he says. "You can’t get too near. John Henry, who’s a leading money winner, has probably the worst disposition of any I’ve painted. He won’t let anyone but his groom near him without biting. He’s not a good-looking horse either, but he’s a running machine."

One of the most congenial horses Reeves has ever painted is Secretariat, who first posed in 1973, after winning the Triple Crown. "I did a print after the painting, in an edition limited to 850," Reeves says. "They sold for $325 each then. Now they’re getting $2,500 each."

The artist and the record-setting champion came together again earlier this year. "I did a painting and another limited edition print of him walking in a pasture," Reeves says. "Secretariat is 17, but people haven’t forgotten him."

Reeves’s ability to expertly render a horse’s personality and physical characteristics distinguishes his work from that of less prominent sports artists. The paintings are portraits of individual horses, not generalized depictions of a species. Equally significant in a Reeves portrait is the rendering of the landscapes in which the horses are depicted.

"Many artists of the 19th century loved the racetrack because of the beauty of the horses and their movement," he says.

"Nowadays, a lot of artists who have made their living in commercial art for years have turned to painting racehorses; they know there’s a lot of money to be made," he adds. "Unfortunately, some of them don’t understand horses or their anatomy. They’re in it for the market, but usually the top owners see the difference."

O BVIOUSLY, SOMEONE sees the difference, for Reeves’s career is still reaching new heights. His work has been documented in four books:
Thoroughbreds I Have Known, Classic Lines, Decade of Champions, and The Golden Post. The latter, published in 1985, was produced in a leather-bound edition of 2,000. All four of Reeves’s books sold out their initial printings.

Reeves was further recognized for his work in April, when 21 of his paintings and drawings of thoroughbred champions were exhibited at the Kentucky Derby Museum concurrently with the running of this year’s Derby.

The Derby exhibition is just further proof of Reeves’s enviable position in the age-old tradition of thoroughbred portraiture.

"Not often is one fortunate enough to earn a living doing something he enjoys most," Reeves wrote in Thoroughbreds I Have Known. "I am one of those lucky people."