



Lawrence Tenney Stevens, sketch for proposed Pony Express monument, c. 1934, graphite on paper, approx. 15" x 55"

Longstanding Remington Mystery Solved?

by John Faubion

It's a mystery that has long puzzled devotees of Frederic Remington (1861-1909): Given his knowledge of the horse, and his penchant for historical detail and accuracy in his artwork, why did his illustration for the December 1, 1888, issue of *Harper's Weekly*, titled *A Peccary Hunt in Northern Mexico*, depict a horse - and the fleeing pig-like peccary - in the "rocking horse" pose that was widely known to be unrealistic?

This question was given new life earlier this year at the Ninth Biennial Symposium presented by The University of Oklahoma and The Charles M. Russell Center for the Study of Art of the American West. There, scores of the nation's top scholars in the field of Western art gathered in the auditorium of the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art in Norman, Oklahoma, to hear, and query, esteemed guest speakers whose essays form **Frederic Remington: A Catalogue Raisonné II**, the newly revised book published by the University of Oklahoma Press.

The rocking horse question inspired some discussion that favored the opinion that the use of this pose - in which all four legs are typically off the ground with the front legs extended fully forward and the hind legs extended fully rearward - is an example of one of Remington's artistic oversights. In other words: Remington goofed. However, my research in the archives of artist Lawrence Tenney Stevens (1896-1972), informs an alternative opinion that may help put the issue to rest.

The 1888 Harper's publication date is central to the rocking horse issue. Because about ten years earlier, pioneering photographer Eadweard Muybridge received international acclaim for his groundbreaking high-speed photos showing a horse in motion. For the first time, artists had proof that the rocking horse pose was not an accurate depiction of a galloping horse. In his 1936 book **Animal Painting and Anatomy**, English painter W. Frank Calderon (1865-1943), wrote of the Muybridge photos: "The one thing that stands out clearly above all others is that nowhere is there to be found anything to account for the old rocking horse attitude, which has been such a favourite pose adopted by artists in the past to simulate a galloping horse."

Calderon presumed these artists had wanted to realistically portray the horse in motion but were, for some reason, incapable of it. While this may be true in some cases, tens of thousands of years ago early man was depicting animal gaits in cave art with remarkable accuracy. An exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History titled: **Freeze Frame: Eadweard Muybridge's Photography of Motion** (Oct. 2, 2000 - March 15, 2001), addressed this issue: "In comparing artistic representations of animal movement against the actual movements of those animals, a group of Hungarian researchers found that, out of all the pre-Muy-

bridge era artwork they studied, prehistoric cave paintings were the most accurate." When I asked one of the world's foremost authorities on cave art,

Jean Clottes, Ph.D., to expand on this, he replied: "A major difference between them [our early ancestors] and later artists is that they constantly lived among animals. It thus seems quite normal that they should know them inside and out and depict them accurately when the need arose." Clearly, man has long possessed the powers of observation required to discern that the rocking horse pose is not an accurate reflection of how horses, and other animals, move. Yet, at some point, artists made a conscious decision to adopt it.

Curiosity about a drawing found in the archives of Lawrence Tenney Stevens led to answers about why some artists, Remington likely among them, have used the pose. The drawing, c.1934, shows Stevens's plan for a bas-relief scene to adorn one side of the

base that was to support his proposed equestrian monument to the Pony Express. It was drawn in the simplified style that Stevens had adopted after his visit to Egypt shortly after the 1922 discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb. And, like items unearthed from the tomb, it included examples of a variety of animals in the rocking horse pose. Asked why, Stevens's widow, Bea, thirty years his junior (now 90 years of age), offered these answers: 1) Though unrealistic, the rocking horse pose is one of the most artistically appealing ways to depict an animal in rapid motion, particularly in the context of the campiness and bravado of the art of the American West. 2) Its long tradition has established an expectation that this is how horses and other animals running at high speed are supposed to look (as angels in art are expected to have any combination of auras, halos, and wings). 3) Such stylistic choices help distinguish a fine artist from an illustrator, the latter being a distinction Stevens did not want.

So, was Remington's use of the rocking horse pose an oversight? No. He aspired to overcome criticism that he was an illustrator and not a fine artist. He made a deliberate stylistic, and campy, choice consistent with the subtle humor of the rest of his illustration. Mystery solved?

John Faubion has researched, written, and lectured about Lawrence Tenney Stevens since 1995. He was award-winning co-curator of a major 1996 Stevens retrospective exhibition at the Tempe Historical Museum in Arizona. His discoveries in the Stevens archives contributed to the preservation efforts of the 1936 Dallas Centennial Fair site, and led to the recreation of three of Stevens's monumental sculptures there. He is writing a book about Stevens and is planning related exhibitions for 2016 and beyond. He established the Western column in the Journal of the Print World and welcomes your feedback and suggestions for future articles.

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Frederic Remington, (1861-1909)
"A Peccary Hunt in Northern Mexico,"
 published as black and white halftone in December 1, 1888,
 edition of Harper's Weekly, (this copy later hand-colored) 11" x 15.5"