

≈ ART ≈

OUR ICONIC BREED TOWERS IN THE PUBLIC SCULPTURE “TRAIL SCOUT”

Artist Maretta Kennedy draws inspiration from her Morgan background to illustrate history.

By Kim Oplotnik

Rising into the azure sky above the midwestern plains grass is a Maretta Kennedy original, a portrait in bronze of a historic, local personality. It also happens to be a tribute by the artist to the Morgan breed she loves.

A 14-foot-tall sculpture of James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok atop a high-strid-

ing horse sits prominently along the Shawnee Mission Parkway in Kansas. The original concept for the large bronze statue was recommended by renowned Shawnee artist Charles Goslin. He nominated Maretta to execute it.

In the sculpture, titled “Trail Scout,” the man sits astride Black Nell, a horse mentioned in historical accounts of Hickok’s



Artist Maretta Kennedy with her Fleetwing statue in the clay phase.

exploits. The rider is holding the reins in one hand while waving his hat with the other. The inspiration, written records, and the artist’s intuition all put a Morgan horse under the famed horseman.

Maretta Kennedy draws on her hands-on experience in the horse world, specifically her ties to the Morgan breed, for her artistic motivation. It is a “life illustrates art” kind of relationship.

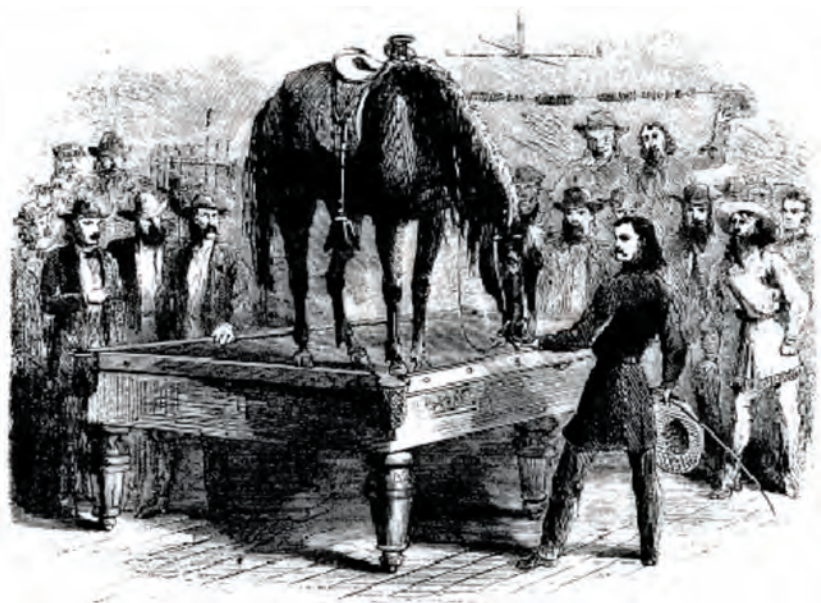
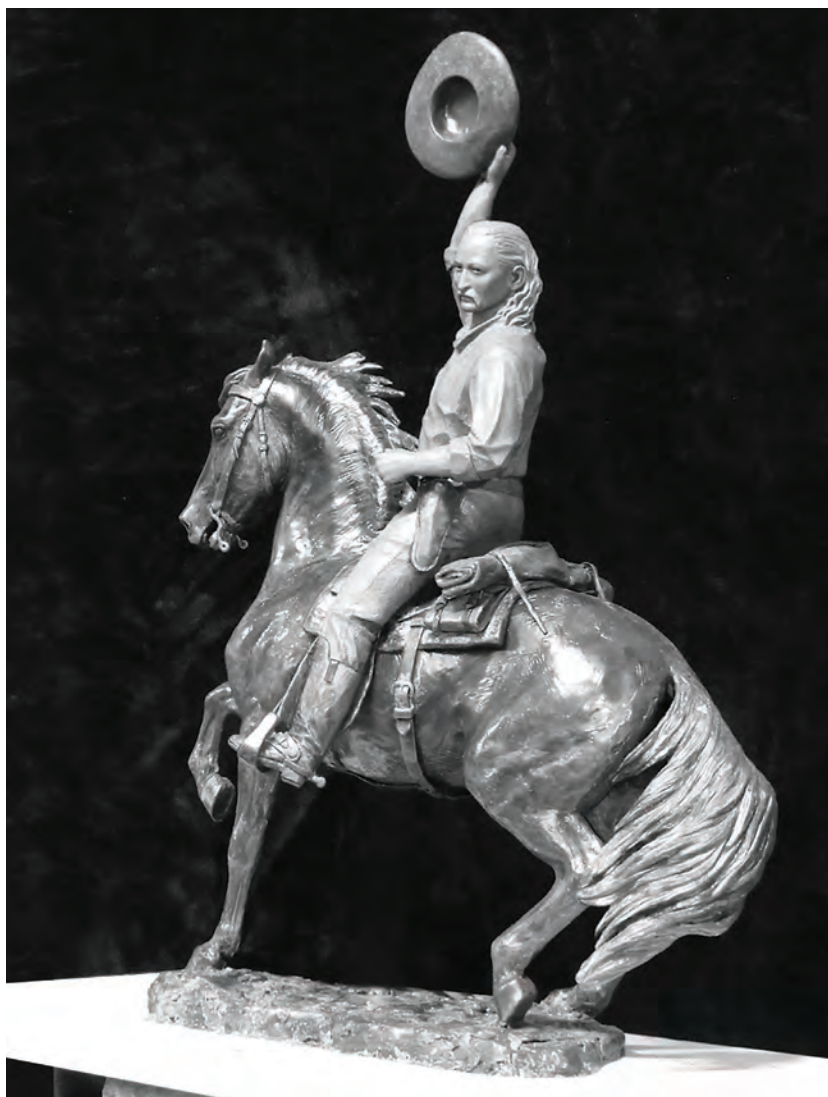
Maretta fell in love with riding at the age of four after riding a pony named Sugar at the zoo. By the age of nine her parents bought Maretta her own pony. Around the same time, Maretta entered a horse-drawing contest, which she won. “I was always horse crazy, so they have always been a big artistic theme. Horses were always there. Growing up, I was constantly drawing and doodling to the point that it was a nervous habit. I got to know [Morgan artist] Jeanne Mellin Herrick and she was a doodler as well.” As Maretta’s relationship with Jeanne developed so did her admiration. “I attempted to emulate her drawing and painting skill when I was younger. We traded art a few years ago. The painting she made for me of a gray Morgan is a prized possession, my only ‘grab-it-on-the-way-out-if-the-house-in-on-fire’ object.”

Maretta’s passion for Morgans began when she studied Equine Science at the University of Minnesota, where Lyle Wick was the head of the department and an instructor. “There were a lot of Morgans in the program,” Maretta recalls. “We were paired with a horse to oversee and take care of. Lyle put me with Wil-O-Mor Spitfire.

“I got to work Spitfire and show him. I just loved his beauty combined with the power and personality that he oozed. I fell in love with that horse and Morgans because of him. You just about couldn’t get a better example of an old, park Morgan. He is always in the back of my mind and has been very inspirational.”

After college, Maretta assisted at Tanglewood Manor in Princeton, Minnesota, with romance novelist Kathleen Woodiwiss and Pierre Loiselle. “I got to work with some great horses like Heart To Heart, LCS Wild Mariah, and Trophy’s Lucky Lad. It was wonderful to work under Pierre. My interest and love for Morgans only increased while at Tanglewood,” Maretta says. Minnesota led her to Wisconsin where Maretta worked for Jackie Sweeney and cared for Christmas Hymn and Serenity Flight Time.

From there, Maretta opened a training barn with Andy Marlett, and after a few years, she moved to Colorado to be closer to family. The move led her to an assistant position with Bob Kellert and Mary Cockriel at The River’s Edge. Maretta remembers



TOP TO BOTTOM: Beginning design stages of the “Trail Scout” sculpture of Wild Bill Hickok aboard Black Nell; Black Nell & Wild Bill Hickok illustration from *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, February 1867.

ART ≈ OUR ICONIC BREED TOWERS IN THE PUBLIC SCULPTURE “TRAIL SCOUT”



MORGAN AWARDS

TOP TO BOTTOM: Mareta Kennedy has designed numerous trophies, medallions, and décor for both the American Morgan Horse Association and Morgan Grand National, including the AMHA Broodmare Hall of Fame branding statue entitled *MINE* and the inductee medallions, the AMHA Breeder's Award, and the Morgan Grand National World Championship trophies and performance ring decorations.



NOTABLE BRONZES

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The first sculpture of a person and a buggy created by Maretta was of Francis Pugh driving her home-bred, raised, and trained Tara’s War Eagle GCH, winning World Champion Amateur Classic Pleasure Driving; Life-size bronze of World Champion Park Saddle Treble’s First Take created for Dawn Montgomery, with a second statue created for breeder Carol Hudson (photo © Howard Schatzberg); bronze maquette of Justin Morgan and Figure modeled after Marguerite Henry’s famous book “Justin Morgan Had a Horse”; World Champion Bazinga as a weanling created in bronze for Peggy Alderman and displayed at her Salem Farm (photo © Heidi Osgood-Metcalf).

“trying to be a groom and people wanting me to be an assistant. I absolutely love horses and love taking care of them. I love putting people and horses in the ring, but I didn’t have a huge desire myself to show or train. I had more fun helping get everyone else in the ring than being in there myself.”

Although Maretta enjoyed working at The River’s Edge, she says, “I knew I didn’t want to be a horse trainer and I didn’t want to be a groom all my life. I wanted to pursue my art.” The next move brought Maretta to Kansas with the intention of doing just that.

She says, “I had painted and drawn commissioned artwork of

horses, but I have always been curious with how things are made, so that led me to the three-dimensional work and bronze. I enjoy the process of recreating things, in particular horses. I said yes to the first people who asked me to do a bronze.”

David and Cindy Vogel’s stallion Chandel Absolut was the first Morgan to be immortalized in a bronze sculpture by Maretta. She recalls the experience, explaining “I’ve always been kind of fearless when it comes to art. I don’t think there’s anything I can’t do. I didn’t really know what I was getting into, but I proceeded. I loved the horses and everyone at The River’s Edge. I really do believe it

ART ≈ OUR ICONIC BREED TOWERS IN THE PUBLIC SCULPTURE “TRAIL SCOUT”



MARETTA AT WORK

TOP TO BOTTOM: World Champion Bada Bing as a foal being sculpted in the clay stage; Maretta atop Ultra's Formal Request making the welds invisible by "chasing"; Maretta welding the Trail Scout sculpture.

was serendipitous. It was at that time that I realized I really wanted to concentrate on my art and when I turned my attention to it, everything just fell into place.”

Maretta brought her sculpture of Chandel Absolut to a newly-established foundry in Kansas City to be cast in bronze. They were so impressed with her talent that they offered her a job. “That’s really where I learned sculpture,” Maretta says. “The process is complex, and you work on other artist’s work. I learned a lot from great artists through a very hands-on environment. It was a great experience.”

Most sculptors let the foundry take over the final casting and patina stages after a clay sculpture has been submitted. Maretta chose to approach it differently, “I learned to do everything working in the foundry and because of that, I can do all the work, from the beginning clay sculpture to the finished, patinaed piece. It would be like having someone else finish a piece for me. It’s a big part of my process. I solder all the equipment on myself and fabricate everything myself. I can do it and it would be an exercise in frustration for me to tell someone else how to do something. I am completely hands on from start to finish.”

Working in the foundry also afforded Maretta the ability to self-finance commissioned pieces. “Bronze is an expensive medium. And I am grateful to Bob and Mary, they helped promote me quite a bit.”

Maretta’s first life-size Morgan creation was for Gail Bratz of her World Champion Mare Ultra’s Formal Request. “I look back now, and I barely had done any bronze at that point so the fact that Gail trusted me was really something. My years grooming gave me all these imprinted memories, moving around a horse, remembering curves and muscles and the way a body is built. I noticed that I could feel if things were right or wrong because of having had my hands on horses so much.”

As commissions increased, so did Maretta’s reputation for high-quality, true-to-life artwork. “I became known in the Kansas City area for the pieces I created of horses. There was an older sculptor named Charles Goslin and he had done a lot of work in the area of historical Western-themed artwork. He proposed this project to create a Wild Bill Hickok statue. Goslin was nearing 90 at the time. He tried to start it, but it never got going. He chose me to takeover and do the sculpture.” Having worked with Goslin at the foundry, Maretta’s expertise in bronze and sculpting horses were obvious credentials for the project.

The original Wild Bill Hickok proposal was a companion piece to a relief sculpture of a wagon train at the nearby Pioneer Crossing Park in Shawnee, Kansas. The Hickok piece would be positioned to appear as if he is waving at the wagon train with his hat. In Goslin’s imagination, Hickok was to be depicted atop his mount of the time, Black Nell. It was Maretta who chose to make Black Nell in the form a Morgan. “I knew the American history of the period. Morgans came West, Morgans were cavalry horses, they pulled wagon trains. Morgans were farm horses, they were all-purpose horses,” Maretta stressed.

“I went searching for evidence of what I suspected to be true.” According to the All Breed Pedigree website, there are ten registered horses with the name Black Nell. Six have birth dates associated with their listing. “The Morgan foaled in 1855, by Rolla

ART OUR ICONIC BREED TOWERS IN THE PUBLIC SCULPTURE “TRAIL SCOUT”



Maretta and her niece, Katie Long, have enjoyed showing Maximum Pepper under the direction of Shaughnessy Morris. Katie won the 2015 Western Pleasure 13 & Under World Championship with the gelding (photos © Howard Schatzberg).

Morgan, would fit the time frame,” Marretta points out.

Maretta also communicated with Dar Wujek, executive director of the Illinois Mendota Museum & Historical Society, who spoke with a local Hickok historian with connections to the family. “Some of the members of the Hickok family stated that [Wild Bill] did indeed ride a Morgan horse, but not all agree on that. What is even more interesting is that Wild Bill’s oldest brother, Oliver, who traveled to the California gold rush in the 1850s, was not successful at finding gold but became a horse breeder. He was instrumental in introducing the Morgan breed in California, according to family history.”

In the February 1867 Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, written by George Ward Nichols, a description of Black Nell jumping up on a pool table at Hickok’s command was published along with an etching of the event. It reads, “Bill whistled in a low tone. Nell instantly scrambled to her feet, walked toward him, put her nose affectionately under his arm, followed him into the room, and to my extreme wonderment climbed upon the billiard table, to the extreme astonishment of the table, no doubt, for it groaned under the weight of the four-legged animal and several of those who were simply bifurcated, and whom Nell permitted to sit upon her. When she got down from the table, which was as graceful a performance as might be expected under the circumstances, Bill sprang upon her back, dashed through the high, wide doorway, and at a single bound cleared the flight of steps and landed in the middle of the street.”

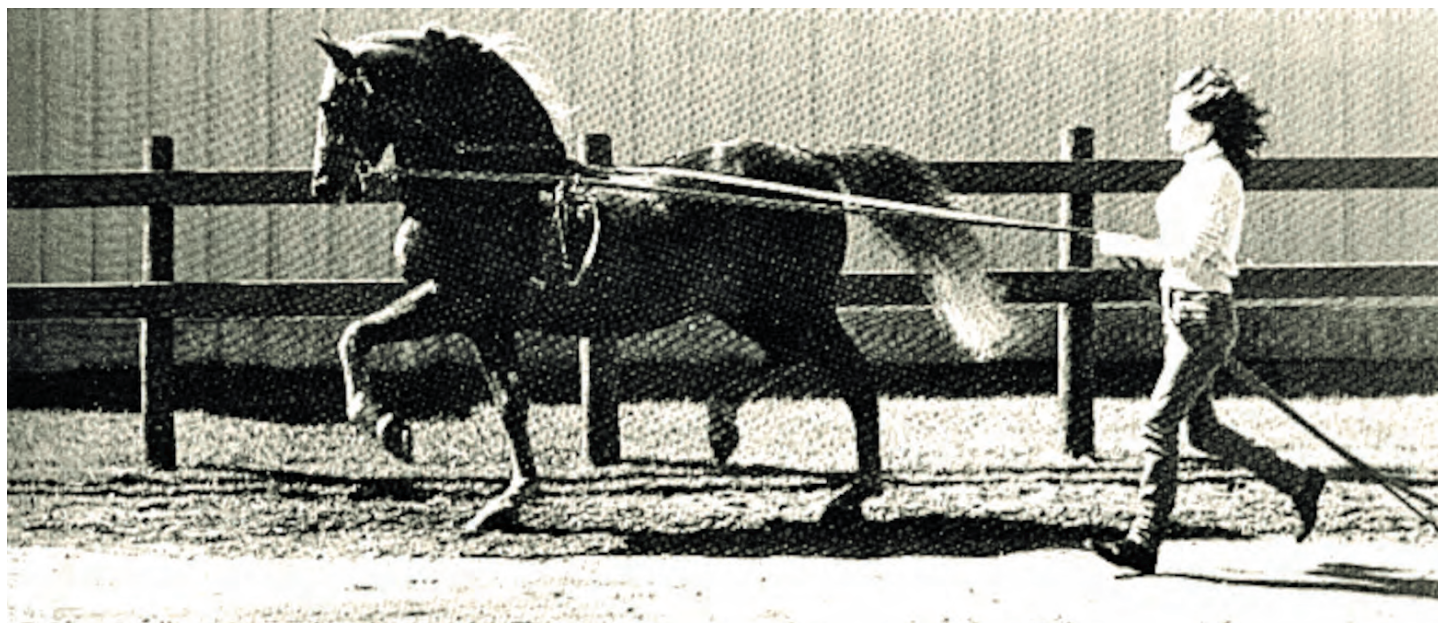
“The mare in the Harper’s Weekly tale sounded like a Morgan to me,” Maretta says. “Smart, kind, and goofy. How Morgans are. And you can’t deny the Morgan resemblance in the etching. I went

looking for the Morgan in her [Black Nell]. I believe I found enough evidence that it’s quite possible. In talking with Charles Goslin, I gave him a book, *America’s Own—A Celebration of America and It’s Horse*, about the history of Morgans in every state because he was a history buff. He really liked the idea of Black Nell being a Morgan. I had his blessing to go ahead with the horse being modeled as a Morgan. Morgans are my breed. I am always trying to help them be seen in a good light. Anytime I can promote them, I do.”

The entire process of creating “Trail Scout,” from start to finish, took a little over two years. “Wild Bill is very detailed and it’s a portrait. There’s a lot of equipment, from his saddle bags to his two Colt Navy revolvers, there are a lot of fine details. It was more than just sculpting a horse,” Maretta explains.

Maretta did extensive historical research to ensure that Civil War reenactors and history buffs who would examine the piece would be pleased with the product. “I could just hear someone saying I had the wrong knife or pistol. Hickok used the McClellan saddle, so I studied that. I went to gun stores and did a lot of research to make sure I had things right. Where I took a little artistic license is in Hickok. He is depicted as a younger man than when he was leading wagon trains out West.”

Because of the larger-than-life scale, Maretta could not just take molds of an old boot, stirrup, or other artifacts, she had to sculpt everything as close to historically accurate as possible. Wild Bill and Black Nell were sculpted separately, both for the small prototypes and for the final project. Maretta describes the process of joining the separate parts into one sculpture, explaining “I would put



Hickok and Black Nell together and make adjustments then take him off the horse. There is a lot of assembly and disassembly in the clay phase—where the figures are smaller—to make everything fit.”

The assembly and disassembly continued when the pieces were enlarged. “I had a hoist that I would [use to] lift Wild Bill up and down onto Nell. I worked with scaffolding. The large clay model of Black Nell is constructed of steel pipe and foam inside. Black Nell was on a steel platform with wheels so I could move her and change positions under the hoist. There is a lot of moving around to get everything perfect.”

The finalization of the project came to a halt during the nation’s civil unrest due to the George Floyd protests. “We were concerned the sculpture could get taken down. But then it became interesting. Wild Bill’s parents were a stop on the Underground Railroad as they transported escaping slaves. Bill and his brothers took part on those routes.” An online biography indicates Wild Bill served the Union Army as a scout and was believed to be a Union spy in the Confederate Army. After research, the project was green lighted and, Maretta says, “I was allowed to con-

tinue on to finish it.”

Charles Goslin passed away just two days before the 2,300-pound statue was unveiled to the public on January 24, 2023. “He had seen photos of the sculpture, but died before getting a chance to see it in person. Because of his age and with COVID, I wasn’t able to interact with him much,” Maretta said in an article with the Shawnee Mission Post. “That’s unfortunate, but I believe he was happy with it.”

After beating a 2021 cancer diagnosis, which affected the production of the Trail Scout sculpture, Maretta is looking forward to future endeavors involving her Morgan connections. A newly purchased parade saddle will hopefully adorn her homebred mare, Precious Metal. “It’s my goal to show in parade at Grand National, partly in honor of Arthur Perry Jr. who was an early and frequent patron. Parade too because it looks ridiculously fun and no cantering. I can’t always tell what lead I’m on,” Maretta giggles. “I also wanted something to look forward to after fighting cancer. Thankfully my health is great now.” Maretta and her works are chiefly prized because of their rarity—our own precious metals of the breed. ■



TOP TO BOTTOM: Maretta drew artistic inspiration from Wil-O-Mor Spitfire (pictured here with Maretta long-lining the horse) after working with him as a student at the University of Minnesota. That inspiration is reflected in the completed Trail Scout statue of Wild Bill Hickok aboard Black Nell (photo © Barbara Sullivan).

RESOURCES

- Allbreed Pedigree, www.allbreedpedigree.com
- Biography, www.biography.com
- Hammill, Roxie. “The Story Behind Shawnee’s New Statue of Wild Bill Hickok.” Shawneemissionpost.com. January 26, 2023. <https://shawneemissionpost.com/2023/01/26/shawnee-wild-bill-hickok-statue-192356/>.