

# Passion from His Pencil:

## AMISH FINE ARTIST ANDY MAST



by VIRGINIA  
PERRY DAFFRON,  
STAFF WRITER

The cowboy is exhausted. Shoeing horses is a side job he does at night to make ends meet. He has been working all day long, and now his back is aching with exhaustion. You can see how tired he is in his posture, his bowed head.

But the horse is full of life, strength and peace. In the darkness, his neck wraps around the cowboy, protecting and supporting him in his time of struggle.

The horse's eye is the true heart of the picture, expressing profound energy, comfort and support.

As Andy Mast explains the story behind his graphite drawing *A Long Day*, the profound symbolism of his art comes into focus. What at first appears to be a straightforward depiction of a traditional way of life revolving around horses begins to reveal itself as a visual metaphor for Andy's personal and professional journey.

### A UNIQUE PATH

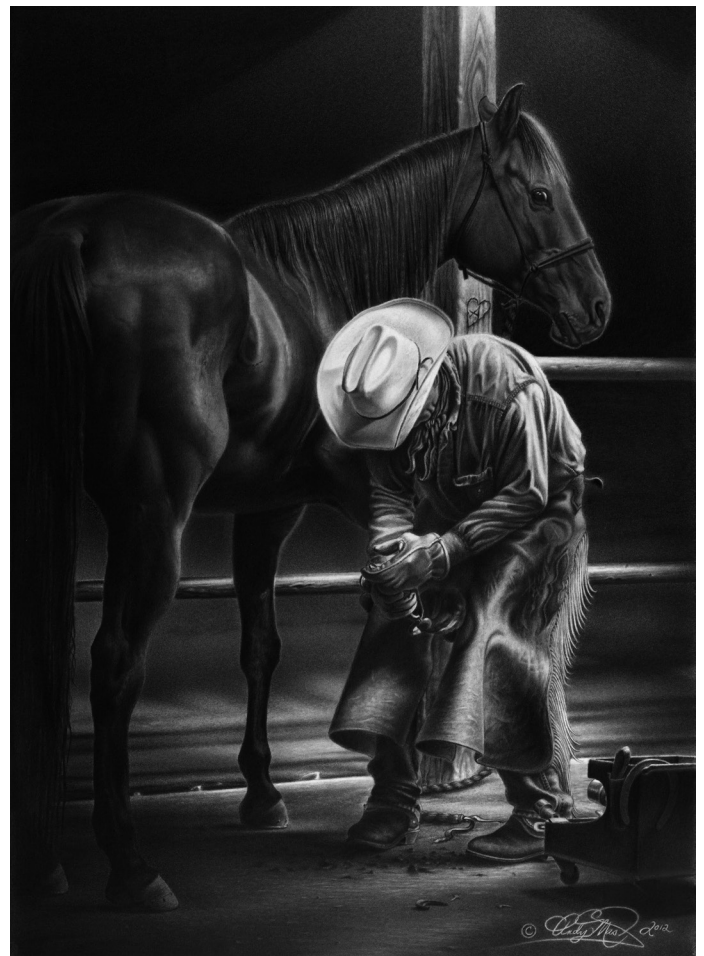
Growing up as one of five children in an Amish farm family in rural Illinois, Andy loved to draw from the first time he picked up a pencil. He remembers looking forward to art in school and thinking that, someday, he would make his living as an artist.

Trouble was, he didn't know any professional fine artists. He didn't even know anyone who knew a professional artist. As a teenager, I craved leadership and critique for my artwork. Amish people are very creative and excel at a wide variety of arts and crafts, but there was no one in my community with a background in the fine arts, explains Andy.

Even after leaving school, Andy continued to draw. After a full day working in the fields on his family's farm, he would sit and draw late into the night. At seventeen, he began working at a part-time job with an Amish enterprise and still he continued to draw. But he began to see that the demands of daily life and adult responsibilities might soon make it difficult for him to find the time and quiet he needed to make art.

### A TURNING POINT

On January 19, 2009, Andy suffered a serious head injury while leading a horse to pasture at his family's farm. He was taken by air ambulance to a major hospital in St. Louis, MO, for trauma treatment. Although it is still unclear exactly how the accident happened, the results were devastating. Though Andy did not sustain permanent brain damage, he continued to experience physical symptoms through a long period of poor health. His progress was far from steady, and he remembers the years following the accident as a dark and difficult time.



Andy Mast's award-winning graphite drawing *A Long Day* is an allegory for his struggle to regain his health after a serious accident.





Andy's drawing *Best Friends* is another highly personal picture using places, animals and tack owned by family and friends to convey a message of optimism for the future.

By 2012, the formerly healthy young man weighed only 115 pounds. His diminished strength made it impossible for him to perform most farm duties and to participate fully in the life of his Amish community.

Once a beloved hobby, drawing became Andy's refuge and solace, providing him a way to both express his despair and to see hope beyond it. At his lowest point, when he couldn't even muster the energy to draw, Andy found the process of conceptualizing and composing his drawing *A Long Day* profoundly therapeutic. Over a year and a half in the making, the work required 260 hours at the drawing board.

## A SLOW RECOVERY

As Andy's body and spirits continued along the long road toward health, a new picture emerged from his pencil.

At 24"x 30" *Best Friends* is Andy's largest work to date, and it expresses his sense of emerging from the darkness (represented by the wooden barn) into the hope of a bright day filled with light streaming from the sky. In front of the barn, a horse and a dog wait together, looking into the future with calmness and hope. On the right side of the picture, space stretches out before the pair, open and endless.

In addition to its symbolism, *Best Friends* is an intensely personal picture which demonstrates Andy's ideas about the importance of details. The barn belongs to a friend in Illinois, but its surface is different from what is seen in the finished work. Andy added the fine wood grain from his own imagination.

"Details are not in my picture for the sake of decoration," Andy explains, "but rather, to express my belief that everything is made of details. To see the truth of something,



*□To see the truth  
of something,  
we need to see the  
details within it.□*

we need to see the details within it. That allows us to understand that the truth is deeper than just what we see on the surface. Small details make a difference, sometimes even the difference between life and death.

The horse and saddle in the picture belong to Andy's brother, who trains horses full-time. At first, the scene was composed with a newer and fancier saddle, but Andy eventually realized that it didn't feel right. He asked his brother to let him photograph a trusty old saddle which still sees daily use. Since Andy does not use computers or projectors to compose his work, he painstakingly resized the saddle to fit the scale of the picture. The results were worth the effort because Andy loves the feeling of wear and tradition the old saddle conveys.

*Best Friends* represents over 320 hours at the drawing table, though Andy says the drawing is in his mind before he ever puts pencil to paper. His labor intensive technique requires him to be flexible when certain ideas don't work out while remaining focused on his larger vision for the image.

"I rather take the extra time and do it right," laughs Andy. "Otherwise, it would bother me for the rest of my life, if something in the picture wasn't quite right."

During the period of his recuperation, Andy submitted pieces to a regional

museum, the Cedarhurst Center for the Arts, for twice-yearly shows of the work of regional artists. Carrie Gibbs, director of Cedarhurst's Schrode Art Center and a curator for the shows, remembers that visitors always seemed to be drawn to Andy's work. "His pictures just seemed to strike a chord with our visitors. They asked many questions about his pieces and expressed a lot of enthusiasm for them."

## **RECOGNITION IN THE ART WORLD**

In 2014, Andy was stunned to hear that his work had been invited to the Western Spirit Art Show at the Old West Museum in Cheyenne, WY. The honor, says Andy, was humbling: "The Old West Museum has pieces from some of my artistic heroes in its permanent collection, so I was

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amazed to be asked to show my drawings there.

Not only did Andy show his work at the museum, he also had the thrill on his birthday, March 3, 2014 of being awarded Best in Show for *A Long Day*.

Also in 2014, the Schrode Center at Cedarhurst in Illinois invited Andy to present a one-man show of his work. To help show visitors understand Andy's work in the context of his daily life, the museum commissioned local photographer Nick Wheeler to create a series of photographs depicting life on the Mast family farm.

Out of respect for the family's Amish faith, however, special consideration was given to the composition and selection of Wheeler's photography. Because they believe that posing for pictures violates biblical prohibitions



Andy finds meaning and inspiration in his work with horses. "The eyes of my horses feel like the windows to my soul," says Andy, shown here on his family's farm in Illinois. Photo by Nick Wheeler.

against making graven images, Amish people usually do not work with photographers. Nick Wheeler and Schrode Art Center director Amy Gibbs met with the Mast family several times to discuss the goals of the photography project and the

types of unposed images that would help art show visitors to gain a greater sense of Andy's artwork and subject matter.

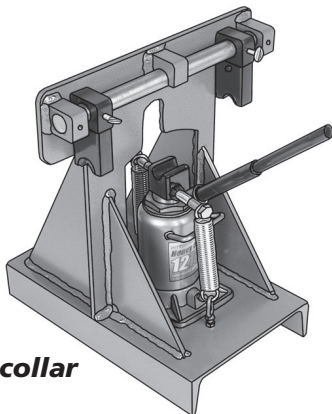
Carrie Gibbs explains the significance of using photography in the



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Andy's father works a team of draft horses on the family's farm. One source of income for the Masts is growing fall mums for local sale. Photo by Nick Wheeler.

show: At first glance, some may think Andy's artwork is romanticized and created in a nostalgic, ideal way, but, in fact, his day to day experience is similar to that of an earlier time. Horses are vital to the Amish way of life, which would not be possible without them. Andy is able to convey the true spirit and personality of his family's horses because they are not only useful but also partners in his way of life. The photography accompanying this

exhibit gave insight into the importance and relevance of Andy's choice of equestrian subject matter.

Photographer Nick Wheeler, who owns and operates Once Upon A Lifetime Photography in Mt. Vernon, IL, says he jumped at the opportunity to visit an Amish home and farm. We grown up in this community alongside Amish neighbors, but it was a rare privilege to be given a closer look at their lifestyle, Wheeler remembers. In two photography sessions, one in the spring and one in the fall, Wheeler captured views of Andy's drawing studio inside the family home, as well as farm work with horses. All of the images Wheeler shot were then reviewed with Andy and his parents. Wheeler remembers one photograph as being a particularly good example of the collaboration between the Mast family and himself.

One image showed Andy's father as he drove his team in the fields. Andy thought his dad wouldn't like his face to be visible, so I said, How about we make the horse's hindquarters bigger to cover it more? Andy thought that was a good idea, and I was able to alter the image so that Andy and his father felt comfortable, Wheeler says. It ended up being one of my favorite pictures in the show.

Presented from January 18 through February 15, 2015, the one-man show proved popular with visitors. An Art

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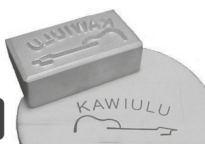
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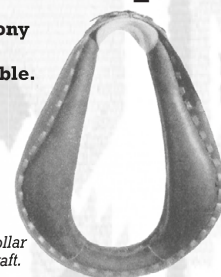
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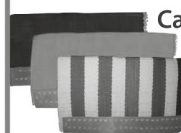
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Drawing studio at the Mast home. Photos by Nick Wheeler.

Chat featuring Andy and Nick Wheeler allowed audiences to ask questions and to gain a fuller understanding of Andy's inspiration and technique. At the end of the show, a collector from Houston, TX, purchased *A Long Day*, which represented a new milestone in Andy's professional career as an artist.

## NEW ADVENTURES AND INSPIRATIONS

In 2015, Andy was once again invited to show his work at the Western Spirit Art Show at the Old West Museum. Andy traveled to the show and was again humbled by the response his work received. "The show opened at 5:00 in the afternoon and by 5:02 I had sold another picture," Andy marvels.

Following the show, Andy has stayed on in the West, visiting friends and soaking up the natural beauty of the landscape and the Western lifestyle. From the bunkhouse where he is lodging in Westcliffe, CO, he delights in magnificent views of the Sangre de Cristo mountains which rise over 14,000 feet from the valley floor. Sangre de Cristo, Andy explains, is Spanish for "blood of Christ," so named because of the pinkish or reddish glow of the light on the peaks at sunrise and sunset.



In Andy's drawing *Dream Team*, the artist's close attention to every detail of the team's harnesses is evident.

During his stay, Andy is collecting inspiration and new material. He delights in opportunities to ride with cowboys and to assist with the work of caring for, sorting, and driving cows. As his health continues to improve, he is looking toward the future with hope and growing confidence: "God has led me through all I have experienced. Now it is my job to keep my priorities in line and keep God first. I have been very blessed despite my hardships, and I hope that my work may inspire people and bring them closer to their inner quietness."

Andy believes that the simplicity and sincerity of his work can serve as an antidote to the pace of modern life. "I hope that my drawings remind people of the beauty all around us and of a simpler time. I hope my work causes the viewer to pause and reflect and thereby be emotionally or spiritually refreshed with a sense of peace," he says.

## NEXT FRONTIERS

Schrode Art Center director Carrie Gibbs observes that Andy's talent and personal story are unique. "I think he will have a strong career in the arts," she says, noting that the young artist also faces unique challenges. "As he continues to participate in art exhibits and to make connections with galleries, he will need to find new solutions for providing digital images and communicating with the broader art world," says Gibbs. "It will definitely not be easy to pursue this path while staying true to his Amish convictions, but fortunately his family and community are very supportive of his talent."

For his own part, Andy plans to stay focused on refining his technique and exploring new ideas. He is not daunted by the challenges ahead. "I think that being immersed in the computer world--well, people can become blind to the real things in life," he reflects. "I don't have sophisticated tools or a sophisticated vocabulary, but I believe that my simple lifestyle shines through and allows me to show the essence of my subjects."

### For More Information

To learn more about Andy Mast's work or to inquire about purchasing reproductions, contact him at: 7155 N. Goshen Ln., Belle Rive, IL 62810 (618) 246-2964