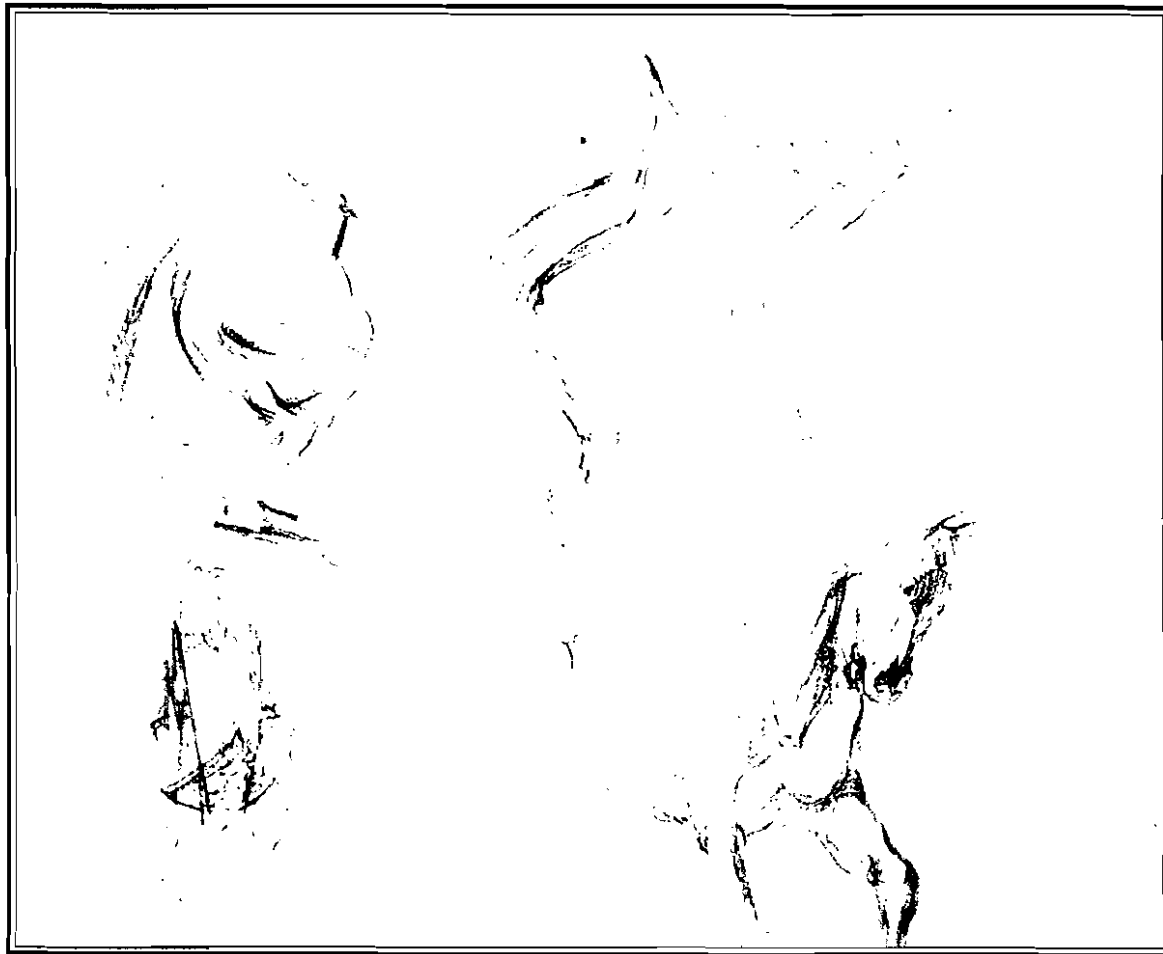


# *Artistic Anatomy*

by Joseph Sulkowski



*W*e live in an age of automatic cameras with zoom lenses and high speed film and as artists we find the photograph to be an invaluable aid in our efforts to accurately portray the horse in all its attitudes. However, today's artist may be relying too heavily upon this asset. Often the photograph records our subject as a distorted image of the true thing. The foreshortening is exaggerated so dramatically that to copy its photographic image is to create a new species of animal! Therefore, as painters and sculptors who have chosen the equine as our subject, it is incumbent upon us to gain as full an understanding of artistic anatomy as possible. What do we mean by artistic anatomy? Artistic anatomy "implies a delicate and dynamic balance between the esthetic and the scientific."

In other words a knowledge of the bones and muscles as well as a sense of their function and proportion are essential elements in the artist's arsenal that enable him or her to create a credible figurative study, be it horse or man.

Over two decades ago, while a student at the Art Students League of New York, I had the good fortune of studying with America's premiere teacher of artistic anatomy, Robert Beverly Hale. Hale made it clear that it was absolutely imperative for us to learn and understand the skeleton profoundly well so that, one day, as we became professional artists, whether we would paint or sculpt a portrait, figure or animal, we'd know "where to place the bumps." He convinced us that from our study

"of skeleton and muscle, artists may become familiar with important landmarks on the figure which assist in creating the planes, shapes and patterns which distinguish the design and aid in the artist's esthetic intent." It was imperative that photography should only be used as an adjunct to a more thorough grounding in an age-old artistic tradition as viable today as in the day of Leonardo da Vinci.

It was Da Vinci's belief that the artist must know his subject well enough to draw each and every form from his imagination. He taught that the forms of the body's surface contours could only be truthfully revealed by an awareness of the structures that lie beneath the flesh; understanding where the bumps go. In attitudes of action, Leonardo understood that having a knowledge of artistic anatomy enabled him to imply the motion of a horse by combining a few basic elementary movements of the different parts of the animal. Again, this insight can best be gained by an in-depth study of the bones upon which all the bodily shapes are dependent, not only the obvious hard parts like the head, legs and joints.

If you find it impossible to have access to a veterinarian school's lab or to acquire a collection of equine bones, there are several excellent artistic anatomy texts available in most art stores. But remember to use these as aids to a greater understanding of your subject and not as an end in itself.

Leonardo's work is evidence of his awareness that science must be tempered with an artistic sensibility. In his notebooks he warns against overstating anatomical elements which would make the resultant artwork look "like wood, devoid of grace." The study of anatomy must primarily be concerned with the essential construction and form of the animal from a draughtsman's point of view. Leonardo believed it most important to arrive at an artistic conception of his subject, the horse, and secondly to look at the technical means of expressing this conception. Although, ultimately, it is the artist's personal vision which drives his or her expressive intentions, it is still of fundamental importance that he or she be able to communicate to others the knowledge he or she has towards his or her subject and also to acquire a masterful understanding of the medium he or she employs in rendering his or her unique interpretation.

Since the days of Phidias' great horses of ancient Greece to our own time, artists have held "a mirror up to

nature." Their great masterpieces show us that the artist's knowledge of artistic anatomy has often been an integral part of his or her artistic conception and has brought a truthfulness to his or her personal interpretation. Through the various periods of art history, whether it be Leonardo, Velasquez, Gericault, Stubbs, Degas or Munnings, each believed in the science which informed his individual artistic vision. And after all, it is truth the artist seeks and truth transcends all artistic periods.

*Joseph Sulkowski is represented by Halcyon Gallery of Birmingham, England which shows his oils of horses, dogs, sporting landscapes and still life. He is considered to be one of the major equine artists of the U.S. and was voted a "Modern Master of the Thoroughbred" by the eminent equine art dealers and museum curators of the U.S., Canada and England and is currently under contract with Applejack Limited Editions, one of the major art publishers in the U.S. ♦*