

like that. They're really creating *art*, not just going through the motions! And...uh..."

My train of thought derailed as the blond fellow's patient smile flared, for a brief moment only, into a wicked grin. "They're really creating art, hmm? What is it that you consider 'art'," he purred, "and what isn't?"

Uh-oh.

"I phrased that wrong!" I blurted.

"Oh, no, please go on," he urged. "No need to be burdened by diplomacy—not a single word will go beyond this room."

"But I *did* phrase it wrong," I insisted. "Every single model horse is art! Even an OF model horse is art—the art of its sculptor, its caster, and the guy who was paid a buck an hour to paint it. Then, someone else—a remake artist, or someone who just enjoys painting models different colors, or maybe even someone who simply loves to glue potpourri onto whatever will stand still long enough—does their own thing to it to make that horse into their *own* art.

"After that, scads of people will see the horse. And to every other person in the world, what the *artist* thinks of their own art *doesn't* matter. No question that it's art—but it's up to each person to personally decide whether, to them, the horse is *good* art or *bad* art!"

"Or fine art?" he offered.

"Naw," I grinned. "'Fine art' is just the label you stick on a model horse that has more stylization than conformation!"

He grinned back at me with sinister significance. "Uh, that's a joke," I added hastily.

"Don't be modest—you've hit it exactly!" he exulted. "That's a catchy, classy slogan for the hobby's new era: More Stylization, Less Conformation!"

"Oog," I groaned. "Just don't tell anyone where you got it!"

"It's that silly insistence that a model horse should have correct conformation that has kept the hobby in the dark ages for two decades!" my unexpected guest continued fervently. "It absolutely shackles artists! How can they explore their boundless imaginations, when 'skeletal structure' and 'muscle mass' keep getting in the way? Why should they adhere to the rigid conformity of nature, when plastic and epoxy can be coaxed into so many different, far more interesting, and infinitely more challenging shapes and positions?"

"Um...because you'd have a painfully lame horse otherwise?"

"Oh, come now," he admonished. "These are inanimate objects! They begin as an outlet for artistic creativity—vessels shaped, defined, and refined by each artist's hands and imagination! Then each creation is let go by its creator, like a pebble into a pond, where it is embraced by the pride, love, and joy of its new owner. Together, the model and owner—pebble and pond—send ripples throughout the hobby, radiating further and further..."

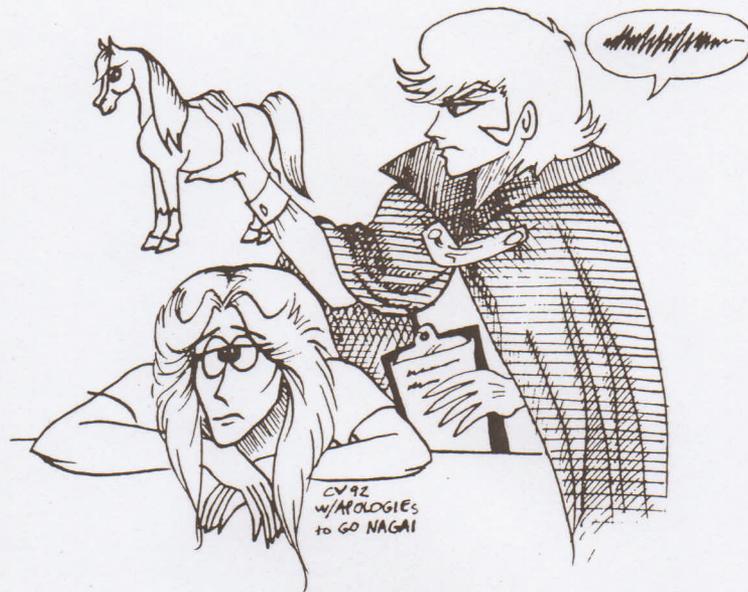
"You mean, like, through photo and live shows?" I volunteered.

"That, and word of mouth, and letters, and appearances in hobby publications," he nodded. "Soon, other hobbyists will be seething with envy and desire. The artist will enjoy well-deserved attention and adulation, the owner of the artist's work will gain a loftier status in the hobby strata, and as a result, the value of all other works by the artist, and the status of their owners, will also rise!"

He flipped his wrists and knuckles in some mystical sleight-of-hand, and was suddenly holding a breathtakingly beautiful, Traditional-sized remake. "This," he said slowly, dramatically, turning the park-trotting model from side to side, "is the future of the model horse hobby!"

The paint job was the most incredible ever. Ever! The eyes appeared liquid, and had such depth...the nostrils were flared outward, the ears paper-thin, and his muzzle and lips were wrinkled with astonishing realism. They actually appeared velvety, and there were even hints of teeth behind the relaxed lower lip. He had an affable, almost sentient expression, full of kind, compassionate courage, and looked far more intelligent than any real horse I had ever encountered. I heard myself gasp, "Wanna sell him?!"

But then my eye began to analyze the structure beneath the peerless paint job. Each leg was a different length, and all were bisected by joints



that resembled mutant melons. Each Plastigoop cannon swooped down to a tiny blob of fetlock, from which a seeming toothpick protruded to spear a sliver of hoof barely thicker than its miniature, fitted horseshoe. The poor, poor fellow, cursed to lameness by an artist who didn't know a hock from a hole in the ground...!

"He'd be wonderful to have, just to be able to look at his darling face every day," I sighed. "But it hurts to look at the rest of him...just think of the agony he'd be in if he were real! And forget campaigning him in shows—he'd be laughed right out of the ring."

"Ah, but that's part of the beauty of the new era—the new show criteria will reward his exquisite workmanship and dazzling personality!"

"So in the near future, model horses will compete as *art*? Sure, why not?" I shrugged. "That way, there's something for everyone. Not only would there be model horse shows, with breed and sex and performance classes, judged on conformation, breed type, and realism, but people could also enter model horse art exhibitions, judged on artistic workmanship and..."

"No," he cut me off flatly. "There will still be breed and sex and performance classes, but they'll all be judged on the artistic merits and workmanship of each element in the scene—the horse, the tack, the obstacles, the lighting, the photography—as they *should* have been all along. Any other way"—his voice hushed conspiratorially—"and people might think you're in your second childhood, playing with horsies. But by creating and collecting *art*, the hobby becomes *respectable*."

"But it's *already* respectable!" I protested. "And we've gotten that respect thanks to the hobby's educational aspects! Model horses are used as an educational tool in some 4-H programs. And I think you'll find that for most people, including its founders, the hobby is a way to learn about real horses and to practice what you're learning, even if there isn't a real horse around for miles. The more you learn, the more skillful you become in campaigning your models and in judging other people's horses. You can see the progress you've made, and it's a good feeling."

"The hobby is a continuous learning process," I stressed, "*not* a contest to see who can spend the most money or crow the loudest about their collection. And as long as shows are judged on conformation and breed type, everyone in this hobby has an equal chance to enjoy it! See, shows are the great equalizer. It doesn't matter who did the horse, or how much it cost! A \$1,000 horse can get its clock cleaned by a \$10 horse, and vice versa. It depends on which model is conformed better, is typier for its sex or breed, or is performing its particular task more correctly."

"I don't know why some artists can capture charisma but seriously foul up a horse's conformation," I continued. "Everyone has a blind spot, artists and collectors included, but it could be that some artists would just plain rather not make the effort to get things right. And maybe they think

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