

The horse whittler

Utah artist coaxes steeds from lumber to produce exquisite, gentle rockers

By Gwen Florio
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For anyone who's ever dreamed of owning a horse but doesn't have a place to keep one, Dennis Page is here to help.

His horses require little grooming to maintain the high sheen of their glossy coats. They sell for between \$1,400 and \$5,000, pretty reasonable for a purebred — which all of them are.

With most horses, the purchase price is usually only the first scoop into the money pit — think feed, shoeing, vet bills, pasturing. But a buyer can stick one of Page's horses in the corner of the living room and forget it.

Not that anyone would.

Page bills his hand-carved, nearly life-size wooden rocking horses more as works of art than toys — the sort of thing that becomes the focal point of a room, rather than just an accessory.

"When people hear rocking horse," said Page, 58, of Riverton, Utah, "they think of a plastic child's horse," not of a lifelike replica, its carved wooden muscles rippling beneath a gleaming coat, with a real horsehair forelock hanging into its eyes and a horsehair tail sweeping its runners.

Each horse Page carves is true to its breed: the quarter horse has a deep chest and powerful hindquarters needed to work cattle; the appaloosa a spectacularly spotted coat prized by the Nez Perce Tribe that developed the breed; and the Friesian a luxuriantly flowing mane and tail and high-stepping action particular to the one-time war horses.

"All the girls go for the Friesians," said Page, and indeed, a few moments later, 18-year-old Jessie Kaehn, of Parker, made a beeline for the Friesian, the largest wooden horse in the collection that Page is exhibiting at the National Western Stock Show, Rodeo & Horse Show.

"It's pretty," said Kaehn, as she sat atop the horse, leaning forward to stroke its mane. "I like its hair," added Kaehn, who has two real horses at home.

The Friesian was about the size of a pony, nowhere near as big as the live version, but



RICK GIASE/SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Dennis Page, of Riverton, Utah, watches as Malia Wright, 4, of Boulder, takes one of his creations for a test ride Monday at the National Western Stock Show, Rodeo & Horse Show. Page's hand-carved rocking horses sell from \$1,400 to \$5,000, and no detail is overlooked.

larger by far than the average rocking horse. Page makes smaller models, for children, although those also have the same exacting attention to detail — even down to the pint-size tooled saddles made for Page by Sandy, Utah, saddler David Nay.

One horse's bridle even had a "slobber strap," a piece of tooled leather attached to the bit, and most bridles had a "shoo-fly," a decorative horsehair fly whisk attached.

"Fantastic," breathed Maggie Fouquet, of Boulder, originally from London, whose 3-year-old son, Raphie, escaped her grasp and ran to pet the horses. Raphie wanted to ride them; his mother thought they'd make a nice addition for, say, the lobby of a ski lodge.

That's the idea, said Page: Parents — well, typically doting grandparents — buy a horse for a child, and it ends up getting passed down through the family.

Often, he said, a buyer will ask him to carve a horse to resemble the owner's real horse. Page is happy to oblige. Besides, he says, his horse has one advantage over the real one:

"It doesn't kick."

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