

JOHN FAWCETT

# RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY

By Mary Nelson



After running a successful veterinary practice in Pennsylvania for 20 years, John Fawcett decided to cash it in and forge a new career as a fine artist. It was not a decision he made lightly, however. After all, his first love has always been animals (he bought his first horse at age 10), and leaving his practice behind hadn't even been a consideration, until he and his wife Elizabeth happened on a Western art show in Arizona.

Fawcett had always dabbled in art and was interested in the history of the West, but he never thought of creating Western art as vocation until that fateful day. "I was familiar with [Frederic] Remington and [C.M.] Russell, and the big names in Western art," he says. "But I didn't know the contemporary Western artists, until I saw their images at the Rocky Mountain Oyster Club

show in Arizona, during a visit to my wife's relatives in 1991."

Suddenly, Fawcett's world tilted on its axis, and his hobby of drawing and painting took on new possibilities. As he absorbed the aesthetic appeal of contemporary art and fanned his artistic fire, he decided to reignite his childhood pastime. Because Fawcett's veterinary practice was well established, and his employees were reliable, he could afford to spend time at his easel.

Fawcett pushed himself to learn more and expand his talent. Confident in his ability, just one year later, he entered his watercolor paintings in the Rocky Mountain Oyster Club show and was thrilled when they were accepted. Buoyed by his success at that show, he approached a gallery that quickly agreed to represent him, and he threw himself into painting.

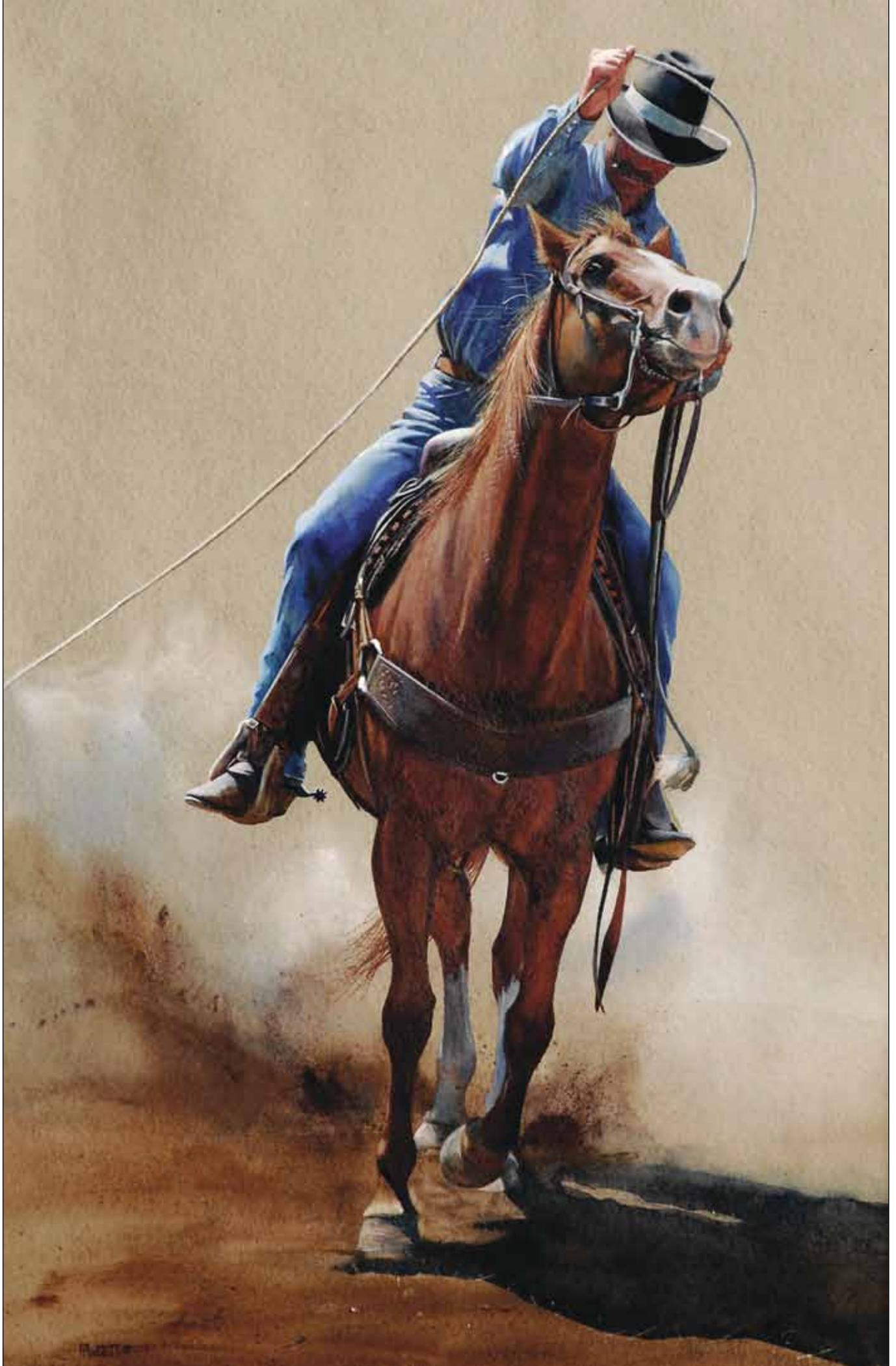
Fawcett researched art shows and applied to those he thought were the best. Calling on his business acumen, leveraged the success from those shows to approach other galleries. As the demand for his art grew, it became woefully evident that Fawcett needed a larger body of work. Suddenly, his veterinary

*Above - Evening Light, oil, 16" by 30"*

*"There is nothing like the crunching of fall grass under the horse's hooves, the creaking of saddle leather, the warm sun on your face, and the bond between friends and their horses. It must be good for your soul!"*

*Opposite Page - Savvy, watercolor, 23" by 14"*

*"During gatherings and brandings, it is essential for cowboys to have a good horse that knows its job and what is expected of him. Unity and harmony between the rider and horse, with subtle gestures and movements, play an important role in the communication between the partners."*





practice was beginning to get in the way of his art career.

Initially, Fawcett agonized over stepping away from a lifelong career of animal husbandry and into painting and portraying animals on canvas. Finally, in 1994, he sought the advice of his stepfather, a retired physician, who wisely asked Fawcett two questions.

"[My stepfather] said, 'When you're painting, do you think about veterinary medicine?'" Fawcett recalls. "I said, 'No.' 'Well,' he said, 'When you are doing surgery, do you think about art?' I said, 'Yes, of course.' He said, 'There's your decision right there.'"

From that point on, it was all systems go. Fawcett continued his veterinary work on a part-time basis for a year or so, but his focus was most decidedly on his art. In forging his art career, he had two essential advantages: a deep, abiding understanding of the animal psyche and

good business sense. "That's not something they necessarily teach you in art school," he says.

By 1996, Fawcett's separation from veterinary medicine was complete. He is justifiably proud of taking a chance and achieving success—again.

A self-taught artist, Fawcett is one of few Western artists, who work mostly in watercolor. "I started out in watercolor, because you didn't need as many materials," he says. "You needed pigment, you needed water, and you needed brushes and paper. Then you were good to go."

Fawcett says his artist friends like to tell him that he put the cart before the horse. "As time went on, I started using oils more," he says, "and they said to me, 'You kind of did it backwards; watercolor is more difficult than oil because you can't cover anything up.' But I really like both mediums; I don't really have a favorite."

*The Chief's Flag, oil, 36" by 48"*

*"Beginning in 1804, the U. S. Government made special 'chief's flags' to hand out as gifts to prominent Indian chiefs. Lewis and Clark carried them on their expedition, and there were many left over to give as gifts throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as seen here. This U.S. scout is showing the chief's flag to these unsuspecting braves, who are both curious and apprehensive about the colorful piece of cloth."*

Fawcett explains that, when he looks at a subject or scene he wants to paint, he can tell whether he'd like to use oil or watercolor. "There are certain aspects of both media that you can't really duplicate in the other," he says. "In watercolor you get the spontaneity and happy accidents and fluidity from blending the colors and washes that you can't get with oils. With oils, I like the texture and rich color, the buttery feel and impasto look of oil. I wouldn't like to limit myself to one or the other."

Because so few Western artists work in watercolor, Fawcett seeks



*A Cold Return, oil, 16" by 20"*

*"Winter can come early in the mountains of Colorado, where these two cowboy friends have been riding. This early October snow provided a perfect backdrop for the painting, contrasting the warm colors of the horses with the cool snow and leafless aspen in the background."*

out those who do. He is fortunate to live near the Brandywine Museum in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, where works by N.C. and Jamie Wyeth are displayed. Both, he says, have influenced his technique and style.

Fawcett's realistic style lends itself well to the Western art genre, but he is quick to point out that he also likes the painterly aspect of the brushwork. It's the realism that brings to life the relationships between the animals and humans. But even more important is his love for, and understanding of, the animals that often are a focus in his paintings.

"One of the main things I want to show is how either contemporary or historical cowboys did things on the range or the ranch," Fawcett says. "In telling that story, it's important in my work to show the relationships of the dog or horse to the humans that are in the piece or, if there are no humans, the personality of the animal and how the animal feels at

the time."

Fawcett thanks his veterinary career for his uncanny ability to communicate human-animal relationships to viewers. It is evident in the tilt of a horse's head, the direction of its ears, how it holds its tail, the tension of its back. His eye for composition and nuance is spot on, and viewers can almost sense the bond between human and animal. Many of Fawcett's paintings suggest that man and animal anticipate each other's next moves. The nonverbal exchange is often palpable, and viewers are drawn in to anticipate the next move.

Growing up in Iowa in the '50s, Fawcett watched Western programs on TV and spent much of his time studying the lifestyle of individuals who rely on animals. More recently, his deep-seated interest in cowboys and Indians drew him to closely observe his Mennonite neighbors, who provided subject matter that





*You are Golden, oil, 24" by 20"*

*"Fall in the Yampa Valley brings golden colors to our area in northwest Colorado, with the willows turning rust, temperatures dropping, and the Sandhill Cranes flying south. I was drawn to the willows contrasted by the reflections of the deep blue sky and the golden tones of the horses. "*



*Ceremony of the Horse Mask, oil, 40" by 60"*

*"With the onset of Spanish explorers in the 1500s, the Indian natives of the southwestern U.S. encountered horsemen and their mounts protected by armor of leather and metal. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Indian tribes throughout the West were using full-face coverings as a 'psychological' hedge against the enemy. Often decorated with images of thunder, lightning, and horns for speed, they believed the masks could turn an ordinary horse into a mount of exceptional ability. In this scene, the Medicine Man was blessing the mask before the brave put it on his pony for protection in battle."*

lent itself well to portraying a simpler life, life as cowboys might have known it.

In 1996, Fawcett reached another milestone, when he realized his dream of owning land in Colorado. He and Elizabeth built a house, barn, and studio in Clark, a rural area just north of Steamboat Springs. Both had spent time in Colorado before they knew each other, and both longed to one day live there.

Fawcett met Elizabeth while he was enrolled in the pre-veterinary program at the University of New Hampshire. They married and moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where Fawcett continued his studies at Iowa State University and earned a degree in veterinary

medicine in 1978. The couple later moved to Pennsylvania, Elizabeth's home state, and Fawcett worked for a couple years for equine and small-animal veterinarians before opening his own practice in 1980.

Today, Fawcett and Elizabeth divide their time between their homes in Pennsylvania and Colorado. Elizabeth, he says, is an invaluable business partner in his art career, possessing a "great eye" that helps him decide which paintings should go to which galleries or shows and matting and framing all of Fawcett's watercolor paintings.

"She handles some of the business side and is a great extra pair of eyes, when I'm working on something, to tell me if it's worthy or not worthy," he says. This year, the couple will

celebrate their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a tribute to their commitment to each other and to their work together.

Some might see "changing horses" in midstream as potential for disaster, but Fawcett is thankful for the advice he received from his stepfather. He is grateful for the wisdom that set him on a path that has been more fulfilling than he possibly could have imagined. 

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