Natural Poses

BREEDERS' CUP ARTIST CHARLES CHURCH BRINGS HIS SUBJECTS' CHARACTER TO LIFE

Charles Church in his Dorset, England, studio

By **JULIE JUNE STEWART**

AT 15, CHARLES CHURCH knew he wanted to paint horses in a traditional way. But the traditional paths of instruction were not working out for him. He dropped out of several art schools and took a job washing dishes in a hotel in Newmarket, England. This allowed him time to paint horses in the afternoon. A local art gallery started exhibiting his work. Church heard about the Charles H. Cecil Studios in Florence, Italy, which trains in old master techniques in painting. He wrote to them, and they responded with an invitation to attend.

But he was broke. Church fondly remembers "the gallery did an incredibly kind thing. They bought my entire stock of paintings because they could see how important it was going to be for me. That paid for my first six months." He lived in the studio and became a studio assistant through their atelier system. He studied for two years learning 17th century master painting techniques earning his keep by teaching, grinding paint, and mopping floors.

Initially, he painted hunters from 1994-2002 through commissions. "I was careful not to promote myself in the racing industry until I felt I was up to a standard particularly about the conformation of Thoroughbreds." In

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHARLES CHURCH

Enable is among a plethora of Breeders' Cup winners to be painted by Church on commission

Queen Camilla unveils Church's largest painting in 2023, "The Belvoir Huntsman," which hangs in the National Horseracing Museum in Newmarket. The masterpiece was commissioned by the British Sporting Art Trust

2007, he was invited to take part in a London exhibition where he displayed several of Coolmore's stallions, including Sadler's Wells, High Chaparral, and Montjeu. The paintings were bought immediately by Coolmore founder John Magnier. "It kind of snowballed from there because then I had more commissions coming in."

He was honored at his first London exhibition when the Prince of Wales (now King Charles III) wrote, "I happen to think this is a remarkable young artist. How refreshing it is in the era in which we live to find a young artist portraying the rich diversity of our rural heritage with such a unique sensitivity and profound understanding of his subject matter."

Now an internationally renowned painter, he has been commissioned to paint numerous grade 1 winners including Breeders' Cup winners such as Curlin, Enable, Gio Ponti, Vino Rosso, and Goldikova, who he remembers as "a real character. She was super feisty and really knew who was the boss."

He was thrilled to paint 2022 Horse of the Year Flightline, who was "super relaxed and quiet. He has such an amazing physique." He said, "It was a real honor to paint Enable. A beautiful horse to look at with lovely big ears to boot."

Using a technique known as "sight-size," a method used by many of the finest painters in oil since the 17th century, Church's old-world techniques include painting with lead white "which is highly poisonous, but it's by far the best white you can use. It gives the paintings a glow." He will paint multiple studies of his subjects from life. He also takes photographs to take back to the studio where he assembles his final painting from his meticulous studies.

"It's like you are painting a sky. You wait for the best bits of clouds. It's the same with a horse. They all have their own particular way of standing. I don't like sticking to a conformation pose. I take a lot of time to look and study the horse when it is brought out. I try to see how the horse relaxes in certain poses. If you are going to get the character of a horse, you need to nail the way they look naturally."

In 2023, his largest painting was commissioned by the British Sporting Art

TOP: COURTESY OF THE BRITISH SPORTING ART TRUST; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF CHARLES CHURCH

Church working on the six foot by seven foot "The Belvoir Huntsman," a painting which took him more than a year to complete

As the official Breeders' Cup artist of 2024, Church crafted both the Friday (left) and Saturday program covers for the Nov. 1-2 World Championships at Del Mar

Trust. The six foot by seven foot painting was unveiled by Queen Camilla and hangs in the National Horseracing Museum at Newmarket. "The Belvoir Huntsman" features John Holliday and it took him more than a year to complete.

Church is the official artist for the 2024 Breeders' Cup World Championships Nov. 1-2 at Del Mar. His paintings are featured on the tickets and the track programs. He traveled to Del Mar to study the characteristics of the track.

"It's fun and much more relaxed. It's like a carnival atmosphere," Church said. "I wanted to get a sense of the scale and the iconic yellow towers which I love. It has an amazing atmosphere by the sea, and it has that amazing light."

"We are honored to feature Charles Church as this year's official Breeders' Cup artist," said Justin McDonald, chief marketing officer for Breeders' Cup. "Charles approaches his art with precision, an eye for detail, and an understanding of the equine subject built on a lifelong love of horses. His striking images of Del Mar will give attendees a beautiful keepsake from two days of world-class racing."

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An early supporter of Church is Lexington's Cross Gate Gallery founder Greg Ladd. "When he was young, I used to meet him in Tesco parking lots and purchase paintings from his trunk. His work progressed and he's turned into one of the top British portrait painters and in America as well. He knows the horse and horsemen appreciate that. We have his two Breeders' Cup paintings in this year's annual Keeneland Sporting Art Auction on Nov. 15th."

Church honors 17th century masters as he captures the champions of today. It's an amazing journey for a young man who started off washing dishes in Newmarket and now finds his paintings honored by royalty and hanging in museums and homes throughout the world. BH

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHARLES CHURCH