



Joanne Mehl, a Portland artist, wanted to capture the artfulness and power of dressage, a horseback riding style that resembles a dance, in the mural commissioned for the DevonWood Equestrian Centre in Sherwood.

BRENT WOJAHN
THE OREGONIAN



COURTESY OF JOANNE MEHL

Portland artist Joanne Mehl is well known in the field of equestrian sporting art for her portraits, such as this one of Caitlin Lyons riding Clowney.

The art of dressage

Joanne Mehl paints a mural for DevonWood Equestrian Centre depicting the formal movements

By SARAH ALLEN
THE OREGONIAN

This is what West Linn's Ginny Rattner loves most about the place: the land, lush and emerald green and, this misty morning, shimmering with raindrops, signaling spring. The barn, airy and colossal, with state-of-the-art heated floors and hydroactive sand arenas. And the feeling, one of the power and precision of dressage riding, where horse and rider become one artful form.

And all of this, everything Rattner loves about the DevonWood Equestrian Centre in Sherwood, which

she owns with her husband, Justin, is reflected in Joanne Mehl's mural in the main arena.

It is DevonWood's crown, says Rattner. The 12½-foot-tall, 50-foot-long mural, titled "The Mural at DevonWood," is one of the reasons the Rattners proudly consider DevonWood a world-class barn.



As an artist, Joanne Mehl knew the complexity of painting portraits. But her experience as a longtime horse enthusiast gave her the confidence to bring

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animals alive on canvas.

The Portland artist hesitates to say she specializes in animal portraiture. Although Mehl, who graduated with honors from the Art Center in Pasadena, Calif., has depicted horses and riders, dogs and owners, and a host of other beloved creatures, she has extensive experience in graphic design and illustration.

She is best known in equestrian circles for her sporting art, which has been featured on industry magazine covers and national horse show posters, as well as those she is commissioned to paint privately.

For inspiration for the DevonWood mural, she studied the dance as much as the horse. She knew she could paint a horse, but could she capture the sport of dressage?

It's a meticulously studied form, one in which horse and rider move in perfect harmony like a giant ballerina. Dressage is the most stylish, most formal, most charismatic of equestrian sports, and when they designed DevonWood in 1998, the Rattners wanted their barn to emulate it.

So they visited European dressage stables, noting the way wood, soft colors and music were used. And Ginny was taken with the Europeans' placement of art in their barns.

"I wanted something that would lend the air of eloquence and strength, which is what dressage is all about," Ginny Rattner says. "Having a stable without art is like having a wedding without music."

However, until she received a thank-you card featuring Mehl's image of a girl on a pony, she didn't know where to begin. The artist's rendering of a horse in motion was, exactly what she was looking for.



This portrait of DevonWood Equestrian Centre's director and head trainer, Teri Emrich, hangs in the main barn. It is one of the favorite pieces of DevonWood's owner, Ginny Rattner, by Portland artist Joanne Mehl.

To truly know a horse, Ginny Rattner says, you have to ride a horse, feel a horse, have a sense of

the way its body moves.

Originally, she had wanted a single horse in the painting, giving the

salute to the judges that is part of the formal dressage test. But she and Mehl realized that the giant

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GINNY RATTNER,
OWNER, DEVONWOOD EQUESTRIAN CENTRE

space could handle a more dramatic picture.

Until Rattner saw Mehl's idea for a stop-motion series of movements from the canter pirouette — an upper-level dressage movement in which the horse prances while pivoting in a circle — she was convinced that anything more than a single rider would be too distracting. When she saw Mehl's sketch of the mural concept, she backed the artist 100 percent. The mural was installed last May.

"The sheer size of it allows you to have activity," says Mehl, walking quietly through the 12 inches of impact-absorbing wood shavings that line the arena floor below the painting. "A lot of this process was evolutionary. We didn't know what we would do until we did it."

At the end of a lesson, Teri Emrich's student leads her horse from the arena, and Emrich gathers her notes. As DevonWood's director and head trainer, Emrich was called upon for consultation in the facility's overall design and operation. Because of Emrich's level of involvement, Ginny Rattner wanted her opinion about Mehl's work, as well.

Like many serious horse people who have what Mehl and Rattner call "the sickness," Emrich is more interested in riding horses than talking about them. Still, she can't help stopping in front of the mural this misty morning, on her way to her office, to ponder the magic of such powerful animals executing the most elegant dance of dressage.