

"Doesn't that bother the artist?"

"Lots of people use Breyers as armatures and call the end result one-of-a-kind sculptures, the remaker explained. "Others customize Breyers and just call them customized Breyers, although the end result is sometimes more unique than some of the 'one-of-a-kinds'! And of course there are artists who use wire, cardboard tubing, or wooden dowels as armatures to create one-of-a-kinds. But since model horses are judged on their own merits—what you can see outside, not whatever is lurking inside—they're all considered C/Us for showing purposes, until they're cast."

On the table, a photo display featured remakes sporting paint jobs of various type and technique, and she pointed out variations of airbrushed horses, variations of oil-painted horses, various styles of hand-painted acrylic horses, headstudies of horses with glass eyes and with painted eyes, and so on.

"It's fun to look at the variety of styles of C/U horses," suggested the remaker, and handed me the finished PAM.

A flash of silver caught my eye, and there on the mare's belly, penned in silver ink, was a number that dropped my jaw. "This is your 4,051st horse?" I gasped.

She blinked, then realized what was confusing me. "Oh, that's the horse CHIN," she explained, "its Crafted Horse Identification Number. A different one is assigned to every C/U model."

"Isn't that a lot of work to keep track of?"

"What was hardest was getting the system set up," she recalled. "That took some time and money to do, but with all the good that's come from it, it was a bargain. And now, at \$1 a horse for registration and \$5 a horse for record retrieval, it pays for its maintenance, too."

"But...I don't mean to sound stupid, but why?"

"No such thing as a stupid question," the tour guide assured me. "What we haven't mentioned yet is how much some of these

customized model horses cost...and, well, the really unique ones can get pretty steep. A few hundred dollars, sometimes." I caught myself nodding in approval—I'd have soft-pedaled that point the same way to a prospective hobbyist.

"If you ever make an investment like that, it has to be protected," she went on, "and a horse's CHIN tells people that they have a valuable piece of artwork, no matter where they acquired it. The Crafted Horse Identification Board is very high-profile, and if you're into, say, equine art, doll house miniatures, or model horses, it's easy to find their address. So if you bought horse #4,051 down the line, you could send the Board \$5 and the horse's number, and they'd send you information on the horse that includes its creating artist, the month and year it was created, and previous owners and selling prices."

"Right now the Board is working on a system to compile sale prices and generate averages for each artist's horses by the year they were created, too," she added. "It requires a lot of cooperation from everyone in the hobby, but the end result will help C/Us retain their value."

"Any reason why the C in CHIN means 'Crafted' and not 'Customized'?" I asked.

The remaker grinned. "When they saw the system being set up, people who were making other kinds of horses, outside our hobby, wanted in on it too!"

I sure hated to hand the PAM back.

Next on the tour was the pointkeeper, who was typing the results of each class into a laptop computer. "After the show, the results will be transmitted to the national pointkeeper," explained the guide. "Each horse's placings here count toward Horse Of The Year honors—each breed has a Horse Of The Year, and then there's the overall Horse Of The Year, which right now is our highest honor. Next year, we hope to have the U.S. and Canadian point systems linked for a North American Horse Of The Year, and after that, who knows? Model horses are being shown all over the world!"

"What about showholders that don't have a computer?" I asked.

"They either fax or mail their show results to the national pointkeeper, who scans them into the point system through an optical character reader," said the guide.

The loudspeaker crackled, and from the insulated cluster of showers' tables ahead, a stream of entrants surged toward the eastern show ring. As they loaded it with horses, the judge spotted us, and as she strolled over, the guide explained that while anyone could judge a model horse photo show, live show judges must pass a test to be certified by a board formed for that purpose.

"It's not the toughest test in the world," smiled the judge. "It's a hobby, after all, and we need to have more than two or three judges. All the certification test does is confirm that you have a basic working knowledge of conformation and breed type. From that point on, the more you judge, the more you learn, and the more you hone your skills as a judge." Then she chuckled, gesturing toward the showers' camp with her clipboard—"not that everyone will be happy with your decisions anyway!"

Clipboard! And paper...pen...I still had a column to write! If I could just jot down some notes to take back with me... "Could I borrow your clipboard?" I asked.

She handed it over, and my eyes nearly leaped out—the page on top was a roster of the show's classes, with a tidy purse listed in front of each one: \$80 a class!

"Is that the entry fee?" I gasped, pointing.

She peered at the page. "Oh, no, that's the cash payback," she explained. "It's divided 50%-25%-12%-8%-5% among the top five placers in each class."

"Wow! But, how?!"

Then, abruptly, the canopy came billowing down...and I woke up with the answer, at least for now: Only in our dreams.