



# Cowgirl RISING IN SAINT JO



FM 677 near Illinois Bend, the Red River, and the Oklahoma/Texas border north of Saint Jo. One of Donna's signature works, *Making a Name for Herself*. The artist in her Saint Jo studio.

**A**rtist Donna Howell-Sickles' fascination with the cowgirl began in the early 1970s when she found a vintage hand-tinted postcard of a woman wearing chaps and a green kerchief, with bright red lips that framed a wide smile. "Greetings from a Real Cowgirl from the Ol' Southwest," the card read. "The image spoke to me, and I had no idea why," Donna recalled.

Discovering why she felt such a deep connection led the artist to research the cowgirl's history and to meet real horsewomen. In Donna's vibrant artworks, she paints the cowgirl as a monumental figure and a universal symbol of female strength, optimism, and independence. She's a likable gal, too, who radiates joy.

*Texas Highways* regular contributor Kathryn Jones recently caught up with Donna at her studio just off the downtown square in Saint Jo, a hamlet of about 1,000 people west of Gainesville and south of the Red River. (The light-filled studio occupies a former Presbyterian church, complete with stained-glass windows, that dates to 1909.) While Donna and her husband, John, return their Montague County ranch to its natural state, they live in a remodeled loft in a historic building on the town square.

**KATHRYN: How did you wind up living and working in Saint Jo?**

**DONNA:** John and I had been living in Frisco [the suburb north of Dallas], but it was changing. In 1995, we went out to Wyoming to look at property. Then one Sunday we took a long afternoon drive around Saint Jo. I've driven US 82 through town a million times, but I don't think I had ever been north of town.

When we went out the Illinois Bend road (FM 677), we found this drop-off where you can see for miles. And we said, "Oh, this is what we're looking for."

**KATHRYN: You grew up not too far from here on a farm near Gainesville. Did you know much about cowgirls back then?**

**DONNA:** I had never even seen a cowgirl. I was in my late twenties when I bought my



Donna Howell-Sickles' home in Saint Jo is just miles south of the Red River (shown here).

first pair of cowboy boots. Even though our family had a farming-ranching operation, we really didn't think of ourselves as Western. We didn't do rodeo, we didn't ride horses in parades. Daddy had a horse that he used for rounding the cows up. He was kind of an unfriendly horse (laughs).

**KATHRYN:** Nothing like the ones in your paintings. When did you see the postcard and get interested in cowgirls as subjects for your art?

**DONNA:** This was when I was probably a senior at Texas Tech University [Donna graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1972]. I didn't realize it was going to become important immediately, but I was

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attracted to the idea of the cowgirl, and I did some sketches. My teachers said, "Oh, you really don't want to be a regional painter. And you surely don't want to be a Western painter. Given your gender, that's going to be tough." But I kept playing with it until I could figure out where I was going with it.

**KATHRYN:** In your early paintings and drawings, your cowgirls had almost blank, featureless faces. Now they are more defined and individual. How did that evolve?

**DONNA:** At first, my figures were completely anonymous with no specific personality at all. It was more like a memory. For a long time I thought the cowgirl

was an invented image, that there were no real cowgirls. It was just something made up for dime novels and Wild West shows and then later for TV. On the other hand, like every other little farm kid in Texas, I grew up pretending to be a hero saving the world, ripping up and down the creeks on Sunday afternoons. So although it felt unreal, the concept behind the cowgirl had a real impact on who I was.

**KATHRYN: What did you learn from your research into cowgirls?**

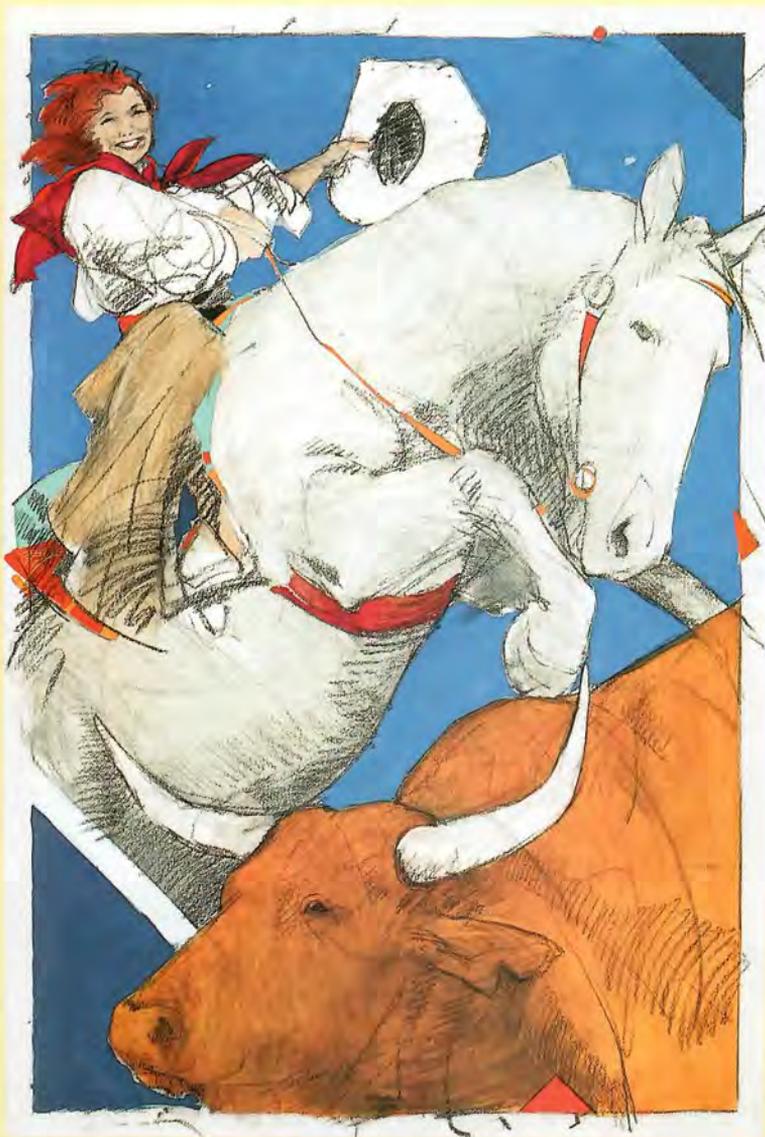
**DONNA:** I discovered some of the women who helped create that imagery in the early Wild West shows, and I became fascinated with how atypical they were for their times. They were superstars. They would get the most press at their shows for their daring deeds, which really were quite dangerous. It was a very competitive sport. I would venture a guess that the cowgirl was the first woman athlete who was able to support herself with her winnings.

**KATHRYN: Why do you think your cowgirl work has become so popular?**

**DONNA:** One of the most common things people say is that its joy is contagious.



Tools of the trade. The artist's palette contains an abundant choice of colors.



HATS OFF. THE COWGIRL SMILES IN TRIUMPH AS HER WHITE HORSE LEAPS OVER THE RED BULL.

## CHASING DONNA'S COWGIRLS

The **Howell-Sickles Studio and Gallery** is at 209 S. Main St. in Saint Jo. (The gift shop will be relocating to 105 E. Howell St. this fall). Studio gift shop hours: Mon-Fri 9-4:30. Call 940/995-9447; [www.donnahowellsickles.com](http://www.donnahowellsickles.com).

Fine-art galleries across Texas and throughout the West show and sell Donna's work. She's one of the featured artists at the **Texas Art Gallery** in Dallas (5570 W. Lovers Lane, in the Inwood Village shopping center), which hosts two annual art shows and auctions (May 11-12 and November 2-3 this year). Hours: Mon-Sat 10-6. Call 214/350-8500; [www.txartgallery.com](http://www.txartgallery.com).

The **National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame**, 1720 Gendy St. in Fort Worth, sells T-shirts in its gift shop with Donna's image of a cowgirl and Longhorns. Hours: Mon-Thu 9-5:30, Fri-Sat 9-8, Sun 11:30-5:30. Call 800/476-3263; [www.cowgirl.net](http://www.cowgirl.net).

For more about the artist's work and vivid reproductions of her drawings and paintings, read *Cowgirl Rising: The Art of Donna Howell-Sickles*, by Peg Streep with an introduction by Teresa Jordan (The Greenwich Workshop Press, 1997). —KATHRYN JONES

A TEXAS HIGHWAYS MOMENT  
WITH DONNA HOWELL-SICKLES



Welcome to her world. Donna Howell-Sickles strikes the pose of one of her colorful cowgirl images. At right, *Celebration Dance* captures a joyous moment with a cowgirl and her dogs.

All of these women appear to be living in the “now” and are happy. Joy is such an important aspect of who we are, even a defining aspect, just like what makes you sad is a defining aspect. I decided it was time for me to think about expressing that. I had taken a trip to New York to look at galleries with a friend of mine, and we saw some wonderful artwork, but the overwhelming majority was about the sorrow of the human condition, the angst of the human condition. There’s a lot to be said about joy, and about our friendships, and about our quirkiness.

**KATHRYN:** I see you’ve got things like chaps and hats hanging in your studio. Do you try to incorporate authenticity and history into your work?

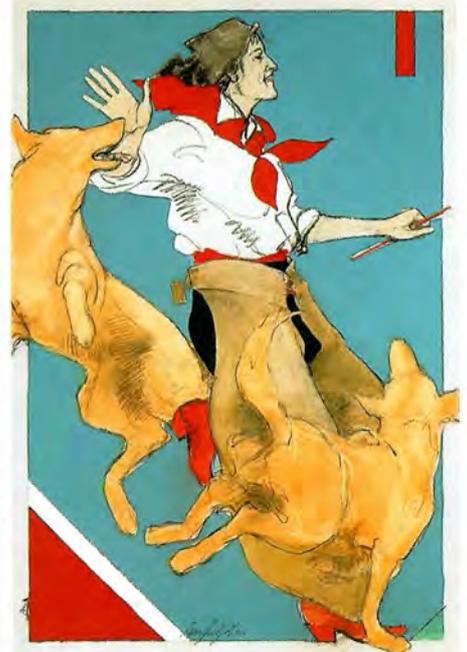
**DONNA:** To some degree. It’s more like bits and pieces. My work typically doesn’t tell an entire story. It doesn’t typically reproduce an entire outfit, and it’s not about a specific event. I pick and choose elements from all kinds of things.

**KATHRYN:** You also have a lot of dogs in your work. What dogs do you own?

**DONNA:** Three big dogs: an Australian Shepherd, a Catahoula, and a stray: They’re named Lilly, Louise, and Shiner. Actually, he’s named Shiner Bark.

**KATHRYN:** Are they your models?

**DONNA:** Yes, I’ve used all of them. At one time, my daughter, Katie, accused me of never buying a pet, only buying new models (laughs). I wanted to say, “Honey, I don’t buy them, they just show up.”



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**KATHRYN:** Although you did a commissioned portrait of golf legend Byron Nelson [cover art for the May 2006 EDS Byron Nelson Championship] and occasionally include cowboys in your paintings, your work doesn’t depict many men. Why?

**DONNA:** I can draw guys, and I usually do a couple a year. But their heroic stories in the context of the American West have been told and are being told very well by other people. A woman’s story in the West, where she’s an active, involved participant, is not such a well-told story.