

First Longears Sculpture Park Opens in Loveland, Colorado
By Helen T. Hertz

Residents of Loveland, Colo. are no strangers to great sculpture. For more than 20 years, the city has hosted the annual Sculpture in the Park show, drawing exceptional artists from around the world. Each year show proceeds go toward the purchase of a few new pieces installed permanently in the Benson Sculpture Garden and today, more than one hundred works of art grace the park's grounds.

Now Loveland has a second "sculpture park," this one dedicated to two of the most aesthetically pleasing forms in nature: the donkey and the mule. In an effort to serve both her community and her favorite animals, long-time Loveland resident and mule and donkey aficionado Meredith Hodges has opened her Lucky Three Ranch to the public for scheduled tours of her longears-inspired art.

The works, which include several bronzes by artists Cammie Lundeen, Dawn Weimer, Robin Laws and Bonnie Shields, pay homage not only to mules and donkeys in general but to some of Meredith's own animals. This year she commissioned two extraordinary additions. "Leap of Faith," by Bonnie Shields, is a life-size bronze of Meredith and her champion donkey jack, Little Jack Horner, jumping a stone wall. "Lucky Three Sundowner," by Robin Laws and John Taylor, is a life-size bronze of Meredith astride her fourth-level dressage mule, Sundowner.

Meredith's decision to commission the works had a great deal to do with the artists. Bonnie and Meredith have been friends for years. Bonnie provided illustrations for Meredith's books on equine training and for her series of children's books about a young mule named Jasper. Her art was also used to create the 2-D animation for the children's television program *Jasper: the Story of a Mule*.

Bonnie approaches her work with a healthy sense of humor and whimsy and a nod to traditional cowboy art. She works in a variety of media, from pen and ink to acrylics to bronze, but the Tennessee mule artist, as she is known, has a knack for capturing the mule's intelligence and personality in any form. A member of the Cowboy Cartoonist Association, her illustrations have appeared in *The Brayer*, published by the American Donkey and Mule Society, *Mules & More Magazine*, *Cowboy Magazine*, and many others. She's also illustrated several other children's books, including the last by famed Misty of Chincoteague author, Marguerite Henry.

Bonnie was thrilled to execute her first life-size bronze for her friend and fellow longears fan. "No one has done more for mules and donkeys than Meredith," she says. "We share an appreciation and love for these animals, and as I know both subjects personally, it was a pleasure to do this piece."

Meredith met Robin Laws at Loveland's Sculpture in the Park, where she fell in love with and purchased "Dee Dee & Libby," Robin's sculpture of a jennet and foal. Robin is recognized internationally for her sculptures and paintings. And while she's traveled the world exhibiting her art, her inspiration typically comes from the animals at home on her Wyoming ranch. When Meredith commissioned her for the Lucky Three Sundowner project, Robin brought in Fort Collins, Colorado artist John Taylor.

"I do animals, and John is excellent with people," says Robin. "He's so meticulous and detail oriented, while I'm more focused on form. We make a great team."

In August “Lucky Three Sundowner” was on display at the Loveland Invitational Sculpture Show, where Robin was an exhibiting artist. Then it was installed permanently at Meredith’s Lucky Three Ranch. Robin says it’s the finest work she’s ever done, and the subject couldn’t be more to her liking.

“Donkeys and mules have carried our burdens and been our buddies for centuries,” she says. “They’re a wonderful subject for art, and Meredith has such an admirable passion for them.”

Meredith was so taken with the Lucky Three Sundowner piece, she has commissioned Robin and John to do another life-size work, this one of her champion mule, Lucky Three Ciji, pulling her in a cart.

As arts patron, educator and advocate, Meredith is widely recognized as one of the most influential figures in a growing community of mule and donkey fans. As a breeder, trainer and competitor, she has tapped potential in these animals that few thought they had. She’s taken her mules into competition not only with other mules, but with horses as well, in elite sports such as dressage and show jumping. She’s been a tireless advocate for their humane treatment and training, and she’s developed her own step-by-step training method. For her, this fascination with mules and her desire to immortalize them in bronze is easy to justify.

“A mule, once you’ve earned his trust, will do anything for you,” she says. “They’re so brave, so smart and have such great personalities. I had to find some way to honor them – my friends.”

For more information or to schedule a tour of the Lucky Three Ranch Longears Sculpture Park, visit www.luckythreeranch.com.