

Donna Howell-Sickles Sends Real Cowgirl

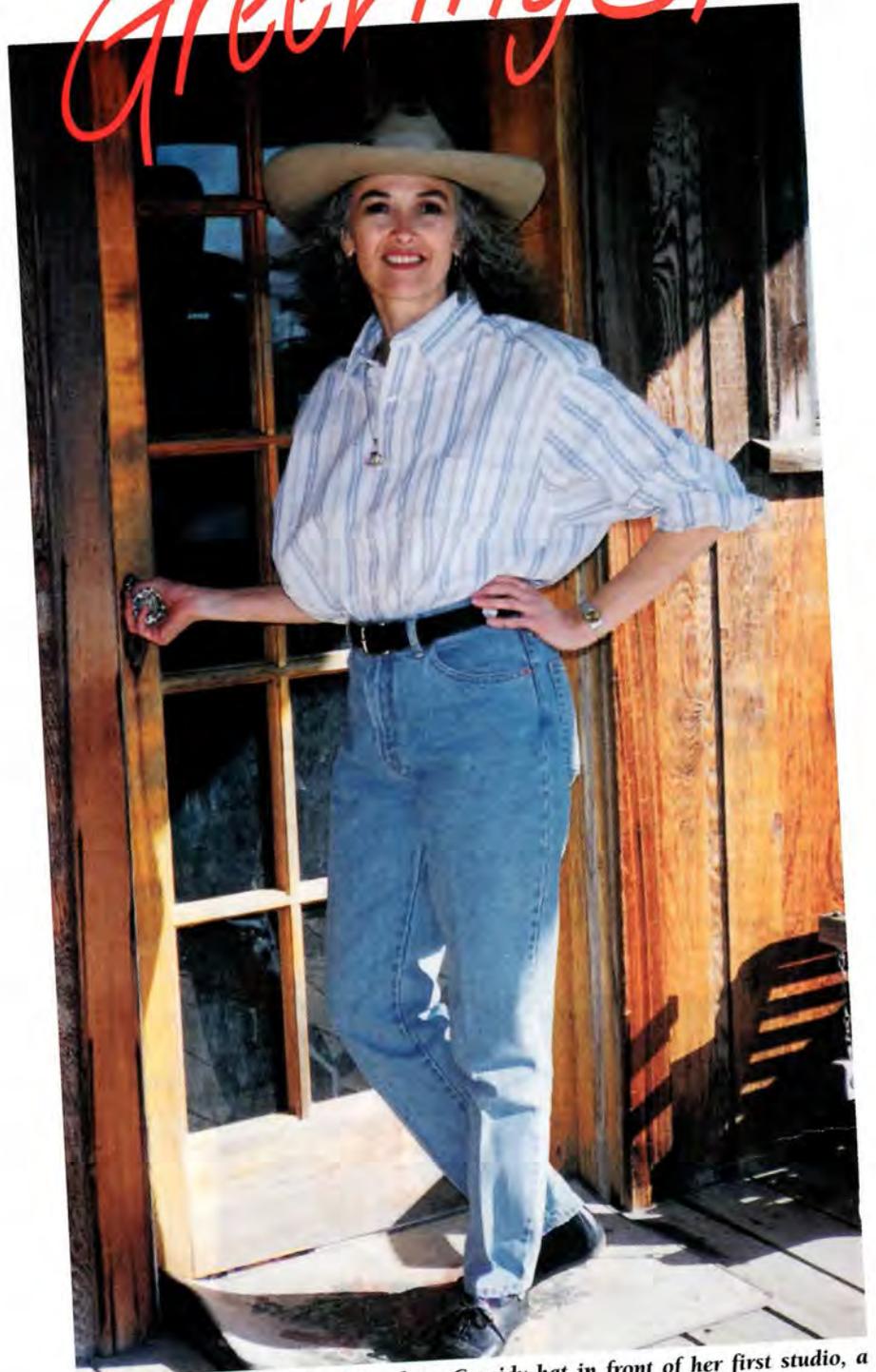
GREETINGS!

by Shari R. Carman

Donna Howell-Sickles enjoys living on the edge. Her work is on the cutting edge of today's contemporary art market and her home, in rural Frisco, Texas, is on the northern edge of arts-minded Dallas. But Howell-Sickles is decidedly not a fringe artist. Her paintings of cowgirls at play are some of the most sought-after images in the United States. John Villani of the *Santa Fean* magazine describes Howell-Sickles as being "hot as a Texas jalapeño."

Howell-Sickles caught many critics by surprise with her images of carefree cowgirls set against familiar and not-so-familiar backdrops. Art Goodtimes, an art critic for the *Telluride (Colo.) Times-Journal*, confessed to being charmed, in spite of himself, "by all the rouge-lipped sirens in chaps in Howell-Sickles' big, bold canvases. She [Howell-Sickles] is one of the best I've ever seen."

Although Howell-Sickles' popularity extends beyond the West, her following is strongest in regions where sagebrush and mesquite dot the landscape. Her painting *Dance Romance* received widespread exposure as the poster image for last year's Fall Arts Festival in Jackson Hole, Wyo. Seven galleries show her work, museums across the West have featured her work in solo and group exhibitions, and she has already staged more than a dozen one-woman shows, a tribute to her standing in the art world.



Howell-Sickles models her Hopalong Cassidy hat in front of her first studio, a building that originally served as the buggyhouse.

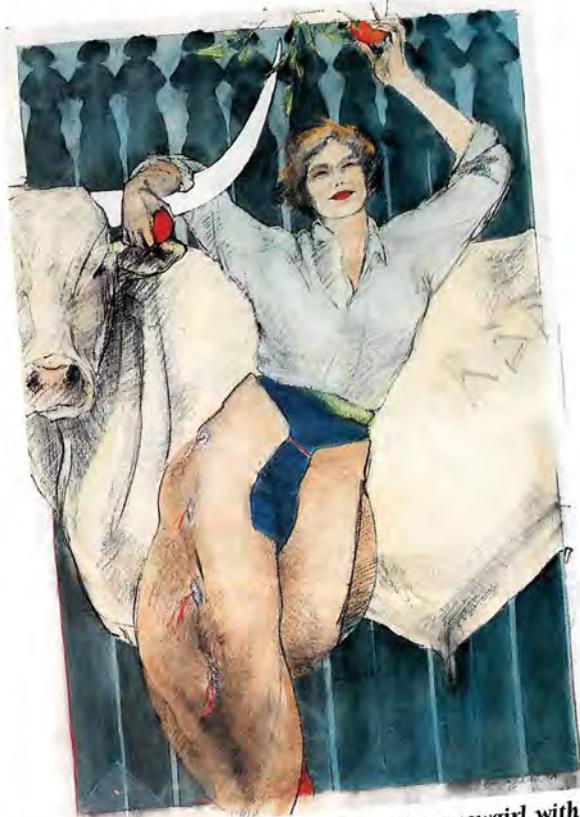


Postcard Cowgirl is reminiscent of the 1920s-era postcard that originally inspired Howell-Sickles.

Howell-Sickles, 44, still owns the postcard that changed her career and her life. The hand-tinted card portrays a 1920s-era cowgirl riding a horse with a caption reading "Greetings from a real cowgirl from the old Southwest!" The off-set registration and the cowgirl's bright red lips make her seem almost otherworldly. This surreal feeling led Howell-Sickles to research the real cowgirls of the 1910s and '20s.

"Their loud, bright costumes and eccentric lifestyles fascinate me," she says. "They exude a spirit of independence and adventure which I think we all seek. They were wonderfully, wildly atypical for their time."

In researching this theme, Howell-Sickles filled two photo albums with old postcards and pictures of the cowgirls and cowboys of the Old West. The photos she bought then for only a few dollars are now worth \$75 or more, because of the soaring interest in the western memorabilia market. Though she paints the contemporary cowhand, the artist finds a steady supply of inspiration in these cards and photographs.



In The Grove, Howell-Sickles pairs a cowgirl with a bull, a symbol of virility. Together they represent masculinity and femininity in harmonious balance.

Drawing upon her own brand of magic, Howell-Sickles gently summons the belles of Wild West Shows to travel through time into her paintings, where they emerge as modern women shrouded with their heritage. They are comfortable with the animals that surround them, just

like the women who rode bulls in the rodeos of times past. And just as the cowgirls of the Wild West Shows were idolized and glamorized, Howell-Sickles' cowgirls



In the mixed-media drawing Just One of the Guys, Howell-Sickles portrays a cowgirl holding her own among three cowboys. The number three is symbolic in Howell-Sickles' work.



Howell-Sickles works on three to four paintings at a time. Occasionally she is assisted by a furry feline friend, Oreo.

evoke a mythology and a heritage all their own.

Men have always been drawn to the macho genre of cowboy art, and it's no secret why many are attracted to Howell-Sickles' art. One collector became so captivated with the image of a cowgirl in a mixed-media drawing that he told Howell-Sickles that he was in love with the cowgirl, and that when he found her, he was going to ask her to marry him! On another occasion, shortly after the artist used a new model in a series of paintings, Howell-Sickles' framer asked her, "Who is that girl and when can I meet her?"

While men fall in love with the happy-go-lucky, self-confident cowgirls, women identify with them. Susan Hallsten McGarry, editor in chief of *Southwest Art* magazine, says she appreciates the subtle symbolism.

"What attracts me to Donna's work is her remarkable repertoire of mythology," says McGarry. "She brings a world of knowledge to her work. Because of the depth of meaning in her work, Donna Howell-Sickles is unquestionably recognized as a special artist. Besides that, her paintings are hands-down happy—you feel so positive when you see them!"

Howell-Sickles says she adds this life-affirming element on purpose.

"I try to convey the joy these cowgirls find in being alive," Howell-Sickles says. "She [the cowgirl] is aware of being happy, aware of her own condition. She's also very competent and confident, strong without being anything other than a woman.

There is strength and joy in her womanhood."

Howell-Sickles draws on a menagerie of animals to add dimension to her stories. An avid student of mythology, she uses common animals to create uncommon undertones. Some favorite animals include fish, a symbol of rebirth; dogs, symbols of protection; and deer, symbols of the chase.

Although early cowgirls were bull riders in rodeos, that's not the only reason why Howell-Sickles might pair a cowgirl with a bull. Bulls and horses are both symbols of virility in mythology and are still associated with masculinity. In her painting *The Grove*, a cowgirl stands with one arm wrapped around the horn of a bull.

"When we have the goddess and a bull, or, in the case of *The Grove*, a cowgirl and a bull, it is symbolic of the whole of us, male and female," says Howell-Sickles. "Sort of like yin and yang. And the crescent of the horn is like the crescent of the moon, which speaks of life cycles or



Howell-Sickles' view of life as cyclic is expressed in the surreal *And the Cowgirl Jumped Over the Moon*.

phases. All of life is cyclic, as in seasons, day and night. There is birth, life and death; three parts to the life cycle."

The number three is significant in Howell-Sickles' paintings. Her works often feature images appearing in threes: dogs, ravens, roebucks or, more subtly, graphic designs, such as triangles or rectangles. "A lot of older deities are comprised of three parts," says Howell-Sickles. "Even in Christianity there is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Always in mythology, three is a lucky number."

Howell-Sickles is recognized as an expert in capturing a character's individuality on canvas. While she has been called "a great draftsman" by more than one art critic, her talent for expressing personality in two-dimensional form goes beyond the merely technical. "I don't know how I do it," Howell-Sickles says, "but I know when I've got it, and I certainly know when I don't."

Howell-Sickles' training as an artist began in college when she switched her major from elementary education to art. She grew up on a farming ranch on the Red River in Texas, and attended a rural grade school in which eight grades were taught in a two-room schoolhouse. Of the 32 students in the school, six were her cousins. While grade school didn't bring Howell-Sickles into contact with an art teacher, she says she was always called on whenever a poster or drawing was needed.

In her junior year of college at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Howell-Sickles took a required art class for her education degree and found her mission.

Upon graduation, Howell-Sickles moved to Seattle, working for two years as a visiting artist for the Washington State Arts Commission. While she was teaching, Howell-Sickles also painted and sold her work. But it wasn't until her encounter with the fateful postcard and her return to Texas that her

career took off. "When I began painting full time, I thought, 'I need more galleries to sell my work! I don't think I'll ever have enough [galleries]," she recalls.

Today, she finds herself turning down requests from galleries that plead with her to join their stable of artists. Howell-Sickles works long hours, but makes time for her 12-year-old daughter, Katie, and her husband, John, who is an inventor.



Howell-Sickles plays with her favorite model, Penny.

Howell-Sickles' first studio was a outbuilding which originally served as a buggy house on the 100-year-old farmstead where she lives. John converted the buggyhouse into a garage for one of the antique cars in his beloved collection, but Howell-Sickles needed a big studio in which she could paint 40- by 60-inch canvases, and the buggyhouse/garage was perfect. In a generous gesture, John built a larger structure to hold his treasures. But soon the demand for Howell-Sickles' work was so high that she found herself working on three or four canvases at a time, and the buggyhouse proved much too small. You guessed it! The large, spacious building housing John's car collection soon became Howell-Sickles' new studio. John is currently building a new garage and

has his fingers crossed that the new addition will serve its intended purpose.

Howell-Sickles' studio is bright, flooded with sunlight. It is decorated with tokens from yesterday's heroes and heroines. On a shelf are two pairs of multi-colored, high-heeled, sharp-toed cowgirl boots, familiar from frequent appearances in her paintings. One pair is embellished by a yellow butterfly pattern, the

other by a bright red flower. Antique fedoras hang on the wall and a Texas white-tailed deer salvaged from a taxidermy shop stands at alert in the corner. When she paints, it's as if all the elements in her studio come to life, like the toys in the *Nutcracker Suite*.

One last warning: once you partake of a Donna Howell-Sickles painting, with its bold expressions, its mystery and romance, you will be hungry for more. A painting by Howell-Sickles is like a visit from friends who make you laugh and feel good. It's a feeling you never want to end. **AC**

A free-lance writer living in Scottsdale, Ariz., Shari R. Carman was executive director of the Scottsdale Artists' School and most recently served as vice president of marketing for Southwest Art magazine.