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IF WISHES WERE HORSES: THE WORK OF ROBERT VAVRA

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One of the most successful commercial photographers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is Robert Vavra. Although he is best known for his horse photography, his portfolio includes many subjects like wild animals, flowers and landscapes. The work that sells the best are his horse images, so naturally Vavra has concentrated on the horse since the success of his 1977 book *Equus: The Creation of a Horse*.

In a 2011 interview with the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, Vavra said that he thinks of himself as an artist and storyteller more than a photographer. His images are lush, unconventional and often very beautiful. Most photographers would stick a horse in the center of the picture. Not Vavra. His horses are often off-center or dominated by the landscape around them. Vavra often tries to capture the movement of the horse. His animals run off of the frame or blend in with the darkness as they splash over a stream. One photo consists of the shadows of two mating horses taken while he was in a tree looking down on the happy pair. Perhaps his most famous photo, first seen in *Equus* and later used as the cover for *The Horse Whisperer*, is the silhouette of a running horse against the mountains and the clouds. The horse springs up like a tree instead of being separate from the land and sky around it. The horse becomes a bridge between the physical and the metaphysical or things seen and things unseen.

Vavra also has managed to capture the very subtle expressions horses have

in various situations, revealing their complex emotional lives. Who knew that horse faces could look mischievous, anxious or in downright fury? Horse expressions change rapidly and Vavra has managed to capture the split-second changes. This is one reason why he is considered to have captured not just the physical beauty of horses, but their spirits and personalities as well.

Vavra's photographs look spontaneous but they are not. He plans the situations, backgrounds and compositions very deliberately. He also helps train the horses in order for them to pose and move at liberty (without wearing a saddle or bridle). Some of his books feature an Andalusian stallion named Majestad, a horse able to learn hand-signals and other cues in order to stand still, run about or relax.

However, these images look unplanned, as if Vavra just happened to be at the right time and the right place with a camera in his hands. Placing the horses slightly off-center, using bizarre angles, even letting some images be slightly blurred helps lend to this sense of spontaneity. The horses also do not wear any tack, which gives the illusion that they are wild horses moving freely about their world.

Vavra's horse pictures often do not have any people in them. The images are only of horses, as if they are the only important things in the world. Vavra also does this in his flower images and in images of beetles. Vavra did try a picture book, *Stallion of a Dream* (1980) of a gypsy boy making friends with a wild stallion but that book did not do as well as his other human-free books.

In his books, Vavra often pairs his photographs with quotes about horses

from literature or religious books like the Bible. But the images can stand alone without words. They show the exterior of horses but also shows a bit of their inner world through their expressions, landscape and lack of people to get in the way.

The photos makes the viewer wonder if a world without people would look like Vavra's photos. People only are necessary, in a sense, as observers and appreciators of everything else.

References

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