

# Laurel Cook — Capturing Dog Moments

What struck me driving up the lane to Culandubh Kennels in Clayton was the absolute absence of barking. I could see beautiful Labrador Retrievers bounding about on the fenced grounds, but even when I got out of the car, not a single dog barked.

My mission was to interview Laurel Cook, dog portrait painter extraordinaire. Her acrylic paintings are as lively and cap-

by Sally Hansen

tivating as her handsome, lovable subjects. What I discovered is that the degree to which she captures their personalities is a mirror reflection of the degree to which her most recent life revolves around dogs.

With her husband, Ross McLaughlin, Laurel breeds, nurtures and trains gorgeous Fox Red, Black and Chocolate Labrador Retrievers. The couple also offer a boarding service at their carefully designed facilities at 355 Bowland Rd. in Clayton (near Union Hall at Wolf Grove and Tatlock Roads). Culandubh is a Gaelic word (pronounced cool-ann-doo) that means "little dark dog."

## The Proof is in the Paintings

Laurel's irresistible portraits of the Labs she raises perfectly portray the key to her success both as a painter and as a dog breeder. She knows and loves her dogs. Ross and Laurel work together on the three essential aspects of raising a great dog — genetics, nutrition and training. But from the moment of their birth until they are eight weeks old, Laurel micro-manages all aspects of their development. Since her retirement from the Canadian Air Force in 2003, she has worked constantly to hone her skills as a breeder and young puppy trainer. She is an adherent of the "Super Dog Program" developed by the U.S. Military to improve the performance of dogs used for military purposes. Based on early neurological stimulation, the program gives puppies a "head-start" on brain development.

A few years before her retirement she also started working on her art. She explored different media and styles through a wide variety of courses, and eventually earned a Creative Arts Certificate from Algonquin College. Perhaps the best artistic advice she ever received came from a "Wee Beasties and Gargoyles" course she took in 2001 at the Mississippi Mills Summer School of the Arts. Sculpting instructor and puppeteer Matt Ficner told her to "start with something you know!" so Laurel created a Labrador Retriever gargoyle that would definitely be snapped up as garden art if she put them on the market. She

credits a multi-media course taught by wonderful artist Mary Pfaff of Carleton Place with the inspiration for her "personality portraits" of her dogs. "There are just some dog moments that should be captured in paint," she explains.

## The Evidence is Everywhere

A walk through the house provides overwhelming evidence of this creative artist's prodigious capabilities. Laurel has just completed the conversion of an upstairs hallway into a new gallery for her dog portraits. She experimented with various off-the-shelf products and developed a technique for creating faux textured stone wall tiles. Guests are treated to their choice of five different colour-themed rooms, with window treatments, pillow cushions, lamps and other touches all conceived and executed by Laurel. She has painted portraits of dogs and other favourite animals on furniture, stools, walls, and countless other objects. The house probably contains in excess of a hundred carousel horses and models, restored and sometimes refashioned into new pieces by Laurel. "I love colour!" she exclaims superfluously.



Downstairs, the living room coffee table sports a wrought iron hunting dog emerging through the glass top with a duck tenderly secured in its mouth. No, Laurel did not make it. She did, however, defy gravity and an aching neck to create a faux tin ceiling throughout much of the large main floor. She credits the knowledgeable folks at Valley Design with her success in applying paint over textured wallpaper to achieve a very realistic result. Nor can you tell the difference between the real interior brick walls and the faux brick walls she has created.

## Eat the Elephant One Bite at a Time

This energetic woman tackles her house the way she tackles life — fearlessly, creatively, and with



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determination and humour. At the age of seventeen she applied to join the Canadian Air Force because a guy in her high school math class suggested she wouldn't be accepted. She was working as a cook at a summer camp near Kenora, ON, when she received her instructions to apply to the University of Manitoba Engineering Program as part of her officer training program. She became the second woman to be promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in her trade of military communications electronics, and she did it as a single parent until she hooked up with Ross who was a Major in the Army infantry.

Laurel bought their first Lab in 1988 when Ross was serving in Cypress. The experiment was a life-changing success; today Ross is a Qualified Judge for Canadian Kennel Club Hunt Tests and an expert obedience, gun dog and hunt test trainer. Together the couple have successfully titled numerous dogs including one of the first five Labradors in Canada to receive the title of CKC Grand Master Hunter. Laurel is achieving wide recognition as an exceptional trainer of young puppies. Their goal is to "breed the best working retrievers in the world!" I'd bet on it.

## Art in the Attic Too

From May 6 to 8 you'll get a chance to enjoy Laurel Cook's perceptive, humorous and loving portraits of her magnificent Labrador Retrievers at the annual Art in the Attic exhibit in the Almonte Old Town Hall at 14 Bridge St. Don't miss the wine and cheese reception at the grand opening at 7PM on Friday, May 6. The show is presented by the Almonte and Area Artists Association, and as director of the show this year, Laurel is delighted that works by high school artists will be included. Another aspect of Laurel's artistic versatility also will be on display through her intarsia collaboration with Bruce Gilchrist. Laurel's drawing expertise combines with Gilchrist's mastery of this demanding scroll saw wood inlay technique that resembles marquetry to produce dramatic original works of art that are surprisingly affordable.

To learn more about all aspects of Laurel's and Ross's Culandubh Kennels, visit their informative website at <www.foxredlabs.ca>. The site includes photos of Laurel's artistic renderings of her own favourite subjects, as well as commissioned pet portraits she has painted for others. You can contact her at <kennel@magma.ca>, or by phone at 256-5863.

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