

# A Long Shot Pays Off

500 YEARS LATE, BUT 56 HANDS HIGH

**I**N THE DAYS WHEN MILAN WAS ONE OF THE RICHEST AND most powerful city-states in northern Italy, its duke, Ludovico Sforza, liked to do things in a grand way. In 1482 he commissioned Leonardo da Vinci to create the biggest horse statue ever. Made to honor the duke's father, it was to be 24 feet high. Leonardo spent years sketching a great charger, eventually sculpting a full-sized model in clay and leaving notes about how to cast it—the bronze would weigh 80 tons! But then a French army threatened and the metal was needed for cannon. When Milan fell in September 1499, Leonardo fled. French archers used the clay horse for target practice. For more than four centuries it was lost to history.

Then a most unlikely thing happened. United Airlines pilot Charles Dent, a lover of Italy and an amateur sculptor, saw copies of the Leonardo sketches that had been rediscovered in Spain in 1966. Dent sculpted a rough clay model of Leonardo's charger, and resolved that somehow he would build the famous animal as a gift from the American people to the people of Italy. Such a horse looked like a 100-to-1 shot, but Dent persevered. He created an organization, Leonardo da Vinci's Horse, Inc., which raised \$4 million. The job of making the horse was given to the Tallix, Inc., foundry in Beacon, New York. Charles Dent died in 1994, but the work went on, most recently under the direction of sculptor Nina Akamu (right), who created the eight-foot master model. From it, a larger, clay version was made and will be cast in bronze. On September 10, 1999, five hundred years to the day after the archers shot Leonardo's model to pieces, the bronze horse—broken down into seven manageable sections and flown for free from the United States by Alitalia—will take its place on a pedestal in the ancient city of Milan. —Nancy Mohr

Backed by horses, sculptor Nina Akamu holds one of the sketches that led to the model before her—and to the finished charger.

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