

ANTIQUE ARABIAN HORSE *Sculptures*

Part I

by ©Judith Wich-Wenning

The 19th century was the time of the Arabian horse in art. As described in my series of articles "Orientalism and the Arabian horse" in several previous issues of "Desert Heritage", numerous painters were fascinated by Arabian horses. However, exotic equines from the Middle East inspired also sculptors to create extraordinary works of art. From monumental statuary to small, handy table bronzes, Arabian horses were most favourite motives. Already in the 19th century Arabian horse sculptures had a top rank amongst collectors. Similar to paintings and lithographs depicting Arabians, friends and breeders of Arabian horses are inspired by the beauty and aura of Arabian horse sculptures. But what is the background behind artists and their work? In this new series of articles, the different kinds of antique Arabian horse sculptures and their famous creators will be introduced.

The History of Animal Sculpture and the "Animaliers"

Sculpture is one of the oldest arts known to man. Already in classical times, numerous animal statues were created, ranging from the cats and falcons of ancient Egypt to the horses of Greece and the Roman dogs. Then after the fall of the Roman Empire, comparatively little animal

sculpture in the narrow sense was produced for almost 2.000 years. Interestingly, although animals were almost completely neglected by sculptors during that time, they continued to be regarded as proper subjects for painting. Then from Renaissance times on, equestrian statues became highly popular. More than any other animal, the horse can be found in European sculpture. However, the horse was usually destined to play a secondary role. Most often it was a status symbol, underlining the wealth, power and virility of a kind or leader. Only here and there we can find rare pieces of artwork created purely for the love of animals. In most cases, though the horses were anatomically correct, they were not the focus of the sculpture. Usually, they had some functional or heraldic purpose.

In the early years of the 19th century, the animal world came into the center of attention for sculptors. A group of artists named "Animaliers" attempted to show animals as they really were. They approached their subject in a more scientific and realistic way. Many of the "Animaliers" went even further and tried to convey the emotions and mental characteristics of the animals. It was however an unwritten law within this group of artists not to humanize animals. The



Prosper Le Courtier:
"La Fantasia Arabe" (Arab Warrior on Horseback)
bronze ca. 1890, signed "Le Courtier" on base

hey-day of the "Animaliers" was the time between 1830 and 1890 with the center of this movement being in France. The term "Animalier" was by the way coined as an epithet for the sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye (1796 – 1875). He was the earliest and certainly one of the most famous artists of this French school. An art critic had used the expression "Animalier" for Barye in a reproachful way. However, little did he know how successful Barye and his colleagues would turn out and how popular their art would become. The term "Animalier" soon found wide acceptance by the public, then standing for a highly appreciated art movement.

Most favourite subjects for the Animaliers were birds, lions, tigers, camels, whippets, but first and foremost horses. The artists were often strongly influenced by Orientalism. As Orientalist painters wanted to immortalize the fascination of the Arabian horse on paper, the Animaliers aimed at the same, but working three-dimensionally. An Arabian horse had pride of place amongst sculptors in the 19th century. Also today lots of Animalier collectors put an Arabian horse at the top of their priorities. The exotic expression, muscular complexity and swift movement of a noble horse were certainly a challenge to any artist. Especially as we have to consider that photographic studies were not available until the 1870s!

Interestingly, a few Orientalist painters produced also sculptures. They either changed direction in their career or practiced animal modelling alongside their painting, drawing or engraving. One of the most famous examples for this was certainly Théodore Géricault (1791 – 1824). He was not only a leading painter of the Romantic Movement and of Arabian horses, but created also several impressive sculptures. We can only regret that Géricault passed away at only 32 years of age and had no chance to further perform his artistic talents. Other important Orientalist painters who worked also in the field of sculpting were Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Léon Gérôme and Sir Edwin Henry Landseer.

Materials

The most sought-after and highly valuable material for sculptures is certainly bronze. Bronze ranks as one of the oldest metals known to mankind. It is an alloy of copper and tin and excels by its malleability and durability. Artefacts produced from bronze have been discovered in most parts of the world with the earliest dating back over 5.000 years. Thanks to its very positive characteristics and looks, bronze has always been a perennial favourite among artists.

As bronze was also expensive in the 19th century, artists often worked with alternatives as for example spelter and cast-iron. Spelter is a mixture of zinc alloyed with other soft metals. It has a lower melting point compared to bronze and is far softer. Spelter was invented around 1850 and was especially popular



Bronze sculpture "Arabian Stallion with Halter"
19th century, from the collection
of Judith Wich-Wenning.



One of the most impressive sculptures ever created:
Antoine-Louis Barye's work "Cheval Turc",
casted by the famous foundry Barbédienne.

among German artists. Generally speaking, spelter sculptures are often lighter than bronze models of equivalent size. When tapped with a fingernail, spelter will give a different sound compared to bronze: it has virtually no ring.

Many Arabian horse models can be found in spelter, as for example Mène's famous work "L'Accolade" which exists in bronze, spelter, cast-iron etc. Cast-iron was comparatively popular during the 19th century especially in Great Britain and Russia. If you are not sure regarding the material of a sculpture, simply take a magnet. If it sticks it is iron! Cast-



Signature of the famous
Animalier Pierre-Jules Mène.

iron models can reach a high standard. They should be handled with more care than bronzes. Cast-iron is brittle and will shatter easily when dropped to the ground. By the way, a horse sculpture should never be lifted by the tail. The tail was often cast separately and will break easily. Of course this can be repaired by a restorer but it is always nicer to have a fine, untouched piece.

Other popular materials in the 19th century were white metal, silver and alabaster for smaller decorative parts. In the early years of his career, Antoine-Louis Barye modelled small animals for the court goldsmith in gold. Some Orientalist sculptures, as for example desert sceneries with camels and Bedouins, were manufactured in terra-cotta. This reddish-brown material creates a very different, warm atmosphere.

A high quality sculpture has a certain aura, it radiates a special feeling and can change the atmosphere of a whole room. Especially important are the details of the sculpture – they should be sharp and crisp. When looking the animal in the eye, the face must be realistic.

Today little is known how many sculptures of a certain model were originally cast in the 19th century. It was an uncommon practice to mark sculptures with numbers and name their editions. Only later at the very end of the 19th century, some foundries started to number casts. Many sculptures

have no bases at all, other come on marble or wooden bases. They might stand freely on their base or are held by one or more bolts. An original 19th century bronze was not glued firmly to its base – this practice became popular in the 20th century with modern sculptures. Some bronzes stand even on an appropriate pedestal, which usually has a dramatic effect on the presentation of a piece and highly adds to its importance.

The Modelling and Casting Process

The founder of a bronze played a very important role – no matter how brilliant the original model, in the hands of a second-rate founder, the final sculpture would never reach its full beauty. Also when moulds were used again and again, they lost their sharp, crisp details and the results were not as refined as the first sculptures made with the same mould. Some of the most famous 19th century foundries were Susse Frères and Barbédienne. These long established companies were responsible for very well executed casts of Animalier sculptures.

The starting point for every sculpture was usually a first model in clay or, less commonly, wax. Most artists preferred clay as wax was considered to be more difficult to work with. For those however who mastered to work with wax, this material provided infinite flexibility and responded more easily to those precise touches, which can make all the difference to the completed work. The famous Animalier sculptor Rembrandt Bugatti (1885 – 1916) even designed his own tools for this. They were precision made for him at his brother Ettore's legendary car making factory.



A very decorative object from 19th century:
Two fighting stallions standing on a
receptacle;
made in fire-gilded bronze.

There are several ways of casting a sculpture. The so-called "cire perdue" ("lost wax") process is a method, which was discovered circa 4.000 years ago. It leads to the loss of the original model and could be used only for producing single casts. Here a mould was formed over a wax model, which was then melted out. This created a hollow space for the bronze. As the wax model liquefied, it was of course no longer to be used. This way of casting is considered the most satisfactory method, despite being also the most expensive. Antoine-Louis Barye was one of the few Animalier sculptors who had their work cast by the



One of the most well known bronzes by Pierre-Jules Mène: "L'Accolade", 19th century bronze.



A charming sculpture by Pierre-Jules Mène showing an Arabian Stallion being tied to a palm tree: "Cheval au Palmier", 19th century bronze.

"cire perdue" method. Although this process created naturally absolutely unique pieces, it had also its disadvantage: It made sculptures very costly.

The ancient Greeks developed another method, which is still popular up to this day. Here the mould was formed over the original model. Then it was carefully removed and a coating of wax lined the inside of the mould. Onto this an inner core of refractory material was poured. Later on, the wax was melted out and bronze was finally poured into the intervening space. Similar to the previous method, mould and core had to be carefully broken away, but here the original model was preserved and could be used again and again.

A third way to create sculptures was the sand-casting method, which became popular in the 19th century. Here sand and a suitable bonding as for example clay were used as the mould material. The mixture was then moistened to develop strength and make the material suitable for moulding. The process of sand-casting was an effective compromise as it was fairly mechanical, yet required skillful after-work of chiselling and smoothing the surface of the sculpture. The majority of Animalier bronzes produced in

the 19th and early 20th century were executed in the sand-casting process.

Patination

The patination is a very important part of a piece of art. It can enhance or even break the total look of a bronze. Patination of a sculpture was not an easy task. A considerable amount of skill and experience was needed to receive a successful result.

It was said to have been a five to seven year apprenticeship in the 19th century. Methods and brews of exotic ingredients were often a closely guarded secret. The colours of patination ranged from black to brown and red brown and varied from artist to artist. Barye for example preferred dark greens, while Mène's works were sometimes black or silver-plated. From time to time, the sculptor had achieved an appealing shading of greens and browns by applying colours in layers. The raw, yet unfinished colour of an unpatinated bronze looks surprisingly bright and brassy. Interestingly, the patination of several casts of a particular model was very often done in the same consistent colour.



Rare 19th century clock with the scenery of a lion hunt.

There are several different methods and chemicals which could be used for patination. One



Lithograph by Carle Vernet "Mameluk holding his Stallion" being the basis for the 19th century sculpture "Mameluk holding his Stallion". Both works of art from the collection of Judith Wich-Wenning.



"Mameluk on his Stallion", an imposing sculpture on the top of a large 19th century clock; owned by Judith Wich-Wenning.

19th century method was to warm the bronze in the sun or by a fire and running a solution of salammoniac, potash and distilled vinegar over it. The use of a camel hair brush squeezed by the fingers helped the process. In another recipe, the increase and decrease of the amount of salt led to a variation of colours.

An especially appealing finish for decorative objects is fire-gilding. The created effect brings about the look of prestige and luxury. Fire-gilding can be found for example on horse sculptures standing on clocks or mounted on receptacles. The method of gilding was already known in ancient Egypt. Especially fire-gilding – when skillfully carried out – produces artwork of great solidity and beauty. The bright, golden colour

will stay the same for a very long time – many sculptures from the 19th century still look like fire-gilded just yesterday!

By the way, an antique sculpture does not need much special attention regarding care. However, it should neither be over cleaned – no chemicals should be used! – nor used as a garden ornament. This field is more appropriate for modern sculptures.

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