

# Ali AlHawaj

THE DOC WITH MANY TALENTS

■ *by Monika Savier*



The painter, breeder, and photographer of Arabian horses, Ali Alhawaj, did not have to do what many of his European colleagues did 200 years ago, during the time of orientalism: they traveled to the Orient in order to get into first-hand contact with Arabian horses in their original surroundings, so as to be better able to paint them. Alhawaj, however, is born in Bahrain and was raised in his country of Saudi Arabia, so he has handling of Arabian horses and experience with them in his genetic code. He has been painting horses for a few years and in this short time, was able to develop into a successful portrait painter. He is devoted to depicting flawless horses with noble heads, characteristically displaying great elegance, intensity, and realism. Painting and photography, however, are not all there is in his life.

The artist and medical doctor Ali Alhawaj is, actually, a Plastic Surgery specialist. Currently, the 36-year-old is working in Saudi Arabia as a Fellow of Plastic Surgery.

The doctor-and-artist has been interested in Arabian Horses since childhood. In his own words, his family “value the Arabian horse, and consider it not only a tradition, but a heritage and a treasure that has to be taken care of”. As he loves Arabian Horses so much, he started painting and photographing them, and was inspired by their beauty, exotic expression, and nobility. Actually, his story as an artist began when, even as a boy, he used to watch his father paint horses using oil colors. So he started appreciating art from a young age, and he recalls that his Art teachers in school used to consider him one of the tops of his class in Art and sketching. However, he never expanded his talent until later.

Ali Alhawaj got inspired by many of the famous Arabian Horse paintings made by modern world-known artists from all over the world. Today, he maintains good relationships with great present-time artists from Italy, Australia, the US, Germany, and Iraq. When he had done his first real sketches, he showed them to several of his fellow artists and Arabian horse lovers. He says that their input really motivated him to continue and expand his talent – so during the lock down, he spent many hours self-learning about the principles of Art and drawing from international online courses. Later on, he took lessons at a private studio in Bahrain, acquiring a great lot of skills and getting really familiar with different painting techniques, and above all, increasing his knowledge about Art during that time. In his opinion, the time he dedicated to fine arts during lock down molded him from an immature to a professional level artist.

In October 2021 he received the Swatch Swiss Watches Award for his artwork with which he had represented Bahrain at Expo Dubai 2020.

The fact that Alhawaj is also a self-taught photographer of Arabian horses made painting more easy to learn for him, as he already had a refined understanding of light and shadows which serves him well for painting.

Currently, the versatile artist is working on several projects for his love of Arabian Horses, including painting, sketching, sculpting, and assembling a documentation of the famous authentic Arabian horses that fascinate and inspire him so much.



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Portrait of Ahmer Eladiyat. Oil on Canvas.  
Collection of Al-Ameen Stud, Kuwait.

# INTERVIEW

**Savier:** For thousands of years, wild and ridden horses have inspired people around the world to create images of them, whether in caves or museums. Horses, and especially the horses of the Orient, we get to experience as works of art from ancient times to the present. The reasons for depicting them were many. Before the invention of photography, the paintings also served as a reminder of the Arabian horses' noble role in the cavalries for the wars between peoples and nations.

**How do you see the role of your pictures in the context of contemporary art?**

**Alhawaj:** My drawings are a translation of my perspective on Arabian horses. Arabian Horses are beautiful creatures. Each artist emphasizes, in his paintings, a particular angle or part of the aesthetics of this creature. And I hope that my view highlights the part that impresses me the most and continues to inspire my feelings towards this wonderful creature. And I really think it's a great honor to draw this creature that comes from my own environment.

My paintings represent my personality and my love for the authentic Arabian Horse, who has always had a major impact on my upbringing from a young age. I was raised to love horses. Thanks to my father, of course, who planted in me the love of horses. I have always been fascinated by paintings of famous modern and orientalist artists. But I never thought I'd complete a whole painting before! However, my love for challenge and new experiences made what I thought a dream possible.

**Savier:** For whom, I mean for which target group, do you paint horses?

**Alhawaj:** I don't aspire to draw for a particular audience or taste. Actually it's my feelings that move me when I am painting. I believe that

successful artwork is the one that comes from the heart. It should not be planned or considered "material study". I do not hide that I have tried to follow the taste of fellow horse lovers to plan some of my artworks. But in my view, those pieces of my work that were created purely out of my heart and passion, were the strongest and most beautiful. And I made sure of that by asking the opinion of many of my fellow artists.

**Savier:** Which painting techniques do you prefer, and for which type of horse?

**Alhawaj:** The period of my childhood when I watched my father paint in oil colors affected me the most. That's why oil colors are my favorite, although they require a lot of patience and technique. But I won't try to hide the fact that drawing with charcoal has been fun, especially when highlighting the fine details.

The Layering Technique in oil painting is a very good and safe technique, – however, I find myself doing Alla Prima (which is Wet on Wet) at certain times and that of course goes with my mood during painting.

**Savier:** You mainly paint the heads & necks of the horses – why does the body play a secondary role in depictions today? Does this correspond to the role of today's show horse, who no longer has a function as a riding horse?

**Alhawaj:** The Authentic Arabian horse has many special traits that are widely known. However, the two qualities that we all agree on are the beautiful head and the high tail carriage, both of which highlight the Arabian horse breed.

The ability to draw the head in its fine details and authentic look is a very exciting challenge that highlights the artist's skills and abilities. And of

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**Savier:** Are there any famous painters of the past, such as Carle Vernet, Theodore Gericault, or Victor Adam, who have influenced you?

**Alhawaj:** The motivation for me to paint horses was my love and passion towards the Arabian Horse, in the first place. This encouraged me to start learning about Arabian Horse Art for more inspiration and ideas. I was influenced by many modern and Orientalist artists. Some of my favorites are Carle Vernet, Alfred de

Dreux, Theodore Gericault, and Adolf Schreyer.

course, I need to mention my love for the features of the Arab horse head, which has a special appeal for me. I don't think the body plays a subordinate role, however. In Art, it is a personal preference to highlight the element of beauty I'm interested in showing. Moreover, maybe you noticed I did start painting full bodies in several of my paintings. It's purely a personal taste and related to the mood during creating a work of Art.

**Savier:** Do the horses you paint really exist? After which model do you paint? After a photo you took, or from memory?

**Alhawaj:** Most of the horses I draw are inspired by real horses that I admire or personally love. But sometimes I take inspiration from more than one source. Being a photographer too made that much more simple for me, as sometimes I get references from my own photography. As an Arabian horse breeder, I spend a lot of time near horses, and I think that made it easier to understand the anatomy and details of the Arabian horse.

**Savier:** In addition to painting, graphic art and, today, photography, there is sculpting, which fascinates more and more horse lovers. With all your creative work in the field of the Arabian culture of today, I assume that you even started sculpting – did you?

**Alhawaj:** Yes, I find sculpture very fascinating and enjoyable. Being able to draw in three rather than two dimensions is really challenging, I would say. However, what makes sculpture interesting for me to explore, is that while painting relies on creating the illusion of a real object or scene, sculpture on the other hand actually inhabits the space shared by the viewer. One could actually touch it and feel it with its various forms and textures.

While the painter needs to know how the shadows are accompanied by the lights, in sculpture, nature helps you create those in the artwork. Both are great types of visual art that I really enjoy.

**Savier:** Thank you for the interesting information and best wishes for the future. □



Portrait of NK Nadeer.  
Oil On Canvas.



Painting of Obayyah Al Rayyan.  
Collection of AlWaab Stud, Qatar.



Oil On Canvas.

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During private Arabian Horse  
Sculpting Workshop  
with Mrs Nicole Sachs-Germany



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