

A Celebration of the Horse

The British Museum exhibition

The Horse: Ancient Arabia to the Modern World
The British Museum, London
24th May – 30th September 2012
Free admission

For the very first time the British Museum is holding an exhibition devoted to the horse, with a display tracing the animal's story across thousands of years of human history.

The free exhibition, which opened in May and runs until the end of September, is timed to coincide with the Olympic Games, but is also conceived as a Diamond Jubilee present to The Queen, a celebrated horse breeder.

The exhibition ranges from a stylised figure which decorated a 3,000 year old harness, to the Georgian thoroughbreds Hambletonian and Diamond, immortalised on a gambler's gaming chip – appropriately since Hambletonian won a staggering 3,000 guinea prize when he beat Diamond by a short head at Newmarket in 1799.

The exhibition includes paintings by George Stubbs, newly excavated carvings of horses from Saudi Arabia, panoramic photographs of incised horses on rock faces which may be thousands of years old, clay tablets promising gifts of horses and chariots and beautiful harness decorations, some in pure gold.

The wild horse was domesticated at least 5,000 years ago and probably far earlier, initially for meat and later for transport, transforming how far man could travel and how much he could carry. The exhibition traces the evolution of the elegant, swift Arabian horses, associated in legend with King Solomon and The Prophet Muhammad. Said to have been created by angels or born out of the wind, they were prized more highly than gold, and made suitable gifts for



Painting of the Godolphin Arabian by George Stubbs



Detail of a gigapan photograph of one of more than 2000 petraglyphs discovered in the Saudi desert.

princes and emperors. Their distinctive high-arched necks and tails can be seen in Assyrian sculptures, Egyptian wall paintings and ancient Greek vases, and the exhibition will also trace the bloodlines of all modern thoroughbreds back to three famous Arabian stallions imported into eighteenth century England: The Darley Arabian, The Byerly Turk and the Godolphin Arabian.

Loans from the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge trace the history of the Crabbet Arabian Stud, complete with a painting of a Bedouin tent which the Blunts used for entertaining visitors at Crabbet Park in West Sussex, where the writer and diplomat Wilfrid Scawen Blunt and his wife, Anne, granddaughter of the poet Byron, imported and bred Arabian horses, eventually dividing the collection when his string of mistresses led to their separation.

Breeder and AHS member, Anne Brown, was granted an exclusive interview with HH Prince Faisal bin Abdullah Al Saud, Chairman of the Saudi Equestrian Board of Trustees, the main sponsor of a new exhibition:

At last! We have our own exhibition - at the British Museum, no less. All summer, The Arab Horse takes over an entire floor of the atrium, packed with treasures from pre-historic rock carvings to a 21st century set of the Queen's purple, red and gold racing colours. Entry is free, the gift shop will answer all your Christmas present worries and the



Watercolour of three galloping horses, c.1550, Safavid, Iran.
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extensive catalogue covers the history of the Arabian horse in art and artifacts.

The inspiration for this comprehensive celebration comes mainly from the dedicated and enthusiastic Saudi Prince Faisal. "It is a gift to the British people on the occasion of Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee," he told me. "The British and the Arabs share a love of horses, so we are pleased to show what the desert has contributed to the modern horse."

The Prince takes obvious pride in the Bedouins' ability to perfect the fleetest, soundest, most loyal and most intelligent of horses.

Standing in front of a portrait of the Godolphin Arabian, one of the three

early imported Arabians from which all racehorses now registered with Wetherbys descend, Prince Faisal explains: "As the Arabians' blood spread beyond the Middle East, it infused and improved other horse stocks. The most remarkable is the racing Thoroughbred."

The Saudi's have been instrumental in sponsoring NASA space technology to record in Giga-Pan clarity the 2,000+ rock carvings of horses recently discovered throughout the desert of the peninsula and shown on a huge screen at the exhibition. "They prove that our culture has been based on horses of unmistakable Arabian type for thousands of years," explained Prince Faisal, impressed and amazed by the abundance of petroglyphs in his homeland.

The Prince was particularly impressed by an almost life-size portrait of King Abdul Aziz, the country's founder, mounted on an Arabian stallion, the entire painting comprised of lines of poetry in cursive Arabic calligraphy. The artist, Dr Ahmed Moustafa, later spoke at the two-day conference for academics which followed the exhibition's opening.

A display of the Blunts' contribution to the breeding of pure Arabians at their Crabbet Park Stud also attracted the Prince's eye as he admired original watercolours of Bedouins and their horses painted in the desert by Lady Anne on one of the journeys she and Wilfrid made in the late 1870s.

The most encouraging aspect of the project has been the progress in scientific



Anne Brown with sponsor Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia



Assyrian wall relief showing a bull hunt, c. 875-860 BC, Assyrian, Nimrud, North-West Palace. © The Trustees of the British Museum

research and paleontology – and just about every other ‘ology’ – in a country where such investigation has until recently been almost taboo. The Prince’s visionary approach is especially welcome as he is also the Minister for Education, so we can expect many more discoveries from this formerly hidden world to be made public.

Many of the Museum’s exhibits illustrate the Arabian horse in war, noting that its fiery temperament and loyalty was a great asset to its rider. The very few horses to return from Napoleon’s march on Moscow were Arabians, notably the Emperor’s own stallion, Marengo. Their huge value to their owners is clear when you admire the tiny delicate pure gold statuettes of the Oxus treasure from the 4-5th centuries BC. In fact, you see the Arabian horse portrayed in just about every medium – stone, pottery, ceramic, glass, wood, metalware, canvas, silk, and now in glorious technicolour photography.

I asked Dr John Curtis, curator of the exhibition and co-author

of the catalogue, to identify the most important artifacts. Top of his list was the Standard of Ur (a small box-like object from about 2,600BC, before the taming of horses, which depicts donkeys pulling tumbrils in war); followed by a delicate Babylonian plaque of a horse and rider from 2000BC; then a dramatic and colourful wall painting from Thebes of a pair of prancing horses with tribute bearers, dating back 3,400 years; belt buckles which have miraculously survived since Parthian times; an illuminated manuscript of the *Furusiya* in elegant calligraphy, laying out the art of horsemanship (a hefty two-volume translation is available in the main Museum gift shop); and finally, the very early carved stone figures found by a farmer over the past few years at al-Magar, right in the middle of the Rub-al-Khali (the Empty Quarter).

My favourite? Fragments of Assyrian friezes showing skilled charioteers with their snorting Arabians, four-abreast on a hunt.

The British Museum seminar on the Arabian Horse

Anne Brown joined the delegates and reports on the latest research and discoveries

We should feel flattered that our favourite breed is the centre of attention at the British Museum this year, under the patronage of HM The Queen.

To kick-start the exhibition on “The Horse from the Arabian Desert to Royal Ascot” in May, a panel of enthusiastic experts shared their knowledge at a seminar on “Horses from the Middle East and Beyond”. Our own Peter Upton, scholar, artist and twice President of the Arab

Horse Society, clearly set the Arabian in its homeland and its consequent global importance. “Superfluous colts were sold into a wider market,” he explained. “There, it became the mount of monarchs, a charger for the military, a hunter for sportsmen and the forerunner of the Thoroughbred race horse.”

Peter credited Lady Anne and Wilfrid Blunt with the genius of scouring the Middle East for the very purest Arabians

they could find and importing mares and stallions to create the Crabbet Park Arabian Stud at their home in Sussex in the late 1870s. Its influence has spread around the world.

Peter Edwards from the University of Roehampton, expanded on the theme, illustrating through portraits how the landed gentry took up the Arabian as a status symbol and racing sire.

Middle Eastern enthusiast Donna Landry



Dr Ahmed Moustafa beside his painting in Arabic calligraphy of King Abdul Aziz on Arab horse

from the University of Kent stressed the importance of John Wootton, the first English artist to paint portraits of horses for the aristocracy in the early 18th century.

The even more brilliant George Stubbs followed; many of his paintings of horses grazing in pastoral settings - including one from the Queen's private collection - are in the British Museum exhibition. His most dramatic of course is the multi-race winner Whistlejacket, foaled in 1749. His grandsire was the Godolphin

Arabian, and through his dam, he was also descended from the Byerly Turk. Stubbs depicted him rising to a levade, paying intimate attention to the veins and muscles flexing just below the surface of the skin with anatomical precision.

Both HRH Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud and his compatriot, the archaeologist, Jamal Omar, stressed the importance of uncovering and preserving the treasures they now know lie buried in the Saudi desert. Neolithic icons of carved stone animal heads, including an

equine, have been discovered at al-Magar, dating the existence of horses in the peninsula back to 9,000BC or 8,000 BC.

But another speaker, Peter Harrigan, author and publisher of many learned tomes on the early domestication of the horses, believes that feral horses first became tamed in the Central Asian steppes in the area now covered by Kazakhstan. Speaker Robin Bendrey's research into the discovery of mares' milk in broken pots around the Botai region concludes that horses were likely domesticated there in the mid-4th century BC. Evidence of biting has been unearthed in areas of the Ukraine. An interesting assertion of Robin's is that a horse's colour variation probably dates from their first domestication.

Possibly the most stunning revelation to come from the Exhibition and the Seminar was the existence of thousands of petroglyphs depicting unmistakable Arab-type horses, carved into the soft rock faces of the Saudi desert. Archaeologist Majeed Khan explained how the space-age technology of Giga-Pan multi-imaging photography projected on to a giant screen allows us to appreciate the early Arabians' distinctive beauty and human interaction - from the grandiose to the minutest detail.

Excavations at sites like Jubba and Tayma have revealed that horses probably pre-existed camels in the peninsula. Dr Khan's beautifully illustrated book on "The Arabian Horse" won't sit on my coffee table - it will be night-time reading for months to come!

Gail Brownrigg's dash through the ancient history of horses in harness illustrated the ingenious methods man has used to control a team of horses. They varied to suit the needs of the ploughman, the charioteer, the huntsman and the haulier. Artifacts in the exhibition include the many yokes, collars, reins-through-rings, bits and other devices created for teams and single horses.

The submersion into the homeland and culture of Islam concluded with an enlightening analysis by the scholar and artist Dr Ahmed Moustafa of the relationship between Arabic script and geometry. Each letter's length, balance and spatial existence is governed by a very strict set of inter-related measures - a bit like the perfect balance of the Arabian horse! 🐾