

ORIENTALISM AND THE ARABIAN HORSE: PART 2

HORACE VERNET

By Judith Wich-Wenning

IN THE SECOND OF OUR THREE-PART SERIES ON THE ARABIAN HORSE IN ORIENTALIST ART, THE VERY KNOWLEDGEABLE JUDITH WICH-WENNING INTRODUCES THE HT COMMUNITY TO ANOTHER IMPORTANT EQUINE ARTIST OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD, HORACE VERNET.



"Halte de Cavaliers Arabes", 19th century lithograph typical for Fromentin, owned by Judith Wich-Wenning

Horace Vernet, the son of the renowned Arabian horse artist Carle Vernet, was the last of the influential "Vernet dynasty". Horace developed into the most popular of the famous Vernets. He was born in the Palais du Louvre in 1789 – the year of the French Revolution. Horace Vernet learned how to paint horses from his father Carle, yet developed his own, unique style. He gained fame and fortune at an early age. Horace already won a first class medal at 22, and became a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour at 25.

A few years later, he was named director of the Académie de France in Rome. Its seat was – and still is – the Villa Medici, where his father Carle had already spent an important time many years before. In 1833, Horace decided to resign from this position in order to make the first of his many journeys to Algeria. This travel with all its first-hand impressions inspired Vernet on a large scale. It even brought about a change in his style.

Before this journey, the Romantic Movement, showing vibrant colours and lots of passion and exuberance, influenced his paintings. Afterwards, his work excelled through sharp precision and the love of great ethnographical detail. Travelling to the East was dangerous and often uncomfortable at Horace Vernet's time. High expenses, unreliable itineraries and the risk of disease overshadowed such endeavours. However, Horace Vernet was

certainly both a gifted artist as well as an adventurer.


His numerous, extensive journeys led him to Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Turkey and the Crimea. During these travels, he was not afraid of strains and efforts. He took any means of transport available, be it horse, camel or mule and often camped in the open air if necessary.

While the Vernets were traditionally royalist, Horace had an exceptional ability to adapt to the changing regimes of his time. His career developed steadily, no matter who reigned over France. Horace Vernet became famous for his battle scenes for which he received many important commissions. His fighting sceneries are imposing, first of all through their motifs, but often also because of their large dimensions, being painted on vast panoramic canvases. In many of his artworks, he depicted Napoleon and his impressive Arabian riding stallions. Spectators who had the privilege to watch him working always marvelled at the incredible speed with which he painted.

The revolution of 1830 brought King Louis-Philippe to the throne. He was a close friend and protector of Horace Vernet. This of course pushed Horace's career even more. When King Louis-Philippe decided to create a museum of military history in Versailles, Vernet was commissioned to decorate one of the principal galleries there. For this work Horace Vernet

Painted scenes from Algeria in huge dimensions. Up to then, the traditional way to paint focused on a central hero in the picture. Horace Vernet however created giant compositions, which seemed to tell a whole novel. All little incidents were of equal value.

One of Horace Vernet's most well-known pictures is certainly "The Lion Hunt", an oil painting dated 1836. This work is full of action and dynamic. While the Wallace Collection in London owns the original, lithographs of this motif are popular collector's items.

Horace Vernet became professor at the Paris School of Fine Arts and developed enormous influence on the artistic organizations of his time. Horace Vernet left a large production with some 500 paintings and around 200 lithographs. Especially through his lithographs, Horace Vernet reached a wider audience. This earned him immense public renown. He died in his hometown of Paris at the age of 74. Horace Vernet's grave can still be visited today at the cemetery of Montmartre, not far from where his father Carle was buried. 

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