

## ORIENTALISM AND THE ARABIAN HORSE: PART I

# CARLE VERNET

By Judith Wich-Wenning

HORSE TIMES IS PLEASED TO PRESENT A THREE-PART SERIES BY JUDITH WICH-WENNING EXPLORING THE FINE ART MOVEMENT OF ORIENTALISM AND THREE IMPORTANT ORIENTALIST ARTISTS WHO PORTRAYED THE ARABIAN HORSE AS THEIR KEY SUBJECT, IMAGES SO BEAUTIFUL AND ENDURING THAT THEY ARE ADMIRERD AND COVETED TO THIS VERY DAY.



A very typical motive for Carle Vernet: "Mameluck on his Stallion", lithograph owned by Judith Wich-Wenning.

### The Orientalist Movement

Since primeval time, the horse has been a favourite subject for painters. Arabian horse lovers admire especially works of art from "Orientalism". This term refers to the many 19th century artists who specialized in "Oriental" themes. They painted, for example, Islamic architecture, lively Arabian market scenes, imposing guards and the endless expanse of the desert. But maybe most importantly, Orientalist artists left a treasured heritage: numerous unsurpassed portraits of Arabian horses.

Fiery stallions with flashing eyes, Mamluks on proud steeds, noble mares with their dainty foals – Orientalist art is a feast for the eyes. Today, Orientalist lithographs and originals are highly sought-after collectors' items. They are in great demand by art connoisseurs but of course especially by Arabian horse enthusiasts. We can only marvel at the impressive scenes, showing the classic, timeless beauty of the Arabian horse. But how did the Orientalist movement come into existence?

For centuries Western artists have been fascinated by the exotic world of the Orient. The peak of this interest was certainly reached in the nineteenth century. A door opener for this was Napoleon Bonaparte's – ultimately unsuccessful – invasion of Egypt in 1798. It was not only a military expedition but also a scientific exploration. Its science and art commission made up of mathematicians, artists and architects. This project stimulated great public interest and founded Egyptology, as we know it today. It discovered for example the famous "Rosetta Stone", whose inscriptions later provided the key deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. Another result of Napoleon's expedition was the famous book "Description de l'Egypte". It is the final result of the collective work of all the scientists of the campaign. This extraordinary, well-illustrated publication is one of the most impressive books ever printed.

The beginning of the 19th century brought about a burgeoning appreciation for the Arabian horse. Its beauty, nobility and endurance were highly esteemed. Artists immortalized Arabian horses in breathtaking works and provided a new source of stimulation for breeders and admirers – even up to this day.

Growing interest in Oriental countries soon spread all over Europe and exerted an influence on science and the arts. The centre for this development was certainly France. Although travelling to North Africa and the Middle East was difficult and dangerous at that time, more and more explorers and painters set out for this desirable journey. The discovery of the East, its cities, ruins and exotic way of life fascinated them on a large scale. They were deeply influenced – most of them for the rest of their life – by what they had seen. The quality of the light, intensity of the colours and the diversity of the people were so different from what they knew in Europe. It comes as no surprise that they wanted to immortalize these impressions in their artwork.

At that time, usually artists were only able to do sketches and watercolours on the spot. Due to the complex preparation required, it was almost impossible to paint in oil during a journey. Therefore most oil paintings were executed in the studio after the return home. Only when in the 1860s tubes for containing paint were invented, it was finally possible to carry everything along and work on location. Interestingly, many Orientalist painters came back home with souvenirs. They brought along small pieces of furniture, weapons, jewellery and garments. After their return, these collections

were integrated into their paintings executed in the studio. Today, we can discover these souvenirs in their works of art.

An aspiring technical novelty had its impact on Orientalism: in the year 1796, a new artistic medium was invented. The German Alois Senefelder from Munich developed lithography, a printing method that would become very popular among Orientalist artists. It made printing more affordable and therefore art available to more people. The French Godefroy Engelmann took this invention even one-step further and developed chromolithography. This method perfected the process and made multi-colour printing feasible. Totally new possibilities to reproduce paintings were created.

The taste for Orientalist paintings grew with the public's new preference for information on Arabian countries. This phenomenon was international, supplied by a complex group of artists. Regarding Arabian horse pictures, there is a number of great artists who immortalized the beauty and charisma of the Arabian horse. There were famous as well as almost unknown painters. Many of them came from France – a real stronghold for Orientalism. Indeed, the "Great Three" – Carle Vernet, Horace Vernet and Victor Adam - were French. They are household names for anybody who loves the Arabian horse in art. Their paintings



"Cheval Sauvage", 19th century lithograph by Carle Vernet from the collection of Judith Wich-Wenning.



A homage to Egypt's Arabian horses: "In Front of the Pyramids" by Carle Vernet, collection of Judith Wich-Wenning.



*"Mohammed Ali Pasha, Vice-Roy d'Egypte", lithograph from the year 1818, owned by Judith Wich-Wenning.*

and drawings are exemplary. This article will characterize the life, work and influence of these unforgettable three artists.

### **Carle Vernet: Bordeaux 1758 – Paris 1836**

Antoine Charles Horace Vernet, also known as Carle Vernet, was the youngest son of Joseph Vernet, the famous painter of marine subjects. He was born in Bordeaux in 1758 while his father created his glorious views of the Ports of France on behalf of the French King. Carle Vernet was a pupil of his father and of Lépicié, a very successful history painter.

Joseph Vernet fostered his son Carle and his artistic talent on a large scale. He encouraged him during his art education and supported him financially. Thanks to Joseph's own reputation, he enabled Carle to personally meet many of the most important men – for example, Voltaire and Rousseau – of his time.

Carle Vernet loved horses since his childhood and immensely enjoyed painting and drawing them. Without a doubt, Carle Vernet is one of the best and most famous horse artists of the 19th century. He broke with tradition and drew horses with the forms he had learned while observing nature in stables and riding schools. In 1782 he won the highly coveted Prix de Rome – his first major prize – and left to stay at the famous Villa Medici in Rome. The mystical "Eternal City" fascinated Carle Vernet. During this visit he turned towards religion and seriously thought about becoming a monk. His father travelled to Rome and persuaded him to return with him to Paris – just in time

before Carle entered a monastery.

Back in Paris, Carle soon took up again his old life. In 1787 he married Catherine Moreau. Two years later, in the year of the French revolution, their famous son Horace was born. He would follow in his father's footsteps. However, Carle Vernet's life was not without sorrow. His sister Emilie was guillotined during the Revolution for hiding letters to members of the aristocracy. Together with a friend, Carle Vernet tried to save her, but all was in vain. After this tragic event, he gave up art. When he began to draw again, his style had changed. Carle Vernet started to paint detailed battles and campaigns to glorify Napoleon. In 1800, he followed Bonaparte to Italy and in 1808 Napoleon awarded him the Legion of Honour for one of his battle scenes.

Despite the dark clouds in his youth, Carle Vernet was a very positive and happy character. Apart from the tragic end of his beloved sister, his life – similar to his father's – was an almost uninterrupted series of triumphs and success.

In his own time, Vernet was first of all known as an extraordinary painter of horses in full movement. Carle Vernet's horses are truly special: They are lively creatures, always in action, full of temperament and high spirit. They look slender and elegant, with sparkling eyes and pricked ears. Carle Vernet often depicted his horses having their mouths open – a characteristic giving them a wild, untamed and dramatic touch. The security of Carle Vernet's pencil stroke was remarkable.

The work of Carle Vernet can be divided into four categories: his refined pencil drawings, his impressive paintings, the charming watercolours and sepias and last but not least his lithographs.

Carle Vernet was among the first French artists to experiment with lithography. Carle Vernet loved this new medium, which offered him a wide range of new possibilities. His handling of the black and white scale was outstanding. Apart from his battle scenes and horse pictures, Carle Vernet became famous for his caricatures and the illustrations of La Fontaine's fables. Carle Vernet was also the first teacher for Théodore Géricault – another great French artist passionate about horses. Up to this day, Carle Vernet's Arabian horse pictures are smashing. They provide a fantastic source of comparison and are a model for breeders.

Carle Vernet was an avid, excellent horseman throughout his life. Even in old age, he regularly loved to ride his thoroughbred through the Bois de Boulogne. Just days before his death at the age of 78, he was seen racing with his horse as if he were a young man. Carle Vernet was an exceptional personality and a marvellous artist. No wonder that his pictures are among the most sought-after works concerning Arabian horses.

Carle Vernet's last words before passing away were said to be: "It is bizarre how much I resemble the Grand Dauphin: son of a king, father of a king ... and never king myself." How soothing it would be for Carle Vernet to see his artwork so treasured in these days. He was a true king, a master of the Arabian horse in art. 🐎

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*Photos by Judith Wich-Wenning*