

# The Head of the Arabian Horse

by Dr. Matthias Oster

*“The fanatically breeding Bedouin will basically pay attention to just one single and indeed the most important part of the horse: his head!”*

Carl Raswan

Arabian horses were famous for their variety of types - mostly a matter of climate, the feedstuffs available in the surroundings, and selection by the different Bedouin tribes. However, the pretty dished head with a broad forehead, big black eyes, and small ears was considered an ideal of beauty everywhere, which was probably also because it was a rare thing. This type has always been an asset for the owner, as a lovely and pretty face opens up your heart and makes the horse more precious than a fellow member of the species without that kind of head.



In the countries of origin, only a few of the horses had these desirable features, while selection in the Western industrialized countries during the last 50 years has formed this head, almost a standard head, from out of all the different types. People influenced the type change via their practices of selection: „they kept what they liked, and they neglected what they didn't like“ (Nagel). The optimisation craze reigning our thoroughly commercialized world of beauty has left its tracks even with the horses. Prettying up the type, with the approach of making a standard of quality out of that, a standard that is converted into scores on Arabian horse shows – that's what cost the Arabian horse breed its variety in some areas of breeding, and what promoted narrowing the gene pool for breeding, and what may cost the breed its health in the future. So it's all the more interesting to immerse oneself in the history of breeding, to find out about the variety and the different expressions of type that have been normal for the breed in its original state. All of these different types can be re-included in the breed, advocating and promoting individual taste and style, just in the sense of Kant as „beauty is in the eye of the beholder“.

Monika Savier

**T**he German Carl Raswan is regarded a controversial authority on Arabian horses. After World War I he lived with the Bedouins of Arabia for years, mainly with the Rwala. He had a very important part in the last larger import of desert-bred Arabian horses to the state owned studs of eastern Europe, bringing such influential sires as Kuhailan Zaid to Babolna and Koheilan Haifi, the sire of Ofir, to Poland. Raswan states in his book "Arabische Pferde": "The fanatically Bedouin breeder will basically pay attention to just one single and indeed the most important part of a horse: his head." Because he is speaking only about fanatics, we should set apart all questions about the truth of his statement and first turn to the Bedouin criteria of excellence as handed down by Raswan. He gives us eight features of the head by which a noble Arabian horse can be judged:

- short gazelle-like head
- high pronounced forehead (jibha)
- nasal bone showing convex curve (afnas)
- broad head between jowls with a curved throat (mitbah)
- exceptional big eyes
- wide and thin nostrils which can be dilated exceptionally wide
- nostrils and lips form a triangle
- lower lip shorter than upper lip.

But not only Raswan, many other authors have stressed the importance of the head for judgement of the Arabian horse by Bedouin breeders. Major Upton, back in 1875, supports Raswan's theory of a beautiful head and gives us a very detailed account on his "personal observation of the horse of the Anazah, which

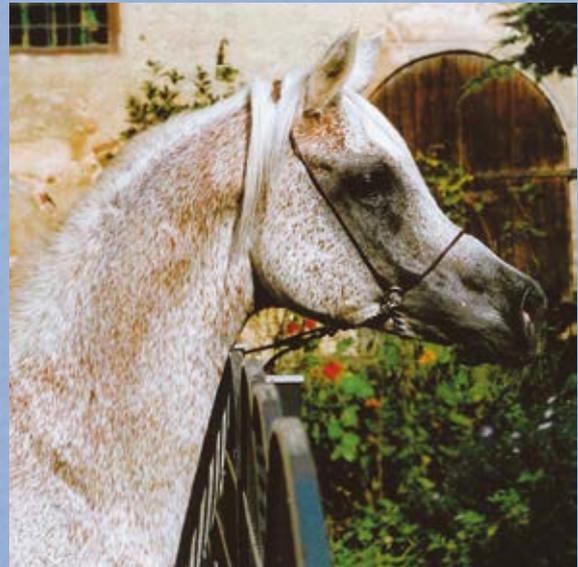
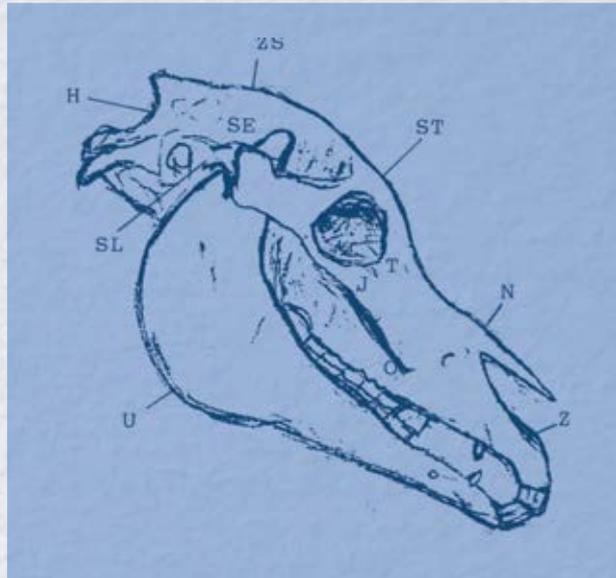
people by general consent are considered to have the best in Arabia. They will serve generally for the Arabian horse as a race, but in a marked and decided degree for the horses of the Anazah." In describing the beauty of the Arabian horse he puts first character. Upton notices the "beautiful balance of power and symmetry displayed in his form, ..., which causes him to be so beautiful, so perfect an animal. The head is very beautiful - not only pleasing to the eye in its graceful outline, but beautiful from its grand development of the sensorial organ, and the delicacy of such parts as are more subservient. ...It is large above the eyes, small and short from the eyes to the muzzle. ...

The head of the horse of the Anazah especially tapers very much from the eyes to the muzzle, and the lower jaw does so equally or even in a greater degree to the under lip... The nostril, which is peculiarly long, not round, runs upwards towards the face, and is also set up outwards from the nose like the mouth of a pouch or a sack which has been tied. This is a very beautiful feature, and can hardly be appreciated than by sight; when it expands, it opens both upwards and outwards, and in profile is seen to extend beyond the outline of the nose, and when the animal is excited the head of this description appears to be made up of forehead, eyes, and nostrils. ... It is the type however, of the head of the Arabian horse.... The muzzle is particularly fine; the lips long and thin (not fleshy); the upper lip well cut or chiselled; the lower lip small, well formed, compressed, and tense. ... The ears are beautifully shaped, pointed, and well placed, and

point inwards in a marked and peculiar manner, which is considered a point of great beauty, and a sign of high or pure breeding. ... The Jibbah, or forehead, can scarcely be too large or too prominent to please an Arab. ... The shape of the Jibbah in which the Arab delights, gives a large brain cavity, adds greatly to the beauty of the head, and gives an expression of great nobility; and thus in this point, as in others of the Keheilan, usefulness and beauty go hand in hand - in him the expressions are synonymous. The Jibbah, or forehead, is somewhat different in the horse and the mare. In the mare it is usually rounder and more decidedly prominent, often strikingly so, and descends in a graceful and easy line to the nasal bones. When a horse has such a forehead he is said by the Arabs to have a Jibbah. ... These three features, Jibbah, Mitbeh, and ears of the above description, go along to form a perfect head."

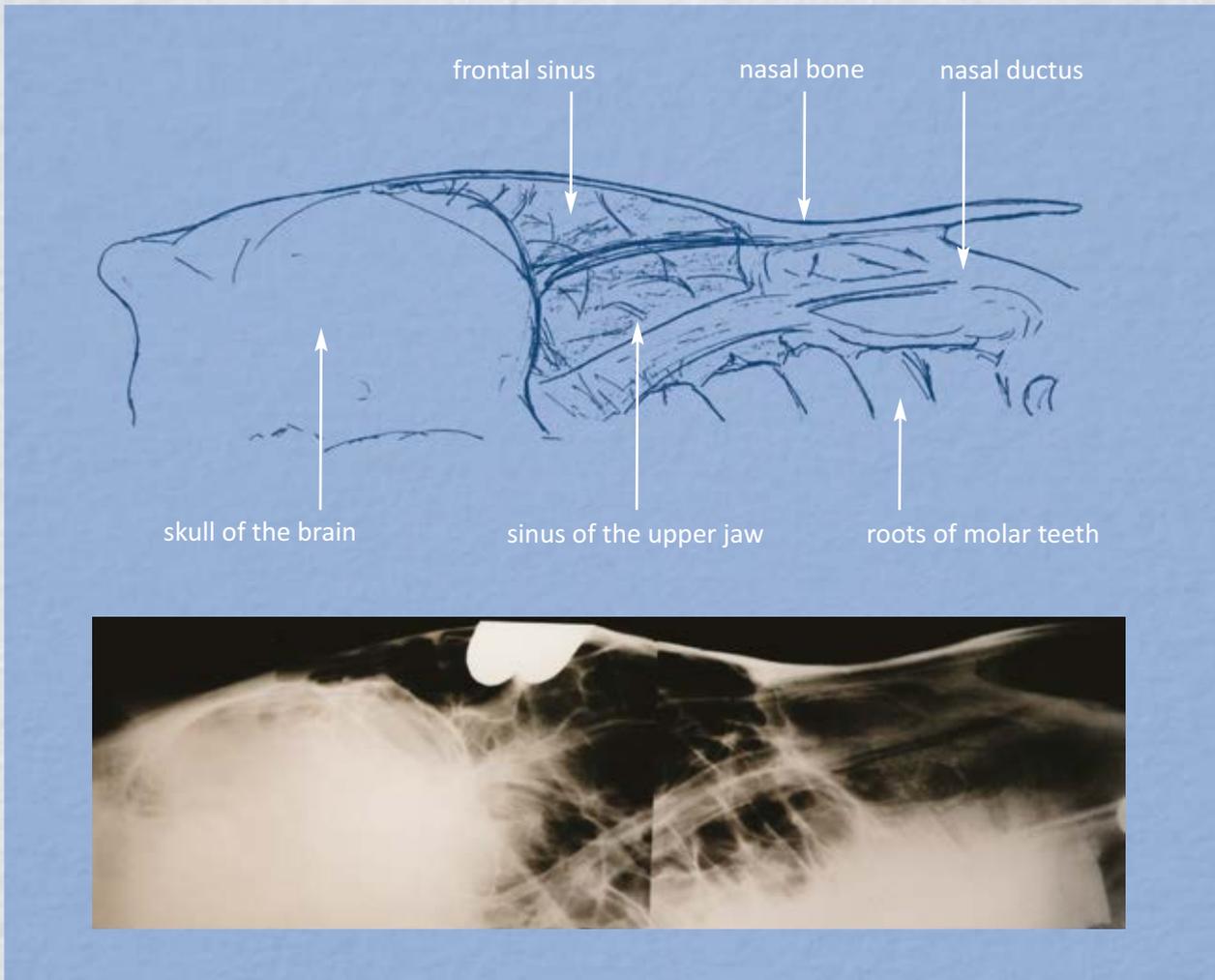
### The Anatomy of the Skull

The skeleton of the head is the skull. It contains the brain, the higher sensory organs (for seeing, hearing, smelling, and tasting) and parts of the respiratory tract and digestive tract. The skull is composed of several bones. We can distinguish two larger compartments; the cranial cavity containing the brain and the nasal cavity with the nasal caves. The latter also form the skeletal roof of the mouth. The mandibular bone together with the bones forming the nasal cavity are called the facial part of the skull. The formation of the skull differs between species. All plant-eating mammals including the



**Montasar** (Madkour x Maymoonah), born in 1981, bred by Seidlitz, Germany. His head clearly fits into the description of Raswan and Upton on a typical Arabian's head.

horse have a pronounced facial part containing the grinding teeth. Man on the other hand possesses the biggest cranial part containing his large brain. An x-ray was done by the author of the 17-year-old straight Egyptian stallion Montasar. X-rays mainly show bone structure (white color) and to a certain degree also soft tissue. In contrast, air is displayed in



black. Instantly, you notice the difference between the white and bony structure of the cranial part as compared to the black and gray areas of the facial part of the skull. The black areas are the air-filled cavities, i.e. nasal cavity and its side-compartments (frontal cavity, maxillary cavity and others). The air-filled bones reduce the weight of the skull and also enlarge the surface to warm up the respiratory air. Furthermore we see that the pronounced forehead, the jibah, is caused by the enormous size of the frontal cavity. On the other hand, the much discussed concave profile of the head, the so-called dish, does not show up as a bony cavity but is caused by two pronounced structures: the jibah and the convex nasal

bone (afnas). This is a very important fact. It clearly shows that by no means head profile like this one hinders air flow and it can therefore not be called degenerative. Interestingly Raswan did not use the word dish. And because of the x-ray findings that there is no dish, but jibah and afnas, it would be appropriate to use these Arabian words instead of the misleading word dish.

With age, the head of the Arabian horse gains dryness and beauty. You will also notice that the jibah will enlarge with age. Many horses show a comparatively straight profile at the age of half a year to five years, but then the frontal cavity increases with age. But don't we find The most pronounced forehead with

new-born foals? If we compare new-born foals of different breeds, we see that they all show a more or less pronounced curvature of the forehead. This is true for the Arabian in particular, but also for pony breeds. And even those breeds with a convex nasal profile show this curvature, although the convexity prevails. However with Arabian foals we do not find the afnas, because the bridge of the nose is straight. The new-born foal - still drinking the mare's milk - shows a relatively large cranial part of the skull. The head seems to look like a doll's head. Behavioral science has coined the word "baby-pattern" for this picture of the new-born: instinct makes everyone love such a baby. With most breeds of horses this baby pattern can not be found in adult horses, but with the Arabian horse you find it. The selective measures of the breeders have been directed towards such heads with a big jibha - therefore such horses prevail today. In America the so-called "head hunter" describes the breeder who looks for heads such as these, instinctly following his sense of beauty and looking for baby pattern. But did the Bedouin warriors, who gave Raswan the eight features of the head, select their horses by beauty? This is not very likely, but may be true for the famous breeders of Egypt like Abbas Pasha. The Bedouin poets, on the other hand, did have a sense for beauty and made many poems on this subject, be it their women, or animals.

The Arabian horse is famous for its intelligence. Klynstra compares the size of the brain in different breeds.

Arabian horses have 655 ml compared with



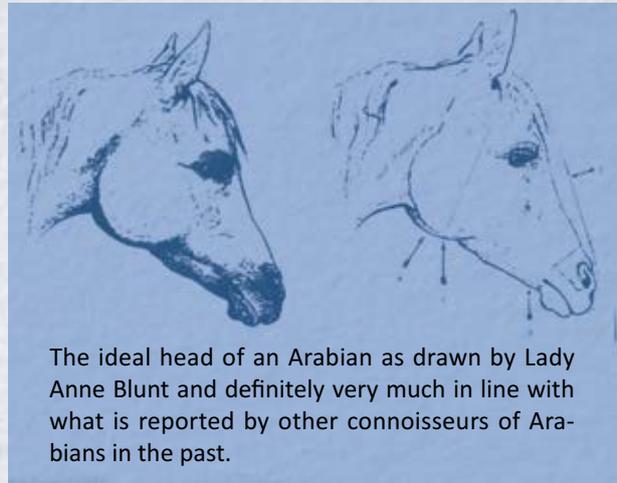
*Equine head, Nineteenth-Century engraving by Carl Vernet*

480 ml with Belgian Draft horses and 531 with Trakehner horses. Therefore the Arabian horse also possesses the largest cranial part of the skull, clearly indicated by the x-ray. Klynstra also points out the extreme size of the mandibula and jowl, with the mandibula getting very small towards the incisors. Between the jowls there should be a larger space, big enough for a man's fit, and wide airways.

The large and fine nostrils can be dilated extremely wide. With loud snorting, the nostrils are totally opened with excitement. The agile part of the nostrils is called nasal trumpet or "false nose" (in German) or nasal diverticle. You only find it with equides. If it is totally opened, the upper edge of the nostril is higher

than the nasal line, giving a sight which really recalls a trumpet: the drinkers of the winds, as poets have written.

Anatomic details are used for a morphological classification in judging horses, or one can look for functional items. Naturally both approaches cannot be separated absolutely, because morphology causes function. In the breeding of English Thoroughbreds, the only criterion of selection is speed, a solely functional approach. The typical thoroughbred with all its characteristic features is a race horse. Function implies a characteristic form: the horse's speed is caused by the morphology of the hind quarters and the big shoulder. Similar, but not always that distinct, we find this union in other breeds of horses like the Icelandic horse or the Warmblood. With the Arabian we handle things differently on our shows. The critical viewer generally notices that type is judged according to beauty or the head's profile - as if the typical feature of the Arabian horse were its beauty, a purely morphological criterion. If we look upon the original Arabian horse of the Bedouin from a functional point of view, we may see the following picture: an enduring and noble riding horse with an unique man-loving character. "In an unbelievably hard and unalterable environment, in which only the fittest survives, and in the utmost closeness with man, all the features of the Arabian that gained him renown were consolidated in uncounted generations: iron health, hardness, endurance, ability of fast regeneration, fertility, longevity, striking genetic power, gentleness, patience, obedience, attachment to his owner, suspicion against strangers, cleverness, courage, intrepidity"



The ideal head of an Arabian as drawn by Lady Anne Blunt and definitely very much in line with what is reported by other connoisseurs of Arabians in the past.

dity" (Schiele). Beauty as a value of its own is thrust in the background here.

The Arabian horse had a special status with the Bedouins. Countless stories and myths but also trustworthy reports are handed down to us. Schiele writes: "The Bedouins' attitude to their horses ranged between extremes. It spanned from the utmost tenderness, patience and love to pride and the taste of power and control to un-imaginable cruelty and hardness." The dromedary - making it possible for the Bedouins to live in the desert - has a totally different character compared to the Arabian horse. It is less friendly towards man but on the contrary often stubborn and with an indifferent to negative attitude towards man. The horse on the other hand could only survive in the arid areas of Arabia under the care of man. The close community between Bedouin and his horse was mutual. Man nourished his horse on camel's milk. The blind confidence of his mare of war meant a big deal of striking power for the Bedouin's expeditions of war and booty. In the bitterly cold nights the horses warmed the tents of the Bedouins. Such a close relation between man and horse could not be found in any society of the world other than that of the nomads of Arabia. Small won-



**Amal Eladiyat** with her colt **Ahmar Eladiyat**



**Al Lahab**



**BK Latif**



**Mahir Al Qusar**

der Muslims have a religious duty to care for their horses. All these facts can only lead to one conclusion: The horse-breeding Bedouin placed the utmost importance to the nature and character of his horse. The horse was a friend and companion but not an animal of utility like goats and dromedaries. The breeding of horses in the desert was

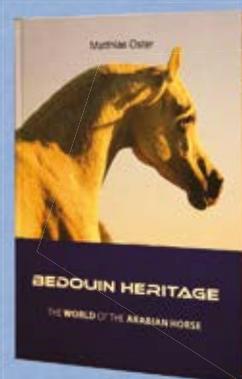
not a science as in the European occident where the exact requirements of certain points of conformation were of importance. No, the Bedouin bred horses intuitively, from an intimate relation to his mare. The Bedouins judged their horses from a totally different point of view than we Europeans do, i.e. not that much by morphologic points. In this

context Raswan's statement quoted at the beginning of this text can be viewed in a totally different light: "The fanatically breeding Bedouin will basically pay attention to just one single and indeed the most important part of the horse: his head!" The author wants to claim that Raswan was right stating this, but wrongly interpreting it with the eyes of an European to build up a catalogue of characteristic features that the Bedouins should never have used in this form! No question that Raswan gives a fitting description of the head of the Arabian horse, but it is only one version among many possible ones. There is evidence from the historical pictures and photographs but also of the variety of different heads you find in the Egyptian state stud of El Zahraa alone. No one should be astonished that the importance of character for the Bedouin breeder implies the particular beauty of the Arabian horse as a characteristic feature of the breed. What did the Bedouin breeder look for in the head of his horse? We will never know this exactly, the less so since it was not morphological features. But luckily the modern breeding of Arabian horses is totally in the tradition of the Bedouins in one point: even today the Arabian horse often lives in a very close contact to man. More than any other breed it seeks contact. They know how to speak to that human they are intimate with, in their own ways. Thus through the communication of the Arabian four-legged with the human two-legged, the head of the Arabian horse becomes the essential part of its body, because it reveals its essence. Let us learn to read in the noble faces of our horses just like the fanatical Bedouin breeders could! For this purpose we must live with our horses and win them as friends through



Dr. Matthias Oster and his stallion Safeen

Veterinary surgeon and Arabian horse breeder **Dr. Matthias Oster** has set himself the task of discussing the history of Arabian horse breeding, devoting an interesting chapter to the development of the head. We would like to present this chapter to you here.



The book can be ordered via the [www.nawalmedia.org](http://www.nawalmedia.org) website.

our daily association with them. Let us make our breeding decisions from this closeness to god's creatures, not only because of recent results in shows or any trends in the scene. We may find out how the following statement by Raswan will become reality in our own lives as breeders: "Fanatics can read in the head of the noble Arabians more than their good attributes: they read their history and origin." ...and also their future which lies in our hands with the coming generations of their descendants. ■