



*Photo taken at La Frasiera Stud Open Farm 2014 - Italy*

# FLYING HORSES IN THE DESERT A PORTRAIT OF HORSE PHOTOGRAPHER **ALI ALHAWAJ**

■ *by Monika Savier*

Horse Photography has a key function today, as the digital world cannot be without it and vice versa. The online pictures of our horses are what catapulted the analogous/real world of horse breeding from its reality into the digital world of wishes, dreams, and business. We owe the globalization of the market to it, while at the same time, digital photography is somewhat suspect for exerting the smart “dictatorship of beauty” – a dictatorship much discussed among horse breeders. The modern means of photo refinement bear some resemblance to the use

“The way to create an icon is through pictures in the media”

Peter Lindbergh, Photographer



*Hattim Al Nasser (Mujabid x Imperial Madanah)*

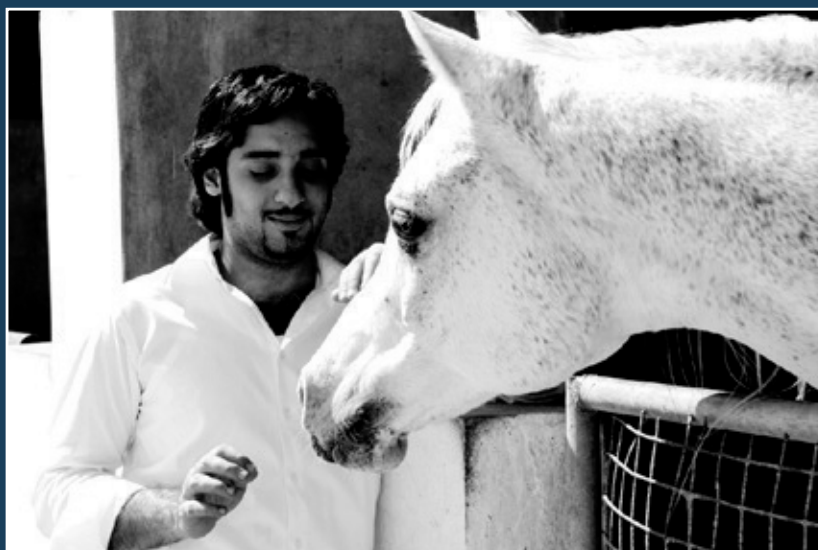
of overstating adjectives in descriptive advertising texts. Pictures, however, profit from their perceived aura of being objective documents; and most breeders perceive digitalizing available information on Arabian horses, as an opportunity for growth. Intercontinental markets are based on good advertisement pictures – which often do some re-explaining of reality, however. With this backdrop in mind, it is not easy to find good photographers who will capture a real appearance of a horse's beauty, doing it without manipulative finishing processes.

Dr Ali Alhawaj, a young surgical doctor from Saudi Arabia, a photographer, painter, and rider, has given us a fascinating interview making us take part in his role as a horse photographer.

“*Arabian Horses have been a known source of inspiration for artists, whether they are painters, poets, or more recently photographers – as I consider photography to be a branch of Art*”, he says.

With that, he defines his function in the style of the world of Arabian horse breeding as it was 200 years ago, when painters employed by the Royal court would create analogous portraits of noble Arabian cavalry horses for their noble owners. His pictures mirror his passion for the beauty of the horses. He succeeds in optimum handling of light and backlight and in capturing horses in the best possible instant of their movements. His fascination with horse portrayal has now also motivated him to take up brush and an artist's palette and start painting horses, linking himself even more firmly to time-proven traditions.

# BIOGRAPHY



Photographer Ali Alhawaj is actually a surgical doctor and Saudi Arabian citizen. The 35-year-old works as senior plastic surgery resident in the Kingdom of Bahrain and is approaching the end year of his specialization in Plastic Surgery.

The self-taught photographer was introduced to the Straight Egyptian Arabian horse by his family in 1998, as a breeder and dressage rider. He says 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”. So he has been breeding his own horses since 2015, which is why he has traveled and visited studs in Europe and the USA as well as in the Middle East.

As his interest in photography had emerged for quite some time then, he shifted his camera towards “the best purpose of all, which is documenting the beauty of the Arabian horse”. He “learned from and got inspired by artist photographers and great breeders”. He loves to “show the strong expression of the Arabian horse” in his portraits, “believing that we should capture them in their real attitude away from artificial poses or gestures.” His skill won him 6th place in the 2018 Bait Al Arab photo competition in Kuwait.

Currently Dr Ali is working on several projects for his love of Arabian Horses, including photography, planning a breeding program, realizing a book project, and recently painting and sculpting.



# INTERVIEW

*Monika Savier: Would you say that Beauty is the key word for your approach to Arabian horses?*

*Ali Alharwaj:* In my opinion, "Arabian Horse" and "Beauty" are two synonymous words. If we look into descriptions of characteristics of Arabian horses, we find beauty and elegance as the top defining features. It is easy to notice that Arabian Horses have been a known source of inspiration for Artists, whether they are painters, poets, or more recently photographers - as I consider photography to be a branch of arts.

Talking more specifically about Arabian Horse Photography, I think this amazing tool has given us the opportunity to show some of their beauty and appreciate it in one look. And these few seconds of looking may bring all the happiness that I have always felt when I see them in reality.

Though, as a breeder and horse lover, I feel nothing is more beautiful than spending some real quality time next to this precious creature and watching its expressions and spirit in reality.

Nonetheless, I would like to clarify that beauty doesn't necessarily mean softness and delicacy. Strength, vigor and refined power are hallmarks of the Arabian horse beauty. Personally, I'm more attracted to showing the beauty of stallions with their sharp expressions and gorgeous attitudes.

The charisma emanating from the features of Arabian Horses proves the type and identity of such a breed. Hence, I think it is difficult to separate the two terms, and I definitely aim to show this beauty in my photographs; among all those features, the exquisite head, the large black eyes, and the high tail carriage are what inspires me the most.

*MS: Good pictures of the horses have a teaser function in the globalized sales world. As a photographer, how do you deal with this aspect of your task?*

*AA:* I never faced a situation where the owner asked me to enhance type or make their horses nicer than they look. They just ask me to photograph their horses. And it is my challenge to find that correct angle or moment. That is why I might ask to photo-shoot the horse in several sessions if I was unhappy with the initial results. On the opposite hand, for some horses, I might finish their photo sessions in just a few minutes.

The Art of photography and observation skills, when combined with the ability to use the camera in our

favor, enable a photographer to capture the unseen angle that might be hidden or undiscovered for the more inexperienced viewer.

I think that a photographer should never feel pressured to get the best photo of a certain horse in just one session. After all, horses are creatures who have emotions. They might not be ready or might not be in their best condition or mood to be photographed at that very moment.

It is a shared interest between me and the owner, and that basis will build the trust in my photography and eventually lead to beautiful outcomes. What drives me to take photos, in the first place, is my love and admiration for the Arabian horse.

*MS: Still, in modern times, pictures are intended to attract people's interest for a horse. Then, to be sure, to see and evaluate the horse in real life, they will want to see a video.*

*AA:* I don't think videography is replacing photography by any means. In my opinion, a photograph captures one (special) moment that the photographer wants to show to his audience, where he or she puts all their effort into presenting that one idea. A photograph enables us to



*NK Nizam (NK Hafid Jamil x NK Nadirah)*



*Photo presented in Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nabayan Arabian Horse Photography Contest 2019 Gallery and Book*

appreciate all the tiny details presented, it's like a portrait drawing, it captures a certain moment in a single image. Moreover, as you probably noticed, even video clips mostly contain both videos and photographs in their montage. Therefore, in my opinion, videography is complementary to photography in the world of digital presentation. I would describe both of them as types of digital arts.

A simple analogy is to imagine you love and enjoy having books versus having a CD / DVD or hard drive in your personal library. You choose the way you want to keep your valuable memories.

Personally, I believe there is no better method than a picture in a book. And even if I should choose to start shooting videos, I will definitely make sure to have my special and personal approach and touch.

*MS: It probably takes many observational skills to do photography as you are doing. What did you do to achieve that kind of observation power, and your photographic skills in your chosen field?*

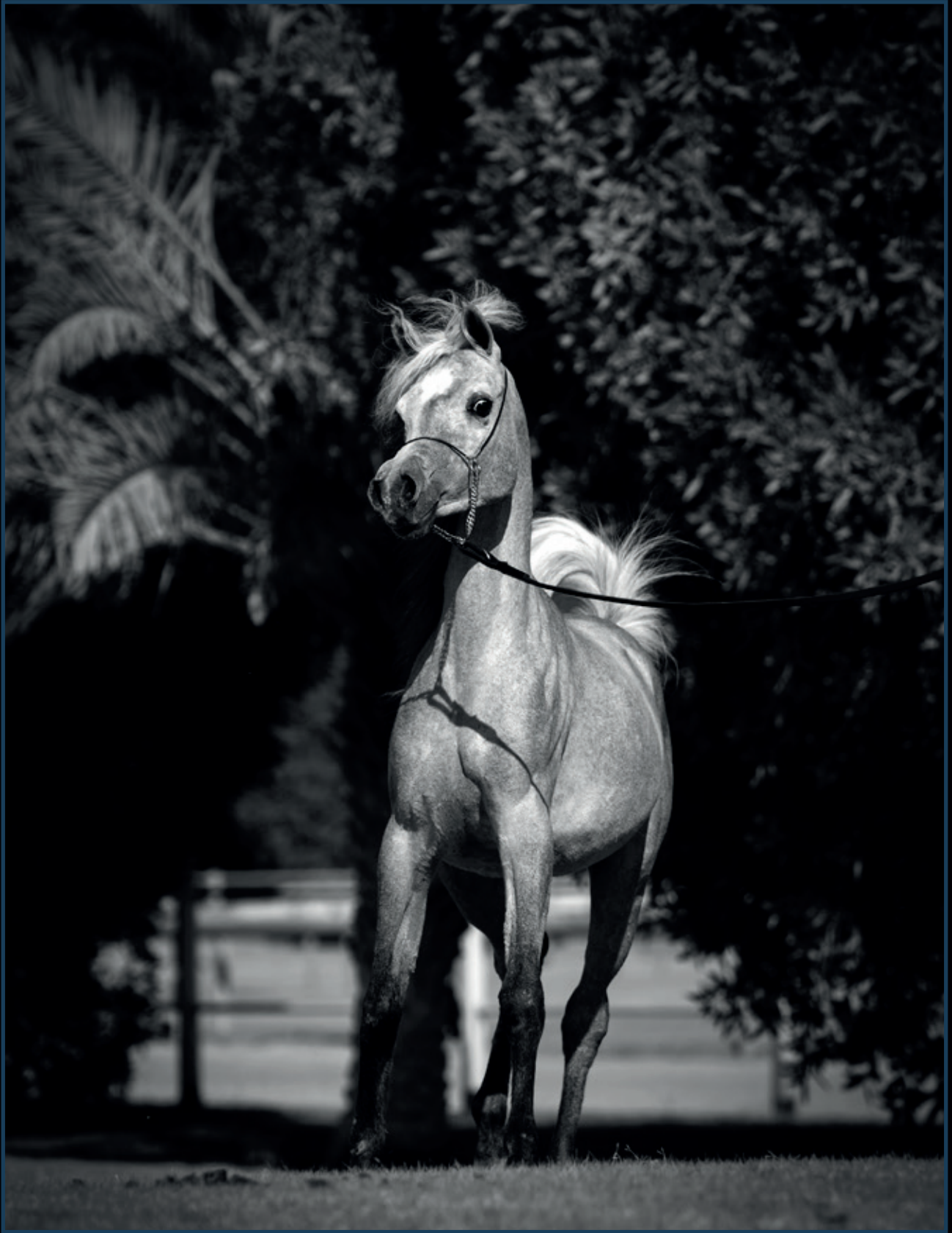
*AA:* The power of observation is one of most essential skills any artist must have. Being able to notice the smallest of details, and capture the beauty of any object,

especially when working with (Arabian) horses, requires a great deal of knowledge of both what is considered beautiful and what is not.

This kind of knowledge might be acquired by reading about the anatomy and aesthetics of the Arabian horse, whether through old descriptions from historical books, Arabian horse tales, or studying the old paintings and photographs. Another important way, in my opinion, is visiting and talking to people who appreciate the beauty of the Arabian horse. WHEN I TALK TO SOMEONE WHO IS DEEPLY IN LOVE WITH THEIR ARABIAN, and he or she describes their horse to me, I start to see the horse through their eyes and by their words. Talking to so many people helped me so much to appreciate all these tiny details.

I never hesitate to ask breeders to criticize my photos. They always come up with great ideas and different views, and this is how I believe we should all learn.

I still remember what a person very dear to my heart, my uncle Usamah Alkazemi, God rest his soul, told me once after I had shown him some photos, asking him for his opinion. He answered me with words I will never forget: "I started seeing the beauty of my horses through your eyes!"



*6th Place Winner Photo of Bait Alarab 9th International Photography Contest 2018.  
Photo of Tasneim Ezzain (Mobhareb Ezzain x Hebatilbari Ezzain)*



*Aamrah Ezzain (NK Qaswarah x Qamar Ezzain)*



*Allazzaz Ezzain (Thettwa Ezzain x Saneiah Ezzain)*

Another important aspect is, of course, experience and continuous practice. Hence, I think that when an artist works hard on improving his or her knowledge, combined with experience, then their observation skills will improve dramatically.

*MS: What role do the horse shows play in your work as photographer?*

*AA:* Honestly speaking, horse shows don't serve my main purpose of Arabian Horse Photography. I admire Arabian Horses and consider them a source of inspiration for creating immortal photographic memories that form a kind of complete Work of Art.

Hence, I never much enjoyed photo shooting during shows and competitions. I feel so restrained with the angles and the crowded atmosphere, which contradicts my ideas for creating beautiful pictures that depict a whole. However, I have done it for some time, for the purpose of keeping references and capturing some special moments for myself as archives.

*MS: I take it that you prefer to have private photo shootings at the farms.*

*AA:* Yes - actually, my main interest is photo shooting

*Saneiah Ezzain and Tasneim Ezzain  
at Ezzain Arabians - Kuwait.*



*Kareemat Kenana (Taleeth Al Naif x Samha Al Nakeeb)*



*At Bait Al Arab - Kuwait*



*Qaswarah Ezzain (Doaabob Ezzain x Saneiah Ezzain)*



*Zabia Eladiyat (NK Jamal El Dine x Zubaida El Adiyat)*

Arabian horses away from any artificial atmosphere. That includes photographing privately in farms or in certain natural environments, as this not only allows the horses to be in their more natural states, but also helps me to create complete works of art.

As a photographer, I aim to produce a complete and unforgettable picture that has all the elements of a masterpiece, hopefully. Sometimes it takes me a lot of thinking, planning, adjusting the proper environment, instruments - a lot of other work overall - to finally get a couple of great photographs. With time, I became very particular and sometimes I discard so many pictures before reaching that one single picture that is engraved in my memory to learn from and get inspired by. There is more to some of my photos than meets the eye, they often took me a lot of effort and thinking.

*MS: Speaking of breeding farms: What differences do you see between the breeding approaches of the USA, Europe, and the Gulf States?*

*AA:* It is very difficult for me to answer this question. Because it is a matter of taste. Taste is not exclusive or determined by region or geographical location. It is a very



*Ahmar Eladiyat (NK Nabhan x Amal El Adiyat)*



personal preference. And during this era of globalization, all geographical barriers are eliminated. The whole world is interconnected, and we are all immensely influenced by each other. Myself, as a breeder, have a certain taste, which might be very similar to another breeder's in a totally different continent. After all, the world of Arabian Horse breeding is not influenced or restricted by geographical borders. And that's part of the beauty of breeding Arabians. However, I believe that there might be certain preferences that are more concentrated in certain areas, somewhat determining the general taste of breeders there, and that of course is affected by culture and backgrounds.

Ultimately, we are all united and agree on the main principles that have been written of and described hundreds of years ago.

*MS: You are also a rider, so are you as well involved in photographing horse sports events?*

*AA:* I was a horse rider even before I learned how to hold a camera. Horse riding is actually what has introduced me to Arabian Horses in the first place. My father used to take me with him to learn the principles of riding his Arabian since the age of six.

Nevertheless, right now I have no experience in photographing horse sports. It sounds interesting though

*Sagr Kenana (Montasir Al Rayyan x Alia Al Rayyan)*



*Najdi Al Shakhoura (Naif Al Rayyan x Falha Al Rayyan)*



*Tasneim Ezzain (Mobhareb Ezzain x Hebatilbari Ezzain)*



*NK Qaswarah (NK Hafid Jamil x NK Nariman)*



*Qamar Ezzain (Noorreddine Ezzain x Ajmal Ibtibaj)*

and I look forward for these kinds of new challenges. I believe that these improve the photographer's technique and help to refine talent.

*MS: You described Photography as a branch of Art. Do you aim to achieve more in the photography field, or to become even more of an artist?*

*AA:* I believe that art conveys a message, creates memories, makes sources of inspiration, and emphasizes certain features of an object. Photography is no different from any other type of art for achieving that.

I'd like to quote a definition of Art from the Oxford Dictionaries:

"Art is a diverse range of human activities in creating visual, auditory or performing artifacts (artworks), expressing the author's imaginative, conceptual ideas, or technical skill, intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power."

Modern forms of fine art include photography, video productions, designs, etc. All of these kinds of arts meet on common grounds, which is to show the aesthetics in



*Safir Al Shakhoura (Naif Al Rayyan x Dana Al Shaqab)*



*Safir Al Shakhoura (Naif Al Rayyan x Dana Al Shagab)*



*NK Qaswarah (NK Hafid Jamil x NK Nariman)*



*Safir Al Shakhbura (Naif Al Rayyan x Dana Al Shagab)*



nature. Since we are talking here about photographing the Arabian Horse, I can't find a greater symbol of nobility and beauty for creating that kind of art. I think there is nothing better than when different types of art meet to produce great works. Here I would like to give a great example: my dearest friend Paola Marinangeli. I am proud that my photos have inspired her and continue to inspire such a great artist to produce amazing paintings. Our conversations, sharing my art with her, open lots of discussions, opportunities, and wonderful memories.

*MS: Is there something you would like to point out, that you have learned throughout your photographer's journey?*

*AA:* I learned that we have to use every opportunity given to us. We should never stop learning and exploring new things. Arabian Horse Photography is not only about being an expert in using the camera, or knowing angles and ways of lighting. It is about the ability to create great photos during difficult moments and circumstances, sometimes in a very short time.

There is art and there is experience. And if you combine both, amazing results will definitely come to reality. □

*Doaabob Ezzain (Thettwa Ezzain x Mardbeiah Ezzain)*