

OUT OF THE DESERT

THE BRITISH ARTIST

Peter Upton

by © Judith Wich-Wenning



"Gallop Mares"



The life-size painting of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt riding Pharaon painted by Lady Anne Blunt in 1881, and Peter Upton

A world-known artist, highly-esteemed judge, notable historian and author of remarkable books – the British Arabian horse connoisseur Peter Upton unites all this in one person! His extraordinary works of art reflect Peter Upton's eye for the Arabian horse and its desert surroundings. In recent years, he had several one-artist exhibitions at the famous Mathaf-Gallery in London, the latest taking place in 2014. Peter Upton is Honorary Governor of the British "Arab Horse Society". He is still judging Arabian horse shows around the world, although he is now limiting himself to no more than six shows each year, as he already turned 78 years! Furthermore, Peter Upton is the author of several important books on Arabian horses. In 2014 his standard work "The Arab Horse" reached already its 3rd edition. Another impressive book is "Royal Heritage – The Story of Jordan's Arab Horses". Peter Upton co-authored this work with HRH Princess Alia Al Hussein. It was launched in Amman, London and Lexington, Kentucky. In 2010 Peter Upton published his book "Out of the Desert", describing the influence of the Arab Horse on the light horse and native pony breeds of Great Britain.

It is impossible to imagine Peter Upton without Arabian horses. But when was he attracted to Arabians for the first time? "It is so long ago that it is quite difficult to remember what it was that first triggered by interest it is noted the Arab horse", he ponders. "In any case there was no blinding vision that I can recall, but a growing recognition of a special affinity with the Arabian. My twin brother and I had as our very first pony a white half-Arab who taught us a great deal. Our mother was an artist whose brother, CW Cain, had lived for many years in Arabia. Indeed, he was known as the 'Etcher of the East' and rode Arab

horses. Horses and Art were my way of life from the age of four. Very much later, though when still a young man, I was to meet Lady Anne Lytton, granddaughter to Wilfrid and Lady Anne Blunt."

It is no secret that Peter Upton has great knowledge about the history of Arabian horses. "All history is fascinating, and Newbuildings Place the old home of Wilfrid Blunt was full of the history of the Arab horse," he comments. "A painting of the stallion Kars, imported from the desert in 1878, the tail of the Hamdanieh mare Sherifa, old documents, stud books, sketches, photographs and memorabilia, including the feather of a francolin picked up in the desert in 1879. Also I very much enjoyed days spent in the company of Lady Anne, who would recall her visits to Sheykh Obeyd, her grandmother's stud in Egypt, and many of the horses at Crabbet that she had known, excited my interest further."

When asked about the beginning of his art projects related to Arabian horses, Peter Upton recalls: "I am a painter, and horses have often been the subject of my work. Commissioned to paint the portraits of some well-known stallion or mare, a Derby winner or a child's pony, it was inevitable that Arabs would soon be the objects of my endeavours in paint. Invitations to paint Arab horses led by my first visits to Arabia where I travelled some of the same routes as those travelled by Major Roger Upton in 1874, the Blunts a few years later, and by my artist uncle after the First World War.

My twin brother, also Roger Upton, had for years visited Arabia and in the 1970s had ridden by camel from Damascus to Doha. He and his Arab brothers fly saker falcons at houbara (desert bustards). When meeting Sheykh of the Bedouin tribes and staying in their black tents, I have always sought out the old men of the tribe to find out as much as possible about the Arab horse before such knowledge is lost.

1978 was the centenary of the founding of the Crabbet Arabian Stud, and to celebrate his occasion an Open Day and Parade of Horses was organised at Newbuildings Place. Incidentally, my brother and I arranged for two great-grandsons of Sheykh Sottam Ibn Shaalan of the Roala, whom the Blunts had visited in 1879, to meet Lady Anne Lytton on that day.

To illustrate the link between the horses in the parade and the original desert imports, I painted a number of portraits which were later to form the basis of my first published book "Desert Heritage". Other books were to follow, the result of years of research. Seeking knowledge is such an



“Saker Falcons”





"The Oasis"

exciting occupation, whereas the writing of books is an onerous task."

Art and the Arabian horse play a very important role in Peter Upton's life. He remarks: "Who knows in which way our lives will evolve or what we will seek in life? All I can say is that Art and the Arabian horse have led me on a magical journey."

Peter Upton is a highly acclaimed judge with a lot of experience. When asked which traits of the presented horses are most important for him, he points out: "Judging is not unlike research. In both cases you seek the truth by studying the material available. Both are also totally absorbing and fascinating."

Obviously, when judging Arab horses the first thing I look for is Arab type, the characteristics of the breed, plus quality and charisma. I only make a final decision on type after I have seen the horse in movement, for that harmony of action when it appears to float and dance is an essential of Arab type. But a good Arab should also be a good horse,

whose sound conformation and constitution were in the desert days honed by the harsh environment in which they lived. In assessing a horse, I start with an initial overall impression, based on type, refinement, action and style. This is then confirmed by a closer analysis of the details of the horse. I believe also that judging should be approached in a positive way: which horse do I like the most?"

Type is generally speaking certainly the hallmark for the Arabian horse. But how does Peter Upton define type? "Arab type evolved through selection, both natural, as just mentioned, and man-influenced, the result of the ideals of breeders", he explains "This second was always the major contributing factor. Type is an essential to determining the breed, but variations in type are inevitable and, I consider, a sign of the breed's antiquity and the changes of influence that time has brought about. However, those variations must fall within the same broad understanding of what constitutes the breed."

In my book, The Classic Arab Horse, I write: "The Arab is a horse of great beauty, full of quality, vigour, elegance,



“The Lone Horseman”

dignity and refined power – an equine work of art. Hallmarks of the breed are its exquisite head and high tail carriage. Without these distinctive characteristics, without type, identity is lost.”

Peter Upton is an expert for Arabian horse history. But which historic Arabian impressed him most? “Every time I think I have a favourite, I then think of another horse.” he muses, “But if I must choose, then I will name Mebrez – one of the last great desert stallions. I met him in Jordan and consider it an honour to have known this horse. His history is one of adventure and romance and he was a king among horses, owned by a king – but that is a very long

story.”

When asked which other Arabian horse breeders or personages have influenced him, Peter Upton states: “Lady Anne Lytton was my first mentor and friend, but I have always listened to all people in the Arab world, particularly those with much experience, because we can always learn more, even if later we reject some of the things that we have been told.”

The Arabian horse has a long, eventful and often glorious history. But where is the Arabian breed currently heading? “The one firm foundation within the Arab breed for the





“The Sheykh’s Favorite”



“Mashour’s Daughters – Jordan”



“Wasama”

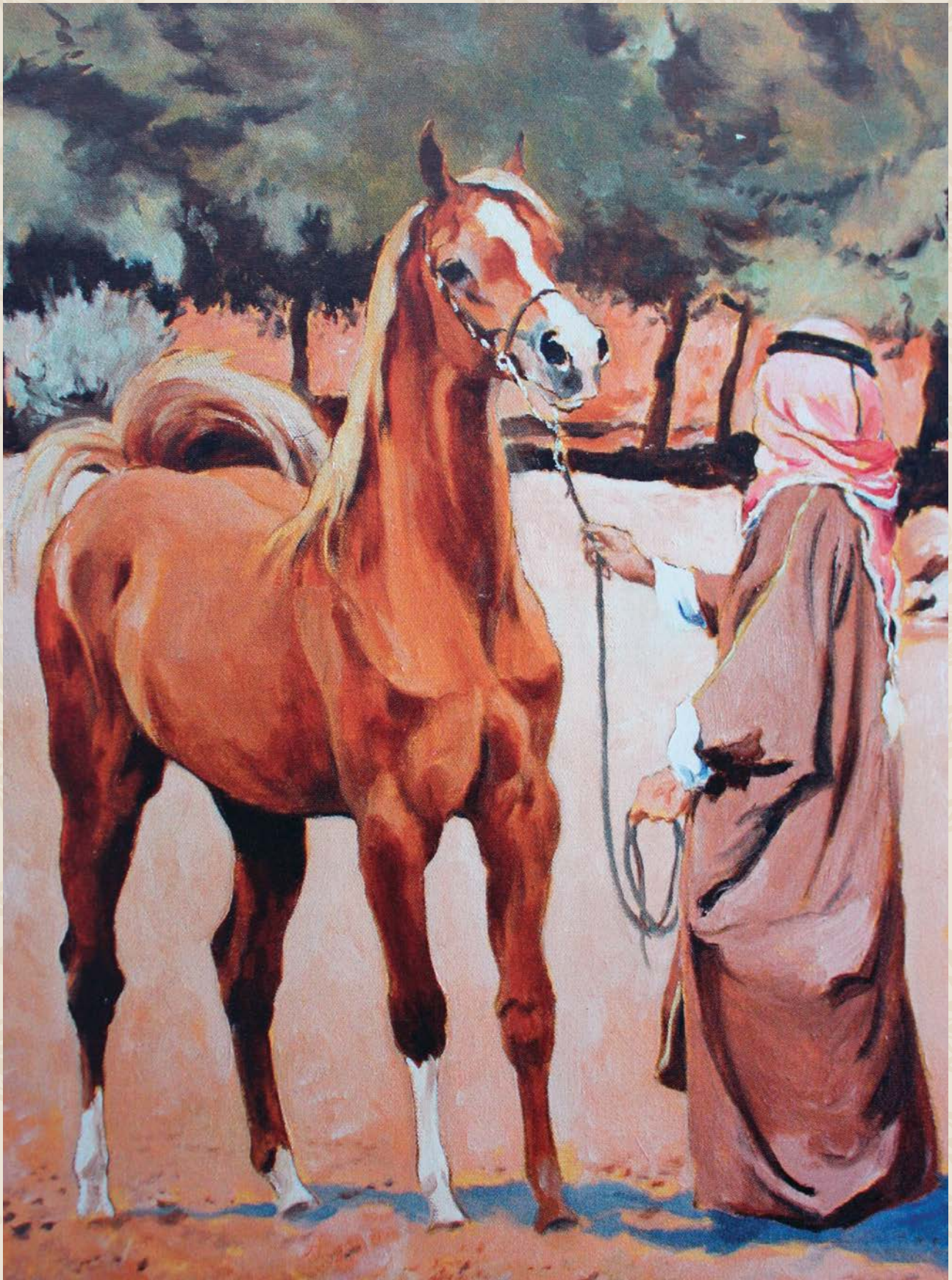


“The Watcher”



“A Chestnut and a Grey Arab”





"A Chestnut Colt and Groom"



“Halima and Haboub”

last hundred years has been the State Studs of Hungary, Poland, Russia, Spain, Germany and Egypt”, Peter Upton explains. “Perhaps we should also add Jordan and Bahrain to that list. They, and only they, can provide continuity and many of them now appear less secure than they once were. Surprisingly, few private studs continue into the second generation of the family even Crabbet only lasted for three generations and it should be remembered that the great collection of Abbas Pasha I lasted barely twenty years, although Ali Pasha Sherif was able to purchase many of its horses which he bred for the next thirty years. It seems to me then that the future is full of questions and doubts regarding the Arab breed.”

When asked which advice he would give to a newcomer to Arabian horses, Peter Upton answers in his modest way: “I

would be disinclined to offer advice to a newcomer to the Arab horse other than, ‘learn all you can, then trust your own judgement’.”

In these days, much is talked about the promotion and preservation of the Arabian horse for future generations. Peter Upton has a firm point of view regarding these subjects: “I am wary of promotion”, he remarks. “It has something of ‘spin’ about it, like present-day politics. However, the best promotion for the Arab is the Arab horse. If it is good enough, it promotes itself.

Preservation – there again I am wary – that’s jam in jars. Preservation for preservation’s sake is a journey of dangerous erosion. One must seek to maintain both what is good, what is original and what is beneficial. The





“Saluki”



“A Chestnut Mare – head study”



“Sunlight Patterns: two Mares”

process outside the State Studs has, of course, no overall guiding hand or benign adviser, so the future of the Arab is obviously a matter of chance.”

When asked about his plans for the future, Peter Upton answers smiling: “To keep going long enough to find out still more about this legendary and fascinating breed, the Arab horse.” □