

ANTIQUE ARABIAN HORSE *Sculptures*

Part III

by ©Judith Wich-Wenning

From cave drawings in ancient times to the modern day artist, horses have always been highly popular subjects in art. In the 19th century gorgeous sculptures of Arabian horses were created by the "Animaliers". This third and last part of the series "Antique Arabian Horse Sculptures" introduces once again important artists who were fascinated by the aura of Arabian horses.

Pierre-Jules Mène (Paris 1810 – Paris 1871)

One of the most important artists of the Animaliers movement was certainly Pierre-Jules Mène. He was born in Paris in 1810 as the son of a metal-turner. Mène grew up in an apparently prosperous artisan family living in the hub of craftsmanship in Paris. The district where Pierre-Jules Mène spent his childhood and early youth was crowded with shops of furniture manufacturers, sculptors and metal workers. Seeing the works of these skilled hands was part of Pierre-Jules Mène's everyday life. Furthermore, his father was able to teach him not only the basics of metal foundry, he explained also the first steps regarding sculpting. Pierre-Jules Mène received some tuition from the sculptor René Compaire. Nevertheless, Pierre-Jules Mène was largely self-taught. He never attended any of the prestigious art schools. Like many of his contemporaries he went to the zoo in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris to study the animals there. He drew numerous sketches there of anatomical studies and made life drawings of the animals. From them he would later do his sculptures. At the age of 22 years Mène married and earned the living for his family by executing models for porcelain manufactures and small sculptures for the commercial market. In 1837 he opened his own foundry for the production of his casts. This was

rather unusual compared to the majority of the Animaliers. Undoubtedly Mène's family background helped him regarding the necessary technical knowledge. In 1838 he exhibited his first bronze at the famous Salon. From then on he showed one or more models almost every year until his death. Even after Mène had passed away entries on his behalf were accepted at the Salon until 1879.

Pierre-Jules Mène was a very charming and outgoing man. Through his personality he attracted the best craftsmen to work for him in his foundry. Moreover he was as comfortable among his workers as entertaining the intellectuals of Paris. Pierre-Jules Mène's house in the center of Paris became a fashionable meeting place for artists and musicians. Mène had enormous success already during his lifetime. He won four medals at the Salons and at major exhibitions and received the Cross of the Légion d'Honneur in 1861. His work was popular in France as well as in England and many of his bronzes were exported to Great Britain. Mène's bronzes were cast with the highest quality and set a new standard of excellence, which other foundries tried to meet. He took personal care to ensure that everything involved in the casting process was kept in perfect condition. It was very important for Mène that even the last bronze of an edition was just as sharp and precisely detailed as the first one that was produced. Mène was not interested in public commissions and declined many offers to sculpt monuments. He concentrated instead on his business of producing and selling his very sought-after bronzes.

Similar to Barye, Mène studied animals as closely as possible. His choice of subject ranged more widely: It



One of the finest examples of Pierre-Jules Mène's work: "Chasseur Africain" ("African Hunter").



The sculpture "Fauconnier à Cheval" by Pierre-Jules Mène is one of the most impressive and dynamic Animalier sculptures.

included domestic animals such as dogs, cows and sheep as well as exotic jaguars, panthers and gazelles. Mène's favourite subjects however were horses, of which he is considered to be the master at portraying. His equestrian sculptures are phenomenal. Mène was widely influenced by the famous Arabian horse painter Carle Vernet and by the English artist Sir Edwin Landseer. Mène produced a number of impressive Orientalist subjects featuring hunters and Arabian horses. One of the finest examples is his "Chasseur Africain" ("African hunter"). It was exhibited for the first time at the 1878 Salon in wax and again in bronze in the following year. It is a very well modelled, powerful sculpture of an African horseman, probably a slave, on a fine Arabian stallion. A small dead deer, the hunter's trophy, compliments the group. This sculpture is typical for Pierre-Jules Mène: It shows the very detailed work he was famous for and has as a great aura.

Probably the best known and most popular example of

Pierre-Jules Mène's work is a sculpture of two Arabian horses known as "L'Accolade" ("The Embrace"). It shows the stallion "Tachiani" and the mare "Nedjibe". Both horses appear also as separate models. Combined as a group they epitomize the romantic but realistic work of the 19th century. Originally this sculpture came in three different sizes all authorized by Mène. As this work of art was and is so highly popular, it has been often copied in bronze, cast-iron and white metal. Furthermore there are also modern reproductions. When buying this sculpture, one has to be careful because prices and value vary a lot depending on the age and material of the piece. The sculpture "L'Accolade" shows the individual characteristics of the horses superbly. The spirited stallion "Tachiani" puts his head over the neck of the mare. The harmony and at the same time high tension between the two horses is superbly portrayed in this composition. The sculpture which was first named "Tachiani et Nedjibé, Arab horses" was first exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1853 and won a medal in

1855 at the Exposition Universelles. It was then renamed "L'Accolade". This work of art found immediately great public approval and success. Therefore it was cast in the three different sizes.

Another exquisite piece by Pierre-Jules Mène is "Fauconnier Arabe à Cheval" ("Arabian Falconer on Horseback"). This work of art first appeared as a wax model at the Salon of 1873 and at the Exposition Universelle in 1878. It was exhibited in bronze at the Salon in 1874. This sculpture portraits an Arab huntsman who looks up towards his falcon perched on his right hand. He is mounted upon a prancing, high-spirited Arabian stallion and is well prepared for hunting with his falcon and a gun slung across his back. This sculpture comes on an oval naturalistic base. It is an impressive piece with a height of ca. 75 cm. The extreme refinement and love to detail of this sculpture is exemplary for Pierre-Jules Mène's work.

Many of Pierre-Jules Mène's works are today housed at important museums as for example at the Petit Palais in Paris. Mène managed to achieve huge commercial success as well as great critical acclaim. In addition to casting his own models, Mène's foundry produced casts from the work of Auguste-Nicolas Cain (1821 – 1894). He was first his business partner and later on his son-in-law. Together they published a catalogue of their sculptures which could be ordered directly from the foundry. This illustrated catalogue of Mène's work turned later on into an important tool for research on Mène's work. It lists over 130 figures, groups, bas-reliefs and plaques. While this was by no means the total figure of bronzes produced by Mène, it gives at least a good overview of the great artwork he produced.

After his death in 1877, his foundry was continued by his son-in-law Auguste Cain. He continued to produce Mène's sculptures as well as his own works in the highest standard of quality.



Pierre-Jules Mène was also a master in modelling dogs: The very popular sculpture of a whippet playing with a King Charles spaniel. From the collection of Judith Wich-Wenning.



A very detailed bronze by Gechter with beautifully coloured patina.

**Jean-Francois-Théodore Gechter
(Paris 1795 – Paris 1844)**

We owe some of the most beautiful sculptures of Arabian horses to Jean-Francois-Théodore Gechter. He was born in Paris in 1795. Gechter was a student of Baron Bosio and the very influential Orientalist Baron Gros. Baron Bosio was a much honoured and patronized sculptor of the French School whose influence was very wide spread, although he was not an Animalier. Similar to Barye, another student of Bosio and Gros, he turned to smaller sculptures and animal subjects.

Gechter first exhibited in 1824 in a show of classical and mythological subjects.



The signature of Gechter.



A very refined bronze by A. Viguiet showing an Arab horseman on his steed.



Power and dynamic movement exemplified by a sculpture created by Doriot.

Gechter's prime occupation was first his portrait work. He was also very gifted in sculpting historical scenes. What made Gechter's work unique was how he managed to infuse emotions into his sculptures. This exceptional ability brought him numerous public commissions. He created for example a marble relief of the Battle of Austerlitz for the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Furthermore he executed the large sculptures symbolizing the rivers Rhine and Rhone for one of the huge fountains at the Place de la Concorde in Paris. Gechter was famous for his sculptures of kings, gladiators, historic persons etc. In his later years, Gechter came under the influence of the Animalier movement. The equine sculptures which he modelled in this second phase of his career were remarkable. Unfortunately, Gechter passed away at only 49 years. Had he lived longer we can assume that he would have produced even more works in this genre. His equestrian groups demonstrate careful, sensitive modelling of the horses.

Important museums as the Louvre in Paris show today his works.

Prosper Lecourtier (Gremilly 1855 – Paris 1924)

The important French sculptor Prosper Lecourtier was born at Gremilly in 1855. He studied under two great masters, Frémiet and Coutan. Lecourtier exhibited at the Salon from approximately 1879 – 1902 and won various medals including a bronze medal in the Exposition Universelle of 1900.

Prosper Lecourtier's work was abundant and entirely devoted to animals. His sculptures are very sensitive and lifelike. Lecourtier was a master in portraying wildlife, his crouching lions for example are amazing. Lecourtier is also well-known for his sculptures of dogs but his work encompassed all forms of animals. His equestrian groups are breathtaking.

All of his works are well executed with a crisp signature. Especially impressive is his large-sized bronze "La Fantasia Arab" which is also called "Arab Warrior on Horseback" (for a photo of this famous sculpture please see "Antique Arabian Horse Sculptures Part I" in Desert Heritage Magazine N. 32/2014). This large, eye-catching work shows an Arabian horseman holding up his gun while his steed gallops in full speed. A very dynamic and expressive pose for a sculpture!

Several museums especially in France have Prosper Lecourtier's artwork on display. Unfortunately very little is known about the personal life of this excellent sculptor.

Paul Edouard Delabrierre (Paris 1829 – 1912)

Another important member of the Animalier school was Paul Edouard Delabrierre. He was born in Paris in 1829. Delabrierre studied art under the painter Delestre but soon found out that his true destination were sculptures. He was greatly influenced by the works of the brilliant master Antoine-Louis Barye. Many of Delabrierre's combat models show the power and violence of nature, similar to Barye's work. Numerous sculptures by Delabrierre incorporate figures as well as animals.

Already the first two exhibits typified the style of this work throughout his career. The first sculpture, which was officially presented, showed a greyhound holding a hare and a wounded deer. This first exhibition took place at the Salon of 1848. He regularly submitted works until 1882. Delabrierre's very realistic subjects are well detailed and placed him in the top league of the Animalier school.

In 1857 Delabrierre received a great commission: The large group "L'Equitation" was incorporated into the façade of the Louvre in Paris.

Other important Artists

The 19th century saw numerous other artists who created exceptional sculptures of Arabian horses. Exemplary for this may be the French A. Viguiet who created a beautiful bronze of an Arab horseman. This sculpture has a great aura of peacefulness and subtle power. Also the Arabian horse is very well executed with his refined head and nice overall structure. The French Doriot was famous for his sculptures in bronze and also spelter. His works full of dynamic action are also very impressive.

Unfortunately many 19th century sculptures were not signed so we can sometimes only assume who was the artist behind them. However, they are nonetheless enchanting and inspiring. Collecting antique Arabian horse sculptures is a very fascinating and charming passion. These works of art honour the Arabian horse. They are a testimonial to the charisma, beauty and strength of these unique creatures.

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