

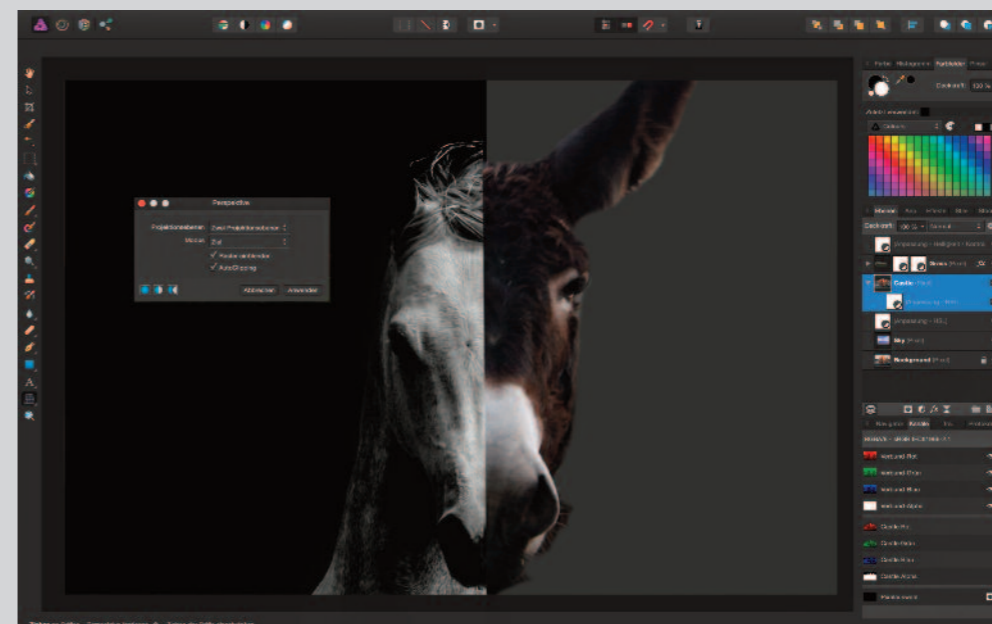
# “...it’s all about pictures...”

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Lay-out: Mario Brunetti

## Arabian Horse Breeding has Arrived in the Digitalized World Long Ago

“Hi, I’m Ahmed, I saw your mare on Facebook, what’s the price? Send me pics and video by WhatsApp!” That’s the kind of messages we get from all over the world nowadays. Gone are the times when the neighbors would drop in with their mare for having her served, or when horses were sold on the occasion of an Open House. Your neighbor will purchase some sire’s service online after checking pictures of the stallion and offspring on the Internet. He will get frozen semen sent from another continent. And customers from other continents will buy your horses via cell phone after viewing pictures online on some social media. The market for Arabian horses is globalized, and this fact has altered communications channels. The digitization of information is something that most breeders, and particularly trainers, like to look at as a chance for growth. It wouldn’t do to underestimate the impact of digitization: it is bound to continue growing, and it is going to reach the more remote parts of horse breeding and horse sports. Breeders have no choice, it’s what the new world-wide markets require, they aim for communications to go almost exclusively virtual, taking place in chats across thousands of kilometers in a matter of seconds. Do you know somebody who will still send anything by physical mail? Digital communication enables today’s breeders to contact a stupendous number of people internationally, at virtually no cost – however, there are some disadvantages to that. No more analogous handshaking on a sales contract. You put up with fraud, fakes, and manipulation, and there is no such thing as an online legal process that’s valid world-wide. Morals and honesty are not an issue that has a place in the jungle of our anonymous, internetted world. On a positive note, new ways of international communication have sprung up - even if they are more about quantity than quality, at least as far as Facebook friendships are concerned.

Magazines and books, on the other hand, are the relics of the real world, the world that can rightfully claim to not only use the language of pictures, but convey educational content via journalistically edited transfer of knowledge. They are our era’s archives, telling of the past, of successes in breeding and showing, often presenting the written (hi)stories of those protagonists of the horse world, be they people or horses, that ought never to be forgotten. Some magazines make for a substantial weight in your hand and are even able to evoke feelings – quite different from the fleetingly hasty world of online



communications that often consists of no more than the two sentences of a Twitter message, or of a picture ad that entirely replaces written words.

The printed media, however, need to cast a baited fishing-rod of their own into the online ocean of digital communications if they want to keep up in the struggle for attracting attention.

We know that a smart phone user will take a look at his mini screen about 150 times a day nowadays. What is it he would most like to see there? Pictures of horses from all over the world? We used to think that reading behavior is no different for online information versus printed media. Today, we know this is not true. After 4 lines at the latest, an online reader will bolt for the next page. 90% of magazine readers, on the other hand, will read their way all through the article they have in their hands. Particularly with customers from the Gulf area, however, there is no history of written horse magazines. They have gone from a Bedouin to a net surfer existence within one or two generations and many are most likely to do their horse shopping entirely based on digital information.

Horse photography has a key function today, as the digital world cannot exist without pictures. The online pictures of our horses are what has catapulted the analogous world of horse breeding out of its reality and into the digital world of business.

Quite confusing, that, considering that in the field of horse breeding, more or less everything is done the analogous way: mucking stalls, feeding horses, repairing fences, educating foals, breaking stallions to the saddle... it's all about tasks that, fortunately, still take place in the real world. Gradually, it's dawning on most breeders: the markets are dominated by the digitalized world, and without access to the markets, there is no re-financing the analogous kind of work required around horses. With the exception, maybe, of the really

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successful horses in sports, as for them, it's still the tangible victory on the race or endurance track that counts and transforms into money, not a photograph.

In our horse business, pics are what anchors the studs in the digital world of communications, of social networks, email blasts, newsletter online or whatever. Photos are like a flirt intended to make people curious for more to come. There is no substitute for them in this function, and they need to be good. The second step for the interested parties from half a world away is the video clip demonstrating the movement of the horse and giving proof that he did not receive beauty treatment by Photoshop. While in former times, you had to plan on visiting several studs to find a suitable sire for your mare, today, you get stallion pics non-stop onto your computer at home or via your smart phone. And with modern image enhancing techniques applied, these pictures come out so overwhelmingly beautiful that they remind you of one of those highly embellished baroque texts studded with lots of exorbitant describers. Surprisingly, when presented with these perfect horses in the pictures, lots of people still believe they are looking at unaltered original shots. In particular, buyers from far-away countries, barely able to get a visa, take risks they don't know they are taking. From the pictures they have seen, they have formed their very own opinions of the world of Arabian (show) horses, and they actually buy via their smartphones. At the same time, a horse owner can view mailed pictures of a stable before deciding to sell his horse there.

Today's "digital breeder" has the moral obligation to deliver a horse that corresponds to the picture that sold the horse. On principle, photoshopping pics is a taboo, but most do it anyway. The competition between photographers results in a flood of genuine as well

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as modified pictures and, in turn, in pressure on the breeders wishing to sell a horse. However, digital photographing is meant to mirror the analogous world, not to add to it. It can serve to amplify and catalyze analogous reality, speeding up economic changes by internationalizing internet data streams at a blinding rate. Everybody is thoroughly informed – fully in the picture, so to speak – in an instant. The impacts are both positive and negative.

To give an example: a photo that portrays a horse at its best – big eyes wide open, ears pricked, nostrils flared to intensify the dish, neck slightly arched, legs straight or the horse trotting uphill to counteract any tendency for a ewe neck and to make the back look stronger and the croup less slanted, tail carried straight and proudly, etc. - gives proof of the art of photography. That's a lucky shot which even a professional photographer will accomplish only once in a while but yes, pictures like this do exist. In our digital online world, colleagues and breeders with their envy masked as fairness are quick to judge such a shot a fake, an altered photo attempt at fraud, thus an absolute no-go. For that which must not, cannot be! Quite often, this may be true, but with digital technology developing at the pace it does, it is hard to say which pictures are faked and which are not, as they will increasingly look so naturally real that we are unable (or unwilling) to see the difference. It's almost as if there were parallel universes existing, the digital one of sparkingly clean panda-eyed horse beauties, and the analogous one of manure-stained everyday horses roaming muddy pastures.

Undoubtedly, the internet has advantages, as online pics make a stud internationally recognizable as such without breeders needing to attend shows. But what to do with even the best of offspring if nobody comes to take a look at them? If we want to keep foreign buyers from thinking (as, alas, they often do) that European breeding is a discounter store offering cheap goods, the pictures of our horses uploaded into the digital world need to be high quality and honest. Such photographs discourage faking and protect our horses, but also enable us to communicate with our real target group: the serious, reliable breeders and horse fans that exist in the Western world as well as in the Orient. To bring us back on safe ground, the analogous reality of our horses needs to regain its status as a criterion of functionality and actual beauty. There is no shortcut to visiting a stud to meet a horse live, not just to check if the photos were genuine, but to keep track of that very important point so often overlooked when deciding on a horse: the character of the Arabian horse, his essence – a trait that has, luckily, not yet made the transition into the digital era. ■

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