

Joanna Jonientz, Photographer

“You don’t get rich, but life with horses is thrilling, and you get to live your dream”

By **MONIKA SAVIER**

Lay-out:
MARIO BRUNETTI



Winner of the National Geographic Photo Contest 2010, category Nature

JOANNA JONIENTZ is an internationally working photographer for Arabian horses. „She is skilled, she is likable, she is committed and creative, she has an eye for the strong points of a horse and can bring them out in her pictures“ - that’s what most people who hired her are convinced of. It’s more than 20 years now that she is touring the studs of Europe, but also of Egypt, the USA, and other countries. She is just a person who is easy to like - that’s what people say who know her personally. Even if her time management is less than perfect at times, as during the season, Joanna has lots of work to do, and when the horses have finally finished shedding their winter coats in Europe’s late spring, she hardly knows which client to serve first. Which client, however, can take the time to wait for the pictures until next

winter? Her answer on that topic: „I am an artist first, and a hired photographer second. After a photo shooting, I go through a thousand pics or more with full concentration, selecting the best shots and getting them optically improved. And that takes quite some time. Sometimes, there is a wheelbarrow or a person in the background that needs to be removed, and more often, contrast, lighting and colors need to be optimized. Most people think that once the photos have been taken, all I need to do is print them. And in addition, those who call me in adhere to high quality standards. After all, everybody does his own digital camera or smartphone shots nowadays, but for good PR, you need good quality material as a basis. And I won’t ever do any photoshopping directly on the horse. I don’t manipulate on the horse, so I need to serially produce what used to be called “lucky



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shots". As a professional photographer, I do that by taking a high number of pictures and selecting the best ones, where the horse looks his best and all the details are correct, all at the same time."

Waiting for her best pictures may be trying, but when they finally arrive, everybody is happy and well pleased. Most are optimum depictions, and without a doubt, Joanna's pictures boost horses' market value. In our digital world, high-quality photographs replace written or spoken words, and they are what can make a horse into an icon for the media. Some self-made passport photo of our animals won't do for that, however, no more than a standard picture of a mare and foal in pasture will. For a picture with icon potential, the art of creative photography is the basis. Secondly, it takes total mastery of professional camera equipment. And for great results to be achieved, the third player in the team also needs to be of good quality: it takes a photogenic, harmonious horse displaying Arabian noblesse. Where the latter is somewhat lacking, horse owners are tempted to try and pressure the photographer into delivering beauty treatment by photoshopping. The photographer who resists usually loses the customer – but he wins several new ones that way, as when a stud is known for choosing an honest photographer, this is a high plus for the stud's image.

Joanna Jonientz came to Germany in 1988, as a person of German origin from Upper Silesia, in what is today Poland. She was 20 years old and a professional in animal husbandry. Her great passion, however, was painting horses. „During the 1990ies, many people asked me to paint a portrait of their horses. To do that, I would first take photos of their animals. Later, I found that photographing was more fun for me than painting, and after quite some time, I was able to make a living from this kind of work."

Arabian horses have a long-standing tradition in Poland. Even at the age of eight, Joanna met Arabian horses there and came to love them. As early as in the 1980ies, she would attend the Arabian horse shows of Janow Podlaski, sitting in the front row in order to take photo shots of the Arabian horses. "When I came to Germany, my first trip was to a newsstand to buy an Arabian horse magazine. That was Arabian Horse Europe, and I became a fervent fan of Erwin Escher's photos. Once again, I sat in the first row during Arabian shows, but I never had the courage to offer my photos to somebody. So the years passed by. I remember one time I went to a stud that owned a famous sire and asked if they would allow me to take photos of him. I think they pitied me, they looked at me and then they said, well, go ahead, visit him where he is grazing. So I went there and for an hour, I lay on my belly in the field, the camera in front of me, waiting for him to



lift his head once in a while. But I love my work, even after so many years. Do you know of any other job which allows you to lie belly-down in a green meadow full of flowers and do your work that way?"

It took long years for Joanna to be recognized by the Arabian scene and to be able to make a living as a contract photographer. She still experiences financing gaps sometimes, depending on the season. In Germany, she only attracted attention as a professional after she had made a name for herself in Egypt. "During a holiday in Egypt, I met a woman who told me of El Zahraa and the private studs there. At once, we organized a meeting with some people, which is how I met Raouf Abbas. We still nurture a friendship. Raouf, in turn, introduced me to different breeders and I was able to work the shows in Cairo. My shots were published, and my name came into focus. At first, it was the small breeders calling me, as they put more emphasis on good pictures of their horses than on the name of a well-known photographer for their advertising. In recent years, I worked for almost every one of the internationally operating studs of Germany. And of course, I returned to the Polish national studs as a photographer, I flew to Russia, the USA, France, and Italy, and back to Egypt."





NK Hafid Jamil, Germany



Mares at Al Qusar Stud, Germany

With markets ever more international, photography is essential for making a horse known to the public. While years ago, only the big studs were able to afford advertising in Arabian horse magazines, today, social media make cost-free advertising possible for any breeder, rider, or just fan of horses. However, the pictures need to be really good in order to catch positive attention from out of the flood of *posts*. Joanna has a sure instinct and a particular eye for portraying the best a horse has to offer.

"I want to show the horse naturally and in his entirety, but of course, I won't set the pace by first presenting, say, a weak back or a ewe neck. I try to bring the beautiful traits to the foreground. Nobody is perfect, but when horses have Arabian charisma and noblesse to offer, they

will look simply stunning. To be able to take good pictures of that, I need to include many different aspects, I need a good team supporting me by presenting the horses and helping me choose the right location, lighting, and time of the day – that's the only way to make the best out of the stuff a horse has to offer. It goes without saying that pictures need to be different for stallions, mares, and foals respectively."

Horse photography today uses methods and serves a function that makes it comparable to fashion photography. Horses, and stallions in particular, are considered symbols of desires for freedom and fierceness, but also fertility and beauty.

"Well yes, there are many similarities. Horses transform into made-up fashion models on the catwalk, as you can see at shows in particular. Instead of using makeup,



Kauber Platte, Germany



The mare Alham Baselah, Colorado, USA



Al Lahab, Friedmann Family, Germany



The mares of Hamdan Stables, Egypt



El Zahraa State Stud, Egypt

however, I usually try to further improve the positive impression of an Arabian horse by beautiful surroundings, such as nature, flowers, or a symbolically interesting background – if you don't, the photo is just like an unframed oil painting. In contrast to fashion photography, however, I never use PhotoShop on the horse. It's a very useful program that enables me to maybe remove the groom holding the horse for the shot, or the flies in the horse's face. Sometimes, the light and the contrasts need to be altered – it's that extra something, like using salt for a meal, but with the emphasis on the whole scene depicted. For example, I don't want some plastic gate handle on the fence in the background to distract from the horse, so I will remove it using PhotoShop. As for the body of the horse and particularly, for the type – which everybody wants to be extremely expressed – I will exclusively rely on my art of photographic depic-

tion, but never on image editing. Editing on the horse himself would be fraud, a fake which I refuse to do, even if some owners would like me to further improve the natural type of their horse. However, this is the balance I need to manage as a photographer, to remain true to my principles and at the same time achieve an optimum representation of the horse in front of me, so the owner

will be happy with the picture. What I really like about photographing is traveling to new areas and countries, meeting new people and many horses, getting the optimum from out of a photo shooting, and of course, I also like it when the owners are happy with the photos. Hunching in front of your computer screen and doctoring a horse with PhotoShop, that's just cheap, anybody can do it. Everybody who wishes to become a horse photographer today ought to avoid the shortcuts offered by digital aids. Study horses and their behavior, intensively so, and master the skill of photographing. Only with experience and by combining these two areas, your work is set out for sustainability and can make you a living in the long run. You won't get rich, but life with horses is thrilling, and you get to live your dream. "




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