Equus Through The Artist: A Look Into The Expression Of The Horse Through Personal Connection

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EQUUS THROUGH THE ARTIST:
A LOOK INTO THE EXPRESSION OF THE HORSE THROUGH
PERSONAL CONNECTION

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In completing this distinction I would like to dedicate it to the people that have helped me along with this process.

Thank you to my family and my friends, who encouraged me with my thesis. Without them I don’t know where I’d be. This paper would not have been completed without their love and support.

Thank you to the Otterbein Art Department for giving me many opportunities while I was here.

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And above all thank you to all of the horses that have entered into my life and inspired me, for without them I would not be where I am today or who I am.
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Horses have been the subject in art through the ages. Beginning in the Lascaux Caves of France, the equine image emerged through cave paintings as a way for humans to describe what they witnessed. The image of the equine continued in the Classical era of Greek culture, depicting the horse in battle scenes on pottery pieces and sculpture. In the Baroque era, artists such as Anthony Van Dyck and Charles le Brun used the figure of the horse as a riding animal used by nobility. This introduced the idea of the horse as an elite beast of burden and gave a sense of power to those who were nobles.

In Asian art, the horse was a common image that represented energy, freedom, and leadership. During the Tang dynasty of China, horses were viewed as prizes for nobility. Sculpture highlighted the strength behind the animal.

In the Romantic and Modern periods, the horse was continually used as subject matter. Works by George Stubbs, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Franz Marc, Susan Rothenberg, and Anthony Alonso highlight different aspects of the horse, relevant to the period in which each artist worked.

Though the horse as subject matter has been prevalent in art, not many of the artists who used it as subject matter had an attachment to the animal itself. Often work was a commission for a client or a study for artists with no desire to engage in a connection to the animal.

There are artists who had a connection to the horse. It began to show in their artwork with detailed descriptions of the horse. Whether it was a connection that started at a young age like that of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Franz Marc or one that developed later in their careers like George Stubbs and Anthony Alonso, their dedication to knowing this creature inspired great works during their careers that are still noted in the development realm of equestrian art.
As a contemporary artist, with background knowledge in equestrian studies and continuing research in the role of the horse, I analyzed the work of Stubbs, Toulouse-Lautrec, Marc, and Alonso in an effort to understand how their connections to the horse informed their artwork and how my connection to horses influences my artistic pursuits. I gained a deeper knowledge of myself through my connection to equine subject matter.
Art of George Stubbs
Born in 1724 in Liverpool, England, George Stubbs began his work with sketches of animal bones found on his family’s homestead. The sketches would later have an impact on engravings he would make to describe the anatomical systems of the horse.

What made Stubbs notable was that he dissected the horse to know more about it. His series of engravings, dedicated to the anatomy of the horse, illustrates to viewers a comprehensive guide to the anatomical systems of the horse. Stubbs would spend time examining layers of the horse through dissection to ensure that his work was accurate for each of the anatomical systems that make up the horse. In his engravings, Stubbs focused on the horse as a vital being even in skeletal form.

It can be argued that many of George Stubbs equine works were created as commissions he received due to his popularity at the time and did not have a primary connection to the animal. Through his extensive research, artists and viewers can find the way he perceived the horse.

Stubbs is unique in his understanding of the horse’s anatomy. He developed a sense of realism that had not been in equine art. He focused on accuracy in each of the horses that he painted during his career. A excellent example of this realism is his painting Whistlejacket (Figure 1. 1762, oil on canvas. 9’ 7” x 8’ 1”). In this painting, viewers are drawn to the size of the piece that depicts a rearing horse. One can gather the strength the horse contains. Looking at the piece further, Stubbs illustrates his use of realism by capturing the details in the horse’s facial expression, showing the inquisitive side of the horse through the forward motion of the ears and the attentive expression through the wide eyes and the flaring of the nostrils.
Stubbs became one of the best known artists of his time period, and his work is still recognized in both the art and equine communities. Even today, Stubbs’ work is used as a reference by many artists to capture detail and expression of the horse.
Figure 1
*Whistlejacket*
1762, oil on canvas. 9' 7" x 8' 1"
Art of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was born in 1864 in Albi, France, into an aristocratic family. Despite being part of a very privileged home, Toulouse-Lautrec was born with physical disabilities. At a young age, Toulouse-Lautrec had been exposed to horses through his father, who owned horses for the sport of hunting. As a young adolescent, horses became his favorite subject and can be seen in his early sketches.

An avid rider, Toulouse-Lautrec wanted to pursue the sport of riding as he was drawn to the strength and athleticism of the horse and the enjoyment of the sport. Though this was a passion for him, he sustained broken bones and caused concern for his parents. They were worried, if he continued with the sport of riding, that it would eventually destroy him. He began the path of an artist and left riding.

Beauty and athleticism can be seen in his work that focused on horses at the track. In *Le Jockey* (Figure 2. 1899, lithograph in color) Toulouse-Lautrec uses this concept of athleticism in the unique positioning of the subject matter. Viewers are drawn to the horse advancing forward from the viewpoint of the back of the horse. Toulouse-Lautrec used this viewpoint to show the power of the moving horse and within the power is an element of grace, as seen in his delicate line build up.

In other works, he continued the equine theme in the circus atmosphere. In *At the Circus: The Spanish Walk* (*Au Cirque: Le Pas espagnol*) (Figure 3. 1899, graphite with black and colored pastels) illustrates to viewers the power in the athletic horse while seeing the expression of grace in the horse’s structure. One can see the defining muscles of the horse while also viewing the unique facial expression of the attentive animal.
Despite all that Toulouse-Lautrec went through, the one thing that was persistent in his life and work was the horse. Though he was a pioneer in art with his use of lithography prints of Parisian life, it is important to realize that the luxurious life was not always his constant joy nor was it the only focal point of his work. With his love for the horse’s athleticism, he wanted to convey the beauty that can be found in the sport of riding. The movement and the different angles that were used in each of his equine pieces gives viewers the sense of power and the grace horse possesses.
From left to right:
Figure 1.
*Le Jockey* (1899, lithograph in color)

Figure 2.
*At the Circus: The Spanish Walk (Au Cirque: Le Pas espagnol)* (1899, graphite with black and colored pastels)
Art of Franz Marc
From an early age Franz Marc had a closeness to animals, particularly horses. Born in 1880 Munich, Germany Marc was exposed to horses and to painting by his father at a young age. In the course of his life, Marc had considered the career of a minister, but changed his path to become an artist like his father. From 1900 to 1904, Marc was a student at the Munich Academy of Art, studying a variety of mediums including painting, drawing, and woodcut prints. While at the Academy of Art, Marc’s subject matter contained work that focused on portraiture of family members and landscape.

After his departure from the Academy of Art in 1905, Marc focused on animals as subject matter, primarily horses. Later, he created a group of expressionist works that contained his most notable equine works before his death in 1916.

Though his career was short, Marc made a profound statement in the art world and in his portrayal of the horse as subject matter. Marc’s unique way of using color expresses a deeper side to the horse, one that suggests human emotions.

In one of his better known pieces, Large Blue Horses (Figure 4. 1911, Oil on canvas), Marc utilizes color in order to convey the mood of the horses. The blue color conveys a somber mood. The positioning of the horses enhances this mood as the horses’ heads are shown in a downward motion rather than an upright and alert movement. Marc showed the horse as an expressive being and not just as an animal of utility.
Figure 4
*Large Blue Horses*
1911, oil on canvas
Art of Anthony Alonso
Born in 1937, Anthony Alonzo did not begin his career with horses. Once he was commissioned by Phil Dunn, he started to learn everything that he possibly could about horses and their general care. He took classes that revolved around the daily care of horses including grooming and hand walking horses. He also researched a foal cadaver to learn more about the muscle and bone structures of his new subject matter.

Often called the Gentleman of the Thoroughbred World, the uniqueness that stands out in Alonso’s work is how he preserves the expression of the horse.

*Secretariat Remembered* (Figure 5. Date unknown, Oil on canvas) shows that preservation of expression. The head of the horse illustrates its kindness through the forward ear motion and the lightness of the eye. The juxtaposition of the racing horse below shows the power contained in this creature.

Focusing on elegance in expression, Alonso continues to show the horse, as an animal that contains elements that are both powerful and sophisticated.
Figure 5
*Secretariat Remembered*
Date unknown, oil on canvas
The Connection and Conclusion

As I have researched and analyzed each of these artists and their personal connections to horses, I see this connection influencing my own work as an artist. I have discovered through each of these artists what ties them together. Though each artist has a different artistic style, there is one common theme that they all contain: the expression of the horse. Though equine art is not an uncommon topic for many artists to examine, what makes these four artists stand out is how they showed the horse to have personality and uniqueness:

- Stubbs, captured the realistic expression of the horse.
- Toulouse-Lautrec was captivated by the athleticism and strength of the horse.
- Marc studied the expressions that horses possessed.
- Alonso explored expression of a variety of different racehorses.

I am able to relate to the idea of capturing the expression of the horse. It is a primary focus of my artwork. Having the unique opportunity to grow with horses and being a practicing equestrian, I always found the different personality traits of horses to be unique. I found it important as a developing artist that this expressive nature should be highlighted in my own work.

The way I convey the message of expression is the use of simple contour lines and the use of color to bring subtle details to the image. With the use of simple lines, I’m able to capture the elegance in the expression of each of the horses I create. Lines are not to overpower the form of the horse, but rather to imply its position. The use of line work I create is based on studies of how Stubbs, Toulouse-Lautrec and Alonso built up the form of the horse in their work.
I use a distinct color system to build up the portrait of the horse. Inspired by the work of Marc, I use colors that are vibrant. They symbolize the horse’s mood through the different expressions. My use of color is similar to Marc’s and informs a majority of my work.

My goal for the viewer is to grasp the concept of how an animal’s personality can be conveyed through color and line. In this series, I used different line techniques and distinct color choices to describe individual personalities.
In the piece titled *Alertness* (2017, relief print with soft pastels), the position of the ears is forward, a sign of the horse listening to a sound attentively. The horse’s head faces in the direction of where the ears are searching. The horse is represented in yellow, an active color. This active color increases the sense of alertness. Background colors are chosen in a way that complements the form of the horse. Color is used to give a sense of approaching conflict that the horse may experience, providing a reason for it to be vigilant.
The piece *Agitated* (2017, relief print with soft pastels) reflects the sensitivity of the horse. The position of an ear going backward and one to the side of the horse indicates the horse’s uncomfortable position. Red in the form of the horse represents discomfort and anger. In the background, the vivid mark making of color gives an illusion of agitation. This systematic use of color gives the illusion of what might be causing the agitation.
Inquisitive (2017, relief print with soft pastels) takes a look at how a horse reacts to stimuli. The head posture is turned in a way that indicates the horse is looking behind itself. The eyes are wider and the ears are in a forward position as a way to process what could be occurring around it. Orange to depicts the form of the horse because it is an evocative color. In the background, there is subtle commotion with color.
The last piece in the series titled *Curiosity* (2017, relief print with soft pastels) conveys a different mood. Unlike the forward positions displayed earlier, the horse in this setting demonstrates a relaxed pose. The head is down, meaning the horse is complacent. Ears are composed and listening softly to sound that surrounds it. Using blue for the body of the horse, I show that even in a quiet, curious state, the horse has an element of calm. In contrast with the horse, the soft red background draws attention but doesn’t require it to be in a fully alert mode.
The primary discovery made through this project is the importance of communicating an emotional connection within each piece in the series. The review of the four artists’ work increased my level of expertise in getting to know the horse as a living being. I was able to create pieces of art that visually describe the complexity of communication. The goal for the viewer is to become connected to the language aware of the horse’s facial expressions and meaning.
Bibliography


