

Article

Realism as a Representational Strategy in Depictions of Horses in Ancient Greek and Egyptian Art: How Purpose Influences Appearance

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Abstract: When modern (Western) viewers look at ancient art, the first feature of the image that is often assessed is its relationship to ‘reality’. How ‘real’ the image looks is inextricably linked to its evaluation and therefore the viewer’s estimation of its quality. The more ‘realistic’ an image is deemed, the more it is appreciated for its historic and aesthetic value. This fixation on reality has often affected the assessment of ancient imagery. It can create a bias that limits the researcher’s ability to analyse and interpret the image(s) to their full potential. When studying ancient images, the viewer should always keep in mind its original purpose. Rather than looking for reality through the notion of resemblance, the degree of reality should instead be assessed through the way the subject is being conveyed as the image’s purpose dictates its appearance. This article will use depictions of the horse in ancient Egyptian and Greek art to highlight some of the challenges one encounters when studying ancient images’ relationship with reality. It will show why it is important for scholars to focus on the image/object’s purpose, their resemblance to their subject, and their meaning in terms of the message(s) they are meant to convey.

Keywords: horses; ancient world; reality; realism; naturalism; equids; ancient equines; Egypt; Greece



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1. Introduction

Two- and three-dimensional images are important sources about the ancient world as they can tell us many things about the culture that produced them. With that being said, the value of an image as a historical source is tied to its original purpose. This means that one must be aware of an image’s purpose when analysing its significance within different contexts. This includes considering a variety of factors including its location, authorship, target audience, whether it is sacred or secular in nature, who commissioned it, etc. The purpose of the image dictates its content and appearance, i.e. ‘what’ is depicted and ‘how’ it is depicted, which in turn influences the level of ‘realism’ found within. This article will critically assess how modern Western viewers tend to look at images and, further, how our expectations of ‘realism’ influence how we assess images of horses in the ancient Egyptian and Greek visual record. In the context of this article, realism is used as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* “Esp. in reference to art, film, and literature: close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering in the precise details of the real thing or scene.” (*Realism* 2022)¹ We have used this definition as the basis of the article because ‘precise details of the real thing or scene’ are features we discuss in this article. This understanding of ‘realism’ can create a belief that resemblance equals quality. Moreover, Bourdieu has observed that the appreciation of an art work depends on someone’s background and education (Bourdieu and Nice 1980, pp. 226–34, in particular pp. 234–35), which strengthens our point about equating ‘realism’ with quality based on the observation described before. He also observes that, “The value of a photograph is measured by the interest of the information it conveys, and by the clarity with which

it fulfils this informative function ... " " ... the judgment it provokes being more or less favourable depending on the expressive adequacy of the signifier to the signified" (Bourdieu and Nice 1980, p. 245). As an alternative to this definition of realism, this article aims to contextualise the cultural and chronological use of the horse in ancient Greece and Egypt by showing how the notion of 'realism' can be interpreted in different ways when one attempts to reconstruct the historical value of an image. Let it be clarified that this article's notion of 'reality' and how it is used has everything to do with the visual clues used to convey the concept of 'a horse', and nothing to do with whether or not the image content is real or not within someone's belief system. Anything, including intangible subjects such as deities, can be rendered 'realistically' in terms of resemblance, colours, shape, movement, etc., as long as the right visual clues are used to convey the subject and invoke recognition in people. This will be the focus of this article, which will argue that seeing something and judging its primary impression of 'reality' the way we are used to in the media nowadays is not adequate when looking at the relation between the use of visual clues and the subject's relation to reality. This article therefore aims to look at how the concept of the horse and its features such as colour, shape and movement are conveyed, what visual clues are used to create a realistic (or not) impression, and how the artists balanced this with fulfilling the function of the image.

Why the horse? It is an animal that has long carried powerful symbolic significance and its form is instantly recognisable to many, even if one has not seen a living, breathing horse 'in the flesh'. In other words, one can clearly identify an animal as 'horse' without ever having interacted with an equine in a face-to-face setting. The symbolic associations connected to the horse throughout its domesticated history have connected this animal to wealth, power, prestige, speed, conquest and victory.² It is therefore no surprise that equines have long been a popular muse for artists.³ The popularity of the horse means that the viewer, whether looking at an abstract or hyper-realistic image, can confidently state 'that is a horse'.⁴ Although this speaks to the importance of equines in human history, it is a double-edged sword when it comes to understanding the horse within particular cultural contexts because the ubiquity of the horse can influence how one understands and responds to equine iconography. The authors have decided to compare horses in ancient Greek and Egyptian culture as they have noted similar tendencies in both cultures. Ancient Greece is often seen as the foundation of the modern (Western) world, and ancient Egypt as something vastly different and disconnected; however, the observations made in this article show that both these pre-modern cultures used similar depiction strategies. As the authors worked on this project, parallels in terms of the use of cultural conventions and motifs began to appear, suggesting some interesting avenues to explore in relation to human appreciation and understanding of equines. The authors feel that these parallels offer an excellent case study for reconsidering how one may read 'naturalism' or 'realism' in ancient art. Moreover, the fact that these parallels exist across such a broad geographical and chronological scope is further evidence for the importance of considering the purpose of putting horses in art and it encourages viewers to think about the broader cross-cultural significance of the horse in its primary role as a marker status, evident in both Egypt and Greece.

The lens(es) through which individuals view an image of a horse are intrinsically coloured by their own pre-existing knowledge or idea of a 'horse,' elements of which can be shaped by social, cultural and economic factors. These expectations can be further exacerbated when the viewer has a first-hand understanding of real horses. In this case, they may critique, reject or accept an image based on their own knowledge of equine anatomy, behaviour, breeds and riding styles. For example, when discussing the emergence of riding in the Ancient Near East, Drews writes, "Although the Near Eastern riders ca. 2000 BC rode fast, they did not necessarily ride well". He goes on to add, "...the bareback riders depicted in the Mesopotamian plaques were evidently riding with no purpose other than to complete their rides successfully" (Drews 2004, p. 40). Hyland refers to the horse of the Armento Rider (from Armento c. 560–550 BCE, British Museum 19.040.703.1) as

“crudely represented and ill formed” (Hyland 2003, pl. 25).⁵ These are obvious value judgements based on different cultural ideas and practices towards riding styles, equine form and on the idea of how the horse should be depicted ‘correctly’. This is a problematic perspective from which to view the visual record. If the horses in an image do not line up with these ideals and expectations, the art runs the risk of being dismissed as unrealistic and its various components picked apart in relation to what the viewer deems ‘correct’. Such an approach, however, creates a very biased and narrow perspective not only on equine history, but also on the artistic styles and genres of past cultures and their importance to art history.⁶

This becomes particularly evident when we consider responses to equine imagery through the modern Western interest in ‘realism’. Approaching an image based on the (dichotomic) expectation that it will be either ‘realistic’ or not ‘realistic’ limits our assessment of the visual record. Rather than considering what the images can and cannot tell us about the complex significance of the horse to a particular culture, there is an implicit tendency to look for what an image can tell us about the horse as we understand it today. Whereas it is clear that images are always *based* on (something in) reality, the more important question is to what extent the image *conveys* reality. This, among other things, will be demonstrated in this article. The widespread familiarity with the horse makes it an ideal subject to serve as the basis for this study, as it will allow us to move beyond the generalised analysis of ‘realistic’ vs. ‘unrealistic’ by considering what the iconography of the horse in Egyptian and Greek art can tell us about the idea of the horse within these two cultures, and how the use of the horse in art serves as a visual language that reflects more than the simple concept that a ‘horse is a horse’.

The horse was introduced to Egypt in the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1759–1539 BCE) (Hornung et al. 2006, p. 492) and the earliest two-dimensional images of horses begin to appear shortly after this, during the Eighteenth Dynasty (1559–1292 BCE; see Harvey 1994, p. 5; Spalinger 2005, Figures 1.6 and 1.7). These early images are found in royal contexts, such as in temples, and soon spread to private contexts such as non-royal tombs, amulets, figurines, stelae, etc. There have been a few recent publications on the horse in Egyptian art, most recently, “What makes a horse a horse? Configurational aspects of ancient Egyptian equines” (Delpeut 2021b) and “The Role of the Horse in Ancient Egypt: In Society and Imagery” (Delpeut 2021a), as well as more general publications about the horse in ancient Egypt such as Susan Turner’s *The Horse in New Kingdom Egypt: Its Introduction, Nature, Role and Impact* (Turner 2022) and Catherine Rommelaere’s *Les Chevaux du Nouvel Empire Égyptien: Origine, Races, Harnachement* (Rommelaere 1991). These publications have focused primarily on the New Kingdom period as equine iconography is most prevalent during this period. As a consequence, this article will do the same.

Based on these images as well as textual sources, we can safely say that the main use of the horse in Egyptian society was as a mode of transportation, pulling a chariot (Köpp-Junk 2021, pp. 12–19; 2016, pp. 70–75; among others), in warfare (Spalinger 2005; Heagren 2010, pp. 74–88), as private transportation (Köpp-Junk 2013, pp. 131–42), and in sports, including hunting (Decker 1994, pp. 265–352). The horse and chariot are therefore inextricably linked: whenever one sees a horse in the visual record, if it is not harnessed to a chariot there will almost always be one found nearby. The horse and chariot revolutionised Egyptian warfare (Spalinger 2005, p. 1). It therefore comes as no surprise that this is reflected in royal iconography in the Eighteenth dynasty: temple walls are covered in battle scenes from this dynasty onwards, for example, in the mortuary temples of Thutmose I (Iwaszczuk 2021, pp. 147–62) and Thutmose II (Bruyère 1956, pls. III, IV) in Thebes, the temples of Ramses II (Breasted 1903; Kuentz 1928), as well as in that of Ramses III at Medinet Habu (The Epigraphic Survey 1930, 1932) and Seti I (The Epigraphic Survey 1986) for later examples. At first, access to horses was limited to only the highest elite in close relation to the king due to their use in warfare. A new social class might have even emerged from the introduction of the horse and chariot in ancient Egypt (Bibby 2003; Spalinger 2005, pp. 70–83), and a whole new array of titles came into existence (Gnirs 1996,

pp. 19–29). This was related to both the use and value of the horse and chariot, as “raising and training draught animals and developing vehicular technology was an expensive and time-consuming investment and is therefore likely to be representative of high status” (Bibby 2003, p. 13). As the horse became more common in society, it also became more prevalent in private use, as reflected in the non-royal tomb iconography. Here we see once again horses and chariots used as a mode of transportation, often transporting the tomb owner himself (as for example in Figures 1 and 2) or transporting the King and Queen, a theme popular in tombs in Amarna.



Figure 1. Hunting scene from the tomb of Userhat. TT56. Photo: JJ Shirley.



Figure 2. Horses and chariot from the tomb of Amenhotep Sise, TT75. Photo: Alexis den Doncker, © Université de Liège.

Horses migrated into the Greek world from Central Asia and the Near East between 1900 and 1600 BCE (Anderson 1961, pp. 2–3). Terminology for horses and chariotry are found in Mycenaean Linear B tablets, indicating the economic and military importance of the animal following its integration into Greek society (Enegren 2002, pp. 12–13). Based on both the literary and artistic records, it is evident that the primary roles of the horse in the Greek world revolved around warfare and sport, although they were also used for hunting, processions and travel. All of the roles connected the horse firmly to the lives of the elite as they were expensive animals to purchase and maintain, and many regions of the Greek world were not suited to large-scale horse breeding—notable exceptions being Thessaly and Macedonia (Willekes 2016, pp. 123–24). This means that we should read visual (and literary) references to horses with an awareness of their status within Greek society. The inherent eliteness of the horse would have drawn attention to its presence in the streets or countryside, making it an easily recognisable animal to viewers of all classes. The value attached to the horse allowed it frequently to find its way into the visual record. Early representations of horses began to appear in the 16th century BCE on Mycenaean grave *stelae*. They became a popular subject in Mycenaean vase painting, and were also produced in a three-dimensional form as terracotta figurines. There are also some surviving fragments of horses on large-scale fresco paintings from Tiryns (Hemingway 2017, pp. 11–12). From the Geometric period onwards, the horse became a popular subject in Greek art, and only humans are depicted with greater frequency (Zimmerman 1989, p. 1). As a result, we see the horse represented in every medium of Greek art, within sacred and secular context in both the private and public spheres. Given the prevalence of the horse in the Greek artistic record, there have been several publications and dissertations on the use of the horse in Greek art (Markman 1969 Benson 1970; Zimmerman 1989; Eaverly 1995; Barrie 1993; Moore 1968, 1972, 2003, 2004; Hemingway 2004; Willekes 2016). Two recent exhibitions have focused on equines in the Greek visual record: *The Horse in Greek Art*, which ran at the National Sporting Library and Museum as well as the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in 2018 (for the catalogue see Schertz and Stribling 2017) and *Hippos: the Horse in Ancient Athens*, which ran at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens in 2022 (for the catalogue see Neils and Dunn 2022), as well as the 2022 exhibit *Das Pferd in der Antike von Troja bis Olympia* at the Archaeological Museum of the University of Münster (for the catalogue see Ebers et al. 2022). All these publications provide a broad chronological scope for the use of the horse in Greek art, focusing primarily on representations of horses and equestrianism from the Geometric to Hellenistic periods, with an interest in the stylistic developments of both two-dimensional and three-dimensional mediums, as well as some of the thematic roles of the horse, particularly in the representations of the horse in its military, athletic and ceremonial contexts.

2. Where and Why? Finding Horses in the Visual Record

Images are produced for many different reasons, and the intended purpose can depend on location, function and their target audience; however, all “images are representations of something. These objects of representation are the world of reality: in the sense that images can be called realistic” (Hölscher 2018, p. 209). Hölscher goes on to add that one of the primary issues we face when attaching degrees of ‘realism’ to art lies in the manner through which we conceive the very idea of reality, which he places within the context of the ‘objective’—a material world that consists of objects and beings (p. 209). If something cannot be placed within this objective context, it tends to move further down a perceived scale of ‘realism’. This creates a division in how one views ancient art: categorising it as ‘realistic’ or ‘naturalistic’ representations of reality, or ‘conceptual,’ suggesting a more abstract interpretation based on how ‘objective’ it is. In the context of Greek art, this places Archaic art within the category of ‘conceptual,’ while Classical and Hellenistic art are ‘realistic’ or ‘naturalistic’ (Hölscher 2018, p. 10). This in turn affects the response of viewers to the piece of art based on their own cultural influences and expectation around what equates to a ‘realistic’ work. However, this approach to defining realism or naturalism

does not consider the cultural contexts in which the image was originally constructed. The content as well as the appearance of an image is intrinsically connected to its purpose, as the form of the image is shaped by who made it, the reason it was made, and the audience for whom it was intended. An image can be intended to serve a variety of functions. For example, It can be Informative, commemorative or ritualistic, or a combination of the above. Since ancient images had a primarily functional role, images were shaped to fulfil their function. This means that an image is ‘successful’ if its intended audience recognises what is happening in a scene, both for individual subjects as well as for larger compositions. As Manakidou writes, “Creators of Greek art were not just craftsman . . . but also representatives of the social milieu, from which they received impulses and inspiration for their artistic repertoire, as well as—specific orders for producing particular works of art on a practical level” (Manakidou 2012, p. 414). In terms of the horse, this indicates that the inclusion of equines in the art of Egypt and Greece was not an accidental afterthought; it was intentional, as horses were meant to contribute to the purpose and message of the image. Although there are overarching qualities connected to the horse—power, wealth and status—it is possible to create a more nuanced reading of equine iconography. The specific role of horses in a work of art, and the meaning attached to them, varied based on the purpose of the object on which it was depicted, as the images were responses to and reflections of specific socio-political and cultural contexts (Manakidou 2012, p. 415). When considering the presence of the horse in the visual record, one must take several questions into account: Was it public or private art? Was it commissioned by an individual, a group or the state? What medium of art was used? Is it sacred or secular in context? What purpose was it meant to serve? The art of these two cultures was not purely ‘decorative.’ In other words, the horse(s) contribute an intrinsic meaning to the piece, and that meaning is far more nuanced than a generalised 1:1 rendering of reality. As Hölscher writes, “Reality is to some degree an image, and realism is conceptual”. He rightly suggests that we should view ancient art as *mimesis*, as this approach does not require a delineation between art and life, or reality and the conceptual (Hölscher 2018, pp. 216–17).⁷

Images of ancient Egyptian horses were first found in temple contexts as part of decorative programmes in funerary temples dedicated to the pharaoh. The earliest example comes from the funerary temple of pharaoh Ahmose in Abydos (Harvey 1994, pp. 3–5). Harvey reconstructs the scene as part of a battle relief (Spalinger 2005, Figure 1.7) The majority of equine scenes produced during the New Kingdom in royal context are directly related to the horse’s use in warfare. This is for two reasons: first, the introduction of the horse and chariot created a significant shift in how battles were waged (Spalinger 2005, pp. 32–83) and the iconography reflects the changing nature of the battlefield to accommodate this new technology; and, second, the main function of the scenes was to overawe the people and tell the story of how glorious the pharaoh was through his victories over his many enemies. In non-royal tombs, the image of the horse was quickly adapted into the wall decorations, first in hunting scenes, but also in tribute scenes, funerary processions and private transportation, among others. The horse is always inextricably linked to the animal’s main purpose: pulling a chariot. The connection to the elite is particularly reflected in scenes of private transportation and in hunting scenes, which links the horse and the chariot directly to its use by the tomb owner.

Horses become a staple part of temple decoration, and during the second half of the New Kingdom became more and more frequent in the iconography of battle scenes, often playing a role in showing dominance over the enemies through their size, posture, behaviour and setting (see for example Kuentz 1928, pl. XXXV for a battle relief of Ramses II at Qadesh). They were an important part of the pharaoh’s propaganda, announcing his victories, even if he had lost the battle. We know for a fact that the battle of Qadesh resulted in a peace treaty between the Egyptians and the Hittites (Jauß 2018, pp. 21–75). This is in stark contrast with Ramses II’s account of the battle, which both in text and image shows his victory over the enemy⁸ (see Breasted 1903 for the battle scenes, and Kitchen 1996 for a translation of the texts). In this case, the purpose of the image was not to tell

the truth. Instead, these reliefs had a propagandistic nature, and the image of the horse played a strong role in that. Ramses II even mentioned the names of his horses that assisted him in his glorious victory: “I crushed a million countries by myself, on Victory-in-Thebes, Mut-is-content, my great horses; it was they whom I found supporting me, when I fought alone in many lands” (Lichtheim 2006, p. 70). Clearly, Ramses did not win anything, let alone by himself. One would like to believe though that it is not all fiction; we have no reason to believe the royal stables did not have two horses named Nakth-em-waset (Victory-in-Thebes) and Mut-herti (Mut-is-content). These texts and images were used here to tell a very specific story, its relation to truth notwithstanding.

Egyptian temples show a clear differentiation in iconographic style depending on the function and target audience of the structure and its components. They were commissioned by and made for the pharaoh, and dedicated to one or more particular deities. This building was sacred, which means not everyone would have been allowed to see the different parts of the temple; only selected priests who worked in the temples had full access. The most visible and accessible parts of the temples, namely the outer walls and the courtyard, often show battle and processional scenes aimed to impress the audience, whereas the inner rooms are decorated with scenes with a more ritual function and, thus, a completely different subject matter.

Non-royal tombs, in contrary to temples, had both public and private spaces, and the images used to decorate these spaces were chosen to suit location, function and audience. The depictions in non-royal tomb chapels were chosen to celebrate, commemorate and (re)vive the tomb owner in both life and the afterlife (Hartwig 2004, pp. 5–7, 37–43). This explains why the majority of images in these spaces revolve around the tomb owner and the display of their identity. These depictions were not government controlled; instead, the tomb owner had the final say on the themes depicted in his tomb, and he had the freedom to choose a group of artists to his own liking (on artists’ creativity, see Laboury 2017, pp. 229–58). It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the content and appearance of the themes and subjects in these tombs varied greatly, because every artisan had their own particular preferences for shape and form, painted of course within the Egyptian canon and decorum. These non-royal tombs also had a substructure, the burial chamber, which was inaccessible to the public, and consequently rarely decorated (for some general information about non-royal tomb architecture, see Kampp-Seyfried 1996, 2003; Dorman 2003, pp. 30–41).

Hunting scenes with horses and chariots in non-royal tombs served as a status symbol par excellence in Egyptian art (Delpeut 2022, pp. 7–15). An example can be seen in the hunting scene from Theban Tomb 56 (TT56), the tomb of Userhat (Figure 1). The inclusion of this scene in the long hall of his tomb tells the viewer that he was a man of means and leisure: not only did he have the time to go hunting, he was also able to do this from a chariot, rather than on foot, as was more commonly shown in non-royal tombs (Delpeut 2022, Table 1; Rogner 2020, pp. 157–74). At least, that is what he would like us to think. The place of this large scene within the long hall of the tomb was deliberate: it would be seen by everyone visiting the tomb as they made their way down the hall to the cult statue at the back (Rogner 2020, p. 167). The iconography and deliberate inclusion of the chariot and horses aims to convey the message, “I was rich and fantastic, please contribute to my cult”. We cannot know, however, whether Userhat himself ever actually hunted from a chariot. What matters here is the idea of hunting from a chariot and what that says about the status of the individual, rather than the physical act of hunting itself (Bodziony-Szweda 2010, pp. 55–66).

The connection between the horses, chariots, status and commemoration can also be found in TT75, the tomb of Amenhotep-Sise (Figure 2), another non-royal tomb that was open to the public for viewing and admiration in the Theban Necropolis. Here we see two horses harnessed to a chariot on which the owner of the tomb rides. The tomb owner uses his chariot as a mode of transportation to move from A to B doing his job. Although a seemingly straightforward representation of chariotry, there is a clear message to this

image. Amenhotep-Sise was broadcasting that, as a ‘second prophet’ of the god Amun, he had the wealth and resources to maintain a chariot and team of horses as a mode of transportation. The fact that the image links the tomb owner directly to ownership of the horse and chariot is a direct display of his access to wealth and resources. Whether or not Amenhotep-Sise actually owned a horse (or two!) is irrelevant; he is signalling to us that he did. So the ‘what’ of the image is clear: displaying Amenhotep-Sise’s high status. The ‘how’ of the image might raise some eyebrows, but the fact that these horses look like a caricature rather than having a more proportionate and posture appropriate rendering is irrelevant; the purpose of the image, to impress the viewer and convey the tomb owner’s wealth, is still fulfilled.

The prevalence of the horse in the Greek visual record allows us to consider carefully the connections between purpose, audience and subject matter in relation to the artistic depiction of equines. Greek artists focused their renderings primarily at a generic rendering of ‘a horse’. They “...tended to look for the typical and essential forms that expressed the essential nature of classes of phenomena . . . A geometric statuette of a horse is an attempt to get at the ‘horseness’ that lies behind all particular horses” (Pollitt 1999, p. 6). Although there are visual cues we can trace across mediums, locations, periods and audiences that can be used to identify clearly an equine as a Greek horse (Willekes 2016, pp. 8–12; Benson 1970, pp. 32–59 for the protogeometric and geometric periods in particular), the specific purpose and meaning ascribed to that horse is tied into these other features.⁹ As an example of this, we can look at representations of sport horses.

Athletic competition played an important role in shaping Greek identity. It is intrinsically connected to the notions of *arete* (glory), *time* (honour) and being *aristos* (being ‘the best’) (Kyle 2014, pp. 54–70 for a general overview of athletics in ancient Greece; Smith 2012, pp. 543–63 for competition in Greek art, especially 547–53).¹⁰ An equestrian competition was a sporting venue for the elite, with their racehorses serving as a clear, visible marker of wealth as they galloped around the hippodromes of the Greek world (Mann and Scharff 2021, pp. 14–20; Nicholson 2021, pp. 242–53; Bell and Willekes 2014, pp. 480–82; Golden 1997, pp. 337–43). Although the owners of these horses rarely held the reins themselves, they were nonetheless the ones who claimed the accolades and rewards of victory (Golden 2008, pp. 12–13).¹¹ These victories could be commemorated with epinician poems commissioned to celebrate the deeds and glory of the winner, and also through victory monuments.¹² In the case of equestrian competitions, these could include representations of horses. Some of these dedications were small-scale, like the bronze chariot horse from Olympia (Olympia Archaeological Museum B 1741), while others were close to or even larger than life size, as can be seen with the near life-size Artemision Horse and Jockey (National Archaeological Museum, Athens X15177, see Hemingway 2004, pp. 83–114 for an analysis of this piece). Pausanias describes several such monuments in his description of important Panhellenic sanctuaries including that of Cynisca the Spartan, who was the first female Olympic victor. He writes, ‘...beside the statue of Troilos is a stone ledge with a chariot and team and a driver and a portrait of Cynisca herself by Apelles, and there are inscriptions about Cynisca’ (*Description* VI.1.6).¹³

Unfortunately, few of these larger scale monuments have survived. So, when we read of an equestrian monument like Cynisca’s, should we imagine the artist producing lifelike copies of the actual equines who were involved in the victory? Was this a type of veristic equine portraiture? The answer is likely ‘no’. In other words, the four horses who decorated Cynisca’s monument at Olympia were not lifelike renderings of the specific four horses who pulled her chariot to victory, but rather four idealised representations of the Greek racehorse that fitted the cultural conventions of horses in Greek sculpture. They represented the values and virtues connected to athletic victory and what this meant for Cynisca, rather than specific individual horses (Nicholson 2005, pp. 95–104 provides an overview of racehorse monuments). Evidence to support this claim can be found via depictions of racehorses in other media.

If one looks at Panathenaic amphora, there are uniform conventions for depicting racehorses: the viewer is constantly presented with the Greek idea of the racehorse, rather than an artistic interest in portraying specific individual racehorses (Figure 3). These amphorae were awarded to victors in the Panathenaic Games, and so they served as markers of status and accomplishment while also fulfilling a practical function. Tradition was key with the stylistic elements of Panathenaic amphora: they continued to be produced in the black figure style long after the red figure came to dominate the ceramics market, and thus the use of well-established conventions on these vessels makes sense (Boardman 1974, pp. 167–78). The conventions of the Greek racehorse are not, however, limited to Panathenaic amphora, as racing scenes on other ceramics, regardless of the type of vessel or painting style, still present the viewer with standardised depictions of racehorses rather than individualistic animals (Pevnick 2017, pp. 69–75 for racehorses on pottery).



Figure 3. Panathenaic Prize Amphora, compared with work by the Painter of Boulogne 441. Ca. 520 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund 19576. Inv. no. 56.171.4.

Likewise, coins celebrating equestrian victories used standardised scenes with uniform representations. These conventions were upheld because of the audience. Victory monuments were often erected in public spaces, and they would have been viewed by a large and diverse audience. Thus, the focus was in representing the significance of the accomplishment and adding to the glory of the owner, their family and their *polis*, rather than celebrating the individual horses, particularly as many of these monuments stood for generations. These coins were meant for public consumption. The badges placed upon them served as propaganda and statements of cultural identity for the ruler or state who issued them. Many of the issues depicting equestrian victories were released by tyrants and monarchs who used them as a means to transmit a statement about their authority, legitimacy and power/success (Figure 4, Brousseau 2019, pp. 391–96; Oliver 1986, p. 70). Once again, it was what the victorious racehorses represented that mattered, rather than the heroisation of a specific real racehorse. A Macedonian or Syracusean using a silver tetradrachm to purchase goods would have seen the badge and recognised the significant meaning of, say, an Olympic victory within the broader context of the Greek world, rather than concerning themselves with the individual horse(s) who obtained that victory. Panathenaic amphorae celebrated the accomplishment of victory in a set, conventional way, with

particular scenes being used for each event. These vessels were produced in large numbers prior to the festival making it impossible to represent specific horses, as the outcome of the race was not yet known. Once again, we can read these equines as representative of the cultural values and ideals connected to the racehorse and equestrian sport.¹⁴



Figure 4. Silver Tetradrach commemorating Philip II's victory in the keles race. Issued c. 348–329 BCE. American Numismatics Society. Inv. no. 1967.152.195.

3. Realism versus Resemblance: Reading Colour, Sex and Movement

For the depiction of a subject to be successful within the context of its intended purpose and audience related to recognition, it must have a level or resemblance to its subject. Without a degree of resemblance, the audience is unable to recognise what is being shown in the image. Resemblance, of course, requires a basic relationship to reality between the subject and its depiction. We all see the problematic features when looking at ancient images and understand where people are coming from when deeming the art of lesser importance due to its often less 'realistic' nature. This often has to do with the fact that the image primarily needs to fulfil the basic requirements of resemblance for the audience to recognise the horse, combined with any further function of the image, as seen above. Anything beyond those recognitional features is up to the specific cultural traditions of artistic production, often resulting in what we would deem 'unrealistic', as for example the horses in Figure 2. These horses from the tomb of Amenhotep-Sise are rendered in a way that immediately seem 'incorrect' to us: the hind quarters are too big, the back is too hollow, the tail is held upwards way too far from the horses' bodies, and the horses seem to be tiptoeing. Anyone who has ever seen a horse in real life knows that horses do not look or move like this. We are all, however, still able to recognise that this is a horse, showing that the basic requirements of resemblance, and therefore reality, have been met. As we will see in the following part of this paper, all images of horses from Greece and Egypt meet these requirements.

As we have already shown, the primary function of an image in Greek and Egyptian art was not to portray reality in the same way a photograph does. We have also seen that in many cases the image portrays the concept of the animal rather than one specific horse. This concept is often built up out of generic features to best display the culturally defined category of 'a horse'. To what degree, however, are the horses shown in Egyptian and Greek art accurate representations of the animal in real life rather than representations of a generic 'horse'? This question will be explored by considering the representation of equine colour, sex, movement and 'horsiness' within the visual record.

4. Colour in Egyptian Art¹⁵

The horses in both TT56 and TT75 (Figures 1 and 2) follow conventional patterns within Egyptian art. They are two horse chariots, as was customary in ancient Egypt, and the horses are depicted overlapping one another. One can see the two horses best by looking at the outlines. The teams in both tombs are of a chestnut and a grey.¹⁶ This colour combination was very popular at the beginning of the Eighteenth dynasty. Indeed, until the reign of Amenhotep II, all pairs of horses in Egyptian art were depicted with this colour combination. This does not mean that Egyptian horses were universally chestnut or grey, or that they were always paired this way. Instead, we should consider this colour pairing a component of artistic composition. In the early years of the Eighteenth dynasty, the horse was still new to Egypt, and the artists used the consistency of the coat colour as a way to define the image of a horse (Delpeut 2021b, p. 26). The horse was often juxtaposed with other quadrupeds, so it needed to develop its own iconographic character; the grey and white colour combination was one way of doing so.

The grey horse in the tomb of Amenhotep-Sise also has an orange tinge to its mane, which could reflect the age of the horse as it takes several years for the coat, mane and tail of the grey horse to turn 'white'. It could very well be that the artisan made this observation and purposefully included it in the image, or it could of course also have been an artistic choice to match better with its surroundings. This is however not the only occurrence of grey horses with orange manes. In fact, in the tomb of Menkheperre-seneb, there are two pairs of horses visible with varying tones of orange manes (Rommelaere 1991, pl. 1). These artists went through the same considerations as those of the tomb of Amenhotep-Sise and decided to include the orange tinge only in the grey horse on the left, and chose to depict the other grey horse without it. Did either of these two tomb owners have a team of grey and chestnut horses? Probably not, so in that sense the depiction does not reflect reality in the sense that it shows what the tomb owners' horses looked like. The rendering however still reflects what the artists saw, and therefore reflects some kind of reality, nonetheless, namely the reality of the existence of grey and chestnut horses, as well as the reality of a difference in appearance based on age.

The viewer is intended to recognise that these are horses, as they follow established conventions for representing horses in the visual record. The artists worked within the Egyptian canon and decorum, even within non-royal tombs, meaning that they followed certain norms in terms of content and appearance. In order for the audience to recognise the culturally defined category of 'horse' as efficiently as possible, the coat colour is an important factor of the appearance of the horse. This explains why there are no purple, green or blue horses; this is too far away from resembling the animal. Artists depicted what they knew had 'realistic potential' by using a combination of visual elements that could actually exist. The difference between these two worlds, the 'real' and the 'image', is what Dimitri Laboury calls "a world in representation" (Den Doncker 2017, p. 333). Thus, these images convey an idea about reality without necessarily being a carbon copy representation of a specific Egyptian horse. The image is therefore definitely based on reality, but does not always convey it in the way we would expect it.

5. Sex

It is generally assumed that the Greeks preferred stallions, i.e. a horse that is in possession of a phallus and testes. This belief may reflect assumptions about the patriarchal structure of Greek society.¹⁷ This theory seems to be supported by the visual record, as a summary overview does show a tendency towards stallions. Various physical features can be used to identify a stallion, with the most obvious being the genitalia. An examination of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's online catalogue is a useful introduction to representation of sex in Greek horses. The survey conducted included pieces from the Geometric to Hellenistic periods. Of the 750 Greek artefacts with images in the digital collection, 183 pieces fitted the parameters of the study.¹⁸ These pieces were further categorised as scenes of warfare (44 total), sport (23 total) and other (119 total). Within each scene, horses

were identified as having male genitalia, not having male genitalia, or unknown. Of the 44 combat scenes, 27 (61.3%) were clearly stallions, 4 (8%) had no visible genitalia and 13 (29.5%) were unknown. A total of 16 of the 23 racehorse scenes (69.55%) showed males, 6 (26%) were unknown, and 1 (0.04%) showed a team that was clearly male and a team with no visible male genitalia. A total of 55 (46.2%) of the other scenes showed males, 38 (31.9%) showed no visible male genitalia, 23 (19.3%) were unknown, 1 (0.08%) had a horse that was clearly male and a horse with no clear markers, and 2 (1.6%) had male horses and unknown horses. This number suggests that the visual record supports the assumption that Greeks preferred stallions, but it should not be accepted *carte blanche*.

If we dig a bit deeper, there are some contradictions, particularly when it comes to racehorses. The literary record makes several references to female racehorses in mixed-sex races.¹⁹ Agamemnon's mare Aithe is praised in the chariot race of the *Iliad* (23. 300, 407–9, 525–27), and Eumelus drives a team of mares. Pausanias recounts the victory of Aura in the *keles* race at Olympia (6.13.9). Herodotus (6.103.3) refers to the tomb for the mares of Cimon who won the *tethrippon* at Olympia three times. Mares and fillies appear in the epinician poems of Posidippus, with the most notable being the filly of Callicrates, who clinches the victory for her owner after a close finish. Posidippus calls her an “excellent female among males” (AB 74). It is possible, then, that the sex bias shown in the visual record is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the reality. It is more likely that mares were commonly used for various equine purposes, rather than only stallions. It would be impractical to rely solely on stallions simply from a numbers point of view, as it would cut out 50% of the available horses. The preference for stallions that appears in the visual record is another example of idealisation. The stallion might have been preferred as a symbol of powerful masculinity, but mares were just as suited to war, sport, hunting, travel, etc. as stallions. It is the conformation, training and attitude of a horse that makes it suitable for a particular role, not its sex. What we see in the visual record is a cultural trope, rather than a reflection of reality.

In Egyptian art, the depicted genitalia are related to the function of the horse within the image. Depicted genital sex markers vary from ‘udders’ to ‘phallus sheath’ and ‘phallus sheath + testes’ and ‘none’, representing ‘mare’, ‘gelding’, ‘stallion’ and ‘just a horse’. The majority of horse images in private contexts show the full variety of all these different sex markers, but ‘none’ is the most common occurrence (Delpeut 2021a, p. 121), and therefore representing ‘just a horse’. This means that, in most cases, genital sex markers did not need to be depicted in order to fulfil the function of the image; conveying ‘just a horse’ was enough. A particular theme where stallions are prevalent in a private context is in hunting scenes, which like in Greek art might be related to a symbol of powerful masculinity linked to the tomb owner who is operating the chariot. This point is supported by the different display of seemingly the same pair of horses in Theban Tomb 56, tomb of Userhat, (Figures 1 and 5), where the horses in front of his hunting chariot are clearly stallions, whereas the horses in his procession scene do not contain any sex markers at all. Here it was enough to convey simply ‘just a horse’, while in the hunting scene the sex markers of a stallion were required. This might be related to royal iconography, where the options are much less variable. In royal iconography, the horses of the pharaoh are often clearly stallions, serving as a status marker as it differentiates the status of the different agents involved (Delpeut 2022, p. 4). In Figure 6, we clearly see that the Egyptian horses contain the sex markers of a stallion, whereas the enemy's horses only have a phallus sheath, or no sex markers at all. This is a repeated occurrence, where the sex markers clearly function as a status marker.



Figure 5. Two horses in the tomb of Userhat (TT56) taking part in his funerary procession. Photo: JJ Shirley.



Figure 6. a (top left), b (top right), c (bottom left) and d (bottom right). Egyptian troops (top) ver-sus enemy troops (bottom) on a wooden. Chest belonging to Pharaoh Tutankhamun, 18th dyn-asty. Location: Cairo Museum. Inv. no. JE 61467. Photo: Lonneke Delpout.

Did this mean that the Egyptian army only used stallions, as they would have liked us to believe? Probably not, as using only stallions is rather problematic (Delpout 2021a, pp. 122–23). The Egyptians clearly were aware of the behaviour of stallions, as we can see in the biographical text found in Theban Tomb 85, tomb of Amenemhat (Sethe 1907, p. 894). Amenemhab is described as saving the Egyptian army by killing and cutting off the tail of the mare the enemy intended to use to disrupt the Egyptian army’s stallions (for a more precise description, see Delpout 2021a, p. 123). According to O’Daniel Cantrell, it is much more likely that the Egyptians would have used geldings instead of stallions, since

they have a calmer temperament and are able to work side-by-side with mares and other geldings (O'Daniel Cantrell 2011, p. 26). Considering that the visual record supports the hypothesis that horses were castrated, this is likely true. As mentioned above, mares were just as suitable for use in warfare as stallions and, further, using only stallions would have excluded quite a large group of horses to become warhorses. The fact that in non-royal tombs the use of genital sex markers is much more fluid supports the assumption that it is much more likely that, within these depictions of stallions, the sex markers work as a status symbol, and do not reflect realistic practice of only utilising stallions in warfare.

6. Movement in Greek Art²⁰

The question of equine movement and its representation in the visual record is a fascinating one. In general, horses will naturally produce four different gaits: walk (four beats), trot (two beats), canter (three beats), and gallop (four beats). Although it is tempting to try and read specific gaits on ancient horses, it is important to note that the correct sequence of footfalls, especially at the faster gaits, remained an unknown until 1878 when Eadweard Muybridge captured every stage of a horse's gallop using a sequence of photographs to show motion along with his 'zoopraxiscope' to create a 'motion picture' of the galloping horse (see Getty Museum 84.XM.628.38 for Muybridge's galloping horse). Thus, we should not focus on reading the 'gaits' we see as accurate depictions of a walk, trot, canter or gallop, but rather as presenting the idea of movement. With the images we gaze upon, we are not meant to read a specific gait, but instead associate particular associations/feelings of power, speed and motion. As Markman states, "The basis of recognition, however, is derived not from anatomy, proportion, or movement, but rather from the nature of the perspective, composition, style, and subject matter" (Markman 1969, p. x).

In Greek art, there are conventional poses used to relay different ideas of speed, movement and energy in the horse. The halt appears frequently in the visual record, particularly in harnessing scenes, departure scenes and votive statuary. In some cases, the horse(s) stand calmly, and the image exudes a sense of quiet or controlled energy, as is evident in the departure scene depicted on a black figure amphora, dated to c. 530 BCE. The four horses stand with their feet solidly on the ground as the driver climbs into the chariot. One can feel their readiness to move forwards, but they are not trying to lunge forwards; instead, they wait for the command to move on (Figure 7, Metropolitan Museum of Art X.21.26 attributed to the manner of the Lysippides Painter). In other cases, they may be pawing at the ground, stamping a foot or dancing on the spot, as can be seen on a kylix attributed to Onesimos, dated to c. 490 BCE (Figure 8 Metropolitan Museum of Art 1989.281.71, see Moore 2004, p. 50 for this scene in the context of equine care). In this scene of a groom and horse, the tethered horse appears restive as if he is shifting his weight from one side to the other while being brushed out. This is communicated through the raised front and rear legs on the left side of the body, as well as the deeply flexed poll. We see a horse who is restrained and so attempts to expel energy while contained, creating a visible sense of restless or anxious/nervous impatient energy. A more vivid version of this situation can be found on a 4th century BCE relief of a horse and groom. The body language of both equine and human give a clear message that this horse is trying to charge forwards as the groom attempts to keep him under control (National Archaeological Museum, Athens 4464). Likewise, one can compare/contrast the body language of the unmounted horses of W III with that of W V of the west frieze of the Parthenon. In W III, the horse drops his hindquarters as if trying to move away from the individual handling his face, while in W V the horse stands square and level (Markman 1969, Figures 39 and 40).²¹



Figure 7. Amphora attributed to the manner of the Lysippides Painter. Ca. 530 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Inv. no. Y.21.26.



Figure 8. Kylix attributed to Onesimos. Ca. 490 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of the Norbert Schimmel Trust, 1989. Inv. no. 1989.281.71.

The walk is typically denoted through the lifting of a front leg, and flexion of some sort in a hind limb. The motion can be subtle, as with the bronze harnessed horse from Olympia, where the forward movement is indicated by the placement of the legs, rather than the raising of the hooves (Olympia B 1741), or the marble statue of the forepart of a

horse who turns its head and neck slightly to the right as it begins to lift its right foreleg. Although the hind legs do not survive, the piece nonetheless gives the impression of a horse moving calmly forward at a sedate speed (Ακρ. 697, Eaverly 1995, pp. 36–37 for equine posture in Archaic sculpture). The motion of the walk can also be exaggerated depending on the feeling of energy and tension the artist seeks to communicate. By increasing the elevation of a front and hind limb and increasing the degree of arch and muscling on the neck, the artists can depict the sense of a horse who is fighting against the control of its rider or trying to explode forward into a more rapid gait, suggesting the idea of barely contained energy and impulsion.

This posture can be seen on the proto-Corinthian Chigi Vase, dated to the first half of the 6th century BCE (Villa Giulia 22,679).²² The band of horsemen, in which each rider ‘ponies’ a second horse off his own, advance forward with a gait that is meant to evoke the walk, but the horses do not move in an equal manner. The horses of the first and third riders appear to be fighting their riders’ control, with their necks over flexed and their noses dropping ‘behind the vertical’ as they try to avoid the contact with the bit, while the second and fourth riders appear to be urging their horses forwards, possibly using the ends of their reins as a whip to try and get more impulsion of out them, and these horses raise their heads in a different form of evasion (Moore and Schwartz 2006, pp. 40–41). Although all of the horses in this scene have exactly the same sequence of leg movements, which are meant to imply a ‘walk,’ subtle changes in the head carriage of the horses and posture of the riders allows the artist to convey different attitudes towards the walk.

The concept of the two-beat gait is an interesting one to read because of how it is typically depicted. The trot has the front and hind legs moving in diagonal pairs. An understanding of legs moving in diagonal pairs can be found in the visual record, and, although sequences of movement and the angles of the legs do not match that of a ‘real’ trot, they nonetheless reflect an idea of the two ‘pushing off’ phases of the trot. Examples of this can be found on the Bryaxis Base, dated to c. 350 BCE, which was likely part of a victory monument (National Archaeological Museum, Athens 1733) and the tondo of a red figure kylix, dated to c. 490 BCE and signed by Onesimos (Louvre, G 105; also signed by Euphronios as potter), as well as a 4th century silver tetradrachm commemorating the victory of Philip II of Macedonia’s horse in the *keles* race at Olympia (Figure 9, American Numismatic Society 1964.42.22).²³ Are we meant to view this as a ‘true trot? Likely, not. The viewer is meant to obtain a sense of speed, rather than see a carbon copy of a specific gait. This two-beat gait implies a horse moving at a consistent but controlled speed, covering ground at a level pace.



Figure 9. Silver Tetradrachm issued by Philip III Arrhide-us, c. 323–315 BCE. American Numismatics Society, 1964.42.22.

Instead of trying to decipher a ‘canter’ from a ‘gallop’ in the visual record, it seems more logical to categorise the scenes as ‘collected’ and ‘extended’. The collected scenes are very common in Greek art, particularly in scenes of combat and processions. The body of the collected horse appears compressed with its hind legs moving under its barrel, while the forelegs are raised (usually at different heights), the neck is upright and arched, and the head flexes downwards at the poll. This posture creates the feeling of controlled power, i.e. a horse that can pivot, twist, jump or surge forwards at a moment’s notice. In his *Art of Horsemanship*, Xenophon focuses on the idea of collection in the ridden horse (VII 13–18, X.1–5). The rider typically sits upright but with a relaxed posture, as on a red figure column krater of two mounted travellers, dated to c. 430 BCE and attributed to the Marlay Painter (Figure 10, Metropolitan Museum of Art 07.286.65); this ‘gait’ is prominent with the procession of horsemen on the Parthenon Frieze (see, for example, W II and N XLI).²⁴ For the use of this movement in a military context, we can look at both chariotry and ridden scenes. A black figure neck amphora from c. 540–530 BCE depicts a warrior in a four-horse chariot, with all four horses ‘cantering’ in a collected manner (Figure 11 Metropolitan Museum of Art 96.9.10), while a black figure trefoil oinochoe of c. 510 BCE shows a similar form of movement, but with two mounted cavalrymen spearing a fallen foe (Figure 12, Tampa Museum of Art 1986.041). At the other end of the spectrum are the ‘extended’ horses, often depicted through some form of a ‘flying gallop’. The body of the horse is elongated, with the forelegs reaching out in front, and the hind legs stretched behind, often with the rear hooves on the ground. In some cases, the head and neck stretch forwards, as with the Horse and Jockey of Artemision (National Archaeological Museum, Athens, X15177, dated to the 2nd century BCE), while in other examples the head carriage is more upright, as can be seen with the *keles* scenes on numerous Panathenaic amphora, including an example from c. 490 BCE, where one horse has a more elevated neck while the other is starting to reach forward with its head and neck as it tries to pass the leader (Figure 13, Metropolitan Museum of Art 56.171.3).



Figure 10. Column-Krater attributed to the Marlay Painter. Ca. 430 BCE. Metro-politan Museum of Art. Rogers Fund. Inv. no. 07.286.65.



Figure 11. Neck Amphora. Ca. 540-430 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchased 1896. Inv. no. 96.9.10.



Figure 12. Trefoil oinochoe. Ca. 510 BCE. Tampa Museum of Art, Joseph Veach Noble Collection. Inv. no. 1986.041.



Figure 13. Panathenaic Prize Amphora attributed to the Eucharides Painter. Ca. 490 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Fletches Fund, 1956. Inv. no. 56.171.3.

In these scenes of an ‘extended’ gait, the viewer is meant to read speed, and it is not surprising that they appear most frequently in racing contexts. (Hemingway 2004, pp. 94–95 for the Artemision horse in particular, 113 on the flying gallop and racing scenes).²⁵ One can also find scenes of the bolting or wild, frenetic movement. An excellent example of this can be found on the Amazonomachy frieze of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, dated to c. 350 BCE. Slab 1015 depicts an intriguing scene with an Amazon seated backwards on her galloping horse. Based on the movement of her body, one gets the impression that she has spun around on her horse to attack the hoplite behind her.²⁶ The horse, meanwhile, lunges or leaps forwards with an explosion of energy. This is neither the controlled collection nor flying gallop, but an expression of pure, wild energy. As Markman writes, “The high pitch of excitement carries over from the cold marble to the spectator, in whose eyes the scenes are not mere inanimate representations of reality, but reality itself” (Markman 1969, p. 95; British Museum 1857, 1220.268 slab 1015).

7. Horses Being Horses

When studying scenes that depict horses in ‘daily life’, showing natural behaviour, we can clearly see that both Egyptian and Greek artists definitely possessed the skills to represent horses in any way they wanted. In most formal art, however, they followed a particular canon to suit cultural expectations (see Davis 1989), as the purpose of the image did not require a degree of realism directly related to the viewer’s experience and observations beyond their initial recognition of the subject matter. This would suggest that scenes of horses being horses must be rare, as the scenes generally carry specific historical and/or rhetorical purposes.²⁷ Indeed, at first glance, scenes of natural behaviour—i.e. horses being horses—can seem sparse, with most scenes having direct connections to humans and/or human control. If, however, one looks a bit closer and begins to read the subtle interactions, movements and body language of both equine and human figures, an understanding of natural equine behaviour and personality starts to come through, even in scenes that are mythological or abstract in context. This suggests that artists and viewers, at least to a degree, were familiar with some elements of ‘horsiness’. This adds to the significance of the scenes and the inclusion of horses within them, for it suggests that there was some degree of social familiarity with the animal and an understanding of human–equine interactions.

There are some scenes of horses without humans, particularly if we look at Corinthian, geometric and early Archaic pottery, where we see representations of linear horses grazing (Moore 2004, pp. 45–48; Benson 1970, pp. 39–40). We can also consider the many small bronze votives of horses from the geometric period, which are rarely depicted with human figures (Zimmerman 1989, pp. 319–31 for an overview of the iconography). One such example is an 8th century BCE votive: although ‘abstract’ in appearance they are distinctly recognisable for what they are, i.e. a mare and her foal (Figure 14 Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999.526, Picón et al. 2000, p. 10).²⁸ Similar scenes can be found on Thessalian coins from Larissa, a testament not to the breeding of a specific mare or foal, but rather to the relationship between Thessaly, the Thessalians and horse breeding (Figure 15 see, for example, American Numismatics Society 1944.100.16976).

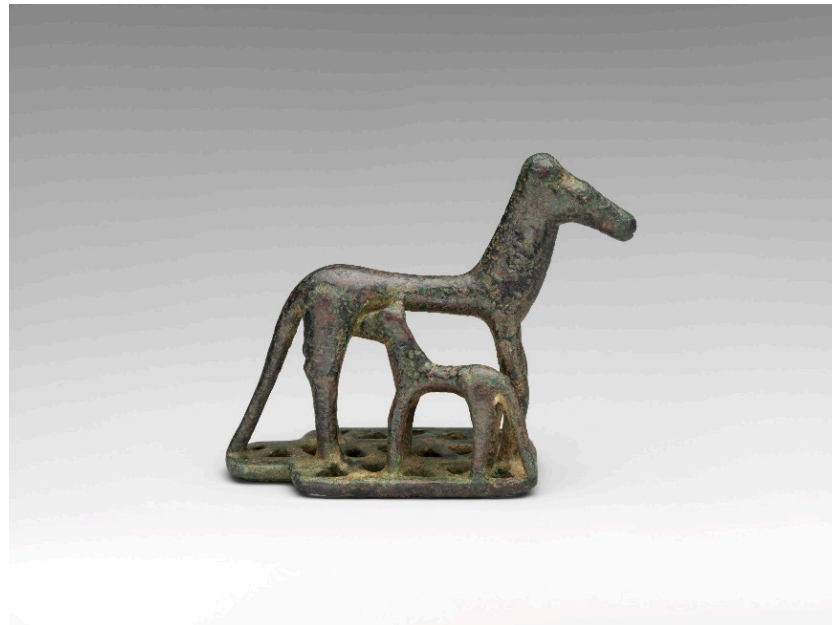


Figure 14. Bronze mare and foal. Late 8th century BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mrs. Frederick M. Stafford in memory of Mr. Frederick M. Stafford, 1999. Inv. no. 1999.526.



Figure 15. Silver drachm from Larissa. Bequest of E.T. Newell. American Numismatics Society. Inv. no. 1944.100.16976.

Another interesting scene is found on a black figure amphora attributed to the Swing Painter, dated to c. 535 BCE (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts 61.1.2). Here we see very animated horses, two of which are rearing up against one another.²⁹ Are these two horses battling it out? Are they play fighting? The exhibition catalogue for *The Horse in Ancient Greek Art* labels them as a mare and stallion fighting, as male genitalia are only visible on

one of the horses (Schertz and Stribling 2017, p. 134). This is certainly a possibility, as mares and stallions will tussle during the breeding season, particularly if the mare is not yet receptive to mating. The possibility of play fighting rather than serious combat is suggested by the third horse in the scene who is rolling (Kiley-Worthington 2005, pp. 260–61 and 360–61 for fighting, 365–70 for play in horses). This is a perfectly natural act performed by horses, and it is typically a sign that the animal is relaxed. If the animal had felt it was in a tense or stressful situation it would not have risked lying down, let alone exposing its belly in this way.³⁰ Thus, what we may be seeing on this vase is a scene of play, with three equines ‘horsing around’ in the field (Moore 2004, pp. 53–54 for this and other scenes of rolling).

What about scenes of horses and humans? Here the clues may be more nuanced, but evidence of social understandings about ‘horsiness’ exist. For example, a Chalcidian black figure neck amphora attributed to the Inscription Painter, dated to c.540 BCE, depicts Odysseus and Diomedes stealing the horses of Rhesus, as they are considered to be extraordinarily fine and quick (*Iliad* 10. 436–37; see also Oakley 2017, p. 29). The scene conveys a sense of panic and anxiety in the horses as they are handled by strangers in the darkness of night. One horse rears above the others as if trying to twist and break away, while another looks as if it is trying to break its tether and bolt (Figure 16, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 96.AE.1, Oakley 2017, pp. 29–30). Likewise, we can look at a black figure kylix of c. 540 BCE attributed to the Amasis Painter depicting Poseidon’s stable recounting an episode from book thirteen of Homer’s *Iliad* (XIII.16–38) (Figure 17, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989.281.62, Picón 2007, pp. 420–21; Moore 2004, pp. 39–40). Although set in a fanciful context with erotes leaping about on the backs of the tethered horses as they are prepared for harnessing, the actions of the horses are very much based in reality: they paw, stamp their feet and toss their heads impatiently as they anticipate what is to come. In the ‘real’ world, there are those horses who stand patiently or even doze while being prepared for work, and those who fret and dance with impatience. Although this kylix does not depict the image of a ‘real’ stable, it nonetheless conveys certain elements of realism through the body language of the horses.

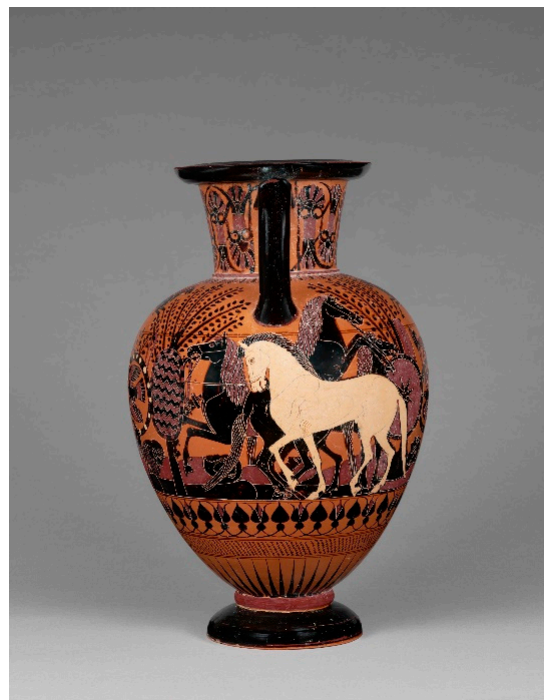


Figure 16. Chalcidian Neck Amphora. Attributed to the Inscription Painter. Ca. 570-530 BCE. Getty Museum. Inv. no. 96.AE.1. Digital Image Courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program.

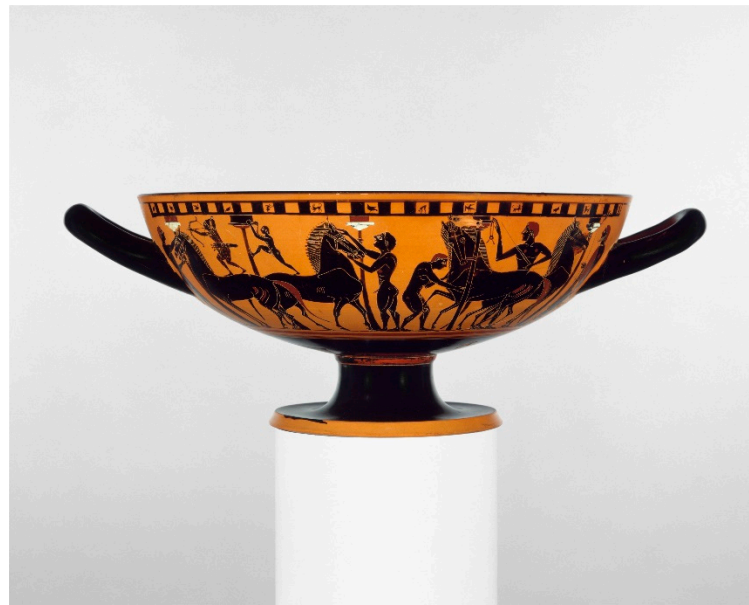


Figure 17. Kylix, “Poseidon’s Stable”. Attributed to the Amasis Painter. Ca. 540 BCE. Metro-politan Museum of Art. Gift of the Norbert Schimmel Trust, 1989. Inv. no. 1989.281.62.

Finally, we can consider a scene from the west frieze of the Parthenon on W XII ([Moore 2003](#), pp. 32–38 provides a thorough overview of the scholarship on this piece; [Markman 1969](#), pp. 73–74). Here, an unmounted rider holds the reins of his horse, who is rubbing its nose on its leg. Rubbing the nose is a natural action for horses; it is something they do when they have an itch. Are we meant to view this horse as a specific, real Athenian horse? No. What we see here very clearly is the generic rendering of a horse being a horse, and a glimpse of a perfectly innocuous, everyday moment in a rather unexpected place: a major civic and religious monument. The energy of the prancing, snorting cavalcade of horses who gallop around the frieze is to be expected on a structure like the Parthenon, but a horse rubbing its nose? Well, that is something a bit different. Although this horse lacks the glory and power of the cavalcade, it still tells us something meaningful about the place of the horse in Greek society and thought. The horse was woven into the familiar fabric of daily life. After all, people were as likely to see a prancing horse in real life as they were to see an equine scratching its nose. Thus, this horse reflects naturalism, and its inclusion on this monument suggests that the audience would be able to read its meaning and recognise it as a representation of regular ‘horsiness’ rather than expecting it to be a snapshot of ‘reality’ in the same way as a photograph.

The study of animal behaviour is an important source for what the ancient Egyptians are trying to convey ([Evans 2010](#), p. 11). In Egyptian art, scenes depicting horses without human involvement are uncommon in monumental art as these types of scenes did not ‘belong’ there. For more on ancient Egyptian decorum, see ([Baines 2007](#)). There are a few exceptions where the artist includes some horse behaviour, albeit influenced by humans. An example of this can be seen in Theban Tomb 123, the non-royal tomb of Amenemhat (Figure 18), where two foals are playing. The accuracy with which the artists convey the playfulness of the animals is astounding. Another example of horse behaviour can be seen on a talatat block from Amarna in the Brooklyn Museum (Figure 19), where we see a pair of stallions in front of a chariot, where the first horse is scratching his head on his leg. Anyone who has ever ridden a horse will recognise this scene. Examples like these show us that the Egyptians were very keen observers who had the ability of very skilfully conveying these equine behavioural features if they chose to. In some cases, however, the drawing method of the Egyptians could compromise the natural accuracy of the display ([Evans 2010](#), p. 16).



Figure 18. Two foals playing in the tomb of Amenemhat, TT123. Photo: Dimitri Laboury.



Figure 19. Two stallions in front of a chariot on a talatat from Amarna. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Norbert Schimmel, Inv. no. 1985.328.18. Amarna period (end 18th dynasty).

In monumental art, however, the desired content of the scenes leaves little to no space for non-human interference-based behaviour or movement of horses. There is one exception where these kinds of scenes are more common, even in monumental art, and that is during the Amarna period, of which Figure 19 is just one example. Art in the Amarna-period shows an overall preference for things from nature, including plants, flowers and animals. The talatat block from Amarna in Figure 20 shows the only known example of unbridled horses galloping in monumental art. One place where these kinds of scenes occurred more frequently were figurative ostraca, often used as scrap paper to practise drawing and painting skills but also just used to draw on for fun. In an ostrakon from Deir el Medina (Figure 21), we see a beautiful example of how the Egyptians captured horse behaviour on an ostrakon of a horse scratching his foot. There is no question about the skillset of the ancient Egyptians. The reasons their horses look the way they look have to do with the cultural standard of reproduction and the function of the image, not with the skills of the ancient Egyptian artists.



Figure 20. Group of galloping horses on a talatat from Amarna. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Norbert Schimmel, 1985. Inv. no. 1985.328.17.

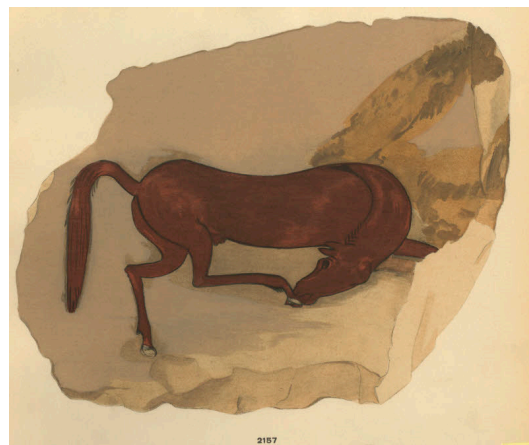


Figure 21. Horse scratching his hind leg on an ostrakon from Deir el Medina. Painting by Vandier d'Abbadie, Ca-talogue des ostraca figures de Deir el Medineh, 1936. © Ifao, ostrakon #2157.

8. Conclusions

To grasp fully the potential ancient art can provide as a source of information, we have to understand why things look the way they do, without letting our expectations of 'reality' get in the way of evaluation. In this article, we have proposed an alternative reflection on how to assess 'reality' and how this might be useful when analysing ancient imagery. Instead of judging ancient images of horses by modern standards of resemblance to 1:1 reality, we propose looking at what the artists are trying to convey within the purpose of the image. By looking instead for 'realistic potential', i.e. visual features used to convey the generic concept of a horse that are based on natural observations and could potentially exist, one is able to use these images to a much fuller potential as a source of information. We have seen that the main reason why compositions have the content and appearance they do, is because of the images' purpose; both factors depend on why the image is made. Purpose should therefore always be kept in mind when studying these images. Since they had a primarily functional nature, the images' main aim was never to 100% reflect reality or naturalism the way we understand it. Understanding the images' purpose brings us one step closer to understanding why they look the way they look.

Images are always based on reality, but the question is to what extent they convey reality. After establishing the images' purpose, we proposed to look at the images' resemblance. The shape and form of the horses within ancient images can often leave quite a bit to be desired when it comes to displaying reality and naturalism in formal art, and they may not meet our expectations, especially when looking at art where the artists had more freedom when it came to layout. When looking closer at the images, however, we can still learn a lot from them: movement is indicated by the posture and surroundings of the horses in both cultures, and even though we cannot define certain gaits in the images, they still convincingly convey different types of movement. When it comes to colour, the Egyptians only used colours and patterns that had a realistic potential; they would not use something that could not exist. Genital sex markers in both cultures suggest that the depicted horses' sex might have a purpose strongly linked to status, masculinity and power, and a preference for male horses is shown in certain contexts. This contradicts some of the material we have, showing that both Greeks and Egyptians used mares in front of chariots too and that the Egyptians even castrated their horses. This is a great example of where the idea behind the image and the purpose of this specific visual clue overrides its desire to resemble actual animal practices. This illustrates how important it is always to keep an eye on why the image is made. The appearance and layout of the horse, however, is never compromised to the extent that it does not resemble the intended depicted subject anymore, and therefore always contains a basic degree of realism. This is why we argue to look for ideas that are being conveyed instead, and the visual clues used to do so, and assess the idea in terms of conceptual realism rather than assessing the final product in terms of natural realism. By redefining how to assess 'realism,' we hope to show that there is much potential in assessing images in order to learn as much as we can from them.

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Notes

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, Third Edition, Revised online 2022.

² For general overviews of horses in human history with extensive illustrations see (Curtis and Tallis 2012; Wiczorek and Tellenbach 2007; Johns 2006; Dossenbach and Dossenbach 1987; Dent 1974; Gianoli 1969). For a chronological catalogue of examples of the horse in (primarily) European art see (Barnes and Barnes 2011). Although we now live in a highly mechanised world, it is important to note that until quite recently humans were dependent on horses in a variety of ways, creating what Reinhart Koselleck termed an 'Age of the Horse'. This implies that the horse was not necessarily subordinate to humans, but rather essential to them in very meaningful and fundamental ways. When one examines images of equines produced during this period (which includes those of ancient Egypt and Greece), one should be aware of this relationship and how it might influence the ways in which horses are represented in the visual record. See (Bell et al. 2021).

³ Horses are the most popular subject in the cave art of the Upper Palaeolithic period. For an analysis of equines in the art of this period see, for example, (Cheyne et al. 2009; Pigeaud 2007; Clottes 1996).

⁴ When writing of bronze horses in the geometric period, Zimmerman states, 'Plus les formes vectrices de propriétés spécifiques sont compartimentées, plus la figuration est efficace, c'est-à-dire immédiatement compréhensible aux yeux de tous ceux qui la regarderont' (Zimmerman 1989, p. 4). His point extends beyond the Greek geometric period, however. The prevalence of the

horse in visual records has created a visual language of the horse that extends from prehistory to the 21st century, and this makes it instantly recognisable to viewers.

The bias present in assessing ancient art goes back even further than the art within the scope of this article. It was only in 2011 that research could prove that the coat colours of horses in Palaeolithic cave art reflected actual coat colours as they appeared on horses in those times (Pruvost et al. 2011). Before that, it was often assumed that the Palaeolithic painters took much more artistic freedom than was actually the case. We were wrong about the whole premise of the rendering, based on our ignorance and underestimation of ancient cultures.

Of course, not all artists in any culture or period are equally skilled; there are always examples of art that do not show the horse's form to its best advantage, even within the parameters of a particular image's cultural context. Some images are inherently 'better' than others due to the skill and expertise of the artist.

For a thorough analysis of the issues with realism vs. conceptualism in Greek and Roman art, see (Hölscher 2018, pp. 209–43). Although Hölscher does not focus on equids, his evidence and discussion present a clear and astute analysis with regards to some key cultural motifs and styles that influenced the appearance of Greek and Roman art, particularly within the context of *lebenswelt* and the idea that art is given meaning through social and cultural practice.

The 'Egypt versus the other' theme is very common in royal iconography (see Loprieno 1988). Ramses II made sure, however, that he himself was perceived as the hero in the story in the textual account of the battle. For a translation, see (Gardiner 1960).

By Greek horse, the author refers to the combination of conformational features that are used to represent horses in Greek art. These horses tend to follow a set form from the protogeometric period onwards. Even when non-Greeks are depicted riding horses (for example, in battle scenes) their horses always have this distinct Greek appearance, rather than Persians on Nisean horses, Amazons on Central Asian horses, etc.

The topics of sport, elites, social values and identity have been covered by several authors (see Golden 2008, especially chps. 1–3; Christesen and MacLean 2021, pp. 24–35; Miller 2021, pp. 141–47).

One of Pindar's *Odes* might imply that Hieron of Syracuse drove his own team of four fillies to victory, but it could also be interpreted as Hieron having had a role in training them, rather than competing with them (*Pythian* 2.1–9); likewise *Isthmian* 1.55–56 suggests that Herodotus also drove his own team to victory. The Spartan Damonon records forty-three victories in chariot racing, and adds that he drove the teams himself (*IG* 5.1, 213).

(Rashke 2021, pp. 455–71), provides a great overview of the cultural context of the victory monument and its importance to Greek society; for epinician poetry, see (Kurke 2021, pp. 305–19).

One of these inscriptions states:

Kings of Sparta were my father and brothers,
and I, Cynisca winning the race with my chariot of swift-footed horses,
erected this statue.

I assert that I am the only woman in all
Greece who won this crown (*Palatine Anthology* 13.16).

Pevnick also comments on copies of Panathenaic amphora being sold as souvenirs and sold to visitors to the games. This suggests that the goal was to capture what the horses represented within the context of Greek culture and the games, rather than presenting portraits of specific horses (Pevnick 2017, p. 70).

We have chosen to focus on Egyptian art here, as determining the colours of horses in Greek art can be tricky due to the nature of the style, which can restrict the colours used (for example, black figure and red figure pottery), the material used (i.e., bronze) and the deterioration of pigments on painted statues.

The horse is white coloured, but truly white horses are rare as the skin of the horse is usually dark (rather than pink as in albinos and leucistic horses), and the animal is typically born with a dark coat that lightens over time. Thus, it is common practice to refer to such horses as 'grey' rather than 'white'.

Xenophon's reference to the use of muzzles on horses (*Art of Horsemanship* V.2–3) has been interpreted as suggesting that he speaks of stallions, as stallions have the stereotype of being aggressive. For references to horses wearing muzzles in Greek vase painting, see (Moore 2004, pp. 40–41). Metal horse muzzles have survived in the material record as well. See, for example, (Mattusch 2017, pp. 59–60). Hyland (1990, pp. 80–81) likewise presents the use of muzzles in a Roman context as evidence for the preference towards using stallions.

The study required that the piece met the following requirements: 1. it was clearly a horse and not another form of equid; 2. the rear part of the body was visible to allow for sex determination.

The only sex-specific horse race was the *kalpe*, which seems to have been a trotting race for mares. It was only part of the Olympic programme for a short period of time (494–444 BCE).

For a detailed analysis of equine movement in Egyptian art, see (Delpeut 2021b).

These can further be juxtaposed with the horse in W VIII who tries to bolt away from its handler in a spectacular explosion of energy. For a discussion of this scene, see (Rossholm Lagerlöf 2000, p. 32).

- 22 For a detailed analysis of the Chigi Vase and its connection to Greek visual narrative, see (Giuliani 2021).
- 23 The tondo of a red figure kylix by Euphronius *might* show an understanding of the suspension phase of the trot, but we cannot state this for certain due to the damage on the forepart of the horse, as it is difficult to determine which is the right fore, and which is the left fore. The scene depicts a rider in a *petasos* and Thracian cloak on a horse moving with a two-beat gait. C. 510–500 BCE. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek NI 8704 (2620).
- 24 See also the band of horsemen on a black figure neck amphora attributed to Group E from c. 540 BCE (Metropolitan Museum of Art 56.171.18). The posture of the riders once again emulates Xenophon’s advice in *Art of Horsemanship* VII.5–7.
- 25 Scenes of Greek racehorses are useful for comparing these two different postures, as we can look at the form of the ‘gallop’ as depicted in the race itself versus the scenes of victory. A black figure Panathenaic Amphora of c. 520 BCE depicts the flying gallop in full force as the four horses harnessed to the chariot reach forward and extend their bodies to their full extent; one can almost picture them putting on a burst of speed after a turning post or as they approach the finish line (Metropolitan Museum of Art 56.171.4). This can be contrasted with the team of four horses on a late 5th century BCE red figure bell krater. These horses gallop forward in a more collected posture as they receive the accolades of victory. They are the very personification of a victorious team as Nike herself drives them towards a victory monument (Metropolitan Museum of Art 07.128.2). A variation on this scene is a common motif on numerous Sicilian coins struck to commemorate victories in equestrian contests, as with an early 4th century example from Syracuse (British Museum, G.2192).
- 26 This manoeuvre is perhaps not as improbable as one may expect. It resembles the ‘around the world’ exercise taught to many beginner riders to make them more comfortable with balancing on horseback. Although new riders start at the halt and progress to the walk, this movement can also be performed by expert trick riders at speed, with some particularly skilled individuals having their horses jump obstacles while they are facing backwards. Given the equestrian skill connected to the Amazons, it is perhaps not surprising to expect their abilities to include such gymnastic feats.
- 27 Moore points out that scenes of horses in ‘daily life’ are rare in Archaic Greek art, and that we should read them within a specific mythological context or a particular event (Moore 2004, p. 45).
- 28 For other examples of this motif see Zimmerman (1989, pls. 3 no. 68, 69; 6 no.90; 47 no. 16; 65 no.34; 66 no. 35).
- 29 Note the difference in pose between these horses and those discussed in the airs above the ground part of the movement section. The collection entry for this vessel reads, “The Swing Painter was a prolific and playful artist. This scene of three horses, two mares and one stallion, may record nothing more than horses at play, but it could also be a metaphor for the contemporary struggle over Ionia (part of modern Turkey) between ‘manly’ Greeks and ‘effeminate’ Persians. It could also be a parody of either a battle between Greeks and Amazons (an Amazonomachy) or of a fight over the body of a fallen warrior”.
- 30 Herd members will typically roll where other horses in their group have rolled, ‘particularly when sweaty after exercise, when joining a new group or when entering a new field’ (Kiley-Worthington 2005, p. 102).

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