

## THE ABUSE OF BEAUTY

**Sylvia Loch protests against the fashion for driven, overbent horses whose riders rob them of all semblance of natural balance and pride**

*This article was first published on the Horse Hero website at [www.horsehero.com](http://www.horsehero.com) on 19<sup>th</sup> August, 2009...*



What has happened to our eye for beauty? Some examples of modern art clearly lack the harmony and balance that once defined a good picture and it's all too evident that tastes have changed.

Increasingly, we are bombarded with images designed to shock or disturb rather inspire, elevate or delight the eye. Even the critics seem taken in, but I suspect it's often a case of the Emperor's New Clothes.... if one person says 'it's marvellous!' ... then the rest of the herd follow like sheep.

Could the same thing have happened to dressage? Might the collective equestrian eye, once so appreciative of flexibility, nobility

and pride in the horse, been dulled or changed? Have riders unwittingly allowed the wool to be pulled over their eyes? Not so, according to those who organise the tours of The Spanish Riding School of Vienna or the Academies of Portugal and Spain, where the spirit of classical riding still reigns supreme. Tickets are sold, crowds go wild, people are moved to tears. Sadly, on closer examination, it's often those who do not ride that support these stunning displays. One is then forced to conclude that the eye of the 'common crowd' is often wiser than that of the *cognoscenti*. More disturbing, why do so few competition trainers and judges bother to attend, often dismissing this art as an irrelevance?

So what do I mean by the abuse of beauty? Whether talking of art or dressage I deplore anything that looks forced, jarring, heavy, artificial and contrary to Nature. Since time immemorial, the Masters of equitation sought balance and lightness in their horses, not just for beauty's sake, but to render the horse fit for purpose. Today, the goal posts have changed. People seem more concerned that the horse replicates a powerful machine rather than display himself in all his glory as a living, sensitive, sentient being.



But seriously! Is a piston-like action really so thrilling? Don't we have enough vehicles on our roads without expecting our horse to move up and down the gears with the same frenzied thrust of a galvanised machine? Do we really enjoy seeing him drip with sweat and champ against the bit? Is it fun to see held in as if fit to explode?

And how is it all achieved? Clearly, there's nothing natural about the robotic precision of certain combinations presented under the guise of 'dressage' and one wonders at the training methods? Thank God the Rollkur is finally falling from favour - at least from the world's warm-up arenas - but what do we do

about the draw-reins, the harsh seats, the busy spurs and the winched in nosebands? You can see from certain horses' expressions they have never known fun in their lives. In the rush to move up the levels, how many young horses have ever experienced the joy of simply being a horse, turned out in a field or ridden home from a jolly hack with the rein on the buckle end?

When dressage first became an Olympic sport, it was the cavalry who dictated the method and pace of training. Everyone recognised that in combat, a horse that was heavy on the hand and unable to lift his forehand from well-engaged hocks was a sitting duck for the enemy. So a horse that was upward-bound and light on the rein was the ultimate goal. Riders had to learn the tough discipline of riding better themselves until their mount could stop, start, sidestep, advance and turn all at a moment's notice and all without any visible effort from them.



It was this concept combined with the practical knowledge of how the various movements worked on his body that protected the horse. A code of practice disallowed rushed training; artificial aids, or bringing the work on too quickly. It was well understood the horse must have time to develop those important joints, tendons and muscles and that too much too soon, would lead to

breakdown. The horse must also have time to develop mentally.



For this reason a great deal of time was spent in walk to build up strength behind to bring about collection. The so-called dressage movements were strictly monitored in terms of how, when and why they were taught. No horse was considered fit enough to produce tempi changes or canter pirouette before at least the age of nine.

As for over-bending, this was clearly damaging to the correct development of the horse's back and quarters. To artificially shorten the neck was not only ugly, it put the horse on the forehand. In extended trot for example, it was imperative the forward reach of the front legs was roughly

aligned with the horse's muzzle. If the horse could not stretch through its topline and see where he was going, then how could he be in extension? Anyone with an 'eye' could see that – you certainly did not have to be a judge!

It was the job of judges nevertheless to uphold these guidelines and deduct marks where appropriate. Their knowledge of biomechanics must be sufficient to understand how a horse should move correctly under his rider. The hallmark of an advanced horse should be of one continuous, animated and upward curve emanating from engaged, lowered quarters and ending in a proud arching neck with the poll at its pinnacle. The ridden horse should never be seen as a beast of burden with the weight equally apportioned over all 4 legs. Good equine balance is similar to that of an ice-skater or ballerina – where the weight is carried over 2 points - the hocks - thus rendering the forehand free and expressive.



Graceful elevation and a full arched neck is beautiful and we must strive to attune our eye to that type of natural beauty again. The horse is one of Creation's great masterpieces - how dare we rob him of his splendour! We only need to look at the statues in our squares and palaces and the art of Van Dyck, Velasquez, Rubens and Goya to see how horses were ridden, should be ridden and how they like to be ridden. Perhaps then, we will get our 'eye' back again and reject the imitators. For the sake of horses and the future of dressage – I hope so. © SL