

Shannon Lawlor

Words by Samantha Mattocks

I first met Canadian artist Shannon Lawlor during the Arabian Horse Days in Poland 2011. Her eye-catching artwork immediately captured my attention, as did her obvious passion for the Arabian horse. Shannon's trip to Poland was significant, injecting her art with a new vigour and taking her in a new direction. Shannon is now in a position where she is ready to share her Poland Collection with the rest of the world, choosing exclusively to unveil them in the The Arabian Magazine. Read on to find out more about this talented young lady, and why the Arabian horse has captured her so

Clockwise from right: Shannon with her part-bred Arabian gelding, Kadet in her teenage years; Kantor - 3 ft x 4 ft acrylic on board; Shannon at a recent exhibition.



Painting a Rainbow through the Arabian World

A true horsewoman at heart, Shannon has known horses all her life; she jokes with me that she could ride a horse as soon as she could sit up. "I used to go riding with my sisters while still in diapers!" she smiles. "I have never known a life without horses."

"As a little girl, everyone in my world that mattered to me loved the horses, so it was without question that I felt the same way. And when a movie such as *The Black Stallion* came to the big screen, when I was young and impressionable, it was my dream come true, especially with an Arabian horse as the leading role. I grew up on a part-bred Arabian; he made sense of my childhood and I loved him more than anything. So from a very early age, the Arabian horse had a big hold on my life."

Shannon grew up in Kenton, a small town of 200 people in Manitoba, a Canadian province that neighbours Ontario, and she recalls that in her grade in school, there were just five children: "I couldn't have grown up in a better environment; parents always provided a barn full of horses for us kids on the outskirts of town. Truthfully, if it weren't for the horses in my childhood I cannot say what would have become of me as an adult. "As for the art... That was just an extra fun thing that I did as a child. It wasn't taken seriously by others, or encouraged, and it wasn't until 2005 that I actually thought of becoming 'an artist', as such. Until then, I spent my life in Western Canada, making a living in the equine and agriculture industry. So it was quite a change of career path!"

Indeed, Shannon tells me just what a change of path that was, having spent a lifetime working with horses of various breeds and through many different disciplines. It is this broad experience, she believes, that helps her now create what she can't

Clockwise from below: a drawing of two Arabians completed when she was 21 years old; A finger painting from early childhood depicting a sun and a horse; a pencil drawing of Etiw completed when Shannon was 17 years old.



explain that is in her paintings.

"As an adult, I wore many hats in my chosen career. Some being, an equine vet assistant, cooking and wrangling in a hunting and fishing outfit in northern British Columbia, checked cattle riding pens in a feedlot, foaled out mares, and started hundreds of colts. I owned many of my own horses that I bred, raised and trained. I rode cutters, reiners,

and ranch horses alike.

"I also worked with some great horsemen over the years, which helped me garner a solid knowledge and a common sense approach to horses. I apprenticed with one particular horseman in the 1990s, an experience that completely changed my perspective on how to be around the horses. Out of all the experiences I have had, this made the greatest impact on me at the time, and it changed my life in many ways.

"Suffice it to say, my entire life has revolved around horses, and even though I have changed careers, my life still revolves around horses through my artwork."

I ask Shannon how these two worlds manage to collide and she tells me that, as a little girl, if she wasn't at the barn with the horses, she was in her bedroom at home drawing them, thus making her move to an equine artist a very natural one. "I pretty much spent my summers riding the hair off my Welsh Pony and part-bred Arabian gelding, x Raafs Ara Bella," she laughs. "I spent

Kadet (Sir Majah the long cold Manitoba winters drawing pictures of Kadet, my ponies, and other Arabians I admired in *Arabian Horse World* magazines. Those Arabian magazines had a great influence on me, being that this is where I first learned about Poland and the horses bred and raised there. It was where I first discovered the mares knee-deep in the straw in those huge barns at Janów, through the photographs of Jerry Sparagowski and Johnny Johnston when I was about six years old. I still have the clippings, safely tucked away from the magazines, of the State Studs. "It was then that I first dreamed of going to Poland – a wish I was finally able to fulfil in 2011. Where I grew up, we were relatively isolated and those magazines... Well, they brought me hope that there was life beyond Kenton, that there was a great big world out there waiting for me, with lots of beautiful horses in it."

By the late 1990s, Shannon was developing her skills as an artist, primarily working in acrylics and graphite, and in 1998 she began taking casual lessons from wildlife artist David Kitler, a fellow Canadian. "David has been an incredible mentor to me in regards to my art," says Shannon. "I have been taking lessons from him for the past fifteen years now. David has helped me hone my artistic skills and also master the medium of acrylic. I certainly would not be where I am

today had I not sought out David's guidance as an art teacher."

It was eight years ago that Shannon took the step of becoming a full-time artist. "I took that chance, I made that break and off I went," recalls Shannon with a wry smile. "Looking back, I really had no idea what I was doing, but my desire to make this work never weakened. There were some really wonderful opportunities presented to me along the way and, thankfully, I had the tenacity and foresight to embrace them. "I must admit, looking back, that I was possibly delusional in my confidence at that time. Thinking that I could not be a full-time artist and make a living out of it was something that never entered my mind; perhaps just as well!"



The first 'real' painting she ever did, aged 27 years, of the Arab gelding she grew with, Majahs Kadet.

Shannon's confidence paid off and awards followed including taking a host of Best in Show Awards at Art Shows across North America. All the time, as well as working on her technique, Shannon was continuing her pursuit of the Arabian horse leading to a memorable visit to Sheila Varian in 2008. "It was a wonderful California August," Shannon recalls. "Sheila and I rode the Sierra Coastal Range Mountains and it was a true honour to have such an experience with a woman such as her."

The different paths that Shannon was on all converged into one in 2011 when she finally fulfilled her childhood dream and made her way to the hallowed ground of the State Studs in Poland. The experience of being at Janów Podlaski, Michalów and Białka was, for Shannon, life-changing and she has spent the past eighteen months working on an impressive body of work, which includes what she considers to be her best work to date.

Shannon explains: "The fact that I am self-employed, making a living doing what I love, is by far my greatest accomplishment in life so far. The work I am most proud of is the new collection of Poland paintings. It feels like all those years of hands on experience with horses combined with honing my skills as an artist, was the essential groundwork to creating this body of work. This body of work undoubtedly benefits the most from my resume up to this point, which is expressed fully in my depiction of Piaff. For me, this piece represents my best work to date. What the horses in Poland gave back to me remains a huge honour and gift.

"Primarily, my interest lies in painting what moves me, things that resonate within me; my style of painting is realism. I especially like to paint sometimes close up, cropped and intense subject matter, as I love detail in painting and in life. My hope is that the viewer will be intrigued and inspired as well, when looking at my work. Firstly, I need to be inspired and intrigued by an image before I will even think about painting it, so naturally, there is a piece of me in each piece of work.

"My creativity is inspired by a great many things including horses, history, beauty in life and the arts in general. To be more specific, to see really great horses, of any breed, good horsemanship, great tack, as well as seeing horses execute manoeuvres when asked are just some of the things that spawn my creativity. However, my life has seemed to come full circle, having travelled to Poland in 2011 to see the horses there ... I am still drawing on the inspiration I came home with. The lineage, history, spirit and beauty of these horses has undoubtedly reignited something inside of me."

Shannon expands further, saying that having the idea of going to Poland was just the first step in this remarkable journey that she has been on these past months. "Gathering reference photos was the

"Most of all, I feel blessed to have been in the lives of all the horses I have, especially the Arabians, starting with that gangly part-bred Arabian colt born in our barn on a cold spring day back in 1974. Their contribution to my life is unequalled by another."

"The opportunities I've had as a result of my association with horses on many levels holds me grateful for the experiences and the wonderful people associated with them. I am thankful for the time and effort I took to learn as much as I possibly could stand about my subject matter before pursuing a career as an artist. And for that, I am truly grateful, just as I am indebted to the Arabian horses of Poland and their caretakers that make it so, for allowing me to access their everlasting beauty, spirit and contribution to the Arabian breed. They have, like no other, inspired me to create this collection of paintings that I offer back to those who appreciate the Polish Arabian in the same fashion I do."

ultimate purpose of my trip, along with being inspired by what I knew I would see there.

"Once back home in the comfort of my studio, days are spent composing a piece and drawing out the subject matter long before the painting itself begins. Ultimately the most important detail for me is anatomical accuracy, which is established in the drawing process. The composition, the idea itself and the attention to detail come secondary, for me. The foundation is the most significant part of a good piece of artwork.

"It is only when all the ground work is completed that the painting then begins. When I paint in acrylics, I tend to only work on one piece at a time, so doing this series of paintings based on my trip to Poland has been a somewhat daunting task at times. However, it has been the most rewarding, inspiring and fulfilling one.

"To date, this is my largest body of work based on one particular theme. It is very important to me that this body of work is seen by the people that appreciate and know about the Polish Arabian and its significance in the breed's history. The Polish Arabian has moved and inspired me to reach deep into myself to create this series, I am still as much in awe of these horses now as I was when I was a little girl." Shannon is yet to decide upon the final title for this collection, as she is still in the middle of its completion. She is hoping to unveil it in full by July of this year. With that in mind, we have included only a couple of pieces in Shannon's Poland Collection in this edition, and will display them in full in our July issue, which



Piaff - 4 ft x 5 ft acrylic on board. Shannon was greatly moved by the horses she saw in Poland and cites this piece as her best work to date.

Ivory - 2 ft x 3 ft acrylic on board.



precedes the 2013 Arabian Horse Days Poland. For more information on Shannon, please visit www.shannonlawlor.com