



## Joseph Sulkowski



About twenty years ago while still living and working at my studio in New York City, I made a familiar journey uptown to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the latest 'Blockbuster' show. As I ascended the mountain of stairs I could already glimpse the outline of the latest star on the scene. It was a great gilded bronze horse—one of four—that has stood for centuries over the entrance to the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, Italy.

These magnificent horses are considered to be among the greatest sculptural masterpieces of antiquity and the occasion for their New York visit was to bring attention to the need for their continued preservation. Even if you've heard the story of these beautiful bronze equine sculptures, their tale is still fascinating and captivating. For one thing, their very origin is shrouded in mystery.

Who made them and when? How did they find their way to Venice? Why has so much valuable bronze been fortunate enough to have survived intact since days lost in time? Scholars have only been able to date these works of art over a rather wide time period—from as early as the 4th century B.C. to as late as the 4th century A.D. Some experts believe that the great Greek sculptor, Lysippos, from the time of Alexander the Great, created these monumental horses; others conclude that they could be of a later Roman origin. It is somewhat certain that they arrived in Venice from Constantinople in 1204 after that city was conquered by the Crusaders. Since then, artists from medieval times as well as the legendary Renaissance masters like Leonardo and Michelangelo were directly influenced by the Horses of San Marco in the creation of their own inspired equine works.

Originally these bronze horses were gilded and thought to have been part of a larger grouping; perhaps they were designed as a team or quadriga—drawing a golden chariot in a great creation symbolizing power and conquest. Their value to mankind seems evident by the many times throughout their history that they were sought as trophies of war. It is known that the 4th century AD Emperor Constantine on down to Napoleon coveted these horses of antiquity. Perhaps this is why various conquering armies declined to melt down the impressive sculptures for their bronze content usually desired for the production of more cannon.

Ironically, what makes the actual origin of these horses so difficult to place is the unusual circumstance that no other horses with similar anatomical and stylistic characteristics have been found, neither from Greek nor Roman times. Nonetheless, scholars are still able to speculate that possibly even Phidias himself, master sculptor and architect of the Parthenon in 5th-century BC Greece, may have had a hand in their creation. In fact, artists of Hellenistic Greece preferred a lightly built horse with a heavy head while the Roman counterpart of the 2nd and 3rd-centuries AD crafted larger, more robust horses with strong arched necks and muscular bodies. The San Marco horses appear to be strongly, not heavily, built keeping with the Roman concept, the type exemplified in the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius of the 2nd-century AD. In fact, it has been noted that the care and attention the artist placed on the modeling of the hair inside the ears, details of the mouth, teeth and nostrils, including the fold in the skin dividing the false nostril from the true nostril, are reminiscent of the horse of Marcus Aurelius.

Stylistically speaking, the quadriga of San Marco do not appear to represent a particular breed of horse, but instead are the creation of an artist with an inspired vision of the ideal. Their bodies are somewhat elongated with long heavy necks. Although not necessarily representative of modern day English thoroughbreds, neither are they as heavy and bulky as the draught horse. There is a balance between these two ideas which resulted in a unique vision of proportion and grace. Their heads are pleasing in shape with broad foreheads while their shoulders and hindquarters are wide, corresponding to the thickness of the body. Interestingly, the artist expressed the legs by exaggerating their length in order to compensate for the massive body and neck, but even so, one is not initially aware of this. The reason being that the sculptor was very careful to respect the proportions of the parts to the whole so that the large hooves, cannon bones, gaskins and forelegs take their place in perfect harmony relative to the length of the limbs.

Whether of Greek or Roman influence, it is agreed that the outstanding features of this quadriga are the undeniable elegance of their arching necks, lifted forelegs, and heads held high, all in perfect proportion in a triumph of artistic genius inspired by a timeless vision. ♦

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