

Horse tales



Tamain
Pickeral with
Shine
Daigarno,
owned by
Debbie Symes



Tamsin Pickeral has combined her twin passions of art and horses to produce a definitive history of the noble beast

Words by Piers Ford Pictures by Keith Jones

MOST OF US have to settle for fulfilling one passion at a time. But Tamsin Pickeral has scored a rare double hit. Her book, *The Horse: 30,000 Years of the Horse in Art*, is the culmination of a lifelong love of that most noble of beasts, and several years' research that effectively began when she won a scholarship to study art history in Italy and went on to read the subject at university.

Sitting at home just outside Bungay on the outer edge of Suffolk, she still can't believe her luck at finding a publisher prepared to commission such an ambitious project. Although the idea first occurred to her more than a decade ago, it wasn't until family commitments brought her back to live here that she decided to try to develop it further.

Publishers Merrell accepted it immediately. "It will probably never happen to me again!" she says. "I was just very lucky."

But Tamsin's own story has something of the unconventional frontierswoman about it – and they have always tended to make their own luck. As a child, this granddaughter of racehorse breeders ("Hunters and jumpers, but they weren't very successful") rode to school in Buckinghamshire on a prize-winning donkey, bought at auction by her parents – her father was a vet and her mother an art teacher. She grew up surrounded by horses and other animals and only deserted them reluctantly for higher education, followed by a move to London in search of employment. Then she bolted.

"The travel company I was working for

sent me to an exhibition at Earls Court and there were all these stands representing places all over the world," she recalls. "I suddenly thought to myself that I really didn't need to stay there. So I wrote loads of letters, putting out feelers. I had a lot of replies, many in foreign languages that to this day I don't know what they were offering. One day I got home and there was a message from a rancher in Wyoming saying, 'Come out if you want to – we'll give you somewhere to stay'."

She handed in her notice and within three weeks was on her way to one of America's more remote destinations. It was an exciting time to arrive, just as the cattle industry was beginning to exploit the potential of ranching as a holiday business. It was the

start of a 10-year personal journey during which she met and married her now former husband and sampled many aspects of the American equestrian life. And started to think about the book.

"I was doing an encyclopedia about horses and they asked me to write a short entry on horses in art," she explains. "I soon realised that 500 words could hardly cover such a massive subject. Well, we were 30 miles from the nearest town, four miles down a dirt track from the nearest road, and that leaves quite a lot of room for thinking. I started jotting down ideas. My mother would send me postcards of horses in art. Meanwhile I had to work, of course.

I worked for a vet and for an Arabian breeding stable, which was brilliant. And my husband and I ran a horse business. So the idea was put on the back burner until I came back here and had to think about what I was going to do."

Wyoming's loss became Suffolk's gain a couple of years ago. During Tamsin's absence, her parents had retired here but the county was hardly alien territory for the returning wanderer.

"My great aunt lived at Southwold, so every year – sometimes twice a year – I would come up and be marched off into the great April wind along the beach," she says.

"We would be the only people huddled up in front of the sea. Today it's more like London over there. But here, this is the English equivalent of Wyoming. I wouldn't consider living anywhere else."

Tamsin's book is an opulent volume, crammed with magnificent reproductions tracing a story that has its roots in the cave paintings of the Ardèche and embraces the work of most of the masters, as well as the more natural and expressionistic studies of leading modern artists.

It would be insufficient to describe her descriptions of the selected pieces as extended captions; these are gem-like mini essays, studded with facts and anecdotes that bring the subject alive for even the novice reader, and reveal the sheer extent of her research. And it skilfully makes the connection between the horse's practical importance to the evolution of the human race and our appreciation of its status as a focus for myth and magic.



Tamsin at home in Suffolk with her new book – a true labour of love

"A lot of these paintings have a massive history, because of the artist, the horse or events at the time they were made," she says. "So it was difficult to condense what I wanted to say into a small number of words. But having to do that makes it an easier book for people to pick up and flick through and find something interesting without having to spend an hour and a half trying to get something out of it."

Tamsin explains: "To my mind, the recognition of the horse in the domestic pantheon is one of the most important

developments of mankind because it opened up the land. Once we'd harnessed horsepower, we went suddenly from being able to travel two or six miles a day in search of food, to being able to cover 30 miles a day. Then there's the matter of war, in which the horse has always been a huge tool for man. I'm sure these are reasons why horses were originally painted in caves. But I'm also a romantic believer that there's something very magical about them, something mythical. And I think perhaps early man tapped into that, too."



Tamsin has loved horses all her life

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In her book, Tamsin traces the passage of the horse from its role as an adjunct – often used by painters including Velázquez and Van Dyck to glorify the rider, mounted high and proud – to becoming an artist's subject in its own right by the late 17th century. Making a selection was a challenge even for her eclectic tastes. She is reluctant to admit to a favourite, although she says she prefers the power and dignity of an unsentimentalised image – Elizabeth Frink's ability to portray the sympathy between horse and man without making the image sentimental, for example – to the more florid representations of the Victorians.

"But they all prove the importance of the horse in art," she points out. "I knew and loved a lot of the paintings anyway, having been brought up the way I was, trundled around art exhibitions from a very young age, always surrounded by art and loving paintings of horses. But of course I had to be balanced in my selections otherwise Munnings and Stubbs would dominate.

And I did have to include some I wouldn't necessarily put on my wall if I had £5 million to buy them."

Tamsin concedes that not everyone shares her love of the animal itself, and that some of the examples show an element of terror. But she suggests that usually, the horse represents terror and becomes a metaphor for the futility and ghastliness of war.

"They are large, powerful animals, but on the whole there aren't many images that depict a horse in a frightening capacity," she says. "If you look at Dürer's *The Riders of the Apocalypse*, it isn't really the horses that are the instruments of terror – it's the association. I don't want to look at images of the horse as a frightening animal. Some of the war paintings are gut-wrenching – Albrecht's *Ownerless Horse on the Battlefield* is so sad. But that's what war is like."

The cave paintings from Chauvet and Lascaux continue to intrigue her. "It's the scale and the proficiency of work that is

30,000 and 17,000 years old," she says. "I think it's because you don't see the learning process, just these accomplished paintings. It's astonishing. People think of our ancestors running around banging their chests and pulling women up by the hair, and maybe they did; but at the same time they were extraordinarily accomplished in an artistic sense."

Tamsin continues to work on other books but admits that this one was special – very much her own baby. With any luck, the next big idea won't take 10 years to materialise. But while she's waiting for it to strike, she'll take the Suffolk life over everything, especially if there's a horse nearby.

"I love it," she says. "The space, the fact that you can still find an old pub, a proper village. The difference between here and London is just extraordinary. People have time to stop and talk. The pace of life is slower. I think you have to branch out and leave your home country. But often, the grass isn't really greener."