

Reading Horse Art on Wine Labels

Francisco LaRubia-Prado
Georgetown University

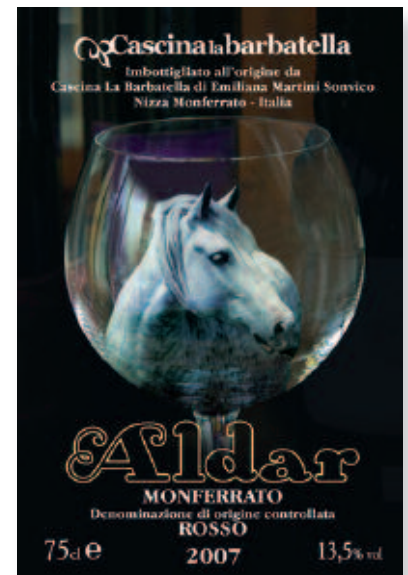
Despite the crucial role that horses have played in “the rise and fall of civilizations,” as author J. Edward Chamberlin reminds us (98), such contribution remains mostly unknown. Yet, the presence of horses in the human psyche lingers. Our own ideal self-image as humans coincides with many of the qualities attributed to horses, such as elegance, strength, gracefulness, style, nobility, and beauty. Today, many influential players in a host of human activities have linked their own image to that of the horse—Lloyds TSB, Hermès, Ferrari, Ralph Lauren, and Mobil, among many others. Thoroughbred races and shows like *Cavalía* remind us of our love and admiration of horses. Yet, one area of human activity has understood and reclaimed the power of the horse image and its resonance in the human psyche more frequently than any other: wine-making. Vintners are trumpeting, “Hey, buy my wine. It shares some of the virtues of the horse—and vice-versa.” But what in the world have horses to do with wine?

In fact, the meeting between wine and horses, particularly on wine labels, is a match made in heaven. Wine is an ancient, complex cultural achievement that takes a natural product as its base, the grape. In the same way, wine labels displaying horses are an example of how a cultural activity (art) incorporates nature, or a “natural” being (the horse) as its basis. Both horse art on labels as well as wine require the most intimate blending of nature and human creativity. The depiction of horses on wine labels is expressed in an array of art forms such as photography, painting, drawings, frescoes, tapestry, or illustration. It also includes many styles, from the naïve to the most representational, realistic forms to abstraction. Horse art on wine labels associates our multifaceted relationship with horses with the experience of wine drinking. In addition, a substantial sample of wine labels offers a historical narrative of the relationship between humans and horses throughout the ages.

The Horse Image and Wine

The connection between the attributes of the horse on the outside of the bottle and, as Ursula Beck says, the “complex experience offered by the wine within” (1) is powerfully shown in two specific labels whose rhetorical approaches at composition and persuasion contrast sharply—and yet, both are highly effective. While *Aldar* places the horse in an enclosed, protective environment (inside a wine glass), La Celia’s *Supremo* leaves the horse extremely exposed to a most disagreeable, even dangerous environment.

In the label *Aldar*, which is a photographic montage, a content and alert horse is placed inside a glass of wine. If the association between the equine image on the label and the wine inside the bottle usually places the horse on the outside of the bottle alone, the *Aldar* image produces an additional visual effect in order to make the association between equine and wine one of complete identification. Thus, the horse is made to take the place of the wine inside the glass. The wine has



metamorphosed into a horse, establishing an interchangeability between the two where the horse is the most visible of them in this miracle of transubstantiation. The mythical, superhuman association between the horse and the wine does not end here because, on closer inspection, one realizes that there is still some wine left at the bottom of the glass. Thus, like Venus being born from the waters, or as the horses of Neptune emerging from the ocean, the



Aldar horse is wondrously born from the small amount of wine existing at the bottom of the glass. The seamless continuity between the wine and the horse inside the glass sends the consumer the message that the wine inside the bottle unquestionably possesses the qualities of the beautiful, elegant, well-balanced horse whose mane freely

and softly falls on the horse's face. Finally, we not only see the head of the horse, but also his hindquarters, adding to the equine image the same sense of depth that so enriches a wine.

Another photograph is used in the label for La Celia's *Supremo*. The image shows a horse in the middle of a storm. Both the horse and the landscape are strikingly and menacingly blurred. The speed of the horse in motion and what seems to be the power of the snow falling in the middle of a nightly storm add a thrilling sense of dynamism and peril to the image. There is an incomplete halo around the vulnerable figure of the galloping horse, and the viewer feels emotionally and aesthetically attracted to this figure that, through its rushed movement, seems to search for shelter, for a safe haven from inclement weather and danger. The consumer, of course, can provide the necessary relief by just acquiring the bottle of wine and taking it to safety!

A Historical Visual Tale

The second perspective elicited by horse art on wine labels is that of the historical and cultural relationships between humans and horses throughout history. The sustained

presence of horses in human life and cultural development makes them our shadow for at least 10,000 years, since they were first domesticated and then selectively bred. Their importance in human life begins to decrease in the early 20th century, when mechanical means of transportation and war take their place. Before that, however, entire cultural periods, such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, can only be explained by the participation of horses in war, travel, transportation, agriculture, postal services, and sports. Much earlier in history (about 6,000 years ago) mounted Indo-Europeans brought with them, as they overran the original inhabitants of Western Europe, their language—the source of most European languages of today (Diamond 91)—but also their culture, and their gods. Without horses, the Normans would have never conquered England, or the Spanish the great Aztec or Inca empires. Both conquests changed the history of the world.

The *Stalking Horse* label depicts this historical sense of the shadow as continuous partnership as well as other more menacing connotations of the word. The label shows a modern person walking on what seems to be an urban sidewalk while the shadow of a rearing horse is both behind and literally attached to him. The connection between the modern human figure shown on the label and his equine shadow clearly suggests that the link between them is profound; it is impossible to make it disappear.

Thus, the perfect continuity between the physical presence of the modern person (symbolizing modernity itself) and the shadow of the horse suggests how the modern world and its inhabitants are inseparable from the horse within a historical process that has shaped modern cultural



identity. The lower part of the wall that makes the wall itself possible as a cultural, physical construct, is like a window into a fertile valley, into nature. This feature reminds us, once again, that nature is at the very foundation of the modern world, of its cities and their people, just like horses—nature themselves—have had a key role in the



unfolding of the historical process leading to modern human identity and culture. The self-absorption of the human figure, unaware of his shadow, stresses the lack of attunement between modern life and nature. Nature, however, despite human efforts to ignore it, always remains there as our perpetual shadow, like the rearing horse who, somewhat comically, asserts its presence behind the self-centered, isolated human figure in the *Stalking Horse* label. The detachment from nature is, of course, a more threatening meaning of the shadow than the one that merely implies the constant presence of horses in human life until relatively recently in history. Another threatening meaning of the shadow suggested by the horse in the *Stalking Horse* label would make the horse to represent the inner, instinctual, wild side of each person, a dimension that culture attempts to repress and even suppress.

Many of the roles that horses have played in human life—often depending on the historical period—are captured on wine labels, and most of those functions are shown in the posters “Celebrating Wine & Horses”. The basic relationship and interdependence between nature and nurture in equine history is exemplified by equestrian *pasos*, or paces, (see label *Dos Pasos*). The frontier between settling down and wandering, which defines horses as, simultaneously, agents of barbarism and civilization is shown in labels that depict the workhorse—often a draft horse such as the one on the label *Oracolo*—or the war horse. It is debatable if settling down is more “civilized”

than mounting up and riding towards new settlements, a path that has often meant war (Chamberlin 94-98). At any rate, both kinds of activities are depicted on wine labels. Farming and transportation are shown in labels such as *Les Aphillanthes*, *Little River*, *Sharecropper’s*, *Festival ‘34*, *Quincy*, and *Placido*. War, since the Trojan Horse (*Vallegarcía*, *Corcel*) to the Romans and other ancient cultures to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance is represented on the labels *Il Nero de Casanova*, *Corte Normanna*, *La Montecchia*, and *Fitz-Ritter*.

On the opposite side of the message sent by war horses and warriors, wine labels often depict love scenes where horses take center stage (*Mollydooker*, *Bargetto*), or they become a key element for the dissemination of poetry in the Middle Ages by bards (*Segrel*). During the Renaissance, horses become central in art, as Leonardo and Mantegna’s studies used on wine labels show (*Haras Estate*, *Gelsomina*). Also, typical motifs from the Renaissance are the hunt (*San Huberto*) and Saint George killing the dragon (*Di Majo Norante*). The labels *Alchemy* and *Piedmont “Hunt Country”* (the second depicts a realistic image of a woman riding sidesaddle) stress the hunt motif from a more modern perspective. The first attempts at creating a superior breed of racehorses happens in the 17th-century. Thoroughbred racing culture is captured by several labels (*Stanley Lambert*, *Burmester Jockey Club*, *Haras Elegance*, and *El Ganador*). *Steele “Stymie”* celebrates Stymie, the richest racehorse in America in the 1940s, and *Native’s*



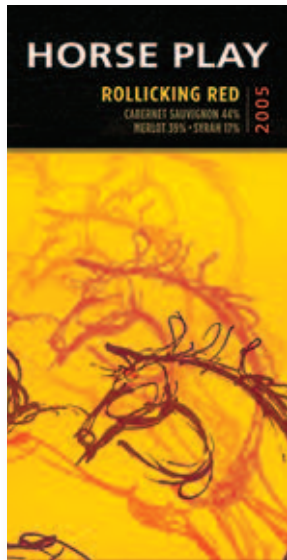
Spirit remembers the famous racehorse Native Dancer by showing two of his actual descendants.

The European presence in America started the creation of the gaucho (*Hacienda del Plata*, *Domados* “Sparkling,”

and *Pannotia Vineyard*) and cowboy (*Purple Cowboy*, *Rogers Ford*, and *Dark Horse*) cultures as we know them today.

The creation of the riding *haute école* in Europe such as the Spanish Riding School in Vienna (1572) is also represented on a label that makes reference to the renowned French Saumur School founded in 1814. The label *Saumur* “*La Pierre Frite*” shows a horse performing a *haute école* move: a *courbette* under saddle. Among the variety of representations of horses in art, sculpture becomes truly important during the Renaissance and after (*Christian Moreau*).

As opposed to the civilized habitat where horses live in domestication (*Olde Mill Race* “*Anselma*”), the wild horse living in freedom is a powerful image in our imagination. *Horse Play* evokes the wilderness of horses in a state of nature. The depicted horses are of three different colors, symbolizing the three varieties used in the “rollicking red” blend—Cabernet sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah. The personality of this wine is associated with the gracefulness, strength, and elegance of wild horses. Other remarkable labels that bring to mind the power of the wild horse, its freedom and beauty are *Barn Buster*, *Wild Horse*, and the herds depicted in *Heritage* and *La Caballada*. These labels showing wild horses emphasize one of the main features of the horse: movement. Movement is portrayed in a more realistic way in the label *Zdrepveva krv*, and in a more stylized fashion in *William Roan*. The wild ponies of



Chincoteague enjoy a restful moment as represented on the label *Boordy*. The movement of horses at the frontier of the human and the divine is depicted on labels showing the mythical horse Pegasus (*Pegasus Bay*, *Clos Pegase*).

Other fictional horses on wine labels are shown in *Unicorn* “*Slightly Embarrassed*,” and *Orleans Hill* “*Alexandria*,” where Don Quixote rides his horse, Rocinante, on his way to challenge the windmills. Horses that excite the imagination and playfulness of children also have their place in horse art on wine labels (*Hosmer* “*Carousel*,” *Jacob Christopher*).

Beyond the cases already mentioned, the representation of stylized as well as realistic horses, or parts of a horse’s body, is frequent in horse art on wine labels. Beautiful examples of it are: *Volteo*, *Corcel* “*Roble*,” *Leatherwood*, *Adviros*, *Montesierra*, *Domados* “*Zaino*,” *Caballo Loco*, *Monarchia*, *Warre’s Warrior*, and *Nyakas*.

Conclusion: The Spirit of Wine and Horses

Whether we focus on wine labels depicting horses metaphorically representing the qualities of a wine, or on how those labels depict a visual narrative of the horse-human relations all through history, both horses and wine by themselves have historically elicited strong spiritual emotions in human beings. The spirituality that no doubt cave dwellers found in the representation of the horse on walls (*Chateau de Lascaux*) is part of what the horse image, when attached to a bottle of wine, can grant wine itself; in turn “the spirituality of wine,” to use Tom Harpur’s phrase, is a perfect match for the image of the horse. Horse art has always attempted to catch the spirit of horses, and when such art is displayed on wine labels a powerful dynamic of reciprocal definition begins. In the end, both are winners, and so are consumers who enjoy a wonderful art form as well as the complex experience of wine tasting.

Bibliography:

- Beck, Ursula. “Vines & Equines.” *Horses in Art Magazine*. Summer 2006. 1-2.
Chamberlin See J Edward Chamberlin, *Horse*. New York: BlueBridge, 2006.
Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. New York: Norton, 1999,
Harpur, Tom. *The Spirituality of Wine*. Kelowna, BC: Northstone, 2004.

