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Gourlay Steell,
Lord Strathnairn's Arab Charger

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GOURLAY STEELL
(Edinburgh 1819-1894)

LORD STRATHNAIRN'S ARAB CHARGER

Signed lower right: "Gourlay Steell"

Oil on canvas
99 x 112 cm (39 x 44 1/8 in.)

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Gourlay Steell (1819–1894) is one of Scotland's foremost animal painters of the 19th century. Born in Edinburgh to the wood-carver John Steell, he began his artistic training under his father's guidance before continuing his studies at the Royal Scottish Academy under William Allan and Robert Scott Lauder. He first exhibited at the Academy in 1832, at the remarkable age of thirteen. Soon afterwards, he became a regular contributor and quickly established himself as a highly accomplished artist, renowned for his meticulous attention to anatomical detail and the expressive character of his animal subjects. In 1872, following the death of Sir Edwin Landseer, Steell was appointed official animal painter to Queen Victoria in Scotland, a position that confirmed his national standing. Today, Steell's oeuvre is firmly situated within the Scottish and broader British nineteenth-century tradition of animal portraiture, and his works are represented in the National Galleries of Scotland.

Lord Strathnairn's Arab Charger portrays the prized horse of Lord Strathnairn, a distinguished British military commander active in Syria, Crimea, and India. With its sculpted muscles, arched neck, and high-held tail, the horse exemplifies the Arabian breed, celebrated for stamina, agility, and elegance. Steell captures these qualities with precision, adopting a naturalistic approach in his handling of the horse's anatomy and posture. His mastery of the animal's anatomy reflects both his personal fascination with horses and the demand for equestrian portraiture among nobles and dignitaries, fueled by the rising popularity of horse racing in Victorian Britain. The large scale of the painting immerses the viewer in the desert landscape where the scene unfolds. The golden, arid ground on which the horse moves gracefully leads the eye towards distant scenes: to the left rise a white-domed Islamic architecture and a cluster of palms marking an oasis; to the right, a large tent shelters several Bedouin men in traditional white robes with their horses.¹

Across this large, near-square canvas, the brilliant whites characteristic of North African settings reverberate throughout, delineating the background elements and intensifying in the luminous, almost shimmering grey coat of the charger. References to the Middle East and North Africa are rarely found in Steell's oeuvre, another example being *A Moroccan Goat Herd*, a colourful Moroccan landscape. While his subjects at times intersect with Orientalist themes, Steell's approach remains firmly rooted in the European tradition of animal portraiture. In this respect, he diverges from the equine presence in the works of contemporaries such as Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) and Tomàs Moragas (1837–1906).

Arabian horses and other animals, notably camels, are carefully rendered in these artists' work, yet primarily serve as symbolic elements within a broader evocation of the so-called Orient, rather than as main subjects, in their own right. Unlike nineteenth-century artist-travelers who journeyed to the Near East for inspiration, Steell did not work from direct observation when rendering the landscape. The

¹ The white building, with its Oriental arch and dome is likely a *Qubba*, usually a tomb or mausoleum where Muslims go for pilgrimage. A very similar structure is depicted in *Moroccan Pilgrimage*, an oil on panel by Antonio Fabrès now at the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.

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Oriental-inspired backdrop evokes the breed's geographical origin, while at the heart of the composition lies a faithful portrayal of Lord Strathnairn's horse.

The Arabian charger was likely acquired by Lord Strathnairn in 1884 from the renowned Crabbet Park Arab Stud. Founded in 1878 near Pound Hill in Sussex, Crabbet Park was established by the English poet Wilfrid Blunt and his wife, Lady Anne Blunt, granddaughter of Lord Byron and daughter of Ada Lovelace, a pioneer of early computing. An intrepid traveler, Lady Blunt made numerous expeditions across the Near East in search of the finest-quality Arabian bloodstock, which she imported to England and bred. An entry from her journal, dated 26 July 1884, offers a valuable glimpse into the history of the Arabian charger depicted by Steell. She telegraphically noted: "Preparations for the Sale. Many people looking at the horses. Wentworths arrived at 12. Tattershall and Lord Strathnairn at 1pm. Many people besides."² A few days later, the *St. James's* recorded that Lord Strathnairn had acquired "two fillies of considerable promise for 85 and 55 guineas."³

The Arabian horse, with its distinctive physical features, would have been immediately recognisable to the informed nineteenth-century viewer, an audience that instinctively understood its value and prestige. Works such as Steell's *Lord Strathnairn's Arab Charger*, along with those by contemporary animal painters, engaged directly with viewers lived experience and familiarity with horses, a ubiquitous presence across both urban and rural landscapes of the Victorian age. In an era when horses were indispensable to transport, agriculture, and industry, such representations carried a vivid immediacy and were imbued with layered social meanings, including the tacit association between prized pedigrees and aristocratic status. Within this context, Steell's painting reaffirms the horse's enduring symbolic significance in art as an emblem of power, prestige, and social status that transcends cultural and geographic boundaries. Celebrated in both Eastern and Western traditions, the noble Arabian horse continued to captivate nineteenth-century artists and patrons alike, maintaining its position as a subject of admiration and aesthetic fascination.

² Blunt, L. A. *Voyage En Arbie., Journals and Correspondence 1878-1917*. Edited by Rosemary Archer and James Fleming. Page 171 as in *The Second Crabbet Park Sale*, 26th July 1884 at 2pm.

³ *St. James Gazette*, July 28th, 1884, as in *The Second Crabbet Park Sale*, 26th July 1884 at 2pm.

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