Art Historian Weaves Passion for Horses Into Research, Teaching

University Communications
January 2018

As a child, Pia Cuneo [1] cherished the fleeting moments she spent riding ponies owned by the tenants on her grandmother's rural Wisconsin farm. She couldn't have known her early fascination with horses would eventually shape her personal life and define her career as an art historian at the University of Arizona.

Today, Cuneo is an accomplished horsewoman with two equines of her own, as well as a highly regarded scholar and lecturer on the equine in art.

Cuneo joined the UA as an adjunct lecturer in 1990. Her move to Tucson came with a lot of changes, chief among them the fact that she now had the means and opportunity to pursue her love of horses. So, in the early 1990s, she started taking English riding lessons with her husband, Peter Foley [2], former director for the UA Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture.

A few years later, they came to a crossroads when their riding instructor retired. Faced with a decision to quit riding or up her commitment, Cuneo chose the latter and bought a horse. Foley, who passed away in 2016, opted to pursue other passions but remained supportive of his wife's equestrian pursuits.

"That really started the journey of my becoming a horsewoman and getting to know all of the aspects of horsemanship," Cuneo, now a professor of art, said of her purchase of Trixie.

After publishing book [3] on 16th-century German artist Jörg Breu in 1998, Cuneo began searching for a fun research project. She traveled to the Herzog August Bibliothek [4] in Wolfenbüttel, Germany — a library of international importance for its collection from the Middle Ages and early modern Europe — and was thumbing through card catalogs when a 1498 publication titled "Master Albrecht's Little Book of Horse Remedies" caught her eye.

"When these pamphlets were printed, they had illustrations on the front that were really quite crude woodcuts," Cuneo said of the books, which detailed cures for common ailments of horses. "They were interesting because you could see they all seemed to be looking toward a similar iconographic model for a horse — standing with one foreleg raised — and you see the horse in that pose on all of the title pages."

While the pamphlets were inexpensive, designed for the common horseman, other books Cuneo found were lavishly illustrated. "Bit books [5]," for example, contained ornate, full-page engraved images of the various types of bits, or mouthpieces, that could be made for horses. Delving deeper into the genre, Cuneo found herself flipping through the pages of centuries-old German books on how to train horses.
“There's not much scholarly work done on German horsemanship manuals; that's kind of a gap that I can fill,” Cuneo said. “You learn some really interesting things, like how little has changed in riding. There are still similar sorts of issues about how you should ride the horse, what the horse should look like while you are riding, how the horse should move as you’re riding, and how to achieve that from the saddle. So when I read a text from 1614, for example, I know what the guy is feeling, essentially.

“For historians, that's a very slippery slope, because I don't live in the 17th century and I'm not a man. I'm a 21st-century woman,” Cuneo continued. "Most things I don't share with what those people did, so it's impossible to really know what they were feeling and thinking. And yet there's this kind of kinesthetic, biomechanical given that I can, to a certain extent, tap into, and that's really thrilling.”

Cuneo began translating some of her research (PDF) into classroom lectures. To learn about Italian Renaissance art, for example, her students study specific works, such as Donatello’s portrait of Erasmo di Narni, created in 1450.

"I remember being very inspired in her courses," said former student Amanda Greer. "She was able to bring up an image and really examine the horse and what it could bring to the viewer's attention about the histories of it, whether it be social, political or even a religious history on the painting."

Like Cuneo, Greer chose to focus her research on the appearance of a specific animal in works of art. She modeled her research on falcons after Cuneo's work with horses.

"By focusing on birds of prey in portraiture, I was able to bring to light new meaning on works of art produced by well-studied artists, such as Hans Holbein and Titian, that had never been said before," related Greer, who was prompted by Cuneo to pursue a master's degree.

Today, Greer is studying for her teaching credential in the hopes that she can make a difference in students’ lives, just as Cuneo did in hers.

"Even though these texts about horses may seem like esoteric subject matter for us as 21st-century historians, they actually have a lot of information about what people thought about nature, about other human beings, about what it means to be a virtuous person," Cuneo said. "Being a horsewoman informs my understanding of these images at such a level that I never see in any text that deals with these works, and the students love it. It provides a welcome opportunity in the classroom to connect with the students in a different way that makes me really happy.”

Outside the classroom, Cuneo still finds happiness on the back of a horse. Trixie is now 26, and has been joined by Stella, an 8-year-old mare. Stella and Cuneo are learning to jump and have competed successfully in dressage, a form of classical riding often depicted in the art she studies.

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