

PHILIP BLACKER INTERVIEW

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It's spring at Aintree and cherry blossoms drift in a sudden gust of breeze and layer the bronze back of Red Rum. Across the Channel at Longchamp the intelligent eye of Suave Dancer gazes over his domain; in Malaysia a dressage horse is poised in the immaculate tension of the dramatic dance of the piaffe; in the Hunter Valley in Australia Danehill strides in a muscular trot across a Coolmore paddock, and back in England a Derby winner - Generous - reigns at Epsom.

Champions and history captured in timeless perfection. But to their creator Philip Blacker – a man acknowledged by many in both art and racing circles as one of the finest equine sculptors in the world – that's probably a bit too much poetic spin for someone who prefers to keep things simple.

“Everyone talks of me leaving an enduring legacy with these bronzes”, he says. “Personally I can't see it. Won't I just be dead?”

It's a glimpse of humour from an artist who comes across as someone who approaches life with a high level of preoccupied intensity. Blacker admits as much. “Writers always say what a solitary job theirs is”, he comments “I would say the same about mine. It has to be.”

A former jumps jockey, now member of the Jockey Club, Blacker has certainly enjoyed a varied career. He has been amidst the thunder of hooves and horses surging at the huge fences that constitute the world's most famous jumps race – the Grand National, he counts all number of famous names as clients, he owned the Group winning filly Ruby Tiger who won £650k in the early 1990's, and today we are sitting in a committee room overlooking the Penang Turf Course on a 34 degree summer day and Blacker is looking a tad askance at the glass of red wine that has arrived overflowing with ice cubes.

Below us horses head out onto the track and circle in the humid heat. He watches them for a moment. “I love flat racing,” he says “have ever since I started buying horses.”

It's not an unexpected confession, even from someone who rode 350 winners over a four year period and was leading jumps jockey at Cheltenham in 1979 (winning the Stayers Hurdle on

Lighter and the Triumph Hurdle on Pollardstown, and placing second in the Gold Cup on Royal Mail - a New Zealand bred horse who came to England after winning the New Zealand Champion Hurdle). He also finished third on Royal Mail in the 1981 Grand National.

He hung up his whip and boots 22 years ago to pursue a career as a sculptor. Whilst artistic talent at his level is unique, Blacker's predominant subject matter – horses – and his appreciation of the equine form is less difficult to explain when one considers his connection with the horse during his many years of professional race riding. "I knew horses from the rider's point of view then I studied anatomy as well. But it's still quite unusual."

Unusual – perhaps – but his bronzes reflect such lines of brilliant simplicity and realism that they have been commissioned by some of the most well known names in the business and racing world including HRH The Prince of Wales, HRH Prince Fahd Bin Salman, The Machioness of Tavistock, The Marquess of Hartington, The Earl of Halifax, HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, Mr Peter O'Sullivan CBE, Coolmore, and Mr Stanley Clarke CBE.

"It creeps up on you," he explains when asked how such an esteemed client list makes him feel. "You just become established."

Famous clients, and even more famous horses – Blacker's commissions have included Northern Dancer, Fantastic Light, Galileo, Generous, Danehill, Desert Orchid, Red Rum, Be Friendly, and Bosra Sham – amongst others.

When asked what his favorite study has been he pauses and looks down the track.

"I always like the latest one I've completed best," he admits "Therefore Best Mate, the triple Cheltenham Gold Cup winner, or Persian Punch who I am finishing for Newmarket at the moment."



What about the 'best built horse'? Again there is a studied pause. "Suave Dancer which I did for Longchamp"

"It's a fantastic privilege to see some of the best horses in the world and study them and measure them", he continues "I have more information about some of the best horses in the world than almost anyone else. It's an absolute privilege to study them. It has given me a lot of insight about what is needed to make a great race horse."

This year he has been working on three life size models. Explaining the artistic timeline he explains that "I like to see [the subject] on 3 or 4 occasions. The first time I see them I don't like to spend long, I just want to get an impression of type. I like to get a picture in my head and like other horsemen I use a sort of shorthand to weigh them up, i.e. compact, strong neck, good forearm etc. This might be something as simple as 'short backed, leggy'. Then I make a note of character i.e. restless, placid, tetchy, kind etc so that it will help me to create a suitable pose and create the right spirit."

Blacker admits that not all subjects are easily reduced to such shorthand however. "Funnily enough it takes awhile for some pictures to build."

At that point it becomes a little more mathematical and process-based. "After that it is just studying the animal with the help of sketches, photos, measurements, so that I really have a mental picture when I get back to the studio. With the large scale pieces I then make a scale model or 'maquette' which if possible I take along to the subject and work from life. I use this maquette to scale up using a ground plan and plumb lines. The big sculptures I create by welding a skeleton in steel, which is then covered in chicken wire. After that I model on the clay. The process takes about 4 months if all goes well. The statue never leaves the studio. The foundry guys come and take a mould from it and take that away. The casting process takes about another 4 months".

Like all artists there are favoured elements of the sculpture. "My favorite part is the shoulder and forearm" Blacker says. "The hardest part is the neck as is it the only part of the animal that is totally flexible. Sometimes the head is easier than others as within an hour of seeing them you've understood them, meaning you have a complete mental picture of who they are. A horse with an individual character and expression – not necessarily a more beautiful horse – can make it a bit easier."

The spirit of the animal is the quintessential factor. Blacker terms it "putting something internal into the model".

"You have to have the personality and feeling of the animal in the sculpture. That's a case of studying them for a sufficient time. Danehill is a good example. I just went down to his paddock. The lad let him loose and he charged around his paddock for awhile then broke into the most extraordinarily powerful trot. It entirely captured him. He is the first horse I have ever sculpted trotting."

It is not only live horses that Blacker is commissioned to sculpt, Persian Punch a case in point. "He had died when then they asked me to sculpt him so I couldn't measure him. He was the people's horse - renowned for his stamina and utter courageousness. So I portrayed him at full gallop – absolutely going for the line - to capture that essence."

Later we stand in front of a bronze of Fantastic Light and Galileo which is owned by Dato Seri Teh Choon Beng, Penang's most illustrious trainer. This is the first of Blacker's bronzes I've seen that includes jockeys. "It's different with a rider on their back," Blacker explains "A rider makes the horse subservient particularly on a large scale so if you really want to commemorate the horse you can't put a rider on. This bronze was meant to capture the different riding styles of the jockeys."

And what of art being 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration? Surprisingly Blacker agrees. "I don't believe in treating my work as a special case just because it is creative. It is like anything else that requires effort. You need discipline. Van Gogh was inspired maybe, but then he was also crazy. Normal human beings have to make do with dogged enthusiasm. Of course talent is enormously important, and I suppose there are times when one gets into 'the zone' which could be described as inspiration, but," he pauses and with a bemused smile "I tend to put it down to going to bed early the previous night!"

The latest in Blacker's collection of life size bronzes – Persian Punch – is to be unveiled at Newmarket this week. The accolades that have already been uttered by those who have glimpsed it speak volumes of the talents enjoyed by this former jumps jockey turned sculptor. Whilst the artist himself remains reticent about his legacy, the bronzes that represent him at race courses and leading horse studs all around the world whisper a different reality.

