

Splendid Saddlery from Past Centuries

The Icelandic Horse History Centre at Hólar is pleased to present a new exhibition disclosing interesting information about saddlery in the past centuries.

Icelandic tackle was, at large, not particularly grand, especially when compared to what was common among other, larger and richer nations with powerful aristocracies and strong armies. The fact is, however, that Icelandic saddlery was often more impressive and sophisticated than is commonly believed.

In the year 2018, a most magnificent exhibition was staged at the National Museum of Iceland entitled *Splendid Saddlery* and was on display from February and well into October that year. The exhibition included a variety of decorated saddles, saddlery, and caparisons in the possession of the National Museum of Iceland. The curator of the exhibition was Lilja Árnadóttir. In relation to the exhibition, a work of the same title was published on saddles and the handicraft which was used to decorate them. The articles of the publication focus on engraved brass on which flowering plants and exotic wildlife appear in fascinating images. Indigenous Icelandic glittering caparisons also bear witness to the artistry of those who created this plenteous heritage. The authors are Ingunn Jónsdóttir, Ragnheiður Björk Þórsdóttir, and Sigríður Sigurðardóttir. Editor is Anna Lía Rúnarsdóttir. This work is for sale in the museum store of the Icelandic Horse History Centre.

After the exhibition had been dismantled at the National Museum, the Icelandic Horse History Centre was offered to have it set up in the housing of the centre at Hólar. The exhibition facilities at Hólar, naturally, presented some limitations to this effort, e.g. the possibilities of guarding the exhibition; the requirements of an exhibition hall, etc. It was, thus, not possible to receive but a limited number of the exhibition objects at Hólar, but it could be compensated with footage, and the District Museum of Skagafjörður was able to take a generous part in the project, e.g. by lending objects to the exhibition.

The Icelandic Horse History Centre, thus, set up an exhibition entitled *Splendid Saddlery from Past Centuries* in collaboration with The District Museum of Skagafjörður and the National Museum of Iceland. The project manager in staging the exhibition was Sigríður Sigurðardóttir who is, furthermore, the author of the text. All the promotional text of the exhibition is in Icelandic, as are other promotional texts of the exhibitions at the Centre. Brochures on the exhibition are, however, available in English, entitled *Riding Gear of Past Centuries*. The project is sponsored by the Reconstruction Fund of North-West Iceland.

The exhibition includes a variety of things, e.g. this richly decorated saddle, *hellusöðull*, see photo by Sigríður Sigurðardóttir. The saddle has high armrests and a broad winch. It dates to the year 1766 and is decorated with embossed brass plates which was considered very artistic handiwork. The brass plates were made with a specific technique and fastened with metal strips, called baits that were nailed onto all edges. These works of art, which were regular Baroque Artworks, portrayed images from near and far. The exhibition includes more intriguing objects, e.g. another winch saddle, also dating to the 18th century. It is of the same make as the above-mentioned, but less luxurious, made of wood and painted, see also photo by Sigríður Sigurðardóttir.





Both these saddles have been changed; seat and tails have been removed from the painted one, when it had stopped being in use, but when the flagstone saddle was no longer laid on a horse in the 19th century, it was placed on a good quality stand with legs and used as an artful piece of furniture well into the twentieth century.

The exhibition includes a variety of other interesting objects as the photos reveal, e.g. bridle bits (the former photo) and ring bits, shown on the latter one, in addition to stirrups and the various rings. Forehead leaves, which were commonly used to decorate good quality headstalls, are shown on the former photo and they appear to be gaining some popularity again. On the wall behind the glass cupboard on the former photo, there is a picture of a caparison. On the latter photo, below, there is a saddle cloth. Both the saddle cloth and the caparison are high quality and beautiful practical items. The saddle cloths were usually found under men's saddles to protect the riding habit, as well as for ornamental purposes, even also to protect the back of the horse like the mattresses that are placed under the saddles do nowadays. The caparisons served the purpose to protect the woman riding the horse from cold, as well as herself and the saddle from dirt, e.g. mud, slush, and dust.

One other ornament connected with saddlery is worth mentioning, namely, the so-called crupper ball. In former centuries, cruppers were commonly very luxurious and decorative. The crupper was a strap that was fastened to the back of the saddle and passed under the horse's tail. In these times, it was considered an indispensable part of the saddlery to prevent it from slipping forward and was, indeed, considered so until recently. Nowadays, cruppers are almost fully out of use, in association with the transformed and improved design of saddlery, etc. The cruppers were often decorated with twigs, groin splashes and straps, engraved crupper balls, which were placed in the middle of the crupper, along with spades for further decoration. The crupper balls were half-balls, or discoid pieces, cast in copper, often heavily ornamented with decorations matching that of the saddlery, and often with engraved greetings, or good advice to the rider, such as "Ride carefully, drink sparingly, death will come instantly".

The exhibition also includes the make of saddles most commonly known, i.e. the so-called English saddles which completely replaced the older make of winch saddles during the 19th century. It also includes examples of a felt mattress with leather harness. Felt mattresses were, indeed, the most common saddlery for the public until the 19th century, when the industrial revolution gave rise to a class of technologically advanced saddlers who managed to produce tackle at a more reasonable price than before.

There are many more things of interest to be seen and, as we say in Icelandic, "sight is richer than tale," so we urge people to visit the Icelandic Horse Centre at Hólar and enjoy the show.

Kristinn Hugason,
Curator