



THE ROYAL AND  
SCHOOL OF  
*Equestrian*





Traditional riders  
outside the Royal  
School's iconic  
indoor arena



# ALUSIAN

# Art

An inside look into the school that preserves the heritage of the purebred Spanish horse

*By Diane E. Barber • Photos by Diane E. Barber and courtesy of the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art*

**T**he city of Jerez de la Frontera on the Iberian Peninsula in southern Spain is globally renowned not only as the sherry and flamenco capital of the world, but also for the prestigious *Fundación Real Escuela Andaluza del Arte Ecuestre* (Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art), which is home to some of the finest



## History of the Royal School

Steeped in aristocratic history and tradition, the Royal School is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of purebred Spanish horses (*Pura Raza Españolas*, or P.R.E.s) and classical and country-style dressage. The school was established in 1973 when Don Alvaro Domecq Romero, of the esteemed Domecq sherry-producing family, was recognized for his significant contributions to the horse world and was awarded the *Caballo de Oro* (Golden Horse) trophy by Prince Juan Carlos (later the King of Spain)—the highest equestrian honor in the country. In celebration of the prestigious award, Domecq presented a dressage show with 15 horses and riders choreographed to Spanish music called “*Como Bailan los Caballos Andaluces*” (“How the Andalusian Horses Dance”)—the first of many performances that would span decades.

The tourism ministry of Andalusia eventually assumed management of Domecq’s school and built an indoor arena with seating for 1,600 spectators and stables for 60 horses on a former palatial private estate named *Recreo de las Cadenas*. In 1982, the ownership and management changed hands to a municipal governing body headed by the province of Cadiz. One year later, the government of Andalusia took the helm and appointed Domecq as the technical director. The acquisition of a stable of 35 Spanish horses and a collection of 19 horse-drawn carriages, harnesses, tack and coachmen costumes from another Domecq family member (Don Pedro Domecq de la Riva) was instrumental in the future success of the school. Other key milestones included King Juan Carlos I lending official royalty to the name “Royal School” when he accepted the position of Honorary President in 1987 (still held by the King today) and the school’s recognition as a foundation in 2003, thus allowing private funding.

horses in the world.

Managed by the Andalusian government, the Royal School is famous worldwide for its year-round performances of “How the Andalusian Horses Dance,” which has delighted interna-

tional audiences for more than 40 years. Riders and horses adorned in 18th-century-style costumes perform what is lauded as an equestrian ballet choreographed to classical music written and composed expressly for the produc-

tion. The captivating and technically difficult performances are simply titled “*Pas de Deux*,” “Passage and Piaffe,” “Airs Above the Ground,” “Airs on Horseback” and a solo performance called “Fantasy,” among others. A salute to Spanish heritage complements the classical dressage program with a performance of *doma vaquera* (country dressage or Spanish cowboy)—the riding style that has been used for hundreds of years on working cattle ranches. Rounding out the rich celebration of horsemanship is a high-energy *enganches* (carriage driving) presentation and a group grand finale performed in unison called “Carousel.”

Though the show is the most publicized highlight of the Royal School, horse and rider *haute-école* (high school) dressage training, education and international competition are also cornerstones of the prestigious foundation. Four-year specialty courses in horsemanship, carriage-driving and saddle- and harness-making are offered as well as training for stable and clinical assistants. Additionally, intensive two-week advanced training courses (practical and classroom) for selected amateur and professional riders are taught on the performance horses by the school’s expert instructors.

Outside of the school, some of the riders and horses compete in national and international equestrian competitions. Their most notable accomplishments are the dressage team silver medal won by Rafael Soto on Invasor and Ignacio Rambla on Oleaje at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens and a team bronze medal at the 2002 World Equestrian Games in Jerez (Soto on Invasor and Rambla on Granadero). Spanish championships were also won annually from 1994 through 1999 and again in the years 2000 and 2004. Riders and horses also serve as ambassadors to Andalusia and Spain with promotional tours abroad to perform “How the Andalusian Horses Dance.”





**ABOVE:** In-hand airs above the ground rehearsal as performed in “How the Andalusian Horses Dance.”



**LEFT:** Rafael Soto, Olympian and head of riding at the school, masterfully performs *doma vaquera* (Spanish cowboy dressage), used for centuries on cattle ranches in Spain.

### The Stars of the Show

There is archeological evidence that the ancestors of Spanish horses inhabited the Iberian Peninsula more than 3,000 years ago. However, the origin of the noble P.R.E. breed that stars in “How the Andalusian Horses Dance” dates back to 1567 and the reign of King Philip II. In his personal quest to create a Spanish horse in the ideal image found in centuries-old mythology, folklore and art, he ordered the royal horse master in the city of Cordoba to acquire numerous Spanish mares and stallions throughout Andalusia for selective breeding.

The King’s grand undertaking to improve the Andalusian horse was heralded as a tremendous success. In the words of François Robichon de la

Guernière, the late dressage master of that era and one of the most influential writers on the art of dressage, “All writers have always given preference to the Spanish horse and considered it to be the best of all horses for the arena due to its agility, resourcefulness and natural rhythm. It has been esteemed as the most appropriate for the arena, for displays and parades, for its poise, grace and nobility; and even more suitable for war on a day of action, both for its great spirit and docility. The Spanish horse is the most fitting to be mounted by a king on occasions of triumph.”

The most defining characteristics of P.R.E.s are their regal conformation, energetic yet docile temperament, willingness, resilience, a natural predisposition

for collection, exceptional extensions and elevations and great aptitude for *haute-école* dressage and airs above the ground. The breed was so revered by royalty that for centuries it was depicted in portraits of European kings and was the most highly sought-after horse in all of Europe. In keeping with the tradition of the association of Spanish horses and kings, there is a royal seating box at the end of the arena for the King of Spain and special guests to watch over the school’s herd during practice, training and performances.

### A Tour of the Royal School

The Royal School of Equestrian Art is in the heart of Jerez, bordered by bustling city streets. Beyond the curbside gate-





The "Carousel" presentation features horses and riders performing choreographed *haute-école* dressage.



The school preserves its carriage-driving heritage. Here is a carriage pictured in front of the *Recreo de las Cadenas* Palace.

houses (now ticket offices) on *Avenida Duque de Abrantes*, the main iron gate opens through a stone wall to the expansive grounds of *Recreo de las Cadenas*.

The newly built reception area welcomes visitors with coffee, gift shops and an audio/video theater presentation of the history of Andalusian equestrian art. In keeping with the school's air of perfection, historical trees and impeccable botanical gardens draw guests from the reception area to a grand fountain at the center of the property. From there, visitors are led to the stately 19th century palace, which was originally a family residence for a prominent vintner named Don Julian Premartin Laborde. During a

thriving economy and at the peak of the boom of sherry houses in Jerez, Laborde commissioned French architect Charles Ganier (famous for designing the Paris Opera House and the Monte Carlo Casino) to design the palace in a park-like setting as his personal estate and extension of his sherry business. Upon the palace's completion in 1864, His Highness Francisco Maria de Asis (husband to the Queen of Spain) attended the inauguration and approved the distinction of placing chains at the main entry (a privilege that could be done only with royal approval) hence the name *Recreo de las Cadenas* (recreation chains). Much of the original Louis XV French-style inte-

rior design has been preserved, though the noble rooms that were once used to entertain aristocrats are now used for meetings, receptions, exhibitions, advertising and movie locations.

The Equestrian Art Museum, located in the basement of the palace, pays reverence to the centuries-old human/equine bond, particularly the cultural significance of horses in Spain. It provides visitors with an interactive educational experience about the origin and evolution of the Spanish horse and the equestrian arts. Highlighted themes of the tour include mythical horses, the history of equestrian art in the world, the history of the Royal School, *haute-école*





dressage, equestrian professions and world championship equestrian events. Located directly above the museum is the Equestrian Documentation Center, which is a resource and research area that was created in 2008. The vast collection of books and documents provides extensive information about Andalusian equestrian art and Spanish horses.

Steps down a columned staircase at the back of the palace lead to the school's outdoor arena, which is used for training and special performances. The quaint brick building perched at the far end of the arena is the Royal School's saddlery, where the master harness-maker and his apprentices preserve the age-old art of

Spanish saddle- and harness-making. So meticulous is the master that his students must first draw every piece of tack with perfection before receiving approval to press cutting tools into leather.

Adjacent to the palace is the outdoor exercise ring and the iconic indoor riding arena where "How the Andalusian Horses Dance" is performed. The deep-yellow and brilliant-white structure is typical of Andalusian architectural design. Numerous round windows adhere to the staunch environmental-sustainability policies of the foundation and also provide natural light for daily training and weekly performances. Through the flag-adorned arches at the end of the

arena and opposite the King's throne is the immaculate two-level circular tack room. Extending from the center of the tack room are five stables (with 12 stalls each) named after some of the most significant horses in the history of the school, including Ruisenor and four of the founding horses—Jerezano, Valeroso, Garboso and Vendaval. The in-house, state-of-the-art veterinarian clinic is next to the stables and is fully staffed with a team of specialists who provide all the medical care for the Royal School's horses and oversee all of the farriers' work. It includes an operating room equipped for abdominal and bone surgery, a laboratory for general and biochemical analysis,





**ABOVE:** The *Museo del Enganche* (Carriage Museum) in a 19th century winery blends heritage and modern technology.

**LEFT:** The circular, two-level tack room situated in the center of the main stables

machines for image diagnostics, a pharmacy, intensive-care unit, a reproduction laboratory and frozen-semen bank and other features.

To honor and preserve the tradition of horse-drawn carriages, the Carriage Museum opened in 2002 across the street from the stables in a 19th-century building that was formerly a sherry winery. Twelve of the original carriages and harnesses donated by the Domecq family are on display in the main room of the museum and are equipped with interactive touch screens for visitors to access information about the origin and history of each carriage. Under the same roof with the collectible carriages, harnesses

and costumes are stabled horses. Guests can watch grooms care for them, clean tack and polish the carriages for a more in-depth equine experience.

### **Viva España**

World-class riders and Andalusian horses, the art of Spanish horsemanship,

architectural perfection, historical tradition, cultural pride, environmental stewardship, passion and warm Spanish hospitality converge to create the sophisticated elegance that is the Royal School of Equestrian Art. Whether an amateur or professional equestrian of any discipline or simply a horse admirer, one who has the privilege to visit the Royal School and experience “How the Andalusian Horses Dance” undoubtedly leaves with cherished lifelong memories.

For more information about the Royal School of Equestrian Art, visit [realescuela.org](http://realescuela.org), [andalucia.com](http://andalucia.com) and [cadizturismo.com](http://cadizturismo.com). 🇪🇸

**Diane Barber** lives in Los Angeles and is a lifestyle writer, interior designer and equestrian with an affinity for Spain. Her horse's Spanish lineage (his Arabian grandsire, Sidi Brahim, was Spain's 1976 gold medal Horse of the Year) led her to Andalusia and to the Royal School, where she has trained under the tutelage of Rafael Soto.