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[Features](#) » [Metroplus](#)

Shades of horse power



Sabrina Siga with her painting 'Equine Elegance.' Photo: R. Ravindran



Another of her works. Photo: R. Ravindran

Sabrina Siga tells Deepa Alexander what it means to be a sporting artist — and why 40 years after she first painted horses she still finds them captivating

The teak frame can barely contain the charging steed and its heroic windswept warrior. A naval officer's sword clangs in the breeze. Copper port and starboard lights glint in the afternoon sun. The burnished bugle almost sounds the end of a polo chukker. Trophies line the shelves and sketches and paintings of stallions crowd the walls. This is a house that clearly celebrates the horse — an animal that, as a writer once said, carries all our history on its back.

Sabrina Siga, who is perhaps Chennai's only sporting and animal artist, has had a lifelong love affair with horses. Her paintings, inspired by the school of Realism, capture favourite race horses, players astride polo ponies and cavaliers. They have been exhibited in galleries in London and New York, auctioned by Christie's and Bonhams, and displayed as centrepieces in regimental messes and the private halls of Indian royalty.

"I was drawn to art even as a child," says Sabrina, who as a boarder at St. Hilda's, Ooty, won the top prize every year. "I was keen on studying architecture but didn't qualify for the course and went on to pursue a **degree in Fine Arts from Stella Maris College.**" Colonel Brijendra Singh who chanced upon her sketches of horses in action at a Delhi game where her naval officer-international polo player-husband, Commander John J. Siga, was participating, encouraged her to quickly put together a collection. "At the 1979 Polo Ball, which used to be held at the old polo club inside the President's Estate, I managed to sell every one of my sketches and that is how this passion was born," she says.

It helped that Sabrina also is a rider. "When you spend time with the horse you learn to empathise with it. Your work tends to be more fluid. You observe the fall of the mane, the lay of the saddle and the dynamics of the footwork..."

It is this accuracy in capturing the spirit of the animal that has drawn many patrons to Sabrina's art. "I do about 30 paintings a year, some of them commissioned works. A premiere of my paintings is often held to start off the polo season in Delhi," says Sabrina. On one occasion, Arvind Singh Mewar, the Maharana of Udaipur, even flew her to Cambridge to paint his polo horses at play.

Sabrina's work has taken her from stud farms in Pune to the green grass of the Royal Western India Turf Club, Mumbai, where she has painted the winner of the race, the jockey and owner of the horse for its galleries. She has also done portraits of the current world number 1 in polo, Adolfo Cambiaso and cavalrymen in vintage uniforms for regimental archives.

Her works hang at the National Maritime Museum, Mumbai, the Cox art gallery, London, and have featured in the U.S. magazine, *Polo Players' Edition*. Sabrina was also commissioned by the Bombay Natural History Society to paint animals for their calendar and cards, following which she did a series on endangered birds and animals such as the red panda for the Maharaja of Nawanagar (Jamnagar).

Through Snaffles Fine Art Gallery, established in the 1980s, Sabrina brings home some of the thrilling moments of polo as well as the races. Naming her gallery after a bit mouthpiece for a horse, Sabrina captures the soul of the thoroughbred largely in watercolours, to which she is partial. "Being a sporting artist means being technically correct in all three — portraiture,

landscape and animal painting. On the field, I quickly sketch the horses even as they gallop with the rider. I then fill in the colours. I work with Winsor & Newton watercolours or Camlin oils, depending on the medium. I prefer the English style of watercolour painting, where you carefully fill in the greens and browns and leave out the white of the paper. Watercolours go from light to dark and oils the other way round, which is why painting the first calls for greater skill. Oils can be rescued but I love watercolours because they are immediate and fresh.”

Inspired by English painters Sir Alfred Munnings, Lionel Edwards (both of whom painted equestrian sports) and the realist painter Paul S. Brown, Sabrina says with time she has changed her style. “It is no longer tight. I focus on the face, the legs and the fearless but gentle eyes — each one’s is so different, so expressive. But I keep the edges loose so that they are part of the scene.”

And so, her paintings are known for blue skies, gnarled oaks, stable scenes, crowds at the races, green turf, flying mallets and man and beast thundering across the canvas. Though sporting art does not have many takers in Chennai, it hasn’t stopped her from working on a series for an upcoming exhibition.

“These are not just manifestations of the good life. My paintings hope to capture the enigma of an animal that has been part of our history for over centuries now.”