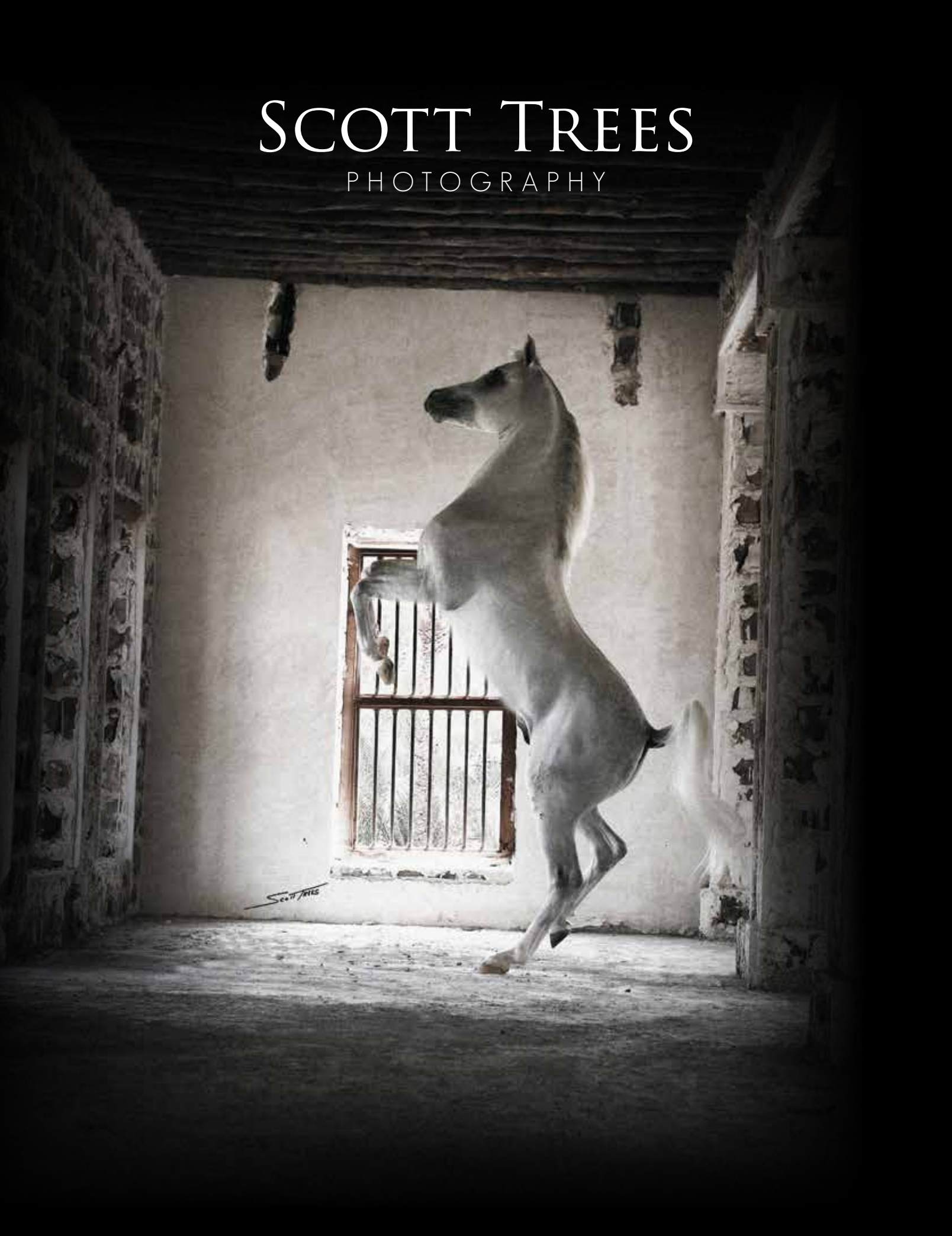
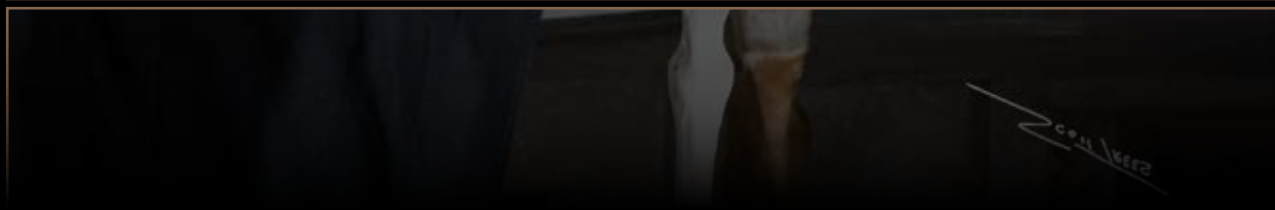


SCOTT TREES

PHOTOGRAPHY





SCOTT TREES

Through The Lens On His Life, Work,
And Making A Difference

by MARY KIRKMAN



Practically by definition, photographers who specialize in Arabian horses are artists. In a breed where one aspect of type is extreme beauty, it was inevitable. What might surprise new owners over the past 20 years, however, is that it wasn't always so. At one time, most Arabian horse photos were the standard conformational or performance shots that nearly every other show breed featured, along with specialty portraits of heads. They were flawlessly executed by a handful of practitioners who were masters of the craft, but dramatic? Not usually. As the breed exploded with growth in the 1980s, though, a newcomer behind the camera brought a fresh sensibility, and although he may not have realized it at the time, he led the charge for what is common

today. Scott Trees created images that reflected not only the individual Arabian's supreme quality, but also the spirit of the breed.

The iconic shot of an Arabian, often a stallion, from over his shoulder, staring regally into space? The original was Baywood Park's *Gokart, a silver grey posed in the white world of a commercial studio. A fiery stallion emerging from a cloud of mist? Nichols-DeLongpré's Barbary. Trees had to push the envelope to distinguish himself among the other top photographers in the breed, and his technique of going for the emotion was his way of doing it—although actually, his shooting reflected his approach to life, which has been one headlong gallop at excellence.



First, The Horses

"I was born into a horse family," he says. "My mother had world champion Saddlebreds and my brother had Quarter Horses." He learned to ride on a full brother to three-time World's Grand Champion Lady Carrigan, using a string in place of reins and a bit ("He had a very sensitive mouth"). At 13, Trees went into hunter/jumpers when he noticed that there were "a lot of cute girls hanging around," but he stayed and became good at it because he loved the adrenaline rush.

And then his mother and stepfather became interested in Arabians. In 1967, Trees catch-led the Fadjur son Fadalan to the title of U.S. National Champion Gelding. At 17, he was one of the youngest amateurs ever to win in open at that level (along with Gene LaCroix, who had won Stallions with *Bask three years earlier), and the same day, he also catch-rode a horse to a top ten in park.

So strong was the lure of horses that Trees' longtime plan of becoming a doctor almost turned into a veterinary career. "But when I got ready to think about med school, they weren't correlating the mind and the body much," he recalls, an early perception that would play an important role later in his life. "That didn't make sense to me, so I thought I would be a vet—but then I realized that I could put a person to sleep more easily than I could a dog."

In the end, he graduated from Colorado State University with a degree in behavioral psychology that featured an emphasis on nonverbal communication.

Equine experience, nonverbal communication; to go into equine photography, all he needed was a camera, and while he was in college, that came too when he borrowed one from his mother. By the time he returned it three months later, he was hooked. "I was shooting black-and-white and developing my own film," he remembers. "Seeing the print come up in the soup—the whole process of the creation of an image—is really what drew me to photography."

He pauses to consider what he has said. "I don't know if I would have become as hooked as I am in a digital world." The red light of the dark room and the intense intimacy with the image, missing in the digital world, were magical.

When his mother asked him to photograph her horses, the connection was complete. The last step was to make it pay, and that came too, beginning when Polly Knoll, one of the great photographers of the breed, invited him to shoot a Pueblo, Colo., show that she was unable to make. He spent three days working his head off; in the ring during the day and up all night with a friend in a rented travel trailer (106 degree temperatures, no air-conditioning) developing contact sheets. By the time it was over, he laughs, both of them were hallucinating about ovals, a vignette technique introduced by industry leader Johnny Johnston.

Without knowing it, Scott Trees had said yes to his career.

Professional: Act One

Over the years, Trees' experiences have been so wall-to-wall that it is easiest to follow just the turning points. And even he would say that if one simply charts the ups and downs, the arc of his life looks more like the peaks and valleys of a mountain range. He never has been afraid to take risks, and rarely settled for mediocrity—not just in his work, but in how he spent his time. There were rough spots, sure, some the result of choices he made and some due to circumstances beyond his control. But at the end of the day, he is satisfied with always looking for challenges, not taking only what came to him, and perhaps the best discovery has been that within himself, he had the will to persevere. “You can knock me down seven times, and I’ll get up eight,” he says, and adds dryly, “although as I get older, it might take me a little longer.”

In addition to horses, Trees has worked in commercial and portrait photography, and for a period was the owner of the second largest postcard distributor in the south (the historic Asheville Postcard Company, acquired while he lived in North Carolina, came with eight million cards and took eight tractor trailers to move when he sold it; its linen-textured images are popular collectibles today). He also created a high-end video production company and did some of the top work in the Arabian industry at a time when home VHS recorders were pretty new on the scene.

It was all part of pushing the envelope; some pursuits passed with time, some remain in his repertoire today.

He credits his success in Arabian horse photography, where he made his first big splash in 1980, as much to sharp perception as to his artist's eye. Other professional photographers already shot stunning pictures, but in the ever-expanding industry, Trees could see that soon, from an advertising standpoint, that would not be enough.

“After working with art directors in commercial work, I got a better understanding that the image had to get attention,” he says. “If all of the car ads, say Ford and Chevy, were shot from the same angle, people would stop looking at them. With all body shots and heads shots, I felt that was happening with equine ads. Well, as beautiful as Arabians are, what made you notice one over another? My goal was not—and still isn't—to have every picture in the magazine. If it's just one, I hope it is the one you remember.”

Women, especially, responded to his work because of its emotional quality, and just by the demographics of the industry (approximately 75 to 80 percent of Arabians, traditionally, are owned by women), that translated to strong market support.



It took just one breakout piece, and his came with a sale catalog for Lancer Arabians; he was given carte blanche on the photo shoot, and the resulting photographs had everyone talking. “I’m sure if I saw the catalog today I’d cringe,” he admits, “but it was different for the time.”

From then on, plenty of people trusted him to go for the new and different, both in still photography and the videos he had begun doing. “And it happened right when the industry boomed,” he observes. “It was a heady time.” He can’t help chuckling. “I was too young and stupid to appreciate it and thought it would last forever.”

As professionals will note now, the really impressive aspect of Scott Trees' photography at the time was that it was all done on film. No Photoshop®, no dropping out or replacing backgrounds, no dramatic color enhancement. *Gokart was posed in a photographer's “cove,” a curved wall that required far more elaborate lighting than the casual viewer would realize, and the red fog surrounding Barbary was real. The photographer had to know his subject, his film, lighting and angles, and he had to have that sixth sense that told when, exactly, to release the shutter, because each roll of film yielded only a finite number of pictures.

And then the 1986 tax reforms shot it all down. By the end of the decade, most of Trees' biggest clients were out of business,



*The pose that is still revered today: the original over-the-shoulder shot, *Gokart.*

and to make matters worse, he went through a rough divorce. The sole relief may have been that in 1990 he met Linna Wickline, who would become a huge factor in his life (and after being together for nearly a decade, they married). But all in all, if the 1980s had dawned on a wave, the 1990s were the opposite: they appeared like a trickle in the sand.

Dark On The Horizon, Or, Learning How To Live

The next turning point came in 1994, and it was another setback. Trees was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Speaking of it now, he could not be more open about the disease and how it positively affected his life—after it stopped his career in its tracks.

“Under the age of 50, prostate cancer was almost unheard of,” he notes. “Under the age of 45, it was almost always fatal.” He was 44. Prostate tumors are hormone-dependent, he says matter-of-factly (at home with the topic now, he is more interested in educating anyone curious than dwelling on its terrors). “It is usually fatal in young guys because they have more hormones. Most men, if they live long enough, are going to get prostate cancer, but they’ll die with it, not because of it.”

He got the news six days before he was to leave for several weeks of work in Europe, a trip he’d been pursuing for two years, and his first thought was to postpone treatment until he got back. “When you’re told, ‘You have cancer and it’s a very aggressive tumor, the prognosis is not good,’ after that it’s blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, because your brain suddenly freezes with, ‘*Holy s***, I’ve got cancer!*’”

Yeah, stupid, he agrees, but that’s how it was; at least he had the sense to talk to Dr. Tom Morgan, his regular GP and a dear friend. “I’m rattling on, ‘I can’t afford to do this, I’ve been building my career back,’ and then Tom just says, ‘Well, I guess your choice is six weeks of work or 40 years of life.’ Man, he hit me right straight between the eyes, and as it turned out, he really saved my life. I said, ‘You’re right, what have I got to do to beat this?’”



The only solution was radical surgery. “[The cancer’s] invasion was so thorough,” he reveals, “that if I’d gone to Europe, it would have killed me.”

And that is when life, as he sees it now, began. “It is not what happens to you,” he reflects. “It’s how you respond to what happens to you. The three weeks before I went into surgery, on August 11, 1994, were probably three of the most difficult but cleansing weeks of my life. All of the issues that I thought I’d dealt with, but that I’d actually tabled or buried, came back and said, ‘What are you going to do with me now?’ And I said, ‘I’m going to let you go.’ I realized that all I had was right now.”

Of course, even when the surgery was dealt with, things did not come easily; depression was a visitor now and then. “It took about four years of mind, body and spirit firing on the same cylinders again,” he says. “My lovely wife was a critical part of that recovery process, and we got through it together. When I look back now, it was the best thing that ever happened. It was kind of a steep price, but it was a good price for learning how to live my life.”

“I learned that all we’re ever really guaranteed is that we have today. I think that’s one of the hardest things for anybody to learn, but especially a self-employed entrepreneur—to live just today, in the moment. Because as a business person, you have to be looking two or three months down the road.”

He had his own technique to get him through. “I’ve meditated off and on all my life,” he says, “and I have this place I go, a special ‘garden’ [in my mind]. The day I was diagnosed, in the incredibly rich and fertile soil of that garden, I planted a seed that is my tree of life. I visualized my fears as weeds, and every time I had a fear that I was going to die, I pulled the weed. Sometimes I’d be pulling that same weed over and over all day long, but it gave me a visual tool for all of the fears and everything that came up that was negative in my life. And slowly but surely, the weeds didn’t come back so often and there were fewer of them.”

“I still have the tree,” he adds, “and it looks beautiful. It’s changed as I’ve changed, but it’s alive and healthy. And I still pull weeds.”

After his ordeal, Trees counseled other men facing the issue and even wrote a book about it, as much for wives as for the affected men, taking a humorous but unflinching approach. He never bothered to publish it, but maybe someday, he allows. In the intervening years since 1994, he and his wife have been grateful for the many advances made in treatment for prostate cancer; life has much improved for those who have survived it. But more than anything, he appreciates the extraordinary opportunity it gave him to tap into what mattered to him, and what his priorities would be for the rest of his life.



Professional: Act Two

Once he could deal with work again, Trees contemplated where to go from where he was. The next highlight came in 2002, when old friend Eileen Verdick, who had booked him for the Imperial Egyptian Stud shoot in the 1980s that became one of his signature collections, provided an entree back to the Middle East. For the next eight years, he worked in North America during the show season and settled in Dubai from October to April.

“One of the reasons I went to Dubai was that I thought that with digital, it was inevitable that everybody and his uncle would be taking pictures some day,” Trees says. “And part of the reason was that I was doing other things—not just photography, but videos and media consulting, working with internet design teams to implement it all into one big platform.”

That included not just equine work, but commercial, fashion and architectural shooting as well. His photographic

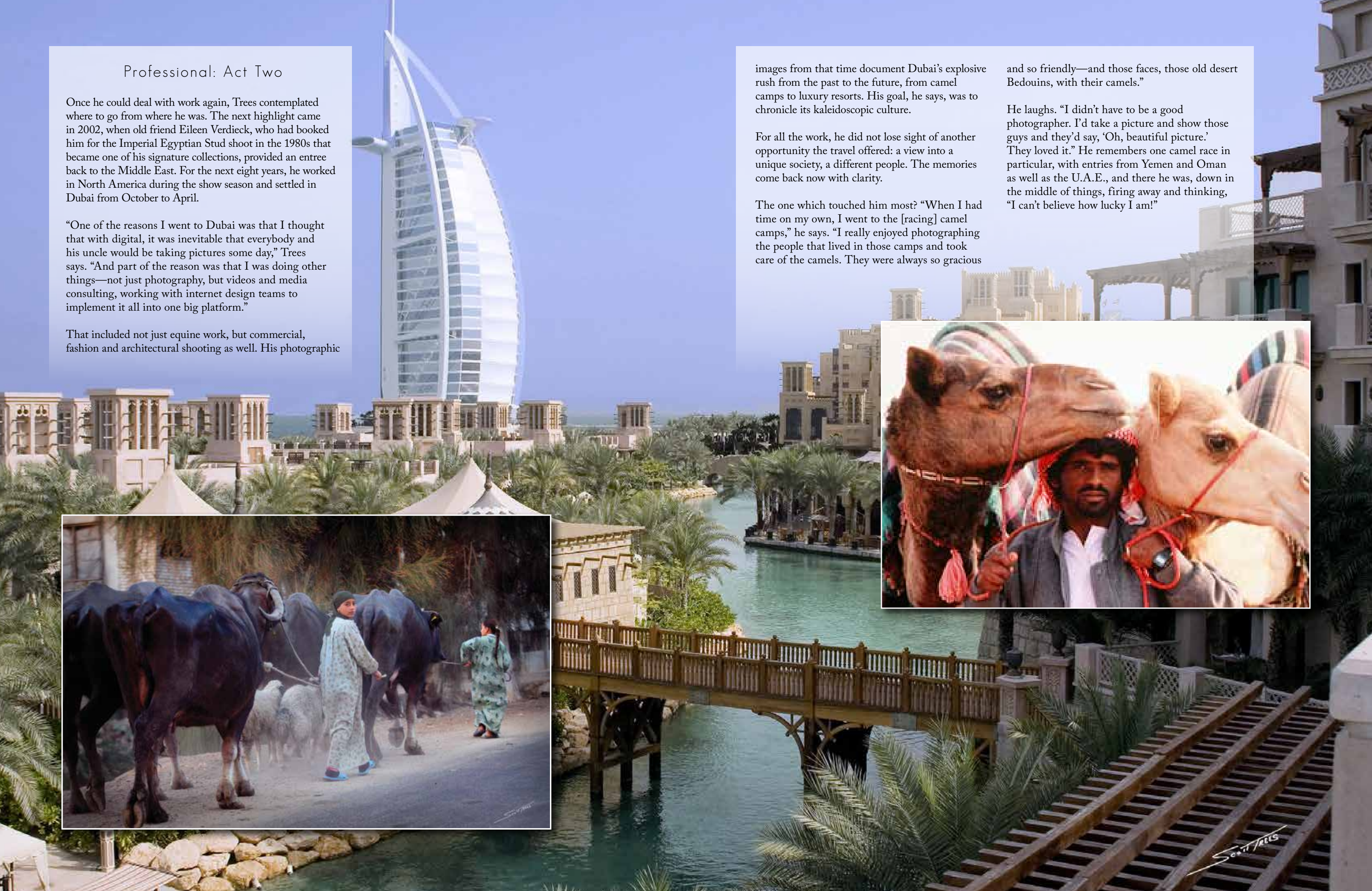
images from that time document Dubai’s explosive rush from the past to the future, from camel camps to luxury resorts. His goal, he says, was to chronicle its kaleidoscopic culture.

For all the work, he did not lose sight of another opportunity the travel offered: a view into a unique society, a different people. The memories come back now with clarity.

The one which touched him most? “When I had time on my own, I went to the [racing] camel camps,” he says. “I really enjoyed photographing the people that lived in those camps and took care of the camels. They were always so gracious

and so friendly—and those faces, those old desert Bedouins, with their camels.”

He laughs. “I didn’t have to be a good photographer. I’d take a picture and show those guys and they’d say, ‘Oh, beautiful picture.’ They loved it.” He remembers one camel race in particular, with entries from Yemen and Oman as well as the U.A.E., and there he was, down in the middle of things, firing away and thinking, “I can’t believe how lucky I am!”





He is forthcoming when asked his experience of the Middle East. "I learned long ago in my travels that if I'm going to visit another country, I have to accept it on its terms and drop my Americanisms," he prefaces his remarks. "I can blend in, in about any culture. So, the Middle East ... if you're really honest about it, while we don't understand their behavior, they don't understand ours. For instance, the association of men and women. We don't think anything about men meeting women for dinner, say, but over there, there is the segmentation of everything—has been for thousands of years. We're saying, 'Why wouldn't you want to see women or talk to your friends' husbands or wives?' And they're replying, 'Why would we want to?'"

sitcoms that make an American male look like an absolute idiot, which most of them do. This is what they were seeing of our culture! You wonder why the world looks at us strangely sometimes? When you visit an Arab city, look around: you'll see satellite dishes everywhere. They watch, and what they see is not the Hallmark specials. I don't think most Americans are aware of that."

Then, in 2008, the worldwide economy took a hit and family crises (successively, his wife, daughter and mother all had been in accidents) convinced him that he was needed more stateside. He also was ready to recharge his batteries; beautiful Arabian horses were beginning to run together in his mind. He came home, but he still enjoys going overseas periodically.

"When I was first going over to the Gulf region, I was staying at the Ritz Carlton in Doha. I turned on the TV, and what was I privileged to watch? 'Judge Judy,' 'Jerry Springer,' all of the

"I love to travel," he says, and grins. "I ask my mom, 'Will you tell me who my real dad is? I want to know where I got this gypsy blood!'"



Personal And Professional: Now, The Third Act

Looking for his next direction, Trees was keenly aware that digital photography had unleashed “thousands” of new photographers onto the scene. Like everyone else, he shoots digital, but it lacks the challenge of film for him, and he would rather create an image through the lens than in Photoshop®.

“I can look back at about any picture or video I’ve ever shot and maybe not know who the horse or the person is, but I’ll remember my emotions at the time,” he says. “I get swept up in the moment of what’s going on around me. I feel it all, and part of that is what I’m trying to convey; I immerse myself as an observer. You get into a groove and everything starts coming together, the momentum builds, and you adapt to the situation as it’s dictated by the light and the subject.”

What does he see in his future? He has several ideas, and his gut is telling him that what is coming may be the best part of his life yet. He’s dividing his time between still and video shooting, speaking and teaching, and trying to stay attuned to an inner compass that helps him figure out his next role.

Every now and then, someone asks him about the 1980s and the prodigious amount of work he put out. “I hit an incredible run then, but those don’t last forever,” he says without a hint of regret.

Artists get into grooves and do great work, he says, and then they get into other grooves; it is in the interim when the innovation occurs, when they reach for new goals. And he couldn’t care less about the volume. It is the creativity that matters. “Part of what keeps me going artistically is that I’m always trying to outdo myself. Somebody asked what my best picture is, and my answer is I hope I haven’t taken it yet.”

So, he’s not slowing down. Some of his projects now relate to a growing concern he has for the breed. He finished off 2014 with an appearance as keynote speaker at the AHA convention, addressing the Arabian’s declining market—and the reactions he got, as trainers and owners alike approached him afterward, told him that they agreed.





"The 1980s was an incredible time for Arabians," he says, "but I'm not so sure that it was good for the breed, because we fostered an image of the Arabian horse that hasn't changed much. That is that they are pretty (that's a given), but also that they're expensive and you can't do anything with them. And that's not true."

"I've experienced other sides of the horse world, not just Arabians," he elaborates. "I believe that if we don't address the fact that 90 percent of these horses don't go around in circles and stand like statues, and that there is a lot more to what they do, the 10 percent who [show] are not going to grow and thrive. And we need to address and help the general market, the other 90 percent, for everyone's good."

"I know the message at convention was well received," he concludes. "And, look—I've made my living off the show side of Arabians for years, so I'm not against it. I'm just being real."

He is already part of a solution. "We need to create a vehicle that will showcase what these horses can do [in addition to showing, to create interest in the breed]." To that end, he is involved in developing media showing the Arabian relating to people. "I want viewers to think, 'That was an interesting story, I didn't know Arabians did that.'"

The video-based delivery system remains a work in progress. Initially, it probably will be over the internet—and given the changing nature of the younger public's viewing habits, potentially long term as well—but cable television is not out of the question. Financing also is part of the project. It will take



An early use of mist to express power and beauty: the renowned sire and English specialist, Barbary.

a small village, he concedes, but he wants to avoid hitting the traditional fundraising targets, and favors, for example, "one hundred people who give \$500, rather than five people who give \$100,000."

Trees smiles at the challenge of overcoming his own show background. "I'm having to open myself up, and that's always good for me," he says. "It's a new way of approaching a subject I'm extremely familiar with, and for me as a creative artist, there's nothing better."



*An early Trees expression of the ethereal Arabian mare: from left, *Fawkia, *Pharrah, and 1971 U.S. National Champion Mare *Serenity Sonbolah at Imperial Egyptian Stud.*

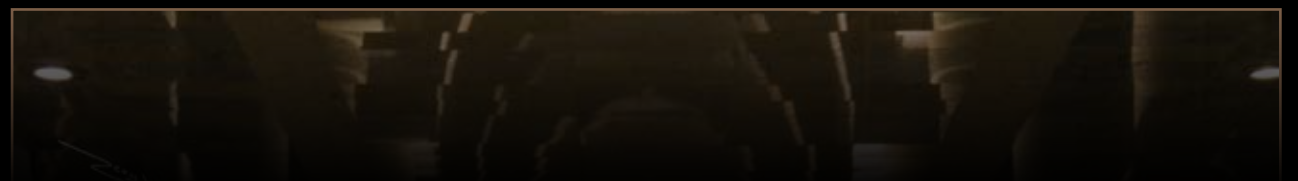
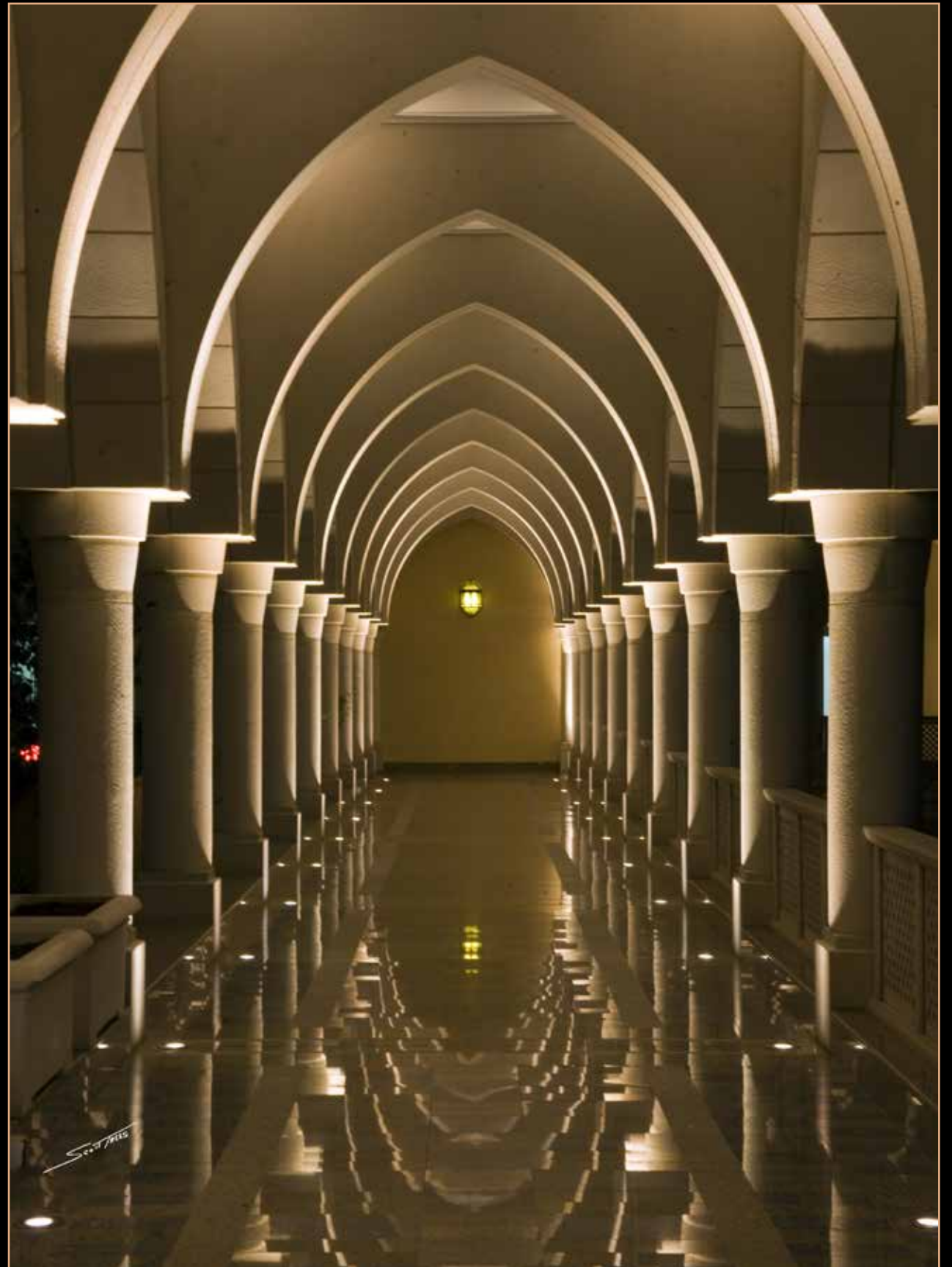
Looking back, Scott Trees is open about thanking a lot of people. Legendary photographer Johnny Johnston and his wife Karen, who did her husband's dark room work, for sure; Polly Knoll, who gave him the opportunity that launched his career; and writer/photographer Robert Vavra are among them. Then there were the clients who provided those landmark moments as well: Bob Battaglia at Baywood Park, Don DeLonpré, Eileen Verdieck, Dick Adams, Arnold and Audrey Fisher, Charlie and Shirley Watts and others. And family—notably his wife Linna, his daughter Maggie and his mother, Harriet Spencer. "My mom has been an amazing inspiration," he says. "She's an artist and she knows horses."

But there was never a mentor, not in the accepted sense of someone to go to with a problem and ask, "How do I do this?" And that led to his long term commitment to teaching (he's done numerous clinics) and helping anyone who wants to learn whenever he can.

"I told myself that if I ever made it in photography and a young person walked up and said, 'Can you help me?' I'd say, 'Yes, I can,' Trees says. "I'm not one of those people who will not tell you how I do something. I'll tell you

what I do; you're not going to take pictures like I do—not because I think I'm better, but because everyone sees things differently. That spiritual or emotional part is what we all put into our pictures that defines our style."

Overall, would he change anything about his life? "Maybe I would have enjoyed it more," he reflects. "You're so wrapped up in it at the time. It's the inexperience of youth; as you get older, you think, 'Maybe I should have slowed down a little more and breathed. Maybe I should just have gone more for the experience rather than the job.'" He pauses, caught in the artist's dilemma. "But I did enjoy it. For me, the job and the art are the experience." ■





SCOTT TREES PHOTOGRAPHY

Ft. Worth, TX
817-933-0204
scott@treesmedia.com
www.treesmedia.com



Designed By AHT Inc.