

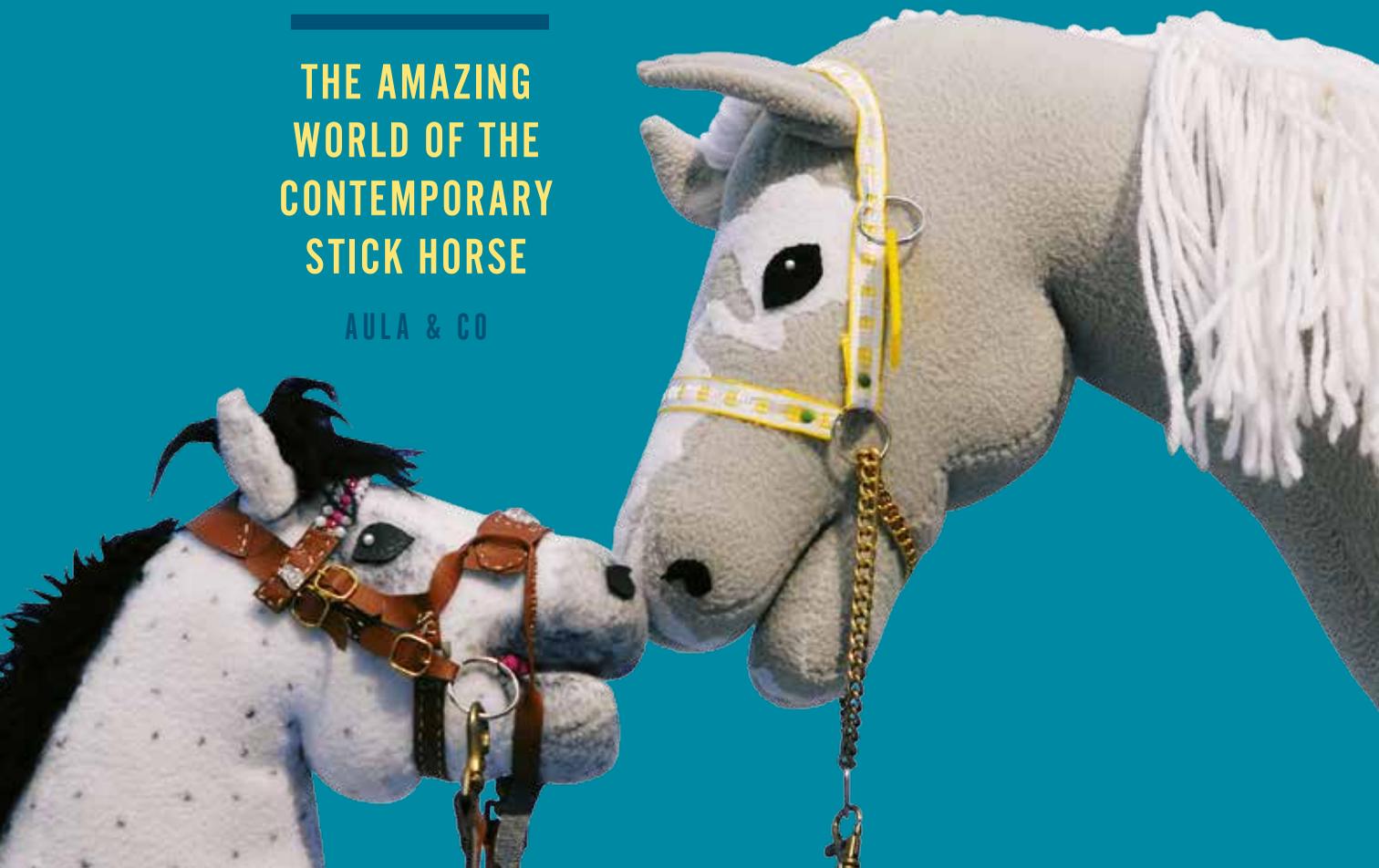
HOBBYHORSE

SINIMAARIA KANGAS & LUCIA STENGER

EQUESTRIANS

THE AMAZING
WORLD OF THE
CONTEMPORARY
STICK HORSE

AULA & CO



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WHAT ON EARTH ARE THOSE HEADS?

We're in Helsinki, on our way to the Finnish National Hobbyhorse Championships, our arms full of hobbyhorses, when a Japanese tourist stops us on the street and asks: "Excuse me, but what on earth are those heads? And what do you do with them?"

Most readers will probably know what these heads are. This book is aimed at offering some tips and inspiration as what you can do with them.

The world of hobbyhorses is broad and constantly changing – and the word hobby itself comes from these horses. Hobbyhorses range from stuffed woollen socks to realistic works of art and you can use them for almost anything. Practice riding in any equestrian disciplines from show jumping to medieval events. Create horses and tack for your own stable or for sale. Create and share videos. Take part in competitions and arrange them.

Some hobbyhorse enthusiasts focus on one particular discipline while others do a bit of everything. For many, the best thing about this hobby is the friends made through it – that such different people can share something fun. There are even wheelchair hobbyhorse riders.

And best of all, the threshold for joining in

the hobbyhorse world is almost non-existent. All you need is a sock or a piece of cloth, some filling and a stick. Some yarn for a mane, a pair of eyes and you're off to the races. The possibilities are unlimited and some horses are amazing masterpieces, with heads that nearly seem alive.

No wonder then that hobbyhorses have been popular for thousands of years. In recent years – especially with the rise of Instagram – the popularity of this original hobby has exploded in Finland and elsewhere, with more than a thousand stables springing up. In Finland, between the annual national championships, fans arrange countless local competitions around the country.

So far the hobbyhorse revival is mostly popular among girls and young women. However boys too are gradually rediscovering this ancient pastime – which has been traditionally a boys' favourite throughout history.

Many aficionados enjoy riding both hobbyhorses and real – or "stickless" – horses, and find that the smaller ones offer a valuable training method. Others don't have a chance to ride or care for big horses, for instance because of allergies, high prices or lack of local access. Regardless of whether one rides stickless horses, though, hobbyhorses offer their own limitless world.



Throughout history stick horses have been furnished with wheels and handlebars.

HOBBYHORSES' WILD HISTORY

The origins of hobbyhorses are shrouded in mystery. The hobbyhorse or stick horse is however one of humankind's oldest known playthings. In its earliest form, though, it was not a toy or leisure item, but was used in prehistoric tribes as a storytelling device.

Over time, the hobbyhorse gradually developed into a toy. It became a great favourite

of children, particularly in ancient Greece and Rome. For instance, the King of Sparta is said to have made hobbyhorses for his children out of reeds. In early times, stick horses' heads were typically made of wood, and the stick sometimes had a seat attached.

Stick horses were also super-popular toys in medieval Europe. The English term hobby



A hobby horse from 17th century France.

horse dates back to the Middle Ages, when a small, pony-like horse was known as a 'hobby' in the British Isles. They most often served as carriage horses. During the reign of King Henry VIII (1509-1547), nearly all horses were referred to as hobbies. As riding was a popular pastime, the word hobby soon began to be used for any kind of leisure time activity.

In another British hobbyhorse tradition that dates back to at least the sixteenth century, performers don structures made of cloth and wood. These are either shaped like large horses or make the person appear to be riding a horse. Known as hobby horses, these remain an important part of local folk traditions and holiday processions in parts of England. Therefore for clarity the smaller, simpler version is often referred to in Britain as a stick horse.

In the Middle Ages there was a new boom in the popularity of hobbyhorses as playthings. At this stage they were also known in England as broomstick horses. The 1500s also gave rise to barrel horses, which were made of parts of round barrels with legs and heads attached.

Stick horses and rocking horses were familiar sights in European and American homes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when they were the most common wooden toys. Sometimes wheels were attached to the bottom of hobbyhorses' sticks to make them easier for small children to ride. These models can still be found today, although the wheels make



Time and mice have taken their toll on these hobby horses.





Sanina is still going strong at 60.

them clumsy for most of today's lively hobby-horse activities.

The wheeled hobbyhorse is also linked to an early version of the bicycle. In 1818 London businessman Denis Johnson began manufacturing an improved type of bike which was soon nicknamed the hobby-horse.

In the 1800s and early 1900s, hobbyhorses remained highly popular until automobiles began to proliferate. Horses were still widely used for transport, agriculture and warfare. Like riding, which was usually done by men, hobbyhorses remained mainly a boy's game – at least compared to today.

Hobbyhorses were still common in continental Europe, as evidenced, for instance, by the French Dadaist art movement, which took its name from *dada*, a French nickname for stick horses and rocking horses.

The spread of cars eventually triggered a decline in interest in stick horses, as boys in particular began playing with toy cars.

The hobbyhorse is an example of a nearly-universal toy that resurges into vogue from time to time throughout world history.

The impetus for the current stick horse boom in Finland is probably the growing populari-

ty of riding among children, youth – and adult women – in recent decades. Certainly there are a few daring men and boys involved, too.

Social media, especially Instagram, has helped the hobbyhorse community to explode in the past few years. Online, stick horse enthusiasts can easily form connections, share images and tips, and arrange training sessions, camps and competitions.

Finland's Hobby- and Wooden Horse Registry (SKPR) was established in 2003. Besides maintaining an online registry of horses, it coordinated and arranged many other activities. In 2007, all of its non-registry duties were transferred to the Finland's Hobby- and Wooden Horse Association (SKY). The only national registry still operates under the aegis of the association.

After a hiatus, the SKY resumed activities in 2012. It serves as the umbrella organisation for young hobbyhorse enthusiasts, and offers online information in six languages.

Stick horse fans can also be found at least in the other Nordic countries as well as Switzerland, Britain, Australia and the United States. Finland is the undisputed world leader in the hobbyhorse revival, with foreign fans closely following its example via social media.