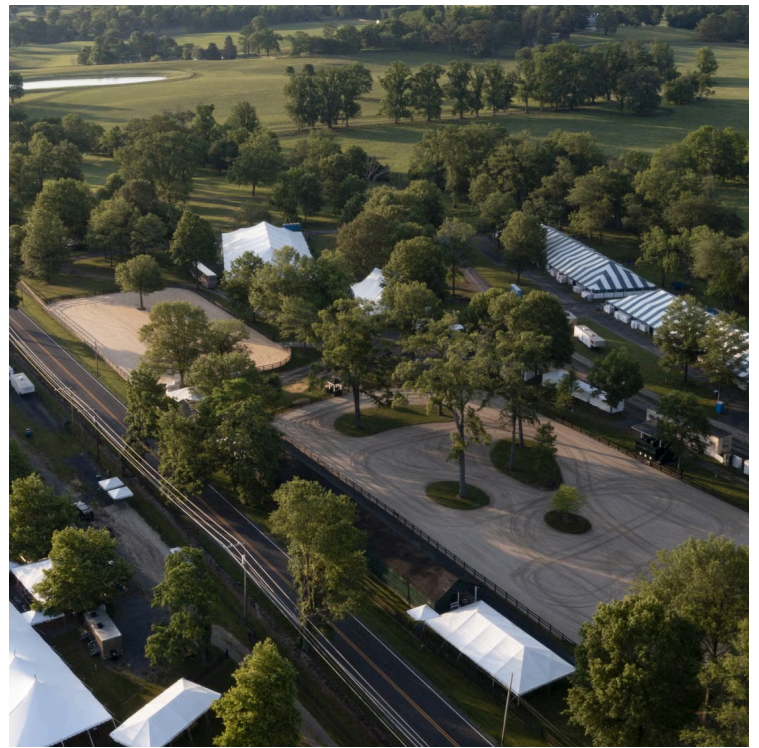


Why America's Oldest Horse Show Is THE Sporting Event for Design Lovers

It's time to add this event to your design-trip bucket list.

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Upperville Colt & Horse Show

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In our fast-changing world, there is something not only comforting, but commendable about the people and places safeguarding traditions. Take, for example, the village of Upperville in Virginia, where America's oldest horse show occurs every year in the first week of June. For over 170 years, the **Upperville Colt & Horse Show** has attracted equestrian enthusiasts from around the country and farther afield, as well as scores of design aficionados drawn to the pomp, pageantry, and nostalgic nature of this beloved, weeklong international event.

The showgrounds themselves are a feast for the senses, encompassing two adjacent properties in a sprawling rural landscape. While Salem Farm is known for its open field design with views of the Blue Ridge Mountains and top-level jumping classes and competitions, the historic Grafton grounds are home to the hunter classes, with an outdoor grandstand from 1895, and the show's renowned outcroppings of majestic old oaks. This year, one of the course designers is none other than Ireland's Alan Wade, who brings with him more than 40 years of design experience, including work on the forthcoming Summer Olympics.



Courtesy of Upperville Horse Show

Like Upperville’s legendary old-growth trees, the show itself has deep roots in Virginia’s historic Hunt Country. Its origins began with Colonel Richard Henry Dulany, who enlisted local friends to form the Upperville Union Club and sponsor the Upperville Colt Show, with the aim of promoting improved breeding practices and equine welfare in local riding horses. The first American horse show was held in 1853 on Colonel Dulany’s Grafton Farm, where it continues to this day.

From June 1–7, attendees can experience a long list of hunter, jumper, equitation, breeding, and breed-specific classes across four rings and a polo field. Sprinkled throughout the week are myriad events, including Saturday’s Leadline, where local children parade on ponies, and the Wall of Honor Luncheon, commemorating an individual’s contribution to the local horse industry.

Part of Upperville’s enduring mystique is its warm, inclusive, and familial atmosphere. “This show is very dear to my heart,” said artist Barbara A. Sharp, who has been attending since she was a young girl. Today, Sharp assembles the large floral arrangements for the VIP 1853 Club overlooking the Grand Prix Ring. In addition to the flowers, which are sourced through local growers, she also manages the Art Under the Oaks tent, where 300 to 400 children come to make art and memories. “It’s kind of what I live for now,” she said, proudly.



Tiffany Keen Dillon

Over the course of its history, the Upperville Colt & Horse Show has become a hallmark of the summer season for generations of Virginia natives, including several descendants of Colonel Dulany, like Elizabeth Courts, who serves on the board.

Earlier this spring, she shared her knowledge on the show's nuanced trophy traditions. In 1853, the winners were awarded sterling silver repoussé mugs made by none other than Charles Lewis Tiffany of New York. Presently, the roughly 75 trophies in Upperville's arsenal are a mix of perpetual prizes held permanently by the show and challenge trophies that can be retired or kept by someone who wins them three times over.

"Each one tells its own stories," Courts explained of the array of engraved tulip bowls, trays, cups, and pitchers crafted of sterling silver, silver plate, pewter, brass, and crystal. In addition to the sterling cup she safeguards in her personal collection—a keepsake passed down through family via an ancestor who won it in 1859—some of her favorite trophies include the bronze sculptures made by local creatives, like the successful female trainer and amateur artist Beverley Sanford McConnell.

McConnell's trophy is presented annually for the Take Two Thoroughbred Hunter Championship and can be visited at the **National Sporting Library & Museum (NSLM)** in nearby **Middleburg**. The

institution, which is dedicated to preserving and sharing the literature, art, and culture of equestrian, angling, and field sports, is also home to an impressive archive on the Upperville Colt & Horse Show.

“The Upperville show has been in existence as long as it has because it’s at the heart of a generational love for the landscape and the equestrian activities here,” said Claudia Pfeiffer, the venue’s George L. Ohrstrom Jr. deputy director and head curator. “There’s an unbelievable community here ... this spectacular corner of the world has such a rich, diverse, and important heritage that we feel very protective of.”

Two notable names among this tight-knit community were Paul and Bunny Mellon, whose **former estate is located near the showgrounds**. In addition to being major benefactors of the National Sporting Library & Museum, Paul was once an exhibitor at Upperville along with other notable horsemen like General George S. Patton.

Though it’s been years now since the Mellons passed on, Upperville remains a beacon of taste and tradition. Throughout the week, thousands show up dressed in their finest to socialize, catch a competition, or stroll by the maze of vendors selling food, farm goods, tack, and fashion, be they boots by Dubarry of Ireland or custom French Arion saddles.



Courtesy of Upperville Horse Show

At the end of the day, Upperville has remained true to its roots, perpetuating a long legacy of equine excellence. From the design crews working diligently to create hospitality spaces within barns and stalls to the women plaiting manes and tails in the darkness of night, it's the horses themselves, and the people who steward and show them, that continue to enchant spectators of all ages.

“Equestrian sports by their very nature have an aesthetic to them,” Pfeiffer explained. “A hallmark of a good sportsman and sportswoman is having impeccable turnout, so it goes hand in hand.” There's perhaps no better place to see that turnout, and the traditions surrounding this age-old pastime, than this historic community horse show nestled amidst the sprawling mountain vistas and soft-shadowed beauty of Upperville's ancient oaks.

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