

Dogs *not* in Canada

by Ria Hörter

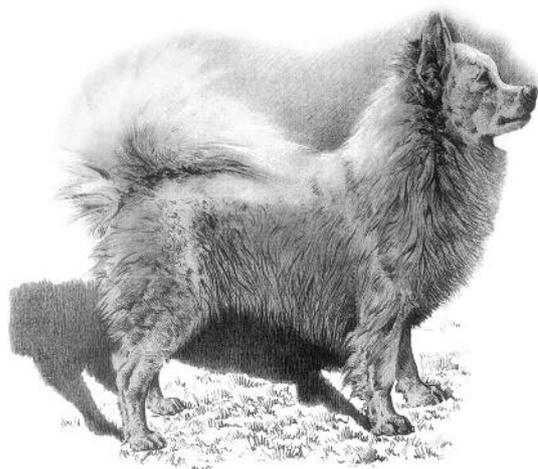
THE CANADIAN KENNEL CLUB RECOGNIZES 164 BREEDS, BUT THERE ARE HUNDREDS MORE WORLD-WIDE, SOME OF THEM RARELY SEEN OUTSIDE THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN.

VOLPINO ITALIANO (ITALIAN SPITZ)

A MEMBER OF THE OLD SPITZ FAMILY

The Volpino Italiano (or, briefly, Volpino), is supposedly a member of the old spitz family, spread throughout Europe since early times. Possibly it's the early Italian version of the German Spitz. When people like to emphasize where he really comes from, they use the name Volpino di Firenze (Florentine Spitz). It's hardly surprising that this dog is not (yet) present in Canada; the breed is rare even in Italy and it's hardly seen outside its homeland.

The first impression of a Volpino is of a Pomeranian or German Spitz. Yet the relation between the Volpino and the German Spitz is not easy to explain; most writers think that, while they share the same origin, the Volpino is not a descendant of the German Spitz, but an ancestor. The breed is very old and a genuine native of Italy. There is some evidence that shows the Volpino existed in the Bronze Age. Skeleton fossils have been discovered around the foundation piles of the stilt dwellings. The breed was very popular with Italian monarchs, nobility and artists. It is said that even the famous painter Michelangelo possessed a Volpino. The Latin word for "fox" is *vulpus*; "Volpino" means "little fox."



Origin: Prehistoric Italy (Bronze Age)

Original purpose: Guard dog; later, companion dog

Description: Small spitz, very compact and harmonious. The head is triangular, the skull slightly ovoid (egg-shaped) and the bony protuberances of the forehead almost perpendicular to the muzzle. The muzzle is short compared to the skull and the nasal bridge is straight. Eyes are well opened and of a normal size, denoting vigilance and vivaciousness. The colour of the iris is dark ochre. The ears are short, high, set close together and triangular in shape. The length of the neck is about equal to that of the head, and is always carried upright. The body is square with well-sprung ribs, the chest reaching to the level of the elbows. The tail is a little shorter than the dog's height at the withers. Fore-quarters are set perfectly vertical to each other and parallel in relation to the median plane of the body. The hindquarters must follow a perfectly vertical line from the point of the buttock to the ground, and are parallel to each other. Forefoot and hind foot are oval with closely knit toes. The coat is dense, very long and exceptionally straight and off-standing. Colour is self-white and self-red. Champagne is accepted but not desirable. Pale orange shades are tolerated, but constitute an imperfection. Movement must not be jumpy, either at the trot or gallop. At all gaits, the strides are long. A Volpino must be disqualified when the ears are completely drooping and when there is lack of a tail or a very short tail.

Height: Dogs 27 to 30 centimetres (10-1/2 to 12 inches); bitches 25 to 28 centimetres (10 to 11 inches).

Information: www.veterinari.it and www.enci.it (Italian Kennel Club)



Left: A black-and-white drawing of a Volpino by the artist Pierro Cozzaglioof.

Right: Self portrait by Leonardo da Vinci, painted before 1482. On his lap is a small white dog that resembles the Volpino.

ILLUSTRATIONS: COURTESY RIA HÖRTER

IVORY BRACELETS

We know that the breed was developed in Italy, and until the 1900s, it was mainly well-to-do women in the cities who were very fond on this little white creature. Some of them even decorated their little dogs with ivory bracelets, a symbol of their everlasting love and devotion. But we must not consider the Volpino a so-called ladies' dog or lap dog. On the contrary, with its natural guard-dog instinct, the Volpino has been used on farms, not to chase away intruders, but to warn its master with loud barking. The Volpino has been used as a help for shepherds, again, not to fight with the enemies, but to play the role of a guard. Seeing or hearing any indication of danger, the Volpino barks and barks until the shepherd or the bigger sheepdogs come into action. His temperament covers a wide range, from fierce guard dog to sweet companion dog for the ladies.



VOLPINO DEL QUIRINALE

Although we know very little about the history of the Volpino, it is known that in the 18th century, this dog accompanied Italian carriages travelling through Tuscany, Latium and other parts of Italy. When stopping at inns on the road, the Volpino kept an eye on the carriage and the luggage and if there was something amiss, his loud voice would warn the owners. It's interesting that another name for the Volpino is *Volpino del Quirinale*, the Quirinale being one of the seven hills on which Rome is built. What could be the relation between the name of this hill and the Volpino? Maybe it has something to do with the fact that the wealthy ladies living in the big houses on this hill often possessed a Volpino. Or has the name derived from this hill because of the many carriages passing, accompanied by Volpinos?

LIVELY, CHEERFUL AND PLAYFUL

Although small in size, the Volpino has a strong personality. He is lively, cheerful and playful and can be a charming playmate for children. Being a bit reserved with strangers, he does not hesitate to bark and to behave like a guard dog. One fancier of the breed told me, "He barks 10

times louder and bites 20 times harder than his size justifies." The Volpino needs to be raised with a firm hand, although it is tempting to cuddle him constantly because of his incomparable sweetness. This 'little fox' is a great personality in a small body. With his long, stand-off coat in white or red, dark-ochre eyes and tail carried permanently curled over his back, the Volpino is an eye-catcher.

LAST FIVE DOGS

After the Second World War, the breeding of Volpinos decreased dramatically and the Italian Kennel Club (ENCI, *Ente Nazionale della Cinofilia Italiana*) registered the last five dogs. When the breed was more or less gone, the ENCI launched a project for the re-creation of old Italian breeds. They selected several dogs for breeding, but the Volpino is still a vulnerable breed, even in Italy. The breed standard dates from November 1989.

A breed club in Italy – *the Circolo Amatori Volpino Italiano, Bolognese e Maltese* – promotes the breed's interests.



The Volpino comes in two colours, white and red. The coat is dense, very long and exceptionally straight and off-standing.

A retired bookseller and publisher, Ria Hörter is a contributing editor of De Hondenwereld, the national dog magazine of Holland.