



A Horse Frightened by a Lion, 1770, Oil on canvas, (40" x 50"),
National Museums Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery

The Greatest

George Stubbs re-emerges as
the finest painter of horses.

By Michael Giltz

BRITISH PAINTER George Stubbs (1724–1806) was blessed and cursed with the ability and desire to paint animals, especially horses. His talent made him both rich and famous in his lifetime, though he was ignored at the end of his days and relatively obscure for many years after his death. How could paintings of mere animals be important? More strikes against him: Stubbs was a British painter when the Italians and others garnered far more study and attention. Finally, most of his paintings were commissioned by landed gentry and aristocrats who wanted paintings of their most beloved animals. Quite simply, they loved the paintings and the works remained within the families for generations. Thus, the many great works by Stubbs simply were unavailable for public view.

Today, Stubbs is recognized as “the most accomplished and engaging painter of animals in the history of Western art,” according to *George Stubbs: A Celebration*, a catalog published by the Frick Collection in New York, where 17 works by Stubbs from British collections are now on display. (Remarkably, this is the first showing for Stubbs in New York.) Also just out is *George Stubbs, Painter* by Judy Egerton (Yale University Press), the first complete catalog of Stubbs’s work.

Denise Allen, an associate curator at the Frick, is intrigued by Stubbs’s outsider status, both in defending his choice of subject matter and in his approach to art. “He became a painter and trained as a painter before there was an academic program set up that defined what the training should be,” details Allen. “So Stubbs had a much broader view of what an artist’s training should encompass and what were worthy subjects. Animal paintings were as important to him as history paintings.”

The emergence of Stubbs also dovetailed with a new insight into the animal world. “Stubbs’s portraits of horses coincide with the time when natural scientists

were beginning to think that animals actually do have a personality, an individual character,” continues Allen. “So Stubbs’s ability to [capture] the individual character of, say, a horse and also its state of mind is part of his time. But he did it better than anybody else.”

Indeed, look closely at his work and you will discover not just an anatomical exactness that is remarkable, but an emotional attention both to the animals and their surroundings. “In *Molly Longlegs*, he manages to show—just by characterizing the horse itself—that she’s finished her exercise because her veins are full and her ears are flipped back and her eyes are rolling and her tongue is hanging out a bit. She’s panting,” notes Allen.

His attention to detail—which led to Stubbs’s being pilloried as a mere anatomist—is revealed in striking flowing manes, in the genuine intelligence and awareness of all the animals he painted and other less obvious impressions. Any lover of riding and competition will see the seemingly placid *Newmarket Heath With A Rubbing-Down House* and immediately sense how Stubbs captured the expectant hush of a racetrack before an event.

Some of the paintings include the name of the horses emblazoned on them, even though Stubbs himself often didn’t sign his works. Adds Allen, “The owner probably asked for that. We know, for instance, that some of the horse portraits were done the year the horse was retired from racing. So they were portraits that commemorated the horse’s career and also announced they were on the market for breeding.”

Quiet study is rewarded with Stubbs as with all great painters. The insouciant groom in *A Grey Hunter with a Groom and a Greyhound at Creswell Crags* is amusing; the fear and shock in *A Horse Frightened by a Lion* is almost visceral, and the sense of being in the presence of creatures that demand and deserve our attention remains constant throughout his works.

“He did vary his subject matter and he did attempt to do history painting from time to time,” concludes Allen. “But he never lost sight of his own talent.” ♦