

The King, the Whig, his Horse and the Painter

Background notes

Carol Orchard - 10 December 2014



Whistlejacket by George Stubbs



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The Painter

George Stubbs was born in Liverpool in 1724, taught himself to draw, and made his name as 'Mr Stubbs the horse-painter' in the 1760s (somewhat to his later chagrin) during an important period for British art: his contemporaries included Reynolds, Gainsborough, Ramsay, Zoffany, Kettle, Romney, West, Wright and Kauffmann.

Stubbs lived in London (where he died in 1806), but did not join the Reynolds/Johnson artistic and literary set or the newly-established Royal Academy. This did not seem to hamper his career; he got many commissions from rich aristocratic horse-breeders and also knew and worked for scientists and explorers such as Josiah Wedgwood, the Hunters and Joseph Banks. He was himself recognised as a skilled anatomist.

The Whig

Whistlejacket's owner, the Marquis of Rockingham (1730-82), was a cultivated and immensely wealthy grandee who led the liberal wing of the Whig party during the 1760s and 1770s, serving two short terms as Prime Minister. His political secretary and lifelong friend was Edmund Burke. As well as politics, Rockingham had a passion for gambling - mainly on horses, which he raced and kept at stud.

The Horse

During Stubbs's lifetime, horse-racing was transformed - largely under the auspices of the Jockey Club (founded in Pall Mall in 1750) - into a regulated and well-resourced sport with the potential to become the lucrative global business it is today. The Club's members developed a new breed of horse - the English Thoroughbred - faster than any known before, built racecourses (which it still owns) at Ascot, Epsom, Newmarket etc, and established short classic races offering big prize-money, eg The St Leger (1776), The Oaks (1779) and The Derby (1780).

The pedigrees of English Thoroughbreds are recorded in the General Stud Book (established by Weatherby's in Newmarket in 1793) and can be traced back to three foundation stallions imported from the Middle East: the Byerley Turk, the Darley Arabian, and the Godolphin Arabian (brought to England in 1729). Whistlejacket, foaled in 1749, was a grandson of the latter (via Mogul) and could also trace descent from the Byerley Turk through his dam.

The King

George III succeeded his grandfather to the throne in 1760. He and Rockingham did not get on politically or personally, but this did not stop rumours circulating that 'Whistlejacket' had originally been intended as an equestrian portrait with George in the saddle.

Images

George Stubbs, *Whistlejacket*, 1762, National Gallery, London

George Stubbs, *Self-portrait*, 1777, National Portrait Gallery, London

George Stubbs, drawing for Tab. X of *The Anatomy of the Horse*, 1757, Royal Academy, London

after Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquis of Rockingham*, 1766/8, National Portrait Gallery, London

George Stubbs, *Mares and Foals without a Background*, 1762, possibly still at Wentworth Woodhouse, Yorkshire (?)

George Stubbs, *The Duke of Dorset's Hunter with a Groom and a Dog*, 1768, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Lascaux cave painting, nr Montignac, France, c. 15,000 BC

Edward Muybridge, *The Horse in Motion*, 1878

Antony van Dyke, *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I*, 1637/8, National Gallery, London

Diego Velazquez, *Felipe III a Caballo*, 1635, Prado, Madrid

George Stubbs, *Hambletonian, Rubbing Down*, 1800, Mount Stewart House, Co. Down

Johann Zoffany, *George III*, 1771, The Royal Collection

George Stubbs, *The Prince of Wales's Phaeton*, 1793, HM The Queen

George Stubbs, *Soldiers of the 10th Light Dragoons*, 1793, HM The Queen

Sources and acknowledgements

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J Egerton, *George Stubbs, Painter: Catalogue Raisonne* (2007), Paul Mellon Centre for British Art

G Stubbs, *The Anatomy of the Horse* (2005), Pallas Athene

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H W Rott (ed), *George Stubbs 1724-1806: Science into Art* (2012), Prestel

'A Walk Through British Art' at Tate Britain, which highlights Stubbs's role as one of the pioneers of native English art

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Ozias Humphry (1742-1810), George Stubbs, 1777