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THE FRICK COLLECTION

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GEORGE STUBBS (1724–1806): A CELEBRATION

February 14, 2007, through May 27, 2007

George Stubbs (1724–1806), *Haymakers* (detail), 1785, Oil on wood, 89 ½ x 135 ½ cm (35 x 53 in.), Tate, London. Purchased with assistance from the Friends of the Tate Gallery, the National Art Collections Fund, the Pilgrim Trust and subscribers 1977

This winter, The Frick Collection presents the first museum exhibition of paintings by George Stubbs ever to be held in New York City, marking the bicentenary of this British artist widely esteemed for his depictions of animals and scenes of country life in late eighteenth-century England. The Frick is the exclusive North American venue for the show, which opened to acclaim in 2006 at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, the artist's birthplace, before moving in the autumn to Tate Britain, London, the city where Stubbs lived and achieved his greatest success. While Stubbs's work is represented in many American collections, the exhibition at the Frick draws on British-owned examples, many of which have not crossed the Atlantic Ocean in more than twenty years, presenting an important viewing opportunity. The seventeen pictures include almost the full range of Stubbs's subjects, and the exhibition's intimate scale emphasizes his gifts as a painter whose acute powers of observation, gracefully choreographed compositions, brilliant palette, and meticulous technique transform subjects, no matter how mundane or exotic, into timeless statements celebrating the relationship between nature and art. Major local funding for *George Stubbs (1724–1806): A Celebration* has been provided by The Peter Jay Sharp Foundation. Corporate support has been provided by Fiduciary Trust Company International. Generous funding has also been provided by Francis Finlay, Melvin R. Seiden in honor of Colin B. Bailey, and by the Fellows of The Frick Collection. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities.

A Horse Frightened by a Lion, 1770, Oil on canvas, 101 ½ x 127 ½ cm (40 x 50 in.), Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool

Presentation of ***George Stubbs (1724–1806): A Celebration*** in New York is coordinated by the Frick's Chief Curator Colin B. Bailey and Associate Curator Denise Allen. Comments Allen: "Stubbs's spare compositions and meticulous technique elegantly simplify the natural world and one can enjoy his work with the pleasure given over to a sunny day. But his paintings, no matter how apparently straightforward, are as complex and multilayered as the diverse studies that Stubbs put into preparing for them. Stubbs has come down to us as a silent personality, and this is fine, for each of his great paintings, and all of those on view at the Frick, reveal the range, depth, and humane genius of the artist who created them."

TALENT, INDEPENDENCE, DILIGENCE, AND A KEEN EYE

As a child, Stubbs surprised his father, a prosperous Liverpool currier, by announcing his intention to become a painter. Stubbs apprenticed briefly with a local master, but soon departed from that traditional path. He schooled himself in art by studying anatomy and practicing dissection; by the age of twenty-one, he was teaching anatomy in York. Talent, independence, diligence, and a keen eye for opportunity characterized Stubbs's approach. He belonged to the last generation of great British painters who came to maturity before the foundation of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768, and he was the only one to exploit so creatively the freedoms afforded by the absence of a rigid institutional system. An ambitious young man, he was undaunted by custom and broke off a sojourn in Rome because traditional study of the ancients and Old Masters did not teach him what he wanted to know.

Molly Longlegs, 1762, Oil on canvas, 101 x 127 cm (40 x 50 in.), Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool

He returned to Liverpool in 1755 and spent eighteen grueling months dissecting horses in preparation for his publication of *The Anatomy of the Horse* (1766). In this unprecedented work—the most accurate compendium of equine anatomy up to that time—drawing after nature was both a means of scientific inquiry and an artistic enterprise. Stubbs's portraits of thoroughbreds, such as *Molly Longlegs*, whose vivid animation is startling, reveal how long years of studying the physical structure of the horse and days spent drawing the living subject prepared Stubbs to bring his portrayals to life in paint. Stubbs's immaculate brushwork captures the gleam of Molly's contoured muscles, the polished texture of her coat, and the liquid spark of her rolling eye. She appears monumental against the expansive landscape, yet also vulnerable: a nervous, powerful creature stilled by intelligent trust in her jockey's steady hand. Such paintings seduce us into focused, pleasurable looking; we are engaged by their harmonious compositions and pristine details as much as by the generous humanity with which Stubbs presents his subjects.

Not everyone, however, recognized Stubbs's mastery. Celebrating George Stubbs as a painter whose invention and artistry equaled that of his contemporaries (such as Reynolds and Gainsborough) represents a modern point of view. Stubbs himself struggled to overcome the limits imposed by his reputation as merely a "horse painter," an artist deemed incapable of rendering grand historical themes. Animal paintings such as *A Horse Frightened by a Lion*

(see first page), which are praised today as brilliant proto-Romantic distillations of Edmund Burke's concepts of the sublime and the beautiful, were valued by contemporaries more for their power as literal representations than for their metaphorical meaning. Country subjects such as the *Haymakers* (see first page) and *Reapers*, now celebrated as icons of British painting and lauded as poetical Virgilian essays on the harmonious relationship between the bounty of nature and the labor of humans, were viewed by contemporaries as genre paintings and little more. In these works, Stubbs addressed the high ideals of his own age, but in a pictorial language too plainspoken for his critics to comprehend. Stubbs's painting technique was similarly denigrated for its apparent realism. His pictures' bright surfaces were found devoid of Reynolds's sonorous chiaroscuros, and his meticulously smooth brushwork was thought to lack Gainsborough's bravura touch.

The Duke of Richmond's First Bull Moose, 1770, Oil on canvas, 61 x 71 cm (24 x 28 in.), © Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow

During his lifetime, Stubbs succeeded as a painter, for he had made his own market. At the height of his career, his popularity among the landed nobility ensured that his horse paintings often commanded higher prices than did Reynolds's portraits. He did, however, fail as an academic painter. The foundation of the Royal Academy, in the decade Stubbs enjoyed his greatest commercial success, established a hierarchy of subjects that ranked animal painting below almost every other genre, and grounded the training of painters in a classical tradition that emphasized the emulation of art over the study of nature. What place could subjects such as *The Duke of Richmond's First Bull Moose* find in an artistic framework bound by academic principles? The picture was commissioned by William Hunter, a scientist who probably used Stubbs's image of this primitive-looking North American beast to lecture on his radical theory of natural extinction. To the Royal Academy, such paintings stood outside the boundaries of high art. Even today, many people qualify Stubbs's achievement by labeling him a "scientific painter." Stubbs himself did not impose such limits on his art. It is significant that he signed his treatise on *The Anatomy of the Horse*, "George Stubbs, Painter." His personal designation encompasses all aspects demanded of painting, including science and anatomy.

A Monkey, 1798, Oil on panel, 70 x 56 cm (27 1/2 x 22 in.), Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool

Stubbs seems to have relished setting himself against the Academy. His inimitable series showing a lion attacking a horse (three pictures related to the subject are exhibited at the Frick), a common subject of classical and Renaissance sculpture, reveal him to have been a discerning student of the art of these periods. *Haymakers* and *Reapers*, on public view in New York City for the first time in this show, depend on a deep understanding of Flemish painting. Yet Stubbs famously resolved that "he would look to nature for himself and consult and study her only." Stubbs did not dissimulate; he was defending the artistry inherent in mimesis. He backed up his claim when he reluctantly debuted at the Academy in 1775, after a staunch public battle against that institution. One of the four works he exhibited was a version of *A Monkey*, a painting in which Stubbs defended the time-honored concept of art as the "ape of nature." The monkey presents a peach, or "Persian apple" (as it was then also known). If the viewer accepted this gift from

Stubbs's fictive Eden, then he had been "peached," or betrayed by his eyes, for Stubbs's *A Monkey* was an artistic illusion just like the grand works the Academy more prominently exhibited "on the line." With this painting, Stubbs declared that he did not merely record things as seen, but interpreted nature's creation. Nevertheless, most of his academic contemporaries continued to believe that there was little artistry in Stubbs's work—as did almost everyone until the mid-twentieth century. No other eighteenth-century British painter who was so successful in his own lifetime was so quickly forgotten after his death and remained so obscure for as long as did George Stubbs.

REVISITING STUBBS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Henry Clay Frick, who was rumored to have been willing to pay "any price" for a full-length Gainsborough or Reynolds, did not collect paintings by Stubbs. Nor did Frick's contemporaries Andrew W. Mellon, Henry Walters, or, most surprisingly, Henry E. Huntington, whose love of British painting was largely responsible for the school's extraordinary popularity among American Gilded Age collectors. Stubbs had not yet entered the British canon, and he would not do so for almost another fifty years. Though his revival had much to do with scholarly effort, his entrance into the popular imagination was inspired chiefly by the first monographic exhibitions dedicated to him in the 1950s in England and to Paul Mellon's collecting of his art in the 1960s in America. Mellon, who emulated the life of an eighteenth-century English gentleman and who raised and raced thoroughbred horses, found in Stubbs a timeless validation of his personal ideals. The first picture he bought as a young man was a painting by George Stubbs. Stubbs served as Mellon's gateway to a profound appreciation of British enlightenment art that resulted in the greatest single collection of works from that period ever privately assembled and ultimately led to Mellon's foundation of the Yale Center for British Art. After almost two hundred years, Stubbs's achievement had been understood by patron and academy alike.

Reapers, 1785, Oil on wood, 90 x 135 cm (35 ½ x 54 in.), Tate, London. Purchased with assistance from the Friends of the Tate Gallery, the National Art Collections Fund, the Pilgrim Trust, and subscribers, 1977

The seventeen pictures that will be presented at the Frick speak directly to our sensibilities. As a rediscovery of the twentieth century, Stubbs can be considered as a modern artist. We respond to the formal harmonies in Stubbs's compositions as viewers versed in the beauties of painterly abstraction. The *Haymakers* and *Reapers'* repeating rhythms and contrapuntal cadences are as complex and satisfying as anything created by Matisse. Stubbs's dramatic subjects such as *A Horse Frightened by a Lion,* show moments of extreme tension and leave the outcome imaginatively open in a manner that appeals to our post-modern pleasure in the unresolved. We also appreciate Stubbs for his almost documentary literalness. His portrayals of physically beautiful horses such as *Molly Longlegs* or engaging exotic creatures like that depicted in *A Monkey* are never overtly idealized, sentimentalized, or humanized. Stubbs instead captures the animal's temperament as accurately as its physical character and places both before us for studied, but never dispassionate, contemplation. Because our daily experience is so often composed of perceptual fragments swiftly come and gone, we are beguiled by the art of a

painter who had the uncanny ability to capture naturalistically the momentary and render it timeless. But most of all, as participants in a visual culture of unprecedented force and pervasiveness, we are drawn to an artist who so forthrightly loved the engagement of seeing and brought all of his patient, critical observation to bear in each of his glorious pictures.

FREE PUBLIC LECTURES *(SEATING FOR LECTURES IS LIMITED AND UNRESERVED)*

Date: Wednesday, February 14, 2007, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker: Alex Kidson, Curator of British Art, Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool
Title: ***"George Stubbs and the Political Art of Making Hay"***

Towards the end of his life, Stubbs made a number of iconic depictions of farm laborers, which, in recent years, have prompted debate about the artist's political views. This talk considers these works within the wider context of Stubbs's political patronage and lifelong affiliations and argues that they provide one of the key definitions of his artistic achievement.

Date: Wednesday, May 2, 2007, 6:00 p.m.
Speaker: Malcolm Warner, Senior Curator, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
Title: ***"George Stubbs and the Image of the Horse"***

George Stubbs greatly resented being labeled a "horse painter." In fact, he drew and painted horses quite differently from any artist before him, bringing to his work a hard-won anatomical knowledge, a classical sensibility, and, at times, a charge of intellectual and imaginative associations.

PUBLICATION

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated booklet by Tate Publishing. It contains an essay by Alex Kidson, Curator of British Art, Walker Art Gallery, National Museums Liverpool; a select bibliography; and a checklist. *George Stubbs: A Celebration* also contains a foreword by Stephen Deuchar, Director, Tate Britain; Julian Treuherz, Keeper of Art Galleries, National Museums Liverpool; and Anne L. Poulet, Director, The Frick Collection. The 16-page publication (softcover, $6.95) will be available in the Museum Shop of the Frick, on the institution's Web site (www.frick.org), and by phone (212) 288-0700.

BASIC INFORMATION
General Information Phone: (212) 288-0700
Website: www.frick.org
E-mail: info@frick.org
Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.
Hours: open six days a week: 10am to 6pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11am to 5pm) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.
Admission: $15; senior citizens $10; students $5; "pay as you wish" on Sundays from 11am to 1pm

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection, and those under sixteen must be accompanied by an adult.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street
Tour Information: included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide INFORM® Audio Tour of the permanent collection, provided by Acoustiguide. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.
Museum Shop: the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.
Group Visits: Please call (212) 288-0700 for details and to make reservations.
Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Manager of Media Relations & Marketing, or Geetha Natarajan, Media Relations & Marketing Coordinator

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