

# MK Gallery

**George Stubbs Solo Exhibition, 7 December 2017 to 25 March 2018**

## General description

George Stubbs (1724-1806) harnessed the materiality of paint in order to arrive at uniquely vivid images of the natural world. As Malcolm Warner declared in the publication that accompanied the National Gallery's *Stubbs & the Horse* show in 2005, Stubbs never strove for painterly flair, but delighted in the exquisite touch. Indeed, Stubbs isn't an exceptional painter despite his descriptive concern for nature, but precisely because of it.

Stubbs was mostly self-taught and appears to have cultivated idiosyncrasy in his work. He was passionate and systematic, throwing himself into a number of anatomically-driven projects throughout his career. Although not unusual for the time, his decision to work almost always from life became a fetish. Unquestionably a progressive artist, Stubbs's concerns with art and science mark him out as 'England's Leonardo' and set him apart from the artistic establishment of his time.

Interestingly, most of Stubbs's works are devoid of narrative. They often have an abstract quality with subjects presented close to the picture plane, at times tightly cropped or on plain grounds. By using repeat motifs in series, formal qualities are brought to the fore and they became one of the principal vehicles by which the artist explored the nature of perception.

Today, Stubbs is recognised as arguably the most original artist of the eighteenth century. His singular ability to translate the study of nature into harmonious compositions separate him out from other practitioners in the field of animal painting. Although his wide-ranging subjects also included portraits, conversation pieces and paintings of domestic and exotic animals, Stubbs never tired of painting horses, and his reputation was established among noblemen devoted to racing and breeding horses who recognised in their chosen chronicler a shared sympathy for the English countryside and rural ways of life.

Stubbs's career as a painter of horses was rooted in his knowledge of equine make-up. In his early thirties, Stubbs spent eighteen months dissecting and drawing the bodies of horses at a remote farmhouse in Lincolnshire. Out of this unflinching and painstaking industry came his seminal publication and a steadfast commitment to the pursuit of reality. *The Anatomy of the Horse* features eighteen plates etched by the artist from his drawings, and more than 50,000 words of meticulous scientific text, and its publication in 1766 earned Stubbs instant and lasting appreciation, not least from the animal painters who followed him.

'Try to imagine, for a moment,' wrote Sir Alfred Munnings, 'Stubbs at his work setting up and dissecting horse-carcasses in the barn there, making detailed drawings, for plate after plate with all the names of the muscles and finally engraving each plate himself, this latter part of the work, an entirely new departure for him, being spread over something like a period of six years, we may then begin to grasp the magnitude of this labour of love.'

*The Anatomy of the Horse* is an extraordinary venture, but Stubbs's belief in scientific inquiry as the basis for art should not blind us to the fact that his subsequent portraits of thoroughbred racehorses are more than just paintings of record for they absorb us on so many levels. To see Stubbs's work solely as a reflection of the Enlightenment aspirations of his aristocratic clients is to neglect its phenomenal aesthetic quality and its lasting, but frequently overlooked impact on the later development of western art.

Presented in association with the Royal Academy of Arts to coincide with their 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the exhibition at Milton Keynes is built around the desire to bring together, for the first time in 30 years, *Whistlejacket* and *Hambletonian, rubbing down*, the artist's two supreme achievements, which define and bracket his career. Alongside this is an ambition to show Stubbs in one of the heartlands of horseracing and to reflect on those aspects of his practice that have led some to regard him as a key progenitor of modern and contemporary art.



Supported by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



900 Midsummer Boulevard  
Central Milton Keynes  
MK9 3QA

+44 (0)1908 676 900  
info@mkgallery.org  
www.mkgallery.org

# MK Gallery

The exhibition is provisionally organised into four thematic groups: (i) A section on portraiture provides an introduction to the artist's life and times. Addressing issues around social status and hierarchy, this section charts the gradual shift in focus from human to equine figure; (ii) 'The anatomy of the horse' includes drawings and first editions of the eponymous book, alongside the actual skeleton, from the Royal Veterinary College, of 'Eclipse', arguably the greatest racehorse that ever lived and the ancestor of nearly all later thoroughbreds; (iii) 'The horse and composition' correlates the underlying anatomy of the horse with its outward appearance, exploring Stubbs's use of symbolism and abstraction; and (iv) 'Comparative anatomies' brings together a group of paintings of exotic animals observed with all the truthfulness to nature that was his guiding principle.

## The curators

The exhibition is co-curated by Paul Bonaventura, Martin Postle and Anthony Spira.

**Martin Postle** is the Deputy Director for Collections & Publications at the Paul Mellon Centre, where he has worked since 2007. Previous roles include Director of the London Centre of the University of Delaware and Associate Professor of Art History; and Head of British Art to 1900 at Tate. Martin's research interests focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British Art. Among the exhibitions he has curated are: *Angels and Urchins. The Fancy Picture in 18th-Century British Art* (Kenwood and Nottingham 1998); *The Artist's Model: Art of the Garden. The Garden in British Art, 1800 to the Present Day* (Tate Britain, Belfast and Manchester 2004, with Nicholas Alfrey and Stephen Daniels); *Joshua Reynolds. The Creation of Celebrity* (Tate Britain and Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara 2005); *Johan Zoffany, RA. Society Observed* (Yale Center for British Art and the Royal Academy of Arts, London 2011-2012), and *Richard Wilson and the Transformation of European Landscape Painting* (Yale Center for British Art and the National Museum Wales, Cardiff, 2014).

**Paul Bonaventura** oversaw fine art research at the University of Oxford between 1994 and 2015, focusing on cross-disciplinary collaborations with artists including Anya Gallaccio, John Gerrard, Tania Kovats, Christina Mackie, Cornelia Parker, Elizabeth Price, Simon Starling, Mark Wallinger, Boyd Webb, Richard Wentworth and Catherine Yass. He worked with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office as artistic advisor on the UK Pavilion at Aichi Expo in 2005 and curated the *One Giant Leap* film, exhibition and events season at BFI Southbank to coincide with the 40th anniversary of Apollo 11 in 2009. He devised a large-scale commission for the London 2012 Festival and is currently working on the Contemporary Art Society Annual Award for Museums, commissions marking the centenary of the First World War, the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Magna Carta and Shakespeare 400, and a major three-venue project that looks at the relationship between electricity and the human body.

**Anthony Spira**, Director of MK Gallery since 2009. Spira was previously curator at the Whitechapel Gallery London (1999-2009) and at the Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris (1994-6). His twenty years of curatorial experience includes numerous group shows such as 'A Century of British Sculpture, from Epstein to Whiteread' (1996, Jeu de Paume Paris); 'The Whitechapel Centenary' from Stubbs to Rauschenberg (Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2001); 'Cadences, from Hendrick Goltzius to Wassily Kandinsky; forty works from the Museum van Boijmans, Rotterdam' (MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, 2014); and solo shows with Mark Wallinger (Whitechapel 2001), Hans Bellmer (Centre Pompidou, Paris, Whitechapel Gallery, London, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich, 2006) and Nasreen Mohamedi (MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, Office for Contemporary Art, Norway, 2009).

A number of colleagues have also kindly contributed towards the development of the project, including Maria Balshaw, Caroline Collier, James Miller, Anthony Mould, Tim Marlow, Sandy Nairne and others.



Supported by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



900 Midsummer Boulevard  
Central Milton Keynes  
MK9 3QA

+44 (0)1908 676 900  
info@mkgallery.org  
www.mkgallery.org

# MK Gallery

## MK Gallery, Milton Keynes and the subject of the horse

MK Gallery was founded in Central Milton Keynes in 1999 as part of a major theatre and gallery complex. While the theatre has become one of the most successful outside of London, the gallery opened with a solo show by Gilbert & George and has presented a very broad range of exhibitions, from Archigram to Gilberto Zorio via Michael Craig-Martin, Piranesi and Andy Warhol. The gallery has curated almost all of its exhibitions, frequently touring them to international partners across the world, is a regular publisher, and producer of a dynamic and diverse public programme.

MK Gallery will be re-opening its doors in 2017 after a major renovation and expansion, with 550m<sup>2</sup> of fully GIS compliant exhibition spaces, generously funded by local and central governments, as well as private supporters including the Wolfson, Sackler and Garfield Weston Foundations. One of the first presentations after the gallery's re-opening, this exhibition will mark a step-change in the ambitions, not only of the organisation but also of Milton Keynes as the city prepares to bid for European Capital of Culture 2023. Renowned for its exhibitions of international contemporary art, the gallery's programme is diversifying to include historical shows alongside the contemporary. Audience development work has revealed that, as the only major visual arts organisation within the region, the Gallery has a responsibility towards a broader remit. For example, a recent exhibition of historical art quadrupled our schools visits.

Milton Keynes is of course situated in one of the heartlands of horseracing (Towcester Racecourse is only 10 miles from the gallery) and the exhibition will highlight local connections to Stubbs, from the portrait of a Northamptonshire patron to works from Ascott House in Leighton Buzzard and those commissioned by Lord Torrington and painted at Southill, an estate in nearby Bedfordshire. It should also be noted that, somewhat surprisingly, the horse was a powerful symbol in creating an identity for Milton Keynes in its 1960s heyday, a high-tech reworking of the Neolithic white horses carved into British hillsides; Lloyds Bank, with its logo of a horse, was one of the first businesses to move to Milton Keynes; as a result Lloyds Court was one of the first buildings in the New City and, consequently, a sculpture of a horse by Elisabeth Frink, the first piece of public art in the New City, still stands on the main Boulevard near the gallery. More recently, artist Sam Jacob, formerly of FAT, created a large LED light piece of a galloping horse for the Venice Architecture Biennale 2014 in tribute to an early advertising campaign by the MK Development Corporation.

In addition to the exhibition and accompanying publication, we are planning extensive public programmes to complement the exhibition, including talks, workshops, film screenings and concerts. We will also be working with contemporary artists to bring elements of the project to life and also local contacts in the horseracing community. By generating new scholarship on the subject, we have reason to believe that a focussed show of work by Stubbs will be enormously popular and attract large new audiences across the region.



Supported by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



900 Midsummer Boulevard  
Central Milton Keynes  
MK9 3QA

+44 (0)1908 676 900  
info@mkgallery.org  
www.mkgallery.org