

Rupert Butler tells the story of George Stubbs, whose Marylebone studio became the centre of a lifelong obsession with the anatomy of horses.



If, using an aged map of Marylebone, you hope to find yourself on Somerset Street off Portman Square, forget it. You are going to end up standing confused and lost outside Selfridges. This was the side of the home and studio of the ultra-obsessive painter and engraver George Stubbs, who in 1763 acquired the lease of No 24 Somerset Street. Here he lived and worked until his death in 1806. The street itself survives until it was pulled down after world war two.

Stubbs, born into a family of skilled Liverpool artisans on 25 August 1724, was a painter whose fanatic interest in animal anatomy drove him to just about any lengths to acquire previously unseen models, including those that stood upright, carried their young in pouches and moved in giant leaps.

A kangaroo, subject of a Stubbs painting in 1772, was inspired by a skin he acquired from Australia. This kangaroo painting, together with one of a dingo, has recently been saved for Britain in the face of a bid from Australia after the National Maritime Museum managed to raise the required £5.5 million. Among his exotic subjects were a nylghau, a moose, a baboon, an Indian rhinoceros, a macaque monkey and a yak, some stuffed and some living.

In the 1750s Stubbs has visited Italy, many years later revealing to a fellow artist that his motive had been "to convince himself that nature was and is always superior to art". In 1756 he rented a farmhouse in Lincolnshire and spent 18 months dissecting horses, then moving to London after the death of his father with the encouragement of his common law wife Mary Spencer, together with their son, George Townley Stubbs, later also a painter and engraver.

In just five years, Stubbs senior was securing commissions from some of citizens. All the while, he continued with his own personal obsession> a minute study of the anatomy of the horse, dead specimens of which had been dragged with his immense strength into his Somerset Street studio cum-laboratory. The corpses were dissected, layer by layer, with drawings portraying muscles, sinews and entire skeletons.

In 1776, Stubbs published *The Anatomy of the Horse*, illustrated with engraved plates. These were made available for likely clients to study in what became an expanding market, particularly among wealthy aristocrats, including the Marquess of Rockingham, the Duke of Grafton and the

Earls of Spencer and Grosvenor. Prominent was the 3rd Duke of Richmond with his Chichester country seat at the Goodwood House. Stubbs produced the three notable pictures of the Richmond family, fellow statesmen and servants, including Racehorses Exercising on the Downs at Goodwood. In his 2002 study of George Stubbs, Martin Myrone, a curator at Tate Britain, writes that the pictures “present a vision of the land taken, quite literally from an aristocratic perspective, confirming the right of the landowning class to view and hold the authority over the nation”.

Making himself available for sittings had its perils though.

Rockingham’s fiery Arabian stallion Whistlejacket, a rich coppery chestnut, later immortalised on a canvas nearly 10 feet high, had turned on Stubbs viciously, causing him to defend himself solely with a thin metre-length pole. Tireless when it came to seeking out menageries like the one at Windsor Great Park, Stubbs created for the Duke of Cumberland paintings of lions, tigers and zebras which had been brought from the Royal Family. A truly outstanding prospect for a commission turned out to be Viscount Bolingbroke. In 1765 Stubbs painted a work for Bolingbroke entitled Gimcrack on Newmarket Heath, With A Trainer, A Stable-lad, And A Jockey. It sold at Christie’s in July 2011 for a sensational bid of over £22 million.

The 1770s saw a major coup with a highly-prized commission from the Prince of Wales. But the decade was not without scandalous associations for Stubbs, with his spirited equestrian portrait of hard-swearing Laetitia, Lady Lade, notorious wife of racehorse breeder, owner and inveterate gambler Sir John Lade, who dressed at all times in riding clothes, perpetually carried a whip and matched his wife when it came to foul language. Among her numerous alleged liaisons, one of the most notorious was with John Rann, a debt-blogged former coachman turned highwayman, apprehended after robbing the chaplain of Princess Amelia, King George III’s youngest daughter. Rann was held in custody at Newgate Jail, where he was said to have entertained seven women to a farewell dinner shortly before his execution which was accompanied by farewell banter with the hangman in the in the company of an ecstatic crowd.

In his later years Stubbs persisted with his vigorous lifestyle, conserving his energy with a strict diet. Unlike so many of his hard-drinking contemporaries, he was reputed to have touched nothing but water for 40 years. In his late 70s he still trudged the 16 miles between Portman Square and Lord Clarendon’s house in Hertfordshire, producing pictures of the countryside workers’ activities, subject of two oils, Haymakers and Reapers. In 1799, the 28-year-old rakish and wealthy Sir Henry Vane-Tempest, with his passion for racing and gambling, commissioned Stubbs to paint his stately bay colt Hambletonian.

Hambletonian won a very famous race at Newmarket against Diamond, a previous victor there, for a massive 3,000 guineas. The race was vicious beyond imagining, both horses being slashed and whipped until they bled. The event, according to Sporting Magazine “drew together the greatest concourse of people that ever was seen at Newmarket. The company not occupied every bed to be procured in that place, but Cambridge and every town and village within 12 or 15 miles was also thronged with visitors”. Hambletonian, Rubbing Down is dominated by the horse, in the care of groom and stable boy.

By then, though, Stubbs had returned to the obsession which likely had never left him- producing a long dreamed –of sequel to the Anatomy of the Horse: the extraordinarily ambitious A Comparative Anatomical Exposition of the Human Body with that of a Tiger and a Common Fowl. But by the winter of 1804 his previously keen eyesight was notably lessening, possibly blurred by cataracts. A fairly regular visitor, George Dance, reported at their final meeting, that Stubbs had appeared “so aged, so in jawed and shrunk in his person”.

Death, on 10th July 1806, came suddenly. Mary Spencer revealed that, an hour or so before his final breath, he had declared: "I have indeed hoped to finish my Comparative Anatomy e'er I went, for other things I have no anxiety".

Stubbs was buried in the Churchyard of St Marylebone Parish Church. His common law wife Mary Spencer was also buried there, as was their son, George Townley Stubbs, also a painter and engraver.