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George Stubbs, ARA
(1724 – 1806)

BRITISH SPORTING PAINTINGS

Sir Abe Bailey Collection, South African National Gallery

RAYMUND VAN NIEKERK

PHOTOGRAPHY: GEOFF GRUNDLINGH

IN 1943, A RATHER TETCHY MILITARY GENTLEMAN complained in an article published in the English art journal *Apollo* that there was 'not a hunting, racing or football picture in the National or Tate Galleries'. Bitterly he went on to say 'There are pictures of Dutchmen playing ice-hockey and golf, drinking and dancing, vomiting and other things not usually depicted in polite society'. But no sporting pictures. How had this come about? According to the major it was because 'the Museum Committees of our great cities know more of junketing than of racing and hunting'. However, by 1943, the Trustees of the South African National Gallery (who could certainly never be accused of 'junketing') were able to point with pride to the remarkable collection

of sporting paintings which graced the walls of *their* building. For some three years already they had been the custodians of one of the finest collections of British sporting paintings in the world, the legacy to the nation of Sir Abe Bailey.

Sir Abe Bailey, a son of Cradock, C.P., had played a notable part in the South African business world and in its public life. Although the major part of his career was pursued in South Africa, he had been educated in England and later maintained residences there, in town and country, as well as his house in Muizenberg. It was perhaps not surprising therefore, that the art collection that he assembled with so much care consisted of a majority of British works. While a small group of Dutch



I Abraham Cooper, R.A. 1787 - 1868 *The Day Family*

and French paintings were ornaments to the collection, British landscape and portrait paintings predominated.

However, a prime enthusiasm of Sir Abe's, that for sport, led him to acquire works that lent a distinctive character to his collection. His interest in racing and shooting inevitably produced a sympathetic apprecia-

tion. At the age of 21 he lectured on human anatomy at York hospital and at the age of 42 he published his remarkable work *The Anatomy of the Horse*, illustrated by his own superb drawings. Major Paget, whom we have encountered above, rather characteristically describes the activities of the dedicated anatomist: 'Having made money with



II Henry Alken, Junior, 1810 – 1894 *Changing Horses*

tion of the achievement of that great school of British sporting painters which had flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries. With an admirable sense of quality and an evident wish to include all the major practitioners of the genre, he put together the most important single group of sporting paintings and drawings of his day. These works, as now held by the S.A. National Gallery, number some 137 items and include examples by most of the top sporting painters of the period 1770–1900.

The principle aim of this brief discussion of the Sir Abe Bailey collection of British sporting paintings is to awaken (or re-awaken) interest in works which can amply repay the attention of the visitor. Not only are many of them fine and sensitive works of art, they are also superbly evocative documents of English country life of the period. So the reader will not be burdened with biographies or art-historical details: let us look at the paintings themselves to see what pleasure they may bring.

Central to the collection are the three paintings by George Stubbs (1724–1806) one of which we reproduce here (front cover). No other painter of the time achieved his mastery of animal anatomy. At the age of

his brush, he retired to a farm, where he carried dead horses up to the attic with the assistance of Mary Spencer, his life-long companion . . . His industry was not appreciated by his neighbours, who said he made the district smell like a battlefield, and at the end of two years were glad to see the end of him¹⁴. As our paintings beautifully show, his assiduity brought artistic rewards. The authority of Stubbs' anatomical realism is further enhanced by his sensitive and almost sensual responsiveness to the horses' coats. His concentration on the vivid presence of his subjects frequently led to somewhat uneasy resolution of his foregrounds and the animals seem thrust forwards out of the picture plane. *The Two Bay Hunters By A Tree In An Open Landscape* however, are in a happy relationship to the space beneath their tree. Our great Stubbs of the racehorse, *Firetail*, is a magnificent portrait, which must have been a source of immense satisfaction to its subject's owner.

The practice in Britain of commissioning portraits of thoroughbred animals, which the skilled husbandry of that nation had produced for centuries, kept many an artist busy throughout the age under discussion. No finer practitioner of this branch of art than Stubbs was

found, but our own century gave us a President of the Royal Academy who has left us portraits which will continue to delight the enthusiast. The Bailey collection includes no fewer than four splendid paintings by Sir Alfred Munnings (1879—1959) of famous racehorses of the 1920s and 30s.

with than human predators. One of our paintings, by Robert Havell, shows *The Exeter Coach Attacked By A Lioness*, the beast having escaped from a travelling menagerie.

Changing Horses by Henry Alken Jnr. (1810—1894) (II), depicts a restful moment in a journey, as the coach



III James Pollard, 1792 — 1867 *The Norwich Mail Coach In A Thunderstorm On Newmarket Heath*. (Part of original frame showing).

No discussion of such commissioned portraits in the collection would be complete without mention of one of its gems, *The Day Family* by Abraham Cooper (1787—1868) (I). This monument to family pride certainly includes the human members but all their attention is focussed on the central splendour of the composition, Venison, the bay racehorse. John Day, the gentleman in black in the painting, had bred him in 1833. A contemporary writer records 'his three years' old running has perhaps never been equalled; twelve races fell to his share in 1836; a gamer or more gentlemanly little horse never cantered down the cords⁵. No wonder the Days look suitably subdued and serious in the presence of Venison.

Far more bustle and excitement are to be found, however, in the coaching paintings. The early part of the 19th century was to be the great age of coaching and the sense of adventure promoted by this mode of travel must have continued strong, even when highwaymen stopped being a menace and the guard no longer carried a blunderbuss. Eventually armed only with his 'yard of tin', the horn which signalled the approach of his vehicle, he had other alarms to contend

stops beneath a halcyon sky in the wide streets of a village. Idle rustics stare at the top-hatted travelling gentry while cattle, poultry and dogs seem unperturbed by the activity in front of the inn. All very different from James Pollard's (1792—1867) *The Norwich Mail Coach In A Thunderstorm On Newmarket Heath* (III) where a highly dramatic coaching experience is celebrated. A thunderously romantic sky looms over the coach and its alarmed passengers as a flash of lightning makes the horses rear. The dramatic play of their legs and shadows echoes the jagged strip of light and a rising cloud of dust behind the brilliant red wheels matches the line of a blown cape.

Slightly more comic alarm appears in Alken's *The Holyhead Mail Stopped By Hounds* which depicts the pack in full cry closely followed by muddied hunters and their riders crossing a road in front of the coach. The surprise and shock of the passengers is exaggerated by the painter, who meant to amuse. But long-distance coaching was to be 'killed almost totally by the railways; the last four-horse coach going into London went out of business in 1845 . . .⁶. A new sort of incident, radically different from that in the last picture, is shown in

Crossing The Railway by John Frederick Herring Jnr. (1860–1907) (IV). Here, as the hunt dashes across the tracks, a signalman waves down the train approaching in the distance, while only one rider turns to look at the new menace.

The same painter, in a similarly small painting (21 cm x 26 cm) (V), places his figures in a more tranquil and typical setting. Many of these artists had considerable skill as landscape painters and took evident delight in depicting the varying moods of the English countryside. If in many of their paintings one's attention is first drawn to the central excitements of hunt or speeding coach, one soon enough becomes aware of the care taken to evoke a time of day or a moment in the changeable weather.

The Fair Sex is only rarely to be found in these paintings and we gather that their resentment did occasionally become acute. The pseudonymous 'lady' writer to *The Spectator* in 1736 may have been making fun, but the chances are that the ladies smiled but grimly: '... the Season being begun he had other business than to regard a Wife. He soon deserted me, to follow a Hare, and left the safe Embraces of my Arms,

to venture his Neck in the Pursuit of a Fox . . . and I soon had the Torture to see myself rivall'd by his Hounds and his Horses: Ringwood was oftener Kiss'd than his Spouse, and Whitefoot had more of his Conversation?.' However we know that relief was to come and that the ladies would eventually ride as hard as the men and rejoice at being blooded.

There is much joy to be had of the paintings in the Sir Abe Bailey collection, and while it is seldom possible to hang them all at once one room in the South African National Gallery is usually devoted to showing a selection of the finest. They are a notable asset in our national collection and it is not difficult to see how privileged we are to have them.

NOTES

- ¹ Guy Paget F.R. Hist. S.: Neglect of Sporting Pictures, *Apollo*, October 1943, p. 89.
- ² Ibid
- ³ Ibid
- ⁴ Guy Paget: *Sporting Pictures of England*, London (1945), page 14.
- ⁵ *British Sporting Paintings and Drawings in the Sir Abe Bailey Collection of the South African National Gallery*, Cape Town, p. 9
- ⁶ Roger Longrigg: *The English Squire and his Sport*, London (1977), p. 138
- ⁷ Quoted in John Arlott and Arthur Daley: *Pageantry of Sport*, London (1968), p. 113.

Opposite: IV John Frederick Herring, Junior op. 1860 – 1907. *Crossing The Railway*

V John Frederick Herring, Junior op. 1860 – 1907. *Finding The Scent*

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