



Man's Best Friend

Three Centuries of Canine Art

No one knows when this special relationship began, but records show man being buried with his dogs over fourteen thousand years ago. The dog, directly descended from the wolf, has become the most widely kept working, hunting and companion animal in human history.

The British Sporting Art Trust 2011 Show, *Man's Best Friend*, sponsored by an active champion of traditional British art James Harvey of James Harvey British Art, a new gallery in Chelsea, is a diverse and entertaining collection of about forty paintings, bronzes and ceramics spanning three centuries. In effect the exhibition presents a joyous depiction of essential Britishness, especially life in the countryside.

There will be working dogs and pampered pets - spaniels, foxhounds, terriers and greyhounds - hounds accompanied by horses and owners, and the occasional backup crowd of human extras, notably top-hatted Victorian gentlemen.

Touches of humour include an effigy of Sir Alfred and Lady Munnings' adored Pekingese, Black Knight, displayed next to his portrait, *Black Knight finishes his Diary*.

Timothy Cox, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the BSAT, declares his own favourite to be Billy the rat catching dog, a rare curiosity among the eight on loan from The Kennel Club.

Big name artists include George Stubbs, John Wootton (on loan from the Tate), Sawrey Gilpin (on loan from James Harvey British Art), and Munnings (three on loan from his eponymous museum).

About the *British Sporting Art Trust* (BSAT)

The British Sporting Art Trust, founded in 1977, is a pioneering, patriotic institution worth celebrating in its own right.

In the early 1970s American collectors were snapping up too many of the finest works by

Stubbs, Marshall and Ferneley. Lovers of sporting art were dismayed and determined to try to stem the flow.

Sir Norman Reid, then Director of the Tate Gallery, recognised a real gap in the Historic British Collection and appealed for help. Under the chairmanship of sporting art dealer and serious equestrian Peter Johnson, a group of enthusiasts formed the *British Sporting Art Trust*. The Trust is a charity with the following objective: The advancement of public education in the fine arts, particularly that branch of painting known as British Sporting Art.

Its first stroke of genius was to persuade HM Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother to become its first Patron, and Lord Dufferin its first Chairman.

opposite: Study of a Foxhound, 'Pytchley' by Sir Alfred Munnings

below: A black and white English Springer Spaniel in a landscape. By Sawrey Gilpin (1733 - 1807).



Over the years the Trust has acquired a fine collection of some 300 works, and a solid membership of 700 enthusiastic supporters.

Paul Mellon, son of old Yankee money, describing himself as a “galloping Anglophile” hooked on horse breeding, racing, hunting and other pastimes of the English gentry, was their first benefactor. He started amassing British art in late middle age, individual works and entire collections. He was the first to offer fifteen of his own paintings to the Trust, doubling the number when the Tate Gallery decided to allocate a permanent exhibition space to the genre. Another benefactor left twenty more in her will.

But a new Tate new director brought a change of policy, plans for a special space were scrapped, and the fifty paintings consigned to an underground storeroom. The Trust was undeterred and resolved not to give up on its mission to “educate the public”, deciding that the only solution was to establish an independent gallery.

Influential members managed to get The Jockey Club on board. This swanky institution set aside two rooms for the BSAT art collection and library at the National Horseracing Museum in Newmarket. No government aid could be found, but members' contributions created the funding.



The most generous contribution came from the late Mr Edmund Vestey, a meat millionaire, who was honoured when the gallery was named the Vestey Gallery.

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council recently gave the Vestey Gallery its stamp of approval, an important step forward, establishing The BSAT it as the Foremost Authority on sporting art.

Pretty well every country sport has made its way into the collection, from hunting, racing and coaching to fencing and croquet, as well as a large section on boxing donated by a Swiss collector. Most of the pictures in the annual exhibition come from its own collection, combined with loans from galleries around the country, the Tate itself, and private owners.

There have been some recent exhibitions of real distinction: *The Engraved Works of George Stubbs*; *Noble Art, Prize-Fighting in England*; and *Horses and Movement: the Paintings, Drawings and Prints of Lowes Dalbiac Luard (1872-1944)*. To honour its first twenty five years, the Trust held an exhibition at Christies: *Sporting Art in Britain*.

The main mission of the Trust is to promote all aspects of sporting art to as wide an audience as possible. Members are offered the chance to view private collections both here in the UK and



overseas. There have been trips to Ireland, Austria, France, Spain, Portugal, America and the Czech Republic to visit studs and equestrian centres, as well as galleries and museum.

The Trust, started in a spirit of preserving the best of the past, but always anxious to move forward, encourages young artists by sponsoring an award for best sporting art by an artist under 30 at the Society of Equestrian Art in London.

The most exciting piece of advance news is a planned move (dates to be confirmed) to a new gallery in a Royal Palace in the centre of Newmarket built in 1673 by King Charles II. The Palace House stables had been in continuous use as racing stables since the 17th century. The local council, owners of the site have sensibly decided to keep the space for equestrian use. The Home of Horseracing Trust will offer new leases to three horsey outfits, including the National Horseracing Museum, a Racehorse Training Trust and, most

relevant for our story, the enterprising British Sporting Art Trust.

This will be an important new visitor attraction in Newmarket, the original home of thoroughbred racing, and what more suitable venue than a Royal Palace for the 'sport of kings' and its celebration in Fine Art.

Man's Best Friend: Dogs and Hounds of Field and Show, sponsored by James Harvey British Art and Lane Fine Art, runs 1 March - 31 October at the Vestey Gallery, 99 High Street, Newmarket, Suffolk, CB8 8JH. Telephone: +44 (0) 1638 664429. www.bsat.org.uk Open Daily (including Bank Holidays) 10am - 5pm (last admission 4.15pm).

James Harvey British Art, 15 Langton Street, Chelsea, London, SW10 0JL. www.jamesharveybritishart.com Monday - Friday 10am to 6pm.

opposite bottom: Study of a Dog for Lady Munnings on Grey Hunter, by Sir Alfred Munnings

opposite top: Black Knight Finishes his Diary by Sir Alfred Munnings

below: Jacques Laurent Agasse, Two Fox Terriers

