Stubbs' seeing

The English painter George Stubbs, best known for his pictures of horses, was recognized in his own lifetime for the anatomical exactitude of his work. His reputation led him into the debates about creation and extinction.

Martin Kemp

The revolution in visual communication in the Renaissance nowhere exercised a more profound effect than on the illustration of natural history. Although skill in naturalistic representation can be a double-edged sword — an accomplished artist can make a unicorn look as 'real' as a narwhal — the rigorous portrayal of specimens from life played a key role in conveying knowledge about the ever-widening spectrum of natural marvels. That most English of English painters, George Stubbs, stood as a distinguished heir to the Renaissance tradition and demonstrates vividly how pictorial evidence can serve as powerful tool for both information and speculation.

In 1770, probably in the autumn, the physician in ordinary to Queen Charlotte, William Hunter, "obtained leave to have a Picture made... by Mr. Stubbs" of the first bull moose to arrive from Canada, imported by the Duke of Richmond. As Hunter tells us, "no pains were spared by that great Artist to exhibit an exact resemblance both of the young animal itself and of a pair of Horns of the full-grown Animal".

Hunter's desire to pin down the exact appearance of the moose was motivated less by old-fashioned curiosity than by the newest debates about extinction.

Three years later he inspected a second moose imported by the Duke, "carrying with us Mr. Stubbs's picture".

Hunter had already argued conclusively that the bones of the so-called Ohio incognitum

George Stubbs, *The Duke of Richmond's Bull Moose*, 1770.

(the mastodon) were not those of an elephant, and he intended Stubbs's painting to confirm that the 'Irish Elk', known through fossils, was not the same as the extant moose. Such a confirmation would have broken another of the links in 'the Great Chain of Being', the traditional doctrine that maintained the eternal continuity of the full spectrum of God's creations.

Stubbs was the ideal artist for the task. He had already published his superb *The Anatomy of the Horse*, containing "eighteen TABLES, all done from Nature", and he was passionately interested in comparative anatomy.

George Stubbs,
The Human Skeleton in Crawling Posture, c.1800.

The project on which he was working at his death in 1806 was *A Comparative Anatomical Exposition of the Structure of the Human Body with that of a Tiger and a Common Fowl*, for which he drew some remarkable images of a human skeleton in animal postures.

His paintings of wild animals, particularly those of terrified horses savaged by lions, purveyed an innovative view of the dramatic interplay of animate and inanimate agencies in nature.

Even if his static moose does not lend itself to exciting narrative, the stirring nature of the lakeland wilderness inhabited by the creature is enhanced by the febrile gloom of the encroaching storm.

Hunter never published his paper on the 'Irish Elk', in the absence of secure data about the range of antler types in the mature moose and uncertainty about the possible survival of the 'Elk' in as yet unexplored wastes. But the artist and the doctor were beginning to sow the intellectual seeds that Darwin was to cultivate to such effect in the nineteenth century.

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