

Stubbs, George (1766) *The Anatomy of the Horse*

George Stubbs (1724-1806) was the son of a Liverpool carrier. His interest in anatomy appears to have started in childhood with an early memoir recording that he was 8 years old when a neighbour lent him 'bones & prepared subjects'.

In 1745 he moved to York so that he could study human anatomy at York County Hospital. Whilst there his interest in anatomy and dissection, coupled with his drawing skills, led Dr John Burton to ask him to design and etch plates for a work he was writing which was subsequently published as *Essay towards a Complete New System of Midwifery* in 1751. To complete this task Stubbs taught himself how to etch.

Around this time Stubbs began to discuss his desire to study the anatomy of the horse with colleagues in York. It is not clear where his interest came from but Stubbs would have helped his father prepare horse hides for the tannery as a child and it may have stemmed from this. The only text on equine anatomy was Carlo Ruini's *Anatomia del cavallo, infermita, et suoi rimedii* which had been published in 1598

In 1756 he moved to a farmhouse in Horkstow, Lincolnshire and began work. For around eighteen months he worked – first bleeding the horses by the jugular vein and then injecting a wax like substance into the veins and arteries to preserve their shape. He then hung them from hooks in the ceiling, suspending them so that they were in a natural position, and dissected them layer-by-layer. Each dissected horse lasted about six weeks. As he dissected he drew – 42 of these drawings have survived.

Stubbs then moved to London in 1758 and approached a number of professional engravers to etch his drawings. Unable to find anyone to do this he set about doing it himself. As he was busy with other commissions this took many years, finally in 1766, they were ready for publication as a bound book.

The full title is *The Anatomy of the horse including a particular description of the bones, cartilages, muscles, fascias, ligaments, nerves, arteries, veins, and glands; in eighteen tables, all done from nature*. It was published as a landscape folio (56cm x 45cm) with 47 pages of text and 15 plates. The plates begin with views of the skeleton from the side, front and back followed by views from similar angles at the different stages of dissection.

In the first issue the plates were printed on heavy grade paper with no watermarks, copies of this first edition were later issued with the plates printed on a lighter quality paper and watermarked 1793, 1812 or 1823 so it would appear that there was an original stock of text sheets with the plates printed as required.

When he first moved to London Stubbs had shown his anatomical drawings of the horse to various wealthy gentlemen with an interest in horse racing and breeding in the hope that it would lead to commissions of equine work. The first of these was from the Third Duke of Richmond who invited Stubbs to paint three scenes in and around Goodwood. Other work rapidly followed, the most famous of which is probably his painting of Whistlejacket which was completed in 1762 for the 2nd Marquess of Rockingham.

Sources

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography