

Painters in the field

The British Sporting Art Trust's collection of prints and paintings from heroic days past are soon to be joined by three monumental 21st-century commissions.

Kate Green talks to the artists

Photographs by Millie Pilkington and Alex Bradbury

THE collector of sporting art is often as much in love with the precious world movingly depicted on the canvas as with the art itself. For these are works that evoke happy memories and feelings of longing and nostalgia, as well as admiration for the nobility of animals.

A Lionel Edwards painting of the Exmoor Foxhounds (1958)—a wedding present to my parents—is synonymous with a damp moorland breeze and a hunter swinging sure-footedly and prick-eared down a steep combe behind hounds; there is hectic, sweaty ante-post anticipation in Sir Alfred Munnings's famous *Moving Up For The Start* (1950); and a touching trust in the dignified expression of the gleaming Thoroughbred horse in American artist Franklin Brook Voss's *Drimore Lad* (1936). The creators of much sporting art are anatomists, landscapers and portraitists combined; in the past, many were active sportsmen themselves and their understanding of the bond between Man and horse, hound, hawk, dog or quarry is what gives their work its soul.

‘My love of painting horses is less to do with sport and more to do with aesthetics’

Sporting art is, of course, not only about animals—the British Sporting Art Trust (BSAT) collection includes fencing, boxing, cricket and archery, among other topics—but its supporters do tend to have an affinity with country sports. The BSAT, a charity of which the patron is now The Duchess of Cornwall (it was initially the Queen Mother), was founded in 1977 to build up a collection of this work.

Its principal driving forces were the writer and sporting-art authority Stella Walker; Robert Fountain, a doctor, hunting man, carriage-driver and collector; Peter Johnson, a long-established fine-art dealer (formerly of Ackermann & Johnson); and the late



Above: The Quorn at Little Belvoir by Lionel Edwards, with The Duchess of Cornwall's grandfather Roland Cubitt MFH in scarlet on the left. Facing page: Charles Church, painter of top equines, at work on his portrait of former Belvoir huntsman John Holliday

Claude Berry, a director of the Tryon Gallery, racehorse breeder and superb horseman.

It was the culmination of a campaign that started in the 1930s, through articles in *COUNTRY LIFE*, *Horse & Hound* and similar publications. The chief motivations were the loss of so many works to American collectors, who were pushing prices beyond the reach of British buyers, the pressure on country-house owners to dispense with anything that might increase the burden of inheritance tax and the need to preserve a record of British country life.

As BSAT chief executive Tim Cox explains, it was somewhat ironic that one of the leading US collectors, the philanthropist Paul Mellon, was also the most generous to the UK, donating 30 paintings. At the time, it was mooted that Tate would have a gallery devoted to sporting art; this didn't happen, but the Mellon pictures are frequently shown in the BSAT's home within the National Horse Racing Museum, housed in what was Charles II's Palace House in Newmarket, Suffolk: 'Sporting art in a sporting palace,' as Mr Cox describes it.

Mr Cox, a retired advertising executive, is one of the largely unsung heroes of the BSAT, of which he has been a member since nearly the start. He doesn't keep—or hunt—any animals, but is 'passionate' about the history of horseracing, has 18,000 books housed in a three-storey library and has painstakingly updated records. 'It is the expansion of the archive that is my interest. A lot of the [BSAT] prints had images of horses, jockeys and trainers whose names were not with Wetherby's,' he explains.

'I do like going around the gallery with experienced country sportsmen—a hawker or huntsman, say, who tells me what is in the art and what is going on. They can describe it so vividly that it brings to life the pictures and that's what I get out of it, more than a happy country scene.'

The BSAT's A-Z of artists runs from Michael Atwell to Doris Clare Zinkeison, who painted Mellon's Derby winner, Mill Reef, but only a tiny fraction are living. Now, three new commissioned paintings will refresh the collection.

BSAT chairman John Chatfeild-Roberts, a lead investment manager at Jupiter Unit →



Trusts who lives in Belvoir hunting country in Leicestershire, is himself a keen collector, of Munnings, Edwards, Cuneo and Seago, but also much 21st-century art—‘I’m a bit of a loose cannon,’ he confesses. In 2010, he commissioned Charles Church to paint his son, Tom, now an amateur jockey, when he was hunting the Radley College beagles and he owns works by the likes of Susie Whitcombe, who painted his hunter, Geronimo—‘she’s a cool person, the canvas arrived in a two-seater plane’—Susan Crawford, Tom Evetts and sculptor Caroline Nunneley.

‘A person looking at the BSAT collection might think “gosh, they’ve got some nice pictures, but some are a bit fuddy duddy”,’ Mr Chatfeild-Roberts suggests. ‘I think we need to give it a shot in the arm. We’ve had lively debates about the direction and we’ve come to the conclusion that we still want to be about country sports. I did think once this should include rugby, cricket and so on, but basically our members are fieldsports folk and we couldn’t compete with Lord’s. However, more people shoot than hunt now, so we probably need to go in that way as well. By keeping this art in the public eye, it makes it normal. We’re doing people a disservice if we don’t.’

Membership of the BSAT costs £55 (£75 joint) and includes free entry to the National Horse Racing Museum, reduced entry to exhibitions and the annual Paul Mellon Lecture (01638 664429; www.bsat.co.uk)

Charles Church

CHARLES CHURCH’S BSAT commission is a monumental (5ft 6in by 7ft 8in) portrait of legendary huntsman John Holliday, who retired from the Belvoir this spring, and his hounds. ‘I do paint reasonably big pictures, but they don’t tend to go over 4ft–5ft,’ Mr Church observes. ‘I definitely had to learn how to work at that scale.’

The project was initially thwarted by Covid restrictions. He finally got his subject to pose in April 2021, but it was during lockdown, there had been no hunting for months, both horse and huntsman had their ‘summer coats’ and there was too much greenery in the trees.

Mr Church, who studied at the Cecil School in Florence and now lives in Dorset, is neither a horseman nor a hunting man; he had a countryside upbringing, in Northumberland, but not with ponies. He did, however, become interested in racing at about the same time he developed a keenness for painting, aged 15, ‘and it snowballed from there’.

His patrons include bloodstock owners the Sultan of Oman, the Aga Khan, John

Magnier and Lady Lloyd-Webber, and he has painted more than 80 Grade 1-winning racehorses, including Harzand, Hurricane Run, Enable and Golden Horn, as well as the five-star eventer Arctic Soul and Exmoor huntsman Tony Wright. A portrait of an elegant lady MFH overlooking the Dorset coast and those of family groups hacking across the landscape with their dogs have a definite Munnings-esque flavour.

‘I love Munnings—I love most of them [the sporting artists of the past]—but he is more akin to the painterly style in which I work and I work outdoors a lot, as did he. Lionel Edwards tended to be illustrative and imagined, whereas Munnings painted more what was in front of him.’

He explains: ‘In some respects, I don’t think of myself as a sporting artist—I’m more of an artist who paints horses. I’m interested in animals rather than the chase and my love of painting horses is less to do with sport and more to do with aesthetics.’ *Charles Church’s next exhibition, featuring livestock, poultry, hounds, horses and landscapes, is ‘Pastures New’ at Gallery 8, Duke Street, London SW1, November 21–26 (www.charleschurch.net)*

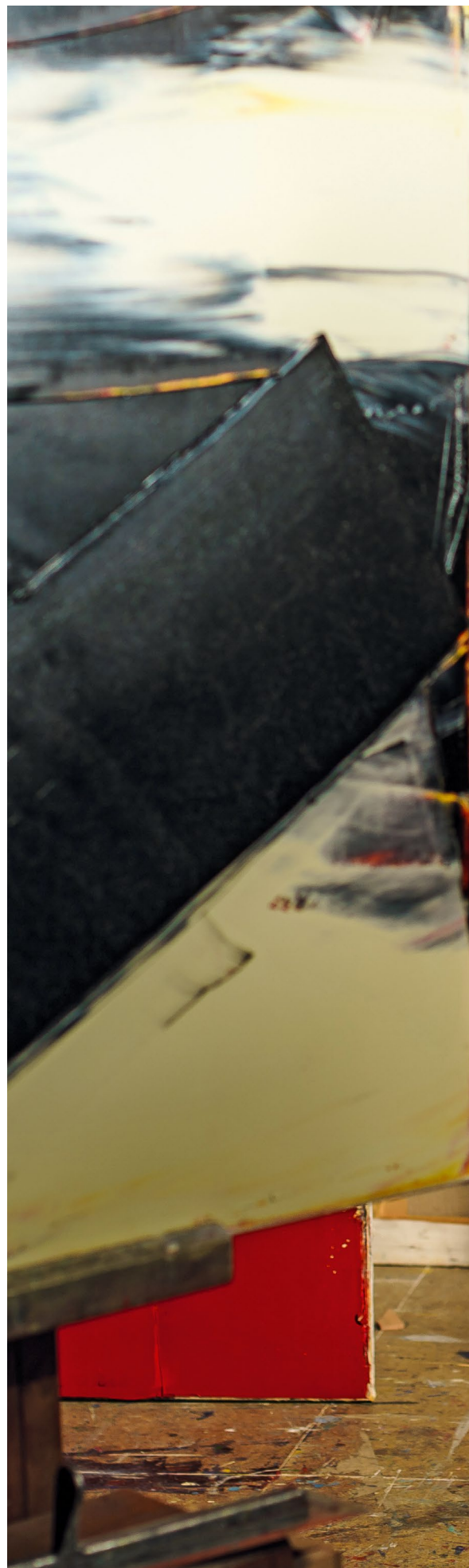
‘A lot of artists are image driven, but paint is what interests me, the surface, tension and movement’

Marcus Hodge

THE painting career of Marcus Hodge, who will take the sport of polo as his BSAT subject, has taken many roads and he acknowledges that he represents an ‘unusual choice’ for the charity. ‘I was surprised to get the commission,’ he admits. ‘I find painting to be a journey that keeps moving. A lot of artists are very image driven, but paint is what interests me the most, the surface, tension and movement.’

Mr Hodge read economics and didn’t start as an artist until he was 25, studying classical oil painting in Majorca for five years, after which he married and returned to England in 1996. He was initially a portrait painter, working with Fine Art Commissions, but travelling to India in 2000 changed everything: ‘I was brought up by my grandparents and my interest in India comes →

The colours of India and the long history of polo absorb Marcus Hodge, who will visit a club in Jodhpur this autumn, ‘where the stories are’, to prepare for his large-scale work







As at home in the air as she is on a horse, former jockey Susie Whitcombe will capture the glory of Goodwood in her commission

from them, as they had lived and worked there and their house was infused with it—pictures, furniture, cooking.’

His work is now chiefly abstract, bold, vibrant and layered, using paint almost in a sculptural way, often applied with spatulas, knives or lengths of wood. ‘I wanted something new and fresh,’ he explains. ‘The abstract route has invigorated my painting.’

The BSAT commission isn’t completely left of field, however: Mr Hodge rode as a child, his portfolio includes several horse paintings, including of horse fairs in Rajasthan, and he has exhibited at—and is still championed by—the Osborne Studio Gallery, which specialises in sporting and equestrian art. ‘I think horses are the most beautiful, mechanical creatures—I view them sculpturally,’ he says.

Polo is a natural subject choice for its Indian associations. It will be a large-scale painting, about 8ft–9ft across, and the canvas ‘will be filled with clues’ about how the sport has spanned history and the world, from Alexander the Great to the polo fields of Calcutta, where it was played by British cavalry officers, the adoption of the game in the UK and US and the present-day domination of Argentinian 10-goalers who clone their best ponies.

Mr Hodge has already been researching at the Beaufort and Kirtlington polo clubs

and plans to travel to India in October, to a club in Jodhpur. ‘I’m going to go where the stories are,’ he says. ‘I am hoping this is going to give me another fresh perspective.’

www.marcushodge.com

‘I persevered and have been flying for 35 years. I love it—it’s like riding a horse’

Susie Whitcombe

SUSIE WHITCOMBE describes herself on her Instagram account as ‘artist, horse-woman and pilot’ and brings romance to her art by delivering canvases by plane—she owns three, including a Tiger Moth, and, in 2013, flew her Super Cub over the Valley of Death with the Royal Air Squadron, dropping poppies into it to mark the Charge of the Light Brigade. ‘My brother learned to fly at university and I thought, how difficult can that be? Actually, it’s incredibly difficult, but I persevered and have been flying for 35 years. I love it—it’s like riding a horse.’

Her painting for the BSAT, which is under way, will be a racing scene, at Goodwood in

West Sussex. ‘It’s my local track and unbelievably lovely,’ she says. ‘It hasn’t been done that often, but is very recognisable, and it’s unusual in that it’s not a circuit. It’s lovely to be part of this scheme, great fun.’

A founder member of the Society of Equestrian Artists, she grew up on a Hampshire farm with horses and cattle and still rides—she has three Thoroughbreds, one homebred, at home in West Meon. ‘I wasn’t brought up with the competitive side of horses—it was more about livestock breeding; how people and animals intertwine is my interest.

‘I’ve hunted, in Northumberland and France, I had a lady jockey’s licence, I’ve ridden all over—in Australia, in the Wadi Rum in Jordan—and I once ponced about pretending to be a dressage rider. I love how horses and people live together around the world—wherever you go, someone will be cherishing a horse.’

Miss Whitcombe, whose work is reminiscent of the working-horse painter Lucy Kemp-Welch, illustrator of *Black Beauty*, trained at the Heatherley School of Fine Art in London. She cites as early inspirations the impressionist Wilfred de Glehn and the Glasgow Boys, notably Joseph Crawhall, also a horseman and a painter of animals. ‘They were fantastic colourists and they loved to paint just for the fun of it.’

www.susiewhitcombe.com