**Animalia, Autopsia, Natura: George Stubbs, *The Moose*, 1770**

**Fig 2.** Two paintings belonging to the original collections of the physician and anatomist, Dr. William Hunter (1718-1783), now in the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow, are believed to have been commissioned from George Stubbs while Hunter was engaged in research on comparative anatomy: one, the *Nylgai* (1769), in the possession of Queen Charlotte and the other, *The Moose* (1770), belonging to the Duke of Richmond. Both paintings demonstrate the close professional relationship between Stubbs and Hunter in the middle years of the eighteenth century, with Hunter tellingly remarking that *The Nylgai* was painted by Stubbs ‘under my eye’, inferring a collaboration between artist and anatomist. While Stubbs’s *Nylgai* formed the basis of Hunter’s paper presented to the Royal Society in 1771, his researches on the Moose were not published and existed as manuscript notes only for many years. Remaining in such obscurity, therefore, *The Moose*, appears to be an unlikely exemplar of the sublime works by Stubbs referred to by the naturalist, Thomas Pennant’s in *British Zoology*, where he refers to Stubbs as: ‘an artist not less happy representing animals in their still moments, than when agitated by their furious passions, his matchless paintings of horses will be lasting monuments of the one and that of the lion and panther the other’. This paper suggests that The Moose is an example of Stubbs’s skill at depicting an animal in its still moment, and proposes *The Moose* might also be considered amongst Stubbs’s pioneering works of animal painting as it demonstrates the artist’s keen knowledge of comparative anatomy, zoology and natural history in the rather somber and solitary image of the Moose, or Canadian Elk.

Much of the cultural fascination surrounding this animal in the eighteenth century originated in ideas of migration, domestication and extinction, and explains their inclusion within the collections and menageries of individuals such as Queen Charlotte and the Duke of Richmond. Hunter was particularly intrigued by such theories and his manuscript notes explain how he was keen to distinguish this animal from the Irish Elk, a similar animal, whose fossil remains had been found in bog sites in Ireland and which Hunter believed to be

extinct. Invited by General Carleton, a future Governor General of Canada, to examine the animal, Hunter instructed Stubbs to ‘get a picture of it made’, commenting that ‘no pains was 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’.

**Fig 3.** In the 1770s, William Hunter was engaged in several personal projects, the most important being research for his impressive *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus* (Baskerville, Birmingham 1774), with its precise, highly detailed, life-size engravings, depicting the stages of pregnancy, all of which were drawn by his artists from ‘life’.

**Fig 4.** During this period, he had also turned his attention to comparative anatomy, attending to various studies with his brother, the famous surgeon, John Hunter. In his paper on the Nylghau which was published and read to the Royal Society in 1771, he describes the advantages of intricately composed and meticulous images over written descriptions for the purposes of conveying knowledge of natural history:

‘Good paintings of animals give much clearer ideas than descriptions. Whoever looks at the picture which was done under my eye, by Mr. Stubbs, that excellent painter of animals, can never be at a loss to know the Nyl-ghau, wherever he may happen to meet with it.’

This belief in the capacity of an image to inform and instruct in a way not readily reducible to language conforms with Stubbs’s and Hunter’s antiquarian approach to the study of natural history and Stubbs depicts something of the animal’s temperament, as expressed by Hunter in his anthropomorphised description:

‘All of the time that the two of them were in my stable, I observed this particularity, *viz*, that whenever any attempt was made upon them, they immediately fell down upon their fore-knees; and sometimes they would do so when I came before them; but, as they never darted, I so little thought this posture meant hostility, that I rather supposed it expressive of a timid or obsequious humility.’

**Fig 5.** Similarly, in his descriptions of the Moose, Hunter remarks on the animal’s character, anthropormorphising its behavior towards him:

‘He appeared to be more intelligent, more grave & docile than a Horse of the same Age, and less apt to be offended. He knew his keeper, and there was a very sincere and mutual friendship between them: but he was not shy of strangers, that he would follow anybody who would shew him a piece of bread or an apple’.

**Fig 6.** In his manuscript notes Hunter describes a list of artists’ impressions of the animal from a variety of naturalists’ descriptions, including Conrad Gesner (1516-1565) and Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) (or Aldrovandus as Hunter writes); none of whom he believed had ever seen a moose in real life and whose images were illustrated by artists from written or spoken descriptions of the animal only. Reiterating how effective good paintings or engravings might be in furthering natural knowledge, Hunter writes of Stubbs’s image:

 ‘In describing this animal, we shall mention only such things as cannot be understood by seeing the picture itself, or an accurate engraving’.

**Fig 7.** In fact, Hunter was in regular correspondence with Thomas Pennant during this period, and along with Stubbs, all three men were actively pursuing knowledge of the natural world in a relentless exploration and examination of the interconnected worlds of zoology, topography, botany, geology and other emerging forms of enquiry and field studies. Their desire as naturalists was to understand the most intimate of relationships between living species.

**Fig 8**. In this respect, Thomas Pennant formed the nucleus of a vast network of early scientists, providing the means and the energy to travel throughout the British isles, collecting information of natural knowledge, usually accompanied by his artist Moses Griffiths. In one extract from Pennant’s *Arctic Zoology*, 1784-5, an incredibly ambitious work which incorporates Scotland within an expansive survey of the countries of the Northern hemisphere, including Greenland, Iceland and the islands of Faroe and Fair Isle, Pennant describes the fowlers of the Faroe Islands:

‘… The dexterity of the fowlers is amazing; they will place their feet against the front of the precipice, and dart themselves some fathoms from it, with a cool eye survey the places where the birds nestle, and again shoot into their haunts.’

The swiftness and acrobatic abilities of the fowlers in Pennant’s description suggests a similarity between the characteristics of the men and the birds, much as William Hunter’s account of the Nylgai and the Moose attributed the animal with certain human qualities such as obsequiousness, so Pennant’s fowlers are imbued with bird-like deftness. The fowlers will even crawl inside the crannies of the precipice, like the birds, to find shelter, sometimes for seven or eight days at a time.

The purpose of Pennant’s reverse anthropomorphizing is not necessarily intended to relate a simple attribution of animal mannerisms to human beings. Rather, the account seeks to convey a strong awareness of the synergy between living creatures, particularly under perilous conditions. Just as George Stubbs’s anatomical correctness relays a visceral experience of the sublime, Pennant’s presentation of the extremities of life lived on the cold, hard rock face, delineated in sharp detail in an accompanying drawing, provides the reader and the viewer with a vitalizing narrative.

**Fig 9.** In his painting of the moose, Stubbs expresses many of these sentiments toward human and animal relations. Read alongside Hunter’s description, Stubbs’s expressive, anatomically accurate image creates a sensibility that defies narrow interpretations of naturalism such as those often attributed to Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy of Arts.

**Fig 10**. In an often-quoted reference, Reynolds tells his students that: ‘a mere copier of nature can never produce anything great; can never raise and enlarge the conceptions, or warm the heart of the spectator’. Remarks such as these appear throughout Reynolds’s *Discourses* and contributed to a tension in the Royal Academy, during the period, on the appropriateness of depictions of natural objects.

**Fig 11.** The opinions of academicians such as Reynolds and Hunter were influential on the ways that naturalists proceeded in their work of recording and inscribing knowledge of Britain’s material environment, as the fine arts developed a new ‘visual discourse’ that identified archaeology, topography, and antiquities, alongside the natural productions of the nation, with Hunter’s *Anatomy of the Gravid Uterus* demonstrating perhaps the exemplar that unites medical illustration with the fine arts to represent natural knowledge in its original reality.

**Fig 12**. George Stubbs’s ability to convey the ferocious passions and still moments in his studies of these animals is no doubt attributable to his intense and extensive knowledge of anatomy and in his highly trained skills of *autopsia*. Ozias Humphry, in his memoir of Stubbs remarked that the artist, on being instructed to copy from a series of Old Master paintings by his teacher, Hamlet Winstanley (1698-1756), refused to entertain the idea and instead vowed to only work directly from nature. The empirical origins of Stubbs’s images distinguish them from the conventions of both Neoclassicism and Romanticism; like Pennant’s descriptions and Hunter’s researches, Stubbs’s artworks are revelatory, deeply integrated within empirical scientific knowledge of the mid-late eighteenth century, a period characterised by a move away from mechanistic and mathematical theories of living organisms to an intense exploration of the life force of matter itself.

**Fig 13.** It is clear that Thomas Pennant selected Stubbs’s painting as plate VII in *Arctic Zoolog*y exactly for its *vita vitalis*; its extreme anatomical tension, an artistic and intellectual skill summarised by Hunter as the principle means of conveying natural knowledge:

Yet for many purposes, especially in the Arts, and in Natural History there is a language which is both easily acquired, & tho’ not so copious, is more expressive than any language in the world, and at the same time so plain that the unlearned as well as the learned, understand it at first sight: I mean the art of drawing. What a pity it is that it had not been sooner introduced, and more generally used! As descriptions in this language are so expressive, so precise and well determined, they have more credit than descriptions in common language; especially too as they are all presumed to be taken from the Life.

These sentiments are also revealed in Pennant’s selection of some lines from James Thomson’s poem *Winter,* first published in 1726:

*Rais’d o’er the heapy wreath, the branching elk,*

*Lies slumbering sullen in the white abyss.*

*The ruthless hunter wants nor dogs nor toils;*

*Nor with the dread of sounding bows he drives*

*The fearful flying race, with ponderous clubs,*

*As weak against the mountain heaps they push*

*Their beating breast in vein, and piteous bray,*

*He lays them quivering on th’ ensanguin’d snows,*

*And with loud shouts rejoicing bears them home*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

While Pennant’s description of the moose seems rather insensitive, ‘The vast size of the head, the shortness of the neck, and the length of the ears, give the beast a deformed and stupid look’, it is the means of hunting and killing these inoffensive creatures that occasions his sympathies.

The hunters avoid entering on the chase till the sun is strong enough to melt the frozen crust with which the snow is covered, otherwise the animal can run over the firm surface: they wait till it becomes soft enough to impede the flight of the Moose; which sinks up to the shoulders, flounders, and gets on with great difficulty. The sportsman pursues at his ease on his broad rackets, or snowshoes, and makes a ready prey of the distressed animals.

Thomson’s poetry, alongside Stubbs’s illustration of the moose demonstrates the commitment to accuracy and authenticity of these naturalists. Suitably, Thomson’s poetry achieved the ultimate form of naturalistic representation having initiated a blind-verse style that encapsulated *pure* description of the natural world. Thomson’s popular and enduring verses established, in a general sense, that as the objects of nature were appropriate subjects for poetry, so they were entirely suitable subjects for painting, argued the surgeon-poet John Akin in 1778:

[I]t was, however, thought that they could not legitimately constitute the whole, or even the principal part of a capital piece. Something of a more solid nature was required as the ground-work of a poetical fabric: *pure description* was opposed to *sense*; and binding together the wild flowers which grew obvious to common sight and touch, was deemed a trifling and unprofitable amusement.

In his essay in response to Thomson’s *The Seasons*, Aikin argued that Thomson had rejected the ‘antient’ taste for an ‘abstracted’ nature:

The most faithful pencil here produces the noblest pictures; and Thomson by strictly adhering to the character of the poet of nature, has treated all these topics with a true sublimity, which a writer of less knowledge and accuracy could never have attained.

Therefore, exactness and accuracy creates noble imagery, drawn with a faithful or truthful pencil, exhorting a sublime experience in the reader and made even more pronounced by the inclusion of Stubbs’s anatomical exactness.

Aikin argues, modern [scientific] philosophy presented the opportunity to explore these affections of physical sensations, and intellectual enquiry and his ‘on the Plan and Character’ of Thomson’s poem might also be understood as a response to the physico-theology represented in the poet’s writings in his own time; an aspect of Thomson’s poetry that often situates him within an earlier period of Newtonian (mechanical) sciences rather than modern Burkean vitalism, as might be said for Stubbs’s reputation also? Nonetheless, there are aspects of Thomson’s imagery that appear to speculate more imaginatively on the interconnections between physical sensations, corporeal impressions and other living matter, that would have appealed to Aikin, Hunter and Pennant

William Hunter and George Stubbs understood that the work of artists was essential in the production of knowledge of natural history and of objects related to the natural sciences. Their collaborations reflect the concerns of naturalists to combine a number of interrelated subjects, including anatomy, zoology, geology and topography, among many others. The extent of their interests reached as far as the elite environs of the Royal Academy of Arts and the Royal Society and to the furthest points of antiquarian curiosity at the peripheries of the globe. The potential for elaborate and stimulating artworks that would result from such curiosity was combined with an apprehension that images might not be ‘truthful’ or accurate enough to convey understanding. Recourse to empiricism demanded by these eighteenth-century naturalists was indeterminate and images subject to such ‘distinguishing’ eyes reveal the various convergences of debates on the role of the fine arts in the imitation of nature and on the workings of mimesis. Anatomical experimentation constituted just one aspect of the natural sciences that came to influence artists’ representation of the natural world, intensifying and exhorting viewers to an understanding of natural knowledge, in some cases.

**Fig 14.** This quality of arresting imagery might also be attributed to the Stubbs’s final project: *The* *Comparative Anatomical Exposition of the Structure of the Human Body with that of a Tiger and a Common Fowl* (1795-1806). Ultimately, Stubbs’s proposed anatomical atlas might have been equal to Hunter’s *Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus*, had the artist been able to finish it. The extraordinary drawings relate to Stubbs’ own research on the comparisons between the physiology of humans with less complex animals and appears to follow the type of comparative anatomical experiments being conducted by John Hunter which were eventually published in his book, *The Natural History of the Human Teeth, Explaining their Structure, Use, Formation, Growth and Disease* (1771).

**Fig 15.** John Hunter had famously succeeded in transplanting a human tooth onto the head of a cockerel’s coxcomb (the original preparation remains in the Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons, London), suggesting that such transplantations appear to be possible in animals with less complex physiological systems.

**Fig 16.** Stubbs seems to have been following a similar line of enquiry in his *Comparative Anatomical Exposition*, moving ever more intensely to a Burkean vitalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The End

1. James Thomson, *Winter*, 1726, in *The Seasons by James Thomson to which is prefixed an Essay on the Plan and Character of the Poem by John Aikin*, London, 1778, p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)