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From Gainsborough to Hockney: The 300-year-old dog portraits



(Image credit: David Hockney)

By Matthew Wilson 27th March 2023

A new exhibition explores the mysterious connection between humans and hounds, writes Matthew Wilson.

As any mutt owner will attest, the human/hound bond is a profound one. What explains this special relationship? The Wallace Collection in London's new exhibition [Portraits of Dogs: from Gainsborough to Hockney](#) suggests that an answer can be found in visual art.

The curator of the exhibition, Xavier Bray, agrees. "The way that our relationship with dogs – that unexplainable, loving bond – transgresses into art history is fascinating, and a greater reflection of society," he tells BBC Culture.

As societies have evolved through history, changing feelings towards canines are captured in art. In different periods, we can see art focusing on certain attributes of our furry friends like empathy, faithfulness, super-attuned senses and intelligence. But there's also a hint at the deeper symbolic meaning of dogs that enters an altogether more esoteric and metaphysical realm.



Dog Painting 19 (1995) is part of David Hockney's series Dog Days, paying testament to his pet dachshunds at a time when he'd lost close friends to Aids (Credit: David Hockney)

One of the most appealing aspects of dogs is their apparent empathy with human feelings. This is tenderly evoked with the single beady eye holding our gaze in David Hockney's Dog Painting 30. It is one of 40 paintings of the artist's pet dachshunds Stanley and Boogie. The series was inspired by the death of the artist's close friend Henry Geldzahler. "I wanted desperately to paint something loving," Hockney has written. "I felt such a loss of love I wanted to deal with it in some way... They're like little people to me. The subject wasn't dogs but my love of the little creatures."

Reflecting our emotions

To see in dogs the mirroring of human emotion is an artistic trope that extends far back into history. It's thought that dogs were originally domesticated around 14,000 years ago, and the symbiotic relationship of hounds and people has even been captured in

cave paintings. The heyday for anthropomorphising mutts came in the 18th Century. The renowned portraitist Thomas Gainsborough wrote letters to his wife, delivered and "signed" by his favourite dog after marital arguments, and even hung a portrait of his two favourite pups in pride of place above his fireplace (Tristram and Fox, 1775-85). It reflects a way of thinking at the time – known as the cult of sensibility. Another of the exhibition's curators, Alexander Collins, tells BBC Culture: "it's very much part of a philosophical dialogue in the 18th Century about the nature of animals and whether they are receptive and emotionally intelligent. It's part of the spirit of the age of respecting animals and understanding their intelligence and giving them identity."



Hector, Nero and Dash with the Parrot Lory (1838) by Edwin Landseer draws on the symbolism of dogs as icons of devotion (Credit: His Majesty King Charles III 2022)

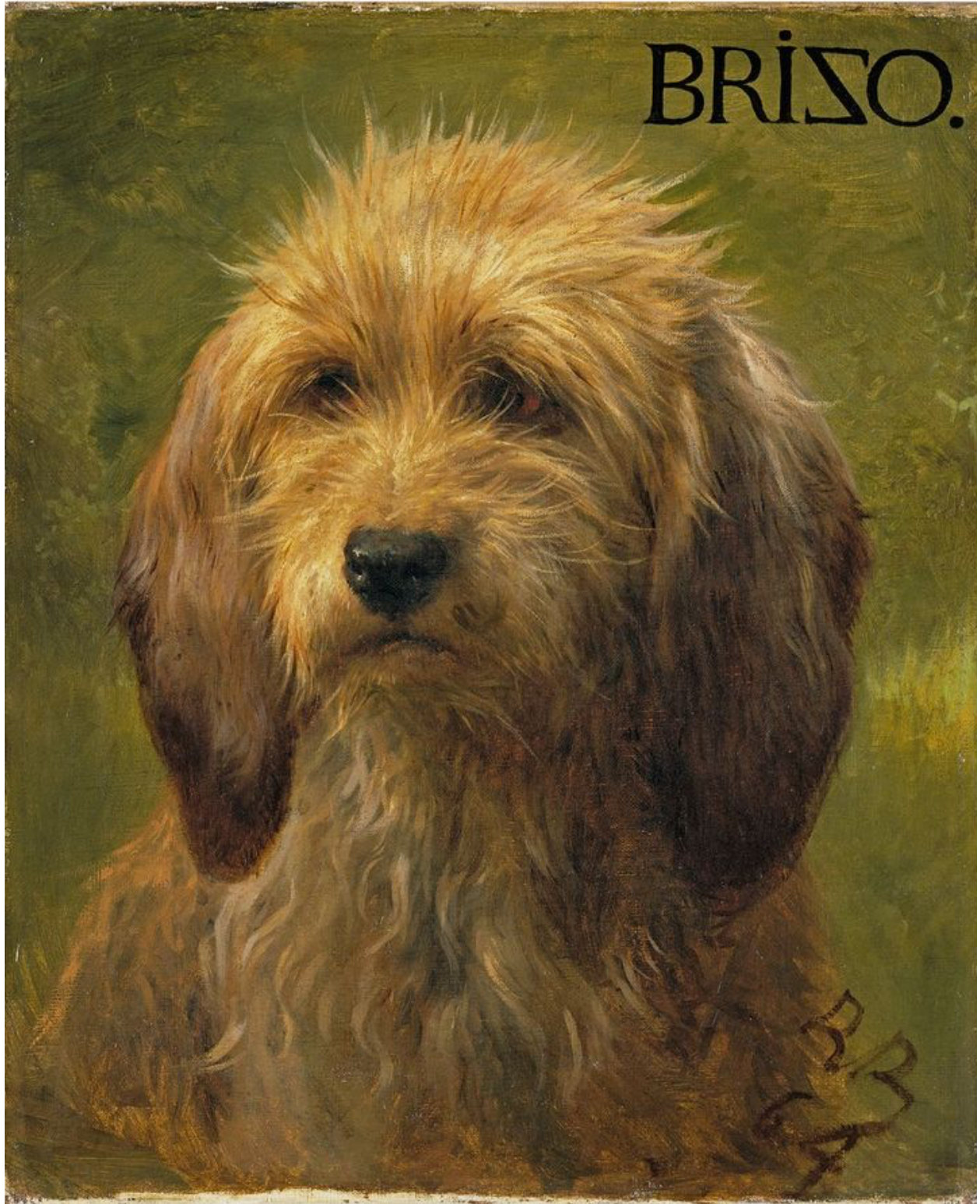
Another aspect of the canine psyche, consistently affirmed in art, is faithfulness. This comes across emphatically in the 19th-Century paintings of British painter Edwin Landseer. *Hector, Nero and Dash with the Parrot Lory* (1838) shows Queen Victoria's pet dogs as the epitome of steadfastness, contrasting with the greedy parrot below them, who absentmindedly spills nutshells all over the floor. Landseer's *The Old Shepherd's Chief Mourner* (c 1837) doubles down on the loyalty theme, showing a hound devotedly resting on her master's coffin with doleful, skygazing eyes.

In using a dog to represent the very apogee of fidelity, he was drawing upon an age-old symbolism. Ancient Greek funerary monuments used to show dogs as icons of devotion, mourning their deceased masters. In the Renaissance, the very first books that catalogued symbols in art (such as Andrea Alciato's *Emblemata* of 1531 and Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1593) showed dogs denoting loyalty.

In Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, a snugly sleeping pup has been inserted for precisely this reason, and marriage portraits from the Renaissance onwards frequently do the same. In the Sistine Chapel, it's possible to see faithful hounds inserted into religious scenes by the artist Cosimo Rosselli, and tombs in medieval churches often have dogs lying at the feet of the deceased. Even Lucien Freud's *Pluto* (1988), a gem of Wallace Collection's exhibition, affirms the same message. Seen from above, and incomplete, you can imagine Freud sketching the pup as it sleeps at his feet. Although he was fiercely opposed to any notion of symbolism in his art, Freud's portraits always show dogs in close proximity to human sitters, confirming their genetic predisposition for allegiance.

Super senses

By looking through art history, it is also obvious how impressed humanity has been with the canine superpowers of smell, hearing, strength and endurance. The first "dog portraits" were created to celebrate the impressive sensory skills of hunting dogs, and proudly included the names of particularly skilful mutts. These were **commissioned by King Louis XIV of France in 1701** to decorate his country retreat, the Chateau de Marly. This new genre was especially favoured in England, and attained new levels of skill in the hands of artists like George Stubbs. Stubbs's *Ringwood, A Brocklesby Foxhound* (1792) stands out in the exhibition, with the proud pup posing like a model and offering his best blue steel gaze.



Rosa Bonheur's Brizo, A Shepherd's Dog (1864) is one of a collection of pet portraits in the exhibition (Credit: The Trustees of The Wallace Collection)

Less naturally urbane, but perhaps more charming, is Brizo (1864), the pet of 19th-Century painter Rosa Bonheur. Brizo was a French Otterhound, a breed blessed with especially strong swimming abilities and a double coat for warmth. Her name derived from an ancient Greek goddess who was worshipped at Delos and protected sailors and fishermen.



James Ward's Fanny, A Favourite Dog (1822) placed the pet of an eminent British architect in the ruins of Athens (Credit: Trustees of Sir John Soane's Museum, London)

James Ward's Portrait of Fanny, A Favourite Dog (1822) gives us yet another perspective on the human obsession with hounds: their perceived intelligence. Fanny's owner, the eminent British architect Sir John Soane (1753-1837), commissioned this portrait after her death in 1820. According to Bray, Fanny was much loved by Soane. "How lucky can that dog be, having a Soane tomb! He couldn't resist putting Fanny within what appears to be the Parthenon ruins in Athens. So not only eulogising him but giving it a nice classical context." It's like he saw Fanny as a kind of wise fellow antiquarian.

There is a longstanding tradition in art history of dogs being the companion of an intellectual. This dates back at least as far as the early Renaissance poet and scholar Petrarch (1304-1374) who had eulogised the bravery, loyalty and intelligence of his pet pooch in verse. Portraits of Petrarch tended to include his dog at his feet. This convention was popularised in some of the most widely disseminated images of the Renaissance – the etchings of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). In his Saint Jerome in His Study (1514), the scholarly Jerome has his faithful hound. In Melencolia I, created in the same year, a frustrated thinker is again accompanied by a dog.



Titian's Venus of Urbino features a dog to depict loyalty, a common symbol in the Renaissance (Credit: Alamy)

It shouldn't be forgotten, however, that dogs have not always been universally admired or loved in human culture. The ancient Greeks and Romans may have been smitten by mutts, but the Christian bible, for example, has been decidedly more disdainful. The Book of Revelation described dogs as being one of the more unseemly inhabitants of planet Earth: "Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolators, and everyone who loves and practises falsehood" (22:15).

The ultimate journey

In ancient Egypt, it was probably the sight of jackals scavenging graveyards that gave rise to the appearance of the god Anubis, who had a jackal's head. Anubis originally presided over funerary rites but, by the Late Pharaonic Period (525-332 BC), his role had evolved. He became what's known as a "psychopomp" – a figure who escorts the deceased from the land of the living to the land of the dead. This development might reflect Egyptian society's evolving attitude to dogs, from seeing them as street curs to trusting them as loyal, domesticated pets.

Dogs are borderline creatures, on the threshold of two worlds – the human and the animal

The most fascinating aspect of this new religious role for dogs, however, is how it falls into line with many other global belief systems. For example, psychopomps in Celtic, Greco-Roman, Zoroastrian and Aztec mythologies are all dogs. In a curious example of syncretism (the melding or cross-over of religions), the god Hermanubis is an amalgamation of the Greek God Hermes (a psychopomp) and Anubis – now represented as a man with a dog's head. In Christian iconography, St Christopher is sometimes shown with a dog's face, although this is believed to be due to a translation error involving the words "canine" and "Canaanite".



Seen as one of Britain's best animal painters in his day, Charles Burton Barber made a portrait of Queen Victoria's dog Minna in 1873 (Credit: His Majesty King Charles III 2022)

The curiously pan-cultural phenomenon of dogs as psychopomps is an indication of our true relationship with our pooches. Dogs are borderline creatures, on the threshold of two worlds – the human and the animal. We see human qualities like faithfulness, empathy and intelligence mirrored in canine behaviour; but also we admire dogs' sensory superpowers and their more instinctive connection with the wild. The Wallace exhibition ultimately proves that we have always been infatuated with dogs because we consider them inbetweeners: half mirrors of our own behaviour, and half windows into the mysteries of nature.

And our interaction with these transitional creatures can be of profound consequence. "The relationship with dogs humanises people, and brings the best out of them," according to Bray. "The connection calms people – anxiety can be conquered by it – it can be a transformative relationship."

Portraits of Dogs: from Gainsborough to Hockney is at The Wallace Collection, London, from 29 March to 15 October 2023.

<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230324-from-gainsborough-to-hockney-the-300-year-old-pet-portraits>