

ART

Why our finest artists are obsessed with dogs

Man's best friend has been a muse to Britain's finest painters. A new exhibition at the Wallace Collection celebrates an enduring artistic fascination



Dog Painting 19, 1995 by David Hockney: After the death of a close friend, Hockney took his pair of pet dachshunds – Stanley and Boogie – as the muses for a series of 40 portraits. "I felt such a loss of love I wanted to deal with it in some way," he explained. "I realised I was painting my best friends."
© DAVID HOCKNEY. PHOTO BY RICHARD SCHMIDT COLLECTION THE DAVID HOCKNEY FOUNDATION

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Which painting did Thomas Gainsborough, the go-to artist of the 18th-century English grandee, hang in pride of place above his mantelpiece? Not some frock-coated lord or furbelowed marchioness but a portrait of Tristram and Fox, his

pair of cross-bred mutts. He was not the only one with such preferences. “I had rather see a portrait of a dog I know, than all the allegories you can show me,” his literary contemporary Samuel Johnson declared.

Some three centuries later the British still seem to concur. Just watch how swiftly red “sold” spots pop up on every dog picture at the Royal Academy’s annual Summer Exhibition. The society photographer Dylan Thomas recently published *Top Dogs: A British Love Affair* dedicated to images of luminaries posing with their pet canines — Andrew Lloyd Webber and his Havanese, Mojito; Lady Bamford with her five shih tzus. Queen Camilla, naturally, wrote the foreword.

“More than any other nationality, the British have commissioned and collected portraits of dogs,” says Xavier Bray, the director of the Wallace Collection in London, who has counted more than 900 images of canines in his museum. We may be more famous for developing landscape and portraiture, but we clearly possess — most markedly from the 17th century on — another national passion: painting our dogs.



Tristram and Fox, c 1775-85 by Thomas Gainsborough: Gainsborough's two pets — named after the fictional character Tristram Shandy and the Whig politician Charles James Fox — meant a great deal to him. One family friend recalled: "Whenever [Gainsborough] spoke crossly to his wife... he would write a note of repentance, sign it with the name of his favourite dog 'Fox', and address it to Margaret's pet spaniel 'Tristram'. Fox would take the note in his mouth and duly deliver it."

TATE IMAGES

Where did this obsession come from? How has it spread through our culture? And what does it say about us? Are we betraying ourselves as lowbrows, capable only of relating to the warm and the cuddly? Or can dog portraiture be as sophisticated as any other genre?

Portraits of Dogs, a forthcoming exhibition at the Wallace Collection, will feed our obsession. But it will also pose questions. More than 50 dog images will go on display: paintings, sculptures, drawings, objets d'art and even taxidermy — a little white terrier, displayed in a catafalque-style kennel, reclines amid her long fluff like some Victorian beauty in a froth of white lace — all belonging to British collections.

The show spans the course of art history. A marble-sculpted pair of playful greyhounds dates back to ancient Rome. Leonardo da Vinci makes a series of metalpoint studies of canine paws. The prepotent sire of the modern foxhound is immortalised by George Stubbs. But so also is the fluffball Maltese terrier “lion dog” of Lady Sarah Archer, a notorious 18th-century gambler. Presumably it sat peaceably on her lap while she fleeced all-comers at the card table and leapt up to yap defensively when losers complained. Sir Edwin Landseer led the pack in the Victorian era when, encouraged by Queen Victoria, who commissioned (and, indeed, herself painted) dozens of dog pictures, canine portraiture boomed. Lucian Freud's slimline whippets and David Hockney's portly dachshunds speak of a passion that continues into contemporary times.



Pluto, 1988 by Lucian Freud: Freud lived with several dogs in his lifetime, but his whippet Pluto, given to him as a pup in 1988, was perhaps his most treasured companion and was painted with as much care and attention as any human model. The last painting devoted to him was of his leaf-strewn grave.

LUCIAN FREUD, PLUTO, 1988 © PRIVATE COLLECTION THE LUCIAN FREUD ARCHIVE/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

We love our dogs, and we love looking at images of them. If once a display of spaniel portraits was only to be expected in the gun room of some great stately, now these floppy-eared canines and their ever more fashionable designer off-shoots are as likely to be found on the urban living room wall. Online you will find a rapidly growing — and never more rapidly than during the pandemic — array of artists offering to paint your pet. Where once the photo of your child's graduation was accorded pride of place on top of the baby grand, now it must jostle for attention with a jackahuahua.

“Pictures of dogs are so amazingly popular,” the dealer Philip Mould says. Visitors to his gallery tend to head straight for them. David Dawson, the director of Lucian Freud’s archive, agrees. “Lucian’s dogs have become by far and away the most popular of his etchings,” he says. “And the most expensive too. Collectors can expect to pay upwards of £140,000 for Eli [one of Freud’s whippets].” A human sitter can be picked up for between £25,000 and £110,000.

Our fascination with dogs extends to the screen. Think of *White Fang*, *Lassie* and *Beethoven*. Remember Bouncer from *Neighbours*? The death of the beloved Ramsay Street labrador was more moving than the demise of any human character.

The relationship between human and canine dates back to a prehistoric era. Discovering that hunting together brought its benefits, we began to evolve along a cooperative path. Adapted and domesticated, canines entered our culture. Their earliest known images were scratched on cave walls more than 8,000 years ago. They stalk across ancient Egyptian and Assyrian reliefs. The classical Greeks admired them — and not least Diogenes the Cynic (his name means dog-like), who, despising the falsities and hypocrisies of human society, was proud to be compared to the canines whose roving life he adopted. “I fawn on those who give me anything, I yelp at those who refuse, and I set my teeth in rascals,” he said.



Ringwood, a Brocklesby Foxhound, 1792 by George Stubbs: Ringwood, the strong and athletic sire of the modern-day foxhound and lead hound of Lincolnshire's historic Brocklesby pack, poses in his four-year-old prime for Stubbs who, being a close friend of the family who owned him (and who still own his picture), would probably have hurtled on horseback in his wake. All the focus is on his physique.

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Dogs hunt, herd and guard across the Middle Ages. They are symbols of loyalty and fidelity in the High Renaissance. Notice the pointer that takes peaceful centre stage in Tintoretto's depiction of Christ washing the disciples' feet, or the leashed pair of hunting hounds that dominate half the canvas in Titian's painting of the encounter between Venus and Adonis. Baroque painters favoured dogs above all other creatures and, according to (unsubstantiated) legend, could make them so life-like that real dogs would attack them. And in 18th-century England, exhibiting even more dogs than horses at the Royal Academy, Stubbs elevated the genre to a completely new status. In

man's best friend British culture found a symbol of the sort of society its class system wanted to preserve. What better allegory of feudal attachment than a dog looking up at its owner? What better mark of status than a highly bred dog made to hunt across private estates? It wasn't long before the Victorians were seeing their anthropomorphised pets as worthy of portraits in their own right.

The scientist might not find this surprising. Research has discovered that oxytocin — a hormone typically linked to warm, fuzzy feelings — is released when a dog gives us puppy eyes. Little wonder that the best-known picture of that most renowned of Victorian animal painters, Landseer, is his *Dignity and Impudence*, in which a soulfully dignified bloodhound and an impishly alert terrier meet our eyes with gazes that have won them countless greetings card reproductions.

Is it a sentimental cop-out to opt for a portrait of a dog over a human? Are we taking the easy option? It might appear so, Mould suggests. "Because dog portraits don't have the complications of human portraits, because they don't set an agenda like a human does, you can project your own feelings on to them."

He says that it may be no coincidence that dog painting in Britain evolved about the same time that, influenced by John Locke's treatise on education that had all but invented the idea of childhood, infants were no longer expected to behave like miniature adults. "Perhaps that idea of the world of the innocent being something that should be respected and understood transferred also to the animal domain."

Is it possible to capture psychological depth in a portrait of an animal? Landseer certainly believed as much — a pipe-smoking Jack Russell possesses the same cocksure defiance as any human counterpart, a pair of wire-haired terriers are dressed up like a doggie Darby and Joan. So did the 19th-century animal painter Rosa Bonheur. Her *Brizo* is a perennial favourite with visitors to the Wallace. Named after

the Greek goddess of seafarers who was worshipped by the women of Delos, it ascribes to an otterhound qualities that Bonheur, a lesbian painter in a male-dominated art world, would have admired — not least her shaggy short-cut hair.



David Hockney, Dog Painting 30, 1995

© DAVID HOCKNEY. PHOTO BY RICHARD SCHMIDT COLLECTION THE DAVID HOCKNEY FOUNDATION

Our bonds with our four-legged friends are close. Lord Byron knew that well. His elegy to Boatswain, a Newfoundland who “possessed Beauty without Vanity,/ Strength without Insolence,/ Courage without Ferocity,/ and all the virtues of Man without his Vices”, is a schoolroom staple. Lyon, his stiff-backed wolf of a pet, now found standing fierce and foursquare at the Wallace, might have started out as a creature that “very nearly ate me at 20” but it was subsequently trained to rescue him from the water (Byron was spectacularly daring as a swimmer) if he got into trouble. “Dogs are like little people to me,” said Hockney, who, after the death of a close friend, took his pair of pet dachshunds — Stanley and Boodgie — as the muses for a series of 40 portraits. “I felt such a loss of love I wanted to deal with it in some way,” he explained. “I realised I was painting my best friends.”

The dogs that crop up in our galleries and museums are not to be dismissed as mere accoutrements. They possess a deep significance. They can tell us an awful lot about ourselves. Take that huge hunting hound that shoves its nose into Titian’s portrait of Charles V. It suggests to viewers that this Holy Roman Emperor, among the most powerful European leaders of all time, was endowed with a penis to fill the massive codpiece to which Titian concedes so prominent a role.

Five hundred years later, we come to Lucian Freud. As an artist he was fundamentally inspired by Titian. But the power relationship between human and canine has flipped. For him it’s the people who should be more like the pets. “I’m really interested in people as animals,” he said. “Part of my liking to work from them naked is for that reason ... I like people to look as natural and as physically at ease as animals, as Pluto my whippet.”

So take careful note of all those canines that were purchased during lockdown. They are far more than public inconveniences that foul our city streets. They are integral to

our human culture. And, if you are a proud dog owner, remember when you stand and scroll through your smartphone, looking to show off some favoured picture of your pooch, that you're showing off who you are to the world.

Portraits of Dogs: From Gainsborough to Hockney is at the Wallace Collection, London W1, Mar 29-Oct 15

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