

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



George Stubbs (London 1724 - 1806)

A lion and a lioness

Circa: 1778

1778

45.4 x 61 cm

Signed and dated *Geo: Stubbs Pinx. / 1778* lower centre

George Stubbs was not only an immensely talented painter of sporting subjects but also a man imbued with the vigorous spirit of scientific enquiry that characterised the age of the Enlightenment. Like so many of his contemporaries he visited Italy (1754-5) where his study of Antique sculpture was to provide him with lasting inspiration. However, on his return to England he devoted himself to two years of the most painstaking and detailed dissection of horses that led to his acclaimed *Anatomy of the Horse* series of engravings, eventually published by J. Purser in 1766. This marriage of art and science was very much a feature of the lives of educated men in the second half of the eighteenth century, common not only to fellow artists such as Joseph Wright of Derby but also to members of the influential Whig aristocracy (among which Lord Rockingham and the Duke of Richmond were patrons of Stubbs) and men of industry such as the ceramics manufacturer Josiah Wedgwood.

This recently discovered work, signed and dated 1778, must be among the first fruits of Stubbs' collaboration with Wedgwood. Stubbs had been experimenting with enamel on copper since 1769 and first exhibited an example in 1770 with the Society of Artists, *Lion Devouring a Horse* (enamel on copper, Tate Gallery, London). However, he soon tired of using copper as a support due to the restriction its use imposed on the size of works it was possible to produce. Attracted to the precision of finish that enamel on copper offered, Stubbs went in search of other options by which he might achieve the same effect on a larger scale. To this end he approached the Coades, makers of artificial stone, and Wedgwood. Whilst the Coades declined assistance, Wedgwood and his business partner, Thomas Bentley, proved to be more receptive to the idea. A meeting between Wedgwood and Stubbs is recorded in an entry in Wedgwood's *Commonplace Book* in 1775 (Wedgwood Archive, on loan to University of Keele, E39.28408) and the project is mentioned on a number of occasions in the correspondence between Wedgwood and Bentley during the later 1770s.

On 26 November 1777 (E25. 18797) Wedgwood writes to Bentley "One or two of Mr. Stubbs tablets go into the kiln on Thursday next, but they are not large, about 22 x 17. We are preparing larger but must proceed by gentle degrees". According to Bruce Tattersall[1] Wedgwood fired a further three tablets early in December of that year of which one emerged intact from the kiln. Whilst Tattersall believes this to have been the Lion Attacking a Stag (enamel on oval earthenware, 17 x 23, , loc. cit. C., p. 96-7) which is signed and dated 1778, he was not aware of the existence of the present work and it is not clear how many other tablets may have survived these early firings. However, both of these two dated pieces must have been among the very first of Stubbs' paintings executed in fired enamel on a ceramic support.

Later correspondence suggests that this collaboration was intended to be very much in the interest of both parties. Wedgwood seems to have hoped for a commercial success as suggested in his letter of 30 May 1779 (E26.18894) to Bentley where he discusses his progress in making larger tablets and writes: "If Mr Stubbs succeeds he will be followed by others to which he does not seem to have the least objection but rather wishes for it; and if the oil painters too should use them they may become a considerable object". For his own part, like many of his contemporaries who were greatly given to experimenting with different media and techniques, Stubbs appears to have been searching for the ideal means of ensuring that his art should speak to future generations. Another of Wedgwood's letters, dated October 1778 (E26.18856) alludes to his attempts to furnish Stubbs with the means of adding immortality to his excellent pencil.

In terms of composition and subject matter both the Lion Attacking a Stag and the present Lion and Lioness are derived from earlier production on canvas, yet neither could be said to constitute a copy. The former is closest to the large canvas of the same title in the Yale Centre for British Art (dated circa 1765-66). The latter borrows from two main sources; the attitude of the lioness, certain aspects of the vegetation and the cavernous setting inspired by the Creswell Crags rely on the Lion and Lioness in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (signed and dated 1771, oil on canvas), while the prowling lion seems close to a rather more fearsome beast in the White Horse Frightened by a Lion now in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (signed and dated 1770, oil on canvas). As recorded by Ozias Humphry[2], Stubbs' earliest biographer, the artist had many opportunities to study lions at first hand since several of his patrons, notably Lord Shelburne, had their own menageries which boasted a selection of such rare creatures. The practise of recycling ideas in this way was common to much of Stubbs' known production on ceramic supports (with the exception of a number of portraits) reaching its height with the repetition of the large scale canvases of 1785 depicting the Haymakers and Reapers (Tate Gallery) in reduced format on oval earthenware plaques in 1795 (Lady Leven Art Gallery and Yale Center for British Art respectively).

Wedgwood's hopes for commercial success were not to be realised. Although a number of the plaques were exhibited at the Royal Academy, earthenware was never taken seriously as an alternative support to canvas. The process of firing the plaques was both difficult and expensive and proved in the end to be far from profitable. A large flat surface is the most technically demanding of all shapes to fire and despite Wedgwood's best efforts, he was never able to produce a plaque exceeding 30 x 40 inches. However, in terms of immortality, Stubbs did perhaps achieve his aim. Where the fragile plaques have survived, as here, his fired colours have remained intact and we are left with a remarkable record of the artist's original intentions, untouched by subsequent generations and preserved for the future as he had hoped.

[1] See lit., p. 18

[2] See appendix to exhibition catalogue *Fearful Symmetry: George Stubbs, Painter of the English Enlightenment*, Hall & Knight, New York, 2000, p. 195-212, especially p. 206.

Provenance

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Probably the artist's studio sale, 27 May 1807, 2nd day, lot 84 as 'Lion & Lioness, in square enamel, accomplished with great Spirit and Truth'

Private Collection, England, and by descent to 2011.

Exhibitions

Exhibited

Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery, *George Stubbs: A Celebration*, April - July 2006; New York, The Frick Collection, February - May 2007, p. 12, fig. 13, illustrated

The Holbourne Museum, Bath, *Stubbs and the Wild*, June - October 2016, illustrated

Literature:

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B. Tattersall, exh. cat., *Stubbs & Wedgwood*, Tate Gallery, London, 1974, p.110

J. Egerton, *George Stubbs, Painter*, London, 2007, n. 203, pp. 77, 408-409, illustrated