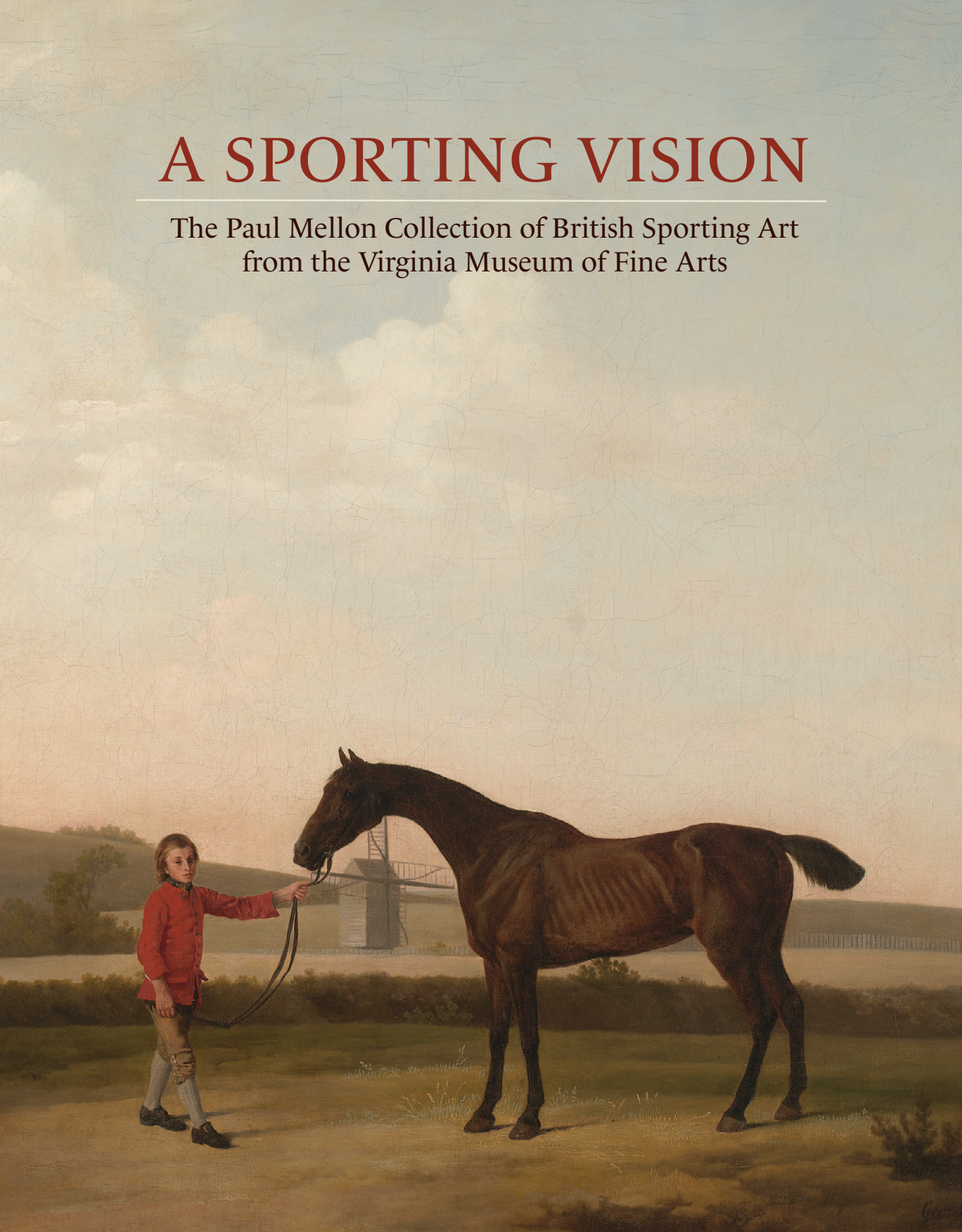


A SPORTING VISION

The Paul Mellon Collection of British Sporting Art
from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts



This exhibition celebrates Paul Mellon's gift of British sporting art to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. While charming in their own right, these depictions of horse racing, hunting, fishing, and farming are also windows into the world of the rural English gentry from the eighteenth to the twentieth century: its class structures, customs, and diversions.



Fig. 1

A leading philanthropist, Paul Mellon had studied at Clare College in Cambridge, England, while his father, the industrialist turned politician Andrew Mellon, was the American ambassador to the Court of Saint James in the United Kingdom. The younger Mellon developed an interest in British art that would continue throughout his life. The first painting he ever purchased was by the eighteenth-century master George Stubbs, who is renowned for the elegant naturalism of his animal portraits. Over decades of collecting, Mellon acquired many works by Stubbs, including the six that introduce this exhibition, featuring powerful racehorses (cover), an adorable spaniel, and even a majestic tiger in repose. In 1966, Mellon commissioned the building for the Yale Center for British Art, to which he gave a vast trove of artworks and rare books. As a trustee at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, he donated the works in this exhibition to the people of Virginia.

Mellon admired and often emulated the lifestyle and traditions of the landed gentry in England. He was particularly enthralled with fox hunting, which “involves the use of the horse, that instinctive animal. . . . It requires physical skill, good judgment, quick thinking, and the age-old thrill of the chase and the kill.”¹ The second section of the exhibition, “In Pursuit,” focuses primarily on this sport, which likely began as an effort to keep predators away from small barnyard animals but evolved into a social activity for the upper classes. (Oscar Wilde described the practice as “the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.”) Set in pastoral environments that show the influence of French landscape painters like Claude Lorrain, these works illustrate the hunt, from the gathering of riders and foxhounds through the chase to the ultimate kill (fig. 1).

One of Mellon's abiding passions was to raise and train thoroughbreds at Rokeby Stables, located at his estate, Oak Spring Farm, in Upperville, Virginia. He said, “I don't think there

is anyone who enjoys racing more than I do, or the sight of mares and foals grazing in green fields, or yearlings running wild and throwing themselves about, even though it puts your heart in your mouth.”² Equestrian vitality and speed are the subjects of the section titled “In Motion.” John Frederick Herring’s portrayal of horses in full gallop conveys the excitement of a close finish. Another type of race, this one against progress, is shown in James Pollard’s depiction of a Royal Mail coach barreling down a country road. The four-horse team and quaintly ornamented carriage are about to be overtaken by a train, illustrating the impact of the Industrial Revolution on England.

While he had grown up in the urban environment of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Mellon had a deep yearning, influenced by visits to rural England, to live in the country. He fulfilled this dream at Oak Spring Farm, his principal family home. The section “Animals, Man, Country” reflects his love of agriculture and rural life, with affectionate portrayals of livestock such as prize oxen, nursing pigs, sturdy farm horses, and eager hunting dogs alongside images of wildlife.

The final section, “The World Upside Down,” shows humorous pratfalls occurring during foxhunts. In *Count Sandor’s Hunting Exploits in Leicestershire*, John E. Ferneley offers satirical sketches of the ignominious accidents experienced by a nobleman renowned for his reckless riding (Sandor eventually died of brain injuries incurred while hunting). The series may have struck a chord with Mellon, who at one time earned the nickname



Fig. 2

“Water Mellon” for the many spills he took into Yorkshire ditches. The exhibition thus concludes with the Anglophile art collector embracing that most venerable of English traditions, the willingness to poke fun at their own customs and eccentricities (fig. 2).

Mark Scala, chief curator

Notes

1. Paul Mellon, *Reflections in a Silver Spoon: A Memoir*, with John Baskett (New York: Morrow, 1992), 152.
2. Mellon, *Reflections*, 259.

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COVER: George Stubbs (British, 1724–1806). *Hyena with a Groom on Newmarket Heath* (detail), ca. 1765–67. Oil on canvas, 40 1/8 x 50 1/8 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Paul Mellon Collection, 99.93. Photo: Katherine Wetzel.
Fig. 1: Henry Bernard Chalon (British, 1770–1849). *Sir Mark Masterman Sykes's Hounds with Huntsmen*, ca. 1820. Oil on canvas, 35 3/4 x 48 1/8 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Paul Mellon Collection, 99.61. **Fig. 2:** John E. Ferneley (British, 1782–1860). *Count Sandor's Hunting Exploits in Leicestershire, No. 1: The Count Floored in the Street of Melton Mowbray, on the First Day of Going to Cover*, 1829. Oil on canvas, 10 7/8 x 14 1/8 in. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Paul Mellon Collection, 99.63. All images © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

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