

Deuchar, Stephen. *Sporting Art in Eighteenth-Century England: A Social & Political History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988. Pp. 195. \$45.00.

The last 20 years have witnessed a steady rise to prominence of sport art in its myriad forms. This work chronicles a century-long search for acceptance by sporting artists. Their efforts are lucidly depicted against the transformation wrought by agricultural and industrial revolutions and the conceptual bases underlying economic forces and central issues of political history; e.g., the work spans much of the Hanoverian years (1714-1815) and careers of political leaders and despots. The author demonstrates what serious scholars have long espoused: that sport art is a valuable, multi-dimensional tool in comprehending the interaction of art and society.

English sporting art's emergence as a distinctive genre is illustrated here with panache. It requires the touch of one well versed in the threads of class strata, history, literature, politics, sport and art as they evolved on the Continent and in England. With Deuchar's excellent credentials, both as a curator and in preparing exhibitions/publications (e.g., Museum of London & Yale's Center for British Art), one's expectations for this book are high. The incisive analysis of that tumultuous century does not disappoint.

In the opening of five balanced topical areas ("Distinctive Pursuits: The Art of the Rural Sportsman") Deuchar traces 16th & 17th century events (e.g., 1671 Game Acts, major rural sports, changes in sporting art imagery, etc.). As sport became the "soul of country life," it was imbued with class associations and ever-shifting contemporary concepts of class and prejudice. In laying the groundwork, one is aware that the English rural scene was "not always beautiful, and very far from silent."

A second emphasis ("The Emergence of a Sporting Ideal") supports a rural ideology reinforced by pastoral works, poetry, prose and 17th century landscapists. With roots from Dutch, Flemish and Italian artists, a country market for art appeared by the onset of the 18th c. Sporting art idealized the sport world (e.g., fishing, nobility of sport, health qualities) as an antidote to the evils of town life. The dilemma of a sporting ideal incongruent with social/political reality of the period is probed at length.

In a third piece ("Sport Art & English Society: A Changing Relationship") questions are posed about this inconsistent affiliation and the role of art in interrelated issues (social/political/intellectual) of 18th c. reality. Focus is on the period to 1760—the end of George II's reign. George III's accession and the arrival of George Stubbs on the scene serve as pivotal points in English history

and sporting painting. As a royal role faded, country squires and rural sports were developing, perhaps presaged by Whig leader “Turnip” Townshend a generation earlier. *The Spectator*, after 1715, explored squires’ roles and the increased accessibility of the major rural sports of hunting, shooting and racing. An artistic focus on sporting activities, deemphasizing land ownership or country houses, became evident. Deuchar uses Seymour’s oil, “A Kill at Ashdown” to exemplify sport stylistically “for its own sake.” This trend firmed up after 1760. With a new kind of sporting art, it was the vogue by mid-century to visit country homes to view collections of art. Sporting pictures were hung in special rooms, mirroring one’s taste by the types of works chosen; e.g., Arthur Young’s tour in the 1760s. Subject matter retreated from broad social themes to sporting topics.

A fourth unit (“Later Sporting & Traditions in the criticisms of Sport”) centers on forms of opposition to sport; e.g., reformist journals like *Tatler* and *Spectator*, and on the evils of gambling. Rapid upward and downward mobility via the latter was targeted by satirical works like Hogarth’s “The Rake’s Progress.” The growing print trade effectively stressed the disrepute of the milieu in the Rowlandson aquatint “The Dinner.” The ribald role of the 1750 Jockey Club (to “jock” was to have coitus) merely highlighted the critics’ view of sportsmen’s ruinous behavior. Pleasure-seeking debauchery of the period united drinking, sex and sport in one image. Rowlandson’s and Collett’s portrayals of drunkenness, lesbianism and bawdy aquatints such as “The country squire new mounted,” confirmed arguments about danger and vice associated with sport. An urban market developed for humorous prints on such “unwholesome” aspects. The complex decade of the 1760s, with political realignments, riots and moral revolution, led to a sporting art showing calm, dignified activity. Stubbs’ “The Grosvenor Hunt” reflected an awareness of his patron’s needs. The 1765 “Gimcrack on Newmarket Heath” revealed a lower-class involvement sans gambling and rowdy crowds. Criticism was thus diverted with a clean, apparently accurate imagery. By the 1770s, with opposition to the hated Games Laws at a peak, Stubbs showed how existing laws were being justifiably broken and gave respectability to the reform movement. His career-long sense of the moral/social responsibility of the sporting world marked him as a leader of this thrust.

Chapter five, “The Sporting Stigma,” clarifies the mood and direction of sporting art at the century’s end. As a “blemished” profession among the artistic hierarchy, connoisseurs dismissed sporting artists out of hand. Witness Walpole’s 1773 critique of Stubbs: “Horses good, trees bad.” Disreputable prints shops and dissolute collectors (e.g., Col. Thornton) added to the problem. Artists like Mason, in a 1768 print “A Country Race Course,” pictured the chaotic mixing of social groups. Nonetheless, by early 19th century the stigma against “horse painters” abated. Sporting art gained a measure of respect and a nostalgia—a “rus in urbe”—for the life of old England took over. By the last decade rural sports were an antidote to war’s depression. Deuchar holds that the 1790s saw sport as a part of a stronger English past. Visually honest in its display of courage, vigor and patriotism, sporting art came to be seen as directly benefitting society. Once the stigma faded so too did the stimulus to be artistically

“respectable” in the genre; the indefatigable Stubbs (1794) went back to horse portraits in his “Review of the Turf” project. Despite Stubbs’ consistent attempts to legitimize sportsmen’s narrow interests to the outside, that world was coldly unresponsive to his art. Today, his stature is secure.

Deuchar’s postscript represents a parting shot at blood sports and the image of cruelty in sport; e.g., contemporary RSPCA leaflets. He believes that the role of sporting art in defining and disseminating controversial ideas of a minority sector of society is far from over. For this reason it is an enabling medium for understanding a distinctive part of English culture in its stratified societal form.

Aesthetically the book is well done. Of the roughly 150 illustrations, black and white outnumber color more than 2 to 1. Those chosen for inclusion are apropos and of good quality with rare exceptions (e.g., p. 126). The illustrations show a broadly selective range from the Queen’s collection, British Museum, Tate, and Louvre to Virginia’s Museum of Fine Arts, Glasgow and the Yale Center. It is well balanced.

The research is suitably documented pointing the way to additional sources for serious readers. Deuchar’s knowledge of the genre and the period is woven into comparisons and relationships which serve as guides throughout this provocative treatise. Expository notes for each chapter and the postscript represent fourteen pages. The selected bibliography is noted as only a guide but offers references of utility and breadth. It is an overwhelming display of period references. Eighty sporting painters (18th c.) are cited (p. 9), including one woman. This alone mirrors Deuchar’s command of his realm. A tendency to obfuscate (e.g., convoluted sentence structuring) may occasionally drive one to wish for the clarity of Coombs’ (1978) work. It is *in toto* a cogent contrasting of changes in the fabric of English society over a century. He effectively reveals the role(s) played by artists as they attempted to make their fortunes, improve their social status, enter politics, or achieve respectability in the Royal Academy.

The author’s command of this discrete, turbulent time provides us with a quality product. His panoramic view mirrors an earthiness and humor that substantiate the universal appeal of sport in the lives of people, cutting across class lines. From a social history standpoint Deuchar serves us a winner. This scholarly piece is decidedly not a coffee-table précis. Be forewarned it is not for the dilettante in sport art. This challenging, interesting work may well serve as a benchmark for those with a receptive ear tuned to the key role art and sport have retained over the centuries.

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