

Artwork of the Month January 2021

Sawrey Gilpin (1733 – 1807), *Gulliver Reprimanded and Silenced by his Master when Describing the Horrors of War* (exhibited 1772?)

This essay, by the Friends' Secretary Benjamin Hilliam, illuminates Sawrey Gilpin's ambition to elevate the perception of animal painting and equine welfare at a time of expanding exploitation of animals for science, amusement, and work, as well a marked public interest in animal cruelty and anthropomorphism.



© York Museums Trust

As these noble Houyhnhnms are endowed by Nature with a general disposition to all virtues, and have no conceptions or ideas of what is evil in a rational creature, so their grand maxim is, to cultivate Reason, and to be wholly governed by it.¹

In 1996, actor Ted Danson – better known for playing the lothario barman from the American sitcom *Cheers* – donned breeches and a delightfully long Fabio-esque wig in a Channel 4 mini-series adaptation which, at the

¹ Swift, J. *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, C. Bathurst, 1760: 260-61.

time, was said to be the most expensive television movie ever made. It is my first Gulliver memory and I have no doubt that everybody has a moment, a scene, or a land that springs to mind when thinking of Jonathan Swift's hugely influential and outrageous satirical novel of 1726, *Gulliver's Travels*. This Artwork of the Month will tap into that universe through Sawrey Gilpin's painting *Gulliver Reprimanded and Silenced by his Master when Describing the Horrors of War*.

During his fourth and final voyage, the English ship's surgeon Lemuel Gulliver has been set down in the land of the Houyhnhnms (pronounced: hoo-IN-um), a nation of rational talking horses, and the Yahoos, bestial creatures who resemble humans. As described in the above quotation, the foremost principle of the Houyhnhnms was to 'cultivate Reason, and to be wholly governed by it' – so they were free from vice, malice, envy, and did not even have a word for lying ('a thing which is not'). In this scene, a kneeling Gulliver is pictured responding to his Master's (the dapple-grey horse) question: 'What are the usual causes or motives that made one country go to war with another?'. The Englishman answers by listing the ludicrous reasons that drive humans to wreak destruction:

Sometimes the Ambition of Princes, who never think they have land or People enough to govern; sometimes the corruption of ministers, who engage their master in a war, in order to stifle or divert the clamour of the subjects against their evil administration. Difference of opinion has cost man millions of lives; for instance, whether flesh be bread [...]. It is a very justifiable cause of a war, to invade a country after the people have been wasted by famine, destroyed by pestilence, or embroiled by factions among themselves [...]. If a prince sends force into a nation, where the people are poor and ignorant, he may lawfully put half of them to death, and make slaves of the rest, in order to civilize and reduce them from their barbarous way of living.

The Master cannot conceive how such reasoning could result in any threat, given that: 'nature has left you utterly incapable of doing much mischief. For, your mouth lying flat with your faces, you can hardly bite each other to any purpose [...] the claws upon your feet before and behind, they are so short and tender'. It is here that we enter the moment captured in Gilpin's painting as, amused by his Master's ignorance,

Gulliver illustrates in the dirt with a stick the inventive tools of warfare, from cannons to ships to being trampled under horses' feet. Following this, the Master silences him, as he 'seemed confident that, instead of reason, we were only possessed of some quality, fitted to increase our natural vices...'.²

It is apt that in the end Gulliver is exiled from the country because the Houyhnhnms believe his 'rudiments of reason' may 'seduce' and organise the Yahoos to attack and devour their cattle. Lemuel had become so enamoured with the Houyhnhnms that after leaving the 'magnanimous nation', he wishes they would 'send sufficient Numbers of their Inhabitants for civilising Europe'.³ Instead, having returned to his family, who filled him with 'hatred, disgust, and contempt' as English Yahoos, he bought himself two young stone-horses for daily conversation and friendship.⁴ Should friends tell Gulliver that he trotted like a horse, he took it as a great compliment, having also attempted to imitate the Houyhnhnms' gait and gestures.

Gilpin and the Gulliver series

This painting forms the centrepiece of a trio of depictions by Gilpin of Gulliver in the land of the Houyhnhnms. Born in 1733 near Carlisle, Sawrey was part of an artistic family which included his father John, an amateur landscape painter, and his brother William, a writer and printmaker who famously published on the principles of picturesque beauty. His own son, William Sawrey Gilpin, became a watercolourist and landscape gardener. Gilpin started his artistic training under his father, who later apprenticed him to the marine painter Samuel Scott at his Covent Garden studio. Yet Sawrey was predisposed to the animals around him, and particularly to the subject that was to become his main painterly protagonist, the horse. In 1758 he gained his most prominent and faithful



William Daniell, after
George Dance, Sawrey
Gilpin. © National Portrait
Gallery, London

² Ibid: 236-40.

³ Ibid: 289.

⁴ Ibid: 285.

patron, the Duke of Cumberland, who commissioned portraits of his horses at the studs in Newmarket and Windsor. Yet Gilpin's rising status in the 1760s was overshadowed by his great rival, fellow artist George Stubbs (1724 – 1806), who was inundated with sporting commissions and in the process of engraving his celebrated publication, *The Anatomy of the Horse*. Like Stubbs, Gilpin was frustrated by the lowly position animal painting held within the hierarchy of genres, sitting only above still-life. It has been noted that the scenery in Stubbs's 1770 [Horse Frightened by a Lion](#) (Walker Art Gallery) may have inspired the romantic but wild rocky outcrop descending from the left of Gilpin's composition.⁵



Sawrey Gilpin, *Gulliver Addressing the Houyhnhnms*, exh. 1768, Oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.311



Sawrey Gilpin, *Gulliver Taking his Final Leave of the Land of the Houyhnhnms*, exh. 1771, Oil on canvas, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.312

The Gulliver series, along with another Gallery painting, *The Election of Darius*, formed the vanguard of Gilpin's approach to elevating his work. The first canvas, *Gulliver Addressing the Houyhnhnms, Supposing them to be Conjurors*, was displayed in London at the Society of Artists in 1768, followed in 1771 by *Gulliver Taking his Final Leave of his Master, the Sorrel Nag, etc., and the Land of the Houyhnhnms*, and in 1772 by what is presumed to be the Gallery's version of *Gulliver Reprimanded and Silenced by his Master when Describing the Horrors of War*. All three paintings were subsequently engraved multiple times as single plates for wider distribution, some of which are held at the British Museum ([I](#), [II](#), [III](#)),

⁵ Proposed by Hugh Brigstocke, Art Assistant at York Art Gallery to John Jacob Esq., Deputy Director of the Walker Art Gallery in a letter dated 10 April 1967. Brigstocke suggested that both backgrounds may have been painted by George Barret, with whom both Stubbs and Gilpin collaborated.

rather than as book illustrations as had historically been the case with this theme. *Gulliver Reprimanded and Silenced by his Master* was purchased at Christie's in 1951 from the Duke of Bedford's collection, while another version was sold at this same auction house in 1978. The alternative version differs only slightly from the Gallery's one, with less shrubbery interrupting the skyline above the rocky edge and a less well-defined Gulliver.

Power and societal hierarchy



In the novel, the traditional perspective of human-horse relationship has shifted, and Gulliver is effectively 'owned' as a pet. Lemuel willingly submits to the physical and intellectual dominance of the Houyhnhnms, especially the dapple-grey horse ('the Master'). This hierarchy is clearly demonstrated in the picture's iconography. Gulliver first arrived in his 'best suit of clothes', but now appears in unkempt, hemp-like, frayed sacking.⁶ As well as his bare feet touching the dirt, his crouched position below every Houyhnhnm confirms his low status. Gilpin's comparatively poorer faculty for figure painting could be seen to benefit the painting, as the Houyhnhnms enjoy an aesthetic elevation over Gulliver.⁷ Note the man's fearful, wide-eyed expression, flushed cheeks and startled hand gesture as he is reprimanded by his Master whilst surrounded by a variety of equines. The scene affords Gilpin an opportunity to showcase the range of horse-types he is able to paint for the nobility, acting as an advertisement to encourage future commissions. In fact, the horses' arrangement and the positioning of their heads and hooves is suggestive of an equine conversation piece.⁸ Given that Gulliver considered the Houyhnhnms a superior race, such an analogy is hardly a stretch. Gilpin had made this reach before, for example in [*The Duke of Cumberland visiting his Stud*](#) of c.1764 (Royal Collection Trust), which featured in the

⁶ Swift, J. *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, C. Bathurst, 1760: 213.

⁷ Duthie, E. 'Gulliver Art' in *The Scriblerian and the Kit-Cats*, Vol. X, no.2 (Spring 1978): 127.

⁸ Halsband, R. 'Eighteenth-century Illustrations of *Gulliver's Travels*' in Hermann, J. R. and Vienken, H.J. *Proceedings of the First Munster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*, W. Fink, 1985: 92.

2008 exhibition 'The Conversation Piece: Scenes of Fashionable Life' at the Queen's Gallery.

Gilpin's display of horse-types draws the spectator's attention not only to the hierarchy between human and animal, but also to the disparities within the Houyhnhnm society itself: 'among the Houyhnhnms, the white, the sorrel, and the iron-grey, were not so exactly shaped as the Bay, the Dapple-grey, and the Black; nor born with equal Talents of Mind, or a Capacity to improve them'.⁹ This is one moment in the book – of which there are a number – where issues of race emerge disturbingly through the text. Undoubtedly, the power resides with the dapple-grey 'Master' in the centre of the canvas, whose piercing stare silences Gulliver. Tracking across the picture from the left, the horses on the higher ground align with those identified in the novel as being superior (black-bay, bay, dapple-grey, black), while others are placed on the lower right with Gulliver (sorrell, buckskin(?), liver chestnut(?)), though no horse is lower than the man.

Gilpin and the beasts of burden

The horse – an animal which combines a genteel nature and enigmatic spirit with an explosive speed and power that can be harnessed – has had a long and prestigious history, entwined with the advancement of human civilisation and storytelling in the forms of myths and religion. As one scholar writes: 'the highest ideal of the horse embodied a sense of moral nobility, even of condescension, its destructive energy magnanimously withheld'.¹⁰ However, the British treatment of horses during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries differed wildly to the near-veneration Gulliver felt for his hosts. The vast majority of horses were classed as 'cattle' in their capacity as draught and labouring animals. At the time of Gilpin's painting, the horse population was estimated to be around 1.5 million, compared with around 847,000 today.

⁹ Swift, J. *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, C. Bathurst, 1760: 249.

¹⁰ Donald, D. *Picturing Animals in Britain*, Yale University Press, 2007: 203.



William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, 2nd edition, 1794, vol.II, *Different forms of mutilating the tails of horses and Passions of horses expressed by their ears*. Etching and aquatint by Sawrey Gilpin. Source: Internet Archive

Gilpin was alarmed by the contemporary exploitation of horses and the cruelty they suffered at the hands of humans. In support of his brother William's 1794 publication *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, Sawrey lent a series of etchings created c.1760 to illustrate their uncontrollable frustration at the practice of docking horses' ears and tails. As William states: 'This digression hath carried me much farther, than I intended; but the mutilation of the tail, and ears of this noble animal is so offensive to reason, and common sense, that I have been imperceptibly led on'. Sawrey brings his brother's written observations into focus for the reader, depicting a horse's ears 'as interpreters of his passions, particularly of fear, which some denominate *courage*, and of *anger*, or *malice*'.¹¹

Gulliver's first meeting with the Houyhnhnms in the book subverts the conventional relationship between human and horse: 'The two horses came up close to me, looking with great earnestness upon my face and hands [...]. He stroked my right hand, seeming to admire the softness and colour; but he squeezed it so hard between his hoof and his pastern, that I was forced to



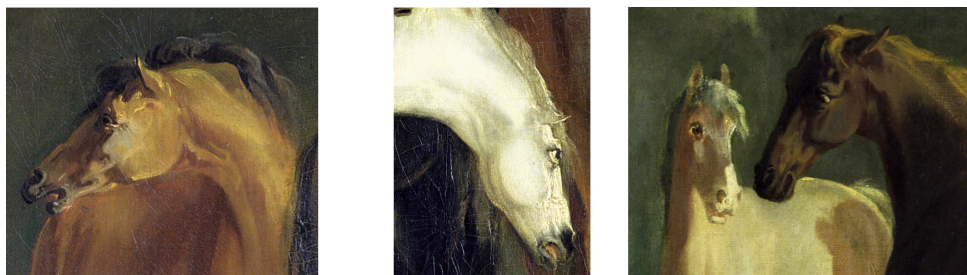
John Templeton Lucas, *Not Sold Yet*, 1860-80. Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 60.3cm. © York Museums Trust

¹¹ Gilpin, W. *Remarks on Forest Scenery, and other Woodland Views*, vol.2, R. Blamire, 1791: 267.

roar.¹² This inspection leaves the horses with a favourably curious view of Gulliver, and they lead him back to their community for further scrutiny, having effectively taken possession of him. This interaction evokes another Gallery canvas, John Templeton Lucas's *Not Sold Yet*, with its familiar scene of buyer and seller negotiating as they stroke, grasp, and pull at the mouth of a horse to inspect the health of its teeth.

Painter of equine emotions

The Houyhnhnms represented a perfect pictorial vehicle for Gilpin's lifelong interest in animal expressions. Around 1760, the artist had put forward proposals for publishing a series of eight etchings on the 'characters' of horses.¹³ One subscriber to this unrealised project, James Nelson, wrote to Gilpin that in consideration to horse painting 'artists pronounce that *you* alone must succeed to our [James] Seymour and our [John] Wootten; and that to the correctness of the one, you will add the spirit and delicacy of the other'.¹⁴



A wide variety of emotions are displayed by the Houyhnhnms as Gulliver discusses how, in his world, Yahoos (humans) can kill at ease with their inventions. The two on the right look at each other in wide-eyed surprise, with pricked-up ears and slightly aghast jaws. The bay to the far left looks to her black counterpart in alarm, though the centre of the tension is the glowering of the Master. Head lowered, ears pointed forwards, the white of the eyes exposed, mouth curved in displeasure, he fixes Gulliver with a fierce stare:

¹² Swift, J. *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, C. Bathurst, 1760: 216.

¹³ Not to be confused with the 'passions' of horses which included their ears and tail mentioned earlier.

¹⁴ Nelson, J. *The Affectionate Father*, J. Dodsley, 1786: 232.

‘... as my discourse had increased his abhorrence of the whole species, so he found it gave him a disturbance in his mind, to which he was wholly a stranger before. He thought his ears, being used to such abominable words, might, by degrees, admit them with less detestation ...’¹⁵

The Master is wary of normalising such monstrous words and thoughts, and it is ultimately this concern that leads to Gulliver’s ejection from the land of Houyhnhnms.

Gilpin was extremely careful with his passage selection from the satirical novel in order to ‘walk a fine line between intelligible drama and ludicrous anthropomorphy’.¹⁶ Depicting an attempted handshake with a hoof, for instance, would impair the painter’s ambition to align his work with the higher echelons of artistic genres. One contemporary reviewer was not convinced by *Gulliver Taking Final Leave of his Master*:

... the subject is so absurd that the skill of the painter may almost be said to be thrown away. We are to suppose the horses it represents to have a degree of reason equal to that of the human species. But who can possibly suppose any such thing? Being used to consider horses as animals of little understanding, compared to that of men, we shall always look upon creatures in the shape of horses in the same light; and it will be impossible for any spectator to view them in another ...¹⁷

Yet for the artist this dalliance into literary painting was successful, with multiple reproductions after the exhibited works. In a letter to his father, where he discussed the merits of a painting method he had extracted from the landscape painter Alexander Cozens for use on his first Gulliver work, Gilpin stated that the canvas had ‘done me more credit than any I have ever painted’.¹⁸

¹⁵ Swift, J. *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, C. Bathurst, 1760: 239-40.

¹⁶ Ferguson, S. *Sawrey Gilpin, R.A. (1733-1807): British Animal Painting in the Age of Sentiment*, unpublished PhD, New York University, 2005: 100.

¹⁷ Baker, R. *Observations on the Pictures now in exhibition at the Royal Academy, Spring Gardens, and Mr. Christie*, John Bell, 1771: 24.

¹⁸ Ferguson, S. *Sawrey Gilpin, R.A. (1733-1807): British Animal Painting in the Age of Sentiment*, unpublished PhD, New York University, 2005: 91-92.

I am rarely disappointed when researching an artwork, but Gilpin's depiction of Gulliver and the Houyhnhnms has fast become one of my favourites at the Gallery. Inspired by a childhood memory of Ted Danson deep in conversation with a dapple-grey horse, the canvas has led me to a variety of fascinating discussions – anthropomorphism, animal cruelty, satire, colonialism, philosophy, animal painting ... and even a study codifying equine facial expressions, of which they have seventeen as opposed to twenty-seven for a human (though one more than a dog!). It is a fine example of the Gallery's artwork, which encourages spectators to interpret what they see, question and create ideas, reach across disciplinary boundaries, make discoveries, as well as share knowledge and sentiments.

Benjamin Hilliam
January 2021

Postscript ~ Lost opportunity: A Gilpin triptych at York Art Gallery

The Gallery's ownership of this painting by Gilpin stoked interest in the possible purchase of companion pieces at a 1967 Christie's sale. Hans Hess, the then Curator, had been advised to be prepared to go above £1,000 to purchase the two other paintings: *Gulliver Addressing the Houyhnhnms* and *Gulliver Taking His Final Leave of the Land of the Houyhnhnms*. The Gallery had hoped to secure support from the V&A Grant Fund, yet with the auction coming so late in the financial year, the V&A had already distributed most of its monies. Alas, unfortunately for the Gallery and its public, both paintings were bought by the art dealers P&D Colnaghi and subsequently made their own voyage over to the Yale Center for British Art. The Gallery's painting would have sat comfortably between the canvases to tell the story of Gulliver's arrival in, experience of, and departure from the land of the Houyhnhnms – the most popular and disturbing of Swift's kingdoms.

New title: Gilpin's 'Study for *Duncan's Horses*'



Sawrey Gilpin (1733-1807), Study for *Duncan's Horses*, undated, York Museums Trust.
Watercolour, 54.7 x 76.3cm © York Museums Trust

In researching for this Artwork of the Month, a fortuitous find has allowed another of the Gallery's Gilpins to reclaim its lost title, a study for *Duncan's Horses*. Previously entitled *Horse Figures* (YORAG: R2431), this watercolour is inspired by the following lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*:

Ross:

And Duncan's horses (a thing most strange and certain),
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make
War with mankind.

Old Man:

'Tis said, they eat each other.

Ross:

They did so; to the amazement of mine eyes
That look'd upon't ...

~ *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene IV

The conversation between the Scottish nobleman Ross and the old man involves the supernatural events on the night Duncan is murdered by Macbeth: a time when 'nature seems dead', where storms roll in upset skies, horses seem as if to wage war against mankind, and an owl devours a hawk, symbolising the destruction of natural orders. The watercolour contains indicators as to the title, with Macbeth's castle high up on the hill and the rolling storm clouds overhead.

The final painting for *Duncan's Horses* appeared in the 1807 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition as no.333, in the same year as Gilpin's death. Another version of this watercolour is held at the Yale Center for British Art, entitled [Fighting Horses](#), which was correctly identified as a study for *Duncan's Horses* by Diana Donald in her book *Picturing Animals in Britain*. It is noteworthy that this watercolour design went into circulation as a print with the figures on the left of the picture removed, thus concentrating the viewer's focus on the crazed horses in the tormented landscape (a version is held at the [Folger Shakespeare Library](#)).