

Leah Modigliani / Stony Brook University

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Painting Improved Breeds in the Age of Enlargement

In 1802, when Thomas Weaver of Shrewsbury painted the Durham Ox, the most famous bull in England, he was five years into a successful career as a portraitist of livestock. Weaver (1774-1843) was one of eleven children born into a middle-class family. At the age of eighteen his parents paid for him to be apprenticed to the older Royal Academy-trained painter John Boulton, with whom he studied for five years, learning the trade of livestock painting and making contacts with clients who would later become his patrons as well. In 1807 he returned home, married a local girl, and set up a house with an attached studio so that horses and cattle could be brought inside to be painted.¹ He mostly stayed close to home, and did not go to London often. His primary clients included local tradesmen and gentry from the areas around Shrewsbury, but as his career progressed he also received more lucrative commissions for cattle and horse portraits from the aristocracy.

Weaver managed to create a long-lasting and successful business for himself, and by the time he painted the portrait of the Durham Ox, he had already painted images of other famous cattle.² In this oil painting of the enormous roan-colored ox, the animal stands in the foreground of a pastoral English landscape.³ At the age of five he weighed in at three thousand pounds,⁴ much of this weight in fat, and was a national example of the improved breeds of the day. The bull had been sired by Favourite, a well-known stud bull that belonged to the Colling brothers, early developers of what would become known as the Shorthorn breed of cattle.⁵ According to standards already established for animal portraiture, Weaver showed the bull in profile so that it

is easy to discern his block-like form and his large deposits of fat, some of which hang down between his front legs. His four legs appear much too slight to support his enormous weight, and his tiny manicured hooves do not give the impression of a sturdy *work* animal, but rather a *show* animal, which he was. The composition of the picture calls attention to the bull's exhibition status, as the outer edges are generally painted in darker tones with light illuminating the bull's side. The artist's awareness of certain contemporary landscape traditions can be recognized in his choice of supporting background imagery; a bucolic park-like estate and a rustic or picturesque cottage in the top left. Similar characteristics are evident in many other Weaver paintings including one titled *Two Prize Rams in a Wooded Landscape* from 1800.⁶ Much in these works can be compared to the general image and tone of Thomas Gainsborough's earlier cottage paintings, such as *Cottage Door with Girl and Pigs* of 1786.⁷

The year that Weaver painted the Durham Ox the bull could not be found grazing the genteel English pastures that the artist had portrayed. As part of a nation-wide tour he was parked in London, greeting fans for nearly a year inside a specially designed carriage. As was the case elsewhere, throngs of admirers paid good money to see this famous example of the Shorthorn breed, and in a single day the bull drew in 97£ in admission fees.⁸ In all likelihood Weaver sketched the animal at one of these fairs and then completed the painting back at his studio, or he may have painted his subject unseen, basing his composition on printed images of the animal that were widely circulating.⁹ Weaver's painting and the others that exist¹⁰ all follow a stylistic model set by Weaver's mentor, the older artist John Boulton, who had painted the most famous image of the bull earlier that same year.¹¹ The Durham Ox and his painted portraits are perhaps the best-known examples of artists' commercial documentation of the animals that resulted from new

breeding technologies of the eighteenth century, which would be called the "Age of Improvement."

Prior to the beginning of the eighteenth century, agricultural techniques and customs had not changed much since the Middle Ages. Independent farmers produced crops and raised free ranging and mating livestock in open unfenced fields called moors.¹² However by the height of the industrial revolution, this was no longer a viable way to feed the rapidly growing population, which had literally doubled in the course of the nineteenth century.¹³ The open moors had been increasingly enclosed by government acts that attempted to maximize land use for agriculture, and by 1801 the process had reached a climax with the passing of the General Enclosure Act in Parliament.¹⁴ These government interventions essentially privatized what had been open and equally accessible to all, making the use and profit of land for recreation and crops the responsibility of the elite, and significantly limiting the ability of the poorer classes to raise enough food for their own survival. Other factors affected the quality of life of the rural poor; for example, they were no longer able to go onto now-private land to collect fuel for heating their cottages in the winter. Land itself was the primary source of income and power for the aristocracy, much of which came from tenants rent, their own administrative responsibilities, and the custom of tenants voting in accordance with the landowner.¹⁵ The inability of the poor to use the land made them dependent on wages from the landowners or forced them to move to the cities in search of jobs. These changes led to real shortages of food and to mass migration out of the country to the city, which was further exacerbated by an influx of servicemen returning from the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1818.

In this context, competition over the development of new breeds spread amongst wealthy landowners, fueled by the rhetoric of patriotism. Descriptions of breeding practices of the time

stress altruistic attempts to create more food for the laboring urban poor, and a nationalistic desire for self-sufficiency.¹⁶ Many of these breeders were influenced by Robert Bakewell (born in 1725), who was one of the earliest and most famous.¹⁷ The breeding of thoroughbred racehorses inspired Bakewell to experiment on his rented land by selectively mating Lincolnshire sheep. His goal was to increase the size of his livestock in order to produce more meat on each animal. By segregating his own stock of male and female sheep, and mating certain animals of the same breed for size, he was able to create larger and fatter animals. Once he succeeded in doing this, he amassed a personal fortune by renting out his best studs. Bakewell's selective breeding, his tireless self-promotion, and new technologies in animal feed caused British livestock to increase drastically in size. At London's biggest agricultural market and trade fair, Smithfield Market, the sizes of cattle were recorded as increasing from 370 pounds to 800 pounds during the course of the eighteenth century.¹⁸ The newer, larger nineteenth century sizes and breeds of cattle, sheep and hogs became known as the "improved breeds."

The rhetoric surrounding breeding articulated a trickle-down-effect; as improved breeds became the norm, it was hoped that all farmers, not only the wealthy, would raise the new breeds and contribute to greater stocks of food. The development of the national railway system made it possible to transport animals around the country for exhibition, and this contributed to the blossoming of agricultural fairs and markets, which drew large and diverse crowds from many urban and rural areas.¹⁹ All of this visibility helped encourage the landed gentry to become involved in competitive breeding. As we have already seen with the Durham Ox, noteworthy animals were sold, put on display, and the 'best' in given categories were awarded prizes. The excitement over the rapidly changing breeds of livestock²⁰ reached a peak in the first few decades of the 1800's when images of animals appeared and proliferated in journals, cheap prints,

entrance tickets and exhibitions. All of this notoriety combined with an awareness of seventeenth century animal painting traditions in the Netherlands, and a general popular interest in natural history, created an atmosphere in which a market developed for the painted portraits of specific animals.

This market allowed artists like Weaver to make a decent living, and so they cannot be considered amateurs in the strict sense. Yet their work would never be accepted as high art by the academy because it portrayed seemingly low or vulgar subject matter—farm animals—in the realm of the lowest genres: landscape, portraiture and still life.²¹ The cultivated eye, or taste for art, was still strictly controlled by the Royal Academy, which continued to dictate the hierarchy of acceptable subjects worth painting. In his Third Discourse to the Academy in 1770, Joshua Reynolds had explained the reasons why "vulgar subjects" should not be taken as seriously as others:

The painters who have applied themselves more particularly to low and vulgar characters . . . deserve great praise; but as their genius has been employed on low and confined subjects, the praise which we give must be limited as its object This principle may be applied to the Battlepieces of Bourgoigne, . . . and even beyond the exhibition of animal life, to the Landscapes of Claude Lorraine.²²

Reynolds goes on to suggest that still lives and portraits, while not necessarily bad, are not the best kinds of art because they will prevent the real artist from "rais[ing] and ennobling his works far above their natural rank."²³ Despite Reynolds' criticism of the landscape genre, this form of painting increased in public popularity because of its association with national pride, the growing middle classes' obsession with touring (also exemplified in the touring of animals), and the real economic dependency on land.

These animal-portraits were both documentation and propaganda for those in the higher economic classes. They were used to record impressive stocks of breed, highlight specific and

unusual animals, and/or generally to complement the ego of the patron. In a chapter titled "Barons of Beef," historian Harriet Ritvo described the vanity of an emerging or existing aristocracy and their relationship to funding the improved breeds.²⁴ Her careful research suggests that elite breeders had little to gain financially from these activities and were also the only ones able to afford the unusually high prices commanded by most studs on sale at the fairs. The agricultural clubs and societies (of which primarily the wealthy class belonged) often lost money on the fairs they sponsored because despite the public's enthusiasm, ticket sales did not cover all the costs spent on production. Ritvo also shows that the agricultural fairs, societies and clubs actually functioned "as ceremonial reenactments of the traditional rural order" and that "they celebrated and reaffirmed the position of the wealthy and powerful magnates who headed it, by parading the symbols of their magnificence in the form of extraordinarily large beasts."²⁵

The re-affirmation of class that Ritvo describes was also found in other aspects of English society. John Barrell's book *The Dark Side of the Landscape* analyzed the class tensions inherent in the landscape paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is important to discuss here because as already mentioned in relationship to Weaver's painting of the Durham Ox, the animals in these paintings are so often situated in the foreground of landscapes that are painted in the contemporaneous style of John Constable, George Morland, Thomas Gainsborough, and others. Eighteenth century ideas about beauty depended on classical constructions of harmony. Many educated men would have been familiar with Virgil's *Georgics*, which described the order and efficiency of Roman animal husbandry and civic organization.²⁶ The landscape paintings of Constable, Gainsborough and others were critically acclaimed because they succeeded in portraying a pure cultivated landscape tended to by mixed classes of

people who appear happy and content in their work. In this way they were closer to the idealized and perfected images of nature promoted by Reynolds and the Academy.²⁷

In his chapter on John Constable's work, Barrell calls attention to the artist's frequent placement of small working figures within much larger landscapes. There is no discomfort or compromise seen in the farmhand's work; it is presented as noble and desirable, without financial necessity or drudgery. Those who are ploughing, building boats, shepherding, or otherwise engaged in "harmonious" rural occupations, are thus ideological and do not reflect the real lives of eighteenth century laborers. In Barrell's words, "Constable arrived at in the attempt to adapt the old georgic vision of England, as a rich and peaceful land where labour is valued and rewarded, to a time in which that vision was clearly threatened by a new fear of the power of the labouring class."²⁸

Barrell's research is grounded in a desire to show how the social relations of the time (between 1730-1840) are reflected aesthetically and how the working "poor could, or . . . could not be represented."²⁹ Within the harmonious landscape, the absence of the workers' sacrifice (sweat and toil) helped to ideologically support the social stability needed in England's colonialist expansion and rise to international power. It is worth mentioning that the ideological role of nature in taming social unrest may also be revealed at this time in romantic depictions of the sublime; landscapes that present nature as overpowering human circumstance. This all relates to Ritvo's assertion that the images of farm animals from the same time period constitute a hidden representation of class division. The metaphoric body of the affluent landowner is depicted through his animal-other in the foreground of a picturesque English landscape—but this landscape is in fact one that he has dominion over because he owns and controls it.

In general, regardless of individual artists' idiosyncrasies, the many livestock paintings that constitute this genre are surprisingly similar in composition. One, two, or three enormous animals are placed in one of two locations, either the center of a pastoral vista or in the center of a plain pen or barn. Usually some additional clue is provided in order to educate viewers towards the animal's pedigree or class. These include painting the prize-winning notice in the pen above the animal as if they are still at the fair in the moment of glory, painting a trophy into the scene, painting the breeder's estate in the distant background of the landscape,³⁰ and/or including in the image a dedicatory script that literally describes the pedigree of the animal or the prizes it has won.³¹ These inclusions serve to reinforce the image of property ownership - either through the grotesque body dominating the landscape or through the animals' role as a kind of performing trophy. When viewed for an audience of competing breeders and/or the working classes who attended agricultural fairs for affordable entertainment, the image of an improved farm animal is doubly significant. It provides the public with the mythology of a bucolic and open English countryside that produces food for all her people, while simultaneously incorporating the obese image of a dominant class of wealthy landowners, who are in fact gobbling up that same countryside in private ownership and land enclosures.

This metaphorical and literal obesity is most humorously represented in John Vine's paintings of over-fattened pigs. Vine, born in 1808, was a self-taught artist who lived near Colchester and whose reputation remained somewhat provincial in terms of his patrons. He was born with the extreme physical handicap of having mal-formed arms and legs, and his success as an artist is that much more remarkable given the fact that he had almost no arms.³² By the 1840s Vine was executing commissions of portraits (people, horses and livestock) for the local gentry, and by the 1860s he was traveling to agricultural shows to document animals shown there and to

solicit new clients. Like Weaver, he often sketched the animal from life then returned to his studio to fill in the background with a repertoire of oft-repeated images, but unlike Weaver he never broke into the upper echelons of aristocratic patronage.

Vine's paintings *Three Prizewinning Pigs* of 1858, and *Three Berkshire Pigs* of 1865, shows the fashion for fat animals reaching its zenith.³³ In both paintings three blimp-like animals are centered in a generic kind of stall. A sign in the background of the former tells us that the breeder of these pigs was John King Tombs, and that they won a silver medal from the Smithfield Agricultural fair. Tombs' pigs lie in a straight line facing their empty trough, forming a kind of metabolic machine, as if to suggest that they efficiently and effortlessly convert food into fat. A fabric banner and gold medal hang in the back of the latter painting and tell us that these pigs won the gold medal in 1858 at the same fair. In both cases the animals are pretty much all fat, and may be pictured laying down because there is little pictorial evidence to suggest that their legs could support their weight.

These paintings were made in the mid-1800s. Although the creation, documentation and exhibition of images like this were still in full force late into the nineteenth century it was not without criticism. Not everyone embraced the fashion for animals that were "unable to stand and scarcely able to move or breathe, from the state of overwhelming and torturing obesity to which they had been unnaturally forced."³⁴ For example, after attending an agricultural fair in 1830's London, an unknown writer, in vivid mocking prose, described his experience and the fashion for fat cattle:

. . . sixty thousand people went to Baker-street to see the cattle show—to feast their eyes on panting porkers, asthmatic sheep, and apoplectic oxen. We should doubt whether the meat is better because the animals are stuffed out to a size hitherto unparalleled except on the external paintings of penny shows, where living monsters are represented about twice the height and breadth of the caravan where the public are invited to visit them. The present, however is the age of enlargement... Perhaps the remains of gigantic animals that geologists have occasionally

lighted on, may be traced to some antediluvian cattle-show, and our ancestors may have rushed to an exhibition of prize mammoths with the same eagerness we of the present day evince in running after overgrown beeves and alarmingly blown out mutton.³⁵

The authors joke about the "Age of Enlargement" serves as a witty pun on the "Age of Enlightenment" and "Age of Improvement." In fact, as already noted, in contrast to the rational ideology of progress, and contrary to the images discussed here, early nineteenth century England was in the midst of an agricultural crisis that had begun decades earlier, one fueled by the industrial revolution and parliament's Enclosure Acts. Essentially, there was not enough food to go around, and from the point of view of a hungry laboring class, the obese cattle, pigs and sheep of the wealthy must have seemed both grotesque and absurd.

The revolution of agricultural technologies and reforms cannot really be separated from the general context of increased industrialization and class segregation that was developing in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain. The curious and charming portraits of over-fed livestock grazing on bucolic English moors that we see today actually symbolize and document a lifestyle that few could attain, or that few attained at the price of many. In their book *The Politics of Transgression* Peter Stallybrass and Allon White suggest that the display of exotic animals in eighteenth century fairs and markets actually served to clarify and reinforce Britain's colonial imperialism and expansion.³⁶ These freakish animals marked the line between the civilized English and the dangerous "other". In the same way, domestic livestock of immense proportions served to mark the line between two classes of the body politic: wealthy landowners and the laboring masses, both of whom had vested interests in how land would be used. The anonymous author's reference to the "Age of Enlargement" can be seen as a particularly insightful view of the underlying conflict between the landed gentry and the expanding body politic of the laboring class.

Notes:

¹ Elspeth Moncrieff, *Farm Animal Portraits* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 1996) 65.

² Weaver also painted portraits of the most famous animals of the brothers Charles and Robert Colling, the best-known breeders of Shorthorn cattle, specifically *Comet* (1818, oil on canvas, 71 cm. x 81.5 cm, private collection), *Petrarch* (1812, oil on canvas, 63 cm. x 80 cm, private collection), and many others. Most of these are in private collections, with limited or no accessibility. See Moncrieff's *Farm Animal Portraits* for decent reproductions.

³ Thomas Weaver, *The Durham Ox*, 1802, oil on canvas, 82cm x 100cm, collection of Clifford Ellison.

⁴ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 45.

⁵ For information on the early breeders, especially Robert Bakewell and Charles and Robert Colling, see Lawrence M. Winters, *Animal Breeding* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1939) 18-21. Also there is an interesting passage in the following essay that describes the specific breeding of the Collings' original stud bull Hubbach with four cows and the subsequent inbreeding of the offspring of these animals: Michael S. Quinn, "Corpulent Cattle and Milk Machines: Nature, Art and the Ideal Type," *Society of Animals Journal of Human-Animal Studies* 1, no. 2 (1993).

⁶ Thomas Weaver, *Two Prize Rams in a Wooded Landscape*, 1800, oil on canvas, 58.5 x 76 cm, collection of Christopher Davenport Jones.

⁷ Thomas Gainsborough, *Cottage Door with Girl and Pigs*, 1786, oil on canvas, 96.5 cm x 121.9 cm, Ipswich Borough Council Museums and Art Galleries. For more information on Gainsborough's use of the cottage motif see Ann Bermingham, ed., *Sensation & Sensibility; Viewing Gainsborough's Cottage Door* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁸ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 45.

⁹ For a fascinating description of the kinds of prints made and circulated in relation to agricultural fairs of the nineteenth century see Andrew Jewell's introductory essay in *Portraits of Animals: A Catalogue of the Nineteenth Century Paintings and Prints of Farm Livestock* (Reading: Reading University and the Museum of English Rural Life, 1964).

¹⁰ The artist George Garrard was also known to have painted the same animal in 1802, and engravings and prints also exist of the animal.

¹¹ See the painting by John Boulton, *The Durham Ox*, 1802, oil on canvas, 103cm x 128cm, collection of Althorp (the Estate of the Earl of Spencer).

¹² Donald N. McCloskey, "The Enclosure of Open Fields: Preface to a Study of Its Impact on the Efficiency of English Agriculture in the Eighteenth Century," *The Journal of Economic History* 32, no. 1 (Mar. 1972): 15.

¹³ The population was recorded as 4.9 million in 1680, 11.5 million in 1820, and 30.5 million by 1900. See E.A. Wrigley, "The Growth of Population in Eighteenth-Century England: a Conundrum Resolved," *Past and Present*, No.98 (Feb. 1983): 122.

¹⁴ E.C.K. Gonner, *Common Land and Inclosure* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1912; Reprint, New York: A.M. Kelley, 1966), 43-100.

¹⁵ Christiana Payne, *Toil and Plenty* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 6.

¹⁶ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 47-50.

¹⁷ See note 5.

¹⁸ These are estimates based on the weights of widely diverse breeds and ages of cattle documented at markets and fairs. In fact the actual sizes of cattle are somewhat disputed, although it seems certain that the dead weight of cattle at least doubled during the eighteenth century. For a detailed

account of sizes and sources of weight records see G. E. Fussell, "The Size of English Cattle in the Eighteenth Century," *Agricultural History* 3, no. 4 (Oct. 1929): 160-181.

¹⁹ The Smithfield Shows, and the Royal Agricultural Society of England (RASE), The London Christmas Cattle Show, The Royal Dublin, and the Royal Highland Society were just some of the annual agricultural shows in England in the first half of the nineteenth century.

²⁰ In a tandem development it is important to point out that during the overall period of livestock portraiture in the mid-nineteenth century, attempts were being made by scientists to understand the biological processes of evolution. These attempts later culminated in Charles Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* to the general public in 1859. The theory that man and animal could have evolved through natural selection over time was a revolutionary concept that went against established religious beliefs. For more information on the developing science of epigenetic or preformative embryo development see Nicholas Russell's *Like Engend'ring Like: Heredity and Animal Breeding in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). This important concurrent history helps explain why the development and existence of new breeds of animals, borne of selected females and males, would have been received with such extraordinary curiosity. These animals, in bodily form, reflected man's conscious manipulation of God's work, and so should be recognized as revolutionary phenomena that literally tested the belief structure of western civilization. Unlike human "freaks" or abnormalities of nature, also put on display in Victorian England, these animals were man-made. As such they occupied a special category of attraction, inspiring a flurry of images and popular media to represent them in both the lower and upper classes.

²¹ The low historical status of these paintings has worked against their conservation and collection. The paintings that do exist are largely in the hands of small regional collectors and/or families and individuals and are not housed in the large estates, trusts and museum collections, where there is easier public access to them. Consequently, very little scholarly research has been devoted to these paintings. Existing sources are often unreliable because they are published in connection to commercial sales and exhibitions. Much more work still needs to be done to research these artists and their works.

²² Henry William Beechley, *The Literary Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds Vol. 1* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846) 341-342. These comments are taken from Reynolds' Third Discourse, a lecture delivered to the students of the Royal Academy on December 14, 1770.

²³ *Ibid.* 342.

²⁴ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 45-81.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 52.

²⁶ Charles Hemming, *British Landscape Painters*. (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd. 1989), 12. See also John Barrell's *The Dark Side of The Landscape, the Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 6-9.

²⁷ One might say that Reynolds espoused an "improvement" of nature; ironically a very different kind of improvement would be depicted in the animal portraits of the improved breeds.

²⁸ John Barrell, *The Dark Side of The Landscape*, 137-138.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 1.

³⁰ Two good examples are *The Craven Heifer* by an unknown artist, circa 1812, oil on canvas, 53.5 x 63.5 cm, collection of J.H.G. Garnett, and *Mr. Freestone and his Shepherd with Four Prize Leicester Rams* by Thomas Weaver, 1824, private collection.

³¹ A good example is the painting of John Vine, *Three Berkshire Pigs*, 1865, oil on canvas, 50.8cm x 61cm, private collection. The painted text reads "Smithfield Club, 1865, class 54, no 425, First Prize of 15£. 0 Age 11 months, 18 days. Silver medal to the breeder. Exhibited J K Tombs."

³² Elspeth Moncrieff, *Farm Animal Portraits*, 137.

³³ John Vine, *Three Berkshire Pigs*, 1865, oil on canvas, 50.8cm x 61cm, and *Three Prizewinning Pigs* by John Vine, 1858, oil on canvas, 48.3cm x 61cm (both in private collections).

³⁴ Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 73.

³⁵ Anonymous letter, William and Robert Chambers, eds. *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 83, 1845, 79-80.

³⁶ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 41-42.