

Thomas Blinks

Victorian master of the foxhound, pointer, and setter.

by Brooke Chilvers

Every February for more than 130 years, borzois, salukis, and vizslas arrive in New York City for the Annual Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. Papillions and Pomeranians ride luggage carts through hotel lobbies as No Pet policies temporarily melt away. Auction houses time special dog sales and invite potential bidders to prestigious benefit brunches and “barkfests” with their pooches. Galleries hang works of the most popular breeds, and invitations to consign sporting art for important June auctions arrive in the mail. New York will never approach the purebred sporting-dog worship of Victorian England, but dog art is big business in the Big Apple.

And yet if you dig through the dusty pages of Oxford, Penguin, and Yale art dictionaries, or click through the subscriber-only *Grove Art Online*, you won't find the four most successful and beloved late 19th-century sporting and dog artists: Richard Ansdell, John Emms, Arthur Wardle, and Thomas Blinks.

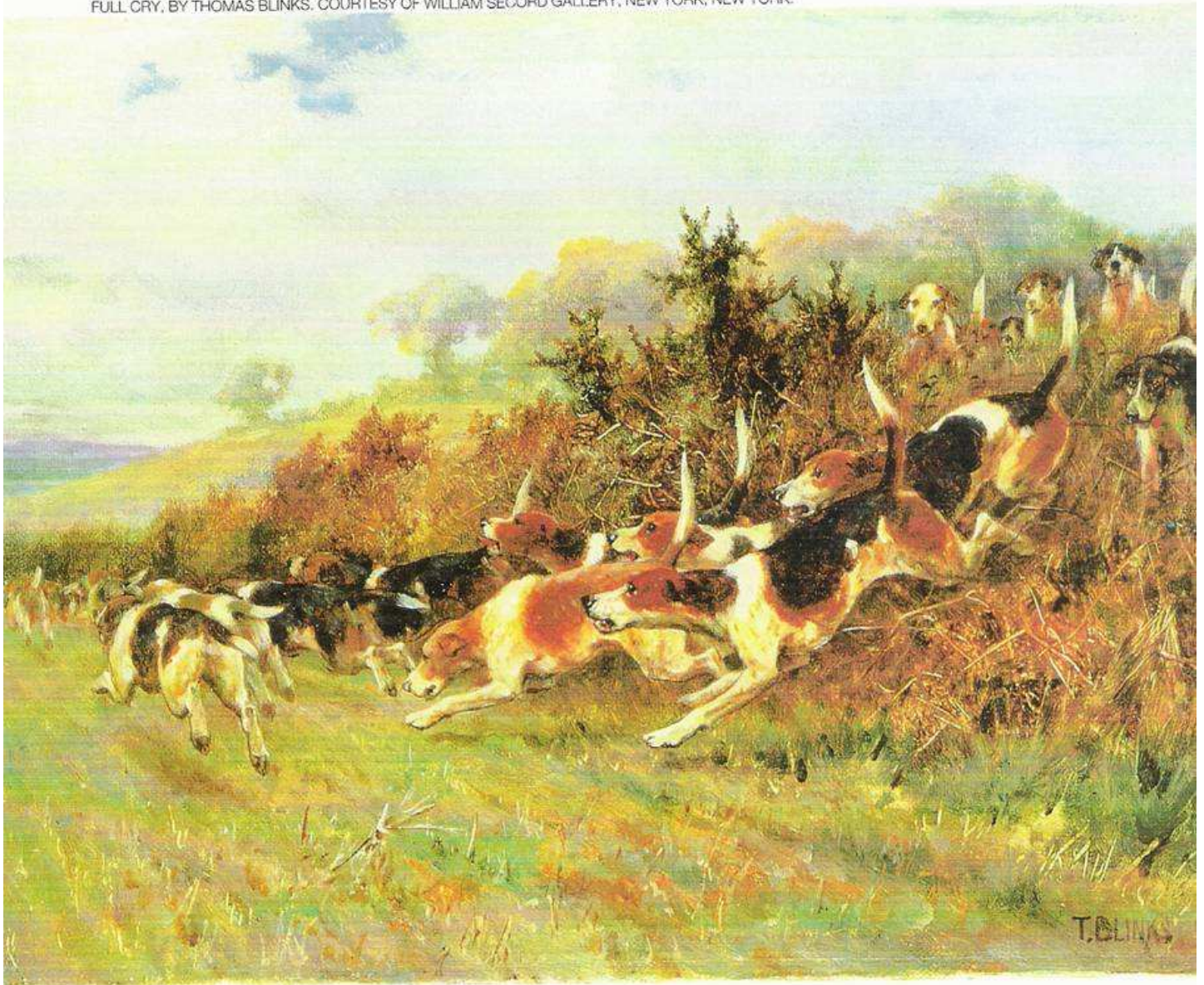
Ever since the artist Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), the first president of England's Royal Academy, pronounced sporting (and still life) art “mere copies of nature” that neither instruct nor ennoble the soul and thus can never assure the painter “a permanent reputation,” academics have overlooked even the genre's best works.

Of course Thomas Blinks's (1853–1910) striking absence from the literature may be due, in part, to so little being known about him. The biographical

notes that accompany his works whenever they come up for sale all state, in different words, that Blinks grew up in Sussex, was recognized early as a gifted sketcher, and wanted to study art but was compelled instead by his father to apprentice as a tailor. Somehow along the way he became a horseman and “enthusiastic supporter of all field sports,” although his obvious understanding of anatomy and movement in horses, which he also applied to dogs, came from hanging out at the horse market at Tattersalls. Later in life he supposedly used a camera to capture the exact anatomies of hounds running at full speed over fields and fences.

We also know that after his first gallery exhibition in 1881, another quickly followed at the Royal Society of British Artists. According to their carefully kept records, he exhibited 29 sporting works at the Royal Academy over the last 27 years of his life. His contemporary John Emms (1843–1912), who exhibited 10 times as many works at the Royal Academy, is equally absent from the art annals. Unfortunately, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, huge supporters of sporting artists like Sir Edwin Landseer, never commissioned Blinks, although several of his works are among the few that depict her successor, King George V, hunting.

If there is a golden age of dog painting, surely it was England between 1840 and 1925, possibly because the Queen herself, who reigned from 1837 to 1901, was dog crazy. She kept some 70 purebred dogs at the Windsor Castle kennels,



commissioned portraits of many of her pets, and even appointed an official “Animal Painter of Scotland.” Not only were competitive dogs shows and field trials becoming increasingly popular; so too was the practice of breeding dogs for specific characteristics or purity of bloodlines. Among sporting dogs, the English setter was recognized as a distinct breed in 1825. Early Irish setters were red and white; solid red setters began appearing in Ireland around 1810, but only became popular some 70 years later.

Sporting art was more mainstream then than today, when abstract art still dominates the scene.

It was even accepted within the established order of the Royal Academy, and art schools and exhibition venues were open to sporting artists who could exhibit, receive commissions, or hope for a benefactor, including the Queen. The result was a flourishing of portraits of pampered pets in sumptuous domestic interiors (to show off the wealth of their owners); sporting dogs performing in the field; and dog portraits meant to demonstrate the standards of a breed or the qualities of a specific dog whose ancestors and awards were of record.

The English art academy system was completely different from that of France or Italy. In England,

students listened to professors of anatomy, architecture, painting, geometry, and perspective during six annual public lectures; and they were obliged to paint in every manner, from landscape to portraits, during their 6 to 10 years of study. In the continental atelier system, dozens of students apprenticed under a single master painter during their entire course of studies.

But Blinks, who worked with oil, watercolors, and engravings, wasn't the product of any academy. In fact, he received no formal training at all. His work sprang instead from that powerful mixture of natural talent combined with the keenest sense of observation. He also was an instinctive colorist who sensed the natural harmony of a chestnut-splashed pointer framed against a blue summer sky with wind-filled clouds, or of a lustrous Irish setter resting within the deepening shadows of a glade at the end of the hunt.

Blinks produced basically two kinds of works: dynamic action paintings of foxhounds in the many versions of *Full Cry*, where the viewer's eye is excited by the steady stream of hounds; and the more static portraits of pointers and setters paused in the characteristic stance of a certain behavior or a familiar moment in the hunt, as in the exuberant, vertically composed *Pointers on the Scent*, where their body language announces to the viewer that a bird is near.

How does one recognize a Blinks in a hall full of dog paintings? By his attention to detail, executed with fine and finished brushstrokes; and by their polished surfaces which, on closer inspection, are topped with spontaneous strokes of subtly highlighting impasto to convey the brittleness of dry grass or prickly gorse.

If his foxhunters are anonymous, his lively dogs are not. Even in *Full Cry*, with 20 hounds pouring over the hill, each dog has its own expression and personality—a bright red tongue in the top right, a floppy ear behind a tree to the left—and not a drop of sentimentality anywhere. The paws of a scrambling foxhound caught in a fence, a painterly tiger-skin rug, are details unique to Blinks.

Viewers also respond to his works for their accuracy of canine anatomy. One can feel skeletal frames beneath silken coats, and the instinctively tense muscle between them. Blinks often took

advantage of the glorious variety of breeds by putting them together on canvas. At Bonhams' February 2007 Dog Sale, the very large 36 x 55 1/2-inch *Setters*, from the Australian Stock Exchange Club of Melbourne, shows three different breeds in a landscape that does justice to them all.

Setters, and Christie's equally monumental *Waiting for the Guns*, demonstrate the best of Blinks. In *Setters*, the strong white horizontal of the dog's silhouette against the shadow-filled tangles of a hedge overgrown in brambles places the setter firmly in the foreground. Blinks does the opposite with the Irish setter, "losing" it in the chestnut and russet colors of grasses in fading light; only the carefully rendered silky luster of its coat makes it stand out. Expression is everything, and in *Waiting*, the Irish setter's quizzical look, aroused by the beetle crawling in front of its extended paw, expresses an endearing quality of that breed and makes the painting a high-priced crowd-pleaser. That detail, and the game bag of the day's hunt lying in the grass, are all Blinks needs to tell the story, which he does masterfully by mixing the tension of tired working dogs with the humorous note of the bug.

Blinks often composed his canvases by filling the space with dogs at a frank eye level. In *Waiting*, the center of the painting consists of a classical "negative pyramid composition," with the alert sitting dog at its apex over the horizontal sleeping dogs in front of a dark triangle of vegetation. In *Setters*, richly vibrant shadows and soil-colored recesses offset them. In both, the climbing vines cascading out toward the viewer contribute to the works' depth of field.

Despite a recent sudden appreciation of George Stubbs (he's in all the dictionaries), the "accessibility" of sporting art will always keep the snobs from considering even its best works as fine art. Stella Walker wrote in her definitive book, *Sporting Art*, that the "time has surely arrived to appreciate these pictures for their true worth." And that was in 1972. ■

Sitting on her hands during the Bonham and Doyle dog art auctions, Brooke quickly realized that she would have to write 182 Sporting Art columns to win the bid on a first-class oil by Blinks.