CHAPTER THREE

1450-1600

Beasts of Flesh and Blood: The Renaissance Horse
Edgar Degas’s acutely perceptive eye and his fascination with capturing movement led to a series of startlingly original images of the horse. Having spent much of his youth on foot-hand specimens staring at the races in Paris from the Hôtel Degas wrote his own chapter on the horse in 1870.

He did not confine his depiction of the horse to painting: he was familiar with portraits of horses in every possible position drawn from a very different point of view. The artist was a great draughtsman during the early 1870s. He never made preparatory sketches. Although Degas was associated with the Impressionists – he exhibited in all but one of the eight shows they held in Paris between 1874 and 1889 – in many ways his aims and achievements as an artist were quite different. Using photography and the bold dynamic compositions in Japanese print as his inspiration, he was always drawn to depict movement – both of humans and the animal kingdom. He wrote early on in his career: ‘It is the movement of people and things that fascinates and delights; if there is still consolation to be had for one so unhappy. If the leaves on the trees did not move, how sad the trees would be and we too!’

The start is the hairiest time in all of the horsey sports, especially in racing. You want your horse to explode – but not just yet. You have to hold back as long as he can be – bit on the box, stirrup leathers too. It is the finest of fine lines, and the matter of holding that line in is quite literally, in the hands of the jockey. This painting, among many other things, is a study in sympathy of the ability to handle a hair trigger without firing it.

The nearest horse, with his head carried high and cocked sideways against the bit, will take off at a gallop at the slightest encouragement. You can see his ears, with his hands carried high and cocked sideways against the bit, will take off at a gallop at the slightest encouragement. But you can see the jockey – at ease with much longer stirrup leathers than a modern jockey – unruffled, sitting deep into the saddle. He is perfectly in balance, and having dealt with the small emergency, he will be able to soften his hands and cajole the horse to the start in good order. The second horse has spooked and half taken off: you can see from the jockey’s position that he is taking a strong correction. But the rider is still completely cool. He is perfectly in balance, and having dealt with the small emergency, he will be able to soften his hands and cajole the horse to the start in good order. The third horse has been taken well off the rail, the jockey doesn’t want his horse to get any idea about spooking from the silly horse ahead. This is a picture of soft light and soft hands – in the fierce speed of horse racing, a crucial gentleness.
The first account of the famous legend of Lady Godiva appears in Roger of Wendover’s (d. 1236) book Flores Historiarum. The beautiful Lady Godiva was supposed to have pleaded with her husband to end the exorbitant toll he imposed on his tenants, the people of Coventry. Weary of her demands, he finally agreed to her wishes, providing she rode naked through the streets of Coventry covered only by her hair. Lady Godiva agreed, providing all the streets were cleared and everyone stopped at home to protect her modesty. The citizens agreed, but one man, named Tom, made a hole through his shutter so that he could see her but was instantly struck blind. The expression ‘Peeping Tom’ derives from the legend.

Although the legend is unlikely to be true, both Lady Godiva and her husband, Leofric (968-1057), certainly did exist and are mentioned in the Doomsday Book. It is also unknown how the legend came about, but the humorous and potentially erotic tale has inspired artists, poets, songwriters and artists over the centuries.

John Collier was a Victorian painter inspired by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their passion for medieval art and literature. The Brotherhood had listed Alfred Lord Tennyson as one of their ‘immortals’ – poets they were inspired by – at their first meeting in London in 1848. Tennyson’s poem, ‘Lady Godiva’, was clearly an inspiration to Collier. His interpretation of the legend focuses on the beauty of the young woman, shown to advantage against the rich red of the horse’s trappings. Collier made his painting at a time when Victorian artists still sought an ‘excuse’ to paint a female nude.

To the modern eye, the rider here seems to be positively naked without her protective headgear, but then times and riding fashions change. Her riding position is an unconventional one if one considers the correct riding position – the one that is most comfortable and gives the rider the best control of herself/himself and the horse – involves sitting with a straight back, shoulders back, chest out, and head forward. Here the rider is slouching round-shouldered on the saddle, leaning back as she bows her head: her modesty is emphasized at the expense of her horsemanship. A good rider never moves with a horse: Lady Godiva seems to be at the mercy of the horse’s movement, rocked forward and rear back, as if the horse were unbreakable. Her somewhat glassy-eyed expression adds to the impression that she has surrendered to the will of her steed.

She is not riding, just sitting on a horse, which requires her role as victim. She rides the horse, which does not hold her. If one considers there is no contact made on the horse’s mouth with either rein in the double bridle the horse is wearing. The horse seems rather stimulated by the whole business, moving forward springily and throwing his head about a bit, as well. At the same time, he seems to be exercising his right, as a gentleman and a gelding should. However, the rider’s long, nearly-straight leg is keeping her just about in the saddle. Perhaps after all, she has a rather good seat.

**LADY GODIVA**

John Collier c.1898

| TITLE | Lady Godiva, c.1898 |
| ARTIST | John Collier (1850-1934) |
| SIZE | 142 x 183cm (56x 72in) |
| MEDIUM | Oil on canvas |
| LOCATION | Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, England |