

Bumper a Bull Terrier, 1745

Loyd Grossman

In 1745 when the teenage Gainsborough painted this, the French court artist, Jean Baptiste Oudry was at the height of his fame as Europe's greatest dog painter. If anyone can be said to have painted swagger portraits of dogs it was Oudry who also used canine subjects in complex allegorical pictures like *The Dead Wolf*, now in the Wallace Collection. Oudry's pomp and magnificence contrast sharply with the warmth and liveliness of Gainsborough's dogs, in a sort of analogy between French absolutism and English liberty.

While Gainsborough painted relatively few dog portraits, dogs feature in many of his works, prompting Ellis Waterhouse to note that 'the number of dogs which diversify his human portraits is surprisingly large and many of them are more memorable than their masters.' Gainsborough painted dogs with the knowledge of someone who had lived with them all his life. There is sharp observation and love but no

Gainsborough's mastery of landscape and portraiture is so considerable that it would be flippant to think of him as 'merely' one of England's greatest dog painters. But I would say that two of his pictures – *Bumper* and *Tristram and Fox* – stand at the apex of the genre along with Hogarth's *Trump* and Landseer's *Eos*.



Just before the Great War, the German expressionist Franz Marc, captivated by the intensity with which his hound Russi observed the countryside, painted a striking portrait *The Dog in Front of the World*. 'I'd like to know for once,' Marc said to his wife 'what goes on inside that dog's head when he sits there and contemplates the landscape!' Did Gainsborough get close to what Bumper thought of the world around him?

phony sentiment. Bumper displays a keen appreciation of the beauty of the dog set in the context of nature, not quite as a noble savage but as an intermediary between civilization and the wilderness.

LEFT: LOYD GROSSMAN, arts & heritage campaigner and supporter of Gainsborough's House

RIGHT: Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), 'BUMPER', A BULL TERRIER, 1745, oil on canvas, private collection

