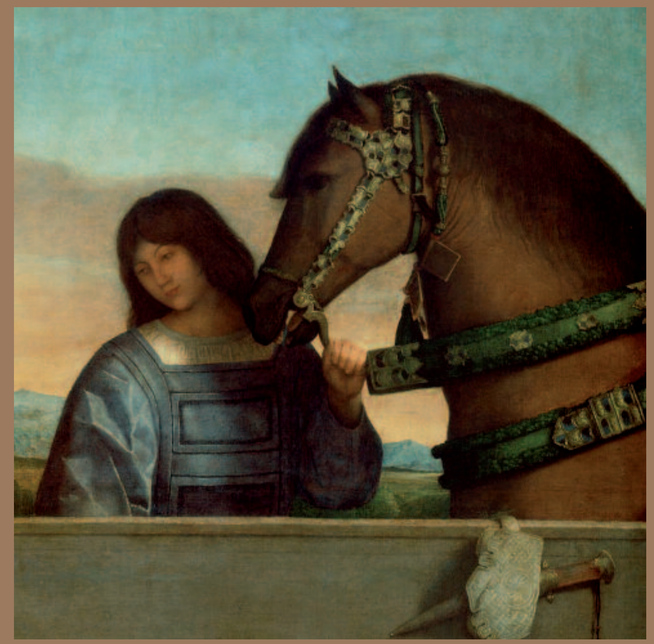
CHAPTER THREE

1450-1600
Beasts of Flesh and Blood: The Renaissance Horse



JOCKEYS BEFORE THE RACE

Edgar Degas 1878-9

Edgar Degas's acute powers of observation and his fascination with conveying movement led to a series of startlingly original images of the horse. Basing much of his work on first-hand experience sketching at the races in Paris from the 1860s, Degas wrote his own chapter on the horse in art.

He did not confine his depiction of the horse to paint; his series of bronze sculptures of horses in every possible position demonstrate his deep understanding and empathy with the subject. These works were never shown during the artist's life; they were his 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 prints 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 distract and console, 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!'

This painting was deeply controversial at the time it was made. So much so that *Punch* made a cartoon of the painting, entitled *Impression in a Jockeylar Vein*. The dramatic composition – the daring contrast of the vertical of the starting pole played off against the energetic movement of the three careering jockeys on horseback – make this painting just as extraordinary today as it was when first shown in Paris.

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 want the horse to be as wild as he can be – but in a few moments. Right now you want him to be tame. It is the finest of fine lines, and the matter of holding that line is, quite literally, in the hands of the jockeys. This painting is, among many other things, 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 smallest encouragement. But you can see the jockey – riding with much longer stirrup leathers than a modern jockey – unruffled, sitting deep into the saddle. He is not tugging with his hands, begging the horse to stay still: he is doing the exact opposite. You can see that he has just taken a small pull – and has instantly softened his hands again. This rhythm of give-and-take is at the heart of good horsemanship, and here it is keeping the horse from a premature departure.

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 clear; the jockey doesn't want his mount to get any ideas about spooking from the silly horse ahead. This is a picture of soft light and soft hands – in the fierceness of horse racing, a crucial gentleness.

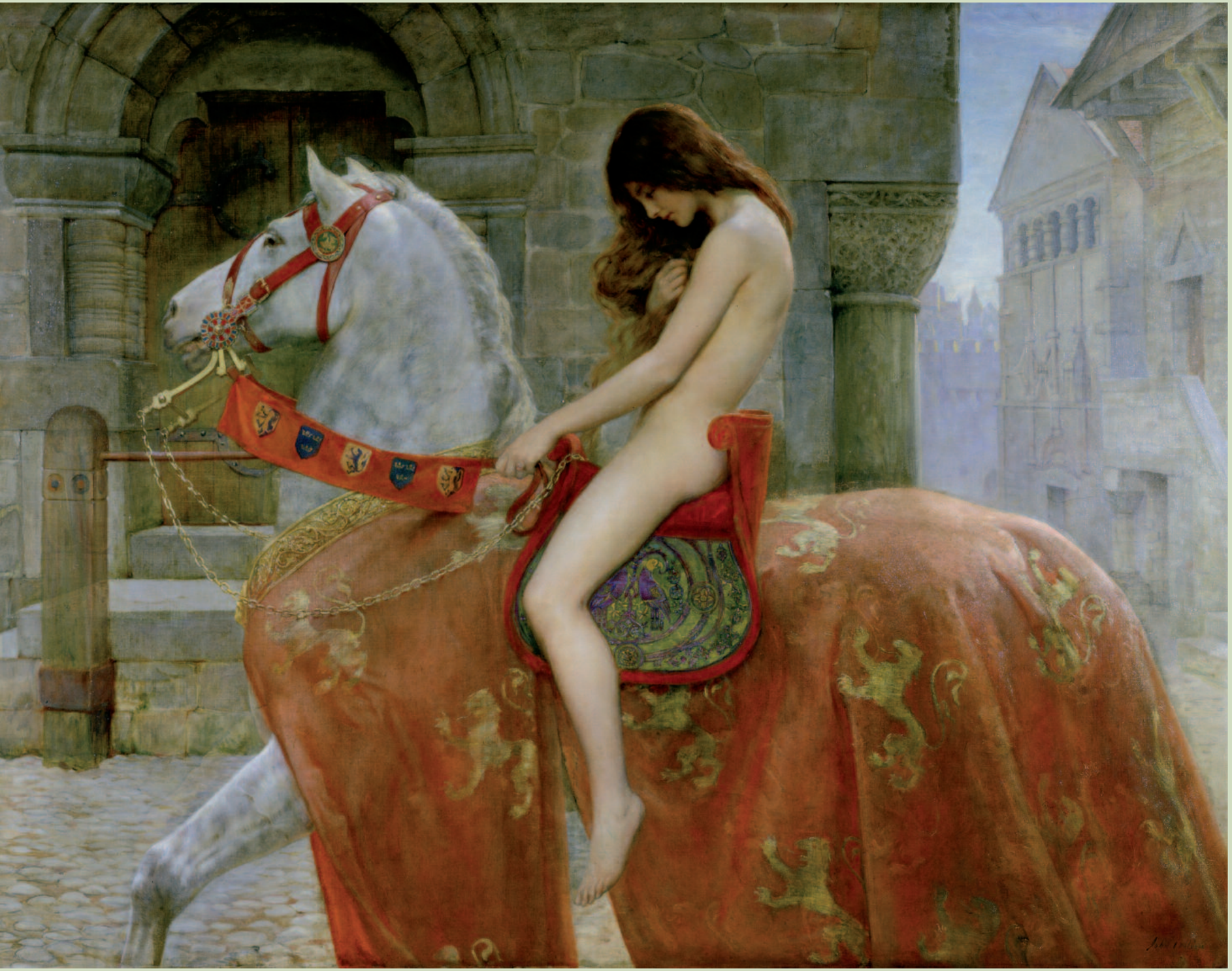
TITLE *Jockeys Before the Race*, 1878-9

ARTIST Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas (1834-1917)

SIZE 107 x 74cm (42¼ x 29in)

MEDIUM Oil, essence, gouache and pastel on paper

LOCATION The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, England



LADY GODIVA

John Collier c.1898

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 stayed 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: he 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 bizarre and potentially erotic tale has inspired novelists, 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 as unconventional as her choice of riding attire. The correct riding position – the one that is most comfortable and gives a 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 moves with the horse: Lady Godiva seems to be at the mercy of the horse's movement, rocked forward and now back, as if she were inebriated. Her somewhat glassy-eyed expression adds to the impression that she has undertaken this ride with the benefit of a handful of Valium.

She is not riding, just sitting on a horse, which stresses her role as victim. She touches the reins but does not hold them with any conviction: 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 averting his eyes, as a gentleman and a gelding should. However, the rider's long, near-straight leg is keeping her just about in the saddle. Perhaps after all, she has a rather good seat.

TITLE *Lady Godiva*, c.1898

ARTIST John Collier (1850-1934)

SIZE 142 x 183cm (56 x 72in)

MEDIUM Oil on canvas

LOCATION Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry, England