

# Basic Instincts

29 September 2017 - 7 January 2018



## New exhibition explores Georgian attitudes to love, desire and female respectability through the radical paintings of Joseph Highmore

A highly successful artist and Governor of the Foundling Hospital, Joseph Highmore (1692-1780) is best known as a portrait painter of the Georgian middle class. However, during the 1740s Highmore's art radically shifted as he turned his focus to societal attitudes towards women and sexuality. Curated by Highmore expert, Dr Jacqueline Riding, *Basic Instincts* explores this ten-year period and his disruptive commentary, reflecting his engagement with the work of the new Foundling Hospital and its mission to support desperate and abused women. On public display in the UK for the first time is a remarkable painting that still retains the power to shock.

In 1744 Highmore created a series of 12 paintings on his own initiative inspired by Samuel Richardson's international bestseller, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. First published in 1740, the novel's sixth edition of 1742 included illustrations by Hubert Gravelot and Francis Hayman. However, unlike the commissioned illustrations, Highmore's paintings explicitly make reference to the abuse and sexual violence at the heart of Richardson's story of a virtuous young maidservant fighting off the unwanted advances of her predatory master. Highmore and Richardson became friends, and Highmore subsequently illustrated Richardson's masterpiece, *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady*, whose tragic heroine avoids a forced marriage,

but dies having been abandoned by her family, duped by an admirer, drugged and raped.

Unlike William Hogarth, Highmore's representation of Georgian society favoured realism over broad humour and theatricality, so his nuanced articulation of social attitudes towards women and sexuality means that modern audiences can miss his challenging commentary. However, at the heart of *Basic Instincts* is a remarkable painting that has never before been publically displayed in the UK and which does not fail to shock. *The Angel of Mercy* (c.1746) depicts a desperate mother in the act of killing her baby, with the distant Foundling Hospital presented as an alternative solution. This painting is unique in western art for showing maternal infanticide as a contemporary reality. The fashionably dressed mother is free from direct biblical or mythological allusion, unlike *Hagar and Ishmael* (1746) the large canvas Highmore donated to the newly established Hospital, which represents an Old Testament story of maternal abandonment. Instead *The Angel of Mercy* confronts the 'elephant in the room' in terms of the Hospital's campaign; that without Christian compassion and practical support, even respectable women will be driven to murder.

*Basic Instincts* curator Jacqueline Riding said: 'This is the first major Highmore exhibition for 50 years and nowhere can his life and work have greater resonance than at the Foundling Museum: an organisation at the forefront of the public display, interpretation and appreciation of early-Georgian art. Setting *The Angel of Mercy*, the *Pamela* paintings and *Hagar and Ishmael* among Highmore's most tender portraits of mothers and children, family and friends, uniquely demonstrates the artist's depth and variety, while indicating the true breadth of British Art in a period still labelled "The Age of Hogarth".'

Foundling Museum director Caro Howell said: '*Basic Instincts* demonstrates that in the eighteenth century, the Foundling Hospital's impact on contemporary artists went far beyond a simple donation of art. For Joseph Highmore it sparked a radical engagement with the issue of women's vulnerability to sexual assault and society's unwillingness to support them, culminating in a work of quite exceptional power.'

*Basic Instincts* explores the limits and narratives around female respectability in Georgian society, and reveals the complexity of Highmore's engagement with issues surrounding women's vulnerability to male exploitation. The first major publication dedicated to Joseph Highmore and written by Dr Jacqueline Riding will be published by Paul Holberton publishing to coincide with the exhibition. The exhibition is

supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

### **Rachel Kneebone, *Raft of the Medusa***

On display in the Museum's historic rooms, a series of nine previously unseen sculptures by acclaimed contemporary artist Rachel Kneebone provide a highly charged counterpoint to *Basic Instincts*. Exploiting porcelain's history as a material of refinement and rococo exuberance, Kneebone subverts viewers' expectations by creating works that are simultaneously delicate and visceral. *Raft of the Medusa's* tumbling limbs and fractured swags are at once coquettish and sinister; their gleaming white surfaces and exquisite detail belie scenes of collapse and dismemberment. Displayed amongst the Museum's historic Collection these works distil and abstract the Foundling Hospital's suppressed narratives of sexual desire, emotional damage, and female strength.

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### **Press Enquiries**

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### **Notes to Editors**

**Jacqueline Riding** specialises in Georgian history and art. She read History and Art History at the universities of Leicester, London and York, and has over twenty-five years' experience working as a curator and consultant within a broad range of museums, galleries and historic buildings, including the Guards Museum, Tate Britain and Historic Royal Palaces. From 1993–9 she was Assistant Curator of the Palace of Westminster and later founding Director of the Handel House Museum, London. She has published widely on early-Georgian art and history, including her major book *Jacobites: A New History of the '45 Rebellion* (Bloomsbury 2016). She is currently writing a biography of William Hogarth (Head of Zeus). She was the consultant historian and art historian on Mike Leigh's award-winning film *Mr. Turner* (2014) and is the consultant historian on his next feature film, *Peterloo*. Jacqueline Riding is Associate Research Fellow in the School of Arts, Birkbeck College, University of London and a Fellow of the Clore Leadership Programme.

**Rachel Kneebone** (b. 1973) lives and works in London. Recent solo exhibitions include *Rachel Kneebone at the V&A*, (2017); *399 Days*, White Cube Bermondsey (2014), and London; *Regarding Rodin*, Brooklyn Museum, New York (2012). Group exhibitions include *Obsession*, Maison Particulière, Brussels and *Flesh*, York Art Gallery, UK (2016); *Lust for Life*, Galleri Anderson Sandstrom, Stockholm and *Ceramix* at Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht (2015); *3am: Wonder, Paranoia and the Restless Night*, The Bluecoat, Liverpool and Chapter, Cardiff (2013–14); *The Surreal House*, Barbican Centre, London (2010); *Summer Exhibition*, Royal Academy of Arts, London (2008) and *Mario Testino at home*,

Yvon Lambert, New York (2007). In 2005, Kneebone was nominated for the MaxMara Art Prize and this year has been nominated for the breakthrough award for the 2017 South Bank Show Sky Arts Award.

**The Foundling Museum** explores the history of the Foundling Hospital, the UK's first children's charity and first public art gallery, and through a dynamic programme of exhibitions and events celebrates the ways in which artists of all disciplines have helped improve children's lives for over 275 years.

The Foundling Hospital, which continues today as the children's charity Coram, was established in 1739 by the philanthropist Captain Thomas Coram, as 'a hospital for the maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children'. Instrumental in helping Coram realise his vision were the artist William Hogarth, who encouraged leading artists of the day to donate work, and the composer George Frederic Handel, who gave annual benefit concerts of his Messiah. In doing so, they created London's first public art gallery and set the template for the way in which the arts can support philanthropy.

**Coram** has been creating better chances for children since 1739. They help children and young people today through their pioneering work in adoption, parenting support, housing support, alcohol and drug education, creative therapies and championing legal rights in the UK and overseas. [coram.org.uk](http://coram.org.uk)

#### **Visitor Information**

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[foundlingmuseum.org.uk](http://foundlingmuseum.org.uk)

Open: Tuesday - Saturday 10:00 - 17:00, Sunday 11:00 - 17:00, Monday closed

Admission: £11 adults / £8.25 concessions (incl Gift Aid), free for children and Foundling Friends

Tube and train: Russell Square, King's Cross St Pancras and Euston