Exhibition Explores James Northcote’s Fables, Illustrated With Unique Eighteenth-Century Collages

PICTURE TALKING: JAMES NORTHCOTE AND THE FABLES
Yale Center for British Art: October 2–December 14, 2014

NEW HAVEN – The first exhibition solely dedicated to James Northcote’s art and career, Picture Talking: James Northcote and the Fables will present a fascinating look at one of Britain’s most imaginative and eccentric painters.

Northcote (1746–1831) has been remembered primarily as a memoirist, a writer on art and artists, and a conversationalist whose strong opinions on diverse topics were often repeated in print. A pupil of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy, Northcote enjoyed a popular reputation in his time for painting portraits of historical subjects, scenes from Shakespeare’s plays, and animals. This subsequently was overshadowed by his prominence as a source of information on his contemporaries. This exhibition, drawn exclusively from the rich holdings of the Yale Center for British Art, will redress that imbalance by presenting an array of Northcote’s art: paintings, drawings, prints, and, at its center, a practically unknown manuscript for Northcote’s One Hundred Fables, Original and Selected (1828).

Northcote wrote and illustrated these fables for adults during the last twenty years of his life. They convey moral lessons, often with themes comparing the similarities of humans to animals. Using techniques well ahead of his time, Northcote created collaged illustrations for the Fables by cutting humans, other animals, and background details from his collection of historical engravings, then reassembling them into chimerical scenes.

This exhibition will explore the translation of Northcote’s highly original designs from collages to their ultimate form as wood engravings for two series of Fables, the first published in 1828, the second, posthumously, in 1833. The wood engravings provided simplified, but highly popular, interpretations of the original fables for mass production and consumption.

Picture Talking will consider the questions of originality versus pastiche and image versus text through careful consideration of Northcote’s art. It will argue that in his

William Daniell, after George Dance, James Northcote, 1809, graphite and red chalk, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; Samuel William Reynolds, after James Northcote, Lion and Snake, 1799, mixed method engraving, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection; James Northcote, “The Bee and the Drones” (p. 61) (detail), pen and ink with hand-cut collaged engravings, from “One Hundred New Fables, Embellished with Designs to Each Fable,” 1817–25, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Fund
earlier work as a history painter and print designer, Northcote worked through the process of borrowing and collage. Thus, the fables represent a culmination of his career.

CREDITS:
*Picture Talking: James Northcote and the Fables* has been organized by the Yale Center for British Art. The co-curators are Mark Ledbury, Power Professor of Art History and Visual Culture and Director of the Power Institute at the University of Sydney, and A. Cassandra Albinson, Curator of Paintings and Sculpture at the Yale Center for British Art.

PUBLICATION:
The exhibition will be accompanied by the first monograph on Northcote, his collages, and his career. Written by Mark Ledbury, *James Northcote, History Painting, and the Fables* will be published by the Center in association with Yale University Press.

OPENING LECTURE:
Wednesday, October 1, 5:30 pm
*Inspiration and Eccentricity: The Ups and Downs of James Northcote*
Mark Ledbury, Power Professor of Art History and Visual Culture and Director of the Power Institute at the University of Sydney

YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART
The Yale Center for British Art houses the largest and most comprehensive collection of British art outside the United Kingdom. Presented to the university by Paul Mellon (Yale College Class of 1929), the collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, rare books, and manuscripts reflects the development of British art and culture from the Elizabethan period onward. Visit us online at britishart.yale.edu.

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