

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



James Ward (London 1769 - Cheshunt 1859)

The Runaway Wagon

signed and inscribed 'I.WARD.x/Paddington' (on the wagon)
oil on canvas
61 x 76.2 cm (24 x 30 in)

An exhilarating and urgent chase is depicted in *The Runaway Wagon* as a man desperately pursues his wagon pulled by two horses as they speed away in a full gallop. James Ward is best known for his accomplished animal studies although he also expertly captured people and landscapes; in this composition, he brings all three components together to create an engaging scene. The tumultuous energy of the scene is heightened by the dark and stormy clouds in the sky and the shadowy ground beneath, and Ward's vigorous brush strokes and strong colours add to the drama.

Central to the composition are two horses showing off their powerful muscles and lustrous coats as they strain to escape the burden of the wagon. The lead horse is turned away but the second horse turns his finely formed head to challenge the viewer. Ward often painted animals in a state of agitation or movement and his preparatory drawings such as [*Studies of a Horse in Motion*](#) in The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, reveal his interest in capturing the specifics of anatomy and the range of movements that were necessary for executing a convincing animal painting.

Chaos abounds in *The Runaway Wagon*, and can be seen in the details of the basket and bundles about to tumble to the ground, and the pigs scurrying from underneath the wagon in fright. A man, presumably the owner of the wagon, runs after it in a state of dishevelled frenzy, while on the left of the composition another man appears terrified as he hastens to close the gate and halt the oncoming horses. Down the path away from the village, a rider can be seen galloping by on his steed, which may explain the commotion that prompted the wagon horses to bolt. Meanwhile, the sky grows dark and threatening and the wind has picked up as can be seen by the movement in the trees. In its heightened emotion and spirited portrayal of untamed nature, *The Runaway Wagon* exemplifies the ideals of Romanticism.

Ward had a lengthy and prolific career establishing himself as one of the most talented painters of animals, portraits and landscapes in Regency England. He frequently exhibited at the British Institution and the Royal Academy of Arts, London. Ward was instructed in the art of engraving by his brother William Ward and John Raphael Smith and developed a successful career as a mezzotinter before turning to oil painting around 1790. Traditionally, the first phase of Ward's painting career is thought to have lasted until c. 1803 and consisted mostly of genre scenes, influenced by the work of his brother-in-law, George Morland. Post 1803, a shift in Ward's style can be detected when his compositions began to emulate Rubens.

Shortly before 1810, Ward began painting characteristically proud and noble portraits of thoroughbreds and blood horses posed in expansive landscapes. He gained particular recognition for these works, leading the *Sporting Magazine* to describe him as 'the first of English animal painters now living'¹. Following this success, Ward was elected to the R.A. in 1811. In the next decade, Ward completed a number of major paintings depicting landscapes and livestock. He devoted most of the years from 1815 to 1821 to executing the *Waterloo Allegory*, a composition of enormous size commissioned by the British Institution. The work, now lost, was critically and financially unsuccessful and its negative reception may have added to Ward's increasing disillusionment with the art world. He retired to a cottage in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, in 1830, although he continued to exhibit in London. His paintings of this latter period, although ostensibly still animal portraits, often have a religious subtext or incorporate moral messages and commentary on the human condition. Ward continued to paint until 1855 when he suffered from a stroke.

¹ *Sporting Magazine*, 1811, p.265.

Artist description:

James Ward was an English painter and engraver. Many of his dynamic compositions depict horses, dogs or wild animals in agitated emotional states, the sense of movement being reinforced by vigorous brushwork and strong colours. With their sweeping landscapes and dramatic skies, his canvases epitomise Romanticism. Not content to excel merely as an animal painter, Ward also produced portraits, landscapes and genre and history paintings of varying quality. A prolific artist, he was a frequent exhibitor at the British Institution and at the Royal Academy, London.

Ward was trained as an engraver by his brother William Ward (1766–1826) and John Raphael Smith and was in great demand as a mezzotinter at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th when he translated into prints works by William Beechey, John Hoppner, Thomas Lawrence and others. He began working in oil around 1790. Ward's painting career is traditionally divided into two phases, with 1803 as the watershed: in the first period the influence of his brother-in-law, George Morland, is most evident, particularly in genre scenes of children and rustics; in the second the influence of Peter Paul Rubens dominates. In 1803 Ward painted *Bulls Fighting, with a View of St Donat's Castle in the Background* (London, V&A) in emulation of Rubens's *Autumn Landscape with a View of Het Steen* (London, National Gallery), then just recently acquired by Sir George Beaumont. His unsuccessful attempt to exhibit this painting and *Liboya Serpent Seizing its Prey* (lost) at the Royal Academy resulted in a rift with that institution; however, in 1807 he was elected an ARA. While the impact of Rubens on Ward's development is well documented and was long lasting, this traditional division of Ward's career oversimplifies the diverse influences, ranging from Classical art to Old Masters and contemporary painters, that shaped his highly eclectic style.

Shortly before 1810 Ward began painting portraits of thoroughbreds and blood horses. Among major early works in this genre, *Eagle* (1809; New Haven, CT, Yale Centre for British Arts) established him as 'the first of English animal painters now living' (*Sporting Mag.*, 1811, p. 265). Placed in a landscape that seems to stretch to infinity, the horse exudes the power and force typical of Ward's finest animal portraits. Similar works led to his being elected an RA in 1811, and many comparable examples followed. Of special note are Napoleon's charger *Marengo* and Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington's *Copenhagen* (both 1824; Alnwick Castle, Northumberland). These were undoubtedly painted as pendants; with the horses symbolizing their masters, the compositions comment on the conflict that pitted France against England.

In the 1810s and early 1820s Ward produced a number of major paintings. *Gordale Scar* (?1812–14; London, Tate Gallery), depicting a gorge in North Yorkshire, ranks as one of his most ambitious compositions. The dark brooding landscape, dominated in the right foreground by a white aboriginal bull and populated with a vast array of cattle and deer, is one of the finest visualizations of the Sublime, an aesthetic then enjoying widespread currency.

From 1815 to 1821 Ward spent much of his time painting the *Waterloo Allegory* (lost), a gigantic composition of 6.4×10.7 m commissioned by the British Institution. It was during this period that Ward suffered a number of personal tragedies, including the deaths of his wife and a daughter. The commission was the result of Ward winning the Institution's competition for a design honouring the Duke of Wellington's victory and the final defeat of Napoleon. The study for the painting (London, Chelsea Hospital) is clearly indebted to Rubens's *Triumph of the Eucharist over Ignorance and Blindness* (1625–7; Madrid, Prado). Ward hoped to augment the money he received from the Institution by exhibiting the work privately in London with an entrance fee, a practice used to great advantage by such contemporaries as Benjamin West and John Singleton Copley. Derivative as it was of an outmoded artistic form, the completed allegory was neither a critical nor a financial success.

Although in the 1820s Ward created such successful and provocative compositions as *The Deer-stealer* (c. 1823; London, Tate Gallery), he became increasingly disillusioned with the art world. In 1830 he retired to a cottage in Cheshunt, Herts, with his second wife, but he continued to exhibit regularly at the Royal Academy and the British Institution.

Many works from the last several decades of Ward's life have religious themes or contain overt moral messages; for example he used a series of 20 canvases, which ostensibly depict character and expression in horses, as a vehicle for commenting on the human condition (e.g. *Confidence* and *Disappointment*, both c. 1840). These are described in the catalogue of works shown by the artist in 1841 at his London residence. Ward wrote theological tracts and poetry that date mostly from this period. A stroke in 1855 ended his artistic career and forced him to seek financial assistance from the Royal Academy.