

# Aesthetic Canons of Animal Beauty from the Renaissance to Today

An anthrozoological review of the exhibition *Beauté Animale* at Gran Palais in Paris  
21<sup>st</sup> of March to 16<sup>th</sup> of July 2012

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*There is no doubt that we need to think unheard-of thoughts about animals, that we need new languages, new artworks, new histories, even new sciences and philosophies.*

Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies*

**T**hroughout history, artists have chosen to represent certain animal species over many others, adopting specific aesthetic canons for their paintings, sculptures and various handcrafts. What are these and why were they chosen? How have they changed over time? These are the main questions that the exposition poses, guiding the visitor throughout its three sections: *Observation*, *Prejudice*, and *Discoveries*. Animals in the first section, *Observation*, are deemed worthy to be represented in virtue of aesthetic standards (aspect, proportions, colours, etc.). Those in the second section, *Prejudice*, embody widespread *loci* of fear, repulsion, and bias. Animals portrayed in the third and final section, *Discoveries*, epitomize the exotic and thus the most elaborate creation of the artist himself.

## Animal subjects *ad vivum*

What is the *fil rouge* of the exhibition? What do all pieces have in common? Which elements, quoting the curator Emanuelle Héran, have served during the preliminary steps of the mounting as crossroads for the selection of the material to place on display? (2012: 12)

The artworks that appear in this exhibition represent, almost exclusively, non-human animals thus disclosing the main goal of its curators, which is to highlight the importance of animals in the history of art. In *Beauté Animale* the animals are the main, if not the only, protagonists, forcing the visitor to leave behind the idea of other animals so very often represented as furniture, corollary to the human world.

There is no doubt that in this choice lies one of the peculiarities that gives this exhibition a unique and innovative look on the artistic international scene for, despite a conspicuous animal presence in the history of art, this had never been displayed in one same place (Clark 1977). *Beauté Animale* looks at this animal presence in a way that reveals its tremendous historical relevance and potential in terms of the unique archeo-cultural heritage it carries within, disclosing new horizons in the field of the multifaceted relationship between humans and those living beings so often merely labelled “animals”.



Fig. 1 - Vincent Van Gogh, *Chauve-souris*, (1885 or 1886), oil on canvas, Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum

Another crucial element of this exhibition is that it displays its subjects as “real” animals, “portrayed as they are”, *ad vivum*, by artists that were so hardly looking for the closest correspondence to the real world they observed. This choice, obeying the rules of *naturalism*, is of crucial importance because it contributes to decrease the feeling of artistic production in the eyes of the visitor. On the other hand, one could think of the animals that are portrayed because they constitute food on royal banquets, animals that are disemboweled and their internal anatomies serve as objects of study (e.g. Rembrandt’s skinned oxen), animals that are killed as prey or used as hunting dogs. These animals (or their pieces) are defined by the very fact that, to some extent, they are the result of the human intervention on their bodies and images, and they serve as the visible proof of the human ability to transform other living beings into meals, anatomical atlases, and trophies.

### **Observation: animals between art and science**

During the Renaissance, animals took their place into the realm of art for a noble purpose: their bodies serve to illustrate and complement the elaborate descriptions given in the treaties of the rising modern zoology. The origins of the so-called “art animalier” is to be found in this practice: animals were usually portrayed in their natural habitat or on a soft background, aiming to provide a visual correspondence to the detailed descriptions that most naturalists drew of them.

From this time on, the animal subject becomes an important element to be observed and, in the light of the primigenial logic that ties the act of viewing to the act of knowing, it also constitutes an important element to be understood. It must be emphasized, however, that this “ocular-scientific” approach still remains deeply tied to the aesthetic pleasure that the pretty shapes, the fabulous colours, and the exotic cloaks and plumages of “ideal animal beauty” provide for the voyeuristic human gaze.

### **Prejudice: demonic incarnations**

Despite the naturalistic approach to depict animals in a realistic way, every cultural product (in this case, artworks) inevitably reflects and carries the signs of the historical period and the social *milieu* that produced it, thus working like a kaleidoscope that is able to transform the animal as well. This process is clearly evident in the second part of the exhibition, *Prejudice*, which is dedicated to the animals that have always inspired fear, phobias, and numerous forms of superstitions. In this section, the main

protagonists are the two toads of Picasso (completed in 1936 and in 1949). There are also several bats, mammals that usually associated with the “inverted” life of the nocturnal world and are also an ideal source for folk beliefs related to misfortune and bad luck.

An interesting case in the history of art is that of cats. This small feline entered the “pets sphere” long ago— that is to say, the cat is now considered an affectionate animal that shares our daily spaces and lives. In the XVIII century, however, in his *Histoire Naturelle*, the naturalist Buffon described cats as false, profiteer, and deceitful animals—it is no surprise that these are also the way artists choose to represent cats in this age.

### **Discoveries: exotic captivity on display**

The origins of the collection of animals for display purposes, such as contemporary zoos and aquaria, trace back to the time when the ownership of exotic animals was related to particular political dynamics and this was a commonly acknowledged practice within certain social groups. The French historian Gustave Loisel defined these embryonic forms of display using the Persian expression “paradeisos” (Loisel 1912; Hoage & Deiss 1996): private spaces where access was strictly limited to an elite niche of aristocrats usually close to the “owner” (the Pharaoh, the emperor, the king) because here one could see animals that were not to be easily found in nature because of their being wild, savage or exotic.

With the new royal *menageries*, this exposition (and, therefore, fruition) of the exotic aimed at acquiring a semi-public character and its *movens* became the taxonomic classification of the species. The display of exotic animals, which were now *specimens*, became since then the meeting point of scientific curiosity (animals=species) and voyeuristic gaze (animals=objects): this is the dualism that characterizes modern zoos and aquaria, all of which aim at educating the public and, at the same time, entertain visitors.

Animals taken away from their natural environment to be put in cages and pens – shifting from an “ontological” state to an “ontic one”, as Kenneth Shapiro would put it (1989: 189) – represent “models” for that reification of the “live nature” that is able to impress and charm both the visitor and the artist with bodies so different from the “normal” animal canon of beauty that real life offers. Take for instance the case of the sculptor Jean Pierre Dantan (said Dantan Jeune) who, after a visit to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris in 1836, was so fascinated with an orangutan called Jack that he decided to reproduce a bronze bust of it. Jack's gaze still looks deep into the visitor's eye and becomes a mirror that reflects and, at the same time, challenges our idea of what is human, of what is animal.

### **The human through the mirror: the artist ape (metaphor and reality)**

In *La Singe Peintre* we can see an ape dressed in human clothes holding a palette and a paintbrush in its hands and attempting to draw a landscape. The allusion implied by Decampes in this painting is an interesting one: a painting in the painting where an ape became the metaphoric representation for the artist's condition. Art, a high cultural product – thus a refined expression of what man is capable of – is here performed by an animal. In *Les Singes critiques d'art (étude préparatoire)* thirteen ape specimens (macaques, vervets, green baboons, and others.) of different sizes and sex are crowded together and sat down on a wooden box while they are busy “criticizing” an artwork of which the visitor can see only the golden frame, its title (“Tristan and Isolde”), and its price.

Having subtly compared them to apes, some have suggested von Max's satirical attack towards his contemporary fellow art critics. Others have read in the eyes of the central ape – the one looking at an hypothetical observer – the search for identification between the animal and the public, both ultimately unable to catch the deep and inner meaning of his work (AA.VV. 2012). Both paintings reveal the ambiguous attraction/repulsion feeling that monkeys have always exerted (and still do) on, artists, and eventually confirm the common identification of the monkey as the *alter ego* of man. Monkeys were in fact considered inferior to men because of their alleged imperfection and inability to “upgrade” to the cultural and self-sufficient human domain. However, in this very artistic shift from man to ape and *vice versa*, they also represent the most “almost-human” non-humans, which makes them extremely mysterious and, therefore, seductive.

A recent exhibition, *Art by Animals*, on display at the Grant Museum of Zoology in London from February 1<sup>st</sup> until April 13<sup>th</sup>, displayed paintings made by monkeys, elephants, and other animal species.



Fig 2 - André Gabriel Decamps, *Le Singe peintre* (1833), oil on canvas, Paris, Louvre

Although it exceeds the scope of this review and delves into the topic of “animal artists”, it is however interesting to reread the last two artworks in the light of the London exhibition, as it allows us to move from the search of animal beauty in human art to the real animal that produces art, forcing us to rethink the concept of “Art” and its disjunctive implications such as the “human=culture” / “animal=nature” opposition.

### **New artistic (and ethic) sensibilities to the “animal question”**

Classical artists so far aimed at capturing the animal world in the most realistic way. Gilles Aillaud, on the other hand, opens up a completely different perspective: the animal beauty is no longer the ultimate goal and now serves as a tool to stimulate and engage serious considerations on the ethical issue that the animal captivity inevitably carries with it.

The so-called “animal issue” emerged in the Seventies and has, since then, generated a serious and pragmatic – not sentimental, nor empathic – consideration on how humans relate to and treat the other living beings in a number of different contexts. Zoos, circuses, intensive breeding centers, biomedical laboratories became places where to rethink animal life and, in fact, a number of philosophers, Peter Singer or Tom Regan for instance, have placed animal’s subjectivity and sensibility in contemporary moral discourse.

With this in mind, Gilles Aillaud has chosen to represent animals in the zoo – confined, caged, and living in putrid waters – to reveal the contemporary need of men to satisfy their objectifying gaze, ultimately depriving animals of their freedom and transforming them in empty *simulacra*. Aillaud seems



Fig 3 - Gabriel von Max, *Les Singes critiques d'art, étude préparatoire*, (about 1889), oil on canvas, private collection

also to question: what do we know about animals if we place them outside of their natural habitats? What do we know about animals if we deprive them of their natural relationships with other animals? What do we know about animals if we feed them with our own hands and have made them unaffected by the presence of visitors? (Shapiro 1989; Acampora 2006)

*Beauté Animale* ends with the *Ours Blanc* by Gilles Aillaud: the animal lying on the icecap reminds us of a big empty bag carelessly thrown away after use and visitors could/should at this point come to ask themselves what is the price that thousands of animals constantly pay to satisfy the human desire to scrutinize the "exotic", to dissect it and to reassemble it again, becoming the product of our own projections, the cultural product that meets our long-standing stereotypes about what it means to be an animal. (Rudinow 1979)

In this sense, animals behind bars at the zoo, or behind glass at the aquarium, tell us more about the collecting nature of *Homo sapiens*, rather than their own "animal nature". (Berger 1980; Marvin & Mullan 1999) "The Lion" at the zoo or "the Dolphin" at the aquarium ultimately embody our archetypical fear, which tends to mark out the distance from our own to the non-human world and, by doing so, we are condemned to remain man amongst men.

### Conclusive remarks

Art, a particular project of that macro-phenomenon that we call "culture", can help interpret the relationship between humans and animals. Along the historical and thematic path suggested by the exhibition *Beauté Animale*, it is possible to observe – in all its visual immediacy – how inter-specific relationships have changed over time (think for instance of how two commonly used categories such as "pets" or "animals for work" are bound to specific historical and cultural circumstances). Furthermore, the

Parisian exposition reveals the often unacknowledged or, at least, underestimated role of animals in human ontopoietic processes. Animals represented in the various artworks collected here are, undoubtedly, the protagonists of this exhibition; however, it must be emphasized that they also are cultural products, the result of an artist's vision, inspiration, and artistic (thus, cultural) process. Humans are only apparently absent from the artworks: their presence shines through and remains alive in the so very human representation of these animals.



Fig 4 - Gilles Aillaud, *Ours blanc* (1981), oil on canvas, Villeurbanne, Institut d'art contemporain Collection

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## About the author

Eleonora Adorni <eleonora.adorni@gmail.com> obtained her MA in Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at the University of Bologna with a final research dissertation on the exhibition of living beings in a contemporary aquarium. Her main interests concern the human-animal relationship (anthrozoology) with a focus the captivity and display of exotic animals and the ethical consequences involved.