Interspecies interactions in the visual arts (1550-1914) (Lyon, 21-23 May 25)

Lyon, May 21–23, 2025
Deadline: Jan 10, 2025

Oriane Poret, Paris

International symposium:
"Interspecies interactions in the visual arts (1550-1914). Collaborations, experimentations, oppositions."

While representations of animals abound in Western art, often invoked by iconography to support symbolic interpretations of works, they are, however, rarely considered for their own sake by academic research, despite numerous calls to “look at animals” (Berger, 1980). Over the last forty years, the role of animals has attracted increasing interest from historians and art historians, particularly in the Anglophone world, and is gradually gaining ground in other regions, notably in French research. This renewed attention is part of a broader movement to reconsider the relationships between humans and other-than-humans, illuminating the multiple ways in which animals have been represented, perceived, and involved throughout history. While Éric Baratay reconstructs animal lives (Baratay, 2017) and Katie Hornstein investigates the reasons behind the disappearance of felines from 19th-century art (Hornstein, 2024), Sean Kheraj and Jennifer Bonnell (Kheraj & Bonnell, 2022) undertake the challenging task of reading animal traces in archives. A similar trend can be observed in museums. For instance, the curators of the exhibition Les Animaux du Roi at the Château de Versailles (2021) endeavoured to reconstruct a royal menagerie through artworks. In 2023, the British Library highlighted its sound archives of the animal kingdom in the exhibition Animals: Art, Science and Sound. Inspired by various natural habitats, the exhibition documented the lives of species while preserving their voices. Broader research projects are also being conducted by research institutions, such as the Moving Animals project led by Raf de Bont at Maastricht University since 2019. Others have focused on specific families of animals and their long-term history, including the New History of Fishes project conducted by the LUCAS centre at Leiden University between 2015 and 2019 (Smith & Egmond, 2024).

The proposed symposium aligns with this dynamic and aims to analyse the interspecies interactions between humans and other animals visible in the visual arts. It spans the era commonly known as the “scientific revolution” to the industrial/industrious revolution, covering a period from the mid-16th century to the early 20th century. The second half of the 16th century witnessed a renewal of thought regarding animals: this was expressed, on the one hand, in the field of natural history, which moved away from the ancient writings that had served as models until then, revised by authors such as Pierre Belon and Ulysse Aldrovandi; and on the other hand, in the renewed reflection on the human-animal relationship, brought to the forefront by figures such as Michel de Montaigne and Pierre Gassendi, or, in opposition, René Descartes. These evolving ideas are per-

ceptible in art, which renders this new philosophy of the human-animal relationship tangible (Cohen in Enenkel/Smith, 2007), and embeds these representations within the process of scientific development. The long 19th century marks a turning point in the understanding and exploitation of animals. As animal protection movements institutionalised at the beginning of the century, with the establishment of societies dedicated to animal welfare and the introduction of the first laws against cruelty, a new perspective emerged, focusing on the animal-machine concept. This notion, already present in Descartes' modern thought, was exacerbated by the development of mechanisation and mass production, embodied by the advent of assembly lines, notably in slaughterhouses. From then on, the animal was perceived not only as a cog in an economic system but also as a participant in the modern war machine (Baratay, 2014).

This symposium proposes to study how artists have not only observed animals and, in some cases, lived alongside them, but have also sometimes attributed agency to them. The idea of an active relationship between the artist and the animal raises fundamental questions about the role of animals in artistic production. Are they merely objects of study, partners in creation, or autonomous agents in a larger process? How does the making of artworks define or blur boundaries between humans and other-than-humans? The analysis of artistic practices allows for questioning the nature of the bond between humans and other animals, and examining how, in certain works, the animal can be perceived as a protagonist capable of resisting attempts at reification. Rather than being a mere reflection of power relations between humans and animals, artistic creation thus becomes a site of negotiation, even contestation, of these relationships.

The ambition of this symposium is to offer a transversal and innovative reflection on artistic modes of appropriation of animals, without limiting itself to domesticated animals and mammals. It is also to transcend traditional frameworks of art history by examining the relationship between Western artists and animals, perceived both as companions in life, partners in creation, and as social and cultural actors. By focusing on the restricted cultural area of the West, it will allow for the exploration of particular modes of relations with animals, situating them in relation to other ontologies (Descola, 2021), and recontextualising them within broader discussions on issues of circulation and domination. In doing so, it will seek to examine how artists have echoed, or not, the profound changes in the relationships between humans and animals.

The symposium seeks interdisciplinary approaches as well as contributions from different disciplines. In the hope to encourage those various attitudes, four main sections can be considered. Proposals for presentations may align with one or more of these sections, as they are indicative and not exclusive, aiming to provoke diverse reflections on the place of animals in art and in the humanities/social sciences. The committee will also appreciate proposals that include reflections on the methodologies of art history in addressing animal-related questions.

Section 1: (Re)viewing and (Re)reading Animal Behaviours:

Animals are inherently active, animated, and mobile beings with their own will. While this understanding is accepted today (Harchi, 2024), a portion of modern authors, particularly those within Cartesian thought, has questioned this capacity. The perception of animal behaviours is fluctuating, prompting an inquiry into how artists represent these behaviours across different historical periods. To what extent do these representations reflect contemporary veterinary, naturalistic, or zootechnical discourses? Are certain animals endowed with human traits, or are they depicted as

autonomous entities with their own behaviours? What of representations that reify animals, transforming the entirety of the creature or its substance? With the “scientific revolution”, modes of representation and appropriation of fauna have evolved, coinciding with the proliferation of menageries. Surpassing mere symbolism or decorative accessory, animals have become subjects in visual culture. Iconographic codes borrowed from scientific literature have been integrated into visual arts by figures such as Paulus Potter or George Stubbs, progressively individualising animals into genuine “portraits”. Does the portrait then reflect actual relationships with the animal? This section aims, first, to examine how artists translate discoveries regarding animal behaviour into their works and how these evocations fit within successive scientific debates. It will then explore potential interspecies affinities detectable in visual or textual archives.

Section 2: Animal Experience, Between Beliefs and Sciences:

Experience is understood here in a deliberately multifaceted sense: the experience by the animal, the experience of the animal, and the experience on the animal. The animal's body is the field for experiments, both scientific and more esoteric, exploiting the animal's substance. This is evidenced from the 16th century by nature casts from the German artists Wenzel Jamnitzer and Bernard Palissy, followed in the 18th century by paintings such as An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump by Joseph Wright of Derby (1768). For a long time, animals were associated with belief systems and superstitions, embodying supernatural forces or polysemous symbols. Alchemy gave them pride of place, echoing other beliefs with pagan origins. Scientific and industrial developments changed these paradigms, turning the animal body into a source of knowledge and production. What are the material traces of experiments and experiences conducted with/on the animal body in works of art and artistic objects? How do artists position themselves in relation to the experiments of their contemporaries?

Section 3: From Extraction to Artistic Exploitation:

From the dawn of sedentarisation, animals have been integrated into human economic systems, playing a central role in exploitation through farming, hunting, transportation, and the trade of so-called “exotic” species. This extractivist dimension (Pouillard, 2019)—which encompasses capture, forced domestication, and mass movements of animals—is often overlooked by art history, despite its profound impact on artistic representations. This section seeks to interrogate the strategies employed to benefit from animal resources and the networks available to artists. Artists were actors in circuits of appropriation and transmission of animals akin to amateur collectors. Who were then the intermediaries (merchants, caretakers, transporters, etc.) between animals and artists? How did the forced circulation of animals, their commodification, and practices of domestication influence their treatment in visual representations? This section proposes to expand the reflection to include animals that have been reified post-mortem through taxidermy and used as artistic models. Extractivist practices invite a reconsideration of the forms of governance exerted by humans over animals (Piazzesi, 2023). In this sense, can artistic work be seen as a form of domination or collaboration? What is the extent of the violence present in the imagery?

Section 4: Resistances, Negotiations, and Oppositions:

In light of the affinities between artists and animals, this last section offers an opportunity to

explore forms of “animal resistances” visible in works of art, discernible in historical testimonies, or perceptible in the material evolutions of objects. Given the diversity of discussions on this issue and the risk of anthropomorphism, this section seeks to reclaim the term “resistances” to encompass more subtle forms that imply “a conscious and intentional decision to oppose” (Pearson, 2015) authority and oppression. Beyond escape attempts, flights, or bites that defy constraints, how can we identify signs of boredom or weariness within the works? What non-human communications are detectable in the sources? What do animal reactions teach us about their exploitation as models? What do textual and visual archives (notably photography) reveal about the reality of the treatment of animals? Many researchers, for instance, interpret the cracking of ivory objects as manifestations of the animal material's memory of its exploitation or reification. Thus, this section, as well as the previous one, also encourages papers looking at animals as art materials.

Numerous academic works invite the humanities and social sciences to question their methods and underscore the necessity of a paradigm shift. This call aspires to foster a convergence between sciences and to summon knowledge from various research fields and plural horizons, conditions deemed essential today to comprehend animal existence (Baratay, 2010) and interspecies issues in images. By gathering knowledge and expertise, the symposium aims to deliberately open the perspectives of art history to collaborations with other scientific fields.

Submission of proposals:

We invite scholars in art history and animal history, as well as those from the fields of animal sciences and ethology, to submit proposals that address these questions and open new avenues of reflection on the relationship between animals and artistic creation. Proposals, whether individual or collaborative, are welcome for case studies, comparative approaches, and ongoing research. Aware of the structural challenges in working with both visual and textual archives to recover animal traces, the scientific committee will pay particular attention to methodologies and to innovative proposals.

Proposals (around 300 words), accompanied by a short bio-bibliography, should be sent by January 10th, 2025 to the following address: clara.langer2@univ-lyon2.fr and oriane.poret@univ-lyon2.fr

Presentations, lasting 15 to 20 minutes, will be followed by discussions with the audience.

Timeline:

Submission deadline: January 10th, 2025
Notification of scientific committee's decision: February 21st, 2025
Symposium: May 21st-22nd-23rd, 2025

Travel costs for speakers to Lyon may be covered by the organization, subject to available funding (doctoral students and speakers with no affiliation as a priority). The symposium may be the subject of a publication, the form of which remains to be defined.

For any questions or additional information, please contact: clara.langer2@univ-lyon2.fr and oriane.poret@univ-lyon2.fr

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