

Animal Artists Don't Get Enough Respect



by
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Many art museum directors today don't appear to believe that displaying paintings of animals and wildlife has merit. In fact, counting the number of animal artists over the past two hundred years whose work directors consider worthy of exhibition can be done on no more than ten fingers: John James Audubon, Antoine-Louis Barye, Deborah Butterfield, Sir Edwin Henry Landseer, Rosa Bonheur, Edward Hicks, Jean-Baptiste Oudry, Jacques-Laurent Agasse, Franz Marc and George Stubbs are about the only painters who mostly painted animals who were critically accepted as great artists.

This is especially surprising because artistic representations of animals have played central roles in religion and magic, both cornerstones of human societies for millennia. Animals were subjects of the earliest art humans ever created—and judging from the photo of a 20,000 year old drawing found in a cave in Lascaux, France, prehistoric artists clearly believed animals were sacred and spiritual beings as well as sources of protein.

The esteem in which Native Americans held animals is clearly shown in their beliefs that people communicate with the Great Spirit by interacting with nature. Many chose or were given symbolic “power animals” for the strength and character they confer, and every tribe possessed a totem animal that signified the collective spirit of its people.

Animal symbolism in art has remained amazingly stable throughout changes in religious beliefs. Ancient Greeks considered the griffin as an attendant of Apollo and keeper of the light; griffins retained their protective position as guardians of the dead in Christian tradition. For a long time, animals held an important place in English and European Medieval art, too, and artists frequently used animal motifs in both art and crafts.

Though animals remained a vital part of art, during the Renaissance depicting them fell out of favor—except for the farm animals shown in Nativity scenes and the dogs, cats, horses and birds used much as artistic “accessories” in paintings of their owners.

The 18th and 19th centuries saw a resurgence of interest in paintings of animals with the animal portraits of George Stubbs, Theodore Géricault and Eugene Delacroix. Later, the modernism of the 20th century owed much to animals in art.

Even when the end result seems overly sentimental, the technical expertise required for painting animals is uniformly high. No subject demands more finely-honed artistic skill and no medium as elegantly capture the essence and personality of animals better as a fine art portrait.

Fortunately, though Stubbs, Géricault and Delacroix have long since departed, there are still a few artists who can do an excellent job of rendering fine art animal portraits. To see the work of one of the best, go to <http://www.howtotalkwithanimals.com/portraits.html>

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