

The Object podcast
Transcript of The Animalier: Rosa Bonheur's Wild Kingdom
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The lions arrive by wagon. Pulled by horses through the French countryside. A male and a female, in a cage, with heads like boulders and roars that whip the horses.

The lions had been bought in Marseilles, in the south of France, and now, more than 400 miles later, they have come to a chateau on the edge of the forest south of Paris. An old red-brick hunting lodge, half-timbered, with a castle-like tower.

When the wagon stops in the courtyard, the first person to greet them is probably a woman. Short, white-haired, with a blue smock and a gold-tipped cane.

The lions seem to terrify everyone but her.

She calls the male Nero, like the emperor. And eventually, when she pets him, he stands on his hind legs and puts his paws on her shoulders, as if to dance.

In the mornings, she has his cage put out on the lawn. Where she has a little tented platform set up. And when the shutters are taken off his cage, Nero looks up at her window. And if the window is open, he knows: it's time to get to work.

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This is The Object, produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Today, the story of Rosa Bonheur and the animaliers, the artists who saw the souls in supposed beasts and turned them into beauty.

I'm Tim Gihring.

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When Rosa is 11 years old, her mother dies. Her father had left the family to join a utopian cult. Her mother had done what she could, teaching piano lessons and moving the family to Paris to be near him. But still, the man was in deep. And there are four kids, and one of them is Rosa, who will eventually be locked in the cellar of her school for drawing her classmates in caricature, only to draw her teachers in caricature and finally get kicked out.

Rosa's mother dies at 36, basically of exhaustion.

Her father's cult is the Saint Simonians, who believe in science and the value of art and equality between the sexes, even designing a special kind of pants-dress for women. All radical ideas in the 1830s.

Rosa admires this, including the pants. And she loves her father for it. But it's not enough. She knows what happened to her mother. She vows never to marry or have children.

When she's finally thrown out of school, she learns to draw and paint from her father. And she keeps pets on the roof of their apartment building. An owl, a pair of rabbits, a dog, a cat, a goat. She carries the goat on her shoulders, down six flights of stairs to walk him around the city.

She starts to draw the pets. She wants to draw everything, she says, as long as it can "creep, crawl, jump, or fly."

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Okay, let's go all the way back to, well, all the way back. "In the beginning," as the Torah and the Christian Bible put it. When God or Elohim creates the animals.

God makes the so-called great sea monsters first, which is kind of interesting. And then, on the fifth day, God says "let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: tame animals, crawling things, and every kind of wild animal."

He doesn't make the humans until later, which, you know, it's hard to know how long that is. Because it all supposedly happens on the Fifth Day. But for a while anyway, the animals have the place to themselves.

And then the humans come along and the rug is pulled out, right. God says, "Let them have dominion over the fish, the birds, the tame animals, the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth."

And that's pretty much the whole ballgame right there, except maybe for viruses.

For a few hundred thousand years, animals and people mostly meet at the end of a spear or a fork, or not at all.

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And then in the 1800s, in Europe, where almost everyone believes the creation/dominion story, people start taking in pets for the first time. In London, Paris. Because the Victorians decide they're good for you, good for the moral fiber. They're steadfast, loyal, innocent. Except for cats. Cats are for catching mice.

But dogs, great. Owls, a-ok. In a pet book from 1871, a pastor declares "there are worse pets to be found than owls. They can be made into very companionable birds, quaint, grotesque, and affectionate. The chief drawback, he says, is its nocturnal habits.

Um, yeah.

By the late 1800s, there are more than a hundred wild animal dealers in London alone. And you can buy anything from them. You want an elephant, you got one. You want a kangaroo, walk it out on a leash. Because colonialism, right. Animals are coming in by the shipload, from all over the world – animals that have no business in London or Paris.

People are riding ostriches around the city on saddles. They're walking monkeys down the boulevard. There's a book from back then called *Notes on Pet Monkeys and How to Manage Them*, which includes the very important part of what to name them. The book recommends Bully or Tommy or Peggy.

Artists see these animals and romanticize their uncivilized instincts. The world is buttoning up, the maps are filling in, and here's a tiger—who would kill a dog in the street and lap up the blood. And they would just be...a tiger. To love these animals is another way to hate the bourgeois.

Some of the most famous French artists of their day, like Eugene Delacroix, start showing up at the new zoo in Paris, in the Jardin des plantes, setting up their easels outside the cages. They go to dissections, too, and slaughterhouses, to see the animal underneath.

Rosa Bonheur cuts her hair short. She gets a special permit from the French government to wear pants – which technically was illegal for women until 2013. And she takes her place among the carcasses and the severed heads, alongside these painters of animals – the animaliers.

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When Rosa is 19 years old, she takes two pictures she had painted of her roof-top pets, titled "Two Rabbits" and "A Goat and a Sheep," and gets them accepted into the Paris Salon. They're that good.

For the next 12 years, she shows in the Paris Salon. Pastoral pictures, mostly, of cattle and sheep and goats—the pride of France. And then, in 1853, she paints her masterpiece.

She had been visiting the horse market in Paris a couple times a week, and coming back to her studio to make a painting she calls *The Horse Fair*. It's enormous, 16 and a half feet wide and eight feet high, and deploys every trick of pose and perspective to show these massive percheron horses in a swirl of action.

It's in the Met now, in New York. And it's so big that when it came to the Minneapolis Institute of Art, in 1969, it had to be unpacked outside on the lawn. It's only left New York once since then.

Rosa sells it for a small fortune. And now she's something of a celebrity. Prints of *The Horse Fair* are circulating everywhere. A doll is made of her, in Germany, with short hair and men's clothes and a gold-tipped walking stick.

She's only 31. But she's like the Beatles now, who stopped touring because they could. Rosa stops sending pictures to the Paris Salon, because she can.

Instead, she takes her fortune and buys that old red-brick hunting lodge on the edge of the forest south of Paris. She brings in horses and wild boar and deer and parrots. Anything that creeps, crawls, jumps or flies.

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The first lions arrive at the chateau in the 1870s. By then, Rosa has been awarded the Grand Cross of the French Legion of Honor, by the empress herself, who showed up at the chateau and found Rosa in her studio trousers and embraced her and when she left Rosa discovered the tiny red ribbon pinned to her shoulder. She is the first woman to receive it.

She has everything an artist could want, except she's tired of going to the zoo in Paris to draw lions, so she rents one named Brutus for a while and then gets the pair from Marseilles. And when those are gone, she gets another pair, as cubs.

For Rosa the lions are the beginning and the end of any argument about her iconoclasm. What can you say about someone who sleeps with a lion at her feet? She is manlier than men. She has drawn a circle around herself, a circle of one.

Except that Rosa is never alone, on the edge of the forest.

When Rosa was 14, after her mother had died, and her father was dreaming of utopia, she moved in with the Micas family in Paris. And there was Nathalie, age 12.

Thirty-five years later, Nathalie moves into the chateau in the forest, with Rosa and the lions and all the other animals, and stays for the rest of her life. Newspapers say she's a friend or nothing at all. But Rosa says enough for everyone to understand. "As far as males go," she says. "I only like the bulls I paint."

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Rosa treats her animals like props – models to be drawn and disposed of. Or at least she says she does. She calls her lions terrible boarders, who eat 20 pounds of meat a day.

But in fact she is never really done with them. Any of them. Her studio is full of taxidermy—her horse's heads, bull's heads, a stuffed parrot. The floors are covered in skins.

At some point she takes her palette, which holds her paints, and is now at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. And she paints an animal on the palette itself – a deer. As though she had learned so much about animals that she could conjure one at will. Let there be deer.

The animaliers, who had started out impressed by the wildness, the uncivilized nature of animals—everything that humans were not—had begun to see similarities instead. In 1829,

Delacroix paints a lion devouring a tiny rabbit. By 1861, he is painting *The Lion Hunt*, in which the tables have turned. The lion is under attack. And the lion's paw looks very much like the hand of his human attacker. The lion's knees, its wrist—these too echo the stance of people.

In killing animals, he seems to say, we are killing the animal in us.

We may have dominion over the animals, but not because we are so different from them. It's because we are the same, slaves to our own self-interest, our own hungers, our own deadly instincts.

The animaliers are eventually displaced by people who don't want pictures of animals on their walls, they want the real thing. One taxidermy company in one city in India, stuffs about 43,000 tigers and leopards between 1900 and 1950. When Teddy Roosevelt goes on safari, in 1909, in Africa, he and his son kill 512 animals between them. Everything from porcupines to elephants, including 17 lions.

When Rosa is born almost no one understands the concept of extinction, much less believes it. Fossils are explained as the bones of giants or something that must be out there, somewhere. Like Thomas Jefferson believing the mastodons must still be out West, for Lewis and Clark to discover. God would never let his creation unravel, his creatures run out.

But of course they do.

After just a couple months of living with Nero, her prize lion, Rosa sends him to the Paris zoo, in the Jardin des Plantes. Because he's big and fierce and she's painted him enough.

Nero is loaded on a wagon and carried into town. And sometime later Rosa goes to see him – the old monarch as she calls him. And she finds him “humiliated and dying,” as a newspaper later reported, blind from neglect.

She calls to him, the story goes, and he runs headlong into the bars of his cage. She puts her hand through the bars and holds his paw until he dies.