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Sue Ann Prince, ed., *Of Elephants & Roses: French Natural History 1790-1830*. Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful Knowledge, volume 27. Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 2013. xxvi + 268 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-87169-267-2.

Review by Victoria E. Thompson, Arizona State University.

In his 1803 guide to the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, Jean-Baptiste Pujoux, playwright and popularizer of science, assured his readers that a visit to the museum's collections would confirm their faith in the possibility of perfection and *fraternité* through education. With education, even reptiles and fish, "beings susceptible to experience this power of education," would become the "zealous servants, companions, friends" of humans.<sup>[1]</sup> This sentiment reflects a view of the possibility of universal perfection that would weaken in subsequent decades. It also captures one of the major themes of the book under review: the relationship between human and non-human living beings.

*Of Elephants & Roses: French Natural History 1790-1830* contains twenty essays organized around two broad topics: natural history theories that emerged between 1790 and 1830 and the reciprocal influences of natural history specimens and French culture. The volume is part of a project undertaken by the American Philosophical Society (APS) beginning in 2007, designed to highlight resources in the archives of the APS focusing on French natural history. Along with the edited volume, a series of educational programs and an exhibition were produced.<sup>[2]</sup> *Of Elephants & Roses* is based upon a symposium held in December 2011. Although edited for publication, it is a very close rendition of the symposium proceedings, including transcripts of panel commentaries and discussions. The volume succeeds admirably in capturing a snapshot of scholarship in action. As a reader, I felt as if I were a silent participant in the discussions. (For an even greater "reality" effect, it is possible to watch the entire conference online.<sup>[3]</sup>) As at any conference, readers will find themselves scribbling questions and ideas as they go through the thought-provoking chapters. They will also no doubt experience some frustration with panelists who don't completely address questions posed to them, references to theories and actors that are not explained, and chapters whose arguments are not fully articulated, often because the research is at a beginning stage. In a typical edited volume, the volume editor would fill in and smooth out these gaps and tangents. That this is not the case for *Of Elephants & Roses* is not a major handicap. For those who are familiar with the field of French natural history, the gaps tend to be areas of common knowledge. For those less familiar, a little background reading easily provides context.<sup>[4]</sup> However, it is not necessary to seek out that context to benefit from this volume, as it is a valuable addition to the libraries of those interested in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century French culture more generally.

The locational focus of the work is meant to be Malmaison and the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle (hereafter "Muséum"), although the essays range far beyond these two sites. The second section of the volume situates the subsequent essays spatially, discussing the importance of Malmaison, home of the Empress Josephine, and the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle as dual, and sometime competing, centers of

French natural history. In the remainder of the volume, however, the Muséum receives far greater attention. The Muséum was established in 1793 (at the same time as the Jardin du Roi became the Jardin des Plantes) and quickly became the leading international institution for the study of natural history during the period of the Revolution and Empire. The Muséum's prominence was due in part, as the essay of Elise Lipkowitz explains, to the seizure of collections in other European nations conquered through war. The Muséum's collections expanded 400 percent as a consequence. Diplomatic efforts in the United States also enriched the collection, as did overseas expeditions. As Sara S. Gronim remarks in her commentary, these essays demonstrate not only the importance of the colonial context for natural history, but also the significance of inter-European and trans-Atlantic exchange. These exchanges altered natural history practices, which in the colonial context were characterized by seizure without compensation. Acquiring specimens from the Americans or other Europeans (even those that were seized by the French) required other forms of interaction.

Because of the nature of the volume, the book succeeds better in exploring the relationships between the natural world and culture, and between non-human and human species, than it does in providing a coherent account of theoretical debates and shifts during the period under study. The volume does, however, open up some interesting avenues for thinking about such debates. For example, several of the chapters engage with the concept of truth-to-nature as outlined in Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison's 2007 work *Objectivity*.<sup>[5]</sup> Truth-to-nature botanical illustrations depicted an ideal type of a species, on a blank background, rather than either a specimen in a natural habitat or a varietal. The goal of such illustrations was to capture the essential components of a species for classification and scientific study. However, as Pierre-Yves Lacour shows in his essay on illustrations in a journal produced by the faculty of the Muséum, fidelity to the truth-to-nature approach, along with budgetary concerns limiting the number of illustrations per issue, resulted in depictions of species as they would never be seen in nature. In order to depict all aspects of snakes, for example, they appeared to be contorted so as to show back and belly simultaneously. Lacour thus demonstrates how illustrative measures meant to "stabilize... the species as a conceptual category" could also lead to misunderstanding of a species (p. 125). Other essays reveal just how often the truth-to-nature principle was abandoned, not only in the botanical images of Pierre-Joseph Redouté that favored color and a "variety of forms," as Dorothy Johnson notes, but also in prints and material objects that placed plants and animals in both indigenous and Parisian contexts (p. 137). The volume is beautifully illustrated with images from the collections of the APS, the Muséum, and other institutions, and the authors analyze the images included from multiple perspectives and toward a variety of purposes.<sup>[6]</sup> Thus although not a stated aim of the volume, *Elephants & Roses* is tremendously valuable for scholars interested in the cultural analysis of images and objects from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Virtually all of the contributors to the volume elaborate upon one of the central ideas raised in the keynote address delivered by Richard W. Burkhardt, Jr. Burkhardt argues that during the French Revolution and on into the early decades of the nineteenth century, natural history specimens became "increasingly *civilized*" (p. 15; italics in original). By this he means the work of naming, classifying, describing, displaying, etc. that made natural history specimens "more and more suited to the needs of science" (p. 15). Civilizing also refers to the work of interpreting the relationship between humans and non-humans. As part of this effort, Burkhardt mentions guidebooks to the Muséum such as that of Pujoulx, which told visitors what they were seeing as well as how they should feel when seeing various specimens. This work of interpretation was of tremendous importance during this period. From speculations on the effect of music on elephant love-making, to fascination with the sexual life of plants, to giraffes as symbols of free speech, these essays reveal the myriad ways in which non-human species were seen as providing clues to human nature, lessons for human improvement, and models for human conduct.

Depicted in prints, on dishware and clothing, brought to life in children's books and on stage, animals were everywhere during this period. As John Tresch and Denise Davidson note in their respective

essays, these decades were characterized by intense social reorganization, and the natural kingdom— itself subject to a massive effort of classification—provided a useful mirror for human society. One of the best-known projects of social classification is Balzac's *Comédie humaine*. Göran Blix argues in his essay that Balzac saw natural history as providing "practical wisdom" about social relationships, even though his own views about the extent to which a specific type (the employee or the courtesan, for example) was born or made were not entirely coherent (p. 190). But as Goran demonstrates, it was not necessary to follow slavishly one or another position in natural history debates in order to use the science for other purposes. As he writes concerning Balzac, classification on the model of natural history could be considered "an analytical move meant to reduce the dizzying complexity of the world" (p. 191).

While non-human species could serve as a mirror for humans, the essays also demonstrate the slippery divide between human and non-human. Animals were attributed characteristics valued in human beings, such as empathy. Depictions of animals also provided occasions for classifying human beings. We see this in Daniel Harkett's discussion of images of the keepers that accompanied the giraffe given to the French by the Egyptian Pasha in 1827. Harkett, like Davidson in her essay on the giraffe, notes that both the giraffe and its keepers were marked as exotic others. In Paris, the giraffe was attended by a Bedouin man, Hassan el Berberi, and a Sudanese man, Atir, as well as by a translator from Marseille of Franco-Arab origins, Youssef or Joseph Ebed and another Frenchman, Barthélemy Chouquet. Harkett shows how despite the diverse origins of the four men, they were depicted variously as all arab or all "nègre," or as having varying skin tones (p. 151). Harkett argues that markers of otherness—whether skin tone or terminology—were unstable in this period, but nonetheless provided the French with a means of thinking about difference.

Anne Lafont makes a similar point in her discussion of depictions of Aboriginal peoples made during and after the 1800-1804 expedition to Australia led by Nicolas Baudin. Focusing on the work of Nicolas-Martin Petit, Lafont shows how the principle of truth-to-nature was applied to humans, leading artists such as Petit to transform images made on site that included distinguishing features such as scars and bodily decoration into ideal types characterized by pronounced facial features and un-individuated bodies. At the same time, however, in prints for a general audience, Petit depicted Aboriginal men, women, and children in ways that made them resemble familiar Parisian types such as the dandy. Lafont argues that in these prints Petit drew upon "familiar visual codes" to render the images of Aboriginal peoples more acceptable to a broad public readership (p. 166). Whether for a scientific or popular audience, these images, like that of the snake in Lacour's essay, illustrate an important point that runs throughout the volume, and that is touched upon by Harkett when he observes that the giraffe was a "cultural object—that is, knowable through its relations with humans" (p. 153). While Harkett refers here to the interplay between animals and humans in depictions of the giraffe, this point can be extended more broadly. Whether fish or fowl, elephant or whale, rose or volcano, Parisian or Native American, nature in all its variety was only comprehensible by placing it within an intellectual and affective framework constructed by and based on human experience. Even the mistreatment of animals was only thinkable in human terms, as when the painter Jean Hoüel refused to depict the lions in their cage at the Muséum because it appeared to him as a prison. Given their focus on the cultural interpretation of natural history, the essays in this volume open a series of fascinating windows onto French culture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Like nature, *Elephants & Roses* is rich and diverse, and no reviewer could capture its entirety. In addition, the commentaries and discussions raise a number of questions and indicate directions for future research. One particularly interesting question that Burkhardt raises in his keynote address is the question of the extent to which natural history specimens escaped the control of the humans who sought to civilize them. "Live plants or animals could fail to survive and reproduce in the places where naturalists or governments tried to establish them. Domesticated plants or animals could revert to their wild forms... Dead specimens could lose their forms or colors. They could decompose. They could stink" (p. 17). In short, specimens had a form of agency that revealed the limits of human control. We

have long since learned that texts (and images) similarly contain elements that escape the control of their creators. What might attention to the limits of textual and pictorial depictions of the natural world teach us about French culture?

This question deserves particular attention for the period 1790 to 1830. With the exception of a few essays, *Elephants & Roses* portrays French cultural representations of natural history as entertaining, reassuring, even playful. Yet nature can be terrifying, horrifying, and deadly as well. As Claudine Cohen notes in her essay, the impact of revolutionary upheaval and civil wars made catastrophe an attractive way of conceptualizing change, and yet fascination with natural catastrophe had begun even before the Revolution. If social upheaval explains the intense popular interest in the natural world during this period, how is this interest different from the fascination with exotic animals of the eighteenth century as discussed by Louise Roberts?<sup>[7]</sup> And how did it lead to movements to protect animals that emerged later in the nineteenth century?<sup>[8]</sup> In addition to the fascinating insights found in this volume, *Of Elephants & Roses* raises questions that will lead to further understanding of the role of nature in French culture and politics.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

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#### NOTES

[1] J. B. Pujoux, *Promenades au Jardin des Plantes, à la Ménagerie, et dans les Galeries du Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, Contenant des Notions claires, et à la portée des Gens du monde, sur les végétaux, les animaux et les minéraux les plus curieux et les plus utiles de cet Etablissement* 2 volumes (Paris: A la Librairie Economique ... de l'Imprimerie de Guilleminet, an XII- 1803), p. 3.

[2] The exhibition, "Of Elephants & Roses: Encounters with French National History, 1790-1830," was on view at the Museum of the American Philosophical Society, March 25-December 31 2011. Information on the exhibition, as well as an educator's guide, is available at: <http://www.apsmuseum.org/elephants-and-roses/> [consulted July 11, 2016].

[3] The symposium was entitled "Of Pictures and Specimens: Natural History in Post-Revolutionary and Restoration France." The program is available at: <http://www.apsmuseum.org/symposium/> [consulted July 11, 2016]. Clicking on a speaker's name will bring the reader to a YouTube recording of the presentation in question.

[4] See, for example, Pietro Corsi, *The Age of Lamarck: Evolutionary Theories in France, 1790-1830*, trans. Jonathan Mandelbaum (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988) and E. C. Spary, *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[5] Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA and London: Zone Books, 2007). This work "inspired" the exhibition and serves as a touchstone throughout the essays (p. 4).

[6] Pdfs of conference papers without the corresponding images are available free-of-charge from the APS at <http://apsmuseum.org/book-of-elephants-roses/> [consulted July 11, 2016].

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[7] Louise E. Roberts, *Elephant Slaves and Pampered Parrots* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

[8] Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

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