

# *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Marion Bélouard

exhibition review of

*The Origins of the World: The Invention of Nature in the Nineteenth Century*

*Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021)

---

Citation: Marion Bélouard, exhibition review of *The Origins of the World: The Invention of Nature in the Nineteenth Century*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 20, no. 3 (Autumn 2021), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2021.20.3.22>.

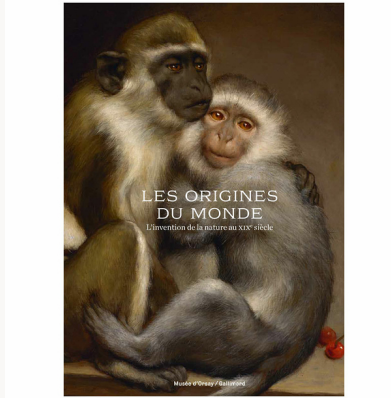
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



*The Origins of the World: The Invention of Nature in the Nineteenth Century*  
Musée d'Orsay, Paris  
May 19—July 18, 2021

Catalogue:

Laura Bossi, ed.,

*The Origins of the World: The Invention of Nature in the Nineteenth Century.*

Paris: Musée d'Orsay and Gallimard, 2020.

384 pp.; numerous illus.; index; selected bibliography; exhibition checklist.

€45 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-2-35433-318-8

Placed in the center of the main hall, overlooking the crowd from her pedestal, she sees visitors rush towards the entrance of the exhibition, sometimes without as much as a glance at her. We might expect that a stuffed elephant in the middle of an art museum would be surprising, but perhaps with her ochre-grey coat, Parkie blends in with the colors of the Musée d'Orsay. This two-and-a-half-century-old Asian elephant has been specially moved, for the first time since 1798, from her home at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle to join the collections of the famous Parisian museum for the spring (fig. 1). Has the animal become a work of art among others? Looking more closely, there is no question that Parkie is not only different from the other works in the museum, but also different from a live elephant: with her wrinkled and rough skin, bristled with hairs, Parkie still gives off the characteristic and slightly disturbing effect of taxidermy, and she is rigid, her weight evenly distributed on her four feet, without any movement, her eyes fixed. The idea of life seems to emanate more from some of the marble and bronze sculptures filling the great nave than from Parkie. Is she more a part of culture or nature?



Fig. 1, Marguerite “Parkie” standing in the entrance of *The Origins of the World* exhibition. Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[larger image\]](#)

Parkie provides a fitting introduction to the exhibition *The Origins of the World: The Invention of Nature in the Nineteenth Century*, which aims to recount a period of intense scientific development and to explore its relationship with the arts. Conceived in collaboration with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, and benefiting from exceptional loans from the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, the exhibition brings together in one place nearly three hundred objects of art and science. By mixing paintings, drawings, sculptures, and films with scientific works, expedition journals, herbariums, botanical waxes, as well as fossils and casts, it aims to analyze the effects of the great nineteenth-century scientific upheavals on artists’ conceptions of the living world, and to provide, in a contemporary perspective, possible answers to existential questions about the relationship between humans and nature.

As the first show at the Musée d’Orsay to probe so deeply into the intersection of the arts and sciences, *The Origins of the World* demonstrates the institution’s ambition to be of its time. In the context of global warming and the sixth mass extinction of species, the relationship between society and the environment is becoming an increasingly central issue for cultural institutions, many of which now wish to promote social awareness of ecological issues. Thus, the purpose of this review is not so much to reformulate the scientific substance of the exhibition as to give a critical reading of it in the light of recent works stemming from the environmental turn in the humanities, and in particular art history. I begin with an overview of the exhibition, then turn to its organization, scenography, and catalogue, before focusing on its content, both material and theoretical.

### Before Darwin

Set in the “long nineteenth century,” from the 1780s to 1920, the exhibition is structured in three rather unequal parts, centered around the rise of evolutionary theories, and in particular the figure of Charles Darwin, referred to as “the pivot point of his century” (16). After an introduction devoted to the attempt to inventory the world and its repercussions for the artistic imagination of the first half of the nineteenth century, emphasis is placed on the publication in 1859 of *The Origin of Species* and the fundamental shift that the theory of evolution brought about in the natural sciences and the arts. The last part is dedicated to

artists' reception and assimilation of these new Darwinist principles, which ranged from questioning the boundaries of animality to the desire to reinvent nature.

The exhibition begins with a “Prologue,” introducing visitors to the myths and religious stories that have structured the conception of the living world in the West (fig. 2). The chapters from Genesis about the Creation, the Garden of Eden, and Noah’s Ark led to a vision of nature as a closed garden, for the use of men and women. The animals, named by Adam and saved by Noah, were understood principally through their relationships to humans: domestic, familiar, or harmful, revealing a fundamentally anthropocentric apprehension of the natural world. The works presented in this first section trace the iconography of nature as suggested by Judeo-Christian mythology: “The Creation of the World,” an illuminated vellum for Nicolas Jenson’s Bible (1476), depicts the formation of the cosmos, the sea, and then the land, while seventeenth century representations of earthly paradise by Van Oosten Isaack and Jan Bruegel the Younger depict Adam and Eve in the midst of Arcadian landscapes populated by animal couples. In a glazed display case *Cross-section of Noah’s Ark* (1675) from the *Arca Noe* by German polymath Athanasius Kircher shows the beginnings of an organized vision of the animal kingdom, where the species are studied in detail and compartmentalized into the three levels of the ark according to their morphology. *After the Deluge* (1884), a monumental painting by Filippo Palizzi, bridges the gap with the nineteenth-century theme of the exhibition by showing the enrichment of the mythological subject as a result of the contributions of new zoological knowledge. The picture depicts the animals of the Jardin des Plantes descending from the Ark.



Fig. 2, “Prologue” gallery of *The Origins of the World*. Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020.  
[\[larger image\]](#)

The second and third rooms of the exhibition, respectively entitled “From Curiosity to Studiosity” and “Immensity and Diversity of the World,” are dedicated to the emotions elicited by the vastness of biodiversity, discovered as a result of the first great campaigns of extra-European exploration in the sixteenth century (fig. 3). They bring together a large number of objects reflecting the wonder of scholars and artists who contributed to the advancement of knowledge in natural history. Attention is paid first to the development of naturalist collections, based on the accumulation of specimens taken from natural environments (*naturalia*) or objects made by man (*artificialia*), for the private use of doctors, pharmacists, academics, but also princes and European humanists. Cabinets of curiosity (*wunderkammern*), like menageries and botanical gardens, were represented pictorially because of the abundance and rarity of their contents—as in the engraved reproduction of the cabinet of Ferrante Imperato in Naples, published in *Dell’Historia naturale* in 1599—but

also because of their contents' new, strange, or fabulous forms, as in *Sea Plumes, Lithophytes, and Shells* (1769) by Anne Vallayer-Coster or *Sea Turtle* (1665–68) by Nicasiaus Bernaerts. The exhibition then turns to animals emblematic of the circulation of living species in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the female rhinoceros Clara, who came from India and made the Grand Tour for twelve years, and the three giraffes offered by the Pasha of Egypt, Mehemet Ali, to the European sovereigns George IV of England, Francis I of Austria, and Charles X of France. The infatuation that each of them aroused in Western populations resulted in the emergence of animal effigies in the decorative and visual arts, symbolized in particular by the *Rhinoceros Clock* (1750) by Jean-Joseph de Saint-Germain and François Viger and a painting by Jacques-Laurent Agasse titled *The Nubian Giraffe* (1827).



Fig. 3, Installation view of “From Curiosity to Studiosity.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[larger image\]](#)

The exhibition then focuses on three major scientific expeditions of the first half of the nineteenth century: those of Nicolas Baudin to the Austral Lands between 1800 and 1804, of Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland to South America between 1799 and 1804, and of Charles Darwin around the world on board the HMS *Beagle* from 1831 to 1836 (fig. 4). This section includes documents and works produced by artists and scientists who participated in these expeditions. Topographical views (*Geography of equinoctial plants* [1805] by Aimé Bonpland), naturalist drawings of animals (*Tufted Capuchin* [1842] by Jean-Charles Werner), paintings of wild vegetation (*Giant Tree in Brazil’s Tropical Forest* [1830] by Johan Moritz Rugendas), and herbariums (botanical waxes [between 1802 and 1826] by Louis-Marc-Antoine Robillard d’Argentelle) illustrate the ambition of the so-called “century of great voyages” to inventory and classify the diversity of species. Other painters and draughtsmen sought to take an independent census of nature, as was the case with the naturalist John James Audubon, whose monumental work *The Birds of America* (1827–38) includes a plate on “The Virginian Partridge.” The discoveries and exotic species brought back from these expeditions flooded European collections, which tended to open up to the public, and thus to artists, who were now better able to study the variety of the living world. Next to the *Tiger Devouring a Gharial* (1832), a bronze by Antoine Louis Barye, hangs *Puma* (1859) and a draft of *The Lion Hunt* (1854) by Eugène Delacroix. Both painter and sculptor studied the anatomy of felines from living specimens in the Ménagerie du Jardin des Plantes, just as Pierre-Joseph Redouté, Nicolas Maréchal, or Pierre-François de Wailly, each of them official painters of the Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle, sketched flowers and exotic animals from life, using the national collections.



Fig. 4, Installation view of “Immensity and Diversity of the World.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[larger image\]](#)

Finally, the exhibition examines representations from scientific expeditions exploring the marine world and its abundant life—such as studies of jellyfish on vellum by Charles-Alexandre Lesueur created between 1804 and 1810. The sea was no longer perceived as a hostile environment but as a source of new forms for artists—as in the aquarium and pedestal by Ferdinand Barbedienne and Édouard Lièvre (ca. 1875), or the aquatic landscape by Eugène von Ransonnet Villez, *Underwater Landscape* (1864)—and for writers (as, for example, in the engravings by Édouard Riou and Alphonse Marie de Neuville for Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, 1871).

A fourth gallery, entitled “The Antiquity of the World,” features another intellectual and aesthetic adventure of the first half of the nineteenth century: the discovery of the unimaginable antiquity of the earth (fig. 5). The rise of geology and the theoretical debates it provoked shook the biblical conception of the creation of the world, suggesting instead its formation over a long period of hundreds of millions of years. These new theories profoundly affected artists’ relationships to landscape, which now had a history—very old and eventful. Fascinated by the discoveries in stratigraphy, volcanology, or mineralogy, many painters accompanied geologists in their endeavor to read the history of the earth in its geological formations and phenomena and represent it in all its theatricality. From *The Eruption of Vesuvius* (1771) by Pierre-Jacques Volaire and that of *Cocopaxi* (1862) by Frederic Edwin Church and DeWitt Clinton Boutelle, to the *Glacier of Rosenloui* (1856) by John Brett, a *Stormy Sea with Blazing Wreck* (ca. 1840) by JMW Turner, and the *Geognostic Landscape* (1820) by Carl Gustav Carus, landscape painting was imbued with a geological imagination and celebrated the “delightful horror” of nature’s spectacle (fig. 6).<sup>[1]</sup>



Fig. 5, Entrance to “Antiquity of the World.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, Installation view of “Antiquity of the World.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020.  
[\[larger image\]](#)

If geology revealed the antiquity of the earth, the study of fossils revealed the antiquity of life (fig. 7). The exhibition dedicates a section to the development of paleontology and the discovery of the remains of extinct animal species (megatherium and mastodon) by Georges Cuvier, and of dinosaurs (megalosaurus and iguanodon) by the English “fossilist” Richard Owen. While casts and fossils accumulated in the collections of natural history museums, artists tried to represent the fauna and flora of forgotten times: twenty years after the first pictorial representation of a scene of prehistoric life, *Duria Antiquior, an Older Dorset* (1830) by the British geologist Henry Thomas de La Beche, the sculptor Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkin set out to restore thirty-three life-size dinosaurs, on the occasion of the inauguration at the Crystal Palace in London, the first prehistoric theme park. At the same time, the advancement of anthropological studies and the discovery of prehistoric humans led some artists to specialize in the representation of ways of life in the Stone Age such as Paul Jamin’s *Escape from the Mammoth* (1885) and *Rapture in the Stone Age* (1888). The 1879 discovery of cave paintings reassessing the origins of art left many artists and prehistorians perplexed. With *First Artist* (1890), the doctor and sculptor Paul Richer gives both life and humanism to Cro-Magnon man, whom he represents carving a mammoth figurine.



Fig. 7, Installation view of “Antiquity of Life.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020.  
[\[larger image\]](#)

### During Darwin

While the first part of the exhibition focuses on the scientific prerequisites that would lead to the theory of evolution from the 1860s onwards—the infinite variety of species and the temporal scale of the world—the section entitled “Evolution and the Descent of Man” marks

a turning point in the exhibition, symbolized by the black wall color (fig. 8). As if on a slate board, Ernst Haeckel's *Tree of Life* (1866) unfolds to represent both the unity and the diversity of the world. After the research of Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck and following the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which added the notions of genera, families, orders, and then classes, Haeckel took up the image of the family tree again in his *History of Creation* (1866) to explain the common ancestry of the living world. At the same time, Darwin developed the theory of sexual selection as the main mechanism of the evolution of species, and thereby opened up the possibility of a natural grounds for beauty. The ornamental characteristics of nature, like the antlers or tusks of certain mammals, would determine the choice of the male by the female for reproduction. Based on these new concepts, the arts seized on the iconography of the femme fatale represented by Frederic Leighton's *Pavonia* (1858–59) or the peacock feather seen in *Study of a Peacock Feather* (1873) by John Ruskin as new symbols of "natural beauty." As for Haeckel, he saw beauty as an unconscious property of matter and proposed several scales of beauty for living forms. Fascinated by the simplest forms of the natural world, the organic geometry of radiolaria and jellyfish constituted for him an inexhaustible repertoire of beauty: his *Artistic Forms of Nature* (1899–1904), illustrated with a hundred lithographic plates by Adolf Giltsch, enjoyed a wide diffusion in the decorative arts, as exemplified in the last room of the exhibition by the decoration of the oceanographic museum of Monaco, inaugurated in 1910. The chandelier in this room is in the form of a radiolarian by Constant Roux (fig. 11).



Fig. 8, Installation view of "Beauty and Sexual Selection." Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d'Orsay, 2020. [\[larger image\]](#)

Part of the initial impact of Darwinism was a radical revision in the iconography of the ape. In the eighteenth century, monkeys had been used to parody the behaviors of men and women. With the evolutionary rapprochement of the ape to the human race, the animal became a cousin, and this preoccupation was reflected in the arts. On the one hand by rejecting the idea and staging the bestiality it suggested like in Emmanuel Frémiet's sculpture *Gorilla Dragging a Warrior by the Hair* (1893) and on the other, by the recognition of the psychological life of apes. Gabriel von Max, in particular, was fond of monkeys as pets, and captured their troubling humanity as seen in his painting *Gruss [Greeting] (Monkey with a Bouquet, a Posy of Pansies)* (1901–15). The exhibition includes some of the many satirical drawings published in the press that portrayed Darwin and his followers as circus chimpanzees, jumping through the hoops of "credulity" and "ignorance" (fig. 9).





Fig. 9, Installation view of “The Monkey: A Mirror.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020.  
[\[larger image\]](#)

### After Darwin

Composed of three main rooms, the last part of the exhibition traces the concerns raised by the theory of evolution among artists. “Hybrids and Chimeras” deals with questions about the animality that lies dormant in us (fig. 10). To express the border between man and beast, painters and sculptors resorted to mythological forms of metamorphosis to respond to recent developments in zoology. In an aesthetic of transmutation, gigantomachies like Arnold Böcklin’s *The Battle of the Centaurs* (1872–73), chimeras in Georges Méliès’s short 1904 film *The Mermaid*, and hybrids such as George Frederick Watts’s *The Minotaur* (1885), invaded the artistic imagination. Fascinated by ontogeny and phylogeny, the artists of Art Nouveau and Symbolism presented themselves as being “coeval with all origins” and drew inspiration from unicellular forms, marine animals such as Odilon Redon’s *The Shell* (1912), and the mysteries of maternity.<sup>[2]</sup> From concerns about the bestiality of man there was but a small step to fears about the degeneration of the human race: Darwinism carries with it the dark possibility that men and women harbor bad instincts. To externalize the fear of alienation, Edvard Munch draws in his lithograph *Madonna* (1895–1902), the femme fatale framed by embryos, as the heir of morbidity and the begetter of deformed fetuses.

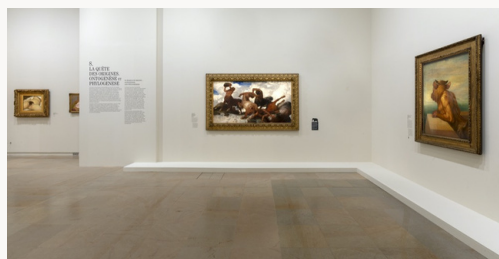


Fig. 10, Installation view of “Hybrids and Chimeras: The Animal Within Us.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[larger image\]](#)

In France, Post-Impressionism and Art Nouveau redoubled the influence of evolutionary theories. In his painted decor of the castle of Domcy-le-Vault, Odilon Redon paid homage to

the trees of life and reenchanting nature with his dreamy flora and fauna such as his *Trees on a Yellow Background* (1901). The master glassmaker and cabinetmaker Émile Gallé was inspired by the creative power of Nature and celebrated the astonishing aspects of aquatic life in his sculpture *Hand with Seaweed and Shells* (1904). These different attempts to synthesize nature led artists to focus on pure form and eventually to abstraction. Claude Monet's *Water Lilies* series (1913–26) evoked, in a vibrant repertoire of pure forms and colors, the universality of the natural world. At the turn of the century, many artists broke with the theory of evolution, refusing its “naturalization” of man. Turning to esotericism and spirituality, the pioneers of abstraction sought a way to free themselves from matter, painting the materialization of the soul in a geometric universe—for example, the series *Primordial Chaos* (1906) by Hilma af Klint—or showing the story of evolution through a theosophical perspective like Piet Mondrian's *Evolution* (1911).

The exhibition ends with the eruption of the First World War, whose atrocities bring to light the double face of nature (fig. 11): that of a generous and nourishing mother, continually generating new forms of life seen in Léon Frédéric's *Nature or Abundance* (1897) but also that of a stepmother with destructive and inhuman laws, repudiating her own children like Rudolf Schlichter's *Blind Power* (1932–37).



Fig. 11, Installation view of “Nature as Artist.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020.

[\[larger image\]](#)

## Review

The main contribution of the exhibition is to gather in the same space a wide array of works of art and science, and to make them interact with each other. The nineteenth century, which saw the consolidation of modern science, is often remembered as the century of rupture between the arts and the sciences. But by comparing the productions of the two disciplines, the exhibition demonstrated that the border between them remained porous throughout the century and beyond.

The museography realized by Martin Michel is sober and lets the objects speak for themselves. The marvelous abundance of the cabinets of curiosity fascinated viewers.<sup>[3]</sup> In keeping with the exhibition's purpose, the display foregrounds the emulation and cross-fertilization between artists and scientists, who can sometimes be one and the same person. The combination of paintings, sketches, study books, sculptures, or casts, all presented as of equal interest, encourages the viewer to look at these objects differently and to reconsider

the boundary between art and science. That being said, several works would have benefited from more extensive labels so that they could be appreciated in their singularity and through their detailed history. This is particularly true of James Audubon's *Birds of America*: viewers are told nothing about the titanic enterprise behind its creation. Similarly, the landscape paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, Frederic Church, and J.M.W. Turner (to name but a few) receive a minimalist hanging and little explication. It is also necessary to point out the predominance of male artists: of the hundreds of creators included in the show, only two painters (Anne Vallayer-Coster and Hilma af Klint) and one actress (Sarah Bernhardt) are women despite the importance of women naturalist artists in the Anglo-Saxon world at the end of the century.<sup>[4]</sup>

The abrupt transition from the evolutionist section to the last rooms of the exhibition is perplexing: the radical change from black to white on the walls is not explained in the extended labels. This rupture is also further manifested in the greater amount of space between works in the modern sections, which gives the impression of a more distanced relationship between art and science, as opposed to the confusion of them in the opulent seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *wunderkammern*. More broadly, the last third of the exhibition, dedicated to the "origins according to abstraction" and to the evolutionist aesthetic that developed from the 1880s to the 1915s, tries to demonstrate, in a confused way, both a turning point in artistic production but also a continuity in the relationship between art and science. I am personally less comfortable with this sequence of the exhibition, which deals with very cerebral aspects of the artistic imagination: research on the articulation between hybridity and humanity, questions about the origins of life, and the pursuit of immortality through esotericism. Not that the subject matter is uninteresting, but one may wonder about its relevance in an exhibition that intends to deal with an invention of nature in the nineteenth century. In any case, it is underdeveloped and deserves an exhibition of its own in order to be properly explored. Its inclusion may be a result of the personal interests of the curator, Laura Bossi, a physician, neurologist, and historian of science, and the opportunity it offered to display some national masterpieces such as Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World* (1866), Monet's *Blue Water Lilies* (1916–19), and Odilon Redon's décor for his château in Domecy-sur-le-Vault.

The exhibition catalogue is printed on relatively thick, matte paper and possesses good quality reproductions. It is composed of thirty-seven essays of varying length, divided into an introduction and ten chapters covering the main themes of the exhibition, plus appendices listing the works exhibited, a selected bibliography, and an index. As with the exhibition, a section devoted to notes on the works would have been welcome, but the volume is already dense. It has thirty-two authors, whose gender and distribution between scientific and artistic disciplines is quite equitable, underlining the will to treat the art and science equally. However, while diverse in these regards, the contributions relate to a very Western-centered point of view with the authors originating from France, Switzerland, the Principality of Monaco, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. In spite of this disturbing perspective for a publication dealing with the origins of the world, the work constitutes a synthetic and documented resource, intellectually much more honest than the exhibition from which it is drawn; an exhibition that is disconcerting in its ability to arrange the history of art and science at its convenience.

The chronology adopted in the exhibition is one of its weaknesses. The choice of a long nineteenth century beginning with the French Revolution, marks, once again, a very European (or rather, very French) perspective. The decision to cover such a long period, notably up to the First World War, is never explained and appears artificial, as if it were more a question of museum issues than epistemological ones, or, more specifically, as if the question of the relationship between art and science had to conclude at the same date as do the collections of the Musée d'Orsay. On closer examination, the question of the exhibition's temporal framework is biased from the outset by the subtitle "The Invention of Nature in the Nineteenth Century." Should one understand "invention" to include the notions of "imagination," "discovery," and "inventory"? And was nature first "invented" in the nineteenth century, or did the period take over processes already underway? The exhibition does not address these questions, and seems to have it both ways, highlighting the supposed preeminence of the nineteenth century while also finding precedents as far back as the medieval period.

The result of this superficial chronology is a serious lack of contextualization throughout the exhibition. In the very first rooms, the objects presented, mainly from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries (for example Dürer's *Rhinoceros* [1515], Jacopo Zucchi's *Coral Fishing* [ca. 1615–30], and Anne Vallayer Coster's *Sea Plumes, Lithophytes, and Shells* [1769]), are reduced to the concept of an "eclectic cabinet" (14), and the developments of science before its institutionalization at the turn of the nineteenth century are the fruit of a simple "curiosity," as opposed to a serious intellectual pursuit. But what is most striking, if not dismaying, is the total blind spot in the exhibition that the colonial context represents. The notion of colonization is referenced only once in the wall texts, without any explanation of its link to the development of the natural sciences: "in the nineteenth century, the colonial expansion of European states accelerated the growth of maritime exchanges and scientific missions including naturalists and artists," we read in the third section entitled "Immensity and Diversity of the World."

This suggests a lack of discernment regarding the motivations behind the great scientific expeditions. Of course, the curiosity for elsewhere, for the diversity of nature, and the universalist aspiration inherited from the Enlightenment to understand and inventory the world encouraged the collective impulse of Europeans to travel by land and sea in search of new knowledge. But this quest for learning was part of a much larger enterprise: the conquest, annexation, and exploitation of foreign territories by Western imperial powers. Between the 1970s and 1980s, the history of science and post-colonial studies demonstrated the close connections between colonization and the development of the natural sciences, which, in the context of political, economic, and ideological rivalries, was essential for gaining a better understanding of, and thus being able to better dominate, the environment in which empires were deployed in a joint production of knowledge and power.<sup>[5]</sup> From then on, like any resource imported from the colonies, natural history specimens and other raw materials from various parts of the world were given an increased epistemological value by European scholarly institutions.<sup>[6]</sup>

Therefore, the colonial context is crucial to understanding the purpose and significance of the circulation and importation of species, and their removal from their natural

environments, but the exhibition does not discuss this in any way. This gap in the exhibition's narrative is all the more concerning because the destructive effects of the unbridled quest for knowledge and power are still felt today in the wildlife ecosystems. A good example of this problem is the explanatory label of a dodo cast, made by Jules Laurent Terrier (1901) and displayed at the entrance of the exhibition: "Victim of predation," it states, "the dodo disappeared in the second half of the seventeenth century; it is one of the first species whose extinction caused by man has been documented." By not mentioning the specific cause of the extinction, namely the colonization of Mauritius by Westerners, the disappearance of this species is minimized, if not simply elided.

Also problematic is the absence of commentary on and works about the birth of anthropology and the interest of Europeans in the different human cultures they discovered in the "new worlds." The thirst for knowledge, which in part guides scientific expeditions, also concerns the exploration of alterity: scholars and artists will seek to understand and classify on the scale of human progress the peoples encountered during colonial contacts. The hierarchization of humanity was not only justified by philosophical theories from the seventeenth century onwards concerning the linear evolution of cultures, but also allowed the legitimization of colonial practices, by drawing up a so-called "civilizing mission" of the European settler towards the indigenous peoples.<sup>[7]</sup> Thus, while a dozen naturalist watercolors by Charles Alexandre Lesueur, produced during the expedition to Australia between 1801 and 1804, are on display, nothing is shown in the section of the exhibition dedicated to the emblematic expeditions of the nineteenth century from the concomitant anthropological studies undertaken by his fellow crew member, the artist Nicolas-Martin Petit. To see and understand how much the "methodical approach to recording the customs and physical characteristics of the human inhabitants" (86) was among the first objectives of the campaigns, the public must read the exhibition catalogue, in which are reproduced two portraits of aborigines by Petit, today in the collection of the Natural History Museum of Le Havre. Similar to the disappearance of the dodo, the exhibition fails to recall the tragic fate of the Tasmanians, "decimated by disease following contact with Westerners and deported as slaves to other territories" (87) —a painful oversight that is somewhat compensated by the catalogue (318–19).

Of course, the exhibition is ostensibly about nature and not humankind. But here, too, lies a problem, because from midway through the exhibition, the subject of the "origins of the world" slips unquestionably into that of the "origins of man." Without evoking the beginnings of what was then called ethnography and the study of so-called "primitive" civilizations, the exhibition retraces the development of prehistoric research and new hypotheses on "antediluvian man," before continuing on the upheaval of the theory of evolution and the issues it raises with regard to the simian ancestors of humanity. Also, since the object of the show is now clearly turned towards the place of man in the kingdom of the living, one wonders about the absence of commentary, once again, on one of the most important debates of the intellectual and political sphere in the nineteenth century: the question of race. While polygenist and monogenist theorists have since the seventeenth century debated the unity of the human species, to which Darwin himself devoted chapter VII of his *Filiation of Man and Sex Selection* (1871), the theories of the racial inferiority of Blacks, guided by the thought, for instance, of Arthur de Gobineau, in the context of the legitimization of colonization, made race a scientific institution.<sup>[8]</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century ethnographic societies and colonial exhibitions took over from museums

and learned societies of natural history in order to study, debate, and show the racial order of humanity.

Sadly, this facet of the quest for man's origins and its translation into the arts is in no way echoed in the exhibition. The catalogue balances this negligence once again by reproducing (without translating it) *The Family Group of Primates*, the frontispiece of Ernst Haeckel's *The History of the Creation of Organized Beings according to Natural Laws* (1868), which shows different heads of various kinds of men and monkeys, numbered one to twelve, with the white man at the top of the list, two Africans at numbers five and six, and a gorilla at number twelve, as well as a sketch for the ceiling of the amphitheater of paleontology of the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle by Fernand Cormon, entitled *The Human Races* (1897) and two prints representing the "Fossil Man" by Johann Theodor Susemihl and Pierre Boitard (respectively, 1838 and 1861). However, when mentioned in the essays, the subject of race is reduced to that of Darwinism and the racist prejudices that permeate not Darwin's thought, but that of many of his followers—the publication trying more to restore the dignity of the father of evolution than to consider the contribution of science and art to the colonial question. Ironically, however, the main image used to advertise the exhibition, Gabriel von Max's *Abelard and Heloise* (after 1900) could not have better introduced the issue: featuring two embracing monkeys, one black and the other white, in a loving portrait, it sensitively questions the notion of human races, which ultimately exist "only for those who think and say them."<sup>[9]</sup>

Finally, another regrettable aspect of the exhibition is its difficulty in discussing the history of art. Conceived as a retrospective on the theory of evolution, the exhibition lingers on demonstrating the influence of one practice (science) upon another (art) during the "long" nineteenth century. More precisely, it considers this relationship in a unilateral and quasi-formalist way, art being summarized as the illustration of scientific discoveries. However, the narrative would have benefited from "turning the tables," by considering artistic sensitivity, for example, as an actor deepening our awareness of nature. What choices—in terms of composition, subject, treatment—have artists made to describe nature and convey its diversity? By what means do they give us a picture of the living world? What role did the visual resources produced by artists in their explorations play in understanding nature? Only the short section entitled "Antiquity of the Earth" and its accompanying essay in the publication strive to take these questions seriously through the theme of the sublime, and to consider how painters "practiced a form of appropriation of scientific knowledge for artistic purposes" (130), restoring "a metaphysical dimension to a field devoted *a priori* to rational knowledge" (132). Otherwise, the exhibition seems like a lost opportunity to study the engagement of art history with other kinds of knowledge and to recognize possibilities for enrolling it in the environmental humanities.

If the nineteenth century "provides keys for understanding our present-day world" (15), *The Origins of the World* unfortunately fails to find many of them. Despite the promising theme and the stated intention to contribute to the affirmation of an ethical and ecological consciousness within society, the exhibition neglects the destructive side of the European appetite for the discovery of nature—namely the subjectivation of territories, peoples, ecosystems, and objects through colonialism.

With its attractive title and enchanting layout, the exhibition aimed to please: visitors in search of picturesque experiences are happily transported into this fable of an idealized nineteenth century, beginning with a legendary “prologue” and ending with the allegorical “epilogue” of an abundant and regenerative Nature. Nevertheless, one should expect more from a national museum—and from art history: these should make us think more critically about the eminently current issue of the relationship between culture and nature.

---

**Marion Bélouard**

PhD Candidate in History of Art at the University of Limoges, France.  
Study and research fellow at Institut National d’Histoire de l’Art  
marion.belouard[at]inha.fr

---

### Notes

- [1] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Dublin: Grassebery & Campbell, 1779).
- [2] The quotation is from Gustave Flaubert, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (Paris: Charpentier, 1874).
- [3] See for example, Elisabeth Franck Dumas, “Orsay: et la culture créa la nature,” *Libération*, May 31, 2021, 24–5. Sophie Pujas, “Au musée d’Orsay, ‘fascinantes’ origines,” *Le Point*, May 20, 2021, 96–98.
- [4] Estelle Zhong Mengual, *Apprendre à voir. Le point de vue du vivant* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2021).
- [5] Joseph Rouse, *Knowledge and Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).
- [6] Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- [7] Benoît de l’Estoile, *Le Goût des Autres. De l’Exposition coloniale aux Arts premiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), 55.
- [8] Aurélia Michel, *Un monde en nègre et blanc* (Paris: Points, 2020), 236.
- [9] Michel Prum, *Ethnicité et eugénisme. Discours sur la race* (Paris: Harmattan, 2009), 7.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, Marguerite “Parkie” standing in the entrance of *The Origins of the World* exhibition. Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 2, "Prologue" gallery of *The Origins of the World*. Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d'Orsay, 2020. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Installation view of "From Curiosity to Studioisity." Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d'Orsay, 2020. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Installation view of “Immensity and Diversity of the World.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Entrance to “Antiquity of the World.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Installation view of “Antiquity of the World.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020.  
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Installation view of “Antiquity of Life.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020.  
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Installation view of “Beauty and Sexual Selection.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Installation view of "The Monkey: A Mirror." Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d'Orsay, 2020.  
[\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Installation view of “Hybrids and Chimeras: The Animal Within Us.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, Installation view of “Nature as Artist.” Photo © Sophie Crépy – Musée d’Orsay, 2020. [\[return to text\]](#)