

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Laurinda Dixon

book review of

Of Elephants and Roses: French Natural History 1790–1830 edited
by Sue Ann Prince

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 14, no. 1 (Spring 2015)

Citation: Laurinda Dixon, book review of *Of Elephants and Roses: French Natural History 1790–1830* edited by Sue Ann Prince, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2015), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring15/dixon-reviews-of-elephants-and-roses-french-natural-history>.

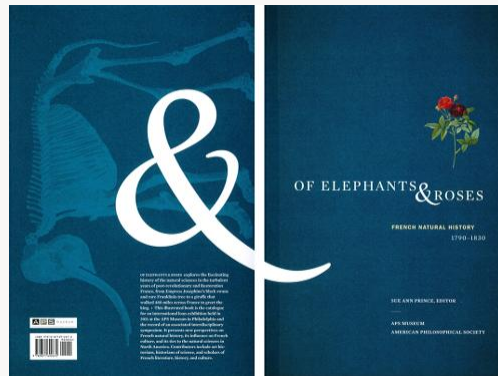
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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Sue Ann Prince, editor,
Of Elephants & Roses: French Natural History 1790–1830.
Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society held at Philadelphia for Promoting Useful
Knowledge, vol. 267.
Philadelphia: APS Museum, American Philosophical Society, 2013.
268 pp.; 112 color illus.; exhibition checklist; index.
\$47.50.
ISBN 978-0-87169-267-2

To the twentieth-first-century mind, the relationship between elephants and roses, noted in this book's title, is a conundrum. What possible connection could there be between a great, lumbering animal and a rose, the most rarified of flowers? But, like London's celebrated Elephant and Castle neighborhood, there is a fascinating story here. Before science became professionalized and accessible to a rarified intellectual elite, and before the compartmentalization of disciplines within a rigid structure of academic "majors," it was all up for grabs by scholars and amateurs alike. Elephants and roses enjoyed an organic symbiosis in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, when the scientific study of the animal and vegetable realms was fully integrated within society and popular culture. By the time readers finish this remarkable book, the pairing of pachyderms and posies will seem natural.

This fascinating volume offers a tantalizing glimpse of life in Paris, a city dominated and enlivened by scientific curiosity, two hundred years ago. Members of the haute bourgeoisie might have eaten dinner on a porcelain plate, painted with the image of *la belle Africaine*—not a beautiful black woman, but an elegant, long-necked giraffe. Afternoons might be spent strolling the grounds of the Empress Josephine's estate Malmaison, where her famous black swans lived among her carefully hybridized roses. One could also enjoy the wonders of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle, whose treasures included a mastodon tooth sent from far-off America by Thomas Jefferson. The week might culminate in a thrilling concert of music, composed especially for the museum's two captive elephants, in an effort to encourage them to mate. This rich, interdisciplinary book suggests many similar scenarios, all inspired by the exploration of the material and visual practices of French natural history, spanning the roughly forty years between the French Revolution and the July Monarchy.

The book serves double duty as the catalogue of an exhibition (*Of Elephants and Roses: Encounters with French Natural History, 1790–1830*, March 25–December 31, 2011) and the proceedings of the scholarly symposium that accompanied it. Both were held at the Museum of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, which was established in 2001 on the site of Charles Wilson Peale's venerable institution. Like its early incarnation, the modern APS seeks to explore the intersection of history, art, and science through the interpretation of objects, books and manuscripts in its vast collections. The museum's eclectic permanent holdings provided material for the core of the exhibition, which was enriched with objects loaned by several other French and American institutions. The text expands the purview of the show, and consists of nineteen essays, five commentaries, and five transcripts of discussions among symposium participants and audience members. Following the book's Introduction are a keynote essay and six topical sections, written by twenty-two well-chosen French and American authors. The impressive roster of contributors represents scholars from the realms of social history, literature, art, and science. The essays flow together organically and eloquently, a tribute to the book's conscientious and perceptive editing by Sue Ann Prince. Some are geared more strongly toward visual topics than others, as is to be expected, but all are written in a cohesive, accessible style. The end matter of the book includes details of the exhibition, including a list of lenders, checklist, bibliography, and index. The book's intelligent organization is complemented by elegant design and an abundance of rich illustrative material. Evident throughout is the American Philosophical Society's stated purpose "to promote useful knowledge." This is an admirable and refreshing goal, especially in light of recent scholarly trends in the history of art.

Part I begins with an essay by editor Sue Ann Prince in which she delineates the organization and content of the exhibition and sets the historical stage for the book. The keynote address, which follows, by Richard W. Burkhardt, Jr., "Civilizing Specimens and Citizens at the Muséum d'Histoire naturelle, 1793–1838," establishes the footprint of the symposium and deftly isolates common strands taken up by subsequent essays. Burkhardt demonstrates the fundamental usefulness of natural history as an important economic tool and notes that it also was capable of elevating the minds of the citizenry, reinforcing the new world leadership of France, and advertising the broad reach of its power. His essay presents both natural history and political advocacy as ongoing enterprises, requiring constant vigilance and monetary support by authorities on all fronts. The transcript of the discussion, which followed, reveals the erudition and engagement of an expert audience, who raised questions about taxidermy of exotic animals, the division of labor among museum curators, and physiognomic parallels in art between animals and their keepers.

The book's topical sections begin with Part II, "About Gardens and Gardening." Bernard Chevallier, "Empress Josephine and the Natural Sciences," and Susan Taylor-Leduc, "Josephine as Shepherdess: Estate Management at Malmaison," share the leitmotif of Josephine as patroness in the realms of botany and zoology. Dispelling the popular myth of the Empress as a frivolous concubine, these essays note that, in a time when the roles of most women were diminished by governmental decree, Josephine's knowledge of natural history approximated that of a trained specialist. Chevallier's essay, the first in this section, focuses on the botanically accurate floral ornamentation, painted by Pierre-Joseph Redouté, on table services produced by the Sèvres Porcelain Manufactory. These are considered among the most sumptuous works of botany ever issued under Empire. In addition to botanical specimens, Josephine's

menagerie included gnus, llamas, parrots, cassowaries, emus, and black swans, seized as spoils of war. As symbols of taste, wealth, and power, these rare flowers and animals testified to the period's fascination with exoticism. Susan Taylor-Leduc's essay is of special interest to art historians. This study focuses on the Empress's prized merino sheep farm and her contrived iconographical identity as shepherdess. Unlike her predecessor Marie Antoinette, who played the role at Versailles, Josephine was a knowledgeable breeder, who put herself forth as a role model for a new class of landowners. By constructing her own public persona, the empress diverted attention from the consequences of her husband's disastrous colonial policies and implied his promise of abundance.

The remaining essays in the "Of Gardens and Gardening" section shift attention to the idea of agriculture as essential to the economic and moral renewal of France. Paula Young Lee's "Of Cabbages and Kings: The Politics of Planting Vegetables at the Revolutionary Jardin des Plantes" explores Claude Nicolas Ledoux's architectural project for a four-level circular "Musaéum." This unrealized scheme, intended as a model farm, was designed to improve the availability and farming of food. Inspired by the monastic ideal, the plan included a residential area for scholars, housing for animals, a library, and even a "temple to the muses." The irony inherent in Ledoux's utopian vision, dedicated to the "common man," was that it required the ruthless razing of the Sans Culottes neighborhood where the working poor of Paris lived. The next essay, Antoine Jacobsohn's "Seed Origins: New Varieties of Fruits and Vegetables around Paris at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century" explores the practical impact of the discovery of plant sexuality. This essay notes the tension between botany, which sought to identify new species, and the practical needs of farmers and gardeners, who were charged with feeding the masses. Jacobsohn notes the ever increasing tensions between social classes, inherent in the elite market, which sought exceptional specimens, and the mass market charged with feeding large numbers of people easily and cheaply.

Part III, "Cultivating Useful Knowledge," considers the role of transnational activities, shifting political and cultural differences, and the persona of the "scientist" as an instrument of political opportunism. The first of the two essays in this section, Elizabeth Hyde's "André Michaux and French Botanical Diplomacy in the Cultural Construction of Natural History in the Atlantic World," examines the international exchange of specimens, notably between the New World and France. The botanist André Michaux played an important role in transmitting information from the American colonies, sharing seeds with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. This interchange and reciprocity helped forge French cosmopolitan and scientific identity, while also highlighting once again the tension between ornamental and utilitarian botanical perspectives. Elise Lipkowitz's essay, "'The Elephant in the Room': The Impact of the French Seizure of the Dutch Stadholder's Collection on Relations Between Dutch and French Naturalists" tells the fascinating tale of the captive elephants Hans and Parke, who entered the Muséum National d'Histoire's collections as trophies of war in the 1790s. Inspired anew by ideology linking natural history to moral reform and political regeneration, the French revived the ancient practice of taking natural history objects as spoils of war so as to propagate an imperial vision of transnational science. Lipkowitz explores the changing relationship between French and Dutch naturalists after the seizure of the stadholder's collection. Both Hyde and Lipkowitz define a new dynamic of conqueror and conquered, as the sharing and seizure of botanical specimens and live animals could no longer be justified as apolitical acts.

Part IV, "Making Art, Communicating Science," contains several contributions, which are of particular interest to art historians. The essays and commentary in this section examine the tension between the persuasive emotional power of images and the objective scientific reality of objects. The first, Pierre-Yves Lacour's, "Picturing Nature in a Natural History Museum: The Engravings of the *Annales de Muséum d'Histoire naturelle*, 1802–13," analyzes the illustrations of the *Annales*. Beauty was sacrificed to truth in these images, which were intended for the scientific cognoscenti. On the other hand, illustrations of animals housed in the museum's Ménagerie were depicted in historical and fantastic settings, so as to galvanize the sensibilities of the general public. The differences between these two traditions evidently had more to do with intended audience than artistic license. Continuing the discussion of the animal realm, Madeleine Pinault Sørensen's "Representing Animals with Empathy, 1793–1810" notes artists' newfound interest in investing live animals with personalities and emotions. Captive lions and elephants displayed the positive effect of civilization, especially when they showed evidence of affection for their human keepers, interpreted as "love beyond difference." In broader terms, sympathy toward the fate of animal prisoners provided an artistic parallel to the struggles of human beings deprived of their liberty. Empathic images of animals played into this political stance, and foretold the emotionalism of the Romantic age. Art history takes center stage in Dorothy Johnson's essay "Botany and the Painting of Flowers: Intersections of the Natural Sciences and the Visual Arts in Late Eighteenth- and early Nineteenth-Century France." Johnson crafts a well argued and beautifully illustrated case for the broad influence of botanical illustrations by Pierre-Joseph Redouté, the so-called "Raphael of flower painting." Redouté's meticulous portraits of individual flowers inspired mainstream academic painters, including Jacques-Louis David, Baron François Gérard, Anne-Louis Girodet, and Eugène Isabey. This essay is an inspirational model for further study of how the cultural products of an era embedded botanical specificity within traditional iconographic contexts.

The two concluding essays in Part IV present the concept of the "other" in representations of exotic animals and people. Daniel Harkett's, "The Giraffe's Keepers and the (Dis)play of Difference" analyzes roles played by the African keepers, who accompany representations of the Egyptian giraffe in the 1820s. Harkett argues that both humans and animal act as metaphorical substitutes for a variety of ethnic "others," and also inspired literary responses. Anne Lafont's "The Visual Terms of Cultural Encounters: Petit and Cuvier's Australian Experiment" explores illustrations of aboriginal peoples encountered during the French expeditions of 1800–04. Lafont maintains that these images supported colonial aims by visually suggesting the incapacity of indigenous peoples to develop moral and intellectual faculties. She sees the concept of "objectivity" as a western social construction, upon which knowledge of the "other" was grafted. While Harkett's and Lafont's essays are interesting investigations of the "period eye" of the era, both would have benefited from more nuanced art historical contextualization. Giraffes, for example, also appear in Renaissance paintings by Bellini and Bosch, which have been widely studied by art historians. Likewise, Lafont's concept of a primitive "other" has predecessors in images of Renaissance the wild man. These essays invite further expansion and referencing of both earlier theoretical constructs and current art historical scholarship.

The fifth section of the book, titled "Natural History and French Culture," contains five essays that consider the impact of natural history on political, social, and cultural life. Common to each is the idea that scientific discourse was evident not only in the halls of academe, but also

in the realm of commercial and popular cultures. The first three essays explore the concepts of evolution and extinction. Claudine Cohen's, "The Quest for 'Lost Worlds': Intellectual Revolutions and Mutations of the Imagination at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century" is concerned with the birth of the new disciplines of geology and paleontology. Cohen suggests that the discovery and study of fossils instigated a tension between traditional scientific rationality and the emerging concepts of imagination and irrationality in the struggle to reconstruct and resurrect extinct worlds. Art historians will readily apply Cohen's hypothesis to Romantic art and its pervasive preoccupation with disaster. Göran Blix's essay "Special Species in the *Comédie humaine*: Balzac's Use of Natural History" links Balzac's exhaustive description and categorization of human types to an effort to do the same with animal species. John Tresch in "The Animal Series and the Genesis of Socialism" continues the discussion, noting that the emerging field of sociology, which was concerned with charting and calculating the future of the human race, relied heavily on the classifying and serializing methodologies of natural history. As in the other two essays, this piece begs a more sophisticated art historical analysis, especially of the quirky works of J. J. Grandville.

The last two essays in this section return to the motif of the celebrity giraffe, which was shipped to France in 1826 as a political gift for King Charles X from the viceroy of Egypt. Denise Z. Davidson's "Domesticating the Exotic: The Giraffe Craze and French Consumer Culture" demonstrates how representations of this odd and appealing animal inspired a new understanding of French colonialism. Illustrated with images gleaned from material culture, Davidson's essay suggests that the ubiquity of the giraffe made the exotic world and its creatures more familiar, less threatening, and potentially controllable. Alain Lescart, in "An Egyptian Giraffe and Six Osage Indians: An Exotic Plea Against the Censorship of 1827," also examines the appearance of the giraffe in popular media. Lescart demonstrates that, in light of the French king's attempts to censor the press, the giraffe herself assumed the role of mouthpiece for freedom of the press in politically charged prints and pamphlets. The two opposing ideas that ground these two essays—domestication and discontent—demonstrate the rich interpretive variety that the examination of material culture brings to art history.

The book finishes with two summary essays by Bernadette Bensuade-Vincent, "The Power of Objects," and Anne Lafont, "Images and Politics." These thoughtful contributions comprise Section VI, titled "French Natural History: Reflecting Back, Looking Forward." Both authors reiterate the themes so artfully presented in the previous pages in their descriptions of a world on the verge of being redefined. That goal involved the processes of transporting, identifying, naming, describing, classifying, preserving, portraying, dissecting, reconstructing, arranging, displaying, distributing, taming, multiplying, and domesticating the world and its populations. This tumultuous period of French history lurched from bloody revolution to new republic to empire and ultimately back to monarchy within the space of a few extraordinary decades. It was an era in which blood was spilled over the function of museums and the nature of acquisition, collection, and display. Within this context, museums functioned as dynamic institutions, capable of instigating and perpetuating social change and public opinion. The implication for us is that museums can and must function in this way once again. This formidable book offers a shining example of how art history can rise to the challenge and begin to redefine itself as a discipline. Under siege by academic and political forces alike as irrelevant and elitist, the field can no longer afford the luxury of scholarly feudalism and theoretical posturing. To this end, the goal of the American Philosophical Society, "to promote useful knowledge," should be the mantra of all art historians. With this book and exhibition,

the American Philosophical Museum moves forward to take its rightful place among the great institutions of the world.

Laurinda Dixon
Syracuse University
lsdixon[at]syr.edu