

## Book Reviews

EVERY, Charles, COWIE, Helen, SHAW, Samuel and WENLEY, Robert. *Miss Clara and the celebrity beast in art 1500–1860*. The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, London: 2021. 108 pp.; illustrated. Price £16.50 (paperback). ISBN 9781913645021.

Published to accompany an exhibition at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, this book consists of three essays and a catalogue of the exhibition. For a typical museum visitor perhaps partially familiar with the history of exotic animals in art, it offers an excellent introduction to the subject – accessible but academically rigorous.

The authors of the three essays come from a range of art historical backgrounds: Robert Wenley is Head of Collections at the Barber, Charles Avery is a fine art consultant and former director of Christie's, and Samuel Shaw is an art history lecturer and co-author of *Zebra* (2018). Shaw contributed one of the two extended entries on individual animals in the catalogue – the other is by Helen Cowie, a leading scholar of the cultural history of exotic animal display.

The three essays address quite different aspects of celebrity beasts in visual culture over the three and a half centuries covered in the book. Wenley's essay focuses on the primary subject of the exhibition – an Indian rhinoceros that toured Western Europe in the mid-eighteenth century and inspired a number of artists. Avery discusses a parade of famous elephants predating Clara's arrival in Europe, while Shaw offers a more general look at the development of wild animal exhibition in the century before 1860. The use of wild animals to convey wealth and power (monarchical, imperial or otherwise) is a dominant theme throughout the book, as is our enduring fascination with, and attachment to, these creatures.

Although Clara has been the subject of biographies (along with several of the other celebrity animals mentioned in the exhibition catalogue), this is the first book dedicated solely to her representation in art. The book should be compared to other exhibition catalogues focusing on artists who are principally remembered for their animal art, especially *Oudry's painted menagerie* edited by Mary Morton (2007). *Miss Clara* might also be compared to cultural histories of wild animals published by university presses, such as those written by Helen Cowie or Diana Donald.

Each essay offers a brief but comprehensive look at aspects of the visual culture of exotic animals. They represent worthwhile contributions to the literature on the subject, although the relationship of the essays to each other could have been made clearer. For a work on celebrity animals, I particularly appreciated the points in the essays where the animals as individuals rather than species representatives shone through in the art – for instance, the “twinkling, observant eye” of Raphael's depiction of Hanno the elephant. The exhibition and its catalogue adopt an appropriately generous interpretation of art. The essays and exhibition entries detail work from both visual and material culture, covering a huge range of genres and media, from the paintings to advertising material to earthenware models. In doing so, it attests to the allure these animals held for people across society. Some of these entries feature unusual, even unique, pieces. The book is exquisitely illustrated. Given the breadth of material the book covers, albeit in just over a hundred pages, it is a shame there is no index.

The catalogue alone is a superb resource for the study of the material and visual culture of exotic animal display – I have already bought a copy for teaching undergraduates.