

## **It's All Happening at the Zoo: Percy Shakespeare, *Tropical Bird House, Dudley Zoo* (c.1939)**

In the 1930s, several British artists – including Dudley-born Percy Shakespeare (1906-1943) – found themselves drawn to the subject of the zoo. This essay explores their motives and considers what the results might tell us about human-animal relationships.

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Collection: [Dudley Museums Service](#)

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According to a recent study, children account for 37% of visitors to wildlife attractions (zoos, safari parks and aquariums) in the United Kingdom.<sup>1</sup> In the last twenty years or so, there has been growing pressure for zoos in particular to highlight their role in conservation, and to continue to underline the educational purpose for which many were founded. Despite this, zoos are still marketed – and approached by many – as recreational spaces, in which ‘fun’ is the key end product. The ‘family day out’ is the easiest path to much-needed ticket sales, with several studies noting that only a very small percentage of people visit zoos on their own.<sup>2</sup>

These are contemporary statistics, but there is clearly history behind this phenomenon. Percy Shakespeare’s 1939 painting *Tropical Bird House, Dudley Zoo* (fig.1) for instance, provides a suggestive early-twentieth-century artist’s vision of zoo visiting. Although it would be unfair to read it as a precise social document, the painting offers valuable clues as to how zoos operated during this period. Of the eighteen human figures depicted here, six are children. A family group dominates the centre of the canvas (although both children, interestingly, turn away from the primary exhibit), and almost all of the figures seem to be in a group of some sort. The exceptions are two figures in the foreground – one seated, one holding a watering can – both of which appear to work for the zoo – and, possibly, a male figure, with his hands in his pockets, standing behind the two female figures at the very back of the picture. Shakespeare’s painting very much confirms this idea of the zoo visit being a ‘social experience’; a recreational space, first and foremost.

Why would you go alone to a zoo? The full answer to this intriguing question is beyond the remit of this essay. I would like to suggest two reasons however, as a starting point for rethinking Shakespeare’s painting and other zoo-related paintings of the 1930s. The first, of

course, would be that you have some kind of professional interest in the animals – a zoology student, perhaps, or zoo-worker. The second, I would like to suggest, is that (like the boy on the far left of Shakespeare’s painting) your motives may be artistic in nature.

As with every painting, there is of course another potentially lone figure suggested here – that of the artist himself. In visiting, and drawing from/at the zoo, Shakespeare was taking part in an artistic tradition with a very long history. Where there have been zoos, or menageries, there have inevitably been artists.<sup>3</sup> [Peter Paul Rubens](#) (1577–1640), one of most famous animal painters, took every opportunity to see wild animals, [lions especially](#), in the flesh. Artists, such as [George Stubbs](#) (1724–1806), [Eugène Delacroix](#) (1798–1863) and [Théodore Géricault](#) (1791–1824), went to great lengths not only to see live animals, but also to dissect their corpses. After opening to the public in 1847, London Zoo can have barely gone a day without admitting an artist or two, with sketchbook in hand.

In the early twentieth century, it has been argued, the presence of the animal in art, or of the animal artist, declined.<sup>4</sup> There is some truth in this. Certainly, the reputation of the most famous Victorian animal painters – [Edwin Landseer](#) (1802–73), for instance – took a hit.<sup>5</sup> Animals had been a mainstay of now unfashionable genres, such as history painting or sentimental narrative paintings, and did not especially suit the new modernist aesthetic, with its emphasis on the contemporary urban environment. However, animals were by no means incompatible with modern art. Indeed, some self-consciously modernist artists, such as [Franz Marc](#) (1880–1916) or [Henri Gaudier-Brzeska](#) (1891–1915) put animals at the very centre of their artistic practice. Animals would feature heavily in the work of [Pablo Picasso](#) (1881–1973). A case could also be made for a resurgence of art related to animals – zoo animals in particular – in interwar Britain, to which tendency Percy Shakespeare’s 1939 painting clearly belongs.

While it is true that a small collection of paintings of zoo animals hardly constitutes a renaissance in animal painting, there are good reasons as to why artists may have been drawn to the subject at this moment. The 1930s was, after all, a significant period in the history of zoological gardens in this country – a history with which many of these paintings, Shakespeare’s included, directly engage. British zoos were changing, and the main force behind these changes was not new ideas in animal welfare, (although these were very important), but new ideas in modern architecture. A fresh approach to animal enclosures had been sweeping Europe since the turn of the century, spearheaded by Carl Hagenbeck, who advocated a move away from cramped cages towards carefully landscaped open spaces, which gave the illusion that captive animals were in a ‘natural habitat’.<sup>6</sup>

Many modern architects saw zoo enclosure design as a great opportunity to explore the relatively new material of concrete. In 1914, London Zoo launched the first of its famous habitat spaces called the Mappin Terraces, which consisted of three small concrete mountains, on which captive bears were set loose. In the early 1930s, the zoo commissioned further buildings, this time enlisting the services of Berthold Lubetkin (1901–90), founder of

Tecton, the radical architectural group who were to dominate zoo design in Britain for the next few years. Tecton were responsible for two key projects at London – the gorilla house and the penguin pool – and, from 1935 onwards, twelve buildings for a new zoo in the town of Dudley, just outside Birmingham.<sup>7</sup> [Plans for Dudley Zoo](#) were considered pioneering enough to appear in the 1937 publication *Circle: International Survey of Constructivist Art*, edited by the artists Ben Nicholson (1894–1982), Naum Gabo (1890–1977) and the architect Leslie Martin (1908–99).<sup>8</sup>

The juxtaposition of modern architecture and the exoticism of the zoo animal seems to have proved too tempting for some artists, even when London and Dudley were not the direct subjects of their work. In 1930, the British artist [Christopher Wood](#) (1901–30) explored this unexpected terrain in what would turn out to be one of his final paintings, [Zebra and Parachute](#) (1930, Tate). Here Wood, perhaps inspired by the surrealistic animal paintings of [Henri Rousseau](#) (1844–1910) and [Giorgio de Chirico](#) (1888–1978), contrasts a melancholic zebra with the clean lines of a modernistic building (usually identified as Le Corbusier's Ville Savoye, then under construction). Wood's painting is a fantasy that anticipates a reality: Lubetkin and Tecton would go on to design animal enclosures that looked much like this one – spaces in which the clean lines of geometrical abstraction met the natural curves and twists of wild animals.

Around the same time that Wood was painting his zebra, two artists of the same generation – [David Jones](#) (1895–1974) and [William Coldstream](#) (1908–87) – were also engaging with the subject of the captive animal. Coldstream's 1930 canvas [At the Zoo](#) (Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent) was painted before Tecton completed work at London Zoo, and chooses as its subject an enclosure built back in the 1830s. His focus, nevertheless, is clearly directed not just at the animals, but at their environment. The four giraffes pictured here are equalled in number by four – all curiously female – zoo visitors (five visitors if you count the artist himself, out of frame). Coldstream, like many before and since, does not seem hugely fascinated by the behaviour of the animals, which is to say that this is not a painting about giraffes, as such, but a painting about *looking* at giraffes. Coldstream's attention appears to be pulled two ways: on the one hand he is enjoying the abstract charms of the scene. The verticality of the giraffes, with their long necks and legs, leaning slightly to the side, both resist and complement the strict grid of the enclosure. Note how the neck of the giraffe on the far right is exactly the same angle as the beam of the roof, on the ceiling above. The standing visitors, with their backs turned to us, also appear as extensions of the architecture. The visual relationships between creatures – human and non-human – and architectural space, are clearly being enjoyed here. On the other hand, Coldstream is encouraging us to question this popular form of leisure. There's an eerie drabness to the painting. The visitors may be enjoying themselves – it is hard to read their expressions from behind – but the overall sense is of an anxious face-off between visitor and animal.

Anxiety is also the keynote of David Jones's 1928 painting of an elephant at London Zoo ([Elephant, National Museum of Wales](#)). Here, no people are present (except the artist),

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though the human presence is very evident in the claustrophobic confines in which the elephant is pictured. Jones's elephant is contained by grey walls – its natural curves, again, juxtaposed with the sharp lines of a brick floor. It is perhaps strange that in an era in which zoos were trying to break out of the drab interior and develop panoramic open-air enclosures, that these canvases by Coldstream, Jones and Shakespeare should all represent indoor spaces. This may suggest, however, a level of scepticism on the part of the artists; a refusal to accept these changes at face value, and to remind viewers that these animals are still captives, still the objects of the visitor's gaze – much like these paintings themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The setting for Shakespeare's painting is the Tropical Bird House, one of the twelve Tecton buildings that formed the basis of the new Dudley Zoo.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising that Shakespeare chose to paint such a scene; not only, as noted, was Dudley Zoo the subject of great national interest in the late 1930s, due to the starkly modern designs of Lubetkin and co., but Shakespeare himself was a Dudley native. He was born in 1906 in nearby Kate's Hill, and must have watched the development of the zoo with great interest. He was also, as other work suggests, interested in painting scenes of leisure: around the same time he painted this work, he produced images (also owned by Dudley) of [boating in a local park](#) and [skating in an ice rink](#).<sup>11</sup> What attracted him to the zoo, therefore, was not merely the Tecton buildings, but the interaction of people and animals within them.

People dominate this painting. It is, like Coldstream's painting, a work about looking at animals, or – more precisely – about the behaviour of people around animals. After all, not everyone here is actively looking. The girl in white at the very centre of the painting seems bored, as does the man seated at the far right (selling seeds?), and the girl in blue beside him, her feet pointing away from her body and her hands in her pockets. Other figures are more engaged: two of them are pictured actively pointing at birds and trying to attract the attention of their companions, while the figure in the foreground on the left (most likely a zookeeper) may be ruffling the feathers of the scarlet macaw.

Though crowded, the bird house is represented as being clean – and, as in Coldstream's work – there is a sense in which Shakespeare seems to be enjoying the surprising juxtapositions that the zoo architecture affords him. Tecton's Dudley Zoo enclosures often consisted of interlocking circles, giving a sense of fluidity, and, like many modernist structures, were painted in bright shades of white, offsetting the natural colours of both animals and, in this case, visitors. The Tecton buildings are somewhat theatrical; a theatre in which not just the animals, but those watching them are part of the stage. In the central cage of the tropical bird house pictured here, you don't just look at the birds, but at people on the other side of the cage. And you are encouraged, as Shakespeare encourages us, to draw comparisons.

*Tropical Bird House, Dudley Zoo* is not the snapshot of everyday life it appears to be. This is a subtly arranged painting, crammed with visual jokes. The red tie of the zookeeper drops down like the tail feathers of the scarlet macaw to which she attends. The colouring of the

sulphur-crested cockatoo in the right foreground echoes the blond-haired girl in white who stands nearby. We are led to anthropomorphise the birds, just as we are led to consider the animal aspects of the humans. Shakespeare reminds us that a visit to the zoo can be an embodied experience. We don't just look, but feel. When you spend time gazing at a flamingo, for instance, you feel the physical differences – you become acutely aware, after a time, of the stubbornness of your own neck, or your frustrating inability to stand so elegantly on one leg. Your lack of feathers begins to bother you. This may not be a universal experience – as Shakespeare's painting reminds us, visitors react to zoos in different ways, ranging from sheer boredom to, in the case of the boy on the left, the desire to recreate through art. It is, however, an experience to which Shakespeare seems to be attuned. The birds in this painting send us back to the human visitors; variances in their beaks and feathers alert us to variances in human footwear, coats, hats and hairstyles.

When Dudley Zoo opened in 1937, one commentator described it as 'at once a scientific centre, an example of an ultra-modern town plan in miniature, and a source of entertainment for a huge industrial population'.<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare's painting captures well this strange mixture of scientific laboratory, architectural showcase and family entertainment. The actual animals – or birds, in this case – are not the central subject of the work. It's not an animal portrait, such as those produced by [Edwin Landseer](#). The animals are really an excuse to re-look at people; but then, this is what so-called animal art has always, in a sense, been about. Looking at how we represent animals often provides deep insights into what we think it means to be human.

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## Images

Fig.1 Percy Shakespeare, *Tropical Bird House, Dudley Zoo* (c.1939), oil on canvas, 75 x 90cm ©Dudley Council Museum Collection.

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<sup>1</sup> Sophie Turley, 'Children and the Demand for Recreational Experiences: the Case of Zoos', *Leisure Studies*, 20.1 (2001), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> For recent surveys of the relationship between artists, zoos and animals see Diana Donald, *Picturing Animals in Britain* (London, 2008) and Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature. Art and the Making of Animal Rights* (London, 2013). A brief overview of images of zoos in public collections in the UK can be found here: Jade King, 'Gotta catch them all! Art and the Zoo', *Art UK*, <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/gotta-catch-em-all-art-and-the-zoo>, accessed 12 July 2018.

<sup>4</sup> This argument is made here: Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London, 2000), pp.20-1. For a more recent discussion of the subject see Jonathan Burt, 'Animals in Visual Art from 1900 to the Present', in Randy Malamud (ed.), *A Cultural History of Animals in the Modern Age* (New York, 2007), pp.163–94.

<sup>5</sup> The modern art critic and artist Roger Fry was said to have noted of the Victorian animal painter Edwin Landseer, 'Consider the enormous reputation of Landseer amongst highly educated people in the nineteenth century. Were they mad, or have we misjudged him?' Quoted in Christopher Reed (ed.), *A Roger Fry Reader* (Chicago, 1996), p.55.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Hagenbeck and the changing face of zoos see Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: the Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Baltimore, 2002) and David Hancocks, 'Zoo Animals as Entertainment Exhibitions', in Malamud (2007), pp.95–118..

<sup>7</sup> Tecton also designed the Elephant House at Whipsnade in 1935

<sup>8</sup> Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo and Leslie Martin (eds), *Circle: International Survey of Constructivist Art* (London, 1937), p.161. Dudley is referred to in the text as 'The Birmingham Zoo'.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the way in which humans look at animals in zoos see John Berger, 'Why Look at Animals', in John Berger, *About Looking* (London, 1980), pp.1–26. For a more recent response to this question see *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, 9.2 (2005).

<sup>10</sup> The Tropical Bird House now serves as a lion enclosure. For information on the conservation of the building, including original plans, see Dudley Zoological Gardens, 'Aviary', <http://tectons.dudleyzoo.org.uk/collection/aviary/>, accessed 12 July 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Dudley Museums Service owns fourteen paintings by Shakespeare, some purchased during his lifetime, some presented after his death, and others (including *Tropical Bird House*) subsequently purchased. *Tropical Bird House* was purchased by Dudley Museums in 1990 with the assistance of the Victoria and Albert Museum Purchase Grant Fund and a donation from Ove Arup.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Juliet Gardner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (London, 2011), p.350.