

Dogs in the Hoods

or

Show me your dog and I'll tell you who you are

"Dogs can talk, but only to those who can listen."-Orhan Pamuk

"Dogs are our link to paradise. They know no evil or envy or discontent. Sitting on a hillside with a dog on a glorious afternoon is akin to the Garden of Eden, where doing nothing was not boredom - but peace."-Milan Kundera

"Some of our greatest historical and artistic treasures are housed with curators in museums; others we take for walks."-Roger A. Caras

Some time ago in northwestern Saudi Arabia, researchers discovered what may be the oldest pet dog petroglyphs. The carvings at Shuwaymis and Jubbah, which are about 8,000 years old, depict hunters armed with bows and arrows and accompanied by groups of dogs-with some of the dogs appearing to be tied to the hunters' bodies with lines, a unique feature to date. The paintings in the rock caves of Saudi Arabia could thus be understood as the earliest artistic documentary record that the dog was already domesticated at this time, perhaps even leashed, and had accompanied and protected humans in their daily lives.

In its role as a protector and companion, the dog leads us through centuries of art history. Impressive for example the innumerable representations of the hunt scenes of the French kings, in which the dogs are moved as attributes of the power and at the same time as embodiment of fight and strength into the picture; unforgettably also Jan van Eyck's mysterious painting "wedding of the Arnolfini", in which the small fuzzy Affenpinscher beside the strange, bone-like formed wooden shoes at the lower right edge of the picture is to confirm the loyalty of the married couple symbolically.

Interesting again that in 17th/18th century England, animals suddenly appear on canvas in a new form with an independent inner life: In the works of painters such as George Stubbs or Thomas Gainsborough, who devoted themselves to portraying various animals, the four-legged companions of people now no longer appear merely as attributes and staffage, but assert themselves as a picture-filling subject that tells its own story. The English masters are not so much interested in the iconographic

meaning of the animal or the dog in the painting, in its symbolic content in the overall structure of the sitter, but rather they try to explore its animal essence, discovering their fascination for the sensitivity and emotional expressiveness of the furry friend. Interestingly, it is thus precisely in this time of enlightenment, as human reason rises above all other forms of perception as the only true approach to the world, that English animal painters celebrate the almost innocent immediacy of canine sentience and expression, which not infrequently reflects the human characteristics and emotions of the owners' themselves.

It may be a small step from the emotional animal portrait to the erotically charged scene in which the Impressionists in the 19th century literally exposed the depicted women (and animals) under their male gaze - for feminist (or perhaps even a FLINTA) art history, it is still a significant theme that says so much about the power relations in our patriarchal system. Edouard Manet's "Olympia" may be mentioned here as representative of this masculine organization of the female body as well as that of the animal, where the cat stands symbolically for the female sex (very scantily covered in the picture) as well as for the frivolity of the scene depicted.

While the depiction of animals in the works of the 20th century in turn - if not from the patriarchal view, but at least - freed itself from the most common art-historically traditional codes, in that artists now moved their very personal, indeed often intimate relationship with their beloved four-legged friends into the picture, completely without fear of kitsch and sentimentality. Yes, at present it even seems that a gentle soft focus has settled over our organs of perception, calibrated by the many cat videos on our social media channels, when it comes to the connection between animals and art. The kitsch factor is unlimited upwards, as long as the animal is revered and at the same time surprises us, catches us off guard or draws a smile on our lips (such as Svetlana Petrova's actually unspeakable long-term project "FatCatArt", in which the artist's cat travels through art history via Photoshop).

The idea for this exhibition was born in the spring of 2020 during the first lockdown, when the world came to a standstill and people held their breath. In that moment of enacted retreat, which for some held the chance for deeper self-discovery, but for most people produced an unprecedented charge of emptiness, fear, and loneliness, many people sought the company of animals. Animal shelters had their hands full and suddenly all neighbours had a cat or a dog at home (not least, walking a dog turned out to be an almost rare privilege in many countries). Our original idea was to set up a small, individually accessible exhibition in the middle of the city at this very moment of rigidity, which would conjure up some warmth and lightness in the cultural void and a smile on the faces of the visitors. And then circumstances did not allow us to carry out the project.

The questions we asked ourselves at that time, we would like to let resurface today with "Dogs in the Hoods" and with XXX extremely diverse, dynamic, thoughtful, funny and poetic works of 18 artists like a quiet echo. What connects us with our furry

companions? Do they reflect our character and our own emotional world? Does the statement thus apply: Show me your dog and I'll tell you who you are? Do we simply project our human characteristics onto them without restraint and half-consciously? Or are we envious of the instinctive wildness of animals, which can break out of their domesticated conformity at any time? How do we manage to enter into a true exchange with our four-pawed friends - is there a language we speak together? A language of the heart, perhaps, beyond words and rational logic? How do contemporary artists see their connection to the four-legged friends that have accompanied humans for so long, and what happens when they bring them into the picture in a variety of ways?

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