Animals

Man and animals

Popular culture

As early as 20,000 years ago, some Primitive men portrayed on rocks, in caves and in the open air the main events of hunting, mostly by drawing animals (caves of Altamira, Pesche-Merle, etc.). Many of these drawings have now become important documents on the fauna that lived on Earth at some historical times and therefore on the climate and flora as well. All peoples in all continents have produced animal figures, either painted or sculpted, giving them a fantastic or divine dimension.

The first important civilisations to have settled along rivers (Nile, Tigris, Euphrates) have distinguished themselves for their strong culture based on deities with animal traits. For the Egyptians, Bastet (the Goddess of joy and sunshine and the protector of the pharaoh) was portrayed as a woman with the head of a cat or as a feline, Anubis (protector of mummmification and lord of necropolises) was portrayed with the body of a man and the head of a jackal, he accompanied the dead in their journey to the afterlife and headed the tribunal of the afterlife.

Later on, animals have kept going hand in hand with man along the centuries, becoming part of folk cultures in the most bizarre ways. The protagonists of legends, fairy tales and myths are often drakes, talking animals or naughty monsters that have always been talking to man in the simplest and most straightforward way through funny, frightening or educational stories.

Some stories derive from well-founded fears, such as that of the wolf, that was really a serious danger, especially in the Middle Ages, when Europe was still mostly covered in forests and in the winter packs of hungry wolves moved closer to villages or even got inside towns. Man feared these animals, not only because of their potentially deadly attacks, but also because of rabies, a disease that was transmitted by their bites and that could not be treated at that time. This historical background is also the source of the werewolf, a man who turns into a wolf during full moon nights. In fact lycanthropy refers to a rare genetic disease, porphyria, which causes hypersensitivity to sunrays, the growth of down on the face and limbs, and finally a red-brown colour of the teeth.

Use or exploitation?

For human beings, fauna has always been an important vital resource. Hunting and fishing were the only means that primitive men had at their disposal to eat and clothe themselves. Then, when men left their nomadic lives to settle permanently in a given area, they began to tame animals. Cattle breeding increased the availability of food, such as meat, milk, eggs, honey; in addition, animals also supplied such raw materials as wool and hides. It should not be forgotten, then, that before the internal combustion engine was discovered the most important source of energy and power were just animals. Animals were used in farming as well as to carry goods and people. With the coming of mechanisation in the late nineteenth century, the old cattle breeding practices used in the country essentially disappeared. The increasing demand for food from a strongly increasing population across the world and the increase and spreading of welfare caused today’s farms to become more and more like “factories” in order to increase production and meet the demand. Lately, though, this trend seems to have reversed, since consumers are giving more and more priority to quality over quantity. In many cases, therefore cattle breeding is going back to more “traditional” methods, more respectful of the animals’ needs.

Experiments on animals

Man uses animals not just to satisfy his primary needs of food and clothing. Many drugs, cosmetics and detergents are usually tested on animals. On the one hand some scientists are sure that they could eliminate most of animal testing
without hindering medical progress or the discovery of new treatments against human diseases; on the other hand many researchers think that part of animal testing is vital for biomedical progress.

**Animals out in the space**

Scientific research was also greatly improved by the use of animals in astronautics. The very first living beings having been launched into space were mice and midges (fruit flies). These insects were chosen for they reproduce very quickly, and this allowed scientists to see very quickly if the cosmic rays could affect the hereditary characters. Laika, a Russian dog, was the first animal to have been sent into space, in particular into orbit around the Earth, in 1957. The environmental conditions of the Earth had been recreated in the space shuttle in which the dog lived; Laika had learnt how to feed herself from an automatic food dispenser. This proved that a living being could live in space for a long time.

**Animals as a resource**

For humans, animals are a productive resource. First of all, they supply a wide variety of foods that man needs to survive: milk, cheese, eggs, butter, salami and cold meat, etc. Some animal species, such as corals and oysters, are used by man to produce jewels and handicrafts. The hide of some animals is used instead to produce clothes. In many places across the world, animals are still one of the main means of transport. For instance, camels are particularly used in such desert areas as the Sahara desert, while in Northern areas sleighs are drawn by huskies, dogs that are very resistant to cold and fatigue.

Every day, animals join man and help him in the most diverse activities. For their innate sensory superiority and their great adaptability to the external climatic conditions, they can carry out tasks that man cannot.