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HISTORY OF ZOOS

**From the royal menageries of the past
to the zoological gardens of today**

Written by Emily Staniforth

The natural world has always been a subject of human fascination. The animal kingdom in particular has rarely been left alone by humans, with the capturing and keeping of animals a feature of many societies over the millennia. But where did the idea of seizing animals from the wild and putting them on display start? And how did this evolve into the zoos and wildlife parks that are a feature of the modern world?

Some of the earliest examples of animals being acquired for a menagerie can be traced back to Ancient Egypt. Evidence found at Thebes suggests that the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut kept animals such as elephants, leopards and baboons in her wildlife collection. Other exotic animal remains found in an ancient cemetery at Hierakonpolis show that although the Ancient Egyptians might have enjoyed ownership of foreign pets they did not necessarily know how to care for them properly.

EXPERT BIO



HELEN COWIE

Helen Cowie is a professor of Early Modern History at the University of York. Her latest book is *Victims of Fashion: Animal Commodities in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

The skeletons of baboons and a hippo with broken bones suggest that the animals were dangerously tied up and sustained injuries while trying to free or protect themselves. But despite the animals not being well cared for, their presence was important in that the menagerie was a source of pride for the collector. It is likely that for Hatshepsut, the existence of the menagerie and the displaying of these animals was a symbol of her wealth and status; having access to such creatures exemplified an ability to travel and trade with foreign lands.



EVIL ETHNOLOGY

The dark history of the human zoo

While zoos and menageries have long been a place where people have been able to view and study the animal kingdom, some European zoos in the 19th and 20th centuries took these ideas to an inhumane level. The 'human zoo' became a popular attraction for people to come and view individuals from elsewhere in the world, primarily Africa and Asia. These poor people were taken from their homes and transported across the globe to be placed in ethnological exhibitions where they were displayed to crowds and kept captive in manufactured surroundings that were said to mimic their authentic living situations. The narrative of these indigenous people as 'savages' was perpetuated in these settings, and they were seen as comparable to the animals kept in similar enclosures.

The exhibitions held at the zoos were often temporary and provided an extra attraction to draw in the crowds. World Fairs were also often home to these ethnological exhibitions, where indigenous people were made to put on displays to entertain the Western attendees. Sometimes, people were displayed in cages and it wasn't uncommon for them to die from disease or from cold. One of the most infamous examples of the displaying of humans in a zoo is from 1906 when Ota Benga, a Congolese man, was kept in a cage with chimpanzees and apes at the Bronx Zoo in New York. He was labelled as "The Missing Link", implying that he was closer to apes than people. The zoo faced some backlash at the time and the exhibition was quickly closed. Benga, however, remained at the zoo.

"Zoos need to be understood within their wider historical contexts," explains Helen Cowie, professor of history at the University of York. "Early menageries, for instance, should be viewed within the context of overseas exploration, elite entertainment and displays of princely power."

The ownership of wild and foreign animals can be seen in different examples from early history all over the world. "Collections of exotic animals were first established by monarchs, who exhibited them as symbols of their power over nature," says Cowie. "In the early modern period, kings sometimes organised fights between exotic animals for the entertainment of the court or paraded their animals through the streets in

elephant in Lisbon's Terreiro do Paço in 1515 to test the longstanding belief that the animals were mortal enemies. (The rhinoceros was declared victor when the elephant ran away)."

Away from viewing animals as a source of violent entertainment and a way to assert dominance and control over the natural world, the displaying of animals as a visual representation of power was a key motivation for their procurement. As a status symbol, animals were often gifted and traded on occasions of political diplomacy and international relations. In 1487, such a gift was presented to Lorenzo de' Medici, the Italian statesman who presided over the cultural, political and economic affairs of the Republic of Florence. The Egyptian Sultan

"THE EXISTENCE OF THE MENAGERIE AND THE DISPLAYING OF THESE ANIMALS WAS A SYMBOL OF STATUS"

grandiose processions." Using animals in fights was not a new concept, with the Romans having pitted wild beasts such as lions, elephants, bears and alligators against each other (and sometimes people) in gladiatorial arenas. During the medieval and early modern periods, animal blood sports continued to be popular in Europe and were a common form of entertainment up until around the 18th century. In Elizabethan England in particular, attending bear-baiting displays, where bears were forced to fight each other to the death, was a popular pastime. Elsewhere in Europe, the owners of menageries also used their animals to satisfy their bloodthirsty curiosity. As Cowie explains: "The Portuguese king Manuel I staged a fight between a rhinoceros and an

al-Ashraf Qaitbay arranged for a giraffe to be brought to Florence for Lorenzo as a gift to ensure the maintenance of the Egyptian relationship with the Florentines, who traded in Cairo.

Although the Medici family were no strangers to the acquisition of wild animals (the noble family's menagerie included a lion house), the giraffe proved to be an impressive site for the people of Florence, particularly as the last giraffe in Italy had been during the reign of Julius Caesar. The Medici giraffe was not kept locked away but was available for all to see as a physical representation of Medici prestige; Cowie describes how it "wandered the streets of Florence, stealing apples from the local peasants". Proof of the giraffe's existence and the



Exotic animals were pitted against each other in the Roman gladiatorial arena



ABOVE-LEFT An engraving of wild animal traders in East Africa

ABOVE-RIGHT The Medici giraffe appears in this painting of Lorenzo meeting ambassadors



BELOW Elephant rides on African bush elephant Jumbo at Regent's Park Zoo

impact it had on the city-state is evident in its depiction throughout the art of Renaissance Florence, despite the animal only having lived for a couple of years.

One of the most impressive royal menageries of the medieval period was the one at Tower of London. Established in 1235 under the reign of King Henry III (1207-72), this menagerie was the first of its kind in England and began with a gift of three big cats given to the king by the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III. There is some debate over whether these cats were lions or leopards, but nevertheless they were housed in the Tower, soon to be joined by an array of exotic animals that were received by the royal family over the years. An elephant joined the menagerie in 1255, a gift from the king of France, but sadly it only survived for a couple of years, possibly because its keepers fed it with wine. Although the

animals were cared for to the best of the keepers' abilities, the cramped conditions and lack of knowledge about the animals meant many of the menagerie's beasts had limited life spans.

Alongside the lions, leopards, lynxes and baboons that made up the menagerie's collection, one of the most unusual occupants was a 'white' bear given to Henry III in 1252 by King Haakon of Norway. Most historians have come to the conclusion that this particular bear was in fact a polar bear, and it became a hit with the population of London who had gotten used to the sight of big cats at the Tower. The polar bear proved to be a challenge for the sheriffs employed as its keepers, particularly as King Henry decreed that the bear must be allowed to feed itself. A muzzle was made for the bear and a chain was provided so that the creature could be walked from the Tower down to

the River Thames on a daily basis. There, it would be allowed to swim in the water and look for fish, all the time attached to a rope that was held by a presumably very brave and very nervous handler. The spectacle was hugely popular with the London crowds, who would never have seen anything of the kind before. Again, while these animals served to entertain the visitors who came to gawk at them, they were primarily to show the power of the Crown. As a result, the care of the animals was a secondary concern and there were occasions where not only the exotic creatures suffered but visitors and keepers were maimed or killed by the Tower's wild inhabitants.

These early royal menageries were not solely a European phenomenon. When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City) in 1519 he reported that the Aztec emperor



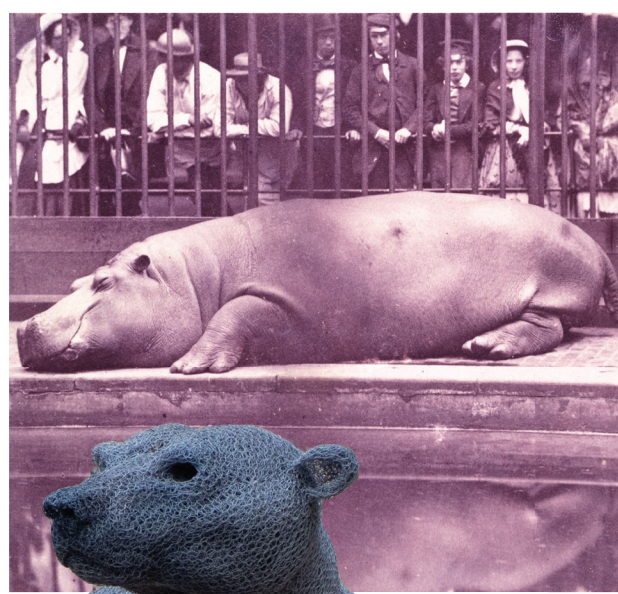
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Moctezuma II had a staff of around 300 people who cared for the animals in his menagerie, which included eagles, jaguars, pumas and wolves. Cowie also highlights that the "Ottomans kept large menageries in Istanbul, while many Indian princes kept exotic beasts for combat and display".

As the centuries passed, imperial expansion and advancements in transport meant that exotic animals became much more accessible. "Zoological gardens (later abbreviated to 'zoos') emerged at the turn of the 19th century and represented a shift from the private menageries of the early modern period to the public institutions we have today," explains Cowie. "This shift began in 1793, when French revolutionaries transferred the surviving animals from Louis XVI's menagerie at Versailles to a new national menagerie in the Parisian Jardin des Plantes. It was consolidated in 1828 with the establishment of the Gardens of the Zoological Society of London (the future London Zoo) and the emergence of zoological gardens in other European cities, including Dublin (1831), Bristol (1835), Antwerp (1843) and Berlin (1844)."

While the Jardin des Plantes was created out of the necessity to remove the animals once owned by the French king as a physical representation of the monarchy's loss of power, the zoological gardens in London are commonly cited as the first to be borne out of scientific intentions. Yet while the Zoological Society's establishment is more of a zoo as we understand them today, collecting animals for scientific purposes actually dates as far back as Ancient Greece.

At the Lyceum in Athens, the Peripatetic School was established by the philosopher Aristotle in around 335 BCE. Here, as well as teaching, Aristotle would research and write on



TOP A sea lion performing a trick with its keeper

ABOVE Obaysch the hippo in its enclosure at London Zoo in 1852

LEFT A wire sculpture commemorates the Tower of London menagerie's polar bear

a number of subjects, including botany, biology, zoology and natural history. Alexander the Great, who ruled in Athens after it had been taken over by Macedonia, is said to have supplied Aristotle with a number of exotic animals, which were housed in the school's menagerie. Aristotle was able to study these creatures, their habitats, behaviours, territories, cycles and anatomy.

Though many of the animals in the Lyceum's menagerie probably did not survive long and were kept primarily for anatomical research purposes and observation rather than conservation, Aristotle's endeavours to understand the animals in his collection can be seen as one of the earliest examples of a zoo dedicated to the study of zoology.

If we look even further back in time to Ancient China, the Garden of Intelligence was created by Emperor Wen Wang in around 1060 BCE. Spread over 1,500 acres, it housed animals such as deer, fish and birds. Although there is not much known about the Garden, and while the creatures kept there appear to have been less exotic than in some of the other menageries from history, the name of the collection suggests that there was some element of study intended to be undertaken by the people who visited.

With the advent of the Age of Enlightenment, a period of time in the 17th and 18th centuries where scientific endeavour was prized in European society, people were motivated to understand more about the natural world around them and thus zoos became a centre of learning for naturalists and scientists. "Most 19th-century zoos embraced scientific goals in order to distinguish themselves from earlier menageries," explains Cowie. "In contrast to menageries, zoos stressed the educational value of their collections, the superior living conditions accorded to their animals and the scope they provided for scientific research. Mortality rates were very high, however, and many animals perished from disease, starvation or injuries sustained during capture. Writing in 1872, naturalist Frank Buckland estimated that out of every six or seven rhinoceroses caught in a pitfall in Malacca, only one was uninjured and in a condition to be sent to Europe."

However, as zoological study advanced, looking after the captured animals became more important as they began to be valued in their own right rather than as an extension of human power. "Survival rates increased gradually over the course of the 19th century as zoological knowledge and veterinary medicine improved, but

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ZOO

Helen Cowie questions whether the ethos of the modern zoo has improved since they first opened



ignorance of the habits and diets of some animals remained high," says Cowie. "In 1848, for instance, an orangutan exhibited at the Jardin des Plantes consumed 'chocolate, roast meat, wine and even liqueurs' and was 'put to bed between a large cat and a very shaggy dog' to keep him warm at night - treatment that resulted in an early death."

While naturalists were transforming zoological parks into places of scientific research and understanding, the zoo became a source of entertainment in an altogether different capacity than it had been in the age of private menageries. As zoological parks and gardens began to be opened to the general public,

by Louis Saint Mars, and a variety of hippopotamus-inspired trinkets from silver figurines to hippo-embossed breast pins. Nearly a century later, the arrival of the first panda, Ming, at the zoo in 1938 elicited a similar reaction, inspiring 'panda dolls... panda jokes... children's books, nursery wallpaper, charms, bangles, cigarette cases [and] brooches.'"

Nowadays, the zoo remains a popular tourist attraction for visitors who are excited to get a glimpse of animals they are unlikely to ever see in their natural habitat. As the climate crisis worsens and more animals are added to the endangered species list, the main purpose of the modern zoological

"MOST 19TH-CENTURY ZOOS EMBRACED SCIENTIFIC GOALS TO DISTINGUISH THEMSELVES FROM EARLIER MENAGERIES"

visitors had the opportunity to explore the world through the variety of exotic animals that were completely new to them. Alongside their scientific purpose, many zoos took advantage of their appeal to a wide audience and started to offer experiences and attractions. Some zoos offered elephant rides or taught the animals in their care to perform tricks for enraptured crowds.

"From the 1850s, zoos also started to promote individual animals as zoological 'stars', capitalising on their 'celebrity' status to increase profits," says Cowie. "In 1850, London Zoo's first ever hippopotamus, Obaysch, prompted a surge in visitor numbers and spawned a range of hippo-themed paraphernalia, including a small statuette crafted by the sculptor Joseph Gawen (supposedly from Nile mud), a Hippopotamus Polka composed

park is now conservation. Breeding programmes attempt to ensure the survival of animals that may otherwise become extinct and zoos still regularly advertise their newest inhabitants, with the birth of certain creatures often making headlines around the world. Outside of the zoo, safari parks and experiences have also soared in popularity as people are able to travel to the natural habitats of wild creatures and observe them in their own surroundings.

Though the modern zoo seems like a far cry from the private royal menageries of the past, the zoo is still a representation of human power over nature as we try to correct some of the wrongs we have done to the natural world and influence how the animal kingdom lives, breeds and survives. ○

"On the face of it, modern zoos have evolved significantly from the first zoos that were open to the public. Zoos no longer take animals from the wild, but generally secure them through breeding or exchanges with other zoos, putting an end to the environmental destruction associated with the wild animal trade. Most have embraced the rhetoric of conservation, contributing to international breeding programmes and giving some of their profits to wildlife protection initiatives overseas. Animal husbandry has also improved considerably since the 19th century, with better nutrition, larger enclosures and better veterinary care resulting in a longer life expectancy for zoo animals.

"While there have certainly been significant changes in the exhibition of exotic animals, however, the continuities across time are perhaps equally striking and offer some important caveats to the 'improvement' narrative. First, despite a shift in emphasis, zoos continue to exert power over animals, and some species (especially pandas) still function as diplomatic gifts. Second, while the range of animals on display has increased over the centuries, audiences continue to gravitate towards a few 'charismatic' mammals, with the result that many modern zoos still stock them for entertainment purposes. Elephants, great apes and big cats have almost always been popular, while reptiles and birds have generally drawn fewer crowds. Third, though staged animal performances may have fallen out of fashion in the 20th century, the desire to see zoo animals being active, or to interact with them in some way, has not abated, as evidenced by the continued popularity of sea lion displays, feeding exhibitions and immersive enclosures where visitors can enter the habitats of selected non-aggressive animals. The chimpanzee's tea party of the early 20th century (which persisted in London Zoo until 1972) was in many ways a sanitised version of feeding time at the Tower Menagerie in the 17th century, when, according to the diarist Samuel Pepys, visitors could gain free entry if they brought along a live dog or cat to feed to the lions! Although the official ethos of the zoo has changed, some elements of animal display remain the same."

