

The logo for the Frye Art Museum, featuring the word "FRYE" in a large, white, serif font above the words "ART MUSEUM" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font, all contained within a teal rectangular background.

FRYE
ART MUSEUM

A detailed oil painting of three cows in a rural landscape. In the foreground, a large brown cow with white patches stands on the left, looking towards the right. In front of it, a smaller calf with similar brown and white markings looks directly at the viewer. In the background, another cow with brown and white patches stands on a grassy slope, looking towards the right. The background shows a hazy, open landscape under a soft, overcast sky.

Human Nature, Animal Culture
Selections from the Frye Art
Museum Collection

June 12, 2021–August 21, 2022

Reason, science, and culture supposedly elevate humans above nature, yet many of our species' greatest achievements would not have been possible without animals. They have nourished our bodies, carried our belongings, and become our closest companions, helping humans to create the world as we know it. But too often we take animals for granted. Now, as we confront climate change and mass extinction, humankind is forced to reexamine how we affect animals and the natural world. While we turn to science for solutions to address this crisis, we can look to art to understand our past, present, and future relationships with our fellow creatures.

The many paintings of animals—especially domesticated animals such as cattle, sheep, pigs, dogs, horses, and fowl—in the Frye Art Museum's collection offer a unique opportunity to examine human-animal interactions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in parts of Europe and the United States. Beyond appearing as subjects in many of the paintings collected by the Museum's founders, Charles and Emma Frye, domesticated animals were critical to the formation of the Museum itself. Charles Frye, raised on an Iowa farm, built a successful meatpacking business in Seattle after arriving in 1888, and this business in turn provided him with the means to begin collecting art. Presenting works from the permanent collection as well as archival materials that illuminate the Fries' history in the meatpacking industry, this exhibition considers the various forms of labor domesticated animals perform and their significance as deeply ingrained elements of human society.

Imagery of domesticated animals provides a fruitful starting point for reevaluating the roles animals have played in our lives. Paintings of animals became especially popular with artists and collectors during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when spreading industrialization and population shifts from rural to urban settings reduced opportunities for close contact with animals. People

increasingly engaged with animals in mediated ways—by means of images. Paintings in particular created—and continue to create—a realm where relationships with animals are negotiated and take shape beyond the confines of language and the demands of reason. Reconsidering our long, often fraught relationships with domesticated animals reminds us that humans are closer to animals and animals are far closer to culture than we often care to think.



Meatpacking operations, Frye & Company, ca. 1945. Frye Art Museum Archives.

Series Overview

Human Nature, Animal Culture is part of an ongoing series of thematic presentations of the Frye Art Museum's collection. Since its founding in 1952, the Museum has honored and expanded upon the vision of Charles and Emma Frye through varied presentations of the Founding Collection—a selection of European and American paintings from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This series brings the collection into focus through the lens of contemporary scholarship. Guest curators, art historians, and artists are invited to organize yearlong exhibitions that mine the many rich veins of the Museum's foundational holdings and newer acquisitions, siting familiar favorites within fresh contexts in order to continually reframe the visitor experience.

The Labor of Rendered Animals: The Art Collection of Charles and Emma Frye

In German artist Heinrich von Zügel's painting *Old Man Asleep with Sheep* (1870s), a seated man slumbers in a chair that leans against a rough wall, while a dog readies itself to lie in the grass next to him. A herd of sheep has gathered in front of them, and one, slightly larger than the others, seems to be bleating at the man, seeking his attention. The scene is one of mutual trust and connection: The man can sleep deeply because he knows the sheep will not stray, and the dog will attend to them if they do. The dog prepares to rest because it can rely on the sheep not to wander. The closeness of the sheep to one another indicates that they feel safe and not under any immediate threat that would necessitate flight. And the bleating sheep expects that the man will respond to its efforts to get his attention. Zügel, the son of a sheep farmer, was familiar with rural life, and this background informs the interactions depicted in the scene. He had spent his childhood helping to herd and tend his father's flocks, so he understood the behaviors of sheep, herding dogs, and other barnyard creatures—and, presumably, the mutually beneficial communications and relationships that could exist with and between them. However, the degree of familiarity that guided his calm depiction of the close relationships between the man, dog, and sheep was becoming rare at the time he created it. He painted this work in the late nineteenth century, when industrialization in Western Europe had widened the distance between idyllic rural scenes such as this and the new realities of modern, urbanized life

As more people began living in cities or towns that relied less on agricultural economies, they had fewer experiences of closely interacting with animals that weren't household pets. The introduction and spread of machinery into agricultural work and transportation meant that the constant presence of domesticated animals such as mules, oxen, horses, and even working dogs in people's daily lives all but vanished. Today, encounters with animals—both domesticated and wild—often occur under controlled conditions such as visits to petting zoos and circuses, legally mandated hunting seasons, or occasional, random meetings in the "natural" environments of designated parks, preserves, campgrounds, and trails. While animals have not entirely disappeared from our lives, most opportunities for directly interacting with them have been replaced with mediated encounters—through images. And, as many scholars have argued, images of animals continue to proliferate in films, in art, and, perhaps most significantly, online, even as more species vanish due to extinction.

Zügel's painting of the man with his dog and sheep is part of this shift from direct to mediated encounters with animals, and his biography follows this trajectory as well. He left an agrarian life surrounded by animals in the rural village of Murrhardt in southwestern Germany to study painting in the cities of Stuttgart and Vienna. Once he arrived in these urban environments, Zügel produced images of animals far more frequently than he interacted with them. He became one of the leading animal painters in Germany, a professor of animal painting at the prestigious Munich Academy of Fine Arts, and a founding member of the Munich Secession, an influential visual artists' association that broke away from the conventions of nineteenth-century salon painting and salon-style exhibitions. Zügel's work addressed a growing interest in visual art featuring animal subjects, a genre that gained popularity in Europe and the United States from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth century among upper-middle-class collectors, many of whom were city dwellers who had never lived in close proximity with the types of animals

whose likenesses they purchased and displayed in their homes. Works featuring idealized rural scenes with placid livestock in green fields or tidy barnyards seemed to offer urban dwellers a connection to nature that was difficult to find in cities. Such scenes presented alternatives to the artificial environment of the city, which lacked the natural rhythms of day and night, the changing of the seasons, the closeness to earth, wind, and sky, and the embeddedness of animals that could be found in rural settings.

Charles and Emma Frye's selection of paintings featuring animal subjects aligns their collecting practices with those of other wealthy collectors of their time. However, the Fryes had uniquely close connections to animals; indeed, their very ability to assemble their art collection depended on them. Yet the Fryes' relationship with animals was markedly different from the harmonious coexistence depicted in the paintings they owned—Charles Frye had earned his fortune primarily from his slaughterhouses and his meatpacking business.

Born in rural Iowa, the children of German immigrants, Charles Frye and his wife, Emma, moved westward during the 1880s, arriving in Seattle in 1888. Charles Frye was already experienced in the cattle industry, and in 1891, he and his business partner Charles Bruhn established the Frye-Bruhn Meat Packing Company and opened several meat markets in the city. They expanded their business into Alaska, taking advantage of the Klondike gold rush by setting up cattle-raising operations on several Alaskan islands and opening markets in growing towns. The Seattle-based slaughterhouse and meatpacking plant, however, remained central to the business. Frye had studied modern slaughterhouse techniques during visits to Chicago and Cincinnati, and his business was soon killing and processing cattle, pigs, and sheep on an industrial scale. His operation was one of many in Seattle, making the city the largest meat-processing center in the Northwest, an important exporter of processed meat products, and a major provider of steady, relatively well-paid employment. Slaughterhouses and processing plants were located in the tidal-flats region of Seattle (today's SoDo industrial area), away from the wealthier parts of the city, but inside city limits nonetheless. Local ordinances decreed that livestock could no longer be raised in any significant numbers in the city proper, so animals destined for slaughter arrived in Seattle by railroad and were delivered directly to the slaughterhouse district. This meant that, with the exception of the many employees in the meat-processing industry, most Seattle residents rarely encountered livestock as living animals. However, despite officials' efforts to keep the ongoing killing and processing of animals separate from most of the rapidly growing city, many residents were reminded of their relatively close proximity to the slaughterhouses by the often-nauseating smells that wafted over the city.¹

Such a visceral connection between the animal subjects in much of the Fryes' art collection and the dead animals that enabled its acquisition reveals the close link not only between the accumulation of economic capital and cultural capital, but also between the consumption of animals and the consumption of art. In fact, the marked presence of images of livestock and other domesticated animals in a collection funded by the butchery and selling of animals as meat and various byproducts invokes in a somewhat literal way the two meanings of the term "rendering." The scholar Nicole Shukin teases out the nuances of these meanings to demonstrate the material and ideological centrality of animals in sustaining the operations of capitalism: "*Rendering* signifies both the mimetic act of making a copy, that is, reproducing or interpreting an object in linguistic, painterly, musical, filmic, or other media . . . and the industrial boiling down and recycling of animal remains."² In Shukin's view, considering this double sense of the term "rendering" allows us to acknowledge and historicize the centrality of animals in what we

usually think are exclusively human domains—economies and cultures. Within the parameters of a capitalist economy, artistic renderings of animals and the various products rendered from once-living creatures for human consumption have equal status as commodities. Thus, the full value of a painting of a cow as an aesthetic object is not determined by the accuracy of the painted depiction of its animal subject nor by the emotional appeal it may have for viewers, let alone by the animal that serves as the artist's model, but by a fluctuating art market. The value of the bodies of sheep, hogs, cattle, and fowl that are processed into meat, hides, gelatin, and other byproducts is likewise calculated not on the basis of their former status as individual, embodied, living beings, but on the basis of consumer demand for their deaths.

Animals and their "renderings" have played a central role in creating the world in which we live today, particularly its cultural and economic dimensions. It can, therefore, also be useful to think of animals as laborers whose efforts help to create our supposedly exclusively human societies. The human rights scholar Dinesh J. Wadiwel has examined the amount of time that domesticated animals are forced to devote to "labor" and reveals that they are as thoroughly enmeshed in the workings of capitalism as humans.³ These animal laborers have specific tasks to perform and are expected to perform them ceaselessly. For example, a livestock textbook from the late twentieth century confidently asserts that the "primary purpose of cattle . . . is to convert roughage to meat, milk, and byproducts."⁴ The work of a cow, in other words, is to eat, digest, and assimilate nutrition solely for the purpose of producing salable products; in this scenario, everything a cow does as it lives and breathes is part of its working day and constitutes its labor. The beef cow, therefore, has no "time off"—it works without interruption until it has converted sufficient amounts of feed into flesh, at which point it is killed and its body transformed into meat and byproducts. But, as Wadiwel and others have demonstrated, there are other ways of conceptualizing the beef cow's working life. For example, cattle farmers can help the animals "flourish" as they work; they can ensure that the animals maintain a sense of agency that allows freedom of movement and opportunities to cultivate relationships with their "coworkers"—their fellow creatures and the humans who tend to them.

Suggestions of this type of attention to animals' ability to flourish rather than simply to exist can be found in the idealized relationships between the humans and animals portrayed in paintings in the Fryes' art collection. For example, in the painting *Three Cows and a Calf* (ca. 1890), Léon Barillot presents cattle standing in the foreground, casting long shadows that indicate that the end of a day of grazing is approaching. They stand beside a stream that flows through the field, neatly contained within its banks; a flock of sheep and a shepherd appear in the background, moving along a smooth path. The cattle are a considerable distance from the shepherd and sheep, but they appear acutely aware of them. As a scene of the end of the cows' active working day, this painting dramatizes close interspecies relationships. And as coworkers, the sheep, cows, and shepherd are all operating according to the same schedule, all cooperating as they complete their shift. The cows watch the movements of the sheep and shepherd closely, knowing that they will be guided toward the farmyard to be milked and to rest for the night. The added detail of the calf in the foreground seemingly looking out of the painting toward the viewer underscores the importance of animals' awareness of humans who look at them and the meaningful exchanges that can arise between them.

Paintings like Barillot's *Three Cows and a Calf* and Zügel's *Old Man Asleep with Sheep* capture the lively intelligence at work in both humans and animals as they interact with each other. Such images allow us to reflect upon the types of close interspecies relationships and modes of

communication that are increasingly rare in a world in which industrialized meat production is the norm and the agency and labor of most domesticated animals, especially livestock, is ignored or taken for granted. However, given the accelerating pace of climate change and the impending extinction of countless species, we are compelled to reexamine how we think about and act upon the natural world and all the living beings that inhabit it. In these dire circumstances, the many paintings of animals that the Fries collected can offer us something more complex than simple, nostalgic scenes of a bygone era in which close relationships between humans and animals were possible. These artworks allow us to recognize the persistent human desire to understand and connect with animals, and they remind us of the important labor that animals have performed in the development of what we think of as exclusively human achievements, such as “civilization” and “culture.” These paintings also present ways of relating to animals and to the natural environment that move beyond domination and control toward mutually beneficial interspecies relationships. At the same time, however, the Fries’ ability to purchase these paintings was based on the exact type of animal exploitation that their paintings deny. Yet by endowing their collection as a free public art museum, the Fries also ensured—wittingly or unwittingly—that images portraying the alternatives to profitable, exploitative relationships with animals continue to circulate. In their vivid depictions of interspecies bonds and communication, these paintings help us realize that the seemingly clear oppositions between human and animal and between culture and nature are, in fact, not all that distinct.

Kathleen Chapman is an associate professor of art history at Virginia Commonwealth University. She specializes in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European art, particularly German modernism. Her publications include *Expressionism and Poster Design in Germany 1905–1922: Between Spirit and Commerce* (2019) and articles focusing on art, visual culture, and collecting practices in Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany.

Endnotes

1. Frederick Brown, *The City Is More Than Human: An Animal History of Seattle* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016), 202–204.
2. Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 20.
3. Dinesh J. Wadiwel, “The Working Day: Animals, Capitalism, and Surplus Time,” in *Animal Labour: A New Frontier of Interspecies Justice?*, ed. Charlotte Blattner, Kendra Coulter, and Will Kymlicka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
4. H.M. Briggs & D.M. Briggs, *Modern Breeds of Livestock*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1980), cited in Michael S. Quinn, “Corpulent Cattle and Milk Machines: Nature, Art, and the Ideal Type,” *Society and Animals* 1, no. 2 (1993), 146.

Cover: Léon Barillot. *Three Cows and a Calf* (detail), ca. 1890. Oil on linen. 52 x 64 ¼ in. Frye Art Museum, Founding Collection, Gift of Charles and Emma Frye, 1952.005. Photo: Jueqian Fang. **Poster:** Heinrich von Zügel. *Old Man Asleep with Sheep*, ca.1870–1880. Oil on canvas. 21 ½ x 28 ¾ in. Frye Art Museum, Founding Collection, Gift of Charles and Emma Frye, 1952.209. Photo: Jueqian Fang. **Back cover:** Adolphe Charles Marais. *Peasant Girl with Cattle* (detail), 1890. Oil on canvas. 41 ¾ x 53 ¾ in. Frye Art Museum, Founding Collection, Gift of Charles and Emma Frye, 1952.110. Photo: Jueqian Fang.

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