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Between the Past and Future. Antwerp Zoo and the 19th Century Belgium

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Abstract. Antwerp zoo was established in 1843 under the management of the Zoological Society of Antwerp. As one of the oldest zoos in Belgium and Europe, the establishment, operation and development of Antwerp Zoo are closely related to Belgian society in the 19th century. At the same time, it also reflects the self-awareness of the newly independent Belgians in the face of industrial civilization and exotic nature. This article discusses how the Antwerp Zoo as a public place embodies 19th century Belgian colonial and imperial ideas from perspectives of function, architecture, visitors and animals and the cultural meaning of modern zoos in European continent. Modern European zoos represented by Antwerp zoo are social and educational places dominated by the middle class in the 19th century, and also reflect people's thought about the relationship between human and nature.

Keywords. History Zoo, Antwerp, Society, Middle class

The Menagerie and Zoo

The history of the zoo goes back to ancient times. Until the 19th century, this collection of animals that could be called menagerie had the following characteristics: First, their owners were mostly kings or nobles. These private places did not allow or strictly restrict the entry of ordinary people. Second, menageries were created to enrich private collections, to satisfy the curiosity and vanity of the owners while demonstrating their power and wealth. Third, the exhibitions of animals in menageries "were not systematically organized"¹ and animals in captivity were simply displayed rather than being scientifically studied.

The birth of the modern zoo was closely related to the social changes of the 19th century. Economically, the industrial revolution strengthened the bourgeoisie in Europe, and railroads, immigration, and trade gave birth to large cities. Antwerp, for example, underwent rapid expansion in the first half of the 19th century, growing from a medium-sized textile center to an international port with over 120,000 inhabitants². In terms of politics, the political map of Europe was adjusted after 1815. Although the old order under the concert system dominated international relations, the ideas spread by the French Revolution were not completely

¹ Rothfels, Nigel. *Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo*. JHU Press, 2002. p.19.

² Winter, Anne. *Migrants and urban change: Newcomers to Antwerp, 1760-1860*. Pickering & Chatto, 2009. p.101.

eliminated. Belgians value regionalism and national independence, and oppose centralization³. In other words, the Belgian bourgeoisie had its own regime since independence. Furthermore, as one of the driving forces of the natural collections of European countries, colonialism continued its activities over the centuries. As early as the 17th century, animals had become normal cargo in major ports in Europe and the colonies⁴. For 19th-century people, colonialism and national identity were linked⁵. Recent research argues that the rise of the modern zoo is not exclusively within the framework of imperialism, but more a product of bourgeois activities⁶. Like London Zoo, the earliest modern zoo in Europe, Antwerp Zoo was founded and supported by the emerging bourgeoisie which Antwerp Zoological Society played the key role. The biggest difference between it and managing institution in pre-modern era menageries was the introduction of scientific research ideas. This notion of not belonging to the monarchy and the working class was embodied in its charter: To propagate in a pleasant manner the taste for and knowledge of natural history, to facilitate the study of natural history by the members of the society as well as by artists and students of the royal academy of fine arts and by students of medicine and pupils of the athenaeum of Antwerp. To this effect collections will be formed, as extensive as the society's resources will permit, both of living and of stuffed subjects, as well as a library compiled of works dealing with science⁷. For Antwerp Zoo, however, its history must be accompanied not only by modern science, but also by the mixture of colonialism and imperialism.

The People and Animal

Zoos all over the world today are open to the public but such a scenario was unimaginable in most part of the 19th century. As has mentioned, like many other zoos in Europe, Antwerp Zoo was under the management of Antwerp Zoological Society and the membership was not open to everyone. Those social elites with financial and social status, on the one hand, paid membership fees to obtain permission to visit animals and participate in zoo activities, and on the other hand, through their resources, contributed to the construction of the zoo and the introduction of new animals. In the Antwerp Zoological Society this continued until World War II⁸. If the pre-modern zoo was a symbol of the status of kings and aristocrats, then the European zoo in the 19th century was a symbol of the bourgeoisie's grasp of social resources. Although the zoo later opened to paying audiences, it remained a place of hierarchy, a place where the bourgeoisie expressed and maintained class differences. First, Zoologists prefer to use classical languages such as Latin and Greek in naming exhibit animals. This standardized nomenclature expresses a tendency to distinguish between the educated and those who need to be educated. The Latin name on the cage helps the former avoid being influenced by the latter's taste.⁹ By doing this, the bourgeoisie tried to keep its distance from the industrial

³ Cook, Bernard A. *Belgium: A history*. Vol. 50. Peter Lang, 2002. p.97.

⁴ Kislring, Vernon N. *Zoo and aquarium history: Ancient animal collections to zoological gardens*. CRC press, 2000. p.33.

⁵ Mehos, Donna C. *Science and culture for members only: The Amsterdam zoo Artis in the nineteenth century*. Amsterdam University Press, 2006. p.127.

⁶ Rothfels, Nigel. *Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo*. JHU Press, 2002. p.22.

⁷ Wirtz, Patrick H. "Zoo city: Bourgeois values and scientific culture in the industrial landscape." *Journal of urban design* 2.1 (1997): 68.

⁸ Engelen, Leen, and Roel Vande Winkel. "A Captivated Audience. Cinema-going at the zoological garden in occupied Antwerp, 1915–1918." *First World War Studies* 7.3 (2016): 244.

⁹ Wirtz, Patrick H. "Zoo city: Bourgeois values and scientific culture in the industrial landscape." *Journal of urban design* 2.1 (1997): 64.

and peasant classes. Second, the maintenance of class differences can also be found in bourgeois entertainment in zoos. In menagerie of kings and nobles, distinctions of status were hereditary, historical, exclusive, but in the zoos of the 19th century, the bourgeois groups on the rise had no clear boundaries, and economic status was a key indicator. Events in the zoo such as garden tea, concerts and science and education events are mainly for people with money and time, where bourgeois visitors push strollers, dress up in smart clothes, socialize and distinguish themselves from lower-income people who purchase tickets during their limited free time to come to experience upper-class life.

Human-animal relationships in zoos may be where colonialism is most evident. When visitors face the various animals in the zoo, what exactly are they looking at? Typically, animal collections focus on species that are not native, especially those from outside Europe such as Africa and Asia. In the 19th century, zoos were one of the ways in which colonial powers presented themselves in home countries. Explorers capturing animals in exotic lands and transporting them back to their home countries was a symbol of the conquest of far-flung lands. Animals in the cages symbolized the colony's obedience and submission¹⁰, and at the same time served as a mirror to show the positive results of overseas colonization activities to the majority of the public who cannot really set foot on foreign lands, and to gain moral and financial support from them. Patriotism and colonialism thus blended together. Building a zoo in a metropolis is an activity that creates an exotic world in a civilized environment. Collecting animals from the colonies reflected their subordination in the international system, and also cultivated the awareness of coexistence between the colony and the home country and the importance of colonies among the public. After Congo became a Belgian colony, Antwerp Zoo exhibited rare animals from the Congolese rainforest¹¹. In interwar Belgium, pro-imperialists said the colonies were places of great wealth and the key to future economic growth. Colonial exhibitions in Belgium in the 1930s show that Congo's incredible wealth can cure its own economic woes¹².

Of course, zoos did not just collect overseas species. German zoos in the late 19th century, for example, began to focus on collecting native animals, while gradually transforming from treating animals as objects of entertainment to acknowledging their emotions and sensitivities¹³. In this process, the relationship between human and animals seems to be more equal, but on the other hand, it also expressed the greater ambition of the bourgeoisie to expand the artificial nature from the confinement of exotic animals into the universal species.

The Architecture and Self Awareness

Every visitor to the Antwerp Zoo would be impressed by its architecture. Although the current architectural layout of the Antwerp Zoo was mainly determined after World War II, the design of the zoo building in the second half of the 19th century set the style of the zoo. A basic question is what kind of place was Antwerp Zoo in the minds of the people at that time? It depends on the zoo owner's definition of the zoo's function and the zoo's role in the city's public building system. As has mentioned, the Antwerp Zoological Society was a bourgeois organization and the first director of the zoo was zoologists and botanists Jacques Kets. So from

¹⁰ John Berger, "Why Look at Animals." *About Looking*, London: Writers and Readers (1980), p19, cited from Rothfels, Nigel. *Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo*. JHU Press, 2002. p.21.

¹¹ Kisling, Vernon N. *Zoo and aquarium history: Ancient animal collections to zoological gardens*. CRC press, 2000. p.97.

¹² Stanard, Matthew G. "'Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture: Toward a Comparative Research Agenda.'" *Journal of Contemporary History* 44.1 (2009): 41.

¹³ Bruce, Gary. *Through the lion gate: A history of the Berlin zoo*. Oxford University Press, 2017. p.105.

the beginning, Antwerp Zoo had a scientific dimension, rather than expanding from the King's private collection. As a scientific site, the zoo has an educational responsibility to promote research in zoology and botany and to impart knowledge to the public, especially the bourgeoisie. This seems to differentiate it from other public buildings in the city, such as theaters. But the zoo at that time was more of a multi-functional mixture, where dances, concerts, banquets, and even movies (During the German occupation of Antwerp in World War I, cinemas were almost the only source of income for the zoo¹⁴) could be seen. Concerts were the main event of the zoo in the 19th century¹⁵ (In 1896, the Antwerp Zoological Society even had its own symphony orchestra¹⁶). The bourgeoisie experienced the process of ceremonial devolution from concerts with an original court color and on this bases rebuilt a bourgeois hierarchical imperialism vibe.

On the other hand, the facilities used to exhibit animals in zoos also had strong colonial and imperialist elements. Obviously, animal exhibition facilities existed before the arriving of animals which means the design was closely related to people's imagination of animals and their positioning of the meaning represented by the animal within the native culture. When designers and operators decided how to present animals to the public, they were dealing with the concept of animals, it was a universal rather individual processing, like Dürer building a rhinoceros in his head. What they were supposed to do was constructing a micro cosmos to make this "a constellation of ideas¹⁷" in order which means arranging different species naturally correctly and integrating them into the knowledge framework of (educated) people.

A representative building of the Antwerp Zoo is the Egyptian temple built in 1856 for elephants, giraffes and zebras¹⁸. At the Berlin Zoo during the same period, elephants lived in Hindu pagodas and ostriches lived in Egyptian temples¹⁹. It is clear that African animals inhabited the wilderness rather than man-made temples, but this practice was a typical way of imaging animals in human environments at that time. One cultural background was Egyptology, which prevailed in the upper classes and was popular with the educated people in both Britain and France²⁰. Another background is the enthusiasm of 19th-century megacities for the decorative role of ancient architecture, such as the obelisks of ancient Egypt in European big cities²¹. The idea of trying to create habitats for animals in zoos in a way that simulates nature rather than mixing cultural factors was from Hagenbeck²², a German animal dealer and zoo owner of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He uses artificial rocks, plants, etc. to create a kind of "living panorama"²³ which was described at the time as "naturalistic" or "authentic". Although this was a design that reshaped the animal imagination in terms of business

¹⁴ Engelen, Leen, and Roel Vande Winkel. "A Captivated Audience. Cinema-going at the zoological garden in occupied Antwerp, 1915–1918." *First World War Studies* 7.3 (2016): 251.

¹⁵ Lambrechts, Wim. "The Brussels zoo: A mirror of 19th century modes of thought on the city, science and entertainment." *Brussels Studies. La revue scientifique pour les recherches sur Bruxelles/Het wetenschappelijk tijdschrift voor onderzoek over Brussel/The Journal of Research on Brussels* (2014). p.7.

¹⁶ Engelen, Leen, and Roel Vande Winkel. "A Captivated Audience. Cinema-going at the zoological garden in occupied Antwerp, 1915–1918." *First World War Studies* 7.3 (2016): 245.

¹⁷ Rothfels, Nigel. *Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo*. JHU Press, 2002. p.20.

¹⁸ Kislung, Vernon N. *Zoo and aquarium history: Ancient animal collections to zoological gardens*. CRC press, 2000. p.93.

¹⁹ Rothfels, Nigel. *Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo*. JHU Press, 2002. p.36.

²⁰ Kislung, Vernon N. *Zoo and aquarium history: Ancient animal collections to zoological gardens*. CRC press, 2000. p.93.

²¹ Osterhammel, Jürgen. *The Transformation of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2014. p.313.

²² Rothfels, Nigel. *Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo*. JHU Press, 2002. p.42.

²³ Santesso, Aaron. "The Literary Animal and the Narrativized Zoo." *Modern Fiction Studies* 60.3 (2014): 448.

philosophy, it was on the basis of a somewhat anti-natural industrial civilization. Massive and intricate glass and steel are used in the zoo to provide visual stimulation to optimistic bourgeois visitors which echoed the colonial thought and project of civilizing mission in wilderness out of Europe. The idea of “freedom through conquest”²⁴ was used to justify the racist activities of European countries in the colonies and it was also utilized to the captive animals in the zoo. From this perspective, the scientific, nature-oriented architectural design covertly transmitted colonialism and imperialism idea which placed humans at the center of this artificial nature. What the bourgeoisie did to the paradox of preserving primal nature in civilized industrial cities was combing them by to show the human supremacy.

The Exhibition and Social Concept

In some ways, the 19th century was the century of public service. The growing middle class not only had a greater voice in political power, but also began to show more and more cultural and leisure needs. It should be noticed that there were some public buildings that have a long history and mainly cater to the tastes of the aristocracy such as music theaters. The bourgeoisie deliberately imitated the aristocracy in the theatre, but at the same time tried to develop its own opera culture to against the aristocracy²⁵. As a result, a trend of nationalizing opera was witnessed during 19th century and the international, aristocratic opera culture was replaced by national and bourgeois ones²⁶. In contrast, as a public facility from the bourgeoisie, modern zoos had the following characteristics. First, although modern zoos had research and educational functions and consciously served the educated class, they were more of a social and recreational place for visitors to satisfy their world-viewing curiosity. For example, the Berlin zoo as a gathering point of the city became the the most popular recreation destination²⁷. The zoo’s emphasis on entertainment and curiosity (intentionally or not) lowers the barriers to participation in public life and provides a broad mass base. In addition, visitors in the zoo move freely around the grounds, and everyone can get the chance to come face-to-face with the animals which in contrast to the fixed and hierarchical seating arrangement in the theater. Second, 19th and even 20th century zoos and also museums, were exhibition centers for colonialism and imperialism. When we look back at history, we usually define and distinguish between colonialism and imperialism as terms but for people living in the 19th century, when they visited museums and zoos, it was a question whether they had these academic concepts in their minds. Possibly, colonialism and imperialism in these scenarios were collections of ideas and concepts that differ across countries and groups of people. On this basis, zoos and museums share some similarities. Both of them are places where independent Belgium cultivates and promotes a sense of nationality, propelled by the royal family, combined with overseas expansion and imperial glory. The Belgian government and imperialists were keen to demonstrate its similarities to European colonial powers to audiences at home and abroad²⁸. They enthusiastically showcased the customs and flora and fauna of the colony in their quest for Belgium’s belated but well-earned place among European colonial powers. The most

²⁴ Stanard, Matthew G. “‘Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture: Toward a Comparative Research Agenda.’” *Journal of Contemporary History* 44.1 (2009): 43.

²⁵ Ther, Philipp. *Center Stage: Operatic Culture and Nation Building in Nineteenth-Century Central Europe*. Purdue University Press, 2014. p.197.

²⁶ Ibid, p.205.

²⁷ Bruce, Gary. *Through the lion gate: A history of the Berlin zoo*. Oxford University Press, 2017. p.102.

²⁸ Stanard, Matthew G. *Selling the Congo: A history of European pro-empire propaganda and the making of Belgian imperialism*. U of Nebraska Press, 2011. p.49.

notorious were the exhibitions on Congolese and other African indigenous peoples. Although holding anthropological and ethnological exhibitions was a European phenomenon, for example, Hagenbeck began in 1874 to purchase indigenous peoples from all over the world and bring them back to Europe for exhibitions²⁹, it seems that such exhibitions were more popular and government-funded in Belgium. Congo as a Belgian colony was a major source of indigenous people and animals. King Leopold II featured 12 and 144 Congolese at Antwerp's 1885 Exposition Universelle and 1894 Antwerp exposition respectively and built pavilions to showcase their daily lives³⁰. From 1897 to 1958, Belgian cities hosted the World's Fair seven times, second only to France in the total attendance of all World's Fairs³¹. Belgian enthusiasm for such exhibitions reflected the social concept of the time, namely the desire for national identity under the rapid industrialization after independence. And this idea was largely realized by establishing and participating in overseas ethnographic and animal collections.

So what is the difference between the zoo and the museum in this context? It is difficult to answer whether a Congolese gorilla was really different from a Congolese native person in the eyes of the exhibition organizers at the time but we can try to understand it by putting animals in the context of people. As has mentioned, both human and animal exhibitions emphasized simulation of their natural state but compared with human exhibitions which generally were promoted by the monarch and government, modern animal exhibitions originated from private sector and for the purpose of scientific research to a large extent albeit some multifunctional use. It is worth noting that the scientific implication here also had an almost religious mindset. In the story of Noah's Ark, every kinds of animals in the world boarded the ark as one male and one female. From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, animal figures have existed in religious legends and moral allegories³². While each generation remakes its animals, some ideas persist. The popularity of animal exhibitions and taxidermy in the 19th century certainly had its scientific drive, but science itself was a form of power that sought to gather animals as the representative of the world in artificial constellations in search of a natural harmony. We call it power because it arranges and maintains the life and coexistence of every species which was a prerogative that once belonged to the supreme creator. As mentioned earlier, animals in zoos are not viewed individually, but universally, They are not only coordinates in the ever-expanding knowledge system of mankind, but also represent the areas waiting for the liberation and civilization of Europeans in the context of colonialism. For example, on a German postcard during the interwar period, the German imperial eagle sheltered an elephant representing Cameroon, a lion representing East Africa and a palm tree representing Samoa³³. Indigenous people were even rarer in this category, meaning they were beings in the blurry zone between animals and humans. Through the animal exhibition, the zoo recreated a human-centered state of eternity and nature, while industrialized cities and the use of new materials expressed the narrative of Western civilization's rescue of the world from primitivity³⁴. Colonialism and imperialism were the basis of this idea.

²⁹ Rothfels, Nigel. *Savages and beasts: The birth of the modern zoo*. JHU Press, 2002. p.8.

³⁰ Stanard, Matthew. "Bilan du monde pour un monde plus déshumanisé": The 1958 Brussels World's Fair and Belgian Perceptions of the Congo." *European History Quarterly* 35.2 (2005): 269.

³¹ *Ibid.* p.268.

³² Cohen, Simona. "Animal Imagery in Renaissance Art." *Renaissance Quarterly* 67.1 (2014): 164.

³³ Stanard, Matthew G. "Interwar Pro-Empire Propaganda and European Colonial Culture: Toward a Comparative Research Agenda." *Journal of Contemporary History* 44.1 (2009): 37.

³⁴ Holtorf, Cornelius. "The zoo as a realm of memory." *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 22.1 (2013): 102.

Between the Past and Future

Brussels Zoo closed in 1878, Ghent Zoo closed in 1904 and Liege Zoo closed in 1905³⁵. Antwerp Zoo survived, but then faced the catastrophe of two world wars. During the World War 1, Antwerp was occupied by German troops and Both the number of animals and the membership of the society fallen sharply (The membership of the association decreased from 9070 families in 1913-1914 to 4368 families in 1916-1917³⁶). In World War 2, Belgium was occupied by Germany again and large numbers of people became forced laborers³⁷. But at the same time, the Belgians do not seem to project their own misery on the Congolese people who have been ruled for decades. During the interwar period, Western European countries hosted regular imperial exhibitions, including racist ethnographic ones. This suggested that a common imperial narrative remained, that Europeans, representing civilizations, freed Africans and Asians from slavery and built colonies into sources of national wealth. Belgium was no exception, even hosting a racist Congolese exhibition at the 1958 World's Fair. There are many reasons why Belgians are reluctant to confront their colonial past, such as the fact that Belgium did not experience the civil rights movement like the US, or the influx of large numbers of black immigrants after the war³⁸. What was special about Belgium's relationship with its colonies was that they were politically two entities³⁹, the movement between Belgians and Congolese was consciously restricted⁴⁰ and the cultural exchange between the two was almost zero⁴¹. This situation of namely colony but segregation in reality affected the mentality of Belgians and also their view of zoos. In a way, visitors may not explore the zoo with a mindset of colonialism and imperial glory. Aside from abstract theoretical analysis, in the increasingly realistic simulation of the natural environment, people tend to focused on more direct and intuitive scenarios such as the life of animals rather seriously thinking about the cultural meaning of steel fences and artificial stones.

This seems to be a common trend experienced by modern zoos in Europe. They originated from the private collections of kings and nobles, expanded and transformed into social and scientific institutions under the patronage of the middle classes. Zoos with public attributes opened up to a wider population after World War 2 and inevitably took root in the working class with the wave of democratization. During this process, zoos were gradually taken over by professional designers and breeders. The architecture of zoos had to take into account both aesthetic significance and practical needs, while the staff paid more attention to animal welfare⁴². At the same time, researchers have gradually moved from the formation of the zoo and its relationship to the state and society to discussing the interaction of humans and animals in zoos and the zoo as a cultural signifier. As a frequent visitor to the Berlin Zoo, Walter Benjamin saw the zoo as an early and condensed version of the modern attempt to collect and

³⁵ Lambrechts, Wim. "The Brussels zoo: A mirror of 19th century modes of thought on the city, science and entertainment." *Brussels Studies. La revue scientifique pour les recherches sur Bruxelles/Het wetenschappelijk tijdschrift voor onderzoek over Brussel/The Journal of Research on Brussels* (2014). p.1.

³⁶ Engelen, Leen, and Roel Vande Winkel. "A Captivated Audience. Cinema-going at the zoological garden in occupied Antwerp, 1915–1918." *First World War Studies* 7.3 (2016): 247.

³⁷ Hochschild, Adam. "Adventures in public history." *The Public Historian* 32.4 (2010): 93.

³⁸ Ibid.p.93.

³⁹ Wigny, Pierre. "Belgium and the Congo." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* (1961): 274.

⁴⁰ Stanard, Matthew G. "Belgium, the Congo, and imperial immobility: a singular empire and the historiography of the single analytic field." *French Colonial History* 15 (2014): 93.

⁴¹ Osterhammel, Jürgen. *The Transformation of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2014. p.441.

⁴² Grazian, David. *American Zoo: A Sociological Safari*. Princeton University Press, 2017. p.18.

organize citizens in a controlled and structured way⁴³. He emphasized the structure of the zoo, which exists to remove the animals from it and replace them with taxonomy which represented the eternity of human knowledge. Michel Foucault also talked about the zoo (zoological gardens) in his concept of heterotopia. In his third principle he pointed out that heterotopia could contain several incompatible spaces in one place⁴⁴ and in his fifth principle a zoo could also be understood as a heterotopia because of its isolation and penetration⁴⁵. Both of them tried to determine the zoo into a certain category based on the function and construction but on the other hand, both of them held an anthropocentric perspective and did not consider animals as the key element.

Just like Antwerp, modern zoos appeared in big, economically developed cities and were humanized nature built in steel and concrete. Thinking and designing zoos with a paternalistic mentality and the motivation to legislate for nature is an unavoidable human quest for eternity and balance in a vast and unknown universe. In this context, animals always play a passive role and be alienated as symbols for human to reconstruct their experience⁴⁶. No one knows what the zoos of the future will look like, but what could be sure is they will be bigger and contain more species. Today, the Pairi Daiza which covers 70 hectares and owns more than 7000 animals is proportionally becoming the busiest zoo in Belgium and it seems fewer and fewer people associate colonialism and imperialism with these attractive sites. However the eagle statues on the gate of Antwerp zoo remind us that the past always exists in what we are seeing and helps to shape the future.

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⁴³ Santesso, Aaron. "The Literary Animal and the Narrativized Zoo." *Modern Fiction Studies* 60.3 (2014): 445-446.

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