

Close Studies of Animal Nature

The celebrated French writer and art critic Théophile Gautier once quipped that Barye was “the Michelangelo of the Menagerie.” Although he intended that the nickname would be understood with a measure of parody to moderate his obvious admiration for the sculptor, it was nevertheless fitting. Like the great Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo, Barye believed that a thorough understanding of anatomy and morphology was necessary to achieve both beauty and truth in art. This principle had originated with artists of the Greek classical tradition who valued “the inside before the outside.” The exceptional degree of naturalistic realism that Barye achieved in his animal forms, however, distinguishes them from sculptures of both the classical and academic traditions. It was probably at the very beginning of his career, during his apprenticeship in the workshop of the goldsmith Fauconnier, that Barye began to frequent the Menagerie of the Botanical Gardens, a zoological park in Paris. There, he sketched detailed studies of the captive animals, observing strong similarities to the human figures in classical art in their behavior and expressions. Like many scientists of the period, he also examined their inner anatomy in detail on the dissecting table after their deaths. The Menagerie became the foundational source of inspiration for Barye’s artistic production, motivating him to represent his animal figures with the same empathy that most artists invested in their human subjects. This elevation of the animal realm to the sphere of human emotion is a quintessential aspect of Barye’s contribution to Romantic art.

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