



BAYERISCHE STAATSGEMÄLDESAMMLUNGEN, NEUE PINAKOTHEK, MUNICH

Monkey business

Charles Darwin changed the way animals were viewed in art.

Colin Martin

Between 1750 and 1900, at a time of accelerated scientific advance and industrialization in Europe, there was a marked change in the human perception and appreciation of animals. This shift can be seen in the paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures exhibited in *Fierce Friends*, an exhibition that can be seen at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, until 5 February 2006. The curators' careful selection of artworks and other exhibits demonstrates how our view of other animals changed as we developed different ways of looking at the world.

In the eighteenth century there was a rapid growth in the number of animals known to Europeans, as new species were discovered and brought from overseas. In the early nineteenth century, the use of dissection increased our knowledge of their comparative anatomy and physiology. In the mid-nineteenth century, geology and the

new science of palaeontology unearthed fossil data that challenged religious beliefs about creation. And in the late nineteenth century, Darwin's theory of evolution helped us understand that new species evolved from older ones.

It was the publication of Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* in 1859 that brought the connection between the human and animal worlds into sharpest focus and had the most profound effect on our perception of animals. *Homo sapiens* could no longer be considered to be 'above' other animal species, but was inextricably linked to them, most closely to primates.

Fierce Friends includes examples from the tradition of painting monkeys dressed like humans and engaged in human occupations, from Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (in around 1740) and Alexandre Decamps (1837). In contrast, Gabriel Max's 1889 painting *The Jury of Apes* reflects a post-darwinian approach to depicting monkeys. Max

reportedly painted the picture to express his unhappiness about the works selected for the first annual art exhibition in Munich. But he uses monkeys to criticize the jury in a new way. He was a darwinist who corresponded with German zoologist Ernst Haeckel, a promoter of evolutionary theory.

Max kept monkeys as pets and his painting shows how carefully he must have observed them. The many different species in his jury are identifiable and behave naturally, despite being shown in an unnatural habitat, clustered together on a packing crate. They are not dressed up or caricatured. If Max intended to criticize the jurors, he does so by subtly implying that the jurors have lost their natural instincts when confronted by art, unlike the monkeys in his painting. The Munich jurors might be stupid, but the monkeys are not.

Fierce Friends can also be seen at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh from 25 March to 28 August 2006. Colin Martin is a London-based writer.