W. FORD, COURTESY PAUL KASMIN GALLERY

Monkey business

Walton Ford's painting of a historical primate banquet belongs to a rich tradition of exploring the 'human animal', explains **Martin Kemp**.

"He collected forty monkeys ... and he used to call them by different offices. He had his doctor, his chaplain, his secretary, his aide-de-camp, his agent, and one tiny one, a very pretty, small, silky-looking monkey, he used to call his wife, and put pearls in her ears. His great amusement was to keep a kind of refectory for them, where they all sat down on chairs at meals, and the servants waited on them, and each had its bowl and plate, with the food and drinks proper for them. He sat at the head of the table, and the pretty little monkey sat by him in a high baby's chair."

The perpetrator of this monkey banquet was the explorer, author and linguist Richard Burton (1821–90), described here by his wife Isabel. The renowned translator of *The Arabian Nights* and the *Kama Sutra* regularly staged his primate parties while he was a captain in the army of the East India Company. There was a serious linguistic purpose behind the monkey business: Burton, who spoke 30 languages, studied the monkeys' modes of communication and compiled a dictionary of about 60 words. Sadly, it was burnt before it was published.

We can witness Burton's disorderly dinner table through the eyes of the contemporary

US artist Walton Ford in *The Sensorium* (2003; pictured), a panoramic watercolour currently on show with other Ford paintings of allegorical natural history at Vienna's Albertina museum in the exhibition *Bestarium*.

As a contemporary artist, Ford is a one-off. However, he belongs to a rich tradition in his characterizations of the 'human animal'. The depiction of animals with human traits goes back to at least the Middle Ages, and ranges from illustrated volumes of Aesop's fables to George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). Even Charles Darwin, in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), does not avoid the seduction of anthropomorphism.

Ford once harboured ambitions to become a natural-history painter and film-maker. These goals merge in his story-telling pictures of staged incidents involving characters from the natural world. Ford's pictures are allegories of the human relationship to nature, and comment especially on the era of nineteenth-century imperialism.

The artist invites us to relish the scenes through their sharp characterization and humour, their historical evocations and their anthropomorphizing of animals. Ford's inspirations are reflected in his painting style. The emphatic outlines and internal details show that he is familiar with the life-sized images

of birds by US painter John James Audubon (1785–1851). He also references the dioramas in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Ford gives a historic look to his works: in *The Sensorium*, he has artificially aged the paper and added inscriptions in a mock nineteenth-century hand.

Ford's relationship to his historical heroes is ambiguous. Audubon was a naturalist and artist but, like many of his contemporaries, he killed birds with happy abandon. Burton placed himself inside exotic cultures and criticized British overseas rule, but he remained an integral part of a colonial enterprise. Ford comes from a slave-owning family in Georgia, an ancestry that adds a personal dimension to his depiction of colonial attitudes, which he says invoke feelings of both attraction and repulsion in him.

The panorama's title, *The Sensorium*, refers to the gathering place of the senses. A notion that has gained mileage in anthropology in recent decades, it is considered the locus for the interaction between the physiology of the senses and those cultural factors that shape what we see, hear, taste, smell and touch. The tableau may be read in part as an allegory of the five senses and their cultural dimensions.

Ford's work repays careful looking, both with respect to his parodic skills as an illustrator and as a witty narrator of allegories.

Martin Kemp is emeritus professor in the history of art at the University of Oxford, UK, and author of *The Human Animal in Western Art and Science*.

Bestarium is at Vienna's Albertina museum until 10 October.