


6-12-2019

Art for Animals: Visual Culture and Animal Advocacy, 1870-1914 by J. Keri Cronin

Gina M. Granter
Dawson College

 Part of the [American Art and Architecture Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), [Fine Arts Commons](#), [Other History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [Visual Studies Commons](#)

Follow this and additional works at / Suivez-nous ainsi que d'autres travaux et œuvres:
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose>

Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

Granter, Gina M. "Art for Animals: Visual Culture and Animal Advocacy, 1870-1914 by J. Keri Cronin." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 2, article 15, 2019,
<https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss2/15>.

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Goose by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Cet article vous est accessible gratuitement et en libre accès grâce à Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Le texte a été approuvé pour faire partie intégrante de la revue The Goose par un rédacteur autorisé de Scholars Commons @ Laurier. Pour de plus amples informations, contactez scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Confronted with Those We Choose Not to See

Art for Animals: Visual Culture and Animal Advocacy, 1870-1914 by J. KERI CRONIN, Pennsylvania State UP, 2018. \$34.95 USD

Reviewed by **GINA M. GRANTER**

In 1911, Britain's Protection of Animals Act prohibited children under sixteen years of age from witnessing the slaughter of animals. The act also prohibited the killing of an animal in sight of another animal awaiting slaughter. As J. Keri Cronin notes, citing Jonathan Burt, the latter aspect of the act acknowledged the participation of nonhuman animals in visual culture. This act did little to protect animals from being killed—they were killed out of sight of certain populations, both human and nonhuman—but it did mark a significant step in recognizing that animals had feelings akin to humans' own. This combination of recognizing the disturbing potential of human-inflicted animal suffering and of finding kinship with animal others is central to Cronin's examination of the power of images to influence humans' feelings about, and treatment of, nonhuman animals.

In *Art for Animals*, Cronin explores imagery related to the beginnings of animal advocacy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain and the United States, imagery that remains at the heart of discourse about animals today. On one side, there are the graphic depictions of violence against animals that afford viewers little protection from bearing witness to the inhumane. On the other, there are attempts to depict animals as kin, sharing in joys and affections. While the former group's detractors feel such images may cause some people to look away or could inspire

blood-lust in others, the latter category of images has been subject to the criticism of anthropomorphism and sentimentality. Cronin's history of public response to both kinds of images is essential to anyone interested in current animal advocacy movements.

Art for Animals is organized into five chapters, each featuring a range of visual culture media, including painting, photography, pamphlet illustrations, and magic lantern shows; the work therefore features an impressive breadth of genre and form. The first three chapters consider visual culture as a tool for education, the power of depicting reality to bear witness, and the effectiveness of imaginative exercises that depict things not as they are but as they could be. Cronin details how the same image could be evoked by different people or groups for arguments on opposing sides regarding the proper treatment of animals: the meaning of an image is neither singular nor static. The final two chapters explore public and private exhibition of animal images. The chapter on displaying art featuring animals in middle-class households is particularly illuminating, and the discussion of images encouraging vegetarianism has resonance in our current age, when factory farming and climate change add increased urgency about the practice of raising and killing animals for food.

Cronin's awareness of the particularities of class concerns enriches her study; it is evident that then, as now, concerns about animal welfare were largely the affair of the middle classes, who were not the ones whose livelihood depended on unsavoury acts such as slaughtering horses who could no longer work in the service of people. Cronin highlights a particular inconsistency, though: it was the well-educated and well-

paid doctors and scientists who were the ones performing vivisections in the name of research, even though animal-rights campaigns tended to characterize cruelty to animals as an act of the less educated and less refined. It was also the upper classes who could afford apparel that depended on animal deaths, creating a demand that had to be met by workers. To open her “Imaginative Leaps” chapter, Cronin asks her reader to imagine being invited to an art exhibition in London in 1899, and choosing to wear feathers, which were particularly fashionable at the time. On the opposite page, an image of George Frederic Watts’ painting *A Dedication* shows readers what such art patrons would have encountered that night: an angel, face in hands, standing over a pedestal covered in the grisly remains of birds taken apart for the fashion industry (100–101). To imagine the discomfort in the room when a feather-clad woman stood in front of such a painting is thrilling, and it is in conveying the power of such moments that Cronin’s text is most appealing.

One apparent omission from the text is any reference to hunting generally, as practiced by rural people, and particularly to fox hunting, which was a traditional practice of Britain’s aristocracy, and which has been targeted in recent decades for its cruelty. This criticism is minor in the context of a work that is focused predominantly on urban spaces, where hunting was likely scarcely considered, and on the middle classes, whose efforts appear to have been devoted to the quotidian suffering and slaughter they saw as warranting the most attention.

The book’s dedication—“For those we choose not to see”—evokes our collective responsibility to bear witness to the suffering of nonhuman animals, and the agency that is part of our denial. *Art for Animals* is a worthy addition to the excellent *Animalibus* series and an essential text for anyone interested in how visual culture can contribute to a more compassionate humanity.

GINA M. GRANTER teaches English at Dawson College in Montreal and is currently pursuing studies in Art History.