

A HISTORY OF ZOOLOGICAL GARDENS IN THE WEST

# ZOO



ERIC BARATAY AND ELISABETH HARDOUIN-FUGIER

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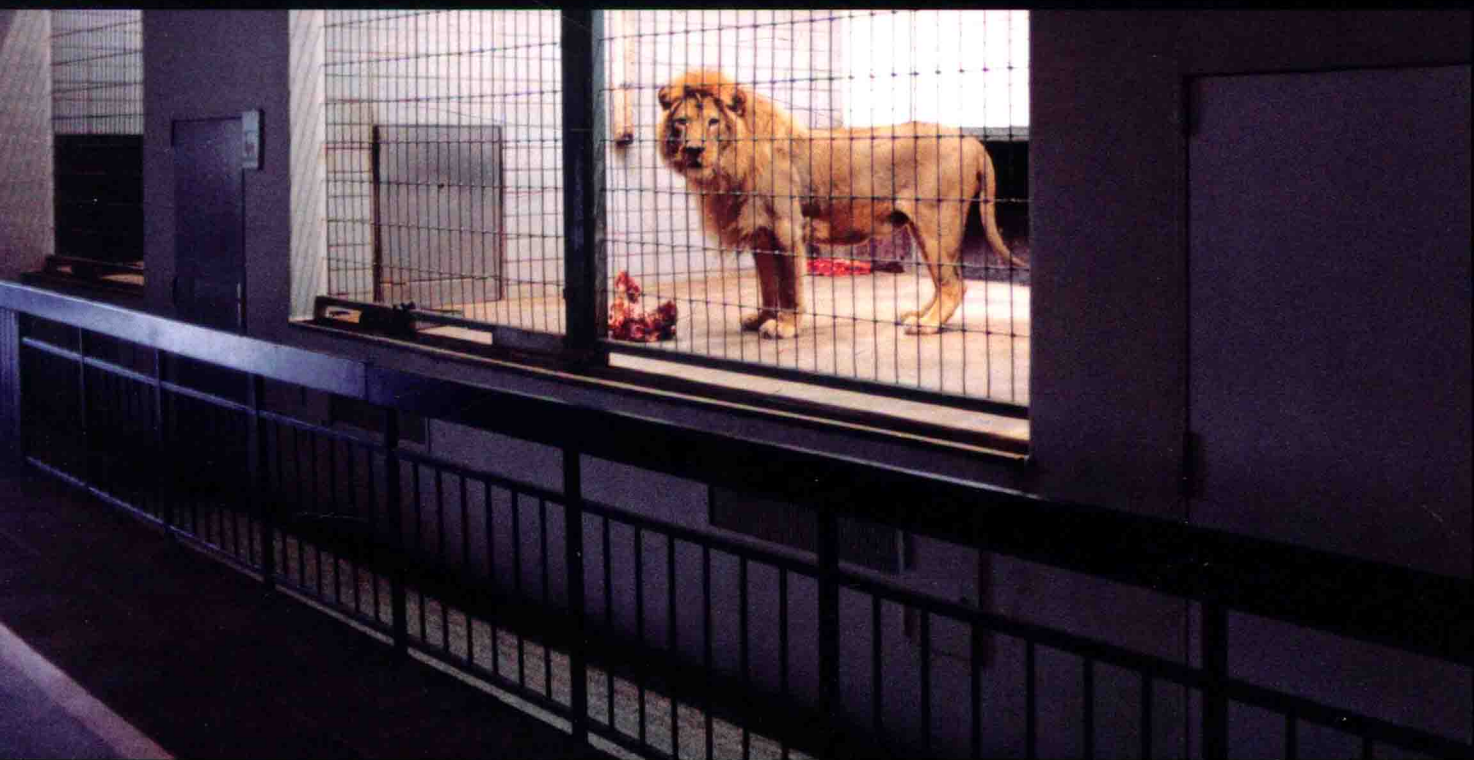


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## INTRODUCTION



Previous page: Hannover Zoo, 1992, by Candida Höfer.



## ◉ INTRODUCTION: THE CALL OF THE WILD

Zoological gardens draw crowds all over the world. In 1995, six hundred million people walked the paths of some eleven hundred establishments listed world-wide. In many countries, a day at the zoo ranks among the most popular of leisure pursuits, both because zoos attract such a varied public, often people of modest means, and because they do so in greater numbers than most cultural or sporting activities. In Germany, for example, zoological gardens receive more visitors than museums, theatres or sports stadiums. In Canada, in 1989, their attendance figures were double those of museums, and triple those of libraries. In France, 24 per cent of the population visits the zoo at least once a year, a smaller proportion than for cinemas, historical monuments or museums, but greater than for sporting events, theatres or concerts of light or classical music.<sup>1</sup>

Wild animals clearly fascinate people. They reveal unknown worlds and diverse life forms; they pose the eternal questions of identity, challenging or reinforcing life's certainties. The exhibition of wildlife in the midst of civilized societies has been a constant of human history because it has helped people to place themselves in relation to the rest of the world. Human beings need the wild and endlessly seek it out.<sup>2</sup> But people are also attracted by animals in captivity, because they symbolize the intentions and actions of human societies towards

wildlife and, in a more general sense, towards nature: exploitation, through hunting, consumption and dissection; control, through acclimatization, reproduction and domestication or reintroduction; curiosity, with the aim of collection; domination or examination, through the accumulation of cages and fences or artificially reconstructed habitats. All of these actions and attitudes have evolved, intertwined and displaced one another as societies' viewpoints have shifted.



Indian elephants bathing, Hannover Zoo.

Because it is a place of forced meeting between animal and human, between nature and culture, where one stares at the other and where the second appropriates the first, the zoological garden brings the various aspects of societies' relationship with the wild into focus – their thoughts about



A caged monkey in a Paris menagerie, 1980s, by J. C. Nouet.

it, conduct towards it and utilization of it. Consequently, zoos help in the identification and compilation of these aspects, and in the study of their complexity, interaction and development. But this observational space – the zoo – is also the constantly renewed and transformed product of the views and attitudes which it helps to shape. The staging of the zoo says just as much as the practices within it about the relationship of human beings with nature.

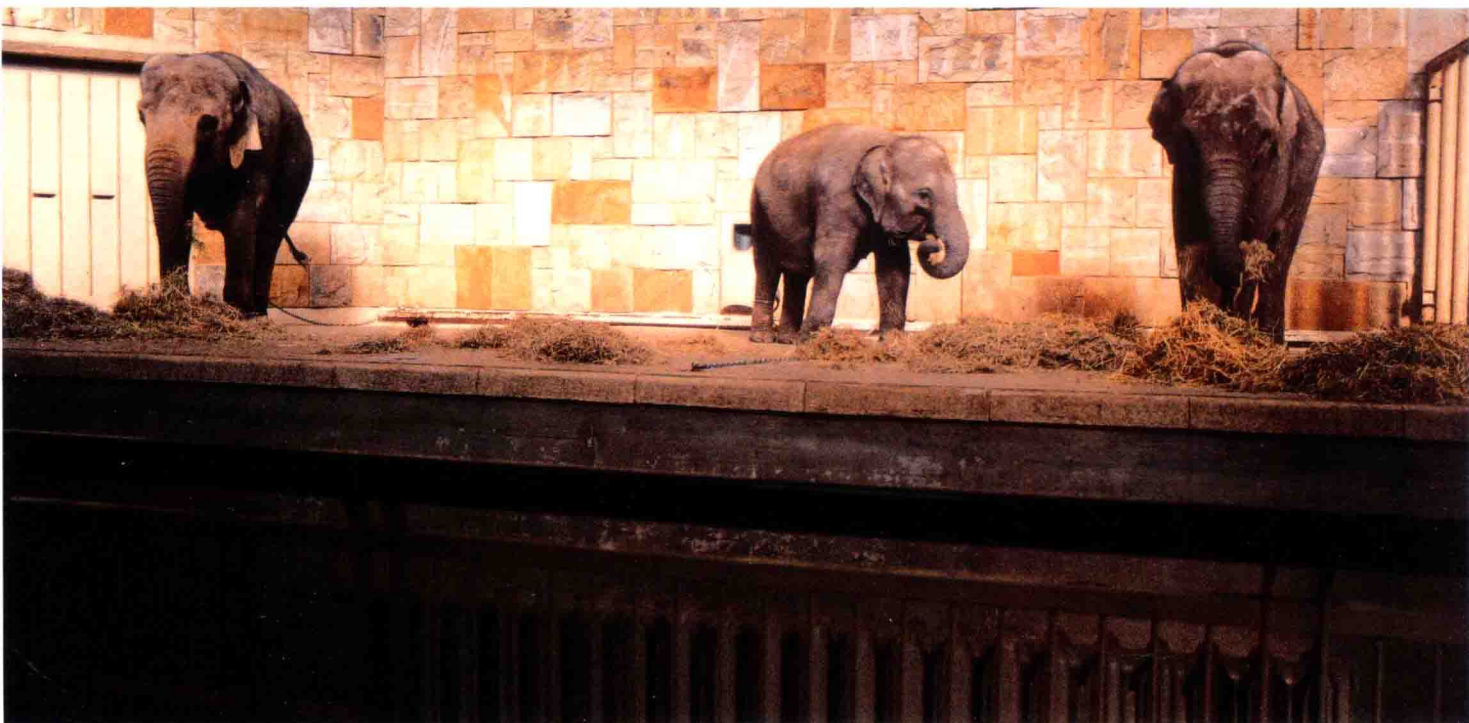
This book is not intended to record the technical history of individual aspects of such places – their architecture, their integration into processes of urban development, the sociology of their founders and personnel, their scientific or artistic relevance – although these significant themes will contribute to our analysis. It is our hope to shed light on humanity's view of wild animals in the context of the zoological garden, approached as a perfect laboratory, while considering the concepts, customs and intellectual interactions relevant to the history of zoos, in an effort to understand why human beings keep wild species near them in enclosed spaces, and why these spaces are so attractive to the curious.

The answers to these questions vary according to period, and a sound understanding of the current fascination with zoos or of their transformation in the contemporary period can only be achieved with reference to the history of these acts and places. The history of the zoo is a long one, dating from antiquity, perhaps even from the Neolithic period, when people kept animals, mostly ungulates, for hunting and food.<sup>3</sup> The expression 'zoological garden', taken in the generic sense of an enclosed space containing a collection of wild animals, in fact covers a broad range of realities across space and time, from hunting reserves to today's wildlife parks, via seraglios of fighting animals and the menageries of private collectors. We have chosen not to retell this entire story, but rather to seek to understand the genesis and evolution of zoological gardens as they exist today. In order to do this, we go back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when new curiosities began to inform age-old practices, when great discoveries in Asia and the Americas heightened interest in the exotic species that were arriving in Europe in ever greater numbers, and when those species became symbols of the wild. At the same moment, the West, having





Rotterdam Zoo, 1999, by Candida Höfer.



Berlin Zoo, 1991, by Candida Höfer.



Lar gibbon, London Zoo, 1992, by Britta Jaschinski.



already eliminated part of its own wildlife, was waging war on those animals that it considered to be the worst nuisances, such as bears and wolves. Along with these two species, it was exotic creatures that became the focus of human curiosity, questions, fears, fantasies and dreams of domination. The idea of establishing a single place for their exhibition, as opposed to numerous locations scattered among seigniorial abodes, developed during this period. Thus the first theatres of the wild were created in the grounds of grand princely residences; these establishments, which turned the act of keeping animals into a spectacle, foreshadowed the zoos of today.

Having looked carefully at the use of captive wild animals during the early modern period, and the intentions informing the spaces in which they were kept, we hope to reveal the perceptions and ambitions that gradually transformed them, that imposed them over and above other means of detention (reserves, travelling menageries and so on), which either fell into decline or were adapted to the new model, and that finally, after a long process of democratization, established them as popular venues for walking and recreation. Our perspective is a European one because these modern forms of zoological garden were invented in Europe and spread from there beginning in the nineteenth century.

Every aspect of humanity's relationship with nature can be perceived through the bars of the zoological garden: repulsion and fascination; the impulse to appropriate, master and understand; the progressive recognition of the complexity and specificity of the diverse forms of life; and so on. The story of this microcosm is thus linked to vast parallel histories of colonization, ethnocentrism and the discovery of the Other; violence in human relationships and the moderating effect of the civilizing process on morals

and behaviour; the creation of places of collective memory such as museums; the complication of social practices; the development of leisure activities. To tour the cages of a zoo is to understand the society that erected them.