

Antoine-Louis Barye

The gold standard in animal sculpture.

by Brooke Chilvers

ON A warm-for-winter day, strolling past Madison Avenue's elegant boutique windows with their faceless anorexic mannequins, I had a chance encounter with the lavishly exuberant works of Antoine-Louis Barye in the Graham Gallery that was so unexpected I tripped over my own feet and almost landed face-down on my way in the door. Barye is the visionary 19th-century French sculptor (1795–1875) who forever dignified animals as a subject of fine art. And that's something.

His is a vibrating, violent universe, where a lion throws himself onto a buffalo, sinking his claws into the thick hide and toppling the huge bull. A Mongolian horseman spears a struggling moose, breaking its spine with a deep plunge of the blade. Starved wolves attack winter-worn stags. Kites consume hares. Eagles swallow snakes. Lions devour antelopes. Boars, crocodiles and pythons lock in deadly battle. After the boring stylized waterfowl and voiceless roaring elk of safari convention bronzes, it's easy to see how Barye became the gold standard against which all animal-as-subject sculpture is judged.

If you owned just one terrific Barye, chances are you'd never see a contemporary *art animalier* sculpture you'd want to buy. The reason for this has as much to do with the man himself as with his art: Barye became a great artist amidst tumultuous

times; for a century, French rule flip-flopped between Revolution, Monarchism, Republicanism and Bonapartism. Imagine the "trickle-down" effect of that!

Even the spirit of the Age of Reason, with its rigidly defined tenets of classicism dictated by the conservative Académie Française, was against Barye. Its prestigious, very official annual Beaux Arts salon steadfastly rejected his work, which meant no patronage by the aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie and no government commissions to decorate the facades of public buildings or create monuments for parks and gardens. This meant less food on the Barye table and fewer artist's supplies on the Barye workbench, because there were few independent galleries and no alternatives to the establishment's exhibitions. Today, anyone who believes he's an artist can buy a booth at an art show or exhibit his work on the Web; no government stamp of approval needed.

And yet why, despite 24/7 Animal Planet and Discovery Channel, is a Barye-like breath of life missing in so much of today's work? Did those uncertain times provide artists with something that these uncertain times do not? Maybe it was the era's general excitement surrounding the explosion of discoveries in natural sciences, with fantastic creatures such as giraffes, elephants and rhinoceros arriving from colonies in Africa

and Indochina to startled viewers in European zoos. It was a time when knowledge itself was being reorganized—Cuvier systematizing comparative anatomy, botanists compiling encyclopedic works. Interest in the nature of nature was intense and real. Both Barye and Delacroix attended animal dissections where they studied the laid-bare musculature and measured tibias, tails and genitals, the angle of an ear's attachment—all of which finds expression in Barye's work.

There are many reasons why, 130 years after his death, Barye remains supreme in animal sculpture. He had the spirit of the naturalist with its love of detail, carefully distinguishing between red deer, fallow deer, axis deer, Java deer, Ganges deer and Virginia deer. This fastidious attention to detail made him figure out how to make his serpents' scales look wet and his boars' coats look scratchy.

He modeled volume and constructed space almost like an architect, so that the empty spaces in the merciless battles between species are as important as the filled ones in holding together his complex compositions.

He experimented with slight variations in polychromatic tints, putting the gold in the lion's eye, the gleam on the hunter's sword, the sweat glistening on the combatant's body. These patinations subtly

contribute to the movement of a piece by trapping the light and making the surfaces palpitate, in the way a watercolor allows the light to reflect off the paper and back through the paint to the viewer. We hardly sees such efforts to create such effects in sculpture today.

His former student, Auguste Rodin, easily summed up Barye by saying he made one feel the animal's invisible motor under its epidermal clothing. Whose work today animates metal into animals whose proportion, attitude and expression are authentic, whether feeding, scratching, roaring, leaping or walking?

Bayre was a goldsmith's son, apprenticed at 13 to a die-maker making metal buttons for military uniforms. Is that when Bayre became a sculptor? During his two-year military stint beginning in 1812, he created models of various terrains for the army. After marriage he joined the workshops of the famous jeweler, Fauconnier, and for eight years he made skillful miniatures in bronze and gold, always submitting works to the official salons. Refining his artisan's skills of chiseling surface details into a casting, and for applying patinas, earned him the coveted title *ciseleur-patineur*. How many of today's sculptors have a decade or two as an apprentice to qualify for an earned class of workmanship?

Eventually poor Barye was saved by the patronage of that culture-maven, the Duke of Orleans, whose Bourbon-blooded uncle, Louis-Philippe, became King in 1830 upon the abdication of his grandfather, Charles X. But after another revolution in 1848, bankruptcy followed Barye. Nevertheless, he managed before he died to win the

gold medal for sculpture at the Universal Exposition of 1855, and be named chevalier in the Legion of Honor. After he died, American admirers erected a monument to him in the heart of Paris, and a huge exposition of more than a thousand of his works increased his market value tenfold. Unfortunately, as more decorative bronze "mantel art" was manufactured using the inexpensive but inexact sand-casting methods, inferior editions of Barye's work flooded the market, which caused it to fall from fashion.

The moral of this story, for both artists and buyers, is to pay attention to castings, because a bronze is only as good as its casting. Even when the original model is excellent, if details are lost in the manufacturing process, the end result can be worthless both artistically and commercially. Barye understood this and stuck to the costly "lost-wax method," which allowed him ultimate control over the quality of his castings: He could add a little volume here or re-engrave the details to his liking after each casting. In fact, he was the only sculptor of his time who cast, chiseled and patinated his own work. How many sculptors work that way today?

Barye also started numbering his castings 50 years before this became standard practice. Unfortunately, his buyers didn't get it and only wanted #1 and not #5, so he stopped. Numbered pieces stamped with his cachet are those most coveted by collectors today, although even a \$3,750 investment in the three-inch *Stork Standing on Tortoise* would bring a lifetime of looking pleasure.

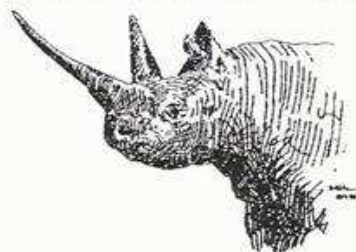
So who is the next Barye? Shouldn't we see him sketching

away in a zoo or standing awe-struck in front of the fantastic Barye collections that have sat for decades in the Corcoran and Walters Art Galleries? Have you ever seen him? Of course, artists today can't go around plugging hawks with lead à la Audubon or dragging home road-kill for an anatomy lesson. Most of us are doomed to experience wildlife entirely on TV or in photos. And it shows in our art.

Maybe we're wrong to expect an art-show duck to be more than the sleek, easy-to-produce silhouettes that populate the galleries of any coastline in the States today. Perhaps they're equally honest efforts to breathe live animal spirit into inanimate metal as the fussy feather-by-feather bronzes. But too often they seem more about calculations of input versus income rather than explosions of inner vision. Barye was the opposite in every way. His personal standards were absolutely uncompromising, and he paid dearly for it. But the power of his vision was so great that, in his struggle against the tide, he changed the nature of the tide. The result was the Romantic Movement, which gave us sculptors like Rodin, the music of Hector Bérlioz and writers like Victor Hugo.

They don't hardly make 'em like that any more. ■

As a seeker of green spaces in big cities, Brooke is always on the lookout for Barye's distinctive huge lion sculptures, which she expected to find in Paris but was thrilled to discover in New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. She says she is ridiculously proud that American collectors were early appreciators of Barye and brought so much of his work to our shores.





"Lion and Serpent," an original bronze, dark brown patina, 10 1/4 x 14 x 7 1/8 inches, by Antoine-Louis Barye (1795-1875). Courtesy of James Graham & Sons, New York, New York.