

REMBRANDT
BUGATTI

A Menagerie in Bronze.

by Brooke Chilvers

HAMADRYAS BABOON

In January 1916, the elegantly dressed 31-year-old Italian-born animalier sculptor, Rembrandt Bugatti, attended Mass at Paris's La Madeleine church, purchased violets from his customary merchant, and returned to his studio. On a table he placed the flowers, his Legion of Honor medal, and letters to the police and to his brother, the automotive engineer Ettore Bugatti. Then he turned on the gas and lay down. He was discovered barely alive, but died on the way to hospital.

So ended a brief and brilliant career that lives on in his 300 sculptures—from five-inch-tall jaguars to full-size antelopes—produced in a little more than a dozen years. Bugatti's morbid depression is hard to understand. Unlike the frustrating struggles common to other melancholy geniuses, Bugatti's talent received early recognition, first by his famous father, the *fin de siècle* furniture designer Carlo Bugatti (whose friends included Tolstoy and Puccini) and by the Russian sculptor Prince Paul Troubetzkoy. At age 18, he regularly exhibited at the prestigious Venice Biennale d'Arte, then at Paris's influential Salon de la Société des Beaux-Arts and Salon d'Automne. He had annual exhibits at the gallery of art promoter Adrien Hébrard (whose foundry also cast works by Rodin and Degas), who had also signed Bugatti to a contract that spared him from having to scrounge for a living. He exhibited and received awards in New York, Milan, Turin, and Antwerp. At age 27, he became a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur for his contribution to French art.

Perhaps critical acclaim could never compensate for his mother's rejection of her infant son, named Rembrandt by his uncle, the successful painter Giovanni Segantini, when his difficult birth transformed the vivacious 22-year-old into an ailing and unhappy woman who stayed behind when the family moved from Milan to Paris in 1904.

Born in 1885, Bugatti grew into a tall and lanky man, with a long face and large forehead, who found his artistic and spiritual sustenance among the elephants, antelopes, and wild cattle of the Paris zoo, the Jardin des Plantes that served as his open-air classroom. Later he moved to Antwerp, whose

Royal Zoological Gardens held rare species from the Low Country's Indonesian colonies and from King Leopold II's own personal fiefdom, the Congo. A veritable haven for artists, the zoo welcomed them, and exhibited and purchased their works.

Bugatti not only tirelessly observed the daily lives and interactions of pelicans and kangaroos, but also fed storks and cuddled lion cubs. The curator even consigned to him for study a pair of harnessed bushbucks, which he bottle-fed in his Paris garden. Inherently aesthetic, animals provided an endless variety of shapes and masses to balance three-dimensionally with "negative" space, as well as different surface textures, body languages, and rhythms of movement.

Without preliminary drawings or sketches, Bugatti would work *en plein air*, seizing his clay and feverishly working it onto the wire armature. If he couldn't complete a model in a single sitting, he often abandoned it. Unlike his predecessor, Antoine-Louis Barye, who also worked from zoo animals and whose leopards and lions are more "generic," Bugatti clinched an instant in an individual animal's life. *Crouching Jaguar*, for example, is a portrait of a specific irascible cat that calmed down in Bugatti's presence.

The spontaneity of his technique conveyed both the animal's motion and emotion. His subjects are often poised, energy gathering in their muscles, for their next gesture: the hippo's gaping mouth will close, the jaguar will set down its lifted limb, the pelican's protective wing will fold, and the delicately touching antelope noses, conveying affection and maternal care, will withdraw.

In his early compositions, he lined up his cows or families of deer; but



REARING ELEPHANT

then he saw that interlocking or interrelating them better expressed their spiritual connection. Often, his lonely yaks, bison, and elephants stand alone.

Bugatti identified with his subject's "zoophobic" behavior: the alienation of caged animals due to the separation from their natural environment and social structure. As opposed to Barye's more violent Romantic Realism that entwined lions and snakes in mortal combat, Bugatti portrayed his subjects in natural but poetic poses, and more at peace than they probably would be in the wild.

His method also meant raw, unfussy, "thumb-worked" surfaces—as if he were feeling with his fingers for the animal's underlying musculature—which became increasingly expressive over time. His hides are like canvases imprinted with textures that dance with refracted light. This makes "his panthers more alive than a realistic sculpture, where too much painstaking work with a small tool can arrest the motion by focusing too tightly on the details," says Edward Horswell of London's Sladmore Gallery, which has championed Bugatti for decades. (In fact, Bugatti worked with tools especially fashioned for him at his brother's car factory in Molsheim, Alsace, then still part of Germany.)

At a time when artists usually exhibited only plaster models of their works and waited for buyers to pay before casting them in bronze—a process they then often left to the foundry—Bugatti, like Barye, involved himself in the entire complicated lost-wax method of casting, so that every step was a manifestation of his vision. He worked with Albino Palazzolo, one of the greatest casters of his century, whose work was "lighter, more delicate and crisper in detail," says Horswell; Palazzolo also made Bugatti's death mask, today in the Orsay Museum in Paris. Compared to more "perfect" works, Bugatti innovatively showed "truth to process," leaving the extraneous bronze "roots" or surface bubbles left from casting that most artists chisel away.

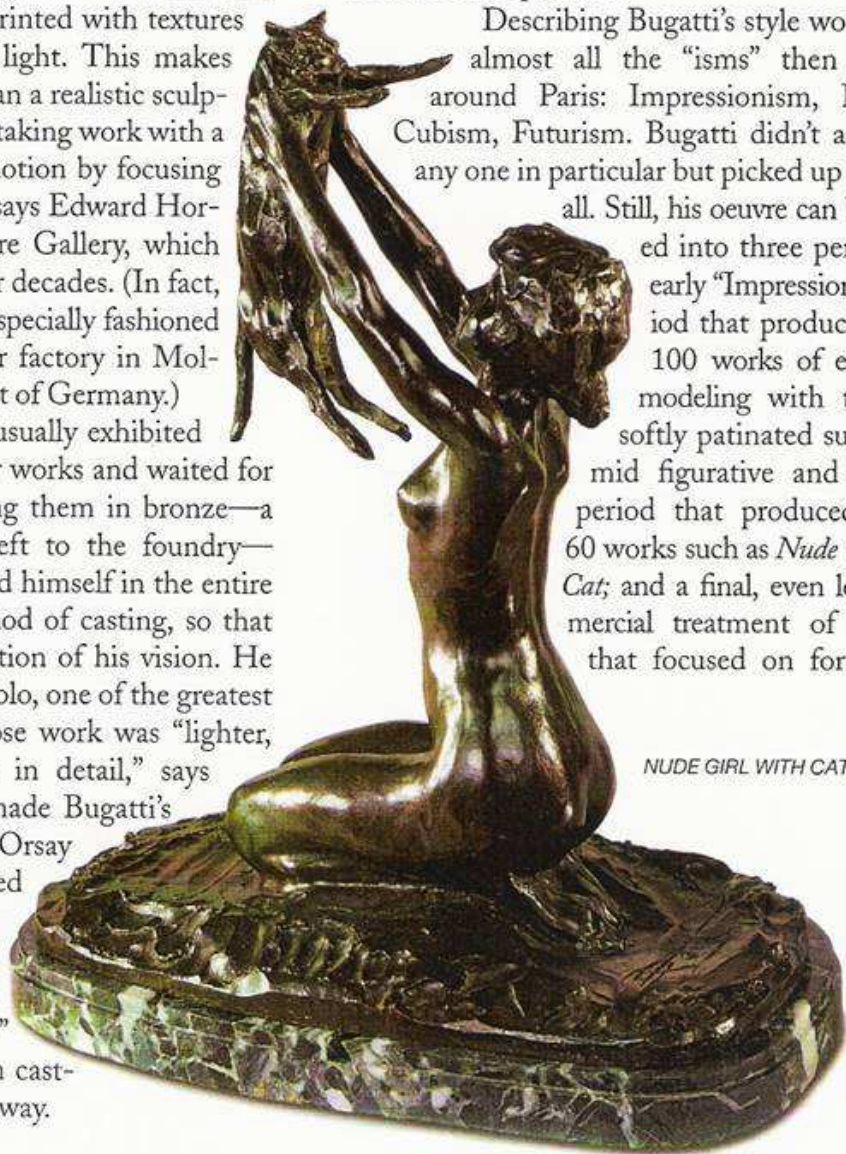
Much of Bugatti's work was cast fewer than 10 times, and many pieces only once. (One of the 11 castings of *Hamadryas Baboon* recently sold at auction for \$4 million.) Also rare for the time, Hébrard numbered his artists' castings and kept records of what was produced in his foundry.

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Hébrard was also a trained chemist, and helped develop Bugatti's soft, glowing, brownish-black patinas, probably achieved by applying ammonia or various acids with heat to the bronzes that were then waxed or polished.

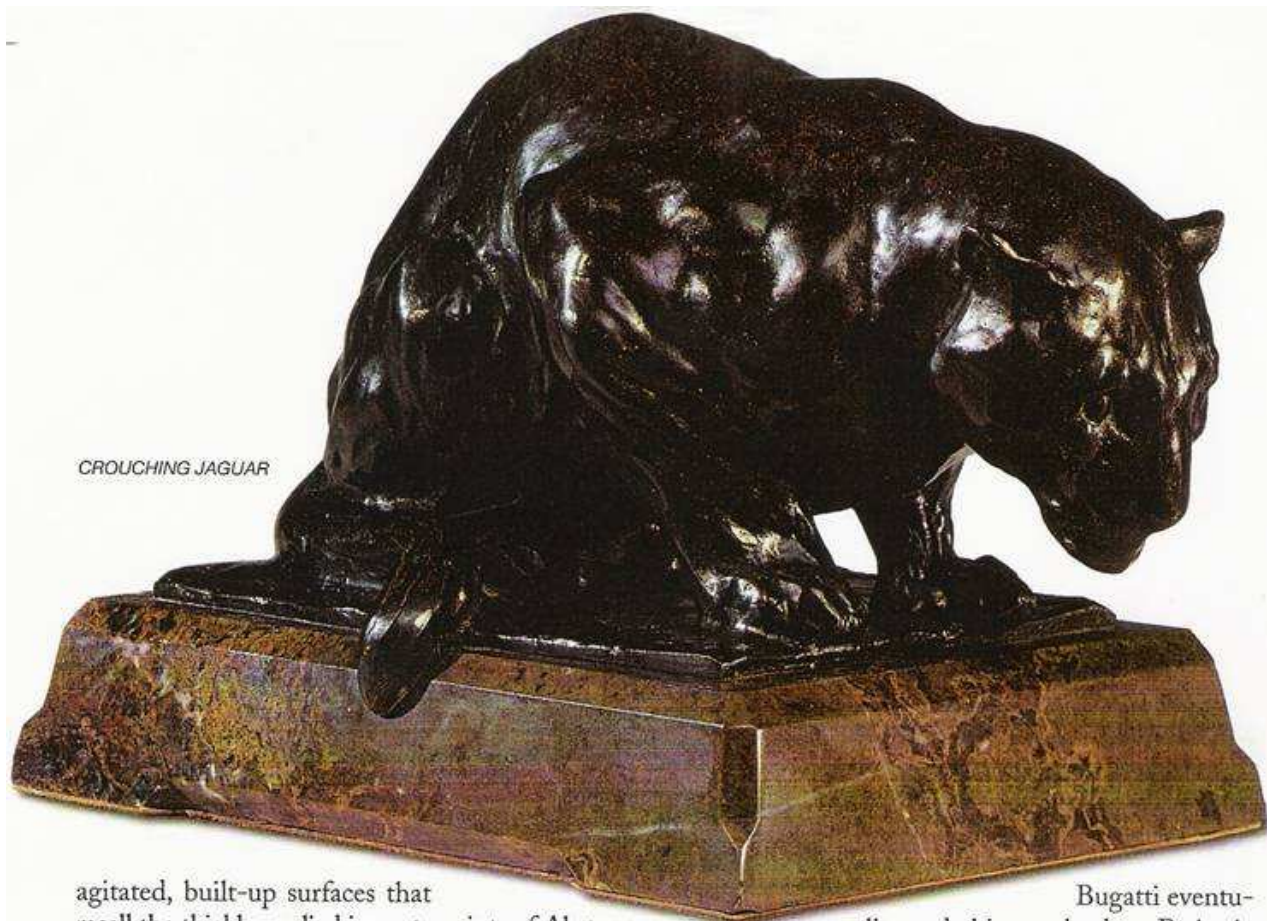
Describing Bugatti's style would need almost all the "isms" then floating around Paris: Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism. Bugatti didn't adhere to any one in particular but picked up on them all. Still, his oeuvre can be divid-

ed into three periods: an early "Impressionist" period that produced some 100 works of expressive modeling with textured, softly patinated surfaces; a mid figurative and portrait period that produced nearly 60 works such as *Nude Girl with Cat*; and a final, even less commercial treatment of animals that focused on form, with



NUDE GIRL WITH CAT

CROUCHING JAGUAR



agitated, built-up surfaces that recall the thickly applied impasto paints of Abstract Expressionism. This deeply personal “sculptural handwriting” makes them “more enduring, harder to get to grips with, more beguiling and fulfilling because they have a heightened emotional content and greater range of expression and implied moods,” says Horswell.

Bugatti’s flirtation with Cubism is expressed in pieces like *Hamadryas Baboon* (1910), whose square composition, formed by the baboon’s flat back and four firmly planted appendages, is broken down into geometric wedges covered with a Sassoon-like “haircut.” While the combed surface of the primate’s silky hair makes this piece particularly stylized and alive, it is simultaneously imbued with the stillness of an icon, a monkey god to be worshipped.

When World War I broke out, Bugatti declined to use his Italian nationality to leave Belgium. Instead, he remained and enlisted as a stretcher-bearer for the Red Cross, working in the Antwerp zoo’s same Marble Hall where he and fellow animalier sculptors had once exhibited and that now served as a makeshift hospital ward. The slaughter of many of “his” animals at the zoo during the war affected him as greatly as the human suffering he witnessed.

Bugatti eventually made his way back to Paris via Holland and Italy, and in 1915 was commissioned to make a life-size statue of Jesus Christ. He supposedly hired a war-stranded Neapolitan as the model and bound him to a wooden cross. Because Bugatti left no journals or long letters home, we can never know his reaction to this private Pietà when the young man was overcome by the agony in his muscles and throbbing veins from his Calvary.

Soon after, Bugatti made his final sculpture, *Tigress and Snake*, which was at the foundry when he died. It shows an indifferent lioness holding down a helpless writhing snake under one massive claw—an allegory, perhaps, for his last thoughts before his suicide.

No joyful romances, no caring wife, no gifted offspring are connected to Bugatti’s name. Just his sculptures, more than a hundred of them conserved in the Musée d’Orsay, and the cherished rearing elephant that graced the radiator cap of the Bugatti Type 41, the magnificent Royale. ■

In the cold short days before Christmas 2007, Brooke visited Rembrandt Bugatti’s grave near Molsheim, France, and wished she could have given him 30 happy years from Picasso’s life.