



FRANÇOIS POMPON (1855-1933)

Head of an Orangutan

Plaster

H. 34.5, W. 23, D. 21 cm

Provenance

- Private French collection

Bibliography

- Édouard des Courrières, *François Pompon. Vingt-sept reproductions de sculptures*, Paris, Gallimard, Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue française, "Les sculpteurs français nouveaux," 1926.
- A.-H. Martinie, *La sculpture*, Paris, Éditions Rieder, "L'art français depuis vingt ans," ("French Art of the Last Twenty Years,") 1928.
- Robert Rey, *François Pompon*, Paris, G. Crès, 1928.
- Guillaume Janneau, "Le Salon d'Automne," *Le Bulletin de l'art ancien et moderne: supplément hebdomadaire de la Revue de l'art ancien et moderne*, décembre 1931.
- Catherine Chevillot, Liliane Colas, Laure de Margerie, Anne Pinget, *François Pompon 1855-1933*, Gallimard / Electa, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994, p. 210-211, n°121, repr.
- Frédéric Chappey (dir.), *100 sculptures animalières: Bugatti, Pompon, Giacometti*, exhibition catalogue, Boulogne-Billancourt, musée des Années Trente, April 13 to October 28, 2012, Paris, Somogy, 2012.
- Emmanuelle Héran, Élise Voisin (dir.), *Beauté animale*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Grand Palais, Galeries nationales, March 21 to July 16,

2012, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux-Grand Palais, 2012.

Exhibitions

Black marble, 1931:

- 1931: Paris, Salon d'Automne (n°1591), Grand Palais
- 1933: Paris, François Pompon retrospective exhibition at the Salon d'Automne (n°2280), Grand Palais
- 1937: New York, exhibition at the Brummer Gallery
- 1947: Paris, « La Flore et la faune, les arts appliqués » ("Flora and Fauna: Applied arts"), Galerie de botanique du Museum
- 1953: Sarrebruck, exhibition « Aspect de l'art bourguignon » ("Aspects of Burgundian Art")
- 1964: Dijon, exhibition in the Musée des Beaux-Arts of Dijon « François Pompon, sculpteur animalier bourguignon » ("François Pompon, Burgundian Animal Sculptor")
- 1971: Saulieu, "Homage to François Pompon"
- 1973: Paris, Salon d'Automne, Grand Palais
- 1976-77: Paris, « L'animal de Lascaux à Picasso, " ("The Animal from Lacaux to Picasso,") at the Musée national d'histoire naturelle.
- 2012: Paris, Grand Palais, « Beauté Animale »

Plaster, 1930, given by the artist to René de Saint-Marceaux's grandson

- 1962: Paris, Galerie Lorenceau

After François Pompon's *Head of an Orangutan* in black marble was exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in 1931, *Le Bulletin de l'art ancien et moderne* published this commentary by the art critic Guillaume Janneau:

"To the old master of animal sculpture, we owe a series of works of extremely high quality, and he seems to have surpassed himself in executing [. . .] this face of an orangutan, simplified through discreet stylization of the principal forms, but so exact in its expressive details, with its eyelids of tissue paper and its striking pupils whose abrupt nature, if one can put it that way, is better rendered than the more finely worked asperities that mark much statuary."[\[1\]](#)

A Professional

By 1931, François Pompon already had a long career behind him. Born in 1855 at Saulieu in Burgundy, he was the son of cabinetmaker who introduced him to the art at a very young age. He took evening courses at the École des Beaux-

Arts of Dijon in architecture, sculpture, and engraving, while also working as an apprentice stone-cutter for a maker of funeral monuments. In 1874, he moved to Paris and enrolled in night courses at the École des Arts Décoratifs. His professors included Aimé Millet and Pierre Rouillard. The latter, an animal sculptor, introduced him to the Jardin des Plantes. Pompon was also drawn to portraiture and hoped to be able to pursue that line. His work *Cosette* drew attention from the jury of the Salon in 1888. Several times, he suggested that the state buy the marble, but without success. Pompon spent many years of his life as a *praticien*^[2] for a number of sculptors, including Dampt, Mercié, Falguière, Baffier, Labatut, Benet, and Desbois. From 1890 to 1895, he worked in the heart of Rodin's studio; that influence led him to experiment with expressing motion by synthesizing it through a series of stages, which he tried to show through slight deformations. He also executed marbles for Camille Claudel and, between 1896 and 1914, for René de Saint-Marceaux, a very well-known sculptor in his day. At the center of the "bande à Schnegg," a group of sculptors close to Rodin engaged with reinterpreting antique sculpture, François Pompon rediscovered Egyptian sculpture and, like Charles Despiau, was inspired by it.

An exclusive passion

In consequence, by the turn of the century, he had "abandoned [. . .] the wretched literary theme of *verismo*."^[3] He became more and more interested in animals, and observed their movements with acute attention. He modeled them on site with the help of a portable workbench that he made himself. Most of all, through his sculptures, he tried to convey the sensation of life; he fine-tuned his working methods, always propelled by a desire to synthesize a form seen in full light from a distance and reproduce its volume. In the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, where he went every day, he drew on the spot and made clay models, then, once back in his studio, he worked up further drafts. He also reworked the surface of his plasters to get the light to flow over them. After the war, French museums became interested in his work; the year 1922 was a decisive one for the artist: he showed for the first time at the Salon des décorateurs and at the Salon d'Automne. His *Polar Bear* in plaster was extremely successful and resulted in much favorable comment on his work. His renown spread quickly throughout Europe and to the United States, Brazil, China, and Japan. He was made a Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur in 1925. The following year, the first monograph on his work appeared, done by Édouard Des Courrières.^[4] Considered the leader of animal sculptors, he joined the Société des artistes animaliers at the beginning of the 1920s and became the president of the group "Douze animaliers français" ("Twelve French Animal Artists") when it was formed in 1931. Hilbert and Poupelet were also in the group.

Face to face with the animal

François Pompon's choice to work with a primate, the only time he did so, is charged with meaning. The iconography of this animal has a long tradition; it has been used to personify vices and bestiality or, on the contrary, to indicate virtue and loftiness. This ambivalence is no doubt caused by the being's proximity to the human species, revealed by Darwin's theories, among others. Thus, primates frighten us as much as they captivate us, seeming to remind of us our position in the animal kingdom. At the end of the 19th century, Emmanuel Frémiet did a work based on the confrontation between a human and an orangutan.^[5] Pompon, however, created his *Head of an Orangutan* full of humanity and nobility, and composed it as a bust. Animal sculptures reduced to just the head are rare, but Pompon, who had a real passion for his subjects, several times created true portraits of animals, such as *Head of a Polar Bear* and *Spotted Panther*.^[6]

The features of the orangutan, which means "man of the forest" in Malaysian, are featured here in a purified mask, with the thick face and direct gaze almost troubled with humanity. It is clearly a male, recognizable by its characteristic folds of skin,^[7] but here they are merely sketched in, as one might for hair or a beard. The projections above the eyes^[8] are softened, resulting in a continuous and elegant line. By an audacious work of simplification, he eliminated all narrative detail, and the animal's coat is only suggested. He stated, "I like sculpture with neither holes nor shadows."^[9] His ambition was to explore the very essence of the animal. Pompon liked to rework his plasters by candlelight or petrol lamp in order to remove anything that he considered superfluous. Nonetheless, this plaster includes subtle striations that animate the surface with great technical mastery. This calm and introspective vision "echoes and questions our humanity" [. . .] "It's up to the viewer to see either the tragedy of the human condition or the melancholic, suppliant resignation of the caged animal."^[10]

The various examples of the *Orangutan*

According to the catalogue raisonné of François Pompon's work,^[11] there were at least three plasters of the *Orangutan*:

—the first was given to the grandson of René de Saint-Marceaux by the artist in 1932 and was shown in Paris in 1962 (current whereabouts unknown);

—the second was given by the artist to Dr. Miguet, the doctor of the zoo at the Jardin des Plantes to thank him for his purchase of a *Panther* (current whereabouts unknown);

—the third, with a patina, was sold in a sale at the Charpentier gallery on June 21, 1960 (current whereabouts unknown).

As it does not have a patina, the plaster presented here must certainly come from either the collection of Saint-Marceaux or of Dr. Miguet.

The only example of the *Orangutan* in black marble, which was done in 1931, was part of the Pompon legacy made to the national natural history museum in 1933; it is currently at the musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon (Inv. 3784 bis (84)). And finally, a bronze proof was made after the artist's death but with his authorization. It is currently in a private collection.

A mature work

Three years before he died, François Pompon "seemed to surpass himself"[\[12\]](#) in the *Head of an Orangutan*. It marks the high point of his reflections, the epitome of his art. François Pompon died in May of 1933, leaving his work to the French state. Several months later, the Salon d'Automne gave him a retrospective exhibition which included the black marble version of the *Head of an Orangutan*. The satirical journal *Fantasio* published a cartoon titled "The Nail in the Salon d'Automne: the Pompon retrospective, reviewed and corrected by Ben,"[\[13\]](#) in which a dozen of Pompon's animal works are given the features of the era's eminent political personalities. The prime minister, Albert Sarraut, [\[14\]](#) an art connoisseur and major collector, appeared in the *Head of an Orangutan*.

The following year, the natural history museum, to which Pompon had been so connected for so long, created a provisional Pompon museum, which consisted of a partial recreation of his studio in the as-yet-unfinished Galerie de Botanique. The same year, the work remaining in his studio was sent to the Louvre and then divided among the museums in Besançon, Dijon, Grenoble, Rouen, Nantes, Strasbourg, and Lyon as well as the new Musée François Pompon in Saulieu.

In 1937, a monument to the sculptor was inaugurated in Dijon, completing a late but fully-earned recognition. The monument gives homage to one of the greatest sculptors of the 20th century, one who revitalized the language of his discipline.

In 2012, the black marble *Head of an Orangutan* was chosen to feature on one of the posters for the exhibition *Beauté animale*, organized by the Grand Palais in Paris.

[1] Guillaume Janneau, "Le Salon d'Automne," in *Le Bulletin de l'art ancien et moderne : supplément hebdomadaire de la Revue de l'art ancien et moderne*, December, 1931.

[2] A "*praticien*" in sculpture is someone who specializes in cutting down a stone or block of wood using a system of landmark points in order to recreate the model of a sculptor. (André Chastel, Jacques Thirion (dir.), *La Sculpture, méthode et vocabulaire*, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1978).

[3] Liliane Colas, "Biography," in *François Pompon 1855-1933*, Gallimard / Électa, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994, p.76.

[4] Édouard Des Courrières, *François Pompon. Vingt-sept reproductions de sculptures*, Paris, Gallimard, Éditions de la Nouvelle revue française, "Les sculpteurs français nouveaux," 1926.

[5] *Orangutan Strangling a Native in Borneo*, 1895, Musée national d'histoire naturelle. *Gorilla Kidnapping a Woman*, 1887, tinted plaster, collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art, currently in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes (Inv. 1117).

[6] *Head of a Polar Bear*, 1930, bronze, Saulieu, Musée François Pompon, (Inv.471).

Head of a Spotted Panther, 1928, patinated bronze, Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, (Inv.3784bis(97)).

[7] Dominant male orangutans have, here and there on their cheeks, deposits of fat that form protuberances on their faces.

[8] A bony projection above the arch of the eye and below the forehead.

[9] Pompon cited by Edouard des Courrières, dans *François Pompon. Vingt-sept reproductions de sculptures*, Paris, Gallimard, Éditions de la Nouvelle Revue française, "New French Sculptors," 1926, p.11.

[10] Emmanuelle Hérin, "Le Singe en miroir. Entretien avec Claude Blanckaert," ("The Monkey in the Mirror: Interview with Claude Blanckaert"), in *Beauté animale*, Paris, Grand Palais, Galeries nationales, March 21 to July 16, Paris, Réunion des musées nationaux-Grand Palais, 2012, p.141.

[11] Liliane Colas, "Catalogue raisonné: Animals," in *François Pompon 1855-1933*, Gallimard / Électa, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994, p. 210-211, n°121, repr.

[12] Guillaume Janneau, "Le Salon d'Automne," *Le Bulletin de l'art ancien et moderne : supplément hebdomadaire de la Revue de l'art ancien et moderne*, December, 1931.

[13] This drawing was published in *Fantasio* on November 16, 1933. It is reproduced on page 93 of *François Pompon 1855-1933*, Gallimard / Électa, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1994.

[14] Albert Sarraut, a radical socialist, was prime minister several times under the 3rd Republic and was the président du conseil twice. He was a great connoisseur of art and collected paintings and sculptures by Picasso, Delacroix, Despiau, Derain, Renoir, and others.