

historyofknowledge.net

Traveling Zoos as Knowledge Mediators?

Eva Andersen

13–16 minutes

Traveling zoos were a common and very popular form of entertainment in the long nineteenth century. Also known as menageries, they were large companies that moved around with various exotic wild species such as lions, tigers, and elephants. For young and old alike, it was often the first and only time they got to see these impressive quadrupeds. Even though they were considered mainly a form of traveling entertainment at funfairs, I will show that itinerant zoos were also an important hub for the circulation of various forms of knowledge.

In recent years, historians of knowledge have been exploring a wide range of knowledge forms that move beyond scientific/learned knowledge. In particular, they have called for more research into the role of knowledge in people's everyday lives and how various forms of knowledge can interact in this context.¹ A good example hereof is the nineteenth-century funfair. The owners of these attractions literally put up their tents and booths in the middle of town's squares and attracted visitors from all layers of society. Many of these attractions also formed an implicit or explicit hub where various forms of knowledge —

educational, artistic, practical or scientific — intersected. We associate funfairs mainly with light-hearted entertainment, which was indeed its main goal, and yet there were other reasons funfairs drew a variety of people. Let me take you on a tour of the various knowledge forms that were represented within menageries during the nineteenth century, such as at the French Ménagerie Pianet.

Introducing Ménagerie Pianet

Ménagerie Pianet — also called Grande ménagerie des Indes or Ménagerie des Frères Pianet — was a traveling zoo established in 1843 by Claude Emilien Pianet. Over the span of sixty years, three generations of Pianet animal trainers toured through France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and Belgium. Over this period, the menagerie grew in size from a handful of exotic animals to a collection of more than one hundred, procured from independent exotic animal dealers, zoological gardens across Europe, or fellow menagerie owners. After Claude Emilien died, his son Joseph Esther and his wife Joséphine Madeleine Pauline Marie Berger (even as a widow) continued touring with the menagerie during the late 1860s and 1870s. After the death of their mother, Emile and Jules took over. Emile became a well-known animal trainer in northwestern Europe and especially in France. Under the direction of the Pianet brothers, the menagerie flourished until it was dismantled in 1903.

Educational Knowledge

Wherever menageries appeared, chances were good that local schoolchildren eagerly anticipated an excursion to the exotic

animals on display. Permanent zoos were mainly located in larger, economically vibrant cities such as Paris (1793), London (1828), Antwerp (1843), Berlin (1844), and Marseilles (1854).² At the time, not everyone could afford a visit to these zoological gardens; travel distances, too, made them less accessible to society at large.

Newspapers regularly depicted traveling zoos as places of instruction. Indeed, they were seen as valuable for schoolchildren's education because they could learn about the animals' lives, anatomy, and behaviors. Menagerie owners liked to reinforce this perception and provided specific information about the animals in their catalogues. Ménagerie Pianet's catalogue, for example, describes a panther with "green and evil eyes," along with its nocturnal habits and habitats.³ They were motivated to support educational knowledge not only out of public goodwill, but also for economic reasons, as it served to promote their business and enlarge their audience.⁴ Special performances were organized for families and children during the day as regular shows usually took place around 8 or 9 in the evening. Menageries also frequently allowed schoolchildren free entrance or offered them a price reduction. In 1880, for example, 3,600 children of the communal schools in Liège (Belgium) were invited to see a show and visit the exotic animals during its days-long run. This high number of visitors seems to indicate that school boards and municipalities had no moral objections to such menageries, nor perceived them as indecent.

However, the line between moral and immoral was sometimes thin, with views easily shifting. While a large group of children had been allowed to visit the menagerie in Liège in 1880, by the 1890s

the mayor found that menageries incited “unhealthy” and “demoralizing” behavior.⁵ During performances accidents could happen, resulting in injuries or even the death of animals *or* trainers. It was exactly this possibility, the mayor believed, that drew people to watch the shows. In Antwerp at that time, officials similarly banned animal trainers from performing public shows inside the animals’ cages. Such objections were very local and temporary and apparently had little impact on other cities. In Geneva, for example, children were still granted access to menageries during the 1890s. The access to “edutainment” — to use a modern word — thus depended on the viewpoints of local city or school administrators.



Drawing of a menagerie by Soury Gustave (1902). MUCEM, inventory number: [1962.78.3](#), © MUCEM. Used with permission.

Artistic Knowledge

Exotic animals have always fascinated people. In the nineteenth century, they were appropriated as symbols of colonialism, power, control, civic pride, luxury, and prestige.⁶ This led to them being commonly depicted in the form of paintings, drawings, engravings,

and later on in photographs, books and periodicals, objects, and moving pictures.⁷

Accordingly, painters often visited menageries to familiarize themselves with the features of exotic animals, such as the two Swiss painters Auguste-Henri Berthoud and Urs Eggenschwyler — who was hailed as a “famous lion painter” in some newspapers.⁸ Artists-in-training, such as from the Ecole des arts industriels in Geneva, and photographers profited from Ménagerie Pianet’s visits as well. Some photographers photographed Pianet’s animals to spread around to animal painters and sculptors for use as models for their artworks. One who did so during the early 1880s was Auguste Petit.

Although most photographers took pictures of exotic animals behind bars, Auguste Petit preferred to photograph them from within their cage because it made the pictures more aesthetically pleasing and useful. Emile Pianet kept the animals under control to enable Auguste to accomplish his mission (but unfortunately these pictures have not been preserved).



Picture of painter E. Eveno doing a painting study of the animals at Ménagerie Camillius (1914). [MUCEM, Sou.4.111.1](#) © MUCEM.

Used with permission.

Experimental and Scientific Knowledge

Aside from schoolchildren, families, and artists, scientists also profited from Ménagerie Pianet's presence. The practical knowledge the Pianet brothers obtained by their daily care of a large variety of exotic animals and the cooperation they provided to scientists formed the basis for scientific research and knowledge creation about the natural world. These scientists could be employees of universities or other scientific establishments; some were independent scholars.

For instance, the Frenchman and amateur psychologist Pierre Hachet-Souplet was interested in the psychology of animals, a newly developing field in the late nineteenth century.⁹ He was not affiliated with any university, but he promoted himself as the founder and director of the Institut de psychologie zoologique. Although the institute did not last long, Hachet-Souplet did independently publish several books about animal psychology that became widely known. Academically trained psychologists intrigued by his experimental methods of observing animal behavior also read these works.

For some of his experiments, Hachet-Souplet relied on animal trainers, finding them through advertisements. He invited (itinerant) menageries and zoos to visit his "manège-laboratoire" — which moved often and was also rather short-lived. One of the people he received in his laboratory was none other than Emile Pianet. In addition, Hachet-Souplet and Emile wrote letters to each other more than once about topics such as infanticide in exotic animals

or about the reasons animals' behaviors and moods could quickly change and lead to dangerous situations.

Natural scientists also benefited from Ménagerie Pianet by collecting samples from the animals for their research. Among them was Louis Georges Neumann, a professor at the veterinary college in Toulouse, who later made important contributions to the field of parasitology. His large collection of parasites contains one he acquired from Ménagerie Pianet on 3 May 1892: the “sarcoptes scabiei du lion” (a type of mite found on lions). This particular sample also traveled to other scientists, such as the Paris-based Édouard Louis Trouessart, who in turn sent it to the Italian biologist Giovanni Canestrini.

Other scientists collected other parts of animals. For example, Louis Guinard, the head of the physiology department at the faculty of medicine in Lyon, used exotic animals from Ménagerie Pianet in his research about the toxicity of various types of animal urine. He specifically thanked “Mr. Pianet, whose menagerie is currently in Lyon” in an 1893 paper for allowing him to have urine samples from the animals.¹⁰

Deceased exotic animals from menageries also contributed to scientific knowledge as menagerie owners, including the Pianet family, often donated or sold them to scientific institutions across Europe, where they could then be dissected and examined. Bidet, for example, donated a lion and a polar bear to the Université de Liège in Belgium.

Natural history museums also quite often received animals originating from menageries. This enlarged their collection for further study and dissection, as well as for public outreach when

the animals were exhibited. Some museums took recurring donations. Between 1873 and 1900, the Musée d'histoire naturelle de Toulouse received nineteen specimens from Ménagerie Pianet, including python eggs and sawfish, as well as the skeleton and skin of lions and jaguars. Such donations enriched the scientific community's understanding of the natural world.

Conclusion

Itinerant menagerie owners, with their practical knowledge of exotic species and their willingness to share their insights and facilitate access to their animals, contributed to the circulation and mediation of different forms of knowledge. Menageries were a hub where practical, educational, artistic, and scientific knowledge converged. While these short-term and erratic exchanges did not necessarily lead to any astonishing scientific breakthroughs still remembered today, they were useful for different groups of people: from children to adults, and from artists to scientists. Itinerant menageries' presence, thus, impacted people's lives and their knowledge and understanding of the natural world. They influenced the everyday knowledge of ordinary people perhaps even more than scientific development and deserve a spot in the history of knowledge, particularly with the field's focus on knowledge outside the academy.

Curious to learn more about the role itinerant showpeople played in the circulation of knowledge? Keep an eye out for the SciFair [website](#) and [newsletter](#) to stay up to date on our project, or join us for the Summer School "[Performing Science, Mediating Knowledge](#)" on **4-8 September 2023** in Antwerp, Belgium **(Deadline: 1 July 2023)**.

[Eva Andersen](#) is a historian who completed her dissertation in 2021 at the [Center for Contemporary and Digital History \(C2DH\)](#) at the University of Luxembourg. Currently she is a postdoctoral researcher in the EU-funded project '[Science at the Fair: Performing Knowledge and Technology in Western Europe, 1850-1914](#)' at the University of Antwerp. Her research examines the social and professional networks of itinerant showpeople and explores the various social and practical facets of their profession.

1. See, e.g., Hammar, "Theoria, Praxis, and Poiesis," in *Forms of Knowledge: Developing the History of Knowledge*, ed. Johan Östling, David Larsson Heidenblad, and Anna Nilsson Hammar (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2020), 113. [↩](#)
2. See, e.g., Éric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardouin-Fugier, [Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens in the West](#) (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 79–81. [↩](#)
3. Description zoologique des animaux composant la grande ménagerie des Indes des Frères Pianet, MUCEM, inventory number O1D2415. [↩](#)
4. See, e.g., Helen Cowie, "[Elephants, Education and Entertainment: Travelling Menageries in Nineteenth-Century Britain](#)," *Journal of the History of Collections* 25, no. 1 (March 2013): 108–11. [↩](#)
5. [La Meuse](#), 12/10/1897. [↩](#)
6. See, e.g., Caroline Grigson, *Menagerie: The History of Exotic Animals in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 262–65. [↩](#)
7. See, e.g., Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher, "[Picturing the Indian Tiger](#): Imperial Iconography in the Nineteenth Century," *Victorian*

Literature and Culture 42, no. 3 (September 2014): 369–72. ↩

8. [*L'Ami du Peuple*](#), 19/10/1889. ↩

9. See, e.g., Élisabeth Chapuis, “[Débats autour de la psychologie animale](#),” *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines*, no. 28 (March 2016): 73–91. ↩

10. Louis Guinard, “[Note sur la toxicité des urines normales de l'homme et des mammifères domestiques](#),” *Comptes rendus des séances de la Société de biologie* 5, no. 9 (1893): 498. ↩