

Painting and Anthropomorphism

Sadie Murdoch Oil Painting Class



Frida Kahlo, Roots, 1943

Anthropomorphism means attributing human characteristics to something that is not human, or vice versa. It usually takes the form of a melding of human and animal, bird, insect or plant forms. It can be a type of metamorphosis - a transformation - as we see in Franz Kafka's novel "Metamorphosis", published in 1925, where a man wakes up one morning and discovers to his dismay that he has turned into a beetle.

We see quite a lot of anthropomorphism in 20th Century Art, but it's origins date back to early human history. You probably have heard of Aesop's Fables, a collection of stories about animals with human characteristics, credited to Aesop, a slave and storyteller, who lived in ancient Greece between 620- 564 BC.

Animals are found most commonly in examples of anthropomorphism, as they are biologically most similar to us – more so than say, a tree - and we have lived in proximity to animals for a long time. They are a source of metaphor - brave as a lion, strong as an ox etc. Anyone who's ever owned a pet will know that as we see animal attributes in humans, we often see human 'personalities' in animals.



“The Sorcerer”, Cave Drawing 13,000 BC.

This drawing is a copy made by Henri Breuil of a mysterious cave painting found in a cavern in the Cave of the Trois-Frères, Ariège, France, from around 13,000 BC. It is known as The Sorcerer, and is usually interpreted as being a great spirit or master of animals. Many ancient caves have drawings and inscriptions showing animals and hunters, and sometimes man and beast are combined. The anthropomorphic is also abundant in ancient Egyptian and Greek Art.

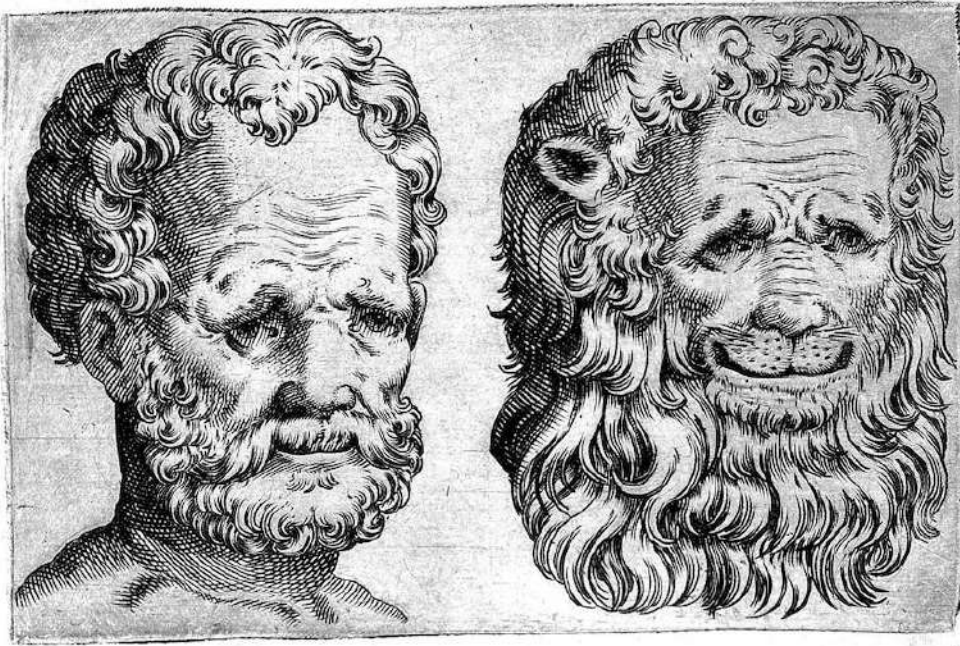


The God Apis - detail, 1550-1070 B.C. Granite



The God Apis, 1550-1070 B.C. Granite

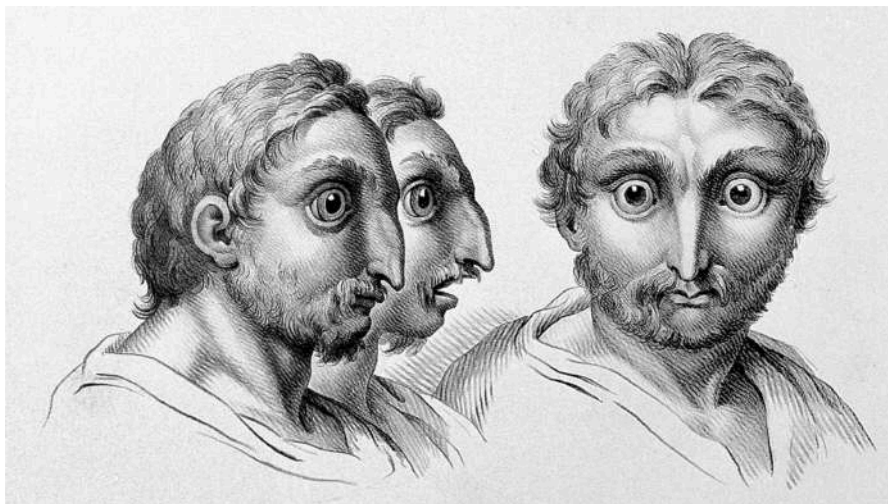
Here we have the God Apis, one of the most important deities of Ancient Egypt. The god has a human body and a bull's head, and dates back to the first dynastic periods. Between the horns there is a solar disc, while around the neck there is a jewellery and ornaments, all beautifully carved in granite.



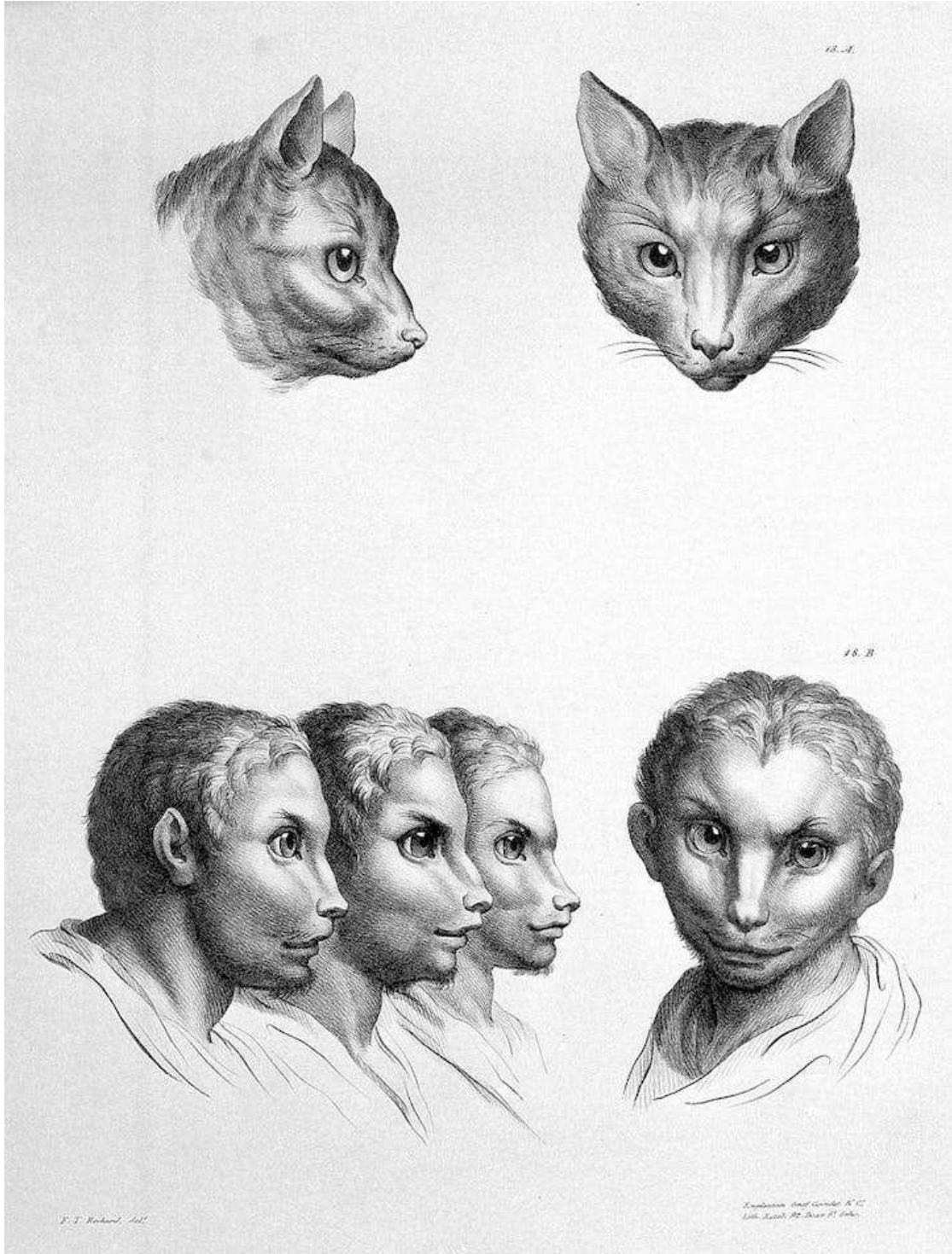
Giovanni Battista della Porta, De Humana Physiognomonia, 1586

Jumping forward in time, here have an example of the work of Italian philosopher Giovanni Battista della Porta, whose 1586 “De Humana Physiognomonia”, included animal-human comparisons as a series of illustrations. Here’s one showing “leonine characteristics” in a man. These drawings influenced a strange and disturbing lecture on physiognomy given by Charles Le Brun. A 17th-century French painter, the favourite artist of Louis XIV and creator of allegorical murals at Versailles.

Physiognomy is the *highly* questionable practice of evaluating a person's character based on their physical appearance. It goes back to ancient Greece, with Aristotle stating that it "is possible to judge men's character from their physical appearance". Its heyday, however, was in the 1800s. Charles Le Brun illustrated the lecture with pen and ink drawings, comparing human and animal heads and facial features.



Charles le Brun, Physiognomic drawings 1806



Charles le Brun, Physiognomic drawings 1806

A person who looked like an owl would presumably be very wise. Someone who looked like a cat – well maybe they are independent and friendly, and likely to stand in a doorway trying to decide whether to come in, or go out! Charles Le Brun's 'scientific' rationale has been rightly criticised.

French Writer Jean de La Fontaine collected and adapted fables from a wide variety of sources. They were issued under the general title of “Fables” and published in several volumes from 1668 to 1694. Humorous and ironical, they are considered classics of French literature. Originally written for adults, they have become required learning for French school children. They have been accompanied by illustrations by Gustave Doré and Grandville amongst others. Here’s one by Grandville:



Grandville, Le Renard et la Cigogne by Jean de La Fontaine

Children’s book authors often used anthropomorphism, often to convey tales of morality and adventure. We have Beatrix Potter of course, and Kenneth Grahams “Wind in the Willows”, with dreamlike illustrations by Arthur Rackham.



Arthur Rackham, illustration for Wind in the Willows

We also have Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland", and C S Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia". In a way, Le Brun's drawings appear to us as rather naïve and charming, like illustrations in children's story book. Which bring us to cartoons. Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse and Dumbo, and Hanna-Barbera's Tom and Jerry are part of our collective childhood memories. They stay with us because of their accurate and often hilarious caricatures. Hanna-Barbera's Wily E. Coyote is so anthropomorphic, that it is not just that Wiley E. Coyote resembles us – it's that we are really *like him!*



Hanna-Barbera Productions, Wily E. Coyote

Frida Kahlo's painting on the first page is an example of an anthropomorphic tradition from human to plant- the artist's body is pictured with vines emerging from a cavity on her stomach which then appears to be sending out tendrils to the earth. Inevitably this image conjures up ideas of 'rootedness' - to the land, to Mexico's traditions, to history. She is like a fallen tree, but revived and metamorphosing.

Joos de Momper the Younger was a Flemish painter who made some amazing anthropomorphic landscape paintings, where like Kahlo's, in a similar, but more fantastical way, figures are either emerging from or descending into the earth. Rocks form facial features, trees cling to the crevices of cheekbones and little hamlets nestle in his ears! His work is often compared to that of Giuseppe Arcimboldo.



Joos de Momper the Younger, Anthropomorphic Landscape, 1600. Oil on Canvas

Arcimboldo was an Italian painter who is famous for creating imaginative portrait heads made entirely of such objects as fruits, vegetables, flowers, fish, and books. These objects formed a recognisable likeness of the sitter and are quite strange and disturbing to look at.

In the 20th Century, Surrealist artists were very influenced by the imaginative possibilities offered up by Arcimboldo and Joos de Memper's paintings. Artists like Salvador Dali and Max Ernst were interested in the hallucinatory and uncanny...



Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Autumn, Oil on Canvas, 1573

In the paintings of Max Ernst we see many examples of strange apparitions, half human, half bird or animal. Essentially the anthropomorphic is often a hybrid figure - The metamorphosis is convincing and often quite terrifying!

Here are some examples:

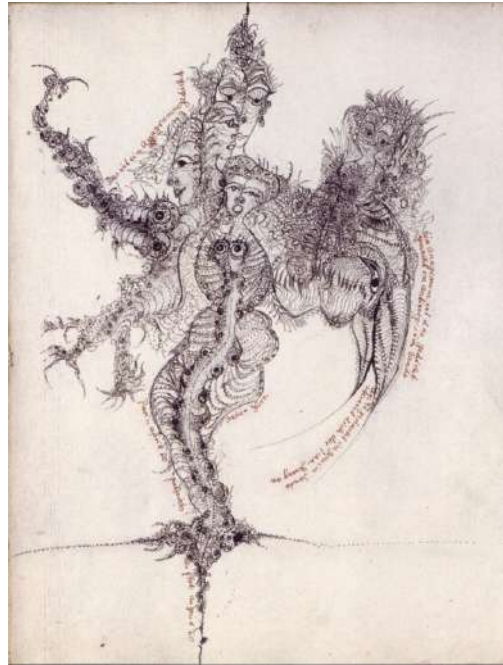


Max Ernst, The Barbarians, 1937, oil on hardboard



Max Ernst, The Robbing of the Bride, oil on canvas

Lastly let us take a quick look at Unica Zürn. Artist and poet, she was known for her anagrammatic writings and drawings. Her linear images often included text and are based on the idea of a rearrangement of elements like letters in an anagram. Plant, insect bird and in animal parts are almost 'woven' together...



Unica Zürn Untitled 1959



Unica Zürn, Oracle and Spectacle, 1961