

## Ethnographic Exoticism Charles-Arthur Bourgeois's *Snake Charmer*

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Résumé de l'article

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**MARIA P. GINDHART**

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*Résumé*

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*Abstract*

*In Charles-Arthur Bourgeois's Snake Charmer, the figure and the serpent, the ethnographic and the zoological, reinforce the exoticism of the Orient. Shown in plaster at the 1863 Salon and in bronze the following year, this sculpture of a dancing, flute-playing African with a coiled snake at his feet was remarked upon for breaking academic tradition and for representing an ethnic type. Since 1874, the bronze has been displayed outside the reptile house in the menagerie at the Museum of Natural History in Paris where it forms an exotic contrast with the neoclassical architecture and recalls the far-off native lands of the reptiles inside.*

*The feeling of type is rendered with a rare skillfulness and it is unnecessary to look at the head to be convinced that one has before one a child of the desert, so much does the whole of the figure present the exotic character. (de Blainville 1863: 3)<sup>1</sup>*

With this comment about *Snake Charmer*, a plaster sculpture by Charles-Arthur Bourgeois on display at the 1863 Salon in Paris, one reviewer associated the figure with the desert and asserted that the exotic character was conveyed by the whole rather than the head, despite the fact that he was writing at a time when physiognomy and skull shape were seen as two of the primary indexes of racial type. Wearing only a striped loincloth, a beaded bracelet on his left wrist,

and a small feather headpiece, the black African blows into the end of the flute he holds between the thumb and middle figure of his right hand, his other fingers suspended gracefully above the finger holes. Poised on the ball of his left foot, he appears to dance, the curves of his body and bent limbs echoing the coils of the hissing snake at his feet, which is somewhat precariously balanced on the edge of the sculpture's base. Together, the charmer and the serpent, the ethnographic

and the zoological, reinforce the exoticism of the Orient.

A bronze version of the sculpture (Fig. 1) was commissioned by the government of Napoleon III on July 17, 1863, exhibited in the Salon the following year while Bourgeois was in residence at the French Academy in Rome, and deposited at the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris in 1869. At some point prior to April 1873, the Museum had made known its desire to have a pendant for *Snake Charmer*, and a new reptile house was specifically designed and built in the early 1870s for two paired sculptures to be situated on pedestals in front of its main façade (AN F/21/121: file 23). While the pendant sculpture, which will be discussed below, was not put in place until the mid-1880s, *Snake Charmer* was specifically incorporated into the plans for the new building and was on display by the entrance when the reptile house was inaugurated in 1874. This location in the menagerie, and the relationship between the sculpture and the building it decorated, only added to the ethnographic exoticism of the work that had already been remarked upon at the Salons of 1863 and 1864.

Bourgeois, who was born in Dijon in 1838 and became a baron by 1870, was one of only a handful of aristocratic artists in the 19th century. In October 1857, he entered the École des Beaux-Arts, where he was a student of Francisque-Joseph Duret and Eugène Guillaume. He won the *tête d'expression* competition for *Resignation* in 1862 and the Prix de Rome for his bas-relief *Nisus and Euryalus* in 1863, the same year he first showed at the Salon with the plaster *Snake Charmer* and won a third-class medal. Although he would subsequently sculpt other Orientalist subjects, including an Arab washerwoman and a female Egyptian dancer, he also created works with classical themes and was an accomplished portraitist (Lami 1970 [1914], vol. 1: 172-74).

There is relatively little biographical material on Bourgeois, who died at the age of forty-eight, but there is no evidence that he—unlike his compatriot artists Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, Charles Cordier, Eugène Fromentin, Jean-Léon Gérôme, and others—travelled to the Orient. Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Egypt in 1798, however, had led to an ongoing French fascination with Egypt, North Africa, and the Near East. A wide variety of sources of information about



**Fig. 1**  
Charles-Arthur Bourgeois, *Snake Charmer*, 1864 (bronze, Paris, Ménagerie du Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle). Photo by the author.

life across the Mediterranean—from publications resulting from Napoleon's campaign and stories in the illustrated press to firsthand travel accounts and Orientalist art—were available in France throughout the 19th century. Much of the appeal of the Orient was due to its perceived exoticism, to the myriad ways in which Orientals were perceived as different from Europeans.

Due to the exoticism of their occupation, snake charmers embodied the mystery of the Orient and were of particular interest to Europeans. Like harem women and sheiks, snake charmers were stock Oriental characters, and this has perhaps been even more the case since Gérôme's painting *The Snake Charmer* (ca. 1870, Williamstown, MA, Sterling and Francine Clark Institute) was reproduced on the cover of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Often referred to as "psylli" (a title given by some to Bourgeois's sculpture) in reference to an ancient North African tribe known for its snake charming prowess and supposed immunity to snake venom, snake charmers performed—often to the delight of European visitors—both in the streets of Egyptian urban centers and in the homes of the elite. Snake charmers were also employed to draw snakes out of houses and gardens (Smith 1856: 155-56; Toledano 1990: 232-34).

Because snake charming was viewed as a contemporary continuation of an ancient practice, one that was frequently passed down from generation to generation within the same family, it reinforced the European sense of the Orient as a place where time stands still (Smith 1856: 155-56; Stutesman 2005: 84). According to art historian Linda Nochlin, Orientalist works of art tended to depict “a world without change, a world of timeless, atemporal customs and rituals” (1989: 35-36).

Accusations frequently arose that snake charmers removed the fangs and/or the venom of the poisonous serpents with which they worked, and this fed existing stereotypes of Oriental trickery (Smith 1856: 156; Stutesman 2005: 84). In this regard, it should be noted that the serpent in *Snake Charmer* does not have fangs, while the near nudity of Bourgeois's figure, which at first seems primarily a sign of his Otherness, may actually be related to the fact that snake charmers were at times asked to take off some or all of their clothing to prove that there was no deception behind their charming skills (Toledano 1990: 234). Furthermore, snake charmers were compared with the reptiles they charmed. In the mid-19th century, after noting that “serpents possess the innate faculty of inducing animals to come directly within their grasp,” one writer commented that “certain half-civilized Arabs and African negroes can use serpents precisely as they [in turn] manage their destined prey” (Smith 1856: 155). Despite the wonder with which snake-charming skills were met, there was still the sense that the charmers were less evolved than Westerners—or perhaps the amazement was all the greater given the general belief in the lack of Oriental progress and development. Either way, in the 19th century, exoticism “was aligned with not simply difference, but also a scale of civilization” (Nayar 2012: 60).

In terms of the *Snake Charmer* in particular, Bourgeois may have been influenced in his choice of subject by the publication of Jules Davasse's *The Aïssaoua or the Charmers of Serpents* in 1862. This unillustrated book about the North African sect drew on scientific studies but was meant for a more general audience (iii). While interested in the ability of the Aïssaoua to enchant snakes (74-80), Davasse was particularly fascinated with how these snake charmers seemed impervious to

poisonous venom. Believing that “le mensonge et la fraude ne sont pas[...] le véritable secret de l'immunité des Aïssaoua” (lies and fraud are not [...] the true secret of the immunity of the Aïssaoua) (32), this medical doctor explored potential physiological and mystical explanations. The ongoing interest in the Aïssaoua was such that representatives were brought to Paris to perform at the 1867, 1878, and 1889 universal exhibitions (Foveau de Courmelles 1890: 168).

Of several critics who commented on the plaster version of *Snake Charmer* in 1863, the most oft-quoted is Julien Girard de Rialle, who remarked that the sculpture was “une belle étude d'ethnographie et une belle statue” (a beautiful ethnographic study and a beautiful statue) (1863: 139). Moreover, Girard de Rialle, who was an ethnographer and would become a member of the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris on January 21, 1864, used the term “ethnographic sculpture” to describe the work of Bourgeois, Bartholdi, and Louis-Guillaume Fulconis, writing: “On commence à sortir des errements académiques en faisant de la sculpture ethnographique, et cette tentative doit avoir d'excellents résultats. D'abord elle fait entrer l'art dans un champ nouveau, dans le domaine de la science.” (One begins to get away from academic bad habits by making ethnographic sculpture, and this endeavour should have excellent results. In the first place it introduces art to a new field, to the domain of science) (138).

Works in the Salon of 1857 by Gérôme, Fromentin, and others had been labelled “peintures ethnographiques” (ethnographic paintings) by critic Charles Perrier (1857: 92; Miller 2010), and the busts of different racial types displayed by Cordier in 1860 at the Exhibition of Algerian Products in the Palace of Industry in Paris had been called a “galerie anthropologique et ethnographique” (anthropological and ethnographic gallery) (Trapadoux 1860). Girard de Rialle, however, drew particular attention to three sculptors who had produced full-length ethnographic figures. Fulconis exhibited two plaster statues entitled *Algerian Canephore*, inspired by the sixteen years he had spent in Algeria (1835-1851) not only decorating various buildings as a stone mason in the employ of the government, but also creating personal works depicting the men and women of North Africa (Fulconis

2005: 248-50). Bartholdi, meanwhile, showed a plaster model of his Admiral Bruat Fountain for the city of Colmar, which included reclining allegorical figures of Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania. As Girard de Rialle wrote in regard to Bartholdi's work, "Au lieu de nymphes banales et de banals tritons il y a autour du piédestal de la statue de l'amiral des statues représentant les races étranges que le célèbre marin a eu l'occasion d'étudier." (Instead of banal nymphs and tritons around the pedestal of the statue of the admiral, there are statues representing the strange races that the famous seaman had the opportunity to study) (1863: 139).

In addition to recognizing that Bruat had been able to study "strange races," Girard de Rialle might also have mentioned that Bartholdi, along with Gérôme, had participated in a mission to Egypt in 1855 and 1856, one of the goals of which had been to photograph diverse racial types (Grigsby 2005: 38-41). Yet while at least one present-day art historian has written of Bartholdi's figures being based more on ethnography, while those of Bourgeois and Fulconis primarily reflect an "orientalisme pittoresque" (picturesque Orientalism) (Le Normand-Romain 1994: 43), the fact that the model for the head of the figure of Oceania was the daughter of a French man and a Mexican woman (45) shows the degree to which Otherness was transposable and exoticism was generalized.

Two mutually reinforcing aspects of Girard de Rialle's commentary relate to the exoticism of *Snake Charmer*: the idea that Bourgeois was diverting from the erring ways of academic tradition—and thus from the classical, from the *beau idéal*—and the belief that his work was ethnographic. Girard de Rialle was not the first to find fault with contemporary sculpture, nor the only to feel that the ethnographic was a solution. As art historian James Smalls nicely summarizes in his discussion of what he calls the French "ethnographic turn," Charles Baudelaire had argued in 1846 that sculpture "had become conservative and monotonous in its redundant mimicry of ancient works of art" while Théophile Gautier and Émile Zola believed that ethnography was "the direction that sculpture had to take in order to be lifted out of its mediocrity and aesthetic doldrums" (2013: 296; Hamrick 2006). In 1849, after noting that art had been "restreint pendant

si longtemps aux formules classiques" (restricted for such a long time to classic formulas), Gautier expressed the hope that "[l]a beauté indoue, la beauté arabe, la beauté turque, la beauté chinoise viendront varier de leurs charmes exotiques la monotonie du type européen." (The exotic charms of Hindu beauty, Arab beauty, Turkish beauty, [and] Chinese beauty would come to vary the monotony of the European type) (1849: 1).

In terms of moving away from "classical conceptions of sculpture," art historian Matthew Simms has analyzed the importance of "suggestions of movement and perceived sound" and a "general preference for bronze over marble" (2010: 324-25). The predilection for bronze may well have been because this metal was seen as being better suited than marble for conveying action, and the perceived movement of *Snake Charmer* was one of the most noted features of the work. Critics remarked that the sculpture showed "une étude approfondie du mouvement" (a thorough study of movement) (d'Aldin 1863: 363), was "d'un bon mouvement" (of good movement) (Lefranc 1863: 537), that the movement was "parfait" (Dumesnil 1863: 112) and "hardi" (bold) (Leroy 1863: 2).

The most extensive comments on sculpture and movement belonged to Léon Lagrange. After noting that sculpture had once been regarded as "un art tranquille" (1864: 27), he wrote, "La sculpture moderne danse haut le pied. Les meilleures statues du Salon de 1864 ne posent que sur une jambe. [...] le *Charmeur de serpents*, de M. Bourgeois: il valse." (Modern sculpture dances with the foot held high. The best statues of the Salon of 1864 pose on only one leg. [...] the *Snake Charmer*, by Mr. Bourgeois: he waltzes) (28). He later rationalized this movement, commenting, "Comment les psyllés arabes charment-ils les serpents? Par la musique et par la danse. Le *Charmeur* a donc raison de danser." (How do the Arab psylli charm snakes? By music and by dance. The *Charmer* thus has reason to dance) (30).

At least two critics related *Snake Charmer* to the sculpture *Dancing Neapolitan Boy* (Fig. 2) by Bourgeois's teacher Duret, with one calling it an "imitation" (Dauban 1863: 395) and another commenting that it was Duret's sculpture "surchargé d'une tête d'Indien" (altered with an Indian head) (Castagnary 1863: 5). This sculpture of a male adolescent dancing with a tambourine,



**Fig. 2**  
Francisque-Joseph Duret, *Dancing Neapolitan Boy*, modelled 1838 (bronze, location unknown). Photograph illustrated in Ruth Mirolli and Jane Van Nimmen, *Nineteenth Century French Sculpture: Monuments for the Middle Class*, *exh. cat.* (Louisville: J. B. Speed Art Museum, 1971), 168, at which time the sculpture, a reduction of the original, belonged to the now defunct Heim Gallery in London.

which he holds in a position similar to the *Snake Charmer's* flute, was exhibited at the 1838 Salon. It was designed as a pendant, with the stance inverted, to Duret's *Young Fisherman Dancing the Tarantella (Souvenir of Naples)* (1833, Paris, Louvre) (Fusco and Janson 1980: 248). As with

the boy in its “sibling” marble sculpture by François Rude, *Neapolitan Fisherboy Playing with a Tortoise* (1833, Paris, Louvre), the dancer in this earlier work by Duret wears a knitted cap on his head and a devotional necklace, both of which would have identified him as Neapolitan.

The similarities between these two sculptures indicate the degree to which the Neapolitan fisherboy was a type, viewed as a natural being and associated with the perceived exoticism of Naples at this time. Moreover, it was a type that spawned subsequent works of art, including Duret's *Dancing Neapolitan Boy* and the plaster *Fisherboy Listening to a Seashell* (1858, Paris, Musée d'Orsay), which was one of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's *envois* from Rome after winning the Prix de Rome in 1854 (Wagner 1986: 77-78, 80, 146). The subject was so popular that some complained that the Salon was “besieged annually by a crop of fisherboys wearing cap and scapula and playing some seaside game” (Fusco and Janson 1980: 146). At a time when emulation was a standard practice in artistic training, *Snake Charmer* clearly owes a debt to Duret's Neapolitan pendants, especially the *Dancing Neapolitan Boy*, who is similarly balanced on his left leg, his right leg bent in the air. The ties are even stronger when one realizes that Naples was viewed as a “gateway to Asia and Africa” in 19th-century France, with Neapolitans being linked with Orientals (Noakes 1986: 146). Thus an 1832 account of a Neapolitan fisherman—“[l]a paresse, l'absence de tout souci, l'imprévoyance de l'avenir [...] empreints sur sa physionomie” (idleness, absence of all care, lack of foresight about the future [...] imprinted on his physiognomy) (de Bourdonnel 1832: 172)—employs many of the standard Orientalist tropes. Bourgeois's sculpture also demonstrates the ongoing allure of the exotic, one that led artists further and further afield geographically.

Art historian Anne Wagner has compared the form of Duret's *Young Fisherman Dancing the Tarantella* to the dance the boy is doing and the music accompanying it, and a similar approach can be taken with Bourgeois's *Snake Charmer*. As Wagner writes of the Duret bronze:

Its silhouette is broken by the angularity of lifted arms and raised leg, of bent wrist and cocked finger. Each angle clacks out a slightly tinny cadence, like the castanets the

dancer holds—a sculpted rhythm in its way as unfamiliar to the Paris audience as the tarantella itself. (1986: 78)

Two of the critics who commented on *Snake Charmer* noted its own “tinny cadences,” with one writing that the “corps est un peu trop incliné en avant” (body is a little too bent forward) (Dumesnil 1863: 112) and another that “il retire avec frayeur la jambe vers laquelle s’élance le reptile” (he withdraws with fright the leg toward which the snake darts) (Jeoffrin 1864: 186). The vast majority, however, noted the rhythmic quality of the work, with one critic remarking that Bourgeois had “le sentiment du rythme développé au plus haut point” (the sense of rhythm developed to the highest point) (de Monchaux 1863: 3). After remarking on the sculpture’s “lignes cadencées” (rhythmic lines), another said, “je gagerais que l’auteur de cet ouvrage n’est point étranger à la musique.” (I would wager that the author of this work is not unfamiliar with music) (de Sault 1864: 1).

While neither Bourgeois nor Duret completely adopted “the *figura serpentina* as an escape from staid nineteenth-century contrapposto” (Getsy 2004: 30), they were both concerned with conveying a sense of animation. In *Snake Charmer* and *Dancing Neapolitan Boy*, the combination of the weight-bearing left leg and raised right leg creates a hipshot S-curve of the body common with contrapposto. At the same time, the slightly twisting torso of each figure, which is accentuated in the Duret sculpture by the left arm that crosses in front of the body, leads to a more spiraling configuration that urges the viewer to consider the works from multiple viewpoints despite a primarily frontal orientation.

In the case of *Snake Charmer*, the use of the term *figura serpentina* serves as an additional reminder that the dance of the African is echoed and underscored by the movement of the snake, which itself received the attention of certain critics. The serpent, described by one Salon reviewer as “une vipère effroyablement cornue” (a horrifyingly horned viper) (Leroy 1863: 2), “s’enroule et se déroule avec volupté” (coils and uncoils with sensual delight) according to another (Paul 1863: 1). This was a definite leitmotif, as two critics noted that the snake “rampe voluptueusement” (slithers voluptuously) at the charmer’s feet (de Saint-Victor 1864: 3; Paul 1864: 2). Of

course, sensuality was a stereotypical Oriental attribute, especially of exotic harem women. In fact, the serpentine of bodies such as the one sculpted by Bourgeois has been linked to Moorish arabesques and been described as being “as seductive as the snake charmer’s meandering melody or the curls of smoke rising from the hashish smoker’s narghile in nineteenth-century Orientalist tableaux” (Apter 1995: 166).

The movement of the “serpent fasciné par la mélodie” (snake fascinated by the melody) (de Monchaux 1863: 3) makes the power of the charmer’s flute playing palpable. The role of the music is more strongly accentuated in the 1864 bronze sculpture, in which the charmer does not hold a rod in his left hand, than in the 1863 plaster and in the various editions made after 1864 (see, for example, Fig. 3), in which he does. When present, the snake seems to be attracted to the end of the rod, mouth agape as if he might bite it. Without it, the snake appears to dance.

If certain sculptures of this time were examples of *trompe l’oreille* as well as *trompe l’œil* as Simms has argued (2010: 328), what kind of music would viewers have imagined hearing emanating from the flute in Bourgeois’s sculpture? Just as viewers might have conjured the sound of the tambourine and castanets when looking at Duret’s Neapolitan pendants—from memory had they voyaged to Naples—so too would *Snake Charmer* and his flute have evoked Oriental music. During the 19th century, French music embraced the exotic, with inspiration primarily coming from the Arab world (Cooper 2004: 116). Thus, for example, Félicien David’s *The Desert* (1844), an *ode-symphonie* combining vocal music and spoken narration, incorporated elements of music that the composer had heard in Egypt, Palestine, and Turkey (Locke 1998: 30-32), and viewers of *Snake Charmer* may have thought of this popular piece. As music historian Annegret Fauser has shown, non-Western music was virtually inaccessible to most Europeans prior to the 1889 Universal Exhibition in Paris. Consequently, “musical concepts of the Orient would have been shaped through exoticism in opera, song, and concert in the form of surface color within the framework of a familiar tonal language” (2005: 146). Thus any musical evocations of the Orient created by *Snake Charmer* would have been ones with a distinctly Western filter. In other words,



**Fig. 3**  
Charles-Arthur  
Bourgeois, *Snake  
Charmer*, modelled  
1863 (bronze, New  
York, Dahesh Museum  
of Art) © Dahesh  
Museum of Art, New  
York, USA / The  
Bridgeman Art Library.

they would have been Orientalist rather than ethnographic.

While the movement of the man and snake as well as the implied music gave *Snake Charmer* a foreign flavour, what was the ethnographic value of Bourgeois's sculpture? In creating *Snake Charmer*, Bourgeois does seem to have worked from an African model or from a photograph of an African, especially in terms of the figure's hair and physiognomy, including the broad nose. There is debate in the art historical community about the availability of African models in Paris at this time, as Antoinette Le Normand-Romain asserts that "les modèles noirs étaient nombreux dans les ateliers au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle" (black models were numerous in the studios of the 19th century)

(1994: 37) while Laure de Margerie states that they were difficult to find (2004: 13). However, ethnographic photographs were increasingly accessible. Furthermore, Bourgeois would also have been able to draw from the work of fellow artists, including busts of Africans by Cordier.

Some commentaries about *Snake Charmer* referenced the African identity of the figure, but others labelled him as Indian or Arab, perhaps due to the prevalence of snake charming in various parts of the greater Orient. This lack of racial fixity could also be due to the fact that, as Davasse had stressed regarding some of the best-known contemporary snake charmers:

les Aïssaoua, ordre religieux recruté parmi les Berbères, les Kébaïles, les Arabes, les Nègres, les peuplades du Maroc, etc., etc., ne forment ni une race, ni une tribu à part, et rien ne les distingue individuellement des autres populations indigènes de l'Afrique.

the Aïssaoua, a religious order recruited among the Berbers, the Kabyles, the Arabs, the Negroes, the peoples of Morocco, etc., etc., form neither a race nor a tribe apart, and nothing distinguishes them individually from the other indigenous populations of Africa. (1862: 34)

Other critics simply commented on the "bizarre" nature of the physiognomy of Bourgeois's figure—"il a je ne sais quelle physionomie bizarre qui justifie mieux sa puissance fascinatrice que ne le feraient des traits réguliers" (he has I know not what bizarre physiognomy that better justifies his bewitching power than would regular traits) (Paul 1863: 1), and his head was deemed "bizarre sans laideur" (bizarre without ugliness) (de Saint-Victor 1864: 3). The snake charmer's difference was thus clearly registered, and he was seen by some as an ethnic or racial type, but there was some confusion about exactly what kind. This suggests that art critics and the public, while increasingly aware of the classificatory systems being created by anthropologists, ethnographers, and ethnologists, were still prone to registering a general sense of Otherness above all else.

In this regard, *Snake Charmer* is quite different from the works of Cordier. While the latter's early sculpted busts were essentially portraits of individuals, he later incorporated them into his larger project for a gallery of universal



human types. Thus his bronze *Saïd Abdallah* (1848, Paris, Musée de l'Homme) and *African Venus* (1851, Paris, Musée de l'Homme) became *Ethiopian Type: Negro, Race of Darfour*, and *Ethiopian Type: Negress from the Coast of Africa*, respectively. Other busts likewise depicted specific races associated with particular places. Overall, Cordier came to envision his sculpture as a sort of ethnographic salvage mission, as he sought to capture ethnicities that were in the process of disappearing. While based in observation and measurement, which gave his work the imprimatur of science, Cordier's sculptures were also strongly grounded in artistic notions of ideal beauty. As he explained in 1862 to the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris, of which he was a member:

[J]'arrive à concevoir l'idéal ou plutôt le type de chacun de ces caractères, puis groupant tous ces types partiels, je constitue dans mon esprit un type d'ensemble où se trouvent réunies toutes les beautés spéciales à la race que j'étudie.

I arrive at conceiving the ideal, or rather the type, of each of their characteristics, then, grouping all of these partial types, I constitute in my mind an overall type where all the beauties that are special to the race that I am studying are found reunited. (1862: 66)

This process paralleled the approach of the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis, who, according to Pliny, combined the best features of five Roman virgins in order to paint the perfect woman.

While Cordier focused on busts and used a process of synthesis based in antiquity, Bourgeois created a full-length sculpture that moved away from the classical tradition. Moreover, as is the case in this article's epigraph, critics felt that it was the body rather than the head of *Snake Charmer* that conveyed—or in some cases failed to convey—the identity of the figure. In 1864, one critic wrote, "Le torse est hâve, amaigri; les jambes et les bras sont grêles; enfin toute la charpente du sujet révèle une nature déjà abâtardie." (The torso is gaunt, thin; the legs and the arms are spindly; finally the entire build of the subject reveals an already debased nature) (Jeoffrin 1864: 186). Although this might be read as praise for Bourgeois's ability to sculpt a "half-civilized" snake charmer, it appears to have been more a

critique of the artist's deviance from academic norms. Lagrange countered such remarks, noting:

On lui a reproché la maigreur des hanches et la sécheresse des membres inférieurs. Mais ce sont précisément les caractères de race du type exceptionnel choisi par M. Bourgeois. Le blâme qui voudra d'avoir cherché dans la nature arabe des exemples de nu que la nature française lui refusait.

One reproached him for the thinness of the hips and the dryness of his lower limbs. But these are precisely the racial characteristics of the exceptional type chosen by Mr. Bourgeois. [He was] blamed for having wanted to search the Arab nature for examples of the nude that the French nature refused him. (1864: 31)

Here Lagrange was praising Bourgeois both for going beyond the traditional nude and for doing so in an accurate way. Meanwhile, other critics acted as experts on the Other and judged Bourgeois's ability to meet their expectations. One commentator bemoaned, "mais pourquoi ces muscles modelés en vigueur? Ne sait-on pas bien que, dans ces natures exotiques, si les nerfs sont d'acier, le muscle jamais ne saillit à ce point?" (but why these vigorously modelled muscles? Is it not well known that, in these exotic natures, if the nerves are of steel, the muscle never stands out to this point?) (Castagnary 1863: 5). Another, on the other hand, enthused, "La nature africaine étant donnée, on ne peut guère l'exprimer avec un sentiment plus vrai." (African nature being given, one would scarcely be able to express it with a truer sentiment) (Dumesnil 1863: 112).

The notable affinity between the pose, or arrested movement, of the dancer and the curves of the serpent also had an ethnographic component, as it reflected the practices of snake charmers. As told in an account of a snake charmer called to Napoleon's house in Cairo:

The Psylle prostrated himself, and requested two troughs filled with water. When they were brought he stripped himself naked as at his birth, then filled his mouth with water, laid himself flat on his face, and began creeping, in imitation of the reptile he was in search of, and shooting the water through his closed teeth to mimic its hissing. (Abrantès 1831, vol. 2: 323)

This was related to the belief that “primitive” peoples often participated in hunting dances that involved imitations of the animal being hunted, including Tasmanians mimicking kangaroos and Native Americans copying buffalos (Letourneau 1880: 88). In a like manner, Bourgeois’s African seems to be doing a “snake charming dance” that will give him power over the animal that he is echoing. Of course, conveying this dance required a full-length figure.

As mentioned earlier, the dance was more easily expressed in bronze than in marble, but this choice of material also served as a racial referent. One critic obliquely said as much, writing, “Le bonze [*sic*] seul lui donne une espèce de couleur locale.” (Only the bronze gives it a sort of local colour) (Jeoffrin 1864: 186). Moreover, although it is impossible to know if this was initially true of the original bronze, which has turned rather green due to oxidation, some of the smaller scale reproductions of the sculpture (see, for example, Fig. 3) have been patinated so that the snake charmer’s skin is a warmer and more highly polished bronze colour than the hair, loincloth, flute, and snake. This recalls the polychromic effects obtained by Cordier in his ethnographic busts through the use of patinas and the mixing of materials, and it produced a greater verisimilitude of black skin at a time when much attention was paid to gradations of skin tone.

Just as ethnography was seen by Girard de Rialle and others as making a contribution to sculpture, art was viewed at this time as enriching science, especially at the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle. The anthropology galleries there were home to ethnographic busts by Cordier, which were considered “objects of both science and art” and were “explicitly intended to serve as models to lend credence to the numerous scientific theories on race and racial typologies that were in circulation at the time” (Smalls 2013: 299; Dias 1997). As Armand de Quatrefages, the professor of anthropology at the Museum, explained in a letter to that institution’s director written on June 16, 1864: “dans l’intérêt [*sic*] de l’étude des races humaines, il me paraît utile de placer à côté [*sic*] de la réalité, représentée par des portraits et des bustes, au moins quelques échantillons de types éloignés, idéalisés par le talent de l’artiste.” (In the interest of the study of human races, it seems useful to me to place next to reality, represented

by portraits and busts, at least some examples of distant types, idealized by the talent of the artist) (AN AJ/15/525).

In his missive—which recognized the busts by Cordier the government had given to the Museum for its galleries—Quatrefages was requesting the acquisition of *Young Negress* (1864, location unknown), a sculpted group by Nicolas Guillemain, to supplement that artist’s *Last of the Mohicans* (1855, location unknown), which was already a part of the Museum’s collection. As with sculptures by Cordier and Guillemain, the decision to give *Snake Charmer* to the Museum was ostensibly due to its “fonction muséographique” and “valeur de témoignage” (value as evidence) (Roquebert 1994: 18). Art historian Christopher Green argues that a main goal of the Museum’s professors was “to offer public curiosity ‘authentic’ experiences” (Green 2005: 36), and sculptures such as *Snake Charmer*—like the life groups and habitat dioramas that were increasingly being incorporated into natural history museums and universal exposition—provided a broader sense of the activities of humans in diverse places at various times than could specimens and artifacts alone. With Bourgeois’s sculpture, the Museum gained both a racial type and the demonstration of an activity seen as quintessentially Oriental and exotic.

According to a letter from Count Alfred-Émilien de Nieuwerkerke, the superintendent of Fine Arts, to the director of the Museum dated April 2, 1869, which was read and discussed by the Museum’s Assembly of Professors on May 18, 1869, *Snake Charmer* was one of six sculptures that were “affectés à la décoration des Jardins du Muséum [*sic*] d’Histoire Naturelle” (assigned to decorate the gardens of the Museum of Natural History). Another work, a marble bust of an Indian by Francis Vincenti, was slated for the anthropology galleries, where it would join the Cordier busts and Guillemain plasters (AN AJ/15/525; AMNHN AM 62: 50). Meanwhile, *Snake Charmer* was destined for the reptile house in the menagerie.

This building (Fig. 4), which was constructed between 1870 and 1874 by Jules André, the architect of the Museum, according to the specifications of Émile Blanchard, then interim professor of herpetology, was considered for decades to be the best conceptualized edifice of the menagerie

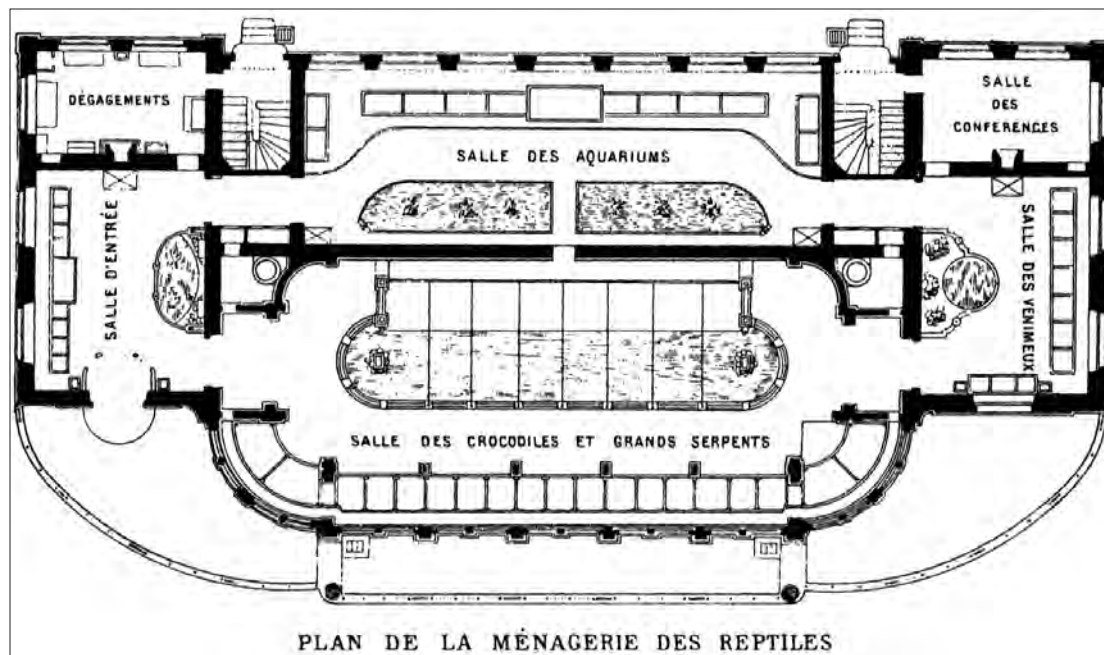


Fig. 4  
Plan of the Reptile Menagerie.  
Frontispiece of Léon Vaillant, *Guide à la ménagerie des reptiles* (Paris: Laboratoire d'herpétologie, 1897).

(Loisel 1912: 142). This new pavilion replaced the original reptile house, the first in Europe, which had opened in October 1838 and originally housed two pythons from Java and three small caimans from Louisiana (Laius 1993: 138-39). Between 1838 and 1869, visitors could have seen more than 4,000 individual reptiles and amphibians representing 280 species, but over time the building became more and more overcrowded and insufficient (150-51). Thirty meters in length, the new reptile house was longitudinally divided in two, with one side devoted to an aquarium with freshwater fish and amphibians and the other to large snakes and crocodiles. Smaller specimens were housed in the two rooms at either end of the building (152). Although the reptile house, which is still in use, seems quite dated now, it represented the cutting edge of science in the 1870s and did not become the object of serious criticism until the 20th century. In fact, it was considered particularly up-to-date in terms of such things as water conveyance and ventilation, with more than half of the overall cost of the building having been devoted to properly outfitting the interior (André 1880: 5-6).

Designed with scientific needs in mind, the building was also conceived to be pleasing so as to improve the image of reptiles. According to an article in *La Nature*, a magazine whose mission was the popularization of science, Blanchard desired:

que ces animaux si méprisés, et, pour le dire, considérés comme si laids et si repoussants, les reptiles, fussent présentés au public avec tout le charme possible, et qu'à un tableau peu attrayant par lui-même, on pût ajouter un cadre qui permit de le contempler, sinon avec plaisir, du moins sans répulsion.

that those animals so despised, and, it must be said, considered to be so ugly and so repulsive, the reptiles, be presented to the public with all the charm possible, and that to a painting not very attractive in itself, one is able to add a frame that permits the contemplation of it, if not with pleasure, at least without repulsion. (Anon. 1874: 339)

A similar desire would lead early-20th-century American zoos to house their reptiles, when possible, in "museumlike buildings that conveyed scientific and cultural authority" (Hanson 2002: 153). In Paris, *Snake Charmer* contributed to that cultural authority and pleasing setting, with *La Nature* noting, "Une belle statue représentant un nègre jouant de la flûte et charmant un serpent se trouve près de la porte d'entrée." (A beautiful statue representing a negro playing the flute and charming a serpent is located near the entryway) (Anon. 1874: 339). In addition to the beauty of the sculpture, one wonders if the subject matter may have helped assuage visitors' fear of snakes, as it emphasizes human control over the serpent.



**Fig. 5**  
H. Scott, The New Palace of Reptiles at the Jardin des Plantes. Illustrated on the cover of *Le Monde illustré* 18 (915) (October 24, 1874).

In terms of its architecture, the reptile house or “palais des reptiles” (de Fonvielle 1874: 262), as it was referred to by some, was simultaneously neoclassical, modern, and decidedly French. Described as “fort élégant et coquet” (most elegant and stylish) (de Langeac 1873: 583), the building was made of stone, iron, cast iron, marble, and slate, and André was particularly proud of the quality of the stonework. The stone came from France, as did the knowledge of how to lay it properly. The building’s neoclassical details, including the virtually blank frieze, the parapet necking that resembles a necklace string, the stone Corinthian pilasters, and the cast-iron Ionic columns in the intercolumniations of the window bays, reflect André’s Beaux-Art training, as well as a certain preciousness. At the same time, the petite size of the cast-iron columns suggests the understanding of an engineer regarding the capacities of that new material. One major feature contributing to the modernity of the building,

while also allowing the animals to be seen from the outside, was the large windows along the front façade. In fact, André noted that one of his mandates was that “les animaux fussent bien en vue, et que les visiteurs pussent même les voir aisément du dehors, lorsque l’intérieur de la ménagerie n’est pas accessible.” (the animals be well in view, and that the visitors be able to see them easily even from the outside when the interior of the menagerie is not accessible) (1880: 4).

This building—in which the layout to a large degree follows scientific function—was constructed at a time when “architectural exotica” was being introduced at other zoos (Hancocks 2001: 56). In the 19th century, as David Hancocks writes:

architects in zoos all over Europe let their imagination flow in fanciful romanticism. They built replicas of castles, Tudor cottages, copies of ancient Greek temples, Swiss chalets, Renaissance pavilions, and whimsical follies. They built in gothic, rustic, classical, Chinese, Indian, and any other style they could conceive. (2001: 58-59)

Two examples of what has alternately been termed colonial, ethnographic, exotic, and historical zoo architecture are the Egyptian temple for camels, elephants, giraffes, and zebras in Antwerp (1856) and the Indian pagoda for pachyderms in Berlin (1873). These and other building types became popular in zoos across Europe and beyond, but they did not consistently house the same species of animals, which frequently had no ties to the geographical regions referenced by the architecture (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 2002: 152-53). These structures provided little to no information about the natural habitats of their animal denizens, instead emphasizing the exoticism and sense of vicarious travel that visitors associated with zoos (153; Mullan and Marvin 1999: 48-50).

The architectural exterior of the reptile pavilion in Paris neither relayed information about the reptiles on display nor conjured lands distant in time or space, but the interior did evoke the exotic indigenous “homes” of the building’s inhabitants in a general way. The luxurious, verdant interior, especially the largest room housing the crocodiles and large snakes, seemed guaranteed to cause visitors to forget that they were in Paris:

Trois magnifiques palmiers la décorent; dans les bassins, des papyrus aux feuilles étroites, des fougères au port élégant; dans les cages, des plantes exotiques, des fleurs, des camélias, des arbustes au vert feuillage, des plantes grimpantes autour des branches où se tiennent enroulés les serpents, des lycopodes cachant les bacs, des plantes grasses garnissant les abris où se retirent les animaux qui fuient le jour; partout la lumière, la verdure et la vie.

Three magnificent palm trees decorate it; in the basins, papyrus with narrow leaves, ferns of elegant bearing; in the cages, exotic plants, flowers, camellias, small bushes with green foliage, plants climbing around branches where snakes are coiled, mosses hiding tubs, luxuriant plants covering the shelters where the animals who flee the day withdraw; light, greenery and life everywhere. (Anon. 1874: 339)

The exotic flora, which probably owed as much to French fantasies as to details about the original habitats of the captive reptiles, figured prominently in illustrations (see, for example, Fig. 5) of articles about the new reptile house in the popular press. Here, the plants, and in some cases the animals, break the bounds of the architecture. These images both highlight the new building and express the desire for it to disappear so as to imagine the animals, and perhaps oneself, immersed in a tropical setting.

Some of the reptiles and their lush surroundings would have been visible from outside but, as the building was originally configured, visitors would have needed to walk past *Snake Charmer* in order to view them (see Fig. 6). A low metal balustrade in front of the building, with which the pedestals for *Snake Charmer* and its pendant were interposed, prevented direct access to the windows. As a consequence, upon approaching the reptile house, the primary sign of exoticism was Bourgeois's sculpture rather than the architecture or the inhabitants of the building. The sculpture's prominent placement and the visual contrast between the light-coloured stone of the building and the dark bronze sculpture would have ensured that *Snake Charmer* did not go unnoticed—and that it recalled the far-off places from which the snakes and other reptiles inside the building came. In other words, while



the architecture in contemporaneous zoos spoke to the exoticism of the “far away” and/or the “long ago,” it is Bourgeois’s sculpture that creates those connotations in the Paris menagerie.

In addition to serving as a sign of the “primitive” in contrast to André’s architecture, the juxtaposition of *Snake Charmer* and the exterior of the reptile house served another purpose. Just as universal and colonial exhibitions were laid out so that “[t]he greatest racial and cultural contrast was established between the primitive, mud-hut ‘villages’ of the Africans and the spectacular displays of European technological achievement, symbols of modernity, displayed in huge electrically lighted halls” (MacMaster 2001: 76), so the control of reptiles by science exercised inside the pavilion was undoubtedly meant, even if subconsciously, to seem superior to the control by music represented outside the building. In other words, the African snake charmer, like the snake he is charming, was conceived as belonging to the natural world as opposed to the cultural world of modern architecture and science. Accentuating this divide was that fact that the *Snake Charmer* was an anonymous ethnographic type, while the names of illustrious men of science, including Aristotle, Linnaeus, Cuvier, and Geoffroy-Saint-Hilaire, were highlighted on one wall of the interior (Anon. 1874: 339; de Langeac 1873: 583).

Bourgeois’s *Snake Charmer* was put on view

**Fig. 6** Jules André, Perspective View of the New Reptile Menagerie at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Plate 45 of “Nouvelle ménagerie des reptiles au Jardin des Plantes, à Paris, par M. J. André, architecte,” *Revue générale de l’architecture et des travaux publics* 36 (1879).

not only outside the reptile house, but also inside a menagerie. In this context and with its pairing of an exotic human with an exotic animal, the sculpture may have called to mind the indigenous animal keepers who accompanied their charges to Europe, becoming part of the spectacle and linking the ethnographic and the zoological. These “natives” served as additional signifiers for the often exotic lands from which the zoo animals originated and were themselves the object of much fascination.

The most famous example of such a pairing at the Paris menagerie was the giraffe given as a gift to Charles X by Muhammad Ali, the Pasha of Egypt. This giraffe walked from Marseille to Paris in late 1826 and 1827 with two keepers, the Bedouin Hassan el Berberi and the Sudanese Atir. Atir was then hired by the Museum and would take his charge on daily walks, much to the delight of the Parisian public (Harkett 2013; Lagueux 2003: 237, 239). Then, in London at the Regent’s Park Zoo in 1850, the hippopotamus Obaysch arrived with his keeper, Hamet, identified at the time as a Nubian Arab, as well as two Egyptian assistants who performed as snake charmers, one of whom proclaimed to have worked for the scientists who accompanied Napoleon to Egypt (Jones 1997: 4, 14-16; Ziter 2003: 99-100). Although popular with visitors, the snake-charming performances were one of the reasons the zoo was found in court in 1854 no longer to be eligible for special rates under the *Scientific Societies Act*, as such entertainment was seen as moving the zoo beyond scholarship into the realm of entertainment (Goodall 2002: 30).

The scientific role of *Snake Charmer* can be similarly questioned, but it was clearly both a sculptural fulfillment of an earlier plan for the menagerie and a bronze foreshadowing of the display of actual humans in what have come to be called “human zoos.” In the very early years of the 19th century, the architect Edme Verniquet proposed a plan, which he said had been discussed with and approved by Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, the director of the Jardin du Roi, for a menagerie that would contain both animals and humans. This zoo would have reproduced habitats from Africa, America, Asia, and Europe and included flora and fauna, both animal and human. The proposal called for the humans to dress in native costume and to live in

picturesque dwellings reflecting the architecture of their homelands (Verniquet 1802: 23-24).

Verniquet’s plan did not come to fruition, but humans began to be exhibited in a variety of venues in the 19th century, including in zoos. Carl Hagenbeck was the pioneer in this regard, exhibiting a group of Sami and a herd of reindeer in Hamburg, Germany, in 1875 (Rothfels 2002: 82-83), but France was not far behind. In Paris beginning in 1877 and continuing into the last decade of the century, the Jardin Zoologique d’Acclimatation was one of the principal French venues for the display of contemporary “primitive” peoples. The Jardin had been created in 1860 by a society dedicated to the study of the transplantation and modification of animals and plants for the benefit of both France and its colonies, a society to which many of the Museum’s professors belonged. The animals and plants were soon joined by temporary ethnographic displays, including Nubians and Eskimos in 1877, Lapps and Argentinian Gauchos in 1878, Ceylonese, Araucans from Guyana, Kalmouks from Siberia, and Native Americans in 1883, and Somalis in 1890 (Osborne 1994: 98-129.) Links may well have been drawn between such ethnographic exhibits and Bourgeois’s *Snake Charmer*, especially as it was none other than Girard de Rialle who regularly wrote about the different zoological garden visitors for *La Nature*.

The relevance of “human zoos” became even greater when *Snake Charmer* was joined by its pendant—*Crocodile Hunter* (Fig. 7), another bronze sculpture of an African by Bourgeois—which was commissioned on March 12, 1882, delivered to the Museum on November 14, 1883, and put into place shortly thereafter (AN F/21/2058: file 19). Although there were reptiles from France, other parts of Europe, and many other places around the world on view in the adjacent building, the focus on African men in the sculptures on the pedestals outside reinforced the reality that visitors to the menagerie “wanted creatures that were curious, wild, ferocious, and very different from European animals, to provide a change of scene and a chance to dream of distant lands” (Baratay and Hardouin-Fugier 2002: 150-51). The African identity of the charmer, hunter, snake, and crocodile additionally reflects the fact that Africa has come to be overrepresented in zoos because that continent is so inextricably



linked with the idea of exoticism (Estebanez 2008: 93-94). The sculptural pairings outside the reptile pavilion also encouraged the equating of “primitive” humans with wild beasts. Furthermore, the fact that Léon Vaillant, professor of herpetology at the Museum from 1875 to 1910, recognized, as had his predecessor Blanchard, “le peu de sympathie et même le sentiment de répulsion que les Reptiles éveillent en général” (the little sympathy and even the sentiment of repulsion that Reptiles generally arouse) (Vaillant 1897: vii) makes one wonder if Africans evoked similar feelings on the part of even learned naturalists, not to mention visitors to the zoo.

Despite its title, *Crocodile Hunter* appears to

depict an animal tamer more than a hunter due to the diminutive size of the crocodile, which was admittedly a result of having to fit the base of a sculpture destined for a relatively small pedestal, and to the fact that the African steps on the back of the reptile with his left foot. As a result, both sculptures can be viewed as depicting performances at a time when “human zoos,” including those at the Jardin Zoologique d’Acclimatation, were increasingly becoming forms of entertainment, with those on exhibit participating in mock combats, ritual dances, and the like (Schneider 1977: 98-99). Not surprisingly, these performances often had more to do with European expectations than with the traditions of those on display.

Bourgeois’s pendant sculptures emphasize the supposed mystical power of Africans over animals, which, although astonishing, was based in the irrational in contrast to the supposedly supreme rationality of French science. While early-20th-century reptile keepers at zoos in the United States actively worked to combat fantasies, myths, and superstitions about reptiles, including the ability of snakes to be charmed (Hanson 2002: 154), *Snake Charmer* and *Crocodile Hunter* remain on view in the Paris menagerie. Although the construction and decoration of the elegant new reptile house in the early 1870s may have been designed with the goal of overcoming the negative views of reptiles held by the general public, the inclusion of *Snake Charmer*, and later *Crocodile Hunter*, fed into stereotypes of the Orient and Africa. The continued presence of these pendant bronzes by Bourgeois underscores the fact that zoos persist as sites of entertainment and fantasy as well as of science, that they are spaces where visitors still expect to encounter the exotic—including exotic ethnographic types.

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#### Note

1. Translations are by the author.

**Fig. 7**  
Charles-Arthur Bourgeois, *Crocodile Hunter*, 1883 (bronze, Paris, Ménagerie du Muséum National d’Histoire Naturelle). Photo by the author.

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