

## THE HIDDEN SIDE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT. A BUFFON-LINNÉ EXHIBITION TO BE TAKEN WITH A PINCH OF SALT

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### BIO

**Tony Fouyer**, a research associate at UMR 6298 ARTEHIS and a lecturer at the University of Burgundy Europe, currently directs the Buffon Museum and Park in Montbard. In this role, he promotes the work of two eminent figures: Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), and Louis Jean-Marie Daubenton (1716-1800), both natives of this small town in the Côte-d'Or region. Author of articles highlighting the work of Buffon and Daubenton, he is also interested in topics related to major contemporary issues.

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### ABSTRACT

The Buffon Museum in Montbard aims to soon reunite the two great naturalists, Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, and Karl von Linné. However, mention of the project raises the “complex” question of theories about humanity developed by scientists and reused, particularly by authoritarian regimes. While Buffon has relatively flown under the radar, Linnaeus was heavily criticized in both Sweden and England during the *Black Lives Matter* movement. The reason was his categorizing humanity into four varieties. These were quickly named and understood as “races,” making Linnaeus “the founding father of scientific racism” and therefore of “modern racial thought.” The Swedish debate in 2020 was intense and raised the question of removing statues of the country’s most famous scientist. Buffon, however, did not receive such treatment, which was rather reserved for Colbert. So, what narratives can we develop around these two Enlightenment scholars without obscuring these aspects and without this polarizing the exhibition? Already seen as scientists who are complete opposites, objects of clichés and a merciless duel that the era is so fond of, we would like to show the reflections and systems developed by the two figures, including on humans. Whether we like it or not, we will contribute to the construction of a memorial story and the staging used, in each of the exhibition contexts, will participate in this.

### KEYWORDS

Buffon Museum, representation, visual, exhibition, science

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## Introduction

To mark the 250th anniversary of Carl Linnaeus's death, the Buffon Museum and Park wishes to honor the renowned Swedish naturalist. A contemporary of Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, born the same year, the Swedish scholar is the leading authority on the classification of species. His *Systema Naturae*<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1), published in 1735 at the young age of 28, brought him particular fame. Buffon, who at the same time was working on his life's work, the 36-volume *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*<sup>2</sup>, did not share this vision of the discipline.

The two engaged in a series of verbal sparring matches, albeit from a distance. While this rivalry is often highlighted, as evidenced in several publications, it is important to step back and move beyond this confrontational approach to present both perspectives in a more factual manner. This, at least, is how the museum and its partners—the Linnean Society of London and the Linnaeus Museum in Uppsala—intend to present the work of these two figures in an exhibition that will be partly itinerant.

In a context of discovering the world and, consequently, the Other, the 18th century, the Age of Enlightenment, was also the century of the emergence of racism. Although the term was not clearly defined at the time, it constituted one of the sensitive points of the period and of the major figures of the era. Philosophers and scientists were not spared. The societal challenges of our time, punctuated by large-scale like *Black Lives Matter movement*, invite us to be critical. Therefore, how can we present these revolutionary works without ignoring these controversial aspects of their research?

## One Science, Two Perspectives

Georges Louis Leclerc, who would become the Count of Buffon (Fig. 2), was born in Montbard on September 7, 1707. A

member of the local bourgeoisie, nothing seemed to destine him for the career he would pursue. After completing classical studies, first in law, then in medicine, he became interested—in connection with the Count of Maurepas and for the needs of the Navy—in forestry. In 1733, he presented a paper to the French Academy of Sciences in Paris. The subject, on probability, allowed him to become an assistant mechanic. His work on forestry, which he never abandoned, led to his appointment in 1739 as assistant to the botany section and later as an associate member. The death of Cisternai du Fay, Superintendent of the King's Garden, that same year proved a stroke of luck. Buffon's connections with Maurepas enabled him to obtain this prestigious position. One of his missions was to create a description of the King's Cabinet, an undertaking that would lead him to the creation of *L'Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*<sup>3</sup>.

Linnaeus, for his part, was born in Råshult, Sweden, a few months before Buffon, on May 23, 1707. Born into a religious family with a keen interest in botany, he quickly developed a passion for the discipline. Wishing to become a doctor, he attended Lund University before transferring to Uppsala University. There, he became a demonstrator at the botanical garden in 1730<sup>4</sup>. He obtained his doctorate in Holland in 1735<sup>5</sup>. That same year, he published the first edition of his *Systema Naturae*.

Buffon and Linnaeus both provided solutions for considering natural history in its entirety. From the outset of his undertaking, Buffon emphasized the immensity of the task and its inexhaustible nature<sup>6</sup>. Aware of these limitations, he emphasizes above all the methodological ambition of the project and the need to “see a lot and review often”<sup>7</sup>.

Indeed, in order for Buffon's proposed experience to align with this approach, he needed to showcase what was not always accessible. While natural history cabinets and

academies were well established throughout the country at the beginning of the 18th century<sup>8</sup> and can allow the observation of more or less well-known specimens<sup>9</sup>, This could not suffice to meet the initial ambition of Buffon's educational project.

To fill this gap, Buffon and his collaborators used three methods, summarized by Benoît De Baere in a 2007 article. The first consisted of visualizing the subject through plates and vignettes. These were mostly black and white, but colored and watercolored when the illustration focused on birds.<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 3). The second consists of a textual production combining description and poetic expression related to the different species. The final device is attributable to Louis Jean-Marie Daubenton<sup>11</sup>. These are summary tables in which the scientist compares the data he collects during his anatomical research<sup>12</sup>. These three perfectly complementary systems give Buffon's work a particular dimension, which has led to recent research on it. Linnaeus, whose classification system is still used today, presents a completely different vision of natural history. This system, presented in 1735, is a classification of the three kingdoms of nature: mineral, vegetable, and animal<sup>13</sup>. Far removed from Buffon's concerns and the pedagogical objective his contemporary wished to implement, Linnaeus opted for a much less visual formula, but offered a detailed examination of all living beings, allowing each one to be classified and placed in a classification based on morphological study<sup>14</sup>.

Although the first edition of *Systema Naturae* consisted of only 10 folio pages, the work gradually expanded and became more complex over time. The most decisive part of Linnaeus's work occurred in the 10th edition, which introduced the famous binomial nomenclature<sup>15</sup>, whose legacy we can still see today, was first applied to the animal in the 12th edition, in 1758. This nomenclature, far removed from

images and the desire to focus on aspects other than morphology, distinguishes the two naturalists.

### **The Origins of "Race"**

In this context, it is not surprising that the place of humans is also at the heart of the tensions between the two naturalists. In the 12th edition of his *Systema Naturae*, Linnaeus places humans among the quadrupeds at the head of the Primates, along with other species such as the horse<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 4). Having named humankind *Homo sapiens*, he turned his attention to varieties. He did not use the term "race" and characterized humankind, as he had done with plants and products, based on known geography. He then took into account climatic and environmental factors. In the 1740 edition, Linnaeus classified humankind into four taxonomic categories: *Europaeus albus*, *Americanus rebescens*, *Asiaticus fuscus* et *Africanus niger*<sup>17</sup>. He later added *Homo ferus* and *Homo monstrosus* to this list<sup>18</sup>. Erza Tawil, in 2006, admitted that in the context of the 18th century, the taxonomic categories established by Linnaeus referred to geographical aspects and not biological and morphological ones<sup>19</sup>. While skin color is indeed a criterion of distinction in the Linnaean system, Staffan Muller-Wille<sup>20</sup> has recently been demonstrated that for Linnaeus, this criterion was as accidental as weight or stature.

This climatic and environmental dimension is also found in Buffon who, aware of the importance of external factors, integrates it into his thinking on generations. Buffon's anthropological system is also based on varieties. From this point of view, therefore, Buffon and Linnaeus converge<sup>21</sup>. While Buffon's name is sometimes linked to the concept of race, it is difficult to attribute to him a key role in its emergence. As Thierry Hoquet emphasized in a 2014 article, Buffon did not define the concept. His use of the term was sporadic and

referred only to “different types of realities or taxonomic levels”<sup>22</sup>. It is particularly noticeable that the term is used interchangeably to refer to “the people”, generations, local varieties of a species, or “lineages” (Fig. 5). This ambiguity, which is very present in Buffon’s text, refers to these local varieties caused by external factors, including climate and diet<sup>23</sup>. Although some of Buffon’s hypotheses are quite brutal—at least in their presentation—the scientist acknowledges that all humans originally descended from a single species<sup>24</sup>. The absence of illustrations indicating each variety clearly shows that physical characteristics are unimportant. He makes this explicit in the text in volume IX, when he refers to Linnaean taxonomies and states that this man “is only the same man tinged with the color of the climate”<sup>25</sup>.

The idea of hierarchy, often associated with Linnaeus, appears to be artificial and clearly stems more from a later reading of his works than from any genuine desire for hierarchy, even when he explores the relationship between *Homo sapiens* and great apes. Linnaeus then focuses solely on “irrefutable differences and similarities”<sup>26</sup>. However, Linnaeus relied as much on the physical characteristics as on the moral component of peoples. In this respect, his classification, which does not involve a hierarchy, corresponds to what we call “races”<sup>27</sup>.

As we can see, the question is as thorny as it is complex. Moreover, the search for the concept’s origin seems futile – even if the Linnaean classification is the closest approximation<sup>28</sup>—and corresponds primarily to contemporary considerations.

### Exposing “Races”

In recent years, the news surrounding racism and antisemitism has become more pressing. This context, far from being confined to France, is global and has found its most

intense expression in the Black Lives Matter movement. Created in 2013 following the death of Trayvon Martin<sup>29</sup> Following the acquittal of the police officer who killed him, the movement became highly globalized in 2020, after the death of George Floyd<sup>30</sup>. While the movement is global at this precise moment, its expression remains highly differentiated at the local level<sup>31</sup>.

*Black Lives Matter movement* has challenged our perception of the Enlightenment. Among the figures most affected is Colbert in France<sup>32</sup>, which nearly led to his downfall, and Linnaeus abroad. The most eminent scientific figure in Sweden, the naturalist was particularly criticized both in Sweden and in England<sup>33</sup> and its legacy was threatened. While the situation has calmed down, it is important to keep this context in mind and not to ignore certain aspects of the Enlightenment. From this perspective, the exhibition “Racism: The Invention of Human Race,” which took place at the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden, is relevant<sup>34</sup>. The exhibition focuses on the 18th century and does not neglect the role that the Enlightenment played. It allows for a cross-referencing of sources and immerses us in the Age of Enlightenment while also extending to the current context.

A true social phenomenon, it has contributed—in a way—to the production of exhibitions on the theme. This theme has been explored since 2017 by the Musée de l’Homme in Paris. It is entitled *Nous et les Autres, des préjugés au racisme*<sup>35</sup> and is designed to be itinerant. It was also featured in 2018 at the Chicago History Museum with the exhibition *Race: Are we so different?*. The Fine Arts have also embraced it. This is notably the case with the exhibition *Le modèle noir de Géricault à Matisse*, which was held at the Musée d’Orsay. The approach combined art history and the history of ideas, going back to the abolition of slavery in France<sup>36</sup>. *Paris noir*<sup>37</sup>, It reveals the

presence and influence of Black artists in France. It shows another side of artistic production, one that has often been rendered invisible. This approach has given a voice back to communities, representing a kind of reversal of the relationship to art. A reversal of perspectives, particularly of the perspective of the Other, was already explored in 2016 in the exhibition *Homme blanc, homme noir*<sup>38</sup>. She then invited Westerners to change their perspective.

This multifaceted inquiry extends to collections themselves, with provenance research emerging relatively recently—coinciding with the political context and the need, in particular, to ease tensions with former colonies, as well as with issues related to restitution<sup>39</sup>. The exhibition *L'Afrique en musée*<sup>40</sup>, presentation of the multi-year research on the history of the primary collections held in French museums demonstrates both the professionals' interest in the subject and the scale of the phenomenon.

The methods used to present artworks, objects, and narratives varied considerably and reflected the approaches taken by the curators and the context in which the artists and communities they highlighted lived. The same should be true for the exhibition *Buffon-Linné*.

### In conclusion

While the *Buffon-Linnaeus* exhibition project primarily aims to explore the worldview and scientific thinking of these two eminent figures of the Enlightenment, the section on “races” should not be taken lightly. It is neither a question of concealing certain facts nor of making unsubstantiated accusations. From this perspective, as we have emphasized, the connection between Buffon, Linnaeus, and racism is more complex than it appears.

The current context in which we operate—even if it is more peaceful—necessitates revisiting this aspect. However, it

is essential to place the statements made within their historical context. We must therefore find the tools to discuss “races” without distorting the thought or philosophy of these two great figures of the Enlightenment. The sequence presented to visitors must reflect the current state of our knowledge on the subject, but also draw inspiration from pre-existing museum experiences, particularly since the *Black Lives Matter* movement. This will be one of the challenges facing the scientific committee and the exhibition curators.

### ENDNOTES

1. Carl Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae* (Leiden: Nieuwkoop, B. de Graaf, 1735).
2. Georges Louis Leclerc Count of Buffon, *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière : avec la description du Cabinet du Roi*, (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1749). The work in question will be abbreviated as HN in the remainder of our discussion.
3. Christian Bange, “Linné: son œuvre, son legs scientifique”, in *Bulletin de la Société linnéenne de Lyon* no. 1 (2009): 16.
4. *Ibid.*, 7.
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. Thierry Hoquet, “L'Histoire naturelle est-elle une science de la nature?”, in *Corpus, revue de philosophie* no. 40 (2001): 127-136.
7. Buffon, “Premier Discours. De la manière d'étudier et de traiter l'histoire naturelle”, in *HN*, 3-6.
8. On the importance of private collectors in the 18th century and the enthusiasm surrounding natural history cabinets, see Daniel Roche, “Natural History in the Academies,” in *Cultures of Natural History*, ed. Nicholas Jardine, Jim Secord, and Emma Spary (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 137-38; Benoît De Baere, “Représentation et visualisation dans l'histoire naturelle de Buffon,” *Dix-huitième siècle* 39 (2007): 613-38, and the associated bibliography.
9. Buffon set up a menagerie in Montbard so that he could observe the animals he was studying.
10. These illustrations were created by De Sève and Martinet. While they did not revolutionize illustration itself, their use provided an essential visual element to Buffon's work. Regarding the somewhat outdated nature of the naturalist illustrations in the HN, see Valérie Chansigaud,

“L’illustration naturaliste,” in *Penser la nature*, ed. Tony Fouyer (Éditions du musée Buffon, 2024), 72–73.

11. On the importance of Daubenton, see Raphaël Devred, Tony Fouyer, and Agathe Giraud, “Bleu, blanc, pourpre. Le mérinos d’Espagne comme fer de lance du mouvement pour l’amélioration des laines : une réponse à la problématique de l’industrie drapière française (1760–1800),” in *L’industrie textile en France : une affaire d’État? (milieu XVIIe–XXIe siècle)*, ed. Anne-Sophie Lienhard, Esclarmonde Monteil, and Alexia Raimondo (Paris: Archives nationales, forthcoming).

12. Benoît De Baere, “Représentation et visualisation dans l’histoire naturelle de Buffon,” in *Dix-huitième siècle* no. 39 (2007), 617.

13. Isabelle Charmantier, “Linneaus and Race,” *Linnean Society of London*, published September 3, 2020, <https://www.linnean.org/news/2020/09/03/linneaus-and-race>.

14. Bange, “Linné,” 4.

15. On this point, see Michel Guédès, “La genèse de la nomenclature binaire,” *Histoire et Nature*, no. 12-13 (1978): 97–100; Christina Bange, “La nomenclature binomiale : les principes et leur application par Linné et par les naturalistes français du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” in *Les mots et les choses au XVIIIe siècle : la science, ‘langue bien faite’?*, ed. Denis Reynaud and Philippe Selosse (Presses Universitaires de Lyon & Société Linnéenne de Lyon, 2009).

16. Bange, “Linné,” 11; Charmantier, “Linneaus and Race”.

17. Charmantier, “Linneaus and Race”.

18. Thierry Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race et racialisation de l’humain : Bernier, Buffon, Linné,” in *L’invention de la race* (La Découverte, 2014), 35–37.

19. Erza Tawil, *The Making of Racial Sentiment* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

20. Staffan Muller-Wille, “Linnaeus and the Four Corners of the World,” in *The Cultural Politics of Blood, 1500–1900*, ed. Kimberly Anne Coles, Ralph Bauer, Zita Nunes, and Carla L. Peterson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 195.

21. Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race”.

22. Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race, 31. Buffon’s role in the evolution of the concept of species is, for its part, well identified, see Buffon, *HN*, 4, p. 384–385; Philippe R. Sloan, “The Idea of Racial Degeneracy in Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle*,” in *Racism in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro (Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973), 293–321.

23. Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race, 33.

24. Buffon, *HN*, 3, p. 529–530 : “tout concourt donc à prouver que le genre humain n’est pas composé d’espèces essentiellement différentes entre elles ; qu’au contraire, il n’y a eu originairement qu’une seule espèce d’hommes”.

25. Buffon, *HN*, 2.

26. Gunnar Broberg, *Homo sapiens L. Studier i Carl von Linnés naturuppfattning och människolära* (Almqvist & Wiksell i distribution, 1975).

27. Hoquet, “Biologisation de la race, 39.

28. *Ibid.*, 41–42.

29. Lizette Alvarez, “Trayvon Martin: le procès qui ravive la question raciale,” *Courrier International*, July 14, 2013 <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/trayvon-martin-le-proces-qui-ravive-la-question-raciale>.

30. Kristine Roth and Alli McCracken Jarrar, “Justice for George Floyd: A Year of Global Activism for Black Lives and Against Police Violence,” *Amnesty International*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/05/justice-for-george-floyd-a-year-of-global-activism/>. On this subject, see Audrey Célestine and Nicolas Martin-Breteau, “Un mouvement, pas un moment’: Black Lives Matter et la revendication des luttes minoritaires à l’ère d’Obama,” *Politique américaine* 28 (2016): 15–39.

31. Audrey Célestine, Nicolas Martin-Breteau and Charlotte Recoquillon, “Introduction – Black Lives Matter: un mouvement transnational,” *Esclavages & post-esclavages* no. 6 (2022).

32. V. D., “VIDÉO. Antiracisme : pourquoi la statue de Colbert est devenue la cible des manifestants,” *Le Parisien*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.leparisien.fr/societe/video-antiracisme-pourquoi-la-statue-de-colbert-est-devenue-la-cible-des-manifestants-09-06-2020-8336277.php>; Clément Gassy,

“Esclavage : faut-il débaptiser les lieux nommés ‘Colbert’, ministre de Louis XIV et auteur du Code Noir?” *La Dépêche*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2020/06/13/esclavage-faut-il-debaptiser-les-lieux-nommes-colbert-ministre-de-louis-xiv-et-auteur-du-code-noir-8889733.php>; Jean-Luc Mounier, “Dans le sillage de ‘Black Lives Matter’, le fracas des statues qu’on déboulonne,” *France 24*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/fr/20200610-dans-le-sillage-de-black-lives-matter-le-fracas-des-statues-qu-on-d%C3%A9boulonne>;

Magali Lesauvage, “Le déboulonnage des statues symboles de la colonisation essaime en Europe,” *Le quotidien de l’art*, no. 1967, June 11, 2020, <https://www.lequotidiendelart.com/articles/1967-le-d%C3%A9boulonnage-des-statues-symboles-de-la>

colonisation-essaimen-europe.html. For a more complete overview of the phenomenon, see Bertrand Tillier, *La Disgrâce des statues: Essai sur les conflits de mémoire, de la Révolution française à Black Lives Matter* (Payot, 2022).

33. On this subject, see Tobias Hübinette, Peter Wikström and Johan Samuelsson, “Scientist or Racist? The Racialized Memory War Over Monuments to Carl Linnaeus in Sweden During the Black Lives Matter Summer of 2020,” *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 9, no. 3 (2022): 27–55.

34. May 19, 2018 – January 6, 2019, Deutsch Hygiene Museum, Dresde.

35. March 31, 2017 – January 6, 2018, Musée de l’Homme, Paris.

36. March 26 – July 21, 2019, Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

37. *Paris noir. Circulations artistiques et luttes anticoloniales, 1950-2000*, March 19 – June 30, 2025, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

38. *Homme blanc, homme noir. Les représentations de l’Occidental dans l’art africain du 20ème siècle*, June 15 – October 9, 2016, Musée du quai Branly Jacques Chirac, Paris.

39. On this subject, see in particular Maris Cornu, *Entre-temps: Le bien culturel et le droit* (Daloz, 2023).

40. *L’Afrique en musée*, in partnership with the Institut national de l’Histoire de l’Art (INHA, Paris). The objective of this thematic exhibition was to provide, throughout France, an exhibition on the formation of collections of African objects in French museums. The exhibitions, visible for varying periods from one museum to another, had to be inaugurated in conjunction with the international symposium held at the INHA.

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Figure 1 : Linné, *Systema Naturae*, Leiden, 1735.

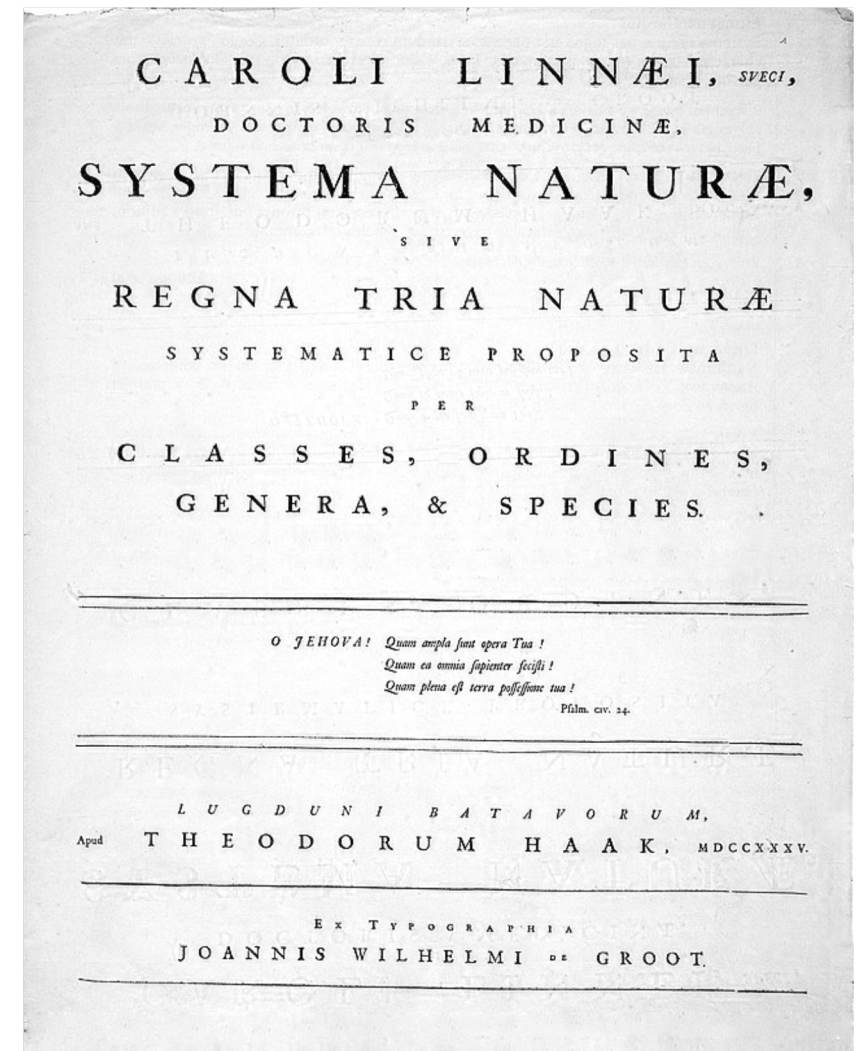


Figure 2 : François Hubert Drouais, *Portrait de Buffon*, oil on canvas, 1761 (Musée et parc Buffon, Montbard, inv. 98.3.1)



Figure 3 : Le Paon, Detail of *L'Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*, volume on birds, p. 433, pl. II, 1777 (Musée et parc Buffon, Montbard)

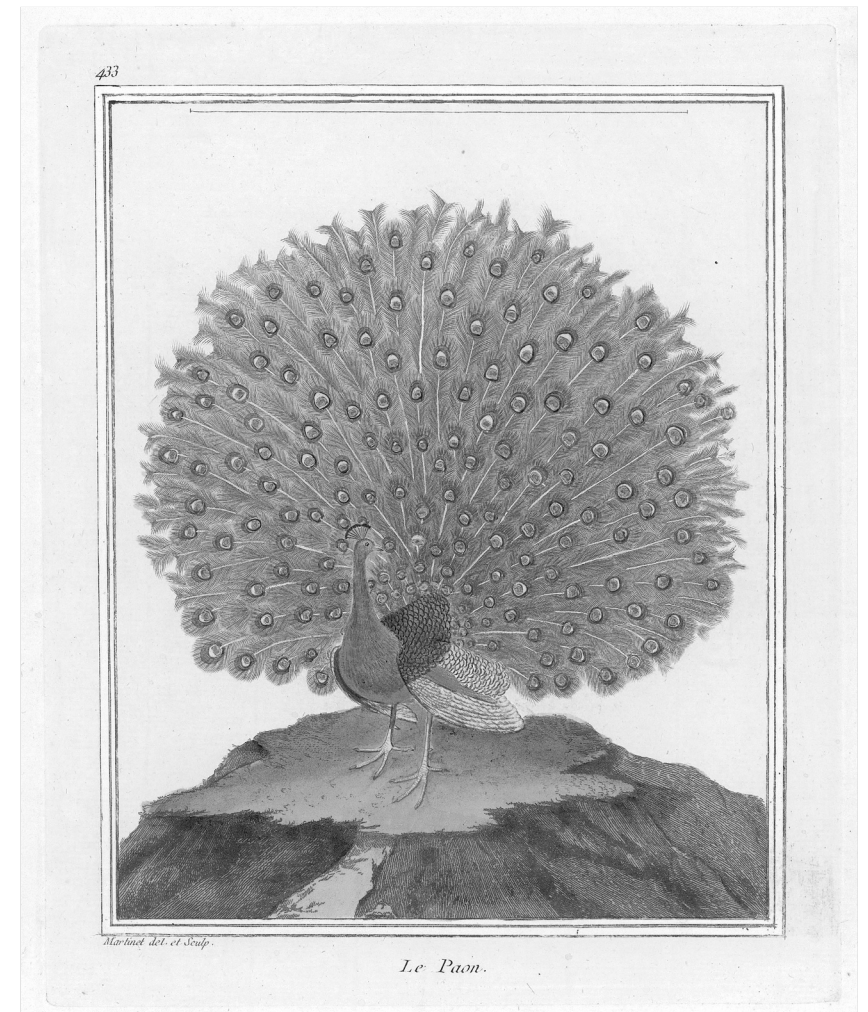


Figure 4 : Linné, *Anthropomorpha*, detail from *Systema Naturae*, 1735.

I. QUADRUPEDIA.			
<i>Corpus hirsutum. Pedes quatuor. Feminae viviparæ, lactiferæ.</i>			
ANTHROPO- MORPHA. <i>Dentes primores 4. utrinque: vel nulli.</i>	Homo.	<i>Noſce te ipſum.</i>	H } <i>Europæus albefc. Americanus ruſc. Aſiaticus fulcus. Africanus nigr.</i>
	Simia.	ANTERIORES. POSTERIORES. <i>Digiti 5. . . . . 5. Poſteriores anterioribus ſimiles.</i>	Simia cauda carens. Papio. Satyrus. Cercopithecus. Cynocephalus.
	Bradypus.	<i>Digiti 3. vel 2. . . . 3.</i>	Ai. <i>Ignavis.</i> Tardigradus.

Figure 5 : L'enfant pie, *Supplements of L'Histoire naturelle générale et particulière*, IV, p. 568, pl. II, 1777 (Musée et parc Buffon, Montbard)

