

ROSA BONHEUR

1822 – 1899



“I have tried to render what I saw and felt, without seeking anything else.”

— Rosa Bonheur

TIMELINE

- 1822 Born in Bordeaux, France
- 1830s Shows talent for drawing animals from a young age
- 1841 Studies under animal painter Isidore Bonheur (her father)
- 1845 Exhibits for the first time at the Paris Salon
- 1848 First woman awarded the Gold Medal at the Paris Salon
- 1865 Awarded the Legion of Honour by Empress Eugénie
- 1899 Dies in Thomery, France

THE ARTIST

Rosa Bonheur was a brilliant animal painter and an independent woman who challenged the conventions of her time.

She was allowed to dress as a man in order to visit livestock markets, abattoirs and stables – places closed to women.

Her enormous canvases, painted from life with extraordinary precision and empathy, brought animals to life with dignity and personality.

Bonheur achieved international fame and remains one of the most celebrated animal painters of the nineteenth century.



AN EXCEPTIONAL CAREER

- First woman to win the Gold Medal at the Paris Salon (1848)
- International acclaim and patronage across Europe and America
- Painted animals with unmatched realism and empathy
- Awarded the Legion of Honour in recognition of her genius
- Influential teacher and inspiration to generations



HER ART

Bonheur's art is defined by its realism, scale and respect for animal life. She studied anatomy, movement and behaviour with patience and compassion. Her paintings are both scientifically accurate and deeply emotional. She used light and composition to create drama, harmony and a powerful connection between the viewer and the animal.



BEYOND THE MYTH

Bonheur is often reduced to 'the woman who painted animals'. In reality, her talent, discipline and independent spirit inspired generations. She lived life on her own terms, championed animal welfare and proved that a woman could reach the highest levels of success in art.

MASTERPIECES: SIX WORKS THAT SHOW HER GENIUS

- 1 **PLOUGHING IN THE NIVERNAIS**
1849
- 2 **THE HORSE FAIR**
1852–1855
- 3 **HIGHLAND SHEPHERD**
1859
- 4 **WEANING THE CALVES**
1879
- 5 **SHEEP IN THE HIGHLANDS**
1860s
- 6 **DEER IN THE FOREST**
c. 1860s–1880s



WHY HISTORY OVERLOOKED HER

- Long before organised feminism, she lived with extraordinary independence and challenged many expectations placed on women.
- Women had limited access to art training and professional opportunities.
- Her realistic style was undervalued by critics who favoured academic painting.
- Large-scale works by women were often overlooked in art history.
- Only recent scholarship has restored her rightful place in the canon.

History did not deliberately erase Rosa Bonheur. It was social barriers and gender bias that pushed her into the background.



WHY HER WORK MATTERS

- She opened the way for women artists through her success and independence.
- Her work changed how animals were represented in art.
- She proved a woman could be a professional artist recognised at the highest level.
- Her legacy continues to inspire artists and animal lovers today.



DID YOU KNOW?

Rosa Bonheur was known for her courage, her tireless work and her deep love of animals. She was surrounded by her human and animal friends until the end.



WHERE TO SEE HER WORK

- Musée d'Orsay, Paris
- Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- National Gallery, London
- Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux
- Private collections worldwide



CONTEMPORARIES FOR CONTEXT

- Gustave Courbet 1819–1877
- Jean-François Millet 1814–1875
- Théodore Rousseau 1812–1867
- Eugène Delacroix 1798–1863
- Constant Troyon 1810–1865
- Édouard Manet 1832–1883

Bonheur was part of a circle of leading realists who transformed painting in the 19th century.



FORGOTTEN WOMEN ARTISTS IS NOT ABOUT REWRITING HISTORY. IT IS ABOUT COMPLETING IT.

