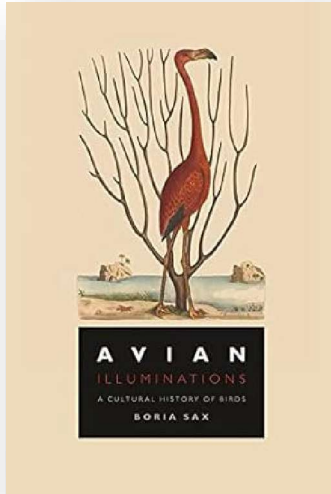




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Avian Illuminations: A Cultural History of Birds

Boria Sax

ISBN 978 1-78914-432-1

474pp. + Endnotes, Further Reading, General Index, Index of Birds, Websites about Birds. Illus., b&w, color.

[Avian Illuminations: A Cultural History of Birds: Amazon.co.uk: Boria Sax: 9781789144321: Books](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Boria-Sax/9781789144321/)

Review by Shelby Shapiro, first published online 9 October 2023.

Boria Sax continues his efforts to examine the links between and among animals and humans in his latest book, *Avian Illuminations: A Cultural History of Birds*. In the Introduction he writes that his intent is "to show how intimately our bonds with birds are bound up in the matrix of ideas, practices, fear and hopes that make up what we call 'human civilization.'" (p. 14) Sax draws upon biology, history, philosophy, folklore, art and religion to achieve this goal, which crosses not only disciplines but territorial borders: this is a worldwide study.

The book is divided into four parts: Birds in Philosophy and Religion; Birds in History; Birds and Art; and Birds and the Future. He writes not so much about birds, but about what birds have meant to their human observers, worshipers and those fearing birds. The illustrations, as in all his books, are exemplary, covering everything from Old Masters to the menu of a Washington, D. C. eatery of the 1940s, the Chicken Hut, to cartoons and cave paintings.

Sax does not limit his examination to what Westerners agree are "real" birds; he includes birds outside the Western canon, for example the deities of Northwestern Native American cultures and Asian civilizations. Throughout he probes what various birds mean, and why, and how these various beliefs fit into comprehensive worldviews.

He writes that "(h)unting birds such as partridges, grouse and pheasants has long been a highly ritualized sport of the British upper classes, analogous to fox hunting." (p. 343). Sax notes that "(w)hen aristocratic hunters faced a lack of game birds, gamekeepers in Britain began stocking the countryside with millions of pheasants." (p. 346).

In *Defending the Master Race: Conservation, Eugenics, and the Legacy of Madison Grant*, historian Jonathan P. Spiro notes how big game hunters belonging to the Boone & Crockett Club ended up becoming the backbone of American conservation movements seeking to replenish what they enjoyed hunting.



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Hermann Goering followed the same strategy at his hunting lodge, Carinhall. Sax discusses the 1973 Nobel Prize-winner and Nazi theorist of animal behavior, Konrad Lorenz (pp. 179-180); for more on Lorenz, see Sax's *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust* (2000). In *Avian Illuminations*, it is clear that the white lab coat of Konrad Lorenz merely covered his political brown shirt.

Among myriad topics, Sax discusses cockfighting, "which became popular in Greece long before chickens and eggs became a dietary staple." (p. 207). He writes that

"(t)he bloody spectacle of cockfighting displays a primal, indiscriminate fury that may be a driving force in all civilizations yet which none can fully acknowledge."

Sax goes on to discuss Fred Hawley, a student of cockfighting in the United States, and anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who studied the same phenomenon in Bali. Sax states that

"(i)n other places, however, cockfighting has become a way to sublimate, rather than act out, impulses towards interpersonal violence. Traditional cockfights are well-behaved at matches from Bali to Mexico and the United States. Cockfights in these locales are conducted according to strict rules, and the judgements of the free are seldom questioned." (p. 209)

This observation would be in accord with Norbert Elias's theories of the "civilizing process," especially as it concerns sports, as set forth in his introduction to *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), as he traced the development of rules which would level the playing field, decrease personal violence and continue a sport's

particular excitement, whether falconry, cockfighting, rugby, soccer or fox-hunting.

Throughout the book are illustrations by the nineteenth-century caricaturist J. J. Grandville, who utilized birds in his anthropomorphic sketches and drawings to make political points; unfortunately, we do not learn more about this artist of the Romantic Era.

As is usually the case with works by Boria Sax, by the time we finish the book, we no longer take its subject for granted: he opens our eyes to see in new and unexpected ways. This, even though there can sometimes be much that is speculative (as indicated by qualifiers such as "might" and "could"). Yet even in such instances, the reader is prompted to question and reconsider what is taken for granted. As is the case with all of Sax's prior books published by Reaktion Books Ltd., the quality of the text and its many illustrations (whether black and white or color), are stellar, a tribute to his choices and the publisher's production standards. This is another volume to be placed on your "to get" list.

Shelby Shapiro (Ph.D. American Studies) served for many years as the English-language editor of *Tsumpunkt/To the Point*, the magazine of *Yiddish of Greater Washington*, as well as for its predecessor publication, and was Associate Editor of *Records of the State of Connecticut* 2012-2021. His Ph.D. dissertation dealt with acculturation and American Jewish women in the *Yiddish press*; he is a *Yiddish-English* translator, and his research interests include *Jazz and Blues* (having presented jazz radio programs for nine years), the labor movement, the First World War, and immigrant anarchism.