

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

While wild animals have appeared in art across all times and places, the four artists featured in *Survival of the Fittest* were particularly influential in their approaches to depicting the natural world. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, painters Carl Rungius, Richard Friese, Wilhelm Kuhnert, and Bruno Liljefors broke with European and American artistic traditions by studying animals in the wild and depicting them in their natural habitats. This attention to natural behaviors and environments paralleled scientific and social developments of the time, such as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and the emergence of the modern conservation movement. *Survival of the Fittest* presents nearly fifty paintings by these four influential artists, along with works by American, European, Native American, and African artists reflecting different perspectives on wildlife. This exhibition invites us to consider a multitude of connections — between animals and their environments, humans and nature, and art and science — that still resonate today.



View of the exhibition galleries

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Through the activities outlined in this guide, students will:

- Observe, analyze, and interpret works of art depicting wild animals.
- Consider how art can reflect ideas about the relationship between humans, animals, and the environment.
- Make connections to scientific skills and knowledge by exploring depictions of animal adaptations.

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide can be used to support a class visit to *Survival of the Fittest*. Both docent-led and self-guided school tours of the exhibition are available at no charge to groups who register in advance. Tours can be scheduled by visiting nelson-atkins.org/learn/field-trips. Images of the art included in the exhibition are also viewable online; links are provided for specific works mentioned in the guide.

In the **Before Your Visit** section of the guide, you will find activities and discussion questions to use when preparing students for what they will see in *Survival of the Fittest*. The **In the Exhibition** section can facilitate exploration within the museum for self-guiding groups, and the **Extend Your Learning** section provides post-visit suggestions that build on what students have seen.

Discussion questions and suggested activities for older and younger students are grouped by theme:

- **Our Shared World** — Consider the relationship between humans and wildlife
- **Adaptations & Environment** — Explore how traits are influenced by the environment
- **Art Meets Science** — Identify connections between studying the natural world and making art.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



Richard Friese (German, 1854–1918) studied at Berlin’s Royal Academy of Arts. During his time there, he painted animals he saw at the Berlin Zoo. Later, he made multiple trips to wilderness areas in Prussia, Canada, and the North Sea, where he both hunted and studied animals for his paintings.



Wilhelm Kuhnert (German, 1865–1926) also studied at the Royal Academy of Arts in Berlin. His interest in observing animals in the wild took him to colonized areas of Africa and Sri Lanka as well as Poland and Sweden. His many paintings of lions earned him the nickname “Lion” Kuhnert.



Bruno Liljefors (Swedish, 1860–1939) focused his paintings on wildlife he observed in his native Sweden. After studying at the Royal Academy of Art in Stockholm, he painted birds, foxes, and other forest creatures he encountered while hunting or spending time in nature.



Carl Rungius (American, born Germany, 1869–1959) was born in Berlin and studied at the Royal Academy of Arts, but he moved to the United States as a young man. He became involved in the conservation movement, spending time each year sketching wildlife in areas that would become (or had already been named) national parks.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Our Shared World: Discuss ways that humans and wildlife interact. Where do students encounter wild animals in their lives? What kinds of reactions do they have when they see a wild animal? In what ways do humans affect the lives of wild animals? You could even have students keep a an individual or classroom log of any wild animals they encounter for a week. What patterns begin to emerge?

Adaptations & Environment: Encourage students to learn about some of the animals they’ll see in the art that’s on view in *Survival of the Fittest*. They can use books or web sources to learn about an animal’s habitat, diet, and special traits. Animals pictured in the exhibition include:

Polar bear	Black-backed jackal	Capercaillie	Grizzly bear
Moose	African elephant	Red fox	Bighorn sheep
Lion	Asian elephant	Pine marten	Caribou
Bengal tiger	Antelope	Elk	Bison

For older students: Challenge students to learn the meaning and origins of the phrase “survival of the fittest.” What does it have to do with the relationship between animals and their environment?

Art Meets Science: Have students practice patience and observation skills by spending time outdoors. Younger students could observe their surroundings using their senses — what do they hear, smell, feel, see, and taste? Older students might take notes of the weather conditions, temperature, and any plants or animals they observe. Encourage all students to sketch something they see in their environment.

IN THE EXHIBITION

Our Shared World: Challenge students to find works of art in the exhibition that show three different ways animals and humans may interact:

- A picture of animals doing work for humans
Possible response: Horatio Walker, *Plowing in Acadia*, 1886, view at bit.ly/4bGch6f
- An object that symbolizes the special traits of an animal that is important to a particular culture
Possible response: Unrecorded artist, Burkina Faso, *Nyanga (Antelope Helmet Mask)*, 1900s, view at bit.ly/4iZBL0a
- A picture that shows an animal approaching a structure built by humans
Possible response: Richard Friese, *Arctic Wanderer*, 1899, view at bit.ly/3E17foj

For each one, have students think about similar examples from their own lives. Where do they see animals doing work for humans, representing special traits, or spending time around manmade buildings?

For older students: Encourage students to view the works by African and Native American artists that are displayed in the first section of the exhibition. What kinds of animals and objects are shown here? How are they similar to and different from the paintings by Friese, Kuhnert, Liljefors, and Rungius? What do these works have to say about the relationship between humans and animals?

Adaptations & Environment: As students explore the exhibition, see how many examples of animal camouflage they can spot. How might each animal's coloring help it survive in the wild? How would these paintings be different if the artists had shown animals on plain backgrounds, rather than placing them in their natural environments?

For older students: Ask students to look for these three types of animal behavior in the exhibition:

- Predator attacking prey
Possible responses: Bruno Liljefors, *Peregrine Attacking Mallard*, 1929, view at bit.ly/41GTZNF, or *Pine Marten Attacking Capercaillie*, 1929, view at bit.ly/43TPQsk
- Fighting for dominance
Possible responses: Richard Friese, *Fighting Moose*, 1896, view at bit.ly/41YIfy0 or Wilhelm Kuhnert, *Fighting Bison at Bialowieza*, n.d., view at bit.ly/4iAhxul
- Attracting a mate
Possible response: Bruno Liljefors, *Displaying Capercaillie*, 1903, view at bit.ly/4bZCJHY

Art Meets Science: Have students compare and contrast two paintings by Richard Friese: *Fighting Moose* (linked above) and *Lion Couple Stalking a Campfire* (view at bit.ly/4kAY7aB). Which painting shows more intense action? Which one seems more detailed? Which one is more interesting to students, and why?

Explain that Friese based *Lion Couple Stalking a Campfire* on sketches he made at the Berlin Zoo; he inserted an imagined scene into the background. For *Fighting Moose*, he observed moose in their natural forest habitat. While science and art both involve making observations, artists are free to alter or deviate from their observations when making art. Doing so can change the overall effect or mood an artwork expresses.

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

Our Shared World: Challenge students to research the conservation status of one of the animals they saw depicted in *Survival of the Fittest*. What threats currently affect its status in the wild? What could be done to protect that animal and its habitat?

For older students: Have students research an issue related to the relationship between humans and animals. Possible topics include:

Hunting	Climate change	Animal testing	Species reintroduction
Pollution	Agricultural practices	Zoonotic diseases	

Adaptations & Environment: Have students create original works of art that depict wild animals in their natural habitats. Students can use the animals they researched prior to their visit, or they can choose new animals. Encourage them to think about how the setting, action, or other details they include could demonstrate the ways their animal is adapted to its environment.

Art Meets Science: Explore other works of art in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins that speak to the intersection of art and science:

- Eadweard Muybridge, *The Horse in Motion: "Sallie Gardner," owned by Leland Stanford; ridden by G. Domm, running at a 1:40 gait over the Palo Alto track, 1878*, view at bit.ly/3FGTBr0
- Gabriel de la Mora, *826 I - Pa.Bl, 2022*, view at bit.ly/3FlalhF
- Terry Evans, *The South Pasture, 2022*, view at bit.ly/42eOffj
- Basilius Wefring, *Recovering Salt from the Sea, 1555-1556*, view at bit.ly/3FT3LEU

Discuss: What scientific topics or concepts could you incorporate into your own art?

TERMS TO KNOW

Adaptation	A change that makes an organism or species better suited to its environment
Camouflage	A tactic organisms use to blend in with their surroundings
Colonialism	The domination of a people or area of land by a foreign power
Conservation	The act of preserving, protecting, and restoring the natural environment
Domesticated	Brought out of a wild status to be under human control
Expedition	A journey undertaken with a specific purpose, such as exploration or research
Habitat	The natural environment in which an organism usually lives
Impressionistic	In the style of Impressionism, with bright, pure colors and visible brushstrokes
Indigenous	Native to a particular place; having lived there from the earliest times
Natural selection	The process through which species adapt to their environments, as individuals with more beneficial adaptations survive and reproduce at higher rates
Poaching	The illegal hunting or capturing of wild animals
Trait	A characteristic that can be shaped by genes and/or environmental factors

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Books

Survival of the Fittest: Envisioning Wildlife and Wilderness with the Big Four, edited by Adam Duncan Harris, 2023. Available in the ERC.

This catalog of the exhibition includes essays and color illustrations of paintings by Richard Friese, Wilhelm Kuhnert, Bruno Liljefors, and Carl Rungius.

How Artists See Animals, by Colleen Carroll, 1996. Available in the ERC.

A picture book with reproductions of animal-themed works by artists from around the world.

Zoology: Inside the Secret World of Animals, published by DK, 2019.

A visual encyclopedia filled with detailed photographs and information about animal traits and habitats.

Web

National Museum of Wildlife Art / wildlifeart.org

View images of works from the *Survival of the Fittest* exhibition, as well as other examples of wildlife art from many times and places.

Wyoming Chronicle, “Survival of the Fittest” Wildlife Art Exhibition / [pbs.org/video/survival-of-the-fittest-wildlife-art-exhibition-fblchc](https://www.pbs.org/video/survival-of-the-fittest-wildlife-art-exhibition-fblchc)

Watch this interview with curator Adam Duncan Harris to learn more about the exhibition and its featured artists.

EDUCATOR RESOURCE CENTER

This guide was produced by the Educator Resource Center at the Nelson-Atkins. The ERC is available to support educators with a variety of programs and resources. If you are interested in learning more about ways to link museum works with classroom learning, we invite you to connect with the ERC to access:

- Curriculum consultations
- Circulating resources
- Professional development workshops

Visit nelson-atkins.org/learn/educator-resources for more information.

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