

When Serpents Had Stairs

by strannikov

A heretofore enduring mystery seemed utterly cleared up once excavations near Stonehenge uncovered a prototype of a Late Bronze Age escalator. Each step was fabricated of glazed enamel, about half in the manner of mosaic and the rest in the style of cloisonné, each step depicting a snake of a different color. Still, it was impossible to tell from the mosaic and the cloisonné steps whether the escalator was to go down or up: the intricate bronze mechanism supporting the steps could plausibly take them either direction.

The identities of the depicted snakes were slightly less unclear: no Irish snakes, for instance. The snakes all had the distinct shape and feature but lacked the distinct coloration of coral snakes: perhaps these, too, had lapsed into extinction after the manner of the Irish snakes. Still, commemoration in the mosaic and cloisonné steps of a marvelous Late Bronze Age escalator betokens high regard. Indeed, each snake thus commemorated was depicted with a knowing smile peculiar to its species.

At the museum exhibit debut, a young girl's dog, Pombo by name (the dog, not the girl), took to staring the snakes down one by one, like Nipper staring at his master's voice. The prototypical escalator on display was apparently operated originally by four sturdy hand cranks, which for museum display purposes had been mechanized so that the museum staff would be spared.

As the mosaic and cloisonné steps would lift or fall past in succession (depending on how they were being turned in that day's exhibition), Pombo would sit mesmerized for hours. Admittedly, Pombo had a fine eye for detail, and being colorblind was no real shortcoming. He would hover over one end of the escalator for hours, nodding up and down as each step passed by. His focus became so riveted to the mosaic and cloisonné steps that his food and water bowls, which the museum staff had taken to replenishing in their copious spare time, soon became unwelcome distractions to

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the dog. Whether Pombo sat at the bottom watching the steps rise or at the top watching the steps descend, or vice versa—no difference! Pombo's fascination with the mosaic and cloisonné steps was unshaken, and soon he would only repair to his water and food bowls once each day's exhibition ended.

Pombo had never exhibited such powers of concentration with elevators or with other escalators, the young girl confessed to the museum staff. "I hope you'll take good care of him," she mumbled one afternoon two weeks into the exhibition—a truncated hope, to be sure, since Pombo, being a boxer, possessed only a truncated tail. Nevertheless: what Pombo's tail lacked in sweep, it made up for with vigor as estimable as his powers of concentration.

To sharpen his prowess on both ends, Pombo took to smoking a pipe with a stem as long as his tail, some months into the initial exhibition. Rather than stunting his growth, the efficacious pipe lengthened his tail four centimeters the first year. (This earned Pombo the sobriquet "the Long-Tailed Boxer" in AKA literature; in AKC literature, though, he was styled "Pombo the Long" and thus took to meriting higher breeding fees.) Arguably, his enduring fascination with the mosaic and cloisonné serpents came to enhance Pombo's social standing, although others took to acclaiming him for his pipe smoking. No other boxers ever paid such attention to the steps of the prototypical Late Bronze Age escalator, but then, no other boxers with AKA or AKC credentials had ever taken up pipe smoking, either, so who can reliably say?

When the exhibit of the Late Bronze Age escalator moved to another museum, the staff there had not been properly alerted to Pombo's enthusiasm. "Kindly leave your pipe in the tray provided at the entrance", a junior curator scolded Pombo on his first visit to the new exhibition. Pombo was not inclined to surrender his pipe or allow the escalator to spin unobserved in either direction, however: the gnawed stem of the former was all his own, while the entrancing mosaic and cloisonné snakes had long since slithered their paths into his canine brain. "Not likely", Pombo replied drily after a four-

minute reflection, a verdict the junior curator mistook for a non sequitur.

The Chief Curator, who had just received a fax concerning Pombo's status, rushed up and waved the rude curator off. "Ahhh, Signor Pombo! Not you, certo!" The Chief Curator apologized and perspired profusely, and although he was considerably near-sighted, he escorted Pombo to the escalator exhibit and installed a spare Canopic jar nearby for convenient ash disposal. Pombo was much gratified by the sudden transformation of curatorial manners in this new museum: but to test the Chief Curator's sincerity, Pombo asked for a light. The Chief Curator obligingly fumbled with a box of small wooden matches and proffered a lit one. With ocular ambidexterity, Pombo eyed the Chief Curator as he puffed and tugged on the pipe and cast his other eye to the Late Bronze Age escalator exhibit.

As the match went out, the Chief Curator observed Pombo's close interest in the escalator. Paying closer attention himself, despite his myopia, the Chief Curator observed that Pombo had settled his gaze unambiguously on the escalator's mosaic and cloisonné steps. "Late Bronze Age", the Chief Curator whispered, not to be a show-off but to offer accurate information to an esteemed visitor like Pombo. For his part, Pombo concurred but lacked the vocabulary necessary to make his agreement plain to the Chief Curator.

Furthermore, Pombo lacked the vocabulary sufficient to make his discovery known to the Chief Curator. What was being exhibited to the public as a prototype of a Late Bronze Age escalator was nothing of the sort. Pombo's focused observations had revealed instead the device to be a prototype of a Late Bronze Age animation device: but with all the snakes writhing through his canine cranium at this point, Pombo just didn't have time to explain: someone had to keep an eye on the squirming, slithering snakes!

As the exhibition of the Late Bronze Age escalator toured the world's museums of science and industry, Pombo toured as the exhibit's official mascot. Visitors learned never to obstruct his view, especially while he was smoking his pipe.

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