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**The J. Paul Getty Museum Presents
*Book of Beasts: The Bestiary in the Medieval World***

The exhibition represents an unprecedented gathering of bestiaries and the first major exhibition to explore them in depth

**At the Getty Museum, Getty Center, Los Angeles
May 14 through August 18, 2019**



Griffin (detail), from Book of Flowers, France and Belgium, 1460. Tempera colors on parchment. Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, Ms. 72.A.23, fol 46

LOS ANGELES—Unicorns, lions, and griffins race, tumble, and soar through the pages of bestiaries – the medieval book of beasts. The bestiary brought creatures – both real and fantastic – to life before a reader's eyes, offering both devotional inspiration and literary enjoyment. A kind of encyclopedia of animals, the bestiary was among the most popular illuminated texts in northern Europe, especially in England, during the Middle Ages (about 500-1500).

On view at the J. Paul Getty Museum May 14 through August 18, 2019, *Book of Beasts: The Bestiary in the Medieval World* explores for the first time in a major museum exhibition the bestiary and its widespread influence on medieval art and culture.

"Many of the illuminated manuscripts produced in the European Middle Ages centered around stories from the Christian Bible," explains Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. "Less well known, however, are the various genres of writing and illustration that celebrate and ornament aspects of worldly life and popular belief. Among the most widely-read and striking of these was the bestiary: illustrated collections of real, imaginary and hybrid beasts, many of exotic origin and sometimes entirely fantastic, that give visual form to the creatures believed to inhabit the known world and the distant realms beyond. Both for their artistic inventiveness and for the insights they provide into the fertile medieval imagination these works are one of the most engaging aspects of medieval art."

This exhibition features one-third of the world's surviving Latin illuminated bestiaries and gathers together more than 100 works in a variety of media from institutions across the United States and Europe, including manuscripts, paintings, tapestries, sculpture, and decorative arts from the Middle Ages. A final section includes modern and contemporary works that trace the enduring legacy of the bestiary tradition. The Getty Museum's three medieval bestiaries, including the famed Northumberland Bestiary (English, about 1250-1260) are central to the exhibition, and provided the inspiration for the exhibition's theme.

"The bestiary's images can be seen as the medieval equivalent of contemporary memes," said Elizabeth Morrison, senior curator of manuscripts at the Getty Museum. "They served as memorable and engaging snapshots of particular animals that went viral in medieval culture. The bestiary, in fact, still impacts how we talk about and characterize animals today.



Lions, from a bestiary, England, about 1250. Tempera colors on parchment. The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, Ms. Bodl. 764. Fol 2v



Aquamanile, Germany (Nuremberg), ca. 1425-1450. Copper alloy, 39.4 x 29.2 x 11.3 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964. 64.101.1493

The very first line of the medieval bestiary introduces the lion as the king of beasts, an idea we take for granted even if most people don't know its origin."

Book of Beasts: The Bestiary in the Medieval World is organized into five sections: *The Unicorn*, *The Bestiary*, *Beyond the Bestiary*, *The Bestiary and Natural History*, and *The Legacy of the Bestiary*.

The first section focuses on a quintessentially medieval beast, the unicorn. This case study explores the bestiary as one of the most popular sources of information on animals in the Middle Ages. It presented real and legendary creatures as

living allegories, with the animals' physical and behavioral characteristics symbolizing central aspects of the Christian faith. For example, the bestiary explains that the unicorn is a pure but fierce creature that can only be captured by a maiden placed in the forest alone, allowing hidden hunters to come forth and slay their prize for its valuable horn. The bestiary goes on to interpret this beast as a symbol for Christ, who was born to a virgin, making possible his eventual death and Crucifixion. The unicorn became one of the most popular animals in art of the period, largely due to its powerful Christian message, and exemplifies how the bestiary's texts and images played a vital role in establishing animal stories and their Christian connotations in the minds of audiences.

The next section — *The Bestiary* — presents the development of the bestiary's textual and visual tradition, highlighting a series of animals and their related stories. Medieval bestiaries contained anywhere from a few dozen to more than 100 descriptions of animals, each accompanied by an iconic image. Although the essential elements of the text and imagery associated with the beasts remained consistent across manuscripts, the bestiary was not a standardized book. The aim of the stories and illuminations was not to impart factual information or visual accuracy but rather to convey the wonder, variety, and hidden meaning found in the natural world. This section will introduce the animals through one of the most common arrangements of the medieval bestiary: quadrupeds, birds, serpents, and sea creatures. Elephants, eagles, sirens, hippos, and dragons are just a few of the fabulous animals encountered in this section and discussed in depth by the medieval bestiary.

The third section — *Beyond the Bestiary* — takes a look at different incarnations of the bestiary's animals. The bestiary's stories and images were so popular that medieval artists readily adapted them to a variety of works of art, ranging from ivories and metalwork to stained glass and tapestries. Because many bestiary animals communicated complex religious messages, they often appeared in liturgical and devotional contexts where worshippers could easily link them to Christian ideology. In addition, the well-known characteristics associated with numerous beasts were effortlessly appropriated for secular works made for the elite world of the court. The use of animals as allegories for human virtues and vices was not limited to European Christian art but was a widespread phenomenon that transcended geography and religion. This section the exhibition will include Hebrew and Arabic manuscripts with moral stories featuring animal characters.

Bestiary and the Natural World encompasses the use of bestiary material in natural history texts, encyclopedias, and maps. The medieval bestiary was never intended as a scientific work, but much of its lore was eventually incorporated into the nascent field of natural history. The period of the bestiary's greatest popularity corresponded with a movement toward the creation of encyclopedia intended to gather together all knowledge. Many of these included a section devoted to animals, which relied heavily on the bestiary but often stripped away the Christian symbolism. At the same time, the European conception of the world was being broadened by a growth in trade and travel that increasingly linked the West with other parts of the globe. The stories popularized through the bestiary continued to influence natural history texts and images well into the sixteenth century.

The final section — *The Legacy of the Bestiary* — explores the medieval bestiary's artistic impact in more recent times with work by modern and contemporary artists such as Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder, Kate Clark, Claire Owen, and Damien Hirst. So influential is this medieval art form that today the term bestiary often refers to any collection of description of animals, whether in words or images. Modern bestiaries, as well as contemporary works of art in an array of media that explore the human-animal relationship, draw on the medieval tradition while also introducing elements from the artists' own time and place.

Book of Beasts: The Bestiary in the Medieval World is curated by Elizabeth Morrison with Larisa Grollemond, assistant curator of manuscripts at the Getty Museum. In conjunction with the exhibition, Getty Publications will release a catalog of the same name edited by Morrison with Grollemond. With over 270 color illustrations and contributions by 26 leading scholars, this gorgeous volume explores the bestiary and its pervasive influence on medieval

art and culture as well as on modern and contemporary artists. In conjunction with the exhibition, Getty Publications will also release *Don't Let the Beasties Escape This Book!* written by Julie Berry, and featuring fantastical illustrations by April Lee. This children's book contains engaging back matter with information on life in the Middle Ages and a mini-bestiary drawn from original manuscripts of the era.

The exhibition is generously supported by The Leonetti/O'Connell Family Foundation, The Ruddock Foundation for the Arts, Jeffrey P. Cunard, and Elizabeth and Mark S. Siegel. Additional support is provided by Allen Adler and Frances Beatty, Ariane David on behalf of the Ernest Lieblch Foundation, the J. Paul Getty Museum Director's Council, Dar and Geri Reedy, Virginia Schirrmeister, and Brian and Kathy Stokes.

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The J. Paul Getty Museum collects Greek and Roman antiquities, European paintings, drawings, manuscripts, sculpture and decorative arts to 1900, as well as photographs from around the world to the present day. The Museum's mission is to display and interpret its collections, and present important loan exhibitions and publications for the enjoyment and education of visitors locally and internationally. This is supported by an active program of research, conservation, and public programs that seek to deepen our knowledge of and connection to works of art.

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