



## **THE MEDIEVAL BESTIARY** AN INTRODUCTION

In the Middle Ages, animal stories were immensely popular throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The people of the time were, of course, dependent on wild and domestic animals for their survival, and so had an obvious interest in the animals around them. But there is more to it than just a requirement for knowledge of the animals they knew and used; there is a distinctly spiritual and even mystical aspect to the animal lore of the Middle Ages.

The bestiary, or "book of beasts", describes a beast and uses that description as a basis for an allegorical teaching. It also includes text from other sources and while not a "zoology textbook", it is not only a religious text, but also a description of the world as it was known in the middle ages.

The medieval period was intensely religious. In western Europe, the religion was Christianity; in North Africa and the Middle East it was primarily Islam. The Jews and their religion were found almost everywhere, living among Christians and Muslims, sometimes tolerated, sometimes not. Despite the frequent violence between them, all three religions were closely related and shared many of the same spiritual and historical texts. In particular, all three considered all or

most of the Hebrew Bible (called the Old Testament by Christians), which contains many references to animals, to be sacred.

The 52 illustrations which introduce the exhibition are drawn from medieval bestiaries, accompanied by modern paraphrases from their texts describing animals' attributes and characteristics. The majority of traits attributed to the animals are false; others, such as the idea that bees are 'birds' because of their ability to fly, have been supplanted by a different system of classification. Several fantastical creatures such as the half-human, half-plant 'mandrake' never existed. The bestiaries were not meant as scientific texts, but tools of study and moralising persuasion. It is unclear which animals were known to be fabulous or mythical, like the centaur, and which were thought to be real. Mostly the texts intertwine fact and fable seamlessly.

Each of the animals' characteristics were seen as allegorical, that is to say they represented a way in which our own behaviour could be sinful or holy. The asp who blocks its ears represented the wealthy, who were metaphorically seen as blocking one ear with sin and pressing the other to worldly desire. The eagle, which when old flies to the sun to regain its youth and sight, reflects the renewal or man's moral insight by the spread of Christianity, after being 'old in his sins' in pagan times.

Bestiaries reflect other aspects of the medieval world-view and social order. It was believed that bees were split between workers and a noble 'king bee', who the former chose to serve. Five hundred years later, the invention of magnifying glasses revealed the 'kings' to be 'queens'; until then it was simply assumed that such leaders would be male. Bestiaries contain several turns of phrase which remain part of our modern lexicon. The phrase 'crocodile tears', for example, reflects the medieval belief that crocodiles wept in pretend guilt if they ate a human.

### **Discussion Point**

- What other common phrases are there which place human characteristics onto animals?  
e.g. Cheeky monkey, elephant never forgets,

Using one or more of these animals create a new page for the bestiary with an image and description of the creature.

- Imaginary or fantasy creatures are often found within film and literature. What examples can you think of? Were there morals associated with them?

In the bestiary some animals are described as 'composite creatures', we would now call this mixed breeding. In the 19th century, breeders crossed cattle and bison to come up with the beefalo. The mule (a horse-donkey combo) has been around, too, for ages. Newer mixed-species breeds include the liger (lion-tiger mix) and zeedonk. In the dog world, the labradoodle, from Australia, started the hybrid trend in the 1980s.

- Medieval animal illustrations are usually not "realistic"; in many cases the artist could never have seen an example of the beast, even of those which were not mythical.

Activity - Split students into pairs and try to describe an unusual animal to your partner without saying its name or which family it belongs to. You can describe its colour, texture, and distinguishing features and also what it eats, where it lives and other characteristics. The person receiving the information should draw what they think the animal looks like.

Then, find a mythological creature from literature e.g The Kraken, the animals found in Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' or 'Alice Through the Looking Glass'. Create a new page for a bestiary which features this animal complete with illustration. You can use some of the characteristics already found in the texts but remember there should be a moral lesson within the page.

# LINKS TO THE CURRICULUM

## SCIENCE

Key Stage 3 - QCA Unit 7D: Variation and classification

Paul Bush's and Uri A's film pieces both deal with the classification of species and portray a series of images which document their differences and variations. The film uses 3500 different species of insects from a museum collection. Aspects of classification can be seen as insects develop an extra leg, bigger wings or change colour.

Although the animals in Uri A's work are man made, the principles of classification are the same as the film spans through wind-up toys and battery powered animals.

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Key Stage 3 - QCA Unit 9B: Where did the universe come from?  
Section 2: Did God create everything, including us?

Darwin's Theory of Evolution verses creationism.

The opening text of Paul Bush's film states that: "There are an estimated 10 million insect species of which only 1 million have been identified." Students can discuss the opposing ideas that these species have evolved over time or that they were created in six days.

## HISTORY

Key Stage 3 - QCA Unit 4: How did the medieval church affect people's lives?

The Medieval Bestiary

In the Christian west, it was commonly believed that the natural world, the so-called "book of nature", had been arranged by God to provide a source of instruction to humanity. This idea was based, at least in part, on biblical verses such as this one from the book of Job:

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the

hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind." (Job 12:7-10).

It was said that the characteristics of animals were created by God to serve as examples for proper conduct and to reinforce the teachings of the Bible. As the [pelican](#) revives her dead young after three days with her own blood, so Christ "revived" humanity with his blood after three days in the grave. The way the young of the [hoopoe](#) care for their elderly parents shows how human children should care for theirs. As [doves](#) are safe from their enemy the [dragon](#) as long as they stay in the shelter of the [peridexion tree](#), so Christians will be safe from their enemy Satan as long as they stay in the shelter of the Church. As the [eagle](#) rejects any of its young that cannot stare unflinching into the sun, so God will reject sinners who cannot bear the divine light. All of Creation was said to reflect the Creator, and to learn about the Creator one could study the Creation.

The bestiary [manuscripts](#) were usually illustrated, sometimes lavishly, as for example in the [Harley Bestiary](#) and the [Aberdeen Bestiary](#); the pictures served as a "visual language" for the illiterate public, who knew the stories - preachers used them in sermons - and would remember the moral teaching when they saw the beast depicted. Bestiary images could be found everywhere. They appeared not only in bestiaries but in manuscripts of all kinds; in churches and monasteries, carved in stone both inside and out, and in wood on [misericords](#) and on other decorated furniture; painted on walls and worked into mosaics; and woven into tapestries.

Information from [www.bestiary.ca](http://www.bestiary.ca) -

## **CITIZENSHIP**

What are the ethical issues of exhibiting art work which contains dead animals?

What statements does the artwork say about the use of animals in society?

## **ENGLISH**

Throughout the exhibition the accompanying wall texts make references to literature, these include:

Lewis Carroll – Alice in Wonderland

Roald Dahl

George Orwell – Animal Farm

WH Auden – Address to the Beasts

## Activity

Other books for reference:

J K Rowling's 'Harry Potter' series - contains many animals from the medieval bestiary including the basilisk and mandrakes.

C S Lewis' 'Narnia' series - contains centaurs which are found in bestiaries.

Poetry anthologies often contain animal poems eg 'The Faber Book of Beasts' including some of the

Classic Poets before 1914

William Blake - The Tyger, The Fly, The Lamb,

John Keats - Ode to a Nightingale

William Wordsworth - The Green Linnet, To a Butterfly, To a Skylark

Christina Rossetti - A Frog's Fate

Thomas Gray - Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Goldfishes.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge - The Nightingale

Percy Bysshe Shelley - To a Skylark

Mythological Creatures

Alfred Lord Tennyson's, 'The Kraken'.

Lewis Carroll - 'Jabberwocky'

## ART HISTORY

**Paul Bush's** film 'While Darwin Sleeps...' displays 5000 insect species in just five minutes of footage. To create this he has produced a photographic inventory and added another element by creating a stop motion animation where the insects appear to change colour and to grow legs and wings. The resulting film is a kind of catalogue of insects.

**Yuri A's** short film 'Unk' is another but one of man-made beasts. In her film she orders hundreds of toy and souvenir animals to create a sequence.

This method of photographic cataloguing has existed within contemporary photographing for a number of years. Among the most famous photographers to use this method are:

**Bernd and Hiller Becher** – They created catalogues of industrialized architecture including mine shafts, lime kilns, silos, cooling towers, blast furnaces, tipples, gasometers.

Isolated, centered, and frontally framed, each object was photographed in as objective a manner as possible. By the mid-1960s the Bechers settled on a preferred presentational mode: the grid. Groupings of prints, each print measuring sixteen by twelve inches or smaller, either framed discretely or encased within a single large frame, facilitate direct, immediate comparison between motifs, which are arrayed without hierarchy, according to type, function, and/or material.

Photographed with a surveyor's stringent attention to detail, these pictures record the idiosyncratic constructions of industrial engineers. These are the marks made on the face of the western world in our recent industrial past - the "anonymous sculptures" which are steadily being demolished and grassed over. The Becher's work has a scientific quality, as they record different "species" of each structure they are also charting the evolution of its design.

#### Discussion Points

- The Bechers photographed objects objectively in order that the subtle differences could become obvious. How does this relate to the work of Paul Bush and Uri A?
- Discuss the presentation method of Paul Bush in comparison to the photographers mentioned above. How does the use of animation change the viewing of the work?

#### Activity

- Using Paul Bush and Yuri A's ideas of creating a photographic and video catalogue of objects, set up a project where students make an inventory of an object familiar to them. They will need to find an object which comes in plenty of varieties in order for them to document the differences. Students will need to find a way to photograph them objectively and may want to look at the Becher's style as inspiration. Students may want to import them into a video package and transform into an animation.

**Ebony Andrews'** transforms taxidermied animals into ornaments and functional objects, **Bryndis Erla Hjalmsdottir's** makes animated taxidermied animals.

**Bryndis Erla Hjalmsdottir's** films and animated taxidermied animals create a tragicomic 'theatre of the absurd'.

Taxidermy in contemporary art is not a new phenomenon, many artists and photographers are choosing to work in this way. One of the most famous of the last few year is;

### **Damien Hirst**

Hirst is famous for his dead animals. In *Mother and Child, Divided* he transected a mother and her calf. Each section of pickled bovine stands alone in a glass case, clinically divided from its other half. An even greater gulf exists between mother and child. Some people thought this was quite clever and new, but not everyone agreed that it was art. Those that did might have said the piece made them consider how alienated we are from the visceral reality of our existence; or how fundamentally alone all creatures are: existing as they do, as unalterably separate biological entities; or any number of other things. Not everyone got that much out of it though. One Evening Standard reader, writing to the paper in protest against Hirst's work, complained, 'However you view the exhibit, it increased the demand for dead animals by two, created unnecessary death and cheapened the life of a mother and child. Justice may yet be done should the artist be reincarnated as a dairy cow.'

Other contemporary artists who use or have used taxidermied animals in their work include:

Thomas Grunfeld  
Mauricio Cattelan  
Mark Dion  
Jordan Baseman

### Discussion Points

- Where do you normally see taxidermied animals? What is the difference between the way animals are shown there and the ones you see in this exhibition?

- Compare the work of Ebony Andrews and Bryndis Erla Hjalmarsdottir, what differences are there in the way they use taxidermied animals in their work?
- How does their work affect your thoughts about what we do with animals in our society?

**Tom G. Adriani's** short film 'The Boy Who Chose Sleep' mixes fantastical pencil drawings with still photographs to tell the story of a skeletal animal which, through one boy's imagination, comes to life.

**Robert Morgan's** short film 'The Cat With Hands' is a modern take on Grimm's fairy tales, combining comedy and gothic horror.

Some medieval animal lore was not at all religious, though it still sometimes had a moral message. The fables of Aesop were well known, as were other moralizing fables involving animals. One of the most popular of the fable series was that of [Reynard the Fox](#), the "trickster" figure of the Middle Ages. Reynard is certainly no example for the proper life; the stories depict him as a schemer, a liar, a thief, and a killer, yet in the end he always gets away with his misdeeds, usually at great cost to those around him. The Reynard stories were particularly popular in the Netherlands, Germany and France, where several vernacular versions were produced.