Animals in Art

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The animal is nearest to man in creation and closely woven into his life. The hunter, the nomad, the agriculturist alike needed and used it. What is more, its impenetrable mysterious nature has brought it into man's religious feeling and thought. No wonder then, that from the earliest days on, it has played a foremost part in the realm of art, where we formulate, interpret, and try to solve the deeper problems of our life.

About twelve thousand years before our time, the animal was the main, if not the only theme in art; why, we do not know for sure. The most plausible of the many theories combines several motives: spontaneous desire to decorate objects, to make images from nature and magical superstitions, still alive today with tribes who use hunting and fishing talismans. Hence the image of animals, often pierced by arrows or facing traps, promises successful hunting; and in the 19th and 20th centuries still, animal masks in ritual dances of people with primitive cultures give hope for fertility, rain and other blessings. (figure 17).

The first of the great ancient cultures of historical date, the Egyptian culture, takes, in its art, a different attitude towards the animal; the Egyptian mind of that period is directed towards the static and the periodically recurrent: day and night, the seasons, the repetitious events in life. It is not concerned with the episode tied to the individual, to the single human being with its personal traits. Monuments of Egyptian kings show often the names not of their own battles but of those fought by their predecessors, or enumerate names of barbarian kings defeated long before their time. It is the event itself, victory and triumph of «the» king over his enemies which is
emphasized in Egyptian art, not a particular victory. In analogy with such conception, the enigmatic physiognomy of the animal, which in our eyes shows a lack of individual traits, seems never to alter throughout the ages. They remain, unlike human beings, unchanged through developments, and seem closer to the eternal. This gives them their importance in Egyptian art. The animal often represents a deity or is itself a god. The falcon is the god Horus. Deities are also represented with half human, half animal features. Hathor, the goddess, is sometimes shown as a cow, sometimes as a woman with a cow's head. Or the sculptor gives her the head of a beautiful woman with cow's ears. Similarly, in early Christian art and still in the Middle Ages, three of the evangelists are shown either as men or as the animals which are their attributes, eagle, lion and bull, and sometimes we see their human figures with the animal heads. In Egyptian hieroglyphs the animal becomes a sign in this written language. Many magnificent small stone reliefs have survived which are sculptors' studies of those animals, which appear in ancient Egyptian script, and which the artist had to cut in stone for the large inscriptions on temples and tombs.

The Egyptians, in works of smallish size, and later, in a more monumental style, the Assyrians, with their grandiose stone reliefs of the 9th and 8th century, B.C. have typified the representation of animals which, while utterly true to nature in every detail, are nevertheless stylised and simplified in the most sensitive and beautiful manner.

Greek art idealises its objects, not only the human body and face, but also animals. Greek horses, sculpt-

tured, or painted on vases, after having passed in the 8th and 7th century B.C. through a period of geometrical simplification are the prototypes of the noble, perfectly beautiful animal which the horse can be. (fig. 6).

The Romans are the first people to be particularly interested in the episode, in the specific. Their battle reliefs are historical reports, contain portraits true to life, of emperors, consuls, and generals. Their portrait busts are realistic studies of human individual character. Their animals, often domestic, dogs and cats, even mice, in stone and bronze are shown with great realism, not in a typical, generalizing form and attitude, but as seen on a special episodical occasion; the mouse eating a piece of cheese, etc.

Christian art is the first to introduce true symbols in art. The fish is in no way identified with Christ as the Egyptian falcon is with the god Horus, but is the symbol, the sign of Christ. The Apostles are often shown as lambs. A deer drinking from a source is the symbol for the Christian soul thirsting for the Gospels. The source represents the fountain of life, itself a Christian symbol. The picture of the peacock stands for the immortality of the soul.

It is only since the Renaissance of the 15th century A.D. that the animal for its own sake, without decorative or symbolistic pretext becomes the theme for the artists (fig. 11, 13). All sorts of animals populate the scene for religious pictures; St. Jerome in the desert is shown with a lion, with birds and snakes and scorpions; St. Eustache is shown in a wood full with game: deer, hares, and a great variety of birds, and so on. Animals appear in portraits; Holbein paints a lady


with a squirrel on her arm, Botticelli, a portrait of Giuliano di Medici with a dove. Later, in the 17th and 18th centuries mainly, the animal is painted for its own sake. Stubbs, the magnificent English painter of horses, Delacroix, and others paint again and again animals. In our time the American Morris Graves creates beautiful animal paintings. An American sculptor, Flannagan, chisels powerful animals from stone. Other great artists like Picasso, Klee, etc. have occasionally represented animals in pictures, drawings or graphic technique or even in sculpture and pottery.

Also in the art of the book, the animal plays an important part. Early manuscripts of religious and secular character show grotesque ornamental animals for the embellishment of the written pages. (fig. 2). Later, zoological books, illustrated in the traditional techniques of the woodcut, engraving and lithography, are created by specialists who, while concerned only with scientific illustration, become great artists in their own right. (fig. 1). It is particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries that such books are produced in great numbers, the finest, in France and England. In the 19th century, the Englishman Gould painted during a lifetime the birds of all five continents and we can see them in beautiful folio volumes with innumerable hand-coloured plates. The American, Audubon, is well-known for his beautiful «Birds of America». In our day Picasso has illustrated Buffon's 'Natural History' in a remarkably powerful manner. We could continue endlessly.

In all the decorative arts the animal appears very frequently. For textiles, pottery, wood-carving, metalwork, the artisan selects again and again animal shapes to make his work attractive.

An exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts tries to give at least a general cross-section of animals in art. It covers all cultures from the Far East to the Americas. It covers all times, prehistoric and historic.


No exhibition on this subject could be nearly complete. The field is too vast. But it can provide an idea of the various points of view from which artists have created images of animals: so we see here assembled animals in context with superstition and religion, we observe the great variety in the use of animals in the decorative arts: objects both for practical (fig. 5, 12) and ceremonial (fig. 7, 8, 18) use in the shape of animals: examples of the innumerable form in which animals are used as basis for ornamental designs (fig. 5, 14, 19). We see heraldic animals. We see animals, not existing in nature, but produced by human imagination: chimeras of the Middle Ages, and of early historical periods, from Assyria of...
the 8th century B.C., from early Far East culture, China in particular. Animals in zoological, scientific illustrations are shown, and many animals created just for the love of the subject by great and minor artists — pure works of art for art's sake. We even see in this context animals painted by children (fig. 15).

When we ask why the animal plays such an important part in works of art, the answer can perhaps only be found in the introductory sentences of this sketch: because of the closeness of the animal to man and his life and, we may hope, perhaps because of an inborn love of man for the animal, his closest companion in creation.