



1/5 An elephant as imagined in a 15th century bestiary from Lombardy

## On Animals in Western Art

*This essay accompanies Modern Forms' support of the Animal Ball Art Show 2019, a fundraising exhibition for the charity Elephant Family.*

We are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction event on earth and we are responsible for it. In the grim light of this fact, looking back at representations of animals in human art, two broad sets of images strike me as particularly poignant.

The first set of images, historically speaking, we shall come to later. Instead we will begin by thinking about the medieval European tradition of the bestiary, 'a compendium of beasts'. These manuscripts comprised detailed descriptions and illustrations of European fauna and flora and, often, exotic creatures from distant lands in Africa and Asia, animals of which little was known and which the illustrators constructed from rumour and imagination.

For us, these visual 'guess works' make for amusing curios; crocodiles depicted with cat-like faces, whales cast as deep-sea monsters, or an elephant, as seen here in a 15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript from Lombardy, as essentially a big hairy dog with tusks and a trunk, or, in the most famous work in this tradition, Albrecht Dürer's fairly accurate depiction of a rhinoceros, which he never saw.

Consider, however, that these last two images were drawn just five centuries ago. For us, in the West, that is all the time it has taken for the elephant and the rhino, to take these two examples, to go from being almost mythical to being at once overfamiliar from countless nature programs and on the verge of extinction. It is a measure of how quickly we have used up the world.

The explosion in human power and population of the modern era has been catastrophic for most of the other life forms on the planet. The fact that it is only very recently that this has become widely accepted as a crisis speaks to a deep-seated Western cultural attitude to animals. It is a mindset into which bestiaries, strangely, provide insight. These manuscripts were not products of whimsy or purely academic interest but catalogues of God's creation, a creation over which humanity had been given a divinely mandated dominion. God's gift of this power to humanity is first political act in the Bible:

*And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.*

This simple but radical prejudice, that humans are set apart from and above other animals is one of the foundational beliefs that has underscored and shaped Western culture for a millennium. In Enlightenment and Modernist thinking this divine mandate morphed into a one legitimated instead by our rationality and the power that it has granted us through science and technology. What remained constant was a vision of the world as a hierarchy with humanity at its apex and the rest of the creation, whether animate or not, as an expendable resource.

During the age of the academies in Western art – between the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – the low status of animals as cultural subjects was codified in the accepted hierarchy of paintings genres, in which history painting reigned supreme and animal painting qualified as the second lowest status tier, just above still life. Tellingly in some of the most famous paintings of animals from this period, the subjects depicted are possessions. Think of George Stubb's portrait of the racehorse Whistlejacket, or Carel Fabritius' *The Goldfinch* (used recently as the cover for Donna Tart's novel of the same name) in which the tiny songbird is chained to its perch.

The first set of images that I was thinking off, are the earliest images made by humanity, all those astonishing pre-historic paintings of animals found across the earth. One of the most significant, oldest and most beautiful collection of such paintings was discovered in the Chauvet Cave in Ardèche Gorge in 1994. Hundreds of paintings, all accomplished by any creative standard, depict over thirteen different species. Unusually for Paleolithic cave art, many of the species were predators, cave lions, cave bears (both now extinct) and hyenas. It is thought the oldest paintings date from around 32,000 B.C.

In reality we know little for certain about the paintings but looking at them (images can be found online) it seems self-evident that there is no sense of superiority over the animals depicted, they are clearly not possessions, nor are they in need of help. They are other creatures that the humans of that time lived and died alongside.

The cave and its artistic treasures are the subject of an extraordinary documentary by Werner Herzog, *The Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. At one point in it, Herzog discusses the discovery that two paintings, one painted over the other, which remains visible beneath, were created, according to carbon-dating, over five thousand years apart – ten times the duration that separates us from Durer as he sat in 1515, imaging his rhinoceros. As Herzog observes in the film “The sequence and duration of time is unimaginable to us today. We are locked in history and they were not.”

Perhaps one day humanity, either through disaster or design, will return once again to some state of respectful equivalence with all the other lifeforms with whom we share this planet.

#### **Links:**

<https://m.paddle8.com/auction/animal-ball/>