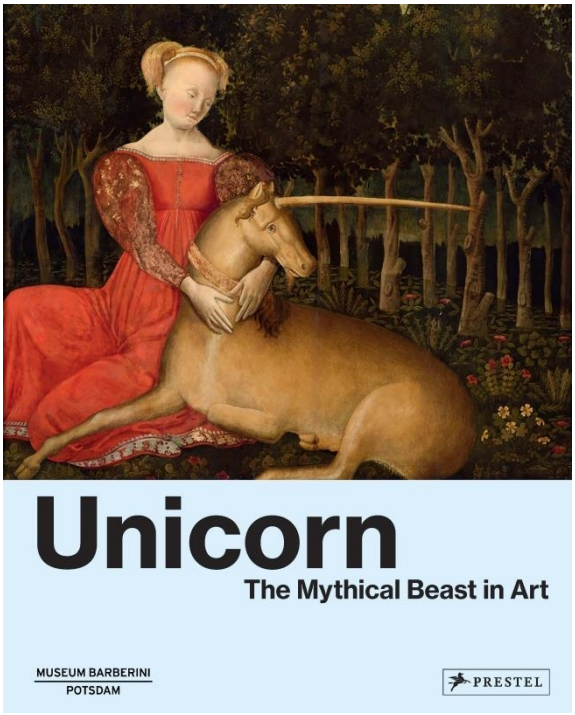

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The Mythical Beast in Art

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Unicorn

The Mythical Beast in Art

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Foreword

The unicorn is unique—even among mythical beasts. Unlike the unicorn, the leviathan, basilisk, and behemoth, though also mentioned in the Bible, are scarcely known today—a fate they share with the gryphon and harpy, protagonists of ancient mythology. By the early modern period at the latest, their existence was discredited, since it could be confirmed neither by first-hand reports nor by excavations. The unicorn, on the other hand, was witnessed by Marco Polo himself, and its horn graced princely chambers of curiosities. The century between 1550 and 1650 would still be required for the emerging natural sciences to shake off the weight of eyewitness reports, identify the famous finds as narwhal tusks, and reject the existence of the unicorn as a species.

The unicorn resonated with the dreams, desires, and longings of people from the Indus region across China and Japan to Persia, before acquiring symbolic significance in the Christian Middle Ages. The difficulty of abandoning belief in the unicorn no doubt arose from its role as a proxy for all that was positive, its status as a symbol of love, innocence, and the harmony of opposites. To part from this belief was to undergo a rite of passage—a coming of age for humanity.

Artistic interpretations of the unicorn have reflected this significance. The exhibition *Unicorn: The Mythical Beast in Art* is thus devoted not just to an animal but to a substantial theme in art history—one that traverses centuries, taking shape in ever-new contexts and a wide range of media and materials. Here for the first time, this theme is explored and exhibited in an overview that extends from antiquity to contemporary art.

With its exit from the animal kingdom, the unicorn passed into the realm of the imagination. Artists have always been fascinated by the extraordinary, and the unicorn's indomitability and connection to nature offered them potential for identification. For them, the magic of the unicorn resided in the impossibility of summoning it by force: it was as indefinable as the art they sought to create. The primal image of the unattainable thus serves as a continual wellspring of artistic possibility.

It is to Michael Philipp, chief curator of the Museum Barberini and coeditor of the museum's publication series, that we owe the idea of exploring this universal theme. At the Museum Barberini, he has set accents with highly successful thematic exhibitions. In 2023 he curated *The Sun: Source of Light in Art,* an exhibition that, like the one on the unicorn, traced a single motif through the world of human imagination from antiquity to contemporary art. His concept for the unicorn exhibition is like a *catena aurea,* a golden chain: for all ten chapters, he has

selected and interpreted written sources that illuminate the historical context and concatenation of the works of art—texts by ancient writers, Christian theologians, naturalists, and early modern physicians. This collection of sources has been assembled into an anthology, a many-voiced fabric of interdependent texts by travelers and naturalists, by compilers, monks, physicians, and poets from 400 BCE to Rainer Maria Rilke and Umberto Eco. They record unicorn sightings, pay homage to the animal, extol it in Marian songs and heroic epics. They call its existence into question and transform it into a fictional character. Michael Philipp's in-depth texts on the exhibited works are based on his ongoing research since 2019 into all aspects of the unicorn's artistic reception. They provide a wealth of fundamentally new insights into the reception history of this mythical beast.

The works for the exhibition were selected by Michael Philipp together with Béatrice de Chancel-Bardelot. As curator at the Musée de Cluny in Paris, de Chancel-Bardelot is an expert on the tapestries of *The Lady and the Unicorn* (cats. 123.1–6), a cycle that remains enigmatic to this day. We are grateful to her for her newest essay on this inexhaustible subject. In 2018 Béatrice de Chancel-Bardelot curated the exhibition *Magiques licornes* in the Musée de Cluny, where she provided the foundations for understanding the unicorn in late fifteenth-century art, while exploring its resurgence in the works of nineteenth- to twenty-first-century artists and its significance in modern society. Together with Annabelle Ténèze and Séverine Lepape, she served as a scholarly curator for the 2021 exhibition *La Dame à la licorne: Médiévale et si contemporaine,* at the Musée Les Abattoirs of Toulouse, demonstrating how contemporary art draws inspiration from medieval works. In this way, Béatrice de Chancel-Bardelot provided important preparatory research for the current exhibition. It is to her engagement that we owe numerous loans from French collections.

The Musée de Cluny is one of the world's most important museums of medieval art. Following an extensive renovation, it reopened in May 2022, inviting visitors to embark on a unique journey through time from the first to the twenty-first century. The fifteenth-century mansion of the abbots of Cluny, built on Roman baths, is now complemented by a contemporary extension designed by architect Bernard Desmoulin and inaugurated in 2018. This cultural heritage houses prestigious collections that illustrate the extraordinary diversity of medieval artistic production, including the world-famous series of six tapestries *The Lady and the Unicorn.* The fascination that this work holds for our audience, young and old, motivated the Musée de Cluny, together with the Museum Barberini, to organize an exhibition on the unicorn in art throughout the ages. One of the Musée de Cluny's missions is to bring art and the medieval world closer to the public. The unicorn remains one of the most popular medieval motifs today. It is therefore important that the museum provides a key to understanding this phenomenon. In a present in which the most successful startups are called "unicorns" and the enduring fascination with the extraordinary manifests itself in pop-cultural mass products, this retrospective is particularly illuminating.

The essays in the catalog originate from an international symposium held in June 2024 at the Museum Barberini. In addition to Béatrice de Chancel-Bardelot and Michael Philipp, we would like to thank Barbara Drake Boehm, Adrien Bossard, Stefan Trinks, and Annabelle Ténèze for their scholarly discussions and contributions. Valentina Plotnikova, assistant curator at the Museum Barberini, played an important role in implementing the exhibition and preparing the catalog.

Together we would like to thank the numerous lenders for their support, including major institutions such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Uffizi Galleries in Florence, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Prado in Madrid, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Louvre in Paris, and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. From German museum collections, we can draw on works from the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz—with five museums and the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin alone contributing loans. We are also pleased that smaller institutions, such as Schloss Hinterglauchau and the Naturalienkabinett Waldenburg, have entrusted their works to us for our show. Many of the works on display would otherwise never or only very rarely travel. Despite its own reopening, the Staatliches Museum Schwerin was willing to part from one of its primary works for our exhibition. For the first time, the unicorn tapestry from the church of Sankt Gotthardt in Brandenburg has been given on loan and was restored with funds from the Hermann Reemtsma Stiftung. We are grateful for the generous support of all participants.

The significance of this joint project for France is demonstrated by the participation of the GrandPalaisRmn, the most important association of French national museums. Our thanks go to its president, Didier Fusillier, for his vote of confidence. Although in our day the unicorn has become a commercial trademark and a product, the deep traces it has left behind in the history of art remain to be rediscovered. The exhibition in Potsdam and Paris is an invitation to this journey of discovery—and to a journey of human imagination through time and space.

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Director
Musée de Cluny
Paris

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Essays

The Existence of the Unseen: The Image and Meaning of the Unicorn in European Art

Michael Philipp

As Arnold Böcklin was working on his painting *The Silence of the Forest* (cat. 148), a visitor to his studio criticized the depiction of the unicorn as "unmöglich und unwahr" (impossible and untrue). Böcklin's friend, painter and printmaker Otto Lasius, reported the conversation between the artist and the critic: "'How could you paint something so unbelievable,' he said to Böcklin. 'No unicorn ever looked like that. The unicorn was a horse with a horn on its head.' 'So—have you ever seen one?' asked Böcklin, laughing."[1]

This anecdote from 1885 shows that it is possible to have a very specific idea of the unicorn's appearance without ever having encountered one. Such an imagination can only come from depictions in visual art, of which there are countless in all shapes, sizes, and media, with considerable variation.[2] With its spotted hide, sand-colored mane, and large bovine eyes, Böcklin's unicorn is an especially unusual example.

This essay begins by examining the earliest literary evidence for the form and character of the unicorn and tracing the influence of these sources on various artistic images of the mythical beast from the ninth to the nineteenth century. Since most authors of monographs on the unicorn since the nineteenth century have come from the fields of evolutionary biology, journalism, theology, history, and philology, little attention has been paid to the animal's outward appearance in its range of variations.[3] Here, the abundance of material calls for a narrowing of the scope to the European unicorn.[4]

A second section focuses on the unicorn in connection with the concept of the "fabulous beast." The uncertainty associated with creatures for which there is no empirical evidence allows the imagination free rein. Comparison with other *creaturae fabulae* such as the basilisk, dragon, and phoenix makes it possible to identify certain characteristics of the unicorn that account for its popularity and favorable reception. Visual depictions of the unicorn played an important role: such images had evidentiary value in travel reports and natural histories of the early modern era, while late sixteenth-century skeptics such as André Thevet and Ambroise Paré pointed to the importance of painting for belief in the unicorn's existence.[5] Finally, the essay concludes by investigating the wide-ranging themes and activities linked to the unicorn over the course of the centuries. Such an overview illuminates the mythical beast as a vehicle for multiple, contradictory attributes, a *coniunctio oppositorum* that enabled projections of all kinds as well as multifaceted associative possibilities.

Moses, speaking of Joseph in his blessing over the tribes of Israel, described his glory "like the firstling of his bullock" and his horns "like the horns of unicorns" (Deut. 33:17).[6] In an interpretation of this passage, fourth-century church father Saint Ambrose, bishop of Milan, asked how Moses imagined the unicorn, "since unicorns themselves are not found among the generations of wild animals, as the experts say."[7]

Whether this passage already voices doubt as to the existence of the unicorn—a thesis that emerged in the sixteenth century at the latest and persisted into the nineteenth century—is a separate question. Other authors, in any case, had a specific notion of the animal's appearance. Ctesias of Cnidus, a physician at the court of King Artaxerxes II Mnemon of Persia, described the unicorn as early as around 400 BCE, claiming that in India there are single-horned "wild asses as large as horses, or even larger. Their body is white, their head dark red, their eyes bluish."[8] Over four hundred years later, Roman scholar Pliny the Elder offered another, more precise description of the unicorn in his comprehensive *Historia naturalis* (Natural History). He, too, localized it in India and characterized it as an animal which "in . . . the body resembles a horse, but in the head a stag, in the feet an elephant, and in the tail a boar" (VIII.31).[9]

Not long after Pliny, however, a second- or third-century author from Alexandria known only as the *Physiologus* characterized the unicorn as a "small animal, like a kid."[10] Although this influential interpreter of animals had nothing else to say about the unicorn's appearance, his brief remark led to its being depicted with a goatee on its chin into the nineteenth century, even when it took on the form of a horse (fig. 1; cats. 25, 99, and 129, for example). The frequent representation of the unicorn with cloven hooves stems from the *Physiologus* as well.

For centuries, these early descriptions remained determinative for visual images of the unicorn. The most precise correspondence to a literary model appears in the monumental painting of a unicorn by Maerten de Vos from 1572, where the combination of features taken from the horse, elephant, deer, and boar points to a careful reading of Pliny (cat. 10). The purplish-red head, described only by Ctesias, appears in an image created in 1587–1630 by the unknown illustrator of the fifteenth-century bestiary *De omnium animalium natura* (On the Nature of All Animals) by Italian humanist Petrus Candidus Decembrius (fig. 2).[11] Here, the unicorn takes the form of a horse and, as Ctesias also specified, has a white coat. Decembrius had described the animal's color as like that of the box tree, that is, a warm nut-brown; Pliny says nothing about color. Given the sparseness or absence of information, the earliest colored images—the bestiaries of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries and the early tapestries—show the unicorn with a white, gray, brown, or even blue coat, sometimes with white speckles (fig. 3; cats. 13, 65).

The horn of the unicorn—its most remarkable characteristic and the one that gives it its name—was not described in detail by ancient authors. The *Physiologus* devoted only a single phrase to this essential feature: "with one horn in the middle of his head."[12] Pliny was somewhat more precise, writing that it has "a single black horn three feet long projecting from the middle of the forehead."[13] The most detailed description is found in Ctesias. According to him, the horn is "about a cubit in length" and is divided by color: "The lower part of the horn . . . is quite white, the middle is black, the upper part, which terminates in a point, is a very flaming red."[14]

– 1 –
Southern Netherlandish after a French (?) cartoon,
The Unicorn Rests in a Garden, 1495–1505,
from the *Unicorn Tapestries,*
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

– 2 –
Italian, *Rhinoceros and Unicorn,* 1587–1630,
in Petrus Candidus Decembrius, *De omnium animalium natura* (On the Nature of All Animals), 1460, fol. 41r,
Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City

– 3 –
Various versions of the unicorn from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century

Top row, left to right:

Southern German, *Unicorn,* in *Aquarelle von Säugetieren* . . . (Watercolors of Mammals . . .), seventeenth century, p. 25 Zentralbibliothek Zurich

English (Salisbury?), *Unicorn,* in a *Bestiary,* 1240–50, fol. 15r, British Library, London

Upper Rhenish (Basel), *Six Symbolic Animals* (detail), ca. 1440, Wartburg-Stiftung, Eisenach (cat. 14)

Spanish, *Tile with Unicorn Decoration,* late fifteenth century, Museum Folkwang, Essen

Middle row, left to right:

Southern French, *Unicorn,* in the *Pontificale de Guillaume Durand,* ca. 1357–60, fol. 232, Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris

English (Salisbury?), *Unicorn,* in the *Bodley Bestiary,* ca. 1230–40, fol. 22r, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford (cat. 28)

Upper Rhenish (Basel), *Wild Men and Fabulous Beasts* (detail), ca. 1430–40, MAK—Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna (cat. 65)

German, *Unicorn,* mid-fifteenth century, Museum Heylshof, Worms

Bottom row, left to right:

English, *Unicorn,* in the *Aberdeen Bestiary,* ca. 1200, fol. 15r, Sir Duncan Rice Library, University of Aberdeen

English, *Unicorn,* in the *Bestiary of Anne Walshe,* 1400–25, fol. 13r, Det Kgl. Bibliotek, Copenhagen

French (Paris), *Calendar Page, March,* in a *Book of Hours,* fifteenth century, fol. 3v, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna

David Kandel, *Date Palm with Unicorn,* in Hieronymus Bock, *Kreutterbuch* (Herbal Book), Strasbourg 1565, p. 345

– 4 –
Netherlandish (Utrecht), *Unicorn,*
in Jacob van Maerlant, *Der naturen bloeme* (The Flower of Nature), ca. 1350–75, fol. 55v,
Leiden University Libraries

These three authors' descriptions, which originated over a period of about six hundred years, were later supplemented only by a few additional details regarding the animal's external appearance. Early third-century compiler Gaius Julius Solinus, for example, echoed Pliny in his entry on the unicorn in the cosmography *Collectanea rerum memorabilium* (Collection of Memorable Things), but also added, "A horn extends from the middle of its forehead with marvelous splendor, four feet in length, so sharp that whatever it attacks is easily pierced by its blow."[15]

Petrus Candidus Decembrius even fabulated a length of "seven feet or more"—over two meters, and thus inconceivable in a practical sense—and supported his claim with the bold assertion, "as I myself saw on a dead specimen in Pavia and Naples."[16] These indications of length, ranging from forty-five to two hundred centimeters, are reflected in various representations of the unicorn. When depicted in isolation, such as in the early bestiaries, the horn can receive fantastical dimensions (fig. 4), while scenes that include other animals or humans usually show it with more "realistic" proportions.

The sources offer no information as to the shape of the horn. The earliest image in an illuminated manuscript, the *Bern Physiologus* from around 830 (fig. p. 39), shows a short, crescent-shaped horn, a rare version that also occurs in Albrecht Dürer's iron-plate etching from 1516, *The Abduction on a Unicorn* (cat. 91). In illuminations in early psalters, the horn can appear long and curved, as in the *Pantokrator Psalter* from the ninth to tenth century, the *Theodore Psalter* from the eleventh century (fig. 5), or early bestiaries.

The orientation of the horn also varies widely: it can stand upright vertically, point forward horizontally or in a curve, or—as often in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—point downward frontally (fig. 6). The surface of the horn is usually smooth; not until 1230 do we find images of a grooved horn, echoing the form of the narwhal tusk, which until the early modern era was considered to be the horn of a unicorn. Among the earliest examples are those in

– 5 –
Byzantine, *Woman with Unicorn,*
in the *Theodore Psalter,* eleventh century, fol. 124v,
British Library, London

– 6 –
Southern German, *Ascending Unicorn,*
late twelfth–early thirteenth century,
Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich

– 7 –
English, *Unicorn,* in the *Rochester Bestiary,* 1230–40, British Library, London

the *Bodley Bestiary* (fig. 3; cat. 28) and the *Rochester Bestiary* (fig. 7; p. 40).[17] The sawblade-like notches in unicorn images from the thirteenth and fourteenth century may be derived from the spiral structure of the narwhal tusk (cat. 84).

Nothing Certain in Science

One element that was almost invariably present in ancient descriptions found little resonance in European depictions of the unicorn. Ctesias had characterized it as swift and powerful, impossible to capture alive. According to Pliny, the unicorn was the "fiercest animal";[18] for Solinus, it was "most horrifying, a monster with a dreadful roar."[19] These descriptions were probably informed by reports of the rhinoceros, a frequent conflation or confusion. Even Marco Polo, whose travel report was composed around 1300, associated the rhinoceros he saw on Sumatra with European unicorn lore: "They are very ugly, and fond of wallowing among mire. It is not true, as asserted among us, that they allow themselves to be taken by a virgin, but quite the contrary."[20]

Roman writer Claudius Aelianus, also known as Aelian, had already noted the differences between the unicorn and the rhinoceros in his second- to third-century zoological treatise *De natura animalium* (On the Nature of Animals), describing the former as a wild ass (4.52) and the latter as *cartazonus* (Greek for "heavily armored") (16.20).[21] In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the aspect of strength and wildness was reflected in the unicorn's association with the Wild People (see cats. 62–71), in scenes showing it engaged in battle (see cats. 73–77, 80–86, for example) or, if depicted in isolation, leaping or preparing to spring (cat. 99).

Contrary to the ancient sources, what came to predominate in medieval Europe was the characterization of the unicorn as a gentle, peaceful, and trusting animal, an interpretation derived from the *Physiologus.* This Christian treatise on nature and symbolism states that the unicorn can be captured "in this manner: men lead a virgin maiden to the place where he most resorts and they leave her in the forest alone. As soon as the unicorn sees her he springs into her lap and embraces her. Thus he is taken captive and exhibited in the palace of the king."[22] This conception, influential until the time of Marco Polo and into the early modern period, is believed to be derived from the ancient Indian legend of Rishyasringa (Gazelle Horn), a hermit, narrated in the Indian epic *Mahabharata.*[23]

The idea of the unicorn in the lap of a virgin had consequences for its visual depiction. Even if, as the *Physiologus* writes, the unicorn was only the size of a small goat, it can scarcely be imagined as fitting in a woman's lap,[24] and such pictorial representations are correspondingly rare (fig. 8; cats. 117, 119). The balance between the desire, on the one hand, to not compromise the unicorn's dignity by reducing it to the size of a lap dog and on the other to show the trusting affection emphasized by the *Physiologus* led to a solution in which the unicorn placed its feet in the virgin's lap or allowed her to embrace it (cats. 32, 34, 36, 110, 112, 113, 116, 118, 122).

Both Ctesias, as quoted by other ancient writers, and Pliny and the *Physiologus* were considered indisputable, authoritative sources of antique or Christian knowledge as late as the sixteenth century. Their explanations were read and repeated again and again in encyclopedias and natural histories until well into the early modern period. These brief, not-very-detailed characterizations of the unicorn allowed artists latitude for a range of imaginative elaborations. In all of the many and diverse variations, however, the animal was always identified by its unique attribute: the single horn projecting from the middle of its forehead.

The discrepancies in the received descriptions of the unicorn made it difficult for naturalists of the early modern period to treat of it in their works of animal lore. Zurich physician and scholar Conrad Gessner adopted a pragmatic approach: in the first volume of his *Historia animalium* (History of Animals) of 1551, he allowed all the antique authors to speak for themselves, repeating at length their varying descriptions.[25] He illustrated his entry on the unicorn with a woodcut (cat. 44) based on illustrations from the travel reports of Bernhard von Breydenbach from 1486 and Ludovico de Varthema from 1515 (cats. 39, 40).[26] Both images incorporated familiar elements of the European characterization of the unicorn and thus seemed to confirm them, laying claim to a level of accuracy rooted in a

– 8 –
Raphael, *Portrait of Young Woman with Unicorn,* ca. 1505–06, Galleria Borghese, Rome

– 9 –
Tobias Stimmer, *The Animals Entering Noah's Ark,*
in *Biblia sacra veteris et novi testamenti: secundum editionem vulgatam,*
Basel 1578, p. 7

new source of persuasive power: eyewitness testimony. Gessner showed a splendid, horselike animal with cloven hooves, billowing mane, and a large spiral horn on its forehead—although he also distanced himself from the illustration with a commentary that expressed doubt as to its authenticity: "This figure is such as is depicted by painters today, about which I have no certainty."[27]

For an early modern scholar, such skepticism with regard to the unverifiable was unusual; predecessors and contemporaries had illustrated the unicorn unquestioningly and as a matter of course. Gessner had adopted the pictorial representation of the unicorn from contemporary artistic images and introduced it into a scientific work. From there, it spread to the art of the subsequent period, as seen in a 1578 woodcut of *The Animals Entering Noah's Ark* by Tobias Stimmer (fig. 9).[28] In 1563 a German translation of Gessner's work by Conrad Forer was published in Zurich under the title *Thierbuoch* (Animal Book). The title page explicitly states that the true "conterfactur" (likeness) of the animals illustrated in the publication was "presented for the use and benefit of all lovers of the arts, physicians, painters, sculptors, huntsmen, and cooks."[29]

A Fabulous Beast

In 1661 the compendium *Zoologia physica* (Zoology) by natural scientist and scholar Johann Sperling was published in Leipzig. Sperling had died three years earlier, and the posthumous publication of his zoological handbook was overseen by his former pupil Georg Caspar Kirchmaier, who like Sperling was a professor at the University of Wittenberg.[30] The frontispiece by Johann Baptist Paravicinus shows Sperling working at a desk by the seashore, with God the Father hovering in the sky above. The landscape is filled with all kinds of animals, including fish, birds, mammals, and insects (fig. 10). To the left stands a female figure, identified by an inscription as *amor spectari,* the love of looking—an allegory of the sense of sight.

Notwithstanding this emphasis on the importance of observation—an essential element of early modern science—the image shows not only an elephant, lion, snail, and caterpillar, but also a number of animals for whose existence there is no empirical evidence. A leviathan in the water opens its terrifying maw, while a winged basilisk crouches in the left foreground; on the right is a unicorn, with a phoenix in the palm tree above it. These additions are reflected in textual augmentations to Sperling's zoological treatise: Kirchmaier included six disquisitions of his own regarding the basilisk, unicorn, phoenix, behemoth, leviathan, dragon, and spiders. The reason for choosing these animals is indicated on the title page of a separate edition of his disputations from 1736: *ad illustrandum varia scripturae sacrae loca* (to illustrate various passages of sacred Scripture).[31]

With this compilation, Kirchmaier identified a category of creatures that today bears the name "fabulous beasts" and includes many others such as the griffin, dragon, and harpy.[32] Animals mentioned in the Bible or in ancient works of natural history or mythology whose existence could not be not proved were self-evidently included in medieval bestiaries or encyclopedias such as the thirteenth-century *Liber de natura rerum* (Book on the Nature of Things) by Thomas de Cantimpré, along with its translation into Netherlandish by Jacob van Maerlant (cats. 45–47). No one questioned the reality of such creatures; only with the rise of scientific criteria such as empiricism and evidence in the sixteenth century did doubt regarding nonobservable animals begin to arise among naturalists. In his *Historia animalium,* Conrad Gessner listed over two dozen creatures whose existence he denied; the unicorn was not one of them. Gessner, however, integrated the entries on these animals into his alphabetical systematization and did not classify them separately as *bestiae fabulae*.[33]

– 10 –
Johann Baptist Paravicinus, *Frontispiece,* in Johann Sperling, *Zoologia physica* (Zoology), ed. Georg Caspar Kirchmaier, second edition, Wittenberg 1669

The first author in Germany to explicitly define the category of fabulous beasts was probably Christian Richter, a secondary school teacher from Gotha who published the treatise *Ueber die fabelhaften Thiere* (On Fabulous Beasts) in 1797.[34] He distinguished between fabulous creatures that were "lediglich Geburten der Dichter-Phantasie" (merely the offspring of poetic imagination) and those that were known from reports and were thus based on real animals, "nur daß nicht bey jedem mit Gewißheit angegeben werden kann, welche" (except that it is not possible in every case to indicate with certainty which).[35] Among others, Richter described the sphinx, chimera, dragon, griffin, and phoenix, creatures that—thanks to enlightened science—could now be banished from natural history. He viewed the unicorn as an exception, since "dessen Existenz noch von vielen jetztlebenden sehr schätzenswerthen Männern, vertheidigt wird" (its existence is still defended by many very worthy men who are still alive today).[36]

But the unicorn's special status among fabulous beasts was due not only to the ongoing discussion of its existence, even around 1800. Rather, it differed from the other creatures in this class with regard to at least five additional aspects: its aesthetic appearance, its religious significance, its relationship to humanity, its visible relics, and its medicinal powers.

The four fabulous beasts from the Bible that Kirchmaier mentions alongside the unicorn—the basilisk, dragon, behemoth, and leviathan—function as representatives of evil and malevolence, as instruments of vengeance, or as symbols of threat and a source of terror. Jeremiah the prophet proclaims that in vengeance the Lord will "send serpents, cockatrices [basilisks] among you" (Jer. 8:17). Isaiah speaks of "the land of trouble and anguish, from whence come[s] the . . . fiery flying serpent" (Isa. 30:6). Of the leviathan, God says to Job, "When he raiseth up himself, the mighty are afraid" (Job 41:25).

Many fabulous beasts are hideous and monstrous; their negative attributes are reflected in their external appearance. The book of Job describes the behemoth as a gigantic, awe-inspiring monster: "His bones are as strong pieces of brass; his bones are like bars of iron" (Job 40:18). No less frightening is the description of the leviathan: "Who can open the doors of his face? his teeth are terrible round about" (Job 41:14). According to Isaiah, the basilisk comes from the snake (Isa. 14:29); in later sources it is described as a hissing, unsightly hybrid, like a rooster with clawed feet and a scaly serpent tail. In the Revelation of Saint John, one of the signs appearing in heaven is "a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth" (Rev. 12:3–4). The descriptions of such creatures were enhanced by pictorial representations in ever more terrifying forms.

I Am the Unicorn

The unicorn has nothing in common with such hideous spawns: whether in the form of a goat or of a horse, whether small and dainty or large and stately, even in its manifestation as a wild beast, its appearance is noble, dignified, and appealing. Dominican theologian Felix Fabri, who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1483–84 with Bernhard von Breydenbach, noted his positive feelings upon seeing a unicorn: *ejus aspectus fuit nobis delectabilis* (its appearance was delightful to us).[37] Portuguese missionary Jerónimo Lobo, who spent time in Ethiopia in 1625–34, described the enjoyment of a group of Portuguese soldiers while looking at a unicorn: "The particular survey of his parts seised them with delight and Admiration."[38]

The aesthetic appeal of the unicorn arises from the fact that its form is *non contra naturam:* it does not contradict the general laws of nature.[39] Its constitution reflects familiar patterns and seems plausible—unlike, for example, the behemoth or leviathan. This potential for realism enabled artists to believably depict the unicorn in the company of other animals. In secular narratives, this occurred in motifs such as *Orpheus Charming the Wild Animals* (cats. 25, 26), in the religious realm in scenes such as *Saint Stephen's Body Exposed to the Animals* (cat. 24) or images of Noah's Ark (cats. 20, 21). The unicorn's privileged position with respect to all other fabulous beasts is also demonstrated by its presence in images of Paradise, where it often occupies a prominent place near the Creator or Adam (cats. 16, 17). In scenes of Paradise or the Fall, the unicorn can be interpreted as a symbol of Christ in relation to salvation history. In other motifs where it appears as an animal among animals, it has no narrative function; rather, its inclusion lends the paintings a certain aura, or at least the appeal of the exotic.

The unicorn also stands in contrast to the exclusively negative connotations of other fabulous beasts. While the latter evoked associations of fear and delusion, the unicorn enjoyed a fundamentally different, positive meaning in Christian tradition. Among the fabulous beasts, only the phoenix likewise has religious significance in relation to sacred history. Concerning the legendary bird, which is rejuvenated every five hundred years, the *Physiologus* writes, "The phoenix represents the person of the Savior since, descending from the heavens, he left his two wings full of good odors (that is, his best words) so that we . . . might return the pleasant spiritual odor to him in good works."[40] The unicorn's association with Christ, however, is even more pronounced: in a conceptual transfer, it becomes the very emblem of the Savior. In his theological interpretation, the *Physiologus* saw the unicorn as a symbol of Christ, the only begotten Son: in the Gospel of John (John 1:18), the Greek for "only begotten" is *monogenes hyios,* an echo of the Greek word for unicorn, *monókeros.*

The unicorn can also emphasize its own significance through utterances—an action unusual for a fabulous beast. On the central panel of a small Marian altarpiece from the early fifteenth century (cat. 32), a banderole assigned to the unicorn is inscribed with the words *Unicorn sum. significoque deum* (I am the unicorn and signify God). There, the animal appears in the lap of a virgin above the central image of Mary with the Christ Child. In the iconography of the unicorn hunt in the *hortus conclusus,* the unicorn also serves as an attribute of Mary's virginity (cats. 34–36).[41] The same is true for the frequently depicted companionship of woman and unicorn, derived from the statements of the *Physiologus*. The animal's placement in the lap of the Virgin Mary suggests a closeness of interaction that also manifests itself in scenes of emotional intensity in secular imagery from fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy (cats. 113, 115). No other mythical beast can be imagined enjoying such an intimate relationship with a human being.

A defining characteristic of fabulous beasts is the unprovability of their existence. To be sure, the mention of such animals in ancient texts or the Bible—sources of the highest authority—was considered beyond question; moreover, beginning with Marco Polo's account from around 1300, there were travel reports and recorded statements by third parties who claimed to have seen fabulous beasts, especially in distant lands, and who described the qualities and activity of these animals in a realistic-seeming manner. But no documentation exists of a report confirmed by multiple witnesses or a living example of a mythical beast in Europe—in contrast, for example, to Clara, the rhinoceros that was exhibited on tours in multiple countries from 1746 to 1758.[42]

While there was no incontrovertible evidence for the existence of the basilisk, harpy, or leviathan,[43] the unicorn was a different matter, since until around 1600 the tusk of the narwhal was believed to be unicorn horn. The visible presence of these "horns," which found their way to Europe beginning in the twelfth century and were exhibited in churches in Bruges, Paris (cat. 94), Utrecht, and Venice, seemed to prove the unicorn's existence.[44] In isolated instances, the same was true of the griffin, for example with the *"Griffin's Claw" of Saint Cuthbert* from 1575–1625, made of ibex horn (British Museum, London). The rarity and aesthetic quality of the long, white, spiraling narwhal tusks made them coveted objects for princely *Kunstkammern*.

While many fabulous beasts were described as harmful and dangerous to humans, the orientation of the unicorn was the opposite. Its horn could neutralize poison and serve as protection for human beings. The *Physiologus* of the fourteenth century describes how the unicorn, applying its horn to a lake polluted by snake venom, "renders the power of the poison harmless."[45] Numerous images show the unicorn dipping its horn into the water (fig. 11; cats. 10, 82, 121), a visual formula that extended to the emblematics of the seventeenth century[46] and Jan van Kessel's painted zoological encyclopedia *The Four Continents* from 1660 (cat. 43). As early as around 400 BCE, Ctesias had mentioned drinking vessels made of unicorn horn, which offered protection from cramps, epilepsy, and poisoning.[47] This notion, which persisted in science until well into the sixteenth century and far longer in the realm of folklore, inspired the creation of drinking goblets made of narwhal tusk and, as a further elaboration, table decorations and *Kunstkammer* pieces with

– 11 –
Leonardo da Vinci,
The Unicorn Purifies Water, ca. 1478–82,
Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

images of unicorns (cats. 100–03, 106, 107). Powder made from the horn was sold as medicine (cats. 59, 60); the use of the name "Einhorn" (unicorn) for well over a hundred pharmacies in Germany and Austria is derived from this medical association.[48] Apothecary vessels were adorned with images of the unicorn (cat. 57), while shop signs were fashioned as carved imitations of a horse's head onto which a narwhal tusk was mounted (cat. 58). No other fabulous beast had such positive connotations or was so firmly anchored in everyday life.

The unicorn differs from the basilisk, dragon, or leviathan not only in terms of its form, religious significance, interaction, manifestation, and healing effect, but also in the multiplicity of its spheres of activity. Over the course of the centuries, however, the meanings attributed to the unicorn could vary, and in some cases could even be contradictory.

At One Time in Praise, at Another in Censure

In one of the Psalms of David, the speaker complains of being abandoned by God and begs for rescue from great danger: "Save me from the lion's mouth: for thou hast heard me from the horns of the unicorns" (Ps. 22:21). In his desperation, the man experiences the unicorn as a mortal threat, like the mouth of the lion. Contrary to this negative assessment, a verse from Psalm 92 portrays the unicorn as a mark of distinction: "But my horn shalt thou exalt like the horn of an unicorn: I shall be anointed with fresh oil" (Ps. 92:10). Given this biblical ambivalence, Saint Basil, theologian and bishop of Caesarea after 370, noted, "It has been observed that the Scripture has used the comparison of the unicorn in both ways, at one time in praise, at another in censure."[49]

Thus the unicorn's double significance emerges as a theme as early as the fourth century. In late antiquity, this central aspect of the history of the animal's reception would develop far beyond the realm of religion and impact a wide variety of spheres.

– 12 –
Jean-Baptiste Théodon,
A Unicorn Fighting a Dragon, before 1675,
Musée d'Île-de-France, Sceaux

This contradictory character can be expressed in countless pairs of antonyms, subsumed under Saint Basil's categories of praise and censure, positive and negative. The polarities include:

delicate—overwhelming
peaceful—aggressive
strong—weak
salvific—threatening
sacred—profane
chaste—erotic
familiar—exotic.

Such pairs of opposites help organize the many contradictory attributes of the unicorn. These polarities are found in the visual evidence as well.

The theme of the virgin and the unicorn, important in Christian art, characterizes the animal as both shy and curious as well as trusting and often dainty. Within the protected *hortus conclusus,* it lays its forelegs in the lap of the virgin (cats. 34–36), an interaction that demonstrates an unusually close relationship between human and animal. However, the unicorn can also appear imposing, forbidding, and intractable, as in the painting by Maerten de Vos (cat. 10).

The polarity of the delicate and the overwhelming is joined by that of peacefulness and aggression. Ancient writers described the unicorn as wild, strong, and courageous; for Aelian, it was also belligerent. As he writes in his zoological treatise *De natura animalium,* if unicorns were to be hunted, they would "allow their colts, still tender and young, to pasture in their rear, while they themselves fight on their behalf and join battle with the horsemen and strike them with their horns. Now the strength of these horns is such that nothing can withstand their blows, but everything gives way and snaps or, it may be, is shattered and rendered useless" (4.52).[50] Aquamaniles from the fourteenth century portray the wildness of the animal: shown with legs apart and a wide-open mouth, shaggy mane, and exaggerated tail, the unicorn seems to defy its role as a serving vessel used to pour water for handwashing (cat. 62). Other images evoke its aggressiveness in the fight against other animals such as elephants or dragons (fig. 12; cats. 73–77, 80–82, 103). Later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the name and logo of the French automobile manufacturer Corre La Licorne would invoke the unicorn's traditional attributes of strength and speed (cat. 144).

A rare instance of a unicorn turning against a human being is shown in the third print from the mid-sixteenth-century unicorn series by Jean Duvet, in which the animal defends itself against capture (cat. 130.3). Similarly, the unicorn in the fairy tale "The Gallant Tailor" by the Brothers Grimm is known and feared for its aggressiveness (see cat. 87). The trick employed by the tailor bears witness to the unicorn's blind rage: it is captured when it rams its horn into a tree, behind which the antagonist has disappeared just in time. Similar episodes are also illustrated in the marginal glosses of illuminated manuscripts (fig. 13). While the unicorn fights bravely and usually successfully, elsewhere it is shown not as the victor, but as the victim—a further element of its ambiguity. In eleventh- to thirteenth-century bestiaries, it succumbs to the lances, swords, axes, arrows, or clubs of zealous hunters, symbolizing the Passion of Christ (fig. 14; cats. 28, 29). Caskets from the

– 13 –
Southern French (Toulouse?), *Unicorn Fighting Bears,*
in Raimund von Peñafort, *Smithfield Decretals* (Decretals of Gregory IX), 1375–1425, fol. 157r,
British Library, London

fourteenth century, known as *Minnekästchen,* and probably used to hold lovers' or bridal gifts, transpose the scene into a courtly epic of unrequited love (cat. 110). The portrayals, often drastic, appeal to the viewer's sympathy.

While in such images the unicorn is presented as weak and subjugated, in heraldry it functions as a symbol of strength, usually appearing as a solitary figure. Aristocratic coats of arms with unicorns are known since the fourteenth century at the latest, as shown in a page from the *Codex Manesse* from the first half of that century (fig. p. 46). Believed to be unicorn horn, narwhal tusks were attributes of secular or ecclesiastical power. The *Ainkhürn* sword from the second quarter of the fifteenth century, whose hilt and sheath are fashioned of narwhal tusk (fig. p. 46), belonged to Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, and in 1615 Emperor Matthias ordered a scepter to be made of narwhal tusk (both now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Weltliche Schatzkammer). A throne commissioned by King Frederick III of Denmark (r. 1648–70), constructed of numerous narwhal tusks (fig. p. 46), was used in coronation ceremonies until 1840. A narwhal tusk was known as the *Staff of Saint Amor* (cat. 95), and as late as 1800, the statesman and diplomat Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand adorned himself with a ceremonial staff made of a tusk ninety centimeters long (cat. 139). As a decorative element evocative of aristocracy, the unicorn, like the lion, is the constant companion of the woman in the tapestries from the series *The Lady and the Unicorn* from around 1500 (cats. 123.1–6).

Unicorns on the Moon

The harmonious fellowship of virgin and unicorn and the salvific symbolism of the animal stand in contrast to its threatening character in a story from *Barlaam and Josaphat.* Here, as a symbol of death, it drives a man into the abyss (fig. p. 42; cats. 88, 89). As an evil shapeshifter and eerie demon, it springs onto the shoulders of the lonely wanderer from behind and bears down on him. This literary motif from a widely known folk saga appears on a waterspout from the cathedral of Freiburg im Breisgau, dated to around 1270 (cat. 90).

Within the dangerous thickets of the forest, the unicorn dwells with the Wild People of the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, who even use it as a mount (cats. 66, 68–70). There the beast stands for unbridled passion and eroticism, the flouting of middle-class virtues. The polarity of bourgeois and marginal, sacred and profane, chaste and erotic comes to pointed expression in a drawing from around 1490, possibly from the Upper Rhine region. The image shows a unicorn consorting with both a naked girl and an austerely clothed burgheress (cat. 112). Occasionally, even in Christian contexts, an erotic element is unmistakable. The relationship between woman and unicorn can take on a sensual quality, and the unicorn's horn can also be interpreted as a phallus (fig. p. 40)—nor does the spirited grasp of the horn by the female hand rule out a sexual interpretation (cats. 29, 34, 112, 122, 123.1, 126.2).

For the most part, however, the unicorn represents chastity, both in the Christian *hortus conclusus* and in the context of secular bourgeois ideals. In the fifteenth century, it appears as a draft animal, pulling the chariot of *Castitas* (chastity) in illustrations to Petrarch's *Trionfi* (Triumphs) on Italian *cassoni*, or wedding chests (cats. 125.1, 126.1). After 1500, a woman rides on a unicorn as an allegory of chastity (cat. 127). While in such instances the animal represents the triumph of virtue, elsewhere it becomes a victim of its own passion and allows itself to be led on a leash by a woman, as seen in an engraving by Agostino Veneziano after a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (figs. 15, 16).[51] Luca Longhi returned to this pictorial formula around 1535–40 (cat. 120), echoing the *Bestiaire d'amour* (Bestiary of Love) of Richard de Fournival from around 1250, in which the author portrays himself as a unicorn who succumbs to feminine charm and becomes the prisoner of his own passion.

Contrasting views were presented not only of the outward appearance, behavior, and character of the unicorn, but also of its geographical localization—although notions of the latter were marked less by explicit contradiction than by differing conceptions. While Dario di Giovanni (?) or a master from the Veneto showed the unicorn with a woman in European costume in a pagan landscape (cats. 113, 115), illustrations in fifteenth-century geographies or travel reports localized the animal in India, Ethiopia (fig. 17), the Holy Land, or Mecca (cats. 39, 40). Maerten de Vos imagined its occurrence both in Africa—as suggested by the clichéd background figures in his unicorn portrait (cat. 10)—and in America, as in his design for an allegory of the continent (fig. p. 64).[52] A map in the *Atlas de Dauphin* from around 1538 (cat. 41) and an engraving in Arnoldus Montanus's book on America, published in Amsterdam in 1671, also placed the habitat of the unicorn in the New World (cat. 42).

The situating of the unicorn in still-unexplored territories, securing for it a refuge in distant lands, compensated for its unfindability in better-known portions of the world. By the nineteenth century, when all the continents had been more or less explored, only the moon remained as the last possible domain of the unicorn. In 1835 American journalist Richard Adams Locke published a series of articles in the New York newspaper *The Sun* reporting the observations of astronomer John Herschel, who had

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The Killing of the Unicorn in bestiaries of the twelfth to the fifteenth century

Top row, left to right:

English (Saint Albans?), *Unicorn Hunt,*
in a *Bestiary,* early thirteenth century, fol. 14r,
Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

Northern French (Cambrai?), *Unicorn Hunt,*
in a *Bestiary,* 1265–85, fol. 4,
Bibliothèque Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Douai

English, *Unicorn Hunt,*
in the *Worksop Bestiary,* ca. 1185, fol. 12v,
Morgan Library & Museum, New York

English, *The Unicorn Is Killed,*
in the *Northumberland Bestiary,*
ca. 1250–60, fol. 11,
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Middle row, left to right:

Northern French, *Unicorn Hunt,*
in a *Bestiary,* ca. 1260–70, fol. 46r,
British Library, London

French (Paris), *Unicorn Hunt,*
in Richard de Fournival, *Bestiary of Love,* 1300, fol. 14r,
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

Unknown, *Killing of the Unicorn,* in Philippe de Thaon,
Bestiary, early fourteenth century, fol. 15r,
Det Kgl. Bibliotek, Copenhagen

Petrus de Raimbaucourt, *Killing of the Unicorn,*
in Garnerus de Morolio (scribe),
Feast Day Missal, 1323, fol. 149v,
KB Nationale Bibliotheek, The Hague

Bottom row, left to right:

English, *Unicorn Hunt,*
in the *Bestiary of Anne Walshe,* 1400–25, fol. 5v,
Det Kgl. Bibliotek, Copenhagen

English, *Killing of the Unicorn,* in a *Bestiary,*
late thirteenth century, fol. 18r,
Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

Flemish/Rhinelandish (?), *Killing of the Unicorn,*
in the *Rothschild Canticles,* ca. 1300, fol. 51r,
Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library,
Yale University, New Haven

English (East Anglia), *Killing of the Unicorn,*
in the *Ormesby Psalter,* 1280–1325, fol. 55v,
Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

– 15 –
Leonardo da Vinci, *A Maiden with a Unicorn,* ca. 1480, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford

– 16 –
Agostino Veneziano, *Woman with Unicorn,* 1516

allegedly discovered life on the moon using an enormous mirror telescope in South Africa. Among the animals sighted was a unicorn: "It was of a bluish lead color, about the size of a goat, with a head and beard like him, and a *single horn,* slightly inclined forward from the perpendicular." The region inhabited by the purportedly "sprightly" animal was given the name "Valley of the Unicorn."[53] Locke's invocation of the unicorn is more than a curiosity within his bizarre tall tale. Rather, it demonstrates how, even into the nineteenth century, the unicorn still functioned as a symbol of the exotic, foreign, and faraway, and thus of the rare and precious.

Chasing the Unattainable

These polarities of the unicorn's meaning cannot be resolved in a broad survey but continue to exist as a *coniunctio oppositorum,* a conjunction of opposites, like the multidimensionality of its symbolic power. The unicorn is the epitome of Aby Warburg's concept of the migration of cultural forms and motifs across time and space, which he termed *Bilderfahrzeug* (image vehicle).[54] Metaphorically, the unicorn may be viewed as the draft animal for this vehicle, its freight changing over the centuries. In antiquity, the unicorn was considered strong and unconquerable. As a symbol of Christ, it became the expression of transcendence and redemption; as an allegory of chastity, it represented purity. As wild beast, it stood for the ideal of freedom, and as an aggressive creature it embodied irrational fears.

These projections followed cultural-historical developments and ended with the transformation of Christianity in the sixteenth century and the decline of allegorical imagery in the eighteenth century. They remained anchored, however, in collective pictorial memory, and continued to maintain their double status as *imago* and *phantasma*—as both real, existing pictures and mere imagination.

The unicorn's enduring attractiveness was also due to its appeal as a rare, noble creature whose forehead was crowned by a single, marvelously spiraling horn. This unusual aesthetic can be understood as a sign of its chosen status and accounts in part for its reappearance at the end of the nineteenth century, as well as its ongoing fascination to this day. Another reason lay in its association with the world of imagination.

The habitat of the unicorn in artistic imagination had already been emphasized by Rostock physician Peter Lauremberg in his *Acerra philologica* (Philological Incense Box) of 1637. In this book, Lauremberg called attention to the independence of the creature's appearance from empirical proofs: "What is not in nature / can be fashioned by painters and poets in their own way: they give wings to the horse (as *Pegaso*) and place horns on the front of its head (as the unicorn), just as they please."[55]

About fifteen years before *The Silence of the Forest,* Arnold Böcklin had painted a unicorn in *Sacred Grove* of around 1871

– 17 –
Robinet Testard, *Animals in Ethiopia and India,* in *Le Secret de l'histoire naturelle,* ca. 1480–85, fol. 20r, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

(cat. 146), in which the entire composition is filled by a stand of woods with two monumental sacrificial bowls on golden shafts in a grassy hollow. Between them lies a unicorn, a figure as unexpected as it is self-evident. As a magical apparition, it is both familiar and mysterious, both secular and spiritual.[56]

With this auraticization, Böcklin stages the unicorn as a symbol of the special and the extraordinary. This presence of the enigmatic can also be understood as a reflection on the rationalism and technological progress of the nineteenth century. In 1917 German sociologist Max Weber described the tendency toward intellectualization typical of the late nineteenth century as the "disenchantment of the world," the assumption that "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."[57] The unicorn was never susceptible to rationalization, from the ancient sources that emphasized its shyness and localized it in the most distant regions to the inexplicable creature in Böcklin's sacred grove.

In his zoological treatise from around the year 200, Aelian had asserted that unicorns could run so fast that "to pursue them is, in the language of poetry, to chase the unattainable" (4.52).[58] With this literary comparison, the late antique author involuntarily formulated a central element of the modern understanding of the relationship between human and unicorn. In so doing, he described a dialectical constellation: the unicorn, never seen in the rational world, does exist. But it cannot be captured—except in art. And there it can assume the most multifarious forms.

The unicorn also appears as the embodiment of the ineffable, and thus also of the unavailable, in a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke from his *Sonnets to Orpheus,* in which he refers to it as "the animal that never was."[59] In a letter from June 1923, the poet further explains that in the unicorn, "all love of the unproven, the intangible, all faith in the worth and reality of what our soul has created and elevated from itself over the centuries" may be praised.[60]

The unicorn, invisible and imperceptible to the rational world, nonetheless exists, in whatever form. It was in this sense that Böcklin rebuked the studio visitor in the anecdote recounted at the beginning of this essay. When the viewer criticized the unicorn in the painting *The Silence of the Forest,* Böcklin countered, "If the painter is not allowed to paint what he imagines and what's in his heart, then it would be better to give up art altogether."[61] The conceptual image of the unicorn stands for poetic reality and artistic imagination.

Translated from German
by Melissa M. Thorson

Notes

1 "'Wie können Sie nur so etwas Unglaubliches malen,' sagte er zu Böcklin, 'so hat doch nie im Leben ein Einhorn ausgesehen. Das Einhorn war ja doch ein Pferd mit einem Horne auf dem Kopf.' 'So—haben Sie einmal eins gesehen?' fragte Böcklin lachend." Lasius 1903, 92.

2 Einhorn 1998, 397–592, compiles well over a thousand visual examples, which he calls *Denkmale* (monuments). Hundreds more can be added to these. For numerous illustrations, see Faidutti 1996, as well as the same author's ongoing blog on the unicorn, https://faidutti.com/blog/licornes (accessed on December 12, 2024).

3 The only art historian is Lise Gotfredsen (b. 1929), who taught at the University of Aarhus. Her monograph *Enhjørningen* was first published in Danish in 1992 and translated into English in 1999 (Gotfredsen 1999).

4 On the non-European unicorn, see cats. 1–8, 74, 83, 85, and 86 as well as Adrien Bossard's essay in this catalog, 26–37. Almost all monographs on the unicorn include a chapter on this aspect; see, for example, Shepard 1930, 90–100; Beer 1977, 69–70; Einhorn 1998, 29–52, 67–73; Gotfredsen 1999, 10–18; and Gerritsen 2011, 11–25.

5 See the anthology "The Trail of the Unicorn," 344–69; see also note 55 below with the 1637 quotation on painting from Peter Lauremberg. On Ambroise Paré, see also cat. 54.

6 In his 1545 translation of the Bible, Martin Luther used the word *Einhorn* (unicorn); later editions replaced it with terms such as *Wildstier* (wild bull). The King James Bible (London 1611) uses the word *unicorn*; in the following, all biblical quotations are from the King James Version with modernized spelling.

7 Ambrose, *De benedictionibus patriarcharum* 1.11, PL 14, 691 ("cum ipsum unicornuum inter generationes ferarum, ut periti aiunt, non inveniatur"). On this passage, see also Einhorn 1998, 367.

8 Ctesias, "History of India," in *The Library of Photius,* vol. 1, trans. John Henry Freese, London and New York 1920, 117.

9 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History,* trans. Harris Rackham, vol. 3, rev. ed., London and Cambridge, MA, 1983, 57.

10 Quoted from a ninth-century Latin *Physiologus* in Freeman 1976, 19.

11 See Italian, *Dog, Rhinoceros, and Unicorn,* 1587–1630, in Petrus Candidus (Pier Candido Decembrio), *De omnium animalium natura,* Urb. lat. 276, fol. 41r, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican City; illustrated in Candidus 1993, 22.

12 Quoted in Freeman 1976, 19.

13 Pliny 1983 (see note 9), 57.

14 Ctesias 1920 (see note 8), 117.

15 "Cornu e media fronte eius protenditur splendore mirifico, ad magnitudinem pedum quattuor, ita acutum ut quicquid impetat, facile ictu eius perforetur"; Gaius Iulius Solinus, *Wunder der Welt*, Latin and German, trans. and comm. Kai Brodersen, Darmstadt 2014, 301.

16 Petrus Candidus, "Monoceros," in Candidus 1993, 22–23, here 22.

17 *Bodley Bestiary,* MS Bodley 764, fol. 22r, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford; *Rochester Bestiary,* MS Royal 12 F XIII, fol. 10v, British Library, London.

18 Pliny 1983 (see note 9), 57.

19 "Sed atrocissimus est monoceros, monstrum mugitu horrido"; Solinus 2014 (see note 15), 190.

20 Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo,* trans. Hugh Murray, 2nd ed., Edinburgh 1844, 282–83.

21 Aelian 1958, vols. 1 and 3.

[22] Quoted in Freeman 1976, 19. The Latin word *sinus* can mean both lap and breast; redactions of the *Physiologus* that speak of *lactatio* ("et nutrit illud animal") follow the latter reading, which is seldom represented in images; see Einhorn 1998, 66, 75, 81, 194–95, 278–79, 371, with fig. 126 from a twelfth-century Latin manuscript (Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford).

[23] See, for example, Einhorn 1998, 43–46. For the text of the legend, see Hörisch 2005, 12–18.

[24] On the size of the unicorn in the various redactions of the *Physiologus,* see Einhorn 1998, 77, 81, 87.

[25] On Gessner, see, for example, Leemann-van Elck 1935; Gmelig-Nijboer 1977; Riedl-Dorn 1989; Fischel 2009; Bamforth 2010; Leu 2016; Blair 2017; and Truitt 2017.

[26] On Breydenbach, see, for example, Mainz 1992, Niehr 2001, Timm 2006, Ross 2014, and Bakker 2018. On Varthema, see, for example, Gerritsen 2007b.

[27] "Figura hæc talis est, qualis à pictoribus ferè hodie pingitur, de qua certi nihil habeo." Conrad Gessner, *Historia animalium,* vol. 1, Zurich: Christoph Froschauer, 1551, 689.

[28] For Gessner's general influence on art, see Ruoss 2019; on Stimmer's woodcut, see ibid., 227 and 299.

[29] "[Z]uo nutz und guotem allen liebhabern der künsten, Artzeten, Maleren, Bildschnitzern, Weydleüten, und Köchen, gestelt." Conrad Gessner, *Thierbuoch: Das ist ein kurtze beschreybung aller vierfüssigen Thieren, so auff der erden und in wassern wonend, sampt jrer waren conterfactur . . . ,* trans. Conrad Forer, Zurich: Christoph Froschauer, 1563; on the unicorn, fols. 35v–39r, "Von dem Einhorn." The unicorn illustration on fol. 35v ("Unicornis") is reproduced without Gessner's relativizing commentary. Other German editions were published by Andreas Cambier in Heidelberg in 1606 and by Wilhelm Serlin in Frankfurt am Main in 1669, the latter significantly revised by Georg Horstius and entitled *Gesnerus redivivus auctus et emendatus, oder Allgemeines Thier-Buch.*

[30] See Johann Sperling, *Zoologia physica posth[umus],* ed. Georg Caspar Kirchmaier, Leipzig: Johannes Berger, 1661.

[31] Georg Caspar Kirchmaier, *Disputationes zoologicae de Basilisco, Unicornu, Phoenice, Behemoth & Leviathan, Dracone ac Aranea: Von dem Basilisken, Einhorn, Phoenix, Behemoth, Leviathan, Drachen und der Spinnwebe,* Jena: Friedrich Ritter, 1736, title page.

[32] On the concept of the fabulous beast, see Zajadacz-Hastenrath 1971. See also the monographic publications Mode 1975, Kiel 1985, Schöpf 1988, Riedl-Dorn 1989, Cherry 1995, Müller 1999, Nigg 1999, Reichholf 2012, and Reyer 2021. On the fabulous beast in the Near East, see *Dragons, Monsters and Fabulous Beasts,* exh. cat., Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, 2004 (with no mention of the unicorn).

[33] On Gessner's approach to fabulous beasts, see Gmelig-Nijboer 1977, 97–120, with discussion of the unicorn on 98–99, 103–04, 116–17, 119; see also Leu 2016, 204–08. In his 1573 publication *Discorso dell'alicorno* (Discourse on the Unicorn), physician Andrea Bacci also referred to a number of animal species as *fauolose* (fabulous), including the phoenix and basilisk, but not the unicorn; see p. 353.

[34] Christian Richter, *Ueber die fabelhaften Thiere: Ein Versuch,* Gotha: Justus Perthes, 1797. Richter may have been the first to use the German term *Fabeltier* (fabulous beast); it does not have a separate entry in the dictionary of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch,* vol. 3, Leipzig 1862. In col. 1217, under "Fabelwesen" (fabulous being), a quotation from Johann Gottfried Herder's third collection of *Zerstreute Blätter* (from the chapter "Von der Aesopischen Fabel" [On Aesop's Fables]) is mentioned.

[35] Richter 1797 (see note 34), 11. Evolutionary biologists have extensively studied the question of real models for the unicorn; see, for example, Lavers 2009, passim, or Reichholf 2012, 173–222.

[36] Richter 1797 (see note 34), 10; on the unicorn, see 29–55.

[37] *Fratris Felicis Fabri Evagatorium in Terræ Sanctæ, Arabiæ et Egypti peregrinationem,* ed. Konrad Dieterich Haßler, 3 vols., Stuttgart 1843–49, here vol. 2 (1843), 442.

[38] Jerónimo Lobo, "Of the Famous Unicorne, Where He Is Bred, and How Shap'd," in Lobo, *A Short Relation of the River Nile . . . Written by an Eye-witnesse, Who Lived Many Years in the Chief Kingdoms of the Abyssine Empire,* trans. Peter Wyche, London: John Martyn, 1669, 28–37, here 34.

[39] According to Gmelig-Nijboer 1977, 119–20, this criterion was also decisive for Conrad Gessner's categorization.

[40] *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore,* trans. Michael Curley, Chicago 2009, 14.

[41] On the significance of the unicorn in Christianity, see Stefan Trinks's essay in this catalog, 38–47, as well as cats. 27–38. On the Mystic Unicorn Hunt, see, for example, Wyss 1960, Kretzenbacher 1978, Lechner 1978, Henning 1999, Wischnewsky 2011, Manuwald 2014, Hubmann-Fellner 2021, and Bornschein 2023; see also Weitbrecht 2018.

[42] See Clarke 1986, 47–68.

[43] Regarding the fossilized shark teeth known in the late Middle Ages as "adder's tongues," see Molitor 2008; they were also sometimes described as dragon teeth.

[44] On the unicorn horn, see, for example, Schönberger 1935–36; Faidutti 1996, vol. 1, 284–365; Pontbriand 2008; Cordez 2012; Pluskowski 2017; Dectot 2018; and Spary 2019. On the narwhal tusks in Utrecht, see Van Vlierden 1989.

[45] Quoted from a late Greek *Physiologus* in Freeman 1976, 27.

[46] See, for example, the etching by Hendrik Hondius after Antonio Tempesta, *Non vi sed virtute* (Not by Force but by Virtue), 1610, pl. 1 from the series *Battling Animals.*

[47] Ctesias 1920 (see note 8), 117.

[48] See Gutmann 1967–71. On the medical significance of unicorn horn, see cats. 52–61. In addition to the monographic literature on the unicorn, see, for example, Miller 1960–61, Caesar 1989, Graumann 1995, Arnold 2003, Jackson 2004, Gerritsen 2007a, and Fischer/Cossu Ferra Fischer 2011; the most detailed discussion with numerous sources is found in Duffin 2017.

[49] Basil of Caesarea, "On Psalm 28," in *Saint Basil: Exegetic Homilies,* trans. Sister Agnes Clare Way, CDP, Fathers of the Church, 46, Washington, DC, 1963, 205.

[50] Aelianus 1958, vol. 1.

[51] On the engraving by Agostino Veneziano, see Philipp 2021. For the unicorn in Leonardo, see most recently Dressen 2024.

[52] Julius Goltzius after Maerten de Vos, *Allegory of America,* from the series *The Four Continents,* 1560–90.

[53] Richard Adams Locke, *The Moon Hoax; or, A Discovery that the Moon has a Vast Population of Human Beings,* New York 1859, 27–28. For a detailed discussion, the first in connection with unicorn research, see Roling/Weitbrecht 2023, 155–58.

[54] See [Andreas Beyer et al.], "Bildbewegungen nach Aby Warburg: Zur Einführung," in *Bilderfahrzeuge. Aby Warburgs Vermächtnis und die Zukunft der Ikonologie,* ed. Andreas Beyer et al., Berlin 2018, 9–12.

[55] "Was nicht in der Natur ist / können Mahler und Poeten auff ihre Art darin machen: die setzen dem Pferde Flügel an (als *Pegaso*) und Hörner forn am Kopff (als dem Einhorn) wie es ihnen nur beliebet"; Peter Lauremberg, "Einhorn," in Lauremberg, *Acerra philologica: Das ist; Dritte hundert außerlesener / nützlicher / lustiger und denckwürdiger Historien und Discursen . . . ,* Rostock: Johann Hallervord, 1637, 206.

[56] Studies of the unicorn usually conclude with a contemporary perspective in which the question of artistic conceptions is not the primary focus; nonetheless, the present conclusion is informed by some of these considerations: see, for example, Beer 1977, 179–95; Einhorn 1998, 365–68 and 373–86: "Ausblick"; Gerritsen 2011, 213–18: "De eenhoorntraditie herbeschouwd"; and Roling/Weitbrecht 2023, 11–19 and passim.

[57] Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology,* ed. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, London 2014, 129–56, here 139 and 155.

[58] Aelian 1958, vol. 1. In the Greek original, Aelian uses the phrase *metathein akihita,* an idiom ("the language of poetry," as the translation renders it) that literally means "to chase the unattainable." I am grateful to Martina Nibbeling-Wrießnig for putting me in contact with Nike Koutrakou, the Byzantinist who shed light on this passage.

[59] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus: With Letters to a Young Poet,* trans. Stephen Cohn, New York 2002, 75. The title of Hörisch's anthology (Hörisch 2005) quotes the original line from Rilke: *Das Tier, das es nicht gibt.*

[60] "[A]lle Liebe zum Nicht-Erwiesenen, Nicht-Greifbaren, aller Glaube an den Wert und die Wirklichkeit dessen, was unser Gemüt durch die Jahrhunderte aus sich erschaffen und erhoben hat"; letter from Rainer Maria Rilke to Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris, June 1, 1923, in Rilke, *Die Briefe an Gräfin Sizzo 1921–1926,* ed. Ingeborg Schnack, rev. and expanded ed., Frankfurt am Main 1977, 65–68, here 67.

[61] "Wenn der Maler nicht malen darf, was ihm einfällt und wie's ihm ums Herz ist, dann ist's besser, man hängt die ganze Kunst an den Nagel"; Lasius 1903, 92.

A Strange Messenger of Fortune: The Chinese Unicorn *Qilin*

Adrien Bossard

The Chinese world of imagination abounds with fantastical creatures of the most diverse forms and meanings.[1] Four of them constitute a canonical group that was already established in ancient texts as the "Four Sacred Animals" (*Siling* 四靈). According to the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) from the second half of the first millenium BCE, this group consisted of the *qilin* 麒麟, the phoenix, the tortoise, and the dragon. The present essay focuses on the *qilin,* which originally had a horn on its forehead and has been described—incorrectly, according to some—as a Chinese unicorn. Its Chinese name is written as a combination of two characters, both of which include the pictogram for "deer" (*lu* 鹿) in the left portion of the logogram, providing a semantic point of reference for the physical appearance of the creature.[2] In Chinese, therefore—unlike the French *licorne/unicorne,* English *unicorn,* or German *Einhorn*—the animal is not defined by its single horn in its name.

The Most Perfect of Hairy Beasts

The oldest reference to the *qilin* comes from the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), a collection of poems dating from the eleventh to fifth century BCE. Though not particularly descriptive, the passage mentions the animal's attributes (hooves, forehead, and horn) and associates it with the figure of the good ruler.[3] Toward the end of the fourth century BCE, Chinese philosopher Mengzi (Mencius) accorded the *qilin* the highest rank among the four-footed creatures, just as the phoenix was preeminent in the bird kingdom and just as Mount Tai (Tai Shan) towered over the hills and anthills and the rivers and oceans dwarfed puddles and rivulets.[4]

In the second century BCE, the *Gongyang Commentary* (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳) described the *qilin* as a creature with a generous nature (*renshou* 仁獸), having the form of a rhinoceros and a horn covered in flesh. Though able to defend itself, it hurts no one.[5] In the first century BCE, the *Ritual Records of Dai the Elder* (*Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記) presented it as the most perfect of hairy beasts, just as the phoenix, tortoise, and dragon were the most perfect among animals with feathers, shells, and scales, and the saint among living things with souls.[6]

A lengthy description of the *qilin* occurs in the *Garden of Eloquence* (*Shuoyuan* 說苑), a collection of short narratives compiled by imperial archivist Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–6 BCE). It states that the *qilin* has the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, and a horn on its head with a rounded tip. The passage describes not only the appearance of the beast, but also its empathetic, upright, and dignified nature. Its rarity is explained by the fact that it does not live in herds, is not migratory, and stays only in level places where it feels safe.[7]

According to the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, a dictionary from the second century, the character *qi* 麒 signifies a benevolent animal that has the head of a deer, the tail of an ox, and a horn, and that bellows like a stag.[8] The character *lin* 麟 stands for a large female deer whose bellowing is like that of the male stag.[9] The word *qilin* thus combines the terms for male (*qi*) and female (*lin*) animals, indicating that the creature named in this way actively participates in the complementary harmony of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽.[10] The subcommentary to the *Mao Commentary* [on the *Classic of Poetry*] (*Mao shi zhuan jian* 毛詩傳箋) by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), likewise written in the second century, includes a variation on the description of the *qilin*'s flesh-covered horn. The passage further indicates that the animal displays its power but does not use it.[11]

This brief survey of ancient Chinese sources in which the *qilin* is mentioned conveys an impression of the way in which textual representations of the fantastical animal changed over time. This development occurred gradually over centuries, with precise details that occasionally emerged and then became part of a corpus that established itself and became canonical. The *qilin* is a composite being, although it is ultimately derived from only a few animals. The horn is its most characteristic and identifying feature. At this stage of its evolution, it is much less monstrous than the dragon, which amalgamates a more varied assortment of animals.

Poised to Attack in the Tomb

Around the beginning of the common era, the form and character of the *qilin* were well established in textual sources, giving rise to visual representations in the Chinese material culture of the time. The most important of these are the golden coins in the shape of a *qilin* hoof, struck at the command of Emperor Han Wudi 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) following an auspicious dream in which he claimed to have seen a white *qilin* and a heavenly horse. The coins created for the ruler in connection with this good omen are called the "golden *qilin* hoof" (*linzhijin* 麟趾金) and the "golden horse hoof" (*matijin* 馬蹄金).

– 2 –
Chinese, *Figure (Qilin): Sheep with Spike in Its Forehead,* 206 BCE–220 CE, British Museum, London

During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the *qilin* entered the iconographic vocabulary of Chinese art, though only a few artifacts have survived. One is a bronze mirror from the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220) (fig. 1), whose reverse shows four *qilin* accompanied by auspicious figures. All four are depicted in the same dynamic pose, galloping with their heads turned toward the rear, each with a single identifying horn. Their association with sinograms such as 吉 (*ji,* lucky), 和 (*he,* harmonious), and 宜 (*yi,* favorable) emphasizes the propitious nature of the object.

The Han dynasty also saw the production of bronze figurines showing the *qilin* with a horn rounded at the tip (fig. 2).[12] Were such figures an attempt to create three-dimensional visualizations of Zheng Xuan's textual description in which the *qilin's* horn was covered with flesh? Such is by no means sure, but the figurines clearly correspond to bas-reliefs and painted decorations on the walls of tombs from the Eastern Han dynasty. In 1982, for example, a bas-relief showing a horse with a horn rounded at the tip was discovered in the tomb of Miao Yu 繆宇 (d. 151) in Yanzibu, part of the city of Pizhou in Jiangsu Province. The characters *qilin* 騏驎 engraved above the animal leave no doubt as to its identity.[13]

– 1 –
Chinese, *Mirror with Four Qilin,* early second–early third century, Cleveland Museum of Art

– 3 –
Chinese, *Unicorn,* 25–220,
Musée national des arts asiatiques—Guimet, Paris

During the same epoch, wooden images of unicorns were produced in the context of a funerary tradition typical of the province of Gansu in northwestern China. In the absence of textual sources, it would be risky to unequivocally identify them as *qilin,* especially since the surviving painted decoration on some of them seems to show wings and scales (fig. 3; see also cat. 3), features not found in the canonical descriptions of the animal. Other examples now in Gansu Provincial Museum are painted with volutes and various colors such as black, red, and yellow over the entire surface of the sculpture. All of these statuettes show a four-legged animal like a horse with a more or less realistically depicted head, and a long pointed horn on its forehead. The animal's posture is characterized by an exaggerated dynamism in which the head is tilted so far forward that the horn projects horizontally. A long, extended tail at the other end of the body forms a counterpart to the horn, while the legs suggest energetic forward motion.

This group of battle-ready unicorns is part of a larger corpus of painted wooden tomb figures that represent other animals such as horses and cattle. It is likely, however, that they played a special role within the tomb and were intended to ward off intruders in order to protect the goods carried by the deceased into the afterlife. This type of unicorn also appears in bronze, as seen in an example discovered in Xiaheqing in 1956 and now in Gansu Provincial Museum. In this region at the edge of the Han Empire, in a cultural context open to foreign influences due to the flow of traffic from the West, local artisans invented strange creatures, including this unique variation of the unicorn.[14]

The Unicorn with Two Horns

During the eight centuries following the fall of the Han dynasty, no significant developments occurred in the representation of the *qilin.* With the beginning of the Song dynasty (960–1279), however, the animal's appearance grew more complex and once again established itself in a form that continues to this day. In his *Dream Pool Essays* (*Mengxi bitan* 夢溪筆談) published in 1088, Shen Kuo 沈括 reports that during the Zhihe period (1054–56), a *qilin* with one horn existed in the province of Jiaozhi in modern-day Vietnam. According to him, it was the size of a cow, and its body was covered in large scales.[15]

This new characteristic was confirmed three centuries later in the *Treatise on the Five Agents* (*Wuxing zhi* 五行志) from the *History of Yuan* (*Yuan Shi* 元史), compiled under the direction of Song Lian 宋濂 and published in 1369–70. A passage in the treatise reports that during the fourth year of the Zhida reign era (1311) in Datong in the province of Shanxi, a cow gave birth to a calf resembling a *qilin* with hairless skin and scales of green-blue[16] and yellow.[17] Considering that this official history of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) was written during the subsequent Ming dynasty (1368–1644), it is certainly no coincidence that a *qilin* should appear some fifty years before the fall of a ruling dynasty of Mongolian origin. The animal functioned as an omen, announcing that the Mandate of Heaven would pass to a new line of emperors.

Earlier texts had made no mention of scales. This new element appears in artistic representations of the *qilin* from the fourteenth century on and remained a feature of most images to the present day. It occurs on all types of surfaces and supports, including a paperweight shaped like a *qilin* from the fifteenth century (fig. 4). The small object shows the crouching animal in the form established during the Ming dynasty, with the body of a deer, a horn, a goatee, and the tail of an ox. Another depiction is found in the Chinese encyclopedia *Illustrations of the Three Powers* (*Sancai tuhui* 三才圖會) from 1609, which presents captioned images of motifs from the realms of Heaven, Man, and Earth. One of them shows a *qilin* with a dragon's head and a shaggy tuft of bristles instead of a long tail. A similar *qilin* appears on a panel of cloisonné enamel made during the reign of Emperor Wanli 萬曆 (r. 1573–1620).[18] Here, it is accompanied by a phoenix and flowers, an iconographic ensemble that combines to form an eminently auspicious motif. The three preceding examples show an element seen only from the Yuan dynasty onward: stylized flames applied to the body of the *qilin,* signifying its prodigious nature.

– 4 –
Chinese, *Paperweight in the Form of a Qilin,*
fifteenth century,
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

– 5 –
Chinese, *Charger with a Qilin,* ca. 1350,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

– 6 –
Chinese, *Plate with Phoenix and Mythical Qilin,* 1678–88,
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Around the middle of the fourteenth century, another change occurred, important not least of all because it calls into question the correspondence between the European and the Chinese unicorn: the *qilin* received a second horn. This new form gradually gained the ascendancy in subsequent visual representations. The oldest representation of a two-horned *qilin* during the research that led to this article is found at the center of a large blue-and-white porcelain plate (fig. 5) from around 1350, near the end of the Yuan dynasty. In the midst of rich vegetal ornamentation, the creature is portrayed in motion, galloping toward the left. Its entire body is covered in scales; four flames ascend from its legs and a fifth from its back, while a mane of stylized waves falls over its neck and a small goatee adorns its chin. The overall resemblance to a horse is reinforced by the form of the tail and hooves. On its head are two slender horns, each with three branches.

In the period that followed, the mythological beast continued to evolve: its head became more and more like that of a dragon, as evidenced by numerous examples including a *famille verte* porcelain plate from 1678–88 (fig. 6). The inside of the plate shows two *qilin* and two phoenixes in a rocky landscape with a fir tree, while the rim is divided into a series of compartments decorated with animals, both real and imaginary, in a variety of settings. The heads of the *qilin* are unmistakably dragon-like and show two horns, a shaggy mane, two fine strands of moustache, bulging eyes, and an open mouth with outstretched tongue. This same, final version of the *qilin* appears on a limestone relief at the entrance portal of the tomb of General Zu Dashou 祖大壽 and his sons in the village of Yongtai near Beijing (fig. 7). Dated to 1656, these monumental images confirm that during the Qing dynasty, the bodies of dragon and *qilin* were interchangeable.

An incense burner in the form of a *qilin,* made of cloisonné enamel and dating to the seventeenth or eighteenth century (fig. 8), precisely translates the images described above into the realm of three-dimensional sculpture. Yet the one-horned *qilin* also lived on in the art of that era. As a strange porcelain sculpture makes clear (fig. 9), even after the addition of scales the creature's appearance continued to vary, oscillating between its original form and its more dragon-like manifestation.

Astonishingly enough, the almost two-thousand-year evolution of the *qilin*—the most perfect of hairy beasts—ends with its formal assimilation to the figure of the

– 7 –
Chinese, *Panel from the Entrance Gate to the Graveyard of General Zu Dashou and His Sons,* 1656,
Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto

– 8 –
Chinese, *Incense Burner in the Form of a Fantastical Beast (Qilin),* seventeenth–eighteenth century,
Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University

dragon, the most perfect of scaly creatures. Moreover, with the addition of a second horn, this new incarnation of the fantastical animal can no longer be described as a unicorn. The deerlike creature with a single horn has become a dragon with the body of a deer; at the end of the Chinese empire, the *qilin* is no longer a unicorn.

Miraculous Sign or Monster

The European unicorn is not considered a monster, since it consists entirely of elements derived from four-footed beasts.[19] While it is always risky to use Western terms to denote Chinese entities, one could argue that unlike the European unicorn, the *qilin* is rightfully described by the Latin word *monstrum:* a divine, miraculous sign or an unnatural monstrosity.[20] In Chinese, the *qilin* is a *shou* 獸, a beast, a word that also forms part of the name for the hybrid tomb guardians known as *zhenmushou* 鎮墓獸. The *qilin* is a living being that is not natural and that announces the approach of a great man or an era of peace and prosperity.[21] Its appearance is an omen, indicating the imminent establishment of wise government.

The origins of this symbolism, which persisted throughout Chinese history, were associated with an episode from the life of Confucius (ca. 551–ca. 479 BCE) recounted in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋). According to tradition, these chronicles were written by Confucius in the early fifth century BCE and were expounded upon in the *Commentary of Zuo* (*Zuo zhuan* 左傳), dated to the fourth century and attributed to Zuo Qiuming 左丘明, and the *Gongyang Commentary* (*Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳), completed during the reign of Emperor Han Jingdi 漢景帝 (r. 157–141 BCE).

– 9 –
Chinese, *Figure: Qilin,* 1750s,
Hallwylska museet, Stockholm

– 10 –
Shen Du, *Qilin/Giraffe on a Scroll,* 1414,
National Palace Museum, Taipei

The *Spring and Autumn Annals* report that in the spring of the fourteenth year [of the reign of Duke Ai] (481 BCE), a *lin* was captured during a hunt in the west.[22] According to the *Commentary of Zuo,* Confucius had opportunity to examine and identify the creature.[23] The *Gongyang Commentary* describes the intense emotion felt by the sage and characterizes the *lin* as a benevolent animal that only appears when there is a [true][24] king.[25]

From the Han dynasty onward, the appearance of the *lin* was interpreted in a variety of ways. The death of the animal could foreshadow the withdrawal of the Mandate of Heaven from the Zhou dynasty following the Spring and Autumn period (770–481 BCE); it could also announce the passing of Confucius, who died two years

– 11 –
Qilong Cheng, *Qilin with a Jade Tablet in its Mouth,* in Wu Jiamo, *School Sayings of Confucius,* vol. 1, 1589, Harvard Library, Cambridge, MA

later in 479 BCE. The *lin* could signify that Confucius had received a mandate to establish the principles of true kingship in the *Annals.* Sometimes the *lin* was an omen, announcing the future appearance of a true king; sometimes it was nothing more than an animal, and not a sign of anything at all.[26] Omen or not, the *qilin* is unquestionably connected to the figure of Confucius, since it appeared both at his birth and before his death. By extension, it is associated with the sage himself, as well as with the good government whose beginning or end it announces.

This legitimation of ruling power is a decisive element in the symbolism surrounding the animal. There is even a report that on September 20, 1414, a *qilin* was present in Beijing, brought back by Yang Chi 楊敕 from his diplomatic mission to the kingdom of Bengal in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent.[27] The ruler of this distant realm had sent the animal as a gift to the Chinese emperor. The idea that the rulership of Yongle 永樂 (r. 1402–24) could be legitimated by this auspicious event was cause for enthusiasm at the imperial court, especially in light of the emperor's tumultuous rise to power. In reality, however, the gift was a giraffe[28] from the west coast of Africa, an animal that at that time was unknown in the Middle Kingdom and was represented by Shen Du 沈度 (1357–1434) in a number of images.[29] One depiction includes a long calligraphic inscription emphasizing the auspicious nature of the beast (fig. 10). Likewise at the imperial court, but in 1662 during the Qing dynasty, Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (r. 1661–1722) decided to replace the lion with the *qilin* as the symbol of the highest rank of military officer—an emblem that was retained until the end of the empire in 1911.

Oddities in East and West

As mentioned earlier, a *qilin* also appeared at the birth of Confucius, as reported in the *School Sayings of Confucius* (*Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語).[30] This work, which dates from the early Han dynasty (although the text known today is from the third century), is a collection of conversations between Confucius and various interlocutors. In the illustrated version dated to 1589, compiled and printed by Wu Jiamo 吳嘉謨, the *qilin* is shown facing Confucius's mother with a jade tablet in its mouth (fig. 11). The four characters *lin tu yushu* 麟吐玉書 in the upper left corner of the image literally mean: "The *lin* spits out the jade book." The creature thus announces the birth of an extraordinary child whose destiny will be linked to writing. This scene is frequently represented in Chinese art.[31]

In an echo of this fantastical apparition prior to the birth of Confucius, the expression *qilin song zi* 麒麟送子 means "the *qilin* brings a son," implicitly promising the offspring an extraordinary career. This aphorism appears in many images, including New Year pictures in which the longed-for child is shown riding the fantastical beast (fig. 12). The same motif also adorns a jacket made for the daughter of a European family by their Chinese neighbors in the Shandong province in 1915 (fig. 13),[32] showing that the meaning of the motif is not as fixed as one might think.

As an eminently Confucian creature, the *qilin* is also associated with Daoist and Buddhist figures, since Chinese syncretism permitted the transfer of motifs from one religion to another. A small statue made of *famille verte* porcelain from the reign of Emperor Kangxi shows the mythological Daoist immortal Zhongli Quan 鍾離權 in a garment decorated with the image of a *qilin* (fig. 14). A *qilin* also appears in one of the six embroidered medallions on the back of a Daoist priest's robe (*jiangyi* 降衣) dated to the reign of Kangxi.[33] This portion of the robe shows a cosmic diagram that was visible to assembled worshipers at religious ceremonies.

In Buddhist imagery, the *qilin* becomes a divine mount, as evidenced by a group of

– 12 –
Chinese, *New Year Picture of Mythical Qilin Delivering a Son,* early twentieth century, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

– 13 –
Chinese, *Child's Jacket,* 1915,
Victoria and Albert Museum, London

– 14 –
Chinese, *The Daoist Immortal Zhongli Quan,*
1662–1722,
Cleveland Museum of Art

three ivory sculptures from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.[34] One of them shows Buddha Shakyamuni seated on a lotus blossom, which in turn rests on the back of a *qilin*. An eighteenth-century figure in *famille rose* porcelain depicts a *luohan*, one of the Buddha's disciples,[35] seated on a *qilin* (fig. 15). Beyond all symbolism, the motif of the *qilin,* charged with meaning, could occasionally be misappropriated—as in the case of a white Dehua porcelain figure from the early eighteenth century (fig. 16) showing a European sitting atop the fantastical being like a Buddhist deity. Here, an Asian oddity meets a European one.

A Fantastical Universe Filled with Animals

With its variable appearance, the *qilin* is not always easy to identify, and not every animal with a single horn is a *qilin.* During the Han dynasty, horses were sometimes represented with a horn as a frontal ornament on their bridles.[36] A glazed terracotta sculpture, probably made during the Tang dynasty (618–907), shows a fantastical being with the body of a lion, a ridge on its back, hooves, and an undulating horn on its feline head (fig. 17). Aside from the horn and hooves, such features do not really correspond to those of a *qilin,* although the creature is designated as such.[37] Instead, it is probably a tomb guardian figure (*zhenmushou*), such as were often placed in funerary chambers for their protection.

Gansu Provincial Museum holds a terracotta unicorn dated to the Northern Wei dynasty (386–535). The wings on the animal's shoulders suggest that it is not a *qilin;* rather, it is described as a *dujiaoshou* 獨角獸, or "animal with a single horn," although for the sake of precision the term *xiezhi* 獬豸 was

– 15 –
Chinese, *Luohan Seated on a Qilin,* 1723–60,
Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University

also added.[38] A *xiezhi* or *zhi* 鷐 is a type of Chinese unicorn[39] that, however, has no wings. Rather, it is a one-horned goat with the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, and thus served as an assistant to Gao Yao 皋陶, minister of justice for legendary Emperor Shun 舜. Nevertheless, in visual representations it is often difficult to tell the difference between the *xiezhi* and the *qilin* (fig. 18), and the same holds true for other fantastical beasts as well. The *bixie* 辟邪, a winged chimera with two horns, a long tail, and a lion's body with scales, can also be mistaken for the *qilin*. The *bixie* was often represented together with its one-horned equivalent, the *tianlu* 天禄.

Another animal that is sometimes difficult to distinguish from the *qilin* is the winged, scaled dragon horse *longma* 龍馬. The *baize* 白泽 is a fantastical creature with a dragon's head and two horns, the body of a lion, and scaled shoulders and flanks. It is said to have mastered human language and to be able to understand any living being. Representations of the *baize* are identical to those of a *qilin* with two horns—the difference being that instead of hooves, it has clawed paws. The *luduan* 角端 is similar to the *qilin,* both formally and symbolically: this auspicious mythological creature has the body of a large lion, a single horn, and bear claws (fig. 19). It can traverse vast distances, speak any language, predict the future, give life to the good, and kill the evil. The *luduan* appears whenever enlightened rulers hold power.

Not all Chinese unicorns, therefore, are *qilin*. The latter not only are variable in form but belong to a fantastical universe full of animals with whom they share certain features, making it all the more difficult to identify them.

– 16 –
Chinese, *European Mounted on a Qilin,*
ca. 1700–10,
Musée national Adrien Dubouché, Limoges

– 17 –
Chinese, *Tomb Figure of a Seated Qilin,*
early eighth century,
National Museum of Asian Art,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

– 18 –
Chinese, *Box with Qilin and Xiezhi,* 1522–66,
Philadelphia Museum of Art

– 19 –
Chinese, *Incense Burner in the Form of a Luduan,*
after 1573–before 1644,
Palace Museum, Beijing

Adaptations Outside of China

Over the course of its long history, China interacted with neighboring civilizations and disseminated a cultural model that gained a lasting foothold—with local adaptations—in countries such as Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. These lands were long unified by the Chinese system of writing and thus also by its classical texts. And so it comes as no surprise that the *qilin,* too, played a role in the iconographic world of these countries, especially given its importance in its civilization of origin.

In Korea, reports of the *qilin* date back to the period of the Three Kingdoms (57 BCE–668 CE), and the creature appears in wall paintings from Goguryeo as well as on earthenware from Silla. During the Goryeo period (918–1392), its name was used as a designation for palaces. As a highly symbolic animal, the *qilin* decorated the lids of celadon incense burners: one example is preserved as National Treasure No. 65 in the Kansong Art Museum near Seoul, while another belongs to the collection of the National Museum of Korea (fig. 20). During the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), images of the *qilin* were reserved for the upper classes of Korean society, for example, on the mandarin squares worn by imperial officials in accord with the Chinese model. In sculptural form, the animal appears on the stone *saritap* (*stūpa*) at the entrance to the Hoeamsa Temple in Yangju from 1347 as a symbol for the harmony between Buddhist art and the Confucian vision of the world.

In Vietnam, the fantastical beast bears the name *Kỳ lân* and had certainly become part of the local iconographical vocabulary by the end of the first millennium BCE, the period during which the Chinese empire established a lasting presence in the region. Chinese influence also remained strong during periods when this territory was independent. The model of imperial China—especially the civil service examinations—was officially adopted in the later Lê dynasty (1428–1788) and continued under the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945). The *Kỳ lân* was often associated with Buddhist deities and was used in architectural settings: in stone form in front of palaces and temples, or in earthenware form on their roofs (fig. 21).

In Japan, the creature is called *kirin* and holds an important place in the bestiary of the archipelago after making its way there from the continent. One of the oldest examples is a mirror in the style of the Tang dynasty, found in Nara and dated to the Heian period (794–1185). It is decorated with two phoenixes and two animals identified as *kirin* (fig. 22). The image of the *kirin* in Japanese art continued to develop in various ways through exchange with the Chinese empire. Many images directly echo forms that had arrived in Japan from China, while others integrate local elements, as seen for example in an eighteenth-century *Seated Kirin,* which served as a netsuke, a toggle for fastening objects to a sash (cat. 5).

While the Chinese *qilin* of that period were usually depicted with two horns and a dragon's head, Japanese artisans gave shape to the creature in other ways. Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾北斎 (1760–1849) proposed his vision of the fantastical being in his *Great Picture Book of Everything* (*Banmotsu ehon daizen zu* 万物絵本大全図). Two preparatory studies made between 1820 and 1840 show the *kirin* once with only one horn, and once with two horns.[40] Although at that time the version with scales was the norm, Hokusai depicted the animal with fur. The second drawing includes an inscription: "I reject images of the *kirin* as it has been represented from ancient times. Those that resemble dragons are incorrect."[41] With this statement, the Japanese artist aptly summarized the complexity of the motif.

– 20 –
Korean, *Incense Burner with Qilin,* twelfth century,
National Museum of Korea, Seoul