

Curious Beasts: Animal Prints from the British Museum

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A stunning exhibition of sixty-three 'animal prints' has recently left Compton Verney (Warwickshire) and will be travelling on to Belfast and Hull later this year. The prints are on loan from the British Museum and they have been selected by curator Alison E. Wright to illustrate the variety of ways in which animals were depicted in print during the early modern period, c.1450-1820. Her second aim is to show us the 'crucial' ways in which animal prints have shaped ideas about the natural world.

'Animal print' here is a capacious term. 'Animal' covers all kinds of living things: fossils, sea-monsters, insects and mammals, in other words the familiar, the exotic as well as the downright invented. 'Print' means images of the high-end and low-end kind: luxurious engravings and etchings, sophisticated woodcuts, gorgeous mezzotints and lithographs in addition to broadsides, caricatures, advertisements, souvenirs and games. Most of this printed material is Dutch, German or British in origin; there are few examples from Italy, France and Spain. About half of the prints were published before 1700, and more than two-thirds before 1800. Overall, the selection includes the familiar and famous (Albrecht Dürer's *Rhinocerus* [sic], 1515; some of Francisco de Goya's *Tauromaquia*, 1816) as well as the rarely seen or infrequently reproduced (for example, Lucas Cranach the Elder's magnificent *The Stag Hunt*, c.1506 or Joannes van Doetecum's stunning *The Siege of the Elephant*, 1550-1570).

The exhibition is divided into three thematic sections that are roughly equivalent in size and which run concurrently rather than chronologically. *Allegorical Animals* highlights the symbolic use of animals in print. *Observing Animals* relates the animal print to science, exploration and the development of natural history. *Encountering Animals* emphasizes how they were a 'familiar feature' in early modern life. They were hunted and fought, stuffed and displayed, farmed for food and raised as pets and these daily encounters were continually depicted in print. In each section the display moves freely, bringing together prints that were published at various points between the 1450s and the 1820s despite the fact that they were made to respond to different functions, or that they resulted from different techniques, or that they originated in different centres. Images that are chronologically distant have been brought together, and the geographical boundaries that have usually kept prints apart have been dissolved. The selection, as much as its organization, frequently enforces some striking visual contrasts: Goya follows on from Bruegel (*Ni más ni menos*, 1799; *The Big Fish Eat the Little Fish*, c.1650s version), Cranach is juxtaposed with Rubens (*The Stag Hunt*, c.1506; *Crocodile and Hippopotamus Hunt*, c.1623) and Dürer is directly compared with a nineteenth-century popular print. The comparisons ask us to consider what seemingly different prints might actually share. The risk, of course, is that such solid organizing themes (*Allegorical*; *Observing*; *Encountering*) flatten out the specific printmaking contexts, that they under-emphasize shifts in depiction or, on the contrary, over-emphasize the stability of human-animal relations across a sizeable chunk of time. We might also be tempted to ask when, and to what extent, is the animal truly the object of depiction?

Yet despite these risks the exhibition proves stimulating. It is good at highlighting the multiplicity of print use at any one time and at drawing attention to some of the specific properties of print culture, in particular its constantly evolving potential for easily circulating a reliable likeness. For print was flexible, transportable and – in the period in question – increasingly available. And we get a sense too of the incremental value of a printed image, the role it was playing in stabilizing a likeness. Furthermore, the strategy of putting old prints into new dialogues with lesser-known or more recent works allows us to notice more quickly what we wouldn't have immediately seen.

Take, for example, the bold pairing of Dürer's fine and famous engraving of *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Paradise* (1504) with the much larger, hand-coloured but anonymous etching of *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden* (1816). In the Dürer print, paradise is dominated by the statuesque figures of Adam and Eve. Eve feeds the snake as if it were her pet and the parrot sitting behind in the tree could easily step onto Adam's shoulder. Stay with the same subject but move forward three hundred years and Adam and Eve are again standing on either side of the Tree of Knowledge, but they are now dwarfed by the abundance of a prolific animal kingdom and a kingdom, moreover, in which they play a less powerful role. Behind, a bright yellow, safari-like plain is teeming with wild animals (camels, rhinos, lizards, leopards, elephants, tigers kangaroos and lions) who stand, sit or roam in male and female pairs. Above, the sky is dense with feathered birds. What this contrast conveys so clearly is less the obvious ineptitude of a modest print-maker when placed alongside a Renaissance master, but how paradise is no longer comprehensible simply within the narrow compass of a domestic animal world, via a cat, or a mouse, or a rabbit or an ox. The exotic has moved in, paradise has gone global and the image speaks clearly of this greater familiarity with a broader, wilder world. Of course this pulling-in of the wild is made tangible elsewhere in the exhibition, via the prints that disseminated the entertaining presence of zoological displays and menageries which from the late eighteenth-century had brought royal zebras, 'noble lions', 'stupendous elephants' and camelopards (the giraffe) to London.

Until the actual appearance of the menagerie though, most early modern people would only ever have known of an elephant as a printed image, which means that the value of many of the *Observing Animals* prints lay in their capacity to make things seem real, believable or true. Yet as most of the prints in this section indicate, artists drew on a variety of pictorial conventions to produce an image that would eventually be understood as a typical and truthful representation of a species. They would use the drawn record of one directly observed specimen to produce a printed image depicting a group of two or three, a point that is illustrated by Herman Saftleven's *The Elephant 'Hansken'* (1646). Saftleven presents the elephant at a distance, from the side and straight on, combining simultaneous views of a single elephant in the same image. Tufts of grass and uneven ground have been added to give an idea of local vegetation and a standard story line (eating, fighting, sleeping) has helped with the depiction of characteristic action or movement. Usually, these aestheticizing procedures were concealed beneath titles that read 'true representation', 'drawne from life' or 'exactly drawne'.

In some instances, however, prints also perpetuated, deliberately or unintentionally, anatomical misunderstandings. Dürer's two-humped rhino remained in print for one hundred years. It was still a point of reference for Francis Barlow when he produced *A True Representation of the Two Great Masterpieces of Nature, the Elephant and the Rhinoceros, drawne from life, lately brought over from the East Indies to London*, published in 1685. Of course, neither animal had ever come that far, but it didn't really matter. Again and again we are reminded how printmakers were in a position to communicate knowledge that wasn't easily obtainable in other forms. In fact, what the exhibition is very good at highlighting is how specific printing techniques could be harnessed to meet the particular challenges of animal depiction. Look close, and we see how etching really did imitate fine caterpillar hair (Wenceslaus Hollar, *Book of Flies, Beetles and Worms*, 1646), how engraving could actually carry into print the stunning clarity of microscopic magnification (after Charles Plumier, *Scolopendra Americana*, 1699) or how lithography could brilliantly communicate the dry, stony appearance of fossilized bone (Henry Corbould, *A Head of One of the Species of the Fossil Animal*, 1819).

Observing Animals shows how prints were used to represent animals not commonly known or easily seen, so the basic procedures at play (observing, recording) would seem to be in opposition to those operating in the prints of the *Allegorical Animals* section. For here, the animal is being re-invented or mythologized, invested with human characteristics and turned into a vital node for the transfer of narrative meaning. Most of these prints are connected by sources they share, as illustrations to the Bible, to an Aesopian fable, or to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Yet they also observe and record animals in similar ways. In some, the utility of the animal as symbolic form hinges on its recognisability. For example, in Hendrik Goltzius' version of *The Seven Deadly Sins* (c.1587) the female personifications of 'Lust' and 'Anger' are twinned with accurately delineated animals – the goat and the bear. Elsewhere, an attention to acutely observed naturalistic form helps tell a story in compelling ways, as in Lucas van Leyden's *St Jerome in His Study* (1521). The lion lies low, licking his master's feet, sharing and amplifying through action and physical proximity the caring and sensitive nature of the saint. But in prints where the allegorical animal functions as a satirical device, printmakers experimented with different degrees of anthropomorphism. Recognisable animal parts are juxtaposed

to invent totally weird and improbable beasts, where animal heads are put on human bodies or human heads are placed on animal bodies, a graphic idiom that was particularly frequent in late eighteenth-century graphic satire for depictions of British politicians (James Gillray, *Bat Catching*, 1803). At times though, this human/animal hybridity produced grotesque abstractions that seem difficult to explain or understand. Thus, in Jakob van der Heyden's version of *The Seven Deadly Sins* (c.1610) a set of four prints shows the curious beast at its very best: raw animal parts remain recognisable for what they are, as horse, or bear, or dog or frog, yet the fragments have been yoked together to create grotesque inventions that supposedly tell very human stories that are detailed in the text beneath. 'Sloth' is a hare with a crab's claw; 'Envy' is dog and lobster; 'Anger' is a bear with horse's legs.

Of particular interest though is how the *Observing* and *Allegorical* modes overlap and interconnect, for in print culture – as we know – boundaries are porous. Allegory sneaks into observation and symbols depend on naturalistic depiction, so the imposed categories leak and the barriers tend to break down. For instance, in the allegorical mode – as in van der Heyden's *Seven Deadly Sins* – hybridity produces curious beasts who are made to stand in for an abstraction (a human virtue or human vice). The same aesthetic procedure resurfaces, rather surprisingly, in the observational mode, and specifically in one of the composite prints where different views of the same or similar species are depicted together on a single sheet. Slipped into Nicolaas de Bruyn's *Pictures of Flying Creatures of Many Kinds* (1594) and alongside the highly scrutinised depictions of grasshoppers and crickets is a flying creature of a more playful insect kind. This specimen has six webbed feet, four feathered wings, a fish's tail and a curling tongue! Once noticed, the trespassing of a curious beast into a fact-filled sheet appears to disturb its decorum, it feels like a joke. Continue through to the encountering mode and hybridity returns, relayed through a print that is again pointing to a new use. George Cruikshank's *The Mermaid!* (1822) satirises and documents the actual appearance of a mermaid, who was exhibited in London by a sea captain in 1822. Scientists rapidly discovered the fake. She was made from the bottom half of a salmon, the upper body of a female orang-utan and the lower jaw of a baboon. Curious Beasts: Animal Prints from the British Museum was at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, from 5 October to 15 December 2013. It will be on show at the National Museum of Northern Ireland, Belfast, from 28 February to 26 May 2014, and at Ferens Art Gallery, Hull, from 7 June to 25 August 2014.

