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The Grand Medieval Bestiary: Animals In Illuminated Manuscripts



Synopsis

As the 587 colorful images in this magnificent volume reveal, animals were a constant presence and delightful presence in illuminated manuscripts throughout the Middle Ages. Many proto-zoological illustrations, of great charm but variable accuracy, are found in the bestiaries, or compendiums of animal lore, that were exceedingly popular in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. But animals are depicted in every other sort of illuminated manuscript as well, from the eighth-century Echternach Gospels, with its geometrically schematized symbols of the Evangelists, to the early fifteenth-century Trés Riches Heures du Duc de Berry, with its famously naturalistic scenes of peasant and aristocratic life. In his insightful opening chapters, the noted art historian Christian Heck explains that the prevalence of animals in illuminated manuscripts reflects their importance in medieval thought, an importance due in part to the agricultural society of that age, in which a variety of species—and not just docile pets—were the daily companions of man. Animals also had a greater symbolic significance than they do today: in popular fables, such as those of Reynard the Fox, they held up a mirror to the follies of mankind, and on the religious plane, they were understood as an integral part of God's creation, whose attributes and behaviors could be taken as clues to His plan of salvation. The main part of the book explores the complex and fascinating iconography of the individual creatures most frequently depicted by medieval miniaturists. It is arranged in the manner of a proper bestiary, with essays on one hundred animals alphabetized by their Latin names, from the *alauda*, or lark, whose morning song was thought to be a hymn to Creation, to the vultur, which enjoyed a certain respect due to its impressive appearance, but whose taste for carrion also made it a symbol of the sinner who indulges in worldly pleasures. The selection includes a number of creatures that would now be considered fantastic, including the griffin, the mantichore, and of course the fabled unicorn, tamable only by a gentle maiden. Not merely a study of art history, *The Grand Medieval Bestiary* uses a theme of timeless interest to present a panorama of medieval life and thought that will captivate even the most sophisticated modern reader.

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Customer Reviews

I first saw this book in its French language edition on 's French website in 2011 at a price of just under Euro 385 (discounted from Euro 405!!). At this price the book was way beyond my means, so I was pleasantly surprised when an English language edition appeared on the UK and US websites at a much more affordable GBP 90. I conjectured that the English language edition must be a 'cut down' version of the French 'Belle reliure', but what the heck I figured, what lover of the art of medieval manuscripts could resist even a cut-down edition displaying some of the world's finest medieval imagery and a text by two specialists from premier French universities? I therefore ordered the book from US and was amazed when a huge package weighing 16.5lb arrived on my doorstep. This is no cut-down version. With exactly the same number of pages (620) as the French original the book itself is 15.25" tall, 10.75" wide and just under 2.5" thick. Printed on high quality glossy paper in full colour, the book boasts around 600 full colour reproductions of illuminations taken not just from bestiaries, but from a wide range of illuminated manuscripts ranging from the early 8th century up to the early 16th. The book comes protected in a heavy slipcase that adds about 0.5" to the overall dimensions. Accompanying the images are four essay chapters covering general topics, such as the role of animals in medieval life and Christian philosophy that fill the first 105 pages of the book. The following 491 pages provide examples of 100 individual animals that were described in medieval bestiaries together with an essay by Professor Cordonnier outlining the symbolism and myths attached to each in the medieval Christian world view.

About a year ago I first discovered Abbeville Press, a publisher specializing in high-end art monographs. Hieronymus Bosch and Caravaggio, by Larry Silver and John T Spike respectively, were both volumes produced at astonishing levels of quality, beautiful to look at, inside and out. For a bibliophile like myself, seeing the terrible genius of Bosch and the chiaroscuro naturalism of Caravaggio reproduced so faithfully and discussed so intelligently, on high grade paper, 11.5 inches

wide by 13.5 inches high, with clothbound covers embossed with gilt -- essentially making each volume into a work of art itself, worthy of its subject-- it was exactly what I'd been hoping for. With 'The Grand Medieval Bestiary' Abbeville Press has created another work of art in their chosen medium, and this one may be their masterpiece, rivaled only by another Abbeville release, 'Audubon's Birds of America: The Baby Elephant Folio Edition'. These are very, VERY large books; each over 12 inches wide and 16 inches tall, between 625 and 700 pages long, and a near-ridiculous 17-18lbs each. Both come with elegant slipcases with cloth tops and bottoms matching the color of the clothbound covers. The overall appearance is stunning, and once again serves as a perfect format for the incredible art and analysis it houses. 'The Grand Medieval Bestiary' is just as fascinating as it is purported to be, a scholarly work that goes far deeper than most of the other, cheaper volumes aimed at Tolkien-obsessed teens. With a \$185.00 MSRP, the \$116.00 I purchased this for seems like a steal... seriously, wait until you see this thing. I ordered the Audubon book at the same time, and the folks at the local post office summoned me all the way into the back to haul the 40lb box out my Damn self.

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