
Unicorn: The Mythical Beast in Art

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More than any other animal, the unicorn has inspired the imagination. Documented in numerous cultures across centuries, the unicorn appears in Christian and non-European art as well as in science and medicine and invokes a wide range of symbolic meanings. Artistic images of the unicorn invite us to reflect on our understanding of the world, on ambiguities and projections. For the first time, the theme of the unicorn is explored and exhibited in a survey that extends from antiquity to contemporary art.

***Unicorn: The Mythical Beast in Art* presents around 150 works and objects including the art of Arnold Böcklin, Albrecht Dürer, Hans Baldung Grien, Angela Hampel, Rebecca Horn, René Magritte, Gustave Moreau, Aurélie Nemours, Olaf Nicolai, Joachim Sandrart, Marie Cécile Thijs, and Maerten de Vos. The historical spectrum of exhibited works ranges from the second millennium BC to the present day and encompasses not only paintings and prints, but also sculptures, manuscripts, tapestries, video works, and *Kunstkammer* objects. Lenders to the exhibition include the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, the Grünes Gewölbe, Dresden, the Historisches Museum Basel, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Musée du Louvre, Paris, the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.**

The unicorn stood, and still stands, for freedom and indomitability, for purity and innocence, for naturalness and affection. Yet the fascination with the fabulous beast is not new, but goes back centuries, even millennia, and is widespread in many cultures. The story of the unicorn originated in India and spread from there to China; via Persia and Egypt, it arrived in Europe, where it acquired many meanings. Interpreted as a symbol of Christ, the unicorn appeared on numerous altarpieces; as an emblem of chastity, it was often depicted with a young woman, and its horn was reputed to possess miraculous medicinal powers, prompting many apothecaries to name their shops after the mythical animal.

In the Middle Ages, no one doubted the unicorn's existence – after all, it was even mentioned in the Bible. Moreover, its marvelous horn was displayed as visible proof in a number of large churches: a long, white, spiraling shaft with a pointed end. Not until the seventeenth century would naturalists prove that in reality, it was the tusk of the narwhal. But even this scientific discovery did nothing to diminish the appeal of the unicorn.

“The unicorn is magical. As a mythical beast, it is a multilayered sign, charged with extraordinary associative energy. Although it is not found in any zoo, it is still ubiquitous – in

pop culture, in advertising, and in children's rooms," explains Michael Philipp, Chief Curator of the Museum Barberini and curator of the exhibition. "The single horn on its forehead – something no other four-footed animal shares – is considered a sign of chosenness. It marks the unicorn as an extraordinary being that belongs to a different world than our everyday one. This supernatural status, this distant familiarity, makes it a projection screen for longings and ideals nourished by traditional stories and images."

Works of Art from Maerten de Vos to Rebecca Horn

The unicorn's many facets are illuminated by outstanding works of art in the extensive exhibition at the Museum Barberini. The monumental painting by Maerten de Vos from 1572, in which he portrays the unicorn as a powerful, combative figure (Staatliche Schlösser, Gärten und Kunstsammlungen Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Schwerin), is featured alongside the sculpture of a kneeling unicorn from an eighteenth-century Buddhist temple in Tibet (Museum Rietberg, Zurich). A Persian tile from the thirteenth century shows the unicorn battling an elephant (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst), while on a tapestry from around 1625 it fights a lion and a panther (Adornes Estate, Bruges). But the unicorn itself can also be the prey: in a thirteenth-century manuscript, Alexander the Great fights a whole host of unicorns (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett), and on an altarpiece from around 1480 the archangel Gabriel chases the unicorn into the lap of the Virgin Mary (Erfurt Cathedral).

Also on view is the large unicorn horn from the church of St. Denis, famous among pilgrims in the Middle Ages (Musée de Cluny, Paris), along with historical apothecary jars for medicinal unicorn powder (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg; Deutsches Apotheken-Museum, Heidelberg). Around 1533, Hans Baldung Grien painted the unicorn in the Garden of Eden along with the other creatures (Angermuseum, Erfurt), while in 1650 Paulus Potter included it in the legend of Orpheus, who charmed the wild animals (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Printed travel reports announce alleged unicorn sightings, while scientists like Conrad Gessner investigate the animal (both publications from the Staatsbibliothek Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, precious vessels of ivory or silver from princely *Kunstkammer* celebrate the unicorn's beauty (e.g. Grünes Gewölbe, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden).

Since the nineteenth century, the unicorn has come to embody the creative, artistic imagination, as demonstrated in works by Arnold Böcklin (Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Sammlung Schack, Munich; Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, Poznań), Arthur B. Davies, who painted a fairytale landscape with four unicorns around 1906 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), and other artists ranging from Alfred Kubin (Kunstforum Ostdeutsche Galerie Regensburg) and René Magritte (private collection)

to Rebecca Horn (Tate, London). The unicorn continues to inspire artistic responses in our own day, as demonstrated by the photographs of Marie Cécile Thijs, video works of Maïder Fortuné, or sculptures of Olaf Nicolai.

In nine galleries of the museum, the exhibition brings together some 150 works from 4,000 years of history, including paintings, drawings, prints, illuminated manuscripts, sculptures, and tapestries. “Many of these works are rarely loaned,” says Ortrud Westheider, Director of the Museum Barberini. “We are delighted that our exhibition concept was able to convince over eighty lenders from sixteen countries.” Lending institutions include the Albertina, Vienna, the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, the Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg, the Grünes Gewölbe der Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden, the Historisches Museum Basel, the KB Nationale Bibliotheek, The Hague, the MAK – Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Musée du Louvre, Paris, the Musées royaux d’Art et d’Histoire, Brussels, the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, the Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Exhibition makes pioneering contribution to the study of mythic motifs in art

The exhibition *Unicorn: The Mythical Beast in Art* explores this fascinating theme in a breadth and depth hitherto unprecedented in a museum context. In so doing, it opens up new art historical perspectives by illustrating how the unicorn functioned symbolically in differing cultural, religious, and scientific contexts over the millennia – and by illuminating iconographical connections and historical transformations that until now have received little attention. For each section of the extensive exhibition, textual sources were selected, translated, and interpreted in order to shed light on the historical context of the works of art and the connections between them. This collection of sources – ranging from ancient writers to Christian theologians to scientists and physicians of the early modern period – is included as an anthology in the 400-page catalogue (Prestel Verlag, Munich): a many-voiced tapestry of interwoven texts by travelers and naturalists, compilers and monks, physicians and poets, from 400 BC to Rainer Maria Rilke and Umberto Eco. The catalogue also contains essays by Adrien Bossard (Nice), Béatrice de Chancel-Bardelot (Paris), Barbara Drake Boehm (New York), Michael Philipp (Potsdam), Annabelle Ténèze (Lens), and Stefan Trinks (Berlin).

“The intensive scholarly research and textual sources compiled in the catalogue offer new impulses for art historical research and show how the fabulous creature served as a projection screen for collective conceptions and cultural narratives,” explains Ortrud Westheider, Director of the Museum Barberini. “In this way, the exhibition makes

a pioneering contribution to the study of mythic motifs in art and their reception over the centuries.”

The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive program of education and events with tours, workshops, lectures, conversations, a reading, a concert, and a film program.

The exhibition was organized in cooperation with the Musée de Cluny and the GrandPalaisRmn, Paris. As its second station, it will be on view at the Musée de Cluny from March 13 to July 12, 2026.