Marvelous Monsters and Beautiful Beasts

Become a detail detective and explore the art of the Renaissance. Discover some of the ways artists have used real and imaginary animals in their work.

A Date with a Dragon

Gallery 203

This painting tells the legend of Saint George, who battled a ferocious dragon in order to rescue a princess and free the townspeople. Notice the texture of the dragon’s skin—does it remind you of a crocodile? What animals do the dragon’s wings, teeth, claws, and tail remind you of?

- What other animals can you find in this painting?
- Where else in this gallery can you see a dragon?
  How many faces does it have?

Lion’s Share

Gallery 203a

In the Middle Ages, a priest or member of the nobility would have used this object to pour water over their hands in order to cleanse them before a religious ceremony or banquet. The artist chose to make this vessel in the shape of a fantastic lion. Notice the wavy patterns that suggest the texture of the lion’s mane and the curvy lines that form the lion’s ears and teeth.

- Look for the hidden hinged door on the lion’s head, used to pour water into the vessel.
- Can you find the handle and the spout?
Creature from the Deep

Gallery 205

This is an actual seashell decorated with fanciful figures that look like they could have come from the sea. Large shells like this were rare and valuable and often placed in elaborate gold or silver settings. Look for the image of a sea creature with a long curly tail on the shell. Search for shapes on the shell that are repeated on the metal stand.

Look for another object that includes a seashell. Believe it or not, this cup held salt, which in those days was a rare and expensive seasoning used in small amounts and only on special occasions. What do you season your favorite foods with? If you were to imagine an animal-shaped container for ketchup, mustard, or pepper, what animal would you choose?

The Birds and the Beast

Gallery 207

Remember the dragon from the painting of Saint George? The dragon in this painting is on a leash. Can you find it? Legend has it that this dragon swallowed Saint Margaret, the woman holding the leash, and that while she was in his belly, the small cross she always carried grew to be so big that it burst the dragon’s stomach, freeing her. Find Margaret’s name in German on her golden halo. Can you find the leaping stag in the golden band of her clothing?

- Look carefully!
  There are twelve birds in this work of art. Can you find them all?
  (Hint: There are 3 birds in the left panel; 6 birds in the middle panel; and 3 birds on the right panel.)

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