

The Power of Animal Images: How Museums Tell the Story of Animal Symbols: Case study of the Museum Catharijneconvent

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Abstract: Animals have consistently been a common subject in art, including religious adornments. The animals illustrated on the items have also been associated with symbolic significance. The utilization of animal symbolism imbued art or religious items with a sense of sanctity and transcendence. Museum exhibitions frequently feature artworks that incorporate animal elements. What are the most effective strategies for curators to leverage animal images' inherent benefits to attract visitors? Perhaps this case study about the Museum Catharijneconvent, Netherlands, can serve as a practical illustrative example.

Keywords: Museum Catharijneconvent; The Path and Puddle; Animal figures; curatorial concept

1. A brief history of animal symbolism

Animals have consistently held significant importance in art, spanning from the ancient Paleolithic era (approximately 36,000 years ago) to the animal representations of buffaloes, lions, and mammoths discovered in the Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc Cave in France, as well as the animal emblems featuring formidable creatures like dragons and wolves utilized by Asian tribes. Animals appear to have served as a wellspring of inspiration for painters' creativity during specific periods. Numerous artworks depicting animals continue to be displayed in museums globally. The history of animal symbolism, whether in Western or Eastern cultures, is extensive. This is closely related to the totem worship common among early primitive humans. "In the late Paleolithic period, totem ancestors often appeared in the form of natural forces or were considered the creators of natural forces. Totems were the fundamental symbols with which primitive humans distinguished themselves from other tribes, and they were also the religious origins of a people." [1] For example, Egypt, it is widely recognized that Egypt was a nation where gods were depicted in animal form and where the afterlife was believed to be inhabited by both humans and tamed as well as wild animals. Later, during The High Middle Age, in the fully developed Romanesque art of the twelfth century, the most important motifs of religious iconography linked to animal symbolism [2].

People's innate attraction to artwork featuring animals has steadily become a marketing hotspot for numerous museums. In front of the museum, visitors often see enormous promotional posters featuring pictures of animals. The sensory and emotional engagement with the tangible elements of a museum, even before gaining any information about it, is a crucial factor that enhances the overall museum experience. [3] Therefore, it raises one crucial question: How can museums and curators enhance the positive aspects of their displays to create a more powerful engagement with their audiences?

2. Case study of The Museum Catharijneconvent



Figure 1. Path and Puddle on display at museum



Figure 2. Marianum (museum collection)

The Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht, the Netherlands, can serve as a suitable illustration that served as the inspiration for this article. The Path and Puddle (Figure 1) [4] displayed in the Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht. This piece of modern art was created in 2022 to honor the anniversary of the museum's founding. Nonetheless, in my opinion, the three components of art, religion, and museum design are all skillfully brought together in this piece of art. The Path and Puddle consists of a series of paintings on the theme of animals, created by the modern artist Kasper Bosmans in 2022. The artwork includes of eight small paintings, seven of which are arranged in an orderly way on a larger yellow door, while the other painting is placed separately on a smaller red door next to it. In organizing the Path and Puddle exhibition, the curator was inspired by another collection Marianum (Figure 2)[5]. As Lieke Wijnia (museum curator) explained, the parts of the sculpture of Marianum were assembled from objects of different periods; for instance, the halo and crowns from the Marianum were made in 19 centuries. The Path and Puddle are also exhibited in a like manner, resembling an assemblage. According to the museum's description[6]:

Bosmans's imagery follows the medieval custom of capturing great stories in simple symbols. The title refers to the path we take as humans and the challenge (puddle) that may arise. The painted doors symbolize the wide and the narrow way. Do you walk the pleasant path of temptation, or do you choose the strenuous path with a reward at the end? The panels also contain a lot of symbolism. For example, the Peruvian poison fog, which is faithful to its partner for life, represents monogamy and a snake skin and an apple refer to the biblical story of the Fall.

People in ancient and medieval periods used classification systems to establish an order by which they could not only make sense of nature and society but also locate their positions within that order. [7] Certainly, not all animals possess a distinct symbolic significance. Numerous animals in medieval art exhibit considerable complexity and may possess multiple, often contradicting, meanings. The concept of an "ant-elephant," previously believed to stem from a hybridization of an ant and an elephant, amalgamates attributes of both little and colossal, frail and robust. To contemporary individuals, this appears to be an irreconcilable contradiction; nevertheless, at that era, it was intentionally constructed to utilize symbols to elucidate numerous concepts that could not be comprehensively spoken. Consequently, when the museum chooses to present this modern artwork beside a collection of historically themed religious artifacts, The intergenerational connection and communication represented by religious art through animal symbolism is now realized through curating. The interaction between disparate eras became tangible through the curatorial strategy. The animal image distinguished itself from the other ancient religious artworks due to its vivid color contrast and visual impact. Additionally, the intriguing arrangement of the artworks compelled numerous visitors to pause and observe. In my opinion, The Path and Puddle in the Museum Catharijneconvent is an excellent illustration of curation that enhances the worth of an exhibit.

3. Reflection

When we turn our lens to the East, animal symbolism seems to transcend cultural boundaries. Numerous museums in China also possess religious artifacts featuring the same animal emblems. In contrast to the Catharijneconvent Museum, the present exhibition of ancient religious artworks in China adheres more closely to traditional curatorial practices. This sort of curating is more formal and typically has an instructional purpose. Artifacts from analogous periods are organized chronologically and supplemented by succinct explanatory texts. Nonetheless, this is insufficient for museum patrons seeking novel and engaging experiences, as well as for scholars aiming to perform comprehensive analyses of the displays. Indeed, the curatorial methodologies of various museum institutions may be influenced by their distinct functions. Nevertheless, visitors will inevitably be drawn to curatorial methods that are sufficiently innovative. This is particularly true of museum exhibits that feature animal figures, such as paintings and sculptures. Consequently, the unique curatorial approach of the Catharijneconvent Museum has inspired and prompted a significant number of Chinese art museums to reflect on the following question: How can curators fully leverage the natural advantages of animal images to attract visitors when incorporating

animal-symbolic collections into the museum? In what ways can curators utilize animal images to enhance the presentation of artistic narratives and convey stories to the audience? As Hans Peter Hahn mentioned, “Every object in the museum is an argument.”[8] As far as I am concerned, the way museums tell the story of an art exhibit is also an argument.

References

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- [4] Path and Puddle, Kasper Bosmans, 2022. 294.5cm*400cm*1.5cm. Collection code: RMCC s382. Picture photography by Gunnar Meier. <https://www.kasperbosmans.com/index/pathandpuddle>
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- [8] Hans Peter Hahn mentioned this at the second day of the experimental workshop at Museum Catharijneconvent, Utrecht, as a concluding statement.