



Medieval Beasts

Ann Payne

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The manuscripts known as bestiaries are among the most attractive medieval books, containing depictions and descriptions of all manner of beasts—some quite real, some imagined.

Alongside the familiar beasts—lion, tiger, leopard, antelope, goat—are to be found the exotic and mythical—unicorn, griffin, monoceros, yale, dragon, phoenix. In the bestiaries there is a story attached to each of them, and very often a moral to point as well; the compilers, in describing the animal kingdom, sought to draw a lesson from the good and the bad traits exhibited by each creature. The illustrators of the manuscripts meanwhile did their best to picture the beasts, many of which, real as well as mythical, they can never themselves have seen. Ann Payne follows the order of a traditional bestiary and describes each beast in a commentary which she has derived from the original texts. The illustrations—eighty of which are in full color—are taken from nine different bestiaries in The British Library's collections. Added together in this way, the flavor of these delightful manuscripts is recreated, and we see the charming, sometimes naïve, and often beautiful, way that the medieval artists depicted and tried to make sense of the living world.

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