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THE GETTY PRESENTS MEDIEVAL ANIMALS, CREATURES AND BEASTS
IN AN EXHIBITION OF MANUSCRIPTS FROM THE MUSEUM’S COLLECTION

Medieval Beasts

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Center, May 1, 2007-July 29, 2007

LOS ANGELES—Lions and tigers and bears—oh my! And those are only some of the animals—real and imaginary—that audiences of all ages will encounter when they enter the world of Medieval Beasts at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center from May 1, 2007 – July 29, 2007.

This new exhibition of animal images, culled from the Museum’s permanent collection, features many of the museum’s most popular illuminated manuscripts, such as its two bestiaries, and some books and leaves rarely displayed, including a lively manuscript of Aesop’s fables.

The 23 images chosen for Medieval Beasts are divided into three sections: Animals in Daily Life, Symbolic Creatures, and Fantastic Beasts. The exhibition includes a special children’s educational activity, Beastly Riddles. Families can pick up Beastly Riddle cards, printed in both English and Spanish, and use them to solve riddles and identify medieval animals in the exhibition.

Medieval Beasts complements the Getty Museum’s Summer Premiere Presentation, Oudry’s Painted Menagerie (May 1, 2007–September 2, 2007), which unveils for the first time in 150 years two life-size Oudry paintings, Rhinoceros and Lion.
Medieval Beasts focuses on the central role of beasts both in medieval art and the medieval conception of the world brought to life. Animals were an essential aspect of almost every facet of life in the Middle Ages. They formed the backbone of a farm-based economy, served as instantly recognizable visual symbols, and were imagined as the fantastic inhabitants of the realms of the unknown.

Bestiaries, collections of moralizing descriptions of animals both real and legendary, were among the most popular books of the 1100s and 1200s. A pseudo-scientific catalogue, a bestiary explained the natural world in terms of Christian symbolism and precepts. Bestiaries, however, were just one of the many types of manuscripts that included images of animals in their pages.

"The great appeal of medieval manuscripts is the seemingly infinite variety of beasts that swarm, creep, and scramble across their pages," says exhibition curator Elizabeth Morrison. "And although we are separated from medieval culture by hundreds of years, this exhibition celebrates those beasts that charmed, delighted, or even frightened medieval viewers, and still do the same for us today."

It is in the colorful pages of illuminated manuscripts that this vast and diverse assortment of beasts comes to life, through the efforts of some of the most skilled and imaginative artists of their time.

Animals in Daily Life

In the Middle Ages, animals provided meat and dairy products, supplied wool and leather for clothing and shoes, contributed the brute strength needed to till the land, were the sole means of rapid travel, and even afforded the resources necessary for the creation of books—from bird-quill pens to the animal-skin parchment. It was natural, then, that the art of the period would reflect activities involving animals, including the yearly cycle of farming duties, elaborate hunts that were a source of both food and entertainment for the nobility, and the violent clashes between horse-mounted soldiers in an era of frequent war.

Symbolic Creatures

The fascination with animals was partly due to the Christian belief system that permeated medieval culture. According to medieval Christian theology, God had created the creatures of the earth as symbols of the divine plan that was inherent in every aspect of the natural world. In addition, animals were also commonly understood to embody standard characteristics that reflected cultural values or beliefs. The presence of a dog might indicate loyalty, while the animal
constellations in the night sky were believed to influence the fates of individual men as well as entire nations. Symbolic animals crept into every aspect of manuscript illumination, from the four solemn creatures representing the four Evangelists to lively drawings of animal morality fables inherited from Greek and Roman times.

**Fantastic Beasts**

At a time when most people never left the confines of their immediate towns, and the lands beyond Europe were only just beginning to be systematically explored, the animals that were imagined to live beyond the known world could be exhilarating or even frightening. Tales of giant creatures with elongated noses called elephants in the far-off land of India would have seemed as incredible to those in medieval Europe as stories of mythological griffins, with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. The realms of hell or the events of the Apocalypse, with demons and dragons galore, also haunted those in the Middle Ages as all too real. Medieval artists let loose their imaginations in depicting these creatures of the unknown and went even further in creating fantastic and far-fetched creatures to cavort and frolic in the margins of manuscripts.

**Manuscripts Collection**

The J. Paul Getty Museum established the illuminated manuscripts collection in 1983 with the purchase of one of the finest private collections of illuminated manuscripts in the world, assembled by Peter and Irene Ludwig of Aachen, Germany.

Since 1983, the Museum has built upon the strengths of the Ludwig manuscripts, filled gaps, and enlarged its holdings. The collection now consists of illuminated manuscripts dating from the 9th to the 16th centuries and features outstanding examples of Ottonian, Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, International Style, and Renaissance illumination.

**Related Publication**

*Beasts Factual and Fantastic* by Elizabeth Morrison, associate curator, Department of Manuscripts, the J. Paul Getty Museum

This inaugural volume of the Medieval Imagination series of books that will draw on manuscript illuminations from the Middle Ages and early Renaissance features vivid and charming details from manuscripts in the collections of the J. Paul Getty Museum and the British Library. Along with a lively text, both word and image provide an accessible and delightful introduction to the

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imagination of the medieval world. Future volumes in this series will focus on a particular theme or subject as represented by medieval artists, including costumes, portraiture, and marginalia, among others. (Getty Publications, Paperback $19.95)

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The J. Paul Getty Trust is an international cultural and philanthropic institution devoted to the visual arts that features the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Research Institute, the Getty Conservation Institute, and the Getty Foundation. The J. Paul Getty Trust and Getty programs serve a varied audience from two locations: The Getty Center in Los Angeles and the Getty Villa in Malibu.

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