

Chasing Unicorns in Art Across the Ages

By Robin Cembalest

05/23/13



Shinique Smith, *Miracle*, 2013, clothing, bedding, stuffed toy, ribbon, and rope.

A herd of the magical, elusive creatures alights in uptown Manhattan, while others emerge in galleries and artist's studios everywhere

If you feel like chasing unicorns, take the A train to 190th Street.

More than 40 of the rare and wondrous creatures have converged on the Cloisters, the Met's Medieval-art branch in Fort Tryon Park.

To celebrate the Cloisters' 75th birthday, they've joined its most famous and beloved treasure, the Unicorn Tapestries. These seven hangings, magnificent and mysterious, depict the hunt, capture, and eventual death of the animal—who is, as legend dictates, entrapped by a virgin.

Woven in wool, silk, and silver and gilded-silver wrapped thread, the tapestries are thought to represent the Passion of Christ as well as the theme of matrimony—though much of their dense symbolism, as well as their original patron, remains unknown.

They were acquired for just over a million dollars in 1922 by John D. Rockefeller, who donated them, along with many other things, to the Cloisters for its opening.

Along with the tapestries, medieval-art curator Barbara Drake Boehm has assembled unicorns in paintings, sculpture, ceramics, tableware, a saddle, a birth tray, and a casket, among other items, mostly from medieval and Renaissance Europe. "Search for the Unicorn" is a collective portrait of a creature at once fierce, tender, and pure. He embodies matters of faith, as well as the heart. He is a symbol of Christ, and of chastity. In wedding portraits, he represents the taming of the beloved.

In the Middle Ages, the unicorn was real, though it was always from somewhere else.

The exhibition includes naturalistic studies like *Animals of the Holy Land*, printed in Mainz in 1486; the unicorn here was spotted in Mount Sinai and drawn from life, the text says. Another print locates their native habitat in the Americas.

The unicorn's horn was known to be magical, its intense healing powers the subject of great scrutiny. This page, from a *General History of Drugs* printed in Paris in 1694, is on loan from the U.S. National Library of Medicine.

Anonymous engravings, written by Pierre Pomet, *Histoire générale des drogues (General History of Drugs)*, printed in Paris, 1694, engraving in printed book.

The idea of a one-horned beast with special powers was global. LACMA owns objects with unicorn imagery from China, Japan, and has shown one from colonial Mexico. "Search for the Unicorn" has a unicorn from Mughal India—in a copy of *The Wonders of Creation and the Oddities of Existence*, a popular book in India and across the Middle East.

The Met's Islamic-art department provided a folio from the early 1300s illustrating the *Shahnama (Book of Kings)*; it shows Alexander the Great fighting a monster of Habash, a mythical creature from Ethiopia (that perhaps originated in the rhino).

The hunt for the unicorn appears in Jewish art too. But in the Jewish versions, the unicorn is never captured.

As early as the 14th century, the creature appeared in Hebrew manuscripts, and later in synagogue decoration and on objects used in religious life, like the spectacular 18th-century Polish Torah crown on loan to the Cloisters from a private collection.

In an act of artistic borrowing that we today might call appropriation, Jewish artists re-purposed the unicorn to be a symbol of their own victimhood. Here, "the hunt of the unicorn represents collective Jewish suffering that will bring on Messiah, and not the suffering of Jesus," says Marc Michael Epstein, author of *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature*. In the book he describes the Jewish adoption of the unicorn as the medieval equivalent to Chagall's painting a Jew on the cross in his *White Crucifixion*.

The 16th-century painter Benevenuto Cellini conceived what might be considered the first modern unicorn sculpture. In his autobiography, he recounts being asked to create a mount for an exquisite "unicorn" horn. He came back with a design for a perfectly proportioned unicorn head.

Claude d'Anthenaise, chief curator at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris, had this story in mind when he was planning to reinstall the museum's collection, devoted to nature and the hunt. The museum owns a horn once thought to be a unicorn's; now it is known to be a narwhal's. D'Anthenaise asked the sculptor Saint Clair Cemin to reprise Cellini's performance. The result was a majestic bronze unicorn head—one of several images of the creature in the galleries. You might call the unicorn the ghost in the installation.

Though the unicorn's symbolism has evolved, its allure as a magical creature persists. Go chasing unicorns in contemporary art and you'll come upon one soon. Of course Mark Dion and Damien Hirst have made unicorn art, along with Rebecca Horn and Inka Essenhigh, to name a few. A beautiful pink unicorn turned up at PPOW last year in Thomas Woodruff's candyland version of the Unicorn Tapestries, a rendering just as cryptic as the originals and several degrees hotter.

Shinique Smith has been enamored by unicorns her whole life. She keeps a bag of My Little Ponies by her desk for inspiration. "I suppose as an adult I lost the hope of seeing one because some say they only

appear to virgins,” she explains. “Now, I feel like they evoke a sparkle of graceful mystery and remind me of my own youthful wishes.”

Smith has put bits of unicorns in three paintings, but recently made her first unicorn sculpture, inspired by “cotton candy, summer playtime, reading fairy tales on my canopy bed kind of feelings.” The piece, called *Miracle*, is in her current show at David Castillo in Miami.

Victim has become conqueror in Kathy Ruttenberg’s *Careful What You Wish For*, part of her bizarre ceramic menagerie recently on view at Stux.

Just like the medieval Jews, Ruttenberg has captured the unicorn and changed its identity, so now he’s a she. Though this triumphant creature shows her roots in porcelain kitsch figurines, she has clearly come a long way. Maybe her necklace of shrunken heads is a warning to anyone who wants to cut off her horn.

When Kimberley Hart created a unicorn trap in Socrates Sculpture Park, she replaced the maiden with a maiden-shaped mirror, confusing the question of who is the hunter and who is the bait. It might be the artist. Or it might be us.

Tejal Shah bypasses the medieval unicorn hunt entirely. Her source is the one-horned creatures on seals and tablets created around 5,000-2,000 BC by the Indus Valley Civilization; part of her goal in *Between the Waves*, a five-channel video installation that premiered at Documenta and is now on view at Barbara Gross Galerie in Munich, was to return unicorns to their native grounds, which are not far from her own. The prehistoric figures are reborn as female humanoid unicorns who, in a circular fable, follow spiritual and erotic rituals until disaster strikes.

In September, the Transformer in Cleveland will open “The Unicorn,” a show inspired by Martin Walser’s book of the same title. Its theme is our impulse to create fictions—especially about the past, says its curator, Reto Thuring of the Cleveland Museum.

“It’s simple to put a horn on its head and suddenly this animal becomes totally different,” he comments.

Participating artists include Martin Soto Climent, who will make a massive collage inspired by another famous set of unicorn tapestries, from the Musée de Cluny in France. He’s used the unicorn figure in other works, but he won’t here. He doesn’t need to.

For Soto Climent, the creature is a “symbol of the power of the mind, the creative force that separates us from the animals.”

That’s the force that inspires us to make art.