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Under the Wing of a Creature of the Night

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Under the Wing of a Creature of the Night

Abstract
Magnificent in its sheer power and beauty, this owl wing has a wingspan of 18 inches and measures 10 inches from the shoulder bone to the secondary feathers. Wings such as the one displayed play a vital role in the lifestyle of owls and other hunting birds who fulfill their dietary requirements through stealthy foraging in the dark of the night. Being predatory animals, an owl depends upon its wings as a weapon, equipping it with an arsenal worthy of any hunter. Because of their composition of downy feathers, soft fringes, and comb-like primary feathers, these light appendages create less audible sound waves through air, giving an owl the advantage of nearly silent flight. [*excerpt*]

Keywords
owls, flight, memento mori, Athena, mythology, antomy

Disciplines
Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

Comments
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Audio guide on the symbolism of owls included.

This student research paper is available at The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/wonders_exhibit/15

Under the Wing of a Creature of the Night

By Julia Marie Chin

Magnificent in its sheer power and beauty, this owl wing has a wingspan of 18 inches and measures 10 inches from the shoulder bone to the secondary feathers. Wings such as the one displayed play a vital role in the lifestyle of owls and other hunting birds who fulfill their dietary requirements through stealthy foraging in the dark of the night. Being predatory animals, an owl depends upon its wings as a weapon, equipping it with an arsenal worthy of any hunter. Because of their composition of downy feathers, soft fringes, and comb-like primary feathers, these light appendages create less audible sound waves through air, giving an owl the advantage of nearly silent flight.

Owl Wing. Approximately 18″ Wingspan. Gettysburg College Biology Department.

This mechanism functions in two ways: preventing unsuspecting prey from hearing an approaching owl; and eliminating excessive noise that could distract a hunting owl, allowing it to truly hone in on its target. [1]

Fatalistic Symbolism

Beyond their roles as predators, owls are nocturnal creatures and have almost always been associated with death which is often described through euphemisms referencing sleep or an eternal night. The Latin phrase *memento mori* became a prevalent theme during this period and served as a reminder of imminent death in popular culture through images of bones, extinguished candles, or hourglasses whose time had run out. However, people of the Renaissance furthered this meaning behind owls to signify a moral death i.e. the loss of virginity.

By cgb.fr [CC BY-SA 3.0], via Wikimedia Commons

This association originates from the ancient Greeks worship of the "unconquered virgin" goddess Athena who was frequently depicted with a small and entirely nocturnal owl called the *glaux*. This bird's name is derived from the verb meaning "to burn," and thus in conjunction the common epithet "*glaux*-eyed Athena", ancient peoples often believed that the *glaux* was a bird which burned or shined, striking creatures dead on sight with its fatalistic eyes. In the acropolis of Athens, a miniature replica of a *glaux* on a pillar supposedly warded of other evil influences by luring birds to itself and then destroying them with its unforgiving glare. [2] Renaissance humanistic thinking often harked back to classical origins, where the correlation between owls and evil was present in prominent literature such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Peter Paul Rubens [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

In these transformational poems, owls were found screeching in stories of misguided lust. Some of the most notable tales include the goddess Venus's aggressive seduction of the mortal youth Adonis or the incestuous advances made by the compelled Myrrha towards her own father, Cinyras. [3]

One physical representation of the owl as an emblem of the night is present in Michelangelo's allegorical statue *Night*, a sleeping woman with "an owl, lodged below the angle of her knee; a bundle of pomegranates beneath her left foot; and a mask under her left shoulder." This figure is

found near a tomb in one of the Medici Chapels, a very wealthy family known for its patronage of the arts during the Renaissance. Besides the bird itself, the star and crescent moon arranged in the woman's hair further serve as alternate representations of the night from a more astronomical perspective.

Night, by Michelangelo by virtusincertus is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Additionally, the slack breasts and corpulent abdomen of the woman characterize her as a maternal figure aged by childbirth. Once again this sheds light upon classical beliefs, reminiscent of the Great Mother, often associated with Minerva (the Roman equivalent of Athena) with an owl by her side. Amongst more physical symbols such as skulls and timepieces, owls have served as metaphors for death for thousands of years: ancient Egyptians used the owl as a hieroglyphic symbolizing mortality, and in the first century A.D. birds were seen as harbingers of death, foreboding imminent destruction if seen in a populous city. Many ancient Eastern Mediterranean countries considered the owl to be reincarnation of a dead man, [4] aligning with other cultures' beliefs in which the owl was viewed as bad luck or sometimes an incarnation of the Goddess of Death herself. [5]

An Avian's Context in the Renaissance

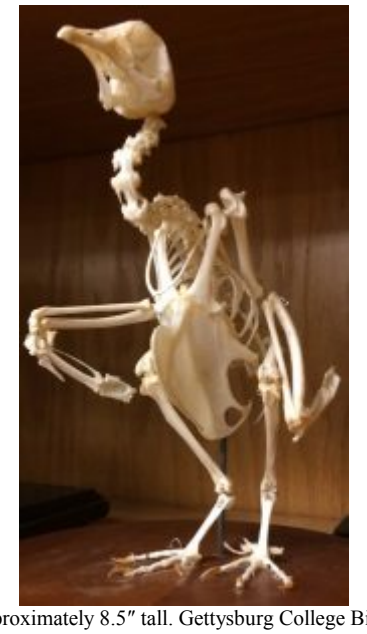
The fascination with aviaries during the Renaissance dates back to the time of the classics, when ancient Greek and Roman cultures prized birds for their melodic songs, e.g. nightingales, or served flashy game, e.g. peacocks, as delicacies at the dinner table. The catching and collecting of birds has always been deemed a pastime for gentlemen, demonstrating societal graces and wealth.

By Melchior d'Hondecoeter [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Due to a growth in exploration during the Renaissance in particular, many exotic breeds came from America, Africa, Europe, and the Indies, often sent back as gifts from travelers or as part of an exchange between collectors. Birds were also desirable for marvelous and unusual plumage coloration, such as the evenly snowy feathers of the albino starling and white pheasants kept in Louis XIII's collection. One story even tells of the great lengths that a Jesuit missionary went to in order to send a pair of ruby-throated hummingbirds back to his mentor in Rome, highlighting birds' status as precious and marvelous animals. [6]

The Bones Beneath the Bird

The anatomy of birds is truly different from other classes of animalia, especially in regards to the structure of their skeletons. Most notably, bird bones are lighter than those of mammals bones of the same size, further enabling the buoyancy of avian flight in conjunction with the contour and types of feathers.



Bird Skeleton. Approximately 8.5″ tall. Gettysburg College Biology Department.

Shape plays a crucial role in the skeleton of an avian. The humeral shafts (i.e. wing bones) of birds are round in order to resist torsion, rendering them study for flight against strong gales of wind. Multiple fusions of skeletal parts also increase birds' force resistance, and higher bone density directly correlates with greater stiffness which can prevent fracturing from occurring easily upon impact. [7] More on the fascinating nature of avian anatomy can be found in Elizabeth Dumont's biological study on "Bone Density and the Lightweight Skeletons of Birds" by clicking here.

This scientific approach towards birds during the Renaissance can perhaps best be seen in the work of the English ornithologist and physician, William Turner (1508-1568). A friend of the famous Swiss naturalist Conrad Gessner, Turner's 1544 publication, *Avium praecipuarum,* was the first book to describe birds scientifically without considering their practical uses on behalf of humans. Though this work did not contain illustrations as expected of many zoological volumes, Turner gave great emphasis to the nature of birds. In this excerpt, Turner clearly outlines the predatory characteristics of the gray shrike *Lanius excutitor*:

Southern Grey Shrike, by Per-Anders Olsson (used with permission) [CC BY-SA 3.0], via Wikimedia Commons

"It lives on beetles, butterflies, and biggish insects . . . also birds, after the manner of a Hawk. For it kills Reguli and Finches and (as once I saw) Thrushes; and bird- catchers even report that it from time to time slays certain woodland Pies, and can put Crows to flight. It does not seize the birds it kills with its claws, after a swift flight, as Hawks do, but attacks them stealthily and soon (as I have often had experience) aims at the throat and with its beak squeezes and breaks the skull." [8]

A Marvel of Curiosity Cabinets

When one encounters a piece of nature and a piece of art, one might immediately define the naturalia as a specimen used for hard, fact-based research and assume that there is a subliminal meaning behind the visible surface of the artificiala. But because of the conceptually fluid nature of most artifacts collected in the 15th-16th centuries, identifying the fixed purpose of an object was not so black and white. While an owl's wing may be an unaltered work of nature, in the European Renaissance, this marvel would have been an exemplary specimen of the type of objects found in curiosity cabinets. Such an object's ability to be interpreted through both a scientific and artistic lens blurs the demarcation line between analytical and aesthetic value. Whether their impact on Renaissance culture goes bone deep or extends beyond the veil of death itself, birds were certainly wondrous creatures of this enlightening period in history and taught a valuable lesson that perhaps no other creature could: the sky's the limit.

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