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Wondrous Cetaceans

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Wondrous Cetaceans

Abstract

The Renaissance was named for the cultural rebirth it witnessed. It meant a decrease in the widespread artistic and scientific suppression of the Middle Ages. As a result, Europeans enjoyed a new exploratory enthusiasm, which brought them to the far corners of the world. The concept of exoticism was renewed by European contact with places like China and Brazil. But as well as new cultural connections being bolstered, immense scientific discovery was going on. Science, then named natural philosophy, was seeing breakthrough after breakthrough. Scientists and interested persons brought knowledge and specimens from far and wide together in curiosity cabinets, museums, and galleries. These *wunderkammern*, as German speakers called them then, were truly an embodiment of the scientifically inquisitive times. What better then, to embody these cabinets of curiosities, than an object which featured in so many of them: the narwhal tusk? [*excerpt*]

Keywords

narwhal, unicorns, naturalia, sea creatures, exploration

Disciplines

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

Comments

Produced as part of a collaboration between Kay Etheridge's course FYS-188: Exploration of the Marvelous: Art and Science in the Renaissance, and Felicia Else's course ARTH 284: Wonders of Nature and Artifice: The Renaissance Quest for Knowledge.

Original version online at <http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/fys-188/wondrous-cetaceans/>

Includes audio guide on cetacean relics.

Wondrous Cetaceans

By Logan Daniel Seward Henley

The Renaissance was named for the cultural rebirth it witnessed. It meant a decrease in the widespread artistic and scientific suppression of the Middle Ages. As a result, Europeans enjoyed a new exploratory enthusiasm, which brought them to the far corners of the world. The concept of exoticism was renewed by European contact with places like China and Brazil. But as well as new cultural connections being bolstered, immense scientific discovery was going on. Science, then named natural philosophy, was seeing breakthrough after breakthrough. Scientists and interested persons brought knowledge and specimens from far and wide together in curiosity cabinets, museums, and galleries. These *wunderkammern*, as German speakers called them then, were truly an embodiment of the scientifically inquisitive times. What better then, to embody these cabinets of curiosities, than an object which featured in so many of them: the narwhal tusk?



Our Narwhal Tusk, photo by Logan Henley

Narwhal tusks, then often thought to be unicorn horns, were essential collectibles as well as implements for medical practitioners. Renaissance doctors, operating under the popular belief that unicorns have magical healing powers concentrated in their horns, would prescribe pulverized unicorn horn to sufferers of all kinds of afflictions. Even when knowledge of narwhals began to replace the belief in unicorns, the tusks remained in high medical and alchemical regard. Narwhals' mysterious maritime origins perhaps increased reverence for the tusks. Our planet's great oceans possess a curious allure, even to this day, by nature of the unknown worlds they envelop.



Our Bottlenose Dolphin Skull, photo by Dr. Kay Etheridge

It is no surprise, then, that nautical *naturalia* represent a large portion of objects in many wonder cabinets. In the 2017 Gettysburg Wonder Cabinet, visitors can see the whale eye, the replica narwhal tusk, an abundance of shells, and even “figured stones”, or fossils, that chronicle ancient marine life. Then, resting opposite a crocodile skull, is the skull of a bottlenose dolphin. This dolphin skull is very peculiar in the context of Renaissance art. It seems like a simple object; it is just lying on a chest of drawers in the exhibit. But consider the image below. Renaissance artists only ever saw dolphins either in the split second it took them to leap up and slip back underwater or as corpses on beaches. Most artists were lucky to even witness the animal, more likely having seen only artworks in the supposed likeness of dolphins. Those scaly, coiled sea creatures in the frontispiece below are, in fact, supposed to be dolphins.



Frontispiece from Johann Sperlingi's *Zoologica Physica*

Further reading and interesting references:

1. http://www.jstor.org/stable/103905?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=skull&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicResults%3Fso%3Dold%26amp%3Bpage%3D3%26amp%3Bsi%3D1%26amp%3BQuery%3Dskull%26amp%3Brefreqid%3Dsearch%253Af8f989220cc7f5ab0dacfc5e63eff8a0&refreqid=search%3A670d69c63ee8f5ff2cc337803fd5beca&seq=3#page_scan_tab_contents
2. http://www.jstor.org/stable/104222?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=sea&searchText=unicorn&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicResults%3Frefreqid%3Dsearch%253A6c160f5e46451bed623d80f42e746a21%26amp%3BQuery%3Dsea%2Bunicorn%26amp%3Bso%3Dold%26amp%3Bsi%3D1&refreqid=search%3Af7f97a445a0997b72831b29aee9a4e2f&seq=6#page_scan_tab_contents
3. http://www.jstor.org/stable/102951?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=whale&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicResults%3FQuery%3Dwhale%26amp%3Bso%3Dold%26amp%3Bpage%3D2%26amp%3Brefreqid%3Dsearch%253A36b88d352986ce2c738c9ab1bf3c1172%26amp%3Bsi%3D1&refreqid=search%3A38d9ee068661dd0cedef74c21c54340e&seq=4#page_scan_tab_contents

