A Field Guide to Medieval Monsters
July 7–October 6

Unicorns. Griffins. Dragons. Sirens. Some of these monsters you may recognize from fairy tales, Greek and Roman mythology, or books about your favorite boy wizard. In the Middle Ages, these monsters and many more made their way onto the pages of illuminated manuscripts. These handwritten texts, which include bibles, books of hours, and books of psalms, were often decorated with elaborate designs and images. This exhibition, *Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, Wonders*, explores how images of monsters played a complex role in medieval society and operated in a variety of ways, often instilling fear, revulsion, devotion, or wonderment.
Before you start exploring, there is some monster terminology you may need to know.

**Anthropomorphic**
A creature or object having humanlike characteristics.

**Cryptozoology**
The study of hidden creatures, which aims to prove the existence of beasts from folklore like bigfoot, aliens, or chupacabras.

**Illuminated manuscript**
a written text that includes decoration or illustrations. Illuminated manuscripts take many forms, such as bibles, books of hours (personal devotional books), psalters (books of psalms), and sacramentaries (book used by a priest during Catholic services).

**Monster**
From the Latin verbs *monstrare* (to show) and *monere* (to warn), monsters are a disruption of the natural world that often take the form of unreal creatures.

**Normative**
What the most powerful members of a society value as proper. Non-normative people are often represented as monstrous in these manuscripts.

**Personify**
Represent a quality or concept through a humanlike form, for example, “a harpy can personify the winds.”

**Quadrupeds**
An animal with four limbs specialized for walking. Can be used to describe an unreal creature, such as “a dragon is a reptilelike quadruped.”

**Basilisk**
A reptile or serpent who can cause death with a glance, often described as a crested snake or as a rooster with a snake’s tail. Here, the basilisk appears in an image that is supposed to represent Ethiopia.

**Blemmyes**
Headless people whose facial features are on their chest. During the Middle Ages, blemmyes were thought to inhabit Africa and later, India.

You are ready to go! Use this field guide to identify monsters you encounter throughout the exhibition.


All images are details.
Cephalophore a saint or martyr who carries their own head

Cetus a large sea creature often depicted as a whale or shark who swallowed Jonah, saving him from his death in the biblical book of Jonah

Demons evil spirits that are active in the world, often working on behalf of Satan. Demons can also be associated with animals like foxes, wolves, and snakes.

Dracontopede a serpent with the head of a maiden. The dracontopede was thought by some to be responsible for tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Dragon a type of winged serpent sometimes used to represent Satan. The story of Saint George killing a dragon appears in many prints and illuminated manuscripts.

Elephants although common creatures in other parts of the world, the medieval European person considered elephants to be creatures of imagination and wonder. Their ivory was thought to smooth wrinkles and whiten teeth, and they were also considered the enemies of dragons.
Giants: humanoids of extraordinary size, strength, and appetite, often with little intelligence. Popular medieval examples include Goliath, Nimrod, and Saint Christopher.

Griffin: a creature with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. Griffin sculptures can be guardian figures at some Catholic churches.

Griffus: a squat creature with a human head that sits on bestial haunches.

Harpies: a bird with the head of a woman. In Greek mythology, harpies personified storm winds.

Hellmouth: the entrance to hell, imagined as monstrous mouth.

Leopard: considered legendary beasts. Leopards were thought to be the degenerate offspring of a lion and a pard (a mythical, spotted cat associated with sin).
**Panotti** a mythical race of people possessing large ears.

**Lynx** the lynx’s urine was believed to solidify into a mythical gemstone.

**Mandrake** the root of a plant whose ointment was reputedly able to cure all ailments except death. The root was thought to resemble a human body.

**Satan (Devil)** a cosmic force of evil that was the catalyst for the original sin: tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the Bible, Satan is referred to as the ancient serpent or dragon, enemy, adversary, accuser, attacker, and devil named Beelzebub.

**Mermen** the mythical male equivalent to mermaids; mermen are marine creatures with the upper body of a man and the tail of a fish.

**Leviathan** a demon representing Satan. The Leviathan eats God’s creations and threatens upheaval.

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**Satyr** part man and part beast, a mythical woodland creature that had the body of a man with the ears and tail of a goat or horse, sometimes with hooves.

**Sea Swine** a monstrous kind of fish resembling a boar.

**Siren** a hybrid woman combining the characteristics of a bird and/or fish. A siren’s irresistible song was blamed for luring sailors to their deaths.

**Sphinx** according to Greek tradition, a mythical creature that is part woman, serpent, and lion, sometimes also pictured with eagle wings.


**Skautuhvalur** a monstrous kind of fish with great raylike fins, so large they appear as an island and are able to overturn ships.

**Tarasque** similar to a dragon, the legendary spawn of the biblical Leviathan and Onachus (a scaly, bison-like creature). The tarasque was thought to have terrorized the countryside of southern France before it was tamed by Saint Martha.


**La destruction de la noble cite de Thèbes (The Destruction of the Noble City of Thebes), in French, c. 1474.** France. Ink on paper. The Morgan Library & Museum, Gift of the Trustees of the William S. Glazier Collection, 1984, MS G.23 (fol. 14v–15r).


**Cover Image**
Wild Men (Wild Women / Wild Children) mythical humanlike creatures covered with hair who live in the wilderness. Wildmen are comparable to satyrs and associated with woodlands.

Unicorn a horselike creature with a pointed horn thought to be able to detect poison. In order to capture a unicorn one needed a virgin, so they were often associated with the Virgin Mary. The tusks of narwhals, a type of whale native to Arctic waters, were traded and purported to be unicorn horns.

Tricephalic something having three heads. Here it is used as a tool to illustrate the concept of the Holy Trinity (Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit).

Ziphius a horrible sea monster native to deep waters all over the world, imagined as a beaked whale.
Related Programming

Gallery Talk: Medieval Monsters Tue/Jul 16 and Tue/Sep 10, 12:00 p.m. Jennifer DePrizio, director of interpretation, highlights how monsters were used in the Middle Ages to instill fear, communicate morality, and explain natural phenomenon.

Gallery Talk: Contemporary Monsters Fri/Aug 23, 6:00 p.m. Contemporary artist Sean Foley reflects on key works in Medieval Monsters using “nonsense” as a way to explore monsters and wonder. Imaginative inquiries and curiosity encouraged.

Lecture: Beast or Monster? Animals in the Medieval World Wed/Aug 14, 6:00 p.m., Gartner Auditorium. Explore animals both real and imaginary in the Middle Ages with Dr. Elizabeth Morrison, senior curator of the Department of Manuscripts at the J. Paul Getty Museum, through the bestiary: a kind of medieval animal encyclopedia.

Docent tours Jul 17–Sep 29, Wed and Sun, 2:00 p.m. Join CMA volunteer docents for tours of Medieval Monsters. Meet at the atrium information desk. Reservation required. Limit 25.

Self-guided tour: “Beyond Medieval Monsters” In the ArtLens App (download for free on iOS and Android devices)

Open Studio Every Sun, 1:00–4:00 p.m. Let Medieval Monsters spark your imagination with a variety of prompts and materials related to July’s theme of Imagine.

Workshop: Medieval Monsters and Creative Drawing (all levels). Sat/Sep 28, 10:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. Explore the terrors, aliens, and wonders of Medieval Monsters as a creative springboard for expressive and abstract reinterpretation in your own drawings. $100, CMA members $85.