

The Object podcast
Transcript of Monsters and Marvels Part II: Finding Unicorns
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For being imaginary, unicorns these days are ridiculously easy to see.

My daughter, who's 5 years old, has unicorns on her pants, her skirts, her shirts, her socks, her face mask. She watches them on *My Little Pony*. She's going to be one for Halloween. She even has a remote-control unicorn that gallops across the floor, with an electronic sound like a metronome being crushed in a garbage truck.

My daughter really likes them.

We've reached peak unicorn.

But that's also what people said 10 years ago. And probably 500 years ago.

There are about half a dozen images of unicorns at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, mostly from the 1500s, including an engraving made in Italy that shows God creating the animals, right, the very beginning of life. Quote "living creatures of every kind," according to the Bible. There's a lion, an elephant, camels, and—way in the background—behind God himself, a unicorn, prancing in the field.

In fact, unicorns have been around longer than many gods. One of the earliest known artworks of a unicorn is a small bronze statue of a horse-like creature with a horn sticking out of its forehead. Made in Persia about 2,800 years ago, or roughly 2,800 years before *My Little Pony*.

The unicorn might be the longest-lived, best-loved imaginary creature there is. But why?

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This is The Object podcast, produced by the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Today, part II of *Monsters and Marvels*, about the long, strange ride of the unicorn through art history. And what an imaginary creature can tell us about our true nature.

I'm Tim Gihring.

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Once upon a time, there lived a Greek man named Tsetias. Tsetias was curious about the world. And he ends up in Persia, in modern-day Iran. He knows something about medicine, so the Persian king takes him on as a physician. And now, about 2,400 years ago, Tsetias is in a pretty good position to learn whatever there is to learn.

He tags along with the king to far-flung battles. He meets all kinds of people in the palace. And he hears all kinds of stories—about the known world and the unknown world.

Now, Tsetias has absolutely filter, okay. He just takes it all in: Fact, fiction, the locker-room talk of 400 B.C.E.

So, when Tsetias finally retires from whatever kind of medicine he was practicing, and moves back to his homeland, and starts writing down what he knows, he writes a lot. I mean, he lives to be 95 years old, and he's taken in a lot of fact, fiction and locker-room talk. He writes 23 books just about Persian history.

And then he writes about India, which he doesn't know so well. He's never been there. But he heard a lot about India in Persia, so he writes these Persian views of its neighbor. Gossip, basically. He describes a race of people with only one leg. People with feet so big they could use them as umbrellas.

And then, he describes a unicorn.

It's hard to say exactly what Tsetias is basing this on. There were legends of unicorn-like creatures throughout Asia back then, and some actual unicorn-like creatures, like the Indian rhinoceros.

But Tsetias is awfully specific. He says it's a kind of wild ass—big as a horse—with a white body, dark red head, blue eyes, and a single horn about a foot and a half long, right on its forehead.

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Now, even back then, people didn't take Tsetias too seriously. As one scholar puts it, Tsetias was as much an entertainer as a historian. He probably didn't expect to be read 300 years later much less 2,300 years.

But his stories become really popular. And a lot of other writers end up quoting Tsetias, even the writers who didn't take him too seriously.

Like, Aristotle.

In Aristotle's *History of Animals* he says Tsetias "isn't worth believing" but then goes on to describe several animals from Tee-zee-us's writing, as though they are totally believable. One of these animals is the manticore, a kind of lion with a human head and a scorpion's tail, which recently had a starring role in Disney's film *Onward*.

And another is the unicorn.

Aristotle calls it the Indian donkey, which is basically what Tsetias said. He even says the Indian donkey has a knucklebone, which is something else Tsetias said, and was apparently important to note back then.

And now, the unicorn is out of the barn, as good as real.

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Shortly after Aristotle comes out with his *History of Animals*, the Hebrew Bible is translated into Greek. And the translators use the word *monoceros*—literally a one-horned animal—to describe a kind of fierce, super-strong beast. By the early Middle Ages, monoceros has become unicornus in the Bible.

Around the same time, this book called the *Physiologus* comes out, a Christian book of sort of beast tales. And there, among all the other real and imagined animals, is the unicorn. It's like a goat, small and sneaky and hard to catch. So smart that, quote, the "most clever devil cannot comprehend him or find him out."

The unicorn can only be caught, the book says, if you have a quote "chaste virgin" around.

Marguerite Ragnow, a historian who is the curator of the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota, a collection of rare books and maps and manuscripts, is working on a book about unicorns in art and literature. And she talked to me about how this unicorn hunt was supposed to work. You, quote, "put a virgin in the woods," she says, then stalk the unicorn and drive it to the virgin—who is the only person who can calm it.

And then, you kill it.

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Now, the *Physiologus* spawns all these books called "beastiaries." These collections of animal lore that feel like zoology but are really morality tales, right—part of the ongoing effort to put a Christian spin on pagan knowledge of the natural world. In the medieval period in Europe, they're second only to the Bible in popularity.

And this where you start to get these pictures, again and again, of a docile unicorn lying in the lap of a young woman, while hunters spear it.

Who knows what the virgin is thinking. Often in these artworks the woman looks kind of protective, kind of annoyed that this incredible, impossibly rare creature, has come to her—like, what are the odds?—and now these jerks show up.

But life isn't fair, right.

Natalie Lawrence is a freelance writer in England with a PhD from the University of Cambridge on exotic monsters in early modern Europe. She's working on a book on the history of monsters. And she told me that this ritual of the courtly hunt is linked to the quest for virtue, as well as the

maintenance of the state and the order of the world. It's a ritual enactment of man's supremacy over nature.

This is usually the fate of fabulous beasts, she says. Dragons must be slain. Unicorns must be slain. To restore order, and to prove your knightly prowess.

But also, that unicorn horn is worth a lot of money.

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Let's go back to our friend Tsetias, twenty-three-hundred years ago. Right there, in his initial description of the unicorn, he says a unicorn horn can prevent poisoning—or heal you, if you got poisoned anyway. Which was a big deal, if you were a big deal. People were always trying to poison the prince or the king or just some guy whose huge tracts of land they fancied.

Assassins even wore these rings with little boxes that would flip open and dump some poison out. “Hey prince, look over there!” Dump. No more prince. Yeah, you've seen “The Princess Bride.”

Now, if you had yourself some unicorn horn, just touch the horn to your water or venison or whatever you're having, and you'll live to oppress the serfs another day.

Of course, the horn was also claimed to be an aphrodisiac and to heal all kinds of things—a panacea. Because why not.

There's just one problem. Where do you get a unicorn horn?

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So, let's pause for a moment to think about what people really believed about unicorns back then.

Marguerite Ragnow says, first of all, let's dispense with the idea that people were confused about what they were seeing, when they talked of fantastic beasts—like maybe sailors saw manatees and thought they were mermaids. No. “If you've actually seen a manatee,” she says, “there's no way you're going to think that's a mermaid.”

But, when people were trying to describe something unfamiliar, she says, they focused on certain important elements. Like if you've ever seen the German artist Albrecht Durer's famous engraving of a rhinoceros, in the 1500s, it looks like a rhino in a ridiculous suit of armor—because that thick, gray skin must have stood out in the description.

These creatures take shape like a game of telephone, each person trying to pass along a sense of something they *don't know* using an analogy of something they *do know*. “As humans,” Ragnow says, “we have to link it to something we're familiar with.”

That said, people really did think differently back then. Natalie Lawrence, the expert on fabulous beasts, says to understand how people used to think about the unicorn we need to quote “create bridges between mental worlds,” “separated not only by time but very different ways of interacting with reality.”

And one way to do this, she says, is to think about why we’re *still* so fascinated by unicorns and other monstrous beasts. We know they’re not real, yet they’re still everywhere, right. Which means, maybe we’re asking the wrong question—“are these things real?”—when we should be asking “What do these things *mean*?”

In the old bestiaries, Lawrence says, there was no such division. The world wasn’t seen in terms of biological reality. The world was divinely created—anything was possible—and everything was encoded with divine meaning.

The bestiaries weren’t just fact or fiction, in other words. They were compilations, Lawrence says, of quote “a very different kind of knowledge than what we now value, about an enchanted world where unicorns were very real possibilities.”

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Now, there’s also a very simple explanation of whether people believed or not: the unicorn was in the Bible. So, as Ragnow puts it, “If the Bible is talking about unicorns, then there must have been unicorns.”

And why wouldn’t you believe? This thing is magic. As Ragnow says, “There’s always someone who wants to buy something with magical curative powers.” Whether it’s a unicorn horn or the finger of a saint or a box of echinacea-flavored tea. “It’s part of human nature,” she says, “for people to want something outside of themselves to help them.”

And, if someone’s buying, someone is going to be selling.

Usually the “unicorn horn” that people bought, through apothecaries or some other kind of seller, were from narwhals—the whales with a single long tooth, as long as 10 feet. They live around Greenland, and very few people would have known what a narwhal was in the medieval era.

People from Scandinavia are risking their lives to capture these whales and cut off the horns and sell them. For about 500 years, they keep the source of unicorn horns a secret, more or less.

No virgin needed.

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Now, eventually people do figure this out. But that doesn’t happen overnight. For centuries, the unicorn evolves, right. At one point, the unicorn becomes a symbol of Christ himself—the white

purity of the unicorn like the purity of Christ. The death of the unicorn like the death of Christ, a symbol of sacrifice.

But the unicorn also becomes a symbol of courtly love, the noble knight captured by the fair maiden.

Some of the unicorn prints in Mia's collection were engraved in the 1500s by an artist named Jean Duvet, who's so good at depicting unicorns being unicorny that he decides to focus on it and becomes known as the Master of Unicorns.

In a couple of the prints, he uses the unicorn as a metaphor for the fierce, forbidden love between the French King Henri II and his mistress. The unicorn even spears the king with its horn—gores him in the chest, like a bull in a bullfight. And in the next image, the unicorn is tamed by the virgin, who, let's be honest, was apparently no virgin.

But whatever. The thing about imaginary creatures is they can be whatever you want. As Natalie Lawrence says, once these "fabulous creatures" are quote "out in the world, they have adventures of their own." And the unicorn, as Lawrence says, "is one of the most malleable fabulous beasts, its simplicity and elusive nature making it the perfect monstrous canvas for all kinds of meanings and allegories."

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But eventually the magic runs out.

For so long, people really had no reason to believe unicorns *did not* exist. But when the world is pretty much explored—like all the way around—they find out where those horns are coming from. And what they don't find are...unicorns.

The unicorns that were printed and reprinted in Renaissance encyclopedias gradually move to the appendices, Lawrence says. And then they move to the quote "fabulous animal" sections of natural history books.

Until finally, by the end of the 1700s, they're gone.

In fact, the entire way knowledge is created starts to change in the Enlightenment, right. From this *symbolic* view of the world, and the inherited stories of the ancient writers, to—well—science. Experimentation. What do I know? What can I see?

What the ancients thought doesn't matter so much anymore.

The unicorn isn't any less magical. We just stop believing.

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That's the world we more or less still live in, right—what Lawrence calls a “disenchanted world,” where even the ritualized connection between the supernatural and the mythical in religion is slowly being cut away.

Which Lawrence finds really unfortunate. Because, as she points out, we're not just rational creatures. The world may run according to laws of physics and chemistry, but that's not the world we actually live in, right. The world is subjective—it's whatever we think it is.

The kind of passion and creativity, Lawrence says, that generate the best science and ideas is “powered by an irrational unconscious, which contains whole realms we hardly understand yet.” And maybe we never will, because these realms resist purely scientific investigation. Which would leave entire elements of our humanity on the table, unexplored.

Monsters and fabulous beasts have always embodied some of those irrational elements of our connection with the world. To deny whole elements of our experience, Lawrence says, is to “drive the monsters underground, where they may become far darker things.”

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Now, let's go back for a moment, to the early 1700s. When, for a while anyway, people think *maybe* the unicorn and other fabulous creatures—existed *at some time*. Before archaeology comes along, they have no way to prove they *didn't* exist—along with all the other things the ancient world talked about as though they were real.

Ragnow, for one, is keeping an open mind. She says, “Because we've never found the remains of a unicorn or a mermaid or a centaur, we say they are mythological. But we haven't dug up the entire world. And for those of us who like to maintain a certain sense of wonder, it's nice to think, well, maybe they haven't found it yet.”

But if we never do, maybe that's okay too. And the unicorn can go on being whatever we want it to be.

In the early 1900s, the young poet Rainier Maria Rilke was in Paris, and he went to see the famous medieval tapestries of the Lady and the Unicorn. You know the ones, with a beautiful young maiden in a field of flowers with a small menagerie of animals, including a unicorn.

“A tent has been set up,” Rilke wrote in his journal, “of blue damask and flaming gold. The animals hold it open, and she is stepping forward, homely almost in her queenly attire. For what are her pearls compared with herself?”

Everything is in such suspense. She herself holds the banner. With her other hand she has grasped the horn of the unicorn.”

“Everything is here,” he writes. “Everything forever.”

In a poem, Rilke later writes, “This is the animal that never was. Not knowing that, they loved it anyway.”