

ANIMALS & INSECTS

self-guided tour



**MUSEUM
OF FINE ARTS
ST. PETERSBURG**

ANIMALS & INSECTS

Nature has always been a source of inspiration for artists around the globe. In every culture, we find creative artworks that feature animals and insects. These creatures often hold a symbolic meaning, and are used in art to share an idea or remind the viewer of a certain person, value, or story. Sometimes benevolent and kind, sometimes powerful and violent, these works of art reflect the crucial place of animals and insects in our lives and psyches.



SCAN THIS CODE FOR A MAP IDENTIFYING
THE LOCATIONS OF THE ARTWORKS

SCARAB BEETLE

Mummy Mask, c. 1000–650 B.C.

FIND THIS IN THE ANCIENT ART GALLERIES

In Ancient Egypt, scarab beetles were among the most popular symbols used in paintings, amulets, and masks. They were associated with a sun god, Khepri, who was believed to roll the sun across the sky each day bringing new life to the world. Ancient Egyptians observed scarab beetles rolling dung into large balls in which they would lay their eggs. Thus, new life, the scarab larvae, would emerge from the dung as it does from Khepri's sun. Khepri was often depicted as a scarab beetle or as a man with a scarab beetle head. Shown here on the mask from a sarcophagus, the scarab beetle represents this person's continued life even after death.



HORSE

Standing Horse, c. A.D. 100–220

FIND THIS IN THE ASIAN ART GALLERIES

During Emperor Wu's reign (141–87 B.C.), a superior breed of horse was imported from the Western Region to China's Central Plains. These animals became a crucial element of military operations. Horses were important to Han rulers and aristocrats as they represented prestige and power. Often included in tombs, these sculptural representations were thought to assist the deceased in the afterlife. This included carrying the soul from this world to the next. The full body, neatly manicured mane, expressive face, and majestic stance of this tomb sculpture emphasizes the characteristics of these "heavenly horses." Originally this sculpture had a tail, but this was a separate component which has been lost over time.



MAKARA

Medicine Container, 19th century

FIND THIS IN THE ASIAN ART GALLERIES

At the tip of this yak horn is a carving of a *makara*, a mighty mythological aquatic creature with diverse physical features including those of crocodiles and lions. Images of makaras appear in art and architecture across the Indian subcontinent, representing their roles as either destroyers or bringers of life. In addition to the horn's symbolic meaning, the vessel was also used to hold substances believed to have spiritual powers. Depending upon someone's needs, a shaman could use it to invoke either protection or destruction.



BEAR AND EAGLE

St. Ghislain in a Landscape, c. 1500

FIND THIS IN THE EUROPEAN ART, 13TH-18TH CENTURIES GALLERIES

Many Roman Catholic saints can be identified by the symbols or attributes shown with them. In this painting, an eagle and a bear rest at the feet of St. Ghislain. Eagles are fairly common in Christian art, but bears are much more unusual. It is said that St. Ghislain was chopping wood one particularly warm day and decided to remove his clothing. A bear, running from hunters, stole his garments as she ran through the forest. Chasing after her, St. Ghislain was guided up a mountain by an eagle to where the bear was hiding under his clothes. The saint believed this to be a sign from God, and decided to build his monastery on the site.



LEVIATHAN

Kehinde Wiley, *Leviathan Zodiac (The World Stage: Israel)*, 2011

FIND THIS IN THE GREAT HALL

Behind the central figure in this portrait and encircled by the signs of the Zodiac is the primordial sea creature known as the Leviathan. It was one of the three enemies of God, along with the Behemoth on land, and the gryphon-like Ziz, found in the air. The Leviathan is mentioned in Hebrew scriptures and is often depicted as a large, coiled serpent. In the biblical text, the Leviathan is both an actual animal as well as a symbol of Israel's enemies, who will be vanquished by God. Over time, the term "Leviathan" has come to represent any large sea creature and is often used to refer to whales or to any monstrous sea creature.



BULL

Antoine-Louis Barye, *Peace (La Paix)*, c. 1876

FIND THIS IN THE STUART SCULPTURE GARDEN

Bulls are often depicted as violent, volatile creatures that pose a threat to whoever is near them. Here, though, Barye has modified the symbolism to align with Emperor Napoleon III's ideas about the virtues of the French nation, government, and citizens. As a result, Barye depicts the bull as a compliant beast, content to rest alongside men and children, in this expression of pastoral contentment.



BIRD

Avian Pendant, 6th–9th Century

FIND THIS IN THE ART OF THE AMERICAS GALLERY

This detailed piece was possibly crafted by the Diquis Culture of Costa Rica. These peoples left no written records, and thus no indication of the object's original purpose. However, it is clear from this pendant's craftsmanship, and that of the hundreds of other abstracted animal pendants from the area, that this culture had a skilled tradition of metallurgy, or metalworking. Its powerful outstretched wings, massive tail, and horns suggest that it might have been inspired by the harpy eagle (*Harpia harpyja*), which is the largest raptor native to that part of the world. This, combined with the sacred associations of gold, suggest that the pendant may have been worn as an amulet to ward off evil, or perhaps to signify spiritual power or elite status.



Cover/Inside: *Standing Horse* (detail), c. A.D. 100–220, Gift of Dr. David and Enid Owens