



Curious Woodcuts of Fanciful and Real Beasts: A Selection of 190 Sixteenth-Century Woodcuts from Gesner's and Topsell's Natural (Dover Pictorial Archives)

By Konrad Gesner

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The magnum opus of versatile Renaissance humanist Konrad Gesner was undoubtedly his 4-volume 'Historia animalium,' first published in the mid-16th century. It brought together all that Renaissance man knew or imagined about the animal kingdom in a prodigious text and hundreds of magnificent woodcut illustrations, executed by the finest artists of Gesner's time. With an eye to modern interest and utility, commercial artist and designer Edmund Gillon has selected 190 of the best woodcuts from the 'Historia' and from its adaptations and sequels.

The 190 creatures in this volume were drawn from medieval bestiaries, religious allegories, and exaggerated descriptions by sailors and explorers as well as from scientific accounts and empiric observation. These illustrations represent the zenith of the artist's conception and the woodcutter's skill in the 16th century. Included are some frankly fantastic animals such as a 7-headed hydra, an ichthyocentaur, sea monsters, as well more prosaic animals such as deer, ducks, and dogfish. Some illustrations, such as an ape, cat or eagle, are strikingly modern in form and content; others, such as a seahorse ridden by Neptune, a giraffe six times the size of man, and an elephant with segmented trunk and umbrella-like ears, are distinctively medieval. Unicorns, crosses and assorted others represent the world of heraldry, as well.

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