

Seeing Ourselves in Animals Throughout Art History

The exhibition Stampede prods the viewer to consider how artists use animals to represent human traits and critique the world we humans live within.

by Sarah E. Bond October 2, 2018



Julie Buffalohead, “A Little Medicine and Magic,” (2018) oil paint on canvas, Denver Art Museum

At the Denver Art Museum, a new exhibition, *Stampede: Animals in Art*, presents close to 300 objects linked to the world of animals. The pieces are pulled predominantly from the museum’s permanent collection and together illustrate the role of animals in art across time and space. From animal deities in ancient Assyria to the modern designs of Kiyoshi Kanai, the spectrum of objects, cultures, and artists on display demonstrates the enduring popularity of animals in art. But can the show tell us anything about ourselves? While it does not appear to present an overarching thesis for the viewer, an underlying theme is satire through anthropomorphism. Stampede prods the viewer to consider how artists use animals to represent human traits and critique the world we humans live within.

As far back as ancient Sumer and Egypt, animals have been used to embody, satirize, and appraise human behavior. The Egyptian fable of the mouse who served as vizier related the lesson that societies need leaders who rule with kindness and without spite. In antiquity, animals often provided a moral mirror for reflecting the best and the worst of the human race. This is evident in the animal fables of the archaic Greek writer and slave Aesop and in the Greek comedic playwrights who used frogs and wasps to comment upon politics during the Peloponnesian War.

Perhaps the best-known modern example of satirical anthropomorphism is George Orwell’s 1945 book *Animal Farm*. Following a revolution on the farm, Napoleon the pig — a populist character based on Joseph Stalin — comes to rule. Similar ideas of wealth and human indulgence are the keys to understanding the porcine imagery in Chen Wenling’s “Riding to Happiness (with 56 little pigs)” (2006). The expansive display of nearly identical fiberglass piglets are led by two humans riding a larger, fat-bellied pig, together questioning the rise of materialism within Chinese culture.

The exhibition includes an adjacent show that displays a number of paintings by a native artist who has similar interests — *Eyes On: Julie Buffalohead*. Julie Buffalohead is a citizen of the Ponca tribe of Oklahoma and uses animals key to Native American folklore — the coyote, the skunk, the buffalo, the fox — to comment on both Native and non-Native communities. Her work entitled “A Little Medicine and Magic” (2018) addresses the cultural expectations imposed on women: purses, lipstick, pink dresses, and other ideas of femininity are depicted. The skunks standing atop one another bear lipstick marks on them symbolizing the “honor marks” Ponca men may have tattooed on a young woman of their choice following distinguished honor in battle. Another, “White Buffalo Reborn” (2018) depicts a fox spray-painting a white buffalo, an animal sacred to many Indigenous tribes. A larger buffalo stands in the background, wearing a blanket that says “Resist.”

One of the most arresting pieces in *Stampede* is Lin Tianmiao’s “Initiator” (2004), a work made of fiberglass and silk that evokes the fairytale of the frog prince. It is the frog who controls the silk veil overtop the naked woman he faces. She stands facing the frog, fully vulnerable with palms face outward. She is waiting to be directed by an animal who may or may not be her prince.

The show also underscores the use of animals as allegory, prized within their cultures as models of virtue and strength. The gilded wood “American Bald Eagle” (1825) by American artist Steven Hassam evokes patriotism and the idea of a United States in the early 19th century. Meanwhile, Mayan effigy urns (600-900 CE) used fierce ceramic jaguars to point to the strength of the powerful men whose remains lie inside them. An Assyrian stone carving of a bird-headed deity from the palace of King Ashurnasirpal II (885 BCE, Calah, Iraq) illustrates that animals could even serve an apotropaic function, that is they were seen as being able to protect a space from nefarious spirits or human malicious intent. We often look to animals to amend the weakness we feel as humans.

The varied aesthetic language of animals spoken through art, literature, political cartoons, and even the clothing we wear echoes across the three floors housing *Stampede*. The exhibition is a curated dictionary that illustrates that the meaning of a fox, a horse, or a hippo is not necessarily consistent; animal allegories shift from culture to culture. While almost all cultures substitute animals for certain human attributes, this aesthetic tendency is not a lingua franca. Careful translation of languages must be applied to alphabets and to art.

Stampede reminds visitors that animals can have many dimensions: They are not relegated to one meaning. To stare at the Egyptian hippopotamus is to see both order and chaos embodied in one beast — just like humans. The exhibition challenges viewers not only to understand how and why certain animals were and are used in art, but also to decipher the myriad ways we have always seen our faults, our virtues, and our potential reflected in the natural world.