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Invisible Hands and Full-Colour Ghosts: *The Paper Zoo*

The Paper Zoo: 500 Years of Animals in Art
by CHARLOTTE SLEIGH

University of Chicago Press, 2017
\$45.00 USD

Reviewed by **GINA GRANTER**

How do we organize animals? What motivates us to impose a sense of order upon nature? Who decides how animals are organized? What are the costs of humanity's sorting the book of nature into chapters? These are questions at the root of Charlotte Sleigh's impressive book, *The Paper Zoo: 500 Years of Animals in Art*. While the title may lead one to expect an exploration of animals in a variety of genres and forms, Sleigh, a historian of science, outlines her parameters early in the text: the book's focus is on the depiction of animals in service to scientific inquiry, and particularly from a Western European point of view. While this narrowing of the field of possibility has the potential to disappoint initially, Sleigh's formidable breadth of treatment of her subject is a humbling reminder to readers of all that we still do not know, and may never know. The more we learn, the more apt we are to be reminded of all that remains a mystery; from Sleigh's book, there is much to learn.

Sleigh begins her introduction by reminding readers of common ways that we are introduced to animals as children: likely in the pages of a book, through an alphabetized index, or through the story of Noah's Ark. While the alphabet limits the scope of animal representation to its 26 letters, "the gopher-wood confines of Noah's vessel enclose the fullness of God's creation" (7). Not content to leave Noah's

Ark's contents and size to the imagination, thinkers and writers in the sixteenth century—the same century in which it appears the first connection was made between animals and the alphabet in print—were inspired to envision and depict the actual dimensions of the Ark based on all the animals that were then known to Europeans. Colonization quickly dismantled these thinkers' conviction that ancient knowledge had accounted for all the fauna in existence, and soon the obsession turned to visually cataloguing these new discoveries from other continents.

Sleigh's study may take this period as a starting point, but hers is not a standard chronology of historical developments; rather, she organizes her paper zoo into four thematic chapters: "Exotic," "Native," "Domestic," and "Paradoxical." Sleigh thus bookends her work with animals that most held Europeans in thrall and were the eventual impetus to turning to one's own surroundings to know more about the creatures in one's immediate surroundings. She also examines illustrations of mythical creatures: often monstrous hybrids that reveal more about the fears and desires of humanity than about the animals that inspired them. As such, *The Paper Zoo* provides insight into how utterly subjective even the purest of scientific investigation is, and how much we take for granted until we are compelled to notice how different things are somewhere—or some time — else.

Readers of *The Paper Zoo* quickly realize how much we take for granted the holding of such a formidable paper bestiary in our own hands. As Sleigh acknowledges, access to exotic animals, and even images of them, does not have democratic roots; live bestiaries were for centuries the

exclusive domain of royalty and their invited guests, and printed illustrations were also formidably expensive for most people. It stands to reason that nobody would want a black-and-white illustration of an animal if a colour one was available, especially since, for many collectors, the images depicted animals they had never seen with their own eyes; they wanted a colour image to properly rein in—or spark—the imagination, as well as to display their wealth. Sleigh notes that before colour could be reproduced mechanically, it was women and children who mostly did the work of painting colours into the images, without being credited for their work. After reading this, it is impossible to look at an image in the book without imagining invisible hands working painstakingly over the original depictions, or to imagine the many people who contributed to the development of technology that have contributed to one's possession of such a treasury of glossy, beautifully defined illustrations that are now so many layers removed from the anonymous fingers that rendered them.

Another invisibility to which Sleigh calls attention is the lives and deaths of all the actual animals represented in *The Paper Zoo's* pages. Natural history images give the impression of a standard specimen of a given species, neutrally detached from its real, animate kin; it can be difficult, no matter how realistic the artist's rendering, to imagine the living creature an illustration is intended to represent. Yet, Sleigh reminds us that these drawings only sometimes came from live specimens, painstakingly

transported abroad, and more often came from dead ones, combined with descriptions of the animals as they moved in life. Some images are from a single specimen, while others are amalgams from the observation of many of the same species. Aside from being haunted by invisible hands, then, the pages of *The Paper Zoo* are visibly haunted by ghosts of creatures past, whose bodies were dedicated, against their will, to science.

Apart from dismantling the notion that art and science are discrete disciplines, *The Paper Zoo* brilliantly reveals how much of how we look at animals is dependent on who we are, what we believe, and how we perceive what we see. The reader who picks up the book expecting art analysis, thinking none is to be found because of the book's scientific focus, will quickly be disabused of any notion that these images were objectively created, or can be objectively perceived. Captivation reigns. Sleigh's text demands re-reading, and the book's carefully curated images invite the reader to pore over its pages for long durations, with renewed appreciation for the intensity of the time and labour that went into each illustration, and for the real animals depicted within. In making the invisible visible, *The Paper Zoo* provides a rich history that transcends the two-dimensional context of its title.

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