CHINESE ZODIAC TRAIL

A trail exploring the symbolism of animals in Eastern and Western traditions.

让一起探索动物在东西方传统文化中的象征意义。
In Chinese astrology, the calendar has a 12-year cycle, and each year is represented by an animal. People born in a given year are said to have personality traits associated with that year’s animal sign.

In European painting, these animals have similar or contrasting meanings, inherited through myth, folklore and religious teaching – how do they compare?

在中国的占星术里，历法为 12 年一轮回，并且每一年由一种动物来代表。据说某年出生的人会具有与该年动物属相相关的个性特征。

在欧洲绘画中，根据神化、民间传说和宗教教义，这些动物属相有着相似或相反的意义——如何将它们加以比较呢？
The Christian story of Saint George is a classic tale of good triumphing over evil: a knight in shining armour rescues the princess from being eaten by the menacing dragon. In Christian symbolism, the dragon represents the devil, and is therefore a figure of fear and destruction. The word comes from draco, the Latin for snake, and these two creatures are often confused with one another. In this painting, a spiralling cloud hovers above the dragon-slayer, perhaps suggesting a heavenly force giving George strength in his battle against evil.

The Chinese dragon is a positive symbol of good luck and success. The dragon represents extraordinary achievement, and the Chinese are described as 'descendents of the dragon'. In the past, the dragon was associated with the emperor, and images of it were restricted to the imperial court. People born in the year of the dragon are charismatic, eccentric and full of life. A popular saying in China is to 'wish my son to be a dragon', whereas in Europe you might wish your child to be the gallant knight.

In China, people born in the year of the rabbit are graceful and stylish. They are known for their good manners and intelligent conversation, although they can sometimes be shy and over-anxious. The rabbit is also associated with the moon, since the legendary 'Jade Rabbit' lived in the night sky with the goddess of the moon. In China, rabbit year people are described as 'descendents of the moon'. In the past, the rabbit was associated with the emperor, and images of it were restricted to the imperial court. People born in the year of the rabbit are intelligent, are said to be born under the influence of the moon and are described as 'descendents of the moon'.

Because rabbits produce so many young, they have always been associated with fertility. In this painting they must represent something else -- it is a religious scene showing Jesus in his last moments before being arrested. As he prays alone, his followers find it impossible to stay awake. This episode leads to Jesus' death, remembered at Easter. Perhaps the rabbits represent springtime, and the hopeful beginning of new life. Or they may illustrate references in the Bible to rabbits surviving on barren ground as a symbol of the endurance of faith.
The goat or ram in Chinese astrology is the opposite of this ancient Western symbol: it is vulnerable, gentle and easily frightened. People born in this year appreciate the love and support of their friends. Often extremely creative and elegant, this is the most artistic animal of the Chinese zodiac.

The ox has similar positive attributes in the Chinese zodiac. Dependable and patient, it is a symbol of prosperity through determination and hard work. In modern Chinese, the word associated with ox, Niu, is used to describe something exceptionally good. The Chinese ox values calm and quiet, so would be equally at home in this still, contemplative Western scene.

Vessels of wine, tambourines and theatrical masks lie strewn on the ground, while the ancient gods abandon themselves to drinking and debauchery. They are followers of Pan, the Greek god who looked after shepherds and their flocks. The artist enjoys the wild animal nature of this party, and includes the goat as a symbol of untamed lust. Some of the characters are half-goat themselves: drunken satyrs slip up on their hairy hooves and reach for naked female flesh. The image of Pan, with his goat-like hooves and horns, may have inspired later Christian images of Satan, the devil.
In the Chinese zodiac the pig is one of the most admired signs: it is considered very fortunate to bear children in this year. Gracious and honest, they are destined to be wealthy and prosperous; however, pig-year people can sometimes be shy and withdrawn. In China, the pig is also associated with laziness.

In Europe, the pig is often a symbol of greed and gluttony. In this painting, the pig is at the centre of uncivilised, bad behaviour: a drunken woman is mocked by children as she sleeps. One boy slips his hand into her pocket to steal some coins. It is a moral lesson, with hidden messages to be decoded. The pig, sniffing at flowers on the ground, represents a Dutch proverb: 'strew no roses before swine', meaning that beauty is wasted on those who aren't cultured enough to appreciate it. In Chinese, a similar idea is expressed in the saying 'to play music before an ox'.

In Chinese astrology, rather than being an unthinking mimic, the monkey is intelligent and inventive. Although often erratic, monkeys have a magnetic personality - they are charming and confident. Monkeys are also astute observers: just as in this painting, perhaps they remind us to think about how we appear to others.

In this imaginary gallery, what role does the monkey play, sitting at the window? Perhaps the artist is contrasting the 'foolish' monkey with the 'serious' art collectors nearby - but could he also be mocking these earnest men, who take such pride in their supposedly superior knowledge? The monkey is well known for its ability to imitate what it sees - and so is often used to represent the art of painting. The monkey reminds us of the artist, who copies the world around him, following a popular saying that 'art is the ape of nature'.

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Those born in the year of the horse are extremely independent and value their freedom. They are hard-working and adventurous – making this one of the most admired animals of the zodiac. The Chinese phrase ‘swift horse’ (‘Qian Li Ma’) describes someone who is intelligent and successful. However, horse-year people can sometimes be too impulsive, getting carried away with a new idea.

In contrast to its free nature in Chinese astrology, this horse is far from independent. King Charles I restrains his powerful horse effortlessly, as a demonstration of his leadership and skill. The portrait is designed to remind us of Roman emperors, who were depicted riding triumphantly into newly conquered lands. The artist has exaggerated the horse’s brute force and reduced the size of its head, so it doesn’t compete with the king. However, something of the impatient Chinese horse is visible in the foaming mouth and rippling muscles, straining against the reins.

In most Western painting, the snake is the embodiment of evil, associated with the devil. This can be traced to the story of Adam and Eve in the Hebrew Bible. Here, the first man and woman decide to eat forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Eve has been tricked into taking the apple by the deceitful snake, which writhes in the tree above. As they bite into the apple, they will release the knowledge of good and evil into the world – including an awareness of their nudity, shown by the leaves that have grown to cover them.

In Chinese astrology, the snake is the wisest of all the animals. Snakes are sensitive, deep thinkers and have no time for frivolous things. Passionate and enthusiastic about new possibilities, they can sometimes forget to listen to others. While the snake can be a negative symbol in Chinese culture, this sign is also known as the ‘little dragon’, giving it a more majestic character.

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在大多数西方绘画中，蛇是邪恶的化身，代表着魔鬼，这可以追溯到《希伯来圣经》中亚当与夏娃的故事。故事中，第一个男人和第一个女人决定吃下智慧树上的禁果。夏娃受到了盘在树上的毒蛇的诱惑，摘下了苹果。当他们咬苹果时，他们将善与恶的知识传播给全世界——包括意识到自己的裸体，表现为用长大的树叶帮他们遮挡私处。

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The dog has always been valued as a loyal companion. The ancient Roman author Pliny named the dog as the most faithful animal to man, along with the horse. In this portrait, made around the time of Mr and Mrs Hallett’s wedding, a dog looks up eagerly at its owners and seems to keep in time with their steps. Dogs are often found in marriage portraits, representing a wife’s devotion to her husband (look out for other examples in Room 35...). The feathery brushstrokes of the dog’s fur are repeated in Mrs Hallett’s dress and hair, creating a sense of harmony and empathy between the two.

People born in the year of the dog share this sensitivity to others and are loyal to their friends. They are good at keeping promises and are known for their honesty. While they are the most likeable astrological sign, they can also be stubborn and are easily shocked.

In China, the rooster’s crow is believed to ward off evil spirits. People born in this year are very outgoing and love to be in the spotlight. Roosters are known for being romantic although they can often end up alone. They are always tidy and pride themselves on looking good.

在中国，人们相信鸡鸣可以驱邪。鸡年出生的人热情洋溢，喜欢出风头。鸡以浪漫而闻名，尽管常常以孤独而告终。它们总是很整洁，并为自己的外形而感到骄傲。

As the morning sun warms up this city square, the rooster crows to announce the beginning of a new day. The artist has carefully observed the effects of light and the fall of shadows across the buildings. Men are shaping large blocks of marble in the work yard, and a young woman drops her broom to attend to her small crying child. The rooster adds further sound and colour to this corner of the painting, but it is also a traditional symbol of lust. Perhaps it is alerting us to the young couple in the shadows beside the house: what could this man be saying to his companion?

当清晨的阳光温暖城市的大街小巷时，一声鸡鸣宣布了新一天的开始。艺术家仔细观察了穿插于建筑间的光影效果，人们的身影长长地拖在工作场所的大理石上，一名少妇放下手中的扫帚去照看自己哇哇大哭的小孩。位于画面一角的鸡带来了远处的声音和色彩，但它同时也象征着强烈的欲望。也许，这是向我们昭示那对躲在房子阴影下的年轻夫妇：这个男人和他的女伴可能正在说什么呢？

The dog一直被认为是忠诚的伙伴。古罗马作家Pliny 将狗和马一同视为人类最忠诚的动物伙伴。在这幅肖像画中，一只狗在举行婚礼的Hallett 先生及其夫人身旁，它殷切地望着主人，看起与他们寸步不离。狗经常出现在婚礼的画面中，代表妻子对丈夫的忠诚（第35室中还有其他例子）。柔软羽毛的狗毛皮的绘画技巧被重复运用在Hallett夫人的服饰和头发上，在两者之间创造了一种和谐与互助的感觉。

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In these celebratory mosaics, the arts are represented by reclining women, who draw inspiration from the natural world. Close to the border are two rats (or are they large, long-tailed mice?) – just one small incident in this rural cycle of growth and harvest. Rats are associated with disease and decay in Western culture, and represent the destructive effect of time. Perhaps not surprisingly, they appear very rarely in European painting: there are no obvious examples in National Gallery pictures.

In contrast, the rat in the Chinese zodiac is charming and attractive. Rat-year people are associated with wealth and are known for hoarding money and possessions. They are intelligent but can be selfish and cunning. Unlike in the West, the rat is thought to bring good luck – and hopefully brings an auspicious end to this Gallery trail.

In Chinese culture, the majestic tiger is the king of beasts, while in the West it is the lion. Tigers are magnetic characters: enthusiastic about new experiences and associated with good fortune. However, the tiger is both respected and feared – they don’t like to be trapped and can conflict with authority.

In these mosaics, the tiger is depicted as a magnetic character, enthusiastic about new experiences and associated with good fortune. However, the tiger is both respected and feared, as they don't like to be trapped and can conflict with authority.

The tiger in Chinese culture is considered majestic and authoritative, while in Western culture, the lion holds this position. Tigers are known for their magnetic and enthusiastic nature, as well as their connection to good fortune. However, they are also respected and feared due to their tendency to avoid being trapped or confronting authority.

How does this tiger respond to its jungle surroundings? Is it in danger of being captured or surprised by something? Perhaps it is the tiger who intends to surprise its hidden prey. The vibrant colours and layers of pattern draw us into the drama, heightened by the glistening teeth. For this French artist in the 19th century, the tiger represented an exotic, unseen world. Like the Chinese tiger, Rousseau seems to be excited by the idea of exploration and the unpredictable, raw energy of nature.

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