

A Contemporary Bestiary Teachers Guide

Hallie Ford Museum of Art
September 13 – December 21, 2014

This guide is to help teachers prepare students for a field trip to the exhibition, *A Contemporary Bestiary*; offer ways to lead their own tours; and propose ideas to reinforce the gallery experience and broaden curriculum concepts. Teachers, however, will need to consider the level and needs of their students in adapting these materials and lessons.

Bestiary: [bes'tē er'ē] *noun*

- a collection of descriptions or representations of real or imaginary animals
- a collection of descriptions of, or stories about, various types of animals, especially one written in the Middle Ages

Goals

- To introduce students to the work of artists using animals as their subject matter.
- To explore the various reasons and ways artists in the exhibition, *A Contemporary Bestiary* use animal imagery in their work.
- To explore the relationships between people and animals, and the role animals have played, and continue to play, in human society.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify animal imagery in a work of art.
- Discuss the many and varied reasons artists use animal imagery in their work.
- Discuss the use of animal imagery as symbolism or narrative (storytelling).
- Discuss how the individual artists use the parts and principles of art in his or her work.
- Discuss how the materials or techniques artists use contribute to the expressive or interpretative elements in an individual work.
- Discuss the relationships between humans and animals throughout history, and in a variety of cultures, and identify examples in the exhibition that illustrate or highlight these relationships.
- Discuss the idea of anthropomorphism, especially as it relates to works in the exhibition.
- Discuss various uses of animals in language and literature (figures of speech, allegories, fables, myth, etc.).

INDEX

| | |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION: by John Olbrantz, The Maribeth Collins Director, HFMA..... | 3 |
| BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT/AT THE MUSEUM..... | 5 |
| WHY ANIMALS?: A TALE OF TWO BEARS..... | 6 |
| LANGUAGE ARTS CONNECTION..... | 11 |
| ART-MAKING CONNECTION..... | 12 |
| RESOURCES/SUGGESTED READING..... | 19 |
| IMAGES..... | 20 |

INTRODUCTION:

John Olbrantz, The Maribeth Collins Director and exhibition curator

From the beginning of time, animals have been a popular subject for artists. In the caves of Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain, for example, Paleolithic artists depicted horses, bison, and other sacred animals on the irregular surfaces of the cave walls. In ancient Egypt, artists represented their gods as half-animal, half-human, and invested them with magical powers. Although the ancient Greeks and Romans preferred to explore the human figure in art, depictions of animals in classical art came to represent the forces of nature and often became symbols of the power of the gods.

Animals, both real and fantastic, occupied an important place in medieval art and thought. Artists readily employed animal motifs, along with foliate designs, as part of their decorative vocabulary. During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, with their emphasis on the human figure, animals appeared less frequently in art, although they continued to be seen in association with representations of the apostles and saints and helped identify them. In China and Japan, animals, birds, and insects symbolic of important virtues appeared on objects ranging from clothing and other textiles to furniture, ceramics, ritual objects, and architecture.

In addition to appearing in the art of Europe and Asia, animals hold a strong place in the art of Africa, Oceania, and North, Central, and South America, where they are part of elaborate and complex mythologies that are typically religious or ceremonial in nature. In nineteenth-century America, the artist John James Audubon made detailed drawings and watercolors of birds in their natural habitats that are considered among the masterpieces of American art, while in twentieth-century Europe, the German Expressionist painter Franz Marc featured animals in bold compositional arrangements and bright colors. In recent years, contemporary artists such as William Wegman, Sue Coe, Damien Hirst, and Jeff Koons have continued to explore the theme of animals in art.

A Contemporary Bestiary focuses on work by artists from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, and British Columbia, who incorporate animal imagery in their artwork as a way of exploring a wide variety of ideas and issues. The late David Gilhooly, for example, used frogs, dogs, cats, and even banana slugs to parody art, religion, politics, and pop culture, while Sherry Markovitz uses animal metaphors to explore issues of intimacy, closeness, and separation. Rachel Denny explores the often complex relationship between humans and animals in her mixed-media wall sculptures, while Robert McCauley attempts to re-tether our connection to nature through his paintings.

Still other artists in the exhibition bring different perspectives. Deborah Butterfield makes horse sculptures from scrap metal and cast bronze because she knows and likes them and admires their beauty, majesty, and grace. Painter Rick Bartow (Wiyot) and printmaker Robert Davidson (Haida) focus on animal imagery as a reflection of the stories, myths, and legends of their cultures, while painters Gaylen Hansen and Fay Jones incorporate animals into their artwork to help drive their respective narratives. For mixed-media artist Gregory Blackstock, who is autistic, animals provide a soothing constant in an increasingly complex and confusing world.

The exhibition features fifty-six objects on loan from public and private collections throughout the region, including a number of objects from the permanent collection of the Hallie Ford Museum of Art. The term “bestiary” comes from the Latin word *bestiarum* and refers to a collection or compendium of allegorical fables and stories about real and imaginary animals, each accompanied by a description, illustration, and a moral lesson. While the bestiary originated in ancient Greece in the second century BCE, it reached its zenith in medieval Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth century.

A Contemporary Bestiary, which includes painting, sculpture, prints, drawings, photography, ceramics, and even embroidery, celebrates the richness and diversity of animal imagery in contemporary regional art, reflecting a tradition and theme that dates back tens of thousands of years. The exhibition has been made possible in part by grants from the City of Salem’s Transient Occupancy Tax funds and the Oregon Arts Commission.

BEFORE THE MUSEUM VISIT

- If possible, visit the exhibition on your own beforehand.
- Use the images and suggested discussions and activities to introduce students to animals in art.
- Make sure students are aware of gallery etiquette.

AT THE MUSEUM

- Review with students what is expected – their task and museum behavior.
- Be selective – don't try to look at or talk about everything in the exhibition.
- Focus on the works of art. Encourage students to look closely at each work of art and consider beginning with the visual scanning they used in the classroom as well as the suggested discussions (see below). A good way to start is by asking, "What is happening in this picture?" or "what do you see here?" Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: "What do you see that makes you say that?" or "Show us what you have found."
 - Describe what you see here.
 - How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
 - What materials and techniques has the artist used? Do they, along with the compositional elements (how the artist puts together the visual elements) tell us something about the animal depicted? Explain. How do they contribute to the expressive or interpretive elements of the work? Do they tell us anything about the subject matter or how the artist views the subject matter?
 - What does the work communicate to the viewer about the animal depicted and the reason or reasons the artist has chosen to depict the animal? How has the artist done this?

A Tale of Two Bears: Why Animals?

Why do artists choose to depict animals? Perhaps a better question may be why do animals hold such an important place in our emotions and psyche, even today in a post-industrial society when our lives are not so intertwined as they once were. As John Berger discusses in his 1980 essay, “Why Look at Animals?” animals are different from humans yet with perceived comparable qualities, they act as companions, as touchstones with nature, and on a more symbolic and metaphoric level they serve as intermediaries or stand-ins for human experience and understanding of the world.

1.



Robert McCauley

Red Flag

2014

Oil on canvas

36” (diameter)

Courtesy of the artist and the Linda Hodges Galley, Seattle, Washington

Artist Statement:

I don't paint the canary because she's yellow. I paint the canary because she's in a coal mine. I don't paint the polar bear because of his exquisite ivory coat. I paint the polar bear because he's a red flag.

Robert McCauley

Suggested Discussion:

First show the image to students without giving the title of the work or sharing the artist statement.

- Start by asking students “what do you see here?” Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: “Explain why you say that” or “Show us what you have found.”
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
- What materials and techniques has the artist used? (Traditional technique of oil paint on canvas with a smooth, often invisible brushwork) Discuss the brushwork, the realistic portrayal and how they affect the viewing experience. Would it have the same impact if the brushwork were looser or impressionistic, or if the portrayal was less realistic and more abstract or stylized? Why or why not?

- Why do you think the artist chose to show the polar bear in a circular format, in such a focused way? (Resembles a portrait; the format and size is reminiscent of *tondo* [round] paintings that were popular during the Renaissance, often for religious scenes and depictions of the Madonna and Child; the circular format suggests a camera lens, a target, the scope of a gun).
- Describe the bear's demeanor. How would the work change if the artist portrayed the bear in a different manner, say more threatening?
- Note the text on the frame (which is also the title). It is not prominently displayed, rather one sees it after careful viewing. Discuss the possible meanings of the text. How does the text affect your experience of the work?
- Read the artist statement. Does this add to your experience/interpretation or change it in any way? Do you think the artist was successful in getting his ideas across to the viewer? Explain.

For Younger Audiences:

- Start by asking students “what do you see here?” Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: “Explain why you say that” or “Show us what you have found.”
- What shapes do you see, not just the painting itself, but in the polar bear's head? Note the repetition of certain shapes.
- Describe the visual texture. What would it feel like if you could pet the bear in real life? Discuss how artists can create texture by repeating elements like lines (in the image detail note the thin lines of the brush that make up the animal's fur).
- What colors has the artist used? (Although he has used a limited palette, there are several different shades between white and black).
- Why did the artist choose to show the bear close-up instead of showing the entire bear? (More like a portrait, focuses our attention on the bear, the bear as a target).
- Describe how the artist has portrayed the bear. Does the bear look threatening? Friendly? Subdued? How would you react if you met this bear in the wild? Why do you think the artist chose to show the bear in this way? Is he trying to tell us something?
- Read the words on the frame (also the title). Discuss the meaning of a red flag and why the artist chose it as the title of the painting. (If the students haven't already done so, introduce the connection between the circular shape and a target).
- Review what you have found and what you think to be the overall meaning of the work.

2.



Sherry Markovitz

Sad Bear

2013

Beads, papier mache, and mixed media

7 ½ x 9 x 6”

Courtesy of the artist and Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, Washington

Artist Statement:

Over the course of my career I have chosen animals, dolls, and organic shapes, or rather they have chosen me, to symbolically represent my emotional states of mind.

Sherry Markovitz

Suggested Discussion:

Again, show the image to students without giving the title of the work or sharing the artist statement.

- Start by asking students “what do you see here?” Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: “Explain why you say that” or “Show us what you have found.”
- How has the artist used the elements of art (lines, color, shape, form, texture, space, etc.) and the principles of art (the way it is organized, i.e., pattern, contrast, balance, proportion, unity, rhythm, variety, emphasis)?
- What do you think is the artist’s inspiration in creating this work? Where have you seen something like this before? (teddy bears, cartoon figures, toys) How is this similar to those familiar objects? How is it different?
- What materials and techniques has the artist used? How does the use of beadwork affect how we see this bear? (Something to hug and cuddle like a teddy bear? Fragile or “handle with care” like a special object?, etc.)
- Discuss the bear’s expression and the combination of the familiar, often comforting object like a teddy bear with the obvious depiction of sadness. Why do you think the artist chose to give the bear this expression?
- Read the artist statement. Why do you think the artist chose to express her emotional state, in this case sadness, in this way? Would it have been more effective if it were a self-portrait? Which would you as the viewer find more relatable or less?

- Discuss the anthropomorphizing of animals (assigning them human characteristics or qualities like sadness, happiness, deceitfulness, wisdom, etc), and the possible reasons we have chosen animals as stand-ins or symbols to represent how humans experience the world. Find examples through history – the origin of zodiac signs, Aesop’s fables, creation stories, medieval bestiaries, Winnie the Pooh stories, etc.
- Compare and contrast *Red Flag* and *Sad Bear*. How are they similar? How are they different? Does the comparison reveal anything more about the individual pieces or change the way you experience them? Explain. How important is knowing each artist’s reasons and intentions to your experience of the works?

For Younger Audiences

- Start by asking students “what do you see here?” Follow with questions that will help students back up their observations: “Explain why you say that” or “Show us what you have found.”
- What do you think is the artist’s inspiration in creating this work? Where have you seen something like this before? (Teddy bears, cartoon figures, toys) How is this similar to those familiar objects? How is it different?
- What shapes do you see? Note the repetition of certain shapes.
- What materials has the artist used to create the bear?
- Describe the visual texture. What would it feel like if you could pet or hug the bear? Compare this to how it feels to pet or hug a teddy bear. Which would you like better? Why? Why do you think the artist chose to use glass beads instead of something more familiar like felt or “fur”?
- Describe how the bear is feeling. What makes you say that? Is this an expression you would see on a real bear? Discuss the idea of bears having feelings like sadness and happiness and how it compares to the emotions of humans.
- Introduce the idea of anthropomorphism and discuss the idea of the bear as a stand-in for the artist in expressing her feelings. Why do you think she chose the bear to express sadness instead of showing an image of herself? What animal would you choose for yourself? Would it depend on what emotion you were feeling? Explain.
- Discuss other examples of anthropomorphism like the wise owl, the sly fox, etc. and the possible reasons they are assigned these characteristics, qualities or behaviors (their appearance, the way they act, etc.) Find historic and modern examples in literature: Aesop’s fables, creation stories, Winnie the Pooh stories, etc.

LANGUAGE ARTS CONNECTION

Terms of Venerly (collective nouns)

A Flock of Sheep. A Murder of Crows. A Singular of Boar. While some of the group terms for members of the animal kingdom are well-known figures of speech, and others are no longer in general use, most have been in existence since at least the fifteenth century.

Also known as “terms of venerly,” from the noun relating to the hunting of game, these phrases originated in a mostly rural England, when the knowledge of proper hunting terms was the hallmark of a gentleman. The original compilations of terms of venerly were found in the so-called Books of Courtesy, such as *The Egerton Manuscript* (1450) and *The Book of St. Albans* (1486). Since then, subsequent compilers have repeated the terms, often in error, and have added to the collection.

The terms of venerly displayed on the walls in the exhibition, *A Contemporary Bestiary* were taken from James Lipton’s delightful book, *An Exaltation of Larks* (1991). In this most recent and comprehensive of the compilations, Lipton provides some of the origins and variants of the collective terms (and a few new additions), and helpfully breaks them down into six “families,” according to the apparent inspiration for each:

1. Onomatopoeia (imitation of sound in words): A MURMURATION OF STARLINGS, A GAGGLE OF GEESE.
2. Characteristic: A LEAP OF LEOPARDS, A SKULK OF FOXES.
3. Appearance: A KNOT OF TOADS, A PARLIAMENT OF OWLS.
4. Habitat: A SHOAL OF BASS, A NEST OF RABBITS.
5. Comment (negative or positive, depending on the observer’s perception): A RICHNESS OF MARTENS, A COWARDICE OF CURS.
6. Error (resulting from an error in transcription that was repeated by subsequent compilers): A SCHOOL OF FISH, originally “shoal.”
 - Gather a list of terms of venerly. Starting with well-known examples, have students decide which family each term belongs to – there may be varying answers – and explain their choice.
 - Create your own terms of venerly using one through five of James Lipton’s “families” (you can focus on one or let students choose from all five). Choose animals that may not already have their own terms, or come up with a new term for an animal that is already represented.

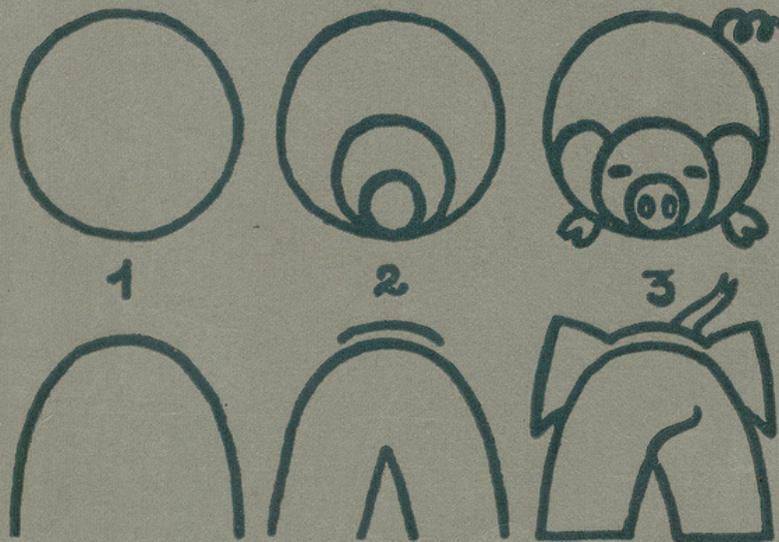
ART-MAKING CONNECTION

Shapes and lines are the building blocks used to depict things like animals, people, buildings, and plants and trees, and even the most detailed and sophisticated portrayals can be distilled into simple lines, shapes, and forms. Instruction books for drawing often include these building block exercises. A wonderful example from France is *Les Animaux Tels Qu'ils Sont*, illustrated in 1933 by Robert (and possibly Leon) Lambry. Five of the illustrations are included below. The full set can be seen on [this Flickr](#) page posted by *Agence Eureka*.

- Study and discuss the diagrams and illustrations – including the kinds of lines and shapes used, how they show movement, etc. -- and have students try as many steps as they can (and also learn a bit of French while they are at it!). Even the most elementary, and abstract, of the steps capture the essence of the animal.

LES ANIMAUX TELS QU'ILS SONT

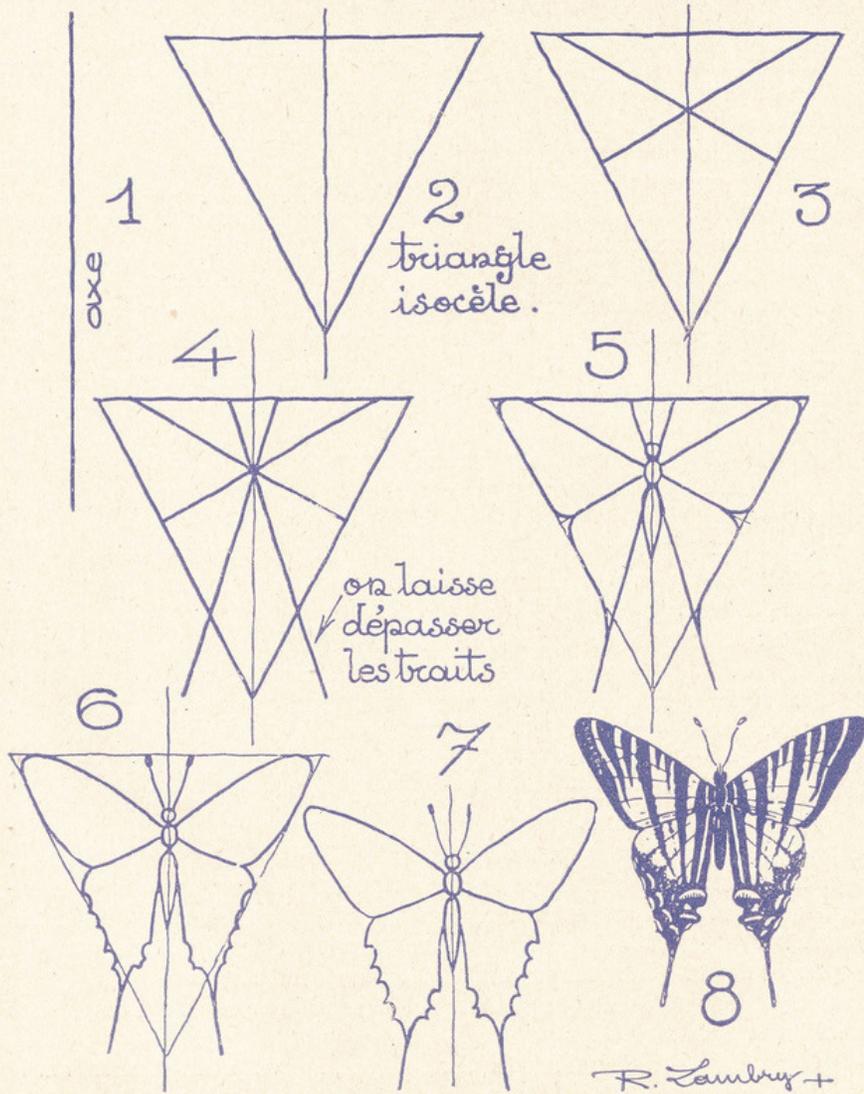
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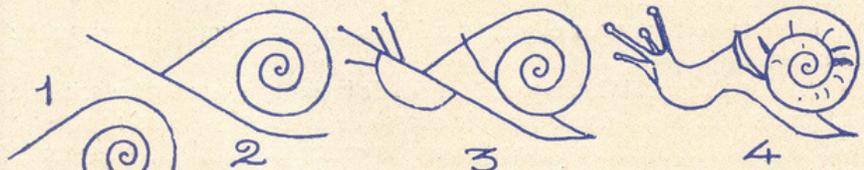
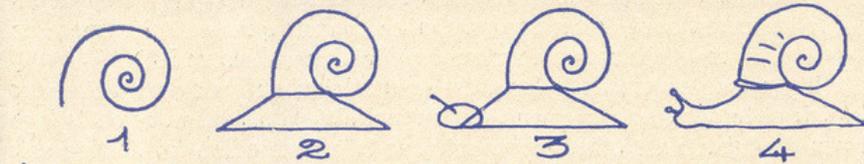
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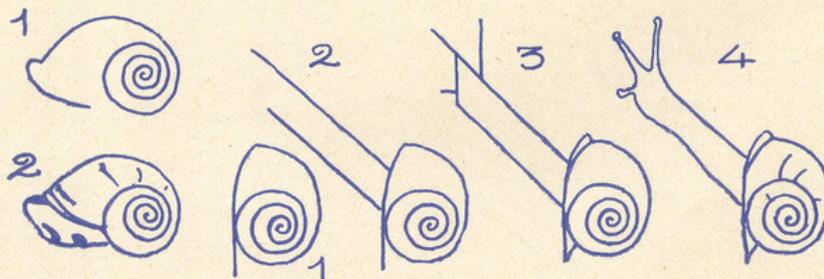
Papillons et triangles.



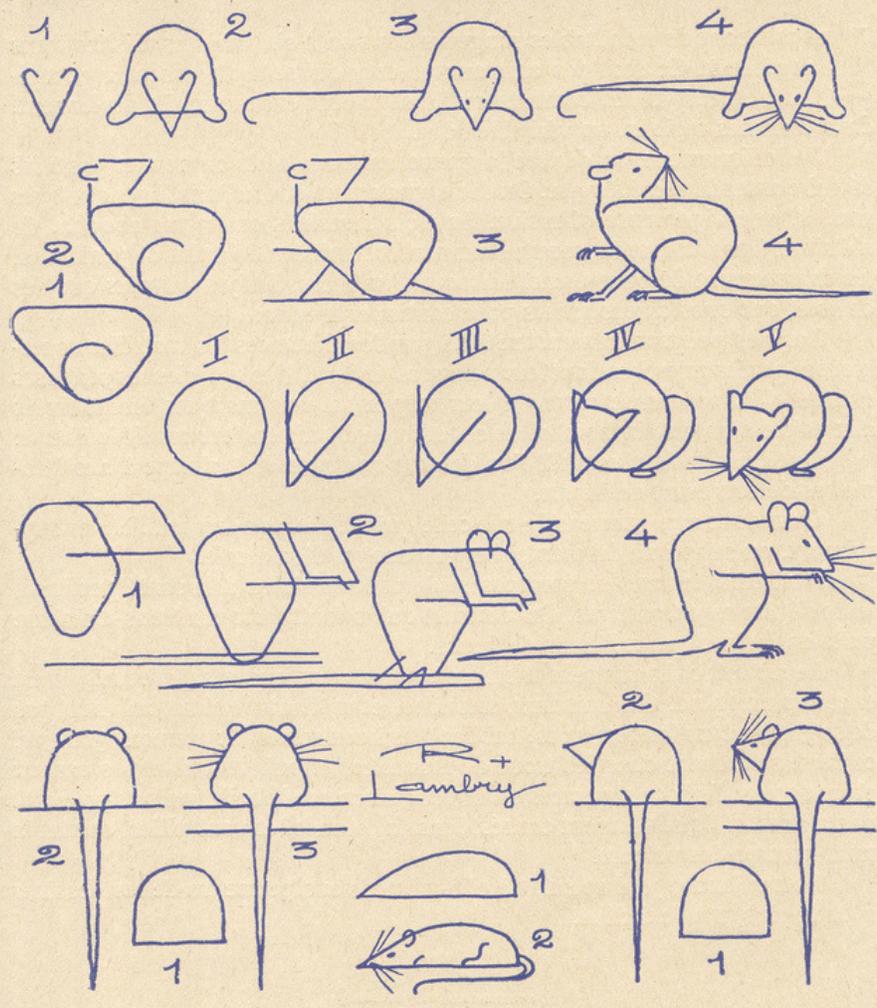
Les Escargots



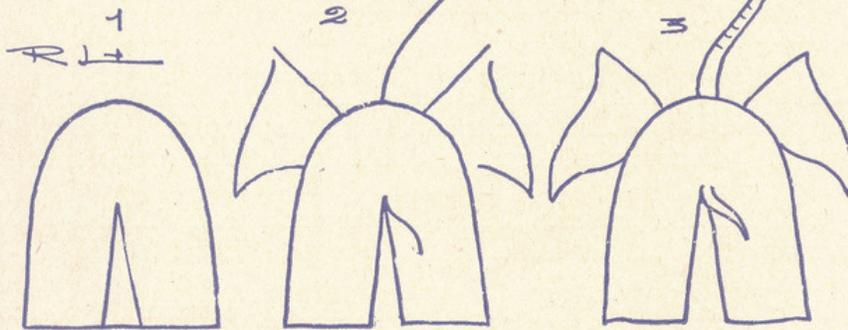
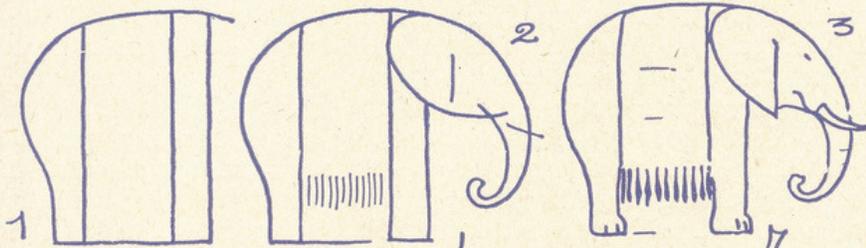
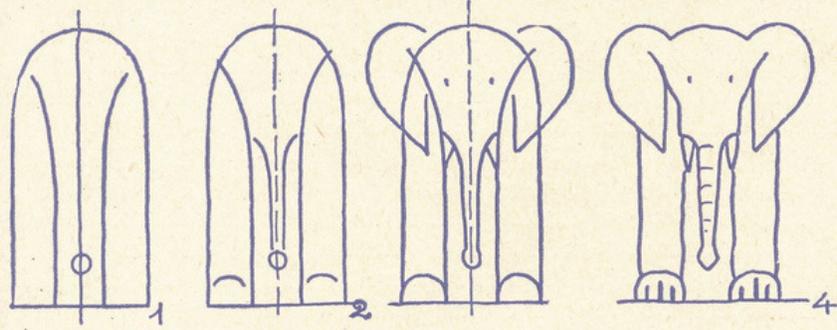
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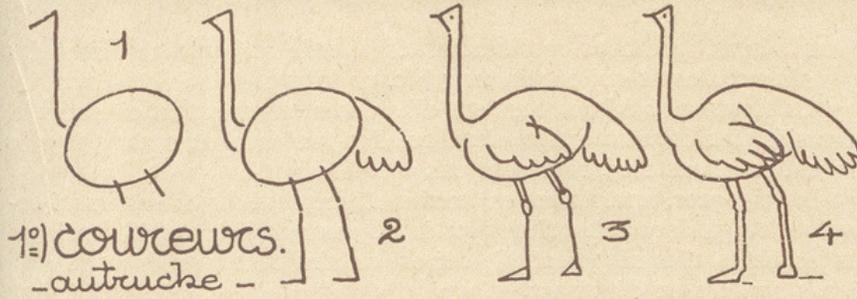
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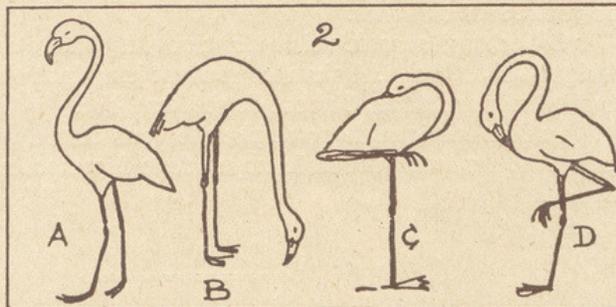
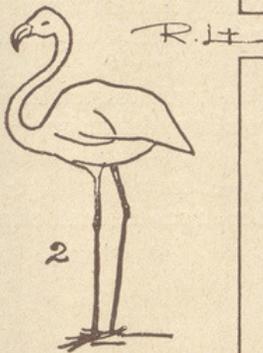
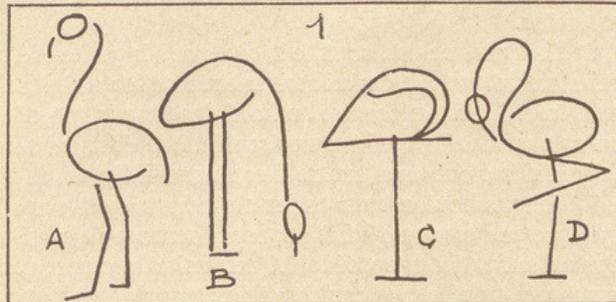
Les "Éléphants Modernes"



Les Échassiers



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SOURCES

Berger, John, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1980.

Lipton, James, *An Exaltation of Larks*. New York, Penguin Books, 1991.

SUGGESTED READING (available through Chemeketa Cooperative Regional Library):

Animals in Literature:

Hastings, Selina: *Reynard, the Fox*, retold by Selina Hastings, illustrated by Graham Percy. New York, Tambourine Books. 1990. A retelling of an old Northern European legend. Ages 6 and up.

McDermott, Gerald, *Raven: a Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest*, told and illustrated by Gerald McDermott. San Diego : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993. Ages 4-8.

Milton, Jacqueline, *The Zoo in the Sky: A Book of Animal Constellations*, illustrated by Christina Balit. Washington D.C., National Geographic Society, 1998. Ages 6-9.

Milton, Jacqueline, *Zodiac: Celestial Circle of the Sun*, illustrated by Christina Balit. London, Frances Lincoln, 2004. Ages 6 and up.

Naidoo, Beverly, *Aesop's Fables*, illustrated by Piet Grobler. London : Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2011. Ages 5-11. This is one of several books of Aesop's Fables available through CCRL.

Wilson, Elizabeth B., *Bibles and Bestiaries: A Guide to Illuminated Manuscripts*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994. Grades 7 and up.

Collective Nouns:

Heller, Ruth, *A Cache of Jewels: and other Collective Nouns*. New York, Grossett and Dunlap, c. 1987. Ages 5-8

Lipton, James, *An Exaltation of Larks*. Penguin Books, New York, 1991.

Webligraphy

[Les Animaux Tels Qu'ils Sont](https://www.flickr.com/photos/taffeta/sets/72157618009562834/with/3547516190/)

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/taffeta/sets/72157618009562834/with/3547516190/>

[Animals in Medieval art](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/best/hd_best.htm) (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/best/hd_best.htm



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