



**FICTITIOUS
AND
SYMBOLIC
CREATURES
IN ART**

JOHN VINYCOMB

**FICTITIOUS AND SYMBOLIC
CREATURES IN ART**

**FICTITIOUS & SYMBOLIC
CREATURES IN ART**

**WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THEIR USE
IN BRITISH HERALDRY**

By **JOHN VINYCOMB**
MEMBER OF THE ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY, FELLOW
OF THE ROYAL SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES OF IRELAND,
A VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE EX-LIBRIS SOCIETY



ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON

ILLUSTRATED

CHAPMAN AND HALL, LIMITED
11 HENRIETTA STREET, LONDON, W. C.
MCMVI

Printed by BALLANTYNE & CO. LIMITED
Tavistock Street, London

PREFACE



Under the title of this book it is proposed to describe and illustrate only those fictitious and symbolic creatures which appear in British Heraldry. The list will include all those beings of whose existence we have not the direct evidence of our senses, and those exaggerations and combinations of natural forms which have been adopted in the system of symbolic heraldry handed down to us from the Middle Ages. Many of the ideas of the writers of that period were undoubtedly derived from still earlier sources, namely, classic story, sacred and legendary art, and the marvellous tales of early travellers; others were the coinage of their own fancies and their fears.

As these unreal beings are constantly met with in symbolic art, of which heraldry is the chief exponent, it may be assumed that they have been adopted in each case with some obvious or latent meaning, as in the case of real animals; they may, therefore, equally lay claim to our consideration as emblems or types, more especially as less attention has been devoted to them and the delineation of their forms by competent artists. The writer has been led into considering and investigating the subject with some degree of attention, from finding the frequent need of some reliable authority, both descriptive and artistic, such as would enable any one to depict with accuracy and true heraldic spirit the forms and features of these chimerical beings. Books of reference on heraldry unfortunately give but a meagre description of their shapes, with scarcely a hint as to their history or meaning, while the illustrations are usually stiff and awkward, representing a soulless state of art.

It cannot be said that artists at any period have succeeded, even in a remote degree, in embodying the highly wrought conceptions of the poets concerning these terrible creatures of the imagination. Milton seems to have carried poetic personification to its utmost limits. Who, for instance, could depict a being like this:

“Black it stood as night,
Fierce as ten furies, terrible as hell!”

Out of the ambiguous and often conflicting accounts of different authors and the vagaries of artists it became no easy task to arrive at a clear conception of many of the forms of these ideal monsters. The poet's pen may turn them to shapes, shadowy at the best; but the artist who follows the poet in endeavouring to realise and give tangible shape to these ideas finds it beyond his art to give material form and expression to his personifications with anything like photographic fidelity. Such shadowy beings prefer the dim light of allegory to the clear sunlight of reason, and shrink from closer inspection. Like all spectres they are ever most effective in the dark. In the childhood of the world, from the dawn of history, and all through the dim and credulous ages past, many such illusions have performed an important part in influencing the thought and lives of mankind. Over many lands these

inherited ideas still exercise a paramount influence, but in the enlightenment of the coming time it is probable their power, like that of an evil dream, will fade entirely away with the dawn of a brighter day, and the memories of their name and influence alone remain. At present we are chiefly concerned with them as symbols, and with their mode of representation, breathing for a brief moment the breath of life into their old dead skins. These mythical creatures may be gazed upon, shorn of all their terrors, in the illustrations I have been enabled to make, and if it is found that from each creature I have not "plucked out the heart of its mystery" it is probably because there is no mystery whatever about it, only what to us now appears as an ingenious fiction engendered by a credulous, imaginative and superstitious past. And so we find the old horrors and pleasing fictions, after figuring for ages as terrible or bright realities in the minds of entire peoples, reduced at length to the dead level of a figure of speech and a symbol merely.

J. VINYCOMB.

HOLYWOOD,
COUNTY DOWN,
APRIL 1906.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Notes on Animated Beings in Heraldic Art

The Symbolism of Attitude or Position

The Heraldic Spirit—Effective decorative Quality essential in Heraldry

Celestial Beings

Mistaken Modern Conception of Angels

Mediæval Art Treatment of Angels

Cherubim and Seraphim in Heraldry

Cherubim and Seraphim of Scripture

Emblems of the Four Evangelists

Chimerical Creatures of the Dragon and Serpent kind

The Dragon

The Dragon in Christian Art

The Dragon in the Royal Heraldry of Britain

The Crocodile as the Prototype of the Dragon

The Heraldic Dragon

The Hydra

The Wyvern

The Chimera

The Lion-Dragon

The Gorgon

The Cockatrice

Basilisk, or Amphysian Cockatrice

The Mythical Serpent

The Scorpion

Other Chimerical Creatures and Heraldic Beasts

The Unicorn

Mediæval Conception of the Unicorn

The Horn of the Unicorn

The Pegasus

Sagittary, Centaur, Sagittarius, Centaurus, Hippocentaur

Griffin or Gryphon

The Male Griffin

Other Varieties of the Griffin

The Opinicus, or Epimacus

The Sphynx

The Phœnix Bird of the Sun

The Harpy

The Heraldic Pelican

The Martlet

The Alerion

The Liver (Cormorant)

The Heraldic Tigre or Tyger

The Royal Tiger

Leopard, or Panther, Felis Pardus, Lybbarde

The Panther “Incensed”

The Lynx

Cat-a-Mountain—Tiger Cat or Wild Cat

The Salamander

Heraldic Antelope

The Heraldic Ibex

Bagwyn

The Camelopard, Camel-leopard

Musimon, Tityrus

The Enfield

Mantiger, Montegre or Manticora Satyral

Lamia or Emipusa

Baphomet

Apres

Stelliones

Fictitious Creatures of the Sea

Poseidon or Neptune

Merman or Triton

The Mermaid or Siren

The Sirens of Classic Mythology

The Dolphin of Legend and of Heraldry

The Dauphin of France

The Heraldic Dolphin

The Sea—Horse

[Sea-lion](#)

[Sea-dog](#)

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CELESTIAL BEINGS:

Angel holding Shield

Egyptian Winged Deity

Hawk-headed and winged figure, emblem of Osiris

Angel with Cloud Symbol

Angel Supporter

Kneeling Angel Supporter

Arms of the Abbey of St. Albans

Gloria in Excelsis Deo

Cherubs' Heads

A Seraph's Head

Arms—Azure a chevron argent between three cherubs' heads
of the last

Cherubim and Seraphim of Scripture

Angel crest of Tuite, Bart., co. Tipperary

Tetramorph

Symbols of the Four Evangelists

The Lion of St. Mark, Venice

CHIMERICAL CREATURES OF THE DRAGON AND SERPENT KIND:

The Dragon

Japanese Dragon

Japanese Imperial Device

The Dragon of the Apocalypse

St. Michael and the Old Dragon

St. Margaret. From ancient carving

St. George and the Dragon

Dragon Standard. From the Bayeux Tapestry

A Dragon passant

Crest, a Dragon's Head erased collared and chained

Arms of the City of London

Sinister supporter of the arms of Viscount Gough

Hercules and the Lernean Hydra. From Greek vase

The Hydra

A Wyvern holding a fleur-de-lis

A Wyvern, wings endorsed, tail nowed

Wyvern from the Garter plate of Sir John Gray, 1436 **A.D.**

Wyvern, or Lindworm (German version)

Wyvern, wings displayed (early example)

Wyvern, wings depressed

Chimera, from a Greek coin

Cockatrice

Basilisk or Aphasian Cockatrice, tail nowed

Greek Shield, from painted vase in the British Museum

Brazen Serpent

Arms of Whitby Abbey

A Serpent, nowed, proper. Crest of Cavendish

Amphiptère, or flying Serpent

Scorpion

OTHER CHIMERICAL CREATURES AND HERALDIC BEASTS:

Unicorn salient

Crest, a Unicorn's Head, coupéd

The Legend of the Unicorn

Pegasus or Pegasos

Coins of Corinth and Syracuse

Pegasus salient

The Sagittary—Centaur

Ipotane, from Mandeville's travels

Compound figures, gold necklace

Centaur, Greek Sculpture

A Griffin statant, wings endorsed

A Griffin passant, wings raised. (Early English)

A Griffin segreant, wings displayed. (German)

Sleeping Griffin

Griffin segreant (German version)

Gold Flying Griffin

Colossal Griffins, Burmah

Carved panel, a Griffin segreant

Male Griffin

Opinicus statant

Egyptian Sphynx

Theban, or Greek Sphynx

A Sphynx passant guardant, wings endorsed

The Phœnix

A Harpy, wings disclosed

The Harpy, Greek sculpture

A Harpy displayed and crowned (German version)

Shield of Nüremberg

A Pelican in her piety, wings displayed

Heraldic Pelican in her piety

Crest, a Pelican vulning herself proper, wings endorsed

The natural Pelican

The Martlet

Alerion displayed

Heraldic Eagle
An Heraldic Tigre passant
Supporter, an Heraldic Tigre, collared and lined
Tigre and Mirror
A Leopard passant
A Leopard's Face, jessant-de-lis
Panther "Incensed"
The Lynx
Cat-a-Mountain saliant, collared and lined
Crest, a Cat-a-Mountain, sejant, collared and lined
The crowned Salamander of Francis I.
Salamander crest of James, Earl of Douglas
Heraldic Antelope
The Heraldic Ibex
Musimon, Tityrus
Mantygre, Satyral
Manticora. From ancient Bestiaria
Lamia. From old Bestiary

FICTITIOUS CREATURES OF THE SEA:

Poseidon. Dexter Supporter of Baron Hawke
Merman or Triton
Triton, with two tails (German)
Mermaid and Triton supporters
Mermaid
Crest of Ellis
Die Ritter, of Nuremberg
Ulysses and the Sirens
The Dolphin
Dolphin of classic art

Coin of Ægina

Sign of the Dolphin

Banner of the Dolphin

Example—Dolphin embowed

Dolphin hauriant, urinant, naiant, torqued

Sea-horse naiant

Sea-horse erect

Arms of the city of Belfast

Sea-lion erect

Sea-dog rampant

INTRODUCTION

"Angels and ministers of grace defend us."—"Hamlet."



he human mind has a passionate longing for knowledge even of things past comprehension. Where it cannot know, it will imagine; what the mind conceives it will attempt to define. Are facts wanting, poetry steps in, and myth and song supply the void; cave and forest, mountain and valley, lake and river, are theatres peopled by fancy, and

“as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.”

Traditions of unreal beings inhabit the air, and will not vanish be they ever so sternly commanded; from the misty records of antiquity and the relics of past greatness as seen sculptured in stupendous ruins on the banks of the Nile and the plains of Assyria, strange shapes look with their mute stony eyes upon a world that knows them but imperfectly, and vainly attempts to unriddle the unfathomable mystery of their being. Western nations, with their growing civilisations, conjured up monsters of benign or baneful influence, or engrafted and expanded the older ideas in a manner suited to their genius and national characteristics.

The creatures of the imagination, “Gorgons and Hydras and Chimeras dire,” shapes lovely and shapes terrible begot of unreason in the credulous minds of the imaginative, the timid and the superstitious,—or dreamy poetic fancies of fairies and elves of whom poets sing so sweetly:

“Shapes from the invisible world unearthly singing
From out the middle air, from flowery nests
And from the pillowy silkiness that rests
Full in the speculation of the stars,—”

KEATS.

“or fairy elves,
Whose midnight revels, by the forest side
Or fountain, some belated peasant sees,
Or dreams he sees,—”

MILTON, *Paradise Lost*, Book i.

the nameless dreads and horrors of the unknown powers of darkness, the pestiferous inhabitants of wastes and desert places where loneliness reigns supreme, and imaginary terrors assault the traveller on every hand, assuming forms more various and more to be

dreaded than aught of mortal birth,—such vague and indefinable ideas, “legends fed by time and chance,” like rumours in the air, in the course of time assume tangible shape, receiving definite expression by the poet and artist until they become fixed in the popular mind as stern realities influencing the thoughts and habits of millions of people through successive generations. We see them in the rude fetish of the South Sea Islander, the myriad gods and monsters of heathen mythology, as well as in the superstitions of mediæval Europe, of which last the devil with horned brow, cloven hoofs and forked tail is the most “unreal mockery” of them all. The days of Diabolism and the old witch creed are, however, passed away; but under the dominance of these ideas during centuries, in Protestant and Catholic lands alike, hundreds of thousands of innocent victims of all ages and both sexes were accused of the most absurd and impossible crimes, and subjected to almost inconceivable torture and death.

The dying Christian about to pass through the valley of the shadow of death, in the words of the poet, expresses his faith in the nearness of the spirit world:

“I see a form ye cannot see
I hear a voice ye cannot hear.”

To the spiritually minded other forms, with more of the beautiful and less of the hideous and frightful, revealed themselves; the solitary recluse, his body and mind reduced to an unnatural condition by fasting and penance, in mental hallucination beheld his celestial visitants with awe and adoration, and saw in visions angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim towering in a blaze of glory to illimitable height and extremest space. The rapt seraph and the whole angelic host of heaven to his ecstatic gaze was a revelation and a reality as tangible as were the powers of darkness seen and felt by more sordid natures, incapable of the higher conceptions, and whose minds were accessible chiefly through their terrors.

To classic fable we are indebted for very many of the fictitious animals which heralds have introduced into coats armorial. In all ages man has sought to explain by myths certain phenomena of nature which he has been unable to account for in a more rational manner. *Earthquakes* were the awakening of the earth tortoise which carried the earth on its back; *the tides* were the pulses of the ocean; *lightning* was the breath of demons, the thunderbolt of Jupiter, the hammer of Thor; *volcanoes* were the forges of the infernal deities. In the old Norse legends we read of *waterspouts* being looked upon as sea serpents, and wonderful stories are related of their power and influence. The Chinese imagine *eclipses* to be caused by great dragons which seek to devour the sun. Innumerable beliefs cluster round the *sun*, *moon*, and *stars*. We may trace from our own language the extent of power which these peculiar beliefs have had over the human mind. We still speak of mad people as lunatics, gloomy people as saturnine, sprightly people we term mercurial; we say, “Ill-starr’d event,” &c. &c. The ships of the early navigators, with masts and sails and other requisites for directing their motion or influencing their speed, would be objects of astonishment to the inhabitants of the countries they visited, causing them to be received with the utmost respect and veneration. The ship was taken for a living animal, and hence originated, some say, the fables of winged dragons, griffons, flying citadels, and men transformed into birds

and fishes. The winged Pegasus was nothing but a ship with sails and hence was said to be the offspring of Neptune.

“In reality,” says Southey, in his preface to the “Morte d’Arthur,” vol. ii. 1817, “mythological and romantic tales are current among all savages of whom we have any full account; for man has his intellectual as well as his bodily appetite, and these things are the food of his imagination and faith. They are found wherever there is language and discourse of reason; in other words, wherever there is man. And in similar states of society the fictions of different people will bear a corresponding resemblance, notwithstanding the differences of time and scene.” And Sir Walter Scott, in his “Essay on Romance and Chivalry,” following up the same idea, adds, “that the usual appearances and productions of nature offer to the fancy, in every part of the world, the same means of diversifying fictitious narrative by the introduction of prodigies. If in any romance we encounter the description of an elephant, we may reasonably conclude that a phenomenon unknown in Europe must have been borrowed from the East; but whoever has seen a serpent and a bird may easily aggravate the terrors of the former by conferring on a fictitious monster the wings of the latter; and whoever has seen or heard of a wolf, or lion and an eagle, may, by a similar exercise of invention, imagine a griffon or a hippogriff.”

Beyond the common experiences of every-day life the popular mind everywhere cares very little about simple commonplace practical truths. Human nature seems to crave mystery, to be fond of riddles and the marvellous, and doubtless it was ever so and provided for in all the old faiths of the world.

“The multitude of dragons, diverse as they are, reflecting the fears and fancies of the most different races, it is more than probable is a relic of the early serpent-worship which, according to Mr. Fergusson, is of such remote antiquity that the religion of the Jews was modern in comparison, the curse laid on the serpent being, in fact, levelled at the ancient superstition which it was intended to supersede. Notwithstanding the various forms under which we find the old dragon he ever retains something of the serpent about him, if no more than the scales. In the mediæval devil, too, the tail reveals his descent.” (Louis F. Day.)

The fictitious beings used as symbols in heraldry may be divided into two classes: (1) Celestial beings mentioned in Holy Writ, and those creatures of the imagination which, from the earliest ages, have held possession of men’s minds, profound symbols unlike anything in the heavens or in the earth beneath or in the waters under the earth. They may be abstract ideas embodied in tangible shape, such as the terrible creature, the type of some divine quality, that stands calm, immovable, and imperishable within the walls of our National Museum; such forms as the dragon, of the purely imaginative class, and those creatures compounded of parts of different real animals, yet unlike any one of them, each possessing special symbolic attributes, according to the traditional ideas held concerning them. (2) Animals purely heraldic, such as the heraldic tiger, panther incensed, heraldic antelope, &c., owe their origin and significance to other ideas, and must be accounted for on other grounds, namely, the mistaken ideas resulting from imperfect knowledge of these objects in natural history by early writers and herald painters, to whom they were no doubt real animals with natural qualities, and, as such, according to their knowledge, they depicted them; and although more light has been thrown upon the study of natural history

since their time, and many of their conceptions have been proved to be erroneous, the well-known heraldic shapes of many of these *lusus naturæ* are still retained in modern armory. These animals were such as they could have little chance of seeing, and they probably accepted their descriptions from “travellers’ tales,” always full of the marvellous—and the misleading histories of still earlier writers. Pliny and many of the writers of his day describe certain animals in a way that appears the absurdest fable; even the lion described by him is in some points most unnatural. Xenophon, for instance, describing a boar hunt, gravely tells us: “So hot are the boar’s tusks when he is just dead that if a person lays hairs upon them the hairs will shrivel up; and when the boar is alive they—that is, the tusks—are actually red hot when he is irritated, for otherwise he would not singe the tips of the dogs’ hair when he misses a blow at their bodies.” The salamander in flames, of frequent occurrence in heraldry, is of this class. Like the toad, “ugly and venomous,” the salamander was regarded by the ancients with the utmost horror and aversion. It was accredited with wondrous qualities, and the very sight of it “abominable and fearful to behold.” Elian, Nicander, Dioscorides and Pliny all agree in that it possessed the power of immediately extinguishing any fire into which it was put, and that it would even rush at or charge the flame, which it well knew how to extinguish. It was believed that its bite was certainly mortal, that anything touched by its saliva became poisonous, nay, that if it crept over a tree all the fruit became deleterious. Even Bacon believed in it. Quoth he: “The salamander liveth in the fire and hath the power to extinguish it.” There is, too, a lingering popular belief that if a fire has been burning for seven years there will be a salamander produced from it. Such is the monstrous character given to one of the most harmless of little creatures: the only basis of truth for all this superstructure of fable is the fact that it exudes an acrid watery humour from its skin when alarmed or in pain.

Spenser, in the “Fairy Queen,” Book 1, cant. v. 18, according to the mistaken notions of his time, compares the dangerous dissimulation and treacherous tears of Duessa (or Falsehood) to the crocodile:

“As when a weary traveller that strays
By muddy shore of broad seven-mouthed Nile,
Unweeting of the perilous wand’ring ways,
Doth meet a cruel, crafty crocodile,
Which in false guise hiding his harmful guile,
Doth weep full sore, and shedding tender tears;
The foolish man, that pities all the while
His mournful plight, is swallowed unawares
Forgetful of his own that minds another’s cares.”

And Shakespeare, *2 Henry VI.* iii. 1:

“as the mournful crocodile
With sorrow snares relenting passengers.”

Quarles, too, in his “Emblems”:

“O what a crocodilian world is this,
Compos’d of treach’ries and insnaring wiles!”

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

