

# Lions, Dragons, and Other Beasts:

Aquamanilia of the Middle Ages, Vessels for Church and Table

**JULY 12 – OCTOBER 15, 2006**

The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the  
Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture



## *Lions, Dragons, and Other Beasts: Aquamanilia of the Middle Ages, Vessels for Church and Table*

*Aquamanilia of the Middle Ages*, the second exhibition resulting from a collaboration between the Bard Graduate Center and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, features the Metropolitan's superb collection of medieval aquamanilia. The first hollow-cast vessels produced in the medieval West, aquamanilia were used by priests to pour water for hand washing before mass, and by lay people at mealtimes. Each vessel had two openings,

one for filling with water and one for pouring. Human and animal forms were used, the animals often being fantastic creations. Aquamanilia are among the most distinctive and delightful products of the Middle Ages.

The Metropolitan Museum houses one of the most important collections of aquamanilia in the world, dating from the 12th to the 15th centuries. Examples are divided between the Department of Medieval Art, the Lehman Collection and The Cloisters, the museum's uptown branch. Until this collaboration with the BGC, the collection was never exhibited together or catalogued. The exhibition has been organized by Peter Barnet, Michel David-Weill Curator in Charge, the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Pete Dandrige, Conservator, Sherman Fairchild Center for Objects Conservation at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



For many museum visitors, aquamanilia hold a particular fascination because of their always original and sometimes whimsical sculptural forms. But if the vessels are seen out of context and usage, viewers may not fully understand their meaning and function in medieval society. This exhibition offers insight into these intriguing objects and provides viewers with a greater appreciation of the history and culture of the period.

### **BACKGROUND**

The BGC–Metropolitan collaborations are a key component of the BGC's Museum History and Practice concentration, which was inaugurated in 2001 in order to accommodate the increasing number of students interested in museum careers. The joint projects provide opportunities for students in the BGC's graduate programs to gain valuable hands-on museum experience, and for BGC faculty and Metropolitan curators to work together to plan exhibitions of significant decorative arts collections normally not known by the general public.

For this exhibition, BGC students collaborated with curators and conservators from the Metropolitan to conduct research on the objects and produce the gallery guide.

Students made an in-depth study of medieval art, history, and culture, and conducted specific research on the Metropolitan's aquamanilia collection. The students were also directly involved in researching additional objects included in the exhibition to help visitors better understand the importance of aquamanilia within the medieval world.

A major focus of the exhibition is the development of the techniques and materials used to cast and finish aquamanilia. Early treatises, including the 12th-century manuscript *On Divers Arts*, were an important resource, but much additional information about medieval metalworking generally and aquamanilia specifically was obtained from physical evidence such as tool marks and core impressions on the objects themselves. A variety of analytic techniques, including study of the alloys and core materials, were also employed. Based on the information generated by this research, Ubaldo Vitali, a fourth-generation Italian silversmith, cast an aquamanile in his studio replicating medieval techniques. Vitali is one of the most accomplished and inspired artisans working today, and a noted historian of metalworking technologies with substantial experience in the casting and finishing of metals. His process was digitally recorded and has been incorporated into the exhibition and its catalogue.

#### EXHIBITION

The entire aquamanilia collection of the Metropolitan Museum, as well as selected examples from other major collections, is on display. Additional objects drawn from the Metropolitan's extensive collection provide context. Late Antique, Byzantine, and Islamic works suggest sources and models. Stylistic and technical relationships are explored with other medieval examples in various media, such as tapestry and ceramic.

#### CATALOGUE

A full-color catalogue documents the entire collection of aquamanilia in the Metropolitan Museum, and presents scholarly essays by the exhibition organizers. Peter Barnet discusses the meaning, usage, and stylistic development of the aquamanile. Pete Dandridge describes the technological discoveries made during the analysis of the aquamanilia collection and explains how this information increases understanding of medieval metalworking and the production of aquamanilia. The catalogue also includes an essay by Dr. Ursula Mende, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg; entries for all exhibited aquamanilia; and a checklist of related objects.



RIGHT *Aristotle and Phyllis*  
South Lowlands, late 14th century  
Copper alloy, 12.75" h x 7" w x 15.5" l  
Robert Lehman Collection

LEFT *Crowned Centaur Fighting a Dragon*  
German (Lower Saxony), early 13th century  
Copper alloy, 14.4" h x 5" w x 13.8" l  
Rogers Fund



**TOP Griffin**

German (Nuremberg), early 15th century  
Copper alloy, 12.6" h x 13" l  
Robert Lehman Collection

**BOTTOM Dragon (Wyvern)**

North German, ca. 1200  
Copper alloy, 8.4" h x 4.4" w x 7.2" l  
The Cloisters Collection

**COVER Samson and Lion**

German, early 15th century  
Copper alloy, 13.4" h x 5.5" w x 15" l  
Robert Lehman Collection

**RELATED PROGRAMS**

An array of lectures, panels, and other offerings will be presented in conjunction with the exhibition. For further information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu).

**EXHIBITION TOURS**

Group tours of the exhibition may be scheduled Tuesday through Friday between 11:15 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., and on Thursdays until 7:00 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. For further information, please call the Bard Graduate Center Gallery at 212-501-3013 or TTY 212-501-3012, or e-mail [gallery@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:gallery@bgc.bard.edu).

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

The Bard Graduate Center is located at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, in New York City. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Thursday from 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Admission is \$3 general, \$2 seniors and students (with valid ID), and free on Thursday evening after 5:00 p.m. For further information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit our website at [www.bgc.bard.edu](http://www.bgc.bard.edu).

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**UPCOMING EXHIBITION, FALL 2006**

***James Athenian Stuart: Neoclassical Pioneer***

The first comprehensive study of Stuart's remarkable career as an architect and designer

**BGC**

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