

# Beasts To Wash Away The Corporeal World

By BRICE BROWN

A crazy-eyed centaur with a dragon jutting out of its stomach; a wyvern clenching a small man in its teeth like a chew-toy; countless proud lions glaring, gnashing, panting. These strange creatures — seemingly ripped from the pages of a bestiary — are only a sampling of the many fantastical forms on view in "Lions, Dragons, and Other Beasts: Aquamanilia of the Middle Ages, Vessels for Church and Table," at the Bard Graduate Center.

## LIONS, DRAGONS, & OTHER BEASTS: AQUAMANILIA OF THE MIDDLE AGES, VESSELS FOR CHURCH AND TABLE

The Bard Graduate Center

Aquamanilia — translated as "water hands" — are medieval copper vessels that held and poured water during ritual hand washing in both ecclesiastical and secular settings. Their bizarre conflation of the human with the animal reflects a medieval mind-set that effortlessly traversed the line between fantasy and reality. Their deceptively compact narratives — built from straightforward, almost naïve abstractions of form and mark-making — belie a complex intelligence that predicts the art of Paul Klee and early Modernism.

This exhibition gathers 30 aquamanilia dating from the 12th to the 15th centuries. Collaborating with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bard has brought together for the first time the Met's unparalleled collection of these vessels (which are housed in the Lehman Collection, the Cloisters, and the museum's department of medieval art). Also on view are 27 related examples from the Late Antique, Islamic, and Byzantine periods; highlighting various stylistic influences, these supporting objects could have made an interesting exhibition all by themselves. A few reproductions from the 19th and early 20th centuries bookend the show and demonstrate our continued fascination with these enigmatic curiosities.

Walking into the exhibition produced the kind of disorienting, exhilarating experience rarely found these days in a gallery. These vessels have such presence that you become instantly immersed in their mysterious world; any hint of the urban bustle outside melts away. The effect is similar to walking through a Romanesque portal such as the one at the pilgrimage church at Vézelay, where tightly packed figures climbing the tympanum mark a vivid transition from matters of the earth (and sin) to matters of God. This makes sense, because aquamanilia, too, signaled a transitional moment within a ceremony: The corporeal world was washed away to welcome the purifying Eucharist.

Greeting you with inscrutable drama is a "Knight on Horseback" (c. 1250)

jecting from its forehead (for pouring); the other is a hinged opening in the back of its head (for filling).

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Latin West and the Byzantine and Islamic East engaged in fluid and abundant trade, creating stylistic cross-pollination. "Lion" (c. 1200) combines sensual decorative details — like almond-shaped eyes and geometric patterns running down the front legs — with stout Teutonic form. Extensive tattoo-like engraving around the face, large incisor teeth, and a pair of vibrant, sky-blue glass inlaid eyes all point to Eastern influences. These details are also examples of the high level of surprise and expression that can be found simply on the surfaces of these aquamanilia.

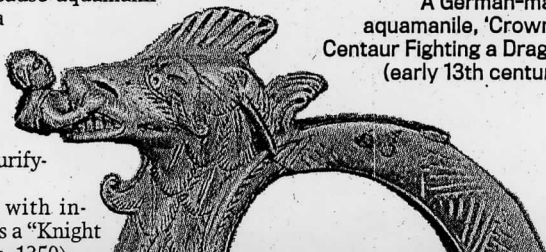
This East-West exchange not only involved precious objects; knowledge regarding new technical processes was also traded. Islamic metalworkers mastered hollow-cast zoomorphic ritual vessels — rooted in Shang Dynasty bronzes — by the 10th century. This knowledge then appeared in northern Germany and Lower Saxony in the 12th century in the form of aquamanilia. Made from lost-wax casts, or *cire perdue*, they represented the first examples of hollow-cast vessels in the West.

To underscore the importance of lost-wax hollow casting, the curators of this show commissioned Ubaldo Vitali (a fourth-generation Italian silversmith) to produce a replica based on a 12th-century example of a lion. The entire process, documented on a DVD included with the show's gorgeously illustrated catalog, is fascinating. The tools, powders, wax molds, and various other items used in this process are all on display, providing a glimpse into the alchemy involved in bringing an aquamanile to life.

Now imagine this: You are sitting at a table during a grand medieval ceremony. The moment has come to wash your hands in preparation for handling food (fingers, not utensils, were *à la mode*). Standing alert on the table is a "Crowned Centaur Fighting a Dragon" (13th century). His flanks are covered with circular pockmarks; on his head is a modest crown. Like a suicide king, he holds a sword with his cracked right arm, seemingly poised to stab himself in the head. Out of his stomach bursts a long-necked serpent; from this serpent's mouth delicately scented water regurgitates onto your hands.

Until October 15 (18 W. 86th Street, between Columbus Avenue and Central Park West, 212-501-3000).

A German-made aquamanile, 'Crowned Centaur Fighting a Dragon' (early 13th century).



wearing a large, helmet-shaped helmet, this knight is awkwardly proportioned. Slender, too-short legs end abruptly in T-shaped feet. His right arm curlicues up into his armpit, creating a space once occupied by a javelin. An incised ring of heart-shaped pendants encircles the horse. A dragon handle curves from the rear of the horse to the knight's back, propping him up with two little hands. To accommodate filling the vessel with water and pouring it out, two openings were made in the horse. One is a horn-like spout pro-



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