

Animals in Non-Western Art



Major support for the Language and Arts School Partnership Program is provided by the Patrick F. Taylor Foundation.

Educator Resources

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The works in this packet include representations of animals from non-western cultures including Benin, Chinese, Maya, Mali, Native American and Indian people. Begin a discussion of these works by asking your students to identify the animal(s) portrayed.

- Search for identifiable parts of the animals. Can you recognize the whole animal?
- Is the animal portrayed realistically or in a simplified or stylized manner?
- What might the animals symbolize? Are they fierce, strong, wise, scary, helpful, or comforting?
- Are the materials used to create the work of art symbolic? For example, bronze could denote strength.
- Consider how the work of art may have been used by its culture.
- What can you learn about the culture that created the work of art?

Teaching Tools

Lesson Plans

- Folk Tales: Talk with the Animals
- I'm An Alichikapotamous: Writing an Autobiographical Poem

Story Map

Poem Template

Leopard Plaque, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 16-17th century, bronze, 34 x 44 cm.

The Benin Kingdom exists today as part of southern Nigeria (not to be confused with the Republic of Benin located to the west of Nigeria) and covers approximately 4,000 square miles. The Kingdom of Benin and the Edo peoples within the kingdom flourished until 1897 at the onset of the British Punitive Expedition when the British army captured, burned and looted the cities of the Kingdom of Benin, destroying the Kingdom and the rule of the Oba. Considered divine by nature, the Oba, or king, was the supreme ruler over the kingdom and ruled as the final judge, chief executive and landlord. The Oba was deposed from rule when the British took over, but the Oba's position was restored years later with limited rule.



The image of the leopard was a common subject on regal art and body adornment in the Benin Kingdom. *Leopard Plaque* depicts a leopard in high relief. Symbolically, the Oba related himself to the leopard because leopards were considered kings of the forest and therefore the animal counterpart of the Oba. Leopards were captured and kept for royal sacrifice as well as paraded in the Oba's annual procession through town. This walk signified the domination of the Oba over the king of the forest. In low relief on the plaque is a floral decor representing the leaves of water plants. The four-leafed design represents the cosmological world of the Edo people: four directions of wind, four days of the Edo week, and four divisions of day (morning, afternoon, evening and night).

The Benin Kingdom has a long tradition of brass casting. The first brass center developed in the 14th century. Brass wall plaques decorated the Oba's palace and were created to commemorate historical events, court life and related matters. Wall plaques, such as *Leopard Plaque*, have African and non-African influences, including an illustrated book, introduced to Benin culture by the Portuguese in 1485.

Did You Know?

The leopard is similar to the jaguar with a rosette patterned coat. The jaguar's rosettes are larger than a leopard's and usually have spots within the spots whereas a leopard has none. The base color of a leopard differs from region to region depending on the environment.

Fish Devouring Human Figure, undetermined Inland Niger Delta Peoples, Mali, c. 11th – 17th century, terra cotta, 3 X 5 x 16 in.

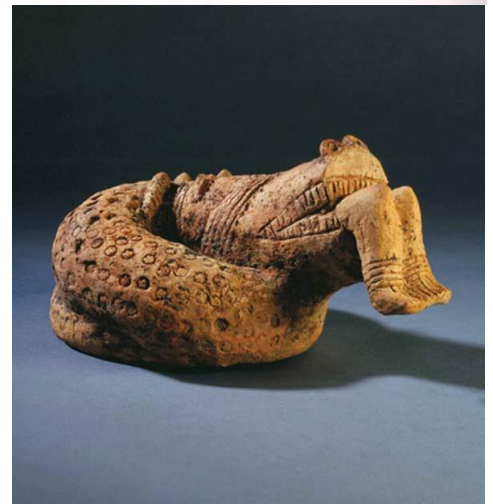
These two unique sculptures are from an unidentified culture from the Inland Niger Delta of Mali. They are the only known examples of works by people of the western Sudan region which depict humans being devoured by animals. Serpents and fish play a prominent role within the history and beliefs of the people from this region.

Representations of coiled snakes are well known in the works of Inland Niger Delta sculpture. They are often decorated with impressed and incised techniques such as the circle pattern applied to the body of the snake in this terra cotta. Serpents may be associated with sacrifice. The Soninke Empire of Ghana offered an annual sacrifice of a female virgin to the serpent Bida. The snake is also prominent in the creation story of the Dogon of Mali, whose first human was believed to have turned into a snake upon death. A Bamana story tells of the transformation of ancestors into serpent form.

Fish also figure prominently in the creation stories of people from this area, however fish imagery is rare. The Bozo people are considered to be the indigenous fishing peoples of this region. Their stories include tales of appeasing the various inhabitants of the waterways including hippopotamuses, crocodiles and fish. Another tale from the Mande peoples tells of ancestors who took the form of fish.

Discussion Questions:

- What is happening in these sculptures?
- What may have happened before this moment?
- What might happen next?
- What are some origin stories from other cultures?



Lidded Burial Urn with Jaguar Motif, Maya Culture, Guatemala, Quiche, c. 900-1200, terracotta, polychrome, 48 in (h).

Funerary urns with conical lids were used by the Maya throughout their history. The lid and cover of the urn have finger indentations made as decoration while the clay was still wet. Modeled in high-relief, a jaguar head with paws protrudes from the mouth of a reptilian Earth monster. In the Maya pantheon, the jaguar god is frequently associated with death and thus is an appropriate image for a burial urn.

The Maya viewed jaguars as the top of the food chain, and they admired the animal for its cunning stealth and power. The jaguar was seen as an animal able to transgress natural boundaries and live in three different realms. It lived in the upper world of the treetops (in the world of flying animals) where it could descend unseen and pounce on its prey. It lived in the terrestrial world among human counterparts, and in the spiritual world in caves and water. Symbolically, the cave and underwater world were where the gods presided, thus the jaguar could move effortlessly between worlds. Because of the jaguar's ability to move from one world to the next, many Maya gods carry jaguar attributes.



Did You Know?

Jaguars are one of the few species of cats that like water. In the wild, jaguars are often found near or in water and are considered very good swimmers.

Discussion Questions:

What animals live in water and on land?

What adjectives describe the jaguar?

What animal would you choose to represent you?

Frontlet Headdress, Nuxalk Peoples, Northwest Coast, late 19th century, wood, pigment, red haliotis shell, ermine pelts, woven cedar bark, walrus whiskers, ferrous metal, 22 x 11 x 10 in

This frontlet headdress, from the Nuxalk Peoples of the Northwest Coast depicts a clawed and beaked bird, with two human faces protruding from the rim. The Nuxalk live in the Bella Coola River valley just north of Vancouver in British Columbia, Canada. Crown-like headdresses such as this one would have been worn by dancers during ceremonies. In addition to the headdress, the dancer would have adorned himself with a dancing apron or a Chilcat blanket, producing a spectacular ensemble.

Frontlet headdresses were probably developed in the northern areas, and were later copied by neighbors and traded to the south. The frontlet is painted in typical colors of blue and orange. Inlays of abalone shell decorate the outside edges of the wooden frontlet, and would have glittered in the firelight during dances. The eyes of the bird have been inlaid with metal discs, which would also have created a glint from the fire.

The headdress is set on a cylindrical frame lined with sea lion whiskers, which protrude from the top. The back of the frame is covered in rows of ermine skins, which would descend down the wearer's back. The headdress combines an intricate carving skill with an imaginative selection of decorative materials. The carved frontlet probably represents some episode of clan history or an aspect of tribal legend.



Standing Horse, China, Tang Dynasty, 618-906, earthenware, glazed in green, 22 x 6 x 17 in.

The Tang Dynasty (618-907) was a period of great cultural splendor in China. The capital Chang'an had a population of approximately one million and was one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities. The thriving trade along the Silk Road, which extended from Constantinople to Chang'an, made the city a popular destination for foreign and domestic visitors and traders. Exotic goods from every region of China and the Western world were sold in the city's markets.

The arts flourished during the Tang Dynasty period. One of the most beautiful innovations, that of the *sancai* (pronounced SAHN-SIGH), or three-colored glaze, took place in the field of ceramics. The Tang *Horse* is a tomb sculpture, or *mingqi* (pronounced MING-CHEE). The practice of burying objects representing the wealth and status of the deceased derived from Shang and Zhou practices of human sacrifice. Most tomb sculptures of the Tang period represent humans, animals or spirits. The strongly muscled *Horse* is a realistic portrait of the new breeding stock available in China during the Tang Dynasty. The mane and tail that were originally attached to the horse after firing survive only partially.

Did You Know?

The Chinese depended heavily on horses, leading to the invention of the stirrup in approximately 400 CE, which made it easier for cavalymen to fight. The Chinese also invented the breast strap harnessing system, which wouldn't appear in Europe for another millennium.



Standing Ganesha, India, Tamil Nadu, Chola Dynasty, c. late 12th – early 13th century, bronze, 17 ¾ in h.

The Hindu god Ganesha is the widely worshipped, elephant-headed son of Shiva and Pārvatī. He is celebrated as a god of intellect and wisdom and also as a Remover of Obstacles. Legend says that Ganesha's human head was removed by his father, Shiva, while Ganesha was protecting his mother at her bath. Pārvatī had requested that her son stand guard, but Shiva returned unexpectedly and did not recognize Ganesha. After the damage had been done, Shiva promised to replace the boy's severed head with that of the next living thing to cross his path. When an elephant sauntered past, his head was placed upon the boy's body.

Ganesha's elephant head reminds devotees to look beyond what is rational and toward the spiritual. In addition to having the head of an elephant, Ganesha is usually portrayed as big-bellied and jovial. He is known for his fondness of sweets. Hindu gods are often depicted with more than two arms to indicate superhuman power and the ability to perform many tasks at once. This Chola period Ganesha holds his attributes, an elephant tusk and a sweet delicacy, in his frontal palm while the posterior hands are in an abhaya mudra, a symbol of protection or fearlessness. The tang to the left of Ganesha indicates that there was once an aureole surrounding the god, who stands on a lotus flower.

This sculpture was created during the Chola period when the Tamil dynasty governed southern India from the 3rd through the 13th centuries. Chola rulers were avid temple builders and reached new heights of excellence in stone and bronze sculpture and in literature.

Discussion Question:

What are some other instances in art or in literature in which humans are given the form of an animal?

