

JOHN VINYCOMB

FICTITIOUS & SYMBOLIC
CREATURES IN ART

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John Vinycomb

Fictitious & Symbolic Creatures in Art / With Special Reference to Their Use in British Heraldry

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.

INTRODUCTION

“Angels and ministers of grace defend us.”—“Hamlet.”

The 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!”

Bossewell, an heraldic writer of the sixteenth century, after the model of his forerunner, Gerard Leigh, edified his readers with comments on natural history in such a delightful manner (according to his friend Roscarrocke) as to provoke the envy of Pliny in Elysium, though now these descriptions in many instances only serve to call up a smile from their very absurdity. With “veracious” histories of this description, is it to be wondered at that such beings as those referred to were made use of in heraldry and accepted as types or emblems of some particular quality in man? As an instance of how an error in the form of an animal may be perpetuated unperceived, it may be mentioned that even in the best books on heraldry, natural history, and in other illustrated publications, the elephant is rarely to be seen correctly delineated. A peculiarity in his formation is that the hind legs bend in the same manner as the fore legs, so that, unlike other quadrupeds, it can kneel and rest on its four knees, whereas it is usually depicted with the hind legs to bend in the same way as those of the horse or the cow. When artists and herald-painters continue to commit this blunder unobserved, some palliation may be afforded to the old heralds for their offences against zoology in the errors and delusions arising from lack of information. They could have little opportunity of acquiring a correct knowledge of the rarer kinds of animals; they had not the advantage of seeing menageries of wild beasts, or of consulting books on natural history with excellent illustrations, as the modern herald may do. Only when their scanty information fell short did they venture to draw on their imaginations for their beasts, after the manner of an ancient worthy, who “where the lion’s skin fell short, eked it out with the fox’s.”

Some writers, however, maintain that these monstrosities are not so much the result of ignorance of the real forms of the beasts as that they were intended to typify certain extraordinary qualities, and therefore exaggeration of the natural shapes and functions was needful to express such qualities. This may be true in some instances. Under this idea the noble form of the lion may have been distorted to resemble the wild cat in the fury of its contortions. *The Panther incensed*, breathing fire and smoke out of its mouth, nose and ears, seems as if taken from some misleading history—like that of the boar, by Xenophon, already referred to—or the result of the erroneous description of some terrified traveller. This is a natural and probable mode of accounting for its unnatural appearance. It may, however, fairly be said that the natural ferocity of the brute, and also its destructive qualities, are

most fitly typified by the devouring flame issuing from the head of this bloodthirsty and treacherous beast of prey.

The Heraldic Pelican, again, is evidently a mistake of the early artists, similar to the heraldic tiger, heraldic antelope, &c., and the persistent following of the traditional “pattern” by the heralds when once established. Early Christian painters always represented this emblem of devoted self-sacrifice, *A Pelican in her piety*—that is, feeding her young with her own blood—as having the head and beak of an eagle or bird of prey such as they must have believed it to possess, and with which it would be possible that it could lacerate its own breast; and not with the clumsy and ungainly “bill” peculiar to this species of bird, which we know is more suited to gobble up small reptiles than to “*vulning*” itself.

Some symbols, again, are neither real nor do they pretend to be fabulous, such as the *two-headed eagle*, but are pure heraldic inventions that have each their special signification. *The tricorporate lion* lays no claim to be other than the symbol of a powerful triune body under one guiding head; the *three legs conjoined*—the arms of the Isle of Man—is an old Greek sign for expedition. Many other instances will, no doubt, occur to the reader of similar emblems of this class.

Notes on Animated Beings in Heraldic Art



“One chief source of illustration is to be found in the most brilliant, and in its power on character, hitherto the most effective of the Arts—HERALDRY.”

Ruskin,

“Relation of Wise Art and Wise Science.”

Heraldry is *par excellence* the science of symbols. A pictorial device is subject to no exact or regular law, provided it carries its meaning with it. Heraldry, on the contrary, insists on the observance of certain definite and easily understood rules constituting it a science, by the observance of which any one acquainted with heraldic language may, from a concise written description (or *blazon* as it is termed), reconstruct at any time the symbol or series of symbols intended, and with perfect accuracy; for a heraldic emblem once adopted remains unchangeable, no matter with what amount of naturalness or conventionality it may be done, or with what quaintness or even grotesqueness it may be treated; the symbol remains intact. “A lion rampant,” “a dragon,” or any other heraldic figure is, therefore, a fixed and immutable idea, and not to be confounded with any other, no matter what the style of artistic or decorative treatment it may receive.

Notwithstanding the evident intention everywhere in heraldry to be symbolic, in attitude as well as in tinctures, we find the greatest errors and absurdities constantly perpetrated. To many it seems as if it was not considered essential to acquire a knowledge of the rudiments of the science. Heraldry is a living language, and when the attempt is made to express it without proper knowledge the result can only be unmitigated nonsense. By inattention to those principles which regulate the *attitude*, the *tinctures*, and the disposition of every part of an armorial achievement, discredit is brought upon the subject, which should fall upon the head of the ignorant designer alone. No matter what heraldic position of an animal may be blazoned (though it admits of only one interpretation), we find the most unwarrantable latitude frequently taken by otherwise skilful artists in depicting it. The designer becomes a law unto himself, and it is posed and treated in a way to suit the fancy of the moment. A lion is only a lion to him, and it is nothing more. To the true herald it is very much more. As a mild instance, see the unkind treatment meted out to the supporters of the Royal Arms. The lion and unicorn are both “rampant,” and the head of the lion is turned towards the spectator (termed *guardant*). Not content to be represented in the regulation positions, they will be found depicted in most strange and fantastic attitudes not recognised in heraldry—not supporting or guarding the shield, which is their special function. At the head of the *Times* newspaper they are represented playing at hide and seek round the shield; elsewhere we see them capering and prancing, or we find them sitting, like begging dogs, as if ashamed of themselves and their vocation.

I may here quote from a most admirable work: “That the decorative beauty of heraldry, far from being that of form and colour alone, was also an imaginative one depending much on the symbolic meaning of its designs, there can be no doubt.... Early Christian Art was full of symbols, whose use and meaning were discussed in treatises from the second century onwards. By the eleventh it had become systemised and ranged under various heads,—Bestiaria for beasts, Volucaria for birds, and Lapidaria for stones. It permeated the whole life of the people in its religious uses, and entered

romantically into the half-religious, half-mystical observances of chivalry, the very armour of the valiant knight being full of meanings which it was his duty to know.”¹

¹ “Decorative Heraldry,” by G. W. Eve.

The Symbolism of Attitude or Position

It must be evident to every one who has given any thought to the subject that a definite idea is meant to be conveyed to the mind by the attitude in which an animal is depicted; and such figures are not mere arbitrary signs, like the letters of the alphabet, which of themselves convey no meaning whatever. “*A lion rampant*” is, as the term suggests, a lion in the act of fighting, rearing on his hind legs to meet his antagonist. He is therefore depicted with wildly tossed mane, staring eyes, and *guly* mouth; his muscular limbs and distended claws braced up for the combat betoken the energy and power of the noble brute. How different is the idea conveyed by the lion *statant* in the firm majesty of his pose, calmly looking before him; or *couchant*, fit emblem of restful vigilance and conscious power, prepared on the instant alike to attack or defend.

Should any reasons be needed to enforce the necessity of adhering strictly to the heraldic law in which attitude plays such an important part, it may be needful only to refer to one or two examples, and cite as an instance in point the noblest of all created beings, and ask whether, of the many acts in which imperious man himself may be heraldically portrayed, the action or position in which he is to be depicted should not indicate distinctly the idea that is to be associated with the representation? whether vauntingly, like the old kings,—

“with high exacting look
Sceptred and globed”

—attributes of his power,—or as a bishop or saint in the act of benediction,—kneeling in prayer as on mediæval seals,—the three savage men *ambulant* on the shield of Viscount Halifax,—or the dead men strewn over the field on the seal of the city of Lichfield—in each the primary idea is *man*, but how different the signification! It will therefore be understood that the particular action or posture, or any of the various forms in which real or imaginary creatures may be blazoned in heraldry, gives the keynote to its interpretation, which, in this respect, is nothing if not symbolic.

It will be seen that to interpret the meaning implied in any particular charge, the *tinctures*, as well as the *attitude*, must be considered. These, taken in combination with the *qualities* or *attributes* we associate with the creature represented, indicate in a threefold manner the complete idea or phase of meaning intended to be conveyed by the composition, and may be thus formulated:

(1) The Creature.—The primary idea in the symbol is in the particular being represented, whether real or fictitious, as *a man*, *a lion*, *an eagle*, *a dragon*, &c., of the form and accepted character for some particular quality or attribute of mind or body, as *fierceness*, *valour*, *fleetness*, &c.

(2) Attitude.—The various attitudes or positions in which it may be depicted in heraldry, each denoting some special meaning, as *rampant*, *sejant*, *dormant*, &c.

(3) Tincture.—Whether blazoned *proper* (that is, according to nature) or of some of the heraldic tinctures, as *or* (gold), *gules* (red), *azure*, *vert*, &c., each tincture, according to the old heralds, bearing a particular and special signification.

Tinctures in armorial devices were, however, not always introduced on these scientific principles or adopted from any symbolic meaning, but as arbitrary variations of colour for distinction merely, and as being in themselves equally honourable; colour alone in many instances serving to distinguish the arms of many families that would otherwise be the same. Hence the necessity for accuracy in blazoning.

Guillam lays down some general rules regarding the symbolic meaning by which all sorts of creatures borne in arms or ensigns are to be interpreted, and by which alone a consistent system can

be regulated. “They must,” he says, “be interpreted in the best sense, that is, according to their most generous and noble qualities, and so to the greatest honour of their bearers.... The *fox* is full of wit, and withal given wholly to filching for his prey. If, then, this be the charge of an escutcheon, we must conceive the quality represented to be his wit and cunning, but not his pilfering and stealing;” and so of other beasts. Even in wild and ruthless animals and fictitious creatures, symbolic heraldry delights in setting forth their most commendable qualities, as fierceness and courage in overcoming enemies, though they may also possess most detestable qualities.

In like manner all sorts of peaceable or gentle-natured creatures must be set forth in their most noble and kindly action, each in its disposition and that which is most agreeable to nature, rather than of an opposite character. Heraldic art thus stamps a peculiar note of dignity for some particular respect in the emblematic figures it accepts, as for some special use, quality or action in the thing depicted; and this dignity or nobility may have a twofold relation, one betwixt creatures of divers kinds, as *a lion* or *a stag*, *a wolf* and *a lamb*; the other between beings of one and the same kind, according to their various attitudes or positions in which they may be represented, as a stag *courant* or *at speed*, and a stag *lodged* or *at bay*; a lion *rampant* and a lion *coward*—one will keep the field, the other seek safety in flight, just as one attitude conveys a different signification from another.

The Heraldic Spirit—Effective decorative Quality essential in Heraldry

It will be observable that in the hands of a capable designer imbued with the true heraldic spirit, all objects, animate and inanimate, conform after their kind to decorative necessities, and assume shapes more or less conventional, and, as far as is consistent with effective display of the charge, are made to accommodate themselves to the space they must occupy. Fierce and savage beasts are made to look full of energy and angry power, while gentle-natured creatures are made to retain their harmless traits. In a monster of the dragon tribe, strong leathern wings add to his terrors; his jaws are wide, his claws are strong and sharp; he is clothed in impenetrable armour of plates and scales, his breath is fire and flame, lightning darts from his eyes, he lashes his tail in fury; and all the while the artist is most careful so to spread the creature out on shield or banner that all his powers shall be displayed at once.

Whatever liberty the artist may take in his interpretation of the form of bird, beast, or monster, there is, however, a limit to his licence beyond which he may not go. He may not alter the recognised symbolic attitude, nor change the tincture; he is scarcely at liberty to add a feature. He may curl the mane of his lion, fancifully develop its tongue and tail, and display its claws in a manner for which there is little or no authority in nature; but if he add wings, or endow it with a plurality of heads or tails, it instantly becomes another creature and a totally different symbol.² A wise reticence in treatment is more to be commended than such fanciful extravagance.

The early artists and heralds, in their strivings to exaggerate in a conventional manner the characteristics of animals for their most effective display, appear to have reached the limits of which their art was capable, and important lessons may be gained from their works. With the extended knowledge of natural history, and the advanced state of art at the present day, decorative and symbolic heraldry should take a leading place in the twentieth century, as in the words of Ruskin, it has been “hitherto the most brilliant” and “most effective of the Arts.”

² The above notes on heraldic treatment are largely adapted from the admirable works on Decorative Art, by Louis F. Day.

Celestial Beings



*“They boast ethereal vigour and are form’d
From seeds of heavenly birth.”—Virgil.*

*“Down hither prone in flight
He speeds, and through the vast ethereal sky
Sails between world and world with steady wings:
Now on the polar wind, then with quick fan
Winnows the buxom air.”—Milton.*

Angels and Archangels the mind loves to contemplate as the ministers of God’s omnipotence and beneficence, and delights in believing these celestial beings to be endowed with a higher and purer intelligence, and as being nearer to the divine nature. In all ages civilised man has thought of them and represented them in art as of form like to his own, and with attributes of volition and power suggested by wings. Scripture itself justifies the similitude; the Almighty is sublimely represented as “walking upon the wings of the wind.” Wings have always been the symbol or attribute of *volition*, of *mind*, or of the *spirit* or *air*. No apter emblem could be found for a rapid and resistless element than birds or the wings of birds; and however incongruous such appendages may be, and anatomically impossible, it is figuratively as the messengers of God’s will to man that we have come to view these celestial habitants.



Egyptian Winged Deity.

The idea of adding wings to the human form has existed from remote antiquity, and for the earliest suggestion of celestial beings of the winged human type we must look to the art works of Egypt and Assyria. In Egyptian art, Neith, the goddess of the heavens, was sometimes represented with wings, and in the marbles of Nineveh we find human figures displaying four wings.³ In classic art wings are given to certain divinities and genii. The Jews probably borrowed the idea from the

³ See Audsley’s “Glossary of Architecture,” “Angel,” p. 101.

Egyptians, and the early Christians adopted—in this as in many other instances—existing ideas in their symbolical art to express the attribute of swiftness and power, and the sanction of the practice doubtless fixed it for acceptance through all future epochs of Christian Art.



Hawk-headed and winged figure, emblem of Osiris, which, having of all birds the most piercing eye and the most rapid flight, serves to express the divine intelligence and activity.

(Palace of Nimrod in the Louvre.)

In holy writ and Jewish tradition angels are usually spoken of as men, and their wings appear to be implied rather than expressed, as when Abraham in the plains of Mamré addresses his celestial visitors as “my lord,” when Jacob wrestles with the angel, and more particularly when the Angel at the Sepulchre is described by St. Matthew, “His countenance was like the lightning and his raiment white as snow,” and by St. Mark as “A young man clothed in a long white garment.”

The Seraphim and Cherubim as winged beings are more perfectly described in the Scriptures.

The Wings Various Coloured.—Not content with a simple departure in form from all natural wings, the early and Middle Age artists resorted to many expedients to invest their angels’ wings with unearthly characteristics. Colour was a fertile field for their ingenuity, and they lavished all their brilliant hues in accentuating or separating the several orders of feathers comprising the wings; now rivalling the rainbow, now applying the startling contrasts of the most gorgeous tropical butterfly; at other times sprinkling or tipping the richly painted feathers with burnished gold, or making them appear alive with brilliant eyes.

Vesture.—In Early Christian Art the white vesture spoken of by St. Matthew and St. John, almost invariably adopted, consisted of garments resembling the classic tunica and pallium, sometimes bound with the “golden girdle” of Revelation. During the mediæval period they were clad in every brilliant colour. Angels do not often appear in the works of art executed during the first six centuries of the Church; and previous to the fifth century they were invariably represented without the nimbus—that attribute of divinity with which they were almost always invested throughout the whole range of Middle Age art.

Nimbus.—The nimbi given to all the orders of the angelic hierarchy are circular in form, with their fields either plain or covered with numerous radiating lines or rays, sometimes with broad borders of ornament, but never with the *tri-radiate* form, which was specially reserved for the persons of the trinity.

Lord Bacon (“Advancement of Learning,” Book i.) says we find, as far as credit is to be given to the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the supposed Dionysius, the Senator of Athens, that the first place or degree is given to the angels of love, which are termed *Seraphim*; the second to the angels of light, which are termed *Cherubim*; and the third, and so following places, to thrones, principalities, and the rest, which are all angels of power and ministry, so that the angels of knowledge and illumination are placed before the angels of office and domination.

Fallen Angels.—We learn from Tradition that many angels, originally holy like the rest, fell from their pristine purity, becoming so transformed in character that all their powers are now used for the purpose of doing evil instead of doing good. These are to be identified with the devils so frequently mentioned in holy writ. By the artists of the Middle Ages they are depicted in as hideous a manner as could be conceived, more generally of the Satyr form with horns and hoofs and tail, which last connects them with the Dragon of the Apocalypse, the impersonation of the Supreme Spirit of evil (*see* Dragon). In Milton's conception Satan—the fallen Angel—assumes noble and magnificent proportions.

Mistaken Modern Conception of Angels

Many poets and artists of modern times appear to have lost sight of the traditions of sacred art, and in their endeavours to spiritualise the character of angelic beings have in this respect been led to portray them as altogether feminine in form and appearance. This error should be carefully avoided, because in a spiritual as well as in a human sense the vigorous active principle they represent, besides having the warrant of Scripture, is more fitly represented by man than by woman.

Mahomet, who borrowed his ideas mostly from the Christians, in this instance, possibly to guard his followers from some latent form of idolatry, said of angels with some show of reason, that “they were too pure in nature to admit of sex,” but to meet the ideas of his followers he invented another race of celestial beings for the delight and solace of the faithful in the paradise to which he lured them.

Ministering Spirits or Guardian Angels.—These form a frequent theme of poets and artists. The idea was apparently evolved from the mention of “ministering spirits” before the throne of God in holy writ, and from the ecclesiastical legends and traditions of the Christian mythology of early date, derived from still earlier sources. Thus Milton speaks of—

“one of the Seven
Who in God’s presence, nearest to the throne
Stand ready at command, and are his eyes
That run thro’ all the heavens, and down to earth
Bear his swift errands.”

Paradise Lost, iii.

According to ancient Jewish belief, each person had his or her guardian angel, and a spirit could assume the aspect of some visible being:

“But she constantly affirmed that it was even so.
Then said they, ‘It is *his angel*.’”

Acts xii. 15.

“Brutus as you know was Cæsar’s *Angel*:
Judge, O ye God, how dearly Cæsar loved him.”

Shakespeare, Julius Cæsar, Act iii. sc. 2.

Spenser finely expresses the idea of the good and evil influences continually warring unseen about us, and his gratitude for the effective protection of the guardian spirits:

“How oft do they their silver bowers leave,
To come to succour us that succour want!
How oft do they with golden pinions cleave
The flitting skies, like flying pursuivant,
Against fowle fiends to ayde us militant!
They for us fight, they watch, and dewly ward,
And their bright squadrons round about us plant;
And all for love, and nothing for reward:
O why should heavenly God to men have such regard?”

Milton beautifully assumes the pure nature of saintly chastity attended by ministering spirits:

“A thousand liveried angels lackey her,
Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,
And in clear dream and solemn vision,
Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear;
Till oft converse with heavenly habitants
Begins to cast a beam on the outward shape.”

“Comus.”

And Scott, in figurative language, apostrophising woman in her higher and more spiritual sphere, says in “Marmion”:

“When pain and anguish wring the brow,
A ministering angel thou!”

Shakespeare expresses a prevailing idea that the pure in heart will become ministering angels in heaven; Laertes, at the grave of Ophelia, fiercely thunders forth:

“I tell thee, churlish priest,
A ministering angel shall my sister be
When thou liest howling.”

Mediaeval Art Treatment of Angels

According to ecclesiastical legend and tradition there are nine degrees of angelic beings. St. Dionysius relates that there are three hierarchies of angels and three orders in each; and by wise allegories each had his special mission, and they were each depicted with certain insignia by which they were recognised in art representations, which vary somewhat in examples of different periods.

The nine choirs of angels are classed as follow, with the name of the chief of each, according to ancient legend:

<i>Cherubim</i>	Jophiel
<i>Seraphim</i>	Uriel
<i>Thrones</i>	Zaphkiel
<i>Dominions</i>	Zadchiel
<i>Virtues</i>	Haniel
<i>Powers</i>	Raphael
<i>Principalities</i>	Camiel
<i>Archangels</i>	Michael
<i>Angels</i>	Gabriel

According to A. Welby Pugin's "Glossary of Architectural Ornament and Costume," and other authorities, we learn the mediaeval conception of these beings.

The following emblems are borne by angels: Flaming Swords, denoting "the wrath of God"; Trumpets, "the voice of God"; Sceptres, "the power of God"; Thuribles, or censers, the incense being the prayers of saints; Instruments of Music, to denote their felicity.

The Apparels, or borders of their robes, are jewelled with Sapphire for "celestial contemplation"; Ruby, "divine love"; Crystal, "purity"; Emerald, "unfading youth."

Archangels are the principal or chief angels, and are extraordinary ambassadors. Among these the name of Gabriel—the angel of the annunciation, the head of the entire celestial hierarchy—denotes "the power of God"; Michael, "who is like God"; Raphael, "the healing of God"; Uriel, "the fire of God."

Angel is the name, not of an order of beings, but of an office, and means messenger: wherefore angels are represented young to show their continued strength, and winged to show their unweariedness; without sandals, for they do not belong to the earth; and girt, to show their readiness to go forth and execute the will of God. Their garments are either white, to denote their purity, or golden, to show their sanctity and glory, or they are of any of the symbolical colours used in Christian Art.

A writer in the *Ecclesiastical Art Review*, May 1878, I. Lewis André, architect, says that "we seldom find angels clad in any other ecclesiastical vestments than the Alb (or tunic of various colours), and the amice. The Amice is sometimes like a mere loose collar; at other times it has richly embroidered Apparels (or borders), and is exactly like the priestly vestment as worn in the Middle Ages. Instead of the amice we sometimes find a scarf or cloth tied in a knot around the neck, the ends falling down in front.

"In Anne of Brittany's prayer-book is a beautiful figure of St. Michael. He has a rayed nimbus, a cross on a circlet round his head, a richly embroidered *dalmatic* (a long robe with sleeves partly open at the sides), and holds a sword in his left hand. The emblems of St. Michael are a crown, a sword, a shield charged with a cross of St. George, or a spear with the banner of the cross, or else with scales in his hand. Sometimes, as at South Leigh, Oxon., he is in complete armour.

"The archangels are often figured with a trumpet in the right hand, scarfs round neck and loins; six wings, sometimes four at the shoulders and two at the hips, the legs bare from the thighs. The four archangels are frequently represented in complete armour and with swords.

“The angels in the Benedictional of St. Ethelwold nearly resemble much later representations; they have wings and the nimbus or aureole, long hair and girded loins, whilst the feet are bare, as is generally the case at all periods of Gothic Art; but the characteristic drapery is loose and flowing as in the Saxon figures of saints; the wings are short and broad, the nimbus is generally rayed like the spokes of a wheel (a form seen in the work of Giotto, with whom it seems to have been a favourite). The alb or vesture has loose sleeves, and at times a mantle or cope envelops the figure; both sleeves and mantles have embroideries or apparels.”

“The modern taste,” says the same writer, “for giving angels pure white vesture does not appear to be derived from the Middle Ages, and certainly not from the best period when angels were clad in every brilliant colour, as a beautiful example at St. Michael’s, York, shows. Here an angel swinging a golden censer has a green tunic covered with a white cloak or mantle. The nimbus is bright blue, and the wings have the upper parts yellow, and are tipped with green. At Goodnestowe church, St. Michael has a deep crimson tunic, a white mantle edged with a rich gold border, green wings, and a light crimson nimbus,” and mention is here made of the white vesture of the angel at the Sepulchre, and that nowhere else does the Gospel mention any angel clad in white but in the narratives of Our Lord’s resurrection.



Angel with Cloud Symbol.

“Often the angels’ wings are feathered red and blue alternately, as on the pulpit at Cheddar, Somerset. Sometimes the wings have feathers like those of a peacock, on the Chapter House, Westminster; round the Wall Arcade, angels have their wings inscribed with a text on every feather. This corresponds with the French ‘hours’ of Anne of Brittany, where an angel (St. Gabriel) wears a mantle with a text running along the border.”

It was not uncommon to represent angels in carving and stained glass in the latter part of the fifteenth century as feathered all over like birds.

Cloud Symbol of the “Sky” or “Air.”—Artists of the Mediæval and Renaissance periods, following classical authority, employed the cloud symbol of the sky or air in their allegories and sacred pictures of divine persons, saints, and martyrs, to denote their divine or celestial condition, as distinguished from beings “of the earth—earthly.” The adoption of *the little cloud* underneath the feet, when the figure is not represented flying, naturally suggested itself as the most fitting emblem for a support, and avoided the apparent incongruity of beings in material human shape *standing* upon *nothing*. The suggestion of the aerial support here entirely obviates any thought of the outrage on the laws of gravity.

Another distinguishing attribute is the Nimbus—an emblem of divine power and glory—placed behind or over the head. The crown is an insignia of civil power borne by the laity; the nimbus is ecclesiastical and religious. The pagans were familiar with the use of the nimbus, which appears

upon the coins of some of the Roman Emperors. It was widely adopted by the Early Christian artists, and up till the fifteenth century was represented as a circular disc or plate behind the head, of gold or of various colours, and, according to the shape and ornamentation of the nimbus, the elevation or the divine degree of the person was denoted. It was displayed behind the heads of the Persons of the Trinity and of angels. It is also worn as a mark of honour and distinction by saints and martyrs. At a later period, when the traditions of early art were to some extent laid aside, *i.e.*, from the fifteenth century until towards the end of the seventeenth century, as M. Dideron informs us, a simple unadorned ring, termed a “circle of glory,” “takes the place of the nimbus and is represented as hovering over the head. It became thus idealised and transparent, showing an outer circle only; the field or disc is altogether omitted or suppressed, being drawn in perspective and formed by a simple thread of light as in the *Disputer* of Raphael. Sometimes it is only an uncertain wavering line resembling a circle of light. On the other hand, the circular line often disappears as if it were unworthy to enclose the divine light emanating from the head. It is a shadow of flame, circular in form but not permitting itself to be circumscribed.”



Angel Supporter.

Although the forms of angels are of such frequent occurrence in Mediæval Art they seem to abound more especially in the fifteenth century. Angels are seen in every possible combination, with ecclesiastical and domestic architecture, and form the subject of many allusions in heraldry. They are frequently used as supporters.

Charles Boutell, M.A., “English Heraldry,” p. 247, says, regarding angels used as supporters to the armorial shield: “The introduction of angelic figures which might have the appearance of acting as ‘guardian angels’ in their care of shields of arms, was in accordance with the feelings of the early days of English heraldry; and, while it took a part in leading the way to the systematic use of regular supporters, it served to show the high esteem and honour in which armorial insignia were held by our ancestors in those ages.” And reference is made to examples sculptured in the noble timber roof of Westminster Hall and elsewhere. As an example we give the shield of arms of the Abbey of St. Albans.



Kneeling Angel Supporter.

Figures of angels holding shields of arms, each figure having a shield in front of its breast, are frequently sculptured in Gothic churches. They appear on seals, as on that of Henry of Lancaster about 1350, which has the figure of an angel on each side of it. The shield of Richard II. at Westminster Hall, bearing the arms of France ancient and England quarterly, is supported by angels, which, if not rather ornamental than heraldic, were possibly intended to denote his claim to the crown of France, being the supporters of the Royal arms of that kingdom. Upon his Great Seal other supporters are used. There are also instances of the shield of Henry VI. being supported by angels, but they are by some authorities considered as purely religious symbols rather than heraldic.



Arms of the Abbey of St. Albans.

The supporters of the King of France were two angels standing on clouds, all proper, vested with taberts of the arms, the dexter *France*, the sinister *Navarre*, each holding a banner of the same arms affixed to a tilting-spear, and the *cri de guerre* or motto, “Mont-joye et St. Denis.” The shield bears the impaled arms of France and Navarre with several orders of knighthood, helmet, mantling and other accessories, all with a pavilion mantle.

Although Francis II., Charles IX., Henry III. and IV. and Louis XIII. had special supporters of their arms, yet they did not exclude the two angels of Charles VI., which were considered as the ordinary supporters of the kingdom of France. Louis XIV., Louis XV. and Louis XVI. never used any others.

Verstegan quaintly says that Egbert was “chiefly moved” to call his kingdom England “in respect of Pope Gregory changing the name of Engelisce into Angellyke,” and this “may have moved our kings upon their best gold coins to set the image of an angel.”⁴

“... Shake the bags
Of hoarding abbots; their imprisoned *angels*
Set them at liberty.”

Shakespeare, King John, iii. 3.

The gold coin was named from the fact that on one side of it was a representation of the archangel in conflict with the dragon (Rev. xii. 7). The reverse had a ship. It was introduced into England by Edward IV. in 1456. Between his reign and that of Charles I. it varied in value from 6s. 8d. to 10s.



⁴ “Restit. of Decayed Intell. in Antiq.” p. 147.

Cherubim and Seraphim in Heraldry

*“On cherubim and seraphim
Full royally he rode.”*

Steenhold.

*“What, always dreaming over heavenly things,
Like angel heads in stone wish pigeon wings.”*

Cowper, “Conversation.”



Cherubs' Heads.

In heraldry A Cherub (plural Cherubim) is always represented as the head of an infant between a pair of wings, usually termed a “cherub's head.”



A Seraph's Head.

A Seraph (plural Seraphim), in like manner, is always depicted as the head of a child, but with three pairs of wings; the two uppermost and the two lowermost are contrarily crossed, or in saltire; the two middlemost are displayed.

Clavering, of Callaby Castle, Northumberland, bears for crest a cherub's head with wings erect. Motto: *cœlos volens*.

On funereal achievements, setting forth the rank and circumstance of the deceased, it is usual to place over the lozenge-shaped shield containing arms of a woman, whether spinster, wife, or widow, a cherub's head, and knots or bows of ribbon in place of crests, helmets, or its mantlings, which, according to heraldic law, cannot be borne by any woman, sovereign princesses only excepted.



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

In representing the cherubim by infants' winged heads, the early painters meant them to be emblematic of a pure spirit glowing with love and intelligence, the head the seat of the soul, and the wings attribute of swiftness and spirit alone retained.

The body or limbs of the cherub and seraph are never shown in heraldry, for what reason it is difficult to say, unless it be from the ambiguity of the descriptions in the sacred writings and consequent difficulty of representing them. The heralds adopted the figure of speech termed synecdoche, which adopts a part to represent the whole.

Sir Joshua Reynolds has embodied the modern conception in his exquisite painting of cherubs' heads, *Portrait Studies of Frances Isabella Ker, daughter of Lord William Gordon*, now in the National Collection. It represents five infants' heads with wings, in different positions, floating among clouds. This idea of the cherub seems to have found ready acceptance with poets and painters. Shakespeare sings:

“Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubim—
Such harmony is in immortal souls:
But while this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.”

Many of the painters of the period of the Renaissance represented the cherub similarly to those in Reynolds' picture. They were also in the habit of introducing into their pictures of sacred subjects nude youthful winged figures, “celestial loves,” sporting in clouds around the principal figure or figures, or assisting in some act that is being done. Thus Spenser invests “The Queen of Beauty and of Love the Mother” with a troop of these little loves, “Cupid, their elder brother.”

“And all about her neck and shoulders flew
A flock of little loves, and sports and joys
With nimble wings of gold and purple hue;
Whose shapes seemed not like to terrestrial boys,
But like to angels playing heavenly toys.”

Faerie Queen, Book x. cant. x. p. 153.

These must not, however, be confounded with the cherub and seraph of Scripture. It was a thoroughly pagan idea, borrowed from classic mythology, and unworthy of Christian Art. It soon

degenerated into “earthly loves” and “cupids,” or amorini as they were termed and as we now understand them.



Cherubim and Seraphim of Scripture

In Ecclesiastical Art literal renderings of the descriptions contained in the Old Testament and the Apocalypse are not of unfrequent use. A more lengthened reference to these great Hebrew symbolic beings will not be considered out of place, as there is great doubt and uncertainty as to their forms.

These mystic symbolic beings were familiar to all the patriarchs—from Adam, who gazed upon them in Paradise, and against whom on his expulsion they stood with flaming sword, turning every way to bar his return—to Moses, who trembled before it on Mount Sinai; while to the Priests and Levites, the custodians of the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle, the cherubim remained the sacred guardians in the Holy of Holies of the palladium of the national faith and liberties during the brightest and, as it has been termed, the most heroic period of Jewish history.



Angel crest of Tuite, Bart. co. Tip.

Josephus, the more effectually to excite respect for the great Hebrew symbol in the minds of his readers, purposely throws over it the veil of obscurity. He says: “The cherubim are winged creatures, but the form of them does not resemble that of any living creature seen by man.” In the works of Philo Judæus there is an express dissertation upon the cherubim. The learned Brochart and many others have attempted to elucidate the subject to little purpose. The ambiguity which always accompanies a written description of objects with which we are imperfectly acquainted applies with greater force to this mysterious being combining so many apparently conflicting attributes.

To the prophetic vision of Ezekiel, the description of which, in the opinion of competent critics, excels in grandeur of idea and energy of expression the most celebrated writers of ancient and modern times, the reader is referred, as it supplies at first hand almost all that can be known concerning the fearful form of the cherubim.

The four living creatures that support the throne of God exhibited to Ezekiel a fourfold aspect; they had each the face of *a man*, the face of *a lion*, and the face of *an ox*; they also had the face of *an eagle*. They had each four wings; they had the hands of a man under their wings. “Two wings of every one were joined one to the other, and two covered their bodies.” They were accompanied by wheels which “went upon their four sides, and they turned not when they went”; “and their whole body, and their backs, and their hands, and their wings, and their wheels were full of eyes”; “and the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.” Such is a concise description of their appearance as set forth in Ezekiel (chap. i.).

“This wonderful and mysterious hieroglyph must be considered as a striking and expressive emblem of the guardian vigilance of providence, all-seeing and omniscient; while the number of

wings exhibit to us direct symbols of that powerful, that all-pervading spirit which, while it darts through nature at a glance, is everywhere present to protect and defend us” (Dideron).

So attached were the Jews to this celestial symbol that when Solomon erected that stupendous temple which continued the glory and boast of the Hebrew nation for so many ages, we are told (1 Kings, vi. 29, viii. 6, 7), he carved all the walls of the house round about with the sculptured figures of the cherubim, and on each side of the ark was a cherub of gold plated upon olive wood fifteen feet high, with their faces to the light, their expanded wings embracing the whole space of the sacred enclosure, serving as a visible sign or symbol of God’s immediate presence, whence the saying of David, “God sitteth between the cherubim” (Ps. xcix. 1). In this place God perpetually resided in the form of a bright cloud or shining luminous body, termed “shechinah,” whence the divine oracles were audibly delivered.

Milton gives the following description of the Seraph Raphael:

“At once on the eastern cliff of Paradise
He lights, and to his proper shape returns
A seraph wing’d; six wings he wore to shade
His lineaments divine; the pair that clad
Each shoulder broad came mantling o’er his breast
With regal ornament: the middle pair
Girt like a starry zone his waist, and round
Skirted his loins and thighs with downy gold
And colours dipped in heaven; the third, his feet
Shadows from either heel with feather’d mail
Sky tintured grain. Like Maia’s son he stood
And shook his plumes, that heavenly fragrance fill’d
The circuit wide.”

Paradise Lost, Book v.

The *cherub* is traditionally regarded as a celestial spirit which in the hierarchy is placed next in order to the seraphim. All the several descriptions which the Scripture gives us of cherubim differ from one another, as they are described in the shapes of men, eagles, oxen, lions, and in a composition of all these figures put together. The hieroglyphical representations in the embroidery upon the curtains of the tabernacle were called by Moses (Ex. xxvi. 1) “cherubim of cunning work” (Calmet).

The *seraphim* are regarded as an order of angels distinguished for fervent zeal and religious ardour. The word means “burning,” *i.e.*, with Divine Love.

The seraphim are described by Isaiah (vi. 1-3): “I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried to another and said, Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.” And in Revelation (iv. 6): “Round about the throne were four beasts full of eyes before and behind, and the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him, and they were full of eyes within.” It will be noticed that these descriptions differ from that of Ezekiel, not only in the number of wings, but also in the individuality of each beast being separate and independent, not compounded of the four.



Tetramorph.

Several forms of these mystical creatures, says Audsley, have been devised by the early mediæval artists; those which display the entire forms of *the man, the lion, the ox, and the eagle*, all winged and invested with the nimbus, appear to have been most frequently made use of. They are to be met with formed of the *heads of the mystical creatures* on bodies or half-bodies of *winged human figures*; at other times we find them comprised in the heads and wings only of the four symbolic creatures. Sometimes they are found united and forming one mysterious being called the *Tetramorph* with four heads and numerous wings covered with eyes, the feet resting on wheels, which are also winged. The example is taken from a Byzantine mosaic in the convent of Vatopedi, on Mount Athos.

Pugin's "Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament and Costume" says the cherubim are frequently represented of a bright red colour to set forth the intensity of divine love, and usually standing upon wheels, in reference to the vision of the prophet Ezekiel.

Cherubim and seraphim seem always vested in the alb or tunic, and a scarf tied in a knot round the neck.

Emblems of the Four Evangelists

The winged living figures, symbols of the evangelists, which are most frequently met with, and which have ever been most in favour with Early Christian artists, appear to have been used at a very early date. They are taken from the vision of Ezekiel and the Revelation of St. John. “The writings of St. Jerome,” says Audsley, “in the beginning of the fifth century gave to artists authority for the appropriation of the four creatures to the evangelists,” and for reasons which are there given at length.

St. Matthew: *Winged Man*, Incarnation.—To St. Matthew was given the creature in human likeness, because he commences his gospel with the human generation of Christ, and because in his writings the human nature of Our Lord is more dwelt upon than the divine.

St. Mark: *Winged Lion*, The Resurrection.—*The Lion* was the symbol of St. Mark, who opens his gospel with the mission of John the Baptist, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” He also sets forth the royal dignity of Christ and dwells upon His power manifested in the resurrection from the dead. The lion was accepted in early times as a symbol of the resurrection because the young lion was believed always to be born dead, but was awakened to vitality by the breath, the tongue, and roaring of its sire.



St. Luke: *Winged Ox*, Passion.—The form of the ox, the beast of sacrifice, fitly sets forth the sacred office, and also the atonement for sin by blood, on which, in his gospel, he particularly dwells.

St. John: *The Eagle*, Ascension.—The eagle was allotted to St. John because, as the eagle soars towards heaven, he soared in spirit upwards to the heaven of heavens to bring back to earth revelation of sublime and awful mysteries.

Independently of their reference to the four evangelists these figures sometimes refer to *the Incarnation, the Passion, the Resurrection, and the Ascension*.

Sedulius, a priest and poet of the fifth century, says much the same in the following verse:

Hoc Matthæus agens, Hominem generaliter implet:
Marcus ut alta fremit vox per deserta Leonis:
Jura sacerdotis Lucas tenet ore Juvenci:
More volens Aquilæ verbo petit astra Johannes.

The Lion of St. Mark.—In the ninth century the rapidly rising State of Venice was dignified by the reception of the relics of St. Mark, transported thither from Alexandria. “Few patron saints,” says Theodore A. Buckley, “enjoy a greater popularity, whether socially or locally exemplified. His lion was emblazoned on the standard of the Republic, and stamped on the current coins, while his name was identified with the pride, the power, and glory of all Venice.”⁵

Emblems of the evangelists do not often appear in heraldry.

Walter Reynolds, Archbishop of Canterbury, according to a manuscript at Lambeth (executed for Archbishop Laud), bore *azure on a cross or, between the symbols of the evangelists of the last, four lions rampant gules*.

The Freemasons appear to use a similar coat of arms upon their seal, viz., *a cross between the emblems of the four evangelists, and for supporters two cherubims, all proper*.



The Lion of St. Mark, Venice.

⁵ “Great Cities of the Middle Ages.”

Chimerical Creatures of the Dragon and Serpent kind



The Dragon

*"The scaly monster of a dragon, coiled
Full in the central field—unspeakable,
With eyes oblique retorted, that askant
Shot gleaming fire."*

Hesiod.—"The Shield of Hercules."

The dragon is the most interesting and most frequently seen of all chimerical figures, and it is a remarkable fact that such a creature appears at an early period of the world's history to have been known in the East and in countries widely separated. Long anterior to the dawn of civilisation in the West of Europe, even in far-off China and Japan in the extreme East of Asia we find the dragon delineated in very much the same form in which it appears in our national heraldry.

The ancients conceived it as the embodiment of malignant and destructive power, and with attributes of the most terrible kind. Classic story makes us acquainted with many dreadful monsters of the dragon kind, to which reference will afterwards be more particularly made.

It is often argued that the monsters of tradition are but the personification of solar influences, storms, the desert wind, the great deeps, rivers inundating their banks, or other violent phenomena of nature, and so, no doubt, they are, and have been; but the strange fact remains that the same draconic form with slight modifications constantly appears as the type of the thing most dreaded, and instead of melting into an abstraction and dying out of view, it has remained from age to age, in form, distinctly a ferocious flying reptile, until in the opinion of many the tradition has been justified by prosaic science. It is surprising to find that the popular conception of the dragon—founded on tradition, passed on through hundreds of generations—not only retains its identity, but bears a startling resemblance to the original antediluvian saurians, whose fossil remains now come to light through geological research, almost proving the marvellous power of tradition and the veracity of those who passed it on.

Mr. Moncure Conway ("Demonology, or Devil Lore") says: "The opinion has steadily gained that the conventional dragon is the traditional form of some huge saurian. It has been suggested that some of those extinct saurians may have been contemporaneous with the earliest men, and that traditions of conflicts with them, transmitted orally and pictorially, have resulted in preserving their forms in fable proximately."

"Among the geological specimens in the British Museum," says Hugh Miller, "the visitor sees shapes that more than rival in strangeness the great dragons and griffins of mediæval legends; enormous jaws, bristling with pointed teeth, gape horrid, in stone, under staring eye-sockets a foot in diameter; and necks that half equal in length the entire body of a boa-constrictor. And here we see a winged dragon that, armed with sharp teeth and strong claws, has careered through the air on leathern wings like those of a bat." We are also told in the sacred Scriptures by Moses of "fiery serpents," and by Isaiah of "a fiery flying serpent." Other monsters—dragons, cockatrices, and some of whose form we have no conception—are also mentioned. Euripides describes a dragon or snake breathing forth fire and slaughter, and rowing its way with its wings. It is evident that such a creature may at one time have existed. Looking at the widespread belief in dragons, there seems little doubt that the semi-myth of to-day is the traditional successor of a really once-existent animal, whose huge size, snake-like appearance, and possibly dangerous powers of offence made him so terrible that the earlier races of mankind adopted him unanimously as the most fearful embodiment of animal ferocity to be found.

One of the latest acquisitions in the Natural History Museum, South Kensington, is the skeleton of that enormous creature the long-limbed dinosaur (*Diplodocus Carnegii*), recently discovered in America, eighty-nine feet in length from the head to the tip of the tail, the huge bulky framework of

the monster measuring eleven feet in height at the shoulder. The enormous length of its neck and tail, with relatively small head, would indicate it to be an amphibious inhabitant of the waters, feeding on the vegetation growing in its depths.

Mr. Moncure Conway, in his remarkable work, "Demonology, or Devil Lore," describes all intermediate stages between demon and devil under the head of dragon. This he believes to be the only fabulous form which accurately describes all the transitions. Throughout all the representations of the dragon one feature is common, and that is the idealised serpent. The dragon possesses all the properties of the demon along with that of harmfulness, but differs from the devil in not having the desire of doing evil. The dragon in mythology is the combination of every bad feature in nature, all of which is combined into one horrible whole. "The modern conventional dragon," says Mr. Conway, "is a terrible monster. His body is partially green, with memories of the sea and of slime, and partly brown or dark, with lingering shadows of storm-clouds. The lightning flames still in his red eyes, and flashes from his fire-breathing mouth. The thunderbolt of Jove, the spear of Woden, are in the barbed point of his tail. His huge wings—bat-like and spiked—sum up all the mysteries of extinct harpies and vampires. Spine of crocodile is on his neck, tail of the serpent and all the jagged ridges of rocks and sharp thorns of jungles bristle round him, while the ice of glaciers and brassy glitter of sunstrokes are in his scales. He is ideal of all that is hard, destructive, perilous, loathsome, horrible in nature; every detail of him has been seen through and vanquished by man, here or there; but in selection and combination they rise again as principles, and conspire to form one great generalisation of the forms of pain, the sum of every creature's worst."

"The external forms of Dragons are greatly dependent on the nature of the country in which they originate. In the far north, where exist the legends of the swan and pigeon, maidens and vampires, exists the swan-shaped dragon. As demons of excessive heat principally existed in the south, so in the north the great enemy of man was excessive cold. In the northern countries is found also the serpent element, but as serpents are there frequently harmless, this feature does not enter much into their composition. The Cuttlefish is supposed to have helped in the formation of the Hydra, which in its turn assisted in forming the dragon of the Apocalypse. Assyrian ideas also seem to have assisted in the pictorial impersonations of the hydra. This many-headed monster is a representation of a torrent, which being cut off in one direction breaks out in another. The conflicts of Hercules with the hydra are repeated in those of the Assyrian Bel with Trinant (the deep), and also in the contentions of St. Michael with the dragon. The old dragon myths left in Europe were frequently utilised by the Christians. Other saints besides St. Michael were invested with the feats of Hercules; St. Margaret, St. Andrew, and many others are pictured as trampling dragons under their feet. The Egyptian dragon is based on the crocodile, and this form being received into Christian symbolism did greatly away with other pagan monsters. The hideousness of the crocodile and the alligator could easily be exaggerated so as to suit the most horrible contortions of the human imagination. Amongst the most terrible dragons is Typhon, the impersonation of all the terrors of nature. Son of Tartarus, father of the harpies and of the winds, he lives in the African deserts; from thence fled in fear, to escape his terrible breath, all the gods and goddesses. He is coiled in the whirlwind, and his many heads are symbolical of the tempest, the scive, the hurricane, and the tornado."

Under the head of The Colonial Dragon Mr. Conway has embodied all the horrors and difficulties with which the early colonists would be beset. Amongst these he places the Gorgon and the Chimera. The most widely spread of all is the last named, and from it is supposed that all Christian and British dragons are descended. The Christian myth of St. George and the Dragon is but a variation of Bellerophon and the Chimera, in which the last has given place to the dragon and the pagan hero to St. George.



Japanese Dragon.

“In ancient families there are usually traditions of some far-distant ancestor having slain a desperate monster. It is always the colonial dragon that has been borrowed by poets and romancers. The Dragon killed by Guy of Warwick is but another variation of the chimera. There is again the Sockburn Worm, slain by Sir John Conyers for the devouring of the people of the neighbourhood; the well-known tradition of the Lambton Worm is in reality a modification of the Aryan Dragon of the Stormcloud; smaller than a man’s hand he swells out to prodigious dimensions.”

A favourite subject for Chinese and Japanese painting and sculpture is a dragon very much of the same type, and a monstrous representation of a dragon in the form of a huge Saurian still forms the central object at Japanese festivals.

Among the Chinese the dragon is the representation of sovereignty, and is the imperial emblem borne upon banners, and otherwise displayed as the national ensign. To the people of that vast country it represents everything powerful and imposing; and it plays an important part in many religious ceremonies and observances. Dr. S. Wells Williams, the eminent sinologue, describes the fabulous monster of Chinese imagination in the following passage: “There are three dragons—the *lung*

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