

# ABEGG-STIFTUNG

Media Release, April 2016



## SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2016

### FRIEND AND FOE ANIMALS IN MEDIEVAL TEXTILE ART

**24 APRIL – 13 NOVEMBER 2016**  
**OPEN DAILY FROM 2 P.M. TO 5.30 P.M.**

*Fabrics with animal motifs were fashionable in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Society's elites clad themselves in silks patterned with eagles, gazelles, lions, hounds or pelicans – often several of them combined and worked into lively and imaginative little scenes. The new exhibition at the Abegg-Stiftung features a selection of these exquisite silks and investigates the meaning of the fauna adorning them.*

We all know what a crocodile or a puma on a T-shirt means today. But what were birds or panthers on medieval clothing supposed to signify? Clearly they were not logos or labels. The silk itself was valuable and the complexity of the process by which figurative patterns were woven made it an even more coveted luxury. But were animal motifs valued solely on grounds of their aesthetic appeal and because weaving them was so difficult? Were they not intended to have a much more specific message? Did the animals perhaps embody a well-known symbolism or were they a play on certain values, attitudes or privileges? The Abegg-Stiftung's special exhibition 2016 sets out to investigate these questions. One line of inquiry is that provided by medieval literature, in which sumptuous textiles are described in detail and whose most famous works, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to the great romances and *Minnesang* love poetry, were as well known then as, say, Grimms' Fairy Tales are today.

#### PELICANS AND PANTHERS AS CHRISTIAN SYMBOLS

One of the most interesting exhibits is a liturgical vestment. It was made in the second half of the fourteenth century using three different fabrics, at least one of which is older than the vestment itself. The main material is patterned with rows of panthers and pelicans facing each other in pairs on a blue-grey ground. The birds are pricking themselves in the breast. At their feet are their hungry chicks, greedily craning their necks with their beaks wide open ready to drink their parent's blood. This strange motif can be traced back to the *Physiologus*, an allegorical interpretation of the natural world dating from the second century that was widely circulated right up to the Late Middle Ages. It describes, among other things, how the pelican sacrifices itself for its young. In Christian iconography, therefore, the pelican stands for selfless love and devotion, making it a

symbol of Christ. The panther that features on the same cloth was also read as a symbol of Christ, since according to the *Physiologus* it is a gentle, peaceable beast with brightly coloured fur and such sweet-smelling breath that all other animals follow it. Such explicitly Christian fabrics nevertheless seem to have been a rarity even then.

#### **HERALDIC BEASTS**

Animals are a frequent feature of heraldic devices. The character traits attributed to eagles, lions or cranes made them a popular choice among ruling dynasties, noble families and regions desirous of projecting a certain self-image. At medieval tournaments especially, when jousting in full armour was almost impossible to tell apart, the heraldic beasts blazoned on their breastplates and caparisons became symbolic proxies for the real person. Wolfram von Eschenbach's heroic epic *Parzival* contains a vivid description of such a contest in which it is not the knights but rather the heraldic beasts that seem to be engaged in combat. These days we tend to imagine a coat of arms as a single, painted- or sewn-on badge. That some medieval textiles featured a repeating pattern of crests, banderoles and heraldic beasts is rather less well known. Several examples of textiles patterned in this way can be admired here in the exhibition. Their purpose as public displays of ostentation was comparable to the logos of today's luxury labels. Then, as now, those who could afford such textiles saw their social status confirmed.

#### **HUNTING AND COURTLY LOVE**

Fabrics with hunting motifs were especially popular. They reflected the privileges of class, the hunting of big game – meaning stags, wild boar, bears, lynx, eagles, cranes or pheasants – being a prerogative of the feudal lord in the Middle Ages. The object of the exercise was not to put food on the table, but rather to have an exciting pastime to engage in. As can be seen here in the exhibition, depictions of animals chasing each other or being slain by a hunter are often joined up to form little narratives. Textiles patterned with leaping hounds and hunting horns dangling from trees are another reminder of the pleasures of the chase. Another key theme of the age is that of the *Minne*, the beloved on whom all the love poetry of the age turned. Courtly love poetry supplied a kind of template for the ideal marriage of lord and lady. These written sources likewise found their way into fabric design. One especially popular motif is the castle surrounded by yapping dogs symbolizing the heavily guarded *Minne*.

#### **FROM ANIMALS TO CLIMBING VINES**

The exhibition ends with a tapestry dating from the late fifteenth century showing a pair of nobles playing chess. Their robes are made of fabrics that are highly ornate but do not feature any animals. The chivalric code was for a long time defined by the epic romance centred on hunting and courtly love. In the Late Middle Ages, however, it was superseded by the allegory of the game of chess, whose figures can move only according to the clear-cut rules governing all interaction between the sexes and classes. In the course of this development, fauna gave way to flora as animal motifs on fabrics were replaced by ornamental vines. This tapestry thus illustrates not only how the aristocratic ideal of society was changing, but also how textile patterns were changing with it.

Those wishing to learn more about the literary sources for animal imagery on textiles and to hear what Middle High German and Old French sounded like are invited to borrow the audio equipment prepared specially for the Abegg-Stiftung's exhibition. The recording of excerpts from original works along with commented translations enables visitors to immerse themselves in the conceptual world of the Middle Ages by listening to the bestsellers of the age while admiring the magnificent silks that it bequeathed us.

This media release is also available as an e-mail attachment.