

# A BESTIARY IN MASKS



AND OTHER STORIES...

*Studies in Ceramics—Northern and Central Italy*  
*Franklin University Academic Travel Fall 2015*  
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FRANKLIN UNIVERSITY  
SWITZERLAND  
ACADEMIC TRAVEL  
STUDIES IN CERAMICS:  
NORTHERN AND CENTRAL  
ITALY  
FALL 2015

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## **A BESTIARY IN MASKS AND OTHER STORIES...**

*Clarice Zdanski*

Franklin University Switzerland's Academic Travel™ course *Studies in Ceramics: Northern and Central Italy* is an itinerant studio art course designed to give students a rare opportunity to survey the world of ceramics by working in the Franklin campus studio, and visiting and doing workshops in museums and individual artists' ateliers. A unique mix of seminars and hands-on experience in institutions and in the studio, it focuses on art as a cognitive activity, and sees the art studio, museum and scholarly institution as places for learning and exchange in the twenty-first century.

Within the course, the main research project, *A Bestiary in Masks*, has involved collaboration between our class (Franklin students and myself), sculptor-ceramicist Luca Leandri, and the University of Perugia's Galleria di Storia Naturale in Casalina, directed by Cristina Galassi, with Sergio Gentili and Angelo Barili among its curatorial staff. In a truly transhistorical framework, our project revisited a tradition that reaches all the way back to classical antiquity: the study of nature, from the bestiary to the scientific classification of animals and the development of zoology, to the age of natural historian-explorers like Charles Darwin and his Italian 'twin' Orazio Antinori.

The project began with Luca Leandri's discovery of and enthusiasm about working with the Galleria di Storia Naturale in Casalina (PG) near the art center and bed-and-breakfast, La Fratta Art House, that he and his wife Elisabetta Corrao operate. The museum is strongly committed

to encouraging the public to engage with its collections, and the intimate, personal way in which the visits are conducted allows the visitor not only to get to know the personalities who contributed to the museum's history, in particular Orazio Antinori, but also to understand how the discipline of natural history has been shaped through the ages.

*A Bestiary in Masks* draws inspiration from the medieval genre of the bestiary, an artistic/literary form and ancient 'scientific' compendium of knowledge about animals and other aspects of nature. Instead of a book, however, our bestiary takes the form of masks in glazed terracotta, each of a different animal. Various phases of interdisciplinary research were undertaken before constructing the masks. The first two were carried out on campus, and the final one at the La Fratta Art House and at the natural history museum in Casalina.

The first phase, a group project, resulted in the creation of an online glossary with terminology and categories. Various readings or links to readings provided guidelines for research:

- The bestiary: definition and description
- Content of the bestiary
- Early bestiaries – major authors
- Manuscripts and the iconographical tradition
- Modern scientific approaches to studying animals: explorers and naturalists
- Bestiaries revisited in modern times: modern artists who revived the art form





The second phase entailed individual research on the use of masks throughout history, with each student concentrating on a preferred aspect of the mask, for example, an artist, a specific use of the mask or a specific civilization, culture, or ethnic group.

In the third phase, each student began to do sketches of animals of their choice before leaving on the travel part of the course, and continued until actually beginning on the masks. This phase overlapped with the visit to the museum and work in Leandri's studio. Selected readings on the symbolism of animals and on the expression of emotions in animals and humans were also made available on the course website.

The stay at La Fratta Art House and the visit to the museum were the high points of the project, and highlight the transhistorical, cross-disciplinary nature of the course. Students not only had the opportunity to understand how modern zoology developed through personalities like Antinori. At the same time, they were able to use those collections as a source of inspiration for their art works, and their attempts to give life to their animal masks echoed Antinori's concern with portraying animals in as lifelike a manner as possible through the art of taxidermy (which he often did himself) and Darwin's pioneering work, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*.

The collections are more a gallery than a museum, as the name *Galleria di storia naturale* suggests. Small and intimate, it is comprised of two different Perugian 'collectors' of animal specimens, the more important of whom was Orazio Antinori (almost exactly Darwin's contemporary,

hence his Perugian ‘twin’). The exhibits begin with a display that presents the animal kingdom in all its variety, and so a plea to protect biodiversity is clear from the outset. A corridor moves around a central core, with the collections displayed according to their geographical regions. The ‘gallery’ aspect of many of the displays recalls another era in the history of science, the Renaissance *Wunderkammer*. It is impossible not to let oneself be taken in by the beauty and expressiveness of the animals. The climax of the tour is the second part, when the museum staff opens up its inner core, the *sanctum sanctorum*, or dark, refrigerated cell where myriad specimens are kept in cases and drawers. Mystifying, yet entirely accessible – visitors are encouraged to open the drawers and cases, and learn more about the specimens they contain. While we were there, temporary exhibition of African Tingatinga painting was also on display, which gave us another opportunity to compare our works to other artists concerned with representing nature.

Our travels ended in Milan, with a visit to the Zero Pavilion at EXPO 2015 and its exhibit on the conservation of food through the ages, a visit to the exhibit ‘Myth and Nature’, a group project for a ceramics mural of the marine world at Spazio Nibe, and the *gran finale* at Milan’s Natural History Museum, where the complex diorama exhibits organized around the theme ‘Collecting Time’ further corroborated the transhistorical nature of the course. We ended up in the dinosaur room, amidst extinct species, to wind up the travel part of the course and move on to the next phase when back in Lugano: a small sculpture, the fruit of each student’s reflections on the pursuit of knowledge in this our digitized world of the Anthropocene Age.

Before moving on to the masks, some thanks are in order. First of all, to Franklin University Switzerland for making it possible to study ceramics in this fabulous way. Then, to Elisabetta and Luca for their exquisite hospitality, infinite patience and for creating La Fratta Art House, a place where creativity can be fostered. My gratitude to Cristina Galassi, director of the Galleria di storia naturale in Casalina, without whose collaboration we could never have achieved such results—so an enormous thank you, also in the hopes of being able to present the bestiary to the public as an exhibit in 2016. More thanks to the institutions: the Museo Internazionale della Ceramica in Faenza, its director Claudia Casali and our guide Dario Valle, who enabled us to learn through interaction with the greatest collection of ceramics in the world. Last but by no means least, I thank the artists we met, for opening up their worlds to us: the Fablab at the Museo Zauli and Luciano Sangiorgi in Faenza, Gabriella Sacchi in Milan, Fanette Cardinali in La Verna, Florine Offergelt from Novara. And finally, of course, to the students, authors of this bestiary of masks.



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# **A BESTIARY IN MASKS**

# THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

## THE ROE DEER (*Capreolus capreolus*)

Na Hyun Kim

A small, reddish to grey-brown Eurasian species of deer widespread in Europe, from the Mediterranean to Scandinavia and from Great Britain to the Caucasus. When alarmed, the roe deer barks like a dog and flashes its white rump patch. World famous Bambi was originally a roe deer, but was changed to a white-tailed deer in Walt Disney's film.





Partially inspired by the Forest Spirit in Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke*, I chose to create a mystical deer or spirit. The symbols on the mask come from the deer's natural environment. The united image of the sun and crescent moon on the forehead symbolize the balance of the day and night. The mountains on the ears represent the earth and the forest, the natural home of the deer. The raindrops of pearl-like hues at the corners of the eyes symbolize the element of water, the basis of life. The turquoise leaves on the cheeks symbolize vegetation, the deer's main food source. I placed the leaves under the eyes to resemble teardrops, in order to convey a sense of sadness as reckless human development continues to damage the delicate eco-system of the deer and numerous other species.

## THE ELEPHANT

*Mamie Murry*



In many cultures, elephants are revered creatures. They can also represent strength and intelligence. My elephant mask is stylized, but also has realistic elements.



THE OX  
*Kyle Hamilton*



Perhaps there is no great ethereal significance behind the use of the Ox as a figure head, other than the meditative process through which it was birthed , a representation of the inner strength one needs to push on through darkness, or an internal drive to keep moving through thick and thin. Forever carrying on, but not without scars. Passing through that dark, heavy fog of suffering leaves us as if painted black. With the weight of the world on our shoulders, we can't help but crack. The use of raku encompassed this feeling, with its random, natural and expressive nature. Everything from the cracks to the black, soot-like exterior follows this theme.

## ANTELOPE SKULL

*Nick Nelson*



The antelope skull represents the impact of man on nature over the past 100 years and the impact it will continue to have in the years to come. This antelope was agile, but died despite its speed. The cracks on the skull create realism while also symbolizing nature's cracking under the weight of mankind's endeavors, with the risk of shattering it altogether. A chunk has been taken out of one eye, pointing to the irreversible impact of some of man's actions. The exclamation point on the forehead represents our urgent need to restore balance and a symbiotic existence with nature.



THE LION  
*Claire Wetzel*



Lions represent courage and strength in overcoming difficulties. When a lion is your spirit animal, you obtain the ability to lead others and overcome challenges. Since lions are nocturnal, they are lunar animals, and could be seen as a symbol of authority over subconscious thoughts. The lion is the King of Beasts, dominating all other animals in nature. His message is to remain focused on self-control and mastering emotions, teaching us to rise above temptation and control urges towards impatience. The silver and gold of the luster glazes symbolize the lion's majesty.

## THE TIGER

*Kate Harris*



The tiger symbolizes willpower, personal strength and courage as well as unpredictability in life. It is also said that a tiger can stir up your power to overcome obstacles—which I found to be true when dealing with the frustration I was facing when trying to get the right form and shape in my mask. The raku glaze I used was very also unpredictable, so it reflects the attributes and symbolism of the tiger, too.

## THE WHITE COUGAR

*Elly French*



The White Cougar does not exist in the real world, but is a creation meant to tell a spiritual story. It roams through the snowy mountains in many parts of the world, hiding from both humans and other animals. Its purpose is to bring wholeness to the environment and protect living beings from danger.

White stands for purity, innocence, wholeness, completion, brilliance, protection and perfection.

The Cougar is a spiritual warrior that is always aware, senses danger, sees threats, and finds resources.



## THE MONKEY

*Kyle White*



This mask is based on an image of a monkey with a hauntingly human expression. Glazes are kept to a minimum to highlight the key features, while the unglazed clay surface allows the raku firing to darken the rest. I wanted it to have the look of an uncovered relic and demonstrate the beautiful coloring that happens when fired clay meets sawdust. Its stony gaze may not be easily likened to a human's, but its bold color and the contrast in the eyes are its most powerful aspects.

## THE SABRE-TOOTHED TIGER

*Ranjeev Biswas*



The saber-toothed tiger was a majestic animal, portraying the inner strength that lies within us, especially in dark times when we need to push forward against all odds. Glazing is kept to a minimum, to make the mask seem rustic, like the way Native Americans made masks. White teeth and a red outline on the lips and face make it seem as though the animal has feasted on one final kill before being killed in turn. The saber-toothed tiger was hunted to extinction by early man. Its fate underlines how unnecessary hunting and the extermination of species continues to this very day.

# MARINE LIFE

## THE SEA DRAGON

*Ryan Hailey*



How little we know about the depths of the ocean! We have explored less than half of the ocean floor but still understand little about the species that live there. I wanted a scary, dangerous-looking mask, so first considered the piranha. But after I saw this beast that I call the sea dragon, it was closer to the effect I wanted: to portray the unknown elements of the ocean. The aquatic appeal of the mask is heightened by using shiny copper, silver and turquoise luster glazes.



## THE BOX FISH (OSTRACIIDAE)

*Clarice Zdanski*



Found in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans, the box fish belongs to a family of square, bony fish. There are over 350 species. The hexagonal patterns of its skin and the distinct ridges of its face inspired my choice for a mask. Young fish can be brightly colored, but older fish lose their brilliance. They are slow swimmers, but their tough skin makes them unappetizing to other fish. Although they are solitary, they are further protected because they can secrete poisons from their skin into the surrounding water.

Bestiaries mention fish (whale, electric ray, dolphin) or composite fish (siren, mermaid), but not all of the 'knowledge' recorded about them is credible. For example, we are informed that humans can be numbed by touching an electric ray, which is true, but we also learn that the swordfish uses his snout to sink ships, or that the sawfish has enormous wings and likes to race against ships—really?

## A TURTLE SHELL

Alexander Rokicki



My original idea was to create a turtle mask inspired by the elongated facial features and characteristic proportions of African cultures. However, inspired by Luca Leandri's workshop, I took a more visceral approach and created what came to my mind, not what was derived from other ideas. My mask is not a turtle face, but its shell, which better represents the turtle's core values of longevity, steadiness, and callousness. Brainstorming with Luca led me to capture the turtle's celestial manifestations: the eyes became the moon and the sun, with 28 marks around its base for the 28 different sections of the sky in Chinese mythology. With its cracked, imperfect look, the raku glazing let me portray the turtle as ancient and weathered. It also strengthens the idea that nothing is perfect in its natural form, but rather a consequence of its environment. The silver color represents the turtle's ancient, noble values.



## INSECTS

### THE BUTTERFLY

*Joud Khoury*



The butterfly mask symbolizes the beauty of nature and the process of change. The wings are decorated with flowers because of their similarities: both arrive during spring-time; both are delicate; butterfly wings resemble flowers. Luster glazes were used to give it a shimmering, metallic effect. The wearer's eyes can be seen through the two holes in the middle of each wing. Perhaps the person behind the mask is strong-willed, full of grace, yet slightly eccentric. After all, there is nothing in a caterpillar that tells you it's going to become a butterfly.

## BIRDS

### THE OWL *Alegra Volpe*



Sacred to Athena, Greek goddess of learning, owls are emblematic of wisdom and knowledge. In many cultures, owls are mystically interpreted as rulers of the night. Because they are nocturnal and possess uncanny abilities to capture their prey, owls can be feared or misunderstood, as in medieval bestiaries, where owls are said to prefer living in darkness rather than in light, or are shown flying by night. Ultimately, their mysterious presence is what inspired me to make a mask of one. The gold luster glaze on the facial features conveys the owl's simple, yet majestic characteristics. Its eyes are the main focus, emphasizing the owl's intensity and presence in nature.

## COMPOSITE BEASTS

### THE GRIFFIN

*Shane MacNeill*



I personally identified with the majestic outline and internal beauty of this animal. Both lion and eagle, the griffin indicates intelligence, strength, courage and leadership.



## LA FARFALLA CHE SI NASCONDE SUL GUFO THE BUTTERFLY THAT HIDES ON THE OWL

Giacomo Molteni

Giacomo Molteni



Found in the forests of Mexico, and Central and South America, the owl butterfly (genus *Caligo*) is known for its huge eyespots that resemble an owl's or other predator's. The mimicry is so effective that small animals are driven off. As nocturnal birds of prey, owls have disproportionately large eyes, which help them capture their prey. However, they are farsighted and cannot see objects close-up very well. Nevertheless, they are often associated with keen eyesight. By way of comparison, we live in a world where what we think we see may not actually be there, yet what we want to see might not actually exist. The hidden butterfly on the owl body represents looking past those objects only a few centimeters away, making an appeal to be more farsighted, like the owl.

## AQUA LIFE AND MAN

*Saurav Gupta*



Man is no different from the other beasts that inhabit this planet. Visiting natural history museums in Italy made me want to make something that would show this. So I decided to turn clay into something that would raise eyebrows and make people want to ask questions about it. This mask has nothing of the feel of an ancient relic. The ocean can hold a world of surprises and things some people have never imagined.

**AND OTHER  
STORIES...**









*The love for all living creatures is the most noble attribute of man.*