

Protectors and Messengers

Animals as Cultural Symbols

Animals have been used as cultural symbols since the Stone Age. In many ancient civilisations, animals were symbols of sanctity and prophetic knowledge. In ancient Egypt, such animals as cats, bulls and crocodiles were regarded as sacred. Awe of their abilities – such as speed and flight – stimulated the notion of beasts as superior to humans, and hence the widespread practice of totem worship.

A particular animal may stand for similar qualities in different cultures. The dove is a universal symbol of peace, whereas the swan always represents grace and beauty. However, differences in cultural and aesthetic heritage have in some cases created entirely different images of an animal to different peoples. To the Chinese, the tortoise is a symbol of longevity. In the West, the tortoise carries no such cultural significance. It is noted more for its slow motion and thus lack of vitality.

In the Celtic (Scottish, Irish and Welsh) cultures, cattle represent fertility. Similarly, in India, the bull represents fertility and the masculine principle in nature. For the Hindus, the cow is the most sacred animal. In Chinese society, cattle symbolise diligence and strength.

While the Chinese admire horses for their speed and virility, they are important icons of power, wealth and status in many Western societies, e.g. the German and the Irish. In the old days, horses, as objects of veneration, were closely associated with many divinities. In Greek mythology, Apollo's heavenly chariot was pulled across the sky by a white horse. In Scandinavian mythology, the mount of Odin, the creator of the world, was an eight-legged horse which could traverse either land or sea.

To the Chinese, the pig is a symbol of fecundity and prosperity. In ancient Celtic tradition, boars represented not only fertility and wealth, but also the spirit of aggression and invincibility in war. Thus they were frequently used as helmet crests – a boar-crested helmet both protected the wearer and made him frightening to look at.

In Irish and Welsh literature, stags are associated with the wild, and with speed

and strength. They are also intermediaries between the gods and living humans. To the Chinese, the stag is a symbol of official position, because the words for “deer” and “officialdom” sound the same in Chinese. In a similar vein, bats symbolise auspice and happiness in Chinese tradition, purely because the Chinese word for “bat” sounds the same as the word for “felicity”. As we know from the vampire legends, bats in the West are perceived as sinister and associated with bad omens.

Birds, like land animals, are favourite symbols in many cultures. In times past, birds, marked by their powers of flight and their ability to sing, were seen as messengers from the supernatural world. People in both China and the West agree in their perceptions of the raven. Ravens are considered birds of ill omen, probably because of their black plumage and harsh squawks, as well as their propensity for eating the flesh of dead animals and humans. In the vernacular tales of Ireland, the raven was associated with combat and destruction. Thus it was a popular motif on armour and weapons. A raven-adorned helmet dating to the third or second century BC was clearly designed to terrify opponents as the warrior would appear much more fearsome with the raven perched on his head.

The Chinese also interpret the appearance of owls as a bad omen. It is their silent, ghostly flight and eerie call that make them frightening. Interestingly, in Western societies, many contradictions exist among traditional perceptions of the owl. Owls are cultural symbols of both dark mystery and good fortune.

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, the owl, originally as the symbol of Athene, has been a symbol of intelligence and learning, and considered an omen of good fortune and victory. In *Aesop's Fables*, the owl is portrayed as alert and astute. It knows that the nets for bird catching are made of flax and encourages the birds to pluck up the flaxseeds sown. In Germany, an owl's appearance is thought to predict the safe birth of a child.

Paradoxically, in many folk and fairy tales, owls are often present at witches' gatherings (Harry Potter has a very special snowy white owl called Hedwig). Witches, too, may appear as owls. The owl has been associated with bad omens and given names like “bird of death” and “bird of sorrow”. Such a mixed image, which embodies the projection of both man's hopes and fears, must amuse the unperturbedly wise owl.

