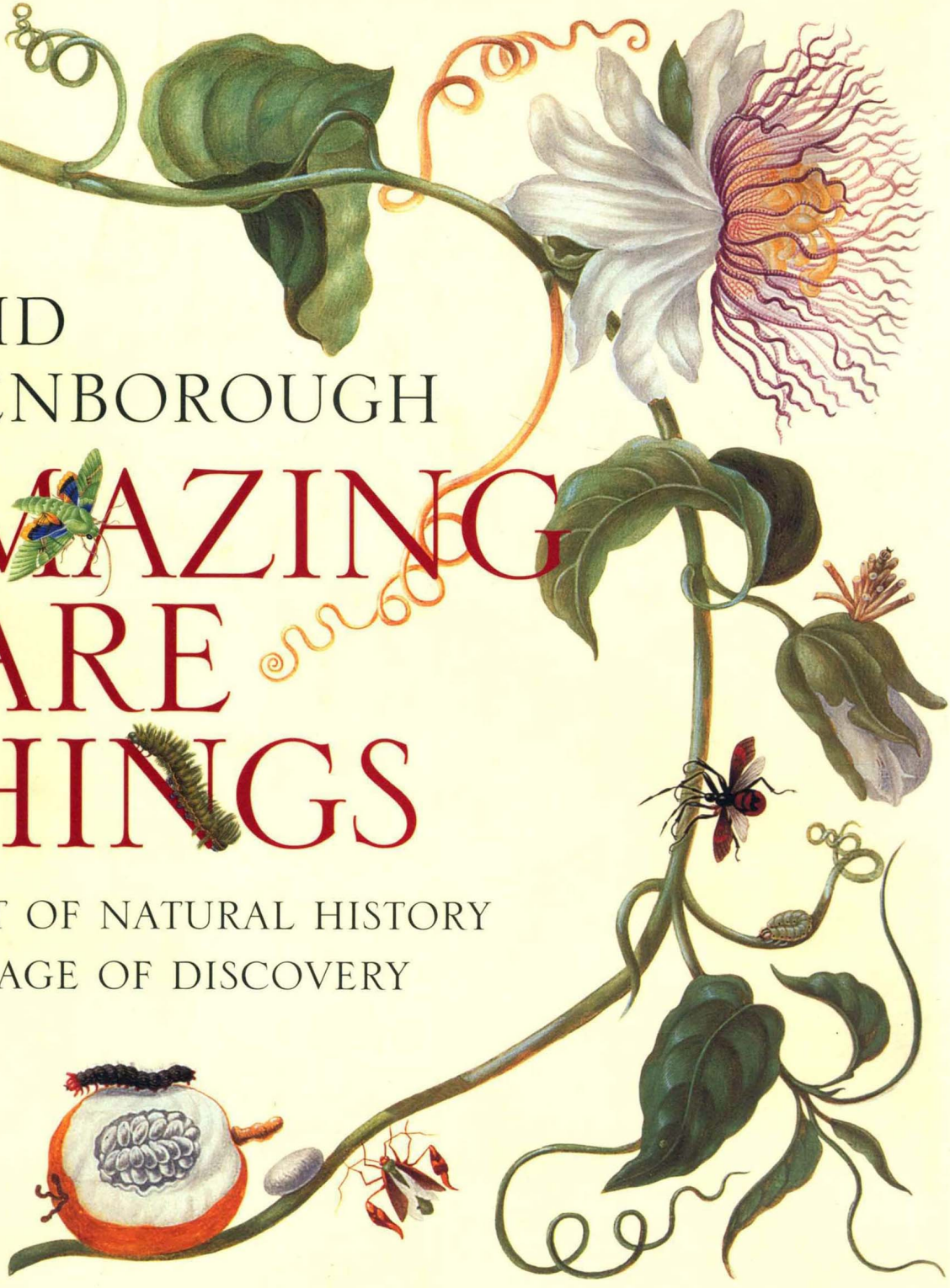
DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

AMAZING RARE THINGS

THE ART OF NATURAL HISTORY IN THE AGE OF DISCOVERY



SUSAN OWENS, MARTIN CLAYTON AND REA ALEXANDRATOS

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FOREWORD

In the early years of the sixteenth century Leonardo da Vinci observed that 'The eye is the chief means whereby the understanding may most fully and abundantly appreciate the infinite works of nature'. Using his eyes and his intelligence, an artist could accurately and concisely record reality, whereas to do so in words alone would take 'a confused prolixity of writing and time'.

The use of imagery to document the astonishing diversity of nature has passed through many stages in the past five hundred years. Recently the possibilities opened up by new techniques of photography and filming have seemed endless. Some of the results have been brought to the general public by the naturalist and broadcaster Sir David Attenborough, one of the pioneers of the nature documentary (and the man responsible for the introduction of colour television into Britain in 1965). This publication is the result of a most fruitful collaboration between the Royal Collection and Sir David, who assisted the curators of the Collection in the choice of works for the exhibition, and has contributed the introductory essay and detailed comments on many of the works.

The eighty-seven watercolours considered here come from five exceptional groups of natural history drawings and watercolours in the Royal Collection. They date from a 250-year period between the late fifteenth and early eighteenth century – the Age of Discovery, when European knowledge of the world was transformed by voyages to Africa, Asia and the Americas. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) was working at the dawn of this era, recording the familiar flora and fauna of Italy but with the new spirit of scientific investigation that marked the Renaissance. Over a hundred years later, Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588-1657) in Rome and Alexander Marshal (*c.*1625-1682) in London catalogued many new species that were being brought by explorers and traders to the shores of Europe. And the artists Maria Sybilla Merian (1647-1717) and Mark Catesby (1679-1749) travelled to the New World themselves, to record exotic and previously unknown creatures in their natural habitats.

As a glance through the pages of this book will show, the ways in which these artists recorded nature are very diverse. Leonardo's sensitivity and incisiveness of line is a world away from what Catesby described as his own 'Flat, tho' exact manner'. The exuberant curves and spirals with which Merian endowed the 'amazing rare things' that she found in South America are a stylistic trait which make her work unmistakeable. The shared ground, however, is the artists' extraordinary engagement

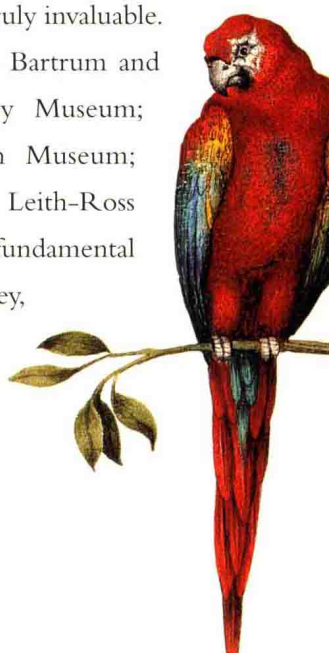
with the natural world, whether they made pioneering expeditions to the Americas or found their subjects in their own garden. Through painstaking examination and description, all these artists hoped to comprehend the riches of the natural world.

The five groups of drawings entered the Royal Collection at different times. The 600 sheets by Leonardo were acquired in the late seventeenth century, almost certainly by Charles II, the founder of the Royal Society. Three of the groups of drawings – 95 by Merian, 2,500 from the Dal Pozzo collection, and over 250 by Catesby – were acquired by George III in the mid-eighteenth century as part of his library collection. And Marshal's florilegium, containing over 150 watercolours, was presented to the future King George IV early in the nineteenth century.

The Leonardo drawings have been accessible to scholars for many years, particularly through the catalogues by Kenneth Clark and Carlo Pedretti (1968-9). Marshal's florilegium was the subject of a magnificent volume by Prudence Leith-Ross published by the Royal Collection in 2000, and the contents of Cassiano's 'Paper Museum' are being published in a series of catalogues which began to appear in 1996. It is intended that the drawings by both Merian and Catesby will in due course be published in full. The essays introducing the five groups here are the work of curators in the Print Room at Windsor: Martin Clayton (Deputy Curator) has written on Leonardo da Vinci, Rea Alexandratos (Dal Pozzo Project Coordinator) on Cassiano, and Susan Owens (Assistant Curator) has written the essays concerning Marshal, Merian and Catesby, and has skilfully guided the publication through its production stages.

I would like to express our sincere gratitude to Sir David Attenborough for his extensive contribution to this project, and for so generously sharing with us his remarkable knowledge and insight into the natural world. His involvement from its very beginning has been truly invaluable.

We should also like to thank the following for their generous help: Giulia Bartrum and Kim Sloan at the British Museum; Julie Harvey at the Natural History Museum; Kay Etheridge at Gettysburg College; Geoff Hancock at the Hunterian Museum; Tessa Rankin, Ella Reitsma and Esther Schulte. We are indebted to Prudence Leith-Ross for her comprehensive study of Marshal. We also gratefully acknowledge the fundamental work on Cassiano, Catesby and Merian carried out by Henrietta McBurney, formerly Deputy Curator of the Print Room.



JANE ROBERTS
Librarian and Curator of the Print Room

PICTURING THE NATURAL WORLD

DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

ANIMALS WERE THE FIRST THINGS THAT HUMAN BEINGS DREW. NOT PLANTS. NOT LANDSCAPES. NOT EVEN THEMSELVES. BUT ANIMALS. WHY?

The earliest of all known drawings are some thirty thousand years old. They survive in the depths of caves in western Europe. The fact that some people crawled for half a mile or more along underground passages through the blackness is evidence enough that the production of such pictures was an act of great importance to these artists. But what was their purpose? Maybe the act of drawing was an essential part of the ceremonials they believed were necessary to ensure success in hunting, for some of the creatures represented appear to be wounded or disembowelled and others have chevrons scratched across them that could be interpreted as spears. Maybe the paintings were intended not to bring about the death of the creatures portrayed but, on the contrary, to ensure their continued fertility so that the people would have a permanent source of meat. We cannot tell.

One thing, however, is certain. These drawings are amazingly assured, wonderfully accurate and often breathtakingly beautiful. Those who produced them had observed

Fig. 1
A bison, *c.*30,000 BC
Cave of Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc, France

their subjects with such intensity that they could draw the images, in the flickering light of their torches, entirely from memory. The grace of a galloping horse, the swell of a gravid mare's belly, the overwhelming strength and power of a charging bull, all are portrayed with supreme skill (fig. 1).

This practice of painting images of animals on walls has persisted throughout mankind's history. Five thousand years ago, when men in Egypt began to build the world's first cities, they too inscribed images of animals on their walls. There is no doubt about the function of at least some of these. The Egyptians worshipped animals. Sacred bulls were mummified and enclosed in immense granite sarcophagi. Ibis and falcons were sealed in terracotta pots and stacked in long galleries by the tens of thousands. And when images were painted on temple walls, their god-like status was made plain by giving them partly human features. So sometimes hawks, apes and crocodiles, while they have fully recognisable animal heads, have been given human torsos. But the

Fig. 2
*A fragment of a wall painting from the tomb of Nebamun, c.*1350 BC
From Thebes, Egypt

Fig. 3
*A fragment of a wall painting from the tomb of Nebamun, c.*1350 BC
From Thebes, Egypt

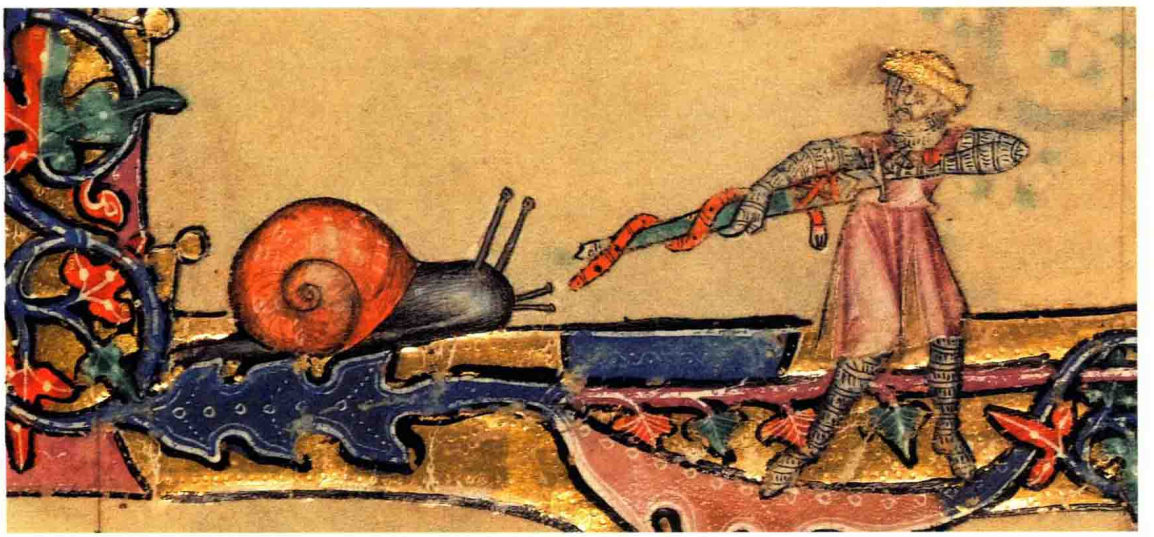
Egyptian artists also delighted in the straightforward natural beauty of animals, for they adorned the walls of their own underground tombs with pictures of red-breasted geese rising from the papyrus swamps, of cats stalking birds, even butterflies fluttering between palm trees (fig. 2). The mummified dead in the next world would surely wish to be reminded of the beauties and delights of this one.

Plants appear in these paintings. There are none in the ancient caves. Those people who drew rampaging bulls and fleeing deer had not yet discovered how to sow seeds and reap the resulting crops. The Egyptians, however, were farmers and they valued plants. They knew how to discriminate between different kinds and they displayed that knowledge on the walls and in their manuscripts. They drew cultivated gardens, vines laden with grapes and fields of wheat rich with grain (fig. 3).

The distinction between animals as gods and animals as themselves, so vivid and clear in ancient Egypt, is also apparent in the manuscripts of early Christianity. The medieval monks, who five thousand years after the fall of Egypt sat in the scriptoria of their monasteries, embellishing the capital letters of their manuscripts with intricate interlacings, also provided their saints with emblematic animals. Saint Mark has his lion, but it is a lion with wings; and Saint John is accompanied by an eagle but often one of such magnificence that it is scarcely recognisable as the brown bird of reality.

Nonetheless, other less exalted and more earthy creatures crept into their manuscripts. The scribes, perhaps as an escape from the solemnity of their devotions, indulged their imaginations and affections by introducing on to their pages the wild creatures that abounded in the natural world outside. Squirrels run up the margins and rabbits chase one another around the limbs of the capital letters. The artists also indulged their sense of humour. A giant snail, tentacles outstretched, jousts with a knight in armour (fig. 4); a dog pumps a chamber organ which is being played by a rabbit; an ape posing as a doctor offers medicine to a prostrate and presumably sick bear (fig. 5).

Fig. 4
A knight and a snail duelling
From the Macclesfield Psalter, *c.*1330



In the early twelfth century, such animals began to escape from the breviaries and Psalters into books of their own. These bestiaries seem to be a particularly English phenomenon. Of the sixty-five examples known, fifty originated in England (fig. 6), an early indication perhaps of a special national affection for animals that endures to this day. But the animals have not yet escaped from their religious connections. The bestiary texts explained that animals were put on earth to illustrate God's purpose and teachings. They were, in the eyes of the devout, parables and sermons, and their morality was even more important than their morphology. Thus the reason a wolf's eyes shine in the dark is to demonstrate that many things that seem attractive are in fact the works of the devil. Among these recognisable images there are some fantastic animals – unicorns and dragons, sea monsters, and griffins that were part-lion and part-eagle (fig. 7). The scribes had not seen them but they certainly believed in their existence.

In the fifteenth century, however, the new scientific spirit of the Renaissance swept through Europe. Scholars began to examine the world with fresh eyes and to question the myths and fantasies of the medieval mind. Galileo scanned the skies with the newly invented telescope to ponder the movements of the planets. And Leonardo da Vinci, the

Fig. 5
An ape doctor with a bear patient
From the Macclesfield Psalter, *c.*1330