

Beasts Fit to Clean the Hands of a King

By ROBERTA SMITH



Robert Lehman Collection

No, it's not a coffee urn (or Ned Kelly): a 14th-century aquamanile, or ritual hand-washing vessel, from Lower Saxony, probably for court use.

WHEN it comes to the cunningly figurative medieval artifacts called aquamanilia, it helps to start with the word itself. Half hip, half archaic, it can sound like some frivolous new product. Perhaps a perfume or the latest sorbet? Or is it an inside-HBO term for promotional figurines for "Aquaman," the fictional action-hero movie of "Entourage"? (Aquaman-ilia — get it?) This fan hasn't noticed such items on the show so far, but you never know.

In truth, aquamanilia is derived from the Latin words for water (aqua) and hand (manus). For several centuries it has referred to small cast-metal vessels used mainly for ritual hand-washing during the late Middle Ages. Relatively rare and unstudied, aquamanilia are shaped in various symbolic combinations of animals or animals and humans. Lions or horses with serpents on their backs seem to have been especially popular.

These truculent objects led triple lives as totems, symbols and pitchers. Now they are having what is thought to be their first exhibition anywhere at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture. A lengthy title lays out some of the terms of their fraught yet endearing nature: "Lions, Dragons and Other Beasts: Aquamanilia of the Middle Ages, Vessels for Church and Table."

The show is a delightful walk-in bestiary whose inhabitants have the urgency and some of the striking abbreviations and translations of folk art, including a rather amazing range of lion's manes, eyes and snouts. It is

Continued on Page 28

Lions, Dragons and Other Beasts

Bard Graduate Center

ART REVIEW

Beasts Fit to Clean the Hands of a King or a Priest

Continued From Weekend Page 27

also an event of some scholarly significance, and the second in a new series of collaborations between Bard graduate students and curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The series was inaugurated two years ago with the elegantly ecumenical "Vasemania," which traced the influence of the Greek vase across a swath of carefully juxtaposed decorative objects from 18th-century Europe.

In contrast to "Vasemania," "Lions, Dragons and Other Beasts" is all tunnel vision, and has been overseen by Peter Barnet, curator in charge of the Met's department of medieval arts and the Cloisters, and Pete Dandridge, the Met's objects conservator. They have also contributed essays to the show's full-scale, beautifully illustrated catalog, along with Ursula Mende, a scholar long associated with the National Museum of German Art and Culture in Nuremberg, and Richard Newman, head of scientific research at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The show displays all 22 of the Met's medieval aquamanilia, a relatively large, exceptionally fine group, along with five more pieces borrowed from other museums and private collections. Also on view are four sometimes weird 19th-century reincarnations spurred by various revivals, and not just Gothic. One of the three owned by the Met, in the shape of a head, shows the influence of the ceramic vessels made by the Moche people of Peru in the first millennium.

Almost all surviving aquamanilia date from after 1250 and were produced in four or five metalworking centers in German-speaking regions. Usually around a foot high, they were made of copper alloy, a sturdy metal with a lustrous matte surface of pale gold (rich but not too rich). This surface takes incising well, as evidenced by the enhancing variety of marks and patterns.

Aquamanilia were the first hollow-cast copper-alloy objects made in medieval Europe with the lost-wax casting method, which had been forgotten since Roman antiquity, especially in this hard-to-work metal. The rediscovery was aided by small zoo-

Lions, Dragons and Other Beasts: Aquamanilia of the Middle Ages, Vessels for Church and Table," Bard Graduate Center, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3000, through Oct. 15.



Cloisters Collection

Symbol and pitter: a lion-shaped German aquamanile, around 1400.

morphic metalwork objects that traveled north either from Islamic Spain or via the ruses and luxury trade with the East. Several examples of such antecedents from the Met's collections — oil jars, hanging lamps and incense burners — are included here, among them a Roman oil jar from A.D. 30-400 in the form of an impressively realistic bear that accentuates the greater power of the aquamanilia's folkish inaccuracies.

Also on view are examples of medieval metalwork: a censor cover, a candlestick and, best of all, a handsome cast-lead cistern from 13th-century France decorated with raised bands of rampant lions, dragons and centaurs.

Water as a symbol of cleansing runs throughout the Bible and the liturgy; one of the better known incidents involved Pontius Pilate washing his hands of responsibility for the decision to crucify Jesus. Hand washing was also part of social protocol and table etiquette among the high-born. And of course it was hygienically useful before utensils were common, when nearly all food was finger food.

The tall, totem-symbol-pitcher or-

der that aquamanilia had to fill required sculptural force, high levels of sacred or chivalric meaning and not just hollow interiors but also handles, openings and spouts or spigots. All these aspects had specific repercussions, among them an unusually contorted relationship between form and function. They walked a delicate line. Meaning, for example, should not be too specific.

Lion aquamanilia are especially dominant because the animal was, symbolically, a switch-hitter; the king of beasts could signify the King of Kings or mortal kings. Unicorns stood for Christ, but, minus the horn, became horses, which were more specifically heraldic, like those with mounted knights or falcons. This show contains examples of all these, including a unicorn turned horse, and a mounted knight whose heavy armor may remind some of that worn by the Australian highwayman Ned Kelly.

In most aquamanilia, form follows function, disguises and is disrupted by function. Spigots protrude unabashedly from the chests or heads of horses and lions, anticipating the coffee urn. A tiny man being consumed

Inside Art

The Inside Art column will resume in September.

by a large dragon is also a spout and in the case of a fabulous aquamanile from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the spouts sticks out from a human forehead like the point of a spear. The suggestion of violence is offset by the man's tiny peaceful hands and a beatific face on which engraved lines indicate whiskers, eyebrows and eyelashes, but also rays of light.

The handle presented the greatest challenge, but the solutions almost always add narrative and even psychic tension. In rare, highly prized instances, known as flame-tail aquamanilia, the challenge was met entirely by the animal's anatomy: a fiery tail that curls up and over the back and connects to the head, like a big, feathered arabesque lash. The exhibition has a modest flame-tail lion and a superb flame-tail griffin with a big, slightly comical beak.

More exceptionally, the handle takes the form of a man on the lion's back, who twists the beast's head around and pries open its mouth. This is Samson, and the lion, although noble-looking, now personifies evil.

But it is the serpent that forms the most frequent and enlivening handle. Its slim body arches from rump to neck on lions and horses, but it also appears on the back of the Boston head and a knight or two. These creatures were intended to represent basilisks, a species considered the king of serpents. Sometimes they seem to be on the attack with heads flat and teeth sunk deep in the lion's mane. Sometimes the serpent, with its head raised and fully defined, is more like a jockey or a goad.

In one of the Met's greatest aquamanilia, which involves both a flame-tail and a serpent, the reptile has an undulating back and a wonderfully nasty expression. It bares its teeth and turns its head to the side as if mocking the rider on an adjacent lion. But the last word is had by a Met piece in which the king of beasts turns his head and clenches the neck of the king of serpents between his big square teeth. The lion looks fit to burst with pride. Not only is he about to yank the serpent off his back, he has also made it serve as both handle and spout.