

Reptiles in Art: An Overview and Commentary

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As residents of the desert southwest, THS members are accustomed to familiar images of reptiles, particularly lizards and snakes, in graphic and decorative art in our region. From representations on t-shirts, hot sauce bottles, freeway walls, petroglyphs, pottery, tattoos, television commercials, and cartoons, we scarcely remark on the common use of reptile icons, much less ponder the why's and where-for's of such artwork. My own curiosity, intersecting somewhere between herpetology and art history, long ago stimulated me to begin recording examples and to question who, where, why, and for what are reptiles a subject in the art around the world and through the ages. After collecting many thousands of examples, I have discovered such images to be ubiquitous geographically and throughout history. They no doubt predate writing if not being coincident with the origins of human imagination and creativity.

Resisting the urge to categorize reptile art taxonomically as a biologist or chronologically as a historian in such a short note, the purpose here is to provide a general overview to stimulate discussion and to encourage a sharing of examples. I shall provide some of the boundaries of the examples while briefly attempting to convey the richness of the whole. I know of no publications on the topic, although Rawson (1977) gave several examples in a small book on "animals in art," and Mundkur (1983) details numerous examples in his scholarly treatment of the serpent as a cult figure. With this topic, I am on the edge of my knowledge but always eager to learn, so I hope that you will point out any mistakes or otherwise offer suggestions or examples. For this courtesy I shall be grateful.

Reptile art, like reptiles, occurs on all continents except Antarctica. Examples tend to cluster in environments where reptiles are common with few or none in areas where reptiles are rare. For example, I am not aware of reptiles in the art of peoples of the extreme northern latitudes (e.g., Eskimos or Laplanders), although reptiles are known in the art of the Nootka Indians of the Pacific Northwest. Surprisingly, an important reptile motif occurs in the art of the Vikings in a similarly northern climate of few reptiles. The usual image is that of a knotted snake with a triangular head, thus a viper. Details of the myth are not necessary here, but suffice it to say this common icon in Viking and Scandinavian art is usually attributed to the Midgard Serpent of the sea, representing unpredictable, lurking terror, but presumably under control when knotted. It is

interesting but not surprising that vipers, depicted with a triangular head and sometimes fangs, found in art of the old world have the sharp pointed tail, whereas those in art of the New World bear rattles. Perhaps only herpetologists understand why this might be.

The oldest example of reptile art known to me is that of a carving on an antler tool from Montaudier, France, depicting, among other animals, two snakes during the spring mating season. This piece of Ice Age Art dates to about 10,000 BC. Presumably other examples exist in the rock art of Ice Age Europe, but I have yet to locate any. Since rock art dates to at least 50,000 years before present (ybp) in Tanzania and 60,000 ybp in Australia and perhaps as much as 300,000 ybp in the near East (Bednarik, 1998), older examples of reptile art are likely to exist. At the other extreme, reptiles are also among subjects in classic art of modern times. Alexander Calder (1898-1976) used snakes in both his graphic and sculptured art, although I have yet to see these in his famous mobiles. M.C. Escher (1898-1972) is well known for his tessellation technique in which he put lizards, snakes, and other creatures in a repetitive mosaic.

Portrayal of snakes is common in many cultures, but not to the exclusion of other reptiles. My own hypothesis is that the reptile subject depended on its importance to the culture. For example, the Asmat people of New Guinea are especially good at carving crocodiles, a critter that is critically important in their world, although they also depict turtles and occasionally snakes. Turtles are found in many cultures including Chinese and Japanese art and mythology. Turtles occur on the shields of the Arapaho Sioux, as well as in the creation myths of North American Indians (e.g., the Wyandot) and curiously in a similar myth of the Hindu of the Indian subcontinent. Mayans built a temple to the turtle in Uxmal, Mexico, and Aztecs a serpent pyramid at Teotihuacan. Egyptians depicted the turtle in engravings and amulets initially as a good symbol (Old Kingdom, 2780-2280 BC) but later as an evil one (New Kingdom, 1580-1085 BC).

Lizards are depicted less commonly, although they were a favorite subject in the art of the Anasazi, Hohokam, and Mogollon of the southwestern United States (see Sherbrooke, 2003, for examples). The Maori of New Zealand carefully distinguished the tuatara from geckoes in their wood carvings. But generally, lizards tend to be included only incidentally, perhaps to depict a sense of reality to a painting. Significant examples include a lizard on the edge



Reptiles. M.C. Escher. Lithograph, March 1943.

of a plate from the 6th century BC depicting King Arcesilas of Cyrene supervising the weighing of wool. Likewise, a lizard occurs at the very bottom of the painting "Creation of Eve" by Spanish painter Fernando Gallego (1440-1507) in his series of Christian art panels, a significant part of the permanent collection of the University of Arizona Art Museum.

Apart from the illustrations of naturalists such as John J. Audubon, I have found few significant paintings by classic American artists that used reptiles as a subject. One is the "Lair of the Serpent" by Elihu Vedder (1836-1923) depicting a huge snake among the sand dunes along a lonely beach of the east coast. Ironically, this is considered Vedder's most famous work. Almost none of the landscape and nature painters of the late 19th century (e.g., the Hudson River School) depict reptiles as part of their compositions. The one exception is "After a Norther, Bahamas" by Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) which features a sea turtle coming onto a sandy beach with a backdrop of an angry surf and rolling ocean. None of the 100's of scenes that Bierstadt did (e.g., Yosemite Valley) nor any of his contemporary Hudsonian's works feature reptiles. Perhaps this owes to the scarcity of reptiles in the places they worked. On the other hand, perhaps the largest piece of reptile art is American. This is the 1400-ft. (426.7 m) long Great Serpent Mound in southern Ohio that dates to 300 BC. There is a mimic piece, the 560-ft. (170.7 m) long "Snake Path" of slate and concrete rendered

in 1992 by Alexis Smith on the campus of the University of California, San Diego, La Jolla.

Before the study of art history became a study of the history of artists in about the 14th century AD, art was often done anonymously as either an endeavour of the powerful to decorate castles, monuments, or triumphs or an amplification of the stories of gods, superstitions, and mythology. The Egyptian pharaohs adopted the cobra as a symbol of power and protection as evident in the gold effigies of their headdresses or carvings on the walls

of their temples. Sebek the Egyptian crocodile god is portrayed widely. Many scenes containing reptiles occur in Greek and Roman architecture and sculpture. The fables of Aesops heralded the steady and persistent turtle that overcame the speed of the hare. It is also interesting that in old anonymous art when groups of animals are portrayed, the entire breadth of reptile kinds is frequently represented. This is seen in a painting depicting a popular Persian fable painted by an anonymous painter of the Mughal School in India (1590 AD). This painting depicts the gossiping crow addressing the assembled menagerie of animals that included two crocodiles, two turtles, a lizard, and four snakes among the 80 or so animals shown. Likewise, a mosaic from the 3rd century AD in Sicily illustrated Christ assuming the traits of Orpheus charming the animals that included a lizard, snake, and turtle among the assembled group of 20.

The most repeated topic of reptile art depicts the Christian biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden being tempted by the evil snake. There are literally 100's of works of art on this subject from folk art (e.g., Mola art of the Panamanian Cuna Indians) to classic art works. Among the many examples include a panel of the Ottonian Empire on the famous bronze door of the Abbey Church of St. Michael in northern Germany finished in 1015 AD, a marvelous 1526 AD painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder, a famous 1504 engraving by Albrecht

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Dürer, and a recent find in the Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe – a carving in pine by the folk artist Patrocino Barela (1908-1964). In most of the cultures of the East and before the Christian era, snakes are depicted as good, not evil. Examples of this include a Chinese bronze axe head (6th century BC) laced with snakes and the many carvings of the cobra (a symbol of protection) hooded Buddha and similarly adorned Krishna of the Hindu tradition. One of the most famous of all pieces of reptile art is that of the “Snake Goddess” of pre-Christian Minoan culture on the Island of Crete. Only a few of these small (35 cm, 13.8 in) terracotta figures are known (1600 BC). The bare-breasted female figure holds a snake in each out-stretched arm in a culture where the snake was a symbol of earth deities and male fertility. It is interesting to speculate whether the large pictographs of the Barrier Canyon Style Rock Art in the San Rafael Swell of Utah dating to the Archaic Period (8500-2000 BC) might convey similar meanings. One of the most famous, the “Head of Sinbad,” depicts a human figure with out-stretched arms and a clearly serpentine figure flying overhead. There are many examples of snakes in Barrier Canyon Rock Art, and no satisfactory explanation has been offered. Interestingly, the famous and spectacular cave art of Central Baja, of about the same age, has very few reptiles, although clearly reptiles are as common in Baja as in Utah.

Many other genre (coins, stamps, flags come immediately to mind) and thousands of additional examples of reptile art can be found all around the world, much of it as yet undocumented and uninterpreted. Certainly the diversity of reptile art is almost as intriguing and pervasive throughout history and the world as are the animals that have inspired it.

Note: Illustrations of many of the art examples cited can be found in de la Croix and Tansey (1975) and Janson (1977).

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The *Sonoran Herpetologist* welcomes short reports for our Local Research News, a regular feature in our journal. We are interested in articles that can update our readers on research about amphibians and reptiles in the Sonoran Desert region. These articles need be only a few paragraphs long and do not need to include data, specific localities, or other details. The emphasis should be on how science is being applied to herpetological questions. Also, if you have seen an article published elsewhere in a peer-reviewed journal and would like to share it with others, feel free to submit a summary or forward the citation. Style and format are informal (see *Sonoran Herpetologist* July or September 2006 issues for examples). Please submit your observations to Roy Averill-Murray (averill-murray@sbcglobal.net). Submissions should be brief and in electronic form.

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