

# Symbiotic, Spiritual, Savage:

## Animals in Art and Literature



C. Lavern Kelly, Holstein and Proud Owner, 1987. © C. Lavern Kelly.

A High School Learning Resource

Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College

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Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art  
Hamilton College

## Table of Contents

Overview	
Essential Questions	<u>2</u>
Key Words	<u>3</u>
Learning Outcomes	
Pre-work	
Look Closely	<u>4</u>
Make a Connection	
Create	
Go Further	<u>5</u>
Image Set	<u>6</u>



## Overview

Animals have long captivated humans. In art and literature, depictions of animals serve a myriad of purposes. In this module, students will consider the multifaceted relationships between humans and animals—from cows on farms, to dogs in homes, to wild animals in nature—as seen in art. We will learn about three common archetypes of how animals are portrayed in art—the symbiotic, the spiritual, and the savage—as well as how they overlap and exist between these categories.

## Essential Questions

How are animals represented in art and what does this reveal about human relationships with animals?

What connections exist between visual art and literature?

## Learning Outcomes

1. Students will strengthen their skills of observation.
2. Students will practice finding visual evidence to support an interpretation.
3. Students will identify common themes that connect visual art and literature.

## Key Words

### **Anthropomorphic**

The representation of an animal or object as possessing human qualities, sometimes including human emotions or consciousness.

### **Personification**

Assigning a human trait to an inanimate object or non-human animal, This does not imply that the object or animal actually possesses free will or "acts" human.

### **Savage**

The trait of wildness in an animal. Most often, we associate this with animals we consider dangerous in some way, but this meaning also makes them otherworldly to us.

### **Spiritual**

Animals that connect with nature on a profound level, or animals that make us think and feel inwards at a higher level.

### **Symbiotic**

Animals that perform tasks that are beneficial to humans, through domestication or naturally. Denotes a mutually beneficial relationship between humans and animals.

## Pre-Work

Discuss the following questions in a group, or reflect individually.

- What memorable experiences have you had with animals?
- What is your role in relation to the animal(s), and what is their role in relation to you?
- Who has power in the scenario you are thinking of?

## Look Closely

1. Choose an image from the image set that you are drawn to.
2. Observe the work of art carefully, taking in the whole image and looking up close at details. Circle details that stand out to you, or sketch them if you have time.
3. Make a visual inventory of what you are seeing.
  - a. What animal(s) is/are depicted in this work of art?
  - b. What colors are used?
  - c. What do you feel while looking at the image?
  - d. What are your immediate associations with the animal(s) you see?
  - e. What questions do you have about this scene?
4. Review the definitions of savage, spiritual, and symbiotic. Decide if the animals in this work of art are best categorized as savage, spiritual, or symbiotic, or somewhere in between. Identify three visual details in the work of art that support your interpretation.

## Make a Connection

Based on your analysis of the animals in your image as being savage, spiritual, or symbiotic, connect the work of art to a piece of literature that also features animals. The animals can be the same or different, but the way they are portrayed should be similar.

## Create and Reflect

Use the image to illustrate a scene, real or imagined, from the book or story you are connecting it to. Or, choose a quote from the book to overlay onto the image you've chosen. Why did you choose that passage?



William Wegman.  
Back and Beyond,  
1998. Digital print  
with acid dye on  
silk twill, 34 1/2 x  
36 in. (87.6 x 91.4  
cm), Ruth and  
Elmer Wellin  
Museum of Art at  
Hamilton College,  
Clinton, NY. Gift of  
William E. Williams,  
Class of 1973, in  
honor of the Class  
of 1973. © William  
Wegman.

Kenneth Kahn.  
Brenda. 1968-  
1970. Charcoal and  
oil on paper, 46 x  
46 cm (18 1/8 x 18  
1/8 in.) Ruth and  
Elmer Wellin  
Museum of Art at  
Hamilton College,  
Clinton, NY. Gift of  
Mr. and Mrs.  
Arthur Jewett. ©  
Kenneth Kahn







Wyndham Lewis. *Lion and Martyrs*. 1947. Black and colored chalk on paper, 12 ½ x 9 ⅝ in. Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Gift of Omar S. Poun... Class of 1951. © Wyndham Lewis.





Patricia Potter.  
Memory Sketch of a Circus. Unknown  
date. Watercolor on  
paper, 22 9/16 x 28  
5/8 in. Ruth and  
Elmer Wellin  
Museum of Art at  
Hamilton College,  
Clinton, NY. Gift of  
Mrs. Edward W  
Root. © Patricia  
Potter.

Nebosja Od Kalja.  
Oxen in Yoke.  
Unknown date. Oil  
on glass, 48.3 x  
68.6 cm (19 x 27 in).  
Ruth and Elmer  
Wellin Museum of  
Art at Hamilton  
College, Clinton, NY.  
Gift of Richard F.  
Plotka, class of  
1956. © Nebosja Od  
Kalja.







Jean Plaskocinsky. Nudes with Lion and Tiger. 1966. Oil on board, 48.3 x 63.5 cm (19 x 25 in). Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Gift of Richard F. Plotka, class of 1956. © Jean Plaskocinsky.

Artist Unknown.  
Fragment  
Depicting a Jaguar  
Head. 700-950 CE.  
Red clay, 6 ½ x 7  
½ in. Ruth and  
Elmer Wellin  
Museum of Art at  
Hamilton College,  
Clinton, NY. Gift of  
Munson Williams-  
Proctor Arts  
Institute, Museum  
of Art.





C. Lavern Kelley.  
Holstein and Proud Owner. 1987. White pine with enamel paint and plastic, 12 3/4 × 7 1/4 × 18 in. Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Purchased with funds donated by D. Roger Howlett, Class of 1966. © C. Lavern Kelley.

Donald De Lue.  
Jupiter as the Bull. 1931, cast 1986. Bronze on marble base, 4 3/4 × 18 1/2 × 7 1/4 in. Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Gift of D. Roger Howlett, class of 1966. © Donald De Lue.

