

A medieval monster book:

The history, treatment and rebinding of *the Fountains Abbey Bestiary*

The *Fountains Abbey Bestiary* (MS M.890) is dated *circa* 1325-1350 and probably executed in the Cistercian abbey of Fountains, in North Yorkshire, England. In 1959, the American collector, Alastair Bradley Martin (1917-2010), donated the book to the Morgan Library & Museum, in New York.

A bestiary is a Late Medieval didactic study book; it explains real and fantasy wildlife through the lore of Christian moral principles and spiritual mysteries. The genre is particular to Northwestern Europe; it especially flourished in England in the 12th century and was highly popular throughout the 13th century and early 14th century. Dedicated to the education of rich patrons, bestiaries were frequently handwritten in Latin and beautifully illustrated.

The *Fountains Abbey Bestiary* is incomplete; it consists of 18 parchment folios, including 4 Early Medieval service book leaves that served as a wrapper. These leaves were turned into decorative “endpapers” when the book was fully rebound by the London firm Sangorsky and Sutcliffe in 1920 for a Sotheby’s sale. Sydney Cockerell (1867-1962), the British museum curator and collector, purchased the book at the time and tipped in extra blank vellum endpapers. He used the additional parchment to paste historic materials cut-outs and wrote bibliographical annotations.

In June 2018, The *Fountains Abbey Bestiary* will be on view in the exhibition: “Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, Wonders”. When choosing to put the *Fountains Abbey Bestiary* on display, a major concern for curators and conservators was the ability of the book to open without damaging the textblock. The 20th century binding had preserved altogether the content of the Bestiary but it had also altered its support. The folios were sewn tightly at the spine, which prevented a full opening of the textblock and resulted in a planar distortion of the vellum in the center of each page. The aim of the conservation treatment, prior to the exhibit and for long-term preservation, was to find a way to release the pressure on the Bestiary’s folios to read them. It was subsequently decided to discard the former binding and to do a full rebinding that will properly address the structural needs of the manuscript.

This presentation will explain the conservation treatment of the *Fountains Abbey Bestiary* and current use for research and exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum. It will explain the meaning and type of bestiaries to which the *Fountains Abbey Bestiary* is related. It will outline the manuscript’s specific role in the upcoming show on iconography of strange creatures in the Middle Ages. The presentation will also address the making of the manuscript: the materials

that were used, including the media (inks, pigments) and the binding components. The presentation will discuss the multiple challenges of the conservation treatment of the *Fountains Abbey Bestiary* due to the mix of medieval and contemporary materials. It will outline how the devising of the new binding structure facilitates the opening of the manuscript and provides a safe enclosure for it. It will describe the choices made with regards to conservation materials for vellum repairs, media consolidation, and guarding and binding.