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***Elephas anthropogenus***

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**Abstract**

This paper and its accompanying artwork examines the history of our perception of nature based on the example of elephants (*Elephas maximus*, *Loxodonta africana*, *Loxodonta cyclotis*). With the fall of the Roman Empire up until the late Middle Ages elephants virtually disappeared from Western Europe. Since there was no real knowledge of how these animals actually looked, illustrators had to rely on oral, pictorial and written transmissions to morphologically reconstruct an elephant, thus reinventing the image of an actual existing creature. This led, in most cases, to illustrations in which the most characteristic features of elephants - such as trunk and tusks - are still visible, but that otherwise completely deviate from the real appearance and physique of these animals. In this process, zoological knowledge about elephants was overwritten by its cultural significance. Based on a collection of these images I have reconstructed the evolution of the '*Elephas anthropogenus*', the man made elephant.

Keywords: elephants; art; taxonomy; history; evolution; illustration; Physiologus; morphology

**1. Introduction**

In my work as a visual artist I deal with the way humans perceive, depict and transform the natural world. Scientific surveys provide one of many possible approaches to observe and interpret nature. Depending on one's perspective, nature can have a subjective, religious or cultural meaning. Nature can be perceived as a threat, as a resource or as a sanctuary. Certainly, this perception varies from person to person, but we also discern how human perception of nature has been shaped by different cultural currents and ideologies through different phases of history. This paper investigates how our image of nature has changed over the centuries and analyzes the effects that different perspectives project upon the representation and perception of nature. I examine these exemplary aspects of human projection by looking at the depiction of a single animal representative: the elephant. (*Elephas maximus* (Linnaeus, 1758), *Loxodonta africana* (Blumenbach, 1797), *Loxodonta cyclotis* (Matschie, 1900))

Elephants were well known in antiquity. In ancient Rome, for example, elephants were frequently used as a motif on coins, as entertainers in circuses and as work animals that drew carriages in triumphal processions. (Lach, 1994, p. 127) As such, elephants were part of everyday life. After the fall of the Roman Empire however, elephants virtually disappeared from Western Europe (Lach, 1994, p. 130). Since there was no real knowledge of how this animal actually looked, illustrators had to rely on oral, pictorial and written transmissions to morphologically reconstruct the elephant, thus reinventing the image of an actual existing creature. This led, in most cases, to illustrations in which the most characteristic features of an elephant - trunk, tusks, ears - are still visible, but that otherwise completely deviate from the real appearance and physique of this animal. These illustrations offer the opportunity to observe how a natural phenomenon, the elephant, was culturally reconstructed and reinterpreted. In this process zoological knowledge about the elephant was overwritten by its cultural significance.

I have developed a tree diagram that traces the evolution of the elephant depiction throughout the middle ages up to the age of enlightenment. This diagram is based on a collection of over 170 illustrations which are classified according to taxonomic principles. The work is entitled '*Elephas anthropogenus*', a neologism, consisting of the words *Elephas* (the genus name of Asian elephants, *Elephas maximus*), *anthropogenic* (made by humans), and the word *genus* (a term from the zoological nomenclature). The term is used here to describe all elephants whose morphology is based on human imagination.

(I chose the word *Elephas* as part of this neologism, simply because its reference to the word elephant is immediately recognizable, not because the illustrations are based only on Asian elephants. In fact both Asian and African elephants have influenced the elephant depictions. In some cases one can still clearly recognize individual morphological traits of the different species. However, many of the more simplified and imaginative illustrations from the middle ages do not carry enough information to clearly distinguish between species. They only allow to deduce that they depict an elephant because they show general striking body features of elephants. Because species distinction is not immediately relevant for the subject of this paper I use the word elephant as representing both Asian and African elephant species.)

This paper and its accompanying artwork present two fundamentally different modes of our perception of animals: The

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