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Animal Symbolism in Ancient Russian Culture

Animal symbolism in medieval culture is characterized by the ambivalence of meaning which can be comprehended only in the corresponding context. One of the explanations for that might be the variety of interpretations of the Bible, the principal source for a medieval reader where he could learn about the creation of the universe. This variety of interpretations of the stories of animals, contained in the Bible, was transferred to the animals in nature, on account of the comprehension of the universe as an immense book. Therefore, the meaning of the depicted animals in medieval iconography is not immediately evident; one and the same animal (for instance, a unicorn) can both symbolize the virginal purity and be the symbol of carnal lust. Eastern Christian tradition absorbed the achievements of both Alexandrian and Antiochian schools of biblical exegesis. This tradition of the interpretation of animals as symbols of the faculties of a human soul can be traced in a statement of Athanasius of Kholmogory : "In a human being one can discern many species: species of a speaking reasonable creature, species of a beast, species of a brute, and many other species". A man was created by God to govern the created universe. However, Adam and Eve did not stand the test by freedom and fell under the burden of their corporeality, which caused the fall of their universe, deprived of its king. In Old Russian art the most popular among animals were the images of birds, griffin, lions, unicorn and bears.

A theme of the transformation of the universe and the salvation of man, treated in a curious way in connection with animals, is present in an Eastern Christian hagiographic literature, where the lives of the saints often narrate the stories of various animals coming to these saints. In Russian lives of the saints the animal in this role was most frequently a bear. Birds, a bear, and other animals became the first monks of Sergius's Radonezskij monastery. The bear became a frequent visitor of the saint. In a later tradition, in the 19th century, a bear is mentioned in the Life of one of the most revered Russian saints, Seraphim of Sarov. St. Seraphim, according to a legend, entertained the bear with rusks. These rusks were comprehended in a Russian religious tradition as associated with the Eucharist. Such a peaceful coexistence of animals and man was to remind the faithful people of the true purpose of a Christian service, that is, the transformation of the universe and man, and the renewal of the harmony lost after the Fall.