

Art History's 8 Greatest Unicorns, from the Met Tapestries to Damien Hirst's Taxidermy

Rachel Leibowitz April 16, 2018

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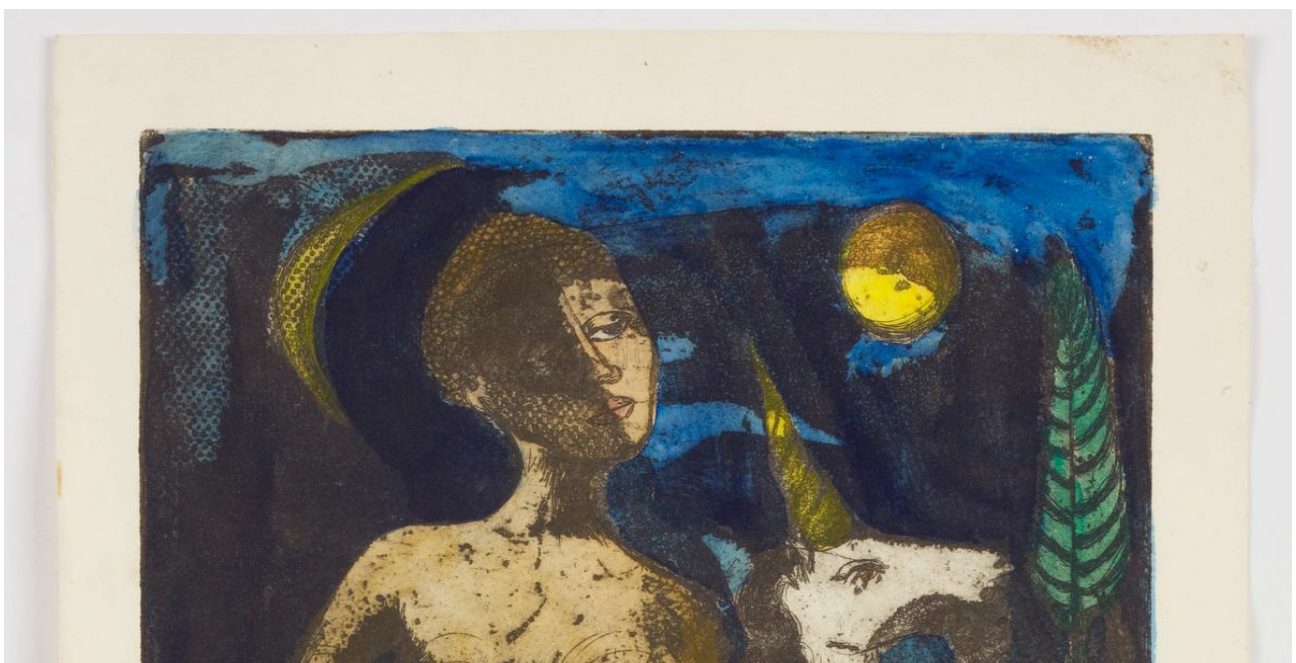
Unicorns had a moment in the 1980s and early '90s, and once again they're making something of a comeback, appearing on everything from Starbucks Frappuccinos to makeup products, and even toast. [Theories](#) link the trend to its aptness for social media, as well as to our current political climate, with unicorns providing a good dose of levity and fantasy in what are, for many, troubling times.

But the history of the unicorn began well before Lisa Frank school supplies, My Little Pony toys, or *Harry Potter*. The unicorn is predominantly a Western phenomenon, though it finds an Asian counterpart in the kirin, a similar creature (but one that often has two horns). Around 398 B.C., the Greek physician Ctesias described an animal whose single horn possessed curative powers, and nearly 500 years later, Pliny the Elder wrote of a hybrid creature that thwarted all attempts to capture it. (These accounts were thought by some later scholars to have been based on European encounters with the Indian rhinoceros.)

Later, in the Middle Ages, the unicorn was known in European folklore as a diminutive yet ferocious attacker that was also a symbol of virginity and a stand-in for Jesus Christ, one that could only be tamed by a female virgin.

While the existence of unicorns was discredited by the end of the 16th century, the creature had already secured a cultural stronghold in artistic depictions that continues through today. The following eight works of art, from medieval tapestries to contemporary sculpture, lay claim to some of the most memorable depictions of unicorns in art history.

Betye Saar, *To Catch a Unicorn*, 1960





Betye Saar, *To Catch a Unicorn*, 1960. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California.

Along with artists like Melvin Edwards and Charles White, Los Angeles-born artist Betye Saar helped create the vibrant Black Arts Movement on the West Coast beginning in the 1960s. This burgeoning artistic community emerged alongside the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and called for an art form that could advance the African American cause. Saar's etching from 1960—made in the early years of her career—alludes to elements of spirituality and the cosmos that appear in her later work, but it also references the period's racial landscape. While the stylized scene is set in a familiar forest setting, it departs markedly from the Eurocentric lineage of unicorn images. A nude Black woman leans against a unicorn, the

curves of her body contrasting with the animal's long, thin neck and angular limbs. Above them are the moon and the sun, perhaps a nod to the passing of time. The moon is also associated with femininity in many cultures, and Saar here celebrates and honors female power.