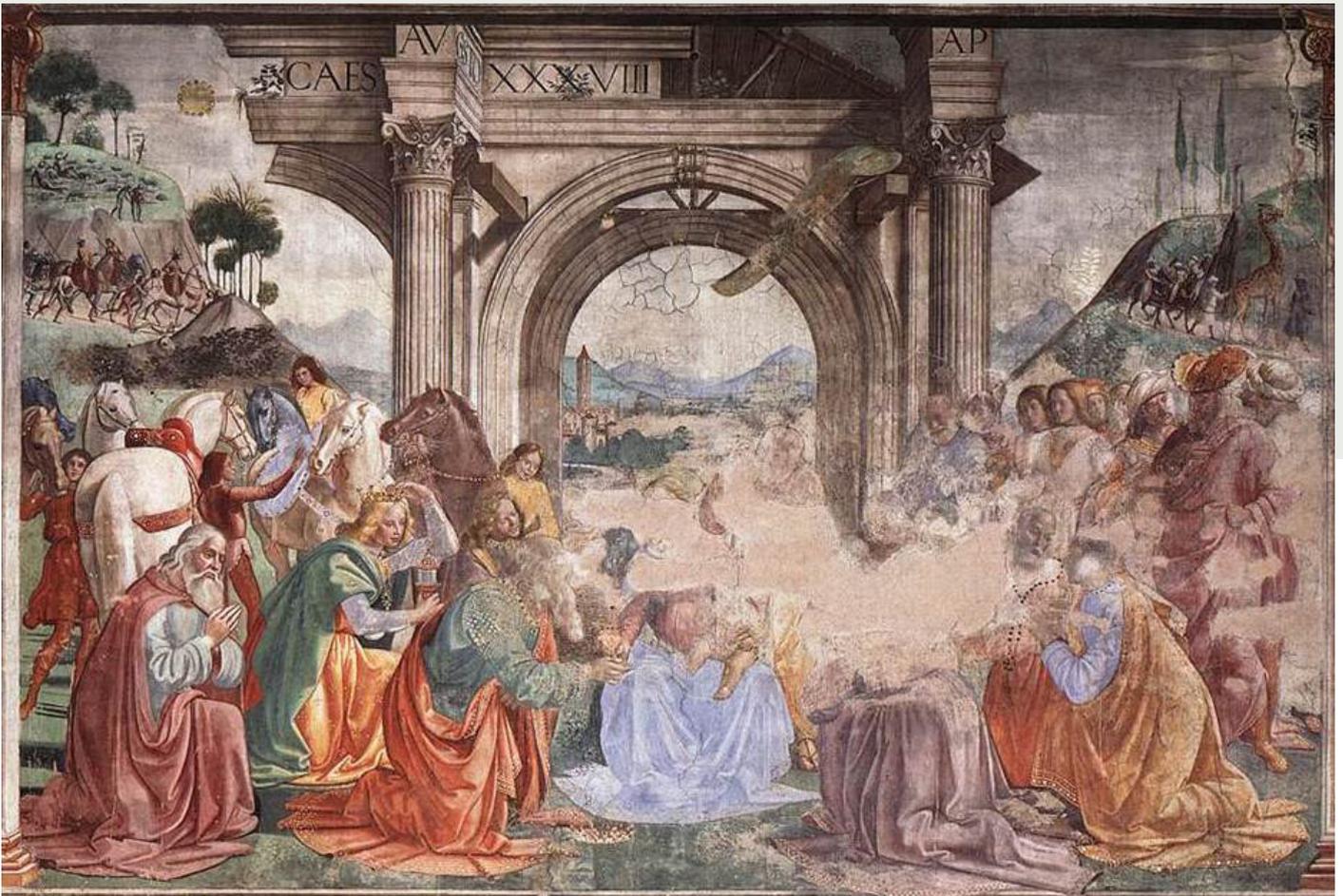


Spot the Giraffe: The Material Culture of Animals Found, Lost and Painted

Giorgio Riello 17.05.2021



The distracted tourist might be forgiven for not paying much attention to what is represented in *The Adoration of the Magi*, one of more than twenty large-scale frescos decorating the Tornabuoni Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. The famous Italian painter Domenico Ghirlandaio and his workshop worked tirelessly between 1485 and 1490 to complete what is one of the largest renaissance works of art. Ghirlandaio was commissioned for the family chapel of the 55-year old Florentine merchant and banker Giovanni Tornabuoni, one of the richest and most powerful men in town. The passing of five centuries and the elements had harsh effects on the frescos in the Tornabuoni Chapel. Yet, one can still see Giovanni Tornabuoni and many of his relatives and acolytes populating the scenes in the frescos.

Alas the Adoration is badly damaged having lost much of its central area.



Fig. 1: The Adoration of the Magi by Domenico Ghirlandaio, Tornabuoni Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence, 1485–1490. [Source](#).

Fortunately, it is a detail in the undamaged upper right-hand corner that is of interest to us. In the distance, among Florentine hills and cypress trees one can spot a distinctive animal accompanied by a retinue of keepers dressed in oriental costumes and wearing turbans. Walking towards the city of Florence and the Church of Santa Maria Novella is a giraffe. We do not know why Ghirlandaio decided to insert it into the scene. Probably it might have been considered a fitting addition to the three wise men traditionally deemed to have come from 'the East'. For sure, Ghirlandaio must have had the opportunity to examine a giraffe in detail. Yet, in normal circumstances, this would not have been an easy task. The only recorded giraffe to have reached Europe since antiquity was the one that the sultan of Egypt sent to Frederick II of the Two Sicilies in 1261. We know that Frederick gave the Sultan a white bear in return. No European medieval representations of giraffes survive, meaning that for the following two centuries knowledge of this animal must have been rare in Europe.¹

It is likely that Ghirlandaio was among the large crowds that on the evening of the 18 November 1487 gathered in Piazza della Signoria in Florence. Lorenzo de Medici, the de-facto ruler of the city, had a ceremonial platform erected to accommodate the elites. Commoners crowded the square and the nearby streets. The centre stage was taken by a giraffe sent by Sultan Qā'itbāy (c.1416/1418–1496) of Egypt, a gift intended to entice the support of Lorenzo de Medici in the fight against the Ottomans.²

Recent scholarship has alerted us to the importance of gifts in diplomacy. Most commonly such gifts would have been precious artefacts, remarkable in their make and materials. The history of material culture and those of diplomacy have found a shared terrain in the analysis of transcultural gifts. Objects acted as tools of diplomacy in an unspoken language of reciprocity (or lack of) and commensurability. As diplomacy was embedded in ritual gestures often performed between rulers who never physically met, artefacts came to have pride of place in presentation ceremonies. Inventories, ambassadorial reports and extant objects show a variety of such gifts that include, among the many, porcelain and precious stones, jewels, paintings, textiles, scientific instruments, and furnishings and furniture, often presented in large quantities.³

Animals are neither objects nor artefacts. They are living creatures and as such have agency. This is a topic that has received much attention in recent historical analyses in what is now called animal history. Similarly, material culture studies have shown how the agency of humans is mediated by those of 'things'. In this framework, however, objects tend to be passive and are conceived as tools, instruments, raw materials, garments to be worn or goods to be consumed. Animals do not fit this paradigm. This might explain why Lorenzo's gifts 'became alive': as living creatures that moved, produced sounds, and

towered over people, they received the adoring attention of large crowds. This would have not happened even with the most accomplished work of art or the most luxurious artefact. Animals – unlike other diplomatic gifts – were paraded and became public ‘objects’. The public spectacle of bears, lions and other ‘exotic’ animals is something that today belongs to the circus; yet in the renaissance it was part of urban entertainment. The Medici, for instance, had no fewer than twenty-five lions living in the Palazzo Vecchio that were set loose in an improvised arena of Piazza della Signoria together with wolves, Corsican dogs and boars.⁴

The Florentine giraffe was therefore not an isolated case. Similar public displays were common and transformed the remit of embassies and visits by delegations from the exclusive audience of the court to that of the lowly street. Thirty years after a giraffe arrived in Florence, a rhinoceros was brought to Lisbon as a gift from Sultan Muzaffar Shah II, ruler of Cambay, for Manuel I of Portugal. The rhino became a sensation: a contest with an elephant was hastily organised to see whether Pliny the Elder was right that the two animals would fight (in fact they didn’t). Part of the allure of these animals was the prestige that they brought to their owners. During the fifteenth century the Medici maintained a large menagerie that had previously featured a giant mannequin of a giraffe before being replaced by a real one.

Once they reached Europe the rhino and the Florentine giraffe had very short lives. Manuel’s rhino drowned off the coast of Italy on its way as a gift (a recycled one) to Pope Leo X; Lorenzo’s giraffe died strangled by her own improvised cage just months after her arrival in Florence. Yet, the stories of the rhino and the giraffe cannot be simply explained in terms of ‘loss’ as we would do for inanimate things. Whilst we care little about the loss of a diplomatic artefact, we do instead care about the death of the giraffe, even if this was five centuries ago. The history of emotions is brought into conversation with material culture and animal histories.

But there is a second problem with the agency of a ‘living present’. Unlike many of the diplomatic gifts that were carefully preserved in treasuries and cabinets of curiosities and whose pedigree is carefully traced through official and private sources, animals such as our giraffe simply disappeared. As Dana Leibsohn recently observed: ‘The thread-count of cloth and the grain in wood tend to persist across time in ways that the warmth thrown by candlelight or the tang of a bloody battlefield does not.’⁵ Here loss is taken not just as a material attribute or an emotional event, but as a methodological problem. Historians of material culture have to acknowledge their inability to ‘access’ the materiality of the object at stake. There is no object-based research, nor object handling here. Not even the bones of the giraffe have survived.⁶

What we are left with is instead a visual representation of a giraffe. The relationship between the material and the visual is a field fraught with difficulties and the work of Susanna Burghartz has done much to help us unders-



Fig. 2: ‘Giraffe’ in Pierre Belon’s *Les observations de plusieurs singularités et choses memorables ...* (Paris, 1553). [Source](#).

tand issues of transposition, codification and recodification. Histories of art are peppered with representations of giraffes. Rarely these were first hand. Pierre Belon was among the few who had the opportunity to see a giraffe: ‘a very beautiful beast of the gentlest possible disposition’, he observed of the animal he saw in Cairo.⁷ He deemed the animal to be of such interest that it deserved representation in his work (Figure 2). We do not know whether Belon knew about the giraffe that arrived in Florence more than sixty years earlier.

It is the power of reproduction of representation – rather than the real animal – that allowed the giraffe to enter the European imaginary. One might say that it was not Lorenzo’s real animal but its representation in Ghirlandaio’s fresco that kept the visual imagination of giraffes alive in Europe. Florence remained key to this: here giraffes can be seen in the ‘Adoration of the Magi’ by Andrea del Sarto (1511) in the Santissima Annunziata church, in ‘The Gathering of Manna’ (1540) by the Florentine Francesco Bacchiacca now displayed at the National Gallery of Art, Washington; the ‘Ambassadors pay homage to Lorenzo the Magnificent’ (1556-58) by Giorgio Vasari and Marco da Faenza, in the Lorenzo the Magnificent room in Palazzo Vecchio; and the animal



Fig. 3: Bernardino Poccetti, Deer or Giraffe (?), decorations of the vaulted ceiling in the Grotta Grande, Boboli Gardens, Florence, 1586–87. [Source: Attributed to Saiko.](#)

represented on the vaulted ceiling in the Grotta Grande in the Boboli Gardens in Florence by Bernardino Poccetti (1586–87) (Figure 3).

I am sure further research will unearth more giraffes hidden in Florentine frescos and paintings. Representations were more important than real animals: it was not until 1827 that another giraffe is recorded as having reached

Europe, this time a present from [Muhammed Ali Pasha](#)⁸, then Governor of Egypt, to King George IV of Britain. Yet it is noticeable how the memory of Lorenzo's giraffe faded. Pocetti's grotto, for instance, represents an animal that is part giraffe and part deer, the latter being very familiar to Florentines of the time.

The example of Lorenzo's giraffe shows the interplay between the extant and the lost object, the imagined and the real, and the visual and the material that allows historians to delineate histories of material change increasingly written on a global canvas.

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has alerted us to the importance of gifts in diplomacy. Most commonly such gifts would have been precious artefacts, remarkable in their make and materials. This short contribution considers instead the gifting of living animal, a giraffe, that was given to Lorenzo de Medici in 1487. The giraffe was received in Florence with much fanfare but died only a few months after its arrival. The animal's legacy was to be seen in paintings thus providing good example of the complex relationship between (an animate) object, its representation and memory over time.

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- 1 Clive A. Spina, *The Book of the Giraffe*. New York 1969, p. 70.
 - 2 Angelica Groom: *Exotic animals in the art and culture of the Medici court in Florence*. Leiden/Boston 2019, p. 181. See also Marina Belozerskaya: *The Medici Giraffe and Other Tales of Exotic Animals and Power*. New York 2006.
 - 3 Anne Gerritsen, Giorgio Riello, 'Introduction: the global lives of things. Material culture in the first global age', in: Zoltán Biedermann, Anne Gerritsen, Giorgio Riello (eds.): *Global Gifts: The Material Culture of Diplomacy in Early Modern Eurasia*. New York 2018, pp. 1-34.
 - 4 Erik Ringmar: *Audience for a Giraffe: European Expansionism and the Quest for the Exotic*, in: *Journal of World History* 17/4 (2006), pp. 353-397.
 - 5 Dana Leibsohn: *Broken saints, house cats, other historical matter*, in Anne Gerritsen, Giorgio Riello (eds.): *Writing Material Culture History*. London 2021, p. 24.
 - 6 The skeleton of a giraffe at the Museum of Natural History is often referred as Lorenzo's giraffe. However there is no evidence that this is the case. In all probability this is the giraffe that reached Florence in the 1830s.
 - 7 'Giraffe', in Pierre Belon's *Les observations de plusieurs singularitez et choses memorables*. Paris 1553.
 - 8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mehmet_Ali_Pasha [29.04.2021].