

'Pictures and Purposes in Early Modern Natural Histories, c. 1550-1700'

Historians of print and historians of science agree that the circulation of illustrations of plants and animals, especially in books, was fundamental to changes in science in the early modern period (Eisenstein, Dickenson, Ogilvie, and Cooper). The execution, printing, copying, and re-printing of these illustrations enhanced the shift to empirical models, increased the amount and density of knowledge in circulation, and strengthened emerging methodologies. Historians of fine and decorative arts likewise inform us that these illustrations offered artists and craftspeople new methods of representation, and new examples from which to copy (Ashworth, Kemp, Smith, and Edgerton). But the impact of the wide dispersion and almost incessant re-duplication of images from natural historical works on the truth-value of these illustrations for natural historians has not been assessed.

This paper looks at Conrad Gesner's *Historiae Animalium* (1551-1558) and the after-life of some of its illustrations through the seventeenth century. The *HA* was the premier work of the era in its field, and it 'remained a zoological reference for the next two hundred years' (Ogilvie 44). But the illustrations in Gesner's works were not just zoological reference points: they were one of the principal sources for animal images in a wide range of fine and decorative arts, across the European continent. At the same time they continued to be copied into other zoological texts, even in – especially in – works that emphasized direct observation, material evidence, and empirical procedures, values that are certainly reflected in the verbal content of the works in question. Examples discussed in the paper suggest that animal images rapidly evaded their 'empirical' origins and adopted iconic or symbolic roles, even within natural histories and zoological texts. These examples suggest that we need to be more mindful of how signs operate in the world when we assess the role of illustrations in the circulation of scientific knowledge.

Works Cited

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