

# Ye Olde Natural History Illustration

Natural history illustration is a branch of art that is dedicated to the natural world. Before cameras and travel were commonplace, exotic animals were sketched based purely on the description of those who had been lucky enough to see them in the flesh - this led to some drawings that look very comical in modern day!

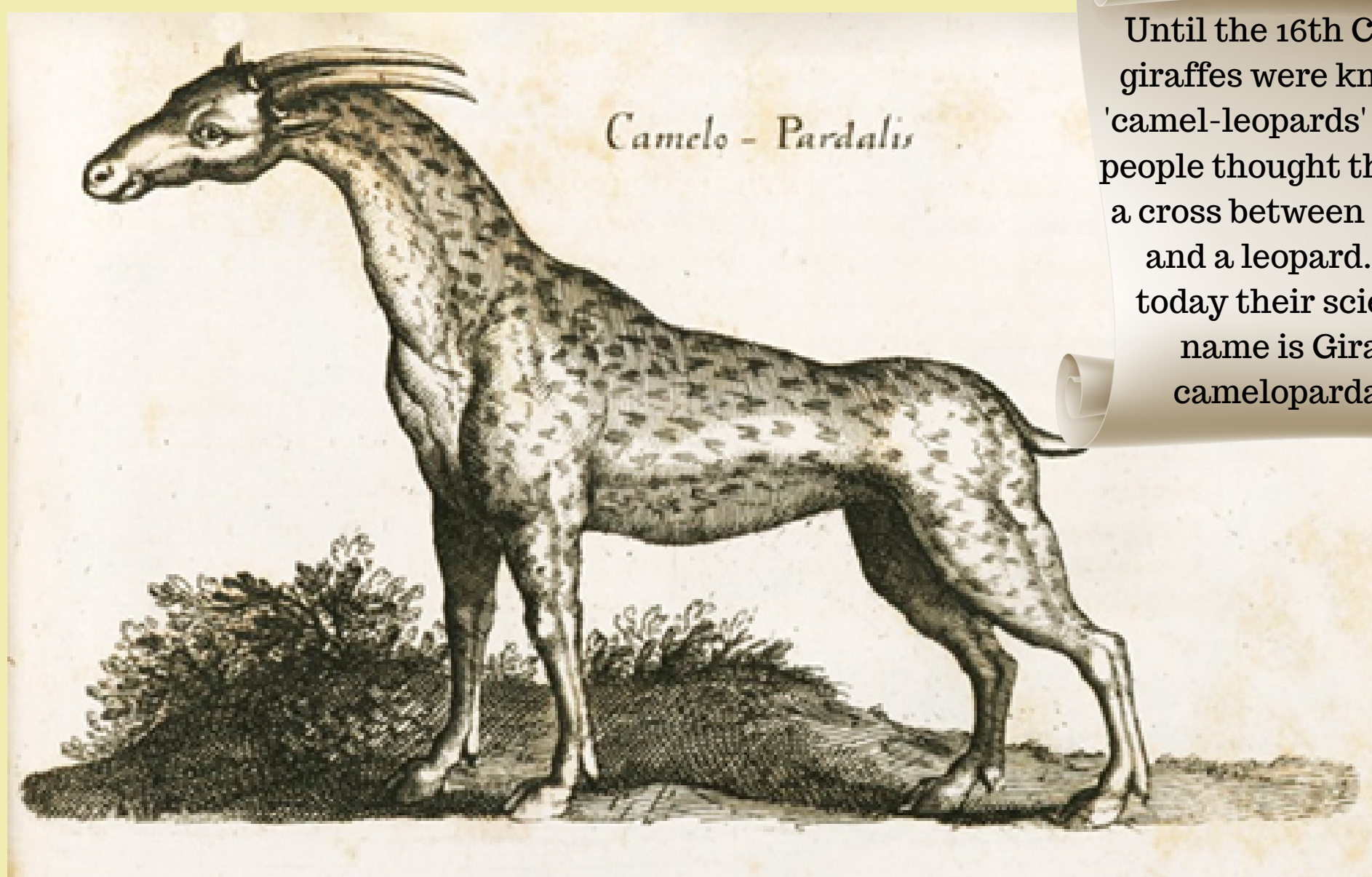
The first known sketch of an elephant dates back to the mid-Medieval period (10th/11th Century). Below is an example of an elephant drawn by Jacob van Maerlant in his manuscript *Der Naturen Bloeme* (The Flower of Nature) from circa 1350:



He drew lots of other animals too, including the 'hippopotamus' below:



As time went on, there were more sightings and more descriptions and details to pull from, so sketches became a little more accurate. They still weren't exactly right though, as this 1655 sketch of a 'giraffe' by John Johnson shows:



**FUN FACT!**

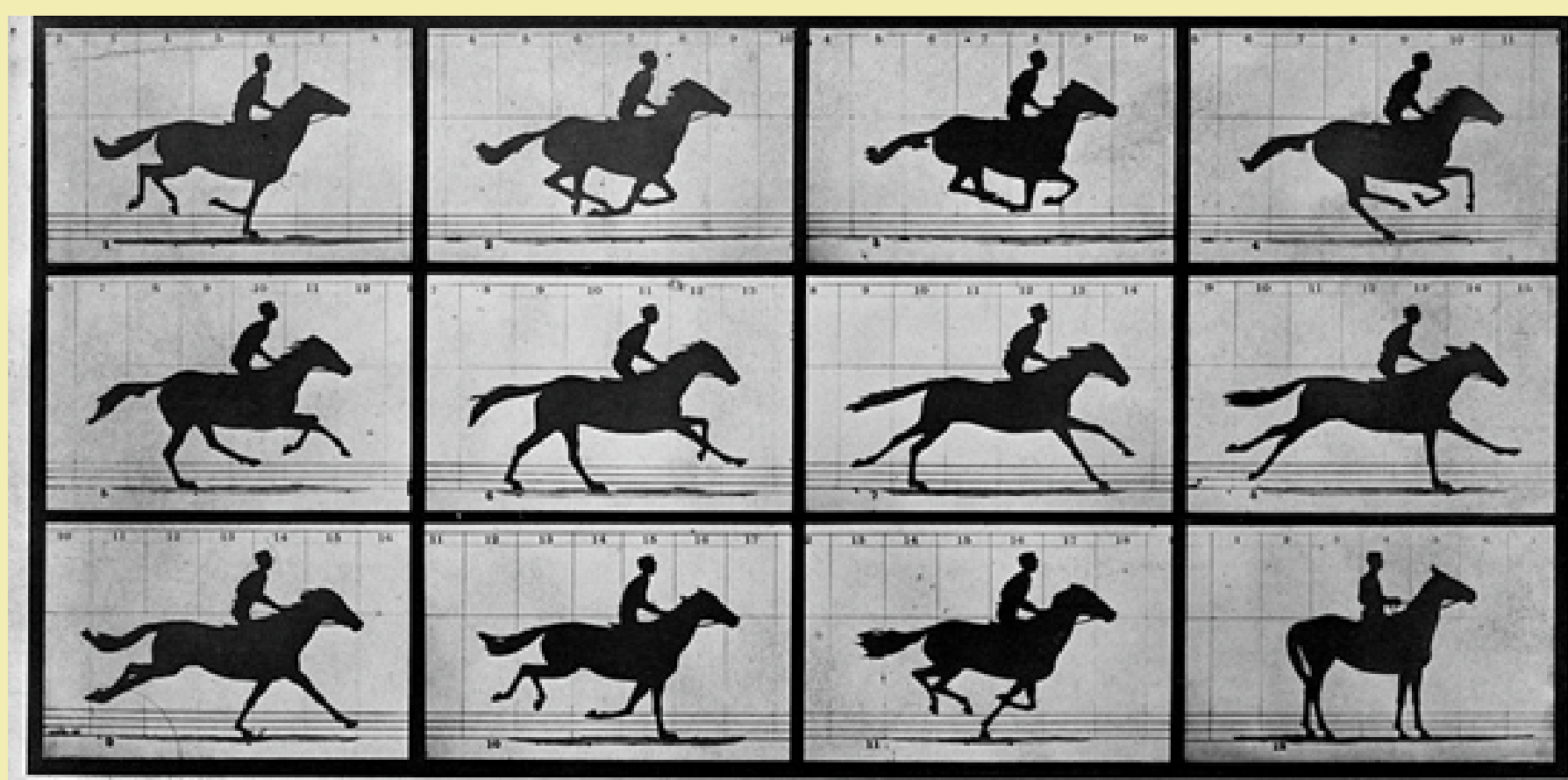
Until the 16th Century giraffes were known as 'camel-leopards' because people thought they were a cross between a camel and a leopard. Even today their scientific name is *Giraffa camelopardalis*!




Even when artists did know the animals they were drawing, they didn't always understand their anatomy well enough to do so accurately. A famous example of this is the 'galloping horse problem'; nobody could understand how horses legs moved when they ran, so they were painted in a 'flying gallop', as seen in the painting 'Baronet' by George Stubbs from 1794:



However, this all changed in 1878 when Eadweard Muybridge took a series of photographs and created the world's first ever short movie! The film perfectly captured how horses moved their legs as they ran.





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Now it's your turn to become an olden day artist and sketch out an animal based on description alone! The animal has been described in bite-sized chunks below. What could it be? Once you have finished, see the bottom of the next page to find out what animal is being described - no cheating!

This creature is the size of a small hound

It walks on four legs

It has large sharp claws on each foot

It is covered in short sandy-coloured hair

It has a long tail, the same length again as its body

Its tail has dark brown stripes

It has small round ears

It has a long flexible snout with a wet nose

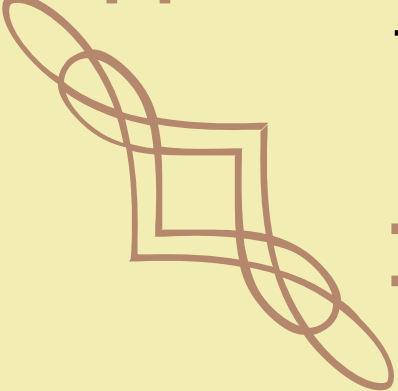
It has sharp teeth

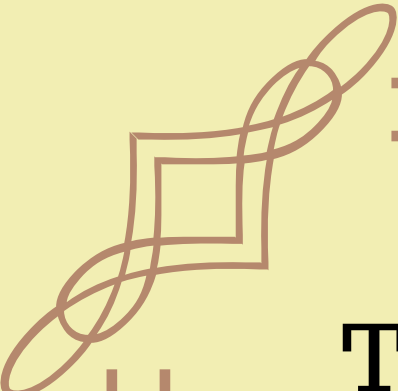
It has a mix of dark and pale markings around its eyes

Now check the answer at the bottom of the next page. How did you do? Does your drawing look anything like the animal it was meant to be?

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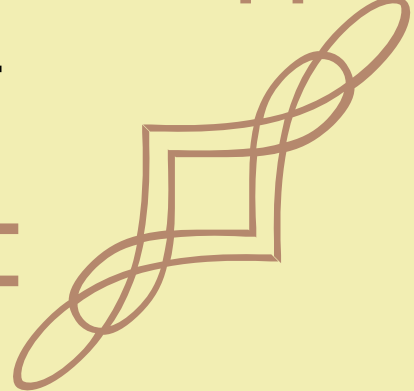


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This time you can try writing out your own descriptive notes. Imagine you are an olden day explorer who has seen an exotic animal and is making detailed notes so that an artist back home can draw an accurate depiction. Remember, you can't compare it to other exotic animals because no-one knows what they look like either! Once you have finished, you could even give your descriptive notes to a friend or family member and ask them to try drawing the animal you've written about. Does it look anything like the animal you were trying to describe?

Answer: Ring-tailed coati!



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