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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Fantastic Beasts at the Museum of Russian Icons

Lions and dragons and snakes, oh my!

June 3 – September 24, 2017



May 23, 2017 (Clinton, MA)—Natural and unnatural creatures will be the focus of the new exhibit at the Museum of Russian Icons. *Fantastic Beasts in Iconography*, on view from June 3 through September 24, 2017, will include 50 icons and artifacts that spotlight the origins, symbolism, stories, and myriad of representations of animals in icons. The family-friendly exhibit will include over 50 icons and artifacts along with six mounted dragon heads created by Worcester artist, Hilary Scott.

The exhibit will open on June 3 with **Fantastic Family Day**, featuring animal-themed crafts, snacks, scavenger hunts, face-painting and tours. All activities are free with admission.

For thousands of years, animals have appeared in art and in literature as symbols to help tell a story or to teach a moral lesson. Lists called bestiaries catalogued animals, along with illustrations and information about their characteristics and their symbolic meaning. Bestiaries were popular from the 1st century through the medieval period and ensured consistency in the way animals were portrayed in art. Though we now know that some of the animals recorded in bestiaries are imaginary, all of the animals catalogued were believed to be real at the time.

In Christian art, many animals had special symbolism related to the Bible. Their depiction was also a way that Christian beliefs could be portrayed secretly during times of persecution. This exhibition features icons from the Museum's collection that show the various ways animals and other beasts have been used in Russian Orthodox art. They illustrate Biblical stories, represent good and evil, connote particular saints, and even personify hell. A special highlight of this exhibition is the only known unicorn depicted in a Russian icon.

Along with standard animals such as doves, lions and donkeys, unnatural beasts also figure prominently in icons and mythology. Hellmouth is a representation of Hell depicted as the cavernous mouth of a monster. The image appeared in Anglo-Saxon art between the 5th and 11th centuries, and then spread throughout Europe, primarily in depictions of the Last Judgment. The Hellmouth can even be found in



popular culture: in the cult favorite television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Hellmouths—portals between heaven and hell—are found in California and Ohio. The countless types of dragons that appear in icons, myths and legends can generally be divided into two main categories: Eastern dragons and Western dragons. The distinction between the two types occurs both in depiction and in attributes. Eastern dragons typically appear as snake-like creatures that do not have wings. Western dragons are usually larger and more lizard-like than Eastern dragons. They tend to have rough scales or spikes, breathe fire, and almost always have wings and four legs.

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High resolution images are available on request.

Image: St. George with Scenes, 2011

RELATED ACTIVITIES:

Gallery Tour: “Unicorns and Dragons in Mythology and Iconography”

Saturday, July 8, 11:30am and 1:00pm

Tuesday August 8, 11:30am

Thursday, September 21, 1:30pm

Free with Museum admission, no preregistration required.

Museum Curator and CEO Kent Russell uses an art historical perspective to focus on the cross-cultural symbolism of mythical beasts in iconography and other art.

Kids Event: BBF (Best Beast Forever) Pajama Party

First Thursday: August 3, 6:00-8:00pm

Free

Kids, put on your PJs and bring along your favorite stuffed beast for games, Russian animal cartoons, a scavenger hunt in the *Fantastic Beasts in Iconography* exhibit, and animal-themed snacks. Suggested for ages 4-8. Children must be accompanied by an adult. (Admission for adults is also free.)

More about the Museum of Russian Icons

The Museum of Russian Icons inspires the appreciation and study of Russian culture by collecting and exhibiting icons and related objects; igniting the interest of national and international audiences; and offering interactive educational programs. The Museum serves as a leading center for research and scholarship through the Center for Icon Studies and other institutional collaborations. It is the only museum in the US dedicated to Russian icons, and it is the largest collection of icons outside of Russia.

Museum hours: Tue. - Fri., 11AM to 4PM, first Thursday of the month to 8PM with free admission after 4PM, Saturday and Sunday 11AM to 5PM, closed Mondays. Admission: Adults \$10, seniors (59+) \$7,

Students \$5, Children (3-7) \$5, Children under 3 Free. For more information please visit www.museumofrussianicons.org.