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DAMIEN HIRST. MYTH AND LEGEND

Speech on the occasion of the opening at the Nymphenburg Porcelain Manufactory

October 13, 2016

Your Royal Highnesses,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very grateful for the wonderful invitation extended to me to speak about the two sculptures of Damien Hirst.

You, esteemed guests, may be filled with wonder and amazement, indeed, with fascination vis-à-vis these two creatures *Myth* and *Legend*, the winged horse and the unicorn, which come from another world, a world of miracles and metamorphoses — a feast for the eyes tempting us to succumb to their enchantment.

Nor have those among you who are familiar with the Nymphenburg Manufactory and its figures, especially the animals that have been created at the master workshops here since the mid-eighteenth century — entirely by hand, with a lavishness, delicacy and elegance that is probably unparalleled in the world — seen such mythical creatures as these before.

They were created by the British artist Damien Hirst. He resurrects these magical creatures of legend in a never-before-seen aesthetic form. “I think mythical creatures are the way I’m going”, he said a few years ago and now here they stand:

The unicorn. Two millennia of Western science, philosophy, theology, visual arts and poetry revolved around this creature. It is not a curiosity of cultural history: early religious and natural history texts engaging in fabulation attested that the unicorn was “real”, until at some point it was both expelled from scientific inventories by scholars and exiled from theology, whereupon it disappeared into the woods, only to all the more celebrate its existence — sensual and mysteriously beautiful — in the imagination. It is a maverick, a symbiotic animal, chaste yet highly erotic. As you know, the unicorn has a habit of leaping into the laps of pure virgins: the image of the “Lady and the Unicorn” woven into a magnificent tapestry from

Flanders (c. 1500) is one of the most famous depictions obviously illustrating the “logic of love” (Jochen Hörisch, p. 217). And you may remember the hymnic call with which the sixteenth of Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* opens (1922): “O this is the beast who does not exist” [trans. Robert Hunter].

O yes it does! As does the winged horse, Pegasus, from Greek mythology, offspring of Poseidon, the God of the Sea, and Medusa, that is, of divine origin and hence immortal — and it is said that whenever it strikes his hoof to the earth, a spring bursts forth. An aircraft, a magic horse in the ancient Orient: an image of spiritual transcendence when Muhammed rides across the celestial spheres on the winged steed Buraq (Manfred Lurker, p. 156). Later, ever since the dawn of the modern era, that horse stood for nothing less than the allegory of creative poetry (Heinz Mode, p. 134). Such meanings of things are something we tend to have forgotten; we do still know of the things themselves and they are indelibly etched into our collective memory — but their meaning?! Damien Hirst is a master of reprocessing symbolic knowledge.

Myth and *Legend* — in white porcelain and partly painted — are skinned on one side to offer the beholder a view of the anatomy, the muscles and bones. “Beauty” thus mixes with “horror”. There is something surprisingly unsettling about this. Yet the aesthetic fascination lies precisely in this transgression. Damien Hirst translocates an instrument of science into the realm of art with its reference to the anatomical models of natural history, which represent nature on the one hand as we see it — from the outside — and on the other as we attempt to understand it: it is about perception and analysis. Treating the “untouchable”, “immortal” animals as mundane makes them, in a way, real: ideas, imaginations having blood and muscles! The artist brings them down to earth, without taking away any of their transcendence.

Damien Hirst created the original, 2010 versions of the two in this fashion: monumental in size and made of heavy bronze, they stood imposingly on pedestals in the gardens of Chatsworth House in Derbyshire. And with the artistic feature of exposing the body’s innards and the aestheticized coloration, *Myth* and *Legend* fits perfectly into a series of other sculptures by Hirst, which include the bronze male torso *Hymn* (1999–2005) and the Carrara marble angel (*The Anatomy of an Angel*, 2008) that have parts of the chest, abdomen and face exposed like the spine in a medieval *vanitas* figure; *Saint Barthólomew* (2006) who carries his

flayed dermis like a coat over his arm, or the famous pregnant *Virgin Mother* (2005) with its visible embryo.

Myth and Legend: it took two years to create them, in close cooperation of the artist and his assistants, who frequently came over from London to visit the workshops here, and the “mastery” of the Nymphenburg Manufactory. A highly complex work process — the fragile horn, the flaring wings of the horse, the preciousness of the painting! All the expertise and know-how of the manufactory went into the work and culminated in these two gems.

The horse is made up of eleven parts, the unicorn of ten; narrow pedestals plated with 25-carat fine gold support both — effortlessly, it seems. A high art of modelling, firing and assembling and then the painting... The objects are glazed only on the left side, which is the side that was then painted; the right side remains biscuit. Seven different shades of bright red as well as a yellow shade and a special black were developed in close coordination with Damien Hirst’s studio and Other Criteria in the laboratory of the manufactory. The selected red shades are reserved exclusively for the *Myth and Legend* edition and will no longer be used after that.

The artist himself seems to be “myth and legend”. He is one of the most prominent representatives of contemporary art — for one thing, of course, due to his spectacular works which are known well beyond the field of art: the shark in formaldehyde of *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991), his “spot, spin and butterfly paintings”, the *Medicine Cabinets* in their pharmaceutical aesthetic of neatly arrayed drugs and, of course, the diamond-encrusted human skull of *For the Love of God* (2007). Beauty, mystery, power, the macabre and wit characterize his painted and sculpted work. On the other hand, Hirst is an influential curator, already as a student with the legendary 1988 exhibition *Freeze* which, in addition to his work, showed that of his fellow students at Goldsmith College in London. And from the outset he has been a collector as well who recently inaugurated his own exhibition venue: the Newport Street Gallery with its fantastic spaces, whose inaugural exhibition was devoted to the British painter John Hoyland. And then there is his *wunderkammer* in which he has collected all kinds of objects from different periods and cultures and which, as he puts it, attests “to some of my most enduring interests: the relationship between science and art, natural history, mortality and our attempts to comprehend death”. Damien Hirst is an extremely successful entrepreneur, as well as a patron

and promotor of other artists, as evidenced by the program of yet another one of his ventures, *Other Criteria*.

As you know, there is a lot of sensation and spectacle surrounding Damien Hirst. Still, his artistic work explores existential themes with great seriousness: it is about life and death, love and hope. Even the iridescent Spin Paintings featuring “butterflies” have titles that refer to spiritual sources such as the Psalms from the Holy Scripture. And is not the butterfly the transformed human soul in search of reincarnation? Hirst is conscious of the pathos and pictorial spell, the charismatic qualities, the “Dynamis”, the “supernatural power” (Hans Belting) of objects. And so he sometimes transforms actual animals, sharks, zebras, piglets and calf — real, dead, floating in glass tanks — into mythical ones by appending an attribute to them: the “Golden Horns” to the *Black Sheep* (2009), for instance, or 18-carat gold horns and hooves to the *Golden Calf* (2008). There is Hirst’s belief in the magic of art, its healing power: “I’ve always loved the idea of art (maybe), you know, curing people.” And when drawing on the sources of myth, religion and science, he does so “to find a path through the darkness”.

Myth and Legend: I am too curious to know what they will do to you at home, in the private sphere — what it is like to live with them. Away from the monumentality, the heroic presentation in public space towards a smaller, intimate format: like household deities, good spirits, magical, for, as George Steiner said about the original: “They still carry in them the *pulse* of the distant *source*“.

Thank you for your kind attention.