"Simia is a Greek word meaning ‘with squashed nostrils.’ Hence, we call monkeys this, because they have turned-up noses and a hideous countenance with wrinkles lewdly puffing like bellows.” From this description in a medieval bestiary, one would hardly recognize the suave and elegant group of animals that decorate both the inside and outside of the fifteenth-century enameled beaker called the “monkey cup” (Figures 1, 2, 8) at The Cloisters. The same bestiary, however, goes on to say: “They are called simia in the Latin language because people notice great similitude to human reason in them,” and this statement is peculiarly appropriate, because the monkeys on the cup are indulging in very human actions. All around the outside, a group of monkeys rob a peddler asleep in the woods and then proceed to cavort among the trees, playing with their booty. On the inside, two monkeys, standing upright like human beings, are in the forest on a hunting expedition. It looks as though the two are working as a team, for one stalks the prey, blowing his hunting horn as his hounds pursue the chase, while the other slyly approaches from the opposite direction and aims his bow and arrow at the stags that are being driven toward him.

1. The monkey cup. Flemish-Burgundian, 1425-1450. Silver, silver-gilt, and enamel, height 7½ inches. The Cloisters Collection, 52.50. The cup was made in two pieces, and unscrews at the lower gilded band.
2. The monkey cup
In further pursuing the “nature” of the monkey, statements in medieval bestiaries range from such simple descriptions as “a monkey has no tail”—and the monkeys on the cup are tailless, like the Barbary ape, the species most familiar to medieval Europe—to more complicated stories such as the following two concerning the hunting of the ape, both stemming from classical antiquity. Because the monkey is like man and imitates him, the hunter, when wanting to catch one and knowing the monkey is watching, puts on a pair of boots weighted with lead, then takes them off and goes out of sight. Naturally, the monkey approaches and, copying the hunter, puts on the boots himself; when the hunter returns, the monkey can escape neither by running nor by climbing a tree because the boots are too heavy.

The other story tells of the mother monkey: when she has twins, she loves the one child and hates the other. Hence, when pursued by the hunter, she claps the one she loves in her arms and carries the one she hates “round her neck pickaback”... so when she is exhausted and can no longer run or wishes to climb a tree, “she has to throw away the one she loves and carries the one she hates willy-nilly.”

In addition to compiling the natural history of animals, the bestiaries often interpret beasts in terms of Christian allegory, and other medieval writers also used animals symbolically to illustrate moral teachings. From the two stories about the hunting of the ape, for instance, the monkey became the sinner, pursued and at last captured by the devil. Through the mother ape, who was overloving of her “treasure” and was compared to the “impious who now embrace pleasures and riches,” the monkey became associated with the avaricious rich and with riches in general, particularly ill-gotten ones. Eventually, through similar moralizations, the monkey was accused of being, among other things, vain, curious, and foolish, and in this last capacity he became a sort of court jester of the animal kingdom. The animals, particularly those on the outside of the cup, live up well to these characteristics. They are very much involved with ill-gotten gains, greedily making off with the peddler’s wares. They study their booty with obvious curiosity: one admires himself in a mirror, while others perform on musical instruments and show off brazenly as they swing through the trees, their antics recalling those of the court jester as well as those of the live trained monkeys who often accompanied the medieval minstrel.

A story of monkeys robbing a peddler does not seem to occur in either classical or medieval literature. H. W. Janson, in his Apes and Ape Lore, has suggested that the figure of the peddler may have evolved from that of the hunter who first used boots, and later possibly mirrors and other attractive trinkets like those in a peddler’s pack, to trap the monkeys, but a hunter who succumbed to sleep while waiting and thus enabled the monkeys to turn the tables on him. In a scene on the base of the cup, boots figure prominently, for one monkey has turned one of the peddler’s boots upside down and is looking up into it; another monkey holds his nose, while one in the tree has put on the other boot.

The whole idea was obviously an appealing one, and the fact that the apes rob a peddler seems particularly fitting, because peddlers were traditionally endowed with many of the same vices as the monkeys, and was, in his own way, the court jester of the merchant world—a slick showman, a bit of a trickster, not always acquiring his wares by honest means, and plying them with enticing words without too much regard to the quality of the merchandise. Judging from his reputation, given this particular situation, the majority of people would have been on the side of the monkeys.

The earliest known representation of the scene is in a series of marginal drawings in a fourteenth-century manuscript of the Decretals of Gregory IX, written in Italy but illuminated in England (Figure 3). At first, the monkeys watch a peddler resting underneath a tree; then, when he is definitely asleep, they open up his pack and start taking things out;
3. The monkeys and the peddler. Marginal illustrations in the Smithfield Decretals, English, xiv century. Page 18 x 11¾ inches. British Museum, ms Royal 10 E. IV, f. 149, 149v, 150, 150v, 151. One of the monkeys is holding a tankard in its paw, suggesting the cause of the peddler’s slumber.
the next three scenes show the monkeys enjoying their loot: one plays on a flute, one in the tree looks in a mirror, and several dress up in the peddler’s clothes.

The theme was also familiar in the fourteenth century in the Low Countries, for around 1375, under Albert of Bavaria, count of Holland and Hainaut, a series of frescoes were carried out by the painter “Loys” in the count’s castle, known as La Salle-le-Comte, in Valenciennes. One scene is described only as *merchier as singes*—“merchant with monkeys”—which certainly sounds as though it showed the thieving monkeys.

Although there is probably no direct connection between this fresco and an *entremet* (a sort of pageant) presented in the following century at the court of the dukes of Burgundy, the two houses were allied by marriage and, after 1433, the lands of the counts of Holland and Hainaut belonged to Burgundy. As part of the extravagant, week-long festivities in 1468 in celebration of the marriage of Duke Charles the Bold to the English princess, Margaret of York, the story of the monkeys robbing the peddler was acted by people costumed as monkeys. It was described in the memoirs of Olivier de la Marche, maître d’hôtel and captain of the guard of Charles the Bold—who was also one of the persons in charge of arrangements for the wedding festivities. A huge tower had been erected in the banquet hall, a tower that reached all the way to the ceiling; from the lower gate of this tower came a singe so true to life that the company was amazed. Then followed another and another until there were seven in all: of these, one was a lady monkey. They were very graceful in their turns and movements; they found a *mercier* sleeping near his goods, and one monkey stole his flute and tambourine and began to play, and another took a mirror, and another a comb, and in the end they left the peddler with only a few possessions. The monkey with the tambourine played a *morisque* (evidently a kind of morris dance), and dancing this *morisque* they went all around the tower and returned whence they came. The description immediately brings to mind the decoration of the Cloisters cup—such details as the monkey at the top with the drum and flute, the one with the comb and mirror, and, in addition, the allover effect of the lithe, graceful monkeys almost dancing around the exterior.

By far the closest parallels to the design of the monkey cup are two almost identical Florentine engravings (Figures 4, 5), dating from around 1470 to 1490, which echo its decoration very closely. The poses of the sleeping peddler and of the monkeys who have removed his hat and appear to be picking fleas from his hair are similar; although the peddler’s purse is still around his waist in the prints, on the cup one monkey has already removed both belt and purse, and sits in the tree holding a coin that he has taken from it. The monkeys looking into the upside-down boot are almost exactly alike in the cup and prints; in all three, there is a monkey playing a drum and flute at the top of the tree, monkeys looking in mirrors and combing their hair and hanging from branches, and there are the same sort of belts, purses, and other trinkets stolen from the same kind of wicker basket. At the top of the cup there is a small rectangular object with tassels at the lower corners, on which are rings, flowers, and round golden objects, probably bells; a similar banner appears in one print. If this occurred only on the cup, one might wonder hopefully whether it was some sort of badge that could help to identify the owner; but if it is compared to Figure 6, a monkey wearing such a placard around his neck, it would appear that this might be a peddler’s sign or his sample card.

There is one major difference: in the prints, the peddler sleeps at the trunk of a real tree while, on the cup, the tree turns into a pattern of delicate leaves, like scrollwork. A detail in one of the prints that is not included in the cup gives a new insight into the monkey-peddler relationship, for an empty jug lies beside the peddler’s hat. An Italian inscription at the bottom of the other print is even more explicit: “Sleep fast, master pieterlin, we shall empty your purse and your basket...
4, 5. The monkeys and the peddler. Italian (Florence), about 1470-1490. Engravings, the one on the left hand-colored, heights 11\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 8\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches and 10\(\frac{3}{8}\) x 7\(\frac{5}{8}\) inches. Topkapi Serayi Museum, Istanbul, H. 2153, f.145; British Museum

6. Monkey as a peddler. Marginal illustration in a Book of Hours, English, 1300-1325. Page 6\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 4 inches. British Museum, Harlean ms 6563, f. 100
so that you may travel light. May your quick hand and the wine in your head guide you.”

It seems that the peddler on the cup, too, is in a drunken stupor, for the monkeys obviously have no fear of waking him up, and are actually in the process of taking off his clothes.

The prints are not only several decades later in date, but rather crude and simplified versions of the theme on the outside of the monkey cup. So the prints were definitely not the source of the cup’s design. Were they inspired by the cup itself or one similar to it? An entry in the 1464 inventory of Piero de Medici gives some support to the possibility, for the Medici owned a beaker with a silver-gilt foot and cover that was completely enameled inside and out with a “fiera” of monkeys. The word fiera has been variously translated as “fair,” “farce,” and “market,” and any of these could describe the type of activity our monkeys are engaged in. According to the inventory, the monkeys were enameled in white on a blue ground. Our cup’s design, to be sure, is enameled primarily in variations of white and slightly bluish gray, but against a background that gives an initial impression of being black rather than blue. Under certain lights, however, the background – particularly in the interior – does seem dark blue.

The consensus today is that the cup was made around 1425 to 1450 in a workshop in the Low Countries for the Burgundian court. According to their expense accounts, by the late fourteenth century the dukes of Burgundy were ordering from a number of Flemish goldsmiths, and though they still patronized Parisian workshops, as the fifteenth century progressed they tended to order more and more from goldsmiths of such cities as Bruges, Brussels, and Ghent. An inventory made for Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy after the death of his father in 1467 lists various objects in silver, silver-gilt, and enamel that sound as if they had decoration similar to the cup’s. Several luxurious vessels with enameled lids appear: on one lid was a monkey, on another a woman riding a bear; another cover had strange beasts, and another had “personages” enameled in white on blue.

There was also an item described as a goblet of silver-gilt worked inside and out: “inside is a child seated on a monkey and other personages, and outside, personages with pairs of herons.”

The fact that the monkey cup or one very much like it belonged to the Medici presents no problem, nor do the two Italian engravings, because there were close connections between Flanders and Italy at this time, from both an artistic and an economic point of view. For instance, the Burgundian dukes ordered many rich Italian textiles from Italian merchants in Bruges. The cup mentioned in the Medici inventory could have been a gift from some prosperous Florentine resident in Flanders, or the Medici could well have afforded – and would probably have been eager to import – such a fascinating object. As for the prints, the use of pieterlin in the inscription instead of an Italian version of the name indicates that the engraver knew, or at least assumed, that the idea originated north of the Alps.

The technique used for the monkey cup is referred to as painted enamel, for the enamel was applied freely, like paint, over a metal base without the aid of cloisons or grooves, or even the incised patterns used in earlier transparent basse-taille enamels. In the case of the cup, opaque enamel was used, with the dark background laid over a lightly scored silver base, and the design painted over it. This method of enameling was evidently something of an innovation for the time, a forerunner of the techniques developed in Venice and Limoges in the late fifteenth century.

There is a relatively small group of painted enamels still in existence that have been related to the monkey cup. Of these, three are strikingly similar – a medallion (Figure 15) and two spoons (Figures 9, 10). Some of the others, like the beaker in Figure 12, are decorated with birds and animals; in these the creatures are reminiscent of the birds and animals on the monkey cup and spoons, but aside from this they give a very different overall impression.

Like the cup, the three closely related ob-
8. Interior of the monkey cup

LEFT:

9, 10. Two spoons, Netherlandish-Burgundian, first half of the XV century. Painted enamel, lengths 6 3/8 and 9 1/2 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Helen and Alice Colburn Fund, 51.2472; Victoria and Albert Museum, C 2-1935

11. Beaker ("pokal") and detail. Painting in Das Hallesche Heiltum, 1520s. Height of painting 13 3/4 inches. Schlossbibliothek, Aschaffenburg, Germany, MS 14, f. 329v
jects are enameled on both sides, primarily in grisaille on a dark background variously described as black, dark blue, or midnight blue. One other piece that seems very close to the monkey cup is a covered “pokal” (Figure 1), of which a painting and description were included in an inventory of the treasury at Halle made for Cardinal Albrecht of Brandenburg in the 1520s. Like the cup in the Medici inventory, it is described as being enameled in white on blue; this time, however, the blue was qualified as a dark or dull blue.

Almost a trademark of this group is a distinctive motif enameled on the inside of the monkey cup: a beautiful white and gold stylized cloud band from which issue both golden rays and drops. It appears on the medallion and spoons, and although no clouds can be seen in the painting of the pokal, there are the same rays and drops. The group is united by other similarities, such as the cup’s cliffs and graceful little clumps of trees, enameled in golden brown and gray, which also occur on the spoons and the pokal. The head of the peddler, too, is almost an older edition of that of the Christ child on the medallion: the same curly hair, large ears, heavy-lidded eyes, and broad nose and chin; and the same stippled building up of enamel was used to create texture in the peddler’s clothes and those worn by the man on the reverse of the medallion.

Another factor that sets the decoration of the cup, spoons, and pokal apart from other painted enamels of this period is that their decoration is narrative rather than decorative. On one spoon (Figure 10), a monkey, a close relative of those on the cup, rides a stag; on the other (Figure 9), a fox preaches to a flock of geese, as another fox sneaks out from under the pulpit and seizes the neck of one of the listeners. In the top enameled band of the pokal, a naked lady, possibly a wild woman or even a representation of Venus, is riding a fantastic animal resembling a lion in pursuit of a stag, as a monkey grabs her spear; around the base a naked woman is again seen, with what appear to be hairy wild men or wodehouses. These scenes have much the same sort of down-to-earth, popular appeal as that of the monkey and peddler, and this type of subject evidently delighted the nobility as well as the lower classes. Such rather lascivious details as the disrobing of the drunken peddler, or the goings-on hinted at by the nude woman and wild men—particularly when presented as elegantly as on the enamels—must have been a welcome change for court circles from the more traditional episodes of romantic chivalry and themes of courtly love.

At least one of the vessels described in the duke of Burgundy’s inventory sounds as if it represented both the type of decoration on the monkey cup and court scenes: the inside was worked with “a child seated on a monkey and other personages, and outside, personages with pairs of herons.” The description of this cup’s exterior could also be applied to another enameled beaker of the same shape as the monkey cup, but known today only through a later painting by Roger de Gaignières (Figure 13). Compare the vigor—almost rowdiness—of the monkey cup’s decoration with this typical courtly scene: elegant men and women stroll amid little clumps of trees like those on our cup. This decoration is very much in the International Style, which reflected the taste of court circles throughout western Europe in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

Although the monkey-cup group of enamels (except the medallion) break away from the International Style in subject matter, stylistically they have several features that reflect it. Their animals, for example, are like those in the sketchbooks of the Italians Giovannini di Grassi and Pisanello, and the cliffs and clumps of trees appear many times in manuscripts and paintings of this earlier period.

The medallion has been associated with two of the most beautiful manuscripts of the Franco-Netherlandish manifestation of the International Style, for the Virgin and Child has been compared to miniatures in both the Belles Heures and the Très Riches Heures, illuminated around 1410 to 1415 by the three Limbourg brothers. The face and hair of the peddler also recall the rather fleshy faces and carefully curled hair of some of the men in the Belles


16. St. George and the Dragon. From the Belles Heures of the Duke of Berry, illuminated by the Limbourg brothers, Franco-Netherlandish, about 1410. Page 9\(\frac{3}{8}\) x 6\(\frac{3}{8}\) inches. The Cloisters Collection, 54.1.1, f. 167

17. Knight, by the Master of the Mount of Calvary (active during the first half of the XV century). Engraving, 6\(\frac{3}{4}\) x 3\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. British Museum
Heures (Figure 16), and the leafy scrollwork on the monkey cup and the back of one of the spoons is reminiscent of the gold-leaf tracery in the backgrounds of illuminations in both manuscripts.

In style the enamels also recall Northern engravings, especially earlier ones still very much in the International tradition, and believed to be of Franco-Burgundian origin. For example, an engraving of a knight (Figure 17) by the Master of the Mount of Calvary suggests in an exaggerated way the face and curled hair of St. George in the Belles Heures (Figure 16), and also resembles the peddler and the medallion's Christ child and bearded man. An engraving by the Master of the Gardens of Love (Figure 14) has the same sort of birds and tree clumps as the monkey-cup group, and the same elegant costumes and general atmosphere as the beaker in the Gaignières drawing.

It is interesting that the technique of making impressions on paper from engraved metallic plates was emerging in Europe at just about the time the monkey cup was made. In fact, some of the first engravers were probably also goldsmiths. The scrollwork patterns of the cup's background are similar to the allover patterns frequently incised on metalwork. An engraving (Figure 18) by Master E. S. (who evidently was also a goldsmith) has a scrollwork background against which, riding a unicorn, is a naked lady very much like the lady on the pokal. The animals, birds, and wild people on the painted enamels are also like those represented on playing cards of the fifteenth century, engraved by Master E. S. and others.

Some engravings very probably served as goldsmiths' patterns: the stiff animals on the beaker in Figure 12, for example, could have been derived from such a source. But the more sinuous, fluid quality of the decoration on the monkey cup suggests that its designer used an original drawing or even a miniature painting. One cannot help wondering whether it may have been the goldsmith-enameler himself who created the design of the monkey cup, as well as carrying out its decoration with such amazing technical skill.
NOTES AND REFERENCES

A sequence of fox scenes in the English fourteenth-century Decretals have been identified as scenes relating to the Roman de Renard. This tale recounts how Renard (the fox) is called to cure the lion, King Noble, and among the things he uses for this is a special herb that he had stolen from a pilgrim sleeping under a tree in the forest. It has been suggested that there may have been some oral tradition, in England at least, connecting Renard to the monkeys and the peddler, a tradition that was echoed much later in a popular seventeenth-century literary composition. If such a connection was intended in the Decretals, it would seem to be more of a spur-of-the-moment idea, for Renard is shown curing the king, not robbing the pilgrim; furthermore, the monkey-and-peddler scenes are widely separated from the fox scenes, while other scenes of an episodic nature seem to be together.


Lilian M. C. Randall, Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1966).


19. Detail of the monkey cup