

# Abstract

The master's thesis *Ermine as Symbol and its Resonance in the Fine Arts* focuses on the origin and development of ermine symbolism and its application in the European environment between antiquity and the end of the 16th century. The choice of the ermine as the subject of research arose from the dearth of systematic inquiry into both the symbolism of this particular animal, as well as its presence in the visual arts, which is rare compared to that of some other animals.

From the uncertain identification of the ermine in classical sources and its possible confusion with other mustelids, the originally ambivalent symbolism of the ermine crystallized during the Middle Ages: the ermine came to represent integrity and moral purity. The ermine in its snow-white coat carried the allegory of these qualities and, in its significance, it also gradually became a political symbol and a representational strategy demonstrating social status and power.

The main purpose of the present work, besides evaluating existing knowledge related to this topic, is primarily to synthesize and present the interpretation of the ermine as a symbol not only in its full breadth, but also in all its period and local iterations and transformations. The basis of this study is the location, description and comparison of the connections between literary sources and their reverberations in artistic production, heraldry and emblematics. The ermine is traced in many of its forms: the "living" animal, the animal as a model for jewelry, amulet, badge, the animal as part of family crests and fur. In the second phase, the work aims to understand period thinking about the world on a symbolic level, in particular the choice of symbols used for personal representation, which manifested in important ways, for example, in the association of the ermine with the exclusive environment of the European royal courts. In the final section, the thesis focuses on two case studies to explore how the meaning of the ermine influences the interpretations of Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with an Ermine* and Vittore Carpaccio's *Young Knight in a Landscape*.

Keywords:

animals, imagery, iconography, symbolism, emblematics, heraldry, ermine, weasel, basilisk, Order of the Ermine, Duchy of Brittany, Leonardo da Vinci, Vittore Carpaccio