

# From *Kalīla wa Dimna* to La Fontaine: Travelling through Fables

## Young Visitor's Guide



اللوفا أبو ظبي  
LOUVRE ABU DHABI



{BnF}

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## Introduction

Discover an exhibition about animal *fables*, told through words and illustrations.

Enjoy these stories that help us share important values, traditions, and morals between one generation and another.

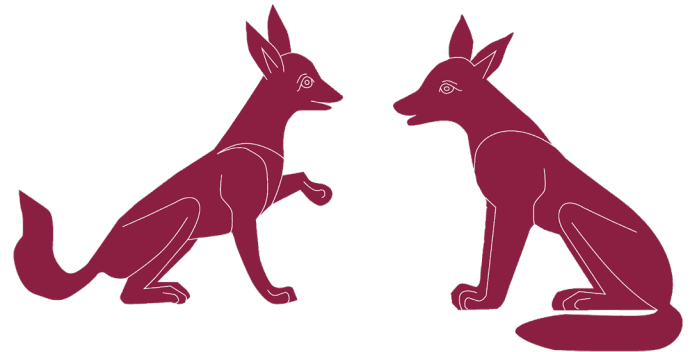
Learn about the various traditions: from the Persian scholar Ibn al-Muqaffa's *Kalīla wa Dimna* in the East, to the *fables* of the Greek storyteller Aesop, and the famous French *fabulist* Jean de La Fontaine's adaptations of both traditions in the West.

Travel through time to explore the origins of these *fables*, and conclude your journey by discovering their influences within works of art.

## Instructions

1. Navigate the exhibition by following the two *jackals* Kalīla and Dimna, by using the symbol below.
2. Use the numbered cards to guide you through each step of your journey.
3. Flip each card over to uncover fun facts and activities

**Come along... and let's begin the journey!**



## Words to know

**Anatomy:** The scientific study of the body.

**Ayyubid dynasty:** A medieval Islamic empire that controlled parts of the Middle East and North Africa, founded by Saladin in 1171.

**Contemporary:** Existing or happening now, and therefore seeming modern.

**Fable:** A short story that tells a moral truth, often with animals as characters.

**Fabulist:** Someone who writes fables.

**Jackal:** A wild dog-like animal that lives in Africa and southern Asia.

**Manuscript:** An original handwritten copy of a book or article.

**Mosaic:** A pattern or picture made using small pieces of coloured stone or glass.

**Quay:** (pronounced "key") A long structure, usually built of stone, to which boats are tied up.

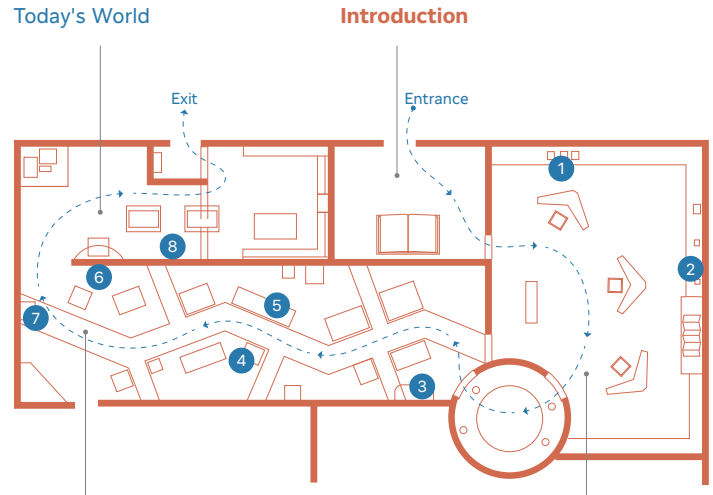
**Roundel:** A circular decoration piece.

**Sanskrit:** An ancient language of India.

## Exhibition Map

This map shows the artworks' location within the exhibition.

**Section 3:**  
The Fables in  
Today's World



**Section 2:**  
Telling Stories

**Section 1:**  
Travelling Tales

## Section 1: Travelling Tales

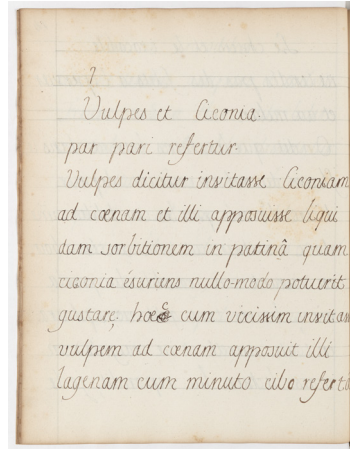
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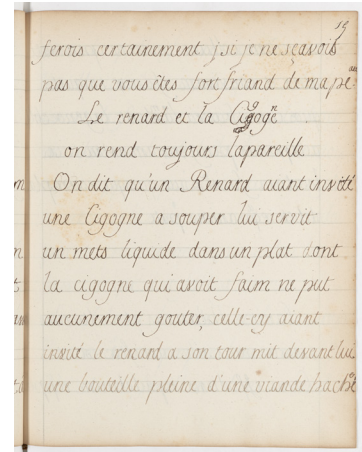
Ibn al-Muqaffa' (c.720-756), *Kalīla wa Dimna* (Arabic), The Two Jackals *Kalīla and Dimna*, Syria or Egypt (?), c. 1220, Manuscript on paper, pigments and gold, Paris, BnF, Manuscript Department, Arabe 3465, f. 48r, © Bibliothèque nationale de France

## Section 1: Travelling Tales

2



Louis XV (1710–1774), *Versions du roi Louis XV écrites de sa main*, [Versions by king Louis XV written in his own hand] (French and Latin), France, 1722, Manuscript on paper, Paris, BnF, Manuscript Department, Français, 2325, f.14v-15, © Bibliothèque nationale de France



This *manuscript* is the oldest surviving illustrated copy of *Kalīla wa Dimna* in the world!

It comes from a book translated to Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa', created almost 700 years ago, during the *Ayyubid* dynasty.

### Look

Now take a close look at the two *jackals* in the illustrations. They are Kalīla and Dimna, the main characters who live at the court of the lion, the ruler of the country. Can you figure out which *jackal* is Kalīla, and which is Dimna?

(Kalīla is red and Dimna is blue)

### Imagine

Use your imagination to create a dialogue between the two *jackals*. What do you think they might be discussing in this *manuscript*?

### Did you know?

Where do you think the stories of Kalīla and Dimna come from? It is believed that they have their roots in the *Panchatantra*, an ancient Indian collection of animal *fables* written in the classical language of *Sanskrit*.

*Fables* were stories used to teach good behaviour and values. For instance, consider the *fable* shown here, "The Fox and the Stork", which teaches us about the importance of fairness.

This story was carefully copied by the king of France, Louis XV, when he was twelve years old.

### Look

Notice that Louis XV wrote in two different languages. Can you recognise them?

(French and Latin)

### Imagine

Like this story, every *fable* contains a lesson for the reader. Think about what lesson you would want to teach your friends or younger sibling if you were to write your own *fable*.

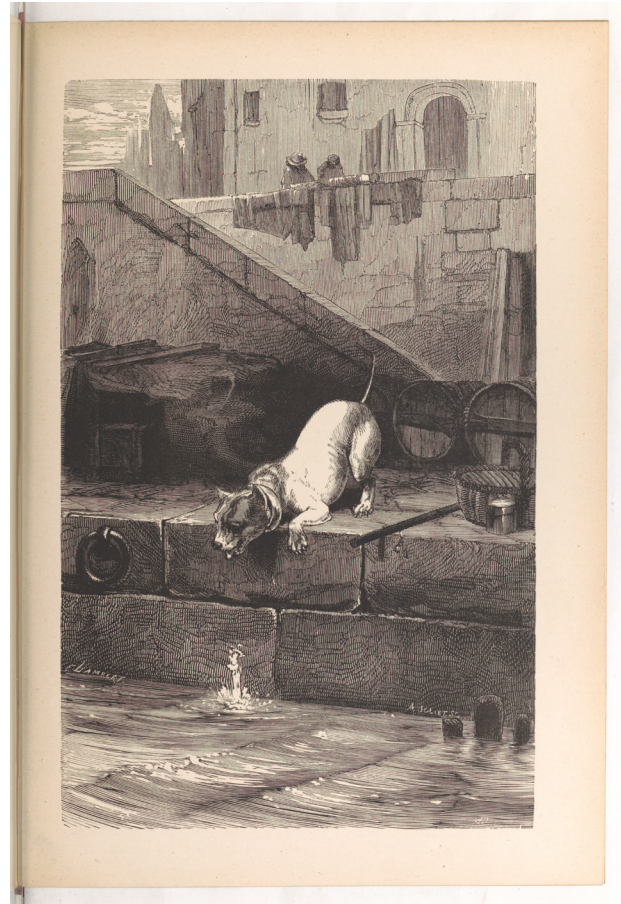
### Did You Know?

Even though French was the main language for the kings of France, they also had to learn Latin as the official language for religious ceremonies, law and education.





Roundel with a lion attacking a bull, Iran, 17th century, ceramic mosaic, Musée du Louvre, Arts de l'Islam, MAO 2026, © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Claire Tabbagh / Collections Numériques



Eugène Lambert (1825–1900), illustrator, *Vingt Fables de La Fontaine* [Twenty Fables by La Fontaine] (French), The Dog Who Drops His Prey for His Reflection, France, 1903, Printed work, Paris, BnF, Department of Literature and Art, 4-YE-228, p. 39, © Bibliothèque nationale de France

In *Kalīla wa Dimna*, there's a special story about a lion and a bull.

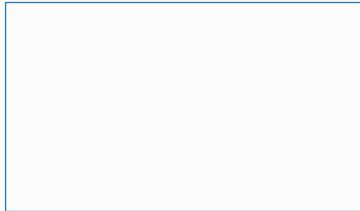
While many of these stories are drawn or illustrated on paper, this one is different because it's made from ceramic, which makes it interesting.

### Look

Observe the brightly coloured details in the artwork. Do you think it was created as one large piece or put together using different smaller parts?

### Draw

Picture making your very own *mosaic roundel*; what colours and animals would you choose for its design? Draw it below.



### Did you know?

Between 500 and 700 years ago, in the city of Isfahan, Iran, people used complete tiles to decorate large buildings quickly.

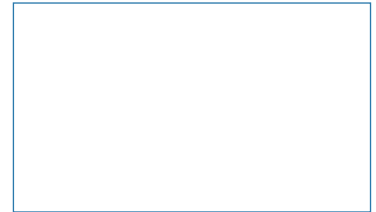
“The Dog who Dropped his Prey into the River” is a true classic written by La Fontaine. It is a story about a dog blinded by greed, who drops the bone he is holding to try to grab the one he sees in his reflection. The tale teaches us the importance of not being greedy.

### Look

See how the illustrator Eugène Lambert crafted this full-page engraving using light and shadow to highlight the dog's posture. The way it is placing its paw on the *quay's* edge invites us to imagine what happens next in the story.

### Draw

Try to capture the feeling of suspense and draw the next scene. Imagine what might have happened.



### Did you know?

This *fable* is the only one included by both Ibn al-Muqaffa' and Aesop in their collections. However, La Fontaine decided to create his own version, taking inspiration from Aesop.



Ibn al-Muqaffa' (c. 720–756), *Kalila wa Dimna* (Arabic), The Hare and the Elephant, Egypt, 1761, Manuscript on paper, pigments, Paris, BnF, Manuscript Department, Arabe 3475, f.125v-126, © Bibliothèque nationale de France



Jean-Baptiste Oudry (1686–1755), draughtsman, Bonaventure Louis Prévost (c. 1733–1816), engraver, La Fontaine, *Fables* (French), The Two Adventurers and the Wondrous Writ, France, 1755–1759, Etching and burin, Paris, BnF, Department of Prints and Photography, DB-23(B,2)-PET FOL, © Bibliothèque nationale de France



Another masterpiece depicting the story “The Hare and the Elephant” teaches us the importance of choosing wise advisers.

This illustration is a perfect example of an adaptation of original images. It was made in Egypt 250 years ago and took inspiration from two different styles of painting originating from Arab countries and Iran, respectively.

**Look**

The painter of this page used the technique of stencilling, which was helpful to accurately copy detailed drawings onto different surfaces. Notice how similar the hares and elephants are to each other.

**Write**

Think about the characters of this story and try to identify their main personality traits. List them below.

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**Did you know?**

*Kalīla wa Dimna* is a book with eighteen chapters. Each chapter contains interconnected stories that are nestled inside each other. The story of “The Hare and the Elephant”, for example, was within one of the main chapter stories. This ancient storytelling technique can be found across cultures around the world.

This beautifully illustrated leaflet teaches us an important lesson about facing challenges, told through the story of two knights. One refuses a difficult task while the other accepts it – only to become king, much to his surprise.

**Look**

Observe the detailed picture by the famous French artist Jean-Baptiste Oudry, known for his realistic drawings of animals based on their *anatomy* and behaviour. Can you identify the animal in the story, and why do you think it was chosen?

**Act**

Make this story into a quick play. Get a friend to join you and decide which knight each of you will be, then act it out!

**Did you know?**

Did you know that Jean-Baptiste Oudry created a total of 275 drawings through his collaboration with La Fontaine for his beautiful collection of *fables*. Now that’s a lot of drawings!



"Au Bon Marché" promotional card, The Milk Maid and the Milk Jug, France, c. 1910, Chromolithograph, Paris, BnF, Department of Prints and Photography, TC MAT-1 (A,2414)-BOITE TOPO, © Bibliothèque nationale de France



Badly Dalloul (born 1986), *Kalifa wa Dimna*, 2016, drawing and collage on archival paper, Paris, Artist's Collection, © Badly Dalloul



In the 1800s, illustrations from La Fontaine's *Fables*, like this promotional card featuring the story "The Milk Maid and the Milk Jug", became part of people's everyday lives.

*Fables* started to appear on advertisements, cards and even board games.

### Look

Notice the tab at the bottom of the card. By pulling it, the reader would reveal the ending of the *fable*. **How do you think this story ended?**

### Make

If you were to transform a *fable* into an everyday object, what form might it take, and why? When you get home, challenge yourself to create this object.

### Did you know?

Just like this beautiful artwork, Le Bon Marché, which was the first department store in Paris, ordered a set of special cards around 1910. These cards showed interesting stories and could change or do different things when people interacted with them. All this was purely for the enjoyment of their customers!

Like many *contemporary* artists today, Bady Dalloul, a young French Syrian artist, was inspired by the world of *fables*.

During his childhood, he would spend his summer holidays in Damascus, Syria, listening to the tales of *Kalīla wa Dimna* told by his grandparents.

He would later take these stories and rewrite them, imagining the setting as Japan in the 1950s. This can be seen in his artistic practice today.

### Look

Look closely at the displayed panels. The artist used different techniques within his artworks; **what types can you identify?**

(Collage and felt-tip/pencil drawings)

### Imagine

During your journey, you have learned about different *fables* written by various *fabulists*, and we hope these have inspired you with their creativity expressed through words and illustrations.

Just like Bady Dalloul, pick your favourite *fable* and imagine it within a different story setting. Where would it be, and why?

### Did you know?

During the artist's first trip to Japan, Dalloul found that in this foreign land, he was able to recapture his childhood. This has inspired multiple works of art.

# Draw

Today, *fables* can also be seen in other artistic forms such as films, theatre, dance and picture books. At home, create a comic strip of a story inspired by a moral within this exhibition, using Kalīla and Dimna as your main characters.

Don't forget to share it by tagging us [@louvrebudhabi](#)

