Animals are one of the oldest pictorial motifs – known already in prehistoric times. The exhibition presents visions of animals and nature from the 16th century to today. The artworks convey the relationship humans have had with animals and with nature through the ages. How do we perceive these works today? As humans, we also look at ourselves through animals. In the western worldview, animals and nature are viewed as something that exists for humans. In reality, humans are merely a part of the whole.

The works in the exhibition examine the journey of humans in and as a part of nature. Understanding co-existence helps to preserve living space both for humans and for all other creatures.

Near
Artists have striven to understand reality and the greatest secrets of the visible world by examining and observing nature and natural phenomena. The interest in sciences during the Renaissance resulted in herbariums and zoological compendiums. After the formal Baroque style, the romantics of the 18th century admired nature as it was. Nature was a great object of interest and source of inspiration – it was something separate from humans, yet alluring. Examining landscape studies may create an impression of moving in nature or in the landscape – one can sense the feeling of one’s foot sinking into wet soil. In the art of East Asia, it is usual to dwell on small details. Familiar everyday subjects are viewed as significant, as windows to an understanding of a greater whole.
Far
The travels of curious and treasure-seeking adventurers broadened the European world view. The first areas to be conquered were the African coasts and the regions east of India. Finally, sea voyages took Europeans to the Americas and to the polar regions. Discoverers departed for their distant destinations full of enthusiasm, with open senses. Previously unknown animal and plant species were brought from the voyages for natural scientists to study. The interest of artists was also awakened. Tired of the exuberance of Europe, Finnish painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931) lived with his family in Africa in 1909–1911. Emotional experiences of nature colour the notes written by the family. Entrancement alternates with observations. Emotions sparked by nature were perhaps emphasised by the family being liberated from the everyday life of the home country. Is the same sense of liberation and detachment more generally a part of experiencing nature? This experience is often defined by a sense of specific location and space. Industrialization and urbanisation have positioned nature as an alternative to the environments constructed by humans — a space for empowerment, quiet, and solitude.

In the Air
The well-being of nature is connected to weather phenomena observed in the sky and their changes. In art, sky and weather often communicate states of mind. In his essay On The Modification Of Clouds (1802) Luke Howard (1772–1821), a pioneer in the study of clouds, introduced classification and nomenclature for various types of clouds. He also identified and emphasized causal relationships between weather phenomena. In addition to scientists, Howard’s work was significant for artists as well. Already his contemporaries John Turner (1775–1851) and John Constable (1776–1837) studied Howard’s theories. Interpretations about the nature of clouds have varied, however. August Strindberg (1849–1912) thought that clouds travelled from one place to another unchanged — one could encounter the same cloud again. The idea of the permanence of clouds perhaps mirrors a deeper longing for order and meaning, and a desire to define the surrounding chaos and sense of randomness.

Living Environment – Freedom and Responsibility
Throughout the history, humans have had captive animals. Rulers have displayed their wealth and power by collecting exotic animals. Zoos based on scientific thinking were born in Central Europe in the mid 19th century. Animal exhibitions were justified by promoting research. They were, however, still also about entertaining humans at the expense of the well-being of animals. Having humans on display was still usual in the 19th century — representatives of unfamiliar cultures were displayed to the European public alongside animals. The connection to the subjugation of the colonies is plain to see. How is a co-existence possible? Many species have given way to more adaptable ones. Geographers call the contemporary era Anthropocene — the era of humans. The Taoist concept wu wei encourages humans to live in harmony with everything else in existence.
Water
Water is one of the most important requirements for life. Being so necessary to life makes water an interesting element. In art, the different aspects of water convey emotions and mental images. Artists and theoreticians of various eras have surrendered to the moods of water. Even though water is experienced through senses, it speaks to us through emotions. Roaring ocean or rugged waterfalls emphasize the enormous power of water – water challenges the viewer. On the other hand, tranquil or peacefully flowing water enchants and evokes inner calm. The atmosphere created by water can also be mysterious, threatening, or melancholy. Climate change poses a challenge to having sufficient supplies of fresh water. The thawing of snow covers and ice masses also require action. The waters of the earth and the life in them are very vulnerable.

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