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DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
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Many decades ago, when I wiled away an academic year reading in the library of London’s Warburg Institute (instead of studying at the Courtauld), I came across an offprint that I felt was worth keeping on file for its title alone: *Vom mythisch-kalendarischen Ursprungsbezirk des Osterhasen* (On the mythic-calendrical origin region of the Easter bunny; published in the periodical *Wirklichkeit und Wahrheit*, 1960, pp. 3–11). What better occasion than an Easter Sunday during a global pandemic lockdown to share the insights of its author Erwin Richter? So, in case you have ever wondered about the Easter bunny . . .



The rabbit was seen as a symbol of fertility in pagan tradition long before it entered Christian iconography. An early woodcut by Dürer even takes its art-historical title from the creatures –*The Holy Family with Three Hares* (1497–98). Still more rabbits frolic in the foreground of the woodcut *Holy Family with St. Anna and St. Joachim* by Dürer’s pupil Hans Baldung, made in 1510–11, soon after Baldung had left his master’s workshop. A few years later, they can be seen again playing at the feet of the pregnant Saints Mary and Elizabeth on one of the wings of Baldung’s altarpiece for the town church of Freiburg (1516).



The traditional belief that rabbits don’t have eyelids was seen as metaphor for Christ, who brought life through his own death. Similarly, the fact that a rabbit’s fur changes color with the seasons was interpreted as a symbol of Christ’s resurrection. Then there is the rabbit’s affinity for the realm of the moon—as a nocturnal animal, it sleeps during the day and is active at night. It is this lunar connection from which Erwin Richter takes his cue, pointing toward parallels between the occidental celebration of the rabbit during Easter (i.e., springtime) and the Chinese calendar. In the latter, the rabbit is associated with the second month, whose earthly branch name is the “rabbit month,” roughly congruent with the month of March. (Although, doing some “google research,” I realized that things are far more complicated than the German folklorist had surmised.) And since Easter remains the one Christian holiday that is calculated according to the lunar calendar—it is always celebrated on the Sunday that follows the first full moon after the spring equinox—the ground was laid for the lunar rabbit to morph into the Easter bunny.



Wishing you all a Happy Easter / Chag Pesach Sameach / or just simply a hopeful beginning of spring in these precarious times.

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PS: Scrolling up to the top, one can notice that back in the 1580s, when the German artist Hans Hoffman painted his rabbit on an astonishingly large sheet of vellum, meadows had a somewhat greater biodiversity compared to the manicured lawns of contemporary suburbia (even if there was a lizard sighting moments before the photo of the chocolate bunny was taken . . .).

