The interest in strange and colorful birds and animals in medieval western Europe was an expression of the fascination with the unusual, with monsters, with the weird and exotic. In the accounts of Jean, Duke of Berry, are numerous references to cage birds, bears, leopards, porcupines, and other beasts, which were kept in the various palaces and establishments of the duke. White nightingales were considered so rare that they were often sent as gifts to princes of state and church. Imported species of bright tropic birds, including the popular parrot, which was then called a popinjay, were extolled and hung in elaborate cages, and great interest was evoked by talking birds. These were usually crows, jays, or magpies and figured in a great many tales of the time, which often dealt with the infidelities of young wives, in whose chambers the observing tattletale birds hung. Some of the young women employed various tricks to deceive the birds, to make them sleep, or to cast doubt on their characters, but the unreasoning and ever truthful birds usually held the upper hand and betrayed the faithless wives to their itinerant husbands.

One of the most amusing stories in Le Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry concerns a burgher's talking magpie. This burgher had a wife he adored, and in his pond he kept a great eel, which he was very proud of and intended to serve some day to an important guest. One day when the burgher was away his lovely young wife and her maid ate the great eel, observed by the magpie. The two women planned to tell the burgher that an otter had eaten it, but on his arrival the magpie recounted the entire story. The forearmed husband confronted his wife with the facts, and she in a rage tore all the feathers out of the poor pie's head, yelling "You told about the eel." The bird ever after recalled the event when he saw a bald man by screaming "You told about the eel; you told about the eel."

In The Seven Sages we read of the burgess who had a magpie that "couthie telle tales alle apertlich, in French langage and heng in a faire cage." Such a "faire" cage, dating from the second half of the fifteenth century, is represented by a bird cage recently acquired for The Cloisters. It was found in the Rhone valley not far from Avignon and is, as far as can be discovered, the only one of the myriad medieval cages that has survived.

The history of bird cages can be traced to the ancient world, and already in the eighth century B.C. an iron bird cage in a Greek house is mentioned by Pollux (x, 160). Many Greek vases depict the tall wicker cages that were characteristic in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., and the Romans had a variety of rectangular, domical, and basket-shaped forms. On an early Christian sarcophagus from the Vatican cemetery a domed bird cage is shown with the bird sitting on top of it, signifying that the soul of the person had been liberated from its earthly prison. Cages in Byzantium were numerous, some of them fabulous with mechanical birds, and the tenth-century Gospels of Etchmiadzin illustrate an amusingly drawn wire cage.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries cage birds and their cages, trappings, and food are mentioned again and again in castle inventories and cost accounts. Isabella of Bavaria, among others, had a caged parrot, and Anne of Brittany kept a singing linnet in her chamber. Children at the court of Jeanne de Laval, Queen of Sicily, and those of Philippe le Hardi, Duke of Burgundy, kept pet birds, and many species were brought to them as gifts by visitors to the courts. Nightingales and turtledoves, particularly the white ones, ranked with parrots in value, but many a princely cage contained local varieties of goldfinches, siskins, and linnets. The palaces
Iron bird cage, originally fitted with an inner cage of wire. From southern France, near Avignon, xv century. Height 13\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. It probably held a pair of songbirds or a popinjay.

of Charles V and Louis XI of France, René of Anjou, and Jean, Count of Nevers, all contained cage birds of one type or other, and the birds were often carried with the noblemen when they traveled. Fewer accounts exist for the average household, but we know that among the possessions of the poor goldsmith John Cobham of York there was a bird cage valued at one penny.

The Cloisters cage, perhaps from a palace or the home of a wealthy citizen, is rectangular and strongly built of iron, and it hung from a central ring at the top. Perhaps it contained a popinjay or a pair of goldfinches, as its height, thirteen and a half inches, suggests. Originally it must have had a light inner cage of wire that rested on the base and was inserted when the hinged lid was tilted back. The cage is a fine example of late medieval ironwork, with four buttress-like corner posts
A French miniature of about 1450 with a bird cage almost identical in style and design to the Cloisters cage but considerably larger, containing about fifteen birds. The scene shows the feast of Aesop’s profligate son. Manuscript of Valerius Maximus, Bibliothèque Nationale

By releasing two hinged catches, both partially damaged, the hinged lid could be tilted back to allow the inner cage to be lifted out for cleaning or perhaps to be carried outdoors and hung in the sunlight. The four holes in the corners of the basal border indicate that the inner wire cage, probably iron, was attached to the frame by four pins or rivets. Records of such iron wire cages mention their use for nightingales in Provence at the end of the fifteenth century. One adorned the bedroom of René of Anjou, King of Sicily, in his palace at Aix.
A miniature showing a tall iron cage suspended from a rope through a pulley. The profligate son is about to dine on songbirds, prepared in the kitchen at the right. Probably painted by François Fouquet. From a xv century manuscript of Valerius Maximus. In the British Museum

Cages were made in a variety of sizes, types, and shapes, but the majority of those depicted in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts, particularly in the marginal drolleries, resemble those in use in this country today. Feeders and water jars or horns were attached in the modern manner, as a woodcut from the Hortus Sanitatis, published by Jakob Meydenbach in Mainz, 1491, clearly shows. Cloth covers, sometimes of rich materials, were employed to cover the cages at night. A fine cover of gay green cloth, for instance, was fashioned to cover the cage of the songbird in Anne of Brittany’s bedroom.

Closely related to the Cloisters example in style and design is a cage shown in a mid-fifteenth-century copy of Valerius Maximus (Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 41, folio 389). The evidence of this manuscript, together with that of other ironwork, indicates the date for the Cloisters cage. The scene illustrated here shows Aesop’s profligate son feasting on valuable singing birds which are being prepared in the adjoining kitchen. The cage, shown hanging against the castle window, is larger than the Museum’s, containing over a
dozen birds, but its construction is nearly identical, with openwork bands around the top and base, diagonal crossbars for suspension, and crockets on the corner posts. The bars of the inner wire cage may here be clearly seen.

An illustration of a varying cage of the same era is shown in another copy of Valerius Maximus, perhaps painted by François Fouquet (British Museum, Harley ms. 4375, book ix). It is tall, apparently also of iron, and accommodates three birds. The method of hanging it from a rope attached to a pulley, which continued in Holland into the seventeenth century, indicates one of the possible ways the Cloisters example may have been hung. Other cages about the size of ours are shown carried in the hand in various manuscripts, like the amusing example with the goldfinch in the Legend of Saint Denis being sold on the Seine bridge in Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. fr. 2091, folio 129). These examples, however, are more likely cages of lighter materials, not iron ones of the Cloisters type, which weighs seven pounds without the inner cage or the bird.

Wood and wicker were the most usual materials for the numerous bird cages of the medieval world. John Lydgate wrote of the “chorle” who

“. . . was so glad when he this bird had take
Mery of chere of loke and of visage
And in all haste he purposed to make
Within his house a praty lityll cage
And with her songs to rejoyse his corage.”

This cage was undoubtedly of wood or wicker in the simple fashion of those made for kitchen purposes and for keeping lesser birds like crows and starlings. The wicker cages were either conical or rectangular and are frequently depicted in the hands of trappers and monkeys in the margins of manuscript pages. Bird cages were hawked by peddlers along the streets, as were the birds themselves, and cooks kept birds fattening in them outside their larders. The value of these wooden cages, of course, was slight in spite of the large proportions that they reached, for Sir John Howard of Stoke by Neyland is recorded to have bought a cage in 1466 with a hundred quail for only twenty-five shillings.

Iron cages were common, as evidenced by those in the Valerius Maximus scenes and others recorded in the palaces of Louis XI and Isabella of Bavaria. A fine octagonal iron cage hangs from the dining-room ceiling in a Flemish tapestry of the early sixteenth century. In it perches a popinjay.

In some of the richer manors and palaces, cages were fashioned to complement the atmosphere of rich costume, gold-thread hangings, and sumptuous tableware. Gold and silver were used for the cage frames, which were richly adorned with jewels and pennons. Cages in Louis XI’s salon were not only made of silver with landscapes and rural scenes painted around their bases but they glittered with shining crystals of cut glass that hung from their lower edges. A curious cage made for Isabella of Bavaria in 1402 had six gilded pillars spread with a netting made of golden fish scales. Forty years earlier an account of Robert de Serres mentions a cage with a turtledove made of silver and decorated with enamel.

The real cages of gold and silver that adorned the richest courts inspired goldsmiths to create for their rich patrons toy cages of gold and silver filled with birds of enamel and precious metals, set with the finest gems. These minute birds were sweetly perfumed, and the cages hung in the wardrobes and chambers of the palaces as sachets. Three such baubles, called little birds of Cyprus, are recorded shortly after 1379 in the inventories of the palace furniture of Charles V of France. One tiny cage was round and fashioned entirely of gold. Within it stood a miniature stork inlaid with rubies, sapphires, pearls, and diamonds, and another of the cages was square with two perfumed and jeweled birds. These little “oysellez de Chippre” remained popular into the sixteenth century and appear in the inventories of the Duchess of Valentinois and Charlotte of Savoy, among others.

But by far the most remarkable of recorded medieval bird cages was constructed in 1344 at the Castle of Hesdin for the Counts of
Artois. It was a huge winter garden built against the screened windows of the castle, and in it an elaborate system of troughs and canals was fed by sprinkling fountains. The lead gutters were disguised and decorated with leaves and lilies made of lead, and the entire cage contained a wealth of artificial trees, painted with green earth. On the branches of the trees sat tiny sculptured birds, filled with rich perfumes, to accompany the flocks of live singing birds. The pets ate from ornate feeders and drank from the complex of canals beneath the bleached netting, which presumably formed the top of the cage. Iron wire, joists, planks, and paving stones fill the lists of materials that were used in the cage and attest the size and complexity of the counts’ pleasure garden.

No known examples of rich bird cages, so renowned in their day, have survived. The majority, like most of the treasures of the Burgundians and other late medieval courts,
must have vanished into the melting pots of later goldsmiths, while cages of lesser materials have been smashed or cast aside. Their loss may not have been keenly felt by those medieval minds for whom the cage was a symbol of bondage, a thought perhaps strengthened by the use of cages to suspend prisoners outside castle and town walls. For Chaucer even a "cage of gold" was "never so gay" for a bird as his natural habitat, and in *The Squire's Tale* are the following lines: "Men loven of propre kinde newfangelnesse, As Briddes doon that men in cages fede. For though thou night and day take of hem hede, And strawe hir cage faire and solte as silk, And yeve hem sugre, hony, breed and milk, Yet right anon, as that his dore is uppe, He with his feet wol spurne adoun his cuppe, And to the wode he wol and wormes etc."