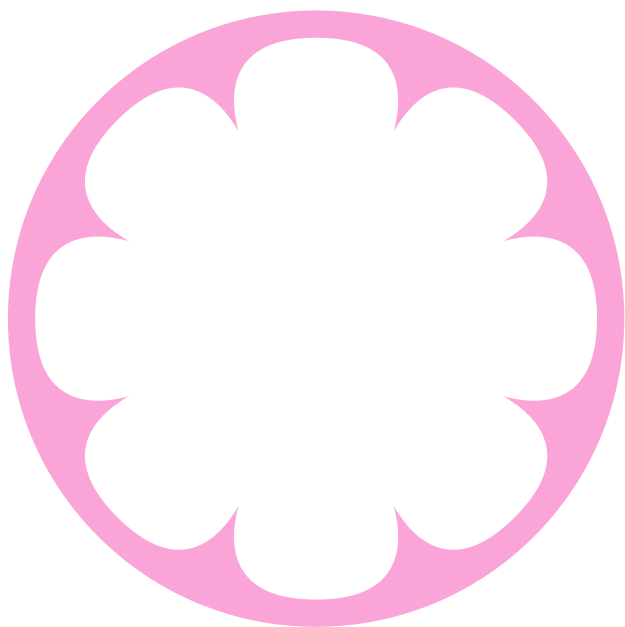


MYTHOLOGIES

TO TELL THE STORY OF THE WORLD



08.07-09.11.2026

ENGLISH

TO TELL THE STORY OF THE WORLD

From the earliest stories whispered around the campfire to the great epics set down in words and images, mythologies have accompanied humanity, reflecting its deepest questions. They are neither mere entertainment nor relics of a bygone era: they constitute a symbolic language, still very much alive, through which societies seek to explain the origin of the world, the place of women and men in the universe, or the invisible forces that govern destiny.

“A myth is a story”
Roland Barthes

Every civilisation creates its own myths, which sometimes take the form of tales or legends. Capricious gods, brave heroes, malevolent creatures and cosmic forces populate these foundational narratives, which lie at the intersection of poetry, religion and philosophy. Through them, human beings project their fears, hopes, values and contradictions. Passed down from generation to generation, myths speak of creation and destruction, love and war, transgression and wisdom. They give form to that which transcends ordinary experience.

From the Americas to Oceania, from Africa to Asia, from the shores of the Mediterranean to the peaks of the Pyrenees, this exhibition takes visitors on a journey through the mythological worlds that have captured the imagination for thousands of years.

I

WRITING THE MYTH

The origins of myths are often lost in the mists of time. Passed down orally for centuries, they are sometimes recorded in writing. This is the case with the Iliad and the Odyssey, seminal works of Western literature. These long poems, composed in Greece around the 8th century BC, recount the Trojan War and Odysseus's long journey home. The Greeks attributed these texts to Homer, a blind poet whom some traditions regarded as of divine origin. As if such tales could not have been passed down by an ordinary author.



Portrait of Homer
Roman copy of a Greek
original. 2nd century AD
Marble

the Odyssey. His wide-open eyes reveal his blindness. A wise old man, he is crowned with the headband of kings and heroes. Whilst the existence of Homer is a matter of debate today, the Greeks celebrated him as “the Poet”, the father of all literature.

This bust is one of the most famous artistic representations of the author of the Iliad and

2

COLLECTING THE MYTH

Whilst some myths are preserved in literary works, many others, passed down solely through oral tradition, have undoubtedly been lost. A few have remained embedded in popular tradition, particularly in the form of folktales. From the late 19th century onwards, in France, “collectors” set themselves the task of gathering these tales in order to preserve them by recording them in writing. This is how the myths specific to certain regions have resurfaced, helping us to understand how a people shapes its worldview.

02

Félix Arnaudin (1844-1921)
Scenes from
the Old Grande-Lande
France (Labouheyre). 1926

(the madman), devoted his entire life to preserving the traditional world of the Landes de Gascogne. His unrivalled body of work, published mainly after his death, has helped to save his beloved region from oblivion, a region he immortalised through thousands of photographs.

Songs, music, tales, legends, rituals, language, history... Félix Arnaudin, nicknamed “lo pec”

03

Eugène Camoreyt
(1841-1905)
Lou Becut
France
(Bagnères-de-Bigorre). 1900

An artist and self-taught scholar, Eugène Camoreyt devoted himself to the history and archaeology of his town, Lectoure (Gers), where he became the librarian and later the first director of the museum that now bears his name.

04

Jose Miguel de Barandiaran
(1889-1991)
Basque Mythology
Spain (Madrid). 1960

linguistics and archaeology, Jose M. de Barandiaran is regarded as the “patriarch” of Basque culture. Indeed, his fieldwork, alongside that of Resurrección Maria de Azkue, ranks among the most significant ever undertaken.

As the author of a monumental body of work devoted primarily to Basque ethnology,

05

Julien Vinson (1843-1926)
*Basque Folk Tales collected
 from 1874 to 1877,
 primarily by W. Webster*
 France (Bayonne).
 Late 19th century

Julien Vinson, a linguist specialising in the languages of India and the Basque language, published the anthology *Folk-Lore du Pays basque* in 1883. To compile it, he drew on the work of two leading collectors of folk tales, Jean-François Cerquand and, in particular, Wentworth Webster, with whom he had collaborated directly and whose valuable field notebooks he had transcribed.

06

*Clay tablet: collection
 of literary and
 mythological texts*
 Iraq (Nippur).
 Circa 2017/1794 B.C.
 Clay

This tablet, inscribed in cuneiform script, comes from Nippur, in the region of Sumer, in southern ancient Mesopotamia. It is a list of 68 literary texts, mostly mythological tales featuring divine figures such as the god Enki, the goddess Inanna or the hero Gilgamesh. This catalogue may correspond to a library inventory or a bibliography for the use of scribes.

3

BRING THE MYTH

Myths are not only heard but also seen: whilst they are read and recited, they are also sung and danced, whether in entertaining plays or more solemn sacred ceremonies. A myth can indeed justify the performance of certain rites, just as certain rites serve to maintain or re-enact events recounted in the myth. Masks and costumes then allow, for the duration of these events, the supernatural beings in question to be brought to life on stage.

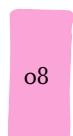
07

Owantshoozi
Antzera
 France (Bayonne). 2026
 Parachute fabric, corn, rice,
 paint

This mask allows the wearer to embody a lamina, a supernatural woman with webbed feet like a goose. The creators and designers at Owantshoozi have developed numerous masks and costumes designed to bring to life the characters of Basque mythology, particularly those featured in the famous Souleline masquerades.

VISUALIZING THE MYTH

Mythology has been depicted in images since prehistoric times. Paintings, sculptures and other works of art play an important role in passing on myths by providing a visual medium for the narrative. These images are sometimes themselves regarded as having a mythological origin, when they are created by supernatural beings such as the gods, to whom the invention of the arts is commonly attributed. Even today, in every field, mythical figures continue to inspire creators: their symbolic power remains undiminished.



Tablet: The Ascension of Ishtar
Iraq (Uruk).
3rd-1st centuries B.C.
Clay

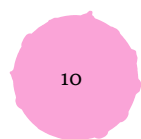
The myth inscribed on this tablet tells of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar, the brightest of the stars, who longs to become the wife of the supreme god Anu. Her “ascension” represents the rise of the planet Venus into the sky, with which she is identified.



Vase of Ishtar
Iraq (Larsa).
Circa 2000/1800 B.C.
Terracotta

as a design engraved into the clay or as small moulded and applied plaques. Winged and naked, she is surrounded by fish, birds, a tortoise and a bull. She is thus depicted as the mistress of the living world, ensuring its fertility and diversity.

Ishtar, goddess of war and fertility, appears several times on the body of this vase, either



Astrological Altar of Gabies: The Gods of Olympus and the Zodiac
Imperial Rome (Gabies).
2nd century AD
Marble

Mercury, Ceres, Vesta, Diana, Mars, a little Cupid and Venus: this remarkable sculpture depicts twelve faces of Roman deities. On the edge, they are associated with the twelve signs of the zodiac. Was it an altar for performing rituals, or a sundial with its 12 hours, combining mythology and the measurement of time?

Jupiter with his thunderbolt, Minerva with her helmet, Apollo, Juno, Neptune, Vulcan,



Told since prehistoric times, myths spread and evolve alongside the societies that pass them down. However, despite the centuries that separate their common origins, many of these stories still share certain “traits” today.

These shared motifs, composed of basic narrative fragments, have been a particular source of inspiration for the various iconographic traditions depicting mythologies, with the result that certain images produced by a particular people at a particular time can be understood and interpreted centuries later on another continent.

“This logic works in much the same way as a kaleidoscope: an instrument that also contains fragments and pieces, through which structural arrangements are created.”

Following this model defined by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, we invite you to wander through a vast mythological kaleidoscope. Conceived in partnership with the Louvre Museum, with the exceptional contribution of the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, this exhibition brings together, thanks to a series of generous loans, the myths of Mesopotamia and ancient Iran, Pharaonic Egypt, Greece and Rome, the Basque mountains and the Landes region of Gascony, pre-Hispanic Mexico, Japan, the Aboriginal lands of Australia and the coasts of West Africa.

The exceptional works presented here are fragments and pieces that come together and interact to tell you, in their own way, some of the great myths that bear witness to our shared humanity.



I.

ORIGINALS

How did the world come to be as it is? Myths often speak of a vast ocean that existed at the beginning of everything, sometimes of darkness and silence, and sometimes of a primordial egg. Many tales speak of the awakening of the first being, or even several. Through thought, action or speech, these beings shaped the earth and sky of the earliest times. Snakes, birds, cows and giant lions regularly clashed in those most ancient times. Their struggles gave rise to mountains and valleys, lakes and rivers, caves and deserts.

Across every continent, myths recount how, subsequently, plants, animals and human beings emerged from the depths of the Earth to multiply upon its surface. Others describe how these primordial creatures annoyed the proud gods, who took their revenge through mighty floods. Paying homage to their divine efforts, which ensure the sun's course and preserve the cosmic order, thus becomes a necessity.

I

AT THE BEGINNING

A cosmogonic account seeks to describe, often in cryptic or even confusing terms, how the Universe as we know it came into being and took shape. The separation of the waters and the sky, of light and darkness, the emergence of the earth and the mountains, of fresh water, the stars, the gods, plants, animals and, of course, humans, are at the heart of these founding narratives.



Statue of Ptah
Egypt. Circa 664/ 332 B.C.
Copper alloy

before all things, with the exception of the Nun, the primordial ocean, from which he emerged. He awoke alone, conceived the world and brought it into being through the power of speech; he is the author of all things, the creator of gods and men.

In the Egyptian mythology that developed in Memphis, Ptah is the creator who existed



*Curved stele depicting
an offering scene
Egypt (Xois?).
Circa 332/30 B.C.
Basalt*

To demonstrate his commitment to the divine order, a pharaoh offers the god Amun a statuette of Maat, the symbol of justice and cosmic balance. According to certain Egyptian traditions, Amun first in the form of a goose and then as a serpent laid and fertilised the cosmic egg from which the world was created.

2

FOUNDING DOCUMENTS

Whilst some creation myths were recorded in writing and have thus survived the centuries to be rediscovered (through archaeology, for example), many of them, having been passed down solely by word of mouth, are now lost or forgotten.



*Augustin Chaho (1811-1858)
Biarritz, between
the Pyrenees and the ocean:
a picturesque route, part 2
France (Bayonne). 1855*

the Bible), in Gascony a few fragments of popular belief featuring the ocean, trees, eggs and storms bear witness to the probable existence of such a tale, now lost to history. To make up for this “gap”, Augustin Chaho developed an original mythology that permeates many of his works.

Whilst the Basques do not appear to have preserved any creation myths (apart from



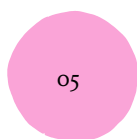
*Clay tablet: Sumerian myth
about the origin of vegetation
Iraq. Circa 2000-1800 B.C.
Clay*

and Earth: “The majestic Earth, the pure Earth, made herself beautiful for Heaven. Heaven consummated his marriage with the vast Earth, pouring into her womb the seed of heroes, the Tree and the Reed... And the Earth devoted herself entirely to giving birth to vegetation.”

This cuneiform tablet recounts the Sumerian myth of the birth of vegetation, focusing in particular on the primordial union of Heaven

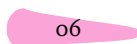
PRIMORDIAL STRUGGLES

Many cosmogonies describe the birth of the Universe as the hatching of a cosmic egg. As the egg shatters, its components separate, giving rise to heaven and earth, whilst deities or primordial creatures emerge from it, whose actions will complete the creation of the world or personify certain aspects of it. Thus, the cosmic tree that connects all parts of the world often becomes the setting for primordial struggles involving birds associated with thunder or the sun, serpents that guard the waters, celestial cattle and other giant lions.



*Engraved dish
with straight sides*
France (Erdeven, Tertre
de Lannec er Gadouer).
5th millennium B.C.
Terracotta

The engraved reverse side of this dish may be the oldest known depiction of the cosmos in human history. The tree and the undulating lines beneath it appear to depict a scene combining a cosmic tree and serpents; the elements on either side are thought to represent celestial bodies.



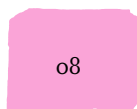
Polished axe
France (Arthez-de-Béarn).
5th / 4th millennium B.C.
Jadeite

In Gascony, as almost everywhere else, it was believed that these stones had fallen from the sky and protected their owners from lightning. In reality, they formed the blades of axes used in the Neolithic period, some of which, like this one made of jadeite, were extremely rare and held great social value.



Axe
Central Africa. 20th century
Wood, iron, plant fiber

This axe continues the tradition of Neolithic hand-held axes. This tool-weapon, like the hammer or the pitchfork, is very often associated with the control of lightning and, in many parts of the world, has become the attribute of the gods of the heavens.



Inscribed and sealed tablet
Iran (Susa).
Circa 3100 / 2900 B.C.
Unfired clay

triumphs of a lion over bulls and a bull over lions. These animals may personify supernatural forces embodying, respectively, the wild world and the domesticated world, the balance between which ensures the order of the universe.

An engraved cylinder has been rolled twice across this tablet, depicting the alternating

4

SKY AND WATER

09

Clan emblem
Papua New Guinea
(East Sepik).
Early 20th century
Wood, natural pigments

This precious emblem depicts a crocodile, an animal believed by the Iatmul people to be the origin of the world: it created the first island by swishing its tail in the water, and its jaws then transformed into the sun, the sky and the earth. A female figure appears opposite its head, and birds cover its body.

10

Ritual vessel (aduno koro)
Mali (Dogon). Before 1958
Wood

to their ancestors. It represents the sacred canoe sent to earth by the sky god Amma: guided by Nommo, a half-man, half-snake spirit, it carried plants, animals and the ancestors of humanity.

This trough was used as a ritual vessel in the Dogon people's ceremonies of offering

5

PRIMORDIAL SNAKES

Celestial, earthly, master of the waters, fire-breather, killer, healer... In mythology, the serpent is omnipresent, and its actions are at the root of many fundamental events.

11

Mithraic Kronos, also known as Aiôn
Lebanon (Saida),
Mithraeum of Sidon.
389 AD
Marble

This statue once adorned a sanctuary dedicated to Mithras, a god of Iranian origin whose cult flourished throughout the Roman Empire in the 4th century. This winged figure with the head of a lion, around which a snake is coiled, is identified with the Greek god Cronus, the god of eternal time. According to certain traditions, he represents the primal creative power.

12

Quetzalcoatl
Mexico. Circa 1325-1521
Volcanic rock

is found among the Mixtecs, the Aztecs, the Maya and the Toltecs. He is the central figure in numerous cosmogonic tales relating to the creation of the Sun, the Earth and humankind. The Aztecs depict him with a human face emerging from the serpent's gaping mouth.

Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent, is one of the principal deities of Central Mexico. He

13

Djulwarak, known as “Dawidi,” Lyiagalawumir Clan, half Dhuwa (1921-1970)
The Wagilag Sisters
 Australia. 1963
 Eucalyptus bark, natural pigments

In Aboriginal mythology, the Wagilag sisters are the daughters of the creator spirit Djanggawul. During a journey, they inadvertently anger the great serpent Yurlungur. Despite the sisters’ songs and dances to divert his wrath of rain and thunder, he swallows them and causes a great flood, before spitting them out again.

14

The Woman with the Snake
 France (Oô). Undated
 (Antiquity or the Middle Ages)
 Marble

association between a supernatural woman and a serpent is a common theme in Basque and Gascon tales. Others see in it the Greco-Roman myth of Pyrene, who was buried beneath the mountains that have borne her name ever since, after giving birth to a serpent.

Discovered in the heart of the Pyrenees, this image may depict an Aquitaine myth, as the

6

CYCLES

Certain deities may bring about a flood and destroy a world deemed too corrupt in order to create a new one. Thus, in most mythologies, different ages follow one another, each populated by different peoples, each arising and passing away in its own way. To prevent Creation from collapsing, it is therefore necessary to honour the deities responsible for the natural cycle of birth and death, of time and the seasons.



15

Standard
 Iran (Luristan?).
 1st millennium B.C.E.?
 Bronze

figures with their legs intertwined and their hands raised. They appear to be supporting a large disc, carried by two bulls and decorated with small ducks and a reclining lamb. The composition may be a representation of the solar cycle.

This bronze plaque probably originates from Luristan in Iran. At its centre is a circle of four

16

Pyramidion of Djedhor
 Egypt. Circa 664/526 B.C.
 Limestone

monument (pyramid, obelisk)—a boat can be seen. On board, three deities form the symbolic solar triad representing the sun’s daily cycle: Khepri, the rising and reborn sun; Ra, the sun at its zenith; and Atum, the setting sun.

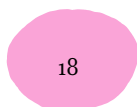
On one side of this Egyptian pyramidion—an element designed to crown the summit of a



Engraved plaque
France (Fontainebleau).
Circa 950/800 B.C.
Sandstone

The various stages of antler growth in deer seem to symbolise the cycle of the seasons.

Indeed, among the Celts, as elsewhere, deer-gods are often associated with the order of the natural cycle, of life and death. The cross associated with them is a symbol found throughout the world, no doubt linked to the idea of eternity.



Ceremonial bowl
Mexico. 20th century
Terracotta, glass beads, wax

Among the Huichol people of Mexico, these ceremonial bowls are carried on ritual

journeys to offer the blood of sacrificed animals or water from sacred springs to the deities. This one depicts Takutsi Nakawe, a central figure in the Huichol creation myth, in which she brings about a flood and teaches humans how to farm.



Figurine depicting Nefertoum
Egypt. Circa 664/332 B.C.
Copper alloy

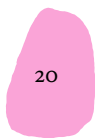
The son of the creator god Ptah, Nefertum is the Egyptian god of resurrection and

immortality. He is the source of the lotus flower that rises from the primordial ocean, from which the Sun emerged at the time of Creation. He is often depicted as a man armed with a curved sword called a “khopesh”, with a blooming lotus flower atop his head.

7

EMERGENCE

Once the world has finally been created or recreated, humanity can then leave its native depths and spread out across the earth’s surface: this is the myth of emergence. Dating back to Palaeolithic times, this origin myth is the most widespread across the planet. But humanity is not the only species to have emerged from the depths: animals have often accompanied it, or even preceded it. Thus, in order to ensure the continuity of the creative cycle, certain peoples hold ceremonies in their “primordial caves” linked to the creation of cave paintings, or call upon the spirits of nature known as the masters and mistresses of the animals to ensure a fresh supply of game.



*Sculpture of a phallus
engraved with a vulva*
France (Marquay,
Laussel rock shelter).
Circa 29,000-23,000 BCE
Limestone

Many prehistoric images depict humans, particularly their sexual organs, but the combination of male and female attributes on a single artefact remains very rare. It is possible that these depictions, which evoke reproduction and fertility, are linked to the creation myth and the figures of the master and mistress of the animals.



*Engraved plaques depicting
a bison and a reindeer*
France
(Saint-Martin-d'Arberoue,
Isturitz Cave).
Circa 15,000 BCE
Sandstone

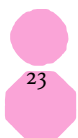
Are the Isturitz and Oxocelhaya caves the earliest caves in the Basque Country? Occupied for tens of thousands of years, this complex of decorated caves was a site of exceptional importance. It has yielded a vast number of artefacts, such as these small plaques, which were used as a medium for depictions of animals, for reasons that remain unknown.



Engraved plaque
France (Fontainebleau).
Circa 950/800 BCE
Sandstone

The horned figure appears to be bringing various creatures to life. This master of animals

is reminiscent of Cernunnos, a major deity in Celtic mythology. Regarded as a Gallic father-god, Cernunnos is often associated with a mother-goddess, who also features in the priceless collection of engraved walls and stones at Fontainebleau.



Seal
Iran (Luristan).
4th millennium BCE
Soapstone

The development of the iconography of the "master of animals" is attributed to northern

Mesopotamia and western Iran. On this seal from Luristan, a spirit with the head of a mouflon stretches out its arms between two pairs of snakes and a pair of small four-legged animals. This theme, common in the iconography of the ancient Near East, persisted for several millennia.



*Carved truncated
cone-shaped vase: master
of animals subduing snakes*
Iran. Circa 2500/2300 BCE
Chlorite

The decoration on this vase depicts three animal masters dominating intertwined snakes. These figures belong to the tradition of herotamer figures, attested in the Near East from at least the 5th millennium BC. By mastering the wild world, they also bring fertility, as snakes were more widely associated with water in the imagination of ancient Iran.

*Tiles depicting
"The Wonders of Creation"*
Iran (Tehran). 19th century.
Ceramic, molded
and painted decoration
under a transparent glaze

It is not known from which architectural structure these tiles originate; they depict jinn (spirits), female demons and animals. They illustrate "The Book of Wonders" by al-Qazvini, a medieval treatise cataloguing the beauties of divine creation on Earth and in Heaven. This highly popular work remains the most famous cosmography of the Islamic world.

8

MOTHER GODDESSES

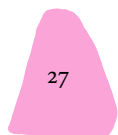
In the rituals of ancient times, it is possible that certain cavities were likened to a female sex from which life emerged. Some have interpreted this association as the manifestation of an ancient religion worshipping a primordial and universal Earth Goddess, reflecting an original matriarchal society. Although there is no evidence of this to date, this belief remains popular in the Basque Country, where Mari is often portrayed as such a goddess. In fact, all over the world, there is not just one but many mother goddesses associated with motherhood and fertility. Sometimes the mothers of animals, plants, humans and gods, these Great Goddesses are, ultimately, the mistresses of life.



Niki de Saint-Phalle
(1930-2002)
Inflatable Nana
France. 1996
Silkscreen print on vinyl

The "Nanas" by the Franco-American artist Niki de Saint-Phalle draw their rounded

forms from prehistoric Venus figurines. Inspired by these goddesses of fertility and nurturing, they embody a powerful and liberated femininity. Having previously created them in other materials, the artist began producing them in inflatable plastic from 1968 onwards in order to make them more widely available.



Engraved stone block
France (Fontainebleau).
Circa 950/800 B.C.
Sandstone

A small figure, pulled along by cattle, appears to emerge from the belly of this female figurine. This pre-Celtic deity, which features on many engraved stones and rock faces in Fontainebleau, is often accompanied by vulvas and birds: it most likely depicts a vision of a mother goddess.



Figurine depicting Cihuacoatl
Mexico. Circa 1325-1521
Terracotta

Cihuacoatl: this name means “serpent woman” in the Nahuatl language of the

Aztecs. It is reminiscent of Coatlicue, a major deity of central Mexico whose name is said to mean “she who wears a skirt of snakes” and who is also known as “mother of the gods”, “goddess of life, death and rebirth” or “mother of the southern stars”.



Cybele seated under a shrine
Asia Minor (Phrygia
or the Syrian region).
1st/2nd century AD
Marble

Cybele, a mother goddess worshipped in Greco-Roman antiquity, symbolised fertility, nature and protection. Her cult was renowned for its spectacular ceremonies, such as the castration rituals performed annually by the goddess’s priests, which plunged the participants into ecstatic trances.



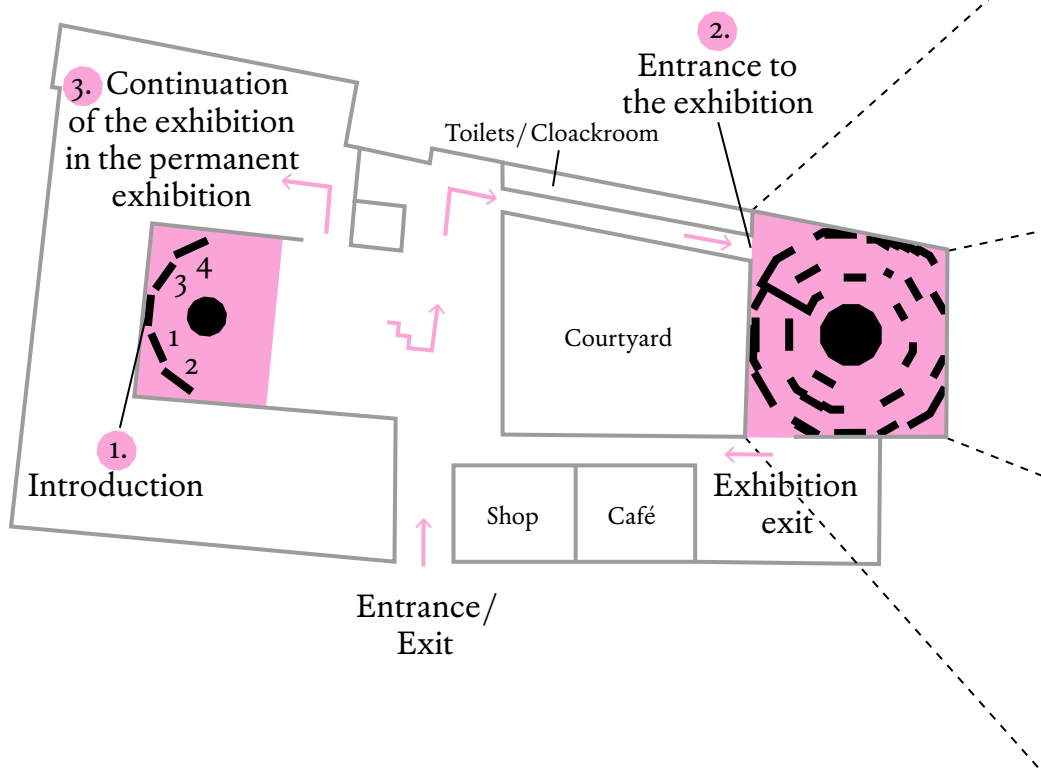
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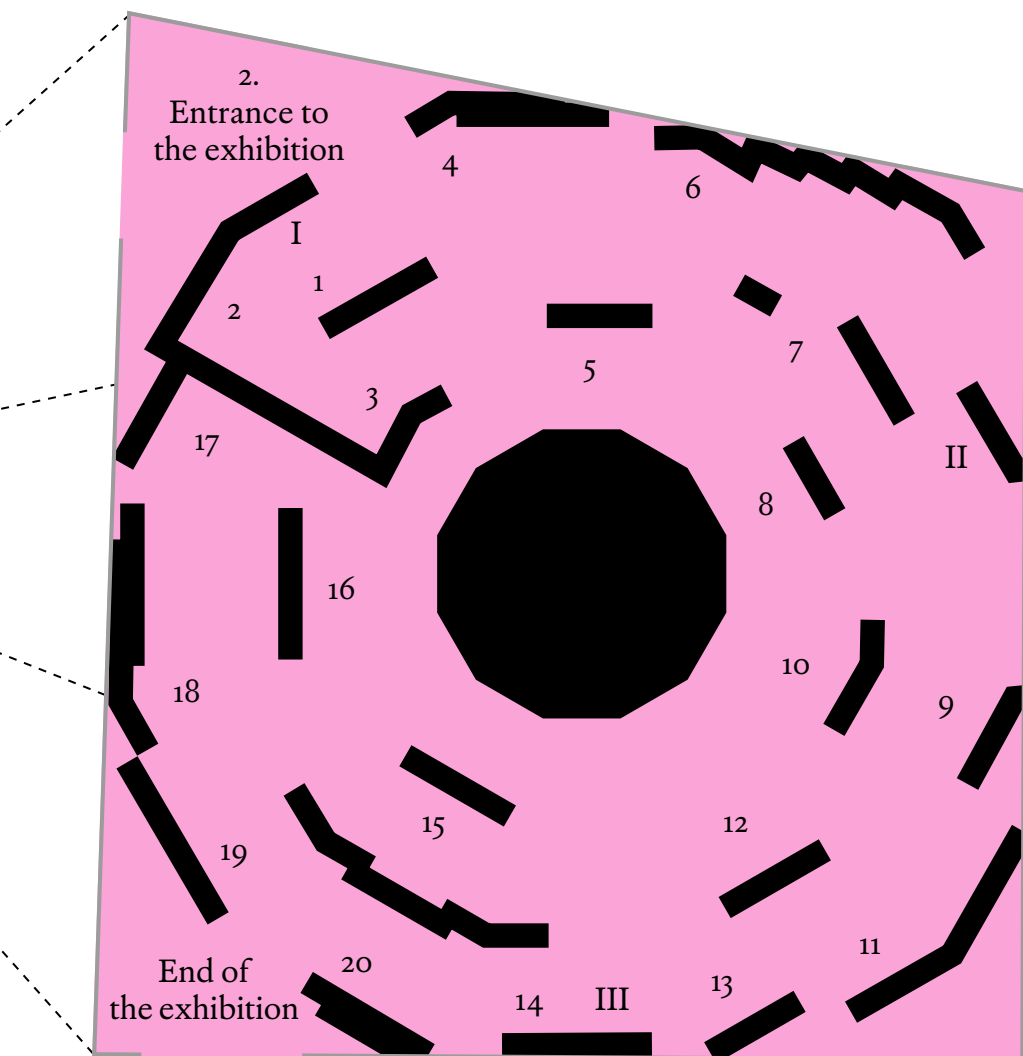
SUPERNATURAL

Myths agree on many points, such as the existence, in the early days of the world, of strange peoples. Bulls with human heads and men with bull’s heads, bison with women’s heads and women with bison’s heads; creatures with two wings, three faces, four legs and the horns of wild antelopes; monkeys with crab claws whose legs end in fish tails; and even more monstrous beings, good genies or evil demons, taking on the forms and limbs of every species in creation.

It is also common for all these creatures to be subject to higher beings, who are likewise present throughout the world: the immortal gods, those extraordinary powers capable of influencing the fate of mortals. Some, however, have little intention of respecting the divine rule. Incredible and powerful giants then do not hesitate to wage war against the gods in terrible conflicts that last for centuries. Yet it is always the gods who prevail. And so the whole world finds itself living in fear of their wrath.

EXHIBITION MAP





DEITY OF AQUITAINE

From ancient Aquitaine (now Gascony and the Basque Country), around a hundred deities are known from dedications inscribed on votive altars. As the vast majority of these come from the Comminges region alone, this suggests that there were a far greater number of deities across the whole of Aquitaine, possibly close to a thousand. Most of these altars were found reused in the walls of various buildings; but originally, intended to thank a deity for a favour granted, they were placed in shrines, the vast majority of which remain unknown.



Montsérié Mask
France (Montsérié).
2nd century AD (?)
Bronze

This mask, about which almost nothing is known, is thought to have come from the sanctuary dedicated to the Aquitanian god Erge. Does it depict him? Popular tradition suggests so, but nothing could be less certain. It is more likely to be an offering to the god, the style of which suggests an Eastern origin.



Bust sculpture
France
(Lurbe-Saint-Christau).
2nd/1st century B.C. (?)
Marble

Discovered at the bottom of a spring, this bust is thought to depict a local deity associated with the cult of water, although its appearance could just as easily be that of a warrior. This piece, which is unique in ancient Aquitaine, is probably the oldest example of stone art from this region.



Votive altar dedicated to the nymphs
France
(Bagnères-de-Luchon).
Late 1st/mid-3rd century A.D.
Marble

Discovered near a hot spring, this altar bears witness to the worship of Pyrenean nymphs. This cult, practised by people who were heavily Romanised or even of Greco-Oriental origin, echoes Basque-Gascon beliefs that associate the laminak and the hadas—other supernatural female beings—with springs and fountains.



Votive altar dedicated to Heraucorritsehe
France (Tardets-Sorholus).
3rd century A.D.
Marble

The votive altar of La Madeleine in Tardets, in Soule, is dedicated to Heraucorritsehe, an Aquitaine god whose name may suggest a connection with lightning and storms.



*Votive altar dedicated
to Abellionn*
France (Garin).
1st/2nd century
Marble

The depiction of a deity associated with his name is exceptional in Aquitaine. Unlike most indigenous gods, whose cults appear to have been very localised, Abellionn has a regional sphere of worship, the largest known to date. Although his name has never been associated with him, he may be an equivalent of the Roman Jupiter.



Roman stone from Hasparren
France (Hasparren).
3rd century AD
Marble

The stone at Hasparren, in Labourd, commemorates the establishment of the Roman province of Novempopulania, an Aquitanian territory through which the ancestors of the Basques and the Gascons asserted their identity in the face of Rome. The inscription is dedicated to the “spirits of the land”.



*Votive altar dedicated
to Leherenn Mars*
France (Ardèche).
1st-4th century AD
Marble

period: the local god Leherenn, whose name appears to be linked to the pine tree, is associated here with the Roman god Mars. Was Leherenn a war god? It remains difficult to assess the nature of this association, but it is highly likely that he was a protective guardian deity.

This votive altar illustrates the cultural evolution of Aquitaine during the Roman

IO

PANTHEONS

Deities often arise from each society's need to give expression to its experience of uncontrollable natural phenomena: rain, thunder, illness and death. In many cultures, primordial gods first inhabited the dawn of time: as ancient creators, these father-gods and mother-goddesses are rarely the object of worship by the faithful, as they are considered to be dead or to have ceded their place to younger deities. Among the latter are the gods and goddesses of the classical pantheons, with clearly defined, and sometimes hierarchical, spheres of influence.

37

Arched stele depicting a scene of worship
Egypt (Akhmîm).
Circa 380/30 B.C.
Limestone

Under the protection of the sign of the Sky and the winged sun disc, the priest Ousirour

(on the right) worships seven deities led by Amun-Min, the guardian of the land's fertility, depicted as an erect mummy-like figure, and by his female counterpart, Aperet-Isis. Next come Osiris, Isis, Nephthys, the falcon-headed Horus and the lioness goddess Tarepyt.

38

Kudurru of King Meli-shipak
Iraq (Babylonia), created.
Iran (Susa), discovered.
Circa 1186/1172 B.C.
Limestone

In Mesopotamia, a kudurru is a boundary marker attesting to the acquisition of land.

This particular kudurru formalises a gift made by the Babylonian king Meli-Shipak to one of his sons. On its reverse side is a legal inscription, guaranteed by the gods depicted on the front, either as symbols or through their associated animals. At the top stand Ishtar (star), Sin (moon) and Shamash (sun disc).

39

Painter of Suessula
Amphora known as the "Milo Amphora,"
decorated with a scene of the Gigantomachy
Greece (Athens), original.
Circa 410/400 B.C.
Red-figure pottery

A masterpiece of Greek art, this amphora depicts the rebellion of the Giants, sons of Gaia, the Earth, against the gods of Olympus. An oracle had predicted that the gods would prevail on condition that a mortal joined them: Zeus chose his son Heracles (Hercules), who was tasked with slaying the Giants with his arrows.

40

Statuette known as the "Princess of Bactria"
Turkmenistan
(ancient Margiana) or
Afghanistan (ancient Bactria).
Circa 2300-1800 B.C.
Chlorite and calcite

The Princesses of Bactria, of whom this statuette is one of the finest known examples, may, despite their traditional name, be representations of the Great Goddess associated with fertility and fruitfulness, who dominated the Central Asian pantheon of the Bronze Age.

41

Minerve Crawford
Italy. 1st-5th century AD
Marble

Minerva, the goddess of war and wisdom in ancient Rome, is depicted here subduing an anguipede, a half-man, half-snake monster which, in Greek tradition, belongs to the race of rebellious Giants.

BEAR

In the Isturitz cave (Basque Country), a vagina has been deliberately drawn on a wall covered in bear scratches. The intentions behind this act and its interpretation remain a complete mystery to us, but the animal has undoubtedly held a special place in the Pyrenean imagination since prehistoric times. Indeed, certain Basque and Gascon traditions hold that the origins of humanity are linked to it. One of the most popular is the story of Jean de l'Ours, a hero born of the union between a woman and a bear, endowed with incredible strength and combining the physical features of both his parents.

42

Thomas Loyatho
(born 1984)
Hartza
France
(Labastide-Clairence). 2025
Sheepskin, vine (clematis),
bramble, chestnut, burlap,
rope, butcher's twine,
leather

The bear-man has long been a feature of Basque and Gascon carnivals, where he is notably associated with the return of spring and fertility. Belonging to the Joaldun group of Hasparren, this Hartza bears witness to the important place this figure still holds today in Pyrenean ritual traditions.

43

Carved bear
France (Marquay,
Cap Blanc rock shelter).
Circa 15,000 B.C.
Flint

The retouching of this flint fragment gives it the shape of an animal recognisable as a bear.

44

*Bear head and cub carved
in the round*
France
(Saint-Martin-d'Arberoue,
Isturitz Cave).
Circa 15,000 B.C.
Sandstone

There is no evidence to suggest that there was a specific cult dedicated to the bear during prehistoric times. Nevertheless, it occupies a unique place in the art of that period: discreet, it is often depicted apart from other animals and, although solitary by nature, it is frequently associated with other bears, and sometimes even with humans.

Valère Bernard (1860-1936)
*Saint John the Bear Emerging
 from the Cave*
 France. 1930
 Engraving

Known across several continents and still very popular in the Pyrenees, Jean de l'Ours was born of the union between a woman and a bear. Here he is carrying his mother, emerging from the cave where he was born and where they were both held captive by his father.

12

HYBRIDS

“Therianthropic” creatures—that is, half-human, half-animal beings—have been ubiquitous since prehistoric times. Men with the appearance of bulls, felines, apes or crabs; women with the appearance of fish or birds: the combinations are endless. The blurring of the boundary between humans and animals allows the former to take on certain abilities of the latter.



46

Kagura Mask
 Japan. Early 20th century
 Carved and painted cedar
 wood, horsehair.

dances often depict mythological events. This hare mask is worn during a dance that recreates the one performed by Ame-no-Uzume, the goddess of joy, to coax Amaterasu, the sun goddess, out of the cave where she had shut herself away.

Kagura are theatrical Japanese dances associated with Shinto worship. These ritualised



47

Noh mask
 Japan. 20th century
 Lacquered wood

popular and its more refined, even elitist, forms. Having evolved in part from sacred dances and choreographies, it is a highly codified performance in which each character wears their own mask, such as this one depicting a demon.

Japanese Noh theatre is a form of dramatic and lyrical theatre, appreciated in both its



48

Hanoman Figurative Mask
 Indonesia (West Central
 Java). 19th century
 Wood, pigments

arts. In these performances, dancers reenact episodes from famous epics such as the Ramayana, featuring the white monkey Hanoman, son of the god of the wind, a hero of legendary strength and righteousness, and a faithful companion to Prince Rama.

The dance-and-mask theater known as wayang topeng plays a major role in Javanese

49

Zoomorphic headdress mask.
Mali (Niala).
19th / early 20th century.
Wood and plant fibers dyed
with mud.

The son of a snake and the first woman of humanity, Ciwara is depicted in the form of a horse-antelope. It was he who taught agriculture to mankind. People pay homage to him through rituals that combine song and dance. Used in pairs during these ceremonies, this type of mask has become one of the emblems of Bambara culture.

50

*Anthropomorphic
and phytomorphic vase*
Peru (Trujillo).
1st century BCE-
7th century CE
Red slip-coated terracotta
with polychrome painted
decoration

A half-human, half-feline figure lies on top of the funerary vase, its head raised. Plant roots sprout from its sides.

51

Vase depicting a crab-demon
Peru (Santa).
1st century BCE-
7th century CE
Molded beige terracotta,
decorated
with reddish-brown paint
on a cream background

On the top of this funerary vase is depicted a crab-like creature catching a ray. It wears a headdress and a diadem adorned with a feline effigy, often associated with the leaders of the Mochica people. Their ceramic art, blending realism and fantasy, is among the richest and most spectacular in the pre-Hispanic world.

52

Vase depicting a monkey
Peru (Trujillo).
1st century BCE-
7th century CE
Two-color terracotta

The monkey plays an important role in the funerary traditions of the Mochica people. It is particularly well represented in ceramic art, as seen on this vase from the city of Moche, home to the people's main places of worship.

53

Relief-molded brick panel
Iran (Susa).
Circa 1150 / 1120 B.C.
Terracotta

guardian deity of the ancient city of Susa. It depicts a bull-man, a protective figure warding off the forces of evil. His association with a palm tree a symbol of vegetation springing from life-giving water gives him an additional dimension here, linked to fertility.

This panel was part of the exterior decoration of a temple dedicated to Inshushinak, the

GENIES AND DEMONS



*Arched stele depicting
Bes and Beset*
Egypt. Circa 664/332 B.C.
Limestone

With his somewhat frightening hybrid appearance—half-man, half-lion—Bès is

nonetheless a thoroughly benevolent spirit. As the protector of the household, he fights the forces of evil and brings joy and good cheer. Particularly revered by dancers and musicians, he also protects women in childbirth and children. Bèsèt is sometimes regarded as his wife.



Bakemono Demons
Japan. 19th century
Wood, ivory

Bakemono, literally “things that change”, are Japanese spirits or demons with the ability to alter their appearance. These small figurines are made by assembling everyday objects.



III.

EXCEPTIONAL

In all mythologies, a handful of men and women have physical relationships with certain deities or other supernatural beings. Their unions usually produce exceptional children with unparalleled destinies: these are the legendary heroes whose unrivalled feats inspire so many sagas, tales of valour and epics.

People celebrate their adventures through dance and re-enact their trials through rituals—sometimes, admittedly, through simple gestures, for only a true hero worthy of the name can slay the terrible dragon and ensure the stability of the cosmic order. Long after their passing, the earth and humanity remain marked by their legendary deeds. Some are even venerated within a cult dedicated to them. But in many cases, their tragic death is not a true passing; it is merely an exile, a long rest taken in an invisible afterlife. And one day, when the time comes, many say they will return to free the oppressed from tyranny and misfortune.



Javelin, spearhead, dagger blade in its sheath, and sword.
France (Ibos; Tayrac for the sword). Between 600 and 400 B.C.
Iron, ferrous alloy, copper alloy

This set constitutes the typical armoury of an Aquitaine warrior from the Early Iron Age, at least as it appears to us in certain grave deposits. We can assume that, at that time, a legendary hero would have been clad in this set of metal armour.



Fragments of chain mail
France (Vielle-Tursan).
Circa 200 B.C.
Iron, iron alloy, copper alloy

These fragments of armour, which are exceptionally rare for this period, were unearthed in 1914 from a burial mound in the Landes region. The grave, which also yielded a helmet, a spear, swords, jewellery and silver tableware, belonged to a person of very high social standing, if not the highest.



Lightsaber
Coruscant (?).
Around 19 BBY
Metal alloys, plastic, kyber crystal

Weapons define heroes; heroes are nothing without their weapons. This lightsaber, the noble weapon of Jedi Knights and Masters, once belonged to Obi-Wan Kenobi, hero of the Galactic Republic and the Rebel Alliance. It lies at the heart of the Star Wars saga, a universe that revives the great myths of European chivalry.

DRAGON SLAYERS

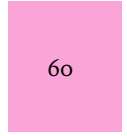
Present since prehistoric times and found all over the world, the dragon is a mythical creature that combines the features of several animals with those of a serpent. It is both a creature of the land and guardian of the underworld, and thus a keeper of treasures; an aquatic creature and guardian of springs, and thus master of waters and fertility, but when it prevents the rains from falling, this fire-breather becomes responsible for heatwaves and droughts. Celestial and guardian of time, he is also immortal, a healer and a seer: the dragon is virtually omnipotent and symbolises power. He is thus the ultimate adversary, the final obstacle that any hero worthy of the name must overcome.



Horse-riding Horus
Sudan (Faras).
Circa 200-399 CE
Sandstone

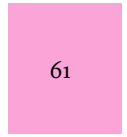
This relief combines the figure of the Egyptian falcon-headed god Horus with

that of a Roman legionary. The composition, drawing on the Egyptian image of the crocodile slayer, would soon come to represent Saint George for Christians in the guise of a dragon-slaying hero, in a symbolism celebrating the victory of Good over Evil.



Raffaello Santi, known as Raphael (1483-1520)
Saint George Fighting the Dragon
Italy. Circa 1503/1505
Oil on wood

The Christian legend of Saint George is summarised here in a powerful diagonal composition: the dragon launches an attack on Saint George, who is preparing to parry it. The outcome is clear: the broken spear suggests that the dragon is already weakened—indeed, the blade remains lodged in its flesh—whilst the princess it was supposed to devour is out of reach.



Ne'meh al-Musawwir
Saint George and Scenes from His Life.
Syria. 1666
Oil and pigments on a gold ground on wood

After slaying the dragon, Saint George was subjected to the persecutions against Christians ordered by the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Whether flayed, burned, poisoned, broken on the wheel or scalded, nothing could make him renounce his faith. He was eventually beheaded, as depicted in the final scene of this masterpiece of Melkite Christian art.



Musa Ibn Istifan
Saint George Slaying the Dragon
Syria (Aleppo). 1699
Terracotta

The imagery of Saint George slaying the dragon on his white horse has endured

remarkably well. According to various sources, it originates from the story of George, a Christian who lived in the 2nd century AD: in Lydda, he put an end to the activities of a band of Persian raiders led by Nahfr, whose name meant “serpent”. In return, George secured the conversion of the entire city to the Christian faith.



Heracles and the Nemean Lion
Cyprus (Pyrgos).
Circa 490/480 B.C.
Limestone

The son of the god Zeus and the mortal Alcmena, Heracles (Hercules) was hounded

throughout his life by the hatred of the goddess Hera, who was furious at having been cuckolded by her husband. In particular, he was forced to undertake his famous Twelve Labours, the first of which is depicted here: to slay the Nemean lion and bring back its skin.



Statuette of Hercules
Italy (Herculaneum).
First half of the 1st century AD
Bronze, silver

Depicting Hercules (Heracles) with his classic attributes (club and lion skin), this

work was discovered in Herculaneum, a city destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD and, according to legend, founded by Hercules himself. More than just a wrestling hero, the most famous demigod of Greco-Roman antiquity is also a civilising hero.



Hercules Fighting the Hydra
Italy. Circa 1525-1615
Bronze

This fountain sculpture, a gift from the Duke of Richelieu to Louis XIV, depicts Hercules (Heracles) fighting the Lernaean Hydra. This creature of the marshes is usually depicted as a multi-headed serpent. Its name, meaning “water serpent”, reflects the frequent association of this element with mythical serpents.

16

COSMIC ORDER



Mithras Slaying the Bull
Lebanon (Saida),
Mithraeum of Sidon.
389 AD
Marble

The god Mithra slays a bull, a symbol of the violence of evil, whose spilled blood promises renewal and the restoration of cosmic order. More broadly, this deity of Iranian origin whose cult spread throughout the Roman Empire from the 2nd century AD onwards embodies the victory of Good over Evil.



Taurobolic Altar of Marciana
France (Lectoure).
Circa 176 AD
Marble

This altar commemorates the sacrifice of a bull dedicated to the Mother Goddess Cybele. Nineteen other taurobolic altars have been discovered and are kept in Lectoure, an important religious centre in ancient Aquitaine. It is the largest collection of its kind in the world.

17

CUNNING

Strength is not the only weapon at the disposal of heroes and heroines. They are also known for their cunning, and sometimes even for possessing intelligence far superior to that of ordinary people.



Charles-Alexandre Renaud
(1756-1815), sculptor.
Charles Crozatier
(1795-1855), foundryman.
*Chained Prometheus Attacked
by an Eagle*
France. 19th century
Bronze

To the Greeks, the cunning Prometheus is the great protector of humanity, whom they sometimes regard as its creator. Among his many acts of kindness, he stole fire from mankind, which had been withheld from them by his cousin Zeus. To take his revenge, the king of the gods had him chained to Mount Caucasus so that every day an eagle would come and devour his liver.



Head of a Cyclops
Turkey (Izmir).
4th-1st century B.C.
Clay

The cyclops, a giant with a single eye, is a creature that features widely in myths across the world. The best known of these is undoubtedly Polyphemus, whom the Greeks depicted as early as the 7th century BC, often in scenes depicting his confrontation with Odysseus, the hero of the Odyssey.



Ulysses Escaping Polyphemus
France (?). 19th century
Clay

Cyclops Polyphemus. This scene depicts the hero, hidden beneath a sheep, escaping from the giant, whose single eye has been gouged out. This 19th century faux antique bears witness to the enduring popularity of the myth of Polyphemus.

During his journey, Odysseus and his men find themselves trapped in the cave of the



*Milo Plate: Odysseus
and Penelope*
Greece (Melos?).
Circa 450 B.C.
Clay

Ulysses, returning from his Odyssey after twenty years at sea, disguised as a beggar, tries to make himself known to his wife Penelope. For a long time now, she has been using her wits to fend off the suitors seeking to marry her in order to gain control of Ithaca. Full of ingenuity, she never falters, thereby protecting the life of her son Telemachus.

18

CULTURAL

Heroes may perform feats for their own benefit, such as ascending to the throne. But they can also take on the role of true cultural heroes when their actions benefit an entire community, particularly when they are the source of new resources and new knowledge, or when they deliver a country from a devastating plague. For slaying the dragon, defeating the Nemean lion or killing the Minotaur also

means overcoming the most overwhelming forces of evil, restoring the natural balance and ensuring the smooth running of the cycle of reproduction.

72

Maurice Denis (1870-1943)
The Bull of Marathon
France. 1918
Oil on canvas

legendary Cretan Bull began to wreak havoc in the region of Marathon, where he was eventually slain by Theseus. Here, Maurice Denis depicts this confrontation, interweaving it with an element from another famous myth: Andromeda in chains, whom Perseus would go on to rescue.

Captured by Heracles (Hercules) and then released into the Greek countryside, the

73

Skyphos Rayet
Greece (Boeotia).
Circa 550 B.C.
Black-figure pottery

sacrifice to the Minotaur, a half-man, half-bull monster imprisoned in a labyrinth by King Minos. The beast was slain by Theseus, who managed to find his way out of the labyrinth thanks to the ingenuity of Ariadne, Minos's daughter.

Every nine years, Athens was forced to offer seven young boys and seven young girls as a

74

Pinhead
Iran (Luristan).
1st millennium B.C.
Bronze

This pinhead depicts, within an oval frame formed by stylised mouflons, a hero grasping two felines by their hind legs. His pose is reminiscent of the figure of the "Lord of the Animals", a motif that enjoyed great popularity in the iconography of the ancient Near East.

75

*Cylinder seal:
mythological battles*
Iran (Susa).
Circa 2340/2200 B.C.
Serpentine

Mythological battle scenes pitting heroes against wild animals were very popular in the iconography of the ancient Near East, particularly during the 3rd millennium BC. Here, a hero subdues a bull whilst a bull-man grapples with a lion.

76

*Cylinder seal:
mythological battles*
Iran (Susa).
Circa 2340/2200 B.C.
Serpentine

On either side of a worn central cartouche, two bulls with ringed horns are each subdued by a naked hero. Beside them, a bull-man is locked in combat with a lion. These mythological battles were once identified as a depiction of the hero Gilgamesh subduing the Celestial Bull, accompanied by his companion Enkidu.

77

*Cylinder seal:
mythological battles*
Iraq. Circa 2334/ 2279 B.C.
Marble

This cylinder seal depicts a series of battles with mythological themes. Two symmetrical groups show a hero subduing a bull-man. A third group depicts a man and a lion facing off against each other.

19

THE STRUGGLE AS A MYTH

Wrestling heroes and heroines, distinguished by their exceptional abilities, their great courage and their determination to ensure that good triumphs over evil, can be found in all mythologies, from Hercules to contemporary superheroes. The writer and semiologist Roland Barthes (1915-1980) draws a parallel between them and professional wrestlers, revered performers in an extravagant spectacle which he likens to Greek theatre.



78

Antoine Louis Barye
(1795-1875)
*Hercules
and the Erymanthian Boar*
France. 19th century.
Bronze

This famous 19th century sculpture shows just how much the myth of Heracles (Hercules) continues to inspire artists long after the ancient world. It is through images such as these that he has come down to us as the greatest of all wrestling heroes.



79

Amphora handles
Italy (Etruria, present-day
Tuscany). Circa 500/ 475 B.C.
Bronze

Heracles (Hercules). On one, the hero captures the Ceryneian hind, a mythical creature with golden horns and bronze hooves. On the other, he is grappling with the Erymanthian boar, which terrorised the inhabitants of the eponymous mountain in Arcadia.

These two bronze amphora handles depict the third and fourth of the twelve labours of

80

Lourdes Grobet
(1940-2022)
*El Santo, Pista Arena
Revolucion, Mexico City.*
1980-1988
Framed photographic print,
as specified
by the photographer

A wrestling legend and film actor, Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta, known as “El Santo” (1917-1984), is a true folk hero in Latin America. He had a significant influence on the artistic career of Lourdes Grobet, a Mexican photographer who documented this spectacle sport through more than 11,000 photographs, helping to establish it as a contemporary legend.

CONTEMPORARY MYTHOLOGY

Born in Bayonne, Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century in the field of literary studies. In 1957, he published *Mythologies*, a collection of 53 essays analysing the myths of his time: whilst gods, monsters and heroes may no longer be as relevant as they once were, have they not been replaced by the Tour de France, washing powder that washes whiter than white, plastic, or even professional wrestling? For him, “mythical” is the name given to anything we wish to distinguish by surrounding it with words, with a dedicated narrative.

81

Howard Averill Terpin
Poster for the film “Cleopatra”
by Joseph L. Mankiewicz,
United States. 1963
Original print 64/66

In his book *Mythologies*, Barthes devotes an essay to the peplum genre, demonstrating how cinema constructs the myth of the Romans, their Empire, and their great figures such as Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, the last queen of Egypt. The epic film that Joseph L. Mankiewicz made about Cleopatra, starring Elizabeth Taylor in the lead role, is one of the most expensive in history.

HEROINES

Women seem to be conspicuously absent from these mythological legends; they are often relegated to the background, somewhat blurred, vaguely sketched out. They are the princess in peril who enables the knight to face the monstrous creature and prove his courage; they are Ariadne, abandoned by Theseus after she helped him slay the menacing Minotaur. They are sorceresses, like Circe; they are madly in love. These founding tales mirror the societies that shaped and passed them down, reflecting the established hierarchies between men and women, the powerful and the weak.

Yet even then, several exceptional women had been celebrated in ancient texts.



EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

The catalogue for the exhibition “Mythologies” explores a central issue in the transmission of mythical legends, namely the transition from the oral and written word to the image, both in the past and today.

Myths do not belong to the past: they continue to shape our imagination and inform our contemporary perspective; they intertwine and weave together universal thought and individual subjectivities.

320 pages; 22 cm × 16 cm

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This exhibition is organised by the Bonnat-Helleu Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts in Bayonne, in partnership with the Louvre Museum and with the exceptional collaboration of the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac.

Curators:

Benjamin Caule and Barthélemy Etchegoyen Glama (Bonnat-Helleu Museum), François Bridey and Dominique de Font-Réaulx (Louvre Museum).

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