

MONSTERS IN ART





A Discovery Tour at the Uffizi

GALLERY OF
STATUES AND
PAINTINGS

◆ Monsters

Monsters are weird

They are mythological characters

They can have several meanings

A monster can be a symbol

A symbol is an image we use to express an idea

They can be good monsters

They can also represent religion

They can be represented as animals

Sometimes they are hybrids



◆ What is a monster?

It comes from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning a marvel, something extraordinary, contrary to nature.

◆ **hybrids**, beings with physical characteristics that come from different animal species, such as man and horse, goat and man, lion and eagle, etc.

◆ **freaks**, beings with distorted anatomies: a single eye, or even many eyes; beings of enormous size or which are extremely small, etc.

in short, terryfying beings! ...beautiful only when portrayed!

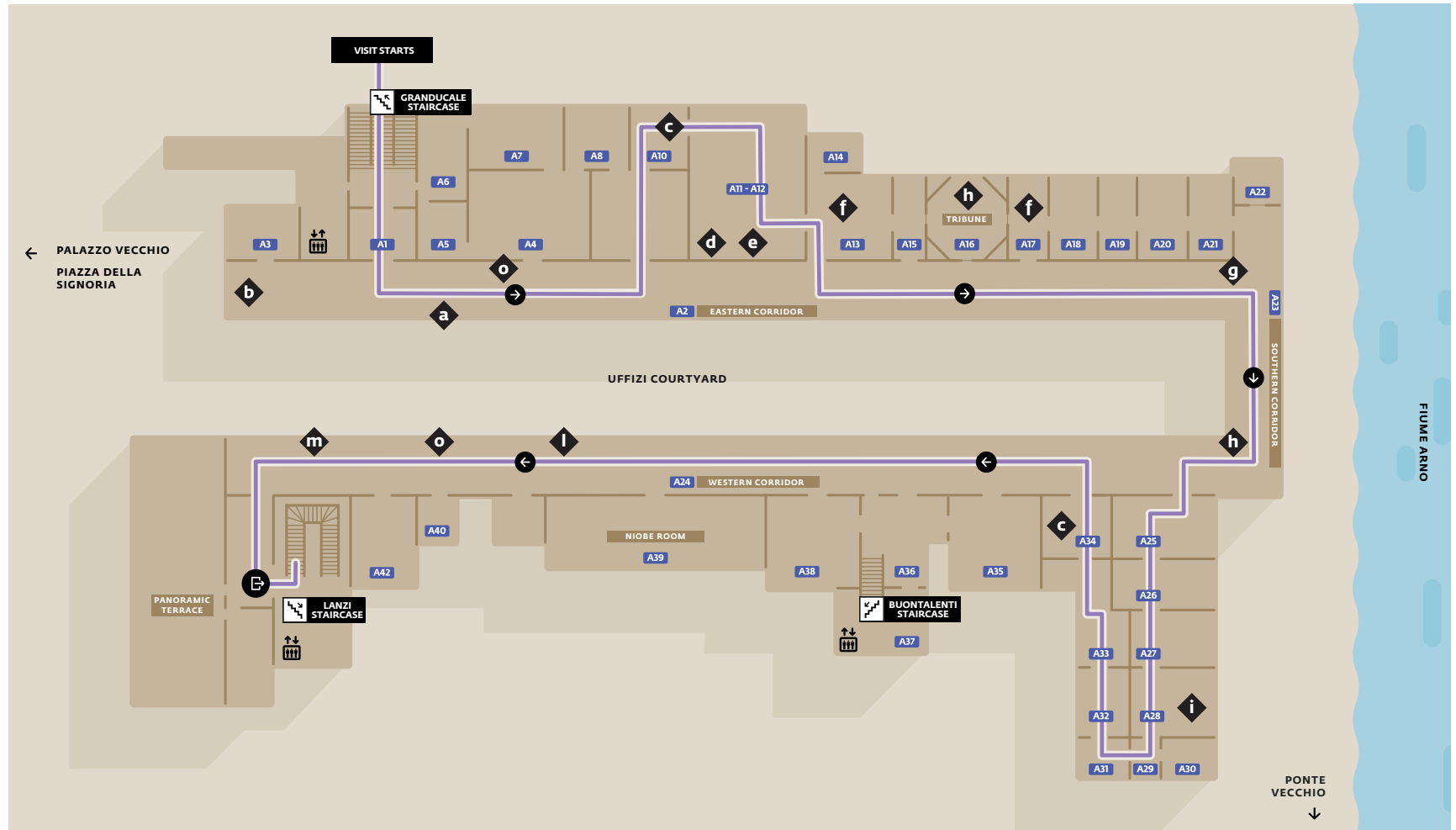
Very good!



Children, are you ready?
Come on, then!

2 SECOND FLOOR

- ◆ **Monsters**
- A2** Eastern Corridor
◆ b ◆ a ◆ o ◆ g
 - A10** I Pollaiuolo
◆ c
 - A12** Botticelli - Venus
◆ d ◆ e
 - A13** Hugo van der Goes
◆ f
 - A16** Tribune
◆ h
 - A17** 15th Century in Siena
◆ f
 - A24** Western Corridor
◆ h ◆ l ◆ o ◆ m
 - A28** Filippino Lippi, Piero di Cosimo
◆ i
 - A34** The antique and the garden of San Marco
◆ c



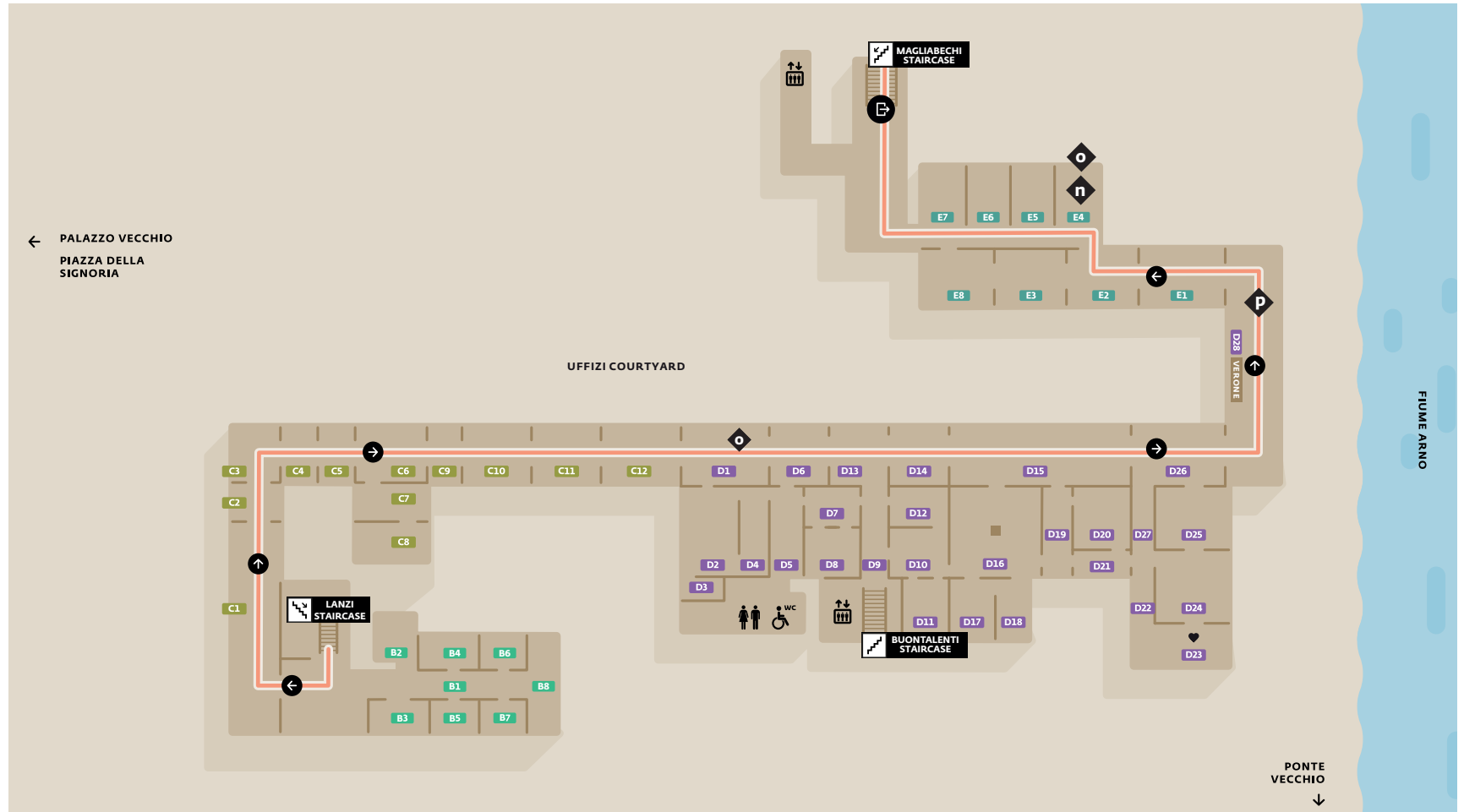
Follow the map to find the works; letters are used to mark the relevant info sheets.

1 FIRST FLOOR

◆ Monsters

D28 Verone

E4 Caravaggio - La Medusa



Follow the map to find the works; letters are used to mark the relevant info sheets.

◊ a Grottesque monsters

The “grotesque monsters” can be found on the ceilings with “grotesque” decorations of the first corridor (east corridor) on the second floor of the museum.

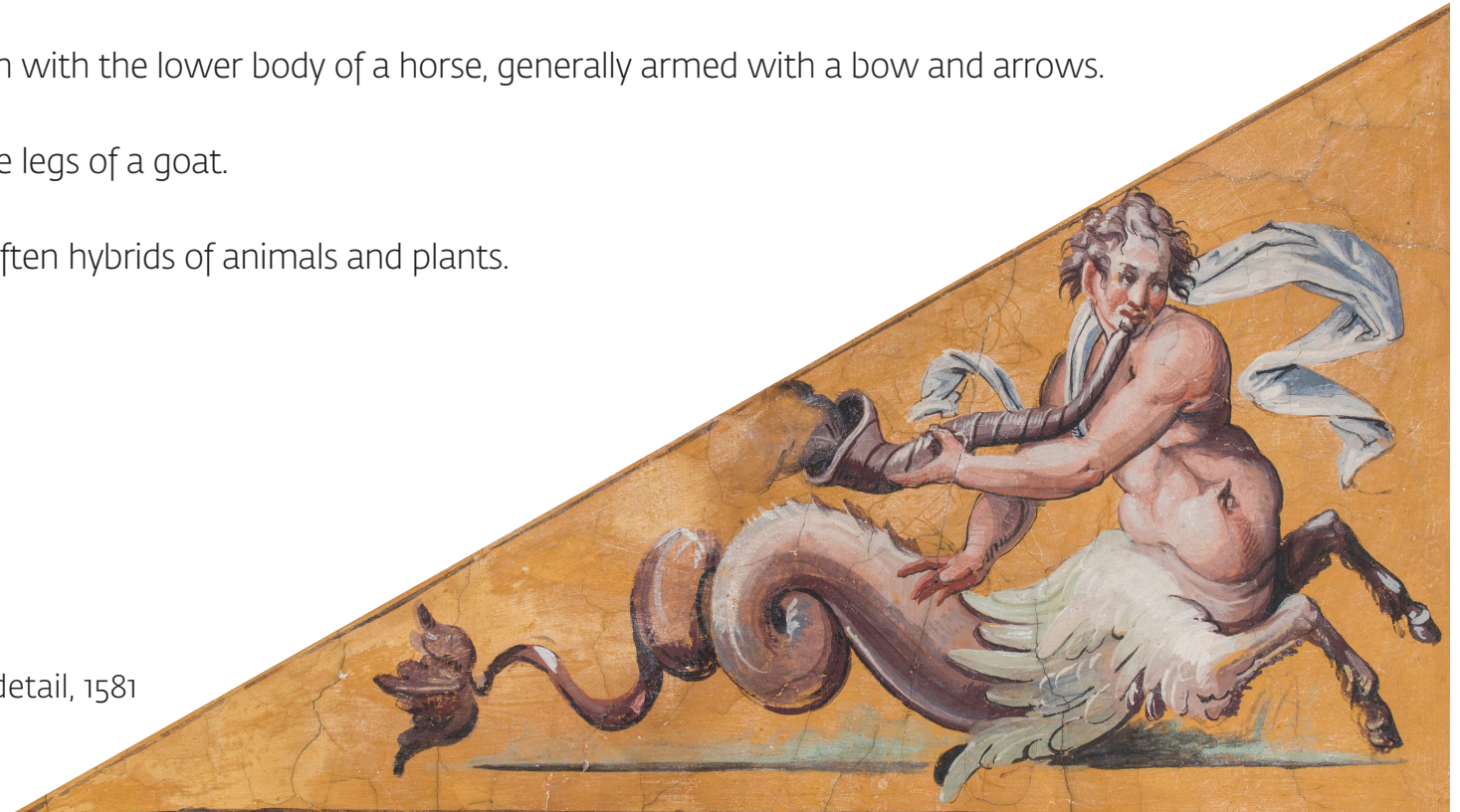
“Grotesque” is a type of wall decoration that includes a large number of figures: mythological divinities, personifications, animals and monsters.

The “grotesques” show almost all of the monsters described in mythological literature: centaurs, satyrs, sphinxes, griffons, etc.

The centaur is a hybrid because is a man with the lower body of a horse, generally armed with a bow and arrows.

The satyr has the body of a man and the legs of a goat.

There are beings with fantastic forms, often hybrids of animals and plants.



Antonio Tempesta, *Grotesque decorations*, detail, 1581

Grotesque

This is a type of mural decoration that uses a vast number of figures: divinities from myths, personifications, animals and monsters. The figures are connected to one another by graphic lines, plant shoots and architectural elements such as stairs, columns, etc. The figures are set out symmetrically so as to fill all of the available space. The term "grotesque" derives from the Italian word "grotta" meaning "grotto".



Grotto

The grotesque decorations are inspired by the ancient "Domus Aurea", the palace of Emperor Nero in Rome.

This looked – and still looks – like a series of underground caves, because it remained buried for centuries inside the Oppian Hill.

It was discovered at the end of 15th century, and its decorations influenced many painters of the period, who called them "grotesques".

Grotesque

As an adjective it means many things at the same time:

- strange
- bizarre
- unnatural
- deformed to the extent of being ridiculous
- so funny to cause a sense of anxiety rather than laughter.

It derives from the "grotesque" decorations representing beings with this kind of features.

Antonio Tempesta, *Grotesque decorations* (1555-1630), detail, 1581

◆ Nessus

Nessus is a centaur, a hybrid half-man and half-horse (see also info sheets “d” and “e”).

Sculptors have always preferred to depict Hercules in a vigorous struggle with the monster and not while stretching its bow in the attempt to kill him with an arrow.

◆ Greek and Roman Mythology

Literary Sources:

- Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, II, 7, 6
- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vv. 101-265



Giovanni Battista
Caccini, *Hercules and
Nessus*, 1st century b.C.
with additions made in
the 16th century



Ercole slaying the centaur Nessus

Nessus, the ferryman from the river Euenos, seeing Hercules and his beloved Deianeira, wanting to reach the other bank of the river, offered to help the woman across. As soon as he took Deianeira on his shoulders, Nessus fell in love with her and, once on the bank, he attempted to force himself upon her, to kidnap her. Hercules, who saw this offence from across the river, fired an arrow, soaked in poison from the Hydra of Lerna (see info sheet "c"), and stopped Nessus by injuring him. As he lay dying, Nessus devised a malicious act of revenge: he took his tunic and spread it with his poisoned blood, giving it to Deianeira and advising her to make Hercules wear it any time that she doubted his love so that she could regain it. The unsuspecting Deianeira believed him, and only recognised the trick when Hercules, wearing the poisoned tunic, died in agony shortly after.

Jean de Boulogne/Giambologna, *Hercules and Nessus*, 1599, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence

The same characters are represented in the sculpture group by Giambologna, on display in the Loggia dei Lanzi in Piazza della Signoria.



◈ Hydra of Lerna

A reptile with an enormous body and many snake's heads. According to some poets, it had seven heads, while others said it had nine or even fifty, and that the head at the centre was immortal.

◆ Greek and Roman Mythology

Literary Sources:

- Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, II, 5



Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *Hercules and the Hydra*, 1460 - 1475



How Hercules defeated the Hydra

The Hydra of Lerna lived in the Lerna swamp, near the city of Argos: there it had grown and terrorized the local inhabitants, raiding the valley to devour livestock and destroying the land.

Hercules found it on a hill and with flaming arrows he forced it to come out of its lair.

He then seized it and the Hydra wrapped around his leg while he sliced off its head with a club, all to no avail, as for every head that fell, two grew in its place. Hercules sought help from his friend and companion, Iolaus, and as every head was cut, Iolaus cauterized the stump, preventing any other head from growing.

Once all the heads had been cut, Hercules arrived at the immortal one, which he cut off and buried under a large stone. He then dipped his arrows in the Hydra's poisonous blood.

The slaying of the Hydra is the second of the twelve labours of Hercules. It is possible to see them all on a sarcophagus in room A34.



◆ Centaur

Man with the lower body of a horse and generally armed with a bow and arrows.

Who are the centaurs?

Mythology describes them as warlike beings, always fighting and violent. They tried to conquer the kingdom of the Lapiths in Thessaly, a region of Greece, and they did not want to accept the peace treaty offered by the prince of the region, Pirithous. In fact, after the prince had invited them to his wedding, they tried to kidnap the bride and the other women at the banquet. A war followed and the centaurs were forced to flee into the mountains by Theseus and other heroes.

◆ Greek and Roman Mythology

Literary Sources:

- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 12, vv. 210-535 (lotta fra centauri e Lapiti)

Roman art, *Centaur*, 2nd century a.D.



◆ Pallas and the Centaur

Botticelli has depicted a rough centaur who, although armed, must submit to the authoritarian gesture of the woman holding him by the hair. She is wearing elegant clothing and is armed with a shield. In one hand she holds an elegant halberd, the weapon provided to guards and sentries, which is decorated with gold and a precious stone. The woman looks a lot like Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and political reasoning. She seems to have arrived in this harsh, rocky place to subjugate this wild being, armed only with a rudimentary bow, and to punish him for his violent behaviour.

Botticelli depicted many other centaurs in his painting *The Calumny of Apelles*, displayed in the same room (see info sheet: "e")



Sandro Botticelli, *Pallas and the Centaur*, 1482 ca.



◆ Midas

Midas is a monster because he has the appearance of a man but with donkey ears, which reflect his ignorance and incompetence.

◆ Midas, unjust judge

Inside a sumptuous palace, King Midas is seated upon a podium. He is agitated; he has to sentence the young man dragged naked before him by a beautiful young woman, dressed in white and light blue.

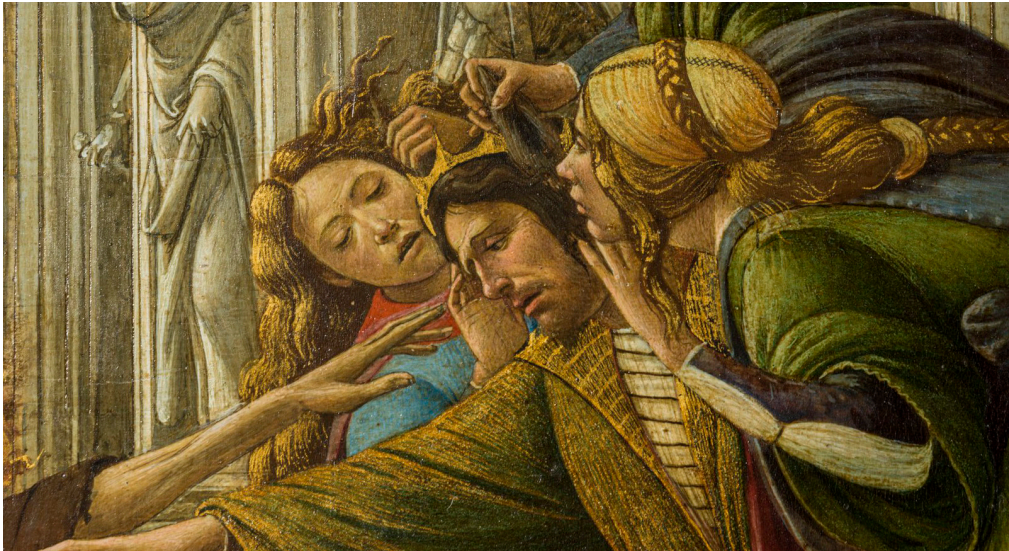
The youth is Apelles, unfairly accused of conspiring against the king, Ptolemy, while the woman is the treacherous Calumny.

On his throne, Midas seems to be listening to the two women who are whispering into his large donkey ears: one is Suspicion and the other is Ignorance, both of whom are misadvising the king.

To the left of the whole group, the naked Truth looks to the heavens. In spite of the unjust sentence issued by Midas, Truth will triumph at the end, once the innocence of poor Apelles is proven.



Sandro Botticelli, *The Calumny of Apelles*, 1496 - 1497 ca.



Sandro Botticelli, detail from *The Calumny of Apelles*, 1496 - 1497 ca.



◆ Greek and Roman Mythology

Literary Sources:

- Lucian di Samosata, *Descriptions of Artworks*, (Calumny)
- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XI, vv. 146-190 (The Transformation of Midas' Ears)

How did midas get his donkey ears?

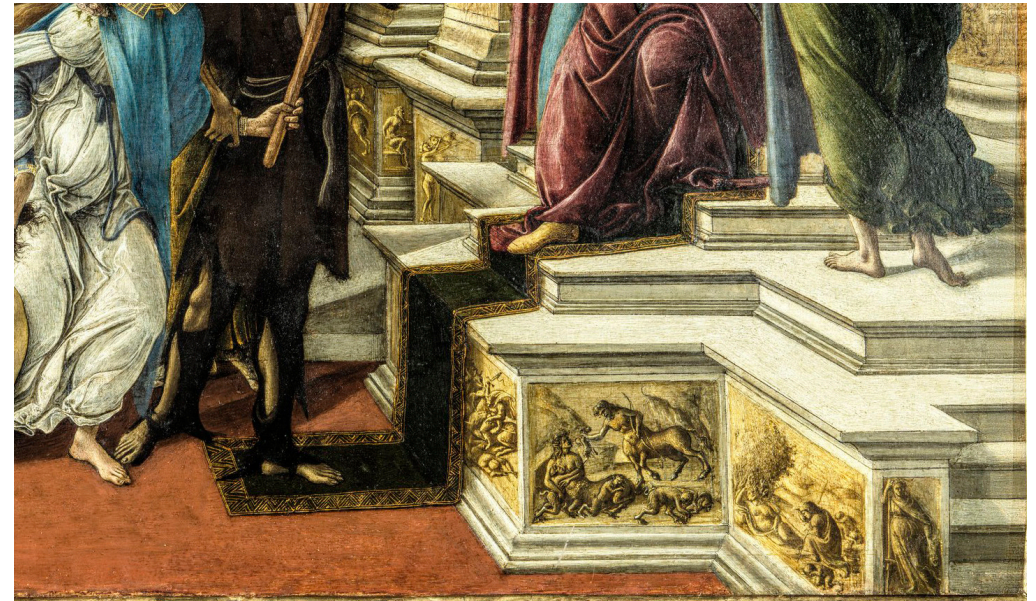
According to mythology, Midas was the king of Phrygia, in Asia Minor, and a friend of the satyr Pan. Pan was an excellent pipe player and he was so proud of his skill that one day he dared to challenge Apollo, god of song and poetry, and a superb lyre player.

The ignorant Midas was called upon to judge the pair and he declared Pan to be the winner. This unleashed the fury of the god who, to punish Midas for his incompetence, turned his ears into those of a donkey.

◆ Fun fact

In this painting by Botticelli, King Midas' palace is decorated with panels that create the effect of gold reliefs.

Many of the scenes contain centaurs that emphasize the unjustness of Midas. Among these is a curious family, the "family of centaurs".



Sandro Botticelli, "the family of centaurs" detail from *The Calumny of Apelles*, 1496 - 1497 ca.



f Devil

Generally, the devil is depicted as having a human appearance but with the wings of a bat, horns and other animal body parts - often reptilian.

His wings are a reminder of his heavenly origins. As suggested by some religious texts, Lucifer was the most beautiful, perfect and intelligent among the angels, but since he became unfair and rebellious, he was expelled from Heaven by Archangel Michael who, at the head of the legions of angels, sent him tumbling down into the abysses.



St. Benedict and the Devil

Benedict of Norcia had withdrawn to a cave near Subiaco to pray.

Every day, one of his followers, a monk called Romano, would drop the day's food into the cave, warning the saint of his arrival by ringing a small bell.

The devil broke the bell and, therefore, Benedict was unable to eat for several days.



Neroccio di Bartolomeo Landi, details from the *Scenes from the Life of St. Benedict*, 1471-72



Santa Margherita e il Diavolo

The Devil is under the feet of Saint Margaret of Antioch, patron saint of Margherita Portinari, depicted here praying before her.

According to the “Golden Legend”, persecuted by the Romans because of her Christian faith, St. Margaret was imprisoned and then devoured in her cell by the devil, who appeared in the form of a terrifying dragon.

Margaret, armed with a cross, was able to rip open the dragon’s stomach and emerge victorious.



◆ Christian Religion

Literary Sources:

- St. Gregory the Great, *The Life of Saint Benedict*
- Jacobus da Varagine, *The Life of Saint Margaret of Antioch*, in “The Golden Legend”

Hugo Van Der Goes, “Portinari Altarpiece” (details), 1477-78

Satyr

Satyrs have the body of a man and the legs of a goat, although artists often limited themselves to giving them pointed ears, horns and a small tail. They are naked and covered only by a “nebris”, a goatskin.

Satyr and Bacchus

Reeling under the effects of wine, the god Bacchus is holding up the young satyr accompanying him.

Together they have drunk from the “kantharos” (the cup that the ancient Greeks used for wine) which, now empty, is held almost upturned by the satyr’s right hand.

The god has elegant footwear, in contrast with the barefoot satyr, who is dressed in a rough goat’s skin that reveals his wild nature.



Roman art, *Satyr and Bacchus*, 130 - 150 A.D.



◆ Satyrs, the companions of Bacchus

The wild, vicious satyrs are among the major followers of Bacchus, the god who, according to myth, taught man to cultivate grapes and to drink wine.

Accompanied by a playful, singing and dancing army of these ever-drunk beings, Bacchus was able to win over people not with arms but with the sole power of fun.

Alessandro Allori and his workshop,
Grotesque decoration (detail), 1581,



◆ Satyrs, fauns and silenuses

Wild beings with a goat-like nature, similar in appearance and behaviour. They lived in the woods and the ancient Romans believed that any unexplained night-time noises could be blamed upon them. Dedicated to all of the physical pleasures and greedy above all for wine, they were attracted by the beautiful nymphs, who they would pester, lurking in the darkness of the woods.

In ancient times, people believed them to be demigods and therefore, in spite of their longevity, they were destined to die.



h Marsyas

Marsyas is a silenus: he has horns and a tail, and sometimes his ears are pointed.

Marsyas flayed

This Marsyas is known as "red" on account of the marble used; being similar to blood, its colour makes the flaying more striking.

Minerva, having found the bone from a deer's leg, began to play it and thus the pipe was born, but when she realised that the gods mocked her for the way her cheeks bulged when she played, she threw it away, cursing anyone who picked it up.

The intelligent and ingenious Marsyas found it and became an expert player. Travelling to Nisa, he met the god Apollo, who was particularly proud of the sweet sound of his lyre playing.

Marsyas dared to challenge Apollo, who accepted, on condition that the winner could inflict the punishment of his choice on the loser.

Roman art, "Red" Marsyas, 2nd century A.D.

The Muses were called upon to judge the contest, and it was not without endeavour and danger that Apollo was made the winner.

On account of the sheer effort that his victory caused him, Apollo hung Marsyas from a tree and had him flayed alive.

In another version of the myth, Marsyas was only tied to the tree but his ears were transformed at the wishes of Apollo and his body deformed by a pig's tail.



It is likely that this sculpture is from a group representing the flaying of Marsyas.



◆ Silenuses

They are old satyrs and, in fact, they are depicted with a tail and horns, and sometimes with pointed ears, but almost never with the goat's legs. The main silenus was a divinity known as "Silenus" (see info sheet: "P").

◆ Greek and Roman Mythology

Literary Sources:

- Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 6
- Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 1.4, 2
- Ovidi, *Metamorphoses*, VI, vv. 382-400



Roman art, A man sharpening his knife, known as the "Arrotino" (Knife Grinder) or "Scythian", II century A.D.

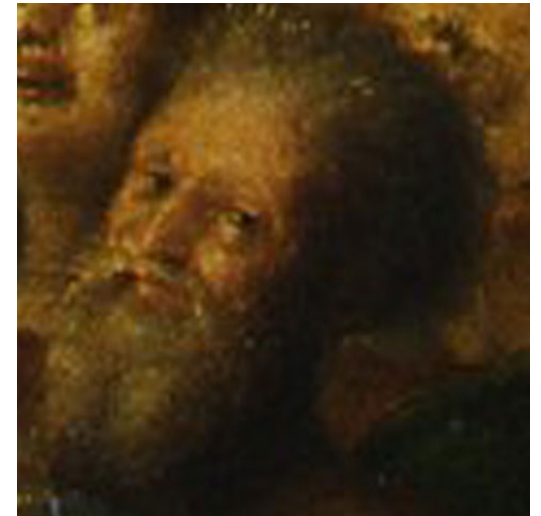
Sea monster

A single picture to tell a whole story.

The artist, Piero di Cosimo has also portrayed himself among the characters celebrating the freeing of Andromeda.



Piero di Cosimo, *The Freeing of Andromeda*, 1510-1513 ca.





❖ 1 The Princess Andromeda is in a critical situation, bound to a rock...



❖ 2 ... and waiting to be devoured by a sea dragon.



❖ 3 Her father Cepheus and mother Cassiopeia are weeping;



❖ 4 her friends, near and far, are in despair,

◆ Greek and Roman Mythology

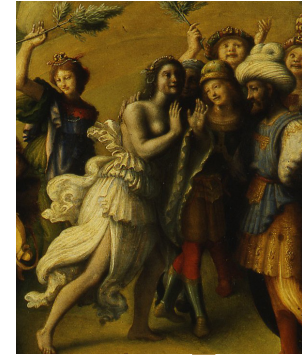
Literary Sources: Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 2.4, 2 - Ovidi, *Metamorphoses*, IV, vv. 668-764



5 but Perseus comes down from the sky...



6 ... borne on his winged sandals, and, at the sight of Andromeda, he fights off the dragon with his sword.



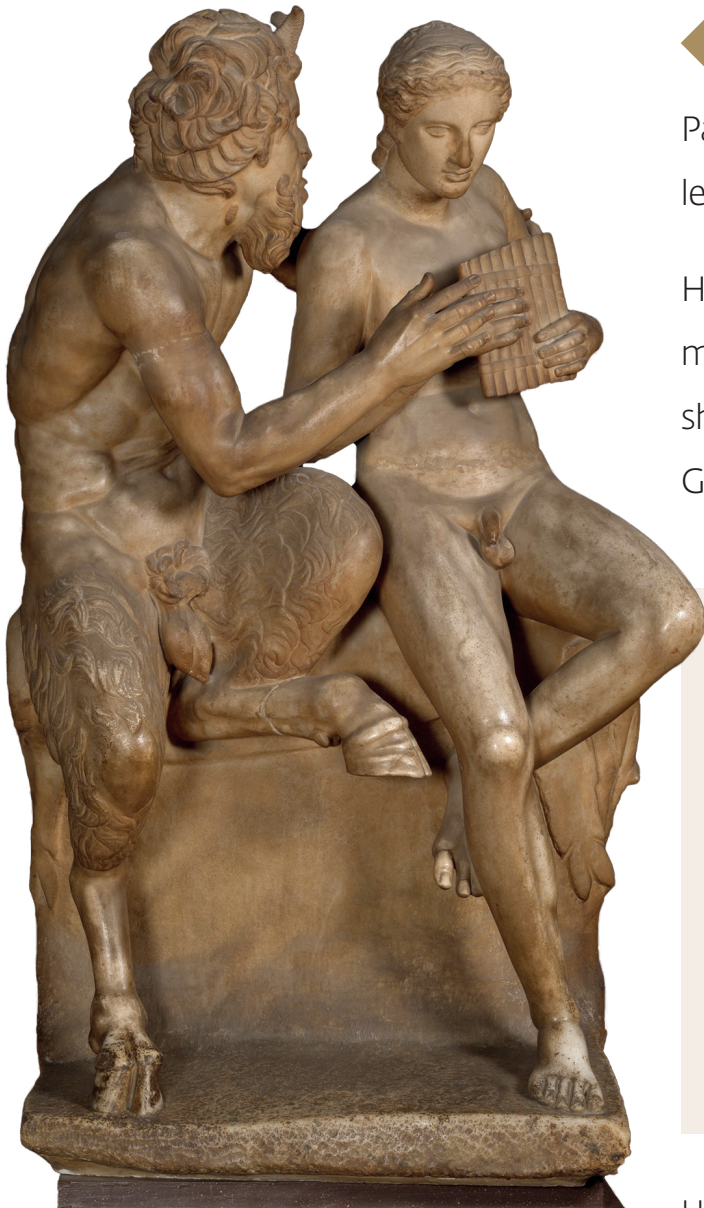
7 Andromeda is thus returned to her loved ones...



8 ... and there are celebrations, with sacrifices being made to the gods,...



9 ...with music and songs to celebrate the hero and the princess who, brought together by fate, are also then joined in marriage.



I Pan

Pan is the first among the satyrs. He has the physique of a goat: beard, unruly hair, horns, legs and hooves.

His name means “everything”, totality. The Greeks and Romans saw Pan as one of the major divinities, since he was considered the god of all nature and, more specifically, of shepherds and all country dwellers. According to myth, Pan lived in Arcadia, a region of Greece full of woods and crags.

Dafni e Pan

Daphnis was a gentle Sicilian shepherd, son of the god Mercury and a nymph. He was born in a laurel wood, a place consecrated to the Muses, the divinities who inspired poets. Pan offered to become his teacher and taught him the arts of singing and of playing the syrinx, the pipes that he himself had invented, to the extent that Daphnis invented a genre of poetry, known as “pastoral” (from the Latin word “pastor” meaning shepherd).

Heliodoros di Rodi, *Pan Teaching Daphnis to Play the Syrinx*, II century A.D.

The “syrinx” or panpipes

These pipes consist of seven or nine tubes and were invented by Pan. The name syrinx comes from the nymph with whom he fell in love, without this feeling being returned. Syrinx in fact begged the gods to remove Pan's unwelcome attention, since he was so deformed and ugly.

Her wishes were granted and the gods turned Syrinx into reeds and Pan, in the attempt to remain close to her forever, made the reeds into a bundle of different lengths, inventing the panpipes. Thus, he made music to console himself for the terrible separation from his beloved.

◆ Greek and Roman Mythology

Literary Sources:

- Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca*, IV (Pan e Dafni)
- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, I, vv. 687-712 (story of Syrinx)



Pan Playing his Pipes, Grotesque in the second corridor (corridoio di Mezzogiorno), 2nd floor

Sea horse

Sea horses have half body of a horse and the other of a fish, and fins in place of their front hooves.



Detail of a grotesque in the third corridor (corridoio di ponente), 2nd floor

How neptune invented the horse

Since the gods on Olympus wanted to choose a country in which to be particularly honoured, Neptune found himself contending the Greek region of Attica with Minerva.

In order to pacify the contenders, Jupiter decided that the region would belong to the one who invented the thing most useful to man.

Minerva invented the olive and Neptune the horse. The olive was considered the most useful and the goddess was given the honour of naming the capital after herself - Athena, in Greek, hence the name Athens.



Nereids

Daughters of Nereus and Doris, they were sea nymphs invoked by sailors to give them merciful seas.

Greek poet Hesiod counts fifty of them, each with her own name. They were beautiful and particularly jealous of their beauty. In fact, the myth tells how they wanted to sacrifice Andromeda, exposing her to the jaws of the sea monster to punish the princess' mother, Cassiopeia, for her pride in considering her beauty and that of her daughter superior to that of the Nereids (for more information on Andromeda, see info sheet: "i").

◆ Fun fact

In Italian, larger breakers are known as "cavalloni" (meaning literally "big horses"), which evoke the galloping movement of Neptune's horses.

Nereid on a Sea Horse,
roman art, I century. A.D.



Medusa

Medusa has the body of a woman and snakes in place of her hair. Her gaze will turn you to stone.

According to the most ancient mythological versions, the Gorgons were the daughters of Phorcys and Ceto; their names were Euryale, Stheno and Medusa, the only mortal. Their heads were wrapped in snakes' scales and boars'.



Medusa beheaded by Perseus

Medusa was one of the three Gorgon sisters and was defeated by the hero Perseus, who fought her with the help of the gods Mercury and Minerva. Minerva lent him the polished shield and Mercury gave him a steel sickle and winged sandals. Perseus reached Medusa's home along an impervious route, dotted with statues of men and animals who had been turned to stone by meeting the gaze of the monster.

He surprised her while she slept alongside her sisters and to avoid being turned to stone, he kept his head turned away and his eyes fixed on the bronze shield that he used as a mirror. After having beheaded Medusa, he flew back and her two frightened sisters took flight to follow him but they were not able to see him.

The painting shows the monster's evil breath as it leaves her mouth and the place where the head itself fell, which is swarming with frightening animals: a bat, rats, and insects.

According to the myth, the drops of Medusa's blood fell on the Libyan desert and turned into snakes that went on to populate the area with a large number of species.

The artist has depicted Medusa's head so that her gaze will never meet that of the onlooker.



Otto Marseus Schrieck, *Head of Medusa*, 1610-12 ca.



Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus* (detail), 1545-54, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence

◆ Greek and Roman Mythology

Literary Sources:

- Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, II 4, 2
- Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, vv. 770-789



◊ Medusa and Minerva



Minerva transforms Medusa's hair into snakes

Ovid tells that originally Medusa was not a monster; on the contrary, she was an extremely beautiful young girl, whose most appreciated feature was her hair.

The hair that made her so stunning was turned into a tangle of snakes by the goddess Minerva, as punishment for having desecrated her temple. The goddess also gave Medusa's eyes the ability to turn anyone who looked at her into stone.



◆ Greek and Roman Mythology

Literary Sources: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, vv. 790-804

Timoteo, *Minerva*, marmo, I sec. A.D.

The medusa's head on Minerva's shield

After having employed Medusa's head against various enemies, Perseus gave it to Minerva, who used it for the decoration on her shield and armour, the "aegis", placing it over her chest.

Greek poet Homer writes that the head of Medusa was carved into the shield of Agamemnon to frighten and terrify his enemies, since the virtue to protect from danger was attributed to this decoration.

This is not a simple circular painting, it is a work painted directly onto a real shield.



Michelangelo Merisi, known as Caravaggio, *Medusa*,
1598-1599

Roman emperors also used to decorate their armours and shields with the Medusa's head in the same way as Minerva did with her aegis and shield.



Portrait of Nero, *Testa di Nerone*, marmo, 54-68 A.D.

Silenus

Old, bearded and with pointed ears

and a small tail. His physical characteristics are those of a satyr. He was often portrayed as fat and old, made lazy by his drinking habit and only able to move around on a donkey.



Bacchus lost his mother before he was even born; he was the son of Jupiter, king of the gods, and the princess Semele. Juno, Jupiter's wife, jealous of her husband's betrayal, plotted a wicked vengeance against her rival by advising her to ask her lover to reveal himself in all his power.

Semele did so, not suspecting that, since she was mortal, the god's power would have turned her to ashes. After Semele's death, Jupiter was at least able to save her unborn son and he left him to be cared for by the nymphs on Mount Nysa.

The wise Silenus was appointed to be his tutor and became one of the god's most faithful companions, following him on his travels and all his adventures.

Silenus and Young Bacchus

Silenus is leaning against a trunk, around which a grape-filled vine is climbing: this is the plant that represents Bacchus.

The ivy crown that Silenus wears is also a reference to the god: it refers to Bacchus' childhood, when the nymphs of Nysa used the plant to cover the young god's cradle, to prevent Juno from realising he was there and protect him against her revenge.



Jacopo Del Duca, *Silenus and Young Bacchus* (copy of *Silenus cradling young Dionisos* from the Borghese collection), 1571-74

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