

Nereids

Naiads

New Brides

Many are familiar with the rich classical literature inspired by Greek mythology, from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to Euripides' *Oedipus Rex*. Accounts of ancient myths like these not only gave voice to men's fears but also justified the patriarchal customs and attitudes prevalent in their society. A deep anxiety among Greek men surrounded women's sexual passions and the need to control them. Men often viewed unmarried virgins as wild, needing to be tamed through marriage. Men doubted, however, that this would guarantee chastity, and they still feared feminine power through sexuality. Thus, women were bound by strict social expectations that set safeguards for their sexuality through separation and seclusion.

The nymph—virginal yet promiscuous, chaste yet hypersexual—embodies this anxiety. The Greek word *νύμφη* (*numphē*) not only refers to a mythical being but also a “bride.” The term was used to describe a woman soon to be married or one who had already married but had not yet had her first child. This was a time of transition for girls becoming women, leaving behind their toys for housework and children. Nymphs, too, occupied this transitional space. These sexual females living outside mainstream society represented the sex lives of new brides.

This exhibition invites viewers to contemplate the constraints on feminine sexuality in two contexts: in the gynaeceum, or the women's space of ancient Greece, and in representations of nymphs throughout art history. The gynaeceum illustrates how women were separated from the males of the household, and containing objects that would have populated it in ancient Greece. The cave, mimicking a shrine to Nereids (sea nymphs) or Naiads (fresh water nymphs), includes artistic renderings of water nymphs ranging from antiquity to the present day. Both spaces demonstrate men's anxiety and desire to control women's sexuality through myth and custom.

The Amphoriskos

Both of these digital spaces stem from the exploration a single object: a silver amphoriskos in the collection of the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College. This small perfume vessel contains more mysteries than answers. The time and place in which it was made is unknown, but researchers do have some theories. Most importantly, professionals have agreed upon its authenticity. It is certainly Greek, perhaps from the Black Sea region of the Crimea since many wealthy women were buried with their jewelry and finer belongings in this area. The corrosion on one side of the vessel indicates that the amphoriskos was partially buried for some time, although the deceased likely used it while living. The subject matter and style suggest that the amphoriskos was made between 425 and 375 BCE. Scholars know that this object would have been made by a male craftsman for a female market, which could account for the representation of these Nereids. The craftsman chose to display these nymphs in a supportive role, carrying weapons and armor to the Greek hero Achilles, perhaps to remind the woman who used it of her role as a wife and mother. The creator also exposed one of the Nereids' breasts, perhaps to add erotic overtones for a more compelling work or to fit into the sexually charged narrative surrounding nymphs.

This arming of Achilles is a popular scene from Homer's *Iliad*. In this epic poem, Achilles receives his armor and weapons twice: once before war with the Trojans and again after his good friend (and perhaps lover) Patroclus dies having battled in Achilles' own armor. The Nereid Thetis, Achilles' mother, is in attendance each time, carrying her son's shield. Because Achilles' shield, and thus Thetis, is not present on this vessel, it is possible that the amphoriskos is part of a series. The arming scene also evolved over time through other Greek literature, including Aeschylus' *Nereids*. Very little of this play survives, but there is enough to know about the arming of Achilles. Nereids ride across the sea on the backs of dolphins, carrying pieces of Achilles' arms. Because the play was written in 490 BCE, this amphoriskos likely mirrors Aeschylus' popular imagery.

The interpretation of the silver amphoriskos has been twofold. Because this object would have been both functional and decorative, it seemed appropriate to contextualize the vessel in both spaces: the gynaeceum, in which the owner used it, and the cave, in which someone could have dedicated it to the water nymphs.



The Cave

The nymphs of Greek myths have an ambiguous sexual status. At times they appear chaste, attending the virginal goddess Artemis and fighting against male abductors. In other stories, these nymphs appear promiscuous, engaging in sexual contact with Dionysus, welcoming the advances of satyrs, and exposing their breasts. This tension can be partially attributed to the characteristics of different types of nymphs. The representation of a sexualized yet virginal nymph persists even after Greek antiquity, resulting in highly voyeuristic scenes throughout the Renaissance and Rococo periods.

Naiads and Nereids appear most often in artistic representations of nymphs, often attending Artemis (Diana) or Poseidon (Neptune). In ancient Greek literature, however, the nymphs' caves are frequently described in detail along with images of nymphs that populated the space. This agrees with the archaeological evidence for many cave shrines that are dedicated to nymphs or other fertility or nature deities. These caves were spaces to worship rustic beings, to whom mortals made appropriate offerings: flowers, goat or sheep sacrifices, libations of milk, wooden figures or bowls, and even small vessels with perfume. This virtual cave pays tribute to these shrines and includes various representations of nymphs throughout art history in which these feminine beings have been sexualized and put on display.

1. Unknown (Roman)

Sarcophagus with Sea Nymphs and Sea Centaurs (ca. 165-180 CE)

Carrara marble

16 15/16 x 70 1/2 x 22 in

Mead Art Museum at Amherst College

AC 2012.346

Museum Purchase

2. Hughes Taraval

The Triumph of Amphitrite (1780)
Oil on canvas
50 15/16 x 38 1/4 in
Mead Art Museum at Amherst College
AC 1976.2
Purchased in honor of Susan Dwight Bliss

3. Gerard de Lairesse

Triumph of Galatea (1640-1711)
Oil on canvas
17 15/16 x 22 1/8 in
Smith College Museum of Art
SC 1961:18
Gift of Anna E. Roelker

4. Peter Anton von Verschaffelt

A Sea Nymph and a Triton on a Dolphin (18th century)
Pen and grey ink, red chalk, red and grey wash
7 1/2 x 10 13/16 in
Metropolitan Museum of Art
2008.250
The Elisha Whittelsey Collection

5. Unknown (Late Classical)

Bronze Handle of a Shallow Basin (4th century BCE)
Bronze
7 3/8 in
Metropolitan Museum of Art
1978.11.18
The Bothmer Purchase Fund

6. Unknown (Greek)

Amphoriskos (date unknown)
Silver
4 3/4 x 2 1/2 x 2 1/2 in
Mead Art Museum at Amherst College

AC 1958.125.a
Gift of Miss Susan D. Bliss

7. Eretria Painter

Terracotta Lekythos (ca. 420 BCE)
Red-figure, white-ground ceramic
19 1/2 in (diameter 8 1/16 in)
Metropolitan Museum of Art
31.11.13
Rogers Fund

This funerary oil flask depicts three scenes on different registers. The bottom scene shows Theseus and his Greek soldiers fighting Hippolyte and the Amazons, a race of warrior women. The middle scene, in white-ground, shows the arming of Achilles by Nereids atop dolphins as he mourns the loss of his dear friend Patroclus. While the top scene is degraded and difficult to read, these two scenes appear to show the proper role of a woman through the helpful Nereids as well as what happens when a woman goes against her nature like the Amazons. The vessel even shows some Amazons paying for crimes against their gender through death.

8. Camille Corot

Diana and Actaeon (*Diana Surprised in Her Bath*) (1836)
Oil on canvas
61 5/8 x 44 3/8 in
Metropolitan Museum of Art
1975.1.162
The Robert Lehman Collection

This famous scene from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* highlights the innocent aspect of Naiads. They help the virginal goddess Diana (Artemis) as she bathes in one of her sacred springs, but the mortal Acteon stumbles upon the nude goddess while hunting. She quickly covers herself with the Naiads' assistance, and they too attempt to hide their own naked bodies. Soon after Diana discovers Acteon,

she turns him into a deer, and the very dogs he hunted with tear him apart.

9. Pietro Santi Bartoli

Hylas and the Water Nymphs (late 17th century)

Engraving

10 5/8 x 21 in

Metropolitan Museum of Art

64.682.125

Gift of Harry G. Friedman

This piece depicting the abduction of Hylas, lover of Hercules, shows the reverse of a typical kidnapping. Instead of a male capturing a nymph, a Naiad instead falls in love with Hylas and pulls him into the river. In Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, it is implied that she forces herself upon him. The rest of the Argonauts are unsure what happened to the poor boy, but it is implied that he eventually drowned as a result of the nymph's lust.

10. René Guérineau

Frieze of Sea Creatures and Nymphs (mid-17th century)

Etching

5 5/16 x 14 5/16 in

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

2007.925

Gift of Margaret and Thomas McCormick

This etching shows the abduction of a nymph by a male, a trope that appears elsewhere in this cave. In this instance, the nymph looks backward, clearly wishing to go back from whence she came. Other sea-centaurs attend her abductor, including a female. In Greek myth, female centaurs of any kind are uncommon since most of these horse-men exhibit the archetypal male characteristics of anger or violent sexual tendencies.

11. Albrecht Dürer

The Sea Monster (ca. 1498)
Engraving on laid paper
9 7/8 x 7 1/2 in
Mead Art Museum at Amherst College
AC 1969.2
Museum Purchase

12. Clément Massier and James Vibert
Sculptural Bowl (1900)
Stoneware
10 7/8 x 21 3/4 in
Metropolitan Museum of Art
2013.503
Purchase: Robert A. Ellison Jr. Collection

13. Reuben Nakian
Nymph and Goat (1976)
Brush and India ink on paper
12 1/4 x 18 in
Metropolitan Museum of Art
1984.539.4
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Donald Erenberg

14. Jean Mignon
Venus Bathing Attended by Nymphs (1535-55)
Etching
12 1/2 x 9 1/2 in
Metropolitan Museum of Art
49.97.606
The Elisha Whittelsey Fund

15. Raphael Drouart
Nymphes Laveuses (1884-1972)
Etching
11 15/16 x 7 7/8 in
Mead Art Museum at Amherst College

AC 1951.998

Gift of Edward C. Crossett (Class of 1905)

16. William Theed the Elder

Thetis Transporting Arms for Achilles (ca. 1804-12)

Bronze

50 3/8 x 56 5/16 x 47 1/4 in

Metropolitan Museum of Art

2013.35

Purchase: Assunta Sommela Peluso, Ignazio Peluso, Ada Peluso,
and Romano I Peluso Gift

This sculpture shows Achilles' mother, Thetis, transporting armor to her son. She mourns because she knows that if her son kills the Trojan hero Hector as prophesized, Achilles would die soon after. Playing the part of supportive mother and respectable female, it is still her duty to assist Achilles however she can. From different angles, one can see Achilles' weapons, helmet, and shield atop the shell she rides. A triton, part man and part sea creature, carries the Nereid Thetis across the sea.

17. Jeff Koons

Antiquity 2 (2009-2011)

Oil on canvas

102 x 138 in

© Jeff Koons

Jeff Koons' work captures the sexual side of the Nereid through a mixture of ancient and contemporary subjects. The contemporary Nereid mimics the position of many before her, a pin-up model in lingerie riding an inflatable dolphin. Koons also includes ancient sculptural representations presumably of nude Aphrodite and her cupids, adding to the erotic aspect of the work. The satyr appears ready to penetrate the Nereid from behind, not uncharacteristic of these hypersexual goat men who often socialize with nymphs.

The Gynaecium

Women in ancient Greece had a subculture authentically their own as defined by their societal roles. As seen in Homer's *Odyssey* and later Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, weaving was a feminine task, and a very special one. The verb "to weave", ὑφαίνειν (huphainein), can also mean to devise a plan or spin a tale. In Ovid's tales, women exchange stories at the loom, often about mythical females. Women also oversaw funerary rites; their connection to birth warranted their presence at one's death. Indeed, Greek women's lives played out in a private, domestic realm, distinct from the more public world of men.

Greek men had concerns about a women's potentially dangerous sexuality. Thus, they created social structures to keep women secluded. Of course, this seclusion applied only to some women, not all of them. Poor families could not afford to keep their women at home, so the women would also work or sell goods in the market. Middle and upper class families would have a gynaecium, but men and women of the same family could move through common spaces together. If the men of the house were to have a symposium (drinking party), however, the women would certainly have been kept away for the duration of the event. It is also worth noting that, although women weren't always confined to the gynaecium, men would not have entered this sequestered space.

The gynaecium was not simply a woman's bedroom but instead a place for her to engage in feminine activities like weaving and beautification. This room would include a loom, cosmetics, jewelry, and specific types of vessels. Many of these objects were decorated with scenes from the gynaecium or representations of feminine activities, while others depict females from myth such as Medusa or Thetis. This virtual gynaecium offers a sense of the architecture and material culture of historic gynaeciiums.

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1. Unknown (Greek)

Loom-Weight (5th century BCE)

Metal

1 15/16 in x 1 in x 3/4 in

Mead Art Museum at Amherst College

AC 1941.7

Gift of Charles H. Morgan II

2. Priam Painter

Hydria with Women at the Fountain (520 BCE)

Black-figure ceramic

20 7/8 in (diameter 14 9/16 in)

Museum of Fine Arts Boston

61.195

William Francis Warden Fund

This water vessel shows a scene of the hydria in use. A hydria would be used to catch water from a fountain, an activity reserved primarily for women. This scene shows these women at work to bring water home to their families. There is also an implication that they could be socializing, a potentially threatening activity in their husbands' eyes.

3. Unknown (Classical)

Silver Bracelet (ca. 350-300 BCE)

Silver

2 15/16 in

Metropolitan Museum of Art

06.1085

Rogers Fund

4. Unknown (Classical)

Silver Fibula (4th century BCE)

Silver

6 x 2 3/8 in

Metropolitan Museum of Art

2007.244.1

Gift of the Rober Haber Family

5. Unknown (Greek)

Pair of Gold Ornaments (ca. 300 BCE)

Gold

5/8 in

Mead Art Museum at Amherst College

AC 1955.549.a,b

Gift of the children of Dwight W. Morrow (Class of 1895) and Elizabeth C. Morrow

This pair of earrings seems to show the visage of a gorgon, presumably Medusa. Athena turned Medusa into a snaky-haired beast after the sea-god Poseidon sexually assaulted the girl in Athena's temple. Later, Athena leads the hero Theseus to Medusa's home so that he may cut her head off without turning to stone under her gaze. Theseus then gifted the severed head to Athena, who wore it upon her aegis (goat-skin) from then on. This female monster is another reminder for mortal women to remember their place, or there could be grave consequences.

6. Veii Painter

Tripod Pyxis with a Domestic Scene (470-460 BCE)

Earthenware with black slip and whit pigment

7 x 6 in

Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

MH 1932.5.B.SII

Purchase with the Psi Omega Society Fund in honor of Mary Gilmore Williams (Class of 1885)

7. Unknown (Hellenistic)

Gold Necklace (4th-early 3rd century BCE)

Gold

11 5/8 in

Metropolitan Museum of Art

13.234.7

Rogers Fund

8. Unknown (Late Classical or Hellenistic)

Bronze Balsamarium (late 4th or early 3rd century BCE)

Bronze

3 3/8 in

Metropolitan Museum of Art

11.91.3

Rogers Fund

This bronze cosmetic container comes from the Etruscan area of Magna Graecia, what is now known as Italy. The woman depicted here could possibly be a deity, either an equivalent of Aphrodite or a nymph-like love goddess. Both are reasonable, as men thought that a woman beautifying herself did so in order to cause love (or lust) in men.

9. Unknown (Greek)

Mirror Cover (late 4th century BCE)

Bronze

3/4 x 6 in

Smith College Museum of Art

SC 1995:24

Purchased with the Diane Allen Nixon (Class of 1957) Fund and gifts from the Shaw Foundation and Caroline Houser

This mirror cover shows Europa riding a bull through the sea. According to Greek myth, Zeus appeared to Europa in the form of a white bull. She caresses him and eventually climbs onto his back, giving Zeus an opportunity to abduct her and abscond to the island of Crete. This object could warn the owner not to stray far from home without a man to watch her, or a rogue god might assault her.

10. Unknown (Hellenistic)

Bronze Cista (ca 325-275)

Bronze

16 in

Metropolitan Museum of Art

22.84.21a.b

Gift of Courtland Field Bishop

11. Unknown (Greek)

Amphoriskos (date unknown)

Silver

4 3/4 x 2 1/2 x 2 1/2 in

Mead Art Museum at Amherst College

AC 1958.125.a

Gift of Miss Susan D. Bliss

Bibliography

Media

[Five College Collection](#)

[Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

[Museum of Fine Arts, Boston](#)

[Jeff Koons](#)

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