

EXPLAINING THE UNKNOWN: A STUDY AND PORTFOLIO ON
MONSTERS AND MYTHOS THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY

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This thesis seeks to accomplish an exploration of individual instances of mythology and fictional creatures from various points of recorded human history and across various continents with documented human presence. This exploration will commence in the form of a written introduction, a list of terms, and a set of background research meant to provide context alongside an artistic portfolio, of which will depict a breadth of mythological and/or cultural figures presented specifically through various digital mediums. The usage of digital art for this thesis is intended to contrast with the traditional mediums of the original figures presented, providing a sense of camaraderie even across different cultures and the passage of time. For the discussion of the creative portfolio, I will be describing the background and process for each piece in detail; the story or purpose of the figure, its significance, and how I decided to go about constructing said figure in my own style of art. Following this, I will then engage in a self-critique that will contrast my original intentions for the project with what ended up occurring, stating what could have been done differently, and finally, end by reflecting on the process of creating the portfolio and its accompanying thesis as a whole.

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I would like to thank Isami Ching and Professor Kate Mondloch for agreeing to be on my thesis committee and aiding me in this long process. I would also like to thank the faculty members within the University of Oregon's College of Design, as every class I have taken these past four years has aided me in better understanding new techniques and generally improving the style and confidence of my artwork. Additionally, I would also like to thank my friends and family. Without their presence and encouragement, this thesis would have not been possible. Thank you all for helping me push myself with this project so that I could create something that I could be proud of.

Secondly, due to the nature of this thesis I feel as though it is necessary to acknowledge that no culture is a monolith. I took the utmost care to depict every figure in this portfolio with accuracy and reverence because this topic as a whole is extremely important to me, but I also acknowledge that I am not infallible. If there are any mistakes or oversights in the works that I have created, I take full responsibility regardless of whether or not it was my intention.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

One of the distinctly unique things about the act of producing art of any form is that it allows the individual to construct something that is either fictional or exists within the realm of faith and then, by some extension, make it tangible. This act of creation is extraordinary in that it is ingrained within human nature, regardless of outside influence; storytelling, artwork, and folklore are all things that are found in every culture, uninhibited by spatial separation and the passage of time¹. It is also something that I myself have held a strong interest in for as long as I can remember; I would become completely engrossed in books and film, particularly enraptured by animals and creatures that otherwise were fantastical. This investment in storytelling and all of its facets has persisted throughout my entire life and this thesis is intended to be a culmination of that interest, in addition to being an expression of appreciation for the diverse array of mythology that has formed in the duration of our species' lifespan. Mythology is culture, and vice versa; people are driven by folklore, by laws, and by morals, and morality is in turn decided by the stories and life experiences that shape a particular society. This is a phenomenon that can still be seen today. People can learn from and dedicate themselves to a particular religion or important figure just as much as one could dedicate themselves to a novel, a movie, or a television show. The mythology of various human cultures is a topic that is remarkably large and expansive; individual papers and studies could be done on a singular influential figure, let alone

¹ Morriss-Kay, Gillian M. "The Evolution of Human Artistic Creativity." *Journal of Anatomy*, vol.216, no. 2, 2010, pp. 158–176., doi:10.1111/j.1469-7580.2009.01160.x.

the thousands that exist and have existed. Therefore, this thesis will be merely a sample into a few different examples of mythology and folklore as opposed to any sort of all-encompassing guide to the subject as a whole. Additionally, it is intended to encourage the reader to take a deeper look at some of the mythological figures that they are familiar with, in addition to providing a potential introduction to figures that may have been otherwise unknown. This thesis is and is intended to be a celebration, a piece of creative self-expression, and an opportunity to learn about one of the most influential and prominent facets of the human experience.

The portfolio portion of this project is going to be exclusively accomplished through the production of digital art, a mode of art that will be further elaborated on in the following section. In order to convey the variety of different art styles and forms that can be carried out through the usage of a computer, I have utilized a variety of different programs and methods in order to create my works. This includes both 3D and 2D forms, as well as animation, vectors, raster illustrations, and still images. As somebody that was born into the age of computers and technology, I have never been without this technology and seeing it change throughout my life has been a fascinating experience in retrospect. Digital art is my main and preferred form of artistic expression because it is what I taught myself on and, in my opinion, it is accessible, versatile, and powerful in its capabilities. While there are aspects of digital art that cannot compare to the physicality and spatial reality of traditional art, I sought to play to its respective strengths by acknowledging its unique attributes as well as its limitations. Furthermore, the depiction of various mythical figures from various points of human history is meant to produce a sense of culmination to this point in time, just as it is meant to be a project that culminates all of my artistic development insofar.

List of Terms

Prior to engaging with the topic of storytelling and mythology, I feel it is necessary to provide definition and clarification on some of the terms that will be utilized in this paper so that my points are made as clearly and succinctly as possible. Additionally, I will be defining various terms that relate to digital art since that is the medium in which the creative project has been produced, and some readers may be unfamiliar with the terminology used in this specific realm. This will include information on technical processes such as layers and rendering, as well as brief descriptions of the programs that I utilized for various pieces and how that decision determined the outcome of the piece.

Mythology

Mythology refers not to things that are intrinsically fictional but rather to a set of characters, ideas, and stories that particular groups of people believe or have believed to be subjectively true². This clarification is extremely important to note as the word possesses a connotation of falsehood in many modern spaces, which is not the intention of this thesis. The word “mythology” stems from the latin words *mythos* and *logos*; the former of which can have a number of definitions usually aligned with “report” or “story”, and the latter referencing “the study of”³. Fictionality is not implied within the root of the word itself, and it will not be implied throughout the course of this paper. Mythology is also an extremely important cornerstone of human culture, as illustrated by this quote from mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik;

No society can exist without myth. Humans cannot function without myths because myth creates notions of right and wrong, good and bad, heaven and hell, rights and duties.

² Smith, Jonathan Z. , Buxton, Richard G.A. and Bolle, Kees W.. "myth". Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth>.

³ Smith, Jonathan Z

Marriages, monogamy, peace, salvation non-violence, are all concepts based on myth; they don't exist in nature. All religions, all nations, all tribes, all ideologies, all ways of life, are based on myth. Human right is based on the myth of equality. Only a world without humans is a world without myths.⁴

Mythology is not the only source of moral guidance in society, but it is a keystone nonetheless. I will reiterate that the distinction of what mythology means, as well as an emphasis on its importance, is crucial to understanding what I mean when I refer to mythology during the discussion of my thesis topic. It is also important to state that I will not be considering one set of mythology more or less true than another regardless of the comparable scale and influence.

Digital Art

Digital art as it is known today is a very new concept in the world of artistic creation, being an invention in the latter half of the 20th century with the creation and innovation of computers⁵. Digital art refers not to one specific medium of art but rather, a set of different art forms that are achieved through the usage of a computer or other electronic device, similar to how traditional art is art that is achieved through mediums including but not limited to painting, drawing, sculpture, and beadwork. That said, it should be noted that not all art created with the involvement of computers is digital art. As described in *A Companion to Digital Art*;

It is highly problematic to classify all art that makes use of digital technologies somewhere in its production and dissemination process as digital art, since it makes it almost impossible to arrive at any unifying statement about the art form⁶

⁴ Sinha, Namya. "No Society Can Exist without Myth, Says Devdutt Pattanaik." *Hindustan Times*, 4 June 2016.

⁵ Paul, Christiane, and Dana Arnold. "Introduction: From Digital to Post-Digital—Evolutions of an Art Form." *A Companion to Digital Art*, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2016.

⁶ Paul, Arnold 2

While I would consider all of the pieces in this thesis and portfolio to be digital art, the clarification that it is still a somewhat complicated medium is necessary for those that may not be as familiar with the medium. Moreover, the modes of digital art extend far beyond what I use in the creation of my own artwork specifically. It should also be noted that even though digital art is referred to as its own group, it is still an widely-encompassing form of art just as traditional art is its own category.

Vector Graphics

Vector graphics refers to a mode of graphical rendering in which the image is made up of logical pixels, so that the image may be resized and warped without any loss of image quality⁷. Some computation is required to accomplish this. Vector graphics are commonly utilized in fields such as graphic design as certain digital items like logos can be resized to fit any situation while still maintaining a high quality.

Raster, or Bitmap Graphics

Raster, also called bitmapped graphics, is the rendering process where the image is created by a set of valued pixels. Bitmap graphics are usually applied to programs that specialize in illustration and painting that are reminiscent of “traditional” art as each pixel stores a certain piece of color data⁸. Raster images can be resized, but tend to lose quality as a result as pixel data must be autofilled or deleted in order to accomplish this sort of alteration.

⁷ Chapman, Nigel, and Jenny Chapman. Digital Multimedia. Wiley, 2014.

⁸ Chapman 71

3D-Imaging

3D imaging refers to a mode of computer-generated graphics that emulates an object within 3D space. It allows for more complicated transformations, rotations, and alterations on an X, Y, and Z axis⁹. The 3D models present within this thesis are made with the program Blender and are composed of polygons to hold their shape. A 2D image texture is applied to these models, and armature “bones” are then placed inside to allow for the movement and animation of the models.

⁹ Chapman 105

Chapter 2 : Creative Research Project & Portfolio

Introduction

This main section of my thesis will serve as both a research project and a portfolio as I fully invest myself in ten different mythological figures from different places and points in time. One of the challenges that I came across while working on the creative project for this thesis is the fact that there is such an expansive library of mythological figures to choose from. I had to set a limit on the exact number of pieces that I wanted to do - as mentioned previously, ten- and then ensure that I could find references and information on that specific subject so that they could be depicted as true to form as possible. Some figures allowed for more artistic liberty than others, usually as a result of a broadness of description or a lack of information. Regardless, I attempted to put some of my own stylization within each piece without taking away from the purpose of the subject. Each work is accompanied by some background information with regards to its story, origin, and purpose, followed by a description of my artistic process and a justification for the decisions that I made, and then a brief reflection on my feelings on the final composition.

Dragons

Comparative mythology is the study a set of myths that arise from similar origins or have similar appearances, formed in groups or cultures that otherwise would not have had any contact with each other, usually as a result of a few different explanations¹⁰. Dragons are an example of

¹⁰ "Comparative Mythology ." Encyclopedia of Religion. . Encyclopedia.com. 4 May. 2023
<<https://www.encyclopedia.com>>.

comparative mythology, though I utilize the term ‘Dragons’ quite loosely as it also has a particular connotation with being a large, aggressive reptile with wings. In this piece I selected nine different dragons from around the world, each with its own story, appearances, nature, and significance, and placed them next to each other in order to accentuate their similarities and their differences. By far, this is the most complicated work within this portfolio despite the relative simplicity of its composition and background, mainly due to how much research was necessary for the construction of each depiction. For the sake of not implying that each of these mythological figures are the same despite their serpentlike appearances, each individual dragon will be summarized as succinctly as possible.

The first dragon that is listed in this piece is perhaps one of the most quintessential, particularly as the word dragon has much of its roots in Europe¹¹. Y Ddraig Goch is the red heraldic dragon that appears on the flag of Wales, though generally dragons were described as cruel, massive, fire-breathing beasts that burned down villages and flew around on batlike wings¹². These dragons are perhaps the ones that have the most relevance in contemporary Western culture, especially when depicted in the fantasy genre. Some notable north-European dragons that have been utilized recently in media are Smaug from *The Hobbit* and Daenerys’ dragons from *A Song of Ice and Fire*. The next dragon depicted is the Chinese dragon, also referred to as a long or lung, and it is generally considered to be much more benevolent than dragons depicted in much of northern European folklore, being symbols of rain, wisdom, and luck, among other things given the specific connotative usage¹³. Ouroborous, always depicted as

¹¹ Harper, Douglas. “Etymology of dragon.” Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/dragon>.

¹² Tatlock, J. S. P. “The Dragons of Wessex and Wales.” *Speculum*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1933, pp. 223–35. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2846752>.

¹³ Wilson, J. Keith. “Powerful Form and Potent Symbol: The Dragon in Asia.” *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, vol. 77, no. 8, 1990, pp. 286–323. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25161297>.

a serpent consuming its own tail, has its origins in Ancient Egypt and Greece and is used as a symbol of infinity and the cycle of life and death¹⁴. Mušḫuššu is one of the creatures that adorn the Ishtar Gate in Babylon, and it is comprised of the features of a fish, snake, lion, and eagle¹⁵. Quetzalcoatl is a major deity within the Aztec pantheon and sometimes appears as a plumed serpent, his feathering reminiscent of the quetzal bird, characterizing the planet Venus as well as the link between the sky and the earth¹⁶. Unktehila, also spelled Uncegila or Unkehi, is a horned water serpent that appears in Lakota legends¹⁷, and she is killed when she is hit by an arrow in her seventh spot¹⁸. A kuzuryū is a Japanese nine-headed dragon that lives within bodies of water; there are several different stories involving this figure, one involving the dragon giving up evil ways in favor of becoming a protective entity and another being an avatar of a goddess¹⁹. The following serpent-based mythological figure, the Rainbow Serpent, is not necessarily a single specific entity so much as it is a widely-spread and powerful being found in several different Aboriginal Australian groups, and therefore the specifics of this subject can differ. That said, it is generally associated with life and water, and is sometimes depicted as a combination of several different animals²⁰. The final serpent depicted on this work is a wyvern, another type of dragon found in heraldry, with the key difference being that it has a pair of wings and a pair of legs as

¹⁴ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Ouroboros". Encyclopedia Britannica, Invalid Date, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ouroboros>.

¹⁵ Watanabe, Chikako E. "THE SYMBOLIC ROLE OF ANIMALS IN BABYLON: A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH TO THE LION, THE BULL AND THE 'MUŠḪUŠŠU.'" *Iraq*, vol. 77, 2015, pp. 215–24. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26426058>.

¹⁶ Aguilar, Manuel. "The Stelae of Xochicalco and Quetzalcoatl." *Mexicon*, vol. 24, no. 6, 2002, pp. 132–39. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23759790>.

¹⁷ "Native American Legends: Unktehila (Unktehi, Uncegila)." *Unktehila, the Horned Serpent of the Sioux (Uncegila, Unhcegila, Unktehi)*, www.native-languages.org/morelegends/unktehila.htm.

¹⁸ Rubalcaba, Jill, and Irving Toddy. *Uncegila's Seventh Spot: a Lakota Legend*. Clarion Books, 1995.

¹⁹ "Yokai.Com." Kuzuryū | Yokai.Com, yokai.com/kuzuryuu/.

²⁰ Taçon, Paul S. C., et al. "Birth of the Rainbow Serpent in Arnhem Land Rock Art and Oral History." *Archaeology in Oceania*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1996, pp. 103–24. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40387039>.

opposed to the traditional four-legs and two-wings of the dragon in northern Europe²¹. Of course, each serpent depicted in this work is its own entity despite the fact that they fall under a particular category of comparative mythology. Some are malevolent, some are benevolent, and some are representations of a deity or force of nature. The differences between each of these subjects should be acknowledged and celebrated just as much as their incidental similarities, and that is what I sought to achieve in the production of this illustration.

As stated previously, this artwork was one of the most complicated in terms of research, if not through the composition itself. There is a fairly vast array of “dragon-like” creatures that appear in mythology from all around the world, and this piece only displays a small handful of examples. Making sure I selected a set that properly encompassed the influence of serpent-inspired mythological figures was my top priority with this piece, and I feel as though I was able to accomplish this goal even though I do also believe the impact of the piece would have been more effective if I had either included more examples, or provided a clearer image of where each dragon is based geologically. I also feel somewhat indifferent on my choice in framing for this piece. While I feel as though a relatively empty background was important for making sure that the composition wasn't too excessive or busy, I also feel as though it could have used something to break it up and aid the viewer's gaze in flowing more smoothly down the page.

²¹ Sayers, William. “The Wyvern.” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, vol. 109, no. 4, 2008, pp. 457–65. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43344731>.

WORLD WYRMS



Y Ddraig Goch - Wales



Long (龍)- China



Ouroboros - Egypt & Greece



Mušhušu - Mesopotamia



Quetzalcoatl - Aztec



Unktehila - Lakota



Kuzuryū - Japan



The Rainbow Serpent - Aboriginal Australia



Wyvern - Britain

Figure 1: My illustrated depiction of various dragons/serpents

The Alphyn

The Alphyn is an English heraldic beast that possesses a long, tufted tail and the front feet of an eagle, though it has also been depicted with cloven hooves on other crests²². It appears similar to other mythical beasts found on heraldry, such as the tyger - which is a hybrid creature separate from the very real *tiger* - and the enfield²³. Heraldry itself is a form of artwork that is intended to set an individual, family, or group apart with a distinguishable set of symbols that also had a tendency to come with their own meanings²⁴. The Alphyn was utilized by the Lords De La Warr and the name bears resemblance to the Middle English word *alfin*, which refers specifically to the bishop in chess²⁵. There appears to be very little information about the Alphyn outside of heraldic context, even more so because it is a rare beast to find on heraldic crests. Most restorations and depictions that I could find featured the Alphyn with a knotted tail, one talon raised, tall ears, and a long, pointed tongue emerging from its mouth.

Given the obscurity of the Alphyn, I decided that this figure would be a good opportunity to take some artistic liberty with my interpretation while also introducing the creature to an audience that may have been previously unaware of its existence. This was also one of the earliest pieces during the process of producing this portfolio, so it is by far one of the most experimental. In this piece, the Alphyn is intended to be the main focus by far, so I opted to leave the background fairly abstract as to draw more attention to the figure. I attempted to strike a balance between realism and stylization with this piece as a means of reinterpreting the Alphyn in my own style while still keeping it reminiscent of heraldic art. I did not include the knotted tail

²² Williams, N. J. A. "Of Beasts and Banners the Origin of the Heraldic Enfield." *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 119, 1989, pp. 62–78. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25508971>.

²³ Williams, 89

²⁴ Wollaston, Gerald W. "HERALDRY." *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 81, no. 4198, 1933, pp. 574–86. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41362616>.

²⁵ Williams, 69

as seen in some of the original depictions of the creature to ground it more within the ‘semi-realism’ aspect that I was going for.

Color choice was probably one of the more challenging aspects of this piece because I was unable to find any colored depictions of the Alphyn from the appropriate time period. Applying some basic knowledge of color theory, I decided that cooler colors did not entirely fit the fearsome, predatory look that the Alphyn possesses. Warm reds and yellows with patterns reminiscent of a lion gave an impression I ended up being much happier with, though I did include some blue accents within the face and skin to provide some contrast.

I am happy with the pose and general design that I did for the Alphyn, though if I were to return to this creature specifically I would want to put more emphasis on its origins by including it on a crest as opposed to an abstract background. While I feel as though the movement and general silhouette of the beast gives off the medieval sense I was going for, I certainly feel as though it could be more apparent.



Figure 2: My illustrated depiction of the Alphyn

Torakoishi

The Torakoishi - translated, the little tiger stone- is a Japanese yōkai that resembles a rounded stone with a face, tiger legs, and a tail. This yōkai was created by Utagawa Yoshikazu and its name is a pun off of the stone Toragoishi in Ōiso, Kanagawa prefecture²⁶. Yōkai themselves are an expansive set of supernatural creatures within Japanese folklore that come in a vast array of natures, appearances, and forms²⁷. A pertinent quote about yōkai from *The Book of Yokai : Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* reads;

One common characteristic of yōkai is their liminality, or “in-betweenness”. They are creatures of the borderlands, living on the edge of town, or in the mountains between villages, or in the eddies of a river running between two rice fields...²⁸

As a result of the multitudes of forms a yōkai can come in, it seems unadvisable to attempt to describe them only as “monsters” or “spirits”, simply because there seems to be very little limit on what they *can* be.

As a result, choosing just one or two for this portfolio proved to be somewhat challenging. While yōkai such as the kappy or tengu do tend to be the more well-known figures from this particular genre of folklore, I wanted to delve further into the database and find some that I previously was unaware of. In the end, I decided on the Torakoishi because I found it both interesting, and because I believed that it would be an excellent subject for a format of digital art that I have experimented very little with; 3D modeling and animation. One Torakoishi model is based off of the coloration of the original illustration by Utagawa Yoshikazu, with a grey body

²⁶ “Yokai.com.” *Torakoishi* | *Yokai.Com*, yokai.com/torakoishi/.

²⁷ Foster, Michael Dylan, and Kijin Shinonome. *The Book of Yokai : Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*. Illustrated by Kijin Shinonome, University of California Press, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520959125>.

²⁸ Foster 21

and a traditionally tiger-colored set of legs and tail. I decided to take some artistic liberty with the other two variations of the Torakoishi by altering the coloration to resemble other phenotypes of the Bengal Tiger, that being white and “golden tabby”, the former of which removes the orange coloration from the cat and the latter turning the animal’s black stripes an darker orange color. While multiple Torakoishi are not described in the original description of the yōkai, I felt as though making some variations on the original model would aid in making the animation more visually interesting. The scene itself is simple and low-poly, intended to draw more attention to the animated subjects, and the movements are fairly simple if mostly due to my own lack of familiarity with the medium. I wanted to portray something relaxed and “in the day of the life of” this creature without making it too strange or fanciful, especially as I feel there is an amusing contrast between that and the unique appearance of the Torakoishi. The final scene from the animation also makes a nod to the fact that this yōkai, while harmless, does enjoy jumping out at people to startle them²⁹.

Out of all of the works that I have completed for this thesis, this one may be one of the most experimental. I do not have a particularly extensive background in 3D, nor do I in animation, but I decided to push myself on both accounts for this final depiction as a way of both challenging my ability to work in a program I’m not used to, and to show how far I have grown over the past year in regards to working with different mediums. If I were to return to this piece, however, I know for certain that I would push myself even further by making longer animations with more complex scenery and camera angles.

²⁹ “Yokai.com.”

Even though I feel as though I learned a lot during the production of this short animation, I also feel like it would be beneficial to return to it so that I could use the models to animate more complicated movements and further get accustomed to 3D imaging in general.



Figure 3 : Screenshot of the Torakoishi animation



Figure 4: Second screenshot of the Torakoishi animation

Navagunjara

Navagunjara is a mythical creature in Hinduism that is composed of nine different animals; a rooster, peafowl, elephant, tiger, lion, bull, deer, serpent, and human³⁰. Navagunjara is not one thing so much as it is a manifestation of a divine entity; an avatar of Vishnu or Krishna that visited the archer Arjuna in a particular telling of the *Mahabharata*³¹. Arjuna, while gazing upon Navagunjara, is initially terrified by the sight, but he promptly drops his bow and salutes the figure once he realizes that the creature in front of him has deific importance³². Navagunjara is an example of a chimera, though in reference towards the broader use of the term in that he is a singular being that is composed of “incongruous parts”³³.

For my depiction of Navagunjara, I was unsure on if I wanted to depict him as a vector or raster-based image, but I ended up going with the former as I felt as though I could obtain a visually interesting composition with the graphical style that I enjoy utilizing when it comes to vector-based imaging. To be more specific, it is easy for me to obtain strong, distinct outlines in this medium of digital art, and I attempted to use this to my advantage when constructing the different animal parts that make up Navagunjara’s body. Each animal portion was broken down into a few different shapes with iconic patterns or silhouettes to maintain recognizability; for example, the stripes on the tiger leg, the distinctive comb of the rooster, and the winding shape of the serpentine tail. In order to further emphasize Navagunjara as the main focus of the illustration, I left the background fairly simple and ambiguous by making it reminiscent of a forested area, layering the different shades of green on and over each other to give a sense of

³⁰ Navagunjara, a Universal Form of Krishna. 1835.

³¹ Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Indian Mythology : Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent. Inner Traditions*, 2003.

³² Pattanaik 21

³³ “Chimera.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chimera>.

depth. The firefly-essque orbs are then intended to break up the background to prevent it from becoming too monotonous to the viewer, especially when compared to the multicolored, highly-saturated and busy design of Navagunjara.

While I do feel like I was able to play to the strengths of vectors fairly well with this piece, I also do believe that this subject could have benefitted just as well from a painting. While the clear lines and distinct separations clearly mark the nine different parts that Navagunjara is made of, I feel as though the divinity and importance of the figure is also lost somewhat given its simplified form. The background also feeds into this effect for me and I do think that making it more abstract or complex could have made it more clear that this subject is intended to be an avatar of an important deity.



Figure 5 : My vector depiction of Navaginjara

Anansi

Anansi is an Afro-Caribbean³⁴ trickster figure that is believed to have roots in the oral traditions of the Asante people of Ghana, among whom he possesses cultural and religious significance³⁵. Similar to other trickster figures that appear in various mythologies from around the world, Anansi is something of a morally gray figure that exists in the border between humanity and the divine³⁶, acting as both a clever underdog and a cunning opportunist³⁷. He is a contradiction and a mediator, seemingly both in characterization and occasionally in purpose³⁸, and tests the boundaries between humans and nature as he both challenges and fortifies the social rules of the Asante³⁹. That being said, he ended up taking on the role of more of a folk hero in the Caribbean as the Asante that were enslaved brought their culture and stories along with them. Dr. Emily Zobel Marshall describes this transformation succinctly in her academic journal on the origins of Anansi;

Anansi was forced to metamorphose from a mythical Asante spider into a representation of the black slave trapped in a social system in which negotiation was an impossibility. In his Jamaican setting, Anansi was a breaker rather than a tester of the chains. He becomes a symbol of creative chaos and longed for freedom in a tyrannical and coercive order⁴⁰

This makes Anansi an excellent example of how a figure can change given different circumstances; how one can go from a morally dubious trickster and loner, to a folk hero that exists in spite of the oppressive force that stole and attempted to break entire groups of people.

³⁴ van Duin, Lieke. "Anansi as Classical Hero." *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2007, pp. 33–42. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40986316>.

³⁵ Marshall, Emily Zobel. "Liminal Anansi: Symbol of Order and Chaos An Exploration of Anansi's Roots Amongst the Asante of Ghana." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2007, pp. 30–40. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40654609>.

³⁶ Marshall 32

³⁷ van Duin 34

³⁸ Marshall 34

³⁹ Marshall 36.

⁴⁰ Marshall 40

Mythological figures like Anansi are important in the way they communicate history and the mindset of certain peoples at different points in time, and that is why I sought to create a depiction of him in this thesis.

In much of western culture, spiders are usually feared and perceived as revolting, and one of the challenges I had with this piece was trying to circumvent that. For my depiction of Anansi, I decided to do a vector-based work as I felt that this format would work best for creating a bold and graphic feeling; a clear and obvious depiction of a spider-like figure without being so detailed that it could immediately unnerve somebody. I also chose a lot of contrasting colors for this piece as a representation of his somewhat contradictory nature; blues, browns, oranges, and yellows working together to emphasize his abdomen, face, and legs. Anansi's abdomen is also the point of highest contrast and saturation as it is intended to be the first place that the viewer looks when they initially see the piece, and then the legs are meant to guide the viewer's eye down towards his "real" face while also providing a sense of depth. I took inspiration from real instances of animal mimicry for the design on the abdomen, as well as inspiration from other depictions of Anansi that I found during my research.

Overall, I feel as though I achieved what I was intending to with the high-contrast style of this piece. If I were to go back or redo my depiction of Anansi, I think I might do more to lean into his more "human" aspect to pay homage to how he is depicted in Jamaican Anansi tales⁴¹. Additionally, I would like to have done more work on the background beyond just a spider web. Perhaps something to grant a better idea of his identity as a trickster figure in Asante mythology by having him blend into the background more, or including some aspects of stories that he has been included in.

⁴¹ Marshall 39



Figure 6 : My vector depiction of Anansi

Mari Lwyd

Mari Lwyd is a wassailing folk tradition in Wales that involves attaching the skull of a horse to a pole, and the skull is decorated with ornaments, ivy, holly, and colorful pieces of tinsel or fabric⁴². The origins of Mari Lwyd are also debated and uncertain, though it seems generally accepted that she comes from pre-Christian horse ceremonies⁴³. The etymology of her name is also unclear. Some theories include; the phrase ‘*Merry Lude*’, with ‘lude’ being an obsolete word in English found in ‘*interlude*’, the *Morris* dance which had associations with a hobby-horse, the Christian Mary and the Festival of the Ass, and finally, that her name is just derived from the English word mare - female horse- and lwyd, which means grey⁴⁴. Grey Mare and Grey Mary are both used as translations for Mari Lwyd. Vernon Phillips Watkins also wrote *The Ballad of Mari Lwyd*, a poem that begins with;

Mari Lwyd, Horse of Frost, Star-horse, and White Horse of the Sea, is carried to us.

The Dead return.

Those Exiles carry her, they who seem holy and have put on corruption, they who seem corrupt and have put on holiness.

They strain against the door.

They strain towards the fire which fosters and warms the Living.⁴⁵

Fittingly, the tradition of Mari Lwyd has significant aspects of death and poetry, the former of which is made obvious by the usage of a horse skull. She is usually associated with the end of the year (also worded as ‘the death of the year’) and holidays such as Christmas, New Year, and

⁴² Rogers, Jude. “The Mari Lwyd.” Wales, www.wales.com/about/culture/mari-lwyd.

⁴³ Peate, Iorwerth C. “35. Mari Lwyd: A Suggested Explanation.” *Man*, vol. 43, 1943, pp. 53–58. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2791759>.

⁴⁴ Peate 53

⁴⁵ Watkins, Vernon Phillips. *Ballad of Mari Lwyd*. Faber and Faber Limited, 1947.

Twelfth Night⁴⁶. During the enactment of the Mari Lwyd tradition, she is taken around a village while adorned with festive decorations, and the performers could either choose to perform wassails or engage in pwnco as they stop at various homes⁴⁷. Pwnco is a back-and-forth exchange of rhymes that, in the instance of Mari Lwyd, involves the horse-figure requesting admittance into the house while the homeowner attempts to turn her away⁴⁸. Despite the somewhat grim interpretation of the horse skull, Mari Lwyd is undoubtedly a tradition of cheer, entertainment, and wassail.

I decided to do a lined illustration for Mari Lwyd's incorporation into the artistic portion of this thesis as I felt I could better obtain a range of subtler colors and flowing movements within her cloak and ornamentation. Much of the piece contains cooler tones to provide a sense of a winter night, especially with regards to the coldly white lights in the background, though I also attempted to provide a sense of warmth and cheer with the candles and the red coloration of Mari's eyes and streamers. While it is also a bit challenging to portray expression on the skull of an animal, I made an effort to make Mari Lwyd herself seem jovial by giving her an open mouth and an animated pose, as though she were opening her arms and singing to the viewer. I also made the decision to give her a distinctly human aspect despite her otherworldly appearance, both as a reference to the fact that Mari Lwyd is puppeted by a human being and to aid in making her appear cheery and empathetic.

Mari Lwyd was probably one of my favorite pieces in this thesis collection, both in terms of research and the final artistic depiction. If I were to return to her, however, I would go for a

⁴⁶ Ettlinger, Ellen. "74. The Occasion and Purpose of the 'Mari Lwyd' Ceremony." *Man*, vol. 44, 1944, pp. 89–93. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2791738>.

⁴⁷ Rogers, Jude

⁴⁸ Yeates, Caroline. "Gennad i Ganu – Pondering the Pwnco." *Mari Lwyd*, 3 Feb. 2019, marilwyd.co.uk/gennad-i-ganu-pondering-the-pwnco/.

more colorful and distinctly wintery feeling as to better convey her association with wassailing tradition. I also would've done more to integrate food and drink into the piece to reference the ritual of pwnco.



Figure 7 : My illustrated depiction of Mari Lwyd

The Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel

The first piece that I will be displaying for the creative portfolio of this thesis is a digital painting of the Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel, of which is a prehistoric sculpture constructed of mammoth ivory excavated from the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave in Germany in 1939⁴⁹. The figure features the head of a cave-lion and the body of a human, and has undergone attempts at restoration due to its corroded nature upon its discovery. It is estimated to be approximately 40,000 years old which places it among some of the oldest pieces of art to have been unearthed⁵⁰. The intended sex of the figure is a subject of debate, with it being initially interpreted as a male and then later proposed to be female. The most recent reconstructions of this figure feature a small plate that could be thought of as a male groin, though this is not a definite conclusion⁵¹. Even though I have been and will continue to refer to it as the Lion Man for the duration of this section, it is not intended as a definitive judgment of the sex of the figure so much as it is intended to remain consistent with what the figure is referred to as in archeology.

While the functions and potential *story* of the Lion Man are not definitive, it is estimated to have possessed some sort of religious or cultural significance⁵². This, combined with the age of the statue, makes the Lion Man one of the oldest known examples of a mythological representation. I wanted to make sure that I was selecting figures from varying points in time in addition to figures from different cultures, and so the Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel ended up being an excellent candidate for accomplishing the former.

⁴⁹ Kind, Claus-Joachim, et al. "The Smile of the Lion Man. Recent Excavations in Stadel Cave (Baden-Württemberg, Southwestern Germany) and the Restoration of the Famous Upper Palaeolithic Figurine." *Quartär*, vol. 61, 2014, pp. 129–145, https://doi.org/10.7485/QU61_07.

⁵⁰ C.-J. Kind et al 130

⁵¹ C.-J. Kind et al 142

⁵² C.-J. Kind et al 144

During the process of creating this piece, I considered several different possibilities in regards to its composition, style, and digital medium. I originally planned on making it a vector piece similar to my depictions of Anasi and Navagunjara, but in the end I decided against it because I wanted to contrast the severely corroded state of the original statue with a more detailed, painterly style. I did this primarily to draw attention to what is arguably one of the Lion Man's most distinctive features; that being, the feline head that rests atop an otherwise humanoid body. Even though this work was done digitally like the rest of the pieces displayed in this portfolio, I also decided to make it stylistically reminiscent of an oil-painted Royal Portrait with the dark background and setting the composition from the bust upwards. I did this to create a sense of importance with the figure. While it seems unlikely that the Lion Man was by any means the first ever mythological figure given its placement in the geological timescale of humanity, it remains one of the oldest physical examples of such behavior documented⁵³. This makes it an important piece of history both artistically and anthropologically, and that is why I wanted to reflect said importance in the piece. I also feel as though it is one of the works in this thesis that benefits the most from being depicted digitally simply as a reflection on how various mediums of art have changed over time; or, alternatively, how the same thing can be depicted in vastly different ways given the circumstances of the artist.

If I were to return to the Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel at a later date, I would want to work on further studies of the original statuette itself so that I could attempt to better blend the distinctly prehistoric style with my own digital work. I would also want to do a full-bodied painting as opposed to a bust to put more of an emphasis on the chimeric nature of the Lion Man, as well as giving it more of a background that resembles the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave itself.

⁵³ C.-J. Kind et al 142



Figure 8: My digitally painted depiction of the Lion Man of Hohlenstein-Stadel

Camazotz

Camazotz is a K'iche Mayan death bat deity that appears within the *Popol Vuh*⁵⁴.

Camazotz appears in a story involving the Hero Twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, in which the two are trapped within a house of death bats. After hiding within their blowguns, Hunahpu sticks his head out to see if the dawn had risen, at which point Camazotz quickly decapitates him⁵⁵.

Bats as a symbol are interpreted to have a number of different meanings in Maya mythology and artwork, such as sacrifice, rest, and decapitation⁵⁶. That being said, their associations were varied and were positive amongst certain Maya divisions; bats were the patron of the town Zinacantán and the people referred to themselves as *Zotzil uinic*, meaning bat men⁵⁷. For Camazotz specifically, however, there appears to be little mention of it outside of its appearance in the *Popol Vuh*.

Much of the composition for this piece was based upon Maya depictions of bats in statues and on vases; I took note of the fact that they often had their wings spread and their mouths slightly open. The presence of necklaces and bones also appeared to be a common motif on some depictions of bat-men, which has relevance to the interpretation that bats have an association with death and sacrifice⁵⁸. While vampire bats tend to have similar symbolism in much of western culture, I decided to base Camazotz' appearance more so off of that of a leaf-nosed bat, a family of primarily insectivorous bats endemic to North and South America. I made this

⁵⁴ Brady, James E., and Jeremy D. Coltman. "BATS AND THE CAMAZOTZ: CORRECTING A CENTURY OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY." *Latin American Antiquity*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2016, pp. 227–37. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26337239>.

⁵⁵ Goetz, Delia. and Morley, Sylvanus Griswold. and Recinos, Adrián. *Popol vuh : the sacred book of the ancient Quiché Maya* / English version by Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley ; from the Spanish translation by Adrián Recinos William Hodge & Co London 1951

⁵⁶ J. Eric S. Thompson. "Maya Hieroglyphs of the Bat as Metaphorgrams." *Man*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1966, pp. 176–84. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2796344>.

⁵⁷ Brady 230

⁵⁸ J. Eric 181

decision because several of the pre-existing depictions of Zotz I saw in Maya artwork appeared to have the distinctive shape of a leaf-nosed bat as opposed to that of a vampire bat. The intense red color scheme is then intended to be reminiscent of the bats' associations with blood and sacrifice, while also marking the character design itself as an assertive figure. The dark, purple background is then drawn and colored to draw attention to the Camazotz in the center. Its face is the point of lightest saturation as to best draw attention to its notable batlike features, its wings then framing the rest of its anthropomorphized body. I went for a stylized look for the linework in this piece that I hadn't had a chance to experiment much with before; thinner, textured lines that also give more definition to the figure's body, fur, and expression.

While I do feel as though the final composition for Camazotz does get across the feeling of power and boldness, I do feel as though it could have been more visually interesting. Symmetry tends to provide a sense of perfection and stability, and I feel as though something with more movement would have benefitted my depiction of this figure much more. If I were to return to this subject, I think I also may experiment more with its appearance; I feel as though I definitely could have leaned more into the unique appearance of bats and allowed that to give Camazotz a substantially more compelling look. Overall, however, I am content with my color choice and the rendering of the final work.



Figure 9 : My illustrated depiction of Camazotz

Baba Yaga

Baba Yaga is a mythological figure that appears in Slavic folklore as a vile old woman that consumes human flesh - usually that of children- and lives within a hut that turns upon the legs of a chicken with her two sisters, also named Baba Yaga⁵⁹. She is also described as bony-legged, flying through the air in a mortar, steering herself with a pestle, and stirring up a storm wherever she goes⁶⁰. She has appeared in a number of different genres, including riddles, rhymes, and poetry, though her roots are in fairy tales⁶¹. Even though she does have a hostile and unfriendly presence in the stories that she plays a part in, Baba Yaga has been described as having a fairly complicated role as she can be a villain, a donor⁶², or both. That being said, she is a villain more often than not. Her status and purpose has had numerous different proposals throughout the past few centuries; Mikhail Chulkov referred to her as a goddess worshiped by ancient Slavic peoples, and Alexander Afanas'ev theorized that she was a personified storm given her tendency to be followed by tempests⁶³. Folklorist Vladimir Propp, however, notes her complexity and association with forests and theorizes her as a guardian between the lands of life and death as well as a mother of beasts and animals⁶⁴. Propp's interpretation of the Baba Yaga is also interesting in that it considers her evolution from a matriarchal point in time, and how the passage of time has melted away any of her maternal aspects and turned her into a figure that is much more reminiscent of a crone or a witch. Unfortunately, like several other mythological

⁵⁹ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Baba Yaga". Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Baba-Yaga>.

⁶⁰ COOPER, BRIAN. "Baba-Yaga, the Bony-Legged: A Short Note on the Witch and Her Name." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 1997, pp. 82–88. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23806796>.

⁶¹ Johns, Andreas. "Baba Iaga and the Russian Mother." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 42, no. 1, 1998, pp. 21–36. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/310050>.

⁶² In fairy tales, a donor is a character that aids the hero figure by providing them with gifts or some other form of assistance, be it magical or otherwise. A fairy godmother would count as a donor.

⁶³ Andreas 23

⁶⁴ Andreas 24

figures depicted within this portfolio, the precise origins of the Baba Yaga are unclear though she is expected to have come from a pre-Christian Slavic culture⁶⁵

For my depiction of Baba Yaga, I decided to lean harder into the horror aspect of her by attempting to make her more enigmatic and unsettling. A monotone color scheme with intense, hard values is intended to shroud the background woods in darkness and emphasize the figure of Baba Yaga in the foreground as she makes direct eye contact with the viewer, and in order to give her a sense of being within the uncanny valley⁶⁶, I made her eyes distinctly non-human and difficult to decipher in conjunction with the shadow upon her face. Despite her relative complexity within Slavic folklore, I did not want to lean too far one way or the other in terms of interpretation. She is meant to be frightening in appearance, but I held off in interpreting her in any way that was obviously violent or crude. I also chose to further highlight her form against the background by making her linework much more jagged and pronounced than the background, which possesses light, wispy line work intended to provide a much more obscured image.

If I were to come back and make alterations to this piece - or reinterpret Baba Yaga altogether- I most likely would have made an attempt to show more of her within the image. I made an attempt to strengthen the unnerving sensation of this image by making the figure “closer” to the viewer, though in doing so I feel as though I missed an opportunity to experience the act of drawing more of the figure herself. I also feel as though this piece would have been strengthened by giving Baba Yaga more inhuman features and pronouncing her chicken-legged hut so that it is more obvious.

⁶⁵ Andreas 25

⁶⁶ The uncanny valley is a point between human and non-human in which the subject seems almost human, which tends to evoke a sense of unease within the viewer.



Figure 10 : My illustrated depiction of Baba Yaga

The Loveland Frog

The Loveland frog is a cryptid from Loveland, Ohio that is described as a humanoid frog-man that has been described at standing anywhere between four⁶⁷ to six⁶⁸ feet tall. It was allegedly first sighted in 1972 by a police officer, and then again in 2016 by some teenagers playing a phone game⁶⁹. Despite the sightings and its legendary status in the region, the Loveland frog doesn't have much in the way of stories beyond its proclaimed sightings. As a result, this is perhaps one of the most personal pieces in this thesis. Cryptids are an interesting part of folklore and I knew from the beginning that I wanted to include one at some point during the process of creating the portfolio. While entities such as Bigfoot and the Loch Ness monster certainly hold more relevance in the public eye, the Loveland Frogman was my decision in the end because I was born and raised in that very city. I have always taken amusement in the fact that there is a cryptid that originated in my hometown, even if it isn't as widespread as some of the other names in cryptozoology. In some way, just about everybody can tie some level of personal experience into a figure of mythology and folklore, and the Loveland frog is one of my examples of that. It is also a somewhat non-serious example of a mythological figure, which aids in capturing the wide variety of forms that such things can come in.

I decided to do a digital painting for this piece so I could put an emphasis on values and ground the work as a whole in some degree of "realism", despite the generally cartoony look of my style of work. One of the few alleged photos of the Loveland frog features it part way in the water, its eyes possessing a menacing glow. I decided to feature that glow within my own

⁶⁷ Bertelink, Tim. "The Loveland Frogman – Ohio's Most Famous Cryptid." *The Loveland Frogman – Ohio's Most Famous Cryptid - Charleston Terrors*, 19 Apr. 2021, charlestonterrors.com/the-loveland-frogman-ohios-most-famous-cryptid/.

⁶⁸ "Loveland Frog." *Gadsden Times*, 18 Oct. 1985, pp. 1.

⁶⁹ Bertelink, Tim

interpretation of the cryptid, though I also made an effort to make it look substantially less threatening as there have been no described attacks from this figure- only a couple of sightings describing it as a large frog that walks on two legs. I also made the decision to lean into the monochromatic color scheme and technical aspect by making the illustration look as though it were taken from a trail cam. The Loveland frog is also a very localized and contemporary figure, and the distinct display of a modern piece of technology aims to help with conveying that.

I am generally content with how this piece turned out. That being said, if I were to return to it, I think I may reference the actual encounters with the figure by basing its depiction more off of its original sighting in 1972. While I do feel as though the trail-cam interface implies a sense of human interaction, this piece may also benefit from making this more obvious.



Figure 11 : My digitally painted depiction of the Loveland Frog

Reflection

The creation of this portfolio was an extremely formative learning experience throughout the entire process. Creatures of folklore and mythological status have been a part of my artistic journey for almost my entire life, though never before had I thought to delve deeper into the origins, stories, and nuance of such figures. Not only that, but I found myself learning about people and cultures just as much as said figures themselves as I conducted further research. While I do feel as though this was an immensely challenging topic to cover simply as a direct result of how massive it is, I do feel as though I am coming out of it having developed as an artist, a student, and a writer. Human culture as a whole is rich, teeming with symbolism and ideas that drive our collective desire to create whether that be some inspiration of faith, a fondness for a particular novel, or a deep investment in a show, movie, or video game. Mythology is the result of people trying to explain the world around them with imagination, and I believe that this is one of the most powerful tools of all regardless of how it is conveyed. Continuing to work with figures from mythology, folklore, and even with fiction that I enjoy is something that I intend on doing for the rest of my life because the creation of characters and the nuances of design are my favorite modes of art production. While I found working on this thesis highly challenging in just about every facet, I also found that it has reinvigorated my desire to depict things that otherwise cannot be seen or felt in the real world. There is no denying that stories have a profound effect on reality, whether that be in a broad society or a smaller, localized culture. It is my artistic goal to leave my mark on the world in some way, regardless of whether it's through a formative work or mere inspiration, and I am glad to say that my work on this thesis has brought me a step closer to making my art what I want it to be.

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