

Creature features at Fernbank and the Michael C. Carlos Museum

Monsters, demons and more on view in two new exhibits

by [Curt Holman](#) February 17th, 2011



Danial David checks out a griffin, once attached to the shoulder of a cauldron, at the Michael C. Carlos Museum's *Monsters, Demons and Winged-Beasts*.

"The sleep of reason produces monsters," according to the title of a frightful 18th-century etching by the Spanish painter Francisco Goya. Two new monster-themed exhibits at the Fernbank Museum of Natural History and Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum offer a glimpse at what could be the dream journals of the human race — with an emphasis on the nightmares.

Fernbank releases the kraken with *Mythic Creatures: Dragons, Unicorns & Mermaids*, while the Carlos Museum's *Monsters, Demons & Winged-Beasts: Composite Creatures in the Ancient World* finds the freaks in classical Greek, Roman and Egyptian artifacts. Each exhibit explores a different angle on the grip monsters hold on the human imagination. But what do make-believe beasts have to do with scientific scholarship?

"People will be thinking about why a natural history museum will have an exhibit of fantastical creatures. They're not real, but they're connected to the cultures that created them," says Bobbi Hohmann, curator of Fernbank's McClatchey collection of ornamentation and decorative arts. New York's American Museum of Natural History developed *Mythic Creatures* in collaboration with museums in Chicago, Canada, Australia and Atlanta's Fernbank, and debuted the exhibit in 2008.

In part, the exhibit allows spectators to revisit the imaginative leaps ancient observers made from nature's scanty clues. In tracing the myth of the giant, one-eyed Cyclops, for instance, *Mythic Creatures* puts on display a mammoth femur that resembles a human leg bone, as well as dwarf elephant skull with an opening in the center, easily mistaken for a single eye socket. It's possible to see how an Indiana Jones-type of ancient Greece might have deduced that the body parts belonged to a one-eyed titan.

A dinosaur-sized horned, winged dragon model guards the exhibit's entrance, as if it were Smaug's lair, as imagined by J.R.R. Tolkien. The dragon's sinister majesty signals that the exhibit keeps one foot in fact, the other in fantasy. *Mythic Creatures* splits into four sections for creatures of the sea, land, air, and concludes with a more in-depth look at dragons, which features a 120-foot long Chinese parade dragon suspended from the ceiling. Other colossal models include the towering tentacles and armchair-sized head of a kraken; a stately unicorn with a yard-long horn; an avian "roc" swooping in for the kill like a hawk the size of a horse; and a statue of a now-extinct *Gigantopithecus blacki*, a primate believed to have inspired the Bigfoot legends.

Mythic Creatures primarily puts human culture under a magnifying glass. "It's got a little bit of paleontology and a little bit of geology, but it's co-curated by an anthropologist [Laurel Kendall] who's very interested in folklore," Hohmann explains. "Through the exhibit you can see the development of religion and the diffusion of cultural traits."

For instance, the statue of a topless, creamy-skinned, greenish-scaled mermaid explores how the legend of the sea vixens originated with European sailors. Christopher Columbus reported seeing three mermaids off of Haiti in 1493, but acknowledged they were "not as pretty as they are depicted, for somehow in the face they look like men." Statues of a manatee, a hammerhead shark and a giant ray suggest cases of mistaken identity on the high seas. "The myth of mermaids traveled to West Africa, and was then swept by the African Diaspora to the Caribbean. Every country has a different version, but they're all half woman, half fish," says Hohmann. Perhaps the enduring myth reflects generations of sailors longing for companionship: Would you rather fantasize about a mermaid or a manatee?

Since they're not real, mythological animals can function like a cultural Rorschach, with different cultures each putting its own spin on the same creature or myth. Western culture primarily sees dragons as menacing, treasure-hoarding threats. The exhibit includes a sandstone statue of St. George grinding a reptilian creature under his armored heel. But dragons serve as symbols of wisdom in many Asian traditions, and the placement of a dragon on a ceremonial robe serves as a status symbol, like the number of stars on a general's epaulets.

Mythic Creatures combines the grand theatricality of the giant models with the tactile, hands-on appeal of bones and artifacts. The Carlos Museum's *Monsters, Demons and Winged-Beasts*, on the other hand, focuses more on the fine details of ancient artwork. *Monsters* derives partly from the Carlos Museum's permanent collection and traces monstrous imagery in works of jewelry, precious metals, terracotta, papyrus and more.

Paradoxically, the monsters in this exhibit can be tiny, fragile and delicate. Some are the size of a kid's action figures, like the centauress with her head raised in a noble expression, or the half-man, half-fish Triton blowing a seashell-shaped horn. A postage stamp-size piece of glass presents the profiles of lion/eagle griffins in remarkably fine detail. An intaglio ringstone of gold and carnelian features an engraving of the Greek hero Bellerophon astride winged Pegasus to fight the ferocious chimera, and is nearly too small to be seen with the naked eye.

If Fernbank's monsters attempt to evoke our collective imagination, the Carlos Museum conveys the obsessive craftsmanship and dedication of individual artists from past centuries. The label copy provides the mythic origins and historical contexts for the pieces, but you can easily imagine the unnamed artists laboring to glorify their gods, please their patrons and secure their reputations for posterity.

Both exhibits convey that monsters aren't just the doodles of bored, prehistoric children or the stars of campfire stories, but deeply entrenched ideas that trace back to the origins of civilization.

Neither exhibit delves too deeply into the idea that monsters serve as mirrors of social anxieties, although *Mythic Creatures* includes more recent entries in the creature canon, such as the blood-drinking, livestock-stalking Chupacabra of Latin American lore. One wonders what a futuristic exhibit of early 21st century monsters would look like. City-destroying behemoths like the *Cloverfield* monster and the zombies of American movie classics? Flying saucers and alien abductors of urban legend? Transformer-type robots that turn vehicles and appliances into our enemies? Of course, compared to such real threats as illness or armed conflict, a lumbering, imaginary monster can seem surprisingly manageable.