

CLASSICAL MYTHS: GODS, HEROES AND MONSTERS

Teachers' Notes

Workshop for Key stage 2 at the Wallace
Collection



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Come face-to-face with Hercules, Perseus and Apollo, characters from ancient Greek and Roman myths whose stories are told in paintings, sculptures, furniture and ceramics. Find out how these stories have inspired artists through the ages and finish with some observational drawing. This workshop is aimed at key stage 2 and lasts an hour and a half.

Classical Myths at the Wallace Collection

Homer's phrase, '*winged words*', reaches us from the sixth century B.C. With his own winged words, Homer wrote many of the great myths and legends of the classical world and, after a visit to the Wallace Collection, students will be inspired not only to research and explore ways of interpreting them but to write their own. Stories by Homer, Virgil and others from the pre-Christian era were re-discovered centuries later, when Greek and Roman sculptures of gods, goddesses, heroes and heroines were being unearthed and their myths passed down to a new and excited audience in the 16th and 17th centuries A.D. They remain the greatest stories ever told and are the basis of most stories made today.

Many of the paintings and sculptures in the Wallace Collection were created during this time and are among the greatest of its treasures. They bring the stories to life in a specific way – portraying drama through movement and emotion captured in paint, bronze and marble, gold and enamel, exciting the viewer and showing off the artist's prowess in the painting of characters, animals, fabrics, landscape backgrounds and in the nudes that were typical of classical times. Greek warriors went to war in the nude, competed in the Olympic Games in the nude. Figures of gods and goddesses were idealised, with poses designed to show off their physical perfection. Later artists aspired to emulate them, demonstrating their own skills in depicting the flawless human form as their predecessors had done – though what actually constituted perfection changed from era to era.

The session

Depictions of all the Greek and Roman myths in the Collection are too many to include here, but your group will have enjoyed exploring and talking about some of the following:

François Boucher, *The Rising and the Setting of the Sun*, France, 1753 and 1752, Oil on canvas



© The Wallace Collection

These two large paintings hang above the grand staircase in the entrance to Hertford House, the home of the Wallace Collection. They were commissioned by Madame Pompadour, the mistress of King Louis XV of France as cartoons, or full-scale preparatory patterns, for tapestries. The tapestries were made as a gift to the King and once hung at Bellevue, Pompadour's country chateau, where the King often visited, but they have long since disappeared, leaving only Boucher's paintings for us to enjoy.

Jeanne, Marquise de Pompadour was not considered a beauty, but she was attractive - vivacious and charming - and very, very clever. Kings of France in the eighteenth century often celebrated themselves as Sun Kings, and were sometimes depicted as the Greek god Apollo, god of the sun, because like the sun amongst the planets they were the centre of the country and the court alike. Like Apollo, the Kings believed that they brought day and night, as did he. The only difference was that they regulated the hours by sleeping and waking, whereas Apollo raced across

the sky in his glittering chariot, pulling the sun behind him on golden chains bringing daylight to the world.

This is the idea behind the tapestries that Madame de Pompadour commissioned from her favourite painter, François Boucher. In the first image (left), *The Setting of the Sun*, Thetis greets Apollo on his return in the soft evening light. The nymphs and cherubs tumble sleepily in the waves, whilst Aurora slumbers, enveloped in clouds. Madame de Pompadour is suggesting that she herself is Thetis, always attendant on the King, Apollo, as he prepares to attend to affairs of state, and always ready to welcome him when his day is done.



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In the second image, *The Rising of the Sun*, Apollo waits in all his glory, attended by his nymphs, to set off on his journey across the sky, bearing the sun behind his golden chariot. The nymphs hold his quiver of arrows, his golden bow, they tie his sandal, while Thetis, his lover, gestures farewell. Above, Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, sprinkles rose petals on the earth below as she sets off before him.

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**Apollo and Daphne (detail of wardrobe),
Attributed to André-Boulle France, 1700, Gilt
bronze**



The wardrobe, or armoire, was made by André-Charles Boulle, the great French cabinet maker. He perfected the technique of marquetry using wood, brass and turtle shell, to such an extent that all furniture like this is called Boulle work, after him.

Not every picture that tells a story is a painting. The tiny gilded bronze decoration on the door of the armoire, tells the story of Daphne and Apollo. Like many beautiful young men, Apollo thought that any girl he fancied would fall at his feet, but he had rather stupidly upset Cupid, the little god of love, telling him his arrows were useless and laughing at him. To punish him, Cupid pierced Apollo's heart with a golden arrow and he immediately fell in love with Daphne. But Cupid's next arrow was lead, not gold. When it hit Daphne, she hated Apollo on sight and she fled from him. Crying out for help, she raced to her father, Peneus, a river god, who turned her into a laurel tree and in the tiny image, Daphne is shown with branches of leaves sprouting from her upstretched hands. Furious, Apollo cursed Peneus so that he was unable to turn Daphne back into a human, so she remained a tree on the banks of the river close to her father forever. But Apollo still loved Daphne. He decreed that her leaves would remain evergreen and he often wore a laurel wreath in her memory.

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**Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*,
c. 1554 - 1556, Italy, Oil on canvas**



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The story of Perseus and Andromeda is one of the most famous of all Classical myths. Titian has chosen to depict a moment of high drama. Perseus is returning fresh from his slaying of the Gorgon Medusa, when he spies the beautiful Princess Andromeda chained to a rock. Her father can be seen in the distance surrounded by his court, crying out for someone to help her. He promises Perseus that if he saves her, he can marry Andromeda that very day, for Perseus, in the best heroic tradition, had fallen in love with her at first sight. So at once, Perseus flies down to rescue Andromeda from the jaws of the sea monster that has been sent by Poseidon, God of the Sea, to devour her.

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**François Lemoyne, *Perseus and Andromeda*,
1723, France, Oil on canvas**



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It is possible that François Lemoyne, working almost two hundred years later, knew of Titian's great painting and chose the same moment for his own picture. The story may be the same, but the styles are very different. Titian's heroine moves away from the monster in fear, looks to Perseus for rescue, while Lemoyne depicts her perched gracefully on a ledge among the rocks, her eyes cast imploringly towards Perseus as he tumbles into action.

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Salvator Rosa, *River Landscapes with Apollo and the Cumaean Sibyl*, c. 1657 - 58, Italy, Oil on canvas



© The Wallace Collection

Salvator Rosa is known for his paintings of classical scenes, set within wild landscapes of rushing rivers, rocky crags and mysterious, distant castles. Many poets and painters in the later Romantic period were influenced by his work. In this large picture the figures are small enough to seem almost incidental, but the vibrant pink of Apollo's tunic draws the eye into the picture and its story.

There are many tales of Apollo's loves. Here, the golden-haired god attempts to seduce the beautiful Cumaean Sibyl, who has come down to meet him from her cave, shown high up on the right of the picture. From this cave she told the fortunes of the many people who valued her wisdom. The Sibyl resisted Apollo's advances for a long time, until at last Apollo promised her anything she desired to become his lover. So she scooped up a handful of sand and told him her wish: to live for as many years as the number of grains of sand that she could hold in her hand. In the painting, a few tiny grains are shown falling from her fingers. Apollo granted her wish, but once again, the Sibyl spurned his love. In anger, Apollo reminded her that she had forgotten the most important thing - to ask for her eternal youth and beauty to last as long as her life.

So she lived on and on, growing older and more wizened till eventually she became a voice echoing around her cave,

telling the fortunes of the fearful souls who came to visit her..

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***Hercules Wrestling with Achelous in the Form of a Bull*, attributed to Ferdinando Tacca (1619-1686) Italy, bronze and Gold**



© The Wallace Collection

Stories about Hercules, known to the Greeks as Herakles, are many. His tussle with the bull is not one of the famous Labours, but happened after those adventures had taken place. The Wallace Collection has a large collection of small sculptures, or statuettes, and many of them show Hercules' adventures, some with the deep brown sheen of bronze, others, like this one, gilded in shining gold.

Achelous was a river god with magic powers. He had the gift of turning himself into either a snake or a bull when danger threatened. Achelous and Hercules both wanted to marry Deianira, a beautiful maiden. They conquered all her other suitors and then faced each other to fight for her hand. Hercules grabbed Achelous and forced him down, but he sprang back and turned himself firstly into a bull-headed man, then into a venomous snake. Hercules laughed. He had defeated huge serpents when he was a child - this snake was nothing to him. So Achelous quickly shed his green scales and turned to Hercules snorting and pawing the ground - a huge bull with pointed horns. Surely he would be stronger than even the strongest man in the world. But Hercules overcame him, wrestled him to the ground and tore out one of his horns. It is this moment that is captured in the statuette, with Hercules' brawny hands grasping the defeated bull's horns. But the naiads took the uprooted horn, turned it into gold and filled it with delicious, ripe fruits. The Roman name for 'horn' was 'cornu', so they called it a cornucopia, and it has become the symbol of richness and plenty for all time. Several of

these cornucopia, gilded and overflowing, are to be found in the wrought iron banister of the Wallace Collection staircase, and there is one held by the figure representing the River Tiber in the bronze sculpture at the end of the Great Gallery where the Tacca sculpture of Hercules is situated.

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Allesandro Algardi, *Jupiter Victorious over the Titans, 'Fire'*

Allesandro Algardi, *uno Controlling the Winds, 'air'*

c. 1655-1680, France, Fire-dog, Bronze and Marble



© The Wallace Collection

Firedogs stand in a fireplace and always come in pairs. Each firedog is made with a strong iron bar fixed to its back, so that logs can be laid between them, resting on the bars. This prevents the logs from slipping and enables them to burn better. In royal or aristocratic houses, these fireplaces were enormous, so logs were huge too and so were the firedogs that held them. The pair in the Wallace Collection is no exception. They no longer have their iron bars, but you can see them on the pair in the Dining Room.

The firedogs show Jupiter riding on an eagle and holding a thunderbolt and Juno summoning the Four Winds to her bidding. Jupiter was King of the Roman gods and Juno was his Queen. (Their Greek names are Zeus and Hera). But Jupiter didn't appear out of nowhere. He had a father, Cronos and a mother, Rhea. His father was a giant, known as a Titan, and it was his father and his fellow Titans that

Jupiter had to fight to gain the throne of Olympus – the place where Greek or Roman gods were said to live. Jupiter called on his brothers, Neptune and Pluto, for their help and promised them their own kingdoms within his own if they should win.



© The Wallace Collection

And win they did. The war went on for ten years, but at the final battle, Jupiter was triumphant. He hurled rocks down on to the Titans, raised a thunderbolt on high - and with a crash of thunder and lightning the Titans were defeated. Juno played her part by summoning the Four Winds to scatter the remnants of the armies of the Titans to the ends of the earth. Jupiter kept his word. Neptune was given the sea as his kingdom, and Pluto ruled the Underworld. (Their Greek names are Poseidon and Hades.) Ever afterwards, Jupiter could be recognised in paintings and sculptures by the thunderbolt that had won him the battle. Either he is shown holding it in his hand or with the thunderbolt close at hand in case he should ever need it again.

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Follow up suggestions:

- Which of today's super heroes do you think might owe something to the ancient heroes, Hercules and Perseus? What could they do that today's heroes can do? Write a storyboard for a film that features your own super hero – or heroine. Think carefully what their strengths are going to be, what beast or monster might they vanquish? Will they rescue someone or something? Will they right a wrong, or have they been set a task?
- When some of the people from the Greek myths died, the gods took them up into the heavens and turned into constellations of stars. Have a look at a map of the night sky. Can you find the constellations called Perseus and Andromeda? See what others you can find and check their stories. Who was Orion, for instance? Is there a constellation Hercules? What about the planets? These names were all given hundreds of years ago by the Greek people. Have a debate about which people alive nowadays might be worthy of having a constellation named after them and how would stars be placed to represent them?
- Look carefully at the two paintings of Perseus and Andromeda. Make a list of things that you think are the same and then a list of things that are different. Write a newspaper review comparing the two and giving your opinion as to which is the better and why.
- Most of the monsters in Greek stories are made from two or more other beasts. Find a picture of a centaur – what is he made from? Design your own monster from parts of three other creatures, give it a name, and decide what it does – is it a wicked monster or a good one? Could you construct it into a puppet that moves? Make a puppet play around it.
- Apollo carried the sun on chains behind his chariot. He must have gone round the Equator. Supposing that the myth is true - that he started out in Greece and came back to Greece travelling west - see if you can make a list of the countries he passed over and in which order. If he looked down, what would he have seen below him? Make a chart and mark the rivers, mountains, towns, seas that Apollo passed over. If the people called up to him, what languages would he have heard – and what kind of music? What food did they eat?
- Many of the myths are about people changing from one thing to another – Daphne to a bush, Achelous to a snake and then a bull. Make a drawing of someone and then use transparent paper for another drawing of them changed into something else. See if you can make the change fit well and be believable.
- Look carefully at the pictures of the firebringers. Jupiter is shown hurling the thunderbolt and the thunderbolt has become his attribute – the object that tells us who he is because of the adventure he has had. He is shown riding into battle on an eagle, another of his attributes. But Juno is shown riding a peacock.. Although Juno always had control of the winds, her attribute is a peacock, not an eagle, and nor is it something blowing in the wind. See if you can find the story that tells why we recognise her by her peacock. Who do you think the people holding the rocks below the two gods might be? Do you think this story is a fitting one for a pair of firebringers? Do you think the eagle and the peacock tell us what kind of people Jupiter and Juno were? Make a group picture of your class with each student holding the creature that most tells us what sort of person they are. Or you could even give them the face of that creature. Give them something to hold in your picture that they really like to become their attribute – their favourite toy or food, flower or book maybe.
- Hold a story-telling tag – you can use one of the myths you have been looking at or you can make up your own. Sit in a circle with the leader holding a baton. As the baton is passed to the next person, so is the story! Put in lots of description and dialogue to bring the story alive and be ready to follow where the story leads even if it isn't what you expect.

Online resources:

Visit our eLearning page on Greek and Roman Myths: <http://www.museumnetworkuk.org/myths/>