

Mermaids of the World

Why do they draw us in?

Who are Mermaids?

Women torn between two worlds. Not entirely happy on land or sea. Sacrifice. Yearning. Stories of Love and Loss:

- Scottish: Selkie
- Danish: Little Mermaid
- Syrian: Astargatis

Water Gods/goddesses:

- African: Mami Wata
- Mesopotamian: Ena/Enika
- Thai: **Suvannamaccha**
- Mexico: La Sirena
- Inuit: Sedna

Seductresses drawing men to their demise with song and beauty. Or the promise of something better.

- Greece: Sirens
- German: Lorelei
- Japan: Ningyo

Ancient Syria: Atargatis

One of the earliest mermaid legends appeared in Syria around 1000 BC when **the goddess Atargatis** dove into a lake to take the form of a fish. As the gods there would not allow her to give up her great beauty, only her bottom half became a fish, and she kept her top half in human form.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Htq45X4qypU>



Ancient Egypt

The Cave of Swimmers is a cave with ancient rock art in the mountainous Gilf Kebir plateau of the Libyan Desert section of the Sahara. It is located in the New Valley Governorate of southwest Egypt, near the border with Libya. They are estimated to have been created 10,000 years ago during the time of the most recent Ice Age.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeHAN1htJ18>



Mesopotamia: Ea/Enki

Enki, also known as **Ea**, was the Mesopotamian god of crafts, water, fertility, semen, magic, and mischief, as well as a culture hero.

He was usually seen as the son of An, the personification of the sky, and brother of [Enlil](#), king of the gods. His spouse was the earth-goddess Ninhursag and they lived on the island Dilmun. The two gods lived happily, but the marriage was strained as Enki started to be attracted to their daughters, which led to various catastrophes between them, varying from myth to myth. As the Babylonian Ea he was also seen as the father Marduk.

Enki was also associated with the Abzu, the underwater source of the Tigris–Euphrates river system, and he was often seen as the creator of the human race, alongside his wife, using primeval clay and sometimes also blood as ingredients, and served as a teacher of crafts, agriculture, writing, laws, architecture, and magic for the humans. He served as the patron deity for the city of Eridu.



Greek: Sirens

In Greek mythology, the sirens were dangerous creatures who lured nearby sailors with their enchanting music and singing voices to shipwreck on the rocky coast of their island. It is also said that they can even charm the winds. Roman poets placed them on some small islands called Sirenum scopuli.

- <https://greekreporter.com/2021/10/02/history-of-mermaids-and-their-origins-in-ancient-greek-sirens/>







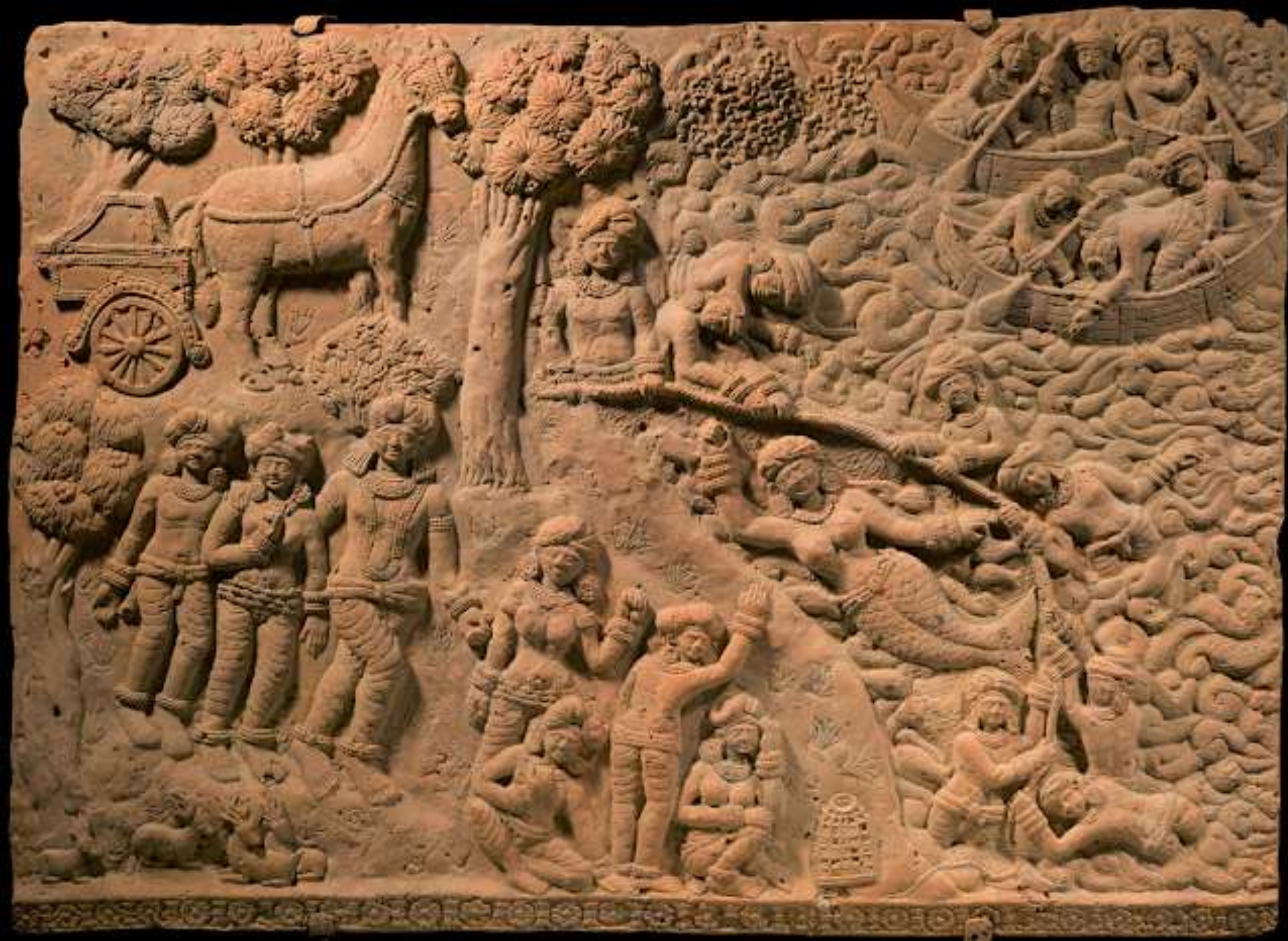
India

Not many would have heard of the archaeological site of Chandraketugarh in India, located roughly 35 km from Kolkata in Eastern India. Chandraketugarh used to be a prosperous, coastal city engaging in international trade, with continuous habitation from c.400 BCE - 1250 CE. All that remains at the site today are the remnants of a brick-built Buddhist temple from the 10th century CE.

The reason why Chandraketugarh is particularly interesting because of the large number of terracotta artifacts of astonishing workmanship that have been found at the site, most of which date from the Shunga Period i.e. 200 BCE – 100 BCE. Unfortunately, nearly all of them were smuggled abroad to private collectors, and only a few broken shards and pieces remain in the museums of India.

Although the site was discovered in 1906, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), which was then functioning under British Rule, did not conduct any official excavation and simply stood by as these priceless pieces of work were routed through the illegal market for ancient relics. A few of the artifacts are now housed in international museums such as the Met museum, Norton Simon Foundation, LACMA etc. The first official excavations at Chandraketugarh were done much later in 1957-68 by the Ashutosh Museum of Indian Art in Kolkata.





Matsyāṅganā

Matsyāṅganā exists within India, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Burma, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, and the Japanese Ningyo. Believed to be the first recording of mermaids in history, Matsya (Sanskrit: मत्स्य, literally "Fish") is the avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu in the form of a fish. Often listed as the first avatar in the lists of the ten primary avatars of Vishnu, Matsya is described to have rescued the first man, Manu from a great deluge. Matsya may be depicted as a giant fish or anthropomorphically, with a human torso and the bottom half as a fish, similar to [Nagas](#), which can be described as a giant snake or a snake with a human torso.

Thailand: Suvannamaccha and Hanuman

The *Ramakien* (literally, “Glory of Rama”) is the Thai version of the Ramayana which was taken to Southeast Asia by Indian traders in the first centuries of the Common Era. There is a story in the Ramakien about a mermaid called Suvannamaccha (from Sanskrit *Suvarna matsya*, meaning “golden fish”) who tried to hamper Hanuman’s effort to build a sea-bridge to the island of Lanka. When Hanuman and his monkey army were throwing large boulders into the sea in order to build a bridge to Lanka, where Sita – the wife of Rama - had been abducted by Ravana and kept as a captive, he found that the boulders kept vanishing from under the waters every day.

When Hanuman and his helpers dived into the ocean to see what was going on, they found that a group of mermaids were carrying away the rocks as soon as they were thrown in. Hanuman tried capture the leader of the mermaids but she kept evading him. Slowly, Hanuman started falling in love with her and tried to seduce her. Then she began to respond to his overtures.

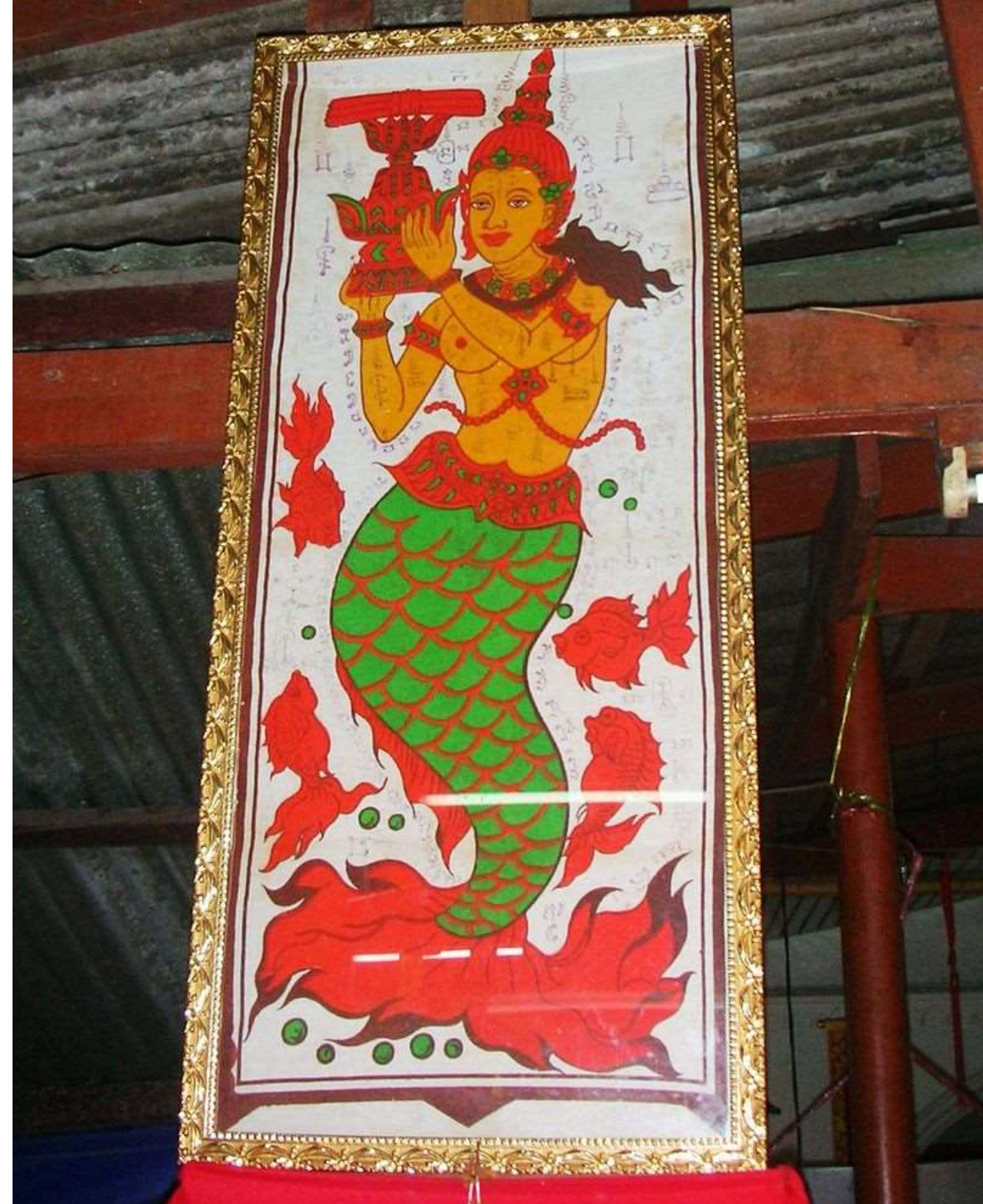
When Hanuman asked her why she was disrupting their work, Suvannamaccha told him that she was a daughter of Ravana, and she had been instructed by Ravana to foil their efforts to build a bridge. Hanuman then explained to her how Ravana had forcibly abducted Rama’s wife, and why it was necessary to build the bridge and help Rama in his fight against Ravana. Suvannamacha understood the importance of Hanuman’s mission and her mermaid friends did not cause any further disruption. Rather, they returned all the stones that they had removed from the bridge. Today, Suvannamacha is a popular figure in Thai culture. She is regarded as a good-luck charm, and her images are hung outside shops and houses across Thailand.

So, that is the story of Suvannamacha and Hanuman - an interesting addition to the Thai adaptation of the Ramayana.

<https://bibliolore.org/2022/03/25/hanuman-and-suvannamaccha/> (9 mins--dance)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kq5TsztI2RM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nu1g1ppcSK4> (8 mins)





Japanese Mermaid: Ningyo

Ningyo (人魚?, "human fish", often translated as "mermaid") is a fish-like creature from Japanese folklore. Anciently, it was described with a monkey's mouth with small teeth like a fish's, shining golden scales, and a quiet voice like a skylark or a flute. Its flesh is pleasant-tasting, and anyone who eats it will attain remarkable longevity. However, catching a ningyo was believed to bring storms and misfortune, so fishermen who caught these creatures were said to throw them back into the sea. A ningyo washed onto the beach was an omen of war or calamity.

人魚

建木の西
あり人面あり
魚身足あり胸
より上人より
下より魚より
人國の人あり
とも云



人魚圖

一名海童

越中國放生湖四方浦より出て
獲れをあたはさまなげいど鉄炮
四百五十挺よりとりとる

頭 三尺五寸
丈 三丈五尺
鬚 毛長き堂丈八尺
而 腋目三ツ鳧有
角 九リ二本金色之
下 腋朱の如く赤き
鱗 小魚の如き助有
尾 ハ鯉の如く
比 魚を一度見たる人ハ
壽命長久し魚身
又 難得なり一生仕合
よく福徳を得と云
あり



文化二世五月

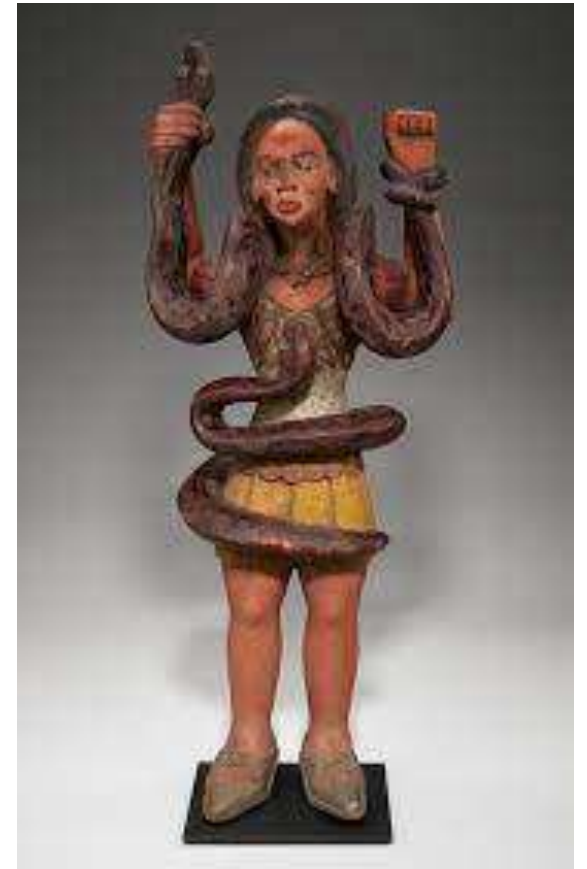
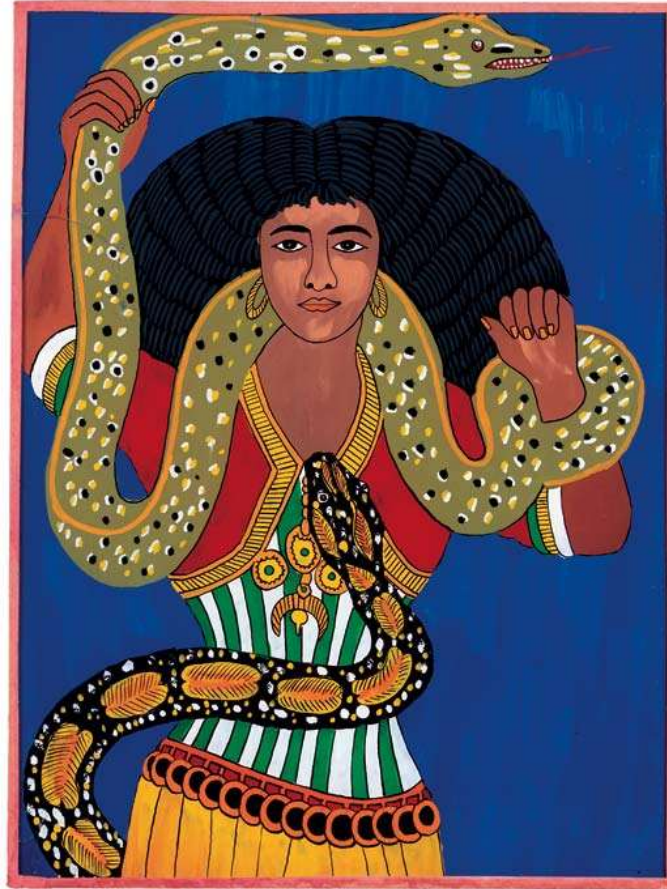
Mami Wata

Mami Wata (Mammy Water), or La Sirene, is **a water spirit venerated in West, Central, and Southern Africa and in the African diaspora in the Americas**. Mami Wata spirits are usually female but are sometimes male.

Mammy Water is a pidgin English name for a local water goddess worshipped by the Ibibio, Ijaw, and Igbo speaking peoples of southeastern Nigeria. The water goddess traditionally gives wealth and children, compensates for hardships, and is sought in times of illness and need, especially by women. Her various cults are led, predominantly, by priestesses. This acclaimed documentary shows numerous rituals and ceremonies associated with Mammy Water, while devotees provide commentary. This is an important depiction of the strength of traditional religion in contemporary Nigeria and one of the few academically sound investigations of the role of women in an African spiritual movement.

- <https://medium.com/high-museum-of-art/mami-wata-december-collection-highlight-7a4df960e93b> (Nigeria)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHjqpJfMFkA> (Ghana)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jME9flgQMAA>





Mexico: La Sirena

She is the **patroness of childbirth**, but she is also credited with bringing a flood that “purified humanity,” killing many. There are undeniable parallels in this particular instance of the mermaid in Mexican folklore and Christian thought—the association of female to the serpent and a flood that rid the world of evil.

the mermaid in Mexican folklore: Chalchiutlicue. Often represented as a mermaid, Chalchiutlicue is described not as half-human and half-fish, but as half-human and half-sea serpent. She is the goddess of water, rivers, seas, and storms (later also being attributed the goddess of baptism). The paradox in her character arises in that she embodies both life and death. She is the patroness of childbirth, but she is also credited with bringing a flood that “purified humanity,” killing many.

There are undeniable parallels in this particular instance of the mermaid in Mexican folklore and Christian thought—the association of female to the serpent and a flood that rid the world of evil. The mermaid is a fusion of indigenous and Spanish-European cultures. Christopher Columbus is said to have spotted mermaids (an already existing phenomenon in the European world) on his arrival to the New World (explained as a misconstruction of the manatee). This myth of the mermaid, from that point forward was enlarged and appropriated by New World cultures, popularizing these new “fusion” legends and myths with new imagery and symbols being used in folk art.

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=643986009693931>







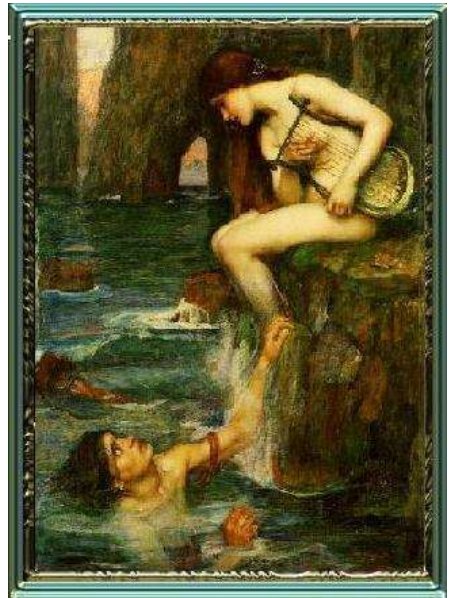
Germany: Lorelei

Lorelei, German Loreley, **German legend of a beautiful maiden who threw herself into the Rhine River in despair over a faithless lover and was transformed into a siren who lured fishermen to destruction.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ow-fZu2vsjE>

<https://www.oq.com.au/loleleimyth/#>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_3feKiuY6o



Mermaids in Aboriginal Art

Many Australian Aborigines of today also believe that mermaids still exist in their waters and rivers. In some Northern Territory regions, mermaids were believed to instruct women in ceremonial procedures in early Dreamtime, particularly those procedures related to fertility. It was believed that they were still present in many areas and could be seen sitting on rocks, but would quickly jump back into the water if they saw anyone coming.

Another Aboriginal story tells of a man who set a trap to capture a mermaid, who he then tied to a tree. He treated her very kindly and eventually she agreed to be his wife. They had children together but she disappeared into the river one day after being reminded of her mermaid form when she saw her reflection in the water.

There is also a belief in some Aboriginal language groups that albino children born to Aboriginal parents are the result of mermaid blood in their ancestry. A Torres Strait Islander Dreamtime story tells of how fishermen caught a mermaid in their nets. The mermaid warned them not to over-fish the lake and to just take what they needed for their family. The fishermen continued to over-fish the lake so the mermaid consequently drowned them.

There are a number of modern Aboriginal paintings depicting mermaids, which are held in National museums and art galleries around Australia. Perhaps the most famous are the Yawkyawk (mermaid) sculptures held in The National Museum of Australia's collection from Western Arnhem Land. These modern woven pandanus sculptures depicting mermaid spirits are by artists Lulu Laradjbi and Marina Murdilnga. One Aboriginal artist from the Central Arnhem Land (Darnkorlo clan, Yirridjda moiety, Ngarridj subsection, Kunwinjku language), Owen Yalandja, creates sculptures and paintings almost exclusively based on the Yawkyawk (mermaid) spirits near Barrihdjowkkeng. One of the first carvings Owen made of a mermaid in 1993 won the 10th National Aboriginal Art Award that year. The work is held in the Maningrida Arts and Culture Centre in the Northern Territory.

There are also several modern Aboriginal artworks that depict mermaids. Notable examples come from Edie Blitner of the Kimberley area of Western Australia, Northern Territory artist Chris Liddy (Moonggun) who notes that when someone drowns it means mermaid Mimi spirits took their spirit, and Kunwinjku artist Lesley Nawirridj of West Arnhem Land. Original paintings and prints by these artists are available to buy from their respective galleries. '

<https://ictv.com.au/video/item/1134>

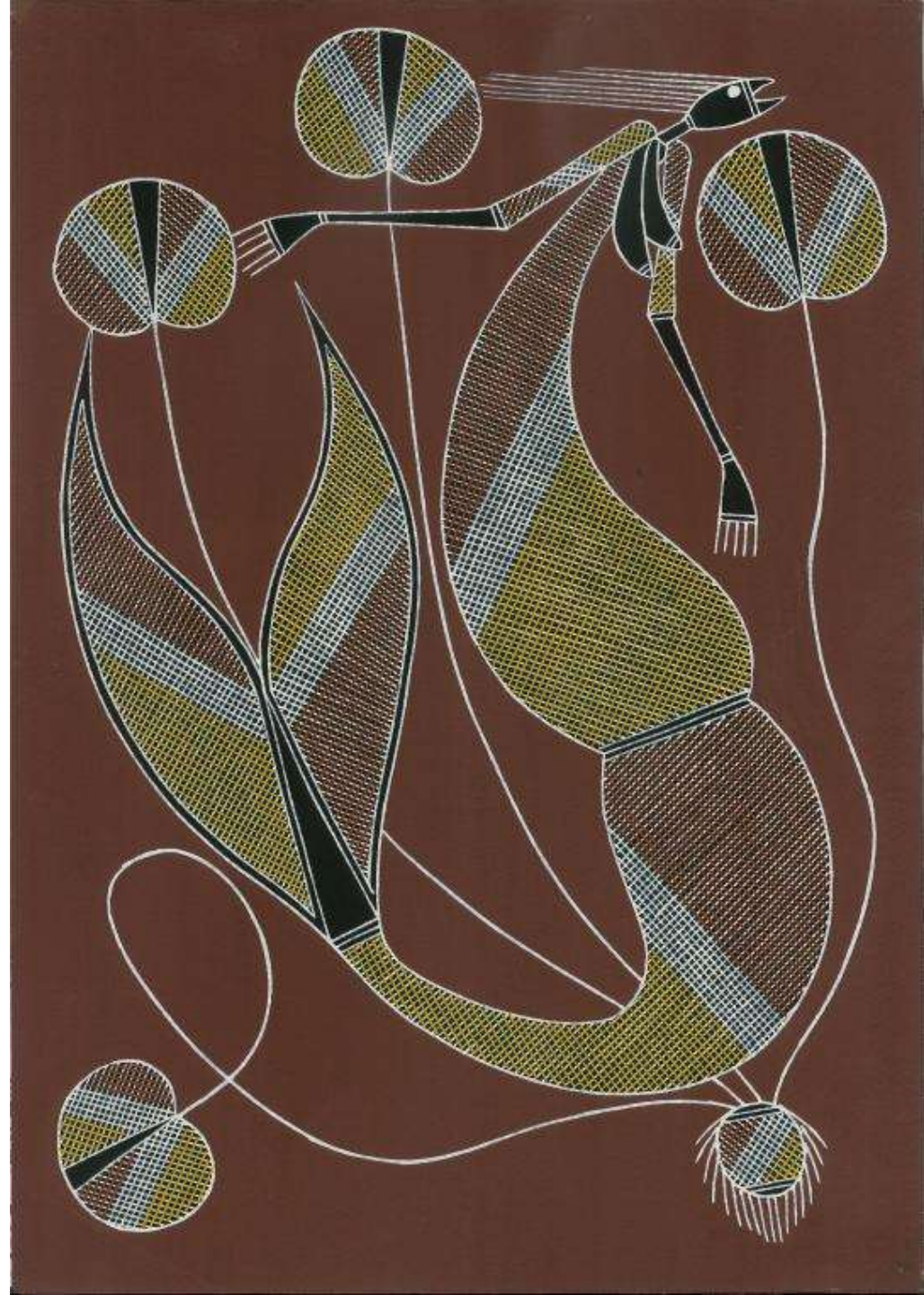
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrptpFeebJI> (10 mins)







C. Liddy "oe" Moonggun







Ireland: Merrow

The term appears in two tales set in Ireland published in the 19th century: "[Lady of Gollerus](#)", where a green-haired merrow weds a local [Kerry](#) man who deprives her of the "magical red cap" ([cohuleen druith](#)); and "[The Soul Cages](#)" where a green-bodied grotesque male merrow entertains a fisherman at his home under the sea.

These tales with commentary were first published in [T. C. Croker](#)'s *Fairy Legends* (1828). [William Butler Yeats](#) and others writing on the subject borrowed heavily from this work. "The Soul Cages" turned out not to be a genuine folktale, but a piece of fiction fabricated by [Thomas Keightley](#).

A number of [other terms](#) in [Irish](#) are used to denote a mermaid or sea-nymph, some tracing back to [mythological](#) tracts from the medieval to the post-medieval period. The Middle Irish *murdúchann* is a [siren](#)-like creature encountered by legendary ancestors of the Irish (either [Goidels](#) or [Milesians](#)) according to the [Book of Invasions](#). This, as well as *samguba* and *suire* are terms for the mermaid that appear in [onomastic](#) tales of the [Dindsenchas](#). A *muirgheilt*, literally "sea-wanderer", is the term for the mermaid.



Scotland: Selkies

In [Celtic](#) and [Norse](#) mythology, **selkies** (also spelled *silkies*, *sylkies*, *selchies*) or **selkie folk** ([Scots](#): *selkie fowk*) meaning '**seal folk**'^[a] are mythological beings capable of [therianthropy](#), changing from [seal](#) to human form by shedding their skin. They are found in [folktales](#) and mythology originating from the [Northern Isles](#) of [Scotland](#).

The folk-tales frequently revolve around female selkies being coerced into relationships with humans by someone stealing and hiding their sealskin, thus exhibiting the tale motif of the [swan maiden](#) type.

There are counterparts in [Faroese](#) and [Icelandic folklore](#) that speak of seal-women and seal-skin.

“It occurred to me that there have always been selkie women: women who did not seem to belong to this world, because they did not fit into prevailing notions of what women were supposed to be. And if you did not fit into those notions, in some sense you weren't a woman. Weren't even quite human. The magical animal woman is, or can be, a metaphor for those sorts of women.” — Theodora Goss.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfE11rwOs8w> (Shetland 3 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nc7UkOtg72w> (6.5 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBk2ZejTBjA>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQM2nGpMrtU> (Scottish legend)



Orkney Islands: Finfolk

In Orkney folklore, Finfolk (sometimes Finnfolk) are **sorcerous shapeshifters of the sea, the dark mysterious race from Finfolkaheem who regularly make an amphibious journey from the depths of the Finfolk ocean home to the Orkney Islands.**

The Finfolk of Orkney folklore were a race of dark and gloomy sorcerers, feared and mistrusted by mortals. Their boating skills were unparalleled and as well as having power over storm and sea, they were noted shapeshifters. Unlike the [selkie-folk](#), who were restricted - according to some tales at least - in the times they could come ashore, the Finfolk were truly amphibious. They came and went as they pleased, venturing between their undersea world and the human realm as they wished.

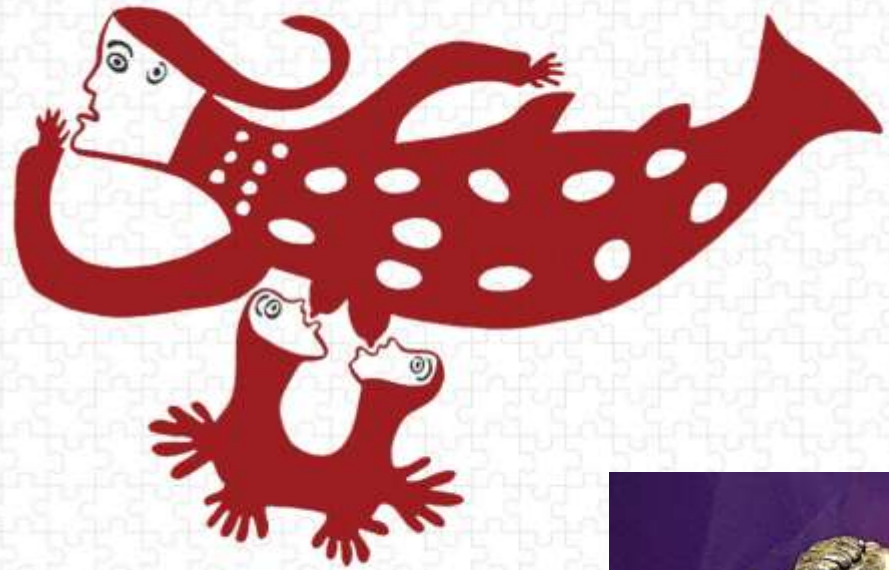
The Finfolk led a nomadic lifestyle. They spent the long Orkney winters in the luxury of [Finfolkaheem](#), a majestic city of unknown location, but usually said to be at the bottom of the sea. In the summer, however, they returned to Orkney, where they took up residence on their magical island home, [Hildaland](#) - one of Orkney's [magical vanishing islands](#). Tradition has it that this [Hildaland was later taken from the Finfolk and renamed Eynhallow](#).

Inuit: Sedna

Sedna is a centrally important goddess for the Inuit, and is said to hold sea animals entangled in her hair, only to release them when she is appeased by offerings, songs or a visit from an *angakok* (shaman).

Cast out of the boat for good, the girl sinks into the depths of the sea and becomes Sedna, or Nuliayuk or Taluliyuk, the woman who controls all sea beasts and is half-woman and half-fish. Sedna is a centrally important goddess for the Inuit, and is said to hold sea animals entangled in her hair, only to release them when she is appeased by offerings, songs or a visit from an *angakok* (shaman). Many songs are sung to this powerful goddess and in new seasons, pieces of the liver of the first-killed sea mammal are returned to the waters, imploring Sedna to release her bounty to the hunters so that they might feed their families. The *angakok* may visit Sedna in a trance, where he hears of the taboos and disrespect inflicted on her by the people, and soothes her by combing her hair with a bone comb.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLGiCJAe-aU>





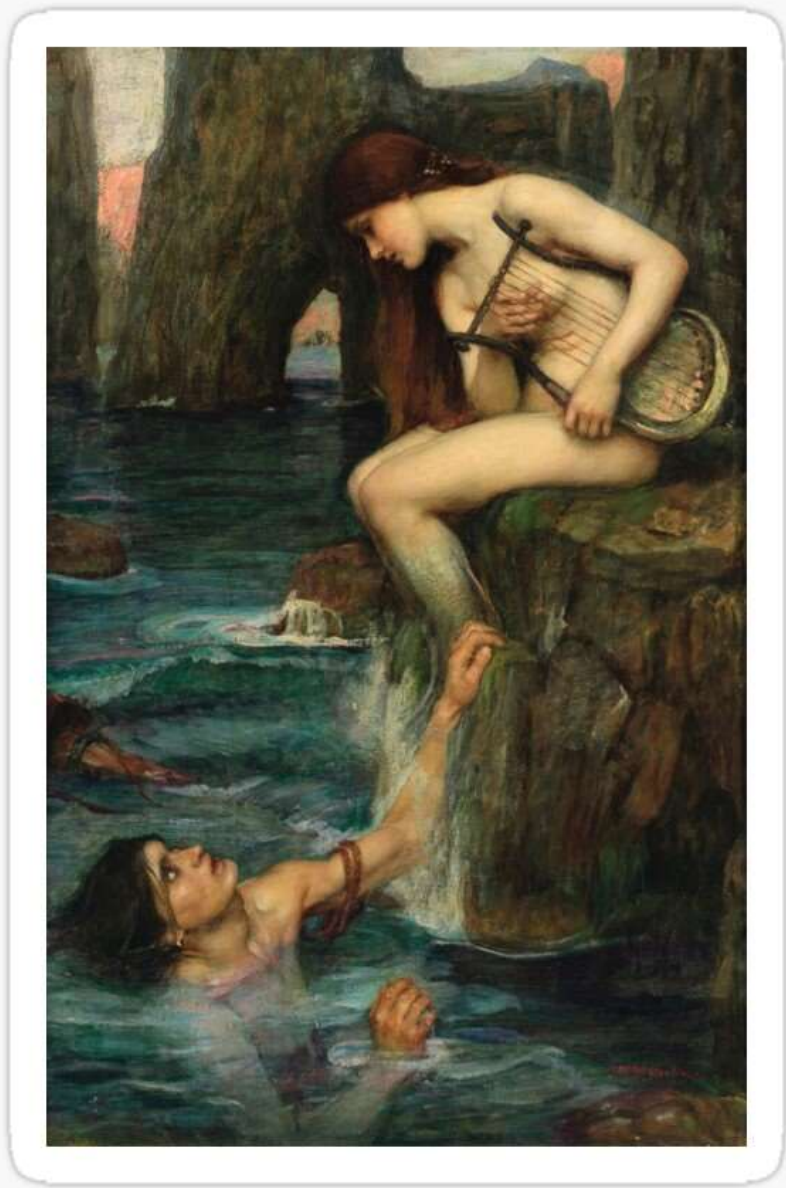


John William Waterhouse (1849-1917)

John William Waterhouse RA was an English painter known for working first in the Academic style and for then embracing the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's style and subject matter. His artworks were known for their depictions of women from both ancient Greek mythology and Arthurian legend.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QZvc6sASLU>







Evelyn de Morgan (1855-1919)

Evelyn De Morgan, née Pickering, was an English painter associated early in her career with the later phase of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, and working in a range of styles including Aestheticism and Symbolism.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dd5Jt69jF8g>
[\(mermaids\)](#)
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= whzxI5fzHA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whzxI5fzHA)







Assignment Suggestions...

- Illustrate your own mermaid mythology
- Create tension between two opposing colors/objects in an artwork