

Snakes

The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful

Snake symbolism in art

Historically, serpents and snakes represent **fertility or a creative life force**. As snakes shed their skin through sloughing, they are symbols of rebirth, transformation, immortality, and healing. The ouroboros is a symbol of eternity and continual renewal of life.

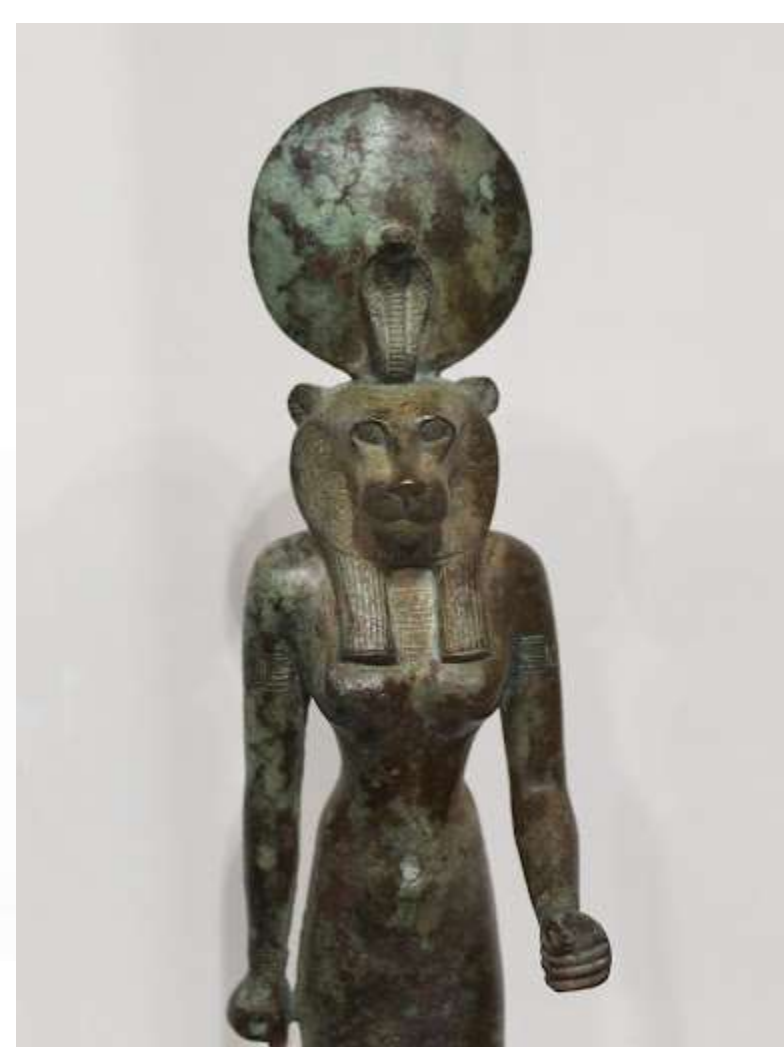
Ancient Egypt—Wadjet

Wadjet ([/'wædʒət/](#); [Ancient Egyptian: *wꜣdyt*](#) "Green One"),^[1] known to the Greek world as **Uto** ([/'ju:tou/](#); [Koinē Greek: Οὐτώ](#)) or **Buto** ([/'bju:tou/](#); [Βουτώ](#)) among other renderings including Wedjat, Uadjet, and Udjo,^[2] was originally the [ancient Egyptian local goddess](#) of the city of Dep or [Buto](#) in [Lower Egypt](#), which was an important site in [prehistoric Egypt](#).^{[3][4]}

Wadjet was closely associated in [ancient Egyptian religion](#) with the [Eye of Ra](#), a powerful protective deity.^[5] The hieroglyph for her eye is shown below; sometimes two are shown in the sky of religious images. Buto also contained a sanctuary of Horus, the child of the sun deity who would be interpreted to represent the pharaoh. Much later, Wadjet became associated with [Isis](#) as well as with many other deities.

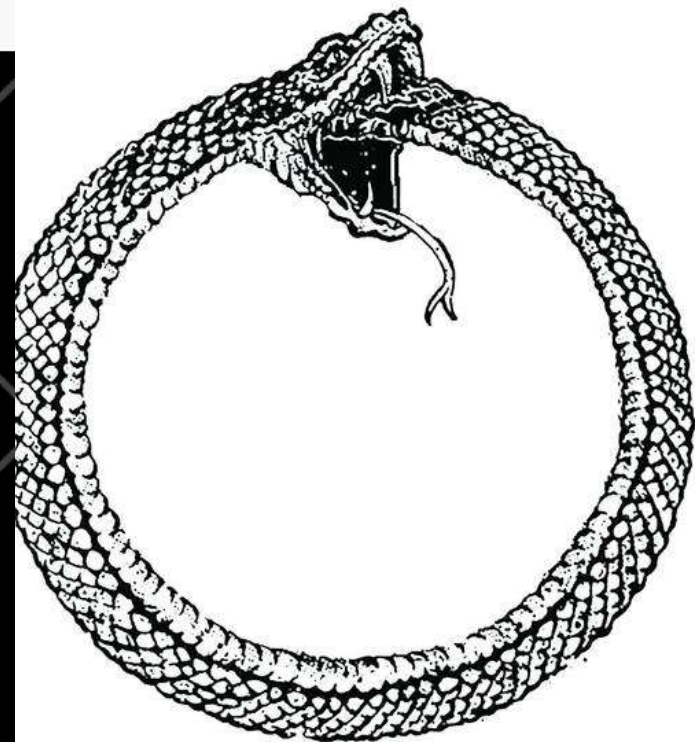
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4tLV4E-Uqs>

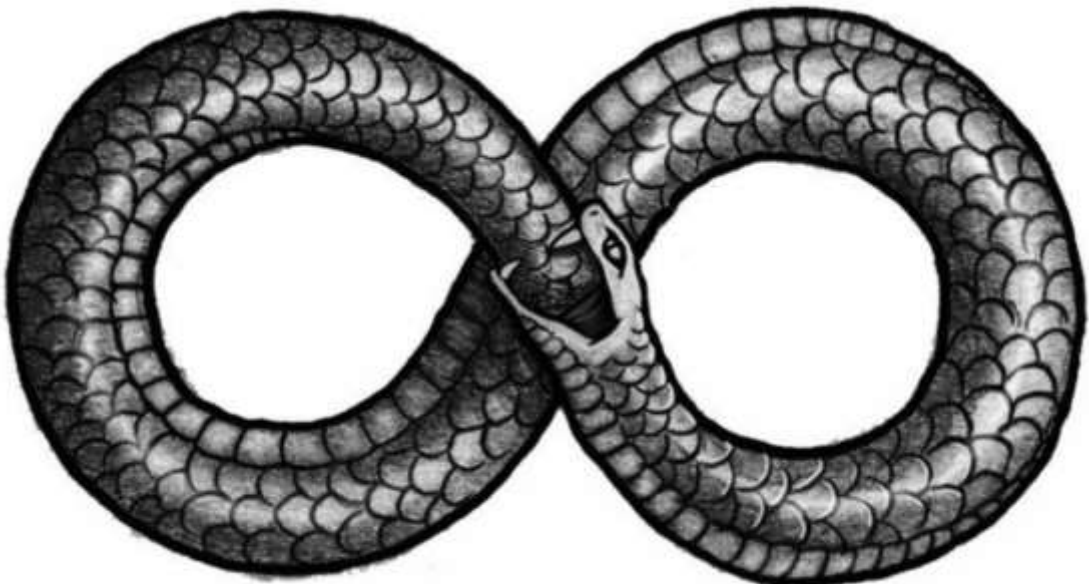




Ouroboros

The ouroboros or uroboros is an ancient symbol depicting a serpent or dragon eating its own tail. The ouroboros entered Western tradition via ancient Egyptian iconography and the Greek magical tradition. It was adopted as a symbol in Gnosticism and Hermeticism and most notably in alchemy.





Lindy Lee—The Ouroboros

The immersive public sculpture is based on the ancient image of a snake eating its own tail, seen across culture and millennia, it is the symbol of eternal return, of cycles of birth and death, and renewal.

Located at the entrance of the National Gallery, people will be able to enter the 'mouth' of the sculpture and walk into the curved space to experience the darkness that is illuminated by light beams emanating from the hundreds of thousands of perforations on its surface.

Lindy Lee: Ouroboros is due to be completed in early 2024

<https://nga.gov.au/art-artists/sculpture-garden/lindylee-ouroboros/>





Serpents in Indian Art

Featuring more than 140 objects dating from 200 BCE to 400 CE, the exhibition presents a series of evocative and interlocking themes to reveal both the pre-Buddhist origins of figurative sculpture in India and the early narrative traditions that were central to this formative moment in early Indian art. With major loans from a dozen lenders across India, as well as from the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States, it transports visitors into the world of early Buddhist imagery that gave expression to this new religion as it grew from a core set of ethical teachings into one of the world's great religions. Objects associated with Indo-Roman exchange reveal India's place in early global trade. The exhibition showcases objects in various media, including limestone sculptures, gold, silver, bronze, rock crystal, and ivory. Highlights include spectacular sculptures from southern India—newly discovered and never before publicly exhibited masterpieces—that add to the world canon of early Buddhist art.

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





TREE & SERPENT

Early Buddhist Art in India

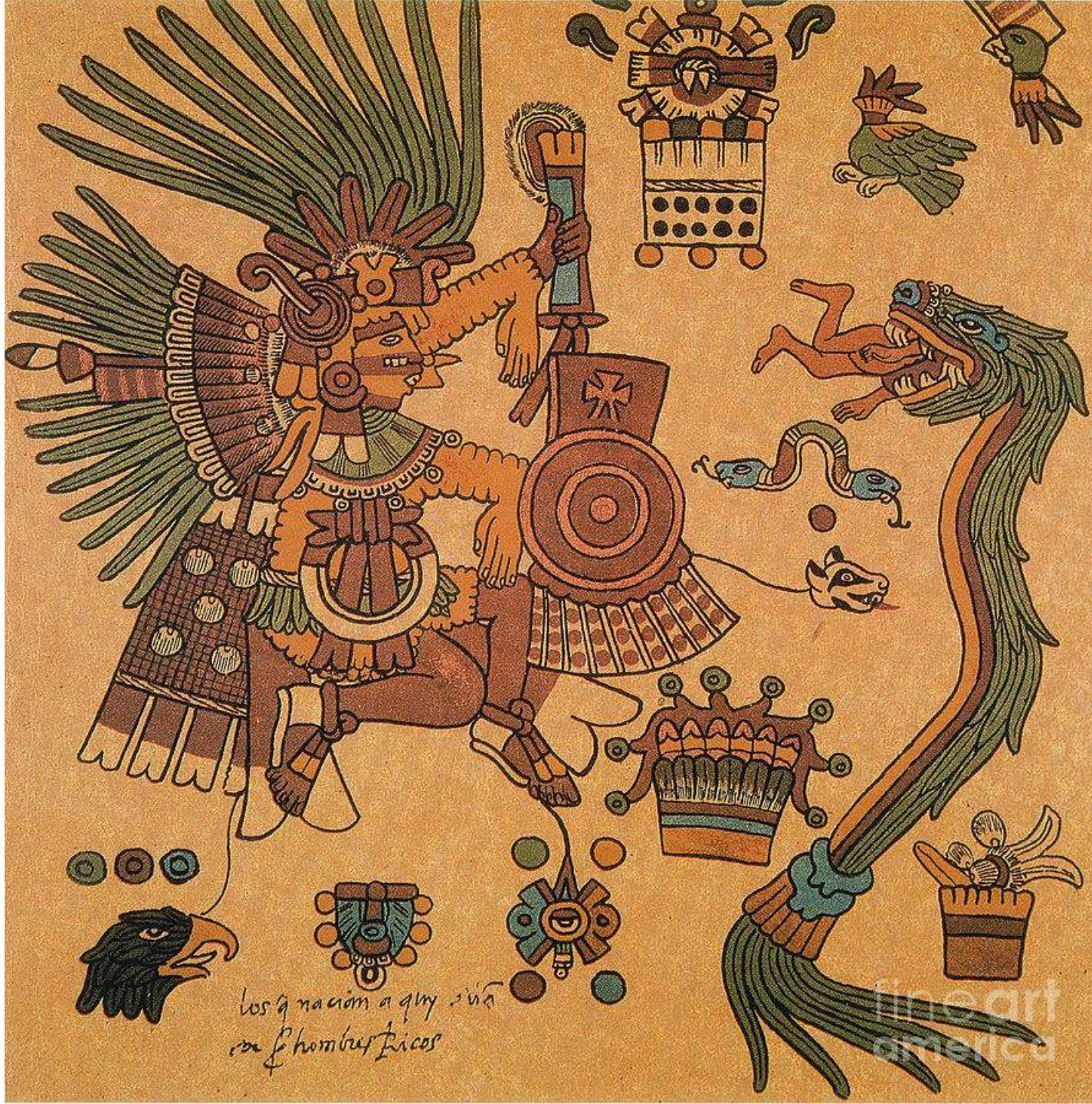


Serpents in Mexican Culture

Serpents **represented fertility, renewal and transformation**, which go along with Quetzalcoatl's godly duties and identity. The snake's terrestrial habitat and periodic shedding of their skin suggest the connotation of fertility and renewal. The feathered serpent in particular symbolizes the union of earth and sky.

- <https://smarthistory.org/serpents-mexica/>

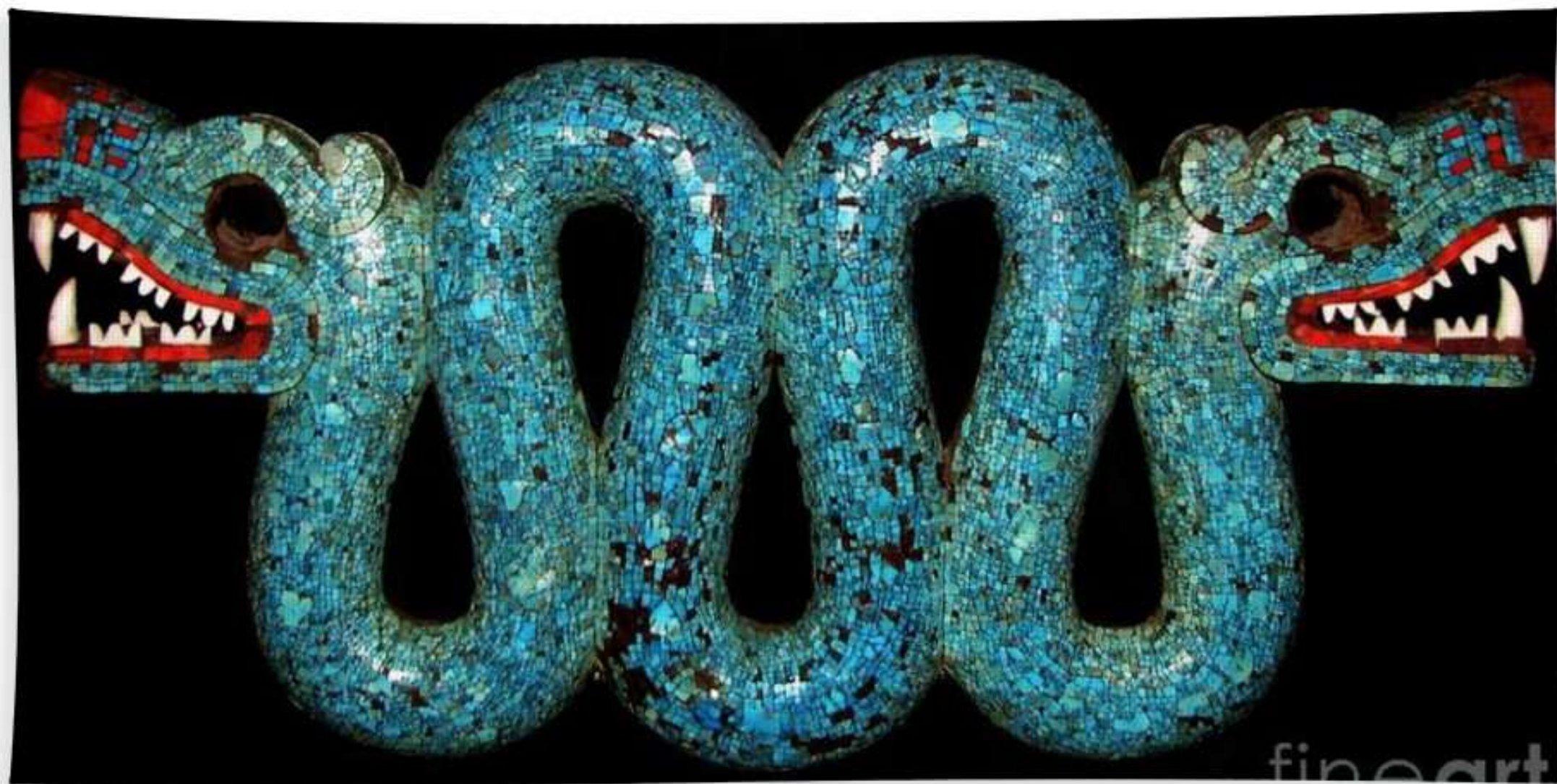




The Double-Headed Serpent

The Double-headed serpent is an Aztec sculpture. It is a snake with two heads composed of mostly turquoise pieces applied to a wooden base. It came from Aztec Mexico and might have been worn or displayed in religious ceremonies. The mosaic is made of pieces of turquoise, spiny oyster shell and conch shell.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjQTUs3CykE>



Laocoön and His Sons

Laocoön and his sons is a marble sculpture that depicts a Trojan priest and his sons being strangled by serpents sent by a Greek goddess. It was unearthed in the 16th century and was thought to be from the Classical period, but later evidence suggested it was from the Hellenistic period. The sculpture is admired for its dynamic, expressive style.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V3s7GysCmik&t=33s>

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ancient-art-civilizations/greek-art/hellenistic/v/laoco-n-and-his-sons-early-first-century-c-e>



Medusa--Bernini

Recent conservation efforts have restored the Medusa to its full glory and revealed previously hidden polish and patina. Believed to date from between 1638 and 1648, this extraordinary work takes its subject from classical mythology, as cited in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It shows the beautiful Medusa, one of the Gorgon sisters, caught in the terrible process of transformation into a monster. Her hair is turning into writhing snakes, which, according to Ovid, was a punishment from Minerva for having had an affair with Neptune, god of the sea. The punishment also made Medusa an instrument of death by turning anyone who looked upon her to stone. Famously, Perseus overcame Medusa's curse by looking at her reflection in a shield to behead her.

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/baroque-art1/baroque-italy/v/bernini-bust-of-medusa-c-1644-48>

- <https://www.thecollector.com/medusa-head-gorgon-in-art/>



Medusa Mosaic--Turkey

The Medusa mosaic in the ancient city of Kibyra is located in Turkey's southern Burdur province. The nearly 2,000-year-old mosaic depicts Medusa, the "serpent-haired, sharp-toothed female monster" of Greek mythology, and adorns the orchestra section of the 3,600-seat Odeon, which served as a concert venue, parliament, court and covered theater in ancient times.





Medusa Mosaic--Spain

Archaeologists in Spain have unearthed an "exceptional" mosaic featuring the mythical gorgon Medusa in the remains of a lavish house from the [Roman era](#).

The mosaic, found at the Huerta de Otero archaeological site in western Spain, depicts Medusa at the center of a patterned octagon, meant to represent the aegis of Athena, a shield or skin that held Medusa's severed head after the Greek hero Perseus beheaded the gorgon. In the mosaic, Medusa is surrounded by masks, geometric patterns and wildlife, including fish and four colorful peacocks that represent the four seasons, according to a translated [statement](#).

- https://www.tiktok.com/@dirtdiaries_video/7262431567593704746



Medusa Mosaic—Brading Villa Rome

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jci2za4lyIU&t=53s>



Medusa--Caravaggio

Two versions of **Medusa** were created by [Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio](#), one in 1596 and the other in ca. 1597. Both depict the moment from Greek mythology in which the [Gorgon Medusa](#) is killed by the demigod [Perseus](#), but the *Medusas* are also self-portraits. Due to its bizarre and intricate design, the painting is said to display Caravaggio's unique fascination with violence and realism. The *Medusa* was commissioned by the Italian diplomat [Francesco Maria del Monte](#), who planned to gift the commemorative shield to [Ferdinando I de' Medici](#) and have it placed in the Medici collection. It is now located in the [Uffizi Museum](#) in [Florence](#) without signature.

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



Medusa with the Head of Perseus

In light of the #MeToo movement, this statue by Luciano Garbati has generated much attention. This is a highly revisionist work that flips the narrative of the Medusa myth.

Whilst in the myth, Perseus slays the unsuspecting Medusa in her sleep, and uses Medusa's head as a trophy, in this piece of Medusa art, the roles are reversed. Medusa stands triumphant with the slain head of Perseus in her hand, with a determined look that many have taken to symbolize "[women's rage](#)" against oppression. Instead of solely featuring Medusa's head, this artwork reunited the decapitated head with the body.

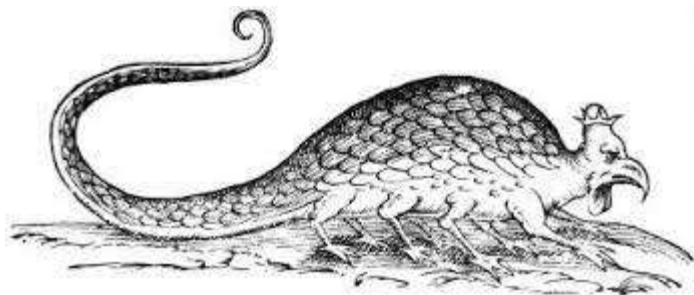
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Q-emXrJVhY>



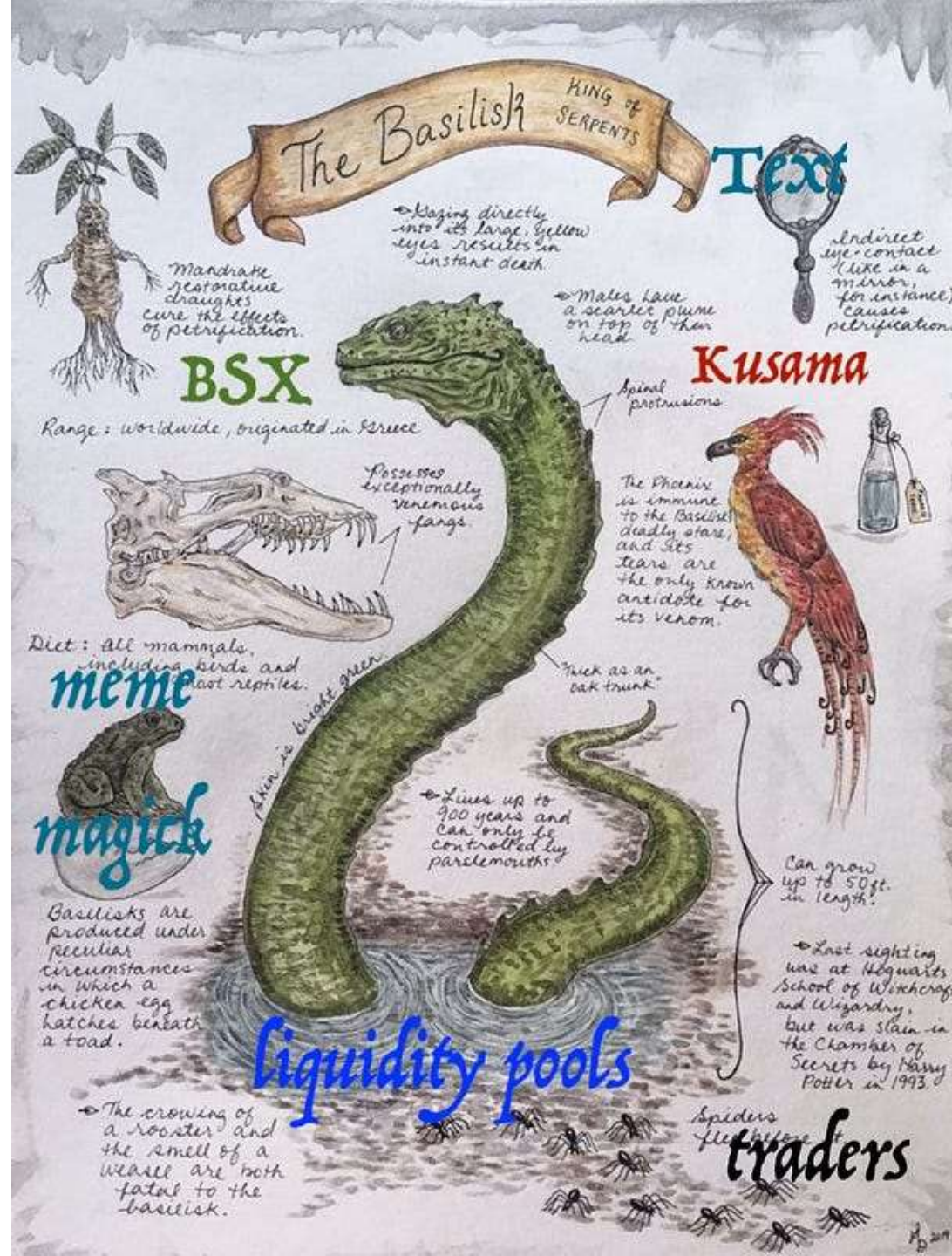
Basilisk/Cocatrice

A venomous snake who can kill with its gaze alone, the basilisk has terrified us for thousands of years. But it also has another name—the cockatrice. That's right, the reptile-chicken hybrid creature and the poisonous snake are actually the same monster. Find out how a real snake likely inspired tales of a mythological serpent in the 1st century CE that over time turned into a mythological beast.

<https://www.pbs.org/video/basilisk-or-cockatrice-the-mysterious-king-of-serpents-rqozd1/>



BASILISK



Queen Elizabeth Wax Vanitas

A striking 18th century wax head: half skull covered in insects and reptiles; half resembling Queen Elizabeth I. Underneath is inscribed, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity'. Sarah Jaffray explores the symbolism of death and beauty in this curious tableau.

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



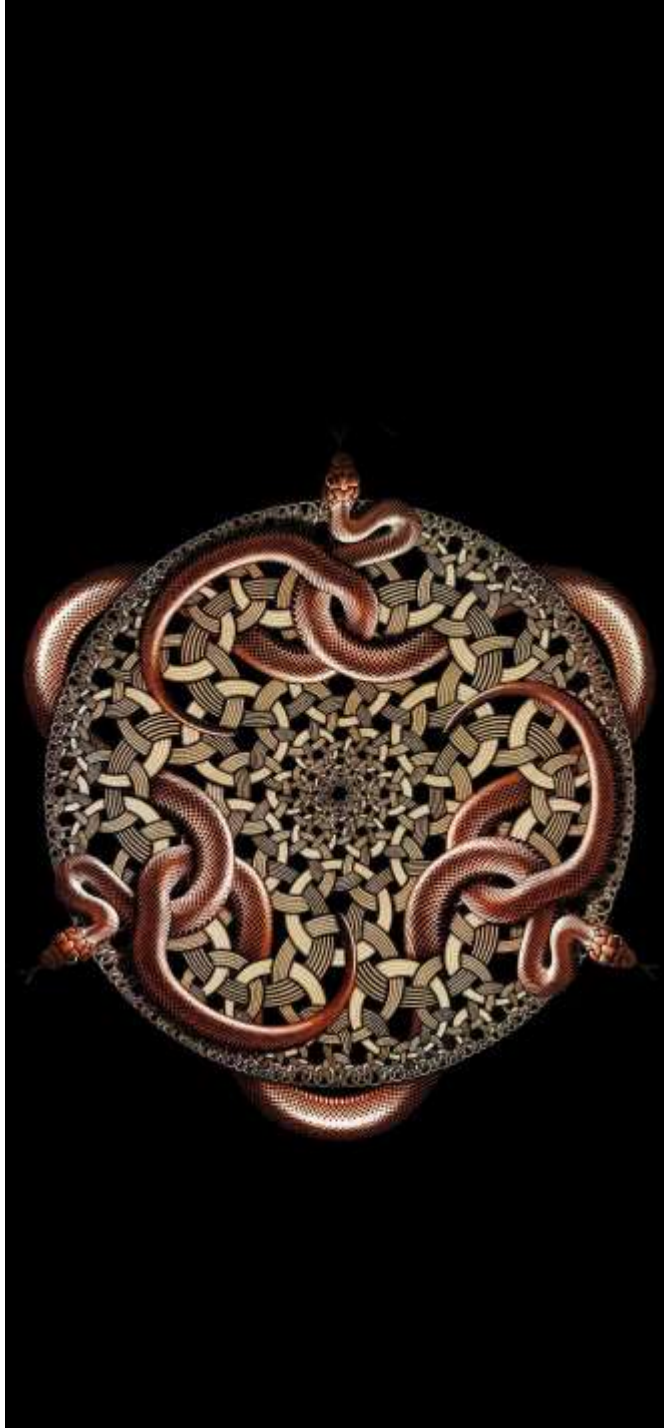
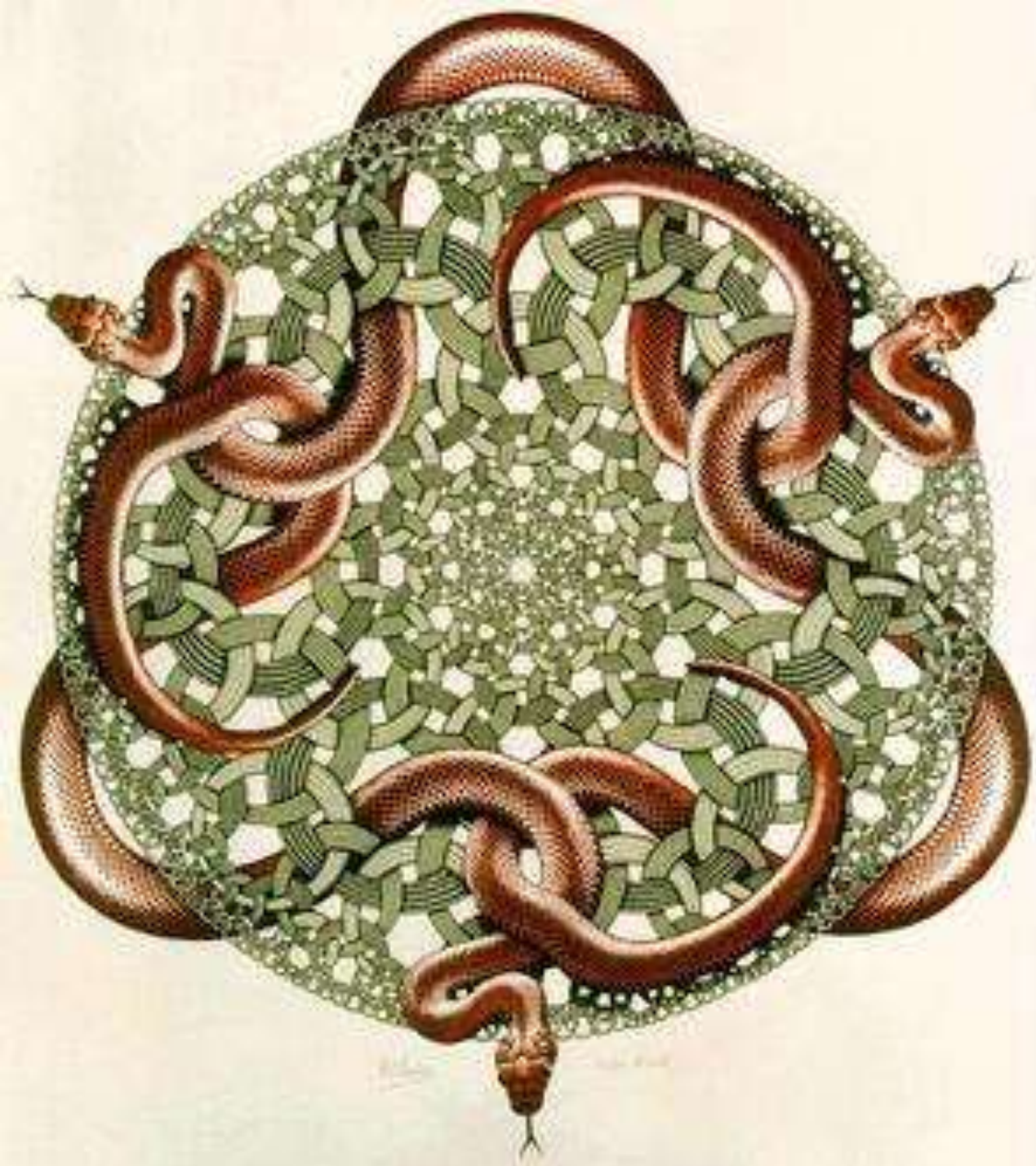
M.C. Escher

Snakes is a [woodcut](#) print by the [Dutch](#) artist [M. C. Escher](#). The work was first printed in July 1969, and was Escher's last print before his death.^[1]

Snakes depicts a disc made up of interlocking circles that grow progressively smaller towards the center and towards the edge. There are three snakes laced through the edge of the disc. The image is printed in three colours: green, brown and black. The use of snakes and the color palette of this composition recalls an earlier woodcut by the artist, *Möbius Strip I* (1960).^[2]

The print has [rotational symmetry](#) of order [3](#), comprising a single wedge-shaped image repeated three times in a circle. This means that it was printed from three blocks that were rotated on a pin to make three impressions each. Close inspection reveals the central mark left by the pin.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cjU5LQgu7M&t=451s>



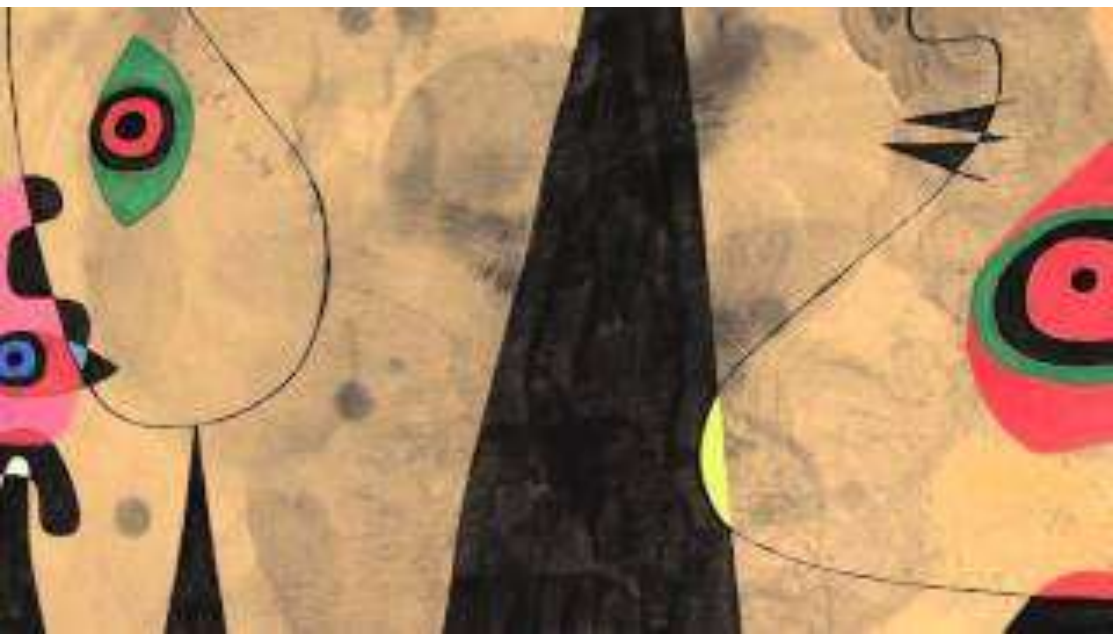
Joan Miró's 'Le serpent à coquelicots'

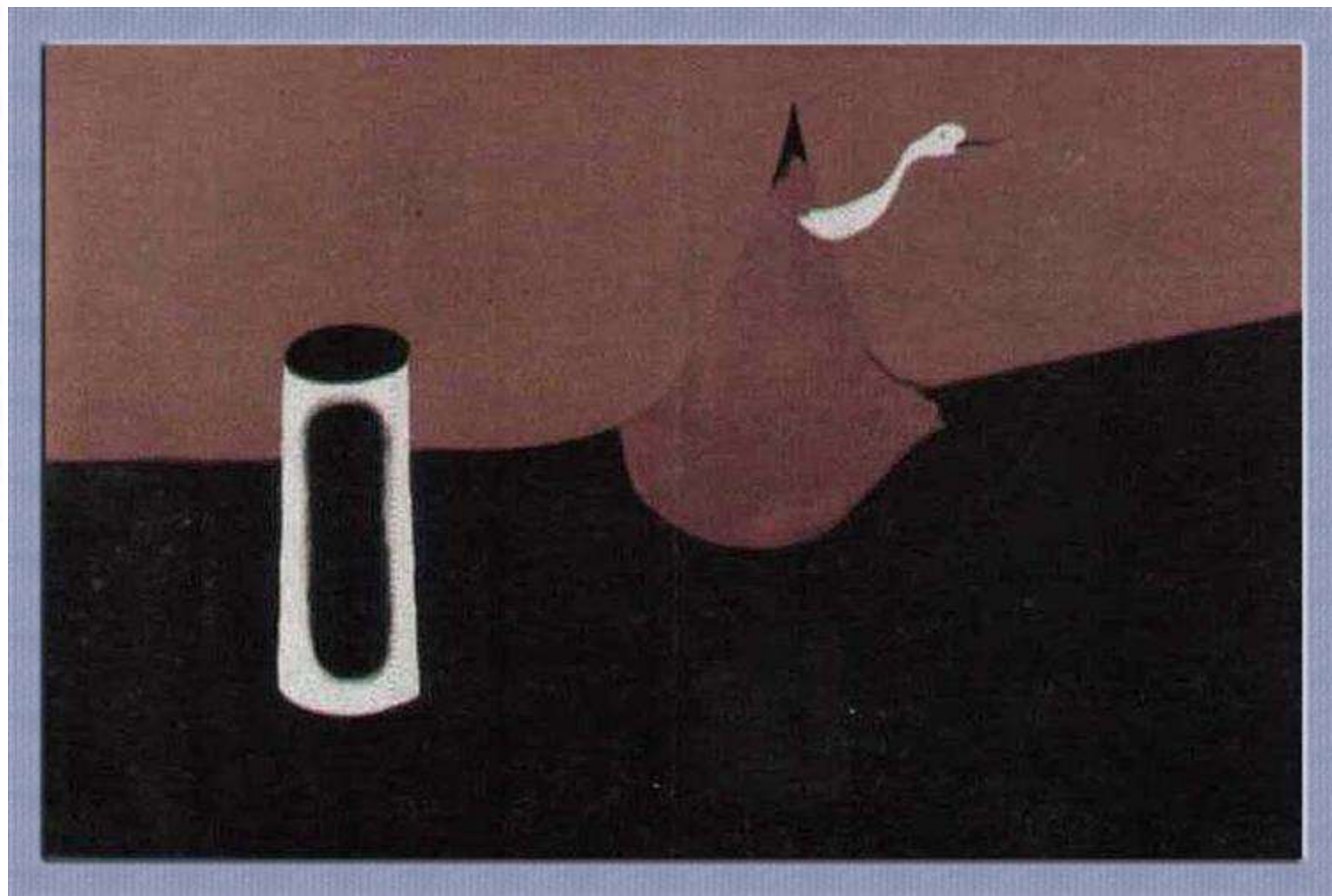
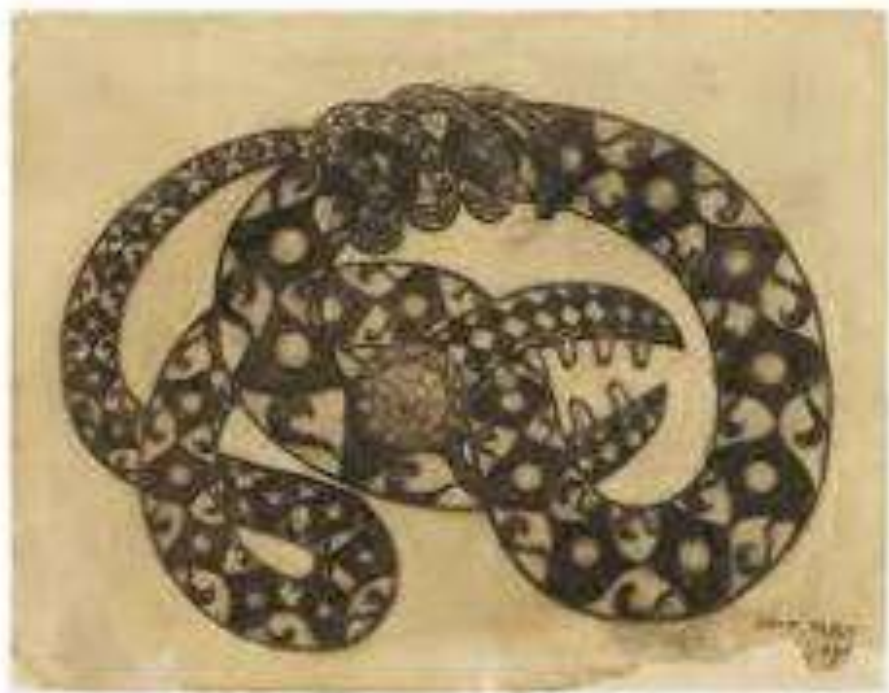
Joan Miro.

Snake with Poppies Moving on a Field of Violets Peopled with Lizards in Mourning. 1947

(oil, mixed media on board)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjETBkS46x4>





Calder--Snake and the Cross

One of the many mobiles at Calder: Hypermobility at the Whitney Museum, a kinetic form of sculpture in which carefully balanced components manifest their own unique systems of movement.

<https://calder.org/works/panel-frame/snake-and-the-cross-1936/>

Snake on Arch

<https://www.purchase.edu/live/profiles/4159-snake-on-arch-1944-by-alexander-calder>



Snake on Arch



<https://www.purchase.edu/live/profiles/4159-snake-on-arch-1944-by-alexander-calder>





Calder





Meret Oppenheim—The Secret of Vegetation

Freud got wrong, according to Meret Oppenheim.

In the 1970s [#MeretOppenheim](#) began to give interviews and speak publicly more frequently, expressing original ideas about gender that were informed by her struggles and achievements as an artist.

“A great work of literature, art, music, philosophy is always the product of a whole person, and every person is both male and female,” she asserted in 1975—a theoretical proposition inspired by the writings of the psychoanalyst Carl Jung.

While Oppenheim embraced Jung’s psychoanalytic theories, she rejected those of Sigmund Freud, including his interpretation of the serpent as a phallic symbol in dreams and mythologies.

“Freud misinterpreted the snake, namely from the patriarchal point of view,” she told one interviewer. For the artist’s part, she associated the snake with women’s agency and the pursuit of knowledge. The symbol appears as a recurring motif in her work, including in this painting.

- <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CkdqwsbjeyF/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qjyK7lyq2r4>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwJZGPHwU78>



José Dolores López

José Dolores López was a **skilled carpenter and furniture maker**. Initially, he created painted domestic furnishings based on popular and imported Mexican furniture styles for his neighbors and friends. He was also skilled at creating delicate filigree silver jewelry common at the end of the nineteenth century.

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Go2G0N6W-vo>



Bill Flowers: The Snake Artist

Bill Flowers (born in 1963, in [Tasmania](#), Australia) an Australian painter, printmaker, cartoonist, animator & snake wrangler who lives in Ulverstone, Tasmania. The [Lowbrow](#) artworks of Flowers consist of wildlife based works and cartoon animations. Flowers was a figure in the Australian comic art scene of the 1990s. Flowers created 'The Cat' for Southern Aurora Comics and 'Father Rice the fearless vampire slayer' The Father Rice comics went on to be short films for the Off Planet Films '[Drakenstien](#)' and '[Albino Santa Cop](#)'.^{[1][2]}

His paintings include subjects such as snakes, Tasmanian Devils, and other predators, often getting close to his subjects in the wild.^[4]

In December 2010 Flowers exhibited a painting that caused local controversy among church leaders in Tasmania, as it depicted Tasmanian devils posed as the famous [last supper](#) painting. The title of the painting was "I hope this is not their last supper" and was meant to be an environmental statement about the endangered Tasmanian devil population.^[5]

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rw8NeEdy4kM&t=274s>













Huang Yong Ping

Huáng Yǒng Pīng (Chinese: 黄永砗; February 18, 1954 – October 20, 2019) was a Chinese-French contemporary artist and **one of the most well known Chinese avant-garde artists of his time**. Born in Xiamen, he was recognized as the most controversial and provocative artist of the Chinese art scene of the 1980s.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Eja4b-rCX8>

Assignment Suggestions...

- Create a serpentine artwork
- Create a tribute to Medusa, the ouroboros, or the double-headed serpent
- Create a curvilinear pattern