

Lair of the Sea Serpent

In this gallery can you find an evil genie, the dangerous sphinx, nasty water nymphs, and the deadly Medusa? Vedder's *Lair of the Sea Serpent* also pictures a monster—one that appears in stories from all over the world: ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and even medieval Norse and Celtic legends. In this painting, we see a serpent—sometimes called a "worm" (Celtic) or "dragon" (Greek)—in its lair or home on the seacoast. In other tales, the setting may be a river or a well, a marsh, or bog. In stories about these monsters, they are usually destroyed through clever tricks or courageous battle, as in the most famous example of St. George and the dragon (a serpent that came from a lake). There is sometimes more to the story, even after the monster is vanquished.

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Elihu Vedder, *Lair of the Sea Serpent*, 1864, oil on canvas, 21 ¾ x 36 ½ in., Bequest of Thomas Gold Appleton. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with permission, 2019. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All rights reserved

A common symbol that reaches back to ancient times is that of a snake biting its own tail. It represents the cycle of life, death, and re-birth, as in the days of the week and the seasons of the year—dawn brings a new day, and spring brings a new year. The lesson in these stories? Conquering the monster and triumphing over evil may be a necessary part of life, making the journey even more momentous.

This silver pitcher shows an episode from Odysseus' voyage home after the Trojan War. Here, Odysseus and his men cleverly trick the cyclops Polyphemus and escape captivity. The 10-year-long journey makes Odysseus' return at times doubtful with ordeals that threaten not only his homecoming, but also his life.

Can you find Aeneas in the painting shown on the right (on view in the gallery upstairs)? In this scene, Aeneas, like Odysseus, is off the course of his destiny, founding the city of Rome.

Support provided by Art Bridges



Rogier van der Weyden, *Saint George and the Dragon*, 1432-35, National Gallery of Art



Ouroboros drawing from a late medieval Byzantine Greek alchemical manuscript.



Pitcher and Tray, Gorham Manufacturing Company, 1893, silver, 16 1/4 x 12 in., 2002.5.a-b



Joshua Shaw, *Dido and Aeneas Going to the Hunt*, 1831, oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 49 1/4 x 4 in., Museum Purchase, 60.197