

## ***Mythic Creatures: Dragons, Unicorns, and Mermaids***

by Eric Siegel

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*The peculiar quality of the joy in successful Fantasy can thus be explained as a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth. It is not only a consolation for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, "Is it true?"* J.R.R. Tolkien

Upon entering ***Mythic Creatures: Dragons, Unicorns, and Mermaids*** at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) visitors encounter a 15 foot sculpture (see figure 1) of a dragon accompanied by two quotations, one by a Chinese scholar and the second by J.R.R. Tolkien. Each addresses the culture of the dragon from his own perspective. As I was entering the exhibition, a father asked his toddler son: "Is that a Chinese or a Western Dragon?" Without a moment's hesitation, the boy answered "Western," as if any idiot could see that, and moved along excitedly to the next exhibit. As Tolkien, a professor of philology at Oxford, suggested, there is a joy in glimpsing the underlying reality of fantastic creatures and beasts.

Clearly, AMNH has tapped into a cultural engagement with mythic beasts that enralls both young and old while attracting an extraordinarily diverse audience. Just as clearly, the Museum is taking a significant risk with the public perception of its core mission as a scientific institution by developing and traveling an exhibition about imaginary beasts. It was not lost on museum professionals that AMNH opened an exhibition featuring fantastic animals at the same time as the Creation Museum in Kentucky opened a fantasy museum featuring anatomically correct dinosaurs (cavorting with similarly correct human beings.)

My strong impression is that the Museum has

handled this difficult juggling act masterfully in this fascinating and enjoyable exhibition. By combining the Museum's uniquely broad curatorial expertise with an impresario flair for the popular, the Museum has produced a series of cultural/scientific exhibitions such as ***Gold, Diamonds, Totems to Turquoise, Chocolate, Darwin, and Einstein*** and now ***Mythic Creatures***. These suggest an important new direction for the future of museum exhibitions, challenging us to integrate science, culture, creativity, imagination, and even commerce as central to the human experience. While not all of these exhibitions are equally successful (the ***Totems to Turquoise*** exhibition felt like a prelude to the gift shop) they all integrate the intellectual tools of art, history, and cultural anthropology to illuminate science for a diverse public.

It is no coincidence that these ambitious exhibitions were designed by the Museum's in-house team, led by AMNH paleontologist Mark Norrell and anthropologist Laura Kendall. As much as there is to admire about Ralph Applebaum's work in institutions throughout the world, the exhibitions his office designed for AMNH in the past decade are not nearly as successful or challenging as the recent exhibitions designed by the Museum's staff. It is a credit to the Museum's administration that they have built a world class in-house design team, and have developed an ambitious exhibition program that keeps the team working and challenged.

### **Walkthrough**

The exhibition is structured in four sections that are quite readily identified, Creatures of the Water, of the Sea, of the Air, and a separate section for Dragons. This structure is refreshingly visitor-centric, as one could



Figure 1. Fifteen foot dragon ©D. Finnin/AMNH.

readily imagine curators organizing the work geographically, historically, or anatomically. It is not a very large exhibition. In fact that is one of my few complaints; compared to most “blockbuster” exhibitions, it is quite modest in size, probably about 5,000 square feet, with an additional 1,500 square feet for the inevitable gift shop.

The galleries are dimly lit with pink, red, and brown theatrical highlights. Text panels are very legible, with high contrast white on brown and serif fonts. Dramatic artifacts and models are effectively highlighted within the dim ambient light, though the effect can be a little odd as a little girl loudly and happily proclaimed: “The Unicorn is pink!” (see figure 2)

Each section has several examples of historical documentation of an imaginary creature that reflects the social context of the group that conjured them up. Original documentation shows how sailors imagined krakens or mermaids, explorers evoked griffins from inexplicable fossils, and other beings were drawn from obscure cultural sources. In many instances the designers paired scientific artifacts and images to these imaginative stories with speculative interpretive text suggesting the relationship between the artifact and the myth. But this pattern does not become overbearing

by repetition, as it is enlivened by fascinating sidebars, such as the adaptation of mermaids into popular West African culture and art. Four beautiful paintings by contemporary African artists depict African mermaids (see figure 3) who have Caucasian features and are bedecked with rings and wristwatches that mark the mermaid as “foreign.” However, each mermaid is entwined in a water snake, an African water spirit, making the mermaid image familiar.

The centerpieces of each section are large sculptures either cast from some sort of plastic for the exhibition, or made with realistic looking fur and feathers. These serve as a visual focus for each section, and also work as families orient themselves around the area. Typically, a family would rush to the unicorn, the dragon, or a series of large extinct animals that the curators speculated formed the basis of some imaginary beast. An impressive 10 foot high Aepyornis, an extinct bird that is the largest that ever lived, also features a 2-gallon egg. Like AMNH’s wonder-inducing dioramas, these pieces are marvels of craft and science.

Compared to science center exhibitions, *Mythic Creatures* incorporates only a few interactive, hands-on exhibits. The few that are included seem like afterthoughts. For example, a pair of hand-cranked plastic models tried

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Figure 2. Dramatic lighting with some surprising effects. ©D. Finnin/AMNH.

unsuccessfully to convey how dolphins or other sea creatures swimming through the waves might be seen as a monstrous sea creature. While I admired the low-tech quality of the interactives, the AMNH exhibition team could use a good dose of interactive exhibit expertise as the hands-on experiences are not up to the extraordinary quality of the rest of the exhibition.

Given how inviting the use of media is for the topic at hand, the designers incorporated relatively little video and no computer kiosks that I can recall. I watched an informative but dryly presented talking head-style video with an anthropologist describing the African mermaids, and noticed out of the corner of my eye some video with Japanese animation featuring imaginary beasts.

The exhibition was richly supported by beautiful and thought provoking objects from anthropological and paleontological collections at the museum and elsewhere. Perhaps my favorite was a dwarf elephant skull from Sicily, which the curators' speculated might have been the source of the myth of the Cyclops (see figure 4). But many visitors were drawn to the ornate Chinese and Korean costumes decorated with dragons and to medieval texts of maps and

fantastic beasts.

#### **Audience and Pedagogy**

Near the entrance to *Mythic Creatures*, I interrupted a group of college-age explainers talking among themselves. They were unanimous that the exhibition was tremendously popular with families and camp groups, and that the quality of the visitors' experience was very high as evinced by their engagement and questions. When I asked them whether they thought science classes or social studies classes would be more likely to visit in the coming school year, they hoped that both would come, as the exhibition had much to offer each.

The exhibition was agreeably crowded and bustling during the late weekday morning that I visited. The predominant groups of visitors were families with young children engaged frequently in parent-child interaction of questions and answers or just the excitement of discovery ("Look, there's a giant gorilla!"). However, there were also camp groups, individuals, and couples of all ages. The visitors were admirably attentive to the artifacts, the text, and the fantastic or lifelike centerpieces to the galleries.



Figure 3. West African Mermaid ©Eric Siegel.

The exhibition's text panels are well designed to offer parents teachable nuggets for their children. For example, the text accompanying the 15-foot high sculpted dragon at the entrance to the exhibition asked whether visitors thought the dragon wings looked like any real animal's wings (they were very bat like). All of the "rules" of layered text were employed, with higher level and more detailed messages set off by different typefaces or different size and placement of panels.

Online resources for the exhibition ([www.amnh.org/mythiccreatures](http://www.amnh.org/mythiccreatures)) are diverse and well worth browsing for general visitors. Specific guides for teachers are fairly straightforward, offering both an educators guide and the hope of a two-day institute (though dates had not been set, which is not promising). A downloadable "field guide" is a well-designed but not particularly imagination-stimulating combination of scavenger hunt and directed inquiry tool for students to use.

### Conclusion

The American Museum of Natural History is really hitting its stride as a generator of strong, diverse science/culture exhibitions. They work closely with partners including the

Field Museum, Fernbank, and others to pool curatorial expertise and to defray the costs of producing world-class traveling exhibitions. In *Mythic Creatures* the Museum has rather boldly taken on a topic which might seem trivial or pandering in less assured hands. As it turns out, they have created an audience success while maintaining the highest quality of creativity, design, and scholarship. ✨



Figure 4. Dwarf elephant skull ©D. Finnin/AMNH.