On View

A Show at the Louvre's Satellite Space Brings Together Artistic Depictions of Mythical Creatures, From Lion-Headed Eagles to Unicorns. See Them Here

More than 200 objects on view at Louvre-Lens tell a cross-cultural history that ranges from antiquity to the present day.

Jo Lawson-Tancred September 27, 2021

Hybrid Creatures, Lion-Headed Nightmare Eagles in Jade, Photo courtesy Artnet, © RMN-Grand Palais

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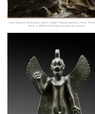
Jade Sphinx Bag (Mesoamerica), Photo, Christian Ingrand, © Musée du Parfum

Monster Bowl, Photo courtesy Artnet, Photo, © Kunstkammer der Universitäten Jena und Halle



Mythical Creatures Carved in Jade, Photo courtesy Artnet, Photo, © Musée du Parfum

The exhibition aren't been visitors to the Musée du Louvre, but Louvre-Lens, the satellite space located in the former mining town of Lens, in the northern coal subdivision. It turns out that the wild creatures of fantastic artists' and artisans' imaginations have been a cross-cultural phenomenon, and have plenty in common with the science fiction and crime fiction genres that we so popular today.

The exhibition is on view at Louvre-Lens 99 Rue Paul Bert, 62300 Lens, France, from September 27, 2021 through January 17, 2022.

Promotion promoting from the exhibition banner

Lion Carpet, Dog Effect (1973), Photo, Christian Ingrand, © Musée du Parfum

Mexican Bowl, Photo courtesy Artnet, Photo, © Kunstkammer der Universitäten Jena und Halle

Mythical Creatures Carved in Jade, Photo courtesy Artnet, Photo, © Musée du Parfum

Figures of the Mythical Mesoamerican Creatures, Photo courtesy Artnet, © Musée du Quai Branly, Jean Nelis photo, Photo

Bird Clothes, Display (2010-18), Photo courtesy of the artist and Nathalie Obadia Galerie Paris, © Courtesy of Nathalie Obadia Galerie Paris

Ceramic Bowl with Lion-Headed Eagle, Photo courtesy Artnet, Photo, © Kunstkammer der Universitäten Jena und Halle

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Thomas Gordon's Jewish Grotesque jug (1600), Photo, © Queens Jewish Library and Jewish Museum of London, Photo, 2021

Tapestry Bestiary, "The Unicorn in Captivity" (c. 1500), Photo, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, © Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Photo

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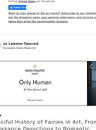

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Art History

A Fanciful History of Fairies in Art, From Renaissance Depictions to Romantic Shakespearean Visions

We trace these magical, miniature beings through centuries of art and culture.

Kelly White, September 26, 2021

Frederick Turner, Oberon, Titania and Puck with Fairies Dancing (c. 1785), Courtesy of Tate Tate

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Though fairies have evolved in so called pagan cultures for thousands of years, they are a fixture in Christianity' belief. Fairies have several different origins, but they are most commonly understood as fallen angels, or elementals, or fallenes, usual representations begin to change from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Shakespeare's Puck, from the bard's popular, delicate Shakespeare's comedy play "A Midsummer Night's Dream" which was written around 1595—particularly popularized the image of fairies as tiny, winged, and mischievous. Puck is the character's famously mischief-filled King Oberon and Queen Titania, along with Puck, and a legion of other fairies, whose individual personalities are mischievous, playful, and powerful.

The popular play had a long lasting influence on artists, and artist the Victorian era would experience a true fury for these winged beings. Artists like Richard Dadd, Joseph Noel Paton, and Arthur Rackham in turn to fairies as a tool for drama or otherworldly experiences. Fairies have also been a tool for artists to explore ideas of gender. Where Blake's watercolor Oberon, Titania, and Puck with Fairies Dancing (1786) shows a fairy queen and her consort, Shakespeare's play when the leading Oberon and Titania quickly reconcile. Puck plays a celebratory lead and the fairies World. Contrast, Shakespeare's Titania and Oberon, Puck, and the fairies present in plenty almost become goners, with Frazer poses in their fact.

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From 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' but Closer a Better Fiction, Shakespeare's Fairies Are Fantastic Beasts, Too

Puck's very name stems directly from the fairies in folklore. Through Shakespeare's Puck, fairies have been a fixture in popular culture. From "A Midsummer Night's Dream" but closer a better fiction, Shakespeare's fairies are fantastic beasts, too. Puck's very name stems directly from the fairies in folklore. Through Queen Titania, leading

her to fall in love with Bottom, a weaver whose head has been transformed into that of a donkey. Here, Titania's attendant fairies gather around clad in contemporaneous 18th-century attire. Fuseli added other peculiar attributes, including a woman with a gnome-like figure on a string on the right, embodying the feminine's victory over the masculine, along with doll-like children—the creations of witches—on the right. Fuseli also took an interest in fairies from other Shakespeare plays, painting Queen Mab, another fairy queen, who is mentioned in *Romeo and Juliet* as "the fairies' midwife."

Richard Dadd and the Fraught Origins of the Fairy Genre

Richard Dadd, *Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke* (1855–1864). Collection of the Tate.

Fairy paintings as a genre originate largely in the work of the troubled British artist Richard Dadd (1817–86). Born in Kent, Dadd was a preternaturally talented artist even as a child, heading to London to attend the Royal Academy of Art at age 17. Dadd had early successes, but when his mental health suffered, he was sent back to Kent to recover. Believed to have experienced delusions, Dadd would later be admitted to Bethlehem psychiatric facility, and later Broadmoor Hospital. In these institutions, and under the care of progressive doctors, Dadd was encouraged to paint, and his works often imagined intricate fairy worlds. His most famous painting, *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*, he returned to again and again over the course of a decade between 1855 and 1864.

Dadd had an incredible talent for detail, creating highly elaborate miniature scenes in such works as *Titania Sleeping* (1841) and *Contradiction: Oberon and Titania* (1858). These images were widely influential to British artists in the decades that followed. Aside from fairy paintings, he created a number of seascapes, portraits, and more. Many of his paintings are on view at Broadmoor to this day—and though he is quoted predominantly by visual artists, Freddie Mercury's 1974 song "The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke" recollects the musician's first encounter with Dadd's eponymous painting.

The Victorian Vogue for Fairies

John Anster Fitzgerald, *Fairies in a Bird's Nest* (ca. 1860). Collection of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco.

A flight of fairy fever swept through the U.K., inspired in part by Dadd's paintings, lasting from the late 19th into the early 20th century. The Victorians were fascinated by ideas of the paranormal, and while depictions of fairies were rooted in mythology, theater, and folklore, this seemingly delightful preoccupation was in fact a reaction to the social travails of the era.

Artists including Joseph Noel Paton, Edwin Landseer, John Anster Fitzgerald, and Sophie Gengembre Anderson offered images celebrating the hidden magic of idyllic, untouched landscapes, and tapped cultural unease at the dawn of industrialization. Meanwhile, as an era of Victorian puritanism shifted British social norms, the hedonistic world of fairies offered a reprieve for artists and viewers alike. Impish and amoral, fairies of the Victorian era are often seen indulging in pleasures at other's expense. In Fitzgerald's painting, *Fairies in a Bird's Nest* (ca. 1860), fairies languish romantically in a nest but have seemingly shoved out a bird's egg to do so. Below them, the egg is devoured by goblins. Other times, Victorian-era fairy paintings hint at man-made indulgences; Fitzgerald's painting titles, including *The Pipe Dream* and *The Captive Dreamer*, have led many to think the artist frequented the era's opium dens, where laudanum was popularly consumed.

Photographic Evidence of Fairies? The Cottingley Controversy

The first of the Cottingley Fairy photographs from 1917, taken by Elsie Wright and showing Frances Griffiths ringed by "fairies."

Could fairies be real? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was among the many convinced of their existence by a series of five photographs taken between 1917 and 1920 by two young cousins, Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths, who lived in Cottingley, England.

The photographs pictured the young cousins, who were 9 and 16 years old in the earliest images, surrounded by the diminutive beings in the woods near their home. Elsie, who had been raised in South Africa, enclosed a print of one of the photographs in a letter to a friend in 1918, writing, "It is funny, I never used to see them in Africa. It must be too hot for them there." In 1919, the photographs gained the attention of Edward Gardner, a leading theosophist, after Elsie's mother began attending meetings and sharing the images. Gardner sent the photographic negatives to a photography expert by the name of Harold Snelling to validate. Snelling corroborated that the negatives were genuine. Kodak was then enlisted into the investigation, and the company agreed that the images showed no signs of staging.

The images would cause their biggest hubbub the following year, in 1920, when Doyle, who was a spiritualist, published the photographs to illustrate a 1920 article on fairies he wrote for *The Strand Magazine*. Doyle believed the images to be factual evidence of psychic and paranormal phenomena. While some readers agreed, others argued that the images were a hoax. Though the cousins maintained that the photographs were real for many years, in 1983, Elsie and Frances admitted in an article that they'd staged the images—drawing the fairies and supporting them on hatpins—but maintained that they had indeed seen fairies on many occasions.

Contemporary Visions of Spritely Beings

Inka Essenhigh, *Rave Scene* (2022). Courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery.

While the popular fascination with fairies has waxed and waned over the decades, these petite pixies never fully vanish from the painted world, and a number of contemporary artists incorporate them into their visual lexicons. Artist Inka Essenghigh's recent exhibition at New York's Miles McEnery was replete with luscious, oversized flowers and yes, convivial circles of faires. Kiki Smith, whose works often mine the dark sides of fairytales, has alluded to the more sinister sides of fairy beings too, in works like *Fairy Circles* (1998), which pictures two witchy circles of bronze mushrooms, in the collection of the Broad Museum. Other artists engaging with the motif include Kate Klingbeil, Allison Katz, and the German photographer Kathrin Linkersdorff, whose current exhibition "Fairies" at Yossi Milo Gallery, explores the microcosmic world of flowers and their vast unseen—dare we say magical—systems.

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