



Stadt Ulm | Museum Ulm | Marktplatz 9 | D 89073 Ulm

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Marktplatz 9 | D 89073 Ulm  
[www.museumulm.de](http://www.museumulm.de)

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## Introduction

### FABULOUS!

#### The Lion Man & His Descendants

For thousands of years, hybrid creatures combining human and animal features have inhabited the myths, images, and imaginations of our world—from the Lion-Man of the Paleolithic era to the sphinx, minotaur, mermaid, and modern-day cyborg. They symbolize our delight in imagination, our wonder at life, and our longing for an expanded self.

Both familiar and foreign, they embody the desire to overcome boundaries: between body and mind, mortality and eternity, the human and the divine. Animals stood for strength, courage, and wisdom, attributes that became visible through their connection with humans.

Hybrid creatures have fascinated us from the ice ages through the Middle Ages to the present day.

They symbolize hopes and fears and raise questions that never lose their relevance:

Where does humanity begin? Where does Nature end? And what happens when the boundaries become blurred?

They reappear in modern art, literature, and pop culture, from science fiction to biotechnology. Our ancient idea of hybrid creatures lives on—as a reflection of our creativity and our eternal desire to be more than we are

## Sphinx:

The sphinx is one of the most fascinating hybrid creatures in art history. Its lion's body, woman's head, and wings combine strength, wisdom, and enigma. In Egypt, the sphinx appears as a protective figure of the kingdom, e.g. in the monumental Sphinx of Giza, a symbol of royal power and divine order. In Greek art, sphinxes initially appeared as a guardian figure, but later became a harbinger of doom, famous for the riddle that only Oedipus could solve. In the Renaissance and Baroque periods, this creature experienced a rebirth as a symbol of mystery, combining beauty and menace – a motif that lives on into the modern era.

## Gorgon

The Gorgons, daughters of the sea gods Phorcys and Ceto, are three sisters—Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa, the only mortal. They have snake hair and a gaze that turns people to stone. Medusa was once beautiful, but was cursed by Athena and turned into a figure of fear. Perseus killed her with the help of a reflective shield, and the winged horse Pegasus sprang from her neck. Artistically, the Gorgons symbolize protection from evil, and the power of female rage and transformation. Their image is characterized by ancient depictions on ceramics or architectural sculptures and, to this day, in painting and pop culture – a symbol of fear, strength, and transformation.

## Cyborg

Hybrid creatures in science fiction, fantasy, and transhumanism embody the removal of natural, biological boundaries. They include humanoid robots, genetically modified humans, so-called mutants, and aliens with mixed characteristics. Cyborgs unite humans and machines. They symbolize the dream of overcoming biological limitations. Implants and genetic interventions give rise to new life forms, half-humans between flesh and metal.



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Chimeras, on the other hand, are created from cells of different species – animal-human hybrids with something mythical and disturbing about them. In games and stories, we encounter them as mutants, artificial intelligences, or mythical creatures that tell of a future in which evolution and technology become one.

## Centaur

The union of the centaur with Thessalian mares gave rise to a race of wild creatures—the centaurs, half man, half horse. They combine the raw power of the animal with the spirit of humankind. They inhabit the woodsy mountains of Thessaly, far from the cities, where freedom and wildness were still one. Their impetuous nature was revealed at the wedding of King Peirithoos: intoxicated by wine, a centaur attempted to kidnap the bride – and thus unleashed the Centauromachy, the battle between human and beast. They fought with fir trees, stones, and their bare hands, as reported by Ovid and Hesiod. In art, they transformed their image: once humans with horse bodies, later noble horse figures with human torsos – symbols of untamed Nature in the face of civilization.

## Mermaids

The most famous hybrid creature of modern times is probably the mermaid, a creature with the upper body of a woman and the scaly tail of a fish. She appears in myths, folk tales, and fairy tales, as well as on ships' figureheads, coats of arms, and, of course, in art, literature, and films.

This hybrid creature has been known for centuries under various names, such as mermaid, water woman, or water spirit. Its recurring use in stories has led to a variety of representations and the attribution of various characteristics and interpretations. These can be both positive and negative: motherhood, virginity, wisdom, love, threat, and seduction. Although they rarely appear, there are also male mermaids or water spirits.

## Drolerie

Fantastic worlds and creatures populate the margins of medieval manuscripts: monkeys with bagpipes, knights battling giant snails, but also centaurs, sirens, and countless other mythical creatures. They can have symbolic meaning or provide playful, humorous commentary on the text. Often, however, the decorative illustrations have neither meaning nor reference to the text. They lead a lively life of their own, in which imagination knows no bounds.



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## Sirens

### Scylla

Sirens and Scylla embody the dangerous temptations and threats of the sea in myths and art. Depicted in Greek mythology as hybrid creatures with bird bodies and women's heads, sirens lure sailors to their doom with their beguiling song. Odysseus had his companions plug their ears with wax and tie him to the mast to resist their spell. They symbolize seductive danger between beauty and death.

Scylla, on the other hand, is a sea monster with a human upper body and six dog-headed necks that lives on a rock in a strait. She was once a beautiful maiden who was transformed into a monster by a sorceress. Scylla attacks passing ships and devours sailors, including six of Odysseus' men. She represents the destructive power of the sea and the dual nature of grace and horror.

### Harpy

In Greek mythology, the harpy appears as a winged hybrid creature with the head of a woman and the body of a bird. Once described as a beautiful figure with flowing hair, she later transforms into an eerie demon with a shrill voice. As daughters of the sea god Thaumas and Elektra, the harpies embody the wild storm winds that threaten humans and steal their food. In art and poetry, their depictions range from seductive to terrifying—symbols of the shifting forces between Nature and the underworld. Their ambivalent character lives on in modern imagination as well.

### Cynocéphale

Dog-headed creatures, known as cynocéphales, have appeared in the visual arts since ancient times as hybrid beings combining human and canine features. They embody the foreign, wild, and uncivilized attributes attributed to "the other." In Byzantine and medieval depictions, they often represent members of geographically distant, so-called "wonderful peoples" at the other end of the world, but sometimes also pagan Christians who were later converted. In the Orthodox Church, St. Christopher, the converted traveler, is often depicted with a dog's head. Hybrid creatures with animal heads also existed in ancient Egypt: the god of death, Anubis, appears with the head of a jackal or fox on a human body and is a symbol of protection and transition to the afterlife.

### The Lion Man

Half human, half lion, the Lion Man is the oldest clearly identifiable hybrid creature known to humankind. The figure is made of fossilized mammoth ivory and was carved from the tusk of a young mammoth.

Found in 1939 during excavations in the Hohlenstein-Stadel cave (Lonetal, Swabian Alb), it had shattered into over 300 fragments after 40,000 years in the ground. It was not until 1969 that the Lion Man was reassembled for the first time, and since then it has undergone an exciting history of reconstruction. The most recent reassembly took place in 2012/2013, after new excavations brought further ivory fragments to light in the cave. As a result, the figure has grown to approx. 31 cm and the right arm and many areas on the back have been added. Nevertheless, our view of it – as well as our knowledge of its use – remains incomplete.



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Depictions of hybrid creatures have existed for 40,000 years – ever since humans created art during the Ice Age. The figure of the lion man is the best-known example, unique as a sculpture. But there are also several examples of human bodies with animal heads in the wall art of this era – in French and Spanish caves and rock shelters. Sometimes they are painted or formed as reliefs, but most often they are carved into the walls. Many are much younger than the Lion Man (around 14,000 BC). They are often called magicians. Archaeologists long believed that these hybrid creatures represented shamans. The people of the Ice Age lived in close connection with nature and may have imagined human-animal beings to explain the world to themselves. Unfortunately, this cannot be proven. Why else would they depict fantasy creatures?

## Faun

## Satyr

In ancient myths, satyrs and fauns embody the two faces of nature: intoxication and tranquility. Satyrs are wild hybrid creatures with human torsos, goat legs, small horns, and horse tails. They are companions of Dionysus, the god of wine and intoxication. They embody lust, natural power, and exuberant joy of living, known for their dancing, their love of wine, and their mischievous pranks. In art, they play the flute or chase nymphs, symbolizing pleasure beyond reason and order and bringing humorous lightness to ancient satyr plays.

Fauns, on the other hand, inhabit quiet groves and springs. As peaceful nature spirits, also half-human, half-goat, they watch over fields and herds, play the flute, and whisper dreamy prophecies. While satyrs represent a wild zest for life, fauns stand for the gentle, harmonious side of nature.

## Minotaur

The Minotaur originates from Greek mythology and was born as a monstrous hybrid creature. He is the child of the love between King Minos' wife Pasiphaë and a divine bull. Locked away in an underground labyrinth designed by Daedalus, the Minotaur was sacrificed to seven young men and women from Athens every nine years. Since ancient times, the Minotaur has been a symbol of revenge and subjugation, chaos and hubris in art and poetry: depicted as a guardian in mosaics, and as a seeker between violence and knowledge in Picasso's works. Only Theseus heroically defeats the creature. Guided by Ariadne's thread, he finds his way back to freedom – a symbol of triumph over the dark side of Nature.

## Manticore

The man-eating manticore is a terrifying mythical creature that originated in the so-called Middle East. It combines the head of a human with the (sometimes winged) body of a lion. The manticore shoots arrows from its scorpion-like tail and mane and tears its prey apart with three rows of sharp teeth.

It is intelligent and capable of speech, but also strong, dangerous, and deadly. It spread throughout Europe in ancient descriptions and medieval bestiaries and lives on today in computer games, films, and fantasy books.



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## Colophon

Fabulous – The Lion Man and His Descendants

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