

Fantastic Beasts

Amazing Animals in Art

MAP DISCOVER



કુરુશી નાઈ

The animal world has always been a part of our myths and stories.

In our stories, animals often speak in human languages and behave like we do. Sometimes they have snazzy outfits, sometimes superpowers and sometimes they're altogether fantastical!

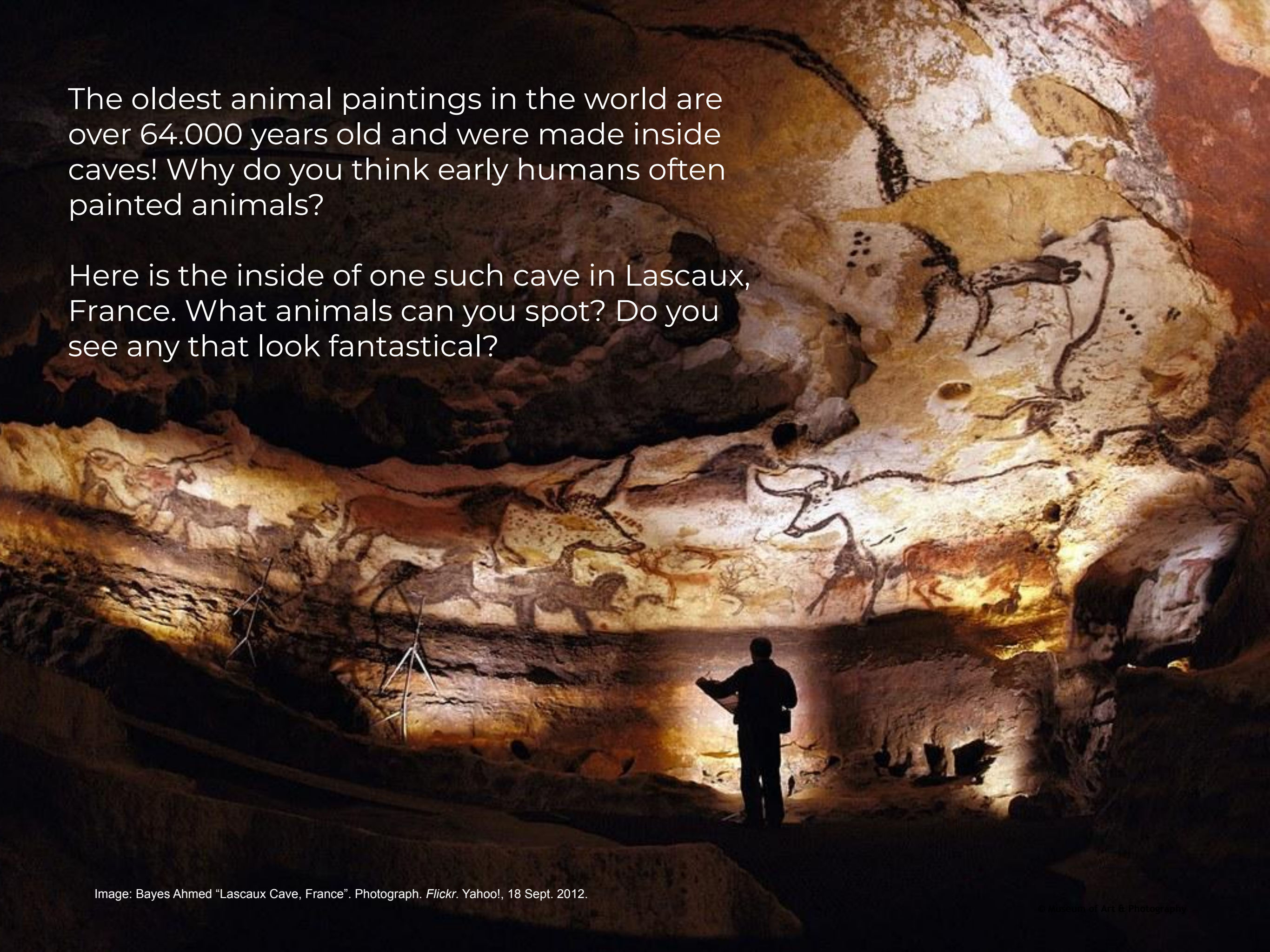
Today, let's explore this world of imaginary animals in art – from the wonderful to the weird.

What kind of superpowers do you think this fantastic creature might have?



The oldest animal paintings in the world are over 64.000 years old and were made inside caves! Why do you think early humans often painted animals?

Here is the inside of one such cave in Lascaux, France. What animals can you spot? Do you see any that look fantastical?



Here are some more cave paintings from other parts of the world.

LOOK CLOSELY.

Is there something about these animals that looks more imagined than real? Focus on individual parts of their bodies.

THINK.

Early humans didn't have the art supplies we have today. What materials do you think they might have used to make these paintings?



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LEARN MORE

Cave paintings are found all over the world. In India, the oldest known cave paintings are found in a place called Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh. These caves have many walls of paintings made by people who lived there almost 3000 years ago!

Today the Bhimbetka shelters are recognised as a World Heritage Site. You can read more about them [here](#).

What three words would you use to describe this creature to someone else?



As you've seen, human beings have a long history of experimenting with animals and their forms in art. Now here is a unique example of one such experiment.

LOOK CLOSELY.

How many animals do you see?
Is there something different about some animals? What is it?

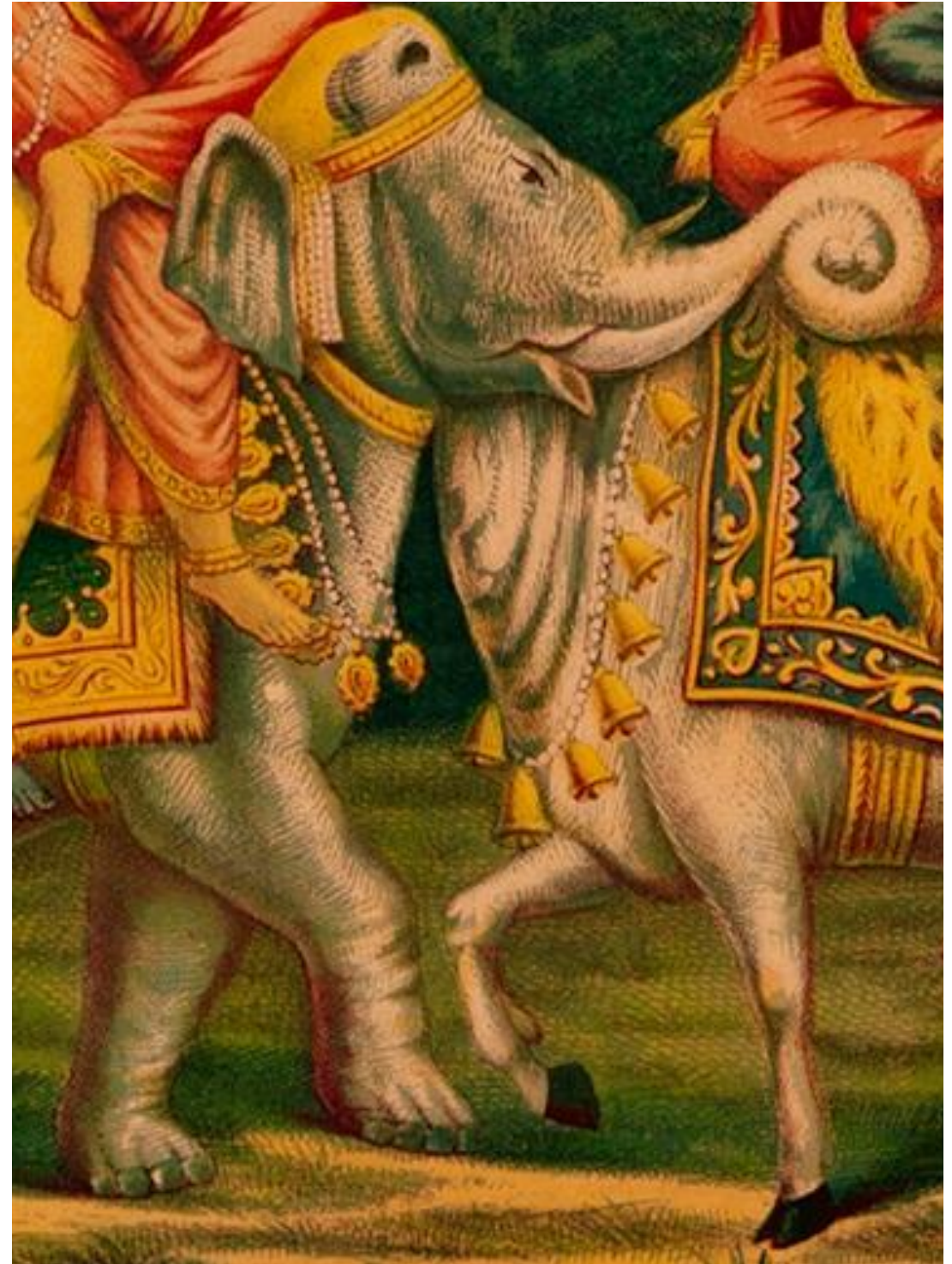
Do you recognise any of these people? What do you think is happening in the scene?



Here is a detail or zoomed-in view of the artwork. If you didn't spot it before, can you see something different about these animals now?

Hint: Try counting the number of heads you see and the number of legs – do they match?

This is an example of optical illusion in art. The artist has cleverly combined the head of two animals into one. Depending on which angle you look at it from, it can look like the head of an elephant or that of a bull. Try looking at it by tilting your head to one side first, then the other. Can you see them both?



LEARN MORE.

The artwork you just saw featured the Hindu gods Shiva-Parvati and Vishnu-Lakshmi on their mounts.

In Hindu mythology, many gods have certain animals they are associated with. These animals sometimes help the gods commute or go from one place to another, when seated upon them, so they are known as their mounts. Some of them also have special powers such as shape-shifting and flying.

Do you recognise this goddess and her mount?*

**If you don't recognise her, google Durga to learn more about her and her mount!*



IMAGINE.

If you could have a fantastic creature as your pet mount, which animal or animals would you like? What sort of powers might it have?

CREATE.

How about experimenting yourself? Can you replace one of the heads in the optical illusion you saw with one of these animals? Try making a rough sketch of the entire scene using your own illusionary animal art now!



Over time, artists continued to experiment and develop many clever techniques that led to the creation of some extraordinary creatures!

LOOK CLOSELY.

First, look at the outline of this animal – which animal do you think it is?

Now observe the face. Do you think your last guess was correct?

Pay attention to the body: what seems different? Have you seen anything like this before?

Image: The Metropolitan Museum, New York



Here is a detail or close-up view of the previous painting.

LOOK AGAIN.

What real and imaginary creatures do you see making up the face now?

Do you spot anything other than animals and birds?



Image: The Metropolitan Museum, New York

THINK.

Go back and look at the complete image again. What do you think the artist wanted to say by creating this clever painting?

IMAGINE.

Can you make a fictional story about how this creature came to be?



Sometimes in art, we see creatures that are made by combining many, many smaller figures of human beings and other animals.

These are called **composites**, and this work is an example of that.

How many animals, birds and humans can you count inside this creature?

VOCABULARY ALERT!

The word composite means something that is made of many different parts.

What is this creature carrying on its back?

CREATE.

Now try making a composite creature for yourself!

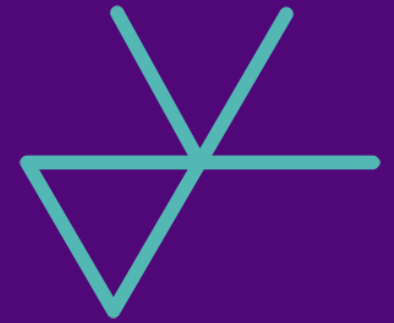


Choose your favourite animal and trace a simple outline of its body. You can use print outs and tracing paper for this, or simply copy from a photograph.

Now get inspired from the image you saw in the last slide and fill your outline with other animals, birds and human beings. Keep them densely packed and make their shapes fit into each other.



You can also experiment by giving these animals and humans a range of actions and props. That's it, your composite creature is ready!



Bonus:
Head to our **Colouring Sheet** extra and try out some more composites on those outlines!



Animals can also help us create some fantastic representations of ourselves.

For example, this is the portrait of Bisal Dev, who was once a king in Ajmer in Western India, but it isn't quite like other portraits that you may have seen before.

LOOK CLOSELY.

What looks different?

Observe his face and neck – can you see something non-human there?

Can you guess what the artist is trying to say by using this animal's features in the portrait of a king?

**Do you
think this is
a portrait of
a human
being too?**

**If so, what
can you tell
about this
person by
observing
the image?**





The last two images that you saw are examples of a **hybrid** creature.

They combine two or more different animals or birds (sometimes even humans) to create a new, completely imaginary species.

If you were to represent yourself using animals, birds and reptiles, which species would you choose and why?

Unlike the portrait of the human king that uses animal features, this is actually the portrait of a horse that has been given a human face!

Meet the Buraq – a creature from Islamic traditions.



Buraq is believed to have been a mount for Prophet Mohammed, transporting him to the heavens and back. It is often shown with a woman's face in art, because it was described as very beautiful!

CREATE.

How about creating your own magical hybrid creature using some or all of these creatures?

Think of how each of them behave and survive in nature and give your hybrid creature qualities and powers based on the real life counterparts you've chosen.

Give your fantastic beast a name as well!



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Sometimes gods are also depicted in hybrid forms. Here is a painting that shows the Hindu god Vishnu as a hybrid man-animal figure.

LOOK CLOSELY.

- What species can you spot that combine to form this figure?
- Observe the space behind the head of this fantastic creature. Are those horns? Inverted boots? Something else?
- Do you know or can you guess the story depicted here?*

Imagine if there was a speech bubble for the female figure. What do you think she is telling the man-lion?



*This is the story where Vishnu takes the form of the man-lion (nara-simha) in order to kill the *asura* Hiranyakashipu.

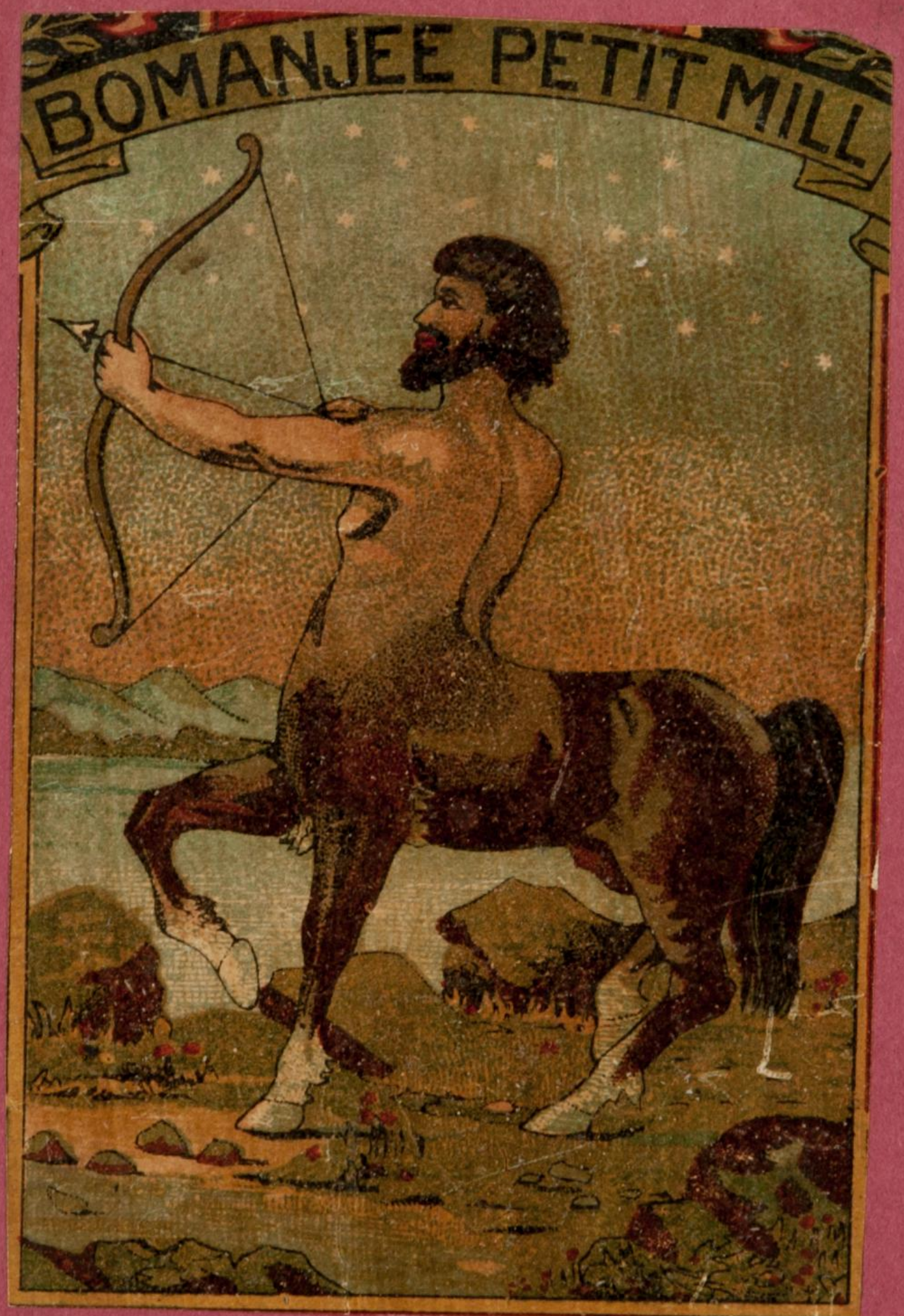
Hybrid creatures abound in myths and stories from all over the world.

Do you recognise this figure from Greek mythology?

This is a centaur – a magical being that is half-man and half-horse. Do you remember another horse-hybrid creature that you saw before? Do you recall which tradition that was from?

Greek mythology has another magical flying horse god. Can you name him?*

*Answer: Pegasus!





Fantastic creatures have not only been a part of our stories but also used as political symbols.

Meet the Gandabherunda! It was the royal emblem of the Mysore kingdom. Today, it is the state symbol of Karnataka in South India.

What about it looks fantastical?

Given a chance, what would you like to call this creature?

The Gandabherunda is believed to be super strong – so it is usually depicted carrying elephants in the beaks of both its heads!

Why do you think it may have been chosen to use it as a symbol (like a logo) of the kingdom and state?

What sounds and smells do you think you would hear and smell if you could magically enter this painting?





Do you recognise the famous imaginary animal portrayed in this label?

If you said unicorn, give yourself a pat on the back! The single horn that is characteristic of a unicorn is how we can make this guess.

DID YOU KNOW?

The unicorn is the national animal of Scotland! Do you know if any other countries have imaginary animals as their mascots?

Do you think the two animals here are friends or enemies? Why?

CREATE.

How about creating a fantastic creature logo for your school, a team or hobby club?

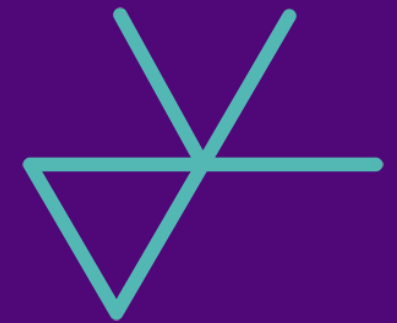


Does your school, team or club have a motto? If not, think of one now. What are the virtues and qualities that your chosen organisation believe in?

Next think of animals, birds and reptiles that would best represent the motto or qualities. For example, a lion could represent courage and a dolphin could mean friendliness.



Now it is time to make your logo. Figure out a layout combining the animals and birds that symbolise your chosen qualities. Add additional components like text, if needed, and your logo is ready!



Bonus:

Try this game with a friend from the same school, club or team and see what animals they use to represent the same qualities.



Here is another imaginary creature from the MAP collection. Do you think this is a composite animal or a hybrid? Or is it something entirely different?

CREATE.

Try creating a short story about what this creature represents and how it came to be. Head to our **Stories With Art** extra and try creating your own beast-book and more stories around fantastic animals!

**What environment or habitat do you think this creature would live in?
A forest, the sea or something else?**



Untitled, 2011
Bhuri Bai
Acrylic on canvas
H. 119 cm, W. 75 cm
PTG.0857



Undated, 2006
Nankusiya Shyam
Acrylic on canvas
H. 90 cm, W. 64 cm
PTG.0906



Gandabairunda, 20th century
Unknown Maker(s)
Oil on canvas
H. 45 cm, W. 27 cm
PTG.02124



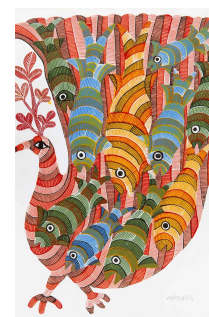
Hari Har Milan, Late 19th century
Chore Bagan Art Studio, Calcutta
Chromolithograph
H. 40.5 cm, W. 30.5 cm
POP.00104



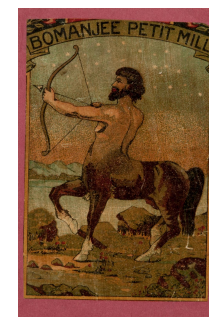
Maharaja Bisal Dev of Ajmer, c.1760
Unknown Maker(s)
Gouache on paper
PTG.01599



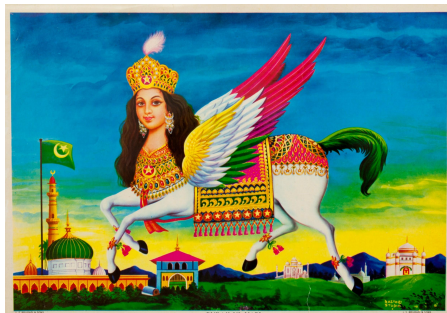
Narasimha
Unknown Maker(s)
Watercolour on paper
H. 23 cm, W. 21 cm
PTG.0518



Untitled, 1970s
Narmada Prasad Tekam
Acrylic on paper
H. 35 cm, W. 28 cm
PTG.0713



Textile label of Bomanjee Petit Mill
depicting a centaur, 19th century
H. 12.8 cm, W. 8.5 cm
Chromolithograph on paper
POP.00404



Burak-ul Nabi, 1930s
S. S. Brij Basi and Sons, Delhi
Offset Print
H. 22.3 cm, W. 32.7 cm
POP.00062



Textile label depicting a unicorn,
late 19th to early 20th century
Unknown Maker(s)
Chromolithograph on paper
H. 12.8 cm, W. 8.5 cm
POP.04439



Painting of a horse
Unknown Maker(s)
Opaque watercolour on paper
H. 10 cm, W. 15cm
PTG.01147



Sheep
Unknown maker(s)
Bronze
H. 8.5 cm, W. 3.5 cm, D. 10 cm
SCU.01274



Gandabherunda, 19th century
Unknown Maker(s)
Watercolour on paper
H. 20 cm, W. 20 cm
PTG.01355



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