

The Ancient world inspires!

Objects from the Holburne Museum's collection

The Holburne Museum has many objects which take inspiration from ancient Greek and Roman mythology and culture. Learn more about the stories behind these objects!

Ancient Greek Owl Coin

This coin is from the city of Athens and shows an owl, the sacred bird of Athene, Goddess of Wisdom and protector of the City. Looking at your 'Museum-in-a-box' you might recognise this coin?

The one in the box is a replica (a copy) of this original Greek coin.



Bust of a Roman Youth Crowned with Laurels

Many Greek and Roman portraits and sculptures show important people wearing laurel wreaths made of olive leaves. These were symbols of triumph and were awarded to winners in the ancient Olympics and Roman commanders who had won battles. This sculpture looks like it is made from bronze but it's actually made of carved marble which has been coloured to look like bronze.

Ancient Greek Pegasus Coin

This coin is estimated to have been made around 330 BC, making it over two thousand years old! Mythology tells that Pegasus was the son of Poseidon, (god of the sea) and the monster Medusa. He was born as a winged horse. According to legend, when Pegasus struck his hoof on land a water spring would burst from the earth.



Medusa Wedgwood Plaqueette



This is a profile of Medusa. Medusa was a Greek mythological creature called a Gorgon. Can you see what her hair is made of? Snakes! Mythology tells us that anyone who looked at a Gorgon would immediately turn to stone.

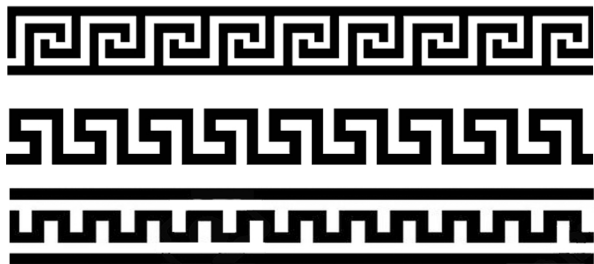
This miniature plaque is made by Wedgwood between 1780 and 1800. Wedgwood became very famous by designing vases, brooches and ceramics inspired by Ancient Greece. In the 18th century it was a very fashionable to own objects that looked like ancient Roman and Greek things - however only rich people could afford them!

Patterned Cameo Brooch



Look at the geometric pattern around the edge - it is called a Greek key pattern. Greek key patterns, also referred to as a 'meander', is a repeated line pattern. The design is made up of one long, continuous line that repeatedly folds back and forth on itself, copying the shapes made by the ancient Meander River of Asia Minor.

Here are some examples of Greek 'meander' pattern designs, that you can take inspiration from!



Siren Carving

Sirens were creatures made up of half of a beautiful human female, half bird shown in this metal carving with a pair of wings spanning behind the creature. A Siren is a creature famous in Greek mythology for luring sailors to their end by singing sweetly and tempting them into the ocean where they would be captured by the beautiful, but deadly creatures.





Satyr Wedgwood Cameo

This Wedgwood cameo shows a Satyr. In mythology a Satyr was a male 'nature' spirit with the ears and a tail of a horse, and the torso and face of a man.

The Roman's showed Satyr's with more goat-like characteristics, as you can see from the horns on the head of the creature in this cameo portrait.

Satyr Candlestick

This candlestick shows a Satyr, shown as half man, half horse in Greek mythology. Satyrs have been most often shown with the legs and horns of goats. It is thought that this candlestick was made in Italy around 1510 and is one of a pair. Beautiful objects like this would have had everyday use for wealthy people but would take clear inspiration from Greek mythology.



Patterned Celebration Cameo

In this noisy celebration scene you may be able to spot mythological creatures but also some musical instruments. At the front a Satyr holds a unique stringed instrument called Lyre, which is a small U-shaped harp with strings fixed to a bar. A Lyre was a popular choice of instrument in ancient Greece. Several of the female characters in this party are playing music too, they are shown blowing through pairs of curved horns. It also appears as if Cupid, (the god of love) is joining in, you can see him sat on a lion crashing a pair of cymbals together.



Pair of Candelabrum: Mercury and Psyche

These Candelabra were made around 1820 and show figures of Mercury and Psyche.

Mercury was known as messenger to the gods. He was able to deliver his messages to the heavens by flying using the small sets of wings on his ankles. Mythology tells of a story where Mercury collected and brought Psyche to Cupid, (the god of love) for them to be married. Psyche was a human princess that was said to be so beautiful that the goddess Venus became extremely jealous. To take revenge Venus instructed her son Cupid to make her fall in love with a hideous monster; but instead Mercury falls in love with her himself. You can see some beautiful detailed floral designs around the top of the objects, designs like this were popular in ancient Greek design.



Psyche



Mercury



A Paper Cut picture: Diana and Actaeon

Look carefully and you may recognise the story that is being told? Can you see a person with the head of a stag? This miniature picture was cut out of paper by artist Mary West in 1709. This piece tells the story of Diana and Actaeon comes from Greek mythology and has influenced artists throughout history in paintings and sculpture.

Neptune Porcelain Statue

In Greek mythology Poseidon is the god of the sea. He is known as Neptune in Roman mythology. You may spot that there is something missing from his extended hand. He is normally pictured holding a trident, but it appears that his has been lost. It is thought that these statues were some of William Holburne's most treasured objects, he was photographed with the pair of statues next to him near the end of his life.



Diana and Acteon Maiolica Dish

Made over 500 years ago (around 1495) this is one of the world's earliest maiolica dishes which tells a story.

Despite being very old it's in perfect condition and the colours haven't faded because of a special glaze made from lead and tin.

This Greek myth shows Actaeon attacked by his own hunting dogs after being turned into a stag by the goddess Diana. Can you see the centaurs (half-man, half-horse) around the rim of the dish?