

# CLASSICAL MYTHS

## PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA

Another popular hero in Greek mythology was Perseus – the son of Jupiter by a mortal woman (and actually a half-brother to Hercules). He is distinguished by the things he is wearing and holding – a winged helmet, wings on his sandals, a sword and polished shield. This shield was given to him by Minerva, goddess of wisdom. The wings on his sandals and helmet enabled him to fly.

Andromeda was the daughter of an Ethiopian king. Unfortunately her mother, the queen, was always boasting of the beauty of herself and her daughters. She was overheard by the sea nymphs – daughters of Neptune, god of the sea – who complained to their father and asked him to punish this boastful queen. Neptune sent a sea monster to terrorise the people of the country who were no longer able to go to sea in their ships or go near the water.

After praying to the gods, the king realised that he must sacrifice his most precious possession – his daughter Andromeda – to appease the monster. She was taken and chained to a rock in the sea to await her fate. The sea monster approached but just at that moment Perseus, flying through the air, spotted the princess and swooped down to rescue her.

A fierce battle took place between Perseus and the monster which ended with the death of the monster and its body sinking beneath the waves. Perseus unchained Andromeda and returned her to her parents who were watching from the shore. His reward was to marry Andromeda.

### KEY WORKS



Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1554-56



François Lemoyne, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1723

# PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA

CLASSICAL MYTHS  
PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA



**TITLE** Perseus and Andromeda  
**DATE** 1554-56  
**SIZE** 183.3 x 199.3 cm  
**MATERIALS** Oil on canvas

**ARTIST** Titian  
**DATES** 1485-1576  
**PLACE** Italy



# PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA

CLASSICAL MYTHS  
PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA



**TITLE** Perseus and Andromeda  
**DATE** 1723  
**SIZE** 183 x 149.7 cm  
**MATERIALS** Oil on canvas

**ARTIST** François Lemoyne  
**DATES** 1688-1737  
**PLACE** France

## CURATOR'S VIEW

Readers who know their Greek mythology may recognise the damsel in distress shown in this oil painting by the Venetian Renaissance artist Titian. It is Andromeda, the beautiful princess of classical legend, who was offered up in human sacrifice to appease the gods made angry by her mother's vanity. Her plight has already triggered the epic battle between the hero Perseus and the ferocious sea monster sent to devour her.

Their fight rages over the water, while the immobilised princess's vulnerable body cuts across the composition, a poignant reminder of the fragile human life at stake. Love wins out: Perseus rescues Andromeda and carries her off to Greece to reign as his queen.

But should we really associate the figure of Andromeda with the pale body Titian gave her? After all, she was the daughter of Ethiopian rulers. In his *Heroides*, the Roman mythographer Ovid specifically evoked the 'dark Andromeda', a description more in line with her parentage.

As scholars such as Elizabeth McGrath have shown, the phenomenon of 'whitewashing' — making black female figures white — is all too

common throughout the history of western art and literature. Heroines such as the Queen of Sheba, Cleopatra, and, of course, Andromeda have been fundamentally altered, their cultural ties and lineage denied in an effort to adhere to standards conflating whiteness and beauty. In the Old Testament, the Queen of Sheba, in the original Hebrew, declares proudly: 'I am black and beautiful.' But by the 4th-century Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible, her statement had been diminished to: 'I am black but beautiful.'

If this same erasure of identity is visible in François Lemoyne's *Perseus and Andromeda* of 1723, also at the Wallace Collection, viewers may at least meet the true 'dark Andromeda' of Ovidian lore in Bernard Picart's etching of 1731, housed at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. With her skin colour in contrast to the whiteness of the rock and the gulls around her, this Andromeda is clearly a black woman. With her flowing hair and sensuous pose, she is also unmistakably the beautiful princess of legend.

**Dr Yuriko Jackall**  
**Head of Curatorial & Curator of French Paintings**

*This text appeared in The Guardian newspaper, and is a revised and expanded version of a social media post that appeared on the Wallace Collection's platforms on 30 October 2020 as part of #WallaceConnections, a new initiative aiming to explore the often hidden narratives that connect the museum's holdings to broader social and cultural issues.*



Detail from Bernard Picart (workshop of), after Bernard Picart, *Perseus en Andromeda*, 1731. Image: Rijksmuseum

## THE ARTISTS

### Titian

Titian was one of the greatest and most famous of the Venetian painters. Although much of his early work was as official painter to the Republic of Venice, he later travelled widely in Europe and painted portraits of emperors and popes as well as religious and mythological scenes. Now his work can be seen in leading galleries all over the world. His *Perseus and Andromeda* is one of a famous series of paintings based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, commissioned by Philip II of Spain, and known as the *Poesie*.

### François Lemoyne

Lemoyne was one of the leading French painters of his generation. Working for the royal family, he painted the great ceiling at Versailles depicting *The Apotheosis of Hercules*. His enormous influence on the later course of French painting was based on the quality of his works and also his teaching; Boucher was among his pupils.

## DISCUSS



- Can you work out the story told in these paintings?
- How do you think that Perseus is able to fly?
- People in ancient times believed that monsters existed in far-away lands and oceans. Why do you think this was? Perhaps they had heard stories about strange beasts but were unable to travel and see them for themselves. Do the monsters in the paintings remind you of any real animals?
- The paintings tell the same story but are by two different artists. What are the main differences and which do you prefer?

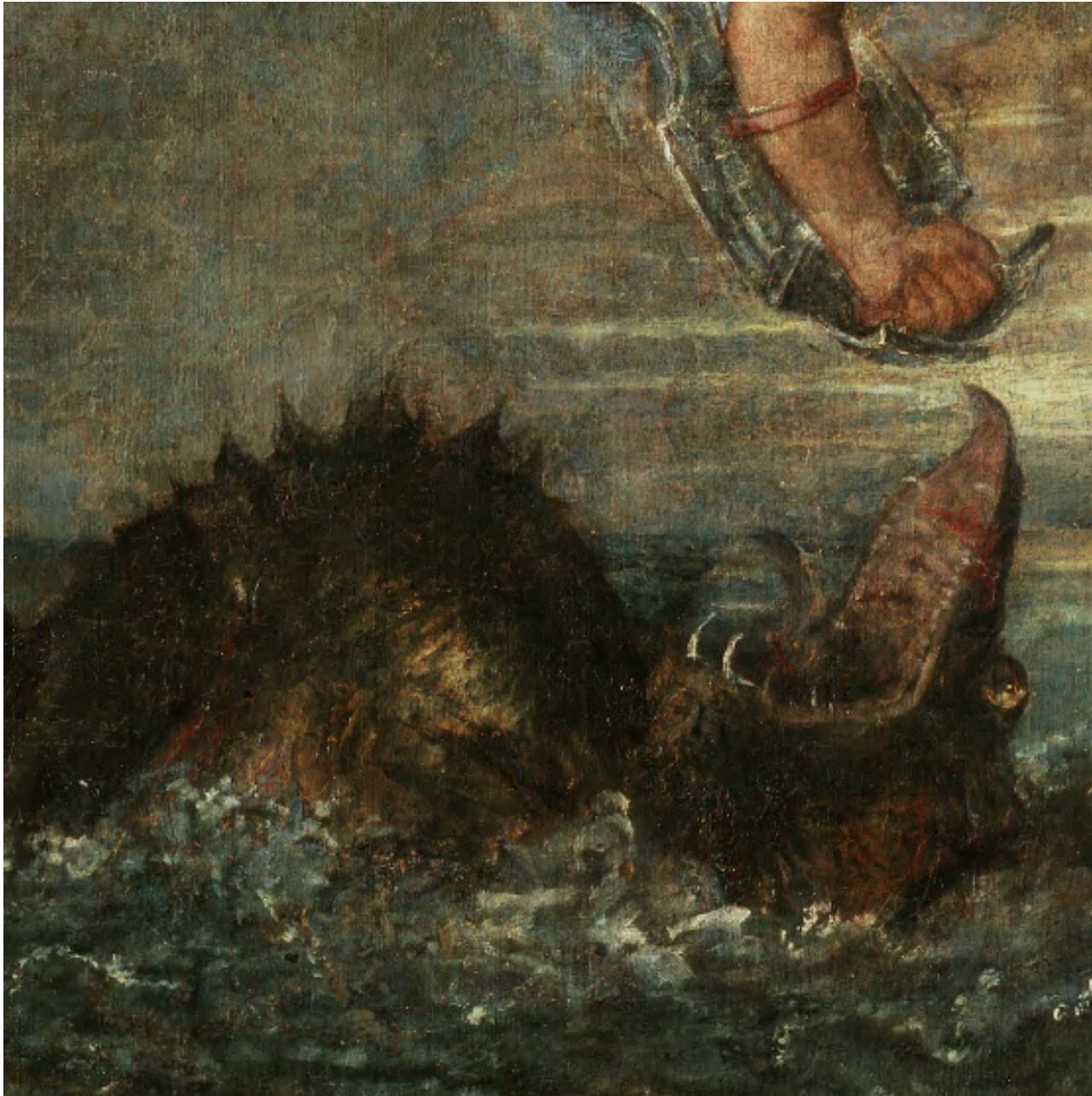
## ACTIVITIES



- Design a fearsome sea or land monster, creating a portrait of the creature, or a mask of its face.
- As a class or in groups, act out the story of Perseus and Andromeda. There can be a large cast of citizens, courtiers and sea nymphs, as well as the main characters.
- Make a list of things that are the same and then a list of things that are different in each painting. Write a newspaper review comparing the two and explaining which you prefer and why.
- When some of the people in the Greek myths died, the gods took them up into the heavens and turned them into constellations of stars. Have a look at a map of the night sky and find the constellations called Perseus and Andromeda. Select some other constellations or planets and research their stories. Many of these names were given thousands of years ago by Greek people. Which contemporary people might be worthy of having a constellation named after them, and how would their arrangement of stars look?



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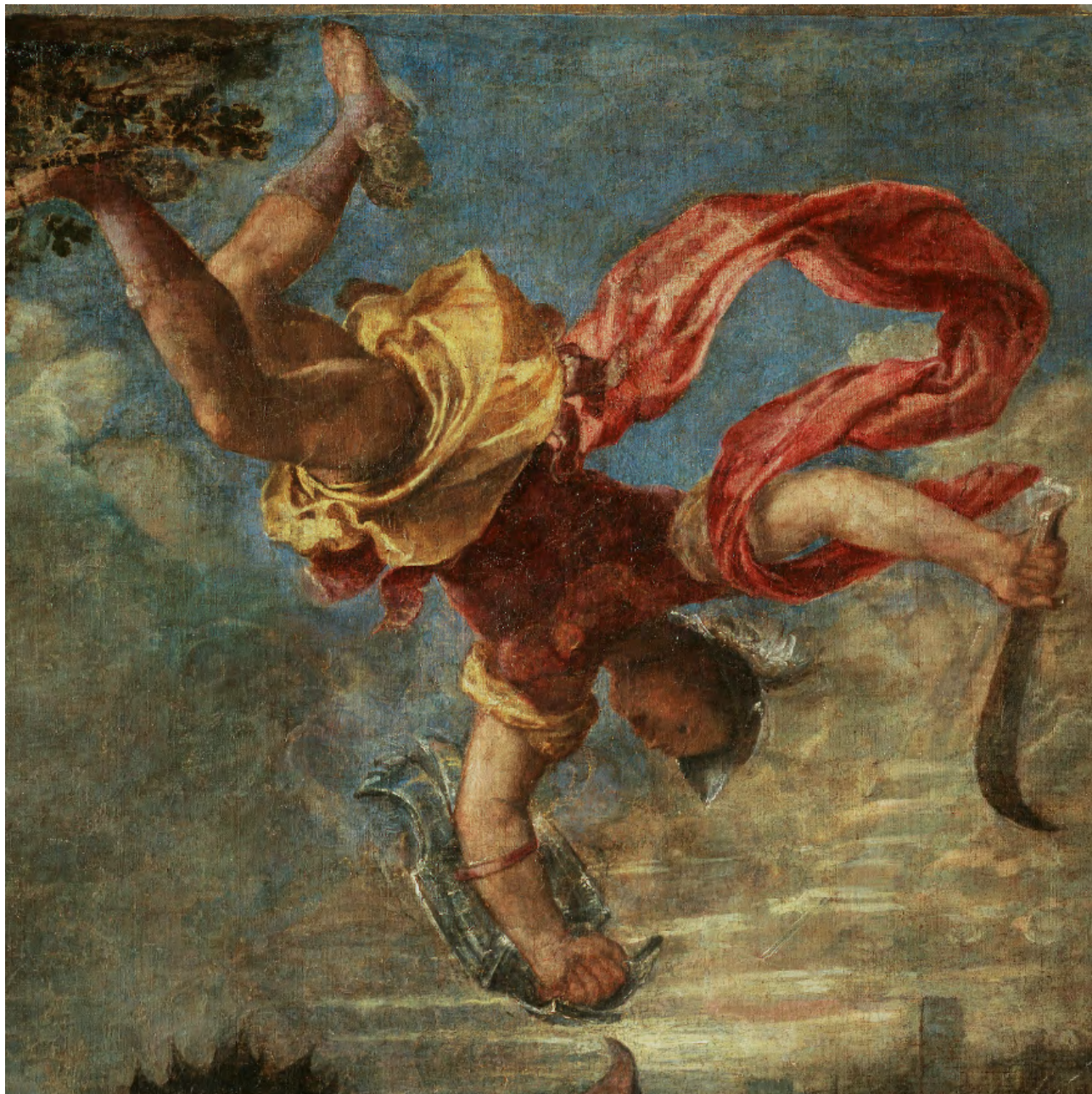


## IN DETAIL





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