

Storytelling through Roman Mythology and the Science of Your Neighborhood



***Collector's Chest*, ca. 1570**

Wenzel Jamnitzer

Germany (Nuremberg)

Silver gilt, ebony, lapis lazuli, feldspar, bloodstone, amethyst, quartz, and gold enamel

Loyola University Museum of Art, Gift of the Abbie Norman Prince Trust, the Frederick Henry Prince Trust, and friends of the Martin D'Arcy Gallery, 1978-09

Grades: 5 – 9

Subjects: English Language Arts, Science, Social Science, Fine Arts, Foreign Languages

Time Required: 2 – 4 class periods, 45 minutes each

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Lesson Overview

Students will learn that during the Baroque age (ca. 17th century), collecting became a mania. People gathered both natural (leaves, insects, rocks, fossils) and artificial (mechanical toys, scientific instruments) curiosities. They will discover that this chest is decorated with luxurious embellishments and figures from Roman mythology.

In the first activity, students will learn about Roman mythology, including some of the figures on LUMA's *Collector's Chest*. They will write short skits involving these gods and goddesses and then will act them out. In the second activity, students will look around their neighborhoods to see what they can learn about the natural world in which they live. They will collect leaves, flowers, rocks, and insects and identify them through research. In the third activity they will create a miniature museum exhibition of their precious objects.

Materials

- Reproduction of the *Collector's Chest*
(http://www.luc.edu/luma/collections/collection_details/collectors_chest.html)
- Paper and pencils
- Computer with internet access
- Assortment of small boxes

Lesson Steps

1. Tell students to look closely at *Collector's Chest*. See how much they can figure out about the work when they take time to look at it, think about it, and share ideas.
2. Use a brainstorming technique, such as Pair Share, to get them started before sharing with the whole class.
 - Pair Share: Students turn to a partner and take turns naming one thing that they notice about the chest. After naming some of the most obvious things, they will soon begin to look more deeply and notice things that their partners did not. They should remember to share these ideas in the discussion later.
3. Use the following questions to begin a discussion.
 - What do you see? What more can you find?
 - What do you think this work is made of? What colors do you see?
 - The D'Arcy's chest is made of silver gilt (gilt is the application of a thin layers of gold over silver), ebony, gold enamel (made from a glass-like paste that turns hard when fired at a high temperature), lapis lazuli (blue stone, pronounced LAP-iss LAZ-ew-lee), amethyst (purple gemstone), and other semi-precious stones.
 - What figures (animals, people, beasts) do you see on this chest?
 - The classical Roman gilt figures arranged against panels of lapis lazuli in two tiers around the box are decorated with mythological gods, including Mars, who is seated atop a broken pillar stamped with the artist's signature. The mythological figures are executed in a Mannerist style, defined by their somewhat distorted and elongated bodies. They are included because of renewed interest in classical history, especially the art, philosophy, and mythology of ancient Greece and Rome.
 - Other embellishments include the pilasters separating each panel, urns placed in niches (recesses in a wall) around the case, and decorative gold strapwork (delicate metalwork made with interlacing bands reminiscent of leather thongs). The entire box rests atop four gilt sphinxes that are likely not original to the chest; Europeans did not know about Egyptian sphinxes until the eighteenth century.
 - What is the purpose of this object? If you owned it, what would you put inside of it? Where would you keep it in your house?
 - Collectors' chests were made at a time when it was fashionable to collect natural and artificial curiosities. They would store feathers, fossils, teeth, leaves, scientific instruments, mechanical toys, and other such items. When too many objects were collected to fit in a chest, rooms were built to house the curiosities. These chests are now recognized as being the origins of the modern-day museum. Since the example in the D'Arcy collection locks, this particular chest likely also held precious objects, such as jewelry.
 - The front of the box, decorated with panels of Jupiter and Juno, opens to reveal a roundel of Medusa's head. This roundel pivots to expose a lock beneath it. Indeed, the chest comprises a variety of drawers and hidden compartments, giving it a puzzle-like character.

LUMA

- What kind of person do you think owned this box?
 - Oral tradition places this chest in the possession of Queen Christina of Sweden, who is famous for giving up the throne of her Protestant country to become Catholic. Although this claim is unsubstantiated, it lends a romantic appeal to the work of art. The queen's name seems to have become associated with the chest at the end of the eighteenth century, when the chest was sold to an English lord. Perhaps the link to the queen was an invention by the seller to raise the price.
 - Even if Queen Christina did not possess the chest, the owner must have been someone wealthy enough to pay for such an elaborate box.
- What kind of person do you think made this box? What kind of skills would the artist need to make the chest?
 - The German artist Wenzel Jamnitzer, who crafted LUMA's collector's chest, was one of the most renowned goldsmiths of the sixteenth century. He was famous for his highly inventive objects and natural figures for curiosity cabinets. He helped to establish Nuremberg as a center for goldsmith design and production for nearly a century. The city of Nuremberg appointed him a coin and seal die-cutter in 1543, and in 1552, he became master of the city mint. His reputation earned him commissions from the most powerful and prominent patrons of Europe, including frequent commissions from four successive Holy Roman Emperors: Charles V (1500 – 1558), Ferdinand I (1503 – 1564), Maximilian II (1527 – 1576), and Rudolf II (1552 – 1612). Rudolf II is known for creating an extensive *kunstammer* ("room of curiosities"), or art room, in which objects were systematically arranged and catalogued. This collection, arranged in encyclopedic fashion, was the precursor to the modern museum.



Germany



First Activity

1. Introduce or review Roman mythology.
 - In the Renaissance (14th – 16th centuries), there was a conscious effort to revive Roman culture, especially its art, philosophy, and mythology. This interest continued into the Mannerist period, in which this box was made, and the subsequent Baroque era (16th and 17th centuries). LUMA's chest features 13 figures from Roman mythology: Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Mars, Venus, Neptune, Mercury, Apollo, Diana, Bacchus, Ceres, Vulcan, and Medusa. In ancient Rome, people used myth to explain and understand occurrences in nature and events in their lives. They assigned character traits to mythological figures and told stories about how they interacted with each other and with people on earth.
2. Share characteristics of the gods and goddesses featured on LUMA's chest.
 - Apollo represents the ideal of male beauty. He has been named the god of light and sun, truth, medicine, archery, music, the arts, and more.
 - Bacchus is the god of wine and theater.
 - Ceres is the goddess of growing plants and motherly love.
 - Diana, brother of Apollo, is the goddess of the hunt and associated with chastity.
 - Juno, the queen of the gods, is the patron goddess of Rome; she guards the empire and its finances.
 - Jupiter, the king of the gods, is the god of law and order and is married to Juno, who is also his sister.
 - Mars, the son of Jupiter and Juno, is the god of war. He is second in importance only to Jupiter.
 - Medusa, who is hidden behind front panels on the box, is not a god or goddess. She is a mythological figure called a gorgon (female monster) with snakes for hair who, by gazing directly at people, can turn them into stone.
 - Mercury, a messenger, is the god of trade and commerce.
 - Minerva, who was born from the head of her father, Jupiter, is associated with wisdom and war.
 - Neptune, the brother of Jupiter and Pluto, is the god of the water and sea.
 - Venus is the goddess of love and beauty.
 - Vulcan is the blacksmith god of fire who crafted weapons, armor, and jewelry for other gods and goddesses.
3. Split your students into groups to write five-minute skits involving Roman mythological characters.
4. Each group can perform its skit in front of the other students.

Expanding the Lesson

Students can do one or more of the following:

- Make costumes out of scrap fabric and other materials.
- Pick Roman gods or goddesses, research them, and write brief reports on your findings.
- Ancient Romans used myths about gods and goddesses to explain natural occurrences that they did not understand, like earthquakes and lightning storms. Research the cause of such events and present the findings to the class.

Second Activity

1. Tell students to explore the natural world around them. Ask them to look around their home, school, and/or park. What aspects of nature do they see?
2. Have students collect leaves, flowers, rocks, and insects, and bring them to school.
3. Direct them to websites to help identify objects and artifacts found:
 - To identify leaves/trees: <http://www.arboday.org/trees/whattree/WhatTree.cfm?ItemID=E6A>

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- To identify flowers: <http://www.realtimerendering.com/flowers/flowers.html> or http://www.bachmans.com/retail/flowers/flower_identification.cfm
- To identify rocks: <http://saltthesandbox.org/rocks/names.htm>
- To identify insects: http://pick4.pick.uga.edu/20/q?guide=Insect_orders

4. Ask students to write reports on their findings.

Expanding the Lesson

Students could do one or more of the following:

- Sketch three different trees while carefully looking at them.
- Write stories with characters inspired by any insects found.

Third Activity

1. Have students use the objects and artifacts found in the Second Activity to create a miniature museum exhibition or *kunstkammer*.
2. Ask students to arrange (and rearrange) the objects for their exhibition in a variety of ways to determine which is the most interesting. For example, categorize them by size, shape, color, purpose, or origin.
3. Have students use small boxes as pedestals or cases to display the objects.
4. Students can create labels to identify individual artifacts or groups of objects.
5. Finally, instruct students to create a catalogue of the exhibition.

Vocabulary

amethyst: purple gemstone.

ebony: a hard, heavy, blackish wood, derived from a tree of the persimmon family.

enamel: a glass-like paste that turns hard when fired at a high temperature.

strapwork: delicate metalwork made with interlacing bands reminiscent of leather thongs.

gilt: the application of a thin layer of precious metal, usually gold or silver.

gorgon: Roman female monster.

kunstkammer: room of curiosities or art room, in which objects were systematically arranged and catalogued.

lapis lazuli: blue stone, pronounced LAP-iss LAZ-ew-lee.

Mannerist style: characterized by somewhat distorted and elongated bodies, it flourished between the end of the Renaissance in the 1520s and the development of the Baroque style in the 1590s.

nich: a recess in a wall.

Renaissance: a cultural and intellectual rebirth during the 14th to 16th centuries.

sphinx: an ancient Egyptian figure having the body of a lion and the head of a man, ram, or hawk.



Illinois Learning Standards

English Language Arts

1 – Reading

3 – Writing

4 – Listening and Speaking

5 – Research

Science

11 – Inquiry and Design

12 – Concepts and Principles

Social Science

16 – History

17 – Geography

18 – Social Systems

Fine Arts

26 – Creating and Performing

27 – Arts and Civilization

Foreign Languages

29 – Culture and Geography