



The Realm of Nymphs

The Olympian gods are well-known to enthusiasts of mythology, but the complete ancient Greek pantheon was astoundingly vast, including thousands of supernatural beings inhabiting the earth, the seas, and the Underworld. Among the most populous of these beings were nymphs, who formed several groups including Oceanids, Nereids, Naiads, Dryads, and Oreads. Their actual numbers were mind-boggling, and ancient authors clearly confused them, with names sometimes overlapping across groups.



Anonymous (Italian, 17th century)
Sea Deities
Ink on paper
Gift of Drs. Saul S. and Gladys D. Weinberg in memory of Bernard Weinberg (73.273)

The mighty Titan Oceanus, who embodied the great ocean encircling Mother Earth, was said to have sired 3,000 daughters and 3,000 sons (by one goddess, unbelievably). Some authors associated Oceanus' daughters with saltwater, while others implied that they inhabited freshwater as well, making them overlap with Naiads. In his *Theogony*, our requisite go-to for origins of Greek gods, Hesiod gave up after naming only forty-one Oceanids, and summed up by saying they were “dispersed far and wide.” We might be grateful that no ancient Greek author set about to name all 3,000 Oceanids, but a few were significant. Metis was the actual mother of Athena, but Zeus swallowed her before she could give birth, fearing that she would bear a son more powerful than he. Athena thus sprung out of Zeus rather than out of Metis. Doris, wife of the ancient sea god Nereus, gave birth to fifty daughters known as the Nereids.

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Johann van Halbig (German, 1814–1882)
Bathing Nymphs, 1867
Carrara marble
Purchased through the Unrestricted Development Fund, MU (80.218)





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Hesiod did show off by naming all fifty Nereids, but only a few became prominent. Amphitrite was wooed and won by Poseidon, and thus became his wife and mother to some of his children. Galatea was wooed (but not won) by a very randy Cyclops. Unlike the French fairy tale, this early beauty-and-the-beast yarn would not have a happy ending. Outraged by his rejection, the Cyclops crushed Galatea's boyfriend to death, but she escaped, her flight across the sea immortalized in a Renaissance fresco by Raphael. Bar none, Thetis is the most well-known of the Nereids. She was the mother of the hero Achilles, and her meddling in the Trojan War on her son's behalf was disastrous for the Greeks. Luckily for Achilles, when he was at his lowest moment, he not only had a helicopter parent for consolation, but forty-nine aunts who all emerged simultaneously from the depths of the sea to fret over him.

Naiads, Dryads, and Oreads are vaguer in origin and do not have an eponymous patriarch, but rather their names derive from Greek words for flowing (*νάω/nao*), oak (*δρῦς/drus*), and mountain (*ὄρος/oros*). Naiads were freshwater deities, and they were sometimes depicted as aggressive and dangerous toward young men. When Jason and his Argonauts stopped at Mysia (Asia Minor), the local Naiads

became enamored with the boy Hylas when he visited their pool to collect water. They summarily abducted him, and he vanished from the expedition without a trace. Salmacis assaulted Hermaphroditus, a son of Hermes and Aphrodite, who emerged from this salacious tale joined in one body with Salmacis, who refused to release him from her clutches. (The story thus provided a bizarre origin for hermaphroditism.) Some authors claimed that the sea monster Scylla began life as a beautiful Naiad but was punished by the Nereid Amphitrite when she discovered Scylla's affair with Poseidon. Amphitrite poisoned the unsuspecting Naiad's pool, transforming her into a polycephalic maneater. Dryads were usually depicted as shy creatures inhabiting oak trees but also laurel, ash, and various fruit trees, such as apple. The nymphs known as the Hesperides, who guarded a golden apple tree, were usually cited as Dryads. Oreads inhabited mountains, and only a few

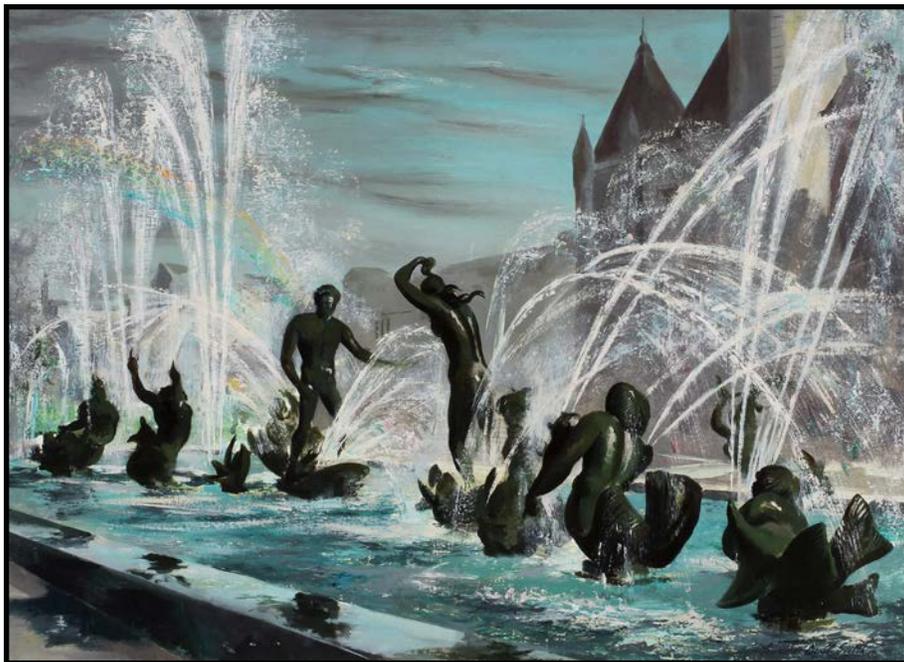


Triumph of Galatea, by Raphael, ca. 1514
Villa Farnesina, Rome
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galatea_\(Raphael\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galatea_(Raphael))

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Lawrence Beall Smith (American, 1909–1995)
Meeting of the Rivers, 1947
Oil on Masonite
Gift of Scruggs-Vandervoort-Barney, Inc.
Transferred from the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Operations, MU (2014.104)

The Meeting of the Rivers fountain in St. Louis, Mo., is a symbolic depiction of the Mississippi River (represented by the male figure) and the Missouri River (represented by the female figure). The water nymphs, mermaids, and fish symbolize the 17 main tributaries that flow into the two rivers.



**Askos with Decorative Handle
Depicting the Monster Scylla**
Greek, South Italian, late 4th century BCE
Probably from Canosa
Pottery
Weinberg Fund and Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2008.172)

The sea monster Scylla was said to have six heads, a characteristic that proved difficult to represent in art. Ancient artists usually showed her with one.

played major roles in myth. One, Echo, loved the arrogant youth Narcissus, who rejected her. That was not the end of Echo's troubles, for she herself was under a curse, and she was doomed to waste away and die. Only her laments remained, echoing eerily through her mountain domain.

Greek and Roman mythographers were largely male and penned their stories under the umbrella of patriarchal cultures. Many of their characters, including nymphs, will read as stereotypes to the reader today. Often deprived of male company, nymphs were typecast as overly amorous, always up for a romp with this god or that. This characterization led to the creation of the word "nymphomaniac" (and urban slang's "nympho"). To be sure, nymphs like Salmacis and the Mysian kidnappers were sexually aggressive, but this type was a minority. On the contrary, nymphs were more often the virgin followers of the goddess Artemis, and they had to be on guard constantly against the lusty pursuits of gods and mortals. Many (willingly or unwillingly) became dedicated mothers and were invariably given the charge of raising illegitimate children whose fathers never had interest in them until they reached adulthood, if at all. ■