

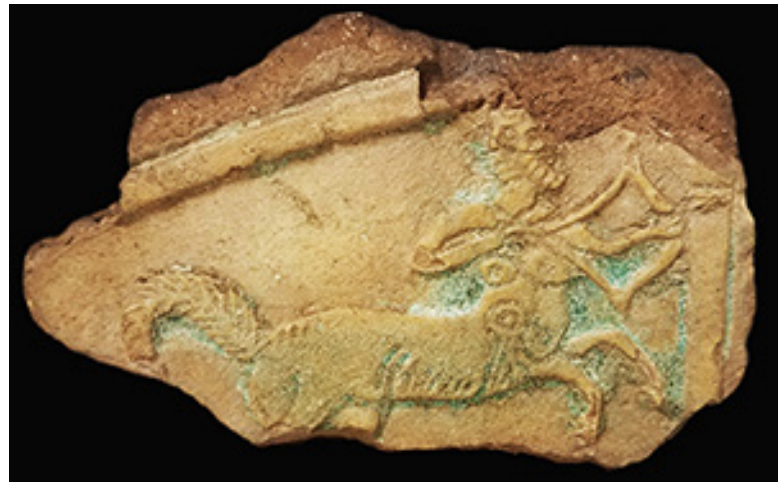


## Centaurs

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

**K**ing Ixion of Thessaly is remembered by Greek mythology enthusiasts as one of the great sinners whose crimes condemned him to Tartarus, the black abyss in the Underworld where the worst offenders were tortured for eternity. After murdering his father-in-law by pushing him onto a bed of burning coals, Ixion was reviled by his kinsman and forced into exile. In an unusual turn of events, Zeus pitied Ixion and brought him to the hallowed halls of Olympus itself. But Ixion became enamored by the goddess Hera, the very wife of Zeus. Zeus suspected Ixion's lustful intentions and created a decoy Hera from a cloud.\* Ixion raped (or seduced) the cloud Hera, and the outraged Zeus flung the disgraced king into Tartarus, where he was bound to a great wheel slowly turning through a raging fire. This would be Ixion's eternal fate, but his story did not end there. The cloud Hera became pregnant, and her offspring was Centaurus, a monstrous child who was shunned and forced to live in the wilderness, where he mated with the wild mares. Their progeny were the bestial centaurs, at once man and beast, destined to inherit their forefather's uncontrollable lust.

Mythographers do not concur on the details of Ixion's story, but they agree on the savage, lustful nature of the centaurs. Their most infamous attack took place at a wedding party of Lapiths, the Greek tribe Ixion himself had once ruled. As Ixion's descendants, the centaurs were invited to the celebration but they became drunk and attempted to assault the women. This notorious *centauromachy* quickly escalated into a violent clash, and many centaurs were killed. Some escaped, including Nessus, who would later menace the hero Herakles by attempting to abduct Deïanira, the hero's new bride. Offering to carry her across a river, Nessus tried to assault her when they reached the other side. Herakles then shot him with an arrow dipped in the blood of the Hydra, an aquatic monster whose blood was a deadly toxin. As Nessus lay dying, he whispered to Deïanira that his blood was a love potion, and that she should collect some and use it on her husband, should he ever stray from her affections. Unknown to Deïanira, Nessus's blood had been overtaken by the Hydra's poison and had become lethal. Some years later, Herakles did turn his attentions to another woman, and Deïanira used the centaur's blood on him. It caused the hero's death but Zeus granted him immortality.



**Tile Fragment with a Centaur in Relief**

Persian, ca. 700–500 BCE

Possibly from Iran

Glazed terracotta

Gift of Mr. J. Lionberger Davis (69.9)

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# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

The most famed of the centaurs was the wise Chiron, but he did not descend from Ixion. He was a son of the god Cronus and a nymph, a lineage that made Chiron the immortal half-brother of Zeus himself. Chiron is most well known as the tutor of young heroes, and many (including Achilles, Jason, and Perseus) were apprenticed to him to learn everything from music to martial arts. Though immortal, the kindly Chiron had an unfortunate fate. While attempting to help Herakles in a skirmish with the uncivilized centaurs, he was wounded by an arrow poisoned with the Hydra's blood. His immortality prevented his death, but the wound was unbearably painful and no treatment could heal it. Zeus, the only god who could decree the death of an immortal, greatly pitied him and allowed him to die. Some report that Zeus immortalized Chiron among the stars, in the constellation known today by its Latin name, Sagittarius ("archer"). But those born in April and May will also recognize the root of their zodiac namesake embedded in the word *centaur*. Philologists suggest that the word's prefix originates from the Greek *kenteo* (κεντέω), meaning "to pierce or stab," and thus "centaur" once meant "bull-piercer." Could this refer to celebrated, mounted men who once hunted bulls? Did such hunts occur in the wild or were they something akin to bullfighting in an enclosure?

Archaeological evidence verifies the presence of centaurs in Greek art by the tenth century BCE, and the Museum's figurine illustrates an early interpretation, which depicted the complete body of a man attached to the rear of a horse. Most depictions of centaurs showed them human only from the waist up. In either configuration, the notion was illogical, since both included two sets of vitals enclosed in a rib cage, two stomachs, etc. Despite the quirky concept, centaurs were enormously influential creatures, both in antiquity and beyond. Ancient Greek artists represented *centauromachies* many times over, and they symbolized the continuous battle against disorder and barbarism. The Museum's curious Persian tile (*page one*) attests to the centaur's appeal even to foreigners, while a Buddhist carving from ancient



**Figurine of a Centaur**  
Greek, late 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE  
Possibly from Schimatari (Greece)  
Painted terracotta  
Museum purchase (58.20)



**Relief Showing an Ichthyocentaur**  
Buddhist, Gandharan, 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century CE  
From Pakistan (ancient Gandhara)  
Schist  
Gift of Alan and Ann White (91.316)

(Continued on page three)



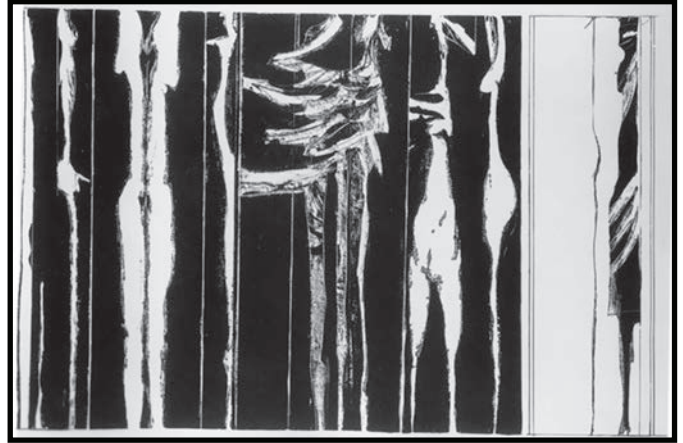


# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Ghandara shows yet another interpretation, the “fish-centaur” (*ichthyocentaur*), which also originated in Greece.

Centaurs continued to inspire artists up through the modern era, such as Beat-era artist Will Petersen, who diminished the creatures to near non-representational forms, while former Mizzou art professor, Robert Bussabarger, gave his centaur a portly presence. A group of ichthyocentaurs were used to decorate a fountain on the grounds of the Missouri State Capitol. Numerous authors of recent years have also brought centaurs to life again. CS Lewis (*Chronicles of Narnia*) made his centaurs noble like Chiron, while JK Rowling (*Harry Potter*) and Rick Riordan (*Percy Jackson*) imagined them truer to their original nature. ■

\*Usually referred to as “Nephele,” the Greek word for cloud.



Will Petersen (American, 1928–1994)  
*Scent of the Centaur*, 1976  
Lithograph on paper  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Christopher A. Graf (76.243)



Adolph Alexander Weinman (American, 1870–1952)  
Model for *Fountain of the Centaurs*, ca. 1926  
State Capitol grounds, Jefferson City, MO  
Painted plaster  
Transferred from University Business Office (87.63)



Robert F. Bussabarger (American, 1922–2013)  
*Centaur*, ca. 1980s  
Ceramic  
Gift of the artist and his wife (2011.20)