Family Self-Guide: Dragons

Lions, tigers and bears... step aside. If you’re looking for something that will truly make you say “oh my!” come and take our Dragons tour.

Just over the rocky hillside is where we’ll find our first beast in Cadmus and the Dragon (Willard-Newell Gallery).

The young prince Cadmus was sent by his parents to find his missing sister, Europa, and though he searched far and wide, he could not find her. Discouraged, he founded the city of Thebes. While there, Cadmus discovered that a fearsome dragon was guarding the city’s only water well. He put together a team of men to slay the beast in its lair, but it killed most of his soldiers (seen scattered on the ground). Cadmus slayed the dragon by himself and sowed the soldier’s teeth in the ground, which grew into a race of warriors that populated Thebes.

What’s more frightening than a dragon? Why a half-serpent, half-child of course! (Willard-Newell Gallery)

The daughters of Cecrops, the King of Attica, were handed a basket by the goddess Athena, and told not to open it. The basket contained the baby Erichthonius, son of Vulcan and Gaia, whose legs were in the form of snakes. Curiosity got the better of the sisters, and they opened the basket and saw the deformed child. Some say they were so horrified at the sight they threw themselves from a nearby cliff.

Need to escape from a dragon? Saint Margaret might be a good person to consult (Nord Gallery).

Saint Margaret was tortured and sent to a dungeon for her Christian faith. While there, the devil appeared to her in the form of a dragon. He tried to tempt her but she resisted, made the sign of the Cross toward him and he disappeared. Later when she was released from the dungeon, the devil appeared as a dragon again, but this time he swallowed her whole. In the belly of the beast, she made her escape using a cross she carried with her to cut through its stomach.
Not all dragons are bad-tempered—this is certainly the case with our Coiling Dragon (Sculpture Court).

While Japanese dragons can be fearsome and powerful creatures, they are also considered to be just and benevolent, often bringing wealth and good fortune to those who see them. They also serve as water deities in Japan and are associated with rainfall and bodies of water. Fittingly, the coiling dragon here served as a fountain out in the museum’s courtyard for a number of years. For its original function, an incense basin rested on a stylized plume of water spouting from the dragon’s mouth.

Let’s follow another Japanese Dragon on his downward spiral (Ambulatory).

Black dragons in Chinese mythology are associated with rain and the fertility of crops. Every spring these dragons would emerge from lairs beneath the sea to create the seasonal rains and later in autumn, they would return to their watery homes. This particular scroll of a dragon plunging into the waves has an accompanying scroll with a dragon ascending from a whirlpool. The two are thought to work together to represent the cosmological forces of spring and autumn.

Although technically these are giant serpents, they’re probably close cousins of dragons (Ellen Johnson Gallery).

An epic tale relates the story of the priest Laocoön who found himself caught in the middle of the Trojan war. The Greeks, with the help of their patron goddess, Athena, hatched a clever plan to attack the city of Troy. Instead of marching troops up to the city walls, they sent one man with an enormous wooden horse. Inside of the horse were men ready to spring out and fight once inside the city walls. The Greeks offered it to the Trojans as a gift. Laocoön suspected something foul, and told the Trojans they should not accept the gift. The goddess Athena, angry that her plan might be ruined, blinded him and sent serpents to strangle his two sons.