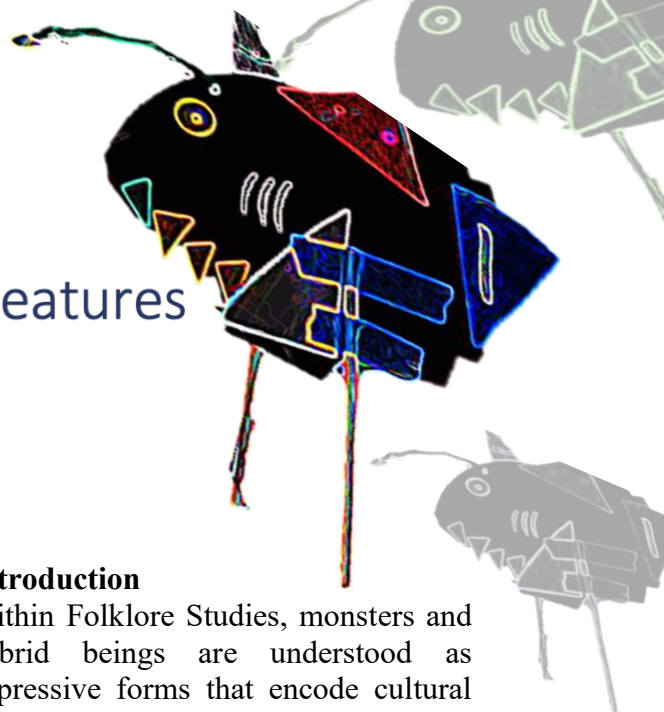




Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious: A Case Study of Mythological Creatures in Museum Family Programs

by Leigh Dale and Teagan Annesly



This article examines monsters and mythical creatures as protective identity tools—symbolic forms that individuals use to explore, project, and construct ideas of safety, strength, and self-definition—as seen through a practice-based case study at the Philadelphia Museum of Art during Art Kids Summer 2024: Mythical Creatures, a family-centered museum education initiative. Drawing on museum pedagogy and informal learning theory with an eye toward inclusion, the program used legendary beings depicted in the museum’s permanent collection—particularly hybrid creatures and guardian figures—to help learners explore how adornment, hybridity, and monstrosity function as strategies of care, defense, and self-definition across cultures.

Anchored by object-based prompts including “What do you wear to feel fancy or fierce?,” program staff invited children and families to examine helmets, jewelry, and wearable artworks adorned with protective creatures before designing their own creature-inspired wearables. These activities framed monstrosity not as something to fear, but as a form of empowerment that supports playful engagement with vulnerability, confidence, and belonging.

We outline concrete strategies for contextualizing original works of art through monster-centered pedagogy and offer adaptable lesson structures for classrooms, museums, and community settings. By treating monsters as protective figures embedded in material culture, we argue for their value as meaningful entry points into identity formation, emotional resilience, and inclusive educational practice.

Introduction

Within Folklore Studies, monsters and hybrid beings are understood as expressive forms that encode cultural knowledge, boundary making, and systems of belief. We argue that monsters can function as powerful pedagogical tools: not as symbols of chaos or fear but as material strategies of care and exploration.

The [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) is a major urban art museum with a global collection spanning over 2,000 years of visual culture. The museum serves a diverse regional and national audience, and the Family Programs Department offers a year-round schedule of drop-in studios, guided experiences, festivals, and community-based outreach initiatives. Drawing on the case study of Art Kids Summer 2024: Mythical Creatures, a family-centered initiative, led by Associate Director of Family Programs Lindsey Bloom, the Family Programs team engaged over 20,000 participants. This article examines how object-based interpretation and artmaking invited children and families to explore protection, identity, and belonging through legendary beings in different areas of the museum’s permanent collection. By framing monstrosity as something one can design, wear, inhabit, and reinterpret,

we positioned monsters as tools for empowerment. This project frames monsters as folkloric forms embedded in material culture and activated through educational practice.

Pedagogical Framework

This project is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework drawing from Folklore Studies, material culture theory, and informal learning pedagogy. Within folklore, monsters and hybrid beings are understood not simply as fantastical figures but also as culturally embedded forms that carry and transmit collective knowledge, values, and anxieties across generations. Looking through an art therapy lens, designing and embodying hybrid creatures offers a reflective process through which participants can safely explore complex emotions and identities. Together, this framework positions “monster pedagogy” as a mode of cultural learning in which symbolic forms—rooted in tradition, yet open to reinterpretation—become tools for exploring protection, belonging, and self-definition.

This study draws on qualitative documentation collected throughout the Summer 2024 program series. Data sources included educator observation notes, photographic documentation of participant work, informal visitor feedback gathered during programs, and post-program staff reflections. This project employs a reflective, practice-based methodology, focusing on patterns observed across repeated interactions rather than formal evaluation metrics. Analysis centered on how participants engaged with themes of protection, hybridity, and identity through both discussion and artmaking. While not intended as a comprehensive assessment, these observations provide insight into how symbolic, object-based pedagogy functions in informal, intergenerational learning environments.

Informal Learning in Museum Contexts

Museums are uniquely positioned to activate monster pedagogy. Informal learning environments privilege curiosity, open-ended exploration, and intergenerational meaning-making. Rather than delivering fixed interpretations, museum educators can invite learners to project, question, and connect.

Object-based teaching further grounds abstraction in physical, material presence. When children encounter helmets adorned with protective creatures or sculptural guardian figures embedded in historical contexts, they see that humans have long used imagery to mediate vulnerability. Protection is not merely conceptual; it is designed, worn, and displayed. It is normalized and externalized as part of the human condition. In this setting, art making becomes a bridge between historical artifacts and personal experience. Learners move from observing how protection has been visualized across cultures to connecting this concept with their own lived experiences. They ask: What protects me? What makes me feel fierce? What do I carry or wear when I need courage? In this way, museum spaces can function as sites where folklore is not only interpreted but also actively reimaged through participant engagement.

Why Monsters?

The decision to center monsters and mythical creatures emerged from both the museum’s collection and a pedagogical interest in forms that invite interpretation, play, and personal connection. Artworks such as *The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon’s Tail* by George Johnson,

Qiu Anxiong's *Ha Lei*, and a Nepali wealth box adorned with a yaksha, a nature spirit of Hinduism, offered visually compelling examples of hybrid and protective figures embedded in material culture. These objects provided a starting point for designing experiences that were both culturally grounded and open ended. As recurring figures in global folklore traditions, monsters and mythical creatures offer a familiar yet flexible entry point into cultural storytelling and symbolic interpretation. This positions monsters as tools through which participants actively reinterpret and extend traditional forms.

In practice, monsters proved especially effective because they resist fixed meaning, inviting participants to speculate, combine, and reinterpret without fear of being “wrong.” Monsters also support imaginative construction rather than replication. Participants were invited not to reproduce what they saw but to assemble meaning from familiar and unfamiliar parts, drawing on personal experience while experimenting with new forms.

Finally, monsters created a productive distance through which more complex ideas could be explored indirectly. Questions of fear, protection, and belonging—often difficult to articulate directly—became accessible when approached through a creature. Asking “What would your creature protect you from?” or “What makes your creature powerful?” enabled participants to externalize internal experiences and reflect on them through symbolic form. This indirect approach supported both emotional safety and depth of engagement, making monsters particularly well suited to intergenerational learning environments.

Cultural Context

In material culture, monstrosity is frequently apotropaic, designed to ward off harm while also leaving room for more fluid interpretation. A dragon carved into a temple door, a yaksha guarding treasure, or a hybrid creature adorning jewelry does not simply represent protection—it performs it symbolically. These patterns reflect the role of folklore as a system through which communities externalize fear, encode protection, and transmit cultural meaning.

Monsters function as tools for meaning-making: hybrid forms that inhabit liminal spaces between categories. Across cultures, guardian figures, composite beasts, and protective adornments appear on helmets, jewelry, boxes, textiles, and architecture. These beings often sit at conceptual thresholds—between inside and outside, sacred and profane, safety and danger.

For children, monsters operate similarly. They provide a vocabulary for negotiating big feelings: fierceness, vulnerability, individuality. Their hybridity resists rigid categorization. They are neither fully one thing nor another. In this way, monsters offer flexible forms through which identity can be tested, expanded, and playfully reassembled.

Observed Outcomes: From Whimsy to Empowerment

The summer's suite of Art Kids programs intentionally followed an arc that began with playful whimsy and culminated in a sense of personal empowerment. Engaging with unusual and fantastical creatures created a low-stakes environment where children and families could experiment, take risks, and embrace imagination without fear of judgment. The very act of playing with hybrid beasts and whimsical dioramas invited participants to enter a world where the rules of reality were suspended, privileging joy, curiosity, and experimentation.

Composite creatures—mixing parts of the familiar and the fantastic—offered a bridge between the everyday and the personal. Families and children could draw on their own experiences and attributes, crafting creatures that were simultaneously universal and deeply individual. In doing so, the programs supported exploration of identity and expression through tactile, creative practice.



Photo by Albert Yee.

Program Context

Art Kids Summer 2024: Mythical Creatures was an eight-week, family-centered initiative designed to activate connections across the museum’s permanent collection through a shared thematic focus. Curatorial teams from different areas of the museum’s collection collaborated to highlight mythical beings as a cross-cultural point of entry, foregrounding the global presence of hybrid and protective figures in material culture. The resulting small special exhibitions were *Mythical, Divine, Demonic* (South Asian art, curated by Neeraja Poddar); *Mythical Creatures: China & the World* (East Asian art, curated by Hiromi Kinoshita); and *Mythical Creatures and Symbolic Animals in Medieval Art* (European decorative art, curated by Jack Hinton).

Building on this institutional focus, the Family Programs team developed a suite of interrelated offerings running Friday through Sunday throughout July and August 2024, engaging more than 20,000 participants onsite. Programming included a drop-in artmaking studio, guided family tours, toddler programs, registered workshops, and two pay-what-you-wish family festivals that featured artist demonstrations and performances. A self-guided activity card invited families to explore the galleries highlighting objects adorned with dragons and other creatures (Appendix A).

To extend access beyond the museum, the program included an outreach initiative in partnership with city parks and recreation centers, distributing 6,000 art kits that combined hands-on materials, activity booklets (Appendix B), and museum passes. Additional partnerships with community

organizations supported both program delivery and material production, embedding the initiative within a broader network of local engagement.

Across these formats, the program prioritized accessibility and intergenerational participation. Free and low-cost entry points, off-site distribution, and flexible engagement structures allowed families to encounter the content in multiple ways. This layered approach to access—economic, geographic, and developmental—aligned with the project’s broader pedagogical aim: to create inclusive, open-ended opportunities for participants to explore identity, protection, and belonging through creative and culturally grounded experiences.

Three Program Examples

Art Kids Summer 2024: Mythical Creatures encapsulated an overall thematic scope of seasonal programming throughout July and August. Programs were organized around three subthemes: Creature Features; Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious; and Homes for Beasts Big and Small (Appendix C). Program examples are outlined below, describing the Art Kids studio project and a highlighted stop on an Art Kids family tour, aligned to each of the subthemes.



Creature Features Studio Project

Combining familiar and unusual parts of animals, George Johnson’s *The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon’s Tail* and Qiu Anxiong’s *Ha Lei* invited visitors to fuse various animal parts with inanimate objects to create their own mixed-up creature. Using colorful and textured paper of many shapes and sizes, children and their families joined unique limbs together with brads and pipe cleaners, with a finishing touch of googly eyes, foam stickers, and china markers.



Creature Features Tour Stop

Using the same object inspiring the studio project, tours were guided to *The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon’s Tail* by George Johnson to examine the contrasting features of a real and an imagined creature. The interconnected components of the dragon and monkey ceramic invited imaginative exploration and prompts such as What features tell us this object is a monkey?, What features tell us this object is a dragon?, and What parts of this object are neither monkey or dragon? Diving deeper into this object, children and their caregivers discovered ways of storytelling through objects by learning of the artwork’s point of inspiration: the story of The Monkey King and the Journey to the West. Tour groups then created their own melded creatures using Model Magic and adornment materials such as feathers, pipe cleaners, and googly eyes.



The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon’s Tail, George Johnson, 2000.
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of the Estate of Frances and Bayard Storey, 2017-113-1 © George Johnson.
<https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/654c8v12u6tj14ry38bl470r1o2wk081>

Journal of Folklore and Education (2026: Vol. 13)

Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious: A Case Study of Mythological Creatures in Museum Family Programs
by Leigh Dale and Teagan Annesly

2.

Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious Studio Project

Wearable objects like a torque, a symbolic neckpiece, in our Chinese art gallery adorned with dragons and phoenixes inspired the prompt: What do you wear to make you feel fancy or fierce? Families used cardboard, metallic markers, and adhesive gems to craft their own wearable protection items. An added benefit of wearable art is its visibility throughout the museum during the day. Children wearing their torques were often asked, Where did you make that?



Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious Tour Stop

One tour stop visited *Phoenix-Shaped Architectural Brackets*, 16th-17th century, artist/maker unknown. Close looking invited tour guests to point out features of the phoenix and learn about the symbolism of fenghuang: a pair of phoenixes representing positivity and new beginnings. Visitors created their own phoenix tails out of trim, ribbon, and yarn, parading around artworks and thinking about what mythical creature mash-ups they would want to portray.



Photo by PMA Education Staff.



Phoenix-Shaped Architectural Brackets, artist/maker unknown, 16th-17th century. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of John T. Morris, 1902-912.
<https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/sl145541p31i8x277ml77aq78t7023e7>

3.

Homes for Beasts Big and Small Studio Project

Referencing a Nepali Wealth Box adorned with a Yaksha, families created an offering to the mythical spirit using colored air-dry clay. Over the course of three weeks, the offerings were collected in a large cardboard and papier-mache replica of the Wealth Box, becoming a velvet-lined dreamscape. In addition, families made their own miniature diorama creature homes, prompting questions of what an imaginary beast may need in their habitat in order to eat, rest and live.



Photos by PMA Education Staff.

Journal of Folklore and Education (2026: Vol. 13)

Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious: A Case Study of Mythological Creatures in Museum Family Programs
by Leigh Dale and Teagan Annesly

➡ Homes for Beasts Big and Small Tour Stop

Family tour groups were led to a stop to spend time with the *Coffered Ceiling from Zhihuasi*, c. 1444, artist/maker unknown. At the center of this ceiling segment a depiction of a dragon peers down at its viewers, surrounded by many relief details. To look closer, families were provided with images of the artwork's details and invited to seek and find the picture within the physical ceiling above them. Discussions guided tour groups to share reasons they think a dragon would be featured at the center of this ceiling, exploring the idea of protection. To extend learning, participants explored etching with textured plates to add and draw details within their own paper outlines of a temple ceiling. At the center of their artworks they could draw a protective creature of their own choosing.



Coffered Ceiling from Zhihuasi
(Temple of Transforming Wisdom),
artist/maker unknown, c. 1444
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Gift of
Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Wasserman,
1930-38-1a—n.
<https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/10062a5kpw25id1v15e2w24x7023u41w>

Challenges and Insights

Large-scale festivals and drop-in formats created access but also introduced challenges related to attention, pacing, and meaningful engagement. With high visitor volume, interactions were often brief, making it difficult to sustain deeper dialogue or reflection. To address this, educators developed concise, flexible prompts that could function at multiple levels of engagement. However, the tension between breadth and depth remained: Designing for 20,000 participants required different strategies from those used in smaller, more intimate learning environments. Educators and staff had a less clear understanding of meaning-making when opportunities for facilitated discussion were limited.

Activating multiple spaces across the museum, including galleries, studio classrooms, and festival zones, expanded opportunities for engagement but created logistical challenges around navigation and cohesion. Some families encountered activities serendipitously, while others missed key components because of unclear wayfinding or limited visibility. Interestingly, wearable art became an informal solution to this challenge. Participants who created creature-inspired adornments often moved through the museum as visible markers of the program, prompting peer-to-peer discovery. This emergent form of participant-led visibility suggested new ways of thinking about movement and communication within large institutional spaces.

One of the central tensions of this work involved navigating the balance between encouraging imaginative reinterpretation and maintaining the cultural integrity of the objects and traditions referenced. Hybrid and protective creatures drawn from South Asian, East Asian, and European contexts carry specific symbolic meanings and histories. However, the program's emphasis on open-ended, participant-driven creation sometimes risked flattening these distinctions into a generalized idea of the "hybrid creature." This tension reflects a broader dynamic in folklore education: balancing the transmission of culturally specific knowledge with opportunities for creative reinterpretation. Educators addressed this by grounding each activity in close looking and object-based prompts before moving into artmaking. Even so, this balance remained an ongoing negotiation: how to invite personal meaning-making without detaching forms from their cultural contexts.

Implications for Educators

For educators within museum and community-based learning environments, this case study offers several practical insights for those seeking to engage in folklore as a living, adaptable resource. Composite creatures provide an accessible starting point for learners of all ages and backgrounds. Because these forms resist fixed interpretation, they reduce pressure to “get it right” and instead invite speculation, recombination, and personal meaning-making. Educators can use hybridity to shift emphasis from accuracy to exploration, allowing participants to engage deeply with symbolic ideas without requiring prior knowledge. Three strategies that particularly positioned our folklore in education program for success include:

→ Frame monsters as protective rather than fear-based. Reframing monsters as figures of protection, guardianship, and care opens space for more inclusive and emotionally resonant engagement. Prompts such as What does your creature protect?, What does your creature mean to you?, and What makes your monster powerful? encourage participants to reflect on internal experiences. This approach supports emotional safety while maintaining conceptual depth. The hybridity, or “creature feature” potential of monsters offers an entry point for connectivity to everyday interests. One could identify snake scales on a dragon or include a lion's tail in a mixed monster. Personal reference points support deeper engagement.

→ Begin with objects, then move toward interpretation. Object-based teaching provides a critical foundation for connecting folklore and storytelling to lived experience. Close looking and guided discussion help ground participants in the cultural and material specificity of artworks before inviting creative artmaking. This sequence—observe, interpret, create—supports a balance between honoring traditions and encouraging individual expression.

→ Use art making as a form of reflection. Art making activities are effective when framed as opportunities for thinking and expressing. After open-ended prompts, discussion, and facilitator questioning, learners can be given time to reflect through making. Artmaking acts as a reflective process through which participants explore identity, emotion, and belonging. Emphasizing process over product encourages experimentation and lowers barriers to participation. Participants assume greater agency and have an opportunity to share their ideas, either visually or verbally, and can extend personal meaning-making of their own creation. This also allows for multiple modalities of engagement.

Conclusion: Why Monsters Matter for Education Now

In contemporary educational landscapes marked by uncertainty and social complexity, learners need flexible symbolic tools. Monsters offer precisely this: forms that hold contradiction and represent protection. When children design and don wearable artworks, they experiment with agency. When families collaboratively build beasts or construct homes for guardian creatures, they practice care. When museums present monstrous imagery as important material culture rather than spectacle, they unlock pathways into identity formation and emotional resilience.

These approaches allow learners to externalize vulnerability, build confidence, and imagine new forms of belonging. In doing so, they transform from figures at the margins into central tools for inclusive, imaginative, educational practice. By engaging monsters as folkloric forms embedded in material culture, this work demonstrates how folklore can function as a dynamic educational

tool for exploring identity, emotion, and belonging. In this way, folklore becomes not only something to study but also something learners actively use to make meaning in their own lives. This case study demonstrates how monster-centered, object-based pedagogy can function as a scalable and adaptable framework for engaging identity, emotion, and cultural meaning-making across informal learning contexts. In this way, monster pedagogy offers a model for how folklore can remain vital, responsive, and deeply relevant within contemporary educational practice.

Leigh Dale (she/her) is Coordinator of Interpretation for Family & Young Audiences, Special Projects at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where she develops interpretive experiences, gallery texts, and self-guided learning resources for (and with!) children and families. Her work focuses on inquiry-based interpretation, accessibility, and participatory engagement in museums. She serves as Museum Education Division Director for the Pennsylvania Art Educators Association and previously held education positions at MASS MoCA, The Ringling and Harvard Art Museums. She holds an EdM in Arts in Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Teagan Annesly (she/they) is an educator, facilitator, artist, and advocate. As Coordinator of Family Programs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art they focus on creating youth and family programming centered on process-based and inquiry-based art making and gallery experiences. Holding an MA in Art Therapy and Counseling, they also program within therapeutic frameworks by facilitating creative interactions through a relational, person-centered, disabled, and queer lens. Their foundation as a queer, neurodivergent studio-based artist, primarily in fashion design and textile arts, lends to their motivation for implementing hands-on, tactical, inclusive, and accessible engagement.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the entire Family Programs team at the Philadelphia Museum of Art who worked on these programs in the summer of 2024, led by Lindsey Bloom, Associate Director of Family Programs. In addition, we are grateful for our summer staff and each one of these summer collaborators for their creativity and support: the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University, CraftNOW, Philadelphia Parks & Recreation, Free Library of Philadelphia, Sue Liedke, Kalila Jones, Madeleine Conover, Sarah Owens, Salma Garcia Nolasco, Maisie O'Brien, Baker Industries, and Susan Coll-Guedes.

URLs

Philadelphia Museum of Art <https://www.philamuseum.org>
The Dream of the Monkey with Dragon's Tail <https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/654c8v12u6tj14ry38bl470r1o2wk081>
Phoenix-Shaped Architectural Brackets <https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/sl145541p31i8x277ml77aq78t7023e7>
Coffered Ceiling from Zhihuasi <https://dams.philamuseum.org/Share/10062a5kpw25id1v15e2w24x7023u41w>

Appendices

Appendix A: [PDF of Dragon Parts rack card](#)
Appendix B: [PDF of Mapping Mythical Creatures activity booklet – spreads](#)
[PDF of Mapping Mythical Creatures activity booklet – folding layout](#)
Appendix C: [PDF Art Kids Studio Lesson Plan](#)
Appendix D: [Partial list of objects in Mythological Creatures exhibitions](#)

Journal of Folklore and Education (2026: Vol. 13)
Flashy, Friendly, Ferocious: A Case Study of Mythological Creatures in Museum Family Programs
by Leigh Dale and Teagan Annesly