

HALF-HUMANS, HALF-FISH

(a story of mermen, mermaids, and alike)

Tales and legends regarding divine and semi-divine water beings (humans above the waist, fish below) have permeated the folklore and religious thought of a diversity of cultures throughout history. Many of these myths still exist, especially among civilizations in which the ocean, or a great river or lake, is important in its lives. This is a story of mermen, mermaids and other similar figures – a story that talks of myths, imagination, adventure... and even love!



Postal stationery of Cuba, 2001, issued for domestic use (inland) – postal indicium (Cupid, "prepagado") on the reverse side

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Thematic comments or details written in Arial 8 black – Philatelic text written in Arial 8 black, italic
For some postal stationery bearing the *indicium* on the reverse, a scanned copy (normal or reduced) is eventually shown

INTRODUCTION

The mysteries of the seas, oceans, rivers, and lakes always intrigued the imaginary of man.



One of the misconceptions of the bodies of water was that they were the domain of deities, monsters and other beings.



Specimen

As the meeting place of land and sea, the beach was peopled, in his tales and mythologies, with all sorts of gods and spirits.



Misplaced colors



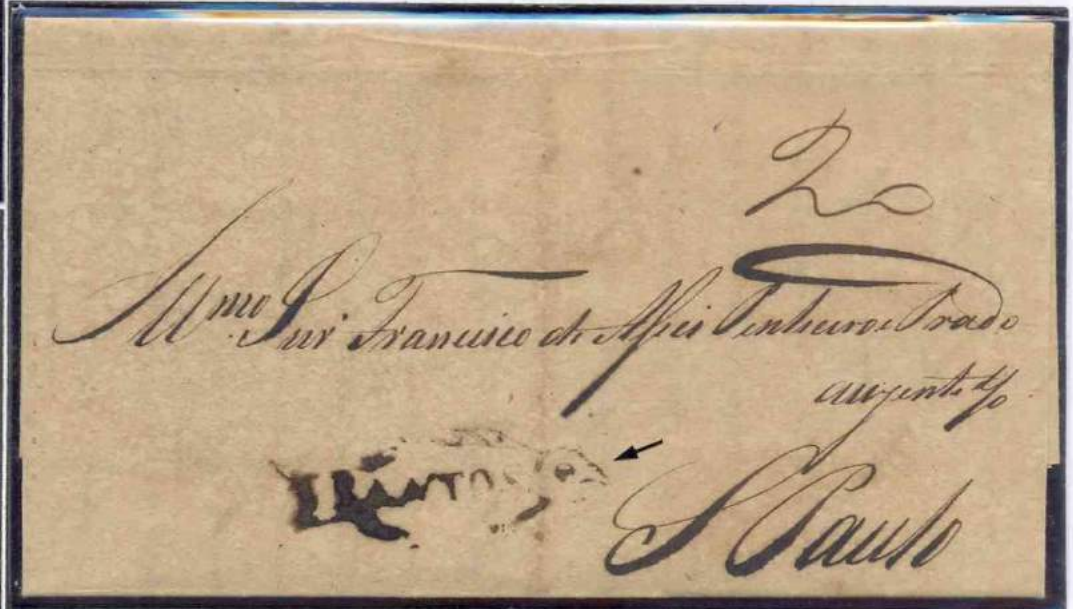
MAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH FISH



Monochrome proof

Niuafoou's "Evolution of the Earth" set - T\$5, 1989

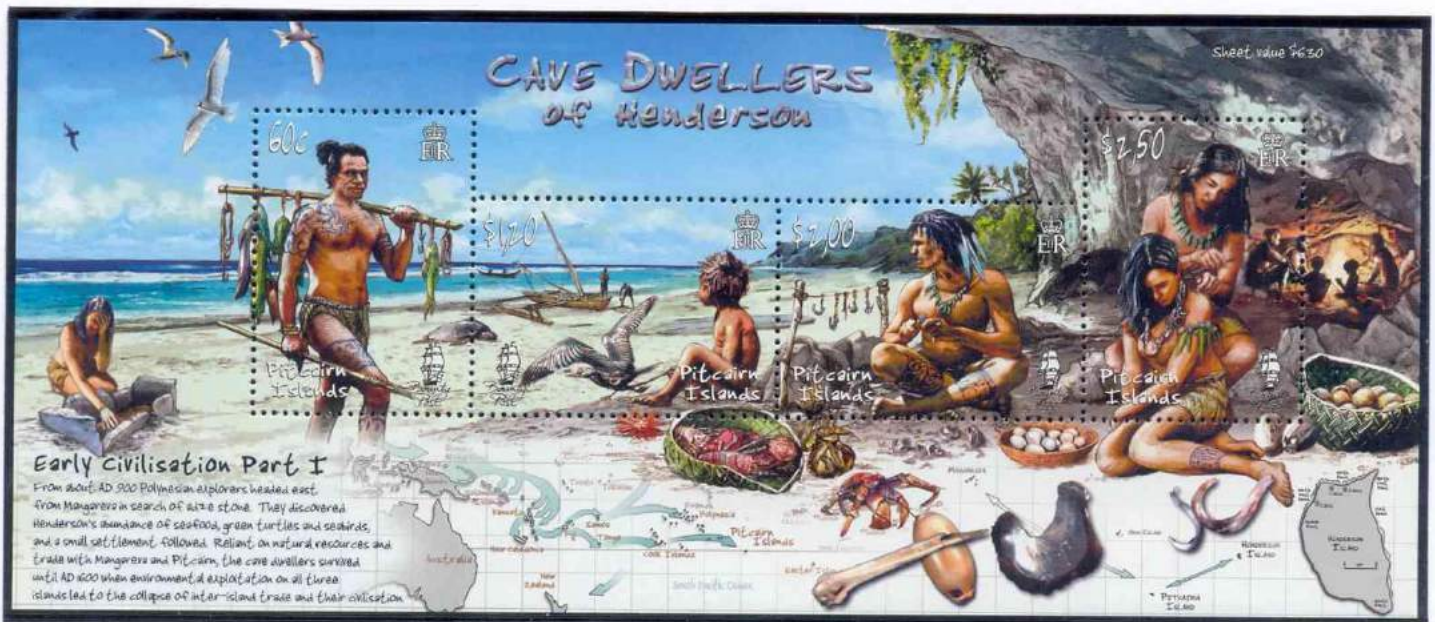
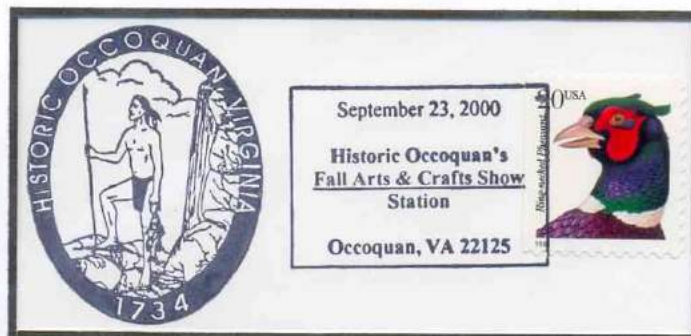
The rich waters of the planet have provided fish for man as long as he has lived on its borders.



Fish depicted on a postal handstamp - Pre-philatelic folded letter, Brazil, sent from Santos to São Paulo, 09 Apr, 1838



As the relationship between man and fish comes since the dawn of humankind, it is natural the existence of many interesting stories connecting both in various forms.



Early Civilisation Part I

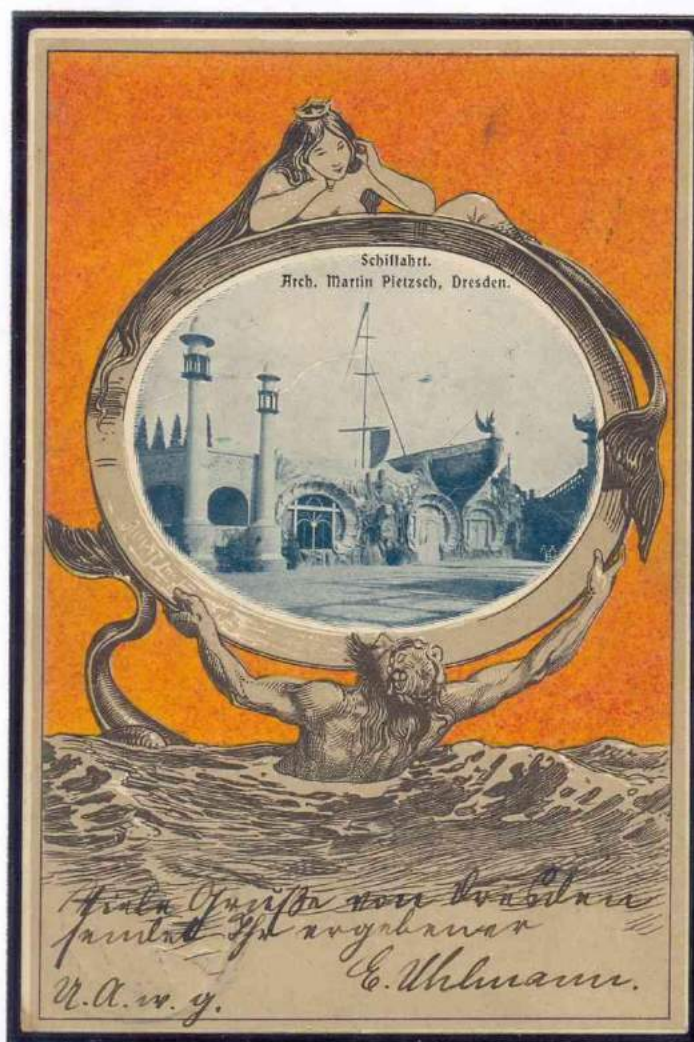
From about AD 900 Polynesian explorers headed east from Mangarua in search of a new home. They discovered Henderson's abundance of seafood, green turtles and seabirds, and a small settlement followed. Reliant on natural resources and trade with Mangarua and Pitcairn, the cave dwellers survived until AD 1600 when environmental exploitation on all three islands led to the collapse of inter-island trade and their civilisation.

MERPEOPLE: MERMEN, MERMAIDS AND ALIKE

The representation of creatures that associate humans and fish depends on the context of the story told about them.



Postal stationery printed to private order, Bayern - "Ausstellung München 1908"



Merpeople (or merfolks) are characteristically all beings, half-humans, half-fish, that are associated with the sea or any other body of water.



The most popular of these legendary beings comprise the *mermen* and *mermaids*.



1. MERMEN

1.1. Attributes and appearance



Mermen have the upper body, arms and head of a man, and instead of legs they have the scaled tail of a great fish, being portrayed as wilder and uglier than their female counterparts – mermaids.



Actually, in some mythologies they are described as extremely ugly water creatures, having green seaweed-like hair, pointed teeth, and a red nose, but the most notable representatives are usually portrayed as handsome, majestic, and powerful.



Much like sirens or mermaids, they are also said to take people down to their undersea kingdoms, and not rarely women are found in certain stories fantasizing about making love with some merman.



1. MERMEN

1.2. Notable mermen

POSEIDON "MERMAN" (MERMAN-LIKE DEPICTION)

Two attributes of Poseidon, and main symbols of his power, were the trident (three-pronged spear) and the crown of gleaming gold, which clearly identify the King of the Sea in his merman depiction.



Known as Neptune by the Romans, he is portrayed in various representations.



It does not matter if Poseidon has been described in his appearance differently throughout history; the fact is that, in modern popular culture, this deity is sometimes pictured part man and part fish.



Merman-like Poseidon riding a fish (seen on the pictorial postmark) – Postal stationery (Funktlotteriekarte), Germany, 1960

TRITON



The most well-known merman is Triton, the messenger of the sea.



Perforation shift

Son of Poseidon and the sea-goddess Amphitrite, he is the *Trumpeter of the Sea* for his attribute of having a conch shell blown to calm or shake seas.

It is mentioned that its sound was so terrible that, when loudly blown, it put the monsters of the sea to flight, who imagined it to be the roar of a dark wild beast searching for them.



Like his father Poseidon, Triton is also seen carrying a trident, which was used by him to shatter rocks, to call forth or subdue storms, to shake the shores, and many other things.



Triton blowing a twisted shell - British Ocean Penny Post stationery (Rawtenstall arrival mark, 25 Feb, 1850)

2. MERMAIDS

2.1. Attributes and appearance

Mermaids are water beings with the head and torso of a woman and tail of a fish, and such word is a compound of *mere*, the Old English word for "sea", and *maid*, a woman.



Examples of the so-called *Dublin mermaid* postmark can be found from 1808 to 1814, showing a double or single ring around the date. The latter one (normally in black/brownish-black) was applied to mail arriving at Dublin, or for transmission to England. As "mermaid" impressions are generally indistinct, a copy is shown.



Pre-philatelic folded letter with a handstamped Dublin "mermaid", mailed from Navan (An Uaimh) to Kilkenny (Cill Chainnigh), Ireland, 6 Oct 1808

They use to be depicted as beautiful, normally holding a comb and mirror, and exhibiting a long, glistening hair.



2.1. Attributes and appearance

Traditionally, mermaids have been portrayed in works of art as seductive women-fish who lured nearby sailors with an enchanting music and very sweet voices to shipwreck on the reefs or the rocky coast of their dwelling island or beach.



Mermaids on the back cover – Stamps booklet in the benefit of the French Red Cross (with all mint stamps inside, copy seen at right), France, 1967

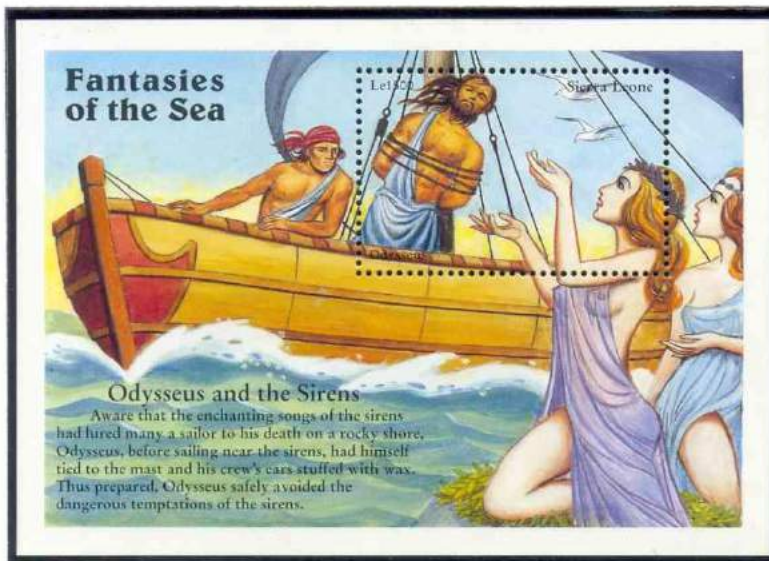
Actually, as singer fairies, they used to sing to passing ships from storm-washed rocks, luring sailors to death with their hunting song.



For this reason, poets and artists have placed mermaids on islands or other locations surrounded by cliffs and rocks.



2.1. Attributes and appearance



By the way, the sirens of ancient Greek mythology – sometimes disguised as beautiful women – came to be represented in later folklore, legends and art as mermaid-like creatures, fully linked to the ocean.



In *Argonautica*, it is said that Odysseus, before sailing near the sirens, had all his sailors plug their ears with beeswax and tie him to the mast of the ship; thus prepared, it was possible for him to avoid the dangerous temptation of the sirens' song.

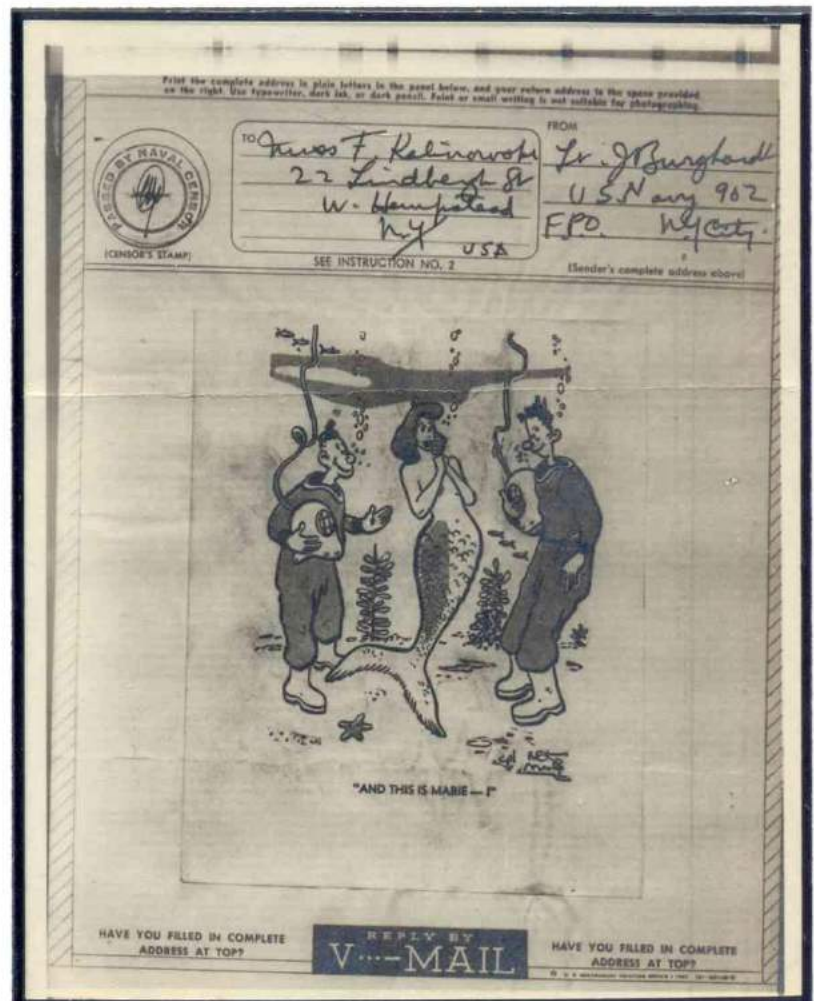
With no doubt, mermaids remain as the greatest symbols of aquatic mythology, and in various other legends they could also swim up rivers to freshwater lakes.



Interestingly, in some languages, such as Spanish, French, Italian, Romanian and Portuguese, the word for *mermaid* is, respectively, *Sirena*, *Sirène*, *Sirena*, *Sirenă*, *Syrena*, and *Sereia*, i.e. similar words for these mythological creatures.



In many cultures, the term "siren song" refers to an appeal that is hard to resist but that, if heeded, lead to a bad result.



Mermaid and hard-hat divers – V-mail (USA, WW II, censor mark, mailed internally in N. Y.).

2. MERMAIDS

2.2. Melusina and other mermaid-like figures

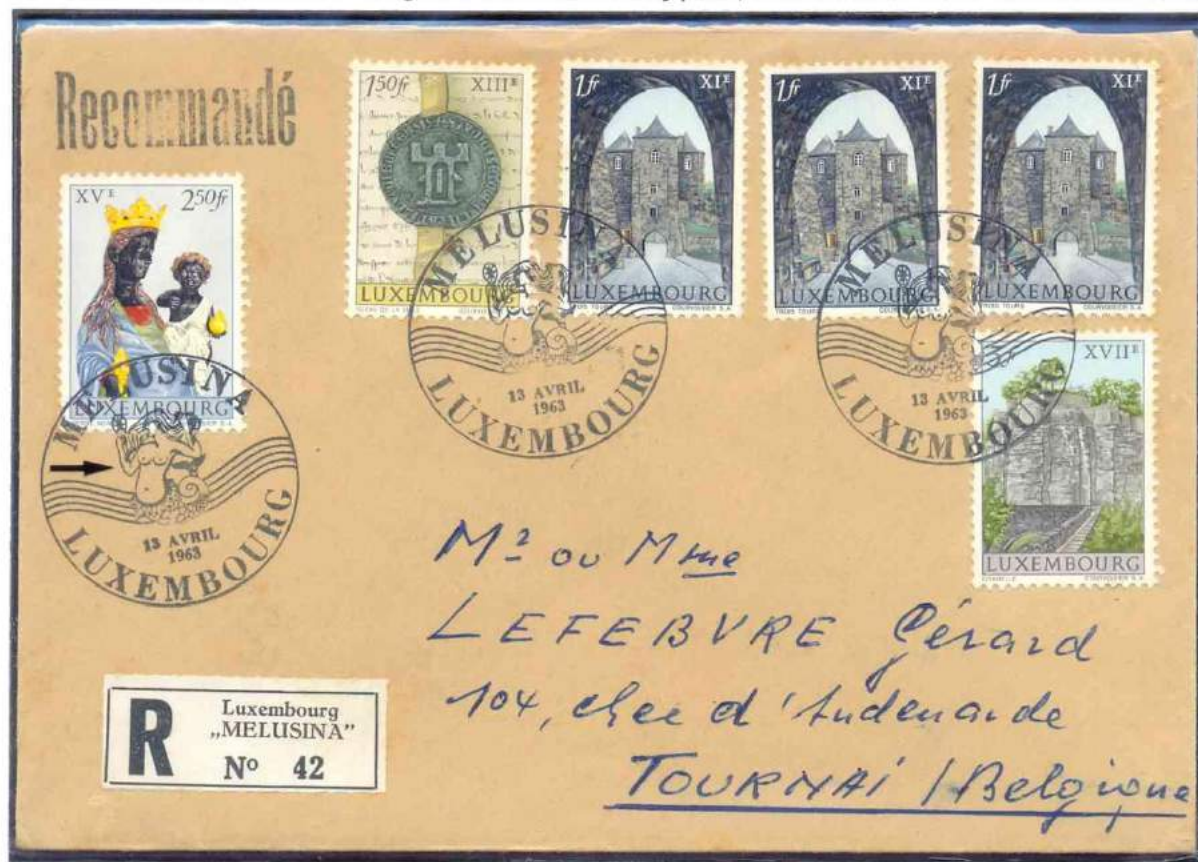
One freshwater mermaid-like creature from European legends and folklore is *Melusine* (or *Melusina*), who is depicted as so vain, and sometimes with two fish tails.



She is used as symbol and heraldic figure throughout Europe, and in some traditional folk tales "melusinas" are beings whose tears can turn into priceless pearls.



Melusina is closely connected with Luxembourg, where she is greatly honored; but the real fact is that the belief in mermaids and similar beings has survived in many parts, associated with both salt and fresh water.



2.2. Melusina and other mermaid-like figures

There is an evident variation on the appearance, attributes, and names of such water creatures, which use to be generally seen as a nymph, siren, or mermaid.



In Brazilian folklore, lara is a beautiful young woman who uses to be seen seductively seated on rocks by the rivers, combing her hair or dozing under the sun.



The lara is similar in nature to several other figures of traditional legends and folklore from various other regions of the Americas, with many versions extant.



Color shift

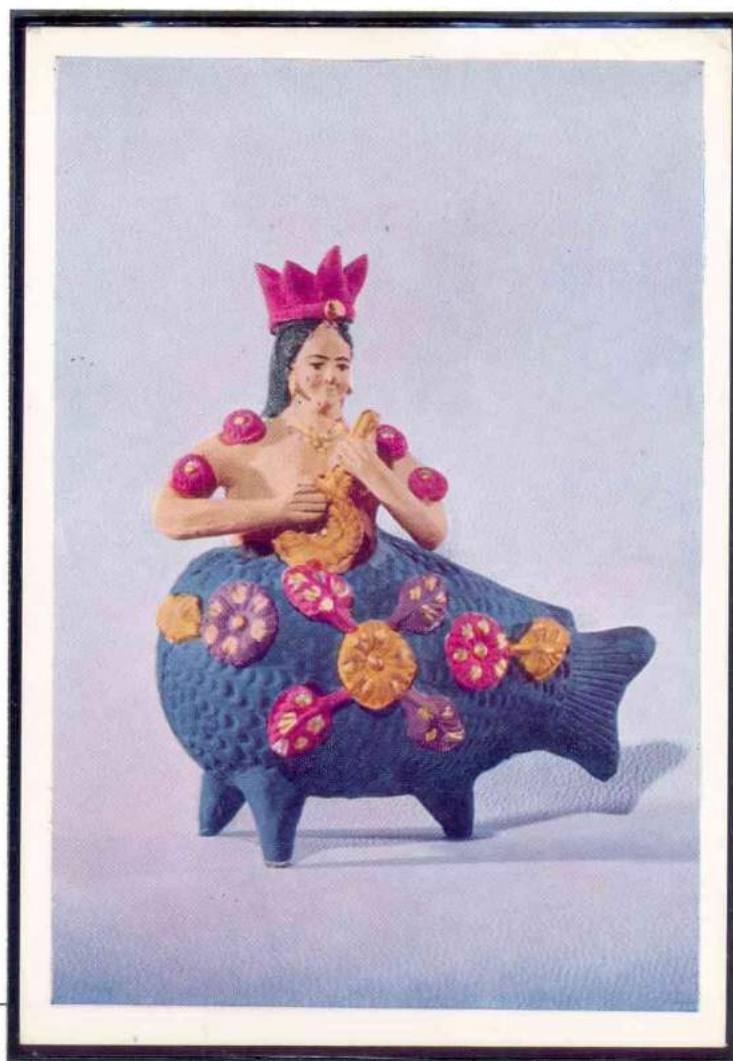
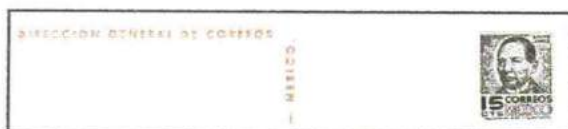
It is said that when she felt a man around she starts to sing gently to lure him, and once under the spell of such *mother of the waters* he leaves anything to live with her under water forever; in order to avoid this fatal attraction, fishermen use *carrancas* on their prows.



Color shift



Perforation shift



2.2. Melusina and other mermaid-like figures



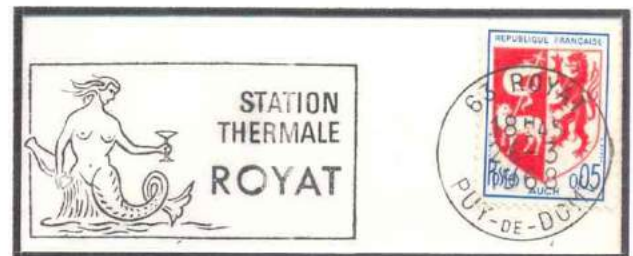
Other related types (water fairies or water nymphs) can also be seen as anatomically identical to land-bound females, or even in a mermaid-like shape, according to each depiction.



They use to be encountered in certain locations by lone travelers, where their music can be heard, thus they can also spy on their dancing or bathing in a stream or pool, either during the noon heat or in the middle of the night.



Postal stationery (printed to private order) sent to Regensburg, Feb 10, 1900



Many have been depicted in their human form as young nubile maidens who love to dance and sing all the time.



It is important to observe that interesting folktales tell of love and marriage between mermaids and mortal men.



2. MERMAIDS

2.3. The fairy tale "The Little Mermaid"

The Little Mermaid is a fairy tale by the Danish poet and author Hans Christian Andersen about a young princess of a kingdom beneath the sea who rescues a handsome prince from a sinking ship and falls deeply in love with him, but it was impossible to give up her life into the sea, and her identity as a mermaid.



Andersen's portrayal was immortalized with a bronze sculpture in Copenhagen harbor and has influenced the modern depictions of mermaids in many places.



Written originally as a ballet, this fairy tale was first published in 1837 and has been adapted to various media since then.



The mermaid of Copenhagen was unveiled in 1913 and represents a very traditional symbol of the city.



2.3. The fairy tale “The Little Mermaid”

The “little mermaid” continues to be used as inspiration in works of art, inclusive for stage adaptations and films.



In 1989, it was released the animated film *The Little Mermaid*, produced by Walt Disney Feature Animation and based on the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale of the same name, and which was a great success at the time.

Ariel and Flounder

Wherever you are, just being in touch with pals can lead to merriment. Ariel, a little mermaid, longs to enjoy life on land, but that doesn't stop her from enjoying music with Flounder and her other undersea friends.

Disney Materials © Disney



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Ariel, a sixteen-year-old mermaid princess, dissatisfied with her life under the sea and curious about the human world, goes with her best fish friend Flounder to the surface to visit Scuttle the seagull, who offers very inaccurate and comical knowledge about the human culture; unlike the original tale, Ariel and Prince Eric have their wedding on a ship among both humans and merpeople.



2. MERMAIDS

2.4. Representation in arts



Mermaids have a broad representation not only in literature and popular tradition, but also in arts, heraldry and so forth.



They have been used to promote touristic and cultural events, as symbols in many forms, and also in heraldry or flags.



In Weeki Wachee Springs (Florida, USA) "mermaids" (women dressed with fins about their legs as well as other fancy outfits) perform typical routines.



So to say, these enchanting creatures, half-humans, half-fish, have captivated men and women for a very long time.

