

# Mermaids in Folklore and Australian Indigenous Culture – Guest Blog by Vanessa Witschi

## **Mermaids in Folklore**

Mermaids are present in the folklore of many cultures around the world. They can be found in Native American culture, Ancient Greek and Roman cultures, as well as in Asia (particularly China, Japan, Indonesia and the Philippines), Norway, Russia, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, France, Spain, the British Isles and India.

One of the most interesting, although perhaps not as obvious facts, is that mermaids appear in Indigenous Aboriginal culture.

Separated by water for thousands of years, mermaids appear as an important factor in many of the language and cultural groups spread across Australia. Interestingly, for a country surrounded by oceans and seas, mermaids are largely portrayed as freshwater creatures living in rivers, lakes and billabongs.

## **How Mermaids are Portrayed in Different Cultures**

Some cultures depict mermaids as meek benevolent beings, others as possessors of medical knowledge and magic.

Both the Indian and Greek folklore see mermaids as Goddesses—some of whom were originally in a human form but were made half-fish as a punishment from the Gods, and some who always existed in mermaid form.

Commonly, mermaids (in particular the sirens who were depicted in two forms – mermaid-like and also bird-like) are portrayed as creatures that sang or played music to sailors. These depictions often have their origin in early Greek, Roman or Spanish civilisations.

In early Russian culture it was believed that women who had died violently or by their own hand lived at the bottom of rivers and mesmerised men to lure them into the river to drown them.

Even today, many cultures still believe in the existence of mermaids. In February 2012, it was reported in the UK *Daily Mail*, that the Water Minister for Zimbabwe announced that

there were delays in building two reservoirs due to mermaids hounding the workers away. It was believed that performing rituals and sacrifices would encourage the mermaids to leave the workers alone.

The Australian Aborigines of today also believe that mermaids still exist in their waters and rivers. In some Northern Territory regions, mermaids were believed to instruct women in ceremonial procedures in early Dreamtime, particularly those procedures related to fertility. It was believed that they were still present in many areas and could be seen sitting on rocks but would quickly jump back into the water if they saw anyone coming.

Another Aboriginal story tells of a man who set a trap to capture a mermaid who he then tied to a tree. He treated her very kindly and eventually she agreed to be his wife. They had children together but she one day disappeared into the river after being reminded of her mermaid form when she saw her reflection in the water.

There is also a belief in some Aboriginal language groups that albino children born to Aboriginal parents are the result of mermaid blood in their ancestry.

A Torres Strait Islander Dreamtime story tells of how fishermen caught a mermaid in their nets. The mermaid warned them not to over-fish the lake and to just to take what they needed for their family. The fishermen continued to over-fish the lake so the mermaid stopped them from fishing.

### **Mermaids in Australian Aboriginal Art**

There are a number of modern Aboriginal paintings depicting mermaids, which are held in national museums and art galleries around Australia. Perhaps the most famous are the Yawk Yawk (mermaid) sculptures held in The National Museum of Australia's collection from Western Arnhem Land. These modern woven pandanus sculptures depicting mermaid spirits are by artists Lulu Laradjbi and Marina Murdilnga.

Woven pandanus yawkyawk sculptures by Kunwinjku artists Marina Murdilnga, left, and Lulu Laradjbi. These mythical beings have the tails of fish and hair resembling algal blooms. Photos: Dragi Markovic.  
Source: <http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/highlights/yawkyawk-sculptures>

One Aboriginal artist from the Central Arnhem Land (Darnkorlo clan, Yirridjda moiety, Ngarridj subsection, Kunwinjku language), Owen Yalandja creates sculptures and paintings almost exclusively based on the Yawk Yawk (mermaid) spirits near Barrihdjowkkeng.





Here is one of the first carvings he ever did of a mermaid in 1993, which won the 10<sup>th</sup> National Aboriginal Art Award that year. The work is held in the Maningrida Arts and Culture Centre in the Northern Territory.

Source: <http://natsiaadigitisation.nt.gov.au/docs/index.php?typ=artwork&p1=ABETH-3121>

There are also several modern Aboriginal artworks for sale that depict mermaids including this painting by artist Edie Blitner from the Kimberley area of Western Australia

Source: <http://arthousebroome.com.au/on-line-store/Kimberley-Art/kimberley-fine-art/eddie-blitner/mermaid-spirit>



And this by Northern Territory artist Chris Liddy / Moonggun who notes that when someone drowns it means their spirit was taken by mermaid Mimi spirits. The first one is called *Mermaid Mimi Spirits and Crocodile*.

[http://aboriginalartdreaming.com/site/index.php?](http://aboriginalartdreaming.com/site/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=shop.flypage&product_id=17&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=1&vmcchk=1&Itemid=1)

[page=shop.product\\_details&flypage=shop.flypage&product\\_id=17&option=com\\_virtuemart&Itemid=1&vmcchk=1&Itemid=1](http://aboriginalartdreaming.com/site/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=shop.flypage&product_id=17&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=1&vmcchk=1&Itemid=1)



The second one by Chris Liddy / Moonggun is called *Mermaid and Mimi Spirits*.

Source:

[http://aboriginalartdreaming.com/site/index.php?page=shop.product\\_details&flypage=shop.flypage&product\\_id=17&option=com\\_virtuemart&Itemid=1&vmcchk=1&Itemid=1](http://aboriginalartdreaming.com/site/index.php?page=shop.product_details&flypage=shop.flypage&product_id=17&option=com_virtuemart&Itemid=1&vmcchk=1&Itemid=1)

And you can also find some more Yawk Yawk spirit painting by West Arnhem Land Kunwinjku artist Lesley Nawirridj below. They are both called *Mermaid (Yawk Yawk) in the Billabong*.

Source: <http://www.kunwinjku-aboriginal-art.com/aboriginal-art-water.html>



You can buy some of these magnificent original paintings and prints at their respective galleries. Just follow the links attached to each piece to find out about the artist, the painting and the price!



*Vanessa Witschi is a polymer clay artist who creates one-of-a-kind dreaming mermaid sculptures. These collectable mermaids are perfect for little girls, girls at heart and those who truly feel the magic of mermaids!*

[www.mermaidsdreaming.com.au](http://www.mermaidsdreaming.com.au)

[www.facebook.com/mermaidsdreaming](https://www.facebook.com/mermaidsdreaming)

Posted by Black Mermaid Productions at 4:19 PM

Labels: Art, Australian Culture, Folklore, Indigenous Culture, Mermaids