

FROM SHORELINE TO *STUDIOLO*: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF
SMALL-SCALE BRONZE SEA CREATURES IN EARLY SIXTEENTH-
CENTURY NORTHEASTERN ITALY

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In the Veneto in the first two decades of the sixteenth century, most likely on a desk or shelf in a study, there sat a small bronze sculpture of a strange creature with a human head and a scaly amphibious body. Its beholder – then as now – encountered an object that seems to scream for attention: its human face has a gaping mouth that forms a dark hole, lined with a row of small square teeth. Its eyes are wide set and cast upwards, leaving deep grooves in its dramatically furrowed brow. This pained face is framed by a beard and crown of acanthus leaves, from which two large, pointed ears emerge, closer to those of a satyr than a human. The creature's scale-covered body is decisively not human: it has frog-like front limbs, spindly fins at its sides, and a lizard-like curling tail that terminates in a tulip-shaped flipper. It cranes its neck upwards, its muscles tensely pushing away from the flat surface beneath, as if struggling against its own weight. *Statuette in the form of a sea monster* (c.1505–1520, figure 1) invites the beholder to ponder what the creature is trying to communicate, as both an image of human/animal hybridity and as a physical bronze object that inhabited the beholder's material environment of the study.

This is one version of several dozen humanoid sea monster bronzes which survive today,¹ a sculptural type generally agreed to have been devised by the sculptor, modeller and marble carver Severo Calzetta da Ravenna (born between around 1465–75; died before 1538).² Severo was working in Padua in the first decade of the sixteenth century, a university city under Venetian rule that already had an established network of bronze foundries.³ There, Severo tapped into the significant appetite for small-scale functional bronzes among a growing cosmopolitan audience, with the sea monster type becoming one of his family firm's most popular products. Scholarship has been characterised primarily by a comparative approach, looking at different



Figure 1 Workshop of Severo Calzetta da Ravenna, *Statuette in the form of a sea monster*, c.1505–20. Cast bronze, 24 × 15.5 × 11 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
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versions of sea monster bronzes side by side. It led Bernice Davidson to designate an ‘extended family of sea monsters’, the *paterfamilias* of which resides at the Frick (figure 2, c.1510).⁴ It is from the latter that discussions of other versions emerge, reinforcing notions of authorship that do not always sit comfortably with the collaborative nature of small bronze production during this period.

This article proposes that the bronze sea monster type allows us to develop a more nuanced picture of how, as Steven Swarbrick and Karen Raber put it, ‘the Renaissance human was, like the posthuman now, open to novel configurations with the lives of ‘others’’.⁵ Among the variety of hybrid sea creatures associated with Severo’s output, no type is quite as ambiguous – and therefore as imaginatively generative – in its combining of human and



Figure 2 Severo Calzetta da Ravenna, *Sea monster*, c.1510. Bronze, 24.8 × 17.1 × 11.4 cm. The Frick Collection, New York. © The Frick Collection

nonhuman forms and scales as the humanoid sea monster (which I will refer to generally as the ‘sea monster type’).⁶ Whilst the semi-aquatic creature in the far left of Andrea Mantegna’s double engraving *Battle of the Sea Gods* (1475–88, figure 3) is frequently cited as the key source of inspiration for Severo’s sea monster type, there are many other points of reference between the bronze and the engraving.⁷ I approach this sculptural case study with an ecocritical sensibility that takes seriously nonhuman animals as ambiguous cultural constructions, starting from an understanding that historical perceptions of animals speak as much to cultural imaginaries as to actual animal presences. The sea monster type is a form of antiquating hybridity (drawing upon an entertaining, pathos-infused visual language frequently seen in ancient Roman and Greek imagery), but it is also connected to actual



Figure 3 *Battle of the Sea Gods*, Andrea Mantegna, 1475–88, engraving print on paper. Left sheet: 27 × 40.4 cm, courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Right sheet: 28.6 × 37.5 cm, courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

sea monsters that were deemed to exist in the world as a range of unnamed sea creatures, referred to in biblical and classical sources.⁸

As a sculpture that evoked imaginative environments and animals beyond the study walls, and as far as the destabilising realm of the shoreline, it had the potential to disrupt and challenge notions of human control and dominion over the material world. In this sense, the sea monster type complicates a view of the Italian Renaissance as the beginning of modern extractivism, as a period frequently absorbed into later-sixteenth-century histories of European colonial violence and expansion. By grounding the sea monster type in the first two decades of the sixteenth century, this article aims to recover some of the more ambiguous perceptions of nonhuman animals in Northeastern Italy at the time. It adopts an ecocritical framework that understands environmental art histories not only in terms of extracted materials or ‘natural’ resources, but also in terms of actual and imagined environments and beings. Speaking closely to the so-called material and affective turns, this ecocritical lens need not – indeed, should not – deviate vastly from the growing body of scholarship that takes seriously questions of interactions, exchange and affect in object histories. However, it is also guided closely by a consciousness of the historical time in which one is writing – that is, at a time of rapid breakdown of the planetary systems on which life on earth depends.⁹

As we shall see, whilst it is tempting to look to the past for different modes of thinking about human relationships with the nonhuman world (which we then might either emulate or avoid), this case study invites us instead to sit with contradictions. It begins with an analysis of the sensory aspects of the bronze sea monster type, locating it firmly in the context of the *studiolo*. I then explore the sculpture’s relationship to the shoreline as both an actual and imagined environment for beholders at the time, followed by a comparative study with bronze life-casts of animals. Finally, I propose that the sea monster type can be connected to the Mediterranean monk seal, a common inhabitant of the Adriatic Sea during this period. In each section, I seek to recover a sense of the beholder’s reception of the bronze sea monster type, a sculptural site in which imagined environments and animals converged with actual ones.

Varied qualities, consistent delights: recovering the sensory potential of the sea monster type

As with small-scale bronzes in general during this period, the sea monster type was designed to be handled, to offer beholders a range of sensory, textural experiences, and to respond dynamically to its surroundings. Its patinated scales would have seemed to glisten in the flickering of candlelight, or in the sun – if near a window – during the day. It may have been thrilling, or perhaps repulsive, to run one's fingers over the scaly surface of the sea monster's body or the curly folds of hair on the back of its head, or to feel the smoothness of its muscular human neck emerging from the scales below.¹⁰ Along the sea monster's back, bumpy spinal ridges run all the way down to the intricate curl of its tail. When partitioned behind glass in the museum space today, this sensory potential is obviously diminished. Among art historians – particularly those focused on cultural histories of the material world – there is a growing range of attempts to mitigate this inevitably flattening effect of the museum display, reflected in Jás Elsner's suggestion that 'we need to get a lot more material and hands-on in our approaches'.¹¹

In the context of small-scale bronzes, an emphasis on tactility and material engagement can reveal the varied quality of modelling and casting. The warm tonality of bronze, and the variation of its surfaces, textures and hues (as a result of patination and gilding) would certainly have affected the beholder's engagement with a sculpture.¹² Bronzes commissioned specifically by wealthy patrons could be of extremely high quality and were, to quote Victoria Avery, 'intended for intimate scrutiny and loving handling',¹³ whereas those that were produced speculatively in batches, as stock for the shop, were generally less well-finished, and may not have been as closely scrutinised by such wealthy owners and buyers. This qualitative variation is visible in the scales on two sea monster versions. In the version already discussed in the introduction, the modeller has clearly taken care over each individual scale, carved into a wax model as a raised semi-circle. The scales are adapted in size for different parts of the body (the front limbs are covered in noticeably smaller scales), and consistently follow the direction of movement, most notably in the spiralling tail. Under the sea monster's neck, a line of semi-circles creates a border between the creature's scaly body, and its smooth, muscular neck, indicating the careful creation of textural differences between body parts. In another, slightly later version (c.1520–1540, figure 4), the scales



Figure 4 Workshop of Severo Calzetta da Ravenna, *Statuette in the form of a sea monster*, c.1520–40. Cast bronze, 21 × 16 × 9 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. © Victoria and Albert Museum.

appear as incisions made relatively quickly by pressing or dragging a tool (or perhaps a fingernail) into the wax, once per scale, and with space in between (figure 5). The muscular human skin transitions into scaly body through a smooth foliate pattern located halfway down the creature's back, beginning above its side fins and extending to its front limbs and neck. The smoothness of this foliate pattern – closer to the texture of the human neck – has allowed the modeller to bypass a significant area of the body which would otherwise have been covered in scales. Although this detail could be understood as indicating a seemingly 'lower' quality of technical modelling, it creates a looser, less obvious transition between human and nonhuman body parts, further blurring the divide between human and animal for the beholder.

Despite the obvious qualitative differences in the two examples discussed here, the tactile appeal of the latter should not be dismissed, nor should we



Figure 5 Workshop of Severo Calzetta da Ravenna, *Statuette in the form of a sea monster* (detail), c.1520–40. Cast bronze, 21 × 16 × 9 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: author's own, courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum.

assume that it was necessarily handled less. Indeed, if less intricately modelled small-scale bronzes were ostensibly more functional, then even the roughest sea monsters would have been interacted with physically by their beholders. It is necessary to remain open to what may be called the cruder examples of bronze sea monsters, particularly since it was serialised workshop products that formed the foundation of Severo's family business (after returning to Ravenna between 1509 and 1511, his workshop flourished, and remained active for almost seventy years, first under Severo and then under his son, Niccolò).¹⁴ Furthermore, in order to locate a bronze sea monster within the study, we must recognise that it would probably have been the only model of its kind in its context, existing in relation not to other sea monsters – as the 'extended family' approach assumes – but rather to its environment.

Desk dreams, shoreline sites: the sea monster type in its *studiolo* environment

The bronze sea monster type was designed for tabletops or shelves, while the context of the study is often implied by their immediate function as tools

of writing (inkwells and sandboxes) or illumination (candlestick holders). Assuming it was placed in the human-made space of the study, or the *studiolo*, for which it was designed, the sculpture would have likely sat on a flat tabletop, or else on a shelf or cupboard – turning it over, it is possible to see where the points of contact with the surface have been smoothed and levelled by the modeller. This sculpture would have formed part of a wider scene among many other collected possessions, including books, papers and inkwells, as well as perhaps medals, statuettes, and paintings. Together, these furnishings created a physical manifestation of the owner's self-fashioned identity, bound up with contemporary ideals of scholarly knowledge of antique culture.¹⁵ For the human who furnished this space, it was a site for contemplation, reflection and, largely, solitude, where hours could be spent reflecting on the knowledge of ancient thinkers. As a compact, contained indoor space, the study encircled and enclosed its human and more-than-human inhabitants, and – as a place of, usually male, withdrawal – kept them secluded from the incursions of the larger household.¹⁶ It was for this curated enclosure of mental labour, overflowing imagination and antiquarian schemes that the bronze sea monster was made.

Within this environment, the sea monster could quickly assume a de-centred position, either as a functional, amusing and, in many ways, ornamental object, marginalised through its familiar daily use or as an entertaining curiosity that was handled occasionally.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the sea monster is designed as an object that seems to resist – or at least call into question – its own marginalisation and absorption into its environment. Its human head reaches upwards with a scream, and its frog-like front limbs are taut with the effort of pushing away from the flat ground, as if beached or stranded. Although it sits firmly without wobbling, many parts of the body do not directly touch the surface, but instead hover slightly above it to cast a shadow beneath, drawing attention to the closeness – and gaps – between bronze object and surface. The sea monster seems to resist, materially and figuratively, both the surface beneath it, as if to say *I am not meant to be here*, and its own object-ness, pleading *do not forget me*. This plea is also an aural interjection into the quiet secluded space of the *studiolo*. Of course, the extent to which the sea monster is heard, or met with sympathy or fear, was determined by the individual beholder.

Whilst the sea monster's physical environment was the *studiolo*, what of the imagined environments it evoked for contemporary beholders? Its

appearance as a stranded, agitated being, uneasy on the tabletop, raises the question: where would this creature feel at home? Its scales and webbed feet suggest an aquatic environment, but its human or satyr head determines that it cannot exist entirely in water. As an *all'antica* hybrid, the sea monster is also infused with temporal ambiguity, as if a relic from a distant, ancient world.¹⁸ I propose that, beyond the flat surface in a study, the sea monster might find a more comfortable environment in a space defined by changeability and ambiguity: the shoreline. This porous site of encounter between land and water makes visible the destructive and generative power of water. For people living in early sixteenth-century Venice – where Severo had worked as a younger artist – and its mainland territories, the tensions and interactions between water and land would have been felt acutely, not only in the Adriatic Sea but also in the estuaries and tributaries of Venetian-controlled cities such as Padua and Ravenna (the latter is constructed on the marshy land between the Padenna and Lamisa tributaries of the River Po).¹⁹ In the Venetian printmaker Jacopo de' Barbari's monumental bird's-eye view of Venice – made up of six woodblock printed sheets – one can see a small detail of two fisherman who, having left their boat, wade through shallow waters to gather shellfish (1498–1500, figure 6). For early sixteenth-century scholars, the generative space of shorelines found intellectual resonance in the idea of spontaneous generation proposed by classical philosophers: Aristotle describes how 'some [fish] are of spontaneous growth... either from mud or sand, or from the putrid matter on the surface'.²⁰ Perhaps most relevant to the bronze sea monster is the shoreline as an imaginative, almost dream-like environment in certain early sixteenth-century visions, where anxieties and fantasies could play out.²¹

This is visualised in an engraving, sometimes called *The Dream* (c.1509, figure 7), by printmaker Marcantonio Raimondi and produced in Venice about a decade after Severo may have been working in the city. It depicts two naked nymphs asleep on the bank of the river Styx, unaware that four monstrous creatures – made up of composite animal body parts – emerge from the water nearby. On the other side of the river, small figures of people can be seen fleeing a burning cityscape under a thunderous sky. Beverly Louise Brown suggests that this print reflects contemporary anxieties about plague, war, and civic disasters in Venice, at a time in Europe when monstrous forms and unusual occurrences were frequently interpreted as omens of



Figure 6 Jacopo de' Barbari, *View of Venice* (detail), 1498-1500. Woodcut, 132.7 × 277.5 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio. Courtesy of The Cleveland Museum of Art.



Figure 7 Marcantonio Raimondi, *The Dream*, c.1508. Engraving, 33.3 × 23.5 cm. British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

societal misfortune.²² The four monsters are the clearest – if only – point of contact between the sleepers and their background, with the potential to either fictionalise or confirm the reality of the apocalyptic scene behind. Here, the shoreline is an unsettling place in which monsters seem to spawn and spill out erratically. As a hybridised creature, the bronze sea monster type shares this potential to evoke a similar sense of threat, occupying an imagined space in which decay and destruction co-exist with burgeoning life.²³ This environment's generative capacities also speak to the intricately entangled associations at the time between artistry and nature. Whereas, for example, Claudia Swan notes that shells were understood during the early modern period primarily as 'instances of nature's artistry', here the hybridised monsters – whether engraved or modelled in bronze – establish clear associations between the artist's *ingegno* (inventive talent) and processes of organic creation.²⁴

For the beholder in early sixteenth-century Northeastern Italy, the sea monster presented a sculptural site in which imagined environments converge with actual ones. It enlivened the indoor, human-made environment by evoking fantastical imagined worlds with all their overlapping possibilities and dangers: the shoreline and *studiolo* seep into each other. Today, it is notable that our own societal anxieties and hopes often find expression through the shoreline and its inhabitants. In an era when the life-giving and life-taking forces of water are unfailingly entangled with human activities, the shoreline is a site on which these consequences are visibly registered – from the devastating effects of cyclones, coastal flooding, and rising sea-levels, to the mass strandings of marine animals (as a result of warming oceans) and tragic scenes of people fleeing violence and poverty, villainised and abandoned by our political and media classes. Although we should primarily understand the sea monster type within its own historical moment, these points of resonance in our own time might encourage us to reflect on shoreline imagery that we encounter in our daily lives, and its imaginative role in reinforcing perceptions of planetary fragility today.

Bronze life-cast crustaceans: the fiction of historical animal presences

Much of our discussion so far can also relate to early sixteenth-century Paduan life-casts (also known as nature casts). Not only did they function as

decorative *studiolo* objects and curiosities with secondary uses as paperweights, inkwells, oil lamps, and sandboxes, the life-casts of crustaceans in particular shared many of the same associations with the shoreline. There is, of course, a key difference: the sea monster type appears to be entirely fantastical (and therefore related only to the historical human), whereas life-casts seem to present an opportunity to excavate the historical presence of an actual animal. Art historical discussions of sixteenth-century life-casts therefore tend to emphasise developments in scientific inquiry and knowledge of natural history, in which the nonhuman animal is conflated with material agent, to the detriment of the former.²⁵ When historians do recognise the once-aliveness of the animals, and the violent processes through which life-casts were made, it is guided by an interest in the artisanal techniques. In a French manuscript from the 1580s, cited by Pamela Smith and Tonny Beentjes, the anonymous author gives instructions on how to kill an animal from which to produce a mould:

To kill your animal put it into a bottle or a vessel... Then cover your animal with some good vinegar or urine, and shake your animal to death, which takes one hour or half an hour. But if you are in a hurry to mold, pour some brandy into its mouth, or add some brandy to the vinegar, and your animal will die very quickly without any injuries that could deform it.²⁶

This extract excites no acknowledgement from Smith and Beentjes of the lived experiences of animal suffering, which reflects a general scholarly (and societal) tendency to approach the nonhuman animal body as matter and an object of technological and artisanal knowledge and skill, rather than a once-sentient being. In many ways, human perceptions of – and interactions with – life-cast bronzes in early sixteenth-century Italy may have aligned with the anthropocentric tone of art historical discussions today: these animals have been *literally objectified*, the organic matter of their bodies physically burned to ashes and replaced by the human-made matter of bronze.²⁷ In an attempt to move away from human-centred narratives, it is tempting to read the ‘real’, once-alive animal into life-cast bronzes, in the hopes of recovering a sense of nonhuman agency.²⁸ Just as the sea monster’s bodily expressions invite reflections on its (imagined) emotional capacities, the bodies of individual crabs might also be read as responding in subtly different ways to



Figure 8 Paduan workshop, *Edible crab (natural cast)*, early sixteenth century. Bronze, width 16 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. © KHM-Museumsverband

their environment. In some bronzes, the crab's two front claws are drawn together in front of its body (figure 8), poses that are tense, defensive, and compact, as if hiding or, by contrast, emphasising a capacity for capturing prey. Either way, they seem to shrink even more into their weighty object-ness as paperweights or boxes. In other versions, the crabs' legs and claws are spread wide apart, or raised upwards, somewhat echoing the sea monster's pushed-up front limbs.²⁹

Crucially, however, all poses of life-casts are the artificial construction of the bronze sculptor, who pinned into place the body of the dead or dazed animal(s) before casting. To overlook this is to underestimate the dominant power dynamics between human/animal.³⁰ Some animals are posed relatively simply – an open-mouthed toad acts as an inkwell – or more dramatically, such as a larger frog carrying a small frog on its back to create a parent and child dynamic, or a crab pulling open a toad's mouth to function as a two-in-one inkwell and sandbox. Once cast, most life-casts were filed down in certain areas, to balance more effectively on flat surfaces. Other traces of the sculptor can be seen in crab sandboxes, in which an incision around the main shell creates the box lid.

For the beholder of a life-cast, an imaginative leap is required to reconcile the coldness, hardness and weight of the bronze with the *perception* that this

is a ‘real’ animal – or at least, an uncanny, almost mimetic record of one. Much of the intrigue of a bronze crab sandbox emerges from the relationality between the inorganic and organic forms of the crab, inviting a constant shift back and forth between two contrasting states. The solidity of the bronze shell echoes the armour-like shell of an actual crab, its bronze hinges presenting a playful nod to a crab’s pincers, which anatomically have their own hinge. Its transformation into a small box plays on the crab shell’s original function, formerly as a container of organic matter that is now an empty vessel to be filled (most likely with sand, an ironic nod to the crab’s shoreline habitat). It is possible that, for contemporary beholders, the culinary familiarity of crab meat also emphasised the organic ‘before’ and inorganic ‘after’ – tender, fleshy inner matter, once only accessible by breaking open the crab’s hard outer shell, is replaced by a small empty space encased in cold metal, and accessed easily through a lid mechanism.³¹ By bringing bronze life-casts, specifically of crabs and frogs, into dialogue with the sea monsters, we are more equipped to appreciate the fluidity between fiction and ‘fact’, and to better understand the life-cast as a human-made object designed for the *studiolo*.

Old man of the sea: finding ‘real’ animals in the bronze sea monster

To further explore the false dichotomy between life-casts as ‘fact’ and bronze sea monster as ‘fiction’, it is helpful to consider the sea monster type and actual animals in early sixteenth-century Italy. Although it may be most tempting to discuss this in relation to its plausibly life-cast details (primarily in the detachable mollusc shell included in some versions),³² the ‘real’ does not only belong to these elements of the sea monster type. I propose that the sea monster type may have connections to the monk seal, an animal inhabitant of the Adriatic Sea that is now endangered after centuries of hunting. The monk seal shares with the bronze sea monster a seemingly fantastical hybridity in terms of its bodily forms, its ability to move between habitats, and even in its compound names used at the time such as ‘vitello marino’ [sea calf], ‘vecchio marino’ [old man of the sea] or ‘orso marino’ [sea bear]. By the late sixteenth century there is written evidence of monk seals being brought – stolen – from the eastern shores of the Adriatic (modern-day Croatia, then under Venetian imperial rule) to Italy, where they were domesticated and used for public entertainment. An extract from *The Kingdom of the Slavs* (published in 1601) by late-sixteenth-century Ragusan chronicler Mavro Orbini, includes

a description of a tame seal, named Martino, who was displayed to the public in 1599 in Pesaro, a *comune* in the Marche region on the Adriatic coast.³³ Despite the chronological distance from the bronzes in our discussion, this description offers insight into early modern experiences of semi-aquatic mammals. Martino the seal was carried ‘in una cassa per molti luoghi d’Italia’ [in a box around many places in Italy], locked in the box at night, and put into ‘un mastello grande, e pieno d’acqua’ [a large tub filled with water] during the day. Note the artificial framing of a semi-aquatic creature through replications of habitats, as if to emphasise its ability to move between land and water. Orbini’s rhetorical comparisons between the seal and other animals – Martino’s front limbs are compared to those of geese, and his movements are often described as snake-like – further emphasises this hybridity, developing a contrast between wildness and domestication, ‘meraviglia’ [marvel] and familiarity.

Most significant to the sea monster type are Orbini’s comparisons between the monk seal and humans, particularly in his description of the animal’s mouth. Orbini writes that, when Martino is asked by his trainers whether he is hungry, the seal:

subito apriva la bocca, et battendo i enti, pareva che volesse dire de si, tenendo gli occhi fissi nel padrone... egli incoltamente mandava fuori una voce, che pareva fusse propriamente di persona arrabbiata, facendo sembiante di volerlo mordere [immediately opened his mouth, chattering his teeth, as if he wanted to say yes, keeping his eyes fixed on his master... He rudely let out a shriek, which seemed to be that of an angry person, making it appear as if he wanted to bite him].³⁴

There is an uncanny resemblance between this description of the seal and the facial expression of the bronze sea monster. Orbini grapples to interpret the communicative gestures of a nonhuman animal – the seal ‘*pareva fusse... di persona arrabbiata*’, ‘*facendo sembiante di volerlo mordere*’ (my emphasis) – just as a beholder of a bronze sea monster was challenged to make sense of the sculpture’s ambiguous expressions. This communicative ambiguity generated by human-animal hybridity is reflected more broadly in the local linguistic description, by Adriatic travellers, of seals as ‘old men of the sea’, and might be productively re-imagined in relation to ancient hybrids more generally –

satyrs, for example, were often represented as libidinous old men with beards. A feminine counterpart may be found in the mermaid (*sirena* in Italian), as another semi-aquatic creature associated with the mysteries and dangers of the shoreline, where boats were at very real risk of catastrophe. Within the bronze sea monster, then, actual animals come to occupy a more porous space between human imagination and physical reality, allowing us further insight into some of the possible imaginative habits of early sixteenth-century beholders in Northeastern Italy.

Conclusion

The bronze sea monster type reflects, at its point of creation, an artistic interest in blurring boundaries not only between human and nonhuman (both animal and plant), but also between subject and object, margin and centre. This continued into the realm of the sculptures' reception, through myriad overlapping representational, sensory, functional or environmental details that presented their erudite beholders with stimulating questions and experiences, both physically and imaginatively – from the textural delights of handling and daily use, to the generative and destructive capacities of the shoreline environment, and the affective game of deciphering what this strange human/animal creature was trying to communicate. At least to some degree, then, the sea monster type resists a conflation of early sixteenth-century Italy with the proto-Enlightenment and European colonial developments of the subsequent decades (which today tend to characterise perceptions of the century as a whole).

This sculpture type was a purposefully ambiguous, multi-layered object, and its popularity among the educated classes living in the early sixteenth-century Veneto reflects a willingness to engage with – and delight in – realms of uncertainty, particularly when unsettling the divide between human and nonhuman animal. This capacity – even desire – for ambiguity between human/animal boundaries is a reminder of the discrepancies and contradictions that existed in early sixteenth-century Italian perceptions of nonhuman animals. Human control over the nonhuman animal was not only violently enacted through the processes of life-casting, it was ever-present (albeit indirectly) in the contained, human-made environment of the *studiolo*. At the same time, this article's ecocritical approach helps to recover the bronze sea monster's potential to repulse or entice, to evoke pity or

bemusement, to resist marginalisation or to be marginalised – in other words, to better understand its capacity to simultaneously disrupt and reinforce the beholder's sense of their own humanness. It lays out a roadmap for exploring human responses – historical and present – to actual and imagined nonhuman animals, encouraging us to reflect on, and learn from, its richness of ambiguities.

Notes

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- 1 Alison Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice: Fantastic Sea Creatures in Venetian Renaissance Art* (London: Miller, 2010), 162.
- 2 Jeremy Warren, 'Severo Calzetta detto Severo da Ravenna', in *Donatello e il suo tempo: il bronzo a Padova nel Quattrocento e nel Cinquecento*, ed. Franco Ambrosio (Milan: Skira, 2001), 131–134.
- 3 Peta Motture defines bronze as 'a copper-tin alloy, with so-called 'true bronze' generally described as 90% copper to 10% tin', noting that Renaissance bronze alloys varied greatly. Motture, *The Culture of Bronze*, 13. On the infrastructure of bronze foundries in Venice and its *terraferma* territories, see: Victoria Avery, *Vulcan's Forge in Venus' City: the Story of Bronze in Venice, 1350–1650* (New York: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2011), 13–22.
- 4 Bernice F. Davidson, *Severo and the Sea Monsters* (New York: The Frick Collection, 1997), 15. The Frick sea monster displays Severo's Latinised signature 'O.SEVERI. RA' in a rare moment of confirmed authorship that also speaks to Severo's classicising aspirations.
- 5 Steven Swarbrick and Karen Raber, 'Introduction: Renaissance Posthumanism and Its Afterlives', *Criticism* 62, no. 3 (2020), 314.
- 6 Severo's workshop – and other Paduan workshops – produced a variety of hybrid sea creature types during this period. There is the Neptune type, in which a figure of Neptune holding a trident stands on top of a dragon-headed monster. A Neptune type which was part of Isabella d'Este's collection, listed as 'Neptuno sopra un monstro col tridente' in the 1542 inventory, may be identical with a bronze in the Frick Collection in New York (inventory extract cited in H. J. Hermann, 'Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi, genannt Antico', in *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen* 27, no. 3 (1910), 216). The Triton type survives in smaller numbers, and depicts an amphibious, fish-tailed creature that is human from the waist up, which raises a hand and screams in agony as a snake attacks him. Another type, the double-tailed siren candelabra, is also associated with Severo's workshop, and includes a life-of-a bird of prey's talon to form the candelabrum base.
- 7 On the connection between Mantegna's engraving and Severo's sea monster type, see Davidson, *Severo and the Sea Monsters*, 15; Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice*, 159; Peta

- Motture, *The Culture of Bronze: Making and Meaning in Italian Renaissance Sculpture* (London: V&A Publishing, 2019), 160–161.
- 8 Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, 'Monsters: A Case Study', in *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150–1750*, eds. Daston and Park (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 173–214.
 - 9 It is predicted that reaching or exceeding 2.5 degrees celsius of planetary warming by 2050 would result in around 2 billion human deaths worldwide. *Global Tipping Points*, 'Earth System Tipping Points', accessed July 1, 2026, <https://global-tipping-points.org/earth-system-tipping-points/>. On the implications of the climate, ecological and biodiversity crises on the United Kingdom specifically, see *National Emergency Briefing*, 'The Expert Briefings', accessed June 6, 2026, <https://www.nebriefing.org/expert-briefings>.
 - 10 'Horror, pleasure, and repugnance... overlapped and coexisted during much of the early modern period, although each had its own rhythm and dynamic'. Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 176.
 - 11 Jaś Elsner, 'Objects and History', in *Cultural Histories of the Material World*, ed. Peter Miller (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 170.
 - 12 It is also possible that the quality varied because of the practice of after casting, which reduced the surface definition. In other cases, the patina has been worn away, which may provide physical evidence of repeated handling.
 - 13 Avery, *Vulcan's Forge*, 128.
 - 14 The output of Severo's workshop was prolific, largely due to the use of the indirect casting method which could be carried out quickly with re-usable moulds by artisans without much training. On the commercial success of Severo's workshop, see Warren, 'Severo Calzetta', 142.
 - 15 See Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in his Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 1–9.
 - 16 See Luke Syson and Dora Thornton, *Objects of Virtue: Art in Renaissance Italy* (London: British Museum Press, 2001), 80–83.
 - 17 The sea monster type does not fall neatly into the category of the ornamental. It may share certain characteristics, primarily that of relationality, as Ethan Matt Kavalier notes in *Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470–1540* (New Haven (Conn.): Yale University Press, 2012), 50. However, as a physical handleable object, it also has the capacity to glide between central and marginal spaces: Elsner writes that objects 'are also reminders of real and tangible things, things we know or can conjure in our imaginations from a space of real-life experience outside the narrative'. Elsner, 'Objects and History', 167.
 - 18 Luchs ponders whether owners of Severo's land and water hybrids may have 'shared the hybrids' imagined nostalgia for a lost antique Arcadia'. Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice*, 161.
 - 19 On Severo's time in Venice, his connections to the Lombardo family workshop there, and how this may have played a part in developing his sea monster imagery, see Alison Luchs, *The Mermaids of Venice: Fantastic Sea Creatures in Venetian Renaissance Art* (London: Miller, 2010), 161.
 - 20 Aristotle, *Aristotle's History of Animals*, trans. Richard Cresswell (Project Gutenberg,

- 2019), 157, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/59058/pg59058-images.html>. Philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi – a former graduate and professor at Padua university until 1509 – was a significant exponent of this theory during this period. On Pietro Pomponazzi's 1518 lecture at Bologna university on the doctrine of spontaneous generation, see Diego Pirillo, 'Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Michael Wyatt, Cambridge Companions to Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 269–70. Pirillo notes too that 'this materialistic explanation of the origin of life drew much attention in the Renaissance also beyond the restricted world of academic culture' (Ibid, 270). See also Amos Bertolacci, 'Averroes against Avicenna on Human Spontaneous Generation: The Starting-Point of a Lasting Debate', in *Renaissance Averroism and Its Aftermath: Arabic Philosophy in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anna Akasoy and Guido Giglioni (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 40. For a short historical overview of spontaneous generation as a theory, see Jerry Bergman, 'A Brief History of the Theory of Spontaneous Generation', in *C.E.N. Technical Journal* 7, no. 1 (1993), 73–81.
- 21 For late-fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Venice, the dream as a site of imaginative encounter holds significant cultural resonance, as exemplified in Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, published in Venice in 1499. On this book, Clare Lapraik Guest notes that 'the desire for antiquity becomes a dream of continuous sensual diversity'. Clare Lapraik Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 357.
 - 22 Beverly Louise Brown, 'Troubled Waters: Marcantonio Raimondi and Dürer's Nightmares on the Shore', in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 92, no. 2 (1 September 2016): 25–43. On the emergence of the prodigy tradition in the early sixteenth century, and the implications this had for perceptions of monstrous forms, see Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 175–76.
 - 23 The landscape of Venetian mainland territories featured many waterways and irrigation systems, and through the sixteenth century there was growing concern about flooding caused by deforestation. See James Pilgrim, 'Jacopo Bassano and the Flood of Feltre', in *The Art Bulletin* 105, no. 3 (3 July 2023): 115–137.
 - 24 Claudia Swan et al., 'The Nature of Exotic Shells', in *Conchophilia*, Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe (Princeton University Press, 2021), 26.
 - 25 Droth describes the life-cast as 'a kind of embodiment, or alchemical metamorphosis, where one substance is transformed into another'. Droth et al., *Bronze: the Power of Life and Death*, 64.
 - 26 Smith, Pamela H., and Tonny Beentjes 'Nature and Art, Making and Knowing: Reconstructing Sixteenth-Century Life-Casting Techniques*', in *Renaissance Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2010), 129.
 - 27 This will develop into objects found in cabinets of curiosities, in which as Bruce Thomas Boehrer notes, 'automata aspire to the status of living beings, while birds and beasts are translated into inert matter'. Bruce Thomas Boehrer, ed., *Cultural History of Animals in the Renaissance* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 19.
 - 28 I agree with Matthew Rampley's argument that expanded notions of agency are not currently providing an effective alternative to the standard theory of agency (i.e. the capacity to act intentionally towards a goal) – instead 'they merely seek to extend the

- range of objects that can be considered agents'. Matthew Rampley, 'Agency, Affect and Intention in Art History: Some Observations', *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 24 (June 2021), 18.
- 29 See the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna collection for examples of early sixteenth-century bronze crabs posed with claws partially raised (numbers 5922 and 5927) and/or wide apart (number 5902).
 - 30 On the dangers of siloing the nonhuman, see T.J. Demos, *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective*, ed. Karl Kusserow (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2021), 21.
 - 31 Laura Giannetti, *Food Culture and Literary Imagination in Early Modern Italy: The Renaissance of Taste, Food Culture, Food History before 1900* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 34–35.
 - 32 The detachable shell on the Frick sea monster (figure 2) is a life-cast of a common Mediterranean mollusc, and a piece-mould would have allowed for multiples. Davidson suggests that the sea monster type's front limbs were possibly cast from the feet of actual frogs (Davidson, *Severo and the Sea Monsters*, 22), however it is more feasible that frogs' feet were observed from life to form part of a loose visual formula for future versions and replicas.
 - 33 William Klinger, 'Note sulla presenza storica della Foca monaca nell'Adriatico' in *La Ricerca*, no. 57 (2010), 6–10. <https://monachus-guardian.org/library/klinger10a.pdf>.
 - 34 Ibid, 6.