

Your

A Self-Guide to the Collection

L  UCKY
DAY

The Irish don't have the market cornered on good luck. Maybe your rabbit's foot or new penny has lost its luster. Rather than rely on good-luck charms, perhaps you need to be a bit more proactive at keeping bad luck at bay. Take a tour of six works of art to learn how different cultures attempt to conjure good fortune or repress ill will.



GALLERY 213

Polycrates Receiving the Fish and Crucifixion of Polycrates
(1663/65) by Salvator Rosa

Fate is luck's worst enemy as the story of the hapless Polycrates proves. Ruler of the Aegean island of Samos in the sixth century B.C., Polycrates worried that the gods would envy his enormous wealth and power. To ward off divine punishment, he threw his most prized possession, a fabulous jeweled ring, into the sea. When a group of fishermen offered Polycrates their day's catch and the ring was found inside one of the fish, Polycrates knew that he was doomed. Sure enough Samos was invaded, and Polycrates was captured and crucified. A philosopher as well as a painter, Salvator Rosa often represented lesser-known stories from antiquity that dealt with the vicissitudes of fortune.



GALLERY 221

Head of Medusa (c. 1801) by Antonio Canova

Talk about making lemonade from lemons. That's what Athena did when given the head of the fearsome Medusa, whom Perseus had slain with the goddess's help. In life and death, Medusa's gaze turned all who met it into stone. Athena used this power to her advantage by placing the severed head on her shield. This myth propagated the use of Medusa's image on various armor throughout the ages. In this compelling study for a larger sculpture, Canova exploited the horrific connotations of a decapitated, yet still living, head wreathed in snakes.



GALLERY 124

Male Figure (Nkisi Nkondi) (early/mid-19th century). Republic of Congo, Kongo, Vili sub-group

Evil-doers beware. This man means business. Beautifully rendered and then violently pierced with nails and blades, this striking object was made to contain and control a spirit in order to assist people in need by enforcing laws and exacting punishment. The spirit associated with the figure was drawn into the sculpture through the application of medicinal ingredients packed in resin on its head and in the projecting box, sealed by a mirror, on its abdomen. A metal point was driven into the piece each time its force was invoked through ritual, thereby provoking the spirit into action.



GALLERY 125

Mural Representing a Priest (A.D. 600–750). Mexico, Teotihuacan culture

If there's one thing the ancients learned it was to thank the gods before asking them for more. This wall fresco depicts an ancient ceremony that likely occurred every 52 years, a "century" in the ancient Mexican calendar. As part of the ritual a priest extends thanks for the good fortunes of the last century and prays for a blessing on the cycle that is to begin. Petitions issue from his mouth in the form of a scroll as he ceremoniously dispenses flowers, water, and incense. Like the chants of a religious litany, this complex image was repeated with others around the walls of a chamber in prayers for agricultural fertility.



GALLERY 135

God Ganesha (11th/12th century). India

This chubby little boy with the head of an elephant is loved and honored by Hindus as the remover of obstacles and the lord of auspicious beginnings. Elephants have been revered in Indian culture for centuries as symbolic of good luck. You may notice a small rat underneath Ganesha's throne. This, believe it or not, is his transport. In situations where Ganesha could not squeeze his way into tight spaces to remove obstacles, the pint-sized rat would come to his and his devotee's aid. The name Ganesha means "lord of the ganas," dwarfish devotees of the God Shiva not unlike leprechauns that could be either good or mischievous.



GALLERY 67

Gaming Set (1735/40). Austria, Du Paquier Porcelain Manufactory

Why put your faith in talismans and gods when you can take matters into your own hands and play for luck? Gambling was an obsession with the denizens of 18th-century royal courts, people with money to spend, plenty of leisure time, and a craving for excitement. This gaming set, made by one of the earliest factories in Europe to manufacture true porcelain, is decorated with images of playing cards and includes small tokens that functioned like poker chips—with the amounts marked in *louis*, gold coins issued by the French crown that were used all over Europe.