

MIT List Center

Jacques Lipchitz Birth of the Muses

This is Birth of the Muses by Jacques Lipchitz from the late 1940s. Born in Lithuania in 1891, Lipchitz's burgeoning artistic career in Europe was cut short by World War II, and in 1940, he immigrated to New York. There he experienced a surge of creativity that led him to incorporate the mythological creature, Pegasus, into his work.

Pegasus was a winged horse whose hooves brought forth the springs from which the muses were born. The muses, in turn, inspired the creation of poetry, literature, music, and art. And so Pegasus is associated with a creative spirit.

Curator Emerita of Williams College Museum of Art, Deborah Rothschild.

Here we see Pegasus turning to look back over his shoulder as his hooves rise in front and touch the ground in the back. His wings appear behind at right and possibly in front, between the pair of legs. Finger-like forms echo one another so that clusters of curving appendages flare out from the center core. Other curving shapes, in likelihood indicating the water of the spring at the bottom left, and the air, or clouds, at the upper right and left, add to the sense of movement through space.

Works like this with more naturalistic, expressive and distorted anatomies marked a new direction for Lipchitz who had previously experimented with cubism. But cubism's influence is still felt here in the work's ambiguity, distortion and shifting perspectives.

Is the curving shape at the rear of the horse, his tail, a cloud, water, or all of the above? Is the three-pronged scalp form that bisects the body of the horse one of its wings, or a symbolic representation of the female muses?

Lipchitz encouraged such associations, but of course, nothing is certain or definite. The viewer's mind is kept engaged and active in puzzling out the ambiguous shapes.

To see and hear about Lipchitz's other work at MIT, please proceed through the adjacent doors into the interior courtyard.