

Dear Parents,

Today, your child learned about the painting *Icarus*, created by the French artist Henry Matisse, and the Greek myth which inspired his work. First the children were read the story, and then they were presented with the artwork. For their project, we read another Greek myth, *Arachne*, and they created their own pieces of art.

### ***Icarus, the Greek Myth***

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Mythology attempts to explain the origins of the world and details the lives and adventures of a wide variety of gods, goddesses, heroes, heroines, and mythological creatures. In Greek mythology, Icarus is the son of Daedalus, a highly talented craftsman from Athens, Greece. Daedalus had built a Labyrinth for Minos, the king of Crete, to imprison the Minotaur (half man, half bull). But then King Minos held Daedalus and Icarus in exile so that Daedalus could not work for anyone else. The father and son wanted their freedom, and began to look for ways to escape.

After studying the birds that flew around Crete, Daedalus decided perhaps they could fly off the island. So he crafted wings from wax and feathers for himself and Icarus. Before they took off, Daedalus warned his son not to fly too close to the sun (or the wax would melt), nor to the sea (or the sea spray would weigh down the wings). But entranced by the idea of being close to the heavens, and overestimating his capabilities, Icarus took flight, soared through the sky, and went too close to the sun, melting the wax. He kept flapping his wings but soon realized that he had no feathers left and was only flapping his bare arms. Icarus fell and drowned in the sea in the area which now bears his name, the Icarian Sea.

### ***Icarus, the Painting and Henri Matisse***

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*Icarus* is one of the most popular sketches created by Matisse for his famous artist illustration book *Jazz* (1947). In this piece of art, the sky is illustrated in deep blue while stars light up in yellow. Icarus himself is depicted as a silhouette against this nighttime sky, as if his destiny is already sealed and his actions have lost their importance. A red dot can be seen, perhaps at the place where his heart still beats. It is unclear whether Icarus is flying or falling in this picture, although absence of wings and the seemingly flailing shape of his body suggest that he is falling.

Henri Matisse (1869-1954) was born in France, where he began painting when he was in his twenties. He created “Jazz,” when he was in his seventies, and many techniques he had earlier employed were no longer available to him. Unable to draw or paint easily with a pencil or brush, he used a technique called “drawing with scissors” – cutting out simple forms from paper which had been painted in bright colors according to his specifications. He then arranged them as desired on another sheet of painted paper. This was then prepared for printing.

### ***Project – Arachne, the Greek Myth***

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For our project, we read another Greek myth, *Arachne*, and the children were able to create their own artwork. Arachne is the story of a young lady, who was a very good weaver and spinner. She wove all sorts of beautiful pictures into her cloth, and people came from all around to see her work. This went to her head and eventually she became so conceited about her weaving skills that she began claiming that her skill was

greater than that of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, war and the weaving arts. Athena was angered, but gave Arachne a chance to redeem herself. Assuming the form of an old woman, she warned Arachne not to offend the gods. Arachne scoffed and demanded a weaving contest against Athena, so she could prove her skill. Athena dropped her disguise and the contest began.

Athena wove a beautiful cloth showing the gods, goddesses and constellations. In the meantime, Arachne wove a cloth mocking the gods and goddesses, filling her tapestry with all the foolish things they had done. Even Athena admitted that Arachne's work was immaculate, but her envy at such human competition, and her anger with Arachne's portrayal of the gods were uncontrollable. She pointed her finger at Arachne and suddenly Arachne's nose and ears shrank up, her hair all fell out, her arms and legs got long and skinny, and her whole body shrank until she was just a little tiny spider (Arachne means spider in Greek). She had turned Arachne into the greatest weaver that has ever lived.

Finally, before doing their own artwork, we discussed some similarities in the two stories. Namely, both show how extreme pride or arrogance can lead to one's downfall. Icarus and Arachne both overestimate their competence and capabilities, and are out of touch with reality, leading to fatal consequences. The word for this extreme pride or arrogance, with its root in ancient Greek, is *hubris*.

#### References:

- Eric A. Kimmel, *McElderry Book of Greek Myths*, Margaret K. McElderry Books, New York, 2008.
- Johnson, Keesia and O'Connor, Jane, *Drawing with Scissors*, Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 2002.
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Icarus> (shows other artistic representations of Icarus as well)
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arachne>
- <http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/greeks/religion/myths/arachne.htm>
- <http://www.art-reproductions.net/matisse-henri/icarus>
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hubris>