Curator Statement:

Mermaids are found in the mythologies of all cultures, and they have a particular history in America. Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492 and claimed to have seen three mermaids off the coast of Haiti the following year. P.T. Barnum, the nineteenth-century American impresario and showman, exhibited the remains of a mermaid in his New York museum for years (it was a hoax), and Mami Wata, the goddess with a fish tail, traveled across the Atlantic Ocean with the African Diaspora and continues to inspire devotees throughout the new world. At present, there are mermaid conventions in Las Vegas and Orlando, Florida; mermaid parades in Coney Island, New York, and other areas of the United States; and people who purchase mermaid tails to cultivate their own rich fantasy life.

American girls are fascinated with Walt Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989)—a sweetly saccharine rewrite of Hans Christian Andersen's tale that was first published in Denmark in 1887. In Andersen's story, the mermaid has traded her tongue (her voice in the Disney version) for a pair of legs that cause her great pain to walk upon (not the case in the Disney version), and she does not win the love of her prince (as she does in the Disney version). As a consequence of this failure to captivate, she is doomed to oblivion; however, at the last moment she is given a choice. In order to return to the sea and her mermaid self, she must destroy the man who spurned her love. Her sister mermaids beseech her to do all that is necessary to come home, but the little mermaid cannot kill the prince and sacrifices herself instead. All is not lost, however, as she is transformed into an air spirit whose good deeds will eventually lead to her winning a human soul.
Disney's little mermaid, whose name is Ariel, lives happily ever after with her prince and returns to the sea on occasion as a mermaid. Her attributes, a green fish tail, a purple seashell bra, and long red hair make a favorite costume for dressing up, and she is a popular character on Disney cruises worldwide and at the Disney theme parks.

Mermaids are also popular attractions at beach resorts. For example, mermaids have performed at Weeki Wachee Springs in Florida since 1947. In this natural spring, which has been turned into an underwater theater, the mermaids enter through a special tunnel and draw air through underwater tubes while performing acrobatic and theatrical shows. In the 1960s, the mermaids at Weeki Wachee Springs were internationally famous and attracted one million visitors a year. While not quite as popular with visitors today, the mermaid show and similar events featuring mermaids continue to draw audiences. Films about mermaids are still being made, and mermaid costumes are a perennial favorite for young women, as well as young girls who often dream of becoming mermaids when they grow up.

How do we explain the continuing appeal of mermaids in America? Appreciating mermaids as fantasy characters brought to life is one facet of the appeal. Another is their eternal youth and beauty; they are beautiful young women with long flowing hair and the ability to bewitch men at sea and summon the powers of nature. There is also an edge to the mermaid, an element of danger that provokes our interest. In olden days, sailors and fishermen may have longed to see a mermaid, but they also feared such encounters. The sighting of a mermaid could lead a man to lose his mind and follow her to certain death in the ocean's watery depths. Mermaids, like sirens, have a powerful attraction that is rooted in their unworldly loveliness.
Unconventional beauty—one way to define a mermaid—has the potential to unseat conservative standards of the merely pretty and to circumvent the constant pressure to conform. For all of us, the mermaid represents an alternative to the status quo and an expression of a universal quest to take us out of our everyday life into a world where beauty of another kind reigns and humankind is in harmony with the natural world.

- Donna Gustafson, Ph.D., Curator