

Octopus as manually/mentally dexterous

Across cultures and historical periods, octopuses are often depicted as both manually dexterous and mentally capable. Unlike many other fictional attributes ascribed to octopuses, these traits seem to correlate directly to the actual animal's behavior, as observed in the wild as well as in captivity. In marketing, the octopus is often used as a symbol of skill, intelligence and efficiency. The octopus is often seen holding various objects in each of its arms, performing multiple tasks simultaneously and reaching areas that would be inaccessible to other animals.

Given that octopuses have eight arms augmented with suction cups, it's not difficult to see why humans have often chosen to depict the octopus as a manually dexterous creature. Octopuses in the wild have been observed manipulating objects in their environment and are the only invertebrates known to use tools. Octopuses have also long been renowned for their intelligence. In times before octopuses were studied closely, the animals were known for their ability to escape from captivity and to pilfer food from humans, in some cases, boarding fishing boats and making off with some of the day's catch. More recently, scientists have observed octopuses solving mazes and puzzles, playing with objects and engaging in what are believed to be acts of observational learning.

Octopus as aggressor/monster

Many visual depictions draw on maritime lore regarding octopus attacks. While there is no historical record of an octopus attacking a ship, tales of giant sea creatures attacking vessels date back to Greek times. In many of these accounts, it is difficult to determine whether the creature that is described more closely resembles a giant octopus or a giant squid (the latter being far larger and more aggressive, based on current scientific knowledge). Regardless, the image of the octopus as aggressor persists and in many such depictions, the octopus' positive qualities (intelligence, cunning, manual dexterity) become fearsome abilities aimed squarely at humans. When depicted as an aggressor, the octopus' size is often exaggerated to monstrous proportions, resulting in a creature far larger than even the largest giant octopus on record. In many of these depictions, the octopus is also objectified as a monster devoid of any clear motivations or agency.

Interestingly, there are a few recorded incidents of real octopuses attacking divers, though in most of these cases, the animal was believed to be acting in self-defense.

Octopus as sexual aggressor

Visual depictions of octopuses as sexual aggressors date back to 19th century Japan, where depictions of octopuses engaging in various sexual acts with human women became a popular visual trope. Perhaps the most famous of these, *The Dream of the*

Fisherman's Wife, was completed in 1814 by the famous woodblock printer Hokusai, as part of a three-volume collection of erotic prints. Curiously, while the print was originally assumed by western scholars to depict an act of rape, the text in the image and surrounding context of the collection seem to suggest that the woman in the image is a willing participant in the act.

Regardless, due possibly to images such as these, depictions of the octopus as sexual predator became popular in the 20th century. Continuing in the tradition of the woodblock printers of the 19th century, many Japanese manga and anime artists chose to depict octopuses engaging in sexual acts with human women, in many cases, casting the octopus as a rapist or predator. Similar, though less explicit images appear in American pulp iconography of the 1950s and 1960s. In both cases, the octopus is often presented as a threat to male sexual dominance; in some scenarios, female characters are rescued from octopuses by male heroes. Few images of octopuses engaging in sexual acts with men exist--in nearly all depictions of octopuses in sexual scenarios with humans, the octopus is clearly gendered as male.