

## The Myth of Zeus and Callisto

Callisto, which in Greek means “most beautiful”, was a forest nymph, the daughter of King Lycaon of Pelasgia.

She was a follower of Artemis (Diana in Roman mythology), goddess of the hunt, who demanded that all the members of her entourage take a vow of chastity.

But Zeus (Jupiter in Roman mythology) fell in love with the young nymph and, knowing Callisto would reject him if he approached her as a man, disguised himself as Artemis (or Apollo, Arcadian god and brother of Artemis, according to other versions) in order to possess her.

Callisto became pregnant and hid her condition from her companions for as long as she could. However, one day, when Artemis and her retinue were bathing in a river, one of them noticed Callisto’s swollen belly and informed the goddess.

Artemis chased the nymph with her bow and arrows, determined to kill her for breaking her solemn oath. Zeus turned her into a bear, but even in that form she could not escape the goddess’s wrath and died. To save his child, Zeus transformed Callisto into a constellation and set her in the heavens, thereby granting her immortality as Ursa Major.

The son of Zeus and Callisto was Arcas, who later became king of Pelasgia, a region thereafter known as Arcadia in his honour. When he died, Zeus made him a constellation and placed him beside his mother in the sky as Ursa Minor.

Meanwhile Hera, Zeus’s wife, learned of her husband’s affair with the nymph and asked him to punish Callisto by never letting her or her son rest, which is why both constellations are always visible in the night sky.

In art history, this myth has often been the subject of paintings and sculptures that depict Callisto and Zeus disguised as either Apollo or Artemis. Here are some examples:



*Diana and Callisto.* Jean-Baptiste-Marie Pierre, 1745–1749  
Museo Nacional del Prado (Madrid)  
Jupiter, transformed into Diana, seduces Callisto.



*Jupiter and Callisto.* Peter Paul Rubens, 1613  
Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen (Kassel)  
Jupiter, as Diana, seduces Callisto.



*Diana and Callisto.* Federico Cervelli, circa 1670  
National Museum in Warsaw  
The love affair of Callisto and Jupiter (disguised as Diana).





*Diana Leaving Her Bath.* François Boucher, 1742  
Musée du Louvre (Paris)

The goddess Diana, on the right, identified by the crown of pearls and crescent moon on her head, accompanied by the nymph Callisto.



*Diana and Callisto.* Gaspero Bruschi, circa 1750  
Museo Stibbert (Florence)

The moment when the bathing nymphs betray their companion Callisto's secret.



*Diana and Callisto.* Ignaz Elhafen, circa 1690–1695.  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Callisto's pregnancy is discovered by Diana's retinue.



*Diana and Callisto.* Peter Paul Rubens, circa 1635.  
Museo Nacional del Prado (Madrid)  
Callisto's companions undress her to reveal the nymph's pregnancy to Diana.





*Diana and Callisto.* Gaetano Gandolfi, circa 1785–1789  
Private collection  
Diana discovers Callisto's pregnancy and points at the evidence of her guilt.



*Diana and Callisto.* Titian, circa 1650.  
Kunsthistorisches Museum (Vienna)  
Callisto's companions force her to undress, tearing off her clothes to show Diana the swell of her pregnant belly.