

CHAPTER EIGHT

Displaying Myth: The Visual Arts

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Identifying Myth

A group of Athenian women arrive in Delphi. They look around them, and in astonishment exclaim ‘So, it’s not only in Athens that there are beautiful temples to the gods!’ Much impressed, they begin to make a closer inspection.

‘Just look,’ one cries to another, ‘there is Herakles, fighting the monstrous Hydra of Lerna.’

‘I see that!’ her friend replies. ‘And next to him a man raising blazing torches. I wonder if it isn’t Iolaos, his faithful companion. I once embroidered a cushion with a picture of him.’

Another woman interrupts, ‘Oh but do look at this man riding a winged horse and fighting a fire-breathing monster with three bodies!’

A fourth woman cries, ‘There is so much to look at! Just look at that raging battle: there’s a giant who has fallen, and someone wearing a gorgon head for protection stands over him...’

‘That is Athene,’ another woman explains.

And then the crowd of women begins to look harder and to name the various defeated giants and the gods who are conquering them: Zeus with his thunderbolt flaming at both ends and Bacchus using his reveller’s thyrsos as a weapon ... and so they might have gone on had they not finally noticed the temple attendant standing by and been forced to get on with the drama. For these ladies are not twenty-first century AD tourists on a day-trip from Athens but members of the chorus in Euripides’ play *Ion*.¹ The reactions that the dramatist puts into their mouths must, however, have rung true in the ears of



Figure 8.1 Herakles with the Hydra and Iolaos. Attic black-figure neck amphora, 540–520 BC by the Swing Painter.

his fifth-century BC audience. This is a truly vivid example of myths on display, but one may wonder: *how do the women know which myths they are seeing?*

Some features the women describe make the myths easy to identify. Herakles is fighting a unique monster, the Hydra, the main characteristic of which was its multiple heads. Artists confronted with a verbal description of the creature decided that it ought to have snake-like heads, and most thought that nine would be just about the right number. Once you have seen one image of a Hydra, it is easy to recognize another.

The Hydra had the peculiarity that whenever one of its heads was severed, two new ones would grow in its place. This made progress discouraging for Herakles until he discovered that cauterizing the stump of a severed head prevented new growth. He therefore called upon his nephew and faithful companion Iolaos to help him. The story was popular with vase-painters like one who showed Herakles wearing his lion-skin standing to the left with Iolaos on the right (fig. 8.1). The scene was also depicted on sculpted metopes decorating temples.²



Figure 8.2 Bellerophon riding Pegasos, attacking the Chimaira. Attic black-figure cup, c. 550 BC.

The winged horse spotted by the third woman is clearly a mythological creature. It must be Pegasos, the mount of Bellerophon when he fought the fire-breathing Chimaira. The Chimaira was triple-bodied; it was basically a lion, but with a fire-breathing goat's head in the middle of its back and a snake for a tail (fig. 8.2). Quite unmistakable.

Such unnatural mixtures – Centaurs that are part man and part horse, sirens with birds' bodies and human heads, a minotaur with a bull's head and a man's body, or a river god with a bull's body and a man's head are all obviously mythological and easy to recognize. Giants can be more difficult. These children of the goddess Earth, whose threat to the gods had to be vigorously fought off, were not necessarily extra-large (though they could be) and for a long time they were represented in art either simply as hoplites (heavily-armed soldiers) or wild men who wore skins and fought with stones rather than man-made weapons (fig. 8.3). In the Hellenistic period some of them were represented with snake-legs (fig. 8.6, below), but before that they could still be recognized by their opponents, that is, the gods whom they fought against. The woman from Athens who pointed out the raging battle knew that it was a fight between gods and giants because she recognized the goddess Athene wearing a 'gorgon head for protection', and others identified Zeus with his 'thunderbolt flaming at both ends' and Bacchus with his characteristic thyrsos. These attributes are very helpful in identifying a god or goddess who might otherwise just be mistaken for an ordinary human being. Thus, the vase painting (fig. 8.3) depicts a similar scene, with Athene shown as a helmeted woman with a leering gorgon's head, a device intended to frighten the enemy, on her *aegis* (a sort of snake-fringed poncho), spearing a giant who looks like



Figure 8.3 Gigantomachy: Athene and Zeus fighting giants. Attic red-figure hydria shoulder, c. 480 BC by the Tyszkiewicz Painter.

a hoplite, while Zeus, a mature man wielding a stylized thunderbolt, slays a wild giant wearing an animal skin and using a boulder as a weapon.

Using such ‘attributes’, artists could distinguish Herakles by his lion-skin (fig. 8.1), Artemis by her bow, Apollo by his lyre, and so on. There is a brief guide to identifying myths and the characters in them in the appendix at the end of this chapter.

We may assume that the myths the Athenian women admired were sculptures decorating the outside of a temple. This was a prominent location for the public display of myths since many people would be able to see them when they gathered to make sacrifices at the altar, which was usually placed to the east of the entrance to the temple.

Myths in Architectural Sculpture

There were three areas on a temple – or, in fact, almost any Greek public building – that could bear such decorations: metopes, friezes, and pediments (fig. 8.4). In Doric buildings (fig. 8.4 top), there were rectangular (almost

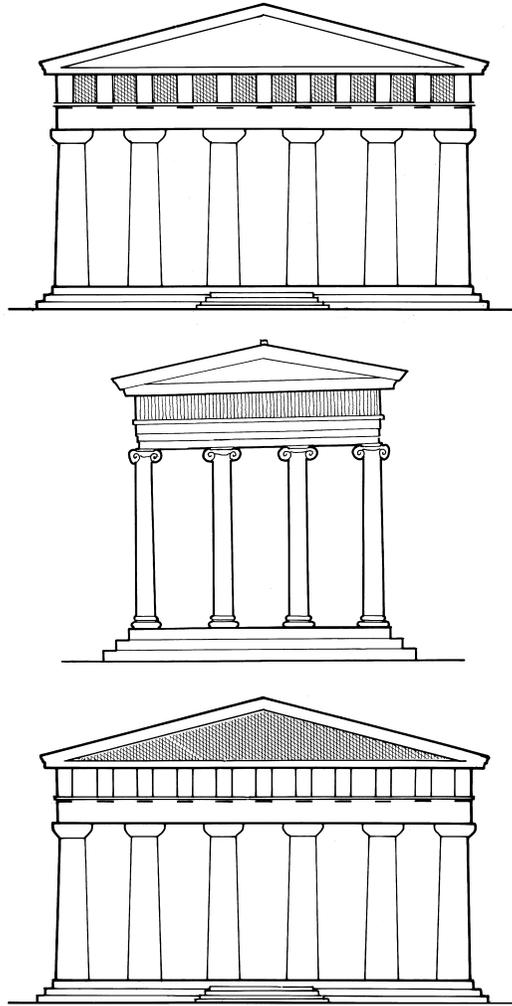


Figure 8.4 Areas for decoration on a temple: metopes (top), frieze (middle), pediment (bottom).

square) metopes, in Ionic buildings (fig. 8.4, middle), long continuous friezes. In both the Doric and the Ionic orders, there was the awkward, low triangle of the pediment (fig. 8.4, bottom). The architecture determined the shape into which decorative sculpture or painting had to be fitted and designers always had to keep this in mind.

The metopes were usually placed on the outside of a building, and had to be decorated with figures made as large as possible in order to be visible from a distance. If the heads of the figures reached the top of the metope and their feet rested on the bottom, there would normally be room for only two, or, at most, three such figures. Presumably the men in charge of constructing the

building would have chosen which myths would be illustrated. We have no way of knowing how this was decided. Different choices were made in different places.

On the Parthenon in Athens all fourteen metopes along the front (east side) of the temple were devoted to scenes of gods fighting giants. Sometimes a single god was shown attacking a single giant, at others a single god charging forward in a chariot – a good way to fill the space of the metope, the horses providing an interesting alternative to the more usual two figures. On the three other sides of the building there were other themes.³

At Olympia, only the metopes within the porches of the temple were decorated. All twelve (six at the front and six at the back) were carved to illustrate the Labours of Herakles.

In western Greece, several temples were adorned with a sort of compendium of mythological subjects, not necessarily related to a single theme. One metope might show a god struggling with a giant and another illustrate one of the deeds of Herakles, while a third showed Artemis having transformed Aktaion into a stag so that his dogs, not recognizing him, attacked him (fig 8.5). He had offended Artemis either by boasting that he was a better hunter than she or having seen her bathing – either way meriting, she believed, his harsh punishment. On the metope from a temple in Sicily *we* can see Aktaion still in his human form, though obviously the dogs attacking him cannot. This was one way that an artist could solve the awkward problem of showing that someone's real nature was concealed within the shape of an animal. Artists depicting Odysseus' men transformed by Circe faced the same sort of problem.

An artist normally selected some telling incident or event (the beheading of the monstrous Gorgon, for instance, or Europa, entranced by Zeus in his disguise as a bull, riding off on his back) or introduced some obvious attribute or action so that the story would be readily recognizable.

While artists designing metopes had to devise ways of reducing the stories they told to no more than two or three characters, those designing friezes had the opposite problem: they had to find ways to expand whatever myth they were illustrating so that it could fill an extended space. Like metopes, friezes were usually seen from a distance and the figures had to be as large as possible, heads reaching virtually to the top of the available space. Certain subjects lent themselves particularly well to this sort of treatment. Battles, for instance, which were reduced to single combats for metopes, could be expanded almost indefinitely for friezes just by adding more and more fighting figures.

Battles between gods and giants were popular for friezes as well as metopes (fig. 8.6). The base of the Great Altar at Pergamon was decorated with a tremendous extended combat, part of which showed a snake-legged giant at the



Figure 8.5 Artemis and Aktaion. From a metope on Temple E, from Selinunte, Sicily. Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Palermo.

far left confronting triple-bodied Hekate (with multiple arms) beside a handsome human-shaped giant awestruck by the beauty of Artemis who draws her (now lost) bow against him at point-blank range. Between the two lies another snake-legged giant attacked by Artemis' dog. Battles between Greeks and Centaurs and Greeks and Amazons (warrior women) also served well for friezes.⁴ All three of these themes could, in theory, be turned into allegories representing the struggle of civilization against barbarism.⁵ Processions and assemblies also provided opportunities for artists to keep adding as many figures as they needed, and usually some sort of mythological justification could be found for them.

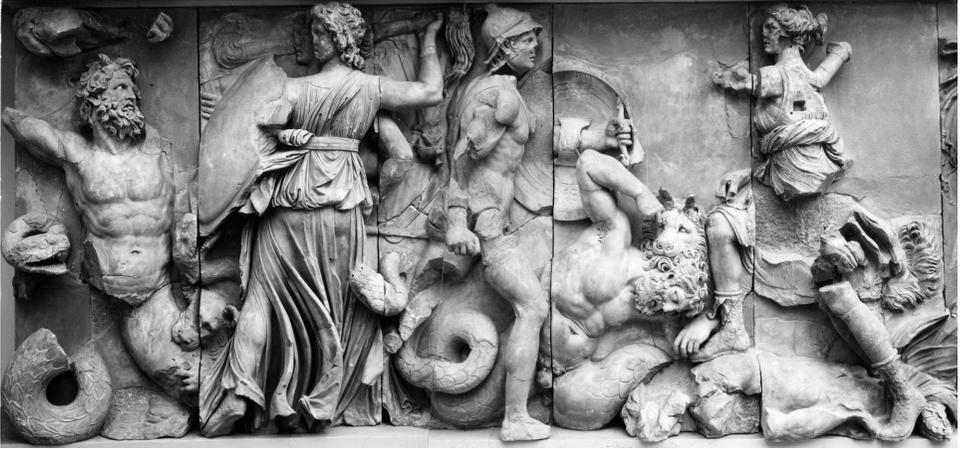


Figure 8.6 Hekate and Artemis fighting giants. From the Great Altar, Pergamon c. 180–160 BC.

The long low triangle of the pediment (the space left at the front and the back of the gabled roof) could present more problems for the designer. If he was not concerned about presenting a single scene made up of figures on a single consistent scale, he might feel free to introduce hints of a variety of different stories filled with figures whose size was determined solely by the headroom offered by the particular place they occupied in the pediment, those toward the sloping sides being shorter than those toward the centre⁶ (fig. 8.7). To illustrate just one myth by means of figures on a unified scale within the pediment was a more challenging task. By the end of the sixth century BC artists had discovered that the challenge could be met most easily by showing a violent conflict. Participants could then all be kept to a single scale but fitted into the slope of the pediment because in the course of the struggle some of them would be standing, while others might be forced down to crouch or even lie flat on the ground.

The battle of the Greeks against the Centaurs was a wonderfully versatile theme: it could be easily reduced to a single combat, as in some of the metopes on the south side of the Parthenon; extended into a running conflict between numerous Greeks and Centaurs, as on a frieze in the Temple of Apollo at Bassai; or organized into a climactic battle presided over by a tall god, as in the west pediment at the temple of Zeus at Olympia (fig. 8.8). In the pediment, the god Apollo occupies the full height of the apex of the pediment, while human heroes on either side of him (shorter than gods) fight Centaurs (who are shorter still). The Centaurs have grabbed women, whose heads do not rise as high as theirs, and, further out from the centre, figures in combat are brought yet lower, so that while they are all on the



Figure 8.7 Herakles and Apollo struggling for the tripod, with Zeus intervening in the centre, and perhaps other stories at the sides. c. 525 BC. Pediment of the Siphnian Treasury, Delphi.

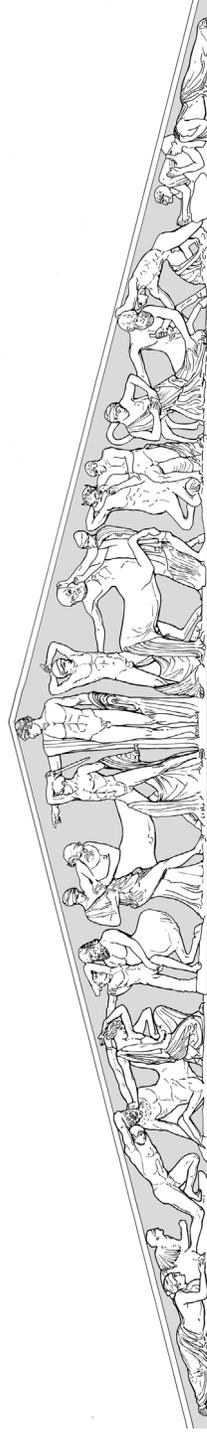


Figure 8.8 Olympia, Temple of Zeus, west pediment. Drawing by Kate Morton.

same scale, the level of their heads is constantly becoming lower – and so conforms to the slope of the pediment.

Statues of the God within the Temple

Because all important ceremonies took place in the open (unlike services in churches, mosques, and synagogues) the sculpted myths decorating the outside of a temple were the ones most frequently seen by the people. Seldom did anyone see the statue dedicated to the god within the temple. Such statues, which could be very large and expensive, were nevertheless sometimes elaborately decorated with mythical subjects.

The huge statue of Athene that stood in the Parthenon, for instance, had its surfaces covered with ivory and gold, ivory for the flesh parts and gold for the clothing. Myths and suggestions of myths were lavishly distributed about the figure: her helmet was decorated by a sphinx in the centre, with two images of Pegasos flanking it. The outside of her shield contained scenes of Greeks fighting Amazons, while on its inner side were represented the battle of gods and giants, and combats between Greeks and Centaurs adorned her sandals. The base of the statue (a long, relatively narrow strip like a frieze) illustrated the birth of Pandora with all the gods in attendance – the sort of assembly that was suitable for the composition of a frieze. We learn all this from authors who saw the statue when it was still extant, and from souvenir copies that were mostly made for Roman tourists.⁷

The celebrated cult statue of Zeus at Olympia, once regarded as one of the seven wonders of the world, was similarly ornamented with images of myths decorating the throne and base of the statue as well as the fencing surrounding it.⁸

Literary Accounts of Mythical Representations Now Lost

Both the statue of Athene in the Parthenon and the statue of Zeus at Olympia were destroyed centuries ago. Many other important works were lost even earlier, particularly paintings. We know of these from writers like Pausanias, who toured Greece in the second century AD and wrote about what he saw, and Pliny the Elder (died AD 79), who included a discussion of works of art in his compendious *Natural History*, as well as from a scattering of other authors. Many of the paintings described were greatly celebrated. Some of them apparently had the sort of subjects we might have expected: Greeks battling with Centaurs and Athenians fighting Amazons in a sanctuary of Theseus;⁹ or

Aphrodite rising from the sea by the famed Apelles.¹⁰ Pliny¹¹ describes a painting by Zeuxis as ‘a superb Zeus enthroned amid the assembled gods, with the infant Herakles strangling snakes in the presence of his trembling mother Alkmene and of Amphitryon’, surely a visual counterpart to the story told in words by Pindar in his first *Nemean Ode*.

Others are more unexpected. For instance, Pausanias describes at length a large wall-painting that the renowned painter Polygnotos made for the club-house of the Knidians at Delphi in the first half of the fifth century BC. Polygnotos chose to represent the Fall of Troy, but approached it in an unusual way. Instead of showing the horrors of the night of the sack, he depicted, instead, the morning after, with only one warrior still actively involved in killing. Practically devoid of action, there must have been a great stillness in the mural with emphasis placed primarily on emotion and character, traits for which Polygnotos was renowned. To make the identity of his numerous figures quite clear, he inscribed their names beside them, and in order to make his composition interesting, he set some figures higher up and some further down in a multi-level scheme which seems to have been invented by him.¹²

We also hear of particularly ingenious devices invented by painters – for instance, how Timanthes ‘being desirous to emphasize, even in a small picture, the huge size of a sleeping Cyclops, painted some Satyrs at his side measuring his thumb with a thyrsos.’¹³

Sometimes painters invented entirely new themes. Lucian describes a mural painted by Zeuxis in the late fifth or early fourth century BC. It depicted Centaurs, monsters who were popular in art in conflicts with men, and normally considered just a group of male adults whose infancy and family life were of no concern to either poets or artists until Zeuxis created

a picture of a female centaur – and what’s more she was depicted in the act of suckling two centaur babies...

The mother centaur was shown with her horse-part lying on some soft grass, and her hind legs stretched out backwards. The woman-part was slightly raised from the ground and propped on its elbow. ... She was holding one of the newborn babies in her arms and breast-feeding it in the normal human manner, but the other was suckling away at the horse-part like an ordinary foal. In the upper part of the picture, on a bit of rising ground, appeared a male centaur, presumably the husband of the lady who was suckling a baby at each end of her anatomy.¹⁴

These are only a few examples of sometimes rather surprising works of art lost to us. Others that have disappeared without a trace would no doubt have brought further surprises.



Figure 8.9 The Judgement of Paris. Attic white-ground pyxis, c. 460 BC by the Penthesilea painter.

The Evidence from Vase Painting

Although many thousands of vases with painted figures have survived, these form only a very small fraction of what had once existed.

Vase painters delighted in creating images of myths, ingeniously transforming flowing stories into static pictures. This was by no means a straightforward procedure. Vase painters, like sculptors decorating architecture, had to devise ways to make verbal narratives clear in visual terms. Like them they made use of attributes and distinctive monsters (figs. 8.1 and 8.2, above); like wall painters, they could also have recourse to inscriptions (see below discussing fig 8.10).

Vases could be decorated in a variety of different ways. The figures could be painted in black silhouette, with internal markings indicated by incisions (as in figs. 8.1 and 8.2). This technique, called ‘black-figure’, began to be developed in the seventh century BC and flourished during the archaic period. From the late archaic period (around 530 BC), it was gradually superseded by the red-figure technique in which the figures were left in the natural colour of the clay, the background was painted black around them and the internal markings were indicated by fluid brush strokes (as in figures 8.3 and 8.10).

A third technique, white-ground, consisted of covering the surface of the vessel with a white slip and painting the figures in outline, sometimes adding less stable colours after firing (fig. 8.9). It could produce very charming effects and probably resembled major wall paintings more than any other vase-painting technique, but it was more delicate and easily damaged than the other two techniques. Consequently it was mostly reserved for dedications and funeral offerings, which did not require hard-wearing

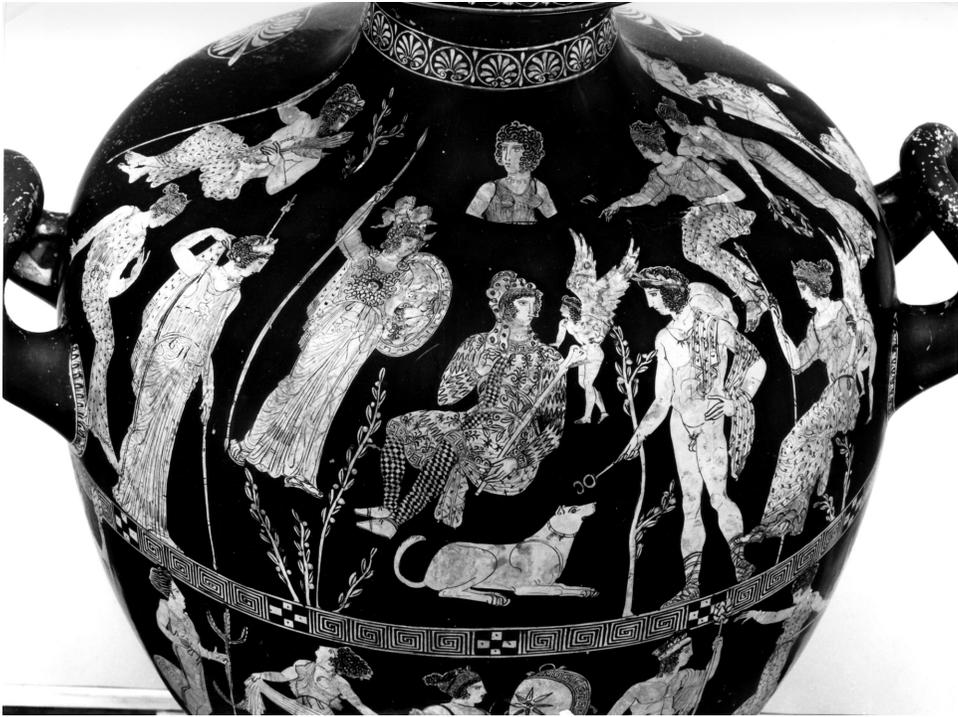


Figure 8.10 The Judgement of Paris. Attic red-figured hydria, 420–400 BC, by the Painter of the Karlsruhe Paris.

vessels. Black-figure vase painters particularly enjoyed depicting action scenes and inventing images for monsters. Red-figure vase painters began to explore the emotional overtones of quieter scenes, and increasingly diminished their representations of violence. White-ground vase painters seldom dealt with mythological subjects, but when they did so it was with great refinement.

The Judgement of Paris, the contest of three mighty goddesses for the golden apple, the prize for beauty and the ultimate cause of the Trojan War, was a popular theme. Vase painters could illustrate it relying on a simple formula: three goddesses following Hermes, who leads them to Paris for his adjudication. Lazy artists would barely distinguish the contestants, but more ambitious ones would take the trouble to produce individual characterizations. One artist (fig. 8.9) abjured movement and shows the three goddesses quietly standing by while Hermes explains to Paris, who is seated on a pile of rocks, what is required of him. Though born a Trojan prince, fortune had made Paris a shepherd, and he looks a rustic type with a sun hat on his back and a thin club in his hand for use in hunting or defending his

flocks. He must have been astonished by the sudden divine apparitions. The vase painter has identified Hermes by his traveller's hat and his *kērykeion* (special herald's staff). Behind him, Hera, the wife of Zeus, is shown holding a regal sceptre; Athene, next, has her helmet in one hand and a spear in the other, while Aphrodite, quietly confident, brings up the rear, holding a libation bowl in one hand and nonchalantly chatting with her son Eros, a valuable ally in the competition. The goddesses were supposed each to have offered Paris a bribe. Aphrodite's offer of Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, turned out to be irresistible. The assistance she rendered to Paris in carrying Helen off provoked a Greek expedition to recover Helen and thus began the Trojan War. The bearded man standing behind Paris defies identification: we are not always able to understand every element in Greek art.

A later artist (fig. 8.10) invented a more complex composition with more complex overtones. Instead of lining up the cast on a single ground line, he has scattered the figures up and down across the surface of his vase at different heights, probably in the manner of the wall painter Polygnotos, whose works (see above) are only known to us from descriptions, but which the vase painter had seen with his own eyes. In the centre Paris, attired in an elaborately embroidered exotic costume, is seated with his shepherd's dog at his feet. Hermes stands to the right holding his messenger's staff, addressing Paris. Paris turns towards Hermes, but his attention may well be distracted by the little Eros perched higher up and touching him on his shoulder.

To the left of Paris stands Athene, magnificent in her high helmet, *aegis* with gorgon's head in the centre, a shield in one hand and a spear in the other. A little below her to the left, Hera stands lifting her veil in a bridal gesture and holding a sceptre. One has to hunt for Aphrodite, eventually to find her seated at the far right behind Hermes, her arm around yet another Eros. All the figures are labelled, though the inscriptions, unfortunately, are not visible in the photograph. On the vase itself, however, it is easy to identify the crucial, though partially obscured, figure of Eris, the goddess of discord. It was she who set the contest in motion, having cast the controversial golden apple into the midst of the assembled deities, and here she is shown, head and shoulders appearing right above Paris' head.

The reason why Eris appears only from the waist up is because the artist probably thought of her standing behind a hillock that hides her lower body. He may well have been trying to create a landscape of hillocks and rocks of the sort that would have worked well on the light ground of Polygnotos' wall paintings, but was largely negated by the conventional black background used for red-figure vase painting.



Figure 8.11 Bellerophon riding Pegasus and slaying the Chimaera, 380–370 BC. Pebble mosaic from Olynthos.

Myths in Other Materials

Myths could also be recounted, or suggested, in other materials. The Greeks started to produce figured subjects in pebble mosaics in the fifth century BC. A fourth-century BC example (fig. 8.11) shows a familiar subject, Bellerophon riding Pegasus attacking the Chimaira (see fig. 8.2, above). The elements in the image are easily recognized, but instead of all standing on a single ground line, the hero is placed above the monster. This new arrangement, a sort of metaphor of Good (above) conquering Evil (below), struck such a positive chord that it was perpetuated down the centuries and used, for example, for images of Saint George and the dragon in Christian paintings. The elaborate decorations surrounding the central circular picture here suggest a carpet-like floor-covering, for which the pebble mosaic was no doubt a substitute.

Whereas a mosaic offers a large space for decoration, a coin offers only a small one. But even coins sometimes carried images of myths. For instance, the Thebans, devotees of Herakles, struck some of their coins with a depiction



Figure 8.12 Infant Herakles strangling snakes (silver coin of Thebes). AR stater. Early fourth century BC.

of the infant Herakles strangling snakes. A silver coin of the late fifth century BC (fig. 8.12) shows a hardy infant with a wriggling snake in each hand. This is unmistakably the infant Herakles – for what other hero could display such might so young? The snakes were, according to most sources, sent by Hera to test which of the twins that Alkmene bore was Zeus’ son. Herakles made it clear at once! This is, of course, the same story as the one painted by Zeuxis in a more elaborate scene as reported by Pliny (p. 167). On the coin, the baby hero is shown in the centre, while the first two initials of Thebes, the minting city, are placed below him.

Though very small, a coin provides a pictorial surface on which it is easy to recount a myth. This is far more difficult – and expensive – in free-standing sculpture. However, a group of figures can do the trick. A famous example illustrating a myth is the group of Laokoön and his sons entwined in the snakes sent to punish the priest for inveighing against the wooden horse (fig. 8.13), a scene dramatically described by Vergil in Book 2 of the *Aeneid* (2.40–56, 201–27). Laokoön, rightly as it turned out, warned the Trojans to ‘fear the Greeks even when bringing gifts’ and had dared to thrust his spear into the suspect wooden horse. As Troy was doomed, Laokoön was not believed but instead was mercilessly destroyed by the gods, for two enormous snakes emerging from the sea attacked both him and his two young sons. The complex stone statuary group, praised by Pliny,¹⁵ was immensely admired when it was first discovered in the Renaissance for its portrayal of pain and suffering.

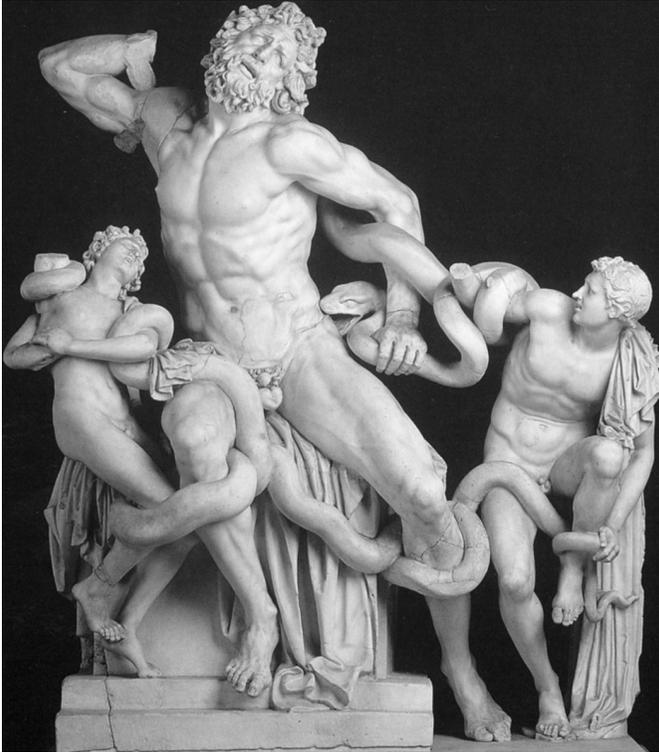


Figure 8.13 Laokoön and his sons attacked by snakes. First century BC/AD. Probably a Roman copy (or variation) of a Hellenistic original.

There was a certain vogue for mythological statuary groups during the Hellenistic period, and entire or fragmentary Roman copies are preserved of Menelaos with the body of Patroklos, and of Artemis rescuing Iphigeneia by replacing the girl with a deer before the sacrificial knife can fall.

Mythological groups could also be composed of separate statues. Pliny¹⁶ mentions that Myron made ‘a Satyr marvelling at the flutes, and an Athene’, which some scholars suggest were two separate statues combined into a group illustrating the story that when Athene discarded the flutes she had invented, being disappointed with the appearance of her puffy cheeks when blowing into them, the satyr Marsyas retrieved them, eventually playing them so enthusiastically that he challenged Apollo to a musical competition.

Judicious use of attributes could transform even single isolated statues into ones carrying a mythological message. For instance, a huge muscular Herakles¹⁷ is shown in a statue leaning on his club looking exhausted. One arm hangs limply, hand open; the other hand is behind his back. If you go round the statue you will see that he is holding the apples of the Hesperides in that hand.

This detail alludes to Herakles' many trials and his final triumph, for it reveals how the mighty hero, wearied after completing all his arduous labours, has, by obtaining the apples of the Hesperides, finally come to the end of his trials.

Myths in Greek Art

The human figure was the subject dearest to the hearts of Greek artists, and it was often shown in a mythological context. But much of Greek art was not mythological in content. Most free-standing statues were images of gods or heroes, personifications of abstract concepts, or mortals celebrated for their athletic prowess, poetic genius, or political power, or simply commemorated after their death. Vase painters, as time progressed, became less interested in conjuring up images of myths and more and more interested in illustrating scenes of daily life. Even architectural sculpture sometimes dealt with non-mythological subjects, whether historical scenes of battles and rituals or generic ones – take, for instance, the heated debate as to exactly what the famous Parthenon frieze represents.

Nevertheless, images of myths permeated Greek society on public buildings and in private homes. To the simple they offered the pleasures of recognition, to the sophisticated a challenge to thought. To artists, they were a constant spur to creativity and a stimulus to create increasingly subtle interpretations.

APPENDIX: HOW TO IDENTIFY MYTHS DEPICTED IN IMAGES

This Appendix describes three strategies for identifying images of myths and warns of the pitfalls associated with each.

Identification through Inscription, Attribute or Characterization

A good way to begin is to identify the personages represented.

When a name is inscribed beside a figure, this is usually clear, simple, and convincing, though on rare occasions an inscription may be inaccurate or misleading.¹⁸

Attributes, too, are generally a reliable guide to the identity of a mythological figure, for instance, a lion-skin and club almost invariably identify Herakles – unless they have been stolen or exchanged so that another figure temporarily possesses them.¹⁹ The usual attributes for the most important gods are as follows:

- Zeus – with thunderbolt or sceptre;
- Hera – pulling aside her veil in a bridal gesture or holding a sceptre;

- Athene – armed with helmet, *aegis* (a sort of snake-fringed bib with the head of the gorgon in the centre) and sometimes also spear and shield, owl and olive;
- Apollo – with a bow or lyre or laurel;
- Artemis – with a bow or accompanied by a deer;
- Hermes – with *kērykeion* (messenger’s staff) and traveller’s hat;
- Dionysos – with *thyrsos* (pine-cone-topped fennel staff), vines, or drinking vessel;
- Poseidon – holding a trident or fish.

Characterization can also be helpful – for instance, Hera pulling aside her veil in the gesture used by brides, but this gesture is not unique to her, as Helen or Andromache may also use it.

Even the age of a mythological character can vary. Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades are always characterized as mature men, but Dionysos and Hermes, who are bearded in the archaic period, become beardless youths later, and Eros, whose early image is that of a young man, grows ever younger as time goes on, eventually becoming a mere winged baby in the Hellenistic period.

Identification through Conflict with a Unique Monster

Herakles slew the hydra. If one man alone is engaged with a hydra (unmistakable in its configuration), it is highly likely to be Herakles. If there are two men, one is Herakles and the other Iolaos (fig. 8.1).

Perseus slew the Gorgon Medusa. Gorgons have visages so dreadful that merely to look at them is enough to turn a mortal to stone. The horribleness of the Gorgon was represented by means of a frontal face, staring eyes, leering mouth with tusks, snaky curls, and, often, a beard. Perseus was well advised to avert his glance while beheading Medusa, a pose that is in itself telling.

Theseus slew the Minotaur. The Minotaur, fruit of the unnatural union between Minos’ wife, Pasiphaē, and an attractive bull that she found irresistible, had a human body but a bull’s head (and sometimes a bull’s tail).

In such instances the unique features of the monster specify the hero, but the matter is not always so simple; for instance, if the Chimaira is shown attacked by three men, none of them riding Pegasos, it is hard to decide whether any or none of them is Bellerophon or what myth might be illustrated.²⁰

Centaur (with human bodies above and horse bodies from the waist down), though clearly recognizable in themselves, do not have any single adversary, as they were associated with more than one hero: Theseus fought the Centaurs who disrupted Perithoös’ wedding feast; Peleus engaged the learned Centaur Cheiron to instruct his son Achilles; Herakles not only slew the ferryman Centaur Nessos who tried to rape his wife but he also fought a group of

Centaurs who gathered uninvited when the Centaur Pholos opened the Centaurs' communal wine jar in order to entertain the hero.

Even Sirens (woman-headed birds) were encountered by more than one hero. Odysseus avoided their fatal lure by having himself tied to the mast of his ship; the Argonauts bypassed these menacing singers by having Orpheus out-sing them.

Identification through Context

Several men poking a stick into the eye of a seated figure is a clear representation of Odysseus and his men blinding Polyphemos. A man clinging onto the underside of a sheep, surely an unusual mode of transportation, must be Odysseus escaping from Polyphemos' cave. But a man *riding on top* of a sheep is Phrixos riding the ram with the golden fleece.

In a scene where Herakles appears to be fighting a hoplite undistinguished by any special characteristics, the hoplite is Kyknos, identified by his adversary. If the scene is expanded to show Athene aiding Herakles and another warrior aiding Kyknos, the second hoplite is Kyknos' father Ares, the god of war, usually distinguished from a generic representation of a hoplite only by context or inscription.

Two women beside a man in a horseless winged chariot are Demeter and Persephone sending Triptolemos on his way to instruct mortals in agriculture.

The activity of fighting Amazons (warrior women) was indulged in by three different heroes: Herakles, Theseus, and Achilles. Herakles can usually be identified by his lion-skin and Achilles by his fatal attraction to Penthesileia, but in the absence of either inscription, attribute, or clear amorous involvement, the conflict remains ambiguous.²¹

FURTHER READING

Woodford 2003 presents a wide-ranging survey of how myths were represented in classical antiquity and is copiously illustrated, as is Carpenter 1991, a useful reference book collecting a rich compendium of images of myths. For the Trojan cycle in particular, Woodford 1993 surveys art and literature with full illustration. A full and scholarly exposition and analysis of images of myths is presented by *LIMC*, an international enterprise with articles in English, French, German, and Italian. It consists of eight large double volumes, of text and illustrations, devoted to mythological iconography with entries arranged alphabetically, each article covering a mythological character (god, hero, or monster) in ancient Greek, Roman, and Etruscan art.

Small 2003 presents an intelligent critical analysis of the relationship of artworks to texts; Schefold 1992 (with plentiful illustration) describes and analyses many images, relating them to literature both extant and lost. For a case-by-case study of the

relationship between vase painting and literature, it is helpful to turn to Shapiro 1994, who focuses on a limited number of myths, with many translations, and observes the independence of the literary and graphic traditions. Friis-Johansen 1967 investigates when and where early Greek illustrations can be taken to reflect knowledge of the *Iliad*, but early images are frequently not directly influenced by the Homeric poems, as Snodgrass 1998 carefully demonstrates. For the influence of Athenian tragedy on western Greek vase painting, we can turn to Taplin 2007 (again copiously illustrated). Weitzmann 1947 is still useful for its scholarly study of the relationship of illustrations to texts, with special emphasis on illustrations in books.

NOTES

1. A loose translation/retelling of the first chorus in Euripides *Ion*, lines 184–218.
2. Metopes showing Herakles fighting the hydra appear on the Hephaisteion and the Temple of Zeus at Olympia.
3. The metopes at the back of the Parthenon, the west side, are thought to represent the battle of Athenians against the Amazons; those on the north side, the Trojan War; those on the south (at the ends) a battle of Greeks and Centaurs, while the subject(s) of those at the centre of the south side are uncertain. Most of the metopes, except for the fights with the Centaurs, have been much damaged.
4. Battles with Amazons and struggles with Centaurs were represented on the friezes of the Temple of Apollo at Bassai and on the Mausoleum at Halikarnassos.
5. The Gigantomachy might be thought to have represented violent opposition to the order of the Olympian gods; the Centauromachy, wild nature against civilized restraint; the Amazonomachy, enemy eastern people (and women at that!) against the Greek conception of proper government and behaviour.
6. The pediment of the temple of Artemis at Corfu, for instance, seems to have illustrated three different stories, each on a different scale.
7. A detailed description is given by Pliny, *Natural History* 36.18–19.
8. Pausanias 5.11.1–8.
9. Pausanias 1.17.2–3.
10. Pliny, *Natural History* 35.91.
11. Pliny, *Natural History* 35.63, tr. K. Jex-Blake.
12. Pausanias 10.25.1–27.4.
13. Pliny, *Natural History* 35.74, tr. K. Jex-Blake.
14. Lucian *Zeuxis and Antiochus* 3–4, tr. H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler.
15. Pliny, *Natural History* 36.37–8.
16. Pliny, *Natural History* 34.57.
17. The ‘Farnese Hercules’ in Naples, Museo Archeologico, presumed to be a copy of an original by Lysippos in the fourth century BC.
18. See, for instance, the vase in Leipzig showing Thetis giving armour to *Menelaos* (discussed in CH. 21, p. 416), illustrated in Woodford (2003: 203 (fig. 165)).

19. Herakles' attributes were stolen by mischievous satyrs or aigipans, who naughtily flaunt them, and the hero was forced to exchange his attire with Omphale, when she bought him as a slave; she is therefore sometimes shown wearing his lion-skin.
20. Attic black-figure amphora c. 540 by the Swing Painter in the British Museum, illustrated in Woodford (2003: 211, fig. 176).
21. von Bothmer (1957).