



Using Visual Arts in Teaching Mythology

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USING VISUAL ARTS IN TEACHING MYTHOLOGY

The adventures, loves, and battles of ancient heroes and divinities were more often observed and heard in the Graeco-Roman world than read. For the most part, ancient peoples were illiterate. They listened to recitations of epic poetry, experienced Greek tragedy, and were surrounded by architectural and freestanding sculpture as well as other visual representations of divinities, heroes, and myths. One needs only to consider the Akropolis, with its wealth of mythological sculptures, or sixth-century Attic pottery, or Roman wall painting to be aware of the extent of ancient visual depictions of mythology.

Mythological representations, then, were an integral part of the ancient environment. It is primarily for this reason that the incorporation of the visual arts into a mythology course is valid: today's students will be provided in this way with a more comprehensive view of the presence of mythology in ancient life.

Another rationale, however, is that our students have grown up in a world of television and film. As a result of this and the explosion of Web sites and computer games, they are more visually than textually oriented. They will relate easily to lives that were filled with brightly colored images and complex, illustrated tales.

While there is certainly no "right way" or "wrong way" to teach mythology, it is my contention that adding the visual arts to the usual emphasis on literature and theory is valid. Such a comprehensive approach sets out to present the ancient world as it was perceived by those who inhabited it.

Visual representations of myths, heroes, and divinities can simply illustrate tales well known in literature (such as episodes from the *Odyssey*) or myths that lack extensive literary representation, such as the Centauromachy.

These representations can also be understood as images in context, having metaphorical, instructional, apotropaic, and/or propagandistic functions. The enormous lost sculpture of Athena Parthenos, for instance—in her ivory and gold glory—displayed attributes appropriate for her role as the patron of Athens. Overwhelming and helmeted, with shield in hand, she reflected military and civic power, strength, and wealth. She is portrayed differently elsewhere, as is seen on the Herakles and Atlas metope of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia, where, without her military attributes, she simply offers divine aid.

As an example of how visual arts can be incorporated into a myth course, I will discuss the Centauromachy, the battle between the Lapith people of Thessaly and the Centaurs, uncivilized creatures from remote northern Greece which are generally represented as horses with the chests and heads of men.

Because this myth became a metaphor for the struggle between civilized and uncivilized peoples and for the ultimate victory of order over chaos, it is an especially appropriate example for class study. The sculptural and painted depictions are propagandistic as well as illustrative. When students examine several sculpted versions of the Centauromachy, they can observe the works in their original architectural contexts and become witnesses to the use of myth as propaganda.

The wedding feast of the Lapith king Pirithous was disrupted by violence caused by the Centaurs' assault on the bride and other Lapith women.

The uncultured guests, unaccustomed to imbibing wine—a product of civilized people—had become inebriated and violent. There are ancient literary sources for this episode. Some, such as Homer's *Iliad* (2.741–744) and *Odyssey* (21.295–304), contain brief references to the myth which serve, for instance, to exemplify the consequences of drinking wine beyond one's capacity. Other literary sources are more extensive: Euripides, for instance, composed a tragedy (now lost) about King Pirithous, and Ovid's account in the *Metamorphoses* (12.210–535) provides an extended, bloody account of the struggle which followed the Centaurs' first encounter with wine and their subsequent lewdness and violence.

Because of the dearth of major extant literary sources, visual representations of this myth become particularly significant. The Centauromachy is represented on important fifth-century Greek temples, including the Temple of Zeus at Olympia and the Parthenon in Athens, as well as on the Temple of Apollo at Bassae and the Hephaestion near the Athenian Agora. Although Centaurs in general and this specific myth in particular are portrayed with some frequency in other media, such as small bronzes and Greek ceramics (on the archaic François vase, for instance), my focus will be on the major sculptural representations. The smaller ones are frequently illustrative and lack the propagandistic elements that make the architectural sculptures particularly interesting for classroom discussion.

The most prominent sculptural representation is at Olympia, on the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus. The sculptures on the east pediment portray a myth of local importance, the chariot race between Pelops and Oinomaos, which is shown here in its preparation. In contrast to the static composition of this narrative, the west pediment is filled with motion and struggle. The aspect of the Lapith and Centaur myth depicted here is not the feast but the imminent calming of the subsequent battle by a son of Zeus, Apollo, who intervenes as the bearded Centaurs seize Lapith women and fight against each other. The opponents, grouped in twos and threes, are portrayed in dramatic positions that are in sharp contrast to that of the calm god. Apollo stands aloof, his outstretched arm, turned head, and commanding stance foreshadowing the calm that will soon prevail. The god is in control while lesser beings are still engaged in violence.

The pedimental sculpture should be seen in its architectural context and the myth considered in propagandistic and symbolic as well as representational terms. Both pediments allude to the temple's deity Zeus, who judges the chariot race said to represent the game's origins, and whose son exerts control over the Centaurs' violence. Both also allude to athletic competition. Ironically—for a sanctuary in which Panhellenic games were held—both mythical events can be seen as dishonorable: deceit is inherent in the chariot race and lack of control in the wrestling match that erupted at the wedding feast. Furthermore, the presence of Apollo may have been seen as urging calm not only for the Lapiths and Centaurs but also for the Olympic game participants. Students can thus understand how events of the Panhellenic games were alluded to in their mythical counterparts, and how the sanctuary's divine patron and his son exacted their power and control.

The Centauromachy has particular significance for Athens, which gained its political supremacy in the years after being devastated in the Persian invasion; the ultimate Greek defeat of these non-Greeks helped to define the concept of Greek versus "the other." In Athens, the Akropolis provides

a treasure trove of mythological representation that can be related to its propagandistic function. Under Perikles, a massive building program of the mid-fifth century B.C.E. asserted the strength, wealth, and power of Athens. Mythological themes reflect these attributes: the architectural sculpture of the elegant marble temple of Athena Parthenos became a metaphor for the polis. Both pediments portray Athena, patron of Athens, one representing her birth and the other her contest with Poseidon for patronage. The metopes on the temple's four sides portray battles of mythological fame, with probable reference to historical conflicts, and particularly the Persian wars waged just decades before the temple's construction. Like their counterparts on the other three sides (the battle of the Gods and Giants, the Trojan War, and Theseus fighting the Amazons), the Lapiths and Centaurs express the victory of strength over weakness and civilization over barbarism. According to Pausanias (1.28.2), the Centauromachy also appeared on the shield of the colossal chryselephantine sculpture of Athena that stood inside the temple, reinforcing the importance of this myth for this polis. The Athenian metaphor of Greek versus "the other," then, is displayed prominently on the Parthenon's exterior. Each of the four conflicts focuses on physical struggle; their outcomes are assumed, not visually narrated. It is only the myth of the Lapiths and Centaurs, however, that blatantly portrays the struggle between human warrior and hybrid beast. Here the "other" has clearly been demonized.

The Parthenon Centauromachy differs from that on the Olympian Temple of Zeus in both placement and narrative. The depiction on the metopes, each representing a single Lapith pitted visually and narratively with a Centaur, contrasts in composition and complexity with the representations on the Olympian pediment. Again, the feast is alluded to only in its aftermath, but in Athens Apollo has no place. The focus instead is on the violence that will end in the victory of the civilized Lapiths. This is an important lesson for students, who can see how the same myth can fulfill different functions.

The Lapith and Centaur frieze on the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, unlike that of the Parthenon, is continuous. The violence, therefore, seems to be ongoing and even confused as opposed to that of the Parthenon metopes, where each one-to-one struggle is perceived in isolation. The Centauromachy appears together with the battle of the Greeks and Amazons, which correlates the stories of the Centaurs and defines "the other" as hybrid beast or woman warrior, both in contrast to the Athenian male warrior.

In each of these sculptural representations of the Lapiths and Centaurs, the wedding feast *per se* is ignored and only the ensuing struggle depicted. The intent seems to have been to use the human versus semi-human struggle as a metaphor for the victory of civilization. Grasping such a notion is an important step in students' understanding of Greek attitudes.

Presentation of visual representations of this myth can be augmented by including related issues: Apollo's demeanor at Olympia can be related to his representation in literature, in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, for instance, and later sculptural representations of the god—the ancient Apollo Belvedere or Bernini's seventeenth-century Apollo in pursuit of Daphne—attest to the continuity of visual portrayals.

Incorporation of the visual arts into a mythology course can be integrated with literary and theoretical presentations of myth throughout the

course. Ancient representations of each topic can be simply illustrative, or they can provide discussion of the historical and propagandistic use of myth, for instance, or the specific visual attributes of a particular divinity. Younger students may enjoy producing their own versions of wall or vase paintings depicting myths, while older students might be more interested in delving into the social, cultural, and even Freudian meanings that can be related to such representations. Visual representation of myth can also be presented as a discrete unit with focus upon specific myths, as suggested above, for instance, or upon Greek sculptural representations of various divinities.

The inclusion of visual representations of myth provides enrichment and is not intended to turn a classical mythology course into an art history or archaeology one. Issues of style, technique, and archaeological history need not be discussed; inclusion of visual representations is intended to enhance rather than to divert attention from the presentation of other manifestations of myth.

Any discussion of the visual arts must, by definition, include images. Slide, PowerPoint, and Web presentations, as well as the use of textbook reproductions are all possibilities. There are many images on the Web, for instance, on the Perseus site and/or links found through university home pages. If there is a lack of resources, art history departments may be willing to lend slides and offer assistance.¹

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¹ A wide variety of books and textbooks pertain to Graeco-Roman art and architecture. For instance, J. Boardman's *Greek Art*, 4th ed. (London 1996), R. Osborne's *Archaic and Classical Greek Art* (Oxford 1998), and J. Griffiths Pedley's *Greek Art and Archaeology*, 2nd ed. (New York 1998) are general sources. Works such as J. Henle's *A Vase Painter's Handbook* (Bloomington 1973) and T. H. Carpenter's *Art and Myth in Ancient Greece* (London 1991) present specific correlations, and guidebooks such as A. and N. Yalouris' *Olympia: The Museum and Its Sanctuary* (Athens 1993) offer excellent photographs. Specific works on the Parthenon are represented by J. Hurwit's *The Athenian Acropolis: History, Mythology, and Archaeology from the Neolithic Era to the Present* (Cambridge 1999) and R. F. Rhodes' *Architecture and Meaning on the Athenian Akropolis* (Cambridge 1995).