**Artistic Device and Meaning**

"The story of a myth unfolds in time; an image is static." (Woodford p.28) Perhaps the greatest challenge for any artist is to convey their message. It must be spoken in a visual language whether signified by a whisper or a shout. It must adhere to restrictions of media, scale, and function. Messages of ancient mythology come to us in many artistic forms. They can be varied or regimented, explicit or mysterious, miniscule or gigantic, utilitarian or purely aesthetic. These images are intricately connected to oral history and traditions passed through generations. In many cases the image remains after the oral history has been lost, leaving a puzzle for art historians to solve. Interpretation is always prefaced with the reminder that new solutions may arise which will alter our current understanding. Woodford lists five main devices which were employed by artists to ensure their message was understood; Labeling by Inscription, Identification through Attributes, Characterization by Means of a Strangely Formed Adversary, Clues Provided by Normal Elements Abnormally Combined, Clarification through Context within a Mythological Cycle.

The most explicit convention used by artists to identify a mythological story is labeling. By inscribing the name of the characters involved, the artist implies the setting and invokes the viewers' knowledge of the subject. An example shown in the textbook is *Hector and Andromache; Helen and Paris*, c. 540-530 BCE. (Woodford p.16, Figure 6) In this image, specific identification of the figures enhances a slightly generic scene. Some knowledge of Homer's "Iliad", the story in which these characters exist, is important in understanding the black figure image. Helen turns away from Paris, who has provoked war by bringing her to Troy. Beside them stand Andromache and Hector. They face one another as if about to embrace. "The contrasting relationships of the two couples, so vividly expressed in the poetry of the epic, is sensitively captured by the painter of the vase." (Woodford p. 17) Without the inscription which expresses their identity, the emotional appeal of the image is reduced. The story of passion and rejection captured in the scene is lost.

Attributes are another common artistic device used to convey a message and enhance understanding of mythological scenes. Often characters are shown in familiar attire or carrying unique weapons. An excellent example is provided in the textbook, *Hercules Farnese* c. 400 BCE. (Woodford p.18, Figure 7) This sculpture shows Hercules with some of his most familiar attributes. He gained the impenetrable skin of the Nemean lion during his first labor by killing the animal with his bare hands. His weapon of choice, a sturdy knotted club, is with him as well. "… he is shown as young and beardless, at other times as mature and bearded, but almost always he is shown with a lion skin and a club." (Woodford p.19) The Farnese Hercules is depicted in mature form, looking exhausted, near the end of his labors. The sculptural form of the myth allows an additional detail which is a clever indicator of the precise moment that is depicted. Behind his back, in his right hand, he holds Hera's prized possession. The golden apples of the Hesperides are hidden from the frontal view. They appear as the viewer moves around the sculpture and have special significance to anyone who knows the story of Hercules' labors.

The remaining devices center largely on the associations between characters and their attachment to the physical setting. In the instances where they are used, it is important to pay attention to detail. To identify a hero by his association with an adversary, the latter must have a unique appearance that makes it unmistakable. Once the adversary is identified the hero is often obvious. In the example, *Theseus and the Minotaur*, c.550-540 BCE (Woodford p. 21, Figure 9), the adversary is a creature like no other. This makes the hero and the story depicted clearly apparent. Woodford notes that in this case the inscriptions have a lesser significance than the presence of the Minotaur. The unusual combination of normal elements and defining context within a cycle both rely heavily on a figures' association with elements found in his surroundings. "… to see a man riding *upside down* beneath a sheep, as in Figure 10, makes it clear something out of the ordinary is going on." (Woodford p.21) When several scenes are included within the same space, their combination may be crucially important. Series of images often help identify characters in the presence of otherwise inconclusive evidence. An example cited in the text is the difficulty in discerning Herakles from Theseus in a scene containing a bull. "The problem is solved, however if the bull episode is represented in the context of other deeds of one or other of the heroes." (Woodford p.23)

The success or failure of any identification depends largely on the five visual devices employed by successful artists. It is also important to note that in addition to producing an identifiable image, the artist must also create an aesthetically pleasing composition. The selection of a subject was a paramount decision. "The most dramatic moment captures the height of action, the climax of the story. Thus most artists tend to show Herakles actually killing the Nemean lion ..." (Woodford p.28). By choosing to illustrate the climax of a story the artist has assured the emotional reaction of viewers who are familiar with the myth. Like the crescendo of a symphony, the climax of a story is the moment when the audience is most invested. Woodford offers several examples labeled *Herakles Strangling the Nemean Lion*, c.520-330 BCE (Woodford pp.28-31) The most successful use of dramatic climax is achieved by the artist of the red figure vase pictured on page twenty-eight. The viewer shares the tension of the battle and is given the opportunity to cheer Hercules to his impending victory. He and the lion are the only two figures in view, opposite black blocking and surrounded by a thin geometric border. They are large, depicted realistically and concisely, and engaged in an epic struggle. The overall composition of the vase is clearly centered on the action. The red figure technique, painted in fine detail, adds visual interest and serves the subject well. Many other artists chose instead to show the rising action, or a turning point at a critical juncture in a story. They invite the viewer to dread the moment before a fateful interaction and sometimes to mourn or celebrate a consequence. The action here may be more subtle, but it is often poignant.

Once the artist had chosen a mythological subject and determined the devices most effective to relay the message, the crafting of the actual artwork could begin. There were limitations in the available space as well as media and method. All these factors combined to create a maze of considerations that had to be addressed before work could begin. Stylization and application often provide an opportunity for the individuality of an artist to emerge. "A myth can be told either expansively, with many supplementary figures, or concisely, with the focus concentrated on the principal actors." (Woodford p.43) Myths could be portrayed with minimal background and few accoutrements as in the red figure Herakles mentioned above. The focus is isolated on the struggle. In contrast, *Nessos Collapsing Under Herakles' Onslaught*, c.660 BCE (Woodford p.48), is an example of an expansive narrative. The three main characters, Herakles, Nessos and the offended Deianeira, are present in the black figure style. Additionally there are four horses, a chariot, plants, animals and various patterns. The amphora is virtually covered with images leaving very little negative space. The composition is extended around the vase. This makes it impossible to see the three figures in one glance. The viewer must move around the object to absorb the entirety of the scene. This artist was successful the minute curiosity inspired his viewers' first step. Our continued interest is a testament to his skill.