Greek myth has played an unparalleled role in the formation of Western visual traditions, for which it has provided a nearly inexhaustible source of forms, symbols, and narratives. This richly illustrated book examines the legacy of Greek mythology in Western art from the Classical era to the present. It reveals the range and variety with which individual Greek myths, motifs, and characters have been treated throughout the history of the visual arts in the West. Tracing the emergence, survival, and transformation of key mythological figures and motifs from ancient Greece through the modern era, it explores the enduring importance of such myths for artists and viewers in their own time and over the millennia that followed.

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Greek Myth and Western Art

The Presence of the Past

Karl Kilinski II
To Gunnie Corbett,
my personal warrior and worrier

An old story is like the wind.
It comes from far away
and yet we feel it as it touches us.
It is fresh yet familiar.
It changes direction and demeanor at will,
appearing out of nowhere and going somewhere else.
Its force and features are always in flux,
yet we know it for what it is.
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Although it is behind us, the past is inescapable. It is essential for the living to acknowledge the presence of the past, as it is just as much a living part of the present as the thoughts and creations experienced today are destined to stimulate and imprint the future. Although we may not be fully cognizant of the past, we are inevitably influenced, if not fortified and rejuvenated, by it. Greek myth has had a special role in this process of shaping and defining what was (and is) present in Western art due to its acknowledgment and application of common truths in human affairs despite its frequent dressing in implausible description. It is perhaps the charming furnishings of mythic narrative, imbued with adventure and danger and charged with tragedy and romance, that contribute to the allure that Greek myths have enjoyed since their inception. But it is also their elastic ability in application, thereby contributing to their universal value, that has made them the time-honored vehicles of expression and commentary that have repeatedly drawn us to them.

This thematic study is offered as an analysis and a guide for those interested in the visual representations of Greek myth in Western art. It is not meant as an introduction to a history of Western art but rather as a supplement to it, and by nature it is greatly dependent in many respects on the publications of others who have contributed in greater or lesser extent to an understanding of Greek myth, its forms and functions, interpretations and applications in the arts at times ranging from antiquity to the present. Interest in these phenomena originated in the studies of two German giants
of the later nineteenth century, scholars in the fields of Classical archaeology and philology and Renaissance art history. These were Carl Robert (1850–1922), whose Bild und Lied (Berlin, 1881) sought a clearer understanding of ancient visual narrative compared with traditional text that he applied primarily to Roman relief sarcophagi, and Abraham (Aby) Warburg (1866–1929), whose shift from stylistic analysis to iconographical and iconological studies in art led to the library that now supports the research institute of the University of London that bears his name and focuses on the resurgence of Classical culture into the eighteenth century. And yet twentieth-century scholarship often treated myth in art as merely illustrative, while in the hands of a growing number of scholars pictorial renditions of myth “are increasingly being seen as symbolic statements in their own right.”

Whereas there exist a substantial number of worthy studies delving into the nature of Greek myth in terms of its literary values and broad cultural meanings, both as applied to antiquity and in more modern assessments of ancient myth, there are somewhat fewer studies focused on the application and expression of Greek myth in ancient art, and much fewer still encompassing the well-endowed heritage of the subject at various periods of Western art. Rare is the book that presents a succinct study of this phenomenon over the scope of Western culture, such as Philip Mayerson’s Classical Mythology in Literature, Art, and Music (1971), albeit with its emphasis on literature. Therefore, it is deemed prudent here to focus more on the appearance and employment of Greek myth in art from antiquity to the present than to overindulge in recasting the often eloquent and lucid analyses of myth’s treatment in ancient art alone. And yet to comply with the parameters expected of a work focused on the topic of Greek myth in art over extensive time, a certain amount of the latter information is necessarily included.

My aim here is not to provide a comprehensive narration of the vast assemblage of Greek myths in art or to make any attempt at tracing the full assortment of renditions any one of these tales has received in the visual arts over time. The first is far beyond the capacity of any single volume, and the second has been attempted from time to time by myself and many others. Instead, the task here is to demonstrate the range in composition and application that individual Greek myths and Greek mythology as a whole have enjoyed throughout the history of the visual arts in Western culture. The purpose, therefore, is to acquaint the reader with a clear sense of the tenacity of Greek myths as well as the variances of their elasticity, applicability, and
hermeneutics in art and also to address a sufficient selection of these myths to appreciate the diversity in form and scope of their visual metamorphoses. This also applies to the various means of myth representation in pictorial form and the measures artists in various eras used to communicate mythic narrative. To this end, the diverse aspects of this history are largely allocated to different chapters so as to more fully explain the various facets of its nature, which are important factors contributing to the enticing displays of kaleidoscopic compositions and metamorphic interpretations that primarily arrest our attention. We are charged, then, with seeking an understanding of Greek myth as applied through the visual arts not only to the Greeks, but also to that horde of humanity that followed in their wake. Bill Calder saw the motivation for tracking the various applications of Classical culture into the modern era when he addressed the issue in his foreword to Meyer Reinhold’s *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit, 1984) as he wrote, “The *Aeneid* does not only mean what Vergil intended it to mean…. Each generation interprets the classics in their own terms and our task is *sine ira et studio* to determine how and why each did.”

Greek myth comprises the lion’s share of what we call *Classical myth*. Classical myth is an amalgam of Greek myths, Etruscan and Roman versions of those tales, and myths indigenous to Etruscan and Roman cultures. Although certain myths that we refer to as Greek only appear in extant literary sources starting from the Roman era, these seem to have had an earlier pedigree, now mostly lost, in the literary tradition, as evidenced either by extant earlier artworks or from indicators that they were referenced in some form by the Hellenistic mythographers or possibly earlier. Even Aeneas, we recall, despite being renounced from Virgil’s epic, has his heritage in Greek art and literature. Lacking an Etruscan literature that might elucidate their myths and acknowledging that the Romans readily embraced historical events in their expressions as opposed to the Greeks, who freely avoided them, largely shapes the Hellenic nature of Classical myth. As the recurrence and application of Greek myths in Western art far outweigh the range and resurgence of specifically Etruscan or Roman myths, it is the former that defines the scope and explains the title of this book. However, the names of Greek mythical characters frequently underwent transformation to their Roman equivalents in time, a process stemming from their reiteration in Latin texts that proliferated in the postantique West before most Greek ones. These designations will be maintained where tradition dictates, for artwork titles and other accepted references, throughout the course of
Western history. Furthermore, the spelling of these names follows in most cases the Latin versions as exemplified in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Abbreviations for ancient authors and their works also follow those prescribed in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Dates before the Common Era are signified as "BCE," while those in it go without any signifying abbreviation.
I wish here to express my gratitude to Gunnie Corbett, enthusiast, advocate, and confidant, without whose perpetual support this work would still be on the road to fruition. Students in my seminars on myth in art have contributed regularly over the years to my enlightenment on this topic while often bringing a genuine sense of joy to the pursuit in making new discoveries. A number of these students have successfully engaged mythic topics of their own in departmental theses, allowing me to pass the torch through their endeavors. I am also indebted to several scholars of art history who have shared their knowledge with me regarding specific artworks or themes with mythological subjects. Of these I need mention Tom Carpenter (Athens, Ohio), Kasper Monrad (Copenhagen), and Alessandra Comini (Dallas). Billie Stovall, as with past projects, once again proved indispensable in ferreting out obscure publications through SMU’s interlibrary loan system.

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Dallas, Texas,
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