

BOOK REVIEW

Greek Myth and Western Art: The Presence of the Past. By KARL KILINKSI. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xxii + 281. \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-01332-2.

G*reek Myth and Western Art: The Presence of the Past* is a richly illustrated text that covers a wide spectrum of myths, themes, artists, geographical places, peoples, cultures, and historical periods. In this work, the late Professor Kilinski offers the reader a thematic study to serve as a guide for the vast visual interpretations of Greek mythology in Western art. However, the book is not meant to be a complete and exhaustive review of the massive amount of Greek myths or a summary of any one myth and its visual manifestations throughout time; rather, the book is meant to “demonstrate the range in composition and application that individual myths and Greek mythology as a whole have enjoyed throughout the history of the visual arts in Western culture” (xvii). Kilinski notes that this demonstration will require from the reader an appreciation of both how the Greeks themselves and the great mass of artists that followed them viewed and applied the myths.

The text has four main chapters (“The Nature and Origins of Greek Myth,” “Survival and Revival: Motives for and Means of Myth Transmission,” “Form and Fashion of Myth in Art,” and “Iconography and Iconology: The Metamorphosis of Greek Myth”) incorporating seventy-five black and white figures and plates and thirty-two color plates. Additionally, the book includes an abbreviations list, a Greek and Latin glossary of mythical characters, notes, a bibliography, and an index. The myths that the author focuses on in the later chapters are those of Danaë, Icarus, Circe, Perseus and Andromeda, and Actaeon.

Kilinski begins his analysis with an examination of the “mammoth and amorphous topic” of myth and reviews how ancient and moderns have defined myth in or about Greek literature and art. The Near Eastern relationship to Greek myth and art is part of this evaluation. This relationship is important and interesting because, Kilinski argues, this link appears to “be based more commonly on mutual iconographic elements, whether or not they also relate similar narratives” (23).

The author then moves on to discuss the reasons for the survival and revival of myth, which he argues are founded on the general acknowledgement, recognition, or familiarity with a certain myth or collection of myths; the popularity of the myth or myths based “on group expressional preferences; and, dependent on the latter, the metamorphic applicability through variations and developments in cultural history” (27).

Thus, for example, Roman culture was heavily saturated with Greek culture and became the vehicle through which Western civilization became permeated with Greek myth. Kilinski traces this growth and progress of survival and revival through such historical periods and places as the rise of Christianity, the flourishing Byzantine East, the Middle Ages, the Carolingian Era, the Trecento, the Renaissance, and the Ottoman Empire (this is not an exhaustive list). Kilinski also reviews the interaction between texts and their transmission and translations; and, the intersection of science, magic, medicine, astrology, astronomy, religion, and culture.

The author traces the forms and fashions of these developments, intersections, and interactions from the earliest examples of the Late Geometric period. The visual representations of the mythological narratives had to include certain specifics in order for them to be recognizable; these specifics were embedded in the fabric of Greek culture and handed down to the later Western artists. The complexity of these specifics can include or create monoscenic, synoptic, cyclic, or continuous visual narratives. However, all of these types of narratives need to be interpreted in terms of content, which the author defines as composition, setting, and purpose, which, in turn, can change, be redesigned, transformed, or reformed. These manipulations were “often intentional in order to mold the myth to new horizons, but they were not infrequently accidental when knowledge of traditional iconography was lacking” (138–139).

In a parallel or peripheral configuration mythical figures and characters often became symbols of various ideas or beliefs. For example, Pegasus could represent apotheosis in the Roman Empire, fame in the Middle Ages, and the lightning speed of air attacks during World War II (142). The author also discusses how myths have been used to make political, religious, or social statements, have been molded to convey the messages in commercial advertising, and appear extensively in television, theater, and film.

In the final chapter of the book Kilinski analyzes the endurance and many permutations of the myths of Danaë, Icarus, Circe, Perseus and Andromeda, and Actaeon. The treatment of Icarus is sufficiently indicative of the book’s approach.

Kilinski begins his review with a summary of the myth as found in ancient Greek and Roman literature; briefly discusses the Greek, Etruscan, and Roman iconography of Icarus' story; touches upon the transformation and melding of Icarus into Simon Magus during the Middle Ages; and ends with a speedy examination of the works by Andrea del Sarto, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Rubens, Artus Quellien, and Pablo Picasso that have Icarus as their subject. Unfortunately, the assessment is too brief for such an enormously popular myth that has often been the inspiration for a multitude of artists.

Kilinski has written a wonderful book that can serve as a solid introduction to the endurance and survivability of Greek myth. If one needs to include a criticism of the book in this review, it is only that the text is too short to cover such a vast amount of information.

EDMUND CUEVA

University of Houston, cuevae@uhd.edu