AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTISTS AFFIRMATION TODAY

FROM THE SERIES

AMERICA PAST AND PRESENT

MYTH AND MODERN SOCIETY
The word myth is derived from the Greek *mythos*, which means word or story. Mythology is the study of myths and the collective body of the myths of a people or culture. Once, myths were believed to be simply fantastic stories about extraordinary events. Today, myths are accepted as having broader functions in society. They not only provide information about the quest for self-fulfillment, but also express humanity’s search for universal harmony and common origins.

Scholars tend to divide myth into three categories: pure myth, heroic saga, and folk tale. Pure myth is those accounts that help explain natural phenomena, often involving magic and divine beings. Heroic saga is tales of action set in the past, often describing the life-threatening adventures of a victorious hero and reflecting the values of the individual and his or her culture. Folk tale is stories, told for pleasure and enjoyment, typically about ordinary people and animals. They can serve to entertain and instruct with a moral.

Twentieth-century artists use myths as vehicles for examining personal and universal themes. Some artists identify with a particular character or the specific subject matter of a myth and associate the stories with events in their own lives. Other artists challenge the viewer’s imagination. These artists are not interested in depicting a narrative based on a myth: instead they manipulate and change the myths, using only subtle clues for the viewer to decode. Still others grapple with universal concerns. They use myths to explore society’s ills, the relationship between humanity and nature, and universal desires for peace and understanding.
ABSTRACTION

BACKGROUND
In mythical Greek geography, Mount Olympus was the center of the world. This was where the gods lived and ruled over the earth and human destiny. Ethiopia was located far to the south. The gods often visited and banqueted there. In the east were non-Greek-speaking people, referred to as barbarians. Monstrous beings dwelled in the western lands and seas. There could be found the one-eyed Cyclops, the Sirens, even the cannibalistic Laestrygonians. Even farther to the west were the Elysian Fields, or Islands of the Blessed, where mortals who were favored by the gods went when they died. Beneath the earth was the underworld kingdom of Hades, land of the dead. This was a sorrowful place where the dead eventually faded into nothingness.

In book eleven of The Odyssey, Ulysses journeys to Hades where he is recognized by Achilles, a hero-warrior killed during the Trojan War. Achilles reproaches Ulysses for daring to venture to this land of the dead. Despite the fact that he has power there, Achilles tells Ulysses that life as a slave would be preferable to being king of the dead.

Book four of The Odyssey describes the other land where the dead dwell, the Elysian Fields. Mortals who have found favor with the gods are sent there to spend eternity:

And now, Menelaus, favorite of Zeus, hear your own destiny. It is not your fate to die in Argos where the horses graze. Instead, the immortals will send you to the Elysian Fields at the world’s end, to join auburn-haired Rhadamanthus in the land where living is made easy for mankind, where no snow falls, no strong winds blow and there is never any rain, but day after day the

Alma Thomas, 1891–1978
Elysian Fields, 1973
acrylic on canvas
76.5 x 107.2 cm (30 1/8 x 42 1/8 in.)
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, bequest of Alma W. Thomas

West Wind’s tuneful breeze comes in from the Ocean to refresh its people. This is because you are the husband of Helen and, in the eyes of the gods, son-in-law to Zeus.

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT
Mosaic-like patches of blue paint, applied in broad strokes, cover the canvas. Colored squares, triangles, and rectangles are offset by white areas of the untouched canvas. The visual effect creates a jewellike pattern that is ever-changing. Further movement is implied as near perfect, vertical stripes of blue divide the canvas into five separate sections, which, viewed from left to right, gradually become broader rectangular bands. The painting is nonrepresentational, meaning that the artist did not attempt to imitate objects in nature. Color is the basis of the painting, as luminous shades of blue, ranging from
deep royal blue to pale powder blue, pulsate against the white of the background.

**COMMENTSARY**

Thomas was in her eighties when she painted *Elysian Fields*. She had retired from a thirty-eight-year career as an art teacher in the public schools of Washington, D.C., and was suffering from painful arthritis. Yet, she persisted and continued working. The paintings she produced during her ninth decade became increasingly more abstract and finally nonrepresentational. Many of her paintings were inspired by rows and borders of colorful flowers seen in Washington, D.C., when the azaleas and cherry trees bloom in spring. The moon landing in 1969, too, had a significant effect on the artist. She was fascinated by man’s accomplishment, especially the vehicles used by the astronauts to explore the moon’s surface. A group of paintings she created are named the “Space” or “Snoopy” series because Snoopy was the term used to describe the space vehicle.

Alma Thomas worked in her home, using her kitchen or living room as a studio for painting. The canvases she created were huge and usually had to be propped in her lap or balanced on a sofa as she worked. Sometimes she had to turn the canvases around in her lap to reach areas to paint. While she worked, she made decisions about where to place color and brushstrokes.

Thomas gave titles to the paintings after she completed them. Perhaps it was the shimmering shades of pale and deep blue covering the surface of the painting that reminded the artist of the Isles of the Blessed described by Homer. The color blue is often associated with air, water, and the heavens and frequently symbolizes peace, eternity, and immortality.

**ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION**

1. Describe the mood of the painting. Is it calm and peaceful or dynamic and full of energy? What helps to evoke the mood? Color or pattern?

2. Discuss how the mood or concept of a peaceful, calm place would change if the artist had selected different colors: red, gold, green, purple.

3. Use the book *Free Within Ourselves* (pp. 166–171) to research the life of Alma Thomas. Discuss reasons why the artist would chose to depict this mythical place near the end of her life.

4. Create a short story describing a place you think “favored” mortals should spend eternity. Use your imagination. Try not to rely on established myths or religious beliefs.

**PERSONAL STATEMENT**

**BACKGROUND**

Mythology comes alive for us most clearly in the stories of heroes, for the hero, wherever he comes from...is our persona, our representative in the world dream that is myth.


Mythical heroes usually face extraordinary challenges. Whether mortal or immortal, they are often called upon to battle supernatural forces and ferocious demons, sometimes even descending to the underworld to wrestle with death. Some heroes must make quests where trials and confrontations with monsters plague every move. Divine forces either
Bob Thompson, 1937–1966
_Enchanted Rider_, 1961
oil on canvas
159.5 x 119.0 cm (62 3/4 x 46 7/8 in.)
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection

Ophon tamed Pegasus with a magic bridle. After mounting the wondrous horse, Bellerophon glided through the air and was able to shoot arrows at the Chimera. He also used a lead-tipped lance to spear the monster in the mouth. Flames from its tongue melted the lead, which ran into its stomach and killed the beast.

Riding Pegasus, Bellerophon had many other successful exploits. Because of them, Bellerophon decided that he should live on Mount Olympus with the gods. Mounting Pegasus, he flew skyward. Zeus, the king of the gods, became angry that a mortal would assume divinity and sent a gadfly to sting Pegasus under the tail. The horse bolted and threw Bellerophon to the earth. Zeus claimed the winged horse for his own use and Bellerophon was left crippled and cursed by the gods.

**LOOKING AT THE OBJECT**

A fantastic horse and rider soar across a sky, which is at once black and deep blue. The equestrian figure wears a dark brown tunic draped over one shoulder. He balances astride the fabulous winged horse by holding his arms out to his sides and raising his palms. Behind him is a mysterious red shape, and above the pair hovers another winged figure with indistinct features. Beneath the horse’s hooves is a gruesome creature with pointed ears, red mouth, and sharp teeth. At the bottom of the canvas a small yellow building is silhouetted against the blue background. Color heightens the sense of fantasy. Bold, unmodulated red, blue, and yellow add to the drama and mystery. The rider is painted using flat, bright yellow. Only the facial features are delineated, with dark lines representing the eyes, nose, and mouth. The horse is a sweeping mass of red, with the wing feathers suggested by blue zigzag lines.

help heroes on their quests or hinder their actions.

The Greek hero Bellerophon accomplished many amazing feats. The most remarkable was his victory over the Chimera, a fire-breathing monster that had the head of a lion, body of a goat, and tail of a serpent. Bellerophon attacked the monster from the air by riding a winged horse, Pegasus, which the goddess Athena had allowed him to capture. Beller-
COMMENTARY
From 1961 to 1963, Bob Thompson traveled through Europe studying the works of well-known artists. Sometimes Thompson borrowed compositions and figures from favorite Old Masters and incorporated these images into his own art. Artists have used this method of copying throughout the centuries as one way to help them solve pictorial problems. Thompson, however, took the practice a step further: he transformed his sources. He used flat areas of color, distorted the figures and spatial relationships, and produced highly personal statements. While it is possible that Thompson based Enchanted Rider on earlier representations of the myth, this work is dramatically different. The artist filled the space with intense colors. Large flat areas of red lure the eyes of the viewer from the top right, across the center, and down to the lower left of the canvas. Accents of yellow vibrate and punctuate the composition, creating another visual rhythm. Blue suggests a celestial background for the action yet alludes to a spatial dreamscape.

The artist may be identified with the mythical character Bellerophon who soared to fame and greatness and whose source of triumph was the means of his downfall. In fact, like Bellerophon, the artist had unprecedented success as a young man. While still a college student, a leading American collector purchased one of his works. By the time he was twenty-eight, Thompson had been represented by major dealers in New York, Chicago, and Detroit, and his work had been collected by world-renowned museums and galleries. Thompson's meteoric career was cut short. He died a month before his twenty-ninth birthday as a result of complications of gallbladder surgery.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION
1. Birds traditionally are considered symbols of freedom and power. Discuss how the winged creatures in the painting Enchanted Rider relate to this concept.

2. Bellerophon was able to tame the winged horse with the help of the goddess Athena, yet Zeus, king of the gods, caused his downfall. Discuss the tenuous relationship between gods and mortals in classical myths.

3. Bellerophon became a prototype for the dragon slayers in Christian art and popular fairy tales. Research examples such as Saint George and the Dragon and Saint Michael.

4. Discuss the concept that heroism sometimes seems to drive people to commit arrogant acts.

5. Create an original creative work—poem, music, painting, or dance—based upon the story of Bellerophon. Consider the following: What will transport your “enchanted rider?” What deeds will your hero perform? What trials will your hero face? Will your hero find favor with the gods or be punished because of pride?

NARRATIVE

BACKGROUND
The return of Ulysses is chronicled by the Greek poet Homer in the twenty-four-book epic poem, The Odyssey. This thrilling tale is rich in adventure and intrigue, fantasy and reality, the heroic and the ordinary. Homer's epic covers a time span of at least sixty years. But instead of focusing on that vast period, Homer concentrates on one episode
to Ithaca after the Trojan War. His journey lasts ten years and is filled with adventures and disasters. He battles a giant one-eyed monster, one of the Cyclopes; he tricks a sorceress who turns his men into swine; and he survives a shipwreck that destroys his ship.

When it seems as though Ulysses will never return, his house is besieged by greedy and arrogant noblemen who demand that his faithful wife, Penelope, marry one of them. Penelope believes her husband is not dead. She devises a scheme to delay making a decision. She declares that she will marry one of the suitors after she has completed weaving a shroud for her father-in-law. By day she diligently works, but at night she unravels all that was woven the day before. When her trick is discovered, Penelope agrees to marry the suitor who can string Ulysses’ bow and shoot an arrow through twelve rings. With the aid of the goddess Athena, Ulysses arrives as a beggar and participates in the contest. After revealing his identity, he kills all of the suitors and is reunited with his wife.

In Homer’s epic, Ulysses is seen as a hero facing difficult challenges. He yearns for home but faces numerous trials and temptations. He is courageous, steadfast, and loyal. To Roman writers, however, Ulysses became an antihero. He is described as selfish and deceitful because of his ability to use disguise and trickery. In spite of these traits he continues to be admired for his intelligence, his fortitude, and his ability to survive adversity with dignity.

-looking at the object

Amid the bustle of activity in the interior of his house, Ulysses, disguised as a beggar, enters through the door in the background. Penelope, the female figure at the left, is sitting at her loom. A maid sits near her, winding yarn; at her feet a cat plays with a ball of thread. The spirited young man in splendid
robes is Telemachus, Ulysses and Penelope’s son, who has just returned from searching for his father. At the right are the suitors who took up residence in the house. Through the open window is the masted ship recalling Ulysses’ travels and safe return.

COMMENTARY
In the 1970s, the artist Romare Bearden produced several images based on Homeric myths. Most, as seen in this work, incorporate flat shapes of objects and people and emphasize a single color, blue or green. The effect is dramatic. Figures appear as if in a stage set, and the architectural elements resemble props. The artist also often altered details of the myths and recast the characters, their settings, and their costumes. Bearden did not adhere literally to Homer’s description of the events that occurred when Ulysses returned:

But the Suitors, after exchanging glances, all began to bait Telemachus by holding up his guests to ridicule. “Telemachus,” said one young man, and his sneer was typical of the rest, “there never was a man so unfortunate with his guests. First you drag in this grubby tramp. All he wants is food and drink. He has never heard of a hard day’s work; in fact he is just a burden on the earth. And now up jumps another to play the prophet. You’d much better take my advice: let’s clap these friends of yours on board a fast ship to Sicily, where you could sell them for a profit.”

Telemachus ignored these comments. He kept his mouth shut and his eyes fixed on his father, watching for the moment when Odysseus would be ready to attack the shameless Suitors.

The prudent Penelope, Icarius’ daughter, had placed her beautiful chair where she was able to hear every word spoken by the men in the hall. They had slaughtered cattle freely, and amid shouts of laughter had prepared a delicious and appetizing midday meal. But as for their sup-

per, nothing less palatable could be imagined than the fare which a goddess and a strong man were soon to spread before them; but it was their villainy that had started it all.


Here Bearden depicted Greek heroes and heroines as black men and women and placed them in a Mediterranean/African-inspired scene. And, instead of wearing Greek tunics, they are shown in flowing robes and turbans. Bearden transformed the myth to make it relevant to his own concerns.

Bearden’s own life was an odyssey that took him from North Carolina to New York, Pennsylvania, and France. Born in Charlotte, he was three years old when his family moved to New York; as a teenager he lived with his maternal grandmother in Pittsburgh; in 1950 he studied philosophy under the GI Bill at the Sorbonne in Paris. Each of these cities made a lasting impression on him. In many ways Bearden equated his journeys to those of the mythical hero Ulysses. Bearden also recognized that Ulysses represented a universal hero whose journey, beset with dangers and setbacks, became an allegory for human struggle and triumph.

ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION
1. The Odyssey contrasts the manly adventures of Ulysses with the domestic activities of Penelope during her husband’s absence. Discuss how Bearden suggests these differences.

2. Using the excerpt from book twenty of The Odyssey, discuss how Bearden altered the events in the narrative. Which segments are similar to those in the poem?

3. The ancient Greeks considered Ulysses a hero
and admired him for his courage and bravery. The Romans found him deceitful and full of cunning. Discuss character traits that may differ from culture to culture (competitiveness, individualism, group collaboration).

4. Write a poem about a contemporary hero’s homecoming. Your hero may be a Vietnam War veteran, a medical doctor who served during the Persian Gulf War, an astronaut from the latest NASA launch. Describe circumstances that may delay his or her return, discuss the events she or he faces upon returning. What character traits does your hero possess? Courage, bravery, fortitude, intelligence?

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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