**Historical Mythology**

"The boundaries between history and myth were fluid. Real people could be recognized in mythological figures. … Similarly mythological figures could be refashioned on the model of real people." (Woodford p. 141) History and myth are totally enmeshed in our earliest knowledge of both. Ancient Greeks had a remarkably tangible connection to their pantheon of deities. The gods and goddesses were not far removed, but walked the same earth as man. They were not gilded in perfection. They possessed and responded to the same virtues and vices as their congregation. Some were jealous, others lustful or vengeful, but few deities were without signature flaws. Instead of detracting from their influence, these human flaws often helped inspire approachability and commiseration. Heroes embodied their patron god or won victory as a result of divine intervention. Helpful deities were often portrayed in heroic scenes. They intercede at opportune moments and the hero triumphs. Had they been absent or reluctant, even a mighty hero would fail. This personal interaction between deity and hero was integral to success. As current events merited recognition, very few sources recorded simple clinical analysis. More frequently an innovative historical mythology was created. Artists successfully expanded traditional mythic themes in response to specific historical events.

Woodford points out that the exchange of these innovations happened in complementary fashion across the broad media of fine arts. Literature inspired theater, which inspired sculpture and painting. The paintings deeply affected the poets, who were then inspired to chronicle their beauty. Poets wrote about heroic characters, which artists were then challenged to depict. This creative symbiosis enhanced the fluidity that characterized both mythological and historic figures in ancient Greece. "...using myths to explain what happened in history and to point moral conclusions had considerable appeal; particular events could thereby be placed within a cosmic context." (Woodford p. 142) Examples given in the text include the subjects of the Parthenon metopes. (Woodford p. 99, Figure 70) Though the scenes chosen for the Parthenon were traditional in theme, many scholars infer connections to the Greek victory over the titanic Persian army. Woodford stresses that though reasonable and arguable, these connections are not absolute. "It is often difficult to prove connections, especially in an early period like the 6th century BC, when historical documents are scarce. … Nevertheless many people are tempted to relate subjects that suddenly became very popular … to contemporary historical events and personalities."

Subtle connections seem to be prevalent from the very beginning of Greek art. Certainly various subjects experienced both widespread popularity and waning disregard. The cause of these fluctuations may be obscure or difficult to pinpoint, but the fact that they occurred is proof of artists' response to significant external influence. Much easier to identify as a connection made through intentional propaganda is the example provided by "Commodus as Hercules". (Woodford p. 147, Figure 110) Here the tyrannical despot is beatifically posed in the guise of Hercules. "… not so much in order to perform arduous labours for the betterment of mankind, … but in order to execute bloody massacres in charades that imitated the deeds of the hero." (Woodford p. 145) Commodus benefits from the artist's considerable skill for composition as well as his association with the myth. No sign of the monster is visible in the intricately carved figure of the man. He wears the skin of the Nemean Lion, which is wrapped around his head and tied in a neat bow. The knotted club is in his right hand, nestled comfortably against his shoulder. His left hand is extended forward as if to show off the apples of the Hesperides. The heavy torso appears to perch precariously on an insubstantial base. Woodford notes that this is accomplished through strategic structural support on the back of the statue. While numerous other rulers (and their wives) had themselves depicted in the guise of deities, none is quite so blasphemous as the repugnant Commodus and his attempts to use heroic propaganda.

Throughout modern history, art has been manipulated to purpose by those seeking to gain influence. In this way we are similar to the Greeks. Other parallels extend far beyond simple individual propaganda. America has created our own myths and heroes. Beginning with our foundation on Plymouth Rock, all we know of our own history has been affected by the authors who wrote it down. Over time historic events gained mythic status. These events gained significance through placement in the cosmic context. Even as literacy, publication, and distribution increased, the spoken word continued to be important. Stories passed through generations, from first person recollection to levels far removed. Heroes were created and their attributes noted. In the early days of settlement there was John Smith who tamed the wilderness and was dramatically rescued by Pocahontas. George Washington chopped down a cherry tree and could not tell a lie. Paul Bunyon was as tall as a mountain and accompanied everywhere by an enormous blue ox. Davy Crockett was "The King of the Wild Frontier". (© Walt Disney Productions. 1955) Even more recently, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was the "Arthur" in our modern day Camelot. Forty years removed from his death we are still captivated with this mythic connection. All of history has benefited from the eloquence of storytellers and image makers. True objectivity is a noble, but unattainable goal. Every observation, every scene, is subject to a single viewpoint.

Our American heroes have become so entrenched in historical mythology that new variations of their stories are now being invented. "Once the formula had been established, the artist could modify or elaborate the image at will. He could make it more profound and moving or more comical and amusing. … At worst it enabled him just to get his story across; at best it allowed him to create something startling and original." (Woodford p. 60) One entirely mythic episode, which has no basis in historical fact, is chronicled in the book "Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter". This mythological innovation relies on the popularity and personality of the hero. Though the absurdity of the plot is evident, the hero is presented in his traditional guise. Tall and gangly, but clever and persistent, the characterization of young Mr. Lincoln appears historically accurate. He is easily recognizable and seems to reflect the image that our history books have conditioned us to expect. As he ages, he grows the requisite beard and purchases his stovepipe hat. These are his most recognizable attributes.

The Civil War is the backdrop for the climax of the story. It provides further historical foundation to an implausible scene. In this version of the epic struggle, the Confederacy has been infiltrated by Vampires. As Lincoln battled in Congress and issued the Emancipation Proclamation, he never lost sight of his true goal, hunting the vampires. This extension of the narrative surrounding one of our most beloved figures requires suspension of disbelief. By interpreting a historic hero in a mythological manner, the author has inspired a great deal of interest in his story. He has capitalized on the popularity of the character to serve his purpose. Whether or not this innovative episode will merit addition into our collective consciousness, it does signify that almost 150 years after his assassination, Lincoln remains one of our most significant heroes. His historical myth is still relevant and inspiring. Perhaps this is how heroes truly achieve their immortality.