

# CLASSICAL MYTHS

## GREEK AND ROMAN MYTHS IN EUROPEAN ART 1500-1800

### THE MYTHS

The relationships between ancient gods and humans were always complex. Gods were often to be feared and appeased rather than adored and admired. They did not always set an example of perfect behaviour but shared the weaknesses of humans in their frequent quarrels, lust, and drunkenness as well as exhibiting more noble behaviour.

Mythological stories of fallible gods and powerful humans were one of the richest sources of inspiration to artists and writers in the classical world.

Depicting these same stories has been a particular feature of European art since the Renaissance, when ancient Roman art was excavated in Italy and classical styles were embraced by contemporary artists.

### THE SUN KING

In 17th-century France, the cult of the Sun King, Louis XIV, was associated with the god Apollo, while his courtiers identified with the deities surrounding Apollo, reflecting his glory. This inspired much of the art and design of the age. Following the French Revolution, many of these works of art were sold and found their way to Britain where they have been displayed in historic houses and museums like the Wallace Collection ever since.

The Wallace Collection, which is well known for its 18th-century French art among many other things, is displayed in Hertford House in the centre of London. It has been open to the public since 1900 but was previously the home of Sir Richard and Julie Amélie Charlotte, Lady Wallace, who were the last of five generations of collectors.

### THE COLLECTION

The works of art featured in this resource include many nude figures. Artists usually depicted classical gods and heroes with few clothes so that their beauty and athleticism could be idealised, a tradition strongly rooted in the ancient world. Deity status elevated the gods in particular above contemporary social norms, so it was a chance for artists to display their skill at depicting the human body. It also differentiated the gods from ordinary mortals who needed to protect themselves from the elements.

The gods and heroes have their origins in Greek stories, but many of these artworks are directly inspired by later Roman interpretations. Therefore most of the images used in this resource are described using later Roman names rather than the ancient Greek equivalents.

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### KEY WORKS



**APOLLO** François Boucher, *The Rising of the Sun, The Setting of the Sun*, 1753  
Long Case Clock with *Apollo and Chariot*, 1780  
Attributed to André-Charles Boulle, *Wardrobe with Apollo and Daphne*, 1700  
Salvator Rosa, *River Landscape with Apollo and the Cumaean Sibyl*, 1657-58

**THE JUDGMENT OF PARIS** François Boucher, *The Judgment of Paris*, 1754  
Anthony van Dyck, *Paris*, 1628



**PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA** Titian, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1554-56  
François Lemoyne, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1723

**HERCULES** Model Pietro Tacca, after a design by Giambologna; cast Ferdinando Tacca, *Hercules Overcoming the Centaur Eurytion*, c. 1640-50  
Unknown, *Hercules and the Cerynithian Stag, Hercules carrying off the Erymanthian Boar*, 17th or 18th century

# THE GODS

## GREEK / ROMAN NAMES

### ZEUS / JUPITER / JOVE

King of the gods.

He is often shown with an eagle or thunderbolt in hand.

### HERA / JUNO

Protector of women in marriage and childbirth, wife of Jupiter.

Her special attribute is a peacock.

### APHRODITE / VENUS

Goddess of love and beauty, mother of Cupid.

Born from the sea, she is sometimes shown inside a scallop shell.

### EROS / CUPID

Infant god of love.

He has wings, a bow and quiver of arrows.

### POSEIDON / NEPTUNE

God of the sea, brother of Jupiter.

Usually shown as an older man with flowing hair and beard, and a three-pronged trident.

### ATHENA / MINERVA

Goddess of both war and wisdom.

Usually shown with spear, shield and helmet. She is the daughter of Jupiter.

### APOLLO / APOLLO

God of the sun and music among other things.

He drives the sun across the sky in his chariot drawn by four horses, also associated with the Greek god Helios.

### HERACLES / HERCULES

The son of Jupiter and a mortal woman, he personifies physical strength and courage.

He had to perform Twelve Labours as a penance for slaying his children while in a fit of madness induced by a jealous Juno.