

# EYES OF THE ANCIENTS: MYTH IN STONE AND PAINT

**Abdul Rehman Khan**

University of Karachi

## Article Info

**Received:** 01<sup>st</sup> April, 2024

**Review 1:** 07<sup>th</sup> April, 2024

**Review 2:** 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2024

**Published:** 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2024



## Abstract

*The mythologies of ancient civilizations have long captivated human imagination, influencing art, culture, and history in profound ways. One of the most compelling ways these myths have been preserved and passed down through generations is through stone and painted depictions. "Eyes of the Ancients: Myth in Stone and Paint" explores the significant role that art has played in the preservation of ancient mythological traditions. The article delves into the intricate relationship between ancient mythologies and their visual representations, examining how civilizations such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Mesopotamians used stone carvings and paintings to narrate their cosmologies, beliefs, and heroic tales. This exploration is illustrated with specific examples from art history and archaeology, demonstrating the power of visual storytelling in the ancient world.*



This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

**Keywords:** *Mythology, Ancient Art, Stone Carvings, Paintings, Egyptians, Greeks, Mesopotamians, Visual Storytelling, Cosmology, Archaeology*

## Introduction

Throughout history, mythology has served as a foundation for civilizations, guiding cultural values and spiritual beliefs. These stories often provided ancient societies with explanations for the natural world, human existence, and the mysteries of life. While mythological narratives were passed down orally, the ancients also immortalized these tales in visual mediums, particularly through stone carvings and painted frescoes. This article examines the "Eyes of the Ancients"—how ancient artists used stone and paint to bring to life the myths of their people and cement their importance for posterity.

The visual depiction of myths enabled civilizations to communicate not just the stories themselves, but also the deep philosophical, theological, and societal ideas embedded in those tales. Stone and paint served as enduring mediums, ensuring that these narratives were accessible to future generations and scholars. From the Egyptian pyramids to the Grecian pottery, each work of art encapsulates a moment in time where myth, belief, and artistic expression met in a unique and powerful way.

---

## The Role of Myth in Ancient Civilizations

Mythology was not merely a collection of stories for the ancients. It was a means of interpreting the cosmos, framing societal norms, and legitimizing the ruling classes. Ancient civilizations like the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Greeks shared a common understanding of the need to preserve their most sacred myths. This often involved turning to stone carvings, frescoes, and mosaics that visually

depicted the gods, heroes, and supernatural beings integral to their cosmological and cultural narratives.

In ancient Egypt, mythological scenes carved into temple walls and tombs conveyed complex ideas about the afterlife and divine kingship. The god Osiris, who ruled over the dead, frequently appears in Egyptian art as a figure of transformation, representing both death and rebirth. The Greeks, similarly, used painted vases and sculptures to depict their mythological pantheon—Zeus, Athena, and Hercules, among others—as a way of communicating their philosophical views on life, fate, and human nature.

These myths were not static; they evolved alongside the civilizations that produced them. As political landscapes changed, so did the depictions of mythological figures. Kings and rulers used myth to reinforce their divine right to rule, often depicting themselves alongside gods or as gods themselves. Thus, myth became a political tool as much as it was a spiritual one, enshrined in stone and painted in vivid colours for all to see.

Mythology has played a foundational role in the shaping of ancient civilizations, influencing their cultural, religious, and societal structures. In many ways, myths were a means of explaining the unexplainable, offering early peoples a way to understand natural phenomena, human existence, and the cosmos. Myths provided answers to life's fundamental questions about creation, life, death, and the forces of nature. Whether it was the creation stories of Mesopotamia, the pantheon of Greek gods, or the celestial legends of the ancient Egyptians, myths laid the groundwork for the development of religious practices and the communal identity of these societies.

In Mesopotamia, myths were closely tied to the gods and their influence over natural elements and human affairs. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the earliest known mythic texts, reveals much about the Mesopotamian worldview. It tells the story of a semi-divine king's quest for immortality and reflects the Mesopotamian understanding of the relationship between humans, gods, and the inevitability of death. In these myths, gods were often portrayed as unpredictable, wielding immense power over humanity. Their myths served as a means to interpret and navigate the challenges of life in an environment susceptible to floods, droughts, and famine, connecting the people to divine forces that were believed to control these occurrences.

In ancient Egypt, myths were integral to their religious beliefs, and the cycle of life and death was central to their mythology. The Egyptians believed that the gods controlled the forces of nature, and they saw life and death as part of a continuous cycle. Myths about Osiris, Isis, and Horus shaped the Egyptians' views on kingship, resurrection, and the afterlife. Osiris, the god of the dead, and his resurrection myth symbolized the renewal of life, a theme reflected in the annual flooding of the Nile, which was crucial for agriculture. This connection between myth and nature allowed the Egyptians to find comfort in the idea of life beyond death, as reflected in their elaborate burial rituals and the building of grand monuments like the pyramids.

Greek mythology, with its pantheon of gods and heroic figures, also played a significant role in shaping Greek civilization. The myths of Zeus, Athena, Apollo, and other deities were not only religious tales but also moral stories that conveyed societal values. Heroes like Hercules and Theseus embodied traits such as bravery, intelligence, and justice. These

myths were woven into daily life through festivals, rituals, and the arts. They informed the Greek understanding of human potential and limitations, providing narratives about the consequences of hubris or the rewards of cleverness. Mythology also provided a way to explain the political structure of Greek city-states, with divine lineage often attributed to rulers.

In the Americas, myths among civilizations like the Maya, Aztec, and Inca were deeply connected to astronomy, agriculture, and the cyclical nature of time. For instance, the Maya had complex creation myths, such as the *Pool Vouch*, which explained the origins of the world and the gods' relationship with humanity. The Aztec myth of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent god, highlighted the importance of duality in life and the idea of regeneration. These civilizations viewed time in cyclical terms, and their myths reflected this through stories of death, rebirth, and cosmic cycles, guiding their agricultural and ritual practices.

In ancient India, myths from the *Vedas*, *Mahabharata*, and *Ramayana* conveyed philosophical and moral lessons. The Indian pantheon was vast, with gods like Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva symbolizing the forces of creation, preservation, and destruction. Myths were a way to understand the cycles of the universe, and they offered explanations for cosmic events, such as the movement of the stars or natural disasters. Hindu myths, particularly those surrounding karma and dharma, provided a framework for ethical living and spiritual progression. They conveyed the notion that human actions have consequences, shaping one's destiny and spiritual evolution across multiple lifetimes.

In China, mythology was closely linked to the idea of the Mandate of Heaven, which

was used to justify the rule of emperors. Chinese myths, such as those involving the creation figures Nuwa and Pangu, as well as the legendary emperors like Huangdi, served to explain the origins of Chinese civilization and its divine sanction. These myths not only legitimized political authority but also helped instill Confucian values of order, filial piety, and the importance of harmony between heaven, earth, and humanity.

The role of myth in the Norse civilization, exemplified by the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*, was no less significant. Norse myths depicted a cosmos in constant struggle between order and chaos, with gods like Odin, Thor, and Loki engaging in cosmic battles that reflected the harsh realities of life in the Scandinavian world. The concept of *Ragnarök*, a prophesied end of the world, conveyed a grim yet honourable view of fate, where even the gods were not immune to death. These stories reinforced values such as courage, honour, and the acceptance of one's fate, crucial to the warrior culture of the Vikings.

In addition to shaping religion and values, myths often served as historical or pseudo-historical accounts that established a sense of lineage and identity. Roman civilization, for example, drew heavily on the myth of Romulus and Remus to establish its founding narrative. This myth not only linked Rome to divine origins through Mars, the god of war, but also underscored the values of strength, determination, and survival, traits the Romans prized in their expansionist endeavours.

Mythology in ancient civilizations was not merely a set of fanciful tales. It was a vital part of the cultural fabric, shaping societal values, religious practices, and political institutions. Myths provided structure to the chaos of existence, gave meaning to the mysterious forces of nature, and

offered models for human behaviour. They allowed early civilizations to connect with the divine, understand their place in the universe, and navigate the complexities of life with a sense of purpose and coherence.

---

### Myth in Stone: Carvings and Architecture

Stone carvings were among the most permanent and durable forms of art in ancient civilizations, making them the ideal medium for conveying important mythological narratives. The ancient Egyptians were masters of stonework, and their monumental statues, such as the Sphinx and the colossal statues of Ramses II, served not only as architectural marvels but also as embodiments of their myths. Each carving told a story, whether it was the journey of the sun god Ra across the sky or the resurrection of Osiris.

Similarly, Mesopotamian ziggurats were more than religious temples; they were representations of mythological cosmology. These stepped pyramids symbolized the connection between heaven and earth, with each level representing a different realm of existence. The gods and goddesses of Sumerian and Babylonian myths were frequently carved into the walls of these structures, reinforcing the idea that the divine was closely tied to the physical world.

Greek temples, adorned with friezes and sculptures, depicted the struggles and triumphs of their gods. The Parthenon in Athens, for example, displays the myth of Athena's victory over Poseidon, emphasizing the city's devotion to its patron goddess. These carvings were designed to inspire awe and reverence,

grounding mythical stories in the real world through the medium of stone.

### **"Myth in Stone: Carvings and Architecture"**

explores the deep connection between mythology and the architectural art forms that have stood the test of time. Across cultures, civilizations have expressed their religious beliefs, mythical stories, and societal values through the enduring medium of stone. From ancient temples to medieval cathedrals, the myths and legends of gods, heroes, and supernatural forces have been immortalized in stone carvings that not only display the technical prowess of their creators but also embody spiritual and cultural narratives. These carvings are more than just decoration—they are a form of storytelling, where each figure, symbol, and motif holds significance tied to a culture's understanding of the world and its place within it.

In ancient Egypt, for example, mythology is inseparable from architecture. The pyramids, with their meticulously carved hieroglyphs and statues of gods like Ra and Osiris, tell the story of life, death, and rebirth. Pharaohs were seen as divine beings, their rule legitimized by mythological narratives that were set in stone to ensure their immortality. Carvings within the temples of Luxor and Karnak depict the gods' direct intervention in human affairs, symbolizing the eternal connection between the divine and the mortal. These monumental structures served not only as religious sites but also as a reminder of the mythic origins of the rulers' power.

Moving eastward, the temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia present a striking fusion of architecture and mythology. The massive stone carvings of Hindu deities and epic scenes from the Ramayana and

Mahabharata are meticulously etched into the temple walls. These carvings capture cosmic battles between gods and demons, reflecting the Hindu concept of dharma, the moral order of the universe. Angkor Wat, in particular, was designed to represent Mount Meru, the mythical centre of the universe in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology, making the very layout of the temple a three-dimensional expression of myth.

In Europe, the Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages are another powerful example of myth in stone. The facades of these cathedrals, such as Notre-Dame in Paris and Chartres in France, are adorned with intricate sculptures depicting scenes from Christian mythology—angels, demons, saints, and biblical figures come to life in stone. These carvings were not just decorative but served an educational purpose, teaching an often-illiterate populace the stories of the Bible through vivid visual imagery. The architecture itself, with its soaring spires and vaulted ceilings, was designed to evoke a sense of the divine, bridging the earthly and the heavenly realms.

The role of myth in Islamic architecture is subtler yet equally profound. Although Islamic art prohibits the depiction of human figures, the intricate geometric patterns and calligraphic designs found in places like the Alhambra in Spain or the mosques of Istanbul carry deep symbolic meanings. The repetition of these patterns is often seen as a reflection of the infinite nature of Allah. The architecture itself, with its domes and minarets, is meant to inspire awe and reflect the grandeur of the divine, while the inscriptions from the Quran carved into the stone remind visitors of the spiritual foundation of Islamic culture.

In the Americas, the pre-Columbian civilizations of the Maya and the Inca also



used architecture to communicate their myths. The stone pyramids of the Maya, such as those at Chechen Itza, were aligned with astronomical phenomena and depicted gods like Kukulcan, the feathered serpent, in their carvings. These pyramids were both temples and observatories, embodying the Maya's belief in the cyclical nature of time and the gods' control over the cosmos. Similarly, the stone walls of Machu Picchu, with their precise engineering and alignment with the stars, reflect the Inca's reverence for the natural world, which was imbued with mythological significance.

Mythological themes are not only found in ancient and medieval architecture but also in more contemporary structures. In the 19th century, neo-Gothic and Romantic movements in architecture revived interest in myth and legend. Buildings such as Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament in London are adorned with gargoyles, knights, and mythical creatures that harken back to a medieval past. These motifs symbolized a desire to reconnect with a time when myths played a central role in shaping a culture's identity and values.

In India, the stone-carved temples of Khajuraho are famous for their erotic sculptures, which depict scenes from Hindu mythology and the Kama Sutra. These temples were not only places of worship but also embodied a celebration of life, love, and spirituality. The carvings are rich with symbolism, depicting the union of male and female as a metaphor for the cosmic balance between creation and destruction, as represented by the gods Shiva and Parvati.

Even in East Asia, architecture and myth are deeply intertwined. The Forbidden City in Beijing, for example, was built as the earthly representation of the divine order, with its layout based on principles from

Chinese mythology and feng shui. The dragon, a mythological creature symbolizing imperial power and protection, is a recurring motif in the carvings and decorations of the palace. In Japan, Shinto shrines are often built in harmony with nature, reflecting the mythological belief in kami, or spirits, that inhabit natural objects like trees and mountains. The torii gates that mark the entrance to these shrines symbolize the transition from the profane to the sacred.

Throughout history and across cultures, architecture has served as a canvas for humanity's most enduring myths. Whether carved into the walls of a temple, inscribed in a cathedral, or embedded in the very design of a city, these stone monuments have immortalized the myths that define civilizations. They remind us of the timeless power of stories to shape our world, inspire awe, and connect us to the divine, the unknown, and each other. These structures, standing for centuries or even millennia, are a testament to the human desire to leave a lasting mark on the world, one that echoes the eternal myths of gods, heroes, and cosmic forces.

---

### **Myth in Paint: Frescoes, Vases, and Mosaics**

While stone carvings were solid and enduring, painted depictions allowed for more dynamic and colorful representations of myth. Frescoes, such as those found in the ancient Minoan palaces of Crete, vividly portray scenes from mythology, including images of bull-leaping—a practice closely tied to Minoan religious beliefs and myths surrounding the Minotaur.

Greek vase painting is another quintessential example of mythological storytelling through art. The black-figure

and red-figure pottery techniques allowed for detailed depictions of gods, heroes, and mythological creatures. These vases often functioned as more than mere objects of utility; they were visual narrations of epic tales like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. For example, scenes of Achilles battling Hector or Odysseus outsmarting the Cyclops became timeless through these painted depictions, reminding users of these everyday objects of the grand stories that shaped their world.

Mosaics, another form of painted art, were often used to illustrate mythological narratives in homes and public spaces. The Roman fascination with Greek myths led to widespread adoption of mythological scenes in their own mosaics, which adorned the floors of villas and baths across the empire. The intricate designs of these mosaics allowed artists to convey complex scenes with emotional intensity, often portraying famous myths like the Labors of Hercules or the trials of Odysseus.

Mythology has long been a profound source of inspiration for artists across cultures and centuries. From the ancient Greeks to the Romans, and even through to the Renaissance, mythological tales have been depicted on various mediums, immortalizing gods, heroes, and cosmic events. Frescoes, vases, and mosaics, in particular, served as some of the most influential canvases for these mythical narratives, providing not only visual pleasure but also spiritual and cultural insight into the values and beliefs of their respective societies. The stories depicted in these works were as varied as they were grand, ranging from the exploits of Zeus and Apollo to the tragic love stories of Orpheus and Eurydice.

Frescoes, with their large-scale and immersive nature, were ideal for bringing mythological tales to life on the walls of

temples, palaces, and villas. The technique, involving the application of pigment onto wet plaster, allowed artists to create vibrant and durable works that often depicted complex scenes from myths. In Pompeii, for instance, frescoes adorned the homes of the wealthy, illustrating gods and goddesses engaged in both divine and human affairs. The frescoes not only functioned as decoration but also conveyed moral lessons and cosmic truths, bridging the gap between the mortal and divine worlds.

Vases, on the other hand, offered a more intimate setting for the depiction of myths. Ancient Greek and Etruscan vases were often used in domestic and religious contexts, making them a part of everyday life. These vessels often portrayed scenes from the epic tales of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as other mythological narratives involving gods, heroes, and monsters. The black-figure and red-figure techniques of vase painting allowed for a detailed and stylized representation of mythological events, often incorporating symbolic elements that heightened the drama and intensity of the stories.

Mosaics, composed of small colored stones or glass, provided another medium through which myths were immortalized. These works were often found in public spaces, such as baths and forums, as well as in private homes, adding a sense of grandeur to the places they adorned. Roman mosaics, in particular, are renowned for their intricate depictions of mythological scenes, capturing the drama and beauty of tales such as the abduction of Persephone or the labors of Hercules. The precision required to create these detailed works showcased the skill of the artisans, while the subject matter continued the tradition of storytelling through visual art.

The significance of these artistic representations extends beyond their aesthetic value. In many cases, they functioned as religious or moral symbols, reminding viewers of the power of the gods and the consequences of human actions. The myths depicted in frescoes, vases, and mosaics often conveyed messages about fate, hubris, love, and heroism—universal themes that resonated with ancient audiences and continue to inspire today. In this way, the art of myth-making and storytelling transcended verbal narrative, becoming a permanent and powerful part of the visual culture.

In the case of frescoes, particularly those in the Roman tradition, the relationship between mythology and politics was often evident. Emperors and statesmen frequently commissioned works that depicted themselves in the guise of mythological figures, thereby associating their rule with divine favor. Augustus, for instance, was depicted as a new Aeneas, drawing on the mythological foundation of Rome's origin in order to legitimize his reign. This fusion of political propaganda and mythological art allowed rulers to align their power with the eternal and the divine.

Greek vases, with their portability and accessibility, played a crucial role in disseminating mythological knowledge. These objects were traded across vast distances, spreading stories from one region to another and helping to create a shared cultural heritage centered around the gods and heroes. The stories told on these vases were often accompanied by inscriptions, giving names to the figures depicted and aiding in the transmission of mythological knowledge. In this way, vases acted as a visual language that connected people across different regions and time periods.

One of the remarkable features of mosaics is their use of space and perspective to create dynamic, almost three-dimensional scenes. The mythical figures in these works often seem to leap from the surface, their forms shaped by light and shadow. This effect was particularly impressive in large-scale public mosaics, where gods and heroes appeared larger than life, presiding over the civic and religious spaces of the city. Such works not only demonstrated the technical prowess of Roman artists but also reinforced the central role that mythology played in the public life of the empire.

Frescoes, vases, and mosaics also reflected the intersection of myth and everyday life in the ancient world. Many of the myths depicted, such as those involving Dionysus, the god of wine, or Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, were intimately connected to agricultural and seasonal cycles. Their representation in domestic and public art served to remind people of the gods' influence over the natural world, ensuring that myth remained a constant presence in both the private and public spheres. This blending of the sacred and the mundane allowed mythology to maintain its relevance in the daily lives of the people.

Frescoes, vases, and mosaics serve as enduring testaments to the power of myth in ancient cultures. Through their depictions of gods, heroes, and mythical creatures, these art forms bridged the gap between the human and divine, making the myths of the ancient's tangible and visible for all to see. Even today, these works continue to captivate and inspire, reminding us of the timeless nature of mythological storytelling and its profound impact on human imagination.

---

## Summary



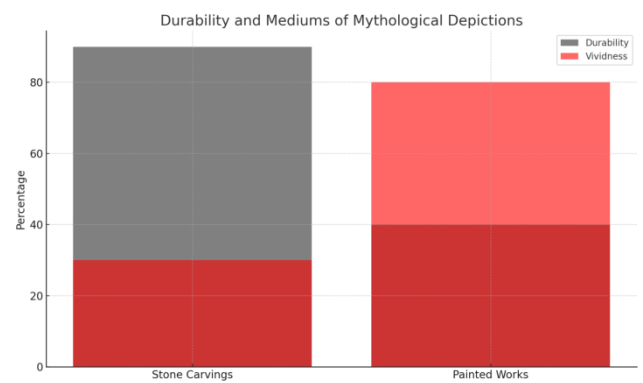
The myths of ancient civilizations live on not just through written texts but through the stone carvings and painted depictions that adorn the remnants of their cultures. From the pyramids of Egypt to the vases of Greece, these works of art have preserved mythological narratives for millennia, giving modern viewers a glimpse into the spiritual and cultural worlds of the ancients. Stone and paint, as mediums, offered these ancient societies a means of ensuring that their most important stories would never be forgotten.

Through the "eyes" of the ancients, we can see how mythology was not just a set of tales but a living, breathing part of daily life—woven into the very fabric of their architectural and artistic achievements. The images carved in stone and painted in vivid hues were more than mere decoration; they were windows into a world where the gods walked among men, and the line between myth and reality was porous. By studying these works, we gain insight into how ancient peoples viewed themselves, their gods, and their place in the cosmos.

ancient Egypt, Greece, and Mesopotamia. Key themes include:

- **Gods and Goddesses** (e.g., Zeus, Osiris, Ishtar)
- **Creation Myths**
- **Heroic Epics** (e.g., Hercules, Achilles)
- **Cosmology and the Afterlife**

*(Graph shows the distribution of mythological themes across different ancient civilizations in stone and paint art)*

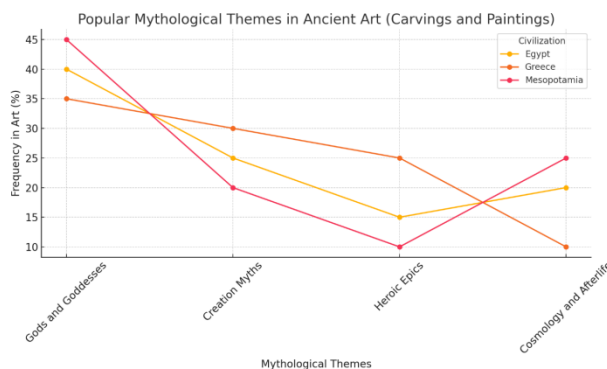


**Graph 2: Durability and Mediums of Mythological Depictions (Stone vs. Paint)**

This graph compares the durability of mythological depictions across different mediums, with stone carvings being more permanent but less dynamic, and painted works providing more vivid, yet more perishable, representations.

*(Graph depicts the relative longevity and fragility of different artistic mediums in conveying myth)*

**Graphs and Visual Representations**



**Graph 1: Popular Mythological Themes in Ancient Art (Carvings and Paintings)**

The graph below illustrates the most frequently depicted mythological themes in the stone carvings and paintings of

**Inline References:**

- Egyptian mythology and its depiction through temple art.
- The role of Greek vase painting in preserving epic narratives.

- Mesopotamian ziggurats as symbols of mythological cosmology.