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# Visualizing the Written Word: an Artistic Approach to Creation Myths

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# Visualizing the Written Word:

An Artistic Approach to Creation Myths

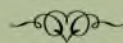
Alexis Ortega



# **Visualizing the Written Word:**

**An Artistic Approach to Creation Myths**

**Alexis Ortega**



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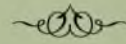
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Palmer, and Dr. Thomas Bowie for contributing, editing, and  
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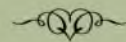






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# Introduction

# Making the Verbal Visual

A little over a year ago, during my spring semester in 2012, I took an art history course on Japanese art with six other students. In January we began by researching Japanese creation myths as an introduction to Japanese culture. At first glance this seemed rather easy work for an upper division course. However, this assignment immediately grabbed my attention due to the foreign nature of the narrative. Prior to this project, my only experience with creation myths came from Genesis in the Bible. I knew the storyline from beginning to end, had seen artwork depicting this narrative from various sources including Michelangelo, and had lost interest in this tale since I had been overexposed to it. In comparison, I was immediately drawn to the Japanese creation myth surrounding the two gods known as Izanami and Izanagi because it was so different from what I knew. There were two gods instead of one. The gods did not predate creation. Instead they came into being during the initial steps of creation. The only commonality I could see was the initiative the gods in both narratives took in setting out to create the world.

At the same time I began looking into these myths, I was also beginning the Honors Thesis process. As I began brainstorming ideas for my thesis, I was still stuck on the idea of creation myths. I wanted to look into more of these myths, but this particular field was not my forte. However, I already knew that as a Fine

Arts major I would need to develop artwork for my final exhibition during my Spring semester my senior year. As soon as I realized there was a creative thesis option, I began to merge my fascination with creation myths with my artistic mindset to generate a feasible project for my thesis work. I decided to develop a series of five images surrounding creation myths. By looking at creation myths presented in *A Dictionary of Creation Myths* by David Leeming and *In the Beginning: Creation Myths from Around the World* by Virginia Hamilton, I hoped to transform the verbal narratives into visual journeys. After reading these myths I wanted to convert my mental image as I imagined it from the actual narrative into a tangible experience for others.

However, as I began my research I needed to narrow down my focus by determining how I wanted to divide my artwork. I could focus on myths from one culture or various cultures or by area. As I started to delve into different myths from different cultures, I came to the conclusion that it would be more interesting to branch out and use a myth from each continent as the basis for each image in my series. This way I could give an overview of different cultures. Since each myth would not logically connect to each other narratively, I decided it would be visually interesting to formally connect my final compositions. This was my motivation behind my choice in creation myths for my series. I wanted the elements of each story to connect visually to each other, so I chose myths with forms that were easy to manipulate to reflect each other. For example, I began with an aboriginal myth from Australia describing a massive wave which I could imagine as a series of curves rushing over each other. These shapes were easy to merge into other forms, such as the clouds presented in the Greek creation myth I decided to depict.

After choosing stories with elements I could visually relate to each other, I moved on to sketching out my ideas for these myths. As I sketched, I kept each story close at hand to reference as I began to formulate ideas on various details for my images. I began with the Aboriginal myth followed by the Native American, Greek, Egyptian, and Japanese creation myths respectively. I began with the narratives I had clearest internal image of and proceeded on to the more difficult narratives. I maintained this order as I set out to complete my series of paintings. In the end, I created a series of five images, each 18 by 24 inches, all completed on Masonite board. Each image is framed by a border of pine wood 2 inches thick that has been stained

to match the brown tones I incorporated into several of my main figures.

In the following five chapters I will discuss my process for each myth as I transformed it from the verbal into the visual. I will focus on how the phrasing of the myths affected my internal visualization of the story. From there I will proceed to discuss how this affected my initial sketch and how this in turn transformed into my final painting. At the end of each chapter I will discuss how successful each image was in relation to the narrative. These chapters will finally culminate in a final chapter discussing how successful my series was as a whole in visualizing the written word.

# Chapter One



# Ngurunderi Creation Myth

As I looked into aboriginal creation stories I was inspired to research creation myths from different continents. Based on this research I decided to create five different images for my series, each relating to a different continent. Finding an aboriginal myth to incorporate into this project was an intimidating first step. The original narrative I looked at came from the Aranda tribe. At first glance, the Aranda narrative seems straightforward. This myth opens with “In the beginning, all was darkness forever. Night covered the earth in a great tangle” (Hamilton 47). This line provides a stable background for the introduction of the main figure and it gives the viewer a concrete image to focus on, namely the Earth in shadow. In addition, it provides an environment which the main figure of the narrative, Karora, can later change. However, even though it is concrete, the opening is ambiguous in its description of the setting. The two central images for the background are clouded by a strange description preventing a clear visual impression of the story. How can night cover the world in a “great tangle?” What does it mean by “all was darkness forever?” In addition to this, the meaning of “forever” creates the impression of endless stagnation. There can be no change in this type of environment and the reader loses any sense of momentum. By making the setting indistinct and static, the myth loses the ability to lure the reader into the fantasy world it creates. This in turn hinders visualization of the narrative.



Karora, the main figure, is introduced into this stagnant background. His entrance occurs immediately after the introduction. He lies "asleep at the very bottom of the deep, dry ground" (Hamilton 47). His introduction is abrupt. There is no transition between the initial description and his entrance. This shocks the reader because something living has broken the unchanging background. The reader questions Karora's presence because it seems at odds with the steady atmosphere already present within the narrative. This disrupts the reader's ability to visualize the myth since the reader is aware of the barrier between the text world and the real world. At the same time, Karora's entrance doesn't even cause a ripple in the action of the narrative since he is himself inactive. Karora is smothered by the earth, offering no real threat to the equilibrium at play. The only source of danger to the status quo is the possibility that he may wake up and take an interest in altering his environment. However, this seems unlikely since the narrative has emphasized the endless, unchanging atmosphere of the background. His presence only increases the static nature of the narrative. He becomes part of the overall setting, just another aspect of the world that has been there" from the beginning" (Hamilton 47).

At the same time, his presence is bizarre because, even though he is inactive, his dreams still affect creation. As he lies underground he dreams about "Bandicoots those large rats" which then begin "coming out of his naval and his armpits" (Hamilton 47). This involuntary act is unnerving on several levels, the first of which is his unconscious influence. Instead of an active creator who demonstrates purpose and control, Karora gives off the impression that creation is a side note, almost a play thing. Impulse drives creation, making it appear meaningless since there is no higher purpose involved. Furthermore,

Karora initiates creation with “large rats.” It may be that these creatures are significant in Aranda culture. In fact, this is probably the case, considering these animals become the main food source for Karora and his sons. However, to my imagination, the image of a rat implies an insignificant, even dirty, animal. This image further served to trivialize the Aranda creation myth for me since the first animal made has only base instincts and in fact is a product of Karora’s primal urges.

These elements from the narrative (the static background, the stationary creator, the strange visuals) gave me no insight. I could not create a cohesive composition from the myth at this point in the myth. The unsettling creation of the Bandicoots left me confused. I was further disorientated as Karora created sons via parthenogenesis who then kill off the Bandicoots. The lack of a cohesive sequence of events left me with a muddled image of the myth. I had to leave this myth and look into another aboriginal creation myth in order to find a narrative I could use. I chose to look into the creation myth from the Ngurunderi tribe.

The Ngurunderi myth dives straight into the action of the story where the Aranda myth begins with a general description of the setting. This narrative begins by stating “the great ancestor Ngurunderi canoed down the Murray River in search of his two runaway wives” (Leeming 209). Three main figures and the main conflict of the story are set up in this opening line. Furthermore, this line creates a sense of forward momentum in Ngurunderi’s chase where the starting point was the disappearance of the two wives and the end goal is their capture. This movement gives a clear sense of the overall plot which prevents any possible confusion for the general storyline. The setting is also established in this line. The image of the Murray River establishes Australia as the main setting but from the

beginning, the primary setting is a river. Not only does the chase create a sense of forward momentum in the narrative so does the image of the river since a river only runs in one direction. Finally, the use of the verb “canoed” provides a vivid picture of Ngurunderi’s vessel. From the setting, the main figures, and the conflict of the myth, I began with a clear impression of the narrative. The conflict between Ngurunderi and his wives gave me a place to begin developing an image.

After defining the main conflict, the myth goes on to describe the encounters and events that occurred between the disappearance and capture of the wives. The first encounter occurs between Ngurunderi and a giant fish that swims in front of his canoe. As the fish travels in front of Ngurunderi’s canoe, he creates “the present river [The Murray River] out of the tiny stream” it was (Leeming 209). While Ngurunderi is the primary creator in the myth, the fish also adds to creation. However, the fish is not aware of his contribution to creation. His main desire is to escape Ngurunderi and the widening of the river is just a product of this desire. For me, even though a new figure had been added, the main presence within the narrative was still Ngurunderi and his chase. This impression was confirmed when Ngurunderi catches the fish, cuts it up, and forms “all the different fish the people find today” from the pieces of the large fish (Leeming 209). Ngurunderi recaptures the lead role in the narrative by destroying the power of the fish. Furthermore, Ngurunderi is conscious of his actions, demonstrating his position as lead creator. I found this chase intriguing in the logic it presented in the origin of every fish in the ocean. I liked the idea that an original fish gave rise to all existing species of fish. I kept this visual in mind as I delved deeper into the myth.

At this point, I had four figures to work with, Ngurunderi, his two wives, and the gigantic fish as well as a general setting for the main action of the narrative. However, two more images fascinated me further on in the myth. The first captured my attention because it was difficult to imagine. It occurs after Ngurunderi sets up camp and when he “sensed the nearness of wives, he left everything, and went in pursuit of them; his canoe became the Milky Way” (Leeming 209). This section brings Ngurunderi down to the level of regular human beings because it acknowledges he needs to rest like a normal human being. At the same time it elevates him beyond human since he is able to sense the presence of his wives. This supernatural quality makes him appear otherworldly while his need for rest makes him a relatable character. What is interesting in this section is the almost throwaway line, “his canoe became the Milky Way.” While brief, this line explains the creation of a heavenly body. However, it gives no details on what prompts this change or if there is anything that helps this transformation occur. The lack of details forces the viewer to pause and consider how the canoe transforms into the Milky Way. For me, this image was striking in the absolute metamorphosis of the canoe. I wanted to include this idea into my painting but did not yet know how.

The key moment in the text, and the most fascinating for me, occurs when Ngurunderi catches up to his two wives. I had assumed that when he captured his wives he would take them back to wherever they had come from and they would return to their regular routine. However, this was not the case. At the end of Ngurunderi's chase, he "caught up with his wives on Granite Island, but they ran to Cape Jervis...Ngurunderi, in anger, caused waves to sweep across the connecting land, drowning not only the land but also his wives" (Leeming 210). This is the climax of the story, when Ngurunderi's pursuit finally comes to fruition. Yet, he denies the capture of his wives in favor of destroying their defiance. Even at this moment of destruction, he is still the creator. All along, Ngurunderi's destructive acts have led to creation and even here, the bodies of his wives become the "little Rocky Pages Islands" (Leeming 210). It seems as if Ngurunderi has destroyed the chaotic elements of the world to create a controlled universe. The gigantic fish has been tamed, the wives' defiance has been mastered, and the landscape has been shaped. After killing his wives with this wave, Ngurunderi "rose into the Milky Way" returning to his canoe and leaving the world behind (Leeming 210).

All of these images intrigued me and I wanted to include all of them in my final image. My problem was how to create a cohesive image without making it too chaotic. Since the main focus of the myth was Ngurunderi's pursuit of his wives, I decided this had to be the main focus of my work. The ending scene where Ngurunderi sends the wave to kill his wives is the climax of the story. I wanted this to be the moment depicted in my composition. If I wanted to include the fish, he had to appear in the wake of the wave, since this encounter occurs before the murder of Ngurunderi's wives. I had to leave enough room behind the wave to place the fish. Since the wives are killed by

the wave, they had to be in the path of destruction. In this way, the wave was caged between the two wives on the left and the fish on the right. I placed Ngurunderi on top of the wave, and through association the entire composition, demonstrating his control over the wave. By placing him on the wave, I was able to incorporate the image of his canoe. Since Ngurunderi appears near the top edge of the image, I included the image of the canoe turning into the Milky Way. I conveyed this with a curved trail leading from the canoe to the upper right hand corner of my composition. All these considerations led to my initial sketch (fig 1).



Figure 1: Initial Sketch for Ngurunderi Creation Myth

Translating this sketch into a painting was difficult because it was the first painting I created (fig 2). I had to figure out how to modify my sketch to fit the larger frame I was working with. In addition, I had to figure out what colors to use in the background to make a clear division between the night sky and the rising wave. The main color I used for the setting was pthalo blue. In order to differentiate the sky from the wave, I added pthalo green to the pthalo blue for the ocean and dioxazine purple for the night sky. The addition of these two colors visually separated the two areas.

After filling in the background colors, I moved to the details of the wave. I did not have a clear understanding yet for the best technique to visually achieve the different layers of the wave. This lack of experience made the swirls of the waves appear too consistent, not nearly as dynamic as I wanted for the drama of the moment I was depicting. In order to break up this pattern, I added highlights of light blue and undertones of pthalo blue mixed with pthalo green. This gave the waves depth, making individual segments of the wave stand out. The diagonal lines of the wave and the Milky Way further emphasize the sense of drama within the piece. These diagonals force the viewer to complete the action of the wave, visually implying the fate of the two women resting in the curve of the wave.

The two women are encased on all four sides by the wave, foreshadowing their impending fate. Ngurunderi, on the other hand, rides the wave. All three figures have organic designs decorating their bodies, suggesting the

culture the image comes from. On the two women these designs are done in a light grey, emphasizing the fact that they are in the shadow of the wave. Ngurunderi's designs are half white, half grey, suggesting his body is half turned away from the light source. Furthermore, these three figures are abstracted. They do not have facial features and appear only as general human figures. The personalities of these three figures are not presented within the myth. I wanted to maintain this concept. The abstraction of their facial features prevents the viewer from identifying them as individuals and maintains their generalized personality from the myth.

Overall, this piece is visually successful in representing the different elements of the Ngurunderi creation myth, but is not as successful in maintaining narrative clarity. The composition represents a majority of all the main figures. However, their relationship to each other is not apparent. While it is evident that the male figure is the aggressive force in the image, since he controls the wave about to drown the two women, his status as their husband is not presented. Nor is the relationship between the fish and Ngurunderi obvious since the fish is still whole and Ngurunderi displays no aggressiveness toward the fish. Since the focus of the fish is on Ngurunderi, there is some kind of relationship implied but it is not clear visually. This lack of clarity prompts the viewer to determine a possible relationship between the figures, thus allowing the viewer to be involved in the creative process.







Figure 2: Final Painting for Ngurunderi  
Creation Myth



## Chapter Two



## Maidu Creation Myth

After creating the centerpiece for my series, I moved on to the image I developed for the Maidu Tribe. The Maidu tribe originally comes from California according to Virginia Hamilton (41). Within the Maidu creation myth there are three main figures known as Earth Starter, Turtle, and Pehe-ipe, also known as Father of the Secret Society (Leeming 175). The beginning of the myth does not give a lot of concrete imagery and what little imagery is presented is shrouded in darkness making it difficult to imagine. The Maidu creation story, as retold by Hamilton, opens with “in the beginning, all was dark. There was water everywhere. There was no sun and no moon and no stars” (35). This myth draws the reader in from the phrase “in the beginning” which invokes the storytelling tradition by imitating the tone of an individual sitting down to relate a story to an audience. After inviting the reader into the story, the opening focuses exclusively on setting up the immediate background for the initial action of the story. The repetition of the absence of light sources in “there was no sun and no moon and no stars,” emphasizes the presence of the water as the sole image in the story. By surrounding the only concrete image within the setting (the water) by the lack of light, the reader is forced to imagine the vastness of the phrase “there was water everywhere.” In this way, the large body of water that makes up the background of the story takes over the entire myth since it is the only concrete presence within the narration.

However, this focus solely on water did not lend itself to any kind of visually interesting artistic pieces. All I could imagine was a vast blue canvas, but that was a foggy visualization because even this was cloaked in darkness within the story. The introduction of Turtle and Pehe-ipe into the narration did little to break up the monotony of this vast ocean because everything was still cast in darkness. These two figures are passive, making their entrance all the more uninspiring. The narration describes the raft as the main force for their entrance, stating “then a raft came from the north, floating on the water” (Hamilton 35). Neither Turtle nor Pehe-ipe are steering the raft, implying they accept their fate as they slowly wander the vast body of water. They are not actively searching for anything. This passivity from both figures hardly creates a ripple in the far-stretching presence of the water within the myth.

It isn't until Earth Starter comes down from above that this passivity is broken. After the rope descends from above, Earth Starter climbs down the rope and “when he was all the way down, he tied the rope to the raft and then climbed into it” (Hamilton 35). Where Turtle and Pehe-ipe's entrance feel as if they are a part of the monotonous background, Earth Starter's presence feels as if a dramatic change has occurred. After all, Turtle and Pehe-ipe exist on the same plane as the water. Earth Starter comes from an unknown place, one that can only be described as “above” the world where Turtle and Pehe-ipe exist. Furthermore, Earth Starter is the first introduction of light within the story, changing the tone of the story even more. After he has sat down within the raft, the myth describes Earth Starter's appearance, beginning with “Earth Starter's face was covered... [And] his body was shining as if the sun shone on it” (Hamilton 35). In Leeming's version,

the "face was covered... [And] his body was shining as if the sun shone on it" (Hamilton 35). In Leeming's version, the Earth Starter "was masked and he shone as if he were the sun itself" (175). It is hard to imagine any human being radiating the light of the sun as Leeming's version suggests, but Hamilton offers a solution by making Earth Starter a reflection of light. By saying "his body was shining as if the sun shone on it," Hamilton creates a separate light source that is reflected in the Earth Starter's skin. This softens the dramatic change within the narration, allowing the audience of the story to begin to imagine the softer details of the story that have now been forced to take a presence within the narration.

At this point, I began to have a clearer sense of the story, not just due to the introduction of light but also due to the active involvement of the characters. Earth Starter's presence was the catalyst that provoked this change within the characters, prompting them to actively participate with each other and their environment. For instance, Turtle begins to prod Earth Starter for information. Turtle initiates conversation by asking Earth Starter "where did you come from," (Leeming 175). This is just the first instance of Turtle's curiosity and imagination since he recognizes Earth Starter's presence as a deviation from the limited pool of events that surround their existence. This question begins to characterize Turtle and demonstrates his forward personality that I would later incorporate into my sketch.

Turtle further demonstrates his forward personality when he asks Earth Starter questions to understand more about the world and the changes Earth Starter will bring about. Immediately after Earth Starter answers Turtle's initial question, he encourages Earth Starter to enact additional changes. Turtle states "it would be nice if you could make me some dry land to stand on once in a while...and, by the way, are there going to be people on



the earth?" (Leeming 176). It seems impossible that Turtle would have this understanding of what dry land and people are but perhaps Turtle assumes these things from what he sees before him and what he has seen under water. After all, Pehe-ipe and Earth Starter might be the model for people in Turtle's imagination and there may be earth underwater that Turtle assumes can also exist above water. What is most important about this moment is that Turtle prompts Earth Starter into creation. The images of the earth and other creatures begin in Turtle's imagination and Turtle actively seeks to make these changes a reality. Even though Earth Starter has the abilities to make change possible, the creation of new things may not have come about without Turtle's initiative.

This emphasis on Turtle as the main push for creation gave me a main figure to focus on during my formation of an image for this story. Without his provocation and help, Earth Starter may not have begun the process of creating land and creatures. In fact, Earth Starter cannot begin creation without raw material, which Turtle volunteers to obtain from the bottom of the ocean. A description is given of Earth Starter tying rope to two of Turtle's legs (in Leeming's version) so Turtle will not lose the raft and to signal whether or not Turtle has found any earth. To my mind, the next logical step in the narrative would be to describe Turtle's journey in the ocean. However, the narration jumps from "As Turtle went over the side of the boat, Pehe-ipe began to shout" to "Turtle was gone six years. When he finally came up, he was covered in green slime" (Hamilton 36). Leeming's version makes the same jump. The only mention of Turtle's journey is how long he was gone, which is a significant amount of time. This short sentence does not begin his journey.

This jump irritated me because Turtle's journey signified whether or not Earth Starter could begin creating new things. Due to the weight behind Turtle's journey, it seemed as if this moment deserved some kind of description because it was the first step to making creation possible.

My focus on this break in narration led me to create my first sketch (fig 1), where Turtle had just begun his dive into the ocean. Even though the narration continues with Earth Starter creating land and, at Turtle's prompting, light, animals, and people, this moment struck me the most. It left me with questions, such as what happened, what did he see, where did he find the earth, and so much more. I decided to use these questions and create an image that described the beginning of Turtle's journey. As I thought about how to illustrate this journey, I realized that imagining the journey was half the fun. Did he encounter a dangerous creature below the water? Were there obstacles to his journey? Dangerous caves? And just where did the green slime come from? I wanted to let the viewer have the same experience in describing his journey, so the image I wanted to create had to describe the initial

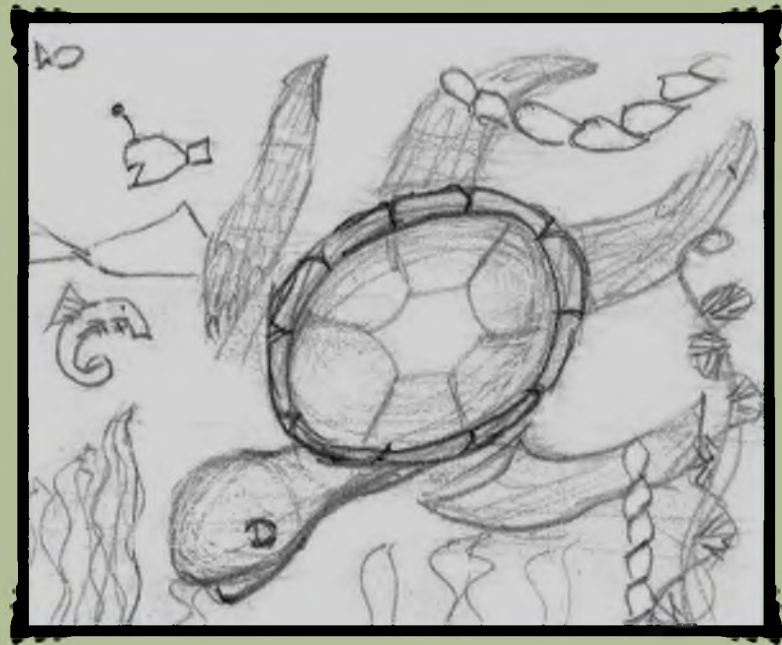


Figure 1: Initial Sketch for Maidu Creation Myth

moments of his dive in order to allow the viewer the same opportunity to imagine what happens on Turtle's journey. After all, the moment initiates the journey. What happens afterwards must be imagined because it is not given.

Of course the only concrete image I had at this point was Turtle with two ropes attached to his legs in addition to the broad oceanic background. This left the question of what went between Turtle and this blue backdrop. Nothing? Other Fish? In my initial sketch of this creation myth, I included various ideas, from a seahorse and other fish to seaweed and underwater plants. The idea of putting fish in the background was the first idea I had, but looking at the story, that didn't seem to fit because the creation of fish logically should fall with the creation of other animals. It wasn't until I put in the seaweed that it hit me. Plants were the answer to what was in the ocean prior to Turtle's dive. After all, plants are associated with earth, at least on land. If Turtle was diving for earth, perhaps there were plants growing from the earth.



This idea led to my second sketch (fig 2) where the only thing in the background is seaweed. I came up with this background idea for two main reasons. The first reason was to solidify the impression that the action of the painting occurred under water. The illusion of being underwater is maintained in the undulating, organic lines created by the individual leaves on each plant. Each leaf follows its own path, as if being carried on an underwater current. While the seaweed provided a concrete setting for Turtle's dive, it further served to create variety and contrast within the composition. Alone, each seaweed stalk is unimpressive; however the repetition of the vertical thrust of each plant provides a stable background against which the diagonal push of the turtle's body provides a definite break. It suggests an environment the turtle must work around in order to obtain his goal.



Figure 2: Second Sketch for Maidu Creation Myth

Translating this sketch into a painting was not difficult compositionally. Instead, the difficulty came in deciding on what colors and technique to utilize within the image. The first thing I had to figure out was my light source and where the basis for this light source was positioned in relation to the composition. Earth Starter's entrance into the narration brings a soft light source into the narration when it states that "his body was shining as if the sun shone on it" (Hamilton 35). This description suggests Earth Starter, as he waits in the raft, should be the light source for this image. Working from this assumption, I believed Earth Starter should be located off the picture plane toward the top of the image since he would be in the raft as Turtle began his dive into the ocean. From this point, it became easier to start working on the actual image (fig 3).

Figure 3: Final Painting for Maidu Creation Myth



I worked from the ocean in the background to the seaweed in the mid-ground until I finally reached the foreground where the Turtle takes on the main action of the image. Knowing the setting for this image was under water, the background had to be a shade of blue to maintain this impression. In order to remain visually accurate in relation to the light source, the background had to transition from a lighter tint of blue at the top edge of into a deeper shade of blue, as if the turtle was headed toward the depths of the ocean. In addition to this, the brushstrokes had to be horizontal to create the impression of underwater currents, which would suggest a possible source for the undulating movement of the leaves on the seaweed stalks. This provided a background that would work with the next level of the image, the mid-ground, where the stalks of seaweed began to create a sense of distance within the image.

Each seaweed stalk was done in various hues of phthalo green and they run from the top to bottom edge of the painting. Within this painting, the seaweed stalks the main source for the illusion of depth. As the width increases for each stalk, so does the level of detail in both the brushstrokes and the variety of shades of green. All of these elements give the impression that the plant is closer to the viewer while the stalks that are smaller and less detailed recede into the distance. The free flowing lines created by the undulating leaves extending from the seaweed stalks provide contrast within the composition by creating a sense of variety against the regularity of the vertical lines created by the

body of the plants. These lines are further emphasized by the gradation from the deeper shades to the lighter hues of green used to suggest highlights and shadows on the plants. The mix of dark and light hues of green draws the eye between the leaves, allowing the viewer's eye a free, indirect path around the image.

Even though the organic lines of the seaweed leaves provides a free path for the viewer's eye, the focus of the piece is undoubtedly the turtle which validates his role in the creation myth. He is the main force of action in this segment of the narration and he is the primary source of movement within the image. He is the only strong diagonal line, creating a sense of drama within the piece, as if he is on a journey he cannot be distracted from. The colors I used to describe his body and shell further serve to emphasize his position within the painting because they contrast with the cooler colored background. The turtle is done in warmer browns, with redder browns for his body and orange browns for his shell while the background is all blue and green. This allows the turtle to pop from the background on the basis that visually, warm colors move forward while cooler colors recede into the picture plane.

Overall, this image is successful in both relating the story and as a stand-alone piece. Visually, this piece is successful in blending different types of lines and brushstrokes to create a cohesive piece where all the elements visually work together. There is just enough contrast between the different figures to make it visually interesting while the overarching theme of

an underwater landscape allows the figures to work cohesively together. In visualizing the story, the image is successful in that it remains true to the details while also allowing a personal interpretation of the story. The light source, background, and Turtle are present within the story and the way they interact is visually represented within the painting in that at the moment being described, each is working in relation to each other. The light source is

Earth Starter, looking down at Turtle from the raft as Turtle emerges himself in the ocean. While the seaweed is not mentioned within the story, it does serve to enhance the impression that this is an underwater adventure. Perhaps the viewer is not sure the image relates to an exact story, but the image does relate the idea that there is a story behind the image. It is up to the viewer to decide what that story may be.



## Chapter Three



# Greek Creation Myth

Zeus, Hera, and Kronos are all familiar names coming from the Greek pantheon of gods and goddesses. Besides Genesis from the Bible, Greek creation myths surrounding “Mother Earth,” Zeus, and Kronos are probably the most well-known narratives describing the origin of the world and mankind. At least, this seems to be true in western culture. After all, famous paintings reference these myths including Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* and there are even film adaptations of Greek stories such as Disney’s *Hercules*. In my project, my goal was not to reiterate these acclaimed stories. Instead, I wanted to depict lesser-known material, thus capturing the viewer’s eye through the foreign nature of the story as apprehended in my composition.

Despite my awareness of their well-known status, Greek creation myths were the first narratives I looked at while conducting my research into European creation stories. I was familiar with these narratives and believed they would be an easy introduction to European creation myths. However, as I looked into these stories, which range from Zeus killing his father Kronos to Prometheus creating mankind, I came across a myth that predated the commonly known tales. This myth is identified as the “Pelasgian” creation story which is “named after Pelasgus, the first man of [the] myth” (Leeming 117). Perhaps this story connects back to the image of Gaia, a “Mother Earth” figure who

appears in later Greek creation myths described by Leeming (118). After all, the main figure in the Pelasgian myth is also a female creator in control of generating order from chaos much like Gaia is in later Greek creation stories.

Even though this legend may be a precursor to the commonly known Greek creation myths, the Pelasgian tale drew my attention in the concrete, but short narrative it describes. This myth states, “In the beginning there was the great goddess Eurynome, who emerged naked from chaos and divided the waters from the sky so she could dance lonely upon the waves” (Leeming 117). Immediately, this myth sets up the main character, the setting, and the conflict of the story. It is apparent that the main character of the myth is female and a goddess. Her status as a goddess implies she is powerful and the fact that she is the only figure present further emphasizes her control within the myth. This is also the main conflict of the story. She may be the only figure present, but perhaps this is not by choice. The description of her dancing “lonely upon the waves” seems to suggest she would like company, or perhaps a partner. However, it seems unlikely that any new creatures will appear to join her, so it falls to Eurynome to create new elements within the chaos surrounding her. She begins by creating a basic setting for the narrative when she transforms the existing atmosphere, or “chaos,” into two definite sections, the sky and the water below. This division enforces the idea that Eurynome is the main creator in this myth because she has taken action and imposed her own idea of order onto her chaotic surroundings.

While the setting is overly general, it does provide concrete images with a specific visual relationship. The word “sky” prompts the reader to picture a vast blue background perhaps covered with clouds which would

be located toward the top of the image. Visually, the image of the water must appear somewhere below the sky to remain true to how these elements appear in nature. From these two images, I had a floor and ceiling to contain the main action of the story. The sky would appear toward the upper portion of my composition while the water would create a foundation for the main figures to stand upon. For this basic background I began to imagine a horizontal composition. A vertical orientation could also incorporate the separation of water and sky but this type of composition would have a different emphasis compared to a horizontal organization. After all, a vertical composition offers greater distance between the top and bottom edges emphasizing the center image. On the other hand, a horizontal orientation would create greater distance between the two sides forcing the viewer's eye to travel across the entire composition, thus simulating the narrative journey from the myth. I chose a horizontal orientation because I wanted to emphasize the time and effort behind the act of creation. This orientation would create a large area where I could incorporate various elements of the story, thus implying a sequence of events with a visual relationship to each other.

At this point I had a general background and a main figure but there was no real action to the narrative yet. Eurynome id described as dancing but the idea of motion is difficult to capture in a single image. So far, I could see a female figure in mid-motion between the sky and the water, but alone this figure was not dynamic enough to capture the viewer's attention. As I continued on with the narrative, new figures began to appear. The first creature introduced is Ophion, a serpent. As Eurynome danced upon the waves she

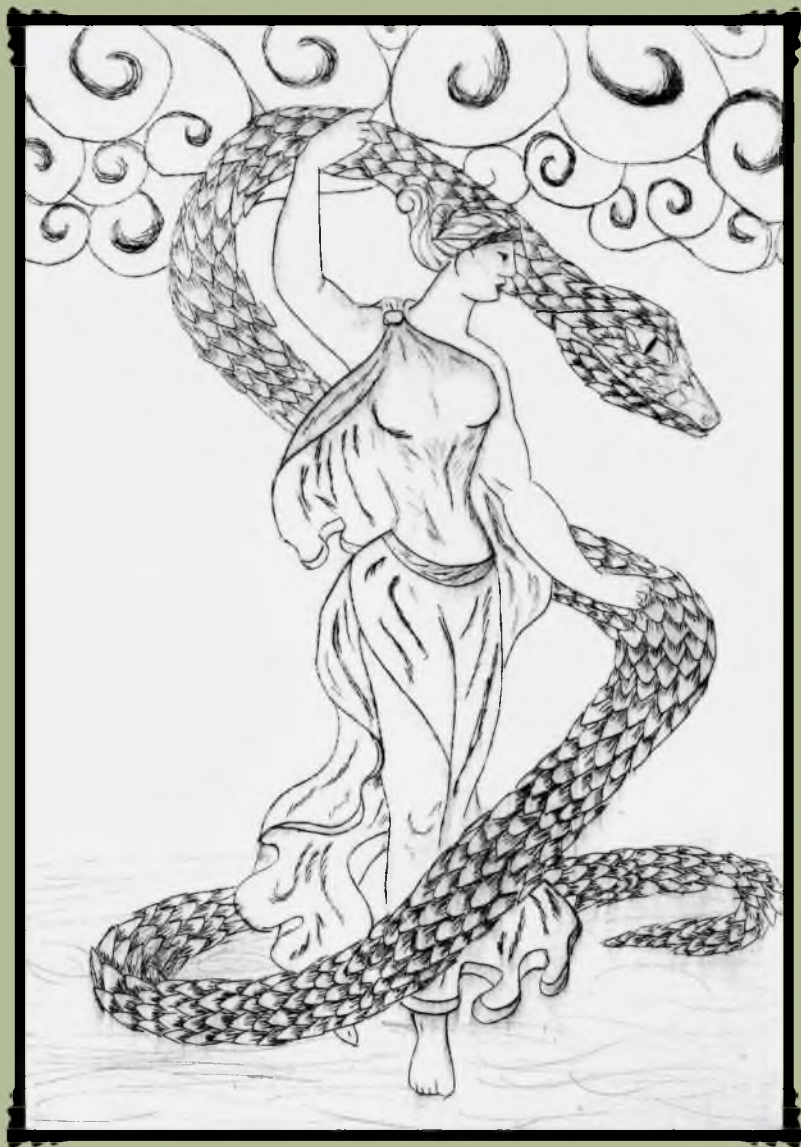


Figure 1: Initial Print of Greek Creation Myth



“caught the north wind and rubbed it, and it became the serpent Ophion” (Leeming 117). This action describes the tactile experience of the wind which is difficult to simulate visually. In nature, the wind is felt more than it is actually seen. Within the narrative, there were no trees or plants I could use to hint at the force of the wind, so it was difficult to suggest the presence of the wind within my image. At the same time Ophion is introduced into the narrative, offering a second dominant figure with a concrete form. While I could not visually describe Eurynome’s contact with the wind, I could imagine Ophion within my composition, perhaps wrapped around Eurynome as she dances on the water.

I created a print of Eurynome and Ophion standing between the sky and the water, as a study for the two figures (fig 1). I decided on a vertical composition for this image in order to create a focus on the two figures depicted. I wanted them to take up the majority of the picture plane because I wanted to explore possible ways to depict these two figures. This image is graceful in both the curves of the snake as it twines around the Eurynome and in the drapery covering Eurynome, but it lacks a direct connection to the creation myth. There is no hint as to the purpose behind their position. It does not explain why they are there, what they are doing, or even their relationship to each other. Although visually pleasing in the graceful curves and implied diagonal lines, there is no greater message presented in the image. For a study, this image was helpful for visualizing the two figures. It helped me figure out how to position the female figure, with her arms lifted in a way to wrap around and support the body of the snake. While a graceful pose it wasn't dynamic enough. I needed something more dynamic from the narrative in order to create a deeper connection to the myth.

By this point, I had a definite idea for the setting involving the water and sky. I wanted to use these two

elements to frame the main action of the image. In addition, I had two main figures with concrete forms I could incorporate into my composition. However, these elements alone did not describe the act of creation as presented in the narrative. I needed something dynamic enough to engage the viewer with my composition. The next two scenes within the narrative were not helpful in developing this aspect of my composition although they provided another concrete image. After Ophion entered the story, he “coupled with the dancing goddess” then Eurynome transformed into a dove and “laid the world egg” (Leeming 117). The initial image from this section of the narrative was unnerving due to the relationship implied between Ophion and Eurynome. However, the creation myth barely gives this act any attention, allowing it to become almost a side note to the myth. The unsettling image of this act and the bare minimum description allow the reader to brush past this section to get to the image of the egg. It is identified as the “world egg” implying it will somehow give rise to the universe, thus making it important to the narrative in the role it plays in creating the universe.

Since the egg is identified with creation, it became another element I considered incorporating into my composition. At this point I had no plan on how to visually position all these figures in relationship to each other. It wasn’t until Eurynome “ordered Ophion to encircle it [the egg] until it hatched the sun, moon, stars, and the Earth with all its creatures and plants” that I developed an idea of how to visually relate each of these figures (Leeming 117). The sky and the water were already set as the ceiling and floor for my image. This left a large space between the two to place the main figures of the myth. I began with Eurynome since she was the first being introduced. I placed her on the far right side of the composition. Since she is described

as “dancing” on the waves, I left her in a loose position with her left arm raised to suggest she had been caught in mid motion.

After positioning Eurynome, I moved on to Ophion. His head rests upon the water as his body curves up and around Eurynome’s body before dipping down to cross beneath her legs, ending with his tail above his head. The loop created by Ophion’s body pulls the viewer’s eye deeper into the image, moving from Eurynome’s solid stance on the right side of the composition to the center of the image. Furthermore, the loop surrounding Eurynome visually implies a connection between the two figures since their bodies intersect. This may seem to suggest that their individual power is diminished but both figures maintain their independence and power. This relationship is not dominated by either figure. Instead it works as an almost symbiotic relationship where both figures are capable of fulfilling their own role but depend on each other to complete their portion of creation. Within the composition they have been caught at the moment where they have chosen to work together. Moving from the center of the composition to the left of the image, I decided to present the “world egg” wrapped in Ophion’s tail. Since the final section stated Eurynome “ordered Ophion to encircle” the egg I decided to represent this relationship by physically wrapping Ophion’s body around the egg. This visually implies that Ophion is connected to the egg, perhaps as a protector since he surrounds the egg preventing any harm from coming to it. By extension Eurynome is indirectly connected to the egg since she is bound



within the circle of Ophion's body as well. I now had my three concrete figures represented but I also wanted to represent the universe spilling out of the egg, just as the narrative describes. I wanted to include this portion of the narrative because this was the image I needed in order to visually connect my composition to the idea of creation. Prior to this moment, the scene seems to be a general narrative but the presence of the universe draws the viewer to assume this scene depicts a moment of creation. All these considerations led me to create my initial sketch for my painting (fig 2).



Figure 2: Initial Sketch of Greek Creation Myth



Figure 3: Final Painting of Greek Creation Myth

This initial composition was easy to translate into my final painting (fig 3); the difficult part was pushing color into this black and white sketch. Already, I knew my light source would come from the universe pouring out of the egg on the left side of the composition since this is where the sun enters both the narrative and my composition. This knowledge made it easier to determine where each figure would be in light or shadow, thus adding a sense of depth and dimensionality to the composition. From this point, it was a matter of choosing different colors to represent the various elements of my

painting. I began by choosing the colors for the background behind the main figures. These colors needed to bridge the sky and water to create unity within the background but they had to contrast enough with the universe to prevent the two from visually blending together. I chose a mixture of pthalo blue, pthalo green and dioxazine purple. These colors allowed the background to recede into the distance while the main figures were pushed to the foreground due to the contrast between the cooler colors in the background and the warmer colors of the main figures.

Each figure was done in different colors making each element unique within the composition. However, I still wanted them to reference each other to make the composition unified, so I incorporated the background colors in the foreground of the image. Eurynome's dress and the "world egg" are prime examples of this. The egg mimics the pthalo blue in the background in the lighter tints present in the shell of the egg. These tints of pthalo blue allowed the egg to visually allude to the background colors but provided enough contrast to make it stand out. Eurynome's dress maintains a similar reference to the background colors, but relates to the pthalo green instead of the pthalo blue. In order to make her dress more dynamic, I mixed hansa yellow with a tint of pthalo green to create the highlights of her dress and mixed in pthalo blue to suggest shadows. These different hues provide enough contrast to keep her form clear underneath her dress while simultaneously pushing her into the foreground. The

egg and Eurynome's dress frame Ophion and Eurynome, allowing them to appear visually unified with the rest of the composition through the allusion to the background colors. These figures become the dominant elements of the image allowing the viewer to assume their role as the primary creators within the narrative.

Overall, this composition is successful in stressing the control and power Eurynome and Ophion have in creation. This is presented by the fact that these two figures are the largest elements within the image, thereby dominating the foreground. Furthermore, this composition is successful in conveying the reference to a creation myth. After all, the universe spills out from the egg, implying Ophion and Eurynome stand within a space that predates the world as we know it. Together the main figures and the introduction of the universe impress upon the viewer the notion that this composition refers to an act of creation.



# Chapter Four



# **Egyptian Creation Myth**

When I moved to the Egyptian creation myth, I had a difficult time finding a concrete story I could use to create an image. My difficulty lay in the vast number of variations in Egyptian creation myths. There was no specific, definite creation myth that defined Egyptian culture. Leeming notes, “Egyptian creation takes many forms, depending on the period and the religious center in question” (104). Each period in Egyptian history probably had leaders seeking to validate their rule while simultaneously differentiating themselves from their predecessors. Religious centers gaining power would have had similar desires. Egyptian leaders and religious centers could alter these myths to reflect their own values and foreshadow their reign over Egyptian life and culture. Changing the creation myth would have been important since it would have been the basis for Egyptian identity. Whatever the reason, these switches in centers of power led to a vast compilation of creation myths consisting of numerous figures and narratives. This variety made it difficult to imagine a cohesive image because each generation added, changed, or altogether deleted different aspects of prior creation myths.

The variety of figures and storylines was not the only difficulty that prevented me from creating a cohesive composition. Leeming presents an overview of these myths that is general and passive in description,

which further impeded my ability to visualize the narrative. Leeming lacks a narrative voice to draw the reader into his synopsis of Egyptian creation. This is apparent from the beginning when Leeming states, “at Heliopolis, Atun took many forms over the centuries...Atun was the original god... [He] was said to have created the world and the gods as a *dues faber* (god as craftsman)” (104). This initial description of Atun is too general; it avoids giving examples of Atun’s forms and favors a general statement of his role in creation. By remaining vague, this description leaves too many options open to the reader’s imagination thus hindering any kind of visualization due to the overwhelming number of possibilities available. Furthermore, there is no storyline. It is all a description of the change in Egyptian myths. This allows the reader to remain disengaged from the myth since general summary keeps the action of the myth distant from the reader. This distance prevents any sense of obligation requiring the reader to imagine the narrative.

Despite Leeming’s passive overview of Egyptian creation myths, his description provided the concept that Atun needed to be depicted in my final image. After all, he was the central figure in many versions of Egyptian creation. Nevertheless, the exact form he would take was difficult to determine because Atun had at least three distinct representations, each known by a different name. There was Atun, “the original god; Khepri...is Atun made visible, and Ra is the god as the sun” (Leeming 104). If Khepri was “Atun made visible,” then the form known as Atun had no physical presence and instead would have been more like a spirit. Therefore Atun did not have a concrete form the viewer could grab onto and recognize as a god figure making this figure unsuitable for my composition. Even Khepri was difficult to imagine because he was “Atun made visible.” This may suggest Khepri has a physical body but leaves open what this form

looked like. It could be a human figure, an animal, or even a combination of the two. The only concrete image provided was Ra as the sun, the third representation of Atun. Leeming notes that “in spite of constant developments over the centuries, certain aspects of an Egyptian creation myth can be said to be relatively constant” including “the presence of an Eye, the sun, that creates cosmos within the chaos” (106). This constant presence and concrete form gave me a figure to work with, but I still needed a storyline I could organize around the sun.

One account that centers on Ra is presented in Virginia Hamilton’s *In the Beginning: Creation Stories from Around the World*. This narrative focuses on the conflict between Ra and Apophis, a dragon bent on destroying Ra. The myth begins with Ra saying, “When I came into being...then being itself came into being” (111). Unlike other creation stories I looked at where a being takes control of creation and shapes the world and its inhabitants, this story presents instantaneous creation as Ra gains awareness. No effort is put forth on Ra’s part at this point in creation. Furthermore, there is no sign of conflict to complicate the myth, yet. Creation proves no challenge for Ra, so there must be another outlet to bring a sense of struggle to the narrative. This is presented in the reoccurring battle between Ra and Apophis. Ra travels across the sky each day and “each night, he crossed the Underneath Sky in his boat...The dragon, Apophis, lived in the Underneath Sky. It waited to destroy God Ra” (111). When Ra enters this realm known as “Underneath Sky,” he is in danger. He struggles to regain dominion as he travels through “Underneath Sky.” After all, this is Apophis’s domain while the world and its inhabitants belong to Ra. In this way, existence itself is in constant peril since Ra presence is threatened each night.



This conflict drew my attention since creation could not survive without the presence of the sun. At this point, I now had two concrete figures to incorporate into my image. In fact, Hamilton provided details on Apophis, filling out my impression of Apophis. As Ra traveled through Apophis's realm, "the dragon whipped his green tail back and forth, and each time, Ra fought the dragon and his mighty tail with all his strength" (Hamilton 111). At first glance, the only detail this provided was the color of the dragon but it also characterizes his power and choice of weapon. It emphasizes the challenge Apophis poses to Ra since Ra must use "all his strength," in battle. For me, this meant Apophis had to be just as large as Ra in order to pose such a threat. Moreover, Apophis becomes limited to his tail. This part of his body comes to represent his power and destructive force, thus becoming the focal point of this figure.

Even though I had an idea on how to represent my two main figures, the setting proved more difficult to determine. After all, the place called "Underneath Sky" was difficult to imagine, even though it seemed logical from a point of view predating the knowledge that the sun must pass through some area in order to rise again in the opposite position the next morning. Early civilizations would not have known the Earth rotated, allowing the other side of the world to receive sunlight. I didn't know how to visually describe this area. It was at this point that I turned to a book on Egyptian hieroglyphics, ranging from symbols denoting Ra to simpler symbols meaning "sky" and "land." I used Richard Wilkinson's *Reading Egyptian Art: A Hieroglyphic Guide to Ancient Egyptian Painting and Sculpture* to create my initial sketch (fig 1).



pictured Ra as the sun crossing the sky, Wilkinson offered the image of a “Barque,” and notes “the Egyptians usually envisioned the gods – and especially the sun god in his various forms – as travelling in such boats” (153). This coincided with Hamilton’s narrative when she states “each night, he [Ra] crossed the Underneath Sky in his boat” (111). This led me to change my impression of Ra since it was difficult to depict him travelling as the sun in a boat. Instead, I placed the symbol meaning “seated god” within the symbol for “Barque” (Wilkinson 31, 153). This way, I could incorporate Ra’s method of travel as described by Wilkinson and Hamilton while simultaneously suggesting the importance of this figure passing along the sky. After all, this method of travel implies luxury and this association leads to the elevation of the figure’s status.

Ra’s depiction in my imagination was not the only change provoked by Wilkinson’s work. In his description of a picture utilizing the hieroglyphic for “Barque,” Wilkinson notes that while Ra travels through “Underneath Sky” his attendants are depicted “fending off the giant serpent Apophis” (153). While interesting in the focus on the attendants battling Apophis, the eye-catching detail for me was Apophis transformed from a dragon to a snake. Since Hamilton had already limited Apophis’s destructive power to his tail, this transformation made sense to me due to the visual similarities between a snake and a dragon’s tail. This form grabbed me because a snake’s body is more fluid than a dragon’s, which is a heavier, static body. The image of a snake was more organic, adding an uncontrollable element to my image, in contrast to the controlled image of the barque. This contrast demonstrates the natures of the main adversaries, visually creating the idea of conflict, where the controlled figure attempts to overcome the chaotic element of the second. This conflict is also presented in the hieratic

scale I incorporated into the sketch. Ra and Apophis are the two largest figures within the image emphasizing their importance. Apophis is slightly smaller than Ra which leads to the assumption that Ra must be more powerful. By making Ra bigger, he becomes the dominant figure, leading the viewer to assume he will eventually win the fight against Apophis.

However, attempting to transform this sketch into a painting proved difficult. As I started to paint, the first problem I encountered was the choice of background color. I work from the background to the foreground of a painting. As the first layer, the background colors define the setting and begin developing the overall tone of the image. In order to convey the different realms of Ra and Apophis, I wanted darker colors for Apophis's domain which would gradually transition into lighter and brighter colors to describe Ra's realm. Since "Underneath Sky" was positioned at the bottom of the sketch, I began with a violet blue along the bottom edge of my painting. As I approached the top, I transitioned from violet blue to yellow orange according to the divisions on the color wheel (violet blue to blue, blue to blue green...). After I had completed this gradual shift I realized the transitions would not be noticeable once I added the Egyptian hieroglyphics over the background. This would destroy the equilibrium created by the background, throwing off the balance between the domains of the two figures. Based on my sketch, these figures would not fit within the space left on the picture plain after I added the other hieroglyphics.

At this point, I was stuck. I knew my initial sketch would not work as I had planned since there was not enough space for the hieroglyphics. I was left wondering how to represent this myth. As I thought

about this problem, I realized the hieroglyphics were the cause of my difficulty. They were too structured and controlled next to the style and technique I employed in my other paintings. After all, these symbols had a logical position in relation to each other, such as “sky” arching over “land” and “field.” There was no other logical placement for these symbols. In my other images I could play with the position of the main figures without interrupting the narrative flow.

Based on these realizations, I scrapped the idea of using hieroglyphics to describe the Egyptian creation myth Hamilton provided. I began over with just the two main figures, Apophis and Ra. I reverted to my original concept of Ra as the sun but retained Wilkinson’s presentation of Apophis as a serpent. My main problem now was how to represent their continuous struggle as well as the separation between their two domains. I needed some kind of partition to create both of these effects. As I pondered possible options, I reflected back on the last painting I had just finished, my image for a Greek creation myth. The last element I had completed for this image had been a segment of the universe leading off the left side of the painting. This inspired me to create an image where Ra is cresting over the side of the Earth while Apophis lurks around the corner, waiting to strike. Instead of creating a new sketch, I dived directly into my painting (fig 2).

Within my new image, I included Ra as the sun in the upper left hand corner, Apophis as a snake in the lower right hand corner, and the curve of the Earth separating the two. The curve of the Earth highlighted by Ra divides the composition into two distinct realms. This partition is further emphasized by the position of Ra and Apophis. Ra resides on one side of the divide while Apophis is contained in the second half of the



image, below the curve of the Earth. The barrier of the Earth also highlights the mysterious air of Apophis's domain. After all, the absence of light allows the imagination to visualize additional dangers and details within this space, just as the area defined as "Underneath Sky" allows the same freedom.

Each figure dominates his space, adding a sense of drama through the use of hieratic scale. Initially, Ra was smaller than Apophis, leading to the idea that Apophis was the more powerful force in this

image. In order to combat this impression, I had to make Ra larger without breaking the illusion that he just beginning to rise over the curve of the Earth. I utilized water color technique to dilute the paint I used for the sun to create broken yellow lines around the sun creating the illusion that Ra radiates light, which adds to the visual weight of Ra. I also integrated directional mark making within Apophis's scales. By allowing my brushstrokes to show through I created the impression the scales overlap and flow down Apophis's body. The

Figure 2: Final Painting for Egyptian Creation Myth



main color of his scales is green, conforming to Hamilton's description, but there was more behind this choice than just Hamilton's description. Each scale had to have highlights and shadows in order to add depth to Apophis. Green falls between yellow and blue on the color wheel. If green was the main color of the snake, I could use yellow and blue to suggest highlights and shadows. Since I used blue in the background, the blue in the scales allowed Apophis to fade into the background as he receded from the light source. I used yellow to suggest highlights on each scale, suggesting Apophis reflects Ra's light as he waits for Ra to pass over the curve of the Earth. This reflection light differentiates the two figures by suggesting Apophis belongs in the darkness since he cannot produce light himself where Ra is the complete opposite, living only in the light.

Overall, this piece does not lay out the events of the Egyptian creation story. It does not describe Ra's creation of other gods or his eventual defeat of Apophis at the end of the narrative. However, it is successful in setting up the battle between Ra and Apophis which is the ongoing source of conflict within this myth. From the separation of these two figures to their distinction through color, these two figures are complete opposites within my painting. This opposition visually creates the struggle between the two figures because they represent different elements within the composition. Ra is identified with light while Apophis is limited to shadows. Since this battle is the main source of conflict within the story, my painting is successful in representing this overarching motif of the narrative.



# Chapter Five



## Japanese Creation Myth

My piece surrounding a Japanese creation myth was the culminating image for my series. This narrative was the final painting I completed but, it was the origin of my fascination with creation myths. My interest in these stories began with an individual assignment given in a Japanese art history class I took my junior year at Regis University. On the first day of class, the six other students and I were given the task of looking into Japanese creation myths as an introduction to Japanese culture. At first the foreign nature of this myth took me off guard but I was soon drawn in by the sequence of events as the story unfolded.

According to this myth, everything is unformed in the beginning. The only image present is “egg-like chaos, containing the seeds of creation” (Leeming 157). Here, the image of the egg offers both potential and limitation. Much as an egg in real life, the potential offered in this image lies within its contents. An egg can produce a living being, this image surrounding chaos implies it too can create life. At this point, the potential of this image is confined by the shape of the egg. This form needs some kind of inner pressure to create life, just as the life inside of an egg breaks the shell of the egg. While visually concrete in the description of the shape chaos takes, it was difficult to visualize the concept of chaos. After all, what does chaos look like? All I could picture was a swirling mass of colors, each

battling for dominance while contained within the basic shape of an egg.

I needed more than just this image to form a concrete composition depicting the narrative and emphasizing the creative act behind the myth. Moving forward in the story, new figures began to emerge. The Heaven and the Earth separate out of chaos and “between the heaven and the earth grew a plantlike form” (Leeming 157). This division of “egg-like chaos” implies a gathering negative space between the two separate forms, almost reminiscent of a void. To prevent complete separation, a “plantlike form” is introduced to create a sense of balance and connection between the now distinct realms of the Earth and Heaven. Visually, this image made sense to me because trees and plants reach toward the sun and sky, so it was logical to me to fill this growing gap between Heaven and Earth with a plant. Furthermore, this image seemed to personify the idea of creation. After all, plants provide necessary nutrients and oxygen needed to sustain life, making it an apt symbol for life and creation. At this point, I had a definite impression of the background mainly consisting of the sky looming over the round form of the developing Earth and a plant growing between the two. The question became what kind of plant to depict within my composition.

At this point in the narrative, this plant is still a vague concept, allowing the reader to fill in whatever form he or she chooses. The next step in the story helped me narrow down the type of plant I wanted to use in my image. After this plantlike substance forms, the first living being springs from this plant. This initial “male god” is “followed by two others, also male...Next six deities, the kami, were formed, and then Izanami and Izanagi”

(Leeming 157). Eleven new figures enter the narrative, producing a crowded scene, considering the only place for these individuals to stand is on the plantlike substance. After all, no land has been created yet since the Earth has barely begun to form. Since the only place for these figures to stand on is the plant, this form had to appear strong enough to support the weight of these figures. This limited the type of plant I could use in my composition. A reed, moss, or any small plant would not be capable of supporting these figures, so these options were no longer possible choices for my image. The only plant I could think of capable of this feat was a tree.

Now, I had a type of plant to use as a bridge between heaven and Earth. Furthermore, the introduction of the eleven gods gave me two specific characters I could focus on in my composition. The first god may seem important because he is the first to spring out of the plant but he is not given a name. Instead it is the last pair of gods, Izanami and Izanagi, that become visually important because they are singled out in the use of their names. In fact, prior to this moment, Leeming mentions that the “central figures in the creation myth that takes place in the Shinto universe are Izanami and Izanagi” (156). Within the narrative I looked at for my composition, a reader with knowledge of the Shinto tradition would recognize the mention of the “kami” makes this story a Shinto myth. Penelope Mason in her work entitled *The History of Japanese Art*, notes as she discusses Shinto, that the “Japanese term for the gods is *kami*” (53). With this knowledge in mind, Izanami and Izanagi become the dominant figures within the narrative. By introducing these two gods as the “central figures” in creation they become the primary focus in the myth.

This focus on these two beings excludes all the other gods, who are only generally described by their gender, if they are described at all. This led me to focus on an image containing only these two gods supported by the tree which acts as a bridge between heaven and earth. My mental image of the narrative still revolved around the introduction of the gods, who are not active yet. Furthermore, the environment was not well defined at this point. The next move in the myth helped me develop my composition. After introducing Izanami and Izanagi, the story goes on to state “the first ancestors...wondered about what lay below. So it was they thrust down the jeweled spear of Heaven and stirred it about in the sea” (Leeming 157). This line sets up curiosity as the motivation behind creation, making the gods seem more human in their lack of omniscience. This information makes the gods easier to define physically since they are brought down to the level of human beings. I began to picture a man and woman, Izanagi and Izanami, dressed in traditional Japanese clothing perched upon a tree branch. Furthermore, this section presents two new details, the sea below and the spear of Heaven. If the figures are balanced on the tree branch and this plant is located between heaven and earth then the sea below comes to represent the world. After all, the gods must “thrust down” the spear to stir the water. If plant is between the Heaven and Earth and the gods must thrust the spear down into the waters, than the sea and the earth must be one and the same since they occupy the same space. This knowledge gave me a definite image to use to describe the Earth as it lies below the two gods.

Now, I had my background, figures, and a moment to focus on within my composition. I began to sketch out my initial idea (fig 1). The easiest image to place was the sea since it is the lowest figure in relationship to the sky and the plant. Since this was the last image I completed, I already had a basic idea of how to simulate the movement of waves in the sea after having painted the gigantic wave in my aboriginal painting. I decided to incorporate the same basic shapes in this image to formally connect it back to the first painting in my series. After constructing this element I moved on to the tree. I knew this image had to include a branch for the figures to stand upon, so I pushed the tree trunk to one side to create space for my main figures. These figures stand upon a branch of the tree. One holds the spear pointing down toward the sea while the other looks on, waiting for the first figure to plunge the spear down below and stir the water. In order to break up the monotonous background and to suggest the idea of heaven, I decided to include the clouds and sun within the image as a suggestion of the tree approaching the atmosphere. This way, the tree could serve as a bridge between the sea below and the sky above.





Figure 1: Initial Sketch for Japanese Creation Myth







As I moved from the sketch to the painting, the easiest pieces to depict were the concrete images of the sea and the tree (fig 2). Prior to painting these two elements, I did the background color of the painting, which began as a mix of yellow and pthalo green at the top of the painting gradually changing to pthalo blue farther down the image. I did this to convey that this scene takes place in the early morning, when the sun has not fully taken over the sky. The introduction of pthalo blue in the background signified the area the waves would cover and allowed a gradual break from the yellow-green background. Visually, this prevents a jarring change of colors as the background gives way to the sea in the foreground. The sea was done in various shades of pthalo blue, with enough contrast to push it forward from the background. Each wave is a different size and shape, with the direction of the brush marks differentiating each individual wave. In addition, the tree was easy to depict as well. Burnt sienna, yellow ochre, and dioxazine purple were the colors I used for the tree. This allowed me to convey the idea of light hitting the bark of the tree as the colors ran from a lighter yellow ochre in the highlights to a mix of burnt sienna and dioxazine purple for the shadows. The sun appears in the upper right hand corner of the painting, creating a highlight on the right side of the tree and pushing the left side of the tree into shadow.

Figure 2: Final Painting for Japanese Creation Myth

At this point, I had the background, the sun, the sea, and the tree figured out. From here it was a matter of deciding how to depict Izanami, Izanagi, and the clouds. The most difficult parts about these elements in my composition were the poses for the two figures, the position of the clouds, and the color for each element. I decided to mimic the curved shape of the seaweed leaves from my painting for the Maidu creation myth in the shape of the clouds, visually connecting the two pieces. However, I changed the color of the clouds in order to convey the idea that these were not seaweed leaves. Instead, I made the clouds a grey-blue color, different from the color of the waves. I did a wash of ultramarine blue to push the clouds and the sun into the background, thus reducing their prominence within the image by diluting the strength of the colors. Izanami and Izanagi are painted over this wash, allowing the full saturation of the paint to show. This makes these figures the dominant presence in the image because the full strength of these colors contrasts with the muted colors of the background.

Initially, I had no idea how to pose Izanami and Izanagi or what color to choose for their clothing. I knew I wanted one of the figures to hold the spear and the spear would point down towards the sea below. The other figure would become more of an onlooker, observing the actions of the initial figure. In my mind Izanami, the female figure, took on this passive stance, so I chose to place her off to the side, toward the tree trunk. Izanagi became the spear holder, and I chose to place him farther out on the tree branch, giving him room to wield the spear. Izanami is a stable, vertical figure, offering minimal movement, thus enforcing the passive nature of her part in creation. Izanagi has more

diagonals in his pose, especially in his four limbs, suggesting he is caught in mid-motion just about to thrust the spear into the sea. In order to connect these two figures, I wanted to visually link them and the easiest way to accomplish this was to incorporate similar colors in their clothing. Both Izanami and Izanagi have two layers of clothing on, allowing me to utilize two different color palettes, one for each layer of clothing. I decided to make their clothing reflections of each other by reversing the color of their top layer of clothing. Izanami has a top layer of clothing that runs from pthalo green in the highlights to dioxazine purple in the shadows. These colors are reflected in Izanagi's under layer of clothing. In contrast Izanami's under layer and Izanagi's top layer of clothing range from a bright orange to alizarin crimson in the shadows. Visually, this creates a connection between the two figures, emphasizing their relationship and partnership in creation. The color palette for their clothing also allows them to become mirrors of each other, accentuating the notion that one is in action while the other is a passive bystander.

Overall, this piece does not truly describe the Japanese creation myth, nor does it truly suggest the act of creation. However, as a standalone piece, it is successful in capturing the viewer's gaze. It includes numerous elements presented in the Japanese creation myth, but it is up to the viewer to determine how these elements relate to one another. The viewer is able to determine the image is influenced somehow by Japanese culture just in the clothing choice of the two figures but it is difficult to determine exactly what story it references.

# Conclusion

# Visualizing the Written Word

When I set out to create a series of paintings based on creation myths for my thesis, my goal was to visually display the text of each myth. I wanted to transform the story into a visual journey. After the completion of my five pieces, I have to say I was not altogether successful in achieving this goal although this does not mean my pieces are unsuccessful in themselves. Each image is a strong piece, able to stand on its own but they do not visually tell the same story as the verbal text I referenced in creating my pieces. The various elements of the myths are there, from the human figures to the basic setting, but the difficult part of transforming these stories into images was how to express the relationships between the elements of my works. They lack any reference on how the figures relate to one another or how they came to be in the situation depicted. For example, in my image relating to the Greek creation myth, the image itself hints at the culture it references in the female figure's dress but it does not present any information on how the woman and the snake interact or where they came from. Perhaps a series of images, relating a step by step progression through each myth, would have been a better plan to accurately transform the verbal into the visual, almost like a children's book.

However, even though I was not altogether successful in visualizing the written word, I was able to come up with a series of images I am pleased with. When

I began this process, I had no experience in creating a series of paintings visually related to each other. Prior to this process, I had only worked on individual, standalone pieces that did not reference each other in any way. This process opened my eyes to the difficulties in trying to create a series of images that are formally unified. Even though the subject matter of the pieces was the same, this was not at first apparent, so I had to figure out another way to create a sense that these images create one set of work. Before I even began painting, I had to determine the visual qualities that would recur between the separate compositions. As I thought of ways to visually express each figure, the sea, the animals, I realized whatever technique I utilized to express these elements I would have to maintain in my other images. For example, the mass of spiral shapes I used to create the wave in the aboriginal painting I repeated in both my Japanese and my Greek painting. I also repeated the shape of the seaweed leaves in my Native American image in the clouds in my Japanese composition. When all these images are placed together, the repetition of these elements unifies the series into one visually cohesive group. Even though the connection in the subject matter is not clear, the formal qualities that reoccur between the compositions overcome this lack of clarity. This repetition creates a steady rhythm between the images allowing the eye to move between each piece.

Before I began to paint I also had to figure out how I wanted to display my work and what material I wanted to use. These considerations allowed me to further unify my images since I was consistent in the material I used. I like the idea of being able to interact with the piece. I feel that frames and glass cut off the piece from the viewer because they make the piece feel more formal, almost distant. The glass may protect the image from damage but it also cuts the image off from the viewer's



realm by creating a barrier between the image and the audience. Based on this, I knew I wanted to present my pieces in a way that invited the audience to come up to the pieces without creating this barrier. This left me with two options, I could use canvas mounted on bars to push it off the wall, or Masonite board. Between these two, I chose Masonite board because I liked the smooth texture of the wood. By using Masonite I was still able to frame my work by adding a two inch piece of stained wood to each side of my images, pushing the piece from the wall. This allows my images to enter the viewer's space instead of remaining flat on the wall.

These considerations gave me a glimpse into the process involved in becoming an artist who actually presents work in formal settings. I had never really thought of myself as an artist prior to this project. Before, art was just a hobby. After taking on this project, I began to realize the considerations that go into a formal show. There is more than just the production of the artwork. Before the artwork even begins, an artist has to come up with a theme for the work, the material used in the work, and the formal qualities that will unite the pieces. Even after these problems are addressed, it is still a matter of figuring out techniques to visually transform the artist's inner image into a visual experience for others. For me, this was the most difficult part of the artistic process. In my first painting, I did not have the skills to express what the image looked like in my imagination. It was only through trial and error that I was able to come up with a process and technique to depict the separate elements of my images. This can best be seen in the spiral shapes present in three of my images and in the scales of the two snakes.

The wave in my aboriginal painting was the first I completed. From here, I moved on to the spirals in the clouds on my Greek painting and ended with the waves in

my Japanese composition. As I progressed from each painting, I developed a pattern to help me express each element in my paintings. When I began my aboriginal image, I moved from the top of the wave down to the bottom, where it crashes around the two female figures in the image. Each spiral was the same shape and as I moved down through my image, the previous spirals were covered up by my progress. When completed this wave was too consistent, making it seem repetitive and visually uninteresting. Moving onto the Greek painting, I changed my technique, creating both small and large spirals, adding a greater sense of motion to the clouds. However, I still moved from one side of the painting to the other, creating a strange overlap between the spiral shapes. As I moved to the Japanese image, I maintained the variation in shape but chose to move from my smaller spirals to the bigger ones as I painted them. This allowed a nice overlap that demonstrated the larger spirals closer to the viewer while the smaller ones recede into the background. It took me three paintings to come up with a consistent technique before I could visually express the rolling waves in the Japanese painting.

In comparison, the snake was easy. I already had a basic understanding of how the scales on a snake looked, so I had a pattern to begin with. The only problem was the color choice. Determining the highlights and shadows on the scales was difficult. I began with the snake in my Greek painting where I decided to add Mars Black with Burnt Sienna to describe the shadows on the scales. In the highlights I added yellow ochre. This led to a visually consistent pattern I was pleased with, but the shadows on the scales were too dark and did not create a smooth transition of colors in each individual scale. As I moved

on to the snake in my Egyptian painting, I decided to use the color wheel to determine the colors of the highlights and shadows on the scales. Since I knew the snake was going to be green so I used analogous colors, yellow and blue, to describe the highlights and shadows on the scales. This change from using black for the shadows in my Greek painting to using analogous colors in my Egyptian painting allowed a softer transition of colors within the scales. This allowed the snake to work in his environment by reflecting the yellow light of the sun and practically disappearing into the background in the shadows.

My progression in developing these patterns gave me confidence as I worked out each problem I

encountered. As I moved from each painting I grew more confident as a painter because I began to use my less successful pieces as examples of how to transform my technique to better express my inner vision of my compositions. Overall, this series may not vividly display my goal of transforming the verbal text into visual representations of the creation myths, but they allowed me a glimpse into the considerations artists make while approaching a formal gallery situation. They also allowed me to develop confidence as a painter as I expanded my experience and skills. In this way, I think this series was most successful in transforming my own view of myself as an artist.

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