



This card illustrating the twelve Olympian Gods forms the introduction to a set of cards drawn by the well known children's books artist Pavlos Valassakis. There are another twelve cards, one for each divinity illustrating representative scenes from the myth and the characteristic symbols of each god.

From prehistoric times to the beginning of the 4th century A.C. and the Christian era, the Greeks, followed by the Romans, worshipped gods and goddesses who, tradition said, dwelled on the untrod heights of Mt. Olympus.

This was a complex religion. Inextricably woven into it was a marvelous mythology, in which the first ancestors of the Greeks, the heroes of a shadowy but much revered past, all had a place. The very localities, the mountains and seas of the Greek world were all-important in this web of religion. A multiplicity of tales, with their various versions, the myths about the twelve immortal gods and a whole world of lesser divinities, for thousands of years from Antiquity to the present have inspired and provided themes for poets, prose writers, musicians, painters, sculptors, in a word, for civilisation.

The ancient Greeks believed that the great gods were twelve in number. Zeus, his siblings Poseidon, Hera, Demeter and Hestia and his children Apollo, Artemis, Aphrodite, Ares, Hermes and Hephaistos. Worshipped together with Demeter was her daughter Persephone. Frequently, Dionysos took the place of Hestia in the Dodekatheon, as described in the present Museum Kit.

The ancient Greeks imagined the gods as living in a family environment, happy, immortal, always young, in the palaces of Zeus on Mt. Olympus. They were imagined as eating, drinking and enjoying music. It was thought that they received the offerings and sacrifices of men and that they discussed the matters of gods and humans. They could even live in the sanctuaries and temples built for them by human hands and they could interfere directly in human lives. In certain circumstances they might make people happy and even give them repose and blessedness after death.





The goddess Athena was one of the most important divinities of Mt. Olympos. She was primarily the protectress of ancient Athens, but of many other cities all over Greece as well. She was the goddess of wisdom and war and at the same time of arts and crafts. She was credited with inventions for harnessing nature (the bridle, the ship's hull, the loom, the lathe, the potter's wheel) and the musical instrument, the aulos. She was thought to have devised strategies for carrying out complicated tasks and strategems of war. She was characterised as the virgin goddess, self-reliant and thus self-directed (according to the myth she neither married nor had erotic affairs). Maturity, responsibility and tolerance were likewise her characteristics. With her vote alone she could upset a tie vote in the court, so that the accused could be proclaimed innocent.

Today she might be thought of as the goddess of culture.

Athena's symbols were the owl, the helmet, the aegis (a protective goatskin, a kind of shield) given by her father, the gorgoneion (the apotropaic head of the Gorgon Medusa) worn on her aegis or as a device on her shield, her spear, the spindle and the olive. Very often she is shown in warrior attire.





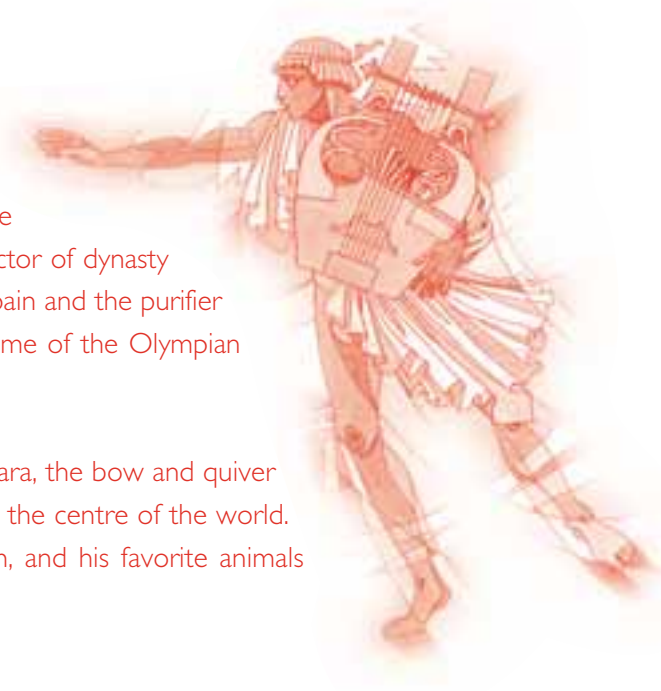
ΑΠΟΛΛΩΝ ΚΑΙ ΑΘΗΝΗ

APOLLO

Daphne is transformed into a plant so as to escape Apollo.

Apollo was the personification of sunlight, the god of music, of poetry, of harmony, of logic; his sphere included prophecy as well. He was believed to carry out the desires of Zeus. He was the punisher of hubris, the protector of dynasty founders and the colonists of cities. He was the healer of pain and the purifier of crime. He was also considered to be the most handsome of the Olympian gods, "the most beautiful of the immortals".

The symbols of the god were the tripod, the lyre, the kithara, the bow and quiver (just as his sister Artemis) and the omphalos of Delphi, as the centre of the world. His special plants were the laurel (daphne) and the palm, and his favorite animals were the swan, the dolphin and the crow.





STAVROS
BATHIS

ARES - Ares with his children Eris (discord), Deimos (fear) and Phobos (fright) in front of a city razed by war.



For the ancient Greeks, Ares was the god of war and warriors. He was the personification of pitiless struggle and for him war was an end in itself. Homer describes the character of the god in the Iliad. He is the archetypal warrior, strongly built and fleet of foot, who leaps maniacally into the battle fray, bellowing his war-cry as loudly as ten thousand men. The poet emphasises the difference between the warrior goddess Athena, who fights for a purpose, and Ares who was so bloodthirsty that even his father Zeus detested him.

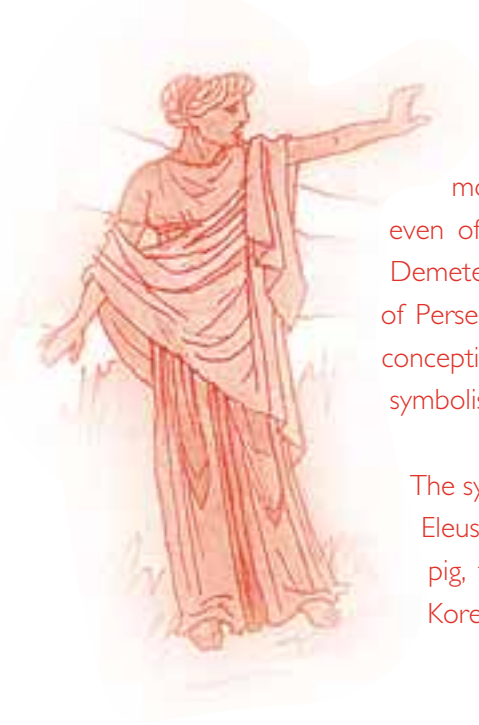
Ares' symbols were his weapons, his spear, his helmet and the torch. His sacred animal was the dog. Apple twigs decorated the animals sacrificed to Ares.





DEMETER AND KORE

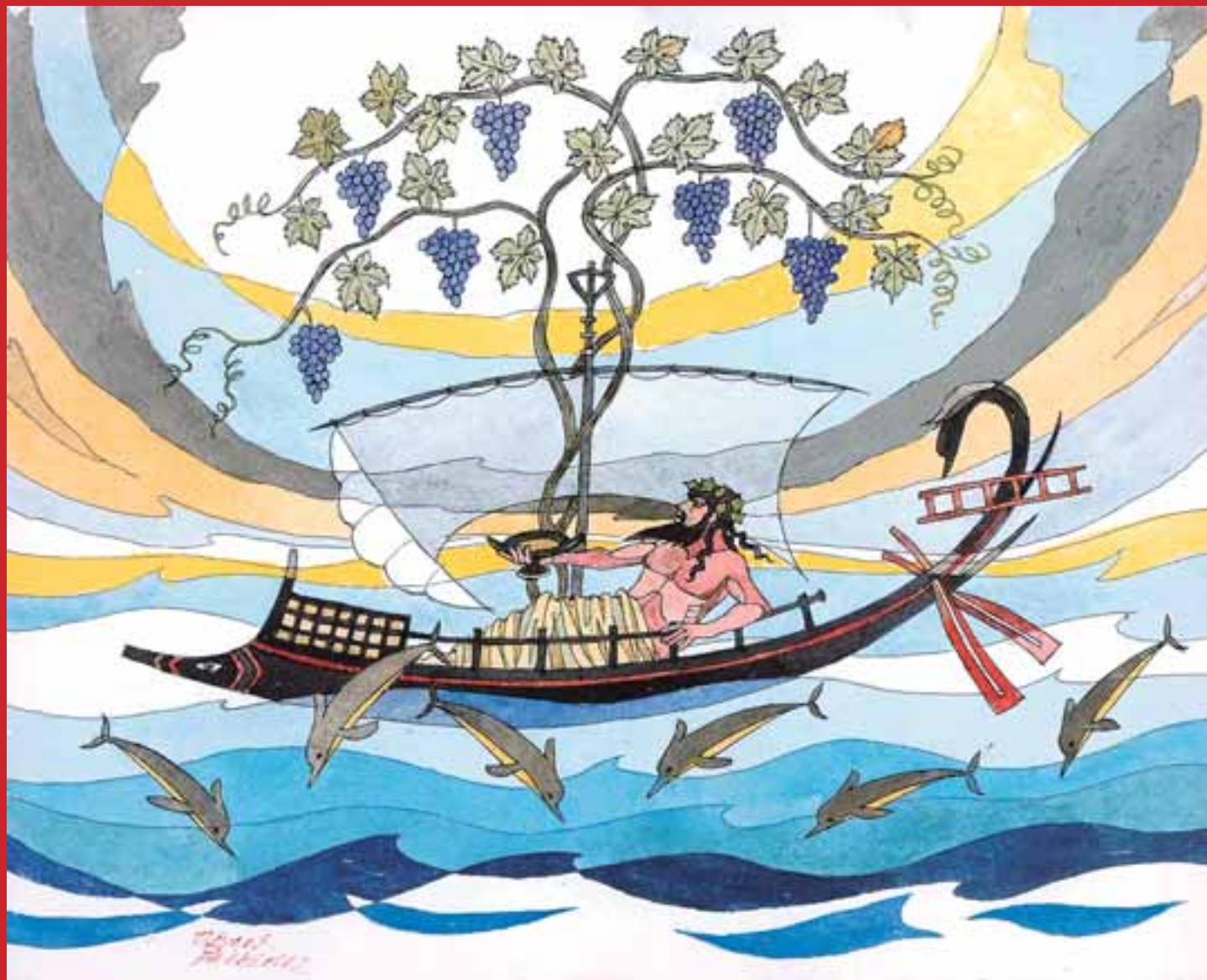
The abduction of Persephone by Plouton (Hades), the god of the Underworld.



Demeter was the goddess of cultivated fields, protectress of agriculture and grain. She taught mankind to cultivate the earth and she was closer to mortals than any other divinity. Under certain circumstances of initiation, she even offered them the prospect of a happy life after death. The personality of Demeter was defined also by her relationship with her daughter. She is the mother of Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, with whom she forms a divine pair, a conception that surpasses mythology and becomes basic for comprehending the symbolism of this mystery cult in antiquity.

The symbols of Demeter were the torch (which was carried by initiates during the Eleusinian Mysteries), her sceptre and ears of wheat. Sacred to Demeter was the pig, to Persephone the cock. When Demeter and Kore are shown together, Kore holds the torches as Queen of the Underworld.





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DIONYSOS

Dionysos transforms the Tyrrhenian pirates who had abducted him into dolphins.

Dionysos was the god of vineyards, of wine, of ecstatic dance. The fertility and productivity of the earth also lay in his domain. To describe precisely his special character is difficult; he appears to have embodied also a sense of the powers of the subconscious, which were expressed by ecstasy, inebriation and enthusiasm that surpassed logic. It is characteristic that he was able to transmit mania, inspired frenzy, as much to his opponents as to his followers. To his followers mania, with wine and dance, provided a happy solution to sadness; to those who rejected him, it came as incurable madness.

To Dionysos we owe, directly or indirectly, the theatres as architecture, that were built throughout the Greek world from the 5th century B.C. on.

Symbols of the god were the thyrsos (a staff wound round with vines and ending in a pine cone), a drinking vessel known as a kantharos, the ivy vine, grape vines, theatre masks. His special animals were the goat, the donkey and the panther.



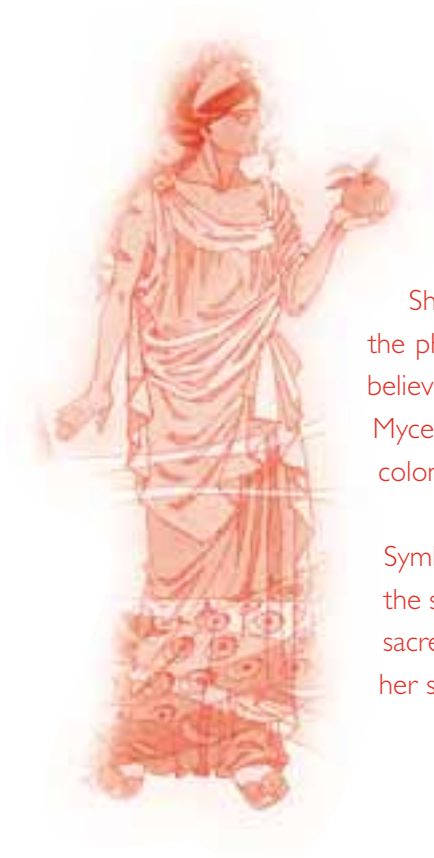


Zeus, for the ancient Greeks, was father of the gods and of mankind. He was the main deity who knew and saw all, the lord of the heavens and master of atmospheric phenomena. Homer tells us that this supreme god was the father of gods and of men. In addition to the power he wielded, he was characterised by justice and ethical perfection: he rewarded excellence and punished evil. He punished those who did not listen to his orders. He knew what the future held and he could pronounce oracles (as at his oracle at Dodone) or send "Diosemia" (portent-bearing omens). Yet he was "Xenios" (hospitable) who protected the act of hospitality.

The symbols of Zeus, which we see in many works of ancient art, were the thunderbolt, his sceptre, oak leaves and the eagle.





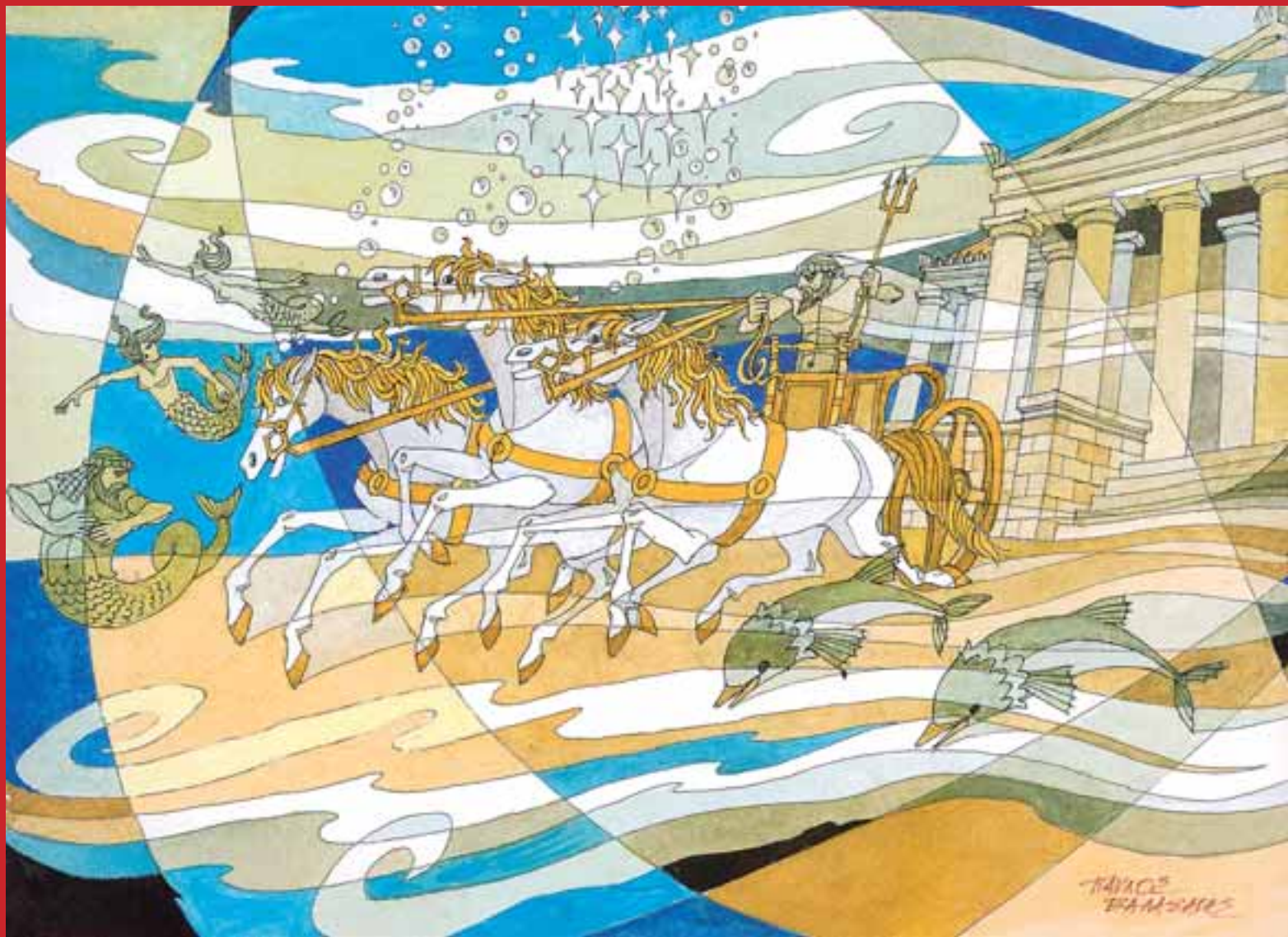


In archaic and classical Greece, Hera was worshipped as the supreme goddess, wife of Zeus, queen of the heavens, protectress of marriage, family and women.

She had many of the powerful qualities of her husband: she was connected with the phenomena of the sky, she had divine inspiration, pride and gentleness. Scholars believe that her cult was very early in the Greek world. It was well established in Mycenaean times at Argos, Sparta and Mycenae and her cult existed also in the colonies of Magna Graeca.

Symbols of the goddess were the pomegranate, signifying fertility and conjugal love, the sceptre, the polos, a tall crown, and the diadem. Her sacred animal was the cow; sacred to her also were the peacock and the cuckoo. The osier or chaste-tree was her sacred plant.



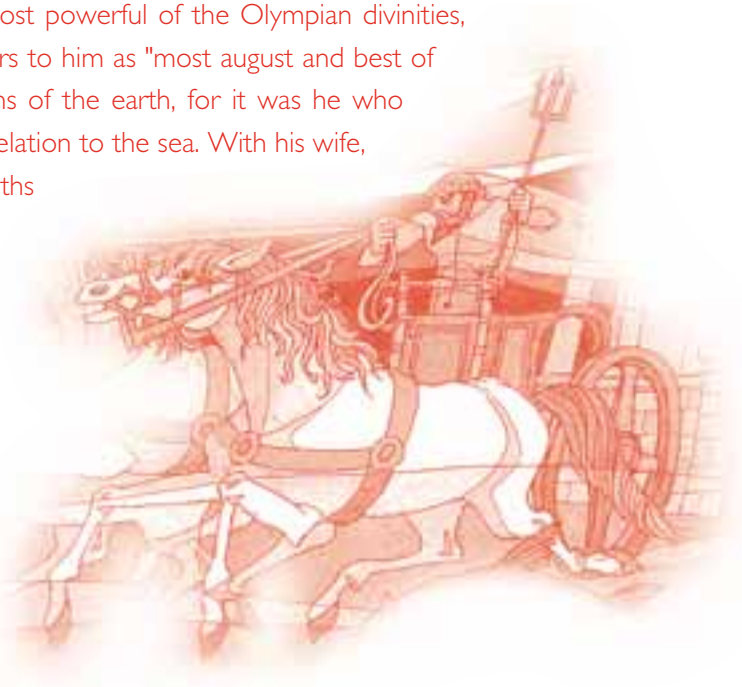


POSEIDON

Poseidon with his chariot in front of his palace in the depths of the ocean.

In the eyes of the ancient Greeks, Poseidon was lord of the watery element, god of the seas, of springs, of lakes and rivers. He was one of the most powerful of the Olympian divinities, brother of Zeus and of Plouton. Zeus himself refers to him as "most august and best of the gods". His realm extended even to the depths of the earth, for it was he who caused earthquakes and made the earth stable in relation to the sea. With his wife, Amphitrite, he lived in a golden palace in the depths of the sea and he flew over the surface of the sea in a golden chariot drawn by wild horses accompanied by Nymphs and sea creatures, tritons, hippocamps (a mythical creature, half-horse, half-serpent) and dolphins.

Poseidon's symbols were his trident, with which he stirred the waters of the sea, his horses, dolphins and various beasts of the sea. Sacred to the god were seaweed and the pine tree.





WINDY
WASSER



Artemis was worshipped in ancient Greece as the goddess of wild nature, of forests, mountains, springs and wild animals. Like Athena and Hestia, according to mythology, she never married. She was the archetypal solitary, free and independent young woman who lived close to the natural world. The ancient Greeks believed that she protected the fruits of the earth, the young, as well as women in childbirth; that she was occupied with the hunt; that she was accompanied by Nymphs and Charites (Graces) and had virginal beauty.

Symbols of the goddess were the bow and quiver, the crescent moon, deer, hunting dogs, the bull and the bear. Frequently she is associated with the cypress. In classical times Artemis was always depicted dressed in multi-folded garments.





APHRODITE

Paris offers the "Apple of Discord" to Aphrodite in the presence of Hera and Athena.

Aphrodite was the goddess of beauty and love. Her importance to the ancient Greeks, however, did not end there, for she embodied the great forces of nature that perpetuate life in the world, the forces that unite sky and earth to create the gifts of nature, plants and animals. In Plato's Symposium and in late classical times, a clear distinction is made between Aphrodite Ourania (of the heavens), who represented pure love and protected family and fertility, and Aphrodite Pandemos (of all the "deme", thus everybody), who protected free relationships and physical love.

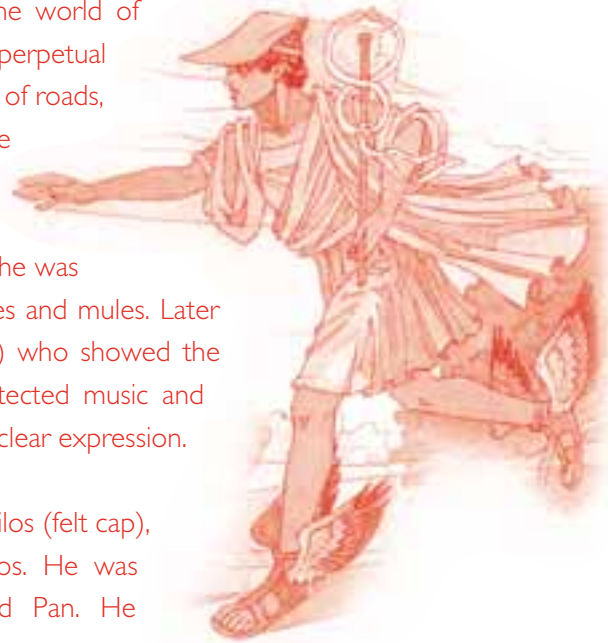
The symbols of Aphrodite were doves, geese and her favorite flower, the rose. She is depicted with richly embroidered garments – woven and sewn by the Charites and the Hours – or she is represented nude, especially in the later works of art. She is often shown emerging from an open shell or accompanied by her son Eros who holds a bow.





Hermes had various capacities according to the ancient Greeks, who believed that his sphere included the divine realm of Mt.Olympos, the world of mankind and Hades, the Underworld. He was the god of perpetual motion, of communication, of exchange, including that of trade, of roads, of good luck. He was the messenger who carried out the commands of Zeus as well. In a strange way, while he protected commercial gain, he also protected gain from fraud, deceit and theft. For the ancient rural communities in Greece, he was the caretaker of grazing herds of goat and sheep, cattle, horses and mules. Later on, he became the friendly "Psychopompos" (leader of souls) who showed the dead the way down to the World of Shades. He also protected music and athletic games and he was known as "Logios", a connoisseur of clear expression.

Hermes' symbols were the kerykeion, his winged sandals and pilos (felt cap), his purse and the traveller's wide brimmed hat, the petasos. He was sometimes accompanied by Nymphs and the goat-legged Pan. He was associated with the cedar tree and the ram.





Hephaistos was the god of fire both on earth and in the heavens. He was the tamer of fire and he forged objects of metal. Mythology portrays him as the god of creative works, sculpture, modelling, metal-working, the forging of armour. He was a goldsmith and patron of artisans. In the Homeric epics his work is greatly admired and described in detail. His cult in classical Athens bespeaks the love and admiration of the inhabitants for fine works of metal and ceramic, in the making of which fire was the indispensable element.

Clearly he was viewed by the ancient Greeks not only as an Olympian divinity but also, since he was lame, as an individual with "special needs", to put it in modern terms, who developed an inventive mind and great skill with his hands.

Symbols of the god were the hammer, the smith's tongs, the double axe and his cane. He is frequently shown mounted on a donkey.

