

TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Memory and the Arts

Mnemosyne reminds us of what is good, true, and beautiful

Continued from **BI**

One was immortality—they could be defeated but not destroyed. Another was superhuman energy and power—hence the word, “titanic.” And finally, according to French philosopher Luc Ferry in his book “The Wisdom of the Myths,” they also had “consummate beauty ... terrifying and fascinating ... born in the depths of the earth ... close to the primordial chaos from which Gaea herself emerged.”

Then, it is clear that art itself—poetry, music, pictorial art, dance, drama, and more besides—each of which has some specific, operative Muse behind it, has, too, as its point of origin or mother, memory. And this mother is “close to the primordial chaos” from which her own mother, Gaea, sprang. And lest we forget, Mnemosyne is characterized by that superhuman energy and power, as well as terrifying, fascinating beauty; and, of course, immortality—the eter-

If we could but remember Mnemosyne now, we should bring to life again all of her primeval energy and beauty.



“Jupiter, Disguised as a Shepherd, Tempts Mnemosyne,” 1727, by Jacob de Wit. Rijksmuseum.

nal nature of memory.

This eternal nature is forward- as well as backward-looking. In his book “The White Goddess,” the poet Robert Graves talks of “memory of the future” too. Indeed, Mnemosyne has complete control of all memories that have ever or will ever occur, including the memories of the dead. This is how the dead are able to subsist in their Greek-style afterlife in Hades: Their spirits—their “shades”—can remember, sometimes tragically (as, say, Achilles reflects in the “Odyssey”), their former life and experiences. Without Mnemosyne, there could be no meaningful afterlife, for without memory, no individual could be held accountable for what they had done in this life.

We have a situation, then, in which we could use Chinese terminology to account for the creation of art and poetry: The yang, or masculine principle of the supreme god of light and thunderbolts (Zeus), meets the yin, which is the feminine principle of energy and dazzling beauty (Mnemosyne). But this dazzling beauty that the Titaness represents is what we take for granted. It’s our old, humdrum memory.

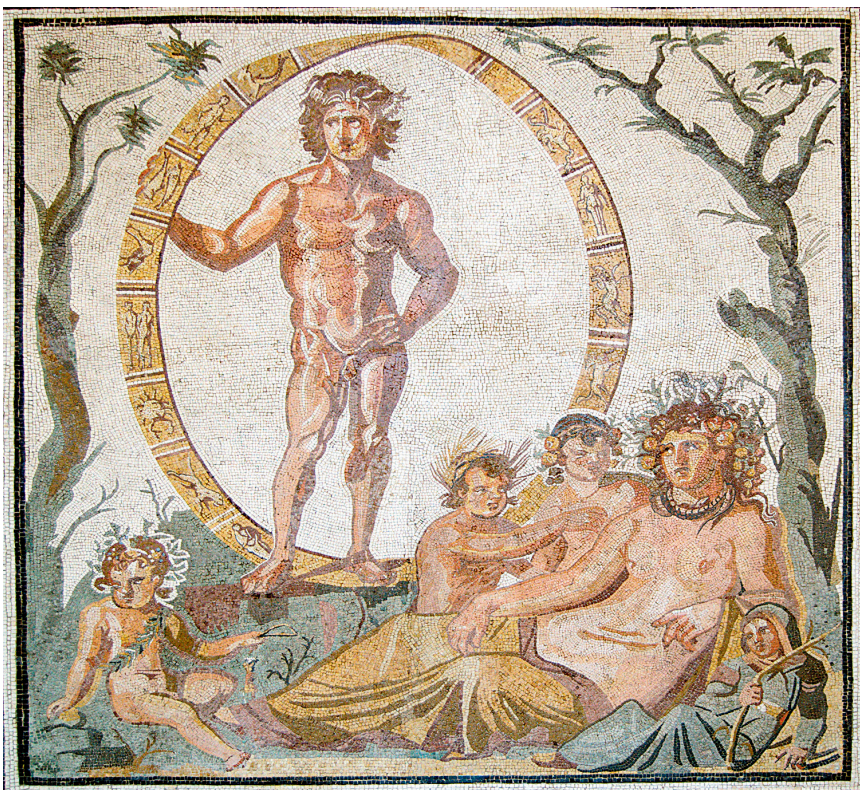
Looking to the Best Times

And here’s the point: Mnemosyne, or memory, draws us back to “first things.” “First things” point to what has gone before; they influence us to consider earlier sources. Part of the reason for this is that the earlier sources—contrary to what the modern world believes with its simplistic notions of “progress”—are better, that is to say, stronger, more beautiful, more accomplished. This is a truism in most cultures, especially the Greek, whereby the world had a Golden Age; and this passed, with each succeeding age—Silver, Bronze, Iron—to become more corrupt and decadent.

A simple example of the power of “first things”—that is, things that come before and which memory can recall—is shown when we talk of role models. For example, these can be our parents, grandparents, teachers, artistic or scientific greats, and so on. Many, if not most, of these people have gone before us, yet when we recall their examples and imitate them, we derive massive strength from the process.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how anything great could be achieved without memory recalling the past. Remember

The parents of Mnemosyne were Uranus, the god of heaven (who is standing inside a celestial sphere) and Mother Earth, or Gaea. She is shown with four children, who possibly represent the four seasons. Part of a large floor mosaic from a Roman villa in Sentinum (now known as Sassoferrato, in Marche, Italy), circa 200–250.



FINE CRAFTSMANSHIP

Exceptional French Gold Embroidery

Master Artist Sylvie Deschamps and her Le Bégonia d’Or atelier

GUERLAIN/COURTESY OF LE BÉGONIA D’OR



Master Artist, gold-thread embroiderer Sylvie Deschamps at work.

LORRAINE FERRIER

For the past 26 years, gold-thread embroiderer Sylvie Deschamps has headed Le Bégonia d’Or, a gold-embroidery workshop in the historic town of Rochefort, just south of La Rochelle in the west of France.

The town dates back to the 11th century, when Rochefort Castle was built to prevent a Norman attack. But the modern fortified town of Rochefort was established in the late 17th century, when the Sun King Louis XIV’s minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, founded an arsenal and military port there. To embellish the men’s military attire, gold-embroidery workshops were established in the town.

Deschamps continues the town’s gold-embroidery tradition. She holds the prestigious title of Master Artist, an honor bestowed by the French Ministry of Culture and Communication to fine craftspeople who are recognized by their peers as virtuoso artists, and who are capable of passing on the embroidery heritage to future generations.

There are only 89 master artists in France, and Deschamps is currently the only gold-thread embroiderer with the title. Recalling the day she received the honor in 2010, Deschamps said in a telephone interview, “It was one of the most memorable days of my life.”

The Master Artist title brought Deschamps and Le Bégonia d’Or much media attention, and many illustrious commissions from luxury companies such as the fashion houses of Hermès, Cartier, and Valentino; the perfumer Guerlain; the Swiss

watchmaker Piaget; and the shoemaker John Lobb.

Besides the luxury brands, the Le Bégonia d’Or atelier also undertakes commissions to design and create unique embellishments for interiors of private jets, yachts, and homes. In addition, Deschamps and her team restore and repair gold embroidery on many items, from ecclesiastical banners to customers’ couches.

An important part of the atelier is ensuring that the tradition of gold-thread embroidery is taught to future generations. Deschamps’s apprentice, Marlène Rouhaud works alongside her, and the atelier runs classes throughout the year for different skill levels.

PIAGET/COURTESY OF LE BÉGONIA D’OR



The gold thread used for this rose, for a Piaget watch face, was hair-thin and had to be handled with extreme care.

“The gold thread chose me.”
Sylvie Deschamps, gold embroiderer

