

Explanation for: “Persephone”

Persephone was a Greek goddess and the only child of Demeter (goddess of bountiful harvests) and Zeus (mighty king of the Olympian gods). She was the embodiment of the Earth's fertility at the same time that she was the Queen of the underworld, as the wife of Hades (the underworld god). Her life story is a paradigm of myths to explain natural processes, with the descent to the underworld and return back to Earth of the goddess bringing about the change of seasons.

The story highlights are: Persephone was a stunningly beautiful adolescent goddess attracting the attention of Hades. The underworld, in Greek mythology, was a dreary, quiet place, the realm of the sleeping and the dead. Hades probably needed some "brightening up", and the radiance of the pretty Persephone would assuredly help liven up the place. However, Hades did not bother to court the young Persephone. After asking for (and receiving) Zeus' approval for Persephone's hand, he simply abducted her in broad daylight when she stooped to pick a flower from a field of wildflowers near her home. The meadow was suddenly open, and Hades simply reached out and snatched Persephone away, taking her to his underworld kingdom and making her his queen. Her mother, the goddess Demeter, had heard Persephone scream when Hades grabbed her. She began a worldwide search for Persephone. After learning how Zeus had betrayed their daughter, she was furious and decided to blackmail Zeus by refusing to let the earth fruit until Persephone was returned. Droughts ensued and the earth lay barren. Zeus finally gave up and sent Hermes (the messenger god) to bring the young Persephone back to her mother. Even though Persephone missed her mother badly, another part of her had grown fond of Hades and his bleak kingdom. Persephone was enjoying her role as Queen of the underworld. While preparing her return to the earth with Hermes, Persephone accepted a pomegranate offered by Hades. She knew that anyone who had eaten while in the underworld would not be allowed to return, even a goddess. Persephone ate seven of the seeds. Her choice prevented her from ever being fully return to Demeter, but did open up the possibility of a celestial deal. Hermes negotiated an agreement between Hades and Demeter. Persephone would stay with Hades in the underworld for four months each year (winter) and be back on Earth and her mother for the remaining months. Persephone was soon joyfully reunited with her mother. Each year when Persephone returned to the underworld, Demeter would begin to grieve, bringing on the cold, barren winters and saw the dying down of plants and the halting of growth. But a few months later Persephone (the goddess associated with awakening) would return to bring spring and flowering of the meadows and the sudden growth of new grain. Thus, the cycle of seasons was established.

What you see: A contemporary representation of the young goddess in a background of a flowering landscape.

The related symbols and hidden clues:

1. The word "Persephone" in Greek letters is embedded beneath several layers of paint and is slightly apparent throughout the painting.
2. The dominant colors are brown, light navy blue, and bright yellow and green, representing the underworld and the surface of the Earth, and at the same time, a normal desert landscape (note the absence of weeds).
3. Half of the face of the goddess is dark and half is illuminated, indicating the dual role of the goddess in nature.
4. The site is in a desert where the renewal of vegetation occurs after the rains of spring and summer.
5. The location is in the Sonoran Desert, as suggested by some typical plants: the ocatillo flower in the hat; blooming ocatillo and yellow palo verde trees in the background, and the magnificent flower of the opuntia cactus that the goddess is holding in her hand.

(This explanation was written in response to request to explain this work.)