

Myths & Tales:

Was there a Helen of Troy? Was she the most beautiful woman in the world? Was she at the center of the Trojan War?...Or, was she a wonderful figment of Homer's literary skills?

In Greek mythology, Helen of Troy, also known as Helen of Sparta, or simply Helen, was the daughter of Zeus and Leda, and was a sister of Castor, Pollux, and Clytemnestra. In Greek myths, she was considered the most beautiful woman in the world. By marriage, she was Queen of Laconia, a province within Homeric Greece, the wife of King Menelaus. Her abduction by Prince Paris of Troy brought about the Trojan War. Elements of her putative biography come from classical authors such as Aristophanes, Cicero, Euripides and Homer (both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*).

In her youth, she was abducted by Theseus. A competition between her suitors for her hand in marriage sees Menelaus emerge victorious. An oath sworn beforehand by all the suitors (known as the Oath of Tyndareus) requires them to provide military assistance in the case of her abduction; this oath culminates in the Trojan War. When she marries Menelaus she is still very young; whether her subsequent involvement with Paris is an abduction or a seduction is ambiguous.

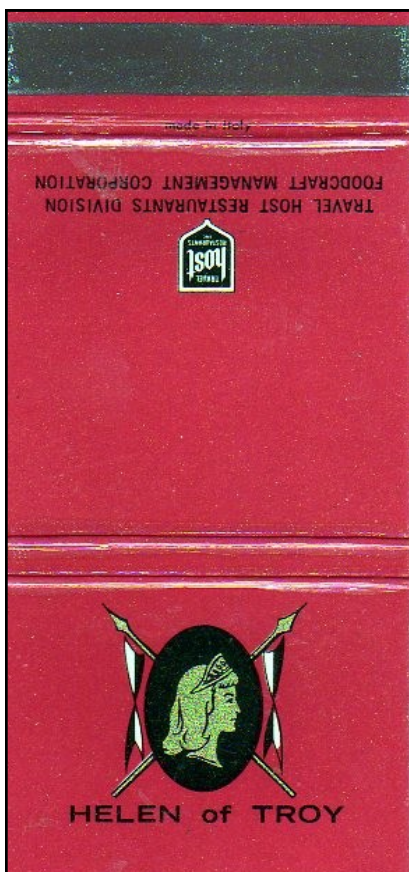
The legends recounting Helen's fate in Troy are contradictory. Homer depicts her as a wistful, even a sorrowful, figure, coming to regret her choice and wishing to be reunited with Menelaus. Other accounts have a treacherous Helen who simulates Bacchic rites and rejoices in the carnage. Ultimately, Paris was killed in action, and in Homer's account Helen was reunited with Menelaus, though other versions of the legend recount her ascending to Olympus instead. A cult associated with her developed in Hellenistic Laconia, both at Sparta and elsewhere; at Therapne, she shared a shrine with Menelaus. She was also worshiped in Attica, and on Rhodes.

Her beauty inspired artists of all time to represent her, frequently as the personification of ideal beauty. Christopher Marlowe's lines from his tragedy *Doctor Faustus* (1604) are frequently cited: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships/And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?" However, in the play, this meeting and the ensuing temptation are not unambiguously positive, closely preceding death and descent to Hell.

Images of her start appearing in the 7th century BC. In classical Greece, her abduction by—or elopement with—Paris was a popular motif. In medieval illustrations, this event was frequently portrayed as a seduction, whereas in

Renaissance paintings it is usually depicted as a rape by Paris. The fact that rape and kidnapping were interchangeable terms lends additional ambiguity to the story.

From Antiquity,



Helen of Troy

depicting Helen would be a remarkable challenge. The story of Zeuxis deals with this exact question: how would an artist immortalize ideal beauty? He eventually selected the best features from five virgins. The ancient world starts to paint Helen's picture or inscribe her form on stone, clay and bronze by the 7th century BC. Helen is frequently depicted on Athenian vases as being threatened by Menelaus and fleeing from him.

This is not the case, however, in Laconic art: on an Archaic stele depicting Helen's recovery after the fall of Troy, Menelaus is armed with a sword but Helen faces him boldly, looking directly into his eyes; and in other works of Peloponnesian art, Helen is shown carrying a wreath, while Menelaus holds his sword aloft vertically. In contrast, on Athenian vases of c. 550–470, Menelaus threateningly points his sword at her.

The abduction by Paris was another popular motif in ancient Greek vase-painting; definitely more popular than the kidnapping by Theseus. In a famous representation by the Athenian vase painter Makron, Helen follows Paris like a bride following a bridegroom, her wrist grasped by Paris' hand. The Etruscans, who had a sophisticated knowledge of Greek mythology, demonstrated a particular interest in the theme of the delivery of Helen's egg, which is depicted in relief mirrors.

In Renaissance painting, Helen's departure from Sparta is usually depicted as a scene of forcible removal (rape) by Paris. This is not, however, the case with certain secular medieval illustrations. Artists of the 1460s and 1470s were influenced by Guido delle Colonne's *Historia destructionis Troiae*, where Helen's abduction was portrayed as a scene of seduction. In the *Florentine Picture Chronicle*, Paris and Helen are shown departing arm in arm.

In Pre-Raphaelite art, Helen is often shown with shining curly hair and ringlets. Other painters of the same period depict Helen on the ramparts of Troy, and focus on her expression: her face is expressionless, blank, inscrutable. In Gustave Moreau's painting, Helen will finally become faceless; a blank eidolon in the middle of Troy's ruins. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_of_Troy]

In modern culture, Helen appear in innumerable poems, songs, novels, and films., portrayed in almost as many ways, according to the whims of the authors. Yet, she will always remain the embodiment of beauty. [*Wikipedia*]

