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## **Mythological Figures in the Works of Prof. Dr. Mutluhan Taş**

**Ahmet Aytaç<sup>1</sup>, Emre Sert<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup> Aydın Adnan Menderes University  
Aydın, Türkiye

<sup>1</sup> [cicimsumak@gmail.com](mailto:cicimsumak@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> [emresertgraphic@gmail.com](mailto:emresertgraphic@gmail.com)

### *Abstract*

This study deals with the contemporary interpretations of mythological figures in Prof. Dr. Mutluhan Taş's works in Turkish art. The compositions created by the artist using balbals, tombstones, shaman figures and Seljuk symbols have an original approach that blends the rich heritage of Turkish culture with modern art. The aim of the study is to examine how Turkish mythological figures find a place in contemporary art through the works of Mutluhan Taş and to evaluate the role of these figures in preserving cultural memory.

Within the scope of the research, figurative and abstract elements used in the artist's works were analyzed in detail. The color palettes, calligraphic arrangements and mythological symbols in the compositions establish an aesthetic bond that brings together the past and the present. In addition, through these symbols, the artist's method of handling historical and cultural elements from a contemporary perspective has been revealed.

The findings reveal the success of Mutluhan Taş's works in reinterpreting Turkish culture through art. The artist's works create a bridge between traditional and contemporary art and take the viewer on a cultural journey. The study supports the consideration of mythological figures in the literature in the context of contemporary art and makes an important contribution to the deficiencies in this field.

### *Keywords*

mythology, painting, art, culture, figure

### *For citation*

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## Мифологические изображения в произведениях профессора Мутлухана Таша

Ахмет Айтач <sup>1</sup>

Эмре Серт <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Aydın Adnan Menderes University

Aydın, Türkiye

<sup>1</sup> cicimsumak@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> emresertgraphic@gmail.com

### Аннотация

Исследование посвящено современным интерпретациям мифологических персонажей в произведениях профессора, доктора Мутлухана Таша в турецком искусстве. Композиции, созданные художником с использованием балбалов, надгробных плит, фигур шаманов и сельджукских символов, отличаются оригинальным подходом, сочетающим богатое наследие турецкой культуры с современным искусством.

Цель исследования – изучить место турецких мифологических персонажей в современном искусстве благодаря работам Мутлухана Таша и оценить роль этих персонажей в сохранении культурной памяти.

В рамках исследования были подробно проанализированы фигуративные и абстрактные элементы, использованные в работах художника. Цветовая палитра, каллиграфические композиции и мифологические символы в композициях создают эстетическую связь, которая объединяет прошлое и настоящее. Кроме того, с помощью этих символов был раскрыт метод работы художника с историческими и культурными элементами с современной точки зрения.

Находки свидетельствуют об успехе работ Мутлухана Таша в переосмыслении турецкой культуры посредством искусства. Работы художника создают мост между традиционным и современным искусством и увлекают зрителя в культурное путешествие. Исследование поддерживает рассмотрение мифологических персонажей в литературе в контексте современного искусства и вносит важный вклад в устранение лакун в этой области.

### Ключевые слова

мифология, живопись, искусство, культура, фигура

### Для цитирования

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## Introduction

Art, in its most general and simple sense, is expressing one's feelings, thoughts and dreams with concrete or abstract materials by using one's creative power, and providing an aesthetic experience.

The phenomenon of art has gone through various changes. Thanks to these changes and developments, it has gone through a rapid process and appeared in different forms. The art of painting, which has survived from the paintings made by the first people to the present day, has been of great importance in terms of observing the emergence and development of new styles throughout the ages [Dğerli and Türker, 2016, p. 63]. When we look at today's arts, it does not seem possible to talk about a single movement or style that drags artists along [Taş and Yıldırım, 2021, p. 183].

From the moment of its existence, in every period of history, human beings have always tried to make sense of the mountains, seas, animals, trees, plants, imaginary beings, natural events, in short, everything in the universe, thanks to the knowledge they have acquired, sometimes out of interest and curiosity, sometimes out of desire to understand and control dangerous situations. Of course, this meaning has varied depending on each society's unique values such as language, religion and culture. These differences have led to the emergence of countless myths, mythologies, legends and symbols [Büyükkol, 2020, p. 110].

Just as it is a branch of science in which very primitive thoughts were tried to be transferred from generation to generation in oral culture in the past, "Mythology is known as the science of myths that are transmitted between generations by traditional means. It is very difficult to make a definition for myths that will be accepted by all experts and accepted by ordinary people. Myth, which each culture interprets from its own perspective, is the mythos of the ancient Greeks; In other words, it is the name they give to their tales, which they call expressions of made-up words. Although the concept of mythology derives from the expression given by the Greeks, it is not the material of a single nation or culture, but is a branch of science that deals with the legends and beliefs of all nations" [Gültepe, 2015, p. 17–18].

A symbol is an abstract image used to represent a specific concept, idea or object. These images may carry cultural, religious, social or personal meanings and facilitate communication. Symbols have been used in various ways in different cultures and periods throughout human history [Bazyar Kaptan 2016, p. 114]. In fact, thanks to metaphors, a lot is explained with few words, indirect expression of things that cannot be explained directly is provided, the

language is enriched, and implicit thoughts are revealed [Değerli, 2021, p. 183].

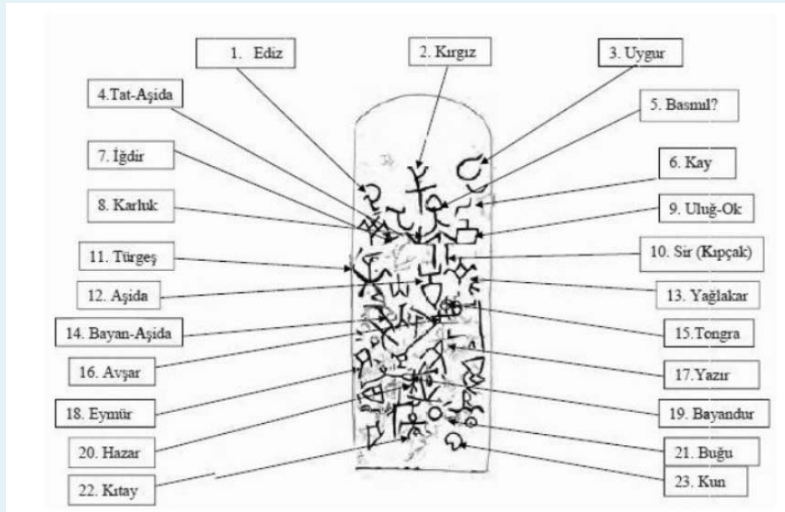


Fig. 1. Tribes to which the stamps on the Şiveet-Ulaan monument belong  
[Kıdıralı and Babayar, 2015, p. 16]

The word Tamga is expressed as Damga in today's Turkey Turkish. Its original form mentioned in eternal stones is Tamga. "Tamgas are defined as signs of clan, lineage and holiness" [Duran, 2019, p. 681]. Tamgas were an expression of identity in Turkish cultural life. This identity was different social and political identities that existed at all stages of life. "The existence of different types of tamgas such as clan, tribal union, ethnic political unity, dynasty [ruling dynasty], family and ruler tamgas" [Kıdıralı and Babayar, 2015, p. 10–11] constitute examples of the different identities in question. "The word 'Tamga', which lives in similar forms in Turkish dialects, has also passed from Turkish to Russian and Mongolian" [Toprak, 2011, p. 556]. Ancient Turkish peoples expressed their belief world, culture and mythological imagination with tamgas. "Tamga" sometimes meant any creation myth, sometimes it meant neck ongunu. Tamga lived on carpets, on horses, in tattoos on bodies, on stones, on clothing, and on almost everything people used. Tamgas first appeared as visual and intellectual writing when there was no textual writing. After their number increased over time, they took the form of writing by ordering the tamgas [Aklimov, 2014, p. 223].

A figure, in the visual arts, especially painting and sculpture, is any depiction that represents an object, living thing, or human form. These depictions can be realistic, abstract or symbolic. Figures are an important tool used by the artist to tell a story, express an emotion or convey an idea. In the painting, the figure may be in the center of the composition or play a smaller role in the background. The figure's size, position, expression, and relationship with its surroundings profoundly affect the meaning of the painting. Figures can reflect not only external appearance, but also the inner world, character and psychological state. The use of the figure in art history has gained different meanings in different cultures and periods and has been shaped according to the personal interpretations of the artists. Figures are used in a wide range of art, from mythological creatures to historical figures, from abstract forms to realistic portraits.

Mythological paintings not only present a visual feast, but also carry deep meanings and cultural codes [Gögebakan, 2017, p. 1].

The colors, shapes, positions of symbols and their relationships with other visual elements give important clues about the belief systems, values and worldview of that society. When examining the symbols in mythological paintings, it is necessary to first have information about the mythology and symbolism specific to the culture to which that painting belongs. Next, visual elements such as the overall composition of the painting, the color palette, and the techniques used should be carefully analyzed.

The place and decisiveness of mythology in contemporary art is undisputed. However, when it comes to mythology, Art History has focused heavily on certain periods, before Modernism. It is rarer to see Contemporary Art evaluated in the light of mythology. However, it can be claimed that the roots of many contemporary movements are based on mythology. What is in question here is undoubtedly a different effect from the clear story transfer in classical art. Searching for traces of mythology today will both bring a new perspective to Contemporary Art and keep mythology alive [Bazyar Kaptan, 2016, p. 114].

There are two aesthetic currents in the structure of the painting. "Going to nature and escaping from nature". Eroğlu, who said, "Turks took the second path as basis," wanted to express that they went beyond imitating the surrealist attitude and nature in Turkish painting and painted the picture of their inner world [Eroğlu, 2019, p. 33].

The origin of Turkish painting goes back to petroglyphs. However, the oldest painting examples are clearly seen in the korigans of the Göktürk period [Aytaç, 2021, p. 74]. It can be said that the main development of Turkish painting started with the Uyghur period. Manichean religion is also the main

reason for the development of painting in the Uyghurs. Uyghur miniatures and Central Asian painting also constituted the source of Turkish-Islamic miniature art [Yılmaz, 2005, p. 12].

On the other hand, it is known that there are many balbals from the Hun and Gokturk periods in the Turkestan geography and that they have an important place in Turkish cultural history. "These ancient stone statues can be found around Issyk-Kul and other places" [Borisenko and Khudyakov, 2015, p. 31].

As a reflection of the cultural traces of the civilizations that dominated Anatolia, as an extension of the spring-winter life and the root belief in Turkish culture; Many mythical figures such as Hima, Kaknus, Zümrüdü Anka, Hoopoe, Şahmeran, Gulyabani, Dragon, Cyclops, Fiend, Giant, Genie, Fairy, Melek, Huri, Umay Ana, Burak, Griffon, Mermaid, Sphinx have been used as images in different periods of Turkish art. In contemporary Turkish art, mythological images are frequently used in the works of artists such as İbrahim Balaban, Erol Akyavaş, Süleyman Saim Tekcan, Nuri Abaç. Mutluhan Taş is one of the important artists who frequently use Turkish mythical elements in his works, both in sculpture and in the perception of contemporary painting.

**Prof. Dr. Mutluhan Taş:  
stone and his understanding of art**

Prof. Dr. Mutluhan TAŞ was born in 1973 in Almelo, Netherlands. He graduated from Gazi University, Gazi Faculty of Education, Department of Art Education in 1994. Between 1994 and 1998, he worked as an art teacher in secondary schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education. In 1998, he was appointed as a research assistant at Selçuk University, Faculty of Education, Department of Art Education. He received his master's degree from the Department of Painting Education at the Social Sciences Institute of the same University in 2001 and XIII. He completed his doctorate with the thesis titled "Reflections of the Sufi Movements Dominant in Anatolia in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century on Contemporary Turkish Painting Art after 1980" and received the title of Doctor of Science.



*Fig. 2 (photo).  
Mutluhan Taş*

In 2010, he worked as an assistant at Selçuk University, Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Sculpture. Assoc. Dr. He was appointed as a lecturer with the title. The artist, who became an Associate Professor in 2014, was appointed to the position of Professor in 2020.

At the same faculty, he served as the Head of the Sculpture Department, Deputy Dean, Head of the Ceramics Department, a member of the Faculty Board of Directors, a member of the Board of Directors of the Mevlana Research Institute and the President of the SELÇÜSED [Selçuk Fine Arts Association]. In 2022, he was appointed to Gazi University Gazi Faculty of Education Fine Arts Education Department Art Teaching Department Sculpture ASD.

To date, he has held 15 personal exhibitions, four of which are sculptures. He participated in more than 100 national and international group art exhibitions. The artist, whose paintings are in many public and private collections in Turkey and around the world, stands out with his identity as a Painter-Sculptor-Academician. His sculpture works, which started with the Ceyhan Earthquake Monument in 1998, continue with more than 100 monuments in Turkey. The artist, who has over 400 hyperrealistic silicone sculptures in 21 museums in Turkey, served as a scientific committee member and practicing sculptor in the project of identifying and reconstructing the identities of the Seljuk Sultans of Turkey. Prof. Dr. Mutluhan TAŞ is one of the most important expert artists on criminal reconstruction in Turkey and the world.

Mutluhan Taş carries deep traces of Turkish culture in his works and interprets balbals and tombstones in a stylized figurative style. In the artist's works, balbals and tombstones symbolize not only the memory of people who lived in the past, but also the mystical ties extending from the own universe of the "silent people" to today's world. Balbals in pre-Islamic Turkish culture and post-Islamic tombstones are seen side by side or as a whole in Taş's works. The artist bases the depiction of Mevlevi tombstones and balbals similar to human figures on the beliefs that the dead do not actually die and their souls continue to live in their own dimensions. In his paintings, he combines traditional culture and contemporary art by blending these monumental forms with a strong color palette and calligraphy. This mystical atmosphere stands out as a language of contemporary art by addressing the interuniversal existence and ontological inquiries of life with a plastic expression.

### **Mythological figures in Prof. Dr. Mutluhan Taş's paintings**

At first glance, the work presents an impressive reflection of a cosmic atmosphere. The color transitions in the background create a rich composition



where blue, purple, red and yellow tones come together harmoniously. These colors create a sense of depth while giving the viewer both a serenity and a dramatic effect.



Fig. 3. "Night Conversation of Stone Fathers",  
100 × 100 TÛAB

The stone balbals at the center of the work symbolize the ancestor cult and spiritual devotion in the Köktengri belief. The mysterious stance of the figures and the play of light and shadow allow them to be perceived as both human and timeless beings. These stone figures offer deep meaning to the viewer as symbols of togetherness and a spiritual journey. The crescent and moon figures at the top carry the meanings of holiness, protection and divine light in Turkish mythology. In Köktengri belief, the moon is seen as a celestial guide and a part of the divine order. Sirius star [Kök Böri Star] represents an important celestial body that was considered sacred by the ancient Turks and accepted as a guide in finding direction. These symbols allow the work to be interpreted in a spiritual and cosmic context. While golden details symbolize holiness and divine power, red and black tones concentrated in the lower part of the composition create a dramatic effect and reflect an existential struggle. Broad brush strokes and fluid forms emphasize the dynamic structure of the work by strengthening the feeling of movement and momentum.

In general, the work presents a narrative that reflects the spirit of the Köktengri belief. Handling traditional Turkish symbols with a contemporary interpretation has created a powerful visual expression that combines the past and the present.





*Fig. 4. "Balballar", 100 × 120 TÛAB*

Strong traces of Köktengri belief and Turkish mythology are seen in the work. While the figures in the middle resemble stone balbals and symbolize the cult of ancestors and the connection with the past, the forms reaching towards the sky create a mystical atmosphere. While the crescent and moon figures represent divine power, protection and spiritual enlightenment in Turkish culture, the contrast of warm and cold colors adds dynamism to the work. Orange and red tones symbolize holiness and energy, while blue and dark tones create a heavenly context. While broad brush strokes and the use of fluid paint strengthen the feeling of movement, the play of light and shadow gives the figures a timeless meaning.

Presenting traditional symbols with a contemporary artistic approach transforms the work into a deep cultural narrative rather than just an aesthetic work.

In the work related to Turkish mythology, the contrast of warm orange and blue tones on a gray background gives the work a movement and mystical atmosphere. The horse figure in the composition reminds us of the winged horse known as "Tulpar" in Turkish mythology, and stands out as a symbol of freedom, speed and spiritual journey. Tulpar is not only a mount for the ancient Turks, but also a sacred being that allows heroes to rise to the sky. While the horse figure generally means strength, courage and independ-

ence, it is accepted as an integral part of warrior identity and nomadic life in Turkish society.

The obelisk-like figures next to Tulpar symbolize the spiritual bond with the past, with reference to balbal motifs. Balbals are stone statues erected to keep alive the memory of the heroes and ancestors who died in the ancient Turks, and they make the audience feel the fine line between death and life and the continuity of cultural memory. While the crescent and star motifs strengthen the spiritual dimension of the work, the crescent represents protection, rebirth and divine order in Turkish mythology. Star, especially when considered in the context of the star Sirius, means blessing and guidance in the Turks. The golden, blue and orange tones in the color palette create a feeling of depth and elegance, emphasizing the harmony of heavenly and earthly elements.

It offers a powerful narrative reflecting Turkish mythology. The spread of bright orange, blue and yellow tones on the dark background gives the work both movement and a cosmic atmosphere. The female figure in the composition evokes the creative and protective power of Turkish women. The geometric motifs and crescent form on the woman's head refer to the concepts of holiness and universal balance. In Turkish mythology, the crescent is considered a symbol of rebirth, transformation and celestial order. In the *Öz* Tengri belief, the crescent is a reflection of divine power and cosmic balance. At the same time, in ancient Turkish societies, the crescent was also used as a dynastic symbol and represented leadership and protection.



Fig. 5. "Tulpar and Balballar", 100 × 120 TÜAB



*Fig. 6. "Seljuk Tales 2"*  
100 × 120



*Fig. 7. "Al Karasi"*  
100 × 120 TÜAB

The calligraphic traces and abstract textures used in the background of the work appear as a visualization of a cultural memory. The woman's clothing and stance are a reflection of both a mythological figure and a narrative that connects with today. The dynamic harmony of warm and cold color tones in the work gives the viewer the feeling of telling a story beyond time and space.

This work titled "Al Karası" offers an artistic interpretation of Al Karası, a mystical being believed to haunt women giving birth in Turkish mythology. In the work, the woman's profile silhouette and the active, wavy structure of her hair create an atmosphere that is both threatening and fascinating about this figure. The bursts of energy in intense orange, green and pink tones used in the background emphasize the both frightening and attractive nature of Al Karası. The transparent structure of the figure represents its permeability between the physical and spiritual worlds, while strengthening its mystical and supernatural presence feature. The blue eye details establish a direct connection with the viewer, making one feel the undeniable power of this figure.

The work deals with the impressive role of Al Karası in ancient Turkish folk narratives with a modern composition. It is based on both the power of women and mythological fears.



Fig. 8. "Shaman",  
100 × 120 TÜAB

The Shaman figure at the center of the work, rendered with acrylic paints on a large, vertical format canvas, displays a serene and meditative stance, while the expression on his face shows that he is on a deep inner journey. The vibrant colors and intricate patterns around the figure emphasize Kam's close connection with nature and the spiritual realms. In particular, the kam drum stands out as an important tool used by Kam in their rituals. This drum is a bridge that allows one to travel to the heavenly and underground worlds. Kams are sacred figures in ancient Turkish communities that communicate with spirits, heal the sick and protect society. The hand figure in the work symbolizes the transfer of power, wisdom and spiritual energy in Turkish mythology. The hands of the kams are considered a tool that directs sacred energy during rituals, and in this respect, they reinforce the spiritual power of the figure in the work.

The large and open area at the top of the work can be perceived as a door opening to Kam's subconscious and the universe. In addition, the elements around the figure remind us of balbals, referring to the cult of ancestors and the belief in immortal souls. Balbals are stone sculptures that keep the memory of heroes and ancestors alive among the ancient Turks and symbolize the existence of spirits. While the texture of the canvas adds both depth and mobility to the work, the light-shadow games used add volume to the figures and draw the viewer into the painting.

## Conclusion

Mutluhan Taş's works make a significant contribution to the continuity of cultural history by reinterpreting Turkish mythological figures in the context of contemporary art. Balbal, tombstone motifs, shaman figures, crescent, Sirius star, calligraphic symbols and Seljuk reflections used in his works not only remind the past but also give the viewer a spiritual journey experience. The artist's approach, which brings together figurative and abstract elements, shows how traditional motifs can gain new meaning in contemporary art.

The findings reveal that the rich heritage of Turkish art can be blended with today's aesthetic and technical art opportunities to create a universal artistic language. The strong color palettes, calligraphic details and mythological elements seen in Mutluhan Taş's works clearly reflect the artist's effort to build a bridge between the traditional and the modern and make the artist's works unique. The importance of the study aims to contribute to the literature in this field by examining in depth the role of mythological figures in contemporary Turkish art. In addition, through the artist's works, it is understood how the reinterpretation of mythological elements in art contributes



to the preservation and enrichment of the cultural memory of societies. Finally, this research will inspire future studies both academically and artistically.

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### Information about the Author

Ahmet Aytaç, Assist. Prof. Dr.

Emre Sert, Master's Student

### Информация об авторе

Ахмет Айтач, ассистент профессора, доктор

Эмре Серт, магистрант

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