

**TIME IN ART:¹
IS THERE ANY ALTERNATIVE TO ‘OLD FATHER TIME’?**

**By Penelope J. Corfield
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**Fig.171.1 ‘Old Father Time’
weathercock**

‘Old Father Time’ appears on many weathercocks, as in Fig.1. He is venerable, stooped, and bearded. He carries an hour-glass to track the minutes in its trickling sands, as he walks the long, long, endless line of Time. He also shoulders a scythe, because eventually he brings death to all living creatures.

Sometimes, at midnight festivities on New Year’s Eve, a variant symbolism is used. A venerable old man leaves the room, and a tiny baby is handed in. The change-over symbolises the end of one twelve-month span - and the start of the next. But ‘New Baby Time’ has not won any great cultural resonance, because its youth - like Time itself - is fleeting. Some images of this change-over show the old man as glum, because he is departing (theoretically) for good, whilst the baby is shown as chortling gleefully. But Time, of course, is steadily ageing the baby, day by day. And a year later, the baby will be replaced by a newer, younger model at the following New Year’s Eve.

Generally, the required look for all forms of venerable temporality is stern, if not outright morose. By the way, the former Wychwood Brewery in Witney (Oxfordshire) used to brew a beer named ‘Old Father Time’. Its bottle displayed the head/shoulders of a bushy-bearded elderly man, looking piercingly intent and cradling close to him a young child.² He is not quite smiling. But he looks benign enough (and I hope that the beer was great).

After all, there is no reason why ‘Old Father Time’ should not smile occasionally, as he trudges through the millennia of cosmic existence. A not-quite-identical figure appeared in classical Chinese cosmology. He represented not Time itself but the power of survival through time. He was the god Shou-lao, whose name means ‘Old Longevity’.

As Fig 2 shows, he is seen as a rubicund and imposing male figure.³ He has a high-domed forehead; he is dressed in flowing robes; he smiles cheerily; and he holds in one hand a peach, which symbolises Long Life (or even, according to some translations, Immortality) and, in the other, a gourd containing the so-called Elixir of Life. Interestingly, Shou-lao was/is not a god who was worshipped in temples. He was/is a household divinity - and, not surprisingly, a popular one.



**175.2 Chinese god Shou-lao
'Old Longevity',
in eighteenth-century figurine
from the Qing dynasty
© Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, 2025**

Classical Greek mythology also had an eminent and antique male embodiment of Time. He was Chronos. He appears as tall, winged, imposing, sombre - and sometimes but not invariably carrying a scythe. But there was a youthful option as well. He was Kairos, a mythical god - not just of the fleeting moment, but of the 'right' or critical moment.⁴ That refers to the key moment when someone is poised between decision and action: *This is it! Let's go for it!* So this god is depicted with four wings, two at his heels as well as on his shoulders. And he carries a pair of scales as he balances the pros and cons of a given course of action. Kairos is physically poised and ready! And his message: *Strike while the iron is hot! Don't miss your moment!*



**175.3 Image of Kairos, the god of action at the right or critical moment, in classical Greek mythology:
© (2025) stone bas-relief of Kairos following model by Lysippus, second century BCE, in Turin Museum of Greco-Roman Art.**

Other than that, artworks depicting Time frequently resort to images of time-pieces, such as clocks or hour-glasses. Or to images of skulls - or, sometimes, to images of clocks and skulls together,

Characteristically, however, painters prefer less abstract and more immediate subject for their artistry. And their customers and patrons also prefer images that are more cheering than perpetual reminders of death and the passing of Time. These big themes have triggered a huge mythology;⁵ but such themes seem to be best expressed in stories rather than in visual images.

I personally do very much enjoy the image of Kairos. And the potent reminder that there is a right (as well as a wrong) moment for action. Nonetheless, I must admit that I also yearn to see a female embodiment of Time. Not as a fighting Amazon: too bellicose. Not as a matronly Earth-Mother: too cosy and predictable. But as something much more creative and unusual and worthy of the great cosmic power of Time ... Any suggestions, anyone?

ENDNOTES:

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- ¹ Another BLOG in my 2025 Time series, to mark publication of PJC, *Time-Space: We Are All in it Together* (Austin Macauley: London, 2025).
- ² <https://untappd.com/b/wychwood-brewery-old-father-time/1971408> (viewed 30 June 2025).
- ³ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/47916> (viewed 30 June 2025).
- ⁴ See B.M.P.T. Baert, 'Kairos: The Right Moment or Occasion', (2020), posted in website of the Princeton Institute of Advanced Study, <https://www.ias.edu/ideas/baert-kairos> (viewed 30 June 2025).
- ⁵ See e.g. L.D. Deutsch, *Mythologies of Time and Timelessness* (2019); S. Nandakumar, *Myths of Time* (2022).