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Feminine Monstrosity: Medusa Through the Ages

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**Feminine Monstrosity:
Medusa Through the Ages**

Senior Project submitted to

**The Division of Arts
of Bard College**

By

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022

This project is dedicated to:

My mom, Wendy.

My dad, Greg.

&

My advisor, Susan.

I couldn't have done this without you all.

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Introduction

Against a light gray background and with a dappled python around her neck, a shirtless black woman of about 25 gazes at her audience with a piercing emerald stare, her pupils mere slits. (Fig. 1.) Instead of hair, multicolored snakes of all kinds sprout from the crown of her head, enveloping the skull in a hood of writhing serpents. She frames her face with both hands, forest green nails extending like talons. She is Medusa. But she is also Rihanna. This image I have just described to you is in fact the cover of *British GQ*'s December 2013 issue, styled by Damien Hirst, starring the eminent Rihanna. While this image represents a stark comparison to Archaic depictions of Medusa from classical Greek mythology, it does provide a great deal of information relating to the socio-historical context of the time it was created. This magazine cover of Rihanna is a testament to the enduring fascination with the image of Medusa; and in this thesis I will examine Caravaggio's *Medusa* in the context of illustrations from antiquity and the Early Modern period,¹ highlighting how his creation is a unique example that fuses characteristics from both periods .

Myth of Medusa

The story of Medusa is a well known Greek myth that first began circulation in the 7th century BC. The story is famously included in the final section of the fourth chapter of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* as well as mentioned by ancient poets Homer and Hesiod. The story of Medusa is one that highlights feminine monstrosity by outlining how she herself became a monster, and eventually how she met her fate. According to Ovid, Medusa was one of the three Gorgons, hideous and fearsome creatures, yet she was not always the monster we associate with her name.

¹ In this paper, I use the term "Early Modern period" which encompasses both the Renaissance and Baroque eras. When discussing this period, I am focusing on the 15th through 17th centuries, as that is when the artists I examine created their pieces.

She was an outlier in her family, for she was born a beautiful mortal with long, glorious hair, unlike her immortal sisters, Stheno and Euryale. According to Ovid

Beyond all others she
was famed for beauty, and the envious hope
of many suitors. Words would fail to tell
the glory of her hair, most wonderful
of all her charms--A friend declared to me
he saw its lovely splendour.²

One day, so Ovid tells it, Medusa was in a temple dedicated to Athena when she was seduced by Poseidon. Athena, in a fit of jealous rage, severely punished the beautiful mortal for her actions and turned her into a hideous monster.

Fame declares
the Sovereign of the Sea attained her love
in chaste Minerva's temple. While enraged
she turned her head away and held her shield
before her eyes. To punish that great crime
Minerva changed the Gorgon's splendid hair
to serpents horrible. And now to strike
her foes with fear, she wears upon her breast
those awful vipers--creatures of her rage.³

The gods and goddesses of Greek mythology were well-known for being jealous and vengeful characters, sometimes acting incredibly human-like in their reactions, almost to a fault. These immortals would often act or perform weighty consequences at the slightest provocation, which was the case when it came to Medusa.

The most famous myth including Medusa surrounds Perseus, a hero in Greek mythology who was sent by Polydectes, the king of Seriphos, to bring back the Gorgon's severed head in order to save his mother. Polydectes assumed this was a suicide mission that Perseus would not return from, as Medusa was known for her fatal stare. Yet Perseus had the gods on his side and

² Ovid, "Metamorphoses" Book 4:1181-95 translated by Thomas Moore. 1 Reproduced by Tracy Marks through the web. <http://www.webwinds.com/thalassa/medusa.htm>

³ Ovid, "Metamorphoses" Book 4:1187-95

arrived on the rocky island of Sarpedon, the home of the three Gorgons, with Hades' cap of invisibility, Hermes' winged sandals, Athena's shield, and an adamantine sword. Perseus manages to slaughter Medusa in her sleep by only looking at her reflection in Athena's mirrored shield. He cut off Medusa's head, which still had a petrifying stare, even in death, and returned to Seriphos with it in tow. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, "When Perseus had cut off the head of Medousa (Medusa) there sprang from her blood great Khrysaor (Chrysaor) and the horse Pegasos (Pegasus) so named from the springs (*pegai*) of Okeanos (Oceanus), where she was born."⁴ While Perseus flew with the head, a few drops of Medusa's blood hit the ground, and immediately turned into snakes. Back on Seriphos, Perseus revealed Medusa's head and turned Polydectes to stone along with the islanders, and then gave the head to the goddess, Athena. Ever after that, Athena's battle shield and her aegis carried the representation of Medusa's head. In some myths, the shield is actually Zeus' which he lends to Athena, while in others, the aegis is not a shield but actually a protective animal skin worn over the garments of the god or goddess for extra protection.⁵

There are other stories about Medusa, which add to or depart from Ovid's and Hesiod's stories. For instance, predating Medusa in Greek mythology, it was believed that she and her Gorgon sisters came from modern-day Libya. In this version of Perseus' myth, the authors credit the island home of the Gorgons as Libya, and therefore that is where he must travel in order to complete his quest for King Polydectes. Before the 6th century BCE, the then-powerful country of Libya worshiped a goddess resembling the Greek Medusa. According to the Greek traveler

⁴ Hesiod, *Theogony* 270 ff (trans. Evelyn-White) (Greek epic C8th or C7th B.C.) :

⁵ GreekMythology.com, The Editors of Website. "Aegis". GreekMythology.com Website, 28 Feb. 2015, <https://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Elements/Aegis/aegis.html>. Accessed 29 April 2022.
Source: <https://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Elements/Aegis/aegis.html>

and geographer, Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece* 2. 21. 5 - 6 from 150 and 170 CE he explains,

In the market-place of Argos is a mound of earth, in which they say lies the head of the Gorgon Medousa (Medusa). I omit the miraculous, but give the rational parts of the story about her. After the death of her father, Phorkys (Phorcys), she reigned over those living around Lake Tritonis, going out hunting and leading the Libyans to battle. On one such occasion, when she was encamped with an army over against the forces of Perseus, who was followed by picked troops from the Peloponnesos, she was assassinated by night. Perseus, admiring her beauty even in death, cut off her head and carried it to show the Greeks.⁶

Both Ovid's version of the myth of Medusa and the story that includes Perseus describe a monstrous yet feminine character with the ability to kill any mortal at the mere sight of her. This story of fatal beauty is well known in modern society and has been inspiring artists since Archaic antiquity. This fabulous creature, unmasculine yet completely terrible evokes fear but also an acute attraction in many different audiences.

Images of Medusa

Beginning in antiquity, images of Medusa became popular motifs that gradually progressed from that of a monstrous head or "Gorgoneion" which functioned as an apotropaic device to that of a more feminine and human individual. Spanning the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods in Ancient Greece, art historians have categorized these illustrations of Medusa into a threefold evolution showcasing this progression, which becomes especially evident on red-figure vases beginning in the Classical period.

Early Modern artists found inspiration in the artwork and mythology of Ancient Greece which resurfaced and rose in popularity specifically during the Renaissance. The myth of Medusa, with its focus on transformation and gruesome decapitation, inspired numerous

⁶ Pausanias, "Description of Greece," 2.21.5-6

creations ranging from paintings to sculptures and even poetry. Artists were interested in evoking emotions in their viewers and therefore employed concepts like extreme realism and concepts of wonder and amazement when it came to their illustrations of Medusa.

The focus of my project, however, is the illustration of Medusa's decapitation on a convex wooden shield at the end of the 16th century by Baroque artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. What makes Caravaggio's *Medusa* so unique is that it employs both the Early Modern period's focus on realism and emotion as well as the Archaic function of Medusa's head as an apotropaic device, hence it being painted on a shield.

There is a great deal of literature analyzing the form and meaning of the Medusa head. Art historians have researched depictions of the myth in Ancient Greece, and discussed the role of the "Gorgoneion" on a multitude of artifacts, leading them to draw the conclusion that it functioned as a device to ward off evil. In addition, the ternary development of Medusa from a monstrous head to a fully formed woman in later Classical and Hellenistic depictions is discussed at length, with numerous writers giving examples of her changing form.⁷ Some believe this may have coincided with new receptions of her myth that allowed artists from later antiquity to see her less as a monster and more as a woman who was punished for actions she had no control over. Literature discussing Medusa in the Renaissance has explored how her story became popular subject matter for artists who were interested in illustrating the stories of Greek mythology.

Each of the pieces from the 15th through 17th century I will discuss have been analyzed by art historians at length, yet never in the context of the entire timeline of Medusa's appearance on artwork. And while there is writing on the Renaissance and Baroque concepts of evoking

⁷ Victoria Cantrell, "Dangerous Beauty: The Evolution of Medusa Imagery in Greek Art," *Georgia Undergraduate Research Conference (2014-2015)*, November 15, 2014, <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/gurc/2014/2014/85>.

emotion through the illustration of interesting, grotesque, and even supernatural subjects, I plan to focus on why Medusa's illustrations specifically fit into this movement. My goal is to look at Caravaggio's shield within the context of the long history of Medusa's head and explore how he is playing with the Archaic concept of her as an apotropaic function, yet within the lines of the Early Modern period's concept of wonder and amazement.

In the first chapter I begin with Medusa's Archaic appearance as a monstrous Gorgoneion motif and follow her evolution as she turns into a more feminine figure, losing details like fangs and snakes until she appears almost completely human. In the second chapter I examine two sculptures and one painting of Medusa, all completed between the 15th and 17th centuries. I will highlight how these pieces play with the concepts of wonder and amazement especially with the evocative presence of blood and gore. Finally, in the third chapter, I will examine Caravaggio's shield, drawing on previous points I discussed in my chapter on antiquity and my chapter on other Early Modern renditions of Medusa.

Chapter 1

Medusa in Antiquity

By first looking at classical antiquity's portrayal of mythology and Medusa, it will allow us to better understand the subject matter of artists' depictions of Medusa in later periods. I will begin by explaining the concept of myth in ancient Greece and then look to artistic models focusing on Medusa's evolution in art from Archaic Greece to the Classical and Hellenistic periods. By analyzing these ancient models, we can more easily grasp what Renaissance artists were looking to for inspiration in their own work when they began illustrating the subject matter of classical Greek mythology.

Myth in Ancient Greece

The mythology of Ancient Greece morphed throughout different periods through a spread of oral tradition and eventually the written word. The gods and goddesses of Greek antiquity were imagined as anthropomorphic beings that interacted with humans, therefore explaining and representing many different aspects of their lives. The gods were thought to be very active on earth. Many stories tell of heroes, mortals, and demigods entangling themselves in the escapades of the gods, sometimes involving different monsters or creatures, but almost always remaining at the whim of the all-powerful twelve Olympians. There is even evidence suggesting the existence of some of these Olympians in Mycenaean mythology which predates that of Ancient Greece. It was the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization that allowed the Greeks to give rise to a new mythology, carried by poets, establishing the stories of Greek mythology we know today.

The people of Greece fashioned gods and goddesses very much like themselves; they take on human forms (most of the time) as well as play out human dynamics with enlarged egos and emotions. Yet ultimately, the gods are immortal and come from a generation of even greater mythological beings, the Titans. The Titans ruled the Cosmos until Zeus, along with his brothers and sisters, overthrew the even more ancient gods. Once the Olympians threw their enemies into Tartarus, they came to power and created mankind.

The spread of Greek mythology did not come from any bible or official culmination of stories, rather, they were retold again and again to newer generations through oral tradition, further allowing the stories to take on a range of meanings for different audiences. Even when written forms of the myths were introduced, they seemed to have a flexible nature that could reflect cultural aspects as well as relate to humans across time. It is important to distinguish that Greek mythology is not synonymous with Greek religion. The stories do not comprise a religious text or represent any specific church. Rather these stories are told and retold because they resonated with audiences, sometimes because they spoke to political issues or provided life lessons. The myth of Medusa, we shall see, is an example of one of these myths that remained relevant with her iconic head symbolizing evil but also being used to repel evil through its apotropaic functions.

Evolution of Medusa Representations in Ancient Art

How the legendary Medusa was represented in the art of Ancient Greece and Rome evolved likely along with the spread of her mythological background. She goes from a hideous and violent creature, not in the least bit feminine in Archaic Greece to that of a more feminine character that succumbs to the hero Perseus' violent slaughter as the artwork reaches late

antiquity and even beyond. The artwork almost always revolves around her death and the iconography of her decapitated head.

Focusing solely on Greek art, it is clear that first and foremost, Medusa was a monster. For the Ancient Greeks, Medusa's role varied greatly but was deeply embedded in their ancient mythology.⁸ Hesiod's *Theogony*,⁹ from the 8th century BCE, seems to be the first work of literature that discusses the famous Gorgon. He credits her as being the only mortal of the three Gorgon sisters and describes the hero Perseus beheading her. Her monstrous head became a popular motif as early as the Archaic period, between 650 and 480 BCE, yet the head of simply Gorgonian figures, not necessarily the fully formed Medusa, was standardized by the early 6th century BCE, possibly first appearing slightly earlier in the 7th century BCE. The head motif, also called the Gorgoneion,¹⁰ was typically a widespread apotropaic device, meant to ward off evil used much like the modern evil eye, and was commonly fearsome and grimacing in nature.¹¹ This would tie into representations of the Greek deities Athena and Zeus as well as the role the Gorgoneion had on devices such as Zeus' aegis in the *Iliad* and Athena's own aegis.¹² The circular and almost always front-facing depiction of the Archaic Gorgon made it a popular decorative design for objects ranging from vases and goblets, to temple ornamentation, antefixes, and shield decoration. For example, a black figure Athenian drinking cup (kylix) dated from 550 BCE now housed in the Ashmolean Museum reveals the Gorgoneion in its classical circular shape. (Fig. 2.) This image of Archaic Medusa would surprise drinkers when the liquid disappeared from the cup. Medusa in this monstrous form was considered so horrifying that it

⁸ Sarah Bernice Wallace, "The Changing Faces of Medusa," accessed December 1, 2021, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/reinvention/archive/bcur2011specialissue/wallace/.

⁹ Hesiod, "Theogony,"

¹⁰ Madeleine Glennon, "Medusa in Ancient Greek Art | Essay | The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History," The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, accessed December 1, 2021, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/medu/hd_medu.htm.

¹¹ Glennon. "Medusa in Ancient Greek Art"

¹² Glennon. "Medusa in Ancient Greek Art"

could ward off evil. Archaic depictions of Medusa and her Gorgon sisters, seen on a vast array of objects and architectural structures, would definitely exemplify both her and her sisters as scary. Their grotesque faces had exaggerated features and artists represented both her and her sisters as horrific and foreign beings, the nightmarish and completely inhuman characters from their myth. Archaic examples often emphasize Medusa's eyes with extraordinary size as it was foretold that her glance could turn a mortal to stone.

Looking at an early example of Medusa, there is a late Archaic terracotta painted Gorgoneion antefix (roof tile) from ca. 540 BC, categorized as coming from Greek, South Italian, and Tarentine culture but found in Tarentum, Italy and now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.¹³ (Fig. 3.) It would appear that the Medusa-like subject of this piece of art represents a very early portrayal of the famous Gorgon. Because the Gorgoneion functioned as a sort of protective device, it would have been a relevant symbol for any sort of sacred architecture. The antefix represents a prime example of early depictions of Medusa. It illustrates a Gorgon or monster-like face with rounded cheeks and large, bulging eyes. In addition to her tongue sticking out, she has large fangs protruding from either corner of her open mouth. Her forehead appears to have small curls that then turn into a ring of serpents enveloping the face. According to Christine Alexander, this decorative motif would have been painted in rich hues, like yellow, red and blue, and traces of these colors are still present. Alexander notes in the *American Journal of Archaeology* that “there is a white engobe over the whole surface, upon which were applied yellow for the flesh and red for the spiral curls, beard, gums, lips, and tongue: the serpent which form a border round the head are red on a blue ground, and enclosing raised line in red.”¹⁴ The image certainly seems to be illustrating a gruesome figure, definitely

¹³ Christine Alexander, “An Antefix and a Hekataion Recently Acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 44, no. 3 (1940): 293–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/499720>.

¹⁴ Alexander. “An Antefix and a Hekataion,” 293

evil, which contrasts with later illustrations that portray Medusa as more feminine than monstrous.

While many standard Archaic depictions of Medusa illustrate a monstrous head meant to ward off evil, it is clear that Medusa's representation somewhat changes in the eyes of Greek artists. Most art historians accept that Greek vases spanning the 5th to 2nd century BCE reveal three stages in Medusa's chronological evolution from monster to a more classically beautiful character.¹⁵ Kathryn Topper points out that most scholars have accepted this theory of evolution in the appearance of Gorgons. "Adolf Furtwängler's entry in the *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, which relied on a tripartite typology that showed monstrous Archaic Gorgons evolving gradually into Hellenistic and Roman beauties, set the course for subsequent scholarship."¹⁶ Archaic depictions of Medusa on vases closely mirror the style in which she was illustrated on the terracotta Gorgoneion antefix. Her features often include a combination of both human and animal attributes including fangs, snakes, and wings. In Greek mythology, the Gorgons were a trio of monsters that even great heroes feared. It would appear that her terrifying Archaic appearance was meant to evoke a sense of fright in viewers, especially because artists aimed to construct an image so terrifying that it could ward off any evil. As the Archaic period ends, Medusa's role shifts to that of a creature undergoing a transformation from monster to woman. Greek vase paintings help to reveal the changing image Ancient Greeks must have had of Medusa.

According to writer Susan M. Serfontein,

The early classical artist visualized Medusa as a woman with an attractive feminine figure, whose facial features alone preserve the remnants of her earlier monstrous appearance. Her once almost ubiquitous snakes are no longer associated with her

¹⁵ Cantrell, "Dangerous Beauty."

¹⁶ Kathryn Topper, "Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction," *Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens* 76, no. 1 (2007): 73–105.

classical form until they are reintroduced in fourth century BC vase illustrations. Generally, the characteristics of her early classical, ‘middle’ or transitional image incorporates the wide, sometimes grimacing mouth and protruding tongue of her archaic predecessors, as well as an animal-like nose. Her moon shaped face retains its rounded contour until the mid-fifth century BC when an oval variation is introduced.¹⁷

Serfontein is explaining the jump from Medusa’s Archaic representations characterized as monstrous, to this transitional period in which her face retains some of the monstrous aspects, yet her body takes on the form of a woman.

To further examine this evolution of Medusa representations, we will now move our attention from Archaic images to vase paintings. A red-figured krater dated between 470 and 450 BC highlights the transitional phase Medusa enters in the Classical period, in which she does not quite appear to be a monster but also does not yet take on a completely human or feminine form. (Fig. 4.) This transitional phase, according to Topper “is even more complex, for now Gorgons with various types of appearances coexist in the images, sometimes defying easy classification.”¹⁸ Despite the somewhat vague classifications of Medusa depictions by the Classical period, she is certainly less scary than her Archaic form. The krater from this phase is housed in the British Museum in London and is credited to the Villa Giulia Painter. The Villa Giulia Painter decorated vases, primarily using the red-figure technique but also creating some white-ground pieces in Athens between 470 and 440 BCE. Most of his work was done on larger pieces, generally kraters in different shapes and sizes. The real name of the Villa Guila Painter is unknown, but his work has been identified through his unique stylistic traits.¹⁹ The depiction of Medusa executed by the Villa Giulia Painter is no longer fully intact but the figures have still

¹⁷ Susan M. Serfontein, “Medusa: From Beast to Beauty in Archaic and Classical Illustrations from Greece and South Italy” (1991).

¹⁸ Topper, “Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction.” 76

¹⁹ “Villa Giulia Painter (The J. Paul Getty Museum Collection),” The J. Paul Getty Museum Collection, accessed April 24, 2022, <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/person/103JTJ>.

been identified. The krater illustrates Medusa asleep while Perseus, flanked by Athena and Hermes, cautiously approaches her. In this depiction, Medusa is illustrated once again with a full round face, confronting the viewer directly. Her features still appear to be of the Archaic type, with a broad nose, wide mouth, and tusks protruding from her upper and lower lips. Her hair is arranged in two small buns on either side of her face. She also wears a short chiton as well as has wings rising from her shoulders. Although the Gorgon is not strikingly beautiful, she certainly appears more human with the exception of her tusks and wings. Her human-like body is reclining on a rock while her left forearm rests across her torso.

If we are now to look to the third and final stage of Medusa's evolution in antiquity, her beautiful stage, it is important to note that within the system Furtwängler constructed, “the Gorgon becomes a single entity that experienced a single gradual change over a period of centuries, and the beautiful type is nothing more than the end result of a long, and largely unexplained, process of transformation.”²⁰ Looking at a red-figured terracotta vase or pelike dated between 450 and 440 BCE and attributed to Polygnotos, the vase depicts the hero Perseus beheading the sleeping Medusa. (Fig. 5.) There are three Athenian red-figure vase painters from the Classical period who went by the name Polygnotos or the Group of Polygnotos.²¹ They shared their name with the early Classical wall painter who was highly celebrated in his time. The Polygnotos credited with painting this pelike was active between 450 and 420 BCE and is considered to be one of the most important red figure vase-painters of the high-Classical period, sometimes referred to as Polygnotos I.²² This example of Medusa makes it clear that the Gorgon has undergone a major shift in appearance. She lacks the gruesome form she often occupied in

²⁰ Topper, “Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction.” 79

²¹ “The Group of Polygnotos | British Museum,” accessed April 24, 2022, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG58561>.

²² Susan B. Matheson, *Polygnotos and Vase Painting in Classical Athens* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

Archaic art; the once bearded, fanged, and grimacing Gorgon is now rendered with a rather beautiful, feminine face. Medusa appears like an ordinary woman who lies sleeping with her head resting in her left hand. Her face is presented in three-quarter view and lacks any supernatural elements. The way Medusa's face is illustrated here is quite unusual because it is one of the earliest examples in which we see the face of a beautiful young woman, not a monster. Even her hair lacks the classical snakelike definition often associated with Medusa: instead her head is covered in shoulder length dark curls. She is clothed in a short dress with woven geometric patterns, as Gorgons had no use for the floor-length robes of Greek women since they were thought to be active creatures when awake.²³

It would appear that by the Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman periods, Medusa's fearsome representations reemerges as a womanly figure, no longer just the face of a monster. The feminine monstrosity produced by artists comes from the multi-layered concepts of her myth. Depictions of her began to incorporate more than just fear, horror, and rage. Medusa was ultimately a woman cursed by the goddess Athena for actions she had no control over, and, as a result, was subject to feelings of grief, despair, and even anguish. She was a woman in pain, and it's possible that Classical, Hellenistic, and even Roman artists may have been drawn to parts of the myth that humanized her. The Classical period of Greek art emerged with a new interest in beauty and the ideal human form. Depictions of Medusa from this period, as well as that of Hellenistic art, show Medusa as a less monstrous creature yet by no means entirely human. Medusa is still a creature from a far away island, an otherworldly being that walks the line between woman and monster. Her body may seem like that of a woman, but she is almost always illustrated with wings, and reptilian hair also makes appearances in this period, furthering the

²³ Marjorie J. Milne, "Perseus and Medusa on an Attic Vase," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 4, no. 5 (1946): 126–30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3257993>.

concept that she may not be entirely hideous, but she is not a human woman. Beginning in the mid-fifth century BCE, especially in context to the Perseus myth, these “transitional” representations begin to reveal a less grotesque and much more feminine Medusa. Hellenistic examples of Medusa change the way she is depicted for centuries to come; her face is no longer monstrous, but rather beautiful and feminine, and the appearance of wings above her brow begin to link her to her Gorgon sisters. Her full body is more frequently illustrated, often in a sleeping position, moments before her decapitation by Perseus. At this point Medusa’s newly recognized beauty and femininity is just as dangerous, if not moreso, than her original monstrous form.

Medusa’s threefold evolution from antiquity allows us to see and understand what Renaissance artists would have seen when they looked back to ancient Greek artwork. While the depictions of Medusa from the Early Modern period reveal very new styles and approaches to illustrating the Gorgon, some aspects carry over. In the late fifteenth through seventeenth century, as we will see, Medusa is rendered in a much more feminine manner, but the gruesome circumstances of her decapitation also become a central theme. In addition, we will see how the function of the Archaic Gorgoneion as an apotropaic device is utilized, specifically within Caravaggio’s rendering of Medusa from the late-Renaissance or early Baroque period.

Chapter 2

Medusa in the Renaissance

Depictions of Medusa from the Archaic through Hellenistic period exhibit a progression of artistic approaches to the Gorgon, yet by the Renaissance, there is an even more evident shift. The stories of classical Greek and Roman mythology became increasingly popular subject matter in Renaissance art. Looking specifically at the myth of Medusa, it is easy to understand why she might have become a desired thematic figure in Renaissance and Early Modern art. Not only is she a hybrid creature, which touches on this period's fascination with the fantastical and even grotesque, but she is a woman with living snakes for hair, and these snakes give her the ability to turn viewers to stone. Renaissance artists were especially drawn to these myths of the fantastic and grotesque because it allowed them to explore a new artistic style, one that could evoke real human emotion in its viewer. This is a powerful theme that likely resonated with numerous artists during a time when styles of art, across mediums, were changing a great deal. The fantastical power of vision that Medusa possesses and this concept of immediate death for any individual that lays eyes on her is a powerful message and Early Modern artists had the ability to illustrate these concepts in new styles never seen before in the history of art. Not only is Medusa an alluring character, both reptilian and feminine at the same time, but the story surrounding her death also touches on other themes of adventure, triumph, and heroism.

Explaining the role of mythology in Renaissance and Baroque artwork is just one of the factors that will aid in the contextualization of Caravaggio's *Medusa* shield. To better understand Caravaggio's piece, in this chapter I will begin by explaining the presence of literature that Renaissance artists referenced in order to illustrate the popular mythical stories and characters

from classical mythology. I will explain a significant shift between medieval relationships to classical mythology and the reinvigorated visual models Renaissance artists had access to and created. Next I will analyze a series of pieces done by several Early Modern artists, and further examine how they fit in with the idea of Medusa and the myth itself. By examining paintings and sculptures completed around the same time as Caravaggio's piece, specifically those that illustrate the same subject matter, I hope to reveal possible consistencies in how these works may have been treated in their own time, as well as reveal deeper themes behind each piece. At the end of this chapter I will tie in the concepts of "wonder" and "the marvelous" in artwork which represented a newfound interest artists had in evoking different kinds of emotion in their viewers. Medusa herself is a figure with a rich backstory and her myth touches on points of transformation, death, and violence in a very specific way. Each of the artists I will mention illustrated Medusa's story, both her life and death, using different techniques and stylistic choices. Yet, her constant presence in some of the most well-known pieces from fifteenth through seventeenth century art reveal she may have additional thematic elements to her story and character that artists and critics were only just beginning to examine.

Medusa and Mythology in the Renaissance

Mythology, including the myth of Medusa, was widely interpreted by Renaissance artists in their work. Ultimately the Renaissance, which literally translates to "rebirth" focused specifically on the rebirth of ideals from classical culture, including a revived desire for proper proportion, form, balance, and ultimately perfection. Renaissance humanism did not, however, spring fully from classical philosophy. It emerged over a century as a fusion of Christian and classical thought. Rather than focusing on religion, as was the case during the Middle Ages,

Renaissance humanism focused on what it meant to be human and, as a result, sculptures and paintings became a great deal more realistic. The increased knowledge of classical culture aided in the restoration of Greek gods and goddesses to their classical forms, which, during the Middle Ages had transformed into relatively unrecognizable figures. For example, in the Medieval period, one might find Zeus cast as a medieval monk or goddesses as fashionable society ladies. There were also illustrations of Herakles from Arabic astronomy texts showing him armed with a scimitar.²⁴ This was likely due to the fact that visual models were totally lacking at this time, and rather, scholars and artists relied a great deal on written sources.

In addition, the Renaissance was truly the first time that scholars and society recognized that they were no longer the living legacy of the classical world. Author Carla Brenner argues that

Acknowledgement of the distance between themselves and a remote past permitted Renaissance men to study the civilizations of Greece and Rome in a way that had never occurred to medieval scholars who saw themselves as simply the latest members of late classical society. Now, artists and patrons alike sought authentic representations, and they looked increasingly for ancient models.²⁵

It was also at this time that scholars looked at the culture of Greece and Rome in a secular light and in intellectual circles, pagan myths were no longer cast in strictly Christian terms which differed greatly from styles of the Middle Ages.²⁶ The Renaissance distinguished itself as a time when philosophers, poets, and artists embraced mythological themes. These ancient myths were especially attractive to Neoplatonists who saw the universe as a kind of spiritual circuit.

Ultimately, during the Renaissance, the image of the artist drastically changed from the medieval concept of craftsman to that of artistic creator.

²⁴ Carla Brenner, *The Inquiring Eye: Classical Mythology in European Art*. (National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1996). 10

²⁵ Brenner. *The Inquiring Eye* 10

²⁶ Brenner. *The Inquiring Eye* 9

The advancements made by Renaissance artists somewhat coincided with the beginning of antique collecting in Rome, especially during the Trecento and Quattrocento, and the discovery of actual archaeological sites in Rome.²⁷ Excavations revealed ancient artwork and architecture which gave scholars more information on a renowned civilization whose methods had been lost for years. It was between 1450 and 1600 that these archaeological sites in Rome emerged, and scholars, as well as Renaissance artists, collaborated to unearth what they could about ancient Roman culture. By the middle of the sixteenth century, scholars in Rome had uncovered enough evidence to support what the city looked and functioned like with incredible accuracy.²⁸ With the newfound ability to study actual ancient Roman art depicting mythology, Renaissance artists were given new sources to base their work on.

A number of manuals including imagery of the ancient gods rose in popularity during the Renaissance, the most important one for painters being Vincenzo Cartari's *Images of the Gods* published in the mid 1500s. One of the sole purposes of the mythography was to provide artists and readers with visual models of mythological characters. In his introduction, the book's translator John Mulryan states that Renaissance mythographies were "a cultural need, felt throughout Europe, to synthesize the wisdom contained in the ancient Greek and Roman myths, and to shape it into a convenient form for both artists and poets."²⁹ According to the forward of Caratari's final edition (included many years after its first publication) it is explained that "Cartari takes an iconographical approach and appeals to painters, sculptors, poets who are interested in representing the physical appearance of the gods, and the symbolic interpretation of

²⁷Petra Heckova, review of *Review of: Empire without End: Antiquities Collections in Renaissance Rome, c. 1350-1527*, by Kathleen Wren Christian, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, accessed March 27, 2022, <https://bmcbr.brynmawr.edu/2011/2011.02.53/>.

²⁸"Archaeology - Rome Reborn: The Vatican Library & Renaissance Culture | Exhibitions - Library of Congress," webpage, January 8, 1993, <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/vatican/arch.html>.

²⁹ Vincenzo Cartari, *Images of the Gods of the Ancients*, vol. 396 (Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1500).

those physical details,” and he “obviously envisioned the *Images* as a reference book, by writing self-contained chapters on individual gods, rather than a general essay on pagan divinities.”³⁰ Art historian Sophia Ploeg notes that Caratri’s *Images* is an encyclopedic work

describing how the people of ancient times (Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, etc) represented their gods in statues, paintings and text. So if anyone in late 16th century Italy was wondering what Jupiter looked like to the ancient Greeks, then this book will tell you. Or perhaps you are wondering what the harpies looked like to the ancient Romans; this book will tell you how the ancient Roman author Virgil described them. Who was the god Pan? Caratari will tell you who he was to the ancients.³¹

Cartari’s mythography was unique in the sense that it was the first manual to be published in Italian as opposed to Latin, which was more commonly used in scholarly publications. Cartari hoped that his mythography would be particularly useful for sculptors, painters, and poets. Similar books were published by Gregoria Giraldi (*De Deis Gentium*, 1548) and by Natale Conti (*Mythologiae*, 1520), both of which were in Latin. In addition, Cartari’s work was the only one that included illustrations. Ploeg points out, while “Giraldi and Conti organized their mythographies around genealogical or moral characteristics” rather “Cartari sought out the iconographical traits of the ancient gods, working with ancient descriptions of art works, attributes and, at times, rituals.”³²

In his mythography, Vincenzo Cartari gives several physical descriptions of Medusa as well as recounts a number of stories and myths from Greek and Roman authors. Cartari explains “so we realize that the Gorgon always stands for the head of Medusa, and that someone could die just by looking at it.”³³ In relation to the goddess Athena, or Minerva in Roman mythology, Cartari says “The ancients also put the Gorgon on Minerva’s breast armor; this was the head of

³⁰ Cartari. *Images of the Gods of the Ancients*

³¹ Sophie Ploeg, “Gods and Myths in Cartari’s 16th Century Imagini,” *Sophie Ploeg* (blog), June 21, 2021, <https://www.sophieploeg.com/blog/cartari/>.

³² Ploeg. “Gods and Myths in Cartari’s 16th Century Imagini.”

³³ Cartari, *Images of the Gods of the Ancients*. 29

Medusa, capped by flowing hair made up of serpents sticking out their tongues. Sometimes they also put the head on her shield, which some commentators called the aegis.”³⁴ There are several stories too with differing or contrasting narratives as to who Medusa was. Cartari cites the work of author Diordorus who, when discussing one version of the myth

writes that the Gorgons were warlike women from Africa who were conquered by Perseus; and he also killed their queen, Medusa. This account could have a historical basis. But the fables say (and we can read about it in Apollodorus) that the Gorgons were three sisters, and the only one of them that could die was Medusa. The names of the two sisters were Euryale and Stheno. All of their heads were covered with scaly serpents; they had huge teeth like pigs, hangs made out of copper, and wings of gold with which they flew around whenever they pleased, turning to stone anyone they saw.³⁵

The final story of Medusa that Cartari writes about is cited as being from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and seems more synonymous with the classical tale mentioned in the introduction. Cartari explains

The commentators also say (and this is the more common fable) that there were three beautiful sisters called the Gorgons after an island of the same name where they lived. The most beautiful of the three was Medusa, and she had golden hair. Thus Neptune developed a passion for her and lay with her in Minerva’s temple. Minerva got so angry and indignant at this that she changed Medusa from the beautiful, charming girl she had been into one that was totally awful and frightening. Her golden hair was changed into repulsive serpents, and the goddess decreed that whoever gazed on Medusa after that would be immediately turned to stone.³⁶

Medusa Representations in Early Modern Artwork

Caravaggio’s was not the only Medusa head illustrated in a realistic fashion by an Early Modern artist. There are a number of well-known works, both paintings and sculptures, that further exemplify how the myth was treated from the 15th to 17th centuries. Looking at sculptors of the same period, Benvenuto Cellini and Gian Lorenzo Bernini; both fashioned their own

³⁴ Cartari, *Images of the Gods of the Ancients*. 299

³⁵ Cartari, *Images of the Gods of the Ancients*. 300

³⁶ Cartari, *Images of the Gods of the Ancients*. 301

rendition of Medusa in unique and imaginative ways during this period. In addition, Peter Paul Rubens famously painted his interpretation of the Medusa myth at this point in history.

Benvenuto Cellini, considered by many to be the finest goldsmith of the Renaissance, completed a bronze sculpture called *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, commissioned by Duke Cosimo de' Medici in the year 1545. (Fig. 6.) It was revealed to the public in 1554 in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence, Italy where it remains to this day. According to Cellini's autobiography, the Duke Cosimo wanted a sculpture depicting Perseus beheading a monstrous Medusa. At this time, the people of Florence were well aware of this patron's harsh rule over their city. Cosimo had even previously beheaded the leader of a group of exiles attempting to remove his family from power and return Florence to its Republican roots. This real life decapitation took place in Piazza della Signoria, the final location of Cellini's *Perseus and Head of Medusa*, possibly revealing why Cosimo wanted this particular sculpture in this piazza.³⁷ With the Medici family being huge art patrons themselves, it's interesting to see that allusions to decapitation are seen in a variety of their commissioned work. It's possible that these pieces actually reveal more about the shifting political status of Cosimo de' Medici and his family than simply illustrations of classical myths.³⁸

Cellini explains the long and complex process of melting materials for this sculpture as “almost epic” in his autobiography titled “La Vita”. It is remarkable that Cellini was able to create this masterpiece from a single block of bronze, which was seldom done when working with such a detailed subject. Cellini, with classic Florentine flair, captures the essence of

³⁷ Ella Mallozzi, “Benvenuto Cellini's ‘Perseus with the Head of Medusa’ (1554) — Renaissance and Mannerism | The Cultural Me,” accessed April 2, 2022, <https://thecultural.me/benvenuto-cellinis-perseus-with-the-head-of-medusa-1554-renaissance-and-mannerism-644343>.

³⁸ Medievalists.net, “Donatello's Decapitations and the Rhetoric of Beheading in Medicean Florence,” *Medievalists.Net* (blog), March 28, 2010, <https://www.medievalists.net/2010/03/donatellos-decapitations-and-the-rhetoric-of-beheading-in-medicean-florence/>.

classical antiquity by illustrating the victorious Perseus standing on a pedestal holding the grisly decapitated head of Medusa high in one hand, and grasping a sword in the other. He wears the winged sandals from Hermes, as well as a crossbody bag from Athena in which he will store the disembodied head. He stands triumphantly over Medusa's flailing corpse which still appears to have snakes writhing and protruding from her neck. According to James Ray, Cellini's rendition of the Medusa myth for the Duke gave the statue "a political meaning and represented the power of the Duke who has 'cut off the head' of the Republic. Medusa symbolizes the Republican experiment and the snakes coming out of her body are the discords that have always affected democracy."³⁹ This statue is both symbolic and political in nature as it celebrates the control the Medici family had over the Florentine people, represented through the hero of this story, Perseus.

Cellini's *Perseus and Head of Medusa* was one of the first bronze sculptures to be cast in Florence in over a century.⁴⁰ Supposedly the sculpture was created on a cold night when a storm broke out. Cellini, now an older man, practically lay on his deathbed while his assistants struggled to cast the piece before the molten bronze clotted and cooled. Cellini jumped from his bed during the storm, ordering his assistants to burn what they could in order to raise the temperature in his studio. Luckily, the temperature rose in time and therefore the statue was saved.⁴¹ It wasn't until after his creation of *Perseus* that Cellini realized his fame would live on, maybe even specifically because of his work as a caster. Author Michael Cole believed that "he recognized that his small-scale metalwork had prepared him for his Florentine patron's monumental commission, and he believed that it was through metallurgy that he had addressed

³⁹ James Wray, "Perseus and the Head of Medusa - A Very Florentine Story," *DailyArt Magazine* (blog), May 22, 2019, <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/perseus-and-the-head-of-medusa/>.

⁴⁰ Michael Cole, "Cellini's Blood," *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 2 (1999): 215–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3050690>.

⁴¹ Wray, "Perseus and the Head of Medusa - A Very Florentine Story."

the challenge of colossal figure sculpture.”⁴² The bronze sculpture is certainly a masterpiece, especially in its choice to show not just the hero, but also the head and body of his victim.

If one looks back to the original myth of Medusa, in some versions when she is beheaded, the winged horse, Pegasus, springs from her neck and flies off into the heavens. Although the statue shows no such thing, the decapitation is certainly symbolic. Specifically, the gushing blood could symbolize creation.⁴³ Medusa’s neck, in this sculpture, attracts quite a bit of attention, both for its macabre nature and Cellini’s masterful bronze work. The statue is made in bronze, yet the blood nonetheless appears real. It is both unnerving and gruesome, yet also displays Cellini’s proficient skills as a sculptor. Cole explains “the blood of Benvenuto Cellini’s *Perseus and Medusa* was a marvel of sixteenth-century sculpture. With its implausible volume, Cellini breached everything he knew of human physiology and voided his tireless insistence on anatomical accuracy.”⁴⁴ The blood pouring from Medusa’s head in Perseus’ outstretched hand is both a focal point of awe but also physical revulsion due to its extreme visceral nature. When the statue was first revealed to the public, there were reactions ranging from extreme admiration to disgust. According to Bernardetto Minerbetti in 1552, he said

I cannot get enough of watching the blood that pours impetuously from Medusa’s trunk. This, although it is metal, seems nonetheless to be real, and it drives others away out of fear that they will be soaked with it.⁴⁵

In the Baroque period, specifically between 1617 and 1618, Flemish artist and diplomat, Peter Paul Rubens, illustrated his own version of the myth calling his piece *The Head of Medusa*.

⁴² Cole, “Cellini’s Blood.” 215-35

⁴³ Simon Abrahams, “EPPH | Cellini’s Perseus (1545-54),” accessed March 7, 2022, https://www.everypainterpaintshimself.com/article/cellinis_perseus.

⁴⁴ Cole, “Cellini’s Blood.” 215-35

⁴⁵ Cole. 215-35

(Fig. 7.) Art historians are almost certain he was assisted by animal specialist Frans Snyders, in order to expertly paint the snakes and reptiles in the piece in a realistic fashion.⁴⁶ In 1818, Joseph I. Earl von Nimptsch donated the painting to the Franciscan Museum. There are actually two versions of Rubens' *Medusa* as well; one residing at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, initially being owned by the Duke of Buckingham, and the second one residing at the Moravian Gallery in Brno, Czech Republic. Rubens was quite captivated by the mythical hero Perseus, and he completed several paintings alluding to the hero including (*The Head of Medusa*) and the rescue of Andromeda (*Perseus Freeing Andromeda*). Even beyond that, the artist decorated his own estate with the thematic Perseus which represented the concept of the triumph of virtue. In her article on *Gender, Politics, and Allegory in the Art of Rubens*, Lisa Rosenthal explained that “looking up from the courtyard to the second story of the painter’s residence, a visitor could see a frieze with a fresco painting of Perseus rescuing Andromeda.”⁴⁷

Rather than illustrating the victorious Perseus, or even the moment of decapitation as Caravaggio had done, Rubens depicts Medusa’s already severed head in a combination of still life and landscape styles.⁴⁸ The female head appears to have fallen to the ground on a sort of stony ledge. She is surrounded by reproducing snakes, a scorpion, a lizard, two spiders, as well as a mess of blood. There appears to be movement among these creatures; should the viewer return in a few minutes, it almost seems possible that the creatures will have moved even further from the decapitated head. The snakes in the painting are based on non venomous European grass or water snakes, despite the snakes in the Medusa myth usually being described as

⁴⁶ Ulrich Heinen, “Huygens, Rubens and Medusa: Reflecting the Passions in Paintings, with Some Considerations of Neuroscience in Art History,” *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ) / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 60 (2010): 150–77.

⁴⁷ Lisa Rosenthal, *Gender, Politics, and Allegory in the Art of Rubens* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁸ Balasz Takac, “How Medusa Inspired Artists, From the Renaissance to Neoclassicism,” *Widewalls*, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/medusa-in-art-renaissance-neoclassicism>.

venomous.⁴⁹ Some historians, however, believe that the mating snakes on the right are actually vipers.⁵⁰ With the help of Snyders, Rubens brought a new touch of authenticity to the mythological piece by including these types of snakes. The background of the painting casts a gloomy, cloudy landscape furthering this sort of terrifying feeling the piece evokes. Once again, Medusa herself looks horrified; her face is incredibly pale with glassy eyes almost appearing to roll around. Her colorless lips are slightly parted and bloody. There is a stark contrast between her pale face and bloody neck. The snakes emerging from her scalp appear to be trying to free themselves from her head in an attempt to escape, and several are illustrated slithering away from the decapitated head. It is certainly one of the more gruesome Medusa images, as Rubens was an artist that certainly fused Flemish realism with the classical styles of the Italian Renaissance.

About twenty years following Rubens, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, the famed 17th century Italian sculptor, created a stone bust of *Medusa* between 1638 and 1648. Now sitting in the Musei Capitolini in Rome, it remains one of the museum's greatest treasures. (Fig. 8.) This interpretation of the classical myth suggests that Medusa is not a defeated figure, as she is often portrayed by artists like Cellini, rather, she is a living, breathing monster. This may suggest a humorous take on the classical myth, considering it is a stone version of a living creature that can turn people to stone.⁵¹ Bernini's Medusa seems to illustrate the moment where she is being turned from a beautiful woman into a fearsome monster by the goddess Athena. The face shows clear agony as well as being contorted with pain and anxiety. In addition, her mouth is open, almost crying out. The head is downcast and turned to the left, and there remains a great deal of

⁴⁹ James C. Harris, "The Head of Medusa: Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders," *JAMA Psychiatry* 71, no. 6 (June 1, 2014): 614–15, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.2735>.

⁵⁰ Harris. "The Head of Medusa" 614

⁵¹ Takac, "How Medusa Inspired Artists, From the Renaissance to Neoclassicism."

expression in the deeply furrowed brow and parted lips. The face is incredibly human-like with a classically beautiful face and delicate features; even the full lips suggest the figure to be rather feminine. The sculpture only reveals her neck and a fragment of drapery over her left shoulder. Unlike most depictions of the Gorgon, Bernini chooses to illustrate the moment just after she is transformed into a monster as opposed to focusing on her eventual decapitation. The metamorphosis she experiences is clearly causing the figure anguish as her beautiful hair turns into writhing serpents. When describing the piece, author Avigdor W. G. Posèq explains “The tense facial expression, especially the wrinkled forehead with converging eyebrows may perhaps refer to the deadly intensity of the Gorgon's gaze but the general effect of the features can hardly be described as monstrous. Rather the opposite: her round face, straight nose and full cheeks and especially the cupid-bow mouth might justify calling her pretty.”⁵² This interpretation of the ancient mythological creature shows a figure filled with emotion and passion and possibly even a sense of humanity, which contrasts greatly with the more monstrous aspects of Medusa that have previously been emphasized.

While this bust is credited to Bernini, considered to be one of, if not the leading sculptor of the Italian Baroque period, this particular piece has stark differences from his more famous pieces such as *Daphne and Apollo* or *The Rape of Persephone*. It's explained that “The attribution of this work to Bernini first proposed in the eighteenth century, has remained uncontested, but in view of certain technical weaknesses the date, initially assigned to about 1630, has been pushed back to the juvenile phase of Bernini's career, perhaps between 1616 and 1618.”⁵³ Despite the fact that attribution remains uncontested, some art historians argue that “the

⁵² Avigdor W. G. Posèq, “On Physiognomic Communication in Bernini,” *Artibus et Historiae* 27, no. 54 (2006): 161–90, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20067127>.

⁵³ Posèq. 164

‘limpness’ of the drapery and the lack of precision in the hair appear to be at odds with Bernini’s signature style.”⁵⁴ In contradiction to this view, other art historians believe that the sculpture does in fact display the precise style and sensual quality characteristic of Bernini’s work. Yet, some features of the face are rather exaggerated, once again posing speculation as to the identity of the sculptor. There is much writing and comparison between this *Medusa* and a bust done by Bernini between 1636 and 1638 called *The Bust of Costanza Bonarelli*. The bust of Bonarelli, Bernini’s mistress, has been suggested as serving as a model for his later piece of the mythological maiden should the supposed dates of creation be correct. While there are a number of hypotheses surrounding when the *Medusa* was created, it is most often dated between 1638 and 1648 in the years following his completion of *The Bust of Costanza Bonarelli*.

Wonder and Amazement in Early Modern Art

Illustrations of Medusa certainly fell into a developing movement during the Early Modern period, regarding wonder and amazement in artwork. Joy Kenseth discusses this movement at length in his piece titled “The Age of the Marvelous”. Kenseth explains that it was “during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries European culture was marked by an intense fascination with the marvelous, with those things or events that were unusual, unexpected, exotic, extraordinary, or rare.”⁵⁵ Paintings and sculptures that were able to evoke responses like wonder and surprise, were well on the rise, with even Giorgio Vasari using words like *meraviglia*, *mirabile*, *miracolo*, and *stupendo*, which would translate to words like marvel or marvelous in English, when discussing pieces regarded for their artistic achievement.

⁵⁴ Patrick Haughey, “Bernini’s ‘Medusa’ and the History of Art,” *Thresholds*, no. 28 (2005): 76–154.

⁵⁵ Joy Kenseth, “The Age of the Marvelous: An Introduction,” in *The Age of the Marvelous*, n.d., 25–60.

This newfound interest in the marvelous may have been reminiscent of fantasy styles from the Medieval world, stemming from folklore and the supernatural to the apparent power associated with religious images and relics. The Renaissance arrived with this fascination with the marvelous, and Kenseth points out that “as Renaissance humanists sought to recover the artifacts, the art, and the texts of antiquity, evidence came to light that the classical civilization they revered had dealt at length with the subject of the marvelous.”⁵⁶ Early Modern scholars and artists both embraced this style but also modified it in order to appeal to the new artistic styles developing in their time. With scholars looking to works like Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, there was a fascination with the worlds of the gods and their abilities to transform and create miraculous and mysterious narratives. In addition to artistic achievements, there was a great deal of exploration and scientific advancements that contributed to this new idea of the marvelous. According to Kenseth, it would appear that “a great many animal, botanical, geological specimens were regarded as marvels, but normally the term was applied when the object was unusually large or small, extremely rare, exotic, abnormally or grotesquely shaped, or spectacularly beautiful.”⁵⁷ Looking at images of Medusa from this period, several of the previously mentioned works of art certainly encapsulate extreme realism and grotesque aspects that surely would have caused viewers to marvel or possibly evoke even greater responses such as surprise and disgust.

Renaissance and Baroque depictions of Medusa, usually being illustrated in moments of decapitation with intense realism, certainly evoked this sense of marvel. For example, Peter Paul Rubens’ *Head of Medusa* is illustrated with dramatic intensity. It is both gruesome, horrifying, and realistic, no doubt conjuring feelings of surprise in its viewer. Constantijn Huygens writes about Rubens piece in his autobiography explaining

⁵⁶ Kenseth. “The Age of the Marvelous” 25-60

⁵⁷ Kenseth. “The Age of the Marvelous” 25-60

It is as if of Rubens' many paintings, one always appears before my mind's eye . . . It represents the severed head of Medusa, encircled by snakes that appear from her hair. In this painting he has composed the sight of a marvellously beautiful woman, who is still attractive but also causes horror because death has just arrived and evil snakes hang around her temples, with such inexpressible deliberation, that the viewer is suddenly caught by terror—since usually it is covered by a curtain—but that the viewer at the same time, and in spite of the horror of the representation, enjoys the painting, because it is lively and beautiful.⁵⁸

Rubens' painting was often covered by a curtain and exposed to viewers in hopes of evoking a mixture of fear and horror but also fascination. Author Ulrich Keinen points out that “the specific moment represented in Rubens's image aims at a spontaneous, shocking effect.”⁵⁹ The somewhat eerie backdrop with slithering snakes, insects, and other reptiles, as well as the blood spilling from Medusa's neck is able to induce a mixture of human responses.

Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, one of Medusa's most famous depictions, further illustrates the influence of societal fixation on the marvelous. Cellini's sculpture chooses to capture the story of Medusa at its most grotesque, portraying Perseus standing on Medusa's corpse while holding her decapitated head. On top of the subject of the imagery, Cellini also made an effort to make all the elements as realistic and gruesome as possible such as the blood and flesh coming out the bottom of Medusa's decapitated head. The fact that it was a statue rather than a painting, and a public one at that, displayed outside, speaks to the large extent to which society welcomed such fantastical artistic depictions. Ultimately, Early Modern artists wanted to illustrate classical mythology in a new style; one that aroused awe but also discomfort. As such, marvelous elements became a feature of Renaissance and Baroque-era depictions of Medusa in art. This isn't surprising, particularly in the case of Medusa, as art is a means of

⁵⁸ Caroline van Eck, “The Petrifying Gaze of Medusa: Ambivalence, Explexis, and the Sublime,” *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art*, accessed February 28, 2022, <https://jhna.org/articles/petrifying-gaze-medusa-ambivalence-explexis-sublime/>.

⁵⁹ Heinen, “Huygens, Rubens and Medusa.” 153

telling the story which happens to feature graphic elements. However, not all Early Modern artists used the visually straightforward style of storytelling employed by Cellini or Rubens, in which a scene from the mythology of Medusa is depicted from an outside perspective. Other artists, such as Caravaggio used more object oriented techniques such as depicting the moment of Medusa's beheading from the reflection of a shield.

Chapter 3

Caravaggio's Medusa

Around 1597, while living in the palace of Cardinal Francesco del Monte, infamous Baroque artist Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio created his version of the mythical Medusa. The piece was commissioned by an early patron of the artist, del Monte (the Medici family's agent in Rome)⁶⁰ as a commemoration shield which he gifted to Grand Duke Ferdinand I de' Medici. (Fig. 9.) The choice for Caravaggio to depict Medusa wasn't a random one; the Gorgon's head represents the values of wisdom and prudence, which were two concepts highly regarded by the Medici family.⁶¹ In addition, it was meant to commemorate the Grand Duke's courage in defeating his enemies. Caravaggio's *Medusa* was unique for a number of reasons, which further set it apart from other Medusa depictions even created in the artist's own time. With the developing ideals of the late-Renaissance, it allowed for new styles of artistry that, especially in Caravaggio's work, focused on realism and even violence.

In this chapter I will analyze Caravaggio's *Medusa* in the context of both relating it to the work from antiquity previously discussed, and in the context of its own time, in the period known as the Baroque. By comparing it to depictions from antiquity, I will highlight the shield's apotropaic qualities, further emphasizing the Gorgoneion symbol that was especially prominent in styles from Archaic Greek art. In addition, I will continue to focus on the concept of wonder and amazement that grew in popularity during the Renaissance and Baroque periods by exploring Caravaggio's unique approach to illustrating the mythical Medusa. In order to further

⁶⁰ "Art & Paintings: Michelangelo Merisi Caravaggio - The Head of Medusa - 2d Version," *Art & Paintings* (blog), June 11, 2011, <https://favourite-paintings.blogspot.com/2011/06/michelangelo-merisi-caravaggio-head-of.html>.

⁶¹ Eelco Kappe, "A Discussion of Medusa by Caravaggio in the Uffizi Museum," *TripImprover - Get More out of Your Museum Visits!*, accessed February 18, 2022, <http://www.tripimprover.com/1/post/2020/11/medusa-by-caravaggio.html>.

differentiate this piece from other Medusa depictions from the same period, I will examine how this shield is actually operating as an object even more so than a painting.

Caravaggio's Shield

Although representing a decapitated head, Caravaggio's *Head of Medusa* evokes a great deal of emotion, as it illustrates a figure in its final moment of life; this moment of recognition in which Medusa realizes she is being defeated by the mythical hero Perseus, the legendary founder of the Mycenae and the Perseid dynasty. Caravaggio depicts a severed head, yet she remains a conscious subject. Through her intense expression, Caravaggio highlights a combination of life and death. Her face exemplifies a number of emotions, while it is also clear that this moment marks her mythological demise at the hands of Perseus.

Although we will be focusing on Caravaggio's *Medusa* painted around 1597, it is important to note that he actually painted another version of Medusa even before this. The first was called *Murtola*, done in 1596 and was named after the Italian poet Gaspare Murtola. (Fig. 10.) Murtola wrote about Medusa, saying "flee, for if your eyes are petrified in amazement, she will turn you to stone."⁶² This version was found in Caravaggio's studio only after his death, and is now held in a private collection, while his more famous *Medusa* now resides in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. *Murtola* is signed "Michel A F" (Michel Angelo Fecit) yet the second version was never signed.⁶³

Now looking at Caravaggio's *Medusa* hanging in the Uffizi Gallery, one can see that the piece is painted onto a convex wooden board, made from poplar, with Medusa's visage, bringing

⁶² Sandhya Ganesh, "Secrets Of Medusa," *Lessons from History* (blog), November 1, 2020, <https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/secrets-of-medusa-d79741b9b548>.

⁶³ "Art & Paintings."

out its reference to Athena's shield and aegis.⁶⁴ Athena's aegis has been credited as possibly her most recognizable attribute. It is both a terrifying and magical goat skin, almost always adorned with the Gorgoneion.⁶⁵ Her shield is also described as being adorned with Medusa's head which emphasizes the goddess's association with battle victories and the death of her enemies.

Caravaggio's painting is unique in the sense that it is actually illustrated on what appears to be a shield. In fact, it is not a canvas, but rather a round, convex piece of wood and stands at sixty by fifty-five centimeters. Against a mossy green background, the head of Medusa is tilted slightly to the viewer's right and appears incredibly life-like. She confronts the viewer with a forward facing angle and her face frozen in a look of anguish, fear, and surprise. Her skin is bright, almost porcelain, alluding to the fact that she is no longer a living creature. Although Medusa is clearly meant to be female in this portrait, yet monstrous nonetheless, there is a sort of masculine quality to the face. The features are more harsh than delicate, and the awful expression she makes does not appear all that feminine. Her brown eyes are deeply set into her face, slightly downcast, but wide with emotion; her face is stuck in this moment of awe and disbelief, as if she thought she were invincible until this moment. Medusa truly appears alive through the emotion the painting evokes and facial expressions represented. Her mouth is wide open, suggesting a silent but dramatic scream. Dark red, stiletto-like blood spurts from her neck to which her body is no longer attached. The snakes coiling around her face also seem to be in a sort of frenzy at this moment of decapitation. The dark gray, brown and white reptiles are seen with their tongues out, some biting at each other in the chaotic moment. According to author Paul Barolsky, "The painter seemingly seeks to capture and convey Medusa's state of mind at the very last pulse of

⁶⁴ Kappe, "A Discussion of Medusa by Caravaggio in the Uffizi Museum."

⁶⁵ Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing, "What Was the Colour of Athena's Aegis?," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 129 (2009): 111–29.

life.”⁶⁶ It is a gruesome moment, but it is full of emotion and naturalism as one would expect a violent decapitation to be.

Art historians have argued for centuries that Caravaggio’s portrait of *Medusa* was in fact a self portrait.⁶⁷ He used a convex mirror in order to paint his own face resulting in the cheeks, forehead, and bulging eyes of the final product being slightly larger than expected and resembling the artist himself.⁶⁸ One theory regarding Caravaggio’s choice to paint himself as the Gorgon could be that he meant to prove that he was, in fact, immune to the monster’s dreadful gaze which revisits the original myth claiming she could look at any mortal and turn them to stone. Caravaggio models himself for Medusa’s face, making him the only one safe from the Gorgon’s deadly gaze. (Fig. 11)

Caravaggio’s preparation for the painting was quite a complex chemical process. Author Eelco Kappe explains that the poplar board in the shape of a shield was “covered with a layer of linen and given four different priming layers. On top of it, an additional layer was added to make the background more reflective and another layer for the actual backdrop, which is a greenish-yellow color (a concoction of verdigris and lead-tin yellow paint).”⁶⁹ Even further than that, the painting was done with three layers of siccative oils (oil-drying agents used in painting) as well as turpentine, and mastic (found in coatings and resins and meant to prevent corrosion) in addition to traces of beeswax. And finally, Caravaggio’s shield was finished with a few more layers in order to protect the paint.

⁶⁶ Paul Barolsky, “The Ambiguity of Caravaggio’s ‘Medusa,’” *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 32, no. 3 (2013): 28–29.

⁶⁷ Avigdor W. G. Posèq, “Caravaggio and the Antique,” *Artibus et Historiae* 11, no. 21 (1990): 147–67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1483388>.

⁶⁸ Esther Fleming, “How Did Caravaggio Paint Medusa? – SidmartinBio,” accessed April 19, 2022, <https://www.sidmartinbio.org/how-did-caravaggio-paint-medusa/>.

⁶⁹ Kappe, “A Discussion of Medusa by Caravaggio in the Uffizi Museum.”

Caravaggio's Shield as an Apotropaic Device

Caravaggio's *Medusa* was a point of inspiration for poet Giambattista Marino. It was actually known that Marino had a bitter literary feud with poet Gaspare Murtola who inspired Caravaggio's first Medusa painting. Nonetheless, in a sonnet by Marino, in which he is celebrating the parade shield given to the Grand Duke of Tuscany by Cardinal del Monte, he says

Or quai nemici fian, che freddi marmi
non divengan repente
in mirando, Signor, nel vostro scudo
quel fier Gorgone, e crudo, cui fanno orribilmente
volumi viperini
squallida pompa e spaventosa ai crini?
Ma che! Poco fra l'armi
a voi fia d'uopo il formidabil mostro:
che la vera Medusa e il valor vostro.⁷⁰

This translates to “Now what enemies will there be who will not become cold marble in gazing upon, my Lord, in your shield, that Gorgon proud and cruel, in whose hair horribly voluminous vipers make foul and terrifying adornment? But yet! You will have little need for the formidable monster among your arms: for the true Medusa is your valor.”⁷¹ Marino is complimenting the valor of the Duke here, and according to author Martina L. Bartlett, he “indicates that the shield was perceived at the time as an apotropaic shield designed to lend the bearer the power of Athena and terrify/petrify his enemies.”⁷² By referencing Caravaggio's shield as an apotropaic device, it further connects it to Archaic Medusa representations, especially the Gorgoneion symbol.

⁷⁰ Elizabeth Cropper, “The Petrifying Art: Marino's Poetry and Caravaggio”: Metropolitan Museum Journal, v. 26 (1991) - MetPublications - The Metropolitan Museum of Art,” accessed April 12, 2022, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/the_petrifying_art_the_metropolitan_museum_journal_v_26_1991

⁷¹ Cropper. “The Petrifying Art”

⁷² Martina L. Bartlett, “To What Extent Can Caravaggio's Medusa Be Described as an Apotropaic Image?,” accessed April 12, 2022, https://www.academia.edu/11866785/To_what_extent_can_Caravaggio_s_Medusa_be_described_as_an_apotropaic_image.

While Caravaggio's particular rendition of Medusa represents a stark contradiction to the styles in which Medusa had previously been illustrated in antiquity and even in the Renaissance, there are some similarities specifically to Archaic depictions. Archaic Gorgoneion faces were far from realistic, often lacking the lifelike and humanlike expressions seen in Caravaggio's shield, yet the shield itself serves as an apotropaic device in a similar way to the original Gorgoneion. Copper addresses the way in which his *Medusa* was displayed by explaining it "is also indicative of it having been reserved, and perceived, as an apotropaic shield, albeit ceremonial."⁷³ The shield was housed in the Grand Duke's armory, where it remained from 1598 until the eighteenth century.

It is important to note that Caravaggio's painting was not executed in the traditional Early Modern pictorial style. This pictorial style can be defined through the use of a perspectival system that evokes a sense of depth in a two dimensional work of art. This perspectival box that is constructed therefore creates the opportunity for narratives to be illustrated. Caravaggio utilizes this by putting the actual head of Medusa on a shield, therefore rendering it an artifact and placing it within the context of the myth from antiquity. Caravaggio's *Medusa* does not simply function as a decorative painting, rather it is an object, a convex shield, that exhibits it more as an artistic creation or even the actual shield that plays a central role in the narrative. Looking back to the earliest reference of a Gorgoneion being used in this manner can be found in *The Iliad* by Homer. He references Athena's aegis, where she puts the Gorgon's head

‘And thereon is set the head of the grim gigantic Gorgon,

A thing of fear and horror.⁷⁴

⁷³ Bartlett. "To What Extent Can Caravaggio's Medusa be Described as an Apotropaic Image?"

⁷⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*. Book 5.741

Here, Homer makes it clear that the Gorgon's head is being used as an apotropaic image on Athena's aegis.

Author Avigdor Poseq suggests that Caravaggio's work was almost definitely inspired by works from antiquity, and explains that "numerous poses and gestures—sometimes entire configurations—are borrowed from Roman statuary, which at that time was ascribed to great Hellenistic masters."⁷⁵ Most depictions of Medusa that predate Caravaggio's shield render Medusa with her eyes looking directly out, confronting the viewer. According to author Hana Nikcevic, "if Caravaggio had access to ancient sources, there, too, would he have encountered solely frontal Medusas. It seems, thus, that Caravaggio chose to depict his Medusa with her eyes averted in contrast to the ancient and early Renaissance adherence to frontality."⁷⁶ The purpose as to why Caravaggio chose to avert Medusa's eyes may continue to support the theory that he was constructing the actual shield from the myth. Nikcevic continues that "Caravaggio averted the eyes of his Medusa in order to communicate his own technical skill, producing an image that maintains its own fiction—that the Medusa depicted can stun—in keeping with a new early modern understanding of the Medusean myth that links the power of her image to petrify with artistic virtuosity."⁷⁷ So if Caravaggio planned on creating an actual shield with the power to turn a viewer to stone, he must avert the eyes to support its authenticity.

Wonder and Amazement

When discussing the Baroque concepts of wonder and amazement, which reached their height in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the name Caravaggio is one of the first to come

⁷⁵ Posèq, "Caravaggio and the Antique." 149

⁷⁶ Hana Nikčević, "Mere Image: Caravaggio, Virtuosity, and Medusa's Averted Eyes," *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal* 3, no. 1 (December 21, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.5070/R73151222>.

⁷⁷ Nikčević. "Mere Image: Caravaggio, Virtuosity, and Medusa's Averted Eyes"

to mind. His work expertly explores not just wonder and amazement, but also horror and terror, and passion and compassion. All of these concepts fit into the Baroque period's study of human emotion through evocative painting. This idea of wonder and amazement translates to a feeling experienced by the viewer. It's a sense that can evoke happiness, excitement, and in some cases, even revulsion. Caravaggio's shield allows the viewer to experience an extended version of this wonder and amazement. His *Medusa* acts almost like an early immersive experience, allowing the viewer to feel like they are in the myth of Medusa as well as looking at her in Perseus' reflective shield. The importance of this piece certainly lies in the unique experiential aspect Caravaggio created in a period when immersive art had yet to rise in popularity. Caravaggio's *Medusa* continues to connect the gruesome and supernatural aspects of the myth and character to this movement where artists focused on evoking reactions from viewers in their work.

For example, Caravaggio had painted gruesome decapitation before in works such as *Holofernes*, *The Beheading of Saint John*, and *Goliath*. (Fig. 12-14.) Yet in these paintings, the decapitated head itself is seen in relation to other figures, settings and situations while his portrait of *Medusa* remains solely an image of an isolated head, further intensifying our focus on her and her gaze. Caravaggio's *Medusa* is unique in the sense that it was meant to evoke horror in the viewer by making the detached head the main subject. There is no body nor is the hero Perseus present, making Medusa's head the sole focus of the painting as opposed to creating a larger narrative by including more characters in his piece.

During this period in art history, artists found there were quite a few things they could paint that were believed to excite wonder, surprise, or astonishment in its viewers; one of these being the supernatural. The subject matter of Greek mythology certainly falls into the category of the supernatural, and the fifteenth through seventeenth century was a period that had no shortage

of mythological illustrations. A man by the name of Giovambattista Strozzi the Younger addressed a paper to the Florentine Academy in 1588 titled “Is It a Good Idea to Make Use of Fables of the Ancients?” in which he explored how mythological material “had the capacity to arouse wonder and hence give pleasure.”⁷⁸ He further explains how “the fabulous events described by Homer (the story of Circe turning men into swine, for example, or the transformation of Odysseus’ ship into stone) and the remarkable metamorphoses related by Ovid (the many stories of Jupiter’s miraculous transformations, for instance) had wide appeal in this era and became the subjects of countless poems and works of art.”⁷⁹ Medusa’s transformation from beautiful woman to fearsome monster, and eventually her decapitation are both stories from antiquity that had the capacity to arouse wonder in audiences.

To continue in analyzing this painting not as simply a painting, but also an object that evokes horror and terror in the viewer through Medusa’s gruesome execution as well as wonder through its fantastic sense of realism, author Paul Barolsky explains that Medusa’s appearance on the shield provokes another degree of symbolism. He recalls how Perseus slays Medusa by only looking at her reflection in his shield, and notes that “Caravaggio’s image thus evokes the very shield of Perseus, in which case we, in the place of Perseus, gaze upon a lifesaving reflection.”⁸⁰ Once again, Caravaggio is drawing the viewer in, almost making us a character within Medusa’s myth because we see what Perseus would have seen when looking at his own shield. Barolsky continues to sum up this point by pointing out that “the painter’s shockingly realistic image is not only a remarkably vivid representation of outer appearances, not only a meditation on mortality; it is also a penetrating portrayal and suggestion of consciousness itself—both Medusa’s final instant of consciousness and our consciousness, in the face of her mortality, of our own

⁷⁸ Kenseth, “The Age of the Marvelous: An Introduction.” 31

⁷⁹ Kenseth. “The Age of the Marvelous: An Introduction.” 31

⁸⁰ Barolsky, “The Ambiguity of Caravaggio’s ‘Medusa.’” 28

finality.”⁸¹ This “suggestion of consciousness” Caravaggio’s shield evokes certainly brings a sense of realism to the work that other Renaissance and Baroque artists never capture. This painting conjures feelings of wonder and amazement in viewers not only because of its otherworldly subject matter, but also because it has us confronting Medusa herself in a very real way, reminiscent of the hero Perseus himself. This in itself is shocking; taking away the frame and allowing the viewer to be absorbed into the world and aspects of Medusa’s myth evokes these feelings of wonder and amazement to an even greater degree than other artists of the period.

How Caravaggio Was Received and Influenced

Caravaggio’s work was interpreted by many, both during his lifetime and in the many years to come. Many early critics considered Caravaggio to be an “artist with no theory” for he painted exactly what he saw, adhering to this extreme notion of realism rather than the idealizing tradition of the Renaissance. Caravaggio’s reputation reached a low point in 1633, just twenty-three years after his death, when the Spanish critic Vincencio Carducho wrote that he “worked naturally, almost without precepts, without doctrine, without study. . . with nothing more than nature before him, which he simply copied. I heard a devoted follower of our profession say that the coming of this man to the world was an omen of the ruin and demise of painting.”⁸² In the year 1672, both an early biographer and critic of Caravaggio, Giovanni Pietro Bellori explained that he “lacked invention, decorum, *disegno*, or any knowledge of the science of painting. The moment the model was taken from him, his hand and his mind became empty”

⁸¹ Barolsky. “The Ambiguity of Caravaggio’s ‘Medusa.’” 28

⁸² Vincencio Carducho, *Diálogos de La Pintura*. Madrid, 1633

and “it seems that he imitated art without art”.⁸³ Caravaggio’s paintings and how he approached them neglected to embody the popular Renaissance styles, resulting in heavy criticism.

While many early critics cast disdain on Caravaggio’s artistic style, he reemerged in the early 20th century and by the 1980’s he was considered a learned painter that could and did read the work of contemporary theologians and likely had a working knowledge of Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects from Cimabue until Our Own Time*. Author Vasari explains that the subject of Medusa had first been explored by Leonardo da Vinci, and he attributes an unfinished painting of Medusa to the painter as well. Vasari says “the fancy came to [Leonardo] to paint a picture in oils of the head of a Medusa, with the head attired with a coil of snakes, the strangest and most extravagant invention one could ever imagine.”⁸⁴ It was through Caravaggio’s “meditation on Leonardo’s experimental approach to the representation of emotions (“moti”), which turned on the two opposite reactions of laughter and of grief in the face of death, that these features of moralizing painting—instantaneous and violent in action—found expression in Caravaggio’s work.”⁸⁵ His *Medusa*, according to author Mina Gregori, was “perhaps, Caravaggio’s earliest experiment with representing the victim’s reaction to a violent action.”⁸⁶ Among Vasari’s readers was also the painter Gian Paolo Lomazzo from Lombard, who wrote a treatise on painting. Lomazzo’s treatise notes that Leonardo “liked to go and observe the expression of those condemned to death—those archings of the brow, those expressions of the eyes and of life” in order to better paint the human face in relation to its own mortality and approaching death.⁸⁷ It is also possible that when creating his painting of Medusa, Caravaggio may have been alluding to Lomazzo who had previously praised Leonardo’s work

⁸³ Sharon Gregory, “Caravaggio and Vasari’s ‘Lives.’” *Artibus et Historiae* 32, no. 64 (2011): 167-91

⁸⁴ Vasari, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*.

⁸⁵ Mina Gregori, *The Age of Caravaggio*. New York, N.Y.: Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.

⁸⁶ Gregori. *The Age of Caravaggio*

⁸⁷ Gregori. *The Age of Caravaggio*

“on physiognomy, citing observations like the way the forehead wrinkles when the subject is in pain or shock.”⁸⁸ Caravaggio’s shield expertly illustrates what one may imagine a figure in pain and shock would be experiencing. There is a reality to it that’s quite visceral, and certainly fits into this idea that Caravaggio was an extreme realist; his work even evokes a sense of the theatrical.

Medusa and Narcissus

Between 1597 and 1599 Caravaggio painted another portrait during the late Renaissance with inspiration from Greek mythology. This piece is titled *Narcissus* and illustrates a scene from the classical myth, also most famously recorded by the Roman poet Ovid. (Fig. 15.) Narcissus was said to be the most beautiful young man living in Ancient Greece, beloved by many, yet could never find anyone to whom he could return the affection. One day, Narcissus gazed into a pool of water and instantly fell in love with his own reflection. He attempted to reach for the figure he saw in the water, but found he could not as the water would ripple and cause his reflection to vanish. Infatuated by himself, Narcissus remained by the water, gazing at himself and not moving, without food, drink, or sleep. Eventually Narcissus wasted away and died, never being able to break his gaze with his reflection.

Caravaggio’s *Narcissus* is situated against a very dark black background. The figure of Narcissus is that of a young boy dressed in 16th century style clothing. He has pale skin that almost appears to shimmer through Caravaggio’s use of dramatic and extreme shadows. The painting is altogether rather dark, yet Narcissus himself seems to be glowing. The boy is kneeling with one knee exposed, his puffy sleeves are rolled up to his elbow, and he wears a slightly green patterned vest. The head of the boy is bent low and the viewer can only see the

⁸⁸ Gregori. *The Age of Caravaggio*

profile of the young man's face. His eyes are cast in shadow while his cheekbones and nose catch light from a mysterious source. His lips are slightly parted, and his gaze into the water seems somewhat permanent and unbreaking. Narcissus is leaning over a dark pool of water in which his body and face are perfectly reflected. His arms are supporting him on either side, and the reflection of them creates a sort of circle, possibly representing the cycle of his own endless and ultimately deadly self-obsession. The portrait appears to be highly realistic, in line with the Renaissance's obsession with classical perfection, but the late-Renaissance style of mannerism and tenebrism, which is seen through Caravaggio's use of shadows, adds an emotional presence that would reach its height in popularity during the approaching Baroque period.⁸⁹

Caravaggio's portrait of *Narcissus* provides viewers with an interesting comparison when looking at his *Medusa*. In *Narcissus*, one can see a male figure looking at himself; a face being confronted by a face. The painting highlights themes of self-love, but especially the dangers of seduction. The structure is straightforward in the sense that it is someone looking at their own reflection and we, as the viewers, are watching the story unfold. In contrast to the *Medusa*, the figure of Narcissus is completely absorbed with the beauty of his own visage. This painting focuses on seduction while that of *Medusa* focuses on this idea of warding off. Rather than simply looking from the outside in on a painting, we, the viewer, see the *Medusa* as a potential threat because we are being the ones warded off. While both these paintings are portraits with inspiration from classical mythology, they are intrinsically different pieces that focus on very different themes and purposes in their composition. *Narcissus* remains a boy who met an untimely fate because of his self-obsession while the *Medusa* shield interacts more with the viewer, confronting them with its warding off function.

⁸⁹ Christopher Muscato, "Caravaggio's Narcissus: Painting, History & Analysis - Video & Lesson Transcript," Study.com, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://study.com/academy/lesson/caravaggios-narcissus-painting-history-analysis.html>.

Conclusion

This project has explored the artistic presence of Medusa from Greek mythology in Western art from antiquity to the Baroque era. I began by examining her development from a monstrous Gorgoneion being used as an apotropaic device in Archaic Greece, to a much more human and woman-like figure on Greek pottery as we approached the Classical and Hellenistic periods. This helped to explore what exactly Renaissance and later artists might have seen when they looked back to Ancient Greek illustrations of Medusa, especially because they were living in a period of rebirth where classical art resurfaced and became a point of inspiration as well as reference for their own artwork. The next portion of the project gave a number of examples from the Early Modern period in which we see Medusa illustrated with utmost realism. These masterpieces coincided with the development of a movement where art was meant to evoke emotion in its viewer, whether that be wonder and amazement or terror and horror. The explicit grotesqueness of some of these pieces allowed for us to understand why Medusa and her story became such a popular and interesting myth for Renaissance and Baroque artists to illustrate. The final part of this project focused on Caravaggio's shield where he painted the decapitated head of Medusa. This piece was and remains a unique example of a Medusa illustration because it explores the horror and terror that came from the Early Modern period's fascination with wonder and amazement, but it also utilizes the shield as an actual apotropaic device in a similar way to the Archaic function of the Gorgoneion.

Had time allowed for it, I had hoped I might be able to extend this timeline of Medusa illustrations all the way to our current moment and look at contemporary art of the last hundred years or so. There is no denying that Medusa has become a symbol of the feminist movement, likely due to her unjust punishment by Athena in her original myth. Classicist Mary Beard has

explored the image of Medusa in her 2017 book *Woman and Power: A Manifesto* in which she has discussed how the figure has been used to criticize women in contemporary politics including Angela Merkel and Hillary Clinton (with Trump illustrated as Perseus in this specific example). She says “There have been all kinds of well-known feminist attempts over the last fifty years or more to reclaim Medusa for female power – not to mention the use of her as the Versace logo – but it’s made not a blind bit of difference to the way she has been used in attacks on female politicians.”⁹⁰

While Medusa has been used as a criticism, a statue completed in 2008 by artist Luciano Garbati called *Medusa with Head of Perseus* attempts to give Medusa an alternative fate to the one in her original myth. The sculpture illustrates the naked feminine body of the Gorgon with the severed head of Perseus in her left hand. (Fig. 16.) It was even installed across the street from the New York County Criminal Court where Harvey Weinstein stood trial.⁹¹ This statue has certainly become an emblem for the #MeToo movement, rendering Medusa a figurehead for the cause. So from ancient red figure vases, to Caravaggio, to *British GQ*, Medusa and her myth has been an inspiration for artists for thousands of years. Her reptilian yet feminine figure, gruesome fate, and adaptable as well as enduring message has captivated people for thousands of years, and hopefully will continue to for thousands more.

⁹⁰ Allison Meier, “The Beauty and Horror of Medusa, an Enduring Symbol of Women’s Power,” *Hyperallergic*, March 20, 2018, <http://hyperallergic.com/432102/dangerous-beauty-medusa-in-classical-art-metropolitan-museum/>.

⁹¹ Tessa Solomon, “#MeToo Medusa Sculpture Met with Controversy Ahead of Unveiling in New York,” *ARTnews.Com* (blog), October 12, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/medusa-metoo-sculpture-luciano-garbati-controversy-1234573326/>.

Figures



Figure 1
GQ Cover 2013. Damien Hirst



Figure 2: Athenian black-figure footed cup (kylix) c. 550 BCE. Ashmolean Museum



Figure 3. Terracotta painted gorgoneion antefix (roof tile). c. 540 BCE. Greek, South Italian, Tarentine. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 4: Red-figure painted krater. Villa Giulia Painter. c. 470-450 BCE. Kamiros, Greece. British Museum.



Figure 5: Terracotta pelike (jar). Attributed to Polygnotos. C. 450-440 BCE. Greek, Attic. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 6: *Perseus with Head of Medusa*. Benvenuto Cellini. 1545-1554. Bronze. Florence, Italy



Figure 7: *Medusa*. Peter Paul Rubens. c. 1618. Flemish. Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna

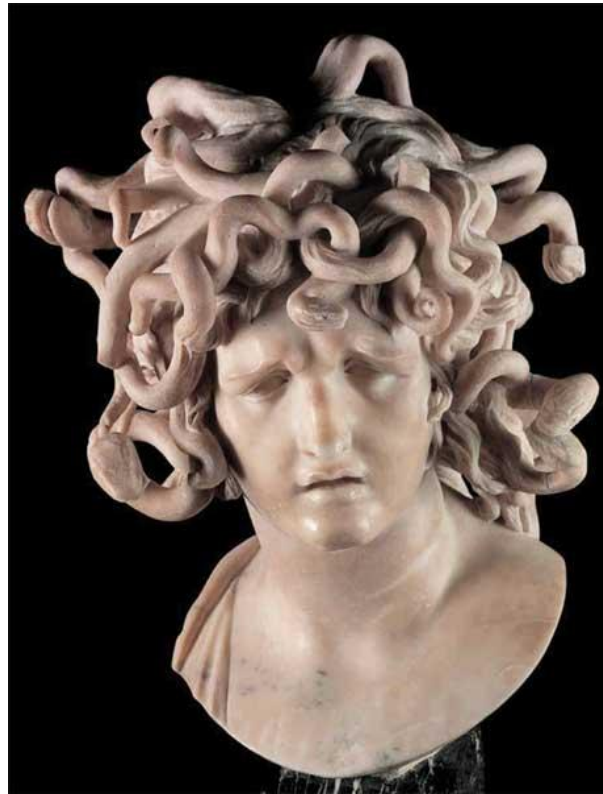


Figure 8: *Medusa*, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, c. 1638-1648. Marble. Rome.



Figure 9: *Medusa*. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1597, oil on canvas mounted on wood, Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Figure 9.1: The author with Caravaggio's *Medusa*. 2021. Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Figure 10: *Medusa (Murtula)*. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1596, private collection



Figure 11: *Medusa* next to self portrait of Caravaggio



Figure 12: *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, c. 1598-1599 or 1601. Oil on canvas. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome.



Figure 13: *The Beheading of St John the Baptist*. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1608, oil on canvas. St. John's co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta



Figure 14: *David with the Head of Goliath*. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. 1610. Oil on canvas. Galleria Borghese, Rome.



Figure 15: *Narcissus*. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. c. 1597-1599. Oil on canvas. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica



Figure 16: *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*. Luciano Garbati. 2008. Clay

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