

Madison Snowden

Grace Harpster

AH 4320

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### Cellini's Ambition

Literary references are frequently seen in art, but Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* (c. 1550) created a multi-layered piece through these references. This sculpture depicts Perseus's beheading of Medusa, a portrayal of a Greek myth. This narrative becomes essential to the statue's interpretation to the public. With it being commissioned by the Duke Cosimo I de' Medici at the time, it dabbled in Florentine politics like most pieces from this period. This statue's different political and material elements create a multi-layered piece that goes deeper than the object itself. Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* is intended to be seen as a material allegory in its process of creation and location of viewing.

Benvenuto Cellini was trained as a metalsmith instead of a sculptor, like his colleagues, Donatello and Michelangelo. This gave him the knowledge and ability to control the whole process of creating *Perseus and Medusa* sculpture. During this time, he built his own furnace and used many problematic elements to create and preserve the sculpture in one piece. Jutting pieces like his arm holding up Medusa's head and the other arm holding the sword are easy to break in the casting processes, so his ability to maintain the sculpture in one piece is notable. Cellini's technique was bound to his identity, he took pride in his mastery of metal craft. Suppose he places importance on the process of Perseus and Medusa's creation, like having complete control

of the casting and furnace. In that case, it is crucial that we, as viewers, place importance on its manufacturing. He describes the thoughtful process and steps to its conception in his autobiography, “I was advancing with my great statue of Medusa. I had covered the iron skeleton with clay, which I modelled like an anatomical subject, and about half an inch thinner than the bronze would be. This I baked well, and then began to spread on the wax surface, in order to complete the figure to my liking.”

The Gorgon Medusa could instantly look anyone in the eyes and turn them to stone. During the battle between Perseus and Medusa, Perseus held a mirror up to Medusa’s face for her to look herself in the eyes and turn to stone. Leading to Perseus beheading her and becoming triumphant, which is the moment Cellini portrays in his *Perseus and Medusa* sculpture. This narrative is significant when recognizing how *Perseus* was sculpted; as mentioned previously, Cellini took melted rock to cultivate a bronze statue. This is the process of a liquid transforming into a solid, similar to the story of Medusa. Medusa turned people to solid stone, and Cellini turned his sculpture to bronze, both creating their own statues out of their own medium. The texture of the blood pouring out of Medusa’s head looks similar to molten rock hardening; this is a notable way to see Cellini’s liquid-to-solid reference.

*Perseus and Medusa* is in the Piazza della Signoria of Florence, Italy. This is significant because this is Florence's city hall with many cultural and politically symbolic sculptures. Being put in the Piazza next to other earlier Renaissance works relates the piece to earlier Florence and Medici rule. The beheading of Medusa strikes similarities to David’s beheading of Goliath and Judith's beheading Holofernes, both of which sculptures are also located in the Piazza. This refers to early humanism and the current Duke Cosimo’s attempt to bring that era back to

Florence. However, if we break down these neighboring sculpture's medium the way we have with *Perseus and Medusa*, we can recognize Cellini's allegory in the piece's placement. The nearby sculptures, for example, Michelangelo's *David*, Donatello's *Judith and Holoformes*, and others, are all made of stone material in juxtaposition with Cellini's being bronze. Perseus is pictured holding out Medusa's head to the Piazza, surrounded by stone figures; this builds the visible narrative of Medusa. Putting the observer of the work in the Greek myth.

Through *Perseus and Medusa*'s complex process of creation and local juxtaposition, it is intended to be seen as a material allegory. Cellini took pride in his process of metal smithery and united his identity with his compound technique. He used the narrative of Perseus and Medusa as a vessel to the public to present his craft and the process. Creating a work heavily set in literary references leads the viewers to ask questions and uncover the meanings. Cellini completely controlled the perspective placed on *Perseus and Medusa* through his creation process. This sculpture isn't about competition to Cellini; he successfully set out to create the next masterpiece of the Renaissance period that is still prevalent in the contemporary world.