



## THE GORGON MEDUSA

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

**F**or our readers who have never had a Greek mythology course, you will nonetheless know the name Medusa. You will also recall the gruesome essentials of her story. Her repellent face was so utterly horrifying that any man who looked upon it was turned instantly to stone. As if her face were not enough, her hair—or lack thereof—was a tangle of writhing, venomous snakes. Despite her fiendish reputation, Medusa somehow achieved a rather astounding legacy. Artists have represented her endlessly. Feminists laud her. Gianni Versace shaped his brand around her. Even Sigmund Freud turned his psychoanalytical eye upon her. But who was she really, and what might the ancient Greeks reveal about her in their language and literature?

In many regards, Medusa's story is typical of Greek literature. The formula is a repetitive one: a female nemesis (monster or otherwise) is outwitted by a handsome hero, who is bolstered along by divine powers that help him cheat his way to success. After all, how does one fight a hero who can fly, turn invisible, wield divine weapons, or have the goddess Athena in his posse? In essence, the hero's opponents are vanquished before the battle starts. Medusa was not alone, and the antagonistic females put down by male heroes of Greek myth are many.

In his *Das Medusenhaupt* (1922), Freud posited that Medusa (because her face was a vagina symbol!) brought on castration fear in male viewers. With all deference to Dr. Freud and his omnipresent sexual symbolism, we might offer a broader interpretation. Ancient Greece's patriarchy had to keep female power in check, and the myths reaffirmed—continuously—that status quo. Like Circe, Medea, the Chimaera, the Sphinx, and others, Medusa posed a serious threat to men. But Medusa could literally take down a man in a heartbeat (curiously, no women were ever petrified by Medusa). Compared to the other *femme fatales* of Greek myth, Medusa thus seems more powerful, more formidable, and more memorable. Why?



*Cast of the "Rondanini Medusa," one of the beautiful interpretations of Medusa created by the Greeks in the Classical period. Versace adopted this one as his brand logo.*

*(Continued on page two)*



# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

The root in Medusa’s name is likely from a Greek verb (*medo/ μέδω*) meaning “to protect, to rule over.” Moreover, the names of Medusa’s sisters, Stheno (“strength”) and Euryale (“wide stepping”), sound like words to describe warriors or athletes. Some scholars have suggested that ancient Greece was once matriarchal, to one degree or another. If there are kernels of truth buried in myths, can we perhaps infer that Medusa and her sisters were once powerful leaders in a matriarchal system of some sort, which was ultimately overthrown by men? That idea no more stretches the bounds of credulity than does the one suggesting that Achilles was once a real warrior of astounding ability. Even the Elder Pliny, writing in the first century CE, interpreted the Medusa myth as one referencing an historical race of fierce, hair-covered women. We can further speculate that their remarkable fierceness was such that it remained indelibly stamped in human memory. Over time, these women were reimagined as monsters, the ultimate threat to the male order.



*The mask also represents the beautified, Classical Medusa with fewer snakes.*

### Mask of Medusa

Greek, South Italian, ca. 325 BCE

Terracotta

Weinberg Fund (81.266)



*“Pallas” was an epithet for the goddess Athena. Here she holds a shield displaying Medusa’s head.*

Jan Saenredam (Dutch, 1565-1607)

After Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch, 1558-1617)

*Pallas*, 1596

Engraving on paper

Museum purchase (64.99)

By the time the author Hesiod wrote (ca. 8<sup>th</sup>–7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), Medusa and her sisters were gorgons (from *gorgos/γοργός*: “grim, terrible”) and Greece was patriarchal, presided over by a supreme male god. The story of Medusa’s conquest, by the hero Perseus, was already in circulation by this time period as well. But vestiges of Medusa’s protective power remained visible to anyone who looked for it. Indeed, the Greeks consistently used her face on shields, armor, temple facades, jewelry etc., to defend and ward away evil. Even the goddess Athena had Medusa’s image on her aegis and shield (in the myth the actual decapitated head was presented to the goddess in repayment for helping Perseus). It seems remarkable that Medusa could even protect a goddess. No other monster had quite such power, and thus Medusa’s legacy is a cut above the rest. ■