

Hello and welcome to All About the Ancient World! Our channel is dedicated to promoting the voices of Early Career Researchers in studies of the ancient world. This presentation is titled "Benvenuto Cellini's Perseus with the Head of Medusa - the Meaning Behind the Violence." It focuses on the 16th century depiction of Perseus and Medusa commissioned by Cosimo I de' Medici and completed by Benvenuto Cellini. It is presented by Sara Myers. Sara Myers is a recent graduate of the University of Colorado Boulder's Classical Art and Archaeology Master's program. She received her undergraduate degree from Brigham Young University where she majored in Classics and minored in Art History. Following her undergraduate career, she pursued a course of study in Florence, Italy, where she graduated with a master's in museum studies. Since then, she has worked at both the Denver Art Museum and the Children's Museum of Denver as a museum educator. Her interests lie in the artistic representation of classical mythology throughout history. Now, without further ado, please enjoy this presentation All About the Ancient World.

Hello, I'm Sara Myers and I'm so excited to be sharing my presentation "Benvenuto Cellini's Perseus with the Head of Medusa - the Meaning Behind the Violence." In 1545, artist Benvenuto Cellini began work on his famous bronze sculpture of Perseus Beheading Medusa. Commissioned by Cosimo I de' Medici shortly after his appointment as Grand Duke, it is believed to hold additional meaning than that of the myth associated with the sculpture. By commissioning the statue of Perseus and Medusa, Cosimo successfully infused hidden meaning into artwork. The myth of Perseus and Medusa served as a perfect outlet for Cosimo to represent two messages; first, he effectively gave a warning to his enemies while, at the same time, celebrated his own rise to power. The location of the statue, the mythological symbolism, the actual material of the statue, as well as surrounding artwork all lend themselves to the idea that this statue was commissioned to commemorate Cosimo I de' Medici's rise to power.

The Medici family, otherwise known as the House of Medici, was an Italian banking family and political power that first rose to prominence during the first half of the 15th century. The family prospered quietly in Tuscany until Giovanni de' Medici emigrated to Florence to found the Medici bank in 1397, which would go on to become the largest bank in Europe. Using their success as bankers, the family quickly rose in the political scene, and by 1434, the Medici's effectively ruled over Florence. For a little over 300 years, the Medici remained the dominant power in Florence. Despite their long rule over the city, there were two notable interruptions to their power, between 1494-1512 and again between 1537-1539, when anti-Medici factions took control of Florence. Cosimo I de' Medici came into power shortly after the latter incident, following the assassination of Alessandro de' Medici and the effective elimination of the main branch of the Medici family. Many influential men in Florence favored Cosimo and indeed, hoped to rule through him. Cosimo, however, proved strong-willed, astute, and ambitious and seized power in Florence. Cosimo, though young, proved capable of defending his power and the city, which was entrusted to him.

The transition between Alessandro's rule and Cosimo's proved to be an uncertain period of time for Florence. During this time of insecurity, in Cosimo's first few months as Duke, a band of exiles, under the command of men like Piero Strozzi, a military leader and member of the

Medici's rival family, and Baccio Valori, a notable Florentine politician and leader, marched into Tuscany to try and seize control for the Republican party of Florence. Upon hearing of this invasion, Duke Cosimo ordered a vanguard of Italian, German, and Spanish infantry to respond to this attack. Cosimo's infantry was able to mount a surprise attack on the rebel army and storm the fortress at Montemurlo, capturing the main supporters of the exiled enemies. Baccio Valori, along with his son and nephew, was beheaded in the Piazza della Signoria, and Piero Strozzi was imprisoned. This episode in Cosimo's career was later known as the Battle of Montemurlo and might have inspired Cosimo's commission for Cellini "to make a statue of Perseus, three braccia high, with the head of Medusa in hand" - and that's by Benvenuto Cellini himself.

This statue was not meant as a simple depiction of the myth of Perseus. Like most art commissioned by Cosimo I de' Medici, it "allowed for a simultaneous, if not harmonious, co-existence of overt political and religious meanings . . . as well as the operation of ulterior meanings skillfully veiled by the artist" - and that's John Rigby Hale. Perseus was the son of Jupiter and Danae, the daughter of Acrisius, to whom it was prophesied that he would be killed by his grandson. In response to this prophesy, both Danae and Perseus were cast into the sea only to wash ashore upon the island of Seriphus. Once fully grown, Perseus was tricked by Polydectes of Seriphus into promising to obtain the head of Medusa and present it as a gift to him. Aided by the gods Mercury and Minerva, Perseus was able to obtain winged sandals, gifting him the ability to fly, the cap of Hades, which conferred invisibility, a curved sword, to be used to decapitate Medusa, and a bag in which to conceal the head. Perseus then approached Medusa, using the reflection of her in his shield, and decapitated her as she slept. Following this event, Perseus further adventured in the Mediterranean and eventually returned to Seriphus and turned Polydectes to stone using the head of Medusa.

I believe that Cosimo I de' Medici and Benvenuto Cellini effectively used this classical myth of Perseus, one frequently depicted in the ancient world and most certainly known in Florence, to convey a political agenda and warn against further insurrection. Cellini's statue of Perseus depicts him immediately after the act of beheading Medusa. He stands atop her crumpled body and extends her head, dripping with blood, towards the viewer. The fact that Perseus is depicted in this manner seems oddly reminiscent of the Battle of Montemurlo that resulted in the decapitation of several of Cosimo's enemies. The myth seems to be directly linked to these historical events and thus effectively ties mythology to the 16th century world of Florence.

The first point of importance that connects Perseus Beheading Medusa with the Battle of Montemurlo is the location of the piece. It stands in the Loggia dei Lanzi, off the corner of the Piazza della Signoria. The Loggia was one of the first open-air exhibition areas in the world and served as a place to accommodate pieces expressing the Medici's power. It seems fitting that Cellini's piece would have political overtones being displayed in the Loggia. Additionally, the Loggia is positioned within the Piazza della Signoria which also served as the location where Cosimo publicly had Baccio Valori and his son beheaded. Anyone who was aware of this event would have been reminded of it while looking at the gory details of Cellini's work. By placing the statue in the location where he had previously beheaded the exiles that revolted, Cosimo

effectively used the myth of Perseus and Medusa to say that he was willing to do it again if necessary, and it would hopefully deter more opposition.

The placement within the Piazza della Signoria, even without the Loggia, is an important marker of Cosimo's power. The Piazza served as the political gathering place within the city of Florence. It was one of two main squares, the other being a religious gathering place. Anything of public importance would have occurred within the Piazza della Signoria. This is due largely in part because of its proximity to the Palazzo Vecchio and the Uffizi offices. The Palazzo served as the living quarters of Cosimo I de' Medici until he relocated to the Palazzo Pitti. Additionally, Cosimo moved the seat of the government into the Uffizi, making the Piazza della Signoria the governmental headquarters of Florence. Therefore, the statue's presence in the Piazza is not only reminiscent of the political beheadings, but is also a reminder of Cosimo's power, since it is in the same location that Cosimo centered the government. The careful placement of the statue within the Piazza della Signoria was done to both remind Cosimo's enemies of his capabilities and commemorate his own rise to power.

In addition to the location, the mythological symbolism also lends itself to Cosimo's desired aim. Both Cosimo and Cellini must have been aware of Medusa's role in Perseus' rise to power. The act of beheading the gorgon provided Perseus with a weapon that had a direct effect in the rescue of Andromeda and then later the death of the King of Seriphus. Medusa's death played a critical role in Perseus' rise to power. Cosimo's own act of beheading his foes had a similar effect. He himself explained that this event served as a type of personal resurrection for him. The decapitation of his enemies was highly significant to him and his recognition of power. Although Cosimo was already in an office of considerable power before the battle, in his mind, the decapitation of his enemies helped him recognize the power he held. In both cases, decapitation led to a rise in power. As such, it makes sense that Cosimo would want a commission of Perseus holding the head of Medusa to be able to display as a symbol of his own rise to power.

In addition to the actual decapitation, the other figures around the base of the statue lend symbolic significance to the piece and add a layer of interpretation that supports my claim. There are four smaller bronze sculptures on the base. They are of Jupiter, Danae, Mercury, and Minerva. According to the myth, these four individuals were the most instrumental in Perseus' rise to power and his ability to defeat the gorgon Medusa. Jupiter and Danae were the parents of Perseus; in fact, it was the claim that Jupiter was his father that caused Perseus to go on the quest to defeat Medusa. Mercury and Minerva provided Perseus with the knowledge and tools to kill Medusa. Therefore, these four individuals were instrumental in Perseus' quest to kill Medusa, without them, Perseus would have failed. Their presence on the statue base then marks this statue as commemorative of Cosimo's rise to power, the Battle of Montemurlo marks the moment that Cosimo recognized as his definitive moment.

This being so, if the four base figures are representative of a rise in power, Cosimo, then, is comparing himself to Perseus, and the statue can be seen as a representation of him. With Perseus standing in for Cosimo, Medusa can be interpreted as the exiles that marched on

Tuscany, or more broadly, the Republican Party. As such, the statue serves to immortalize the crucial moment in Cosimo's rise to power, the act of beheading Baccio Valori and the other rebel supporters. The symbolism does not end there. There is a relief sculpture on the base of the statue, just above the four smaller statues. The relief shows the myth of Perseus saving Andromeda. The story goes that Andromeda, the daughter of Cepheus, the king of Ethiopia, was to be sacrificed to a sea-monster because of her beauty. Perseus, after defeating Medusa, saw the chained Andromeda and was able to defeat the sea-monster by using the head of Medusa, thus turning the creature into stone. This myth fits perfectly into the story that Cosimo is trying to tell. As I've already established, Perseus is a representation of Cosimo. That being so, Andromeda must represent the city of Florence, which Cosimo was able to preserve because of his victory over the exiles at Montemurlo. By selecting this particular myth in the story of Perseus, Cosimo drew particular emphasis on the idea that he wanted to remind his enemies of the battle of Montemurlo and the consequences that followed. He used this statue almost as a weapon, threatening death and ruin to whoever opposed him, just as Perseus used the head of Medusa as a weapon.

The last point I want to make about the symbolism of the piece is concerning the image of Diana that appears four times at the corner of the statue. The multi-breasted Diana is a symbol of fertility. Placing it in conversation with the rest of the piece, the Diana represents the fruitfulness that Florence will experience under Cosimo I de' Medici. Not only did Cellini successfully embody Cosimo's rise to power, but he was also able to infuse enough symbolism to promise a bright future for Florence.

Cellini was able to emphasize Cosimo's rise to power by trying something unheard of at that time. He chose to make his sculpture out of a single bronze cast. In comparison, the Judith and Holofernes statue that is located nearby, which was noticeably smaller, was done in a series of eleven casts. With a one-piece cast of bronze, Cellini was able to depict Perseus extending his arm holding the head of Medusa. Had the statue been done in stone, this would not be possible due to the weight that would have broken the arm. The use of bronze would have made the statue stand out, since Cellini was able to experiment and include unique elements which are impossible in marble works. The casting of the blood pouring out of Medusa's head is recorded as being horrific, so much that it terrified viewers during the Renaissance. That being the case, the casting in bronze of the blood helped Cosimo convey his message and scare his enemies into submission.

Another thing I wanted to point out about the material of the statue is the fact that almost every other statue in the Loggia, and even in the Piazza della Signoria is made of marble. This is interesting because of the myth of Medusa. Legend has it that anyone who looks into the eyes of the gorgon will be turned into stone. The fact that every statue surrounding the Medusa is stone, while Cellini's work is bronze, is fascinating. It gives the statue a sense of realism (as real as a myth can be), in the fact that everything else is stone, as if Medusa's eyes turned everything around her into stone. She is the ultimate weapon and he who wields it is powerful. In this case, Cosimo has the ultimate power. As I implied previously, not every statue in the Piazza is marble, there are two, outside of Cellini's that are marble [bronze]. One is Donatello's

Judith and Holofernes, which I will address shortly, and the other is an equestrian statue of Cosimo by Giambologna. Though this bronze was not completed till much later in Cosimo's career, it is interesting that it would stand in the same square as the Perseus and it is one of three bronze statues. The material alone connects Cosimo with Perseus and, with the mythological symbolism, cements the idea that Perseus symbolizes Cosimo.

The statue of Judith and Holofernes is the other bronze statue in the square. This statue brings up the possibility that Cosimo commissioned this statue with an entirely different reason in mind. Nearly 100 years prior to Cosimo I de' Medici, Donatello was commissioned to create a bronze statue of Judith slaying Holofernes by the earlier Cosimo de' Medici. Michael Levey argues that Cosimo was carrying on the tradition of displaying Florentine power in artwork and that Cellini drew heavily on Donatello's work. He sets forth an argument that seems very compelling. I don't mean to refute him, but rather build upon his scholarship. In his book *Florence: A Portrait*, Levey draws upon several of the similarities between Cellini's statue and that of Donatello. Judith and Holofernes depicts the moment when young Judith, a common symbol of liberty, and the victory of the underdog, slays Holofernes in his sleep. The statue, a bronze, originally stood in the Piazza della Signoria just opposite of the Perseus statue. Both show an underdog character rising up and beheading the more powerful figure. Additionally, both victims are seen resting on a cushion and stepped upon by their killer. The similarities go on. Cosimo I de' Medici then can be seen to be responding to this earlier tradition of patronage and connecting himself to Cosimo de' Medici. This statue then, is often looked at as a reiteration of the past, a way for Cosimo I to equate himself to the earlier Cosimo. The statue, in this light, was commissioned to bolster him up and connect him with a great ruler of the past. I don't disagree with this, but, as my argument shows, I think there is a little more to it. Cosimo and Cellini were both obviously aware of the Judith and Holofernes statue. It's impossible to refute its similarities. Therefore, Levey's argument is most likely correct, that Cosimo did commission the Perseus statue in part to connect him to the past. Due to the symbolism of the piece, as well as the historical significance of his rise to power, however, the specific subject matter of the piece seems more reminiscent of the Battle of Montemurlo and the commission was more likely a response to this event rather than a simple imitation of the Judith and Holofernes by Donatello. I believe that Cosimo was aware of the Judith and Holofernes statue and did intend for a statue to compete with it, but he carefully selected subject matter that would suit his own political history and play into his needs. Cellini achieved Cosimo I de' Medici's desire for "a statue of Perseus, three braccia high, with the head of Medusa in hand" by perfectly blending the unique use of materials and mythology, thus creating an image that immortalized the main event in Cosimo's rise to power. A story frequently told and depicted in the ancient world was effectively used to make a bold statement about Cosimo I de' Medici and visually cemented his claim to power in Florence. Thank you.

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