

## Some Typologies and Artistic Representations of Medusa in Art History

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**Abstract:** *As many of us already know, Medusa is one of the most popular and enduring figures of Greek mythology. Long after many other figures from Greek myth have been forgotten, she continues to live in our contemporary culture and is a real inspiration for artists, historians and writers. The study of the correlation between style and subject-matter in Medusa representations through art history have proven that certain subjects were thought to call for a particular stylistic treatment. For example, hellenistic engraved portraits were always executed in a varying mixture of realistic and idealistic features until the verism of the late Republic. This study purpose is to present some representative typologies of mythological creature Medusa in art history, from Ancient Greece, to Caravaggio and up to modern art.*

**Key-words:** *Medusa, Gorgone, Greek Mythology, Greek Art, symbolism, symbols*

### 1. Introduction. *The Myth of Medusa.*

"Myths are the stories that people tell-and that are told and retold so often that everyone knows them."<sup>2</sup> These are the stories that had inspired artists, poets, writers for ages and are more alive with the passing of time. They represent "... a treasure house replete with golden tales and glimmering thoughts, passions in the rough and smooth, and fancies rich bejeweled"<sup>3</sup>.

The beauty of the myths is that, although they are not factually exact and can be false, not wholly true, or not true in that form, "...they have a power which transcends their inaccuracy, even depends on it"<sup>4</sup>.

This is the case of our subject, the Gorgone Medusa, a powerful mythological creature from ancient Greek myths and legends.

The three Gorgone<sup>5</sup> sisters were described as threatening feminine creatures with living and venomous snakes as hair and a horrible look that transformed anyone who looked at them into stones. The name derives from the Greek word *Gorgos*, which means "terrible".

The three gorgons - Medusa<sup>6</sup>, Stheno and Euryale - were the daughters of the marine deities Phorcys and Keto<sup>7</sup>, htonic<sup>8</sup> monsters. Although her sisters Stheno and Euryale were imortals, Medusa was mortal, reason why she was killed by the demigod Perseus<sup>9</sup> who cut off her head.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen R. Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Mills Gayley, *The Classic Myths in English Literature and in Art*, Ginn Publisher, Boston 1911, p. xxx.

<sup>4</sup> Ken Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, Routledge Publisher, London, 1992, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrandt, *Dicționar de Simboluri*, Ed. Artemis, București 1994, Vol. II, p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> Victor Kernbach, *Dicționar de Mitologie Generală*, Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, București 1989, p. 335.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem.*, p. 280.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrandt, *op.cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, Vol. III, p.70.

The legend says that the Gorgones were once three beautiful women, not the evil characters that are popular now. Due to her beauty, Medusa had a romantic affair with the sea god Poseidon but unfortunately, their adventure took place in the temple of virgin goddess Athena. Considering this thing an offense, the goddess transformed Medusa and his two sisters into the evil creatures that are well known today.

When Perseus killed Medusa by cutting off her head, from her neck came to live two sons (Poseidon's sons): Chrysaor, a giant and the winged horse Pegasus<sup>10</sup>. Later, the goddess Athena adorned her shield with Medusa's frightening face.

## 2. Medusa in Art

Medusa is one of the most popular and enduring characters of Greek mythology. Many years after other mythological figures have been forgotten, she continues to live in popular culture. The meaning of this study is to present some representative typologies of this subject and their reflection in the works of various artists from Ancient Greece to modern ages. The variety of images presented will relief the infinite source of inspiration that a subject can be and how much can be adapted to artist's needs.

### 2.1. Medusa in Greek Art

*"Depictions of the gorgon first appeared around the eighth century B.C.E, and the image has been with us ever since. That's about as far back as what we would call Greek art goes, so the Gorgon is indeed one of the oldest figures in Greek art. As with all images, it has undergone changes through the years, but most of the important features held constant through classical times."*<sup>11</sup>

In 1896 Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher<sup>12</sup> analyzed the development of Medusa's representations in Greek art and identified three different stages<sup>13</sup>.

The oldest one, the **Archaic Gorgone**, last from about the eight century B.C. to the fifth. "The Shield of Hercules"<sup>14</sup> representations are perfect examples for this epoch. In these images, Medusa has wide-open, staring eyes and a broad grinning mouth filled with prominent teeth with both upper and lower fangs. "Despite the toothy display, there is a prominent, painfully protruding tongue. The extreme facial expression usually produces strongly drawn lines at the edges of the mouth and on the forehead."<sup>15</sup> The ears are visible and sometimes show signs of piercing. The nose is broad and flat and the hair is usually shown as a series of tight, curled rings above the forehead.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen R. Wilk, *op.cit.*, p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> a German classical scholar specialized in study of Greek and Roman mythology.

<sup>13</sup> *Apud*. Stephen R. Wilk, *loc.cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *The Shield of Heracles* is an archaic Greek epic poem attributed to Hesiod during antiquity. The subject of this poem is the expedition of Heracles and Iolaus against Cycnus, the son of Ares.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen R. Wilk, *loc.cit.*

Although we have some full body representations, in this period Medusa is mainly shown as a portrait, its round face filling a shield, an antefix, a coin or the bottom of a bowl. "It is as if its only purpose is to stare and scowl at the viewer."<sup>16</sup>



Fig.1. *Archaic representation of Medusa from Artemis temple, Corfu, Greece. Currently the piece can be viewed at Corfu museum of archeology, source:*

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Close\\_up\\_of\\_Gorgon\\_at\\_the\\_pediment\\_of\\_Artemis\\_temple\\_in\\_Corfu.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Close_up_of_Gorgon_at_the_pediment_of_Artemis_temple_in_Corfu.jpg)



Fig.2. *Terracotta antefix with the head of Medusa, a classic representation of Archaic Gorgone, source:* <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/ancient-art/terracotta-antefix-with-the-head-of-medusa>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 33.



Fig.3. *Archaic Medusa*, source: <http://www.icons.it/le-metamorfosi-di-ovidio/libro-iv/perseo-e-medusa/immagini/02-perseo-e-medusa/>



Fig.4. *Archaic Medusa*, ca. 570 B.C., source: [https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7ba5d24936-6862-4f74-89bd-a199111fd4%7d&oid=253342&pkgids=469&pg=1&rpp=4&pos=2&ft=\\*](https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7ba5d24936-6862-4f74-89bd-a199111fd4%7d&oid=253342&pkgids=469&pg=1&rpp=4&pos=2&ft=*)



The next stage of representation is the **Middle or Transitional Gorgone**. This period is characterized by a less wild image of the mythological creature. We can also see that the head shrink relative to the body and acquire neck<sup>17</sup>. This typology last from about the late fifth to the last second centuries B.C. and overlaps with the other two periods.



Fig.5. Roman mosaic representing Medusa, currently at National archaeological Museum of Madrid, source: <https://aquileana.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/gorgon5.png>

The last stage of Medusa representation in Greek art is called **Late or Beautiful Gorgon**<sup>18</sup>. Now we can see a more traditional figure of Medusa, sometimes shown in three-quarter and in profile views. In this period Medusa is represented for the first time asleep, with her eyes closed, so that Perseus can beat her.

In this stage we can see indeed a "beautiful" Gorgone. She no longer has beard or fangs, and the frightening image vanished. Is the period when Medusa stopped to be a monster and was replaced by a young woman. We can see some representations of her golden wings attached to the decapitated head. Medusa is no longer a figure of terror, but rather one of pity, and this image will last until the Renaissance when the horrific Gorgon will return<sup>19</sup>.



Fig.6. Alexander the Great mosaic with the image of Medusa on his breastplate, source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e1/Alexander\\_the\\_Great\\_mosaic.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e1/Alexander_the_Great_mosaic.jpg)

<sup>17</sup> Stephen R. Wilk, *loc.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>19</sup> Genevieve Warwick, *Caravaggio: Realism, Rebellion, Reception*, University of Delaware Press, Newark, 2006, p. 42.



Fig.7. *Terracotta jar representing Perseus killing Medusa, ca. 450–440 B.C.*, source: [https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7ba5d24936-6862-4f74-89bd-a199111fdd4%7d&oid=254523&pkgids=469&pg=1&rpp=4&pos=3&ft=\\*](https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7ba5d24936-6862-4f74-89bd-a199111fdd4%7d&oid=254523&pkgids=469&pg=1&rpp=4&pos=3&ft=*)



## 2.2. Other representations of Medusa

Due to the popularity of the myth, Medusa has many representations in various ages of art history, the subject being adapted to suit the artist's personality, epoch and style. One of the most famous Medusa is Caravaggio's masterpiece<sup>20</sup> from 1598.



Fig.8. *Medusa*, Caravaggio, 1598, source: <https://medium.com/@mariliaribas/eu-gosto-de-pensar-na-medusa-sorrindo-68d2c56b9af4>

<sup>20</sup> Genevieve Warwick, *loc.cit.*

An impressive bronze sculpture that represent Perseus with the head of Medusa is the artwork of Benvenuto Cellini from 1554. The statue can be admired in Piazza della Signoria, Florence.



Fig.9. *Perseus with the head of Medusa*, Benvenuto Cellini, 1554, source: [https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medusa#/media/File:Perseus\\_\(Benvenuto\\_Cellini\)\\_2013\\_February.jpg](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medusa#/media/File:Perseus_(Benvenuto_Cellini)_2013_February.jpg)



Rubens also gave his tribute to Gorgone's myth with a frightening image of Medusa's head.



Fig.10. *Head of Medusa*, Rubens, 1617-1618, source:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rubens\\_Medusa.jpeg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rubens_Medusa.jpeg)

Using Medusa's head, Perseus turns his enemy into stone, as we can see in Luca Giordano painting.



Fig.11. *Perseus Turning Phineus and his followers to Stone*, Luca Giordano about 1680, source:  
[https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Perseus\\_Turning\\_Phineus\\_and\\_his\\_followers\\_to\\_Stone.jpg](https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Perseus_Turning_Phineus_and_his_followers_to_Stone.jpg)



Last but not least in this presentation is Salvador Dali's statue of Perseus with the head of Medusa. The bronze statue keeps the classic posture of the Benvenuto Cellini's one (Fig.9) with the unique approach of Dali's personality.



Fig.12. *Perseus*, Salvador Dali, source: <https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fi%C8%99ier:Dal%C3%AD.Perseo.JPG>

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