

YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY

Focus On: Permanent Collection

"The Power of Ugliness: A Bronze Gorgon from Ancient Greece"

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This is a bronze Gorgon, from Greece, that dates to around 540 B.C. This object is one of our important recent acquisitions in the field of Greek art at the Yale University Art Gallery. It is courtesy of the generous acquisition endowment given by Ruth Elizabeth White. Although the bronze was acquired in 2002, this is the first time it has been on display here at Yale, as it was immediately included in a wonderful traveling exhibition called *The Centaur's Smile: The Human Animal in Early Greek Art*, organized by the Princeton University Art Museum. Our bronze Gorgon made its first public appearance in this exhibition, and we're delighted that she has finally finished her stint on the road and come back to stay with us.

This bronze Gorgon was made by the lost wax method, as were all ancient bronzes. It is solid cast, which means that a wax model was made and then enclosed in a clay investiture. When the investiture was fired, holes in the clay enclosure would allow air and gases to escape. The top of it would be left open. Once the clay was fired and solid, molten bronze was poured in that would melt the clay, which would come out through all the holes and be replaced by the bronze inside. The clay on the outside would then be chipped away to reveal a slightly rough version of the form. Some additional cold-working with tools could then be done directly onto the surface of the bronze. So some of the details might be incised after the piece had been cast and removed from the investiture. If you look closely you can see some of that cold-working technique here. We looked at this piece very carefully to determine whether it was all made at once or whether, as is the case with larger bronzes, it might have been pieced together. Were the wings, head, and snakes cast and applied separately? We've had a number of specialists and conservators in the field examine this piece over many months of research and our conclusion is that it was cast all in one piece. As a work of technical sophistication it's really remarkable.

Many people, when they think of Greek art, think primarily of its representations of the idealized and the beautiful: the statues of beautiful males with athletic, idealized bodies, and depictions of women in vase painting, with beautiful aquiline noses, fancy embroidered dresses, and lovely uplifted hair and gold earrings. But there was an opposing but equally important phenomenon within Greek art: the ugly. The ugly, like the beautiful, had power in Greek art and culture. It's the ugly that I want to focus on today, embodied for us in this Gorgon.

Let's begin with a description of the Gorgon's features. She is a winged female figure, with long Archaic Greek curls extending down the sides of her head, coming down over her shoulders, and spreading across her breasts. She has winged boots. She wears a short chiton, a v-necked dress with little capped sleeves, belted at the waist, and a short, above-the-knee skirt with a central set of pleats. This is a kind of running costume, worn also by the hunting goddess Artemis, as well as by the Amazons, that connotes movement and athleticism in a Greek female figure. This chiton is belted with snakes that are tied in a knot, twining up the Gorgon's arms, with their heads focused out beyond the figure, toward the wings. The snake's head on the right is not preserved, but the one on the left appears to be snarling and quite vicious, projecting from the figure itself, as if emanating evil out from the Gorgon's body.

Now focus on her face for a moment. Is this the beautiful Greek female of the Parthenon? No. This is a female face that is wide and mask-like in its flatness, with protruding boar's tusks for teeth. The huge mouth with its long, distended tongue is meant to suggest a roar. She has giant, almond-shaped eyes, again flat and somewhat horrific, that evoke terror. Her ears stick out. The suggestion that she has curly hair is really the only concession to notions of female beauty during the Archaic period. Those of you familiar with Italian art will know the famous Bernini sculpture of the Medusa head with hair made of writhing snakes—this is also the case in many versions of the Gorgon. This Gorgon does not have snakes in her hair—her snakes are limited to her waist and arms. The mask-like quality of the face is the key feature here, and in every single image of the Gorgon that you will find in the Archaic period. Later, in the Classical period, Gorgons and other female monsters became less ugly, less horrible looking, more idealized and pretty. In my view, their monstrous power declines accordingly—for monsters, ugliness is an essential part of their visual impact.

The Gorgon is a figure familiar from Homer, from both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, where she is first known as just a disembodied head, a mask—the Gorgoneion. "Gorgos" means terror in Greek, so the word "Gorgon" goes back to the idea of a head projecting terror. In Greek myth, those who looked on the head of the Gorgon would turn to stone—literally petrifying the viewer. ("Petros" is Greek for stone.) The Gorgon first receives a body, both in art and in literature, in the eighth or seventh century B.C. She also acquires a mythology and parents: she is the daughter of Phorkys, a sea-god, and Keto, a sea monster, and has two sisters, Sthenno and Euryale, who are also Gorgons with this same kind of monster head. The historian Hesiod says that of those three sisters, only Medusa was mortal. However, no other literary source mentions Medusa's mortality, and it's very hard to understand how she could be mortal, given some of the features of her life and her mythology.

The Gorgon is best known in mythology from the story of Perseus and Medusa. Perseus was the son of Danaë, who was herself the daughter of Akrisius, the King of Argos. The myth tells us that this Argive King received an oracle telling him that his daughter would have a son who would kill him. In order to avoid this fate, the king placed his daughter and her newborn son, Perseus, into a chest, and shipped them out to sea. The chest eventually washed up on the Greek island of Seriphos, where Danaë and Perseus were rescued by Diktys, a brother of the island's king. Diktys brought them up to

the palace where they were both cared for and where Perseus was raised. Ultimately, the king's brother Polydektes fell in love with Danaë, who wasn't particularly interested in him. Polydektes decided that Perseus was interfering with the negotiations and sent him off on a mission to bring back the head of Medusa, the infamous Gorgon, with the expectation that Perseus would probably be turned to stone and leave a clear path for Polydektes in his pursuit of Danaë.

For Herakles, Theseus, and any other hero in ancient Greece, heroic deeds generally set the virtuous hero against some form of evil. The Labors of Herakles pitted a man against a number of monsters, including the Hydra with a hundred heads and the Nemean Lion. Theseus battled the Minotaur. In such cases, the hero frequently succeeds with divine help. Perseus's divine intervention came in the form of Athena and some benevolent monsters, who were also the daughters of the same sea-god who fathered the Gorgons. These three women were called the Graeae. They were not monsters in the sense that they combined animal with human bodies, as many Greek monsters did. They were old hags, characterized by having one eye and one tooth among them, which they passed back and forth as needed. Despite their deficiencies in eyes and teeth, however, they had good hearts, and three of those. They also had magical powers that they could bestow on heroes who traveled at their behest, and they were very generous to Perseus. They gave him three things: the so-called *kibisis*, a kind of magic sack that slings over the shoulder, in which he could put the petrifying head of Medusa were he to succeed in acquiring it, and which would keep it from turning him to stone; winged boots, such as Medusa also has, which made it possible for him to fly; and a cap of Hades, which made him invisible to all viewers. So Perseus was well equipped to go and try to find Medusa. He found her, following instructions given by the Graeae and by Athena, who came along with him in some versions of the story. Athena told him that the safest way to kill Medusa was to cut off her head, while looking away as he did so.

The killing of Medusa by Perseus occurs quite frequently on Athenian vases. Perseus generally appears with his magic hat and his winged boots, the *kibisis* slung over his shoulder, and carrying a special sickle-shaped blade with which he's going to kill Medusa. In most scenes, Perseus clearly looks away from Medusa's head, which is often horrific and monstrous with snakes coming out of her hair. In some scenes he has successfully decapitated her, and her body is falling to the ground with blood flowing out of her neck. In others, Perseus has stuffed the head into the *kibisis*, leaving the bleeding body lying on the ground, and he is flying off with his winged feet to escape Medusa's sisters, who are chasing him. He is sometimes helped by Athena, who pursues Medusa's sisters with her spear and aegis. This story is the context in which we're most familiar with Medusa. The Yale bronze may well be Medusa, but we're calling her just a Gorgon because she's not headless and there's no real narrative context for the figure.

In an unusual example of the scene, Perseus is shown standing, wearing the cap (transformed into a Thracian helmet) that gives him invisibility, and his winged boots. He has completed his deed and has brought the head of Medusa as a trophy to Athena, his patroness. Between Athena and Perseus is a shield, with a face in it, upside down. That face is the reflection of the head of Medusa that Perseus

holds. Perseus is not looking at the head; he's looking only at its reflection, because even disembodied, the head can still kill him. Even the goddess Athena must look at it in the reflection. The fact that the reflection is upside down shows how well the ancient Greek artists understood the laws of optics.

The end of the story is that after Perseus has decapitated Medusa and safely stashed the head in the *kibisis*, he returns to Seriphos and shows the head to King Polydektes, who, as you will remember, had sent Perseus off to kill Medusa in the first place. Polydektes is instantly killed, of course, as are all of his friends in the dining hall. Perseus liberates his mother, Danaë, and goes back to Argos where he was born. When he gets there, he shows the Medusa head to his grandfather, the king of Argos, who at the beginning of our story had sent the baby Perseus and his mother away in the chest. The king dies and Perseus gets his revenge. Perseus then gives the head of Medusa to Athena. He thus no longer has this wonderful weapon, but he's accomplished with it what he wanted.

This story demonstrates the iconographic power of the Gorgon's head in Greek art and popular culture. The Greeks represented the Gorgon's head in many ways in art, most often as a separate, disembodied head (the Gorgoneion). It is affixed to the roofs of buildings, and to the protective aegis that Athena wears on her breast. It is seen in a number of different contexts in which the power to kill is also protective. It is used, for example, on drinking cups to ward off the evil effects of too much drink. So the head is not only death-dealing, it is apotropaic, protecting the user and wearer. It protects Athena; it protects the buildings on which it is installed; and it protects the drinker of the wine from its effects.

The Gorgon head with its body does the same thing and appears in similar contexts. The running figure of the Gorgon is used frequently in architecture, most famously, perhaps, on a late seventh-, early sixth-century temple in Corfu, but also on temples from Greek colonies in South Italy and Sicily. The running Gorgon is shown on a large limestone altar from Gela, in Sicily, where she holds what looks like a stuffed horse with wings and a little doll, which is standing on the Gorgon's thigh and cradled in her arms. These are actually the children of Poseidon and Medusa, who were born from Medusa's neck when she was decapitated. They are Pegasus, the famous winged horse, and Khrysaor, who is the standing male figure that Medusa is cradling. Khrysaor is prominent in Greek mythology because as the son of a monster he is in turn the father of another monster called Geryon, who is actually three human bodies welded together at the waist, with separate heads, feet, and armor. Geryon was one of the monsters that Herakles had to contend with. You frequently see Geryon figures in vase painting, where they are always shown as Greek soldiers with helmets, shields, spears, and swords. They frequently have on their shields the face of a Gorgon—the face of their grandmother. Putting a Gorgon's head on your shield is another way in which the Gorgoneion can be used as protection. The Gorgoneion is known in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as a shield device. Agamemnon, for example, is described in the *Iliad* as having a Gorgoneion on his shield, and examples of actual shields and shield bands with Gorgoneia from the fifth and sixth centuries have been found in Greece.

a bringer of death and a protector. She carried that dual role throughout her existence in both myth and in art, and I think that's the message that all of the Greek monster figures really convey. They have allure. The siren, through its beautiful song, draws the men of Odysseus to their deaths. The sphinx, with its impenetrable riddle, draws young men to their deaths until Odysseus can solve the riddle. The allure of this Gorgon figure is the fascination with the horrible that we might not want to admit we have, but that is a universal attraction and exists in all cultures. These monster figures in Greek art frequently embody the bestial, the uncivilized, and the irrational, and so you see battles of centaurs and Greeks that in mythology embody the battle of the barbarians—the *barbaroi*, the Greeks called them—against Greek civilization. Those *barbaroi* could symbolize the Persians or any historical enemy that the Greeks were facing at the time. In any case, they embodied the force of evil and a lack of civilization. "Civilization" of course is defined as Greek civilization, and is totally Atheno-centric.

So that is what the Gorgon does here. For all her smallness, she has power. She probably originally adorned the handles of a large bronze vessel, such as a big wine krater that would have been used for either mixing wine and water or for cooling wine, as one did at ancient Greek drinking parties. As a disembodied being she appears more as a religious icon, which is not inappropriate. There are examples of votive Gorgons of this period that were offered at sanctuaries. But for us, she protects our gallery, she protects our museum, and she protects anyone who recognizes her power and uses it to advantage. So I hope that you will look at her with respect, but with pleasure as well.