

Perseus with the Head of Medusa: A Medici Adaptation of Myth

Commissioned by Cosimo I de 'Medici shortly after his appointment as Grand Duke, the famous bronze sculpture of *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* completed by Benvenuto Cellini in 1554 uses the myth of the great hero Perseus to serve as a visual representation of Cosimo's rise to power as well as act as a warning to the enemies of the Medici. The mythological symbolism, the location of the statue, the supplemental imagery found on the base of the bronze, as well as surrounding artwork all lend themselves to the idea that this statue was commissioned to commemorate a critical event in Cosimo I de 'Medici's rise to power.

Cosimo, being the son of Giovanni Dale Banda Nere, was not a member of the main Medici family, however, with the assassination of Alessandro de 'Medici, the dominant branch of the Medici family was eliminated. As such, to carry on the Medici rule, the counsel of forty-eight elected 17-year-old Cosimo I de 'Medici as his successor. The transition between Alessandro's rule and Cosimo's proved to be an uncertain period 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 and Baccio Valori, 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. Under the leadership of Alessandro Vitelli, 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, were 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, I argue, inspired Cosimo's commission for Cellini to make a bronze statue representing Perseus just after defeating the gorgon Medusa.

In order to validate this claim, I will approach the interpretation of this statue from five angles. First, I will explore the myth of Perseus and Medusa in order to draw parallels between this classical story and the Battle of Montemurlo and its consequences. Following this, I will delve into the significance of both the Loggia dei Lanzi as the venue for the display of *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* and the political nature of the Piazza della Signoria in which the Loggia can be found. I will then explore the remaining elements of the statue, that of the images of Jupiter, Danae, Mercury, Minerva, as well as the depiction of Perseus saving Andromeda in relief, and finally the four multi-breasted images of Diana, which appear on the corners of the base. I will then talk about how *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* interacts with the other statuary within the Loggia and the Piazza as a whole. Finally, this paper will place my argument within the scholarship of art historian Michael Levey, comparing *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* to Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* (Levey 1998).

This paper takes a closer look at the context, the myth, and the statue as a whole to fully appreciate the thought that went into the commission of this statue. By perfectly blending the unique use of materials, mythology, and location, Cellini and Cosimo I de' Medici were able to create an image that both represented Cosimo I de' Medici rise to power and publicly threatened the enemies of the Medici.

Bibliography

Levey, Michael. *Florence: A Portrait*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998. Print.