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## **Monstrous and Feminine: The way in which Medusa is represented in contemporary art as feminine and monstrous, and what that can tell us about society**

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# Monstrous and Feminine

The way in which Medusa is represented in contemporary art as feminine and monstrous, and what that can tell us about society

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## Abstract

Medusa is an ongoing traditional subject within art. However, she is often depicted as an objectified version of her decapitated head or as a demonised version of a woman. In this research, I analysed if contemporary artworks were depicting Medusa as feminine and monstrous by researching and discussing her physical features, as well as determining what these aspects can tell us about contemporary society. This was achieved through the use of three case studies; Luciano Garbati's *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*, Damien Hirst's *The Severed Head of Medusa*, and PichiAvo's *Medusa*. Through visual analysis and comparison, combined with literary and visual contextualisation from both contemporary and historic times, it was determined that contemporary artworks tend to stray from the stereotypical media portrayal of Medusa as a beast. Each artwork had feminine and monstrous aspects, each with different intentions and reasons. What they ended up showing within society is that Medusa's story is being retold and the arts are helping convey this message. While some still focus on the monetary gains of art, others use their artworks of Medusa to support female empowerment.

## Introduction

The image and representation of Medusa in art have been a point of discussion within the research for many years, including her depiction as a monster and a woman.<sup>1</sup> In modern art, Medusa is still a popular subject for artists to portray. Potentially, these modern artists use the historic art canon to help in their portrayals. However, while the research into these historic artworks is extensive, the research into the modern representation of Medusa in art is lacking.<sup>2</sup> Within this research, the lack of research into Medusa's monstrous and/or feminine aspects within modern art will be demonstrated and discussed. This analysis aims to partially fill this gap of knowledge about Medusa's imagery and signification. This will aid in trying to provide an analysis of the image and representation of Medusa in modern art based on the monstrous and feminine aspects. This will be done with the use of three case studies. Within this introduction, the research problems, aims, objectives and questions, as well as the relevance, will be presented and discussed. Furthermore, the terms 'feminine' and 'monstrous' will be defined. This will be followed by a basic history of Medusa and a discussion of the literature and research already done. Finally, the limitations and the choices made for the research will be justified, and the structure and methodology of the thesis will be outlined.

With this research, the aim is to present and analyse the way Medusa is portrayed as feminine and monstrous within modern art in order to research the way her portrayals reflect and partake in the grander societal debates, such as the 2018 #MeToo-movement. To achieve this aim, the thesis will try to identify trends and aspects as feminine and/or monstrous and place them within the grander tradition of portraying Medusa. These aspects will then be used to define their signification within society, and identify the way that the artworks reflect on society and the artists, as well as the way that these works take a place within the grander discussion of society. Thus, the main question that this thesis will try to answer is; In what way do modern artists utilise the feminine and monstrous sides of Medusa in their artworks, and what do these aspects indicate within modern society?

The reason for this research is the recent resurgence of the Medusa story within the larger society, as she became a figurehead for the #MeToo-movement in 2018, as well as an icon for sexual assault victims.<sup>3</sup> This movement used the Medusa imagery to portray the ongoing tradition of using, violating and demonising women within society, including art. The research into her actual

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<sup>1</sup> Garber and Vickers, *The Medusa Reader*; Haynes, *Pandora's Jar*, 85 – 112.

<sup>2</sup> Copeland Edwards, *Resurrecting Medusa: Facing the fierce Feminine*, passim.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Jacobs. "How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art." *New York Times*. 13-10-2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/arts/design/medusa-statue-manhattan.html>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

representation within modern art is almost non-existent. Due to her rising importance within modern society, it is pertinent to understand the way she is represented as both feminine and monstrous in modern art and society, and whether the femininity feeds into the monstrous depiction.

Important to understand within this research is the interpretation of the words 'feminine' and 'monstrous' that will be used throughout, as these words can mean different things to different people across different periods. The word 'monster' has been determined to be derived from the Latin word *monstrare*, meaning to show. This word is derived from *monstrum*, a noun describing an omen or a being that evokes fear. Ultimately, it all leads back to the verb *moneo*, which can be translated as 'to warn' or 'to advise'.<sup>4</sup> It is this origin of the words 'monster' and 'monstrous' meaning 'to warn' or 'to advise' that will be applied within the research. For 'feminine', the word derives from the Latin *femininus*, meaning 'womanly'. Within this research, when talking about feminine aspects, it will refer to the aspects making Medusa look like a woman. This choice was made to negate the subjectiveness that comes with analysing an artwork based on its beauty, as everyone regards beauty differently.

Before Medusa became known as the anthropomorphic being that she is often portrayed as in modern times, she was a mortal gorgon, appearing on the Greek goddess Pallas Athena's and King Agamemnon's shields as described in Homer's *The Iliad* (c. 750 – 725 BCE).<sup>5</sup> During this same period, imagery of Medusa started appearing in the form of *Gorgoneia*, ornaments depicting the faces of gorgons.<sup>6</sup> While these images have often been attributed to Medusa, it is unclear whether they all actually depict her. The appearances of the gorgons were often considered more beastly than human, as they had big pointed teeth or tusks, thick beards, protruding tongues, and large round eyes.<sup>7</sup> In the fifth century BCE, the portrayal of Medusa starts to depart from the *Gorgoneia* and portrays her in a more human-presenting way than before. Nevertheless, the story of Medusa does not get discussed to its fullest, until the Roman poet Ovid writes the story of the Greek hero Perseus. In his *Metamorphoses* (c. 43 BCE – 17 CE), Ovid describes Medusa as a previously beautiful woman, who got violated by the Greek god Poseidon on the steps of the temple of Pallas Athena. This act caused Athena to punish Medusa and transformed her into the gorgon we now know. It was then up

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<sup>4</sup> Riddle, *A Complete English-Latin and Latin-English Dictionary*, 193.

<sup>5</sup> Garber and Vickers, *The Medusa Reader*, 9 – 10.

<sup>6</sup> Madeleine Glennon. "Medusa in Ancient Greek Art." *The MET*. 2017.  
[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/medu/hd\\_medu.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/medu/hd_medu.htm). Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>7</sup> Haynes, *Pandora's Jar*, 90.

to Perseus to kill Medusa, and he did so by beheading her. After which, he would use the head of Medusa on multiple occasions to defeat Atlas and save Andromeda.<sup>8</sup>

In their book *The Medusa Reader*, Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers present the myth as written by Ovid as the origins of Medusa.<sup>9</sup> In their introduction, they summarise Ovid's myth, while appearing to overlook the previous imagery and mentions. However, the starting point in their book itself is the *Iliad* by Homer, and the mention of the shield with a gorgon face on it, the *Aegis*.<sup>10</sup> From this point on, their book offers a chronological overview of Medusa. These included the earliest mentions within myths, as well as research conducted into the meaning of her appearance and the allegorical uses.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Garber and Vickers believe that the dichotomy between the monstrous and beautiful Medusa is integral to her story and imagery.<sup>12</sup> Even though they mention these aspects, the research within their book does not go into detail about them. While Garber and Vickers speak of a beautiful Medusa, as that is the way Ovid described her, they also place this opposite her monstrous aspects. Equally, they appear to equate 'beautiful' to 'feminine', and while both are up to interpretation, it is the feminine aspects combined with the monstrous aspects that allow for a potentially more objective research and analysis.

Another important research conducted about the Medusa topic is the dissertation written by Gina Copeland Edwards. She uses a plethora of historical sources and offers an analysis of this literature from a feminist point of view. It aims to understand the way that previous researchers used the feminine archetype, and specifically Medusa, to denote a demonised version of the feminine.<sup>13</sup> The research is done with the use of depth psychology and utilises the Jungian archetypes of the Self. This research suggests that Medusa is 'a personification of [the] primordial unity with nature', which the archetypal hero has to separate itself from to become the autonomous self. Edwards concludes that Medusa is equally a personification of feminine sacrifice, as it was her death that would send Perseus to achieve his many victories.<sup>14</sup> Her research suggests that Medusa's historic portrayal should be interpreted as the masculine consciousness projecting itself upon the feminine archetype in order to achieve a full realisation of one's Self. Thus Medusa, by extension the feminine, is the shadow that has to be defeated, so that Perseus, by the extension the masculine, can fulfil its purpose. Both

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<sup>8</sup> Garber and Vickers, *The Medusa Reader*, 2 – 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 9 – 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 – 3.

<sup>13</sup> Copeland Edwards, *Resurrecting Medusa*, 4 – 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 199 – 201.



Edwards, and Garber and Vickers imply that Medusa's feminine side was what caused her to be perceived as monstrous, as often demonised entities were portrayed as female in Greek history. However, the authors appear to ignore the idea that one aspect does not necessarily have to lead to the other. The two aspects are not automatically opposites of one another. It is possible that it was her femininity that caused her monstrous reception, yet it is also possible that her being interpreted as monstrous was what caused her to be portrayed as feminine. Both these analyses by Copeland Edwards, and Garber and Vickers, are based on the historic canon of Medusa, neither of them uses sources from the current millennium.

The gap within the research thus appears on this front. Modern artworks are not taken into account when discussing Medusa, and mainly the big names are discussed when analysing Medusa's appearance and signification. However, if modern artists are still portraying Medusa using a plethora of formats, then one would assume that she is still considered relevant in today's society. To understand these artworks, and the way they fit within society, it is important to analyse them to realise why Medusa is still popular in modern times.

In order to answer the question, three case studies will be used. These three artworks were all created within the last 15 years, thus reflecting the contemporary mindset, as well as the potential change within it. The first of the case studies is a statue from 2008, made by Argentinian artist Luciano Garbati (b. 1973). The statue, named *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*, portrays Medusa holding the decapitated head of Perseus. (Fig. 1) This resin-cast statue is seven-foot tall and was created in Garbati's Argentinian studio. A replica was placed outside the criminal courthouse in Lower Manhattan, New York City.<sup>15</sup> This statue was based on, and an answer to, Benvenuto Cellini's (1500 – 1571) statue of *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, which stands in Florence, Italy.<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 2) This statue was chosen as it rose to fame in 2018 with the creation and rise of the #MeToo-movement. It became a big part of the discussion relating to sexual assault and the demonisation of women.<sup>17</sup> The second case study is a sculpture made by British artist Damien Hirst (b. 1965). *The Severed Head of Medusa* was created for an exhibition by Hirst called *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, which was on display in Venice in 2017.<sup>18</sup> (Fig.3) This sculpture was made into multiple versions, each

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<sup>15</sup> Jacobs, "How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art."

<sup>16</sup> Annaliese Griffin. "The story behind the Medusa statue that has become the perfect avatar for women's rage." *Quartz* (3 October 2018). <https://qz.com/quartz/1408600/the-medusa-statue-that-became-a-symbol-of-feminist-rage/>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>17</sup> Griffin, "The story behind the Medusa."

<sup>18</sup> Biography.com Editors. "Damien Hirst Biography." 25-5-2021. <https://www.biography.com/artist/damien-hirst>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

from different material, yet with the exact same look and expression. The final case study is a mural painted by the Spanish duo PichiAvo (Pichi, b. 1977; Avo, b. 1985). This artwork was created in 2019 as a part of the *Renegades* collection for the Hellenic Museum, in Melbourne, Australia.<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 4) The mural combines urban and classical art styles to present women from Greek myth, including Medusa, who made their mark on Greek history. This mural was chosen as it is a recent entry into the Medusa art canon, but also because the artists stated that their intentions were to break away from the negative portrayals and instead portray her as a complex and nuanced figure.<sup>20</sup>

These three case studies will be analysed for their usage of historic artworks and the way they apply the traditions and trends to portray Medusa in their own way. The artworks will undergo a visual analysis to determine which aspects are feminine and/or monstrous, and the way that they intertwine with each other. This analysis will be combined with existing research relating to artworks from the art canon, as each of these artworks has comparable aspects to other Medusa imagery. In analysing the literature written about Medusa, traditions and interpretations of her portrayal will be determined and applied to the modern artwork. A comparative analysis will be applied to the case studies to determine changes from their historic counterparts, as well as discuss changes over the course of 15 years from Garbati's artwork to PichiAvo's, and the way that the interpretation potentially changed. Furthermore, the specific contexts in which the artworks were created will be analysed and discussed to determine possible reasons and influences for the choices made by the artists, as well as to determine the way that these artworks can reflect on society and culture as a whole.

With the use of this methodology, as well as the use of these three case studies, there are limitations and choices to be made within this research. A big player within Medusa's story is Pallas Athena, as she was the goddess that transformed Medusa into a figure with snake hair. However, while acknowledging that she is important to the grander story, the three case studies have a commonality within them. They each relate to Medusa and Perseus specifically, with two focussing on the decapitation and the third explicitly disconnecting Medusa from the hero's story. While Athena will be mentioned on occasion, the bigger role that she played will not be discussed within the analyses of the artworks.

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<sup>19</sup> PichiAvo, "Renegades Project at the Hellenic Museum of Melbourne." <https://www.pichiavo.com/renegades-project-at-the-hellenic-museum-of-melbourne/>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

A limitation to this research is that the analysis of the contemporary artworks will be expanded upon using research discussing artworks from the historic canon. This will help provide insights into the choices made by the artists, as some modern artists follow a tradition and sometimes blatantly use historic artworks to help model their own. Nevertheless, the research about the older artworks is also related to a different context and time period, meaning that the way the trends and aspects were interpreted and perceived back then, can be vastly different now. This allows for a further discussion of the intentions of the artists, as well as for an analysis of the dialogue that some of these artworks partake in. With every analysis and comparison made, this notion will be taken into account.

Finally, the choice of the case studies also brings limitations, and potential pitfalls, with it. These three case studies were chosen for the same reason as to why Pallas Athena will not be a big part of the discussion, they each relate to Perseus and Medusa. This part of her myth allows for a better analysis of her monstrous and feminine sides, as in Perseus' tale, Medusa was the evil to be defeated. The limitations to these case studies are that they are only three works from an extensive art canon. While they will help in determining the visual aspects, and the signification, it is important to know that these determinations and conclusions might not apply to every Medusa artwork and interpretation within the canon. Nevertheless, it does provide a starting point and insight into these topics and ideas.

In the second chapter, the first case study, the artwork of Luciano Garbati, will be analysed and researched within the ongoing tradition of portraying Medusa. The statue will be discussed from two contexts, the first being the year the statue was created, and the second when the #MeToo-movement discovered the statue and used it for their campaign. In the third chapter, Damien Hirst's sculpture will be equally analysed for its feminine and monstrous aspects. However, for his sculpture, the creation context will play a bigger part in order to analyse the significance within society and the way it reflects the thought and intentions of this sculpture. In the fourth chapter, PichiAvo's mural will be analysed once again on the same grounds as the other two. For this artwork, the intentions of the artists are a big part of analysing what the aspects signify within society. Finally, in the conclusion, the three case studies will be brought together to finalize an answer to the research question.

## Chapter 2: Luciano Garbati's Medusa with the Head of Perseus

In this chapter, I will discuss the monstrous and feminine aspects of Luciano Garbati's *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*. (Fig. 1) This statue, made in 2008, depicts Medusa holding Perseus' decapitated head in one hand and a sword in the other.<sup>21</sup> In order to analyse this statue, while mainly focussing on its modern-day context, famous counterparts that were the intended basis of Garbati's work will also be brought into the analysis. One of those works is Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*. (Fig. 2)

The first part of this chapter will focus on the visual analysis of Garbati's statue. The feminine and monstrous aspects will be determined, discussed and analysed. What aspects can be classified as feminine and monstrous, and what could the potential meaning or interpretation be? In the second part, the previously discussed aspects will be contextualised within modern society, both at the time of creation and at the rise of popularity. How has society impacted the creation process of the artwork, and how does the artwork reflect upon society?

### Garbati's Medusa aspects and features

Luciano Garbati's *Medusa with the Head of Perseus* will be analysed in three categories, each focusing on her feminine and monstrous features. The first category to be discussed and analysed is her overall look, posture and body language. In the following category, the head of both Medusa and Perseus will be analysed in detail. Lastly, Medusa's body will be closely analysed and discussed.

#### Medusa's stance and overall look

The statue of Medusa depicts her naked, feet slightly in front of each other, leaning on one hip, with a sword in one hand and the head of Perseus in the other. Both of her arms are at her side. She is not holding up Perseus's head in victory, nor is she holding aloft her sword as if she is ready for battle. This is in direct opposition to Cellini's *Perseus*. In that statue, Cellini depicted Perseus holding up Medusa's head, and the sword, while at his side, was still pointed forward. While Cellini portrayed Perseus as a victor holding aloft his kill, Garbati depicts Medusa in a less victorious pose. Perseus's pose has often been interpreted as a victorious one, yet also as 'emphasizing [Medusa's] power and her share in the hero's triumphs'.<sup>22</sup> The stance of Medusa in Garbati's statue would thus suggest the opposite of this interpretation. Medusa is not relishing in the powers of Perseus. This could be

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<sup>21</sup> Jacobs, "How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art."

<sup>22</sup> Corretti, *Cellini's Perseus and Medusa and the Loggia dei Lanzi: Configurations of the Body of State*, 17.

interpreted as Medusa showing that she does not need Perseus' strength, as she is capable of defending herself. The aftermath depicted equally shows that Medusa can defend herself without having to resort to her petrifying powers. Medusa matched Perseus' fighting style, ending his life the way he would have ended hers.<sup>23</sup> Her not proudly showing off her victory also adds a level of warning to her overall body language. She defended herself from Perseus and she is not proud of what she did. Her victory is not one to celebrate, but rather one out of necessity. Yet, it shows that she is willing to fight for her right to live.

Nevertheless, this willingness is not necessarily present within the body language, but rather seen in her actions. In fact, her overall stance mirrors that of ancient Greek and Roman statues. It follows the traditions of *contrapposto*. Artists often used this stance to make a statue's appearance more lifelike and relaxed, as well as more human and aesthetically pleasing to the audience.<sup>24</sup> Multiple studies have been conducted into the effect of *contrapposto*, with each showing that this pose caused the subject to be perceived as more attractive.<sup>25</sup> In this case, Garbati appears to have simply mirrored the ancient Greek and Roman traditions, rather than being determined to portray Medusa as attractive. Her stance allows her to fit in with the statues from antiquity while portraying a more modern view of Medusa's story. Furthermore, the *contrapposto* stance makes her appear more relaxed in general, but also with her actions against Perseus. The idea that someone can be relaxed after decapitating another person, combined with the notion that she did it out of self-defence, showcases the monstrous qualities of Garbati's Medusa. Her overall look and stance are a warning to those that want to wrong her.

#### Medusa's head and facial expression

This idea is supported when closely analysing Medusa's face and her expression. Her gaze is directed at the audience, which is uncommon for Medusa statues.<sup>26</sup> She makes direct eye contact, in a sense staring them down. She is daring the audience, and with that dare, she also brings a warning. As this is a staring contest that, according to the myths, Medusa would win. Nevertheless, her expression has been interpreted as pained by some, yet determined by others.<sup>27</sup> Garbati himself said that to him

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<sup>23</sup> Keel, "The seen and unseen: How the image of Medusa in art reflects women in law and society", 36.

<sup>24</sup> Britannica Academic. "Contrapposto." <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/contrapposto/26075>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>25</sup> Pazhoohi, Macedo, Doyle, Arantes, "Waist-to-Hip Ratio as Supernormal Stimuli: Effect of Contrapposto Pose and Viewing Angle", 838 – 839.

<sup>26</sup> Keel, "The seen and unseen: How the image of Medusa in art reflects women in law and society", 36.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 35.

her expression 'is resolute, she had to accomplish what she achieved since she was protecting herself.'<sup>28</sup> For Medusa, it was a fight for survival and her expression mirrors her feelings on this.

Besides her expression, her facial features are also interesting to analyse. Medusa's identifying feature in most portrayals is her snake hair. This statue fits into this tradition to a certain degree. Without the title, this statue could have depicted a random woman holding a decapitated head. The snake hair adds to this differentiation. The snakes are coiled all around her head, and appear to be swept to the side, over one shoulder. However, the snakes seem to be disjointed from Medusa's head and some appear to just be present, rather than actually be part of her hair. Equally, from a distance, her hair can be interpreted as dreadlocks or even normal thick hair strands. It is when one gets a closer look that the snakes are revealed. This ambiguous hairstyle mimics the ambiguity of the hairstyles of Perseus and Medusa in Cellini's work. Perseus' hair is styled to be thick and with curved lines, combined with his helmet, the hair appears to 'mimic the intertwined serpents on Medusa's head'.<sup>29</sup> While this copying of techniques adds to the dialogue that Garbati wants to start with his statue, it also takes away from the individuality of Medusa, yet adds to her femininity. The ambiguity of the hair partially takes away her identifying feature, yet it allows her to be interpreted as womanly, instead of beastly.

Her other facial features are feminine, as well as human. Her eyes are not big and round, she does not have a beard, nor does she have tusks. Her face mirrors the anthropomorphic way that other artists have used to portray her. The femininity of her overall facial features is combined with the monstrous expression to create a representation of a fierce woman. Her face heeds the warning, yet it is not the femininity that causes this warning, but rather the piercing expression.

#### Perseus' head and facial expression

Medusa's face is opposed in this statue by Perseus' face and expression. Perseus' eyebrows are in a slight frown and his lips are slightly parted. His eyes are tilted up, with his irises mostly obscured by his eyelids. His expression appears pained, due to the eyebrows, yet also mimics the expression of a dead person. This expression mimics Cellini's depiction of the face of Medusa. The biggest difference is that Cellini's Medusa has her eyes closed. Garbati's choice to allow the audience to meet Perseus' eyes mirrors the effect created by the open eyes of Medusa. The audience can meet Perseus' gaze and look into the eyes of a dead man. They are met with an empty stare, and while the overall

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<sup>28</sup> Artincontext, "Medusa with the Head of Perseus – A Fresh Take on the Perseus Statue." 4-4-2022. <https://artincontext.org/medusa-with-the-head-of-perseus/>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>29</sup> Corretti, *Cellini's Perseus and Medusa*, 26.

expression is slightly pained, the eyes are empty with no true emotion being conveyed. This expression conveys another warning to the audience, that this is the fate of those that wrong Medusa.

Besides his expression, Perseus' hair also deviates from Cellini's depiction and is not mirroring Medusa's hair. Combining these two aspects, it can be stated that the two heads are not interchangeable within Garbati's work. Both are depicted as individuals, and thus Garbati clearly creates a distinction between victor and victim, even if unwilling. This adds to the monstrous effect of the statue as the distinction allows the audience to identify themselves with one or the other. They can see themselves as the victor or the victim, and depending on this choice this statue is either a warning or advice to potentially follow, metaphorically speaking.

The final aspect of the head of Perseus is the decapitation cut. Garbati has depicted this cut as uneven, yet no blood or entrails are pouring from the wound. The gore is kept to a minimum. Often the depiction of Medusa's decapitated head included a flow of blood, to showcase that the act had just happened. Here, the time of decapitation is ambiguous. While a decapitated head in and of itself is a warning sign, the decision to make it less gruesome makes the impact of the decapitation a little less apparent.

#### Medusa's body

The final part of Garbati's Medusa statue that will be analysed is Medusa's body. As mentioned, in this statue Medusa is naked. Besides her sword, she has no other equipment or accessories. Once again, Garbati mimics Cellini's Perseus with this. However, while Perseus was naked, he was not without his equipment. Besides a sword, he also had his winged helmet, his shield, and a harness on his person. Garbati's choice to depict Medusa without this equipment was meant to show the power of Medusa's victory. To him, this portrayal was meant to show the 'difference between a masculine victory and a feminine one'.<sup>30</sup> Even though Garbati labelled this victory and his depiction of Medusa and her body as a feminine one, it can also be argued that this shows a monstrous victory. One where Medusa shows that she can defend herself without help from the gods and their gadgets. She is showing the world how strong she is and her victory without godly equipment supports this imagery.

However, while the overall look of her body may reflect both the monstrous and feminine aspects, it also brings forth an interesting topic. How feminine can a statue be, when it was created by a man? Medusa's body portrays the body of a human woman. This was Garbati's intention, to

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<sup>30</sup> Griffin, "The story behind the Medusa."

humanise her.<sup>31</sup> While Medusa does look human and feminine, in the sense that she looks like a woman, this statue still depicts her with a slim and lean body. Certainly not every woman mirrors this image, and while Medusa is not meant to be a representation of every woman, Garbati's portrayal makes her appear almost like a model. This aspect, the slim waist, while remaining feminine and not taking away from her monstrous side, does show that the male gaze is still affecting the depiction of women.

This idea, that this is an idealised version of a woman from Garbati's point of view, is also supported when looking at Medusa's breasts and pubic region. While the breasts are not big, they are still sizable and perky. Equally, the pubic region has no hair, nor does the rest of her body. Garbati created a nude statue according to his ideas of a woman's body. Every woman has hair around her southern regions, yet he decided to give her none. Yet, he did give her perfectly sculpted breasts. Nevertheless, the statue still presents Medusa in a humanised and feminine way, even if idealised.

This idealisation does not take away from Medusa's strong appearance. When taking a closer look at Medusa's arms, stomach and back, one can see toned muscles. Her arm holding Perseus' head has visible veins, suggesting that Medusa is flexing her arm slightly. The arm holding the sword is doing the same, yet here her bicep is more visible. Her back and stomach also have slightly visible muscles. Overall, Garbati portrays Medusa as a woman with visible muscles, suggesting a level of strength. This interpretation of strength is aided when looking at the representation of Perseus by Cellini. Perseus has visible and bigger muscles than Medusa. Yet it was Medusa who defeated him. Thus, Medusa's strength in Garbati's statue is highlighted by the subtlety of her muscles.

The statue of Garbati portrays Medusa as a fierce opponent, as well as a reluctant victor. Her entire body, in combination with her stance and facial expression, can be interpreted as menacing, yet determined. She is not showing off her victory, nor is she trying to hide it. She is not portrayed as proud, yet she appears resolute. Garbati's portrayal of Medusa shows an internal battle about her actions. The visual aspects create an amalgamation of Medusa's monstrous and feminine sides. Garbati did not lean one way or the other. He did not demonise Medusa for what she did, nor did he take away from the gravity of her actions.

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<sup>31</sup> Sarah Cascone. "The Artist behind a (very questionable) nude public statue of Medusa as a Feminist Avenger defends his work." *Artnet* (13 October 2020). <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/medusa-courthouse-statue-1914971>. Last visited 28-7-2022.



## Garbati and Society

Having analysed and discussed Medusa's monstrous and feminine aspects, in this section, these aspects will be contextualised and analysed for the impact that society had on the statue and the statue had on society. Equally, the aspects will be analysed for their reflection of society, the way they show the ideas about Medusa and highlight the debates surrounding her myth. This analysis will be done from two different time periods because the statue was created in 2008, but rose to fame in 2018. These time periods are a decade apart, and thus represent two different societies.

### Time of Creation: 2008

Garbati has always stated that he created his statue as a response to Cellini's Perseus. While the two statues have been compared in the visual analysis above, it is still pertinent to know why Garbati chose to create his Medusa. As mentioned, Cellini's Perseus stands in Florence, in the *Loggia dei Lanzi*. Garbati, while born in Argentina, spent a lot of his time in Florence.<sup>32</sup> He would often pass Cellini's statue and after a while, he started to question the statue, but more importantly, started to question the representation and 'the characterization of Medusa as a monster', in this sense, as a terrifying creature.<sup>33</sup> At that time, Ovid's myth about Medusa had already been represented countless times, yet Medusa was still demonised. These representations, combined with seeing Cellini's work, caused Garbati to think about a role reversal. What would it look like if Medusa had won, instead of Perseus? He wanted to show that Medusa's portrayals would not always be a representation of her doom and highlight that there is a woman behind the decapitated head.<sup>34</sup> Thus, in the creation of his Medusa statue, he used Cellini's Perseus to create a polar opposite, yet one that was still situated within the myth itself. He did not swap the roles of Perseus and Medusa, but rather made Medusa the victor.

Cellini's work had the biggest impact on Garbati's Medusa, nevertheless, Garbati still used his own imagination and conceptualisation of Medusa to make the statue its own entity. He made choices to depict her in this way, which also reflects his own ideas about women and Medusa in general. While the choice to depict Medusa with a slim figure is an idealisation of Garbati, it is also a reflection of the decade before its creation. At that point in time, Medusa was starting to be used as an icon for the haute couture fashion brand Versace, because to Gianni Versace her image

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<sup>32</sup> Artincontext, "Medusa with the Head of Perseus – A Fresh Take on the Perseus Statue."

<sup>33</sup> Griffin, "The story behind the Medusa".

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

represented seduction.<sup>35</sup> This idea of the seductive Medusa almost seems to be ‘intrinsic to her story.’<sup>36</sup> An aspect that is reflected in Garbati’s Medusa. Nevertheless, Garbati has stated that he did not create the statue with the feminist movement in mind. He created it from a personal desire to depict the role reversal, to bring his idea of a victorious Medusa to life.<sup>37</sup> When taking this into consideration, as well as the other happenings surrounding Medusa at that time, the idealised version is a product of the time and thoughts of Garbati. To him, it was a personal project, one where he did not think the world would popularise it. Yet, that is exactly what happened.

#### The year of popularisation: 2018

While there is not a lot that can be found or said about the time of creation, nor the impact this had on society, the year of popularisation was also the year of controversy and defending the statue. In 2018, the #MeToo-movement started to gain traction and this statue became a symbol for victims and feminists, yet the visual aspects that made the statue both monstrous and feminine also caused debates and got a lot of criticism.

#### Impact within Society

However, to understand what this statue shows within society, it is important to understand the impact that it had on society. In 2018, more and more women were coming out and sharing their stories about the violence and sexual assault that they had to endure. As the stories kept pouring out, a photo that Garbati had shared on his Facebook earlier in 2018, started to gain traction and went viral because it got used as a meme.<sup>38</sup> People were using the image as a reaction to the countless stories of violence directed at women. Most often the image was accompanied by the text ‘Be thankful we only want equality, and not payback.’<sup>39</sup> People had a way to show their rage, while their calls for equality and justice were aided by the myth of Medusa, a demonised victim. Not only did the statue have an impact on people online, but a physical replica of the statue was also placed in Lower Manhattan. The building it stood in front of was the court where many men accused during the #MeToo-movement were prosecuted, most notably Harvey Weinstein.<sup>40</sup> Now people would also be confronted by the statue in real life. This confrontation is what many women wanted from this

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<sup>35</sup> Karoglou, “Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art”, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Haynes, *Pandora’s Jar*, 110.

<sup>37</sup> Jacobs, “How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art.”

<sup>38</sup> Griffin, “The story behind the Medusa”.

<sup>39</sup> Haynes, *Pandora’s Jar*, 110.

<sup>40</sup> Jacobs, “How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art.”

statue, which is why they shared its images and supported the placement of the replica. With the way Garbati has portrayed Medusa, he has created a mirror in a way. The image is one of revenge and self-defence, yet the gaze that Medusa offers to the audience causes a form of self-reflection. Medusa is used almost as a shadow that the audience must defeat to fulfil one's purpose in life, to reach full self-realisation and self-actualisation.<sup>41</sup> Instead of this resulting in the feminine being defeated by the masculine, it flips this theory around and tries for a masculine defeat. The conventions known within the male-dominated society are put into question. This statue showing feminine rage against their aggressor combined with the stories of both Medusa and other victims allows for society to realise that stories are shaped and manipulated by the media to create the biggest amount of sensation. The same can be said about art. Shaping Medusa into a villain allowed for the archetype hero to gain fame and allowed artists and filmmakers to create a dramatic and action-packed work demonising the feminine and idolising the masculine. Garbati's statue aided women in their battle against this conventional idea. It helped give women a voice in a male-dominated society, it gave them the means to express themselves against the violence that they endured, and it created an icon for them to use against the male-dominated judgement process and justice system.<sup>42</sup>

#### *Response of Society*

Even though the impact on society and the #MeToo-movement has been substantial, the internet still had a lot to say about this image, as well as its artist. Garbati has spoken out about the response that the statue had garnered, mentioning that 'many saw the image as cathartic'.<sup>43</sup> Equally, he mentioned that 'something in the sculpture has been captivating women's attention'.<sup>44</sup> With these statements, Garbati tried to make his statue appear more feminist than he meant for her to be.

While the statue did resonate with many women, a lot more have shared their criticism of it. The biggest complaints were that this version of Medusa was created by a man, yet was being used to support women opposing male-dominated society and violence by men.<sup>45</sup> This harkens back to the idealised aspects created by Garbati, and the way that he created his statue from the male perspective. Furthermore, Medusa's body was scrutinised as she was depicted with a slim body, but without pubic hair. Some women saw the lack of pubic hair as a reflection of 'idealized beauty

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<sup>41</sup> Copeland Edwards, *Resurrecting Medusa*, 4 – 5.

<sup>42</sup> Keel, "The seen and unseen: How the image of Medusa in art reflects women in law and society", 36.

<sup>43</sup> Jacobs, "How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art."

<sup>44</sup> Cascone, "The Artist behind a (Very Questionable) Nude Public Statue of Medusa as a Feminist Avenger defends his work."

<sup>45</sup> Jacobs, "How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art."

conventions.<sup>46</sup> Once again, Garbati defended himself by saying that ‘the pubic hair can easily become either an unwanted distraction or an artificial ornament’.<sup>47</sup> He also stated that this decision was made to mirror the ‘tradition of classical sculpture.’<sup>48</sup> Both sides of this debate have valid arguments. Furthermore, this discussion allows for society to reflect on the beauty standards and creates a discussion about the importance of not only showing idealised versions of both men and women.

The last complaint that many people had, was that Garbati’s statue is used in support of sexual assault victims, yet it shows Medusa holding the head of Perseus and not Poseidon.<sup>49</sup> However, this becomes a debate between intentions and interpretations. As Garbati intended to reverse the roles of Cellini’s Perseus while becoming popular this Medusa statue was interpreted as being about sexual violence. Interpretations can change, but the subject matter as per the artist is a bit more rigid. Furthermore, one could argue that while this statue is not about sexual violence, it is still about male violence against a woman. Perseus decapitated her, appropriated her head and used it as an object in his quests. In a sense, this statue is about the objectification of women, and the way violence is used by men against women in order for them to be victorious in their life.

#### Reflections on Society

The many iterations of Medusa within society reflect society’s ideas about Medusa. Garbati’s statue can tell us that an artist’s intentions do not always reflect society’s interpretations. Furthermore, the popularity of Garbati’s Medusa shows us that in contemporary society, women are ready to share their sexual assault stories with the world, finding solidarity with each other. The visual aspects used by Garbati show that in everything that someone creates there is a certain level of creator bias, and here it is present in the form of the idealised version of Medusa’s body. Furthermore, this statue shows that while Medusa’s identifying aspect is her snake hair, it does not have to be the main focus of attention. Yet, with this statue, the audience’s attention is drawn to the payback enacted by Medusa. This is a reflection of the rage of women and helps these women express these feelings in a non-lethal way.<sup>50</sup> The amount of criticism that this statue received can be seen as the creation of traction surrounding the grander debate about women’s places in society, and the violence they endure. However, every reflection on society shows that the statue of Medusa is a tool used to

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<sup>46</sup> Cascone, “The Artist behind a (Very Questionable) Nude Public Statue of Medusa as a Feminist Avenger defends his work.”

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Jacobs, “How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art.”

<sup>50</sup> Griffin, “The story behind the Medusa”.

express and confront society. While Garbati tried to humanise Medusa and separate her from her myth, to keep her from becoming an object, she became a pawn for society instead. The statue is used for the personal gain of others. Feminists use the statue to try and instil fear in men. Sexual assault victims use the statue to support their fight for justice. Finally, Garbati used the statue too. While it appears that he uses the statue to show his support for the movements, instead he uses the statue's fame to sell miniature replicas of the statue for mostly personal monetary gain.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the reception of the statue within society shows that while Medusa may be a pawn, her story resonates with many individuals and that the more reimaginings of her story there are, like this statue, the more support and understanding she gets from society.

Luciano Garbati's Medusa with the Head of Perseus is a statue that carries a lot of weight within contemporary society. The main reason for this is its popularity with the feminist and #MeToo-movement. Medusa has often been interpreted as a villainous creature who was heroically defeated by Perseus. Yet Garbati chose to depict the story the other way around. He depicted the story of a woman who defended herself against the needless violence of a man. The way Garbati ended up portraying her caused her to be perceived as both woman and warning, as both feminine and monstrous. These aspects do not feed into each other, they coexist. The monstrous aspects, like her expression and her stance, provide the audience with the warning that Medusa is willing to defend herself and that she is strong enough to do so. The feminine aspects, like her overall body type and hairstyle, allow the audience to relate to the statue, as well as see Medusa as a woman, instead of a creature. These monstrous and feminine aspects were also the ones that were used to reflect on society's norms and standards, as well as offer a way for society to take a look at their own judgements and justice systems. Garbati's Medusa statue reflected society's desire to fight the oppressive system and call out the abuse and violence that women had endured. However, it also allowed for the debate about women's beauty standards and the way that a statue created by a man will always be made by the male gaze. Medusa's act of self-defence is a warning to all men; be glad that women are only sharing their stories, instead of enacting revenge.

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<sup>51</sup> Jacobs, "How a Medusa Sculpture From a Decade Ago Became #MeToo Art."

### Chapter 3: Damien Hirst's *Severed Head of Medusa*

Unlike Luciano Garbati, Damien Hirst chose to portray Medusa as only a severed head with his sculpture *The Severed Head of Medusa*. (Fig. 3) This series of sculptures was created from 2008 onward.<sup>52</sup> Each of the entries depicted Medusa in the same pose, each made from a different material, yet some were also in different stages of degradation.<sup>53</sup> In total, Hirst made 5 versions of Medusa's severed head. Hirst's sculpture portrays Medusa with her mouth open and snakes coiling around her head.<sup>54</sup> In this analysis, the main focus for analysis will be on the monochrome black and bronze version, yet the other iterations will be brought into the analysis as well. Furthermore, similar to Garbati's statue, Hirst's Medusa is also reminiscent of older artworks of Medusa, with Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's (1571 – 1610) *Medusa* often being accredited as the inspiration for Hirst's work.<sup>55</sup> (Fig. 5) Nevertheless, the works of Peter Paul Rubens (1577 – 1640) and Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598 – 1680) will also be used within the analysis. (Fig. 6 & Fig. 7)

The analysis of Damien Hirst's Medusa sculpture will start with visual analysis and determine the feminine and monstrous aspects. This section will be followed by an analysis of the impact that this statue had on society, as well as the way that it reflects the view of society of Medusa. While this analysis will focus on the Medusa sculpture, it will also take the grander exhibition into account, as this statue was created specifically for the exhibition with a specific purpose.

#### Visual aspects and features of the *Severed Head of Medusa*

Similar to Garbati's Medusa, Hirst's Medusa can also be divided into smaller categories. These will aid in fully analysing Medusa. The first will focus on the overall impression, as well as the other iterations of the sculpture. Next, the neck and the cut will be analysed. Following this, the aspects of the hair will be determined. Finally, the facial expression will be analysed.

#### Overall look

The overall look of Medusa in Hirst's sculpture is one of agony. Her face is twisted in a scream, the snakes appear to be in agony, and her neck is brutally cut with the bone still visible. The head itself is positioned sideways as if she has fallen to the ground. In this version, Medusa is a monochrome black

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<sup>52</sup> Artsy. "The Severed Head of Medusa." <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/damien-hirst-the-severed-head-of-medusa>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>53</sup> Geuna, "Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable", 37.

<sup>54</sup> Artsy, "The Severed Head of Medusa."

<sup>55</sup> Laura Cumming. "Damien Hirst: Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable review – beautiful and monstrous." *The Guardian*. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/apr/16/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-review-venice>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

bronze, yet other versions are made of malachite, gold and silver, crystal glass, and weathered bronze.<sup>56</sup> The version discussed in this research is intact, with every aspect present and visible. This is not the case for two of the other versions, as the gold and silver one is missing a chunk of her right cheek, and the weathered bronze version is in multiple pieces. Nevertheless, it was the black bronze version that got created first and is considered the original that the others were based on.

In general, this sculpture appears to be mainly feminine, yet once again victimised. Hirst chose to depict Medusa in line with Caravaggio's shield depicting Medusa, but also in line with what Garbati wanted to counter with his Medusa. They are showing her at the worst part of her myth, depicting the part of her story where Medusa as a being ends, and Medusa as an object starts. Caravaggio captured Medusa's image right after her decapitation, where she still had time to look at the audience and react. Both Caravaggio and Hirst portray Medusa only as her head. While the presence of Perseus is implied, he is not shown. The focus is on Medusa's decapitation and the capturing of her response. By taking away the physical representation of Perseus, Hirst and Caravaggio tried to portray Medusa as a victim, yet their portrayals seem to lean more towards objectification. Caravaggio tried to mirror the Aegis, while Hirst is mirroring Caravaggio.<sup>57</sup> Caravaggio's depiction of Medusa, thus, can be interpreted as monstrous, as Medusa was used on the Aegis as a warning to anyone daring to attack Athena. However, Hirst made a 3D copy of this 2D image, and instead of placing her on a shield, put only her head on display. This takes away a grand portion of her monstrous aspects, as the focus of this sculpture now lies more with the pain of a woman hurt by a man.

#### The decapitation

This pain inflicted on Medusa has been portrayed in a plethora of ways. Both Caravaggio and Peter Paul Rubens opted to portray Medusa at the time of decapitation with blood still pouring out. However, Hirst decided to portray the decapitation as an uneven cut, with bone protruding from it, yet no blood spilling out. This implies that it was not a clean cut and probably took many swings, but also that Medusa is no longer bleeding. While Hirst captures the realism of trying to behead someone, this cut implies more the amount of pain and suffering that Medusa had to endure for this image to be created. The violence portrayed in this sculpture allows the audience to see Medusa as a victim.

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<sup>56</sup> Pinault Collection. "Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable – exhibition guide." 2017. <https://www.palazzograssi.it/en/exhibitions/past/damien-hirst-at-palazzo-grassi-and-punta-della-dogana-in-2017-1/>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>57</sup> Marin, "Caravaggio's 'Head of Medusa': A Theoretical Perspective", 144 – 145.

The way Hirst has presented her decapitation can be interpreted as a warning in a sense. Not one where the audience should fear Medusa and her powers, but rather one where they are warned of Perseus and his brutality. The violation of Medusa's body with this brutal cut shows the audience that Perseus was violent in his murder. While Perseus is often seen as the hero of the story, in this iteration, Perseus is more the villain. Thus, the warning signs of the decapitation cut are more aimed at warning the audience about the stereotypical hero, than the stereotypical villain.

#### The hair

The overall look and the decapitation are small aspects of the sculpture compared to the hair, facial expression and features. These features draw the audience's focus first. The hair consists of 14 different kinds of snakes. All of them are modelled after the most venomous and poisonous snakes on the planet.<sup>58</sup> This knowledge about the snakes already gives this aspect a monstrous interpretation. Furthermore, the snakes are still alive. They appear to be screaming, at both the air and the audience. The way they are depicted can be interpreted as a form of expressing pain, yet also as a form of intimidation, showing anger, or as a scare tactic. They are a warning to the audience to not get close, as they are dangerous. Moreover, the monstrous aspects of Medusa's hair are supported by the fact that her hair is made up of actual snakes. Her hair cannot be interpreted as dreadlocks or normal hair, as was the case with Garbati's Medusa. This depiction of her hair is reminiscent of Bernini's Medusa. Bernini depicted Medusa's hair as individual thick snakes. Each of them went a different direction and appeared to be growing from her head. Bernini's Medusa also portrays the snakes as looking at the audience. Hirst does the same with his Medusa. Nevertheless, Bernini depicted more snakes, whereas Hirst shows only 14. Hirst's choice to portray the snakes even bigger, as compared to Bernini, implies that Hirst wanted to depict each snake individually to truly convey their importance for the image of Medusa. Where Bernini went for softness in both his overall look, as well as with the hair, Hirst went for detail and realism. Medusa's hair is one big warning sign for the audience.

#### The facial expression

The other focus of the sculpture is Medusa's facial expression, and features, showing a silent scream. Her mouth is wide open, as are her eyes. However, in this sculpture, Hirst follows more traditions of the old ways to depict Medusa. While the eyes are open, they do not look at the audience. They are staring into the distance with no thought or emotion behind them. Nevertheless, these features are

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<sup>58</sup> Geuna, "Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable", 37.



not resembling the gorgoneia, and are anthropomorphic and womanly. Even though Medusa appears to be screaming, the amount of emotion conveyed by her facial expression is less when compared to both Caravaggio and Rubens, as well as the emotions of the snakes. Hirst has depicted her emotion as pained and screaming, yet also as bland and lacklustre. Caravaggio portrayed Medusa's expression as one of shock, where her eyes are looking at the act. This gaze is also the centre and focus of the artwork.<sup>59</sup> Thus, Medusa's powers are central, even if they did not serve their purpose in this case. In Rubens' painting, Medusa is dead on the ground, but her facial expression is detailed and conveys the horror of the situation. The way her eyebrows are arched, and her eyes are wide and staring at what happened, the gravity of the situation is conveyed. This is not present in Hirst's work. While the message is still conveyed, the gravity of it all is not. Hirst's Medusa's facial expression is not a warning for the audience to fear her. The overall facial features also subtract from the monstrous aspects of Medusa, yet add in feminine ones.

However, the femininity of this sculpture can be put into question, not only because of the same reason as with Garbati. This is a man sculpting a woman, thus creating her from the male gaze. It is also a sculpture said to be based on Caravaggio, who used his own likeness as a model for his Medusa painting.<sup>60</sup> Hirst copied this, and thus the femininity is put into question. Caravaggio's use of his own likeness has been interpreted as a convenience, as well as his wanting to preserve his own image and life to counter the struggle of mortality.<sup>61</sup> While Hirst did not use his own likeness for Medusa, he did use Caravaggio's and thus the same interpretation applies to his sculpture. They both portray Medusa as feminine at first glance, but once the knowledge of their creation gets known, this femininity gets taken away. However, that poses a problem too. Men can appear feminine, while women can appear masculine, and still be seen as men and women, respectively. Thus, the femininity of Hirst's Medusa can be called ambiguous.

Hirst's Medusa falls within the tradition of portraying her as the victim. Yet, he does not demonise her and attempts to make her look feminine. He succeeds in anthropomorphising her, while femininity is a point of discussion. The biggest monstrous aspect of this sculpture is her hair. The snakes seem to represent danger, as they scream and show anger towards the audience. Combining this with the knowledge of their venomous and poisonous status gives the audience a big warning to

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<sup>59</sup> Marin, "Caravaggio's 'Head of Medusa': A Theoretical Perspective", 144 – 145.

<sup>60</sup> Keel, "The seen and unseen", 33.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

not get closer to Medusa. The snakes' warning can also be interpreted as them trying to protect Medusa. In the end, Damien Hirst's Severed Head of Medusa is an ambiguous representation of a woman victimised by society. Her monstrous aspects seem to be of less importance, compared to her femininity and her objectification, which in turn can say a lot about society, as well as Hirst.

### Hirst's Medusa and Society

To determine what those aspects signify within society, one first needs to understand why Hirst created his Medusa, and what influenced him to do it the way that he did. The response to the sculpture and its aspects will be discussed to realise the way the audience interpreted the sculpture. However, this sculpture, and its exhibition, were mainly reviewed by art critics, thus their response will have to be nuanced when discussing general society. Finally, combining the response and the intentions will determine the way this sculpture reflects society's thinking about Medusa.

### Influences on Hirst's Medusa

There is not a lot of research available about Damien Hirst's Medusa, nor his intentions. However, the first appearance of the sculpture, and its different versions, is when it was presented in the exhibition *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*. According to the official press release of the exhibition, Hirst's Medusa showed a plethora of the central themes of the exhibition, 'including horror, fear, sex, death, decapitation, as well as the legend itself.'<sup>62</sup> According to Hirst, Medusa was thus a symbol for sinful vices. This thought influenced his creation process, as he saw Medusa rather as a femme fatale than as a victim. This harkens back to Garbati's representation, stating that often Medusa was seen as a seductive being. Nevertheless, the theme of decapitation is one that is perfectly represented by Medusa. However, this falls within the traditional stereotype of portraying and objectifying Medusa as just her head. This objectification is further shown when once again looking into the reason for the sculpture's creation. While often artworks are created for an artist's exhibitions, the way Hirst set this one up was by portraying it as an archaeological find of treasures in a shipwreck, which turned out to be fictional.<sup>63</sup> The intentions of the exhibition, and thus also of this sculpture, was to try and create an authentic art historic exhibition, with objects from antiquities all over the world. The use of the Medusa image was thus a means for Hirst to try and connect to Greek and Roman antiquity, as well as draw popularity and attention from the excitement of a new

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<sup>62</sup> Geuna, "Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable", 38.

<sup>63</sup> Pinault Collection, "Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable – exhibition guide".

archaeological find. The way Hirst depicted his Medusa thus had nothing to do with monstrous or feminine aspects, but rather with the attention and popularity that could be gained from her image.

These intentions, however, are not new, as Medusa's imagery was often used for her popularity or for her symbolism. Caravaggio wanted to make a statement about the mortality of men, using Medusa's powers and not her femininity. He wanted men to be confronted by their weaknesses and he personified them as a woman. Nevertheless, while implying femininity, he ends up suppressing this aspect by using himself as a model and putting himself in the centre of attention. By using the likeness of Medusa, basing it on representations of her made by male artists, Hirst continues this tradition of men portraying Medusa at the worst part of her story. In creating her multiple times, Hirst also emphasises this aspect, as it is a central theme of his exhibition. Whereas Caravaggio implies a level of symbolism, Hirst forgoes this and sees her as a mere object. The implications are there, because of the similarity to Caravaggio, Rubens, and Bernini, however, he does not execute nor explain them. He simply portrayed Medusa, because of her convenient link to antiquity and his themes.

#### Societal, and art critical, response

The way Medusa is described by art critics, as well as the informational texts of Museums, sheds some light on society's views of her, and the way that Hirst portrayed her. To critics, Hirst's depiction fits with his popularity as an eccentric artist who is interested in the macabre and unusual.<sup>64</sup> To others, his Medusa is a representation of 'everything that was non-Greek', as well as having 'bloodthirsty fangs and [a] wicked smile'.<sup>65</sup> This text accompanied a version of Hirst's Medusa while it was at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England. To them, Medusa is 'the other', someone that can be used to differentiate yourself from. Thus, according to the Ashmolean, Hirst's Medusa is a mirror for the audience, a way for them to reflect on themselves. This was also said about Caravaggio's Medusa.

Nevertheless, some art critics are less excited about Hirst's fake shipwreck exhibition. One of them states that the exhibition was 'founded on a compelling concept that has had the life strangled out of it.'<sup>66</sup> The idea behind fake treasures from a fake shipwreck would have been more impactful if

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<sup>64</sup> Tiernan Morgan. "Damien Hirst's Shipwreck Fantasy Sinks in Venice." *Hyperallergic*. 2017.

<https://hyperallergic.com/391158/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-venice-punta-della-dogana-palazzo-grassi/>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>65</sup> Ashmolean Museum. "Damien Hirst: The Severed Head of Medusa." <https://www.ashmolean.org/event/damien-hirst-medusa>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>66</sup> Morgan, "Damien Hirst's Shipwreck Fantasy sinks in Venice".

the artworks had appeared more authentic than they do. Hirst used the likeness of celebrities to portray statues of gods and goddesses, which could have been used to showcase the value that modern society places on celebrities and the way that some are worshipped to such a degree that it begins to look like a religion. Yet, he never does this and instead sticks with the story of the artworks being authentic pieces of antiquity. This response is supported by the repeated use of Medusa's image through different materials. Hirst's execution is what lays waste to an interesting concept.

Furthermore, Hirst's Medusa, as well as the other artworks from the exhibition, were never meant to be lasting artworks within the museum scene. They were always meant to be auctioned off and sold.<sup>67</sup> While some saw this as Hirst trying to question how one determines the value of art, the other response is that Hirst created a spectacle for his own monetary gains. While the exhibition itself was presumably expensive due to its location in Florence, as well as the use of 2 museums and the size of some artworks, Hirst did it with the help of the owner of the museums, French billionaire François Pinault.<sup>68</sup> One could argue that selling the artworks would account for the money spent on creating the exhibition. However, the financial gain, the promotion of the museums, as well as the increased market value of the artworks, appear to be the driving force for creating the exhibition and its artworks. Thus, the way that Medusa is depicted by Hirst is not as important, but rather the financial benefit that comes with it.

The art critical response is both praising and destructive at the same time. Yet, this only represents a small portion of society. The general audience response to Medusa, and by extension the exhibit, is drowned by the sheer volume of art critics reviewing Hirst's work. What could be argued is that for the general public, a portrayal of Medusa in this way is nothing new. While more grotesque than other depictions, this image is what people often attribute to Medusa. Thus, the general audience's response to her sculpture could go the same two ways as with any of her depictions. They could view her as a victim, as well as feel sorry for her and the pain she endured, the pain that is expressed in the sculpture. Or they could see a decapitated head of a creature often portrayed as the villain within the media. This response would not be based on Hirst's depiction, but rather on the audience's knowledge and interpretation of Medusa's story.

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<sup>67</sup> Cumming, "Damien Hirst: Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable review – beautiful and monstrous".

<sup>68</sup> Morgan, "Damien Hirst's Shipwreck Fantasy sinks in Venice".

### Reflection within society

Nevertheless, even without clearly stated intentions and responses from general society, this sculpture still reflects on society and the way some view Medusa. Hirst's Medusa shows that within society, artists and media can warp reality into fitting their own narrative. Hirst used another artist's portrayal of Medusa to recreate for his own benefit. While at the same time, Caravaggio already used Medusa to confront men about their weaknesses. Hirst's portrayal of Medusa shows that she is still objectified and used. This sculpture shows that within society women are still used for the personal and monetary gain of men. The choices made by Hirst also show that Medusa's story is still used for sensation and intrigue. The use of her image to represent not only the exhibition but also its central themes shows that Hirst tried to use Medusa's status to gain attention for his work. While many artists use a centrepiece to get the attention of the audience, the use of Medusa by Hirst reflects society's tendencies to see Medusa as just her head. A central theme of his exhibition is 'decapitation'. Hirst, and the exhibition's curator, imply that Medusa is thus the perfect example of decapitation. While this is true, as that is where Medusa's story ends and Perseus' story starts, it still shows that Medusa's life is of no importance to some within society. Her death is what people know, and the way Perseus used her head is what they remember. Thus, what Hirst's Medusa mainly signifies within society is that at the time of the sculpture's creation, as well as the year of the exhibition, her monstrous or feminine aspects are second to the implications of the decapitation.

Hirst's Medusa showcases that within society Medusa is still a tool or an object, as Garbati's Medusa did as well. Nevertheless, Hirst takes this one step further. Where Garbati chose to use Medusa in support of devictimizing her, Hirst doubled down on her decapitation and violation of her head. He took away the context of the shield, as with Caravaggio's portrayal, and made her head and facial expression the centre of attention. This focus on her head alludes more to the story of Perseus than it does to Medusa, yet she is the subject. Hirst's choice of depicting Medusa's features as feminine, and her snake hair as monstrous, shows that Hirst did not stray from other portrayals and stuck with the original myth of Medusa. He does not challenge society's norms and values. He does not try to convince the audience that Medusa is a victim, even if some may interpret it as such. He shows her decapitated head because she portrays the exhibition themes. He uses her likeness to promote the fake shipwreck as if from antiquity. By portraying Medusa as just her head, without any context, Hirst has diminished her and her powers to a singular moment in her life. There is no implication that this sculpture can petrify people because they are mesmerised, or that the audience should fear

Medusa's power. Rather the only danger of the sculpture is the snakes. To Hirst, Medusa is nothing more than a decapitated head, a story that people know of, and a way for him to earn money and recognition. As with Garbati's statue, this sculpture's femininity can be questioned due to the artist being a man, as well as the basis being a painting by a man of a woman modelled after a man. What this shows within society is that even though Medusa's story is being retold and she is being shown as the victim of the myth, Medusa is still seen by some as an object, using her in a similar fashion as Perseus did. To the audience, this highlights that without the proper knowledge, Medusa is not monstrous nor feminine, but rather that she is simply a decapitated head.

## Chapter 4: PichiAvo's *Medusa*

In this final chapter, the most recent case study will be presented, analysed and discussed. This portrayal of Medusa was depicted by PichiAvo in 2019 for the *Renegades* exhibition of the Hellenic Museum, in Melbourne, Australia.<sup>69</sup> (Fig. 4) The mural shows Medusa, up-close, as she is lying on the ground, yelling towards the sky, while being surrounded by urban art and graffiti words.<sup>70</sup> For the analysis of PichiAvo's Medusa, like with Hirst and Garbati, historic Medusa portrayals will be used for the visual analysis and the discussion as to what these aspects reflect within society. These artworks are two Medusa busts made by Harriet Hosmer (1830 – 1908) and Evelyn de Morgan (1855 – 1919). (Fig. 8 & Fig. 9)

In the first section of this case study analysis, the focus will lie on the visual analysis of the mural by PichiAvo. The different aspects will be discussed and their femininity and/or monstrosity will be determined. In the second section, the focus will be on the impact of society on the artist, the mural's impact on society, as well as the audience's responses and what those aspects, combined with the visual analysis, can show about society.

### *PichiAvo's Medusa, physical aspects*

To determine PichiAvo's *Medusa's* feminine and monstrous features, similar to the other chapters, this visual analysis will be divided into separate categories. However, this section's category division will be a combination of the ones used by Garbati and Hirst. Starting off, as with the other case studies, the overall look of Medusa will be analysed. This will be combined with a discussion about the urban art style used in the mural. After this, the stance and position of Medusa's body will be discussed, which will lead to an analysis of her body. Lastly, her hair and facial expression will be analysed and the features determined.

### *Overall look, and urban setting*

The first thing that can be noted about this mural is the amount of colour that is present. All previous case studies have presented Medusa as either a singular colour or material. PichiAvo chose to portray Medusa in a different light. They still follow traditional depictions and paint Medusa as if she is made of marble, reminiscent of the statues from antiquity. Yet, they combine it with pink, purple, yellow, and red colours all around her. This colour is what draws the audience's attention, after which the

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<sup>69</sup> The Hellenic Museum. "Remixing the Classics with artists PichiAvo." 8-4-2021.

<https://www.hellenic.org.au/post/remixing-the-classics-with-artists-pichiavo>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>70</sup> PichiAvo, "Renegades Project".

focus is shifted to the actual subject of the mural. Besides the bright colours, the artists also wrote words in graffiti letter type. The biggest word portrayed is 'Myth', while the others show words like 'Athens' and 'Past'. These words highlight the urban art style, yet explicitly show the connection to mythology. Painted over top this background is Medusa. She is semi-translucent, as the background can be seen through the lighter paint used for her skin. Her body appears feminine, and her overall stance can be interpreted as monstrous. These aspects will be further analysed below. PichiAvo uses this combination of classical and urban to portray Medusa within a contemporary setting, yet staying true to her origins in antiquity.

Besides the colours, the other aspect to be noted about the overall look of this Medusa portrayal is that depending on the interpretation of different specific aspects the overall interpretation of her expression will change. The first impression of this portrayal is that Medusa is screaming in agony, while it could also be in anger. It appears that she is in the middle of her transformation, yet it could also be that her transformation is already done. The overall look of Medusa is ambiguous and is dependent on the way the audience interprets its specific aspects. The only consistency in this portrayal is that she does look feminine, with the way PichiAvo shaped her body and face supporting this thought. Nevertheless, each of these aspects will be discussed in detail to determine the possibilities, as well as generate a consensus about her femininity and monstrosity.

#### Stance and body position

This mural depicts Medusa leaning on her arms. Her knee propped up under her body, and her breasts were clearly visible. This stance makes it appear as if she is trying to push herself up off the ground. This implies that either Medusa was struck down, or she fell down. If she was struck down, it could imply that she was either attacked by Perseus or that this is the moment right after Athena punished her for Poseidon's transgressions. However, if she fell down, then it could be interpreted as if Medusa was in such deep sorrow or agony, or felt such great anger, that she fell to the ground to yell up at the sky or the gods. Medusa pushing herself up, whether it is onto a ledge or off the ground, shows strength and power. With everything that has happened to her, her stance shows that she is not giving up, that she is willing to get back up and potentially fight for her right to live. Thus, the stance itself could be interpreted as monstrous, a warning. As this show of strength is amplified by her petrifying powers and her determination.

Another interesting aspect of the way Medusa is positioned by PichiAvo is that the way her head is titled, her neck becomes elongated. This draws a focus to her neck. While PichiAvo does not



portray Medusa as a decapitated head, the implications made by this focus on her neck and making it appear longer still alludes back to her decapitation. This explicit showing of a non-decapitated head puts the focus more on that aspect of her myth. They do not objectify her head, nor appropriate it. Yet, they still follow the tradition of alluding to her decapitation. PichiAvo are not the only ones who show Medusa in this way. Harriet Hosmer did it before PichiAvo. However, she portrayed Medusa as looking down, yet still exposing her neck to the audience.<sup>71</sup> This does not necessarily implicate a feminine or monstrous interpretation, but rather shows that Medusa is inextricably linked to her decapitation myth. Where Garbati used *contrapposto* and Hirst had no body to depict, PichiAvo went in a different direction than both of them. PichiAvo's Medusa is portrayed in a dramatic pose. This dramatism links the statue to the Hellenistic Style. This shows the amount of drama, as well as emotion, that the artists wanted to convey with their mural.

#### Medusa's body

Medusa's body is, besides her hair and facial expression, a big part of her portrayal in this mural. Although many artists decide to not depict Medusa's body, both Garbati and PichiAvo show the existence of Medusa's body within this research. Where Garbati mimicked Cellini's Perseus and used *contrapposto*, PichiAvo positioned Medusa in such a way that a big portion of her body was obscured by her arms and shoulder. Nevertheless, her positioning does not take away from the fact that Medusa is portrayed naked, as well as that her breasts are clearly visible near the centre of the mural. This exposure shows that PichiAvo depicted their Medusa as feminine. Although, the same question can be asked as with the other case studies, which would come to the same conclusion of the femininity of a portrayal of a woman being up for debate when it was made by a man due to personal preferences and the male gaze within a male-dominated society. Furthermore, due to its similarities with Garbati's statue, the same interpretation of objectification and idealisation of Medusa applies here. Nevertheless, PichiAvo did try to some show modesty by not showing the lower half of her body, thus not further exposing her womanhood. Yet, this modesty is opposed by the clear visibility of the breasts. However, this does not take away from Medusa's body being feminine.

Nevertheless, the way that PichiAvo depicted Medusa's body is also similar to the way Hosmer portrayed Medusa. Hosmer's Medusa shows her from the breasts up, with her arms being cut off from the bust. While PichiAvo did portray her arms and a portion of her lower body, the similarity lies within the focus of the artworks. Both Hosmer and PichiAvo focused on Medusa's body from her

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<sup>71</sup> Gustin, "Two Styles More Opposed", 9.

upper torso to her head. In Hosmer's portrayal, Medusa is also naked with her chest exposed. This aspect is often interpreted as Hosmer trying to convey concerns about the female body and the dangers of sexuality.<sup>72</sup> Equally, Hosmer uses Medusa's nakedness as a means of providing commentary on the way that women themselves had no control over the interpretations that were made about their sexuality.<sup>73</sup> While Hosmer used her Medusa as a means of calling out nineteenth-century society, it could be argued that PichiAvo tried to do something similar within contemporary society. By showing Medusa's body as naked, extending her neck, and having her appear lying on the ground, pushing herself up, they create the image of a woman in a vulnerable state. They portray her as a victim.

#### Medusa's hair and facial expression

The final aspects of PichiAvo's Medusa are her hair and facial expression. These two aspects are of true importance when discussing Medusa, as often her hair is the biggest identifier as to who is portrayed. Her facial expression conveys her feelings and emotions and gives insight into the potential message that is being conveyed by the artists.

Starting off with her facial expression, what can be noted is that PichiAvo, as well as Hosmer and De Morgan, fall within the tradition of portraying Medusa not looking at the audience. Nevertheless, Hosmer and De Morgan opted for an expression more reminiscent of Garbati's statue and Bernini's bust. PichiAvo went the route as Hirst and portrayed her with her mouth and eyes wide open, in a silent scream. However, PichiAvo's Medusa has more defined emotion, even though half of her face is shown. Nevertheless, this emotion has a plethora of interpretations. Combined with her stance, the facial expression could be seen as a defiant scream of anger or agony toward the gods. It could also be a scream of fear before she gets struck down by Perseus. Finally, it could also be a battle cry as she is pushing herself up. Each of these emotions is visible, yet each leads to a different conclusion about her monstrosity. The battle cry, as well as the defiant scream, can be interpreted as a warning, a way for Medusa to show that she is powerful and fierce, and willing to defend herself. The fearful expression, however, puts Medusa in the role of the victim once more. Nevertheless, when also factoring in the way the artists described this piece, as a retelling of her story as a powerful woman who marked history, the interpretation of her facial expression becomes more apparent. Within this context, Medusa is screaming out of anger, to whom is up to the audience.

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<sup>72</sup> Coonrod, "Two Images of Medusa in the Sculpture of Harriet Hosmer", 3.

<sup>73</sup> Marshall, "Harriet Hosmer and the Classical Inheritance", 207.

However, the way her head is positioned, it could be a general outcry of rage towards the heavens, but also could be directed at the gods. In either interpretation, it is also a monstrous scream, a warning to those that dare hurt her.

Her hair and facial features are similar to Hosmer and De Morgan. The face is human and feminine, with her eyes and mouth proportionate to her face, not resembling the gorgoneia. Her hair is depicted as a combination of hair and snakes. This could be interpreted as Medusa at the time of her transformation. However, it could also be seen as a way to depict Medusa in a more feminine way, as well as trying to connect with her story of being a woman before the gorgon. Hosmer portrayed Medusa's hair in a similar fashion. Hosmer mixes hair and snake to such an extent that the distinction is barely visible, similar to Garbati's Medusa. This blending of hair was used to portray Medusa in a more compassionate fashion, showing her as a victim and a woman.<sup>74</sup> This distinction between hair and snake is more visible in PichiAvo's work, yet the two elements still blend together. The snakes on the mural are clearly snakes, as some are facing the audience and hissing at them, similar to Hirst's Medusa. This portrayal can equally be interpreted as a compassionate depiction. Furthermore, the use of actual hair implies humanity and combined with the other features also femininity. This does not take away from the potential danger that the snakes pose. It is a combination of Medusa's femininity and monstrosity.

PichiAvo's Medusa is a mural that has many possible interpretations. Yet, there is one that is most likely, when taking the intentions of the artists into account. That is that this mural shows Medusa yelling out of anger, directing this yell at anyone who will listen, whether that be the gods, the sky, the audience or Perseus. She is picking herself up, showing strength by continuing to fight after everything that has happened to her. In this light, Medusa is portrayed as a powerful woman, ready to fight and defend herself. Her scream thus becomes more like a battle cry, which is a warning to all that dare face her. Her femininity works side by side with her monstrous aspects. The femininity appears to be used to show Medusa as the victim and generate a compassionate response from the audience and the art critics. The question is if PichiAvo succeeded in this, as well as what this could indicate about society.

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<sup>74</sup> MiA. "Medusa, c.1854, Harriet Goodhue Hosmer." *Decorative Arts, Textiles and Sculpture*. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/81074/medusa-harriet-goodhue-hosmer>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

### PichiAvo's Medusa within society

To analyse the impact of the previously discussed aspects, the intentions of the artists, as well as the commissioner, should be understood. This will help in determining why Medusa was portrayed in this way, and how society potentially impacted these decisions. As with the other chapters, the final parts of this section will focus on the response to the artwork by the audience and the critics, as well as the way that this artwork reflects on society and what it indicates within society.

### Creation and impact

To start off this part, it is important to state that the creation and intentions of this artwork were influenced by two parties, PichiAvo and the Hellenic Museum in Melbourne. Both of these parties were influenced by society on their own, and all those influences together are what caused this portrayal of Medusa.

PichiAvo's intentions with this mural were to portray Medusa, and the other two women in the exhibition; Phryne and Hippolyta, as beacons of power and strength.<sup>75</sup> They wanted to portray them in a way that celebrated their femininity, without diminishing their strength. Each of them played an important role within Greek mythology, yet according to PichiAvo, they were often portrayed in a negative light 'and accused of the downfall of men, mirroring Greek patriarchal society.'<sup>76</sup> The artists wanted to pay 'tribute to three exceptional women who broke away from the traditional roles and whose actions and free spirits marked history'.<sup>77</sup> They wanted to portray Medusa in a different light, showing that she herself also had an impact on society. They wanted to depict her away from Perseus' myth to show that she is more than an objectified head. For PichiAvo it was important to portray Medusa, and the others, in a way that shows that women are just as strong and important to society, contemporary and historical, as men.<sup>78</sup> They wanted to prove 'that women's voices resonate as greatly as those of men.'<sup>79</sup> By showing Medusa in the middle of screaming to the heavens, and with the knowledge of their intentions, this silent scream is not meant to be interpreted as the artists silencing Medusa, but as them showing Medusa reclaim her voice and expressing her anger.

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<sup>75</sup> PichiAvo, "Renegades Project."

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Equally, in the eyes of the Hellenic Museum, which commissioned the exhibition, these same intentions are present, yet less explicitly stated. To them, it was important to show and reflect on the way women were represented in history and mythology in general.<sup>80</sup> They talk about Medusa as a beastly gorgon but do so as a reference to her representation in history. With this, they want to emphasise the different approaches that they requested the artists to take. The museum wanted to pay respect and honour the powerful women of history, combine this with new readings, and offer a fresh look into these women's lives. They wanted to portray Medusa as a strong woman, embracing her femininity, and displaying her in a new and contemporary manner while still embracing the ancient Greek art style.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, they wanted to show that Medusa is a more 'nuanced and complex character who suffered at the hands of both men and women and ultimately became the archetypal femme fatale.'<sup>82</sup> Their intentions were also to portray Medusa's rage as a symbol 'for the rage felt by women at the systematic repression of both their sexuality and their power.'<sup>83</sup>

For both the artists and the museum, it is clear that they were influenced by contemporary society. They both share the intention to portray Medusa as a powerful woman, rather than the traditional portrayal of a decapitated head. They wanted her to showcase that society should reassess its prejudices against powerful women, both in history and contemporary society. This representation of Medusa was meant to be a way of supporting women, of showing the world that their images, thoughts and ideals of women are shaped by a male-dominated society. By portraying Medusa separate from Perseus' myth, they intended to show her as an individual, as a person who got abused and violated because of her powers and strength. While the impact on society is not visible, like with Garbati's statue, the impact of society on the creation is immense and often explicitly stated.

#### Response to PichiAvo's Medusa

In general, the response to PichiAvo's Medusa is discernible from art critics' response to PichiAvo's art. As these artists use their respective interests and capabilities to combine urban and classical art with every piece they make, their depiction of Medusa fits in with this trend.<sup>84</sup> Their style is often

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<sup>80</sup> The Hellenic Museum, "Remixing the Classics with artists PichiAvo."

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> The Hellenic Museum. "Off with her head: Medusa, Women and Power." 21-6-2021.

<https://www.hellenic.org.au/post/off-with-her-head-medusa-women-and-power-1>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>84</sup> Alexia Petsinis. "Experience The Colours of The World (From Your Lounge Room) With PichiAvo." *Icon*. 2020.

<https://icon.ink/articles/experience-the-colours-of-the-world-from-your-lounge-room-with-pichiavo/>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

praised as they combine two opposites into one. Classical art is often seen as eternal, while urban art is seen as temporary. In combining the two, they make a unique artwork of the eternal temporary.<sup>85</sup> This style has generated a lot of international appreciation and popularity, as their artworks are seen as prominent examples of contemporary urban art.<sup>86</sup> The response to their style is mostly praise and adoration. Their Medusa fits in their style perfectly. Medusa is portrayed in the style of a marble statue, while the colours and words provide the urban aspect. Art critics call their work refreshing and attention-grabbing, fitting within the urban setting while portraying classical subjects.<sup>87</sup> Equally, their portrayal of Medusa is seen as an incredible artwork showing the change that occurred within urban art. Shifting from mostly political subjects to photo-realistic portraits that can mesmerise.<sup>88</sup> One could argue that PichiAvo is combining the past and present not only through the classical and the urban but in this case by also combining photo-realism with a societal statement. Furthermore, the response to the exhibition *Renegades* shows that the message PichiAvo and the Hellenic Museum wanted to convey, reached its targets. The exhibition was labelled 'a powerful and immersive encounter offering viewers of all ages, races and genders messages of strength, courage and the power of imagination.'<sup>89</sup> Medusa's portrayal, thus, succeeded in showing a strong and fierce Medusa, presenting her story instead of the previous history.

Nevertheless, this response to PichiAvo's Medusa comes from art critics. The general audience's response can be found in the images that PichiAvo posted on their Instagram. Over fifteen thousand users liked the image, with many responding stating that they love the art, as well as the subject matter. One user states that they love that PichiAvo is portraying Medusa not as a gorgon but as a woman with her own will, voice and choice.<sup>90</sup> Another user poses the same question that women asked with Garbati's statue, also stating that they find it disingenuous for men to portray female strength by featuring naked women. PichiAvo responded to this statement by arguing that art is a virtue of the soul and that this is genderless. They saw it as portraying Medusa through a contemporary lens while based on the classical artworks that remained. To them, portraying Medusa naked was a form of sincerity toward classical art.

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<sup>85</sup> Petsinis, "Experience The Colours of The World (From Your Lounge Room) With PichiAvo."

<sup>86</sup> St. Art Gallery. "PichiAvo". <https://st-artgallery.nl/kunstenaar/pichiavo/>. Last visited 28-7-2022.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Petsinis, "Experience The Colours of The World (From Your Lounge Room) With PichiAvo."

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> PichiAvo, "Renegades." Instagram, 1-4-2020. [https://www.instagram.com/p/B-cWX\\_AHoEK/?igshid=18v864wev5mn2](https://www.instagram.com/p/B-cWX_AHoEK/?igshid=18v864wev5mn2). Last visited 28-7-2022.

Thus, where art critics are focused on the techniques and styles used, the general audience focuses on the subject matter and the execution. In PichiAvo's case, the only pieces of critique were related to Medusa's nakedness. The rest of the responses were loving and praised their choices for the subject matter. Many saw their work the way that was intended, as a shift in perception from a negative outlook stemming from a patriarchal society to a more nuanced and positive view as a product of contemporary society's vocality in societal and political matters.

#### Reflection on society

When combining the intentions with the audience response and the visual aspects, one could argue that this mural reflects the want for more humane treatment of previously demonised women within art and society. Equally, this artwork shows that more of society is starting to realise that the stories told by the media have multiple sides and are heavily influenced by the prejudices of the creators. The way she is portrayed does still indicate that men portraying women leads to the idealised version of the subject matter. However, as PichiAvo themselves have stated, this mural also shows that it can also be a reflection of society's appreciation for classical art. Furthermore, PichiAvo does show a level of modesty by not fully exposing Medusa. This would indicate that in contemporary society, they understood that while Medusa is more than just a head, that does not mean that she should be overtly sexualised or exposed.

The way they presented Medusa is similar to Hosmer's Medusa. This similarity, while PichiAvo did not base their mural on Hosmer's bust, does show that the body position and the facial expression can be interpreted as a way for the artists to show the vulnerabilities of women within society. Yet, it also shows the strength and power of the same women. They reflect on society's interpretations of Medusa and try to counter those ideas by presenting her in a different light, comparable to what Garbati did. They show that there is strength in vulnerability and power in femininity.

They show Medusa as expressing her emotions, yet they do not use this to make her emotional. They allow her to use her voice, to show society to not underestimate her, and to warn them that she is willing to fight. The way that this resonated with the audience shows that within society more and more women are getting back up to fight the system that put them down. It also indicates in contemporary society women still have a reason to resonate with Medusa. Showing that women are still abused, used, violated, objectified and their bodies appropriated by a male-dominated society. With this mural, PichiAvo thus holds up a mirror to society and confronts them about the generalised ideas that are spread by male-dominated systems. It shows that there is a need

to portray Medusa in a different light, even though her story has been researched and retold many times by feminist researchers.

In conclusion, PichiAvo's Medusa is a representation of society's want for historic and mythological women to be separated from their male-dominated stories. The way they present Medusa as a woman picking herself up, angry at what befell her, but not down for the count. She is shown to be resilient, strong and powerful. The story of Perseus does not define her, as she is her own woman with her own power and strength. While some still believe that a man should not portray a woman naked, especially not when trying to convey female empowerment. It was the Hellenic Museum that wanted Medusa to be portrayed in this way. They wanted to share a nuanced version of her story with a grander audience. Both PichiAvo and the museum wanted Medusa to be seen as an intrinsic part of history and mythology, but not in a way that is traditional. They wanted to see the woman behind the gorgon. Nevertheless, they also wanted to show that Medusa is still a force to be reckoned with. That the femininity does not take away from the power, and that the monstrosity does not take away from the femininity. Medusa is both a warning and a woman in one. She is to be feared for her rage towards those that have wronged her, but she is not to be demonised for wanting to protect herself from the gods and Perseus. Within contemporary society, the way it resonated with many women indicates that they are equally angry with the society represents powerful women, as well as deals with the violence and abuse towards women. They are angry and willing to fight for their rights. They are showing the same femininity and monstrosity that is implied by PichiAvo's Medusa.



## Conclusion

Within this research, the focus was put on determining and analysing the way in which contemporary artworks depict Medusa as feminine and monstrous, as well as discussing what these aspects can show within contemporary society. This was researched by looking at three artworks from different artists and analysing the visual features of their Medusa's. Due to the fact that not a lot of research was available about recent artworks, historic artworks were used to compare and help with possible interpretations stemming from their research. In the end, the artists' intentions were discussed to determine the reasons behind the choices that were made. Audience and art critics' responses were used to gain insight into what people thought of the artworks, as well as to determine the execution of the artist's intentions. In the end, the intentions and responses were combined with the visual analysis to determine what different aspects and different choices for Medusa's portrayals could tell about society.

For each artwork, the first element that was researched were the feminine and monstrous aspects, as well as the physical features that helped shape the portrayals of Medusa. The main issue with all three of the artworks was that each was created by men. The femininity of an artwork is pulled into question when created and shaped through the eyes of a man. This issue was pushed further when looking at Garbati and PichiAvo's artworks. They depicted Medusa naked. PichiAvo tried to give some modesty, whether intentional or not. Garbati wanted to stay true to being an answer, or an opposite, to Cellini's Perseus statue. Yet, both of their artworks were used or created to aid the feminist movement and support female empowerment, thus the critique as to why Medusa was naked increased. To both artists, the portrayal of a naked Medusa was seen as a form of sincerity to the classical Greek art style and statues. Nevertheless, the femininity of these artworks was questioned. While Hirst was not criticised by the public for his portrayal of a woman, this critique still applies to his artwork as well. Hirst's work is based on Caravaggio's Medusa, who used his own likeness as a model for her face. Thus, Hirst's sculpture's femininity can be questioned, because how feminine can a sculpture of a female subject be when the reference used was based on the likeness of a man. Caravaggio, and by extension Hirst, implies femininity with his portrayal of Medusa, yet suppresses this same femininity by making himself the focus and reference.

Keeping this in mind during the analysis of the case studies, it could still be argued that each artwork has at least one seemingly feminine aspect. In Hirst's case, this would be the facial features, if one simply looks at the features instead of knowing the reference. By portraying her as a

decapitated head only, the femininity of this sculpture is, however, pulled into question, once more. The objectification of Medusa's head is a tradition that Hirst continued. By doing so, he reduced her status to that of an object or a weapon to be used against enemies, as Perseus did. However, with Garbati and PichiAvo, this femininity is more apparent. This is aided mainly by the fact that they decided to portray Medusa's body as well. Their intentions to stray from the conventional and depict Medusa in a different light, offered more insight into their artworks and the way they used the aspects to convey a message within society. Garbati's Medusa shows a fierce and feminine Medusa. She is depicted after beheading Perseus out of self-defence. She stands with a sword in one hand and Perseus' head in the other. PichiAvo's Medusa shows her on the ground, defiantly pushing herself up while yelling at the heavens. Both of them portrayed Medusa's face and body as a woman, although one could argue that this is a stereotypical representation. Nevertheless, they are still considered feminine representations, especially when compared to Hirst's sculpture.

The one aspect that all three of them, and many other artworks, can agree on is that a depiction of Medusa is not Medusa unless she has the serpent hair. This aspect of her myth is often used to not only identify her but with these case studies also as a way to show her monstrous aspects. Both Hirst and PichiAvo use Medusa's snake hair to extend a notion of danger to the audience. Hirst adds to this warning by using the most poisonous and venomous snakes as references for her hair. The way they are depicted by hissing at the audience shows that the snakes are giving a warning to the audience to stay away. PichiAvo does something similar with their Medusa. Here, the snakes are also facing the audience and hissing at them. Both these aspects signal a monstrous aspect. However, for Garbati's Medusa, her hair is ambiguous, as the snakes are not clearly defined. Their monstrosity cannot be determined. Nevertheless, due to their ambiguity, the hair can be seen as dreadlocks, thus Medusa's hair could be interpreted as feminine as well. This feminine interpretation of Medusa's hair is also present in PichiAvo's case, as they combine the snakes with real hair. Thus, in this case, Medusa's hair not only implies monstrous aspects but also feminine ones.

Each of these statues has aspects that can be concluded as feminine and monstrous. Yet, only PichiAvo and Garbati's Medusa use these aspects to portray Medusa as powerful and strong. In their depictions, Medusa is to be feared, for both her powers and her tenacity. Garbati shows that Medusa does not need her petrifying powers to win a fight. PichiAvo shows that while Medusa has been knocked to the ground countless times throughout her mythology, she gets back up every time, showing her resilience, as well as her rage. In the end, Hirst's sculpture can be seen as a traditional depiction of Medusa, not expending on her feminine and monstrous aspects, but copying them from

a different time period and context. Garbati and PichiAvo's artworks can be seen as both feminine and monstrous for they portray Medusa as both woman and warning.

The other element of this research was determining what these aspects indicate within society. Each of the artists made their artworks because of different reasons and influences. Hirst and PichiAvo created their Medusa's for the purpose of an exhibition, and Garbati was influenced by Cellini's Perseus to create an opposite scenario. Furthermore, for Garbati, the intention was to show what it would look like if Medusa had won the fight against Perseus. Whereas, PichiAvo had the intentions to portray Medusa as unbound from the traditional portrayals and depict her as a powerful woman who had a great impact on society. For Hirst, the intentions of creating his sculpture were more centred around creating an image representative of antiquity, that portrayed the themes for his exhibition, where in the end he could gain both money and fame.

With these intentions in mind, the way they presented their artworks gives an indication of society and her thoughts on women and Medusa. The choice of these male artists to depict a female mythological figure whose story has been told and retold countless times, whose life was determined by the choices and actions of men, shows that even in contemporary times women are still being used by men. However, the way Medusa is used is different for each case study. Garbati ended up using Medusa in a new context a decade after her creation. She had become an icon for the #MeToo-movement as a symbol for sexual assault victims. The way she was portrayed by Garbati gave people an image to show that what they were doing was still lenient, as they could be going for revenge. In the case of PichiAvo, Medusa was used to reflect on the treatment of women throughout Greek mythology. It showed that Medusa was often demonised for her powers, and overshadowed by the patriarchal society. Hirst's Medusa was used as a means of capitalistic gains, as well as to sell the idea of his exhibition as an authentic treasure find from a fake shipwreck.

However, each of these artworks shows that within society contemporary art tends to lean towards the feminine and monstrous Medusa, rather than the demonised villain that is seen in media. This subversion of mainstream media shows that the artists are trying to get society to reflect on the media and the way that they see and judge the images and information that they receive. In Garbati's case, Medusa was seen as a mirror held up toward society. It was meant as a confrontation of people's judgement systems and beliefs. Her fierce stance and petrifying gaze cause society to turn inward, to reflect on themselves. Yet, she is also a reflection of women's struggles within a male-dominated society. The way she stood up for herself reflects society's change during the #MeToo-

movement, where more and more people, mainly women, were sharing their stories and reclaiming their voices and bodies. They used Garbati's Medusa to show society that there is a flaw in the system, in order for them to reflect on the fact that women have always been used by men and then punished for their transgressions. PichiAvo continues this reflection, yet in a different context. Their Medusa shows society that Medusa's story was told from the male perspective at a time when women were often seen as the root of the trouble, and where they were portrayed negatively to subvert the audience from the patriarchy. This depiction equally causes society to reflect on the way that women are portrayed, and the way that powerful women are treated, also in contemporary society. What Hirst's Medusa truly reflects within society is that art can be shaped by the capitalistic nature of our society. This can influence the way we see and value art and in turn, the way we see and value the subject matter.

Overall, these artworks show that portraying Medusa as feminine and monstrous offers society a way to reflect on themselves, societal systems and the treatment of women. These aspects show that we still live in a male-dominated society where powerful women are demonised. They show that by subverting this idea, a warning is created toward society about the willpower of women. The feminine and monstrous aspects used by contemporary artists show that within society, the fight for women's rights is far from over. Nevertheless, these are only three of many depictions of Medusa, all throughout history. However, these three artworks do show that time periods change, and interpretations can differ depending on your outlook on life and the time from which you come. Art is subject to interpretation, and while these three artworks can be interpreted as monstrous and feminine, to a degree, it is the audience who truly decides if they agree.

## Illustrations



(Fig. 1) Luciano Garbati, *Medusa with the Head of Perseus*, 2008, polyester resin, 205 x 98 x 87 cm, (Luciano Garbati personal collection).



(Fig. 2) Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, 1545 – 1555, Bronze (Loggia Dei Lanzi, Piazza della Signoria, Florence).



(Fig. 3) Damien Hirst, *The Severed Head of Medusa*, 2013, Bronze, 32 x 39.7 x 39.7 cm, (Private Collection).



(Fig. 4) PichiAvo, *Medusa*, 2020, Graffiti on Concrete, (Hellenic Museum).





(Fig. 5) Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Medusa*, Oil on canvas on wood, 60 x 55 cm, (Galleria degli Uffizi).



(Fig. 6) Peter Paul Rubens, *Head of Medusa*, Ca. 1617 – 1618, Canvas, 68.5 x 118 x 2 cm, (Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Gemäldegalerie, 3834).



(Fig. 7) Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Medusa*, 1644 – 1648, Marble, 50 x 41 x 38 cm, (Musei Capitolini).



(Fig. 8) Harriet Goodhue Hosmer, *Medusa*, 1854, Marble, 69.22 x 53.34 x 24.13 cm, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2003.125).





(Fig. 9) Evelyn de Morgan, *Medusa*, 1883, Bronze.

## Credits Illustrations

Fig. 1 Downloaded 23-4-2022. <https://www.lucianogarbati.com/medusa>.

Fig. 2 Corretti, 2015. IX.

Fig. 3 Downloaded 23-4-2022. <https://fadmagazine.com/2021/11/18/is-damien-hirst-his-own-worst-enemy/>.

Fig. 4 Downloaded 23-4-2022. <https://www.pichiavo.com/rene-gades-project-at-the-hellenic-museum-of-melbourne/>.

Fig. 5 Downloaded 23-4-2022. [https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/asset/SCALA\\_ARCHIVES\\_1039778709](https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl/asset/SCALA_ARCHIVES_1039778709).

Fig. 6 Downloaded 23-4-2022. <https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/1626/>.

Fig. 7 Downloaded 23-4-2022. <https://www.famsf.org/press-room/berninis-medusa>.

Fig. 8 Downloaded 23-4-2022. <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/81074/medusa-harriet-goodhue-hosmer>.

Fig. 9 Downloaded 23-4-2022. <https://victorianweb.org/sculpture/demorgan/2.html>.

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