

Daniel Katz Gallery

ANTIQUITY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



Italian, Late 18th century

Medusa

38 x 36 cm

This energetic and extraordinary sculpture is testament to the enduring fascination with the classical mythological figure of Medusa. One of three Gorgonite sisters, Medusa had an appearance so terrifying - with snakes for hair - that anyone beholding her was immediately turned to stone. Having petrified many victims, it was the Greek hero Perseus who eventually overcame her; using the polished shield given to him by Athena to look at only her reflection, he slayed her by cutting off her head.

The depiction of Medusa, with her snake hair and expressive, repulsive gaze, has long captivated artists since the discovery of the famous Hellenistic marble known as the Rondanini Medusa. Thought to be a later Roman copy of an early Greek original, possibly by Phidias, the Rondanini Medusa was the source of much interest and could be viewed by artists, travellers, and writers, in Rome, at Palazzo Rondanini, until the 19th century. Since its discovery, many leading artists have sought to interpret the subject, from Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) onward to Caravaggio (1571-1610) and Antonio Canova (1757-1822) – all intrigued by the challenge of representing the figure of Medusa. Arguably it is the complexity of the image that has made it so iconic, and as such, few but the best artists have sought to portray her. Examples like the present terracotta are rare.

Arguably the most celebrated image of Medusa in Modern times is Gian Lorenzo Bernini's (1598-1680) highly original interpretation with its elaborate plethora of finely carved snakes for hair and expressive physiognomy. Suitably, the present work is much indebted to Bernini's interpretation, given its extremely dynamic display of snakes and the expressive face. At the same time however, the present sculpture

also reveals an equal degree of inventiveness in its creation. For example, the way the hair has been rendered as short serpentine tufts which intermingle with the snakes (flowing both with and against the twisting figures of the serpents) is highly distinctive and original. One really has to look attentively to differentiate all of the snakes running amongst the great mass of hair, and this playful quality marks out the quality of this sculpture and its modelling.

Furthermore, the number of snakes and their diverse variety of size and mass also reveal the sculptor's ingenuity, as does the lively way in which they are placed – including one snake head which stands alone on the right cheek of the face. The skill with which the terracotta is modelled is only heightened when one views the work from an angle – which reveals the great dynamism and mass that the sculptor has managed to achieve in what is actually a relatively thin plane. In homage to the Rondanini Medusa, the sculptor has unified the sculpture with two snakes which frame the chin at the bottom, and which give the sculpture a neat stylisation, tempering its realism.

Unlike Bernini the present terracotta does not include the neck and shoulders. The mask format, in keeping with depictions since Antiquity - also known as a gorgoneion - suggests she is dead. Her furrowed brow and tortured expression a morbid reflection in rigor mortis of the horror she felt in the last moments as she realised her impending doom. It is a look of anguished suffering, rather than horror, and one that invites the viewer to consider the narrative of Medusa as described by Ovid as a beautiful maiden, who's downfall was as a result of being seduced by Poseidon in a temple of Athena - a sacrilege that attracted the Goddess' wrath, and resulted in her having Medusa's hair turned into snakes as punishment. This psychological reading of the image of Medusa is one which would have been of interest to learned humanists from the Renaissance onward, as would the interpretation of her face as a symbolic gorgoneion – an image of evil to repel evil.

The lack of obvious capability for the mask to stand suggests it was intended to be mounted on a wall, which creates a rich theatrical effect.

Provenance

Volta Corni-Pastori a Mira collection

Private collection, Paris, to 2020