Dangerous Beauty

Medusa in Classical Art

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Medusa, the monstrous Gorgon of Greek mythology whose gaze turned beholders to stone, became increasingly anthropomorphic and feminine beginning in the fifth century B.C. A similar transformation occurred in representations of other female half-human beings from Greek myth, such as sphinxes, sirens, and the sea monster Scylla. Believed to have protective powers, these mythical hybrid creatures were frequently employed on sepulchral monuments, sacred architecture, military equipment, drinking vessels, and the luxury arts. Their metamorphosis was a consequence of the idealizing humanism of Greek art of the Classical period (480–323 B.C.), which understood beauty as the result of harmony and ideal proportions, a concept that influenced not only the representation of the human body but also that of mythological beings.

The popularity of Medusa and other hybrid creatures from Greek myth has never waned, leading to their interpretation and adaptation in many other contexts. Among the most powerful and resonant in Western culture, their stories and images have inspired poets, artists, psychoanalysts, feminist critics, political theorists, and fashion designers. This Bulletin and the exhibition it accompanies explore the changing ways in which Medusa and other hybrid creatures were imagined and depicted from antiquity to the present day. Drawn primarily from The Met collection, the exhibition examines a wide range of works dating from the late sixth century B.C. to the twentieth century, from ancient Greek armor, drinking cups, and funerary urns to Neoclassical cameos and contemporary fashion. Also featured is one of the earliest portrayals in Greek art of Medusa as a beautiful young woman.

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Daniel H. Weiss
President and CEO
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Beginning in the fifth century B.C., the Gorgon Medusa—a legendary monster whose gaze could turn beholders to stone—underwent a visual transformation from grotesque to beautiful, becoming in the process increasingly anthropomorphic and feminine. A similar shift in the representations of other mythical female half-human beings (or hybrids), such as sphinxes, sirens, and the sea monster Scylla, took place at the same time.¹ The iconographic makeover of these inherently terrifying figures—symbols of death and the Underworld believed to have apotropaic (protective) powers—was a result of the idealizing humanism of Greek art of the Classical period (480–323 B.C.). Hybrids continued to evolve in form and meaning after the Classical period, however, and many still resonate in modern culture and the artistic imagination.²

**Monsters and the Genealogy of Terror**

Throughout human history, monsters have emerged as figments of the imagination in various cultures.³ These fearsome supernatural beings, often hybrid in form, share many characteristics: they are usually gigantic, malevolent, and violent, and frequently reptilian, ugly, or bizarre-looking. They devour humans and live in remote places such as caves or the depths of lakes. A metaphor for nature’s threatening forces, they can also symbolize innate human fears and anxieties, sexual aggression, and guilt.

Often described as monsters or demons, a wide repertoire of theriomorphic creatures—combining animal parts with human features and fantastical appendages—was introduced to the Greek world from the Near East and Egypt during the late eighth and seventh centuries B.C. Imbued with protective powers, these figures functioned as apotropaia, or talismans that turn away evil, and as such were frequently employed on sepulchral monuments, sacred architecture, military equipment, drinking vessels, and the luxury arts.

The majority of Greek hybrid beings were imagined as female, blending the human female form with elements from animals such as snakes, birds, lions, dogs, and fish. Most were also related by parentage or common ancestry and symbolized a primordial, grisly vision of the terror of the sea. Phorkys and Keto, sea deities and children of the god Pontos (Ocean), bore the three Gorgons; the three Graiai (old women from birth who shared one eye and one tooth among themselves); the sirens;⁴ and the dreadful Echidna, half-woman and half-snake, who in turn mothered Scylla, the Harpies, and Hydra.

Reshuffling what was familiar, hybrids represented all that was alien, the “Other.” Morphological oddities such as hybrids were considered anomalies in ancient Greece and, thus, of a
destructive nature. At the same time, in a society centered on the male citizen, the feminization of monsters served to demonize women. Wronged by men and overcome with rage and desperation, heroines of ancient Greek drama such as Clytemnestra and Medea commit monstrous acts and were judged deviant females who threatened cultured society. For this reason tragedians often compared them to Medusa and other female monsters and beasts.

Beginning in the fifth century B.C., as the grotesque monsters of the Archaic period were rethought, rationalized, and humanized, their animalistic features were progressively softened, and female hybrids became more beautiful in appearance, or, in the words of classicist Susan Woodford, “aesthetically improved to suit the sensibilities of the classical period,” when ugliness was largely avoided. In ancient Greece, the concept of beauty, whether of animate beings or inanimate objects, was understood as harmony and proportion among constituent parts. A beautiful form delighted the senses. Physical beauty was always connected with goodness of character—the Greek ideal of kalokagathia—and since it was thought that character was reflected in one’s physiognomy, physical ugliness connoted moral ugliness. In his Poetics, Aristotle argued that it is possible to make beautiful imitations of ugly things. It is precisely the power of art to portray ugly and horrible creatures in a beautiful way that renders their ugliness acceptable, even pleasurable.

This connection of beauty with horror, embodied above all in the figure of Medusa, outlived antiquity and continued to fascinate and inspire artists for centuries. Medusa, in effect, became the archetypal femme fatale: a conflation of femininity, erotic desire, violence, and death. Beauty, like monstrosity, entralls, and female beauty in particular was perceived—and, to a certain extent, is still perceived—to be both enchanting and dangerous, or even fatal. In this sense, even Helen of Troy, considered the personification of ideal beauty, was deemed responsible, albeit inadvertently, for the Trojan War and the ultimate destruction of Troy.

Perseus and the Gorgon Medusa

The three Gorgons—Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa—were terrible monsters who lived in the Western Ocean, conceived as the frontier of the inhabited world (Hesiod, Theogony 274–75). The Gorgons had large heads covered in dragon scales, boar’s tusks, brazen hands, and golden wings. Whoever looked at their hideous faces turned instantly to stone. Of the three sisters, only Medusa was mortal. She is the most famous Gorgon because of her role in the legend of the hero Perseus, who is the great-grandfather of Herakles, the quintessential monster-slayer of Greek mythology.

The most extensive narrative of the Perseus-Medusa encounter is preserved in the Bibliothèque (Library 2.4.1–4) of pseudo-Apollodorus, a first- or second-century A.D. compiler whose account relied on at least one fifth-century B.C. source, the Athenian mythographer Pherekydes. According to this version, Akrisios, the king of Argos, received an oracle that his grandson by his daughter Danaë would kill him. To avoid this fate, he imprisoned Danaë in an underground bronze chamber, where she could not be approached by suitors. Zeus, however, fell in love with her and seduced her after penetrating the chamber as a stream of gold. As a result of this union, Danaë bore Zeus’s son Perseus. Upon learning this, Akrisios shut both mother and child in a wooden chest and cast it into the sea. The chest floated to the island of Seriphos, where Danaë and Perseus were rescued and looked after by a fisherman named Diktys. In time, the island’s tyrannical
king, Polydektes—Diktys’s brother—wanted Danaë for his wife, but Perseus opposed the match. On the pretext of gathering contributions toward a wedding gift for the Peloponnesian princess Hippodameia, Polydektes asked the island’s noblemen to furnish horses but accepted instead the young hero’s boastful offer to bring him a Gorgon’s head.

With the help of Hermes, Athena, and the nymphs, Perseus equipped himself with an adamantine sickle (harpe); winged sandals; the cap of Hades (kunee), which rendered him invisible; and the kibisis, a pouch in which to put the Gorgon’s head. After receiving instructions on how to find and kill Medusa, Perseus flew to the Ocean and found the Gorgons asleep. Averting his eyes to avoid their petrifying gaze, Perseus used a bronze shield as a mirror and, with Athena’s guidance, cut off Medusa’s head and escaped the pursuit of her two sisters.

On his journey back to Seriphos, he rescued the Ethiopian princess Andromeda, whom he found chained to a rock as sacrifice to a sea monster, and married her. Upon his return to the island he brought Medusa’s head to the palace, using it to turn king Polydektes and his entourage to stone, thereby saving his mother from the unwanted marriage. He then appointed Diktys king of Seriphos and gave Athena the Gorgon’s head, which she put on her shield. In the end, the oracle was fulfilled when Perseus inadvertently killed his grandfather Akrisios with a misthrown discus during funeral games in Larissa.

The Perseus story is a classic folktale hero’s quest, in which a malevolent king sends a hero—typically someone of noble or, usually, semi-divine descent and malign destiny—on a suicide mission that involves slaying a monster or bringing back some distant magical object. He accomplishes this task with the help of the gods, overcoming obstacles along the way and, quite often, winning the maiden upon his return, whereupon, as one scholar put it, “the nasty king dies messily.”9 The essential plot—a young, brave, and handsome hero sets off to slay a hideous and wicked monster—is familiar to us from countless reiterations and adaptations in literature, comic books, and blockbuster movies.

**The Beautiful Medusa**

In the Roman poet Ovid’s retelling of the Medusa myth from the early first century A.D. (*Metamorphoses* 4.778–803), Perseus himself narrates his encounter with the Gorgon during the celebration of his wedding to Andromeda at the court of the Ethiopian king Cepheus. The hero describes the nightmarish landscape he encountered on the way: “On all sides through the fields and along the ways he saw the forms of men and beasts changed into stone by one look at Medusa’s face. But he himself had looked upon the image of that dread face reflected from the bright bronze shield his left hand bore; and while deep sleep held fast both the snakes and her who wore them, he smote her head clean from her neck, and from the blood of his mother swift-winged Pegasus and his brother sprang.”10 The visage of Medusa reflected on a polished bronze shield can be seen on a late Classical South Italian krater (fig. 1).

When asked why Medusa alone of the Gorgons had snakes entwined in her hair, Perseus explains that she was the most beautiful of the three sisters, endowed with hair that was widely admired. After Neptune (Poseidon) raped her inside the temple of Minerva (Athena), the goddess changed Medusa’s hair into foul snakes as punishment. Henceforth, Minerva wore the snaky head on her breast to frighten her enemies, as pictured on a red-figure lekythos (fig. 2). Although in Ovid’s version Medusa is the victim rather than the
perpetrator, her violation is portrayed as a de- 
cration of sacred space that brings down the vir-
gin goddess’s wrath upon her.

This transition from the tale of a hero com-
bating a monster to the sad story of a beautiful 
maiden transformed into a monster affected 
artistic representations of the myth. The striking 
contrast between the monstrous Archaic Gorgons 
and the beautiful Hellenistic and Roman Medusae 
was recognized in the late nineteenth century by 
noted archaeologist Adolf Furtwängler, who 
devised an evolutionary model of Medusa based 
on three types: the Archaic, the Middle (repre-
senting the intermediate stage in the fifth cen-
tury B.C., when grotesque elements were still 
present in artistic depictions), and the Beautiful. 11

Despite challenges by recent scholars, his typol-
ogy remains broadly applicable. 12

In Archaic Greek art, the Gorgon Medusa is 
shown both as a full female figure dressed in a 
short chiton (fig. 4) and as a severed head or mask, 
known as the Gorgoneion. In either representa-
tion the Gorgon has a porcine face, with fierce, 
bulging eyes; a large, simian nose; a wide, grin-
ning mouth; and a protruding tongue. On an 
Archaic stand in The Met collection her bared, 
serrated teeth are bordered by two pairs of tusks 
(fig. 3). She also has the stubble of a mustache, a 
full beard, stylized locks of hair, and pierced ears. 
Ranging from the fearsome to the grotesque, the 
features that make up her hideous countenance 
are more characteristic of masks than of specific

1. Mixing bowl (bell krater) with 
Perseus, Athena with the head of 
Medusa, and Hermes. Attributed to 
the Tarporley Painter. Greek (South 
Italian), Classical, red-figure, 
ca. 400–385 B.c. Terracotta, H. 12 in. 
(30.5 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, 
Boston (1970.237)

2. Lekythos (oil flask) with Athena. 
Attributed to the Tithonus Painter. 
Greek (Attic), Classical, red-figure, 
ca. 480 B.C. Terracotta, H. 13⅜ in. 
(34.9 cm), Diam. 4% in. (11.8 cm). 
Fletcher Fund, 1927 (27.122.6)
animal representations. The Archaic Gorgon is always full-face, moreover, glaring directly at the viewer. This combination of frontality and monstrosity in a single, immediately recognizable figure is what makes the Greek Gorgon such an original and evocative image of radical difference: of the absolute “Other.”

Gorgons were often carved on funerary monuments as apotropaic images intended to protect the grave. Medusa’s association with death is unsurprising, not only because of her petrifying gaze but also considering her own mortality; she embodies the ugly truth that death is an inescapable aspect of life. An Attic marble grave stele (fig. 5) represents a Gorgon in pursuit of Perseus after Medusa’s decapitation. Rushing through the air, the Gorgon spreads her wings wide and moves her arms and legs forcefully in a pinwheel motion, an iconographic convention frequently employed in Archaic art to denote speed.

An early fifth-century B.C. limestone sarcophagus from Cyprus illustrates the birth of Medusa’s offspring from her union with Poseidon (fig. 6). The giant Chrysaor (whose name translates as “He who bears a golden sword”) and a wingless Pegasus spring out of Medusa’s severed neck, while Perseus casually walks away. The scene looks like a caricature owing to its iconographic peculiarities: Perseus is shown as a hunter accompanied by his dog,
and he carries the Gorgon’s deadly head on a stick. A roughly contemporary Attic white-ground lekythos depicts the action following Medusa’s decapitation in full swing: Pegasus, the favorite steed of the Muses, springs from the severed neck of her well-formed, athletic body, which lies on the ground gushing blood, while Perseus escapes with her head in his pouch (fig. 7; see also rollout view on page 47).

In Classical Greek art, Medusa was progressively transformed into an attractive young woman. Simultaneously an aggressor and a victim, she became a tragic figure, as evidenced by Attic representations of her death. A red-figure pelike attributed to the painter Polygonotos preserves one of the earliest depictions of a beautiful Medusa (fig. 8). The Gorgon sleeps peacefully on a hillside as Perseus approaches, sickle in hand, and grabs her by the hair. He looks away to avoid her deadly gaze, though it is disarmed by sleep. The goddess Athena stands next to him, looking on sternly. Quite unusual is the presence of a nimbus, or halo of rays, around Perseus’s head, now faint but still visible. Perseus is the only hero depicted with these rays, but rather than glorifying him, they probably allude to his katasterismos, or his ascension to the night sky upon his death and subsequent transformation into a constellation.14
References to Medusa's beauty can be traced as far back as early fifth-century B.C. poetry—Pindar, for instance, speaks of the “beautiful-cheeked Medusa” (Pythian Ode 12.16)—and scholars have long surmised that a lost monumental wall painting was the inspiration for this and other similar contemporary depictions of the myth. The act of beheading a beautiful sleeping maiden seems rather unheroic, however, and it is unclear whether the scene on the Polygnotos vase is intended to elicit sympathy for the monster or laughter at the hero.

In the late Classical period the trend toward humanization and feminization intensified while, at the same time, the violence of Archaic representations of the beheading returned. On a red-figure pelike, Medusa, now wingless and nude from the waist up, and with an agonized expression on her face, gestures dramatically as she pleads for her life (fig. 9). Centuries later, depictions of the episode, such as an eighteenth-century etching by Alexander Runciman (fig. 10), likewise attempted to provoke pity in the viewer for the monster’s impending demise. After the fourth century B.C., Medusa’s decapitation and the ensuing pursuit of Perseus by the Gorgons ceased to be illustrated, while subsequent episodes in the myth—such as the rescue of Andromeda, which predominates in Roman art—gained in popularity.

Gorgoneia were ubiquitous until the end of antiquity, appearing on temples, artisan work-
shops and kilns, private houses, furniture, utensils, drinking cups, and other vessels. They were incorporated into fortification walls and gates, lined the edges of the roofs of temples and other buildings, adorned the coins of many Greek cities (fig. 11), were engraved on gems and cameos used as personal amulets, and ornamented shields, helmets, cuirasses, and greaves (armor that protects the shin). Their countenances, grisly and transfixing, were thought to have protective, defensive powers by intimidating the spectator and provoking fear in the enemy. This omnipresent and grotesque, almost comic visage may be explained as a bearable reflection of the terrifying alterity of death.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, one contemporary writer has argued that the inspiration for Medusa’s visual representation was the bloated face of a recently dead and decomposing body.\textsuperscript{19}

Like the figure of the Medusa, the Gorgoneion underwent a transformation from grotesque to beautiful, but since attractive faces cannot easily incite fear, artists portrayed Medusa’s head with wild, snake-infested hair; a pathetic, agonized expression; and other unnerving elements such as exposed teeth. This transition is apparent in a variety of media. It is vividly illustrated on a series of terracotta antefixes (roof tiles) from the Greek colonies in southern Italy dating from the early sixth to the early third century B.C. (fig. 12). An imposing, grotesque Gorgoneion occupies almost the entire surface of Achilles’ shield on a fragmentary Attic terracotta relief (fig. 13), while a beautiful version is emblazoned on the shield of a terracotta warrior figurine (fig. 14). Two fine
South Italian bronze greaves bear a Gorgoneion executed in repoussé relief on the uppermost part, which protects the warrior’s kneecap. The pupils of the Gorgon’s eyes in the earlier, sixth-century B.C. example are inlaid with amber and ivory, which in their pristine condition would have intensified the fierceness of her gaze (fig. 15), while on the later, fourth-century B.C. greave Medusa’s face is noticeably less repellent (fig. 16).

The figure of a running Gorgon decorates the tondo of a fine Attic drinking cup dated to about 575 B.C. (fig. 17). With a full beard, bared teeth, and protruding tongue, she is still very masculine and forbidding in appearance. Less ferocious is
the cursorily drawn Gorgoneion on the tondo of another Attic drinking cup, an eye-kylix (fig. 18). When this cup was lifted, two sets of large, disembodied eyes on the exterior stared at the drinker, who, upon draining its contents, would find the face of the Gorgon looking back from the interior, as if warning against the ill effects of too much wine. These painted, grotesque examples on drinking cups were subsequently replaced by heads of the beautiful Medusa in relief in the roundels of Hellenistic cups and bowls (fig. 19).

The famed Medusa Rondanini, one of the most mysterious and intriguing works of classical antiquity (fig. 20), is generally considered to reflect the first beautiful Gorgoneion in Greek art. Named after Rome’s Palazzo Rondanini, where it was formerly exhibited, this fourteen-inch-tall marble mask drew Goethe’s attention in 1786 while the poet was collecting casts of masterpieces of classical sculpture during his first stay in Rome. In his diary Goethe wrote of the “over-lifesize mask of a Medusa in which the fearful rigidity of death is admirably portrayed. I own a good cast of it, but nothing is left of the magic of the original.” He wrote of the sculpture again the next year: “[It] made a great impression on me. . . . I would say something about it if everything one could say about such a work were not a waste of breath. Works of art exist to be seen, not talked about, except, perhaps, in their presence.”

The Rondanini is a masterful composition full of new and surprising elements, such as the small wings on top of the head (in place of the large ones attached to the body) and the pair of snakes...
17. Kylix: Siana cup (drinking cup) with a running Gorgon. Attributed to the C Painter. Greek (Attic), Archaic, black-figure, ca. 575 B.C. Terracotta, H. 5 ¾ in. (13 cm), Diam. 9 ¾ in. (24.5 cm). Purchase, 1901 (01.8.6)

18. Kylix: eye-cup (drinking cup) with Gorgoneion. Greek (Attic), Archaic, black-figure, ca. 530 B.C. Terracotta, H. 6 ¼ in. (15.9 cm), Diam. 15 in. (38.1 cm). Fletcher Fund, 1956 (56.171.36)

19. Shallow bowl with a low foot and the head of Medusa. Greek (South Italian, Campanian), Hellenistic, late 4th century B.C. Terracotta, H. 2 in. (5.1 cm), Diam. 7 ¾ in. (20 cm). Collection of Hiram Carruthers Butler and Andrew Spindler-Roesle
knotted together under the chin. A closer look at the partially open mouth, however, reveals the Gorgon’s upper row of teeth, which render her cold beauty repellent. The high quality and classicizing style of the Medusa Rondanini have led some scholars to surmise that it is a Roman, first-century A.D. copy of a famous fifth-century B.C. monumental work by Pheidias, the most acclaimed Classical Greek sculptor, perhaps a shield device of one of his statues of Athena. Although many scholars question a fifth-century B.C. date for the original, the numerous fourth-century iterations of the type nonetheless demonstrate its widespread fame.

Gorgoneia of the beautiful type did not become common until the end of the fourth century B.C. Maintaining their funerary function,
they often adorned cinerary urns, such as an early Hellenistic terracotta hydria from the Greek cemetery of Hadra, in Alexandria, Egypt (fig. 21). On this vessel a Medusa’s head, represented wingless, is emblazoned on a shield painted in tempera colors on white engobe. Rendered in a three-quarter view against a blue background and skillfully foreshortened, she looks upward, rather than directly at the viewer. Medusa’s beautiful, mesmerizing face dominates the body of another early Hellenistic funerary vessel that was part of a lavishly furnished burial (fig. 22). Here, her head is sculpted in remarkably high relief, and her intense gaze was originally enhanced by color. The only wild, “monstrous” feature is her unruly hair. Even the pair of snakes, whose heads are neatly arranged on top of her hair and whose long tails are elegantly tied under her neck, resemble a clothing accessory.

An exquisite chariot-pole finial with the head of Medusa in high relief shows the popularity of the Rondanini type in Roman decorative arts (fig. 23). Medusa’s wide-open eyes are inlaid in silver, and the pupils were once set with precious stones. Their shine would have magnified the effect of her transfixing gaze, conveying its power to petrify. Thick, wavy locks, flying loose, frame her beautiful face, while two small wings rise from the head. Two snakes rear their heads from under the hair at the forehead, their tails tightly intertwined below the chin, while Medusa’s bared teeth produce a chilling effect. On another bronze finial, probably from a ship, Medusa has lost her wings and two identical snakes crown her bloated face (fig. 24).
23. Chariot-pole finial with the head of Medusa. Roman, Imperial, 1st–2nd century A.D. Bronze, silver, and copper, H. 7 ¾ in. (18.3 cm), W. 7 in. (17.9 cm), D. 4 ¼ in. (10.7 cm). Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.75)

With its round shape and striking features, Medusa’s powerful face was particularly appropriate as an image for the central panel of floor mosaics. One of the most spectacular known examples was recently discovered in the outskirts of Rome in a trench being dug for a water pipe. It once decorated the dining room (triclinium) of a house (domus) dated to the second century A.D. (fig. 25).24 Within the mosaic Medusa comes alive thanks to the superb chiaroscuro modeling of the face and the feral hair tangled with writhing, slithery-tongued snakes ready to attack.

Gorgoneia were also among the typical decorative motifs of Roman frescoes, usually employed in secondary wall panels or ceilings along with garlands, birds, drinking vessels, amorini (putti), or cult implements (fig. 26). Many of these wall paintings illustrated the myth of Perseus. A famous example comes from the Villa San Marco at Stabiae, a resort town overlooking the Bay of Naples and buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79. Perseus triumphantly raises the severed head of Medusa as he realizes that he now possesses the power of her deadly gaze as well as her miraculous blood, which could both heal and poison (fig. 27).25 The scene, painted in the characteristic rich palette and miniature style of Stabian frescoes, is set against a dark red background that accentuates the hero’s heroic nudity. The villa was first explored in 1750–54, and this fresco was perhaps the inspiration for Antonio Canova’s celebrated marble statue Perseus with the Head of Medusa in the Vatican, which monumentalized in stone
a strikingly similar composition. Conceived about 1790 and first displayed in 1801, Canova’s statue is based on the famed Apollo Belvedere, which it temporarily replaced at the Belvedere Court when the Apollo was taken to Paris by Napoleon in 1796. A more ornate version of the Vatican Perseus commissioned by Countess Valeria Tarnowska of Poland is currently the centerpiece of the Metropolitan’s Carroll and Milton Petrie European Sculpture Court (see back cover). Canova wittily makes Perseus look directly at the Gorgon’s head, in essence turning himself into stone.

26. Wall painting fragment with a Gorgoneion. Roman, Early Imperial, Julio-Claudian, ca. a.d. 14–68. Fresco, L. 8 in. (20.3 cm). Gift of Henry G. Marquand, 1892 (92.11.8)

27. Wall painting of Perseus holding the head of Medusa. Roman, 1st century B.C. Villa San Marco, Stabiae, Italy
Along with sphinxes and geometric, vegetal, and Dionysiac motifs, Gorgoneia are part of the stock design repertoire of Roman lead sarcophagi: coffins that were mass-produced in Phoenicia (modern-day Syria) from the second to the fourth century A.D. On a side panel of an almost-complete sarcophagus in the Museum’s collection, a Gorgoneion occupies the center of a temple’s arched pediment (fig. 28). Such architectural elements represent the concept of the coffin as a house or temple for the body.26 Although this depiction of Medusa is reminiscent of those on the pediments of Archaic temples, here the Gorgoneion is fully integrated in the decorative program. As an ornamental device, it also commonly appears on Roman marble sarcophagi festooned with garlands, such as an example from Tarsus in Cilicia (modern-day Turkey) that entered the Metropolitan in 1870 as the Museum’s first accepted gift and accessioned object.27
The face of the Gorgon frequently embellished jewelry, such as a gold pendant from Cyprus in The Met collection (fig. 29). The motif of the sleeping Medusa, in particular, was widely favored on Hellenistic and Roman engraved gemstones, a major luxury art form in the ancient world (fig. 30). Medusa’s delicate face was often depicted in profile view (a Hellenistic invention) with heavy eyelids and stylized hair coiled like snakes and rolled up and tied by a fillet (see illustration on page 1). Intaglios decorated with Medusae in profile, either winged or not, became very popular with Roman patrons in the mid-first century B.C. Since some are signed in Greek, they were most likely produced in Rome by Greek gem cutters.\(^2\) A first-century A.D. Roman glass cameo shows Medusa in a more dynamic, three-quarter view, and donning a pathetic expression (fig. 31).

The Gorgoneion motif was often copied in Neoclassical cameos, such as an onyx cameo with a superb head of Medusa cut in white on black (fig. 32). Medusa’s solemn beauty is framed by voluminous hair with writhing, serpentine locks.\(^2\)

Another striking example is a red jasper cameo of about 1840–50 signed by the distinguished Italian engraver and sculptor Benedetto Pistrucci, who was active in England and became chief medalist at the Royal Mint (fig. 33). A technical tour de force, the cameo depicts a beautiful Medusa based freely on the Rondanini and cut in high relief, endowing the figure with the monumentality of large-scale sculpture.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cameos were used almost exclusively for personal adornment and, along with brooches, were an essential part of a lady’s wardrobe. A particularly elegant brooch with Medusa in glass mosaic alludes to her frequent depiction on Roman mosaics (fig. 34). Gorgoneia and sphinxes *all’antica* were evoked as enigmas in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European decorative arts.\(^3\) A splendid gilt-bronze mask is a testament to their mystique; its gleaming appearance endows Medusa with a transcendent quality (fig. 35).

Since the Renaissance, Medusa has been represented with serpents in place of hair, an iconographic

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29. Pendant in the form of a Gorgoneion. Greek (Cypriot), Classical, ca. 450 B.C. Gold, 1/4 x 1/8 in. (2.9 x 1.8 cm). The Cesnola Collection, Purchased by subscription, 1874–76 (74.51.3397b)

30. Peridot ring stone with the sleeping Medusa. Roman, Late Republican or Imperial, ca. 1st century B.C.–3rd century A.D. L. 1/2 in. (1.8 cm). Gift of John Taylor Johnston, 1881 (81.6.120)

31. Cameo with the head of Medusa. Roman, Early Imperial, 1st century A.D. Glass, 1/4 x 1 in. (2.2 x 2.5 cm). Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917 (17.194.11)

32. Cameo with the head of Medusa. Italy (Rome), ca. 1860–70. Onyx, 1/4 x 1 1/2 in. (4.8 x 3.8 cm). The Milton Weil Collection, 1940 (40.20.52)
invention that Giorgio Vasari attributed to young Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). Caravaggio painted one of the most frightful, haunting images of the snake-haired Medusa on an old rotella, a large, round parade shield, for Cardinal del Monte, his first patron in Rome, who in turn gave it to Ferdinando I de’ Medici, the grand duke of Tuscany, as a wedding present for his son in 1608 (fig. 36). As a shield device, the Medusa head was intended to function in its traditional apotropaic role, to immobilize the enemies of the prince. At the same time, Caravaggio’s painting doubles as the shield of Perseus, reproducing the reflection, or simulacrum, of Medusa prior to her petrification by her own gaze. The image captures the same harrowing stare that all of her victims glimpsed and evokes the savage cry they heard the moment before they died.31

The image and story of Medusa continued to resonate in the twentieth-century imagination. Sigmund Freud, who found classical myth a rich source for his psychoanalytic theories, viewed the Medusa myth from a male perspective. In his 1922 brief essay “Medusa’s Head,” he interpreted the Gorgon’s terrifying face as a reflection of the fear of castration aroused in young boys at the sight of female genitalia and read the serpents in Medusa’s hair as phallic symbols that mitigate this fear, thus affirming the male observer’s masculinity.32

Sensual overtones permeate Gianni Versace’s contemporary recasting of the beautiful Medusa as the highly recognizable logo of Versace. The


36. Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi) (Italian, 1571–1610). Head of Medusa, ca. 1598. Oil on canvas, 23⅜ x 21⅜ in. (60 x 55 cm). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
Italian fashion designer, whose work brims with references to classical antiquity, viewed Medusa as his muse and alter ego. In a 1996 interview, Versace explained his choice of Medusa as his logo: “Sense of history, classicism. Medusa means seduction . . . a dangerous attraction.” In his provocative, sexually aggressive “Bondage” collection of Autumn/Winter 1992–93, which featured fetishistic black leather skins and straps, he incorporated gold metal buttons decorated with the Medusa’s face in every design (fig. 38).

Medusa is represented in the likeness of Kate Moss, the British fashion model, in Frank Moore’s 1997 oil painting To Die For, commissioned by Gianni Versace but completed after the designer’s murder in the summer of 1997 (fig. 37). Medusa’s severed head lies on a bloodstained marble floor next to a shattered bottle of Gucci’s perfume Envy, a spool, and a Polaroid photo that shows the moment of the decapitation. Caught in her twisted, snaky tresses are a dollar bill and a dead white mouse, resembling those used in lab experiments. The painting’s mirror frame implicates the viewer in a play of reflected identity and vanity. A poignant allegory of the complex relationship of fashion and art, the painting came to symbolize the perils of the high-fashion industry and the violence against two Italian fashion icons whose lives ended tragically (Maurizio Gucci was killed in 1995 by a hit man hired by his ex-wife). Phrases such as “dressed to kill,” “drop-dead gorgeous,” or “killer smile” echo this notion of glamorous beauty as a destructive force in contemporary popular culture.

37. Frank Moore (American, 1953–2002). To Die For, 1997. Oil on canvas on featherboard with mirror frame, 27 7/8 x 61 1/8 in. (70.5 x 156.5 cm). The Gesso Foundation / The Estate of Frank Moore, Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York

Sphinxes: Tomb Guardians and Deadly Riddles

The sphinx, a mythological creature with a lion’s body and a human head, originated in Egypt and was known from the Bronze Age on in various forms throughout the eastern Mediterranean. The Greeks represented it as a winged lioness with a woman’s head and often carved its image on stone funerary monuments. Statues of sphinxes flanked the entrance of tombs or were placed on top of funerary stelae that served as grave markers. Along with Gorgons and sirens, tomb sphinxes functioned as watchdogs to guard against and punish those who would disturb the dead. A pair of heraldic sphinxes crowns a late fifth-century B.C. funerary stele from Cyprus noted for its polychromy (fig. 39). Their femininity is emphasized by necklaces and elaborate diadems worn on their elegantly coiffed long hair (see detail on inside back cover).

Sphinxes, Gorgons, and sirens were often integrated into bronze or terracotta vessels and implements. An Archaic sphinx figure with a single feline paw supported a shallow basin (lekanis), a type of vessel that contained water and was frequently placed at the entrance of sanctuaries (fig. 40). A crouching sphinx with outspread wings is perfectly blended into the shape of a semi-cylindrical terracotta stand, one of a unique pair of vessels produced by an Athenian pottery workshop for the export market (fig. 41). Placed above the vessel’s tall stem, as if perched on a column, the sphinx peers down, with an enigmatic Archaic smile animating her face. A more
41. Stand with two sphinxes. Greek, Attic, Archaic, red-figure, ca. 520 B.C. Terracotta, H. 10 ¾ in. (26 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norbert Schimmel, 1980 (1980.537)

42. Lekythos (oil flask) in the form of a sphinx. Greek (Attic), Late Classical, ca. 380–360 B.C. Terracotta (polychrome, gilded), H. 5 ½ in. (14.3 cm). Rogers Fund, 1906 (06.1021.180)
benign and dainty sphinx, brightly painted and gilded, forms the body of a late Classical terracotta lekythos (fig. 42), one of many plastic (molded) vessels deposited as offerings at sanctuaries and tombs. Like Gorgons, sphinxes were widely used in jewelry, often embellishing pendants (fig. 43) or earrings (fig. 44). They were also struck on coins. With remarkable consistency, a sphinx appears on the obverse of coinage from the island of Chios from the sixth century B.C. to the late third century A.D. (fig. 45).

In the Hellenistic period, sphinxes continued to be employed on funerary monuments but were relegated to architectural ornamentation, as in the case of Tarentine funerary naiskoi (small temples), where they are often carved in crisp detail on limestone capitals (fig. 46). In the Roman world, the image of the sphinx maintained its sepulchral function, appearing on funerary altars, urns, and sarcophagi. At the same time, images of sphinxes became increasingly decorative, used frequently to adorn furniture and furnishings, especially table legs and candelabra. They were also part of the decoration of marble figural capitals of elaborate public buildings (fig. 47), similar to the ones recorded by Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778) in his engravings from the area of the Villa Borghese in Rome, as well as the mosaics and frescoes of Roman villas and houses.

Many late Archaic and Classical vases show a sphinx chasing a fleeing man or clutching him as prey (fig. 48). Sometimes the addition of an altar and column identifies the location as a sanctuary (fig. 49). In these scenes, the sphinx combines the role of the late Bronze Age death demon Ker, who snatched the corpses of dead warriors in battle, with that of a lover who passionately pursues handsome youths only to rip them apart.36 It is not always clear whether these sphinxes are generic representations of a death demon or refer specifically to the famous Theban sphinx of the Oedipus legend.37

According to the Oedipus myth, a deadly sphinx plagued Thebes by pillaging the countryside and chanting a riddle while seated on Mount Phicium, devouring anyone who gave the wrong answer.

47. Sphinx from a figural capital. Roman, Imperial, 1st–2nd century A.D. Marble, 14 ⅝ × 12 ⅝ × 5 in. (37 × 32.1 × 12.7 cm). Collection of Andrés A. Mata
48. Kylix: Little Master cup (drinking cup), with a sphinx standing over a nude man. Greek (Attic), Archaic, black-figure, ca. 565–550 B.C. Terracotta, H. 6¾ in. (16.8 cm), Diam. 9½ in. (25.1 cm). Rogers Fund, 1903 (03.24.31)

49. Kantharos (drinking cup with high handles), with a sphinx seizing a Theban youth. Greek (Attic), Classical, red-figure, late 5th century B.C. Terracotta, H. 8⅞ in. (21.5 cm), Diam. of mouth 4¼ in. (12.1 cm). Rogers Fund, 1921 (21.88.64)

50. Statue group with a sphinx attacking a Theban youth (reconstruction). Roman, 1st half of the 2nd century A.D., adaptation of a Greek original of ca. 430 B.C. Graywacke, H. (with plinth) 29⅜ in. (75 cm), L. of wing end 43¼ in. (110 cm), L. of rock 33¼ in. (85 cm). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (I 1536)
The riddle was this: what is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed? (Pseudo-Apollodorus, Library 3.5.8). The kingdom of Thebes and Queen Jocasta’s hand in marriage were proclaimed as rewards for the one who solved the riddle. By the time Oedipus arrived in Thebes, many men had already failed and perished, but he confronted the sphinx and gave the correct answer: it is man, who crawls as a baby, walks as an adult, and then uses a cane in old age. Oedipus saved Thebes, and the sphinx committed suicide.

In Sophocles’ tragedy Oedipus Rex, solving the riddle not only showcases Oedipus’ superior intelligence but also sets in motion the hero’s downfall, with his discovery of his true identity as the man who killed his father, King Laius of Thebes, and his realization that he has married his own mother, Queen Jocasta. The sphinx episode is illustrative of the folktale theme of a hero who wins a bride by slaying a monster, but here his quest has a cruel irony: the brightest of men is a monster through ignorance. Although the hero’s deductive reasoning helps him escape from the sphinx’s cunning trap, it cannot ultimately save him from his tragic fate.

The image of the ravenous, man-eating sphinx finds its most dramatic expression in a pair of Roman statue groups from Ephesus sculpted in dark graywacke, each depicting a sphinx attacking a youth. The ingenious composition, seen in the reconstructed group in Vienna (fig. 50), masterfully captures the tension between eroticism and violence. The sphinx has both fully developed female breasts and animal teats—a combination common in Roman art—and a beautiful face framed by long, wavy locks of hair. She claws the breast and feet of a defenseless youth, whose parted lips express the pain of his torn flesh. The statue groups are considered adaptations of the
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scenes of Theban youths being ravished by sphinxes from the colossal cult statue of Zeus at Olympia made by Pheidias in the late 430s B.C.40

The theme of the erotic, ravishing sphinx (sphinx *amoureuse*) was explored anew by late nineteenth-century Symbolist artists, who frequently used figures and creatures from Greek myth or biblical stories to populate their mysterious, dreamlike worlds. In their works, the semi-human sphinx often embodies an enigmatic femininity—attractive and seductive, but base, instinct-driven, and destructive—set against the figure of Oedipus, the man of reason, whose superior intellect triumphs over the monster’s savagery.41

The Oedipus episode is highly eroticized in Gustave Moreau’s *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (fig. 51), inspired by the 1808 painting (Musée du Louvre, Paris) of the same title by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867). Ingres painted only the front half of a feminine sphinx, noble but menacing, in an ominous, cavernous landscape. She paws at Oedipus, who calmly points at himself as the answer to her riddle: man. In contrast, the sphinx takes center stage in Moreau’s painting, where she appears highly feminized but rather insipid, clawing Oedipus’ chest and genitals. The monster’s long-standing ferocity is evident from the crumbling skeleton and a cadaver’s arm and foot visible at bottom. The two figures’ postures and locked gaze obscure the expected outcome of Oedipus’ victory and the sphinx’s ultimate demise. The Symbolists revived the ancient dualism of body and soul, good and evil, and sensual beauty and spiritual beauty, and it is in these opposing terms that Moreau described his painting: “Man finds himself in the presence of the eternal enigma. She clutches him in an embrace with her terrible claws. . . . She is the earthly chimera, vile as all matter and attractive nonetheless. . . . But the strong and firm soul defies the monster’s bestialities . . . having trampled her under his feet.”42

The enduring appeal of the sphinx as metaphor is demonstrated by Kara Walker’s 2014 public art installation in the defunct (now demolished) Domino Sugar Refinery, in Brooklyn (fig. 52). The colossal, sugar-coated white sculpture represents a sphinxlike creature wearing a mammy’s kerchief with naked breasts and exposed, gigantic vulva. A powerful political and racially charged symbol of the legacy of the sugar and slave trade, the sphinx pays homage to the enslaved men and women who endured brutality, exploitation, and sexual violence in American society.


52. Kara Walker (American, born 1969). *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*, 2014. Installation at Domino Sugar Refinery, Brooklyn, 2014. Sphinx: Polystyrene foam and sugar, approx. 35.5 x 26 x 75.5 ft. (10.8 x 7.9 x 23 m). A Project of Creative Time, New York
53. Stamnos (jar) with Odysseus and the sirens. Attributed to the Siren Painter (name vase). Greek (Attic), red-figure, 480–470 B.C. Terracotta, H. 13¾ in. (34 cm), Diam. 15 in. (38 cm). British Museum, London (1843.1103.31)
The Sirens: Bird-Women and Fatal Songs

In myth, the sirens were singing maidens who lured mariners to their deaths with their melodious, enchanting song. They are best known from their encounter with Odysseus and his companions in Homer’s *Odyssey* (12.39–54, 165–200). The sorceress Circe warns Odysseus that if he hears the singing of the sirens, he will never return home, for they sit in a meadow, surrounded by a great heap of men’s bones covered with moldering flesh, and fatally beguile men with the sweetness of their song. The sirens’ destiny, determined by an oracle, was to live only until a mortal could survive their deadly song. Odysseus sealed the sirens’ end when he was able to hear their song by ordering his men to bind him to the mast of his ship and to put wax in their ears. As a result the sirens drowned themselves (fig. 53). Odysseus was not the first, however, to resist their musical call. Before him, the Argonauts had managed to pass by the island of the sirens safely by having Orpheus play his lyre louder than their singing.

Homer does not describe the physical appearance of the sirens, but in Greek art their form was inspired by Near Eastern and Egyptian models such as the ba-bird, and they were represented as hybrid creatures with a human head and the body and claws of a bird of prey. In the Archaic period they were shown armless (fig. 54), and their gender was still ambiguous, since they were sometimes depicted bearded (fig. 55). By the fifth century B.C., however, the beard had disappeared, and sirens were represented only as females. A frontal siren perches atop an early Classical bronze mirror in The Met collection with a support in the form of a young, peplos-clad woman, one of the finest surviving examples of the type. The siren’s face and coiffure mirror those of the young maiden below, but her outstretched wings and pronounced claws add a menacing note to

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55. Detail of a tripod kothon (vessel for perfumed oil) with a bearded siren. Attributed to the Group of the Boeotian Dancers. Greek (Boeotian), Archaic, black-figure, mid-6th century B.C. Terracotta, H. 6 ½ in. (16.5 cm), Diam. 7 ½ in. (18.1 cm). Fletcher Fund, 1960 (60.11.10)
the composition. From the fifth century B.C. on, sirens progressively transitioned to avian-bodied females with fully developed human chest and arms, the latter being essential to their portrayal as musicians. Sometimes they are shown singing (fig. 56), but most often they play a variety of instruments, including the double flute, lyre, krotala (clappers) (fig. 57), and kithara (fig. 58). In late Classical art the addition of female breasts highlights their femininity, which is further enhanced by the jewelry they wear—including diadems, earrings, and necklaces—and the objects they carry, such as mirrors, fillets, and wreaths (fig. 59).

As sirens’ appearance changed over time, so did their mood and symbolism.
Although sirens had been connected with death since Homer’s *Odyssey* (late eighth century B.C.), their broader association with the Underworld dates back to at least the fifth century B.C., when they were believed to join in mourners’ lamentations. In Euripides’ *Helen* (167–75) they are the winged virgin daughters of Gaia (Earth), whom grieving Helen calls upon in her woes, while in Plato (*Cratylus* 403d–e) even the sirens are enchanted by the beautiful words of Hades, god of the Underworld, and are unwilling to leave him. According to a later tradition, the sirens were originally handmaidens of the goddess Persephone, who were transformed into birds after the latter’s abduction by Hades. Their transformation is explained in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.
(5.552–63): after they searched in vain for Persephone on land, the gods granted their wish to have wings to fly over the sea while retaining their human youthful faces and beautiful voices. This story was later viewed as a prelude to the sirens’ encounter with Odysseus (Pseudo-Hyginus, *Fabulae* 141).

On Attic grave stelae and other funerary monuments, the sirens’ enchanting song turns into a lament. They are portrayed as empathetic mourners, assuming the typical gestures performed during the dirge: beating one’s chest and pulling one’s hair. During the fourth century B.C., funerary statues of beautiful, grief-stricken sirens, often playing lyre music, were placed at the grave to guarantee an eternal lament for the deceased (fig. 60). Their melodious song was believed to offer consolation to the mourning relatives of the dead by expressing hope for a blissful afterlife.

The theme of the sad, beautiful siren is rendered in a strikingly imaginative manner by Raoul Dufy in his woodcut *Les sirènes*, one of thirty illustrations he created for Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Le Bestiaire ou Cortège d’Orphée*, published in 1911 (fig. 61). The two sirens flying over the sea are envisioned as beautiful women naked from the waist up with long, luxuriant hair, arms like bear’s forelegs, and fish tails: an intermediate type between classical bird-women and postclassical representations of the sirens as mermaids. In Apollinaire’s accompanying quatrains, the nocturnal wails of the sirens become a metaphor for the poet’s—and modern man’s—existential ennui. The current usage of the word *siren* to describe the piercing sound of alarms (which dates from World War I) derives from the deadly danger of the mythological creatures.
During Odysseus’s arduous return home after the Trojan War, he and his crew also encountered Scylla (Odyssey 12.85–100, 223–61), a sea monster who, together with Charybdis, a giant whirlpool, terrorized ancient sailors. Homer tells us that Scylla dwelled in a fog-bound cave high on a cliff and yelped like a newborn puppy (skylax). A terrifying monster even to the gods, she had twelve flexible legs and six long necks with ghastly heads equipped with three rows of thick teeth, full of “black death,” with which she snatched and devoured sailors from ships sailing by her cave. Nobody escaped Scylla unscathed: six of Odysseus’s shipmates fell prey to her.

According to Ovid (Metamorphoses 13.730–41; 14.40–74), Scylla was once a beautiful virgin sought after by many men. The envious Circe poisoned Scylla’s favorite bathing sea pool, thus...
transforming her into a monster whose body is girdled by a pack of barking dogs. Stripped of her sexuality and condemned to a life of solitude, Scylla sent countless sailors to the depths of the sea.

The earliest artistic representations of Scylla come from the fifth century b.c. They show her as a tripartite hybrid with the upper body of an alluring woman, a fishy tail, and foreparts of barking dogs emerging at the hip. Grasping shipwreck debris such as broken oars and rudders, she is poised to attack her next unsuspecting victims. On the tondo of a magnificent gilt-silver kylix of the late fifth century b.c., Scylla stirs up the sea beneath her, with her hair and dress caught in the wind and her dogs ready to snap at the swimming fish (fig. 62). A bare-breasted Scylla adorns a terracotta plaque with glass inlays (fig. 63), of a type, often gilded, used on the funerary klinai (couches) of late Classical and Hellenistic tombs.

Ancient geographers imagined Scylla living off the Straits of Messina along the Sicilian coast. She was a popular subject on pottery from Canosa, in southern Italy, which often combines sculpted and painted images. On an askos in The Met collection, a pair of Scyllae with arms raised and dogs poised to pounce rise from the body of the vessel, which also displays a partly preserved sea creature painted in rich blue and pink (fig. 64).

Modern scholars interpret the name Scylla semantically as a symbol uniting the three concepts of sea, dog, and woman that was articulated differently across media and periods. Scylla expresses anxieties about the navigational hazards of the sea, a generalized fear of being devoured, and male dread of female lust and aggression or their opposite, untamed virginity. The beautiful Scylla is yet another instance of an ancient femme fatale that anticipates the conceit of the seductive but threatening woman that emerged in the late nineteenth century.

64. Askos (flask with a handle over the top) with a pair of Scyllae. Greek (South Italian, Canosan), Hellenistic, 3rd century B.C. Terracotta, H. 17 ¾ in. (44.2 cm), Diam. 16 in. (40.7 cm). Gift of Mrs. Frederic H. Betts, 1911 (11.43)
The Nineteenth-Century Femme Fatale

From about 1870 to 1910, the trope of the “fatal woman,” or femme fatale (a term that was not in use before the early twentieth century), became one of the main themes in the art and literature of the Aesthetes, Decadents, and, above all, the Symbolists. Concerning themselves with the inner realm and the expression of ideas and emotions more than external objective reality, the Symbolists employed a limited number of themes and archetypal images to represent personal truth and to find spiritual value in artistic creation. Cautioning of the danger for men, and artists especially, of succumbing to a woman’s sexual allure, they often portrayed women as predatory and destructive figures. Called “grim ladies” or “earthly chimeras” by some contemporary writers, these femmes fatales are described by art historian Reinhold Heller as a fusion of “the sensual charm of women with the intellectual capabilities of men into a sterile union capable only of generating death.”

The characteristics that make up the image of the femme fatale center on beauty, lust, independence, and self-assurance, as she came to symbolize not only male desire but also male fears and anxieties about the educated, nonmaternal, sexually emancipated modern woman. It is no coincidence that its creation corresponded with

65. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (British, 1828–1882). Lady Lilith, 1867. Watercolor and gouache on paper, 20 ¼ x 17⅞ in. (51.3 x 44 cm). Rogers Fund, 1908 (08.162.1)

the expanding role of women in public life and their demands for equality at the beginning of the feminist movement in late nineteenth-century Europe.

The idea of the seductive but destructive woman had already featured prominently in Romantic poetry, which often used mythical or biblical female figures as paradigms. For example, Lilith, a female night demon and Adam’s first, insubordinate wife in Jewish folklore, became enmeshed with Lamia, the fearsome baby snatcher of Greek myth, in John Keats’s narrative poem *Lamia* (1819). The Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti created his version of Lilith as an emasculating sensual beauty in his 1867 oil painting *Lady Lilith*, which he replicated in watercolor (fig. 65). A beautiful young woman, modeled on Rossetti’s mistress Fanny Cornforth Hughes, is portrayed seated in her boudoir looking self-absorbedly into a mirror as she combs her long, red-gold hair. In a handwritten label attached to the watercolor’s original frame, Rossetti quotes from the Walpurgis Night scene of Goethe’s *Faust* (4206–11), when Lilith makes her sole brief appearance and Mephistopheles warns Faust of Lilith’s dangerous beauty, especially her ensnaring hair: “Beware of her fair hair, for she excels / All women in the magic of her locks; / And when she winds them round a young man’s neck, / She will not ever set him free again.”50 As in the case of Medusa, a woman’s threatening nature is manifested in her hair and gaze.

Long, flowing red hair is a recurring element of the iconography of the femme fatale. In contrast to Rossetti’s figure engaged in narcissistic contemplation, the seductive, bare-breasted woman with long, disheveled red locks and eerie emerald-green eyes in Edvard Munch’s masterful print *The Sin (Woman with Red Hair and Green Eyes)* looks out with a blank expression (fig. 66). Although not directed at the viewer, her hypnotic, alien stare is nonetheless reminiscent of Medusa’s petrifying gaze. Munch’s erotic icon floats in the void, as if frozen outside of time, reflecting his belief that love is destined to end in rejection and isolation and that submitting to lust and carnal passion would signal the artist’s spiritual death.

Progressing from the magnificently monstrous to the terrifyingly beautiful, female hybrids represent a conflicting view of femininity, one that is seemingly alluring but with a threatening or sinister underside. They are situated in the uncomfortable space between attraction and desire, on the one hand, and repulsion and anxiety on the other. The process of their feminization was a hallmark of the mythical and artistic imagination of the Classical period, when Greek artists humanized and beautified the most repugnant and hideous of all, the Gorgon Medusa. Much like Medusa’s gaze, the power of their art is transformative and enduring.


4. Alternatively, the sirens were thought to be the offspring of the river god Acheleos and one of the Muses, a genealogy that explains their association with music.


7. Ibid., p. 133.

8. See, for example, Werner Hofmann et al., *Zauber der Medusa: Europäische Manierismen*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Wiener Künstlerhaus; Löcker, 1987), which traces Medusa’s reception in Western art from the sixteenth to the twentieth century.


12. See, for example, Kathryn Topper, *Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction*, *Hesperia* 76 (2007), pp. 73–105. Topper claims that the appearance of the beautiful Medusa in fifth-century b.c. art is determined by narrative context rather than chronology.


16. See the discussion by Topper, “Perseus, the Maiden Medusa, and the Imagery of Abduction,” pp. 93, 102.

17. See, for example, the splendid wall painting with Perseus and Andromeda from the Imperial villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscotrecase in the Museum’s collection, which remains the main study on the subject. Janer Danforth Belson, “The Medusa Rondanini: A New Look,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 84, no. 3 (July 1980), pp. 173–78, pl. 48, summarizes the various theories and argues that the Rondanini copies a classicizing Hellenistic work instead, perhaps the Gorgoneion on the gilt-bronze aegis dedicated on the Athenian Acropolis by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (r. 175–164 B.C.).


19. It probably adorned a large ceremonial chariot used in processions (a *currus triumphalis*). The side loops are for the straps that connected the yokes of the horses with the pole, and the hooks above and below are for fastening the harness.


25. It is perhaps the work of the Italian engraver Luigi Saulini, who signed many other black and white cameo in the Milton Weil Collection, which forms the core of the Museum’s European gemstone holdings.


35. Although the exact use of these stands is unknown, the presence of sphinxes points to a funerary function, perhaps to hold vegetal offerings. See Beth Cohen et al., The Colors of Clay: Special Techniques in Athenian Vases, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006), p. 257.


37. On this long-standing scholarly debate, see Jean-Marc Moret, Oedipe, la sphinx et les thébains: Essai de mythologie iconographique (Rome: Institut suisse de Rome, 1985). Moret, p. 26, suggests that all sphinx images refer to the Oedipus myth.

38. Lowell Edmunds argues, contrary to the commonly accepted view, that the sphinx and the solving of the riddle are later additions to the narrative of the Oedipus myth, intended to motivate the hero’s marriage to his mother; see Lowell Edmunds, The Sphinx in the Oedipus Legend (Königstein: Anton Hain, 1981).

39. The groups were found in fragmentary condition at the port gymnasium of Ephesus and date to the first half of the second century a.d. The numerous fragments are now dispersed between Vienna and London; see Maria Aurenhammer, Die Skulpturen von Ephesos: Bildwerke aus Stein, vol. 1, Idealplastik I (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1990), pp. 178–81, no. 148, pls. 110–15.

40. This association is based on the groups’ scale and medium, which resembles ebony, one of the precious materials used in the throne of the cult statue.


43. The earliest surviving literary reference to their fate is in Lycophron’s poem Alexandra (712–13), composed 196–90 B.C.


48. Ibid., p. 11.


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Dangerous Beauty

Medusa in Classical Art

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