

The dream of Rome

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Gian Lorenzo Bernini
BUST of MEDUSA

from CAPITOLINE MUSEUM of **ROME**
to THE LEGION OF HONOR - FINE ARTS MUSEUMS of
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THE BUST OF MEDUSA

THE BUST OF MEDUSA BY GIAN LORENZO BERNINI

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid narrates that Medusa, the most beautiful and deadly of the Gorgons, had the power to turn to stone anyone who dared gaze into her eyes. By surprising her in her sleep, Perseus was able to cut off her head while looking at her reflection in the bronze shield given to him by Minerva. The hero, after having freed Andromeda thanks to the still intact petrifying power of Medusa, gave the head to Minerva who used it to adorn her aegis, and then her shield, as a terrifying weapon to defeat the enemies of reason and knowledge, virtues that she embodied. This very ancient use led to the custom, resumed in the Renaissance, of decorating battle and parade shields with the Head of Medusa, an invincible monster which terrorizes enemies, but also a symbol of the virtue and wisdom of whoever takes up arms against vices and foolishness of the enemy.

Bernini, disregarding the depiction of the cut-off head of the Medusa proposed by Classical sculpture, Renaissance and Mannerism, so skillfully revived in the last decade of the 16th century in Rome by Caravaggio, in the parade shield painted for Cardinal Del Monte, and by Annibale Carracci in his frescoes painted between 1598 and 1601 in the Galleria of Palazzo Farnese, sculpted a true bust-portrait of Medusa, alive, caught in a transitory moment of an unique "metamorphosis".

The myth narrated by Ovid, wherein the beautiful blonde hair of Medusa is transformed into horrible serpents by Minerva, condemning her to become a terrible instrument of death as punishment for having had intercourse with Neptune in the Temple dedicated to the Goddess, is perhaps revisited by Bernini following the well-known verses of the poet Giovan Battista Marino. In a madrigal taken from *La Galeria* (1620), the poet, exhorting the virtues of the unknown sculptor, pretends that it is a magnificent statue of Medusa that is speaking: "(...) Non so se mi scolpi scarpel mortale, / o specchiando me stessa in chiaro vetro / la propria vista mia mi fece tale". ("I don't know if a mortal chisel sculpted me / or whether by looking at myself in clear glass/ the very sight of myself made me this way.") The classical myth is overturned by Bernini to exalt the imitative quality of the sculpture: it is not the Gorgon who petrifies her enemies with her gaze, but it is Medusa herself, by making the fatal error of looking at her own image in a mirror, who is materially transforming herself into marble right in front of the onlooker. It is proof of Bernini's ability to capture the climax of a transitory action and the contradictory complexity of human emotions – astonishment, pain and anguish – in his sculpture. However, the Bust of Medusa was also intended by the artist to be a refined Baroque metaphor on the power of sculpture and the value of the sculptor. Like the Head of Medusa, according to early seventeenth century iconography, "(...) dimostra la vittoria, che ha la ragione degli inimici contrarij alle virtù" ("demonstrates the victory of reason over the enemies of virtue") (Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, 1603), Bernini's sculpture leaves his enemies and detractors literally "petrified" in astonishment by using his sharpest weapon: the virtue of his chisel.

The artwork, even today lacking documentary evidence, has been dated by Irving Lavin to the first years of the papacy of Innocent X Pamphilj, between 1644 and 1648, when the artist was dismissed from the papal court because he was a favorite of the Barberini and consequently his fame was temporarily diminished. In a recent paper published in 2007, the same expert has established tighter connections between the Bust of Constanza Bonarelli, sculpted between 1636 and 1648, and the Medusa, perhaps created by Bernini as a moral contraposition to the former, where both are personal reflections of the artist and both were donated or given away by the sculptor. In light of these new hypotheses the dating of the Bust of Medusa could be pushed forward to the end of the Thirties of the 17th century.



The bust of Medusa realized by Bernini Gian Lorenzo in the 17th-century (1630)

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THE BUST OF MEDUSA

CAPITOLINE MUSEUM of ROME



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The Capitoline Museum is a complex of buildings located on the Capitoline Hill, one of the Seven Hills of Rome. In antiquity the hill was the religious and political heart of the city, the site of many temples, including the massive Temple of Capitoline Jupiter, which overlooked the Forum. During the Middle Ages, the ancient buildings fell into disrepair. Rising from their ruins were new municipal structures: the Palace of the Senators, which was built largely in the 13th and 14th centuries and turned its back on the Forum to face Papal Rome and the Church of Saint Peter's; and the Palace of the Conservators (magistrates), constructed in the 15th century to the right of the Palace of the Senators. A donation made in 1471 marks the beginning of a new function for the buildings on the Capitoline Hill, which reflects the rising interest in the artistic legacy of Roman antiquity. In that year Pope Sixtus IV transferred to the Capitoline four famous ancient bronze sculptures from the Lateran Palace, then the principal papal residence. In 1537 Pope Paul III commissioned Michelangelo to relocate another sculpture from the Lateran to the plaza in front of the Palace of the Senators: the monumental bronze equestrian statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, which had escaped destruction during the Middle Ages as it was then believed to represent Constantine, the first Christian emperor. Michelangelo was also charged with rationalizing the area, known as the Piazza del Campidoglio. He designed new facades for the Palaces of the Senators and Conservators, completed after his death in 1564. To balance the Palace of the Conservators, he conceived a mat-

ching building, the New Palace, which was finished in 1667. Together, these buildings constitute the Capitoline Museum. The last element of Michelangelo's masterpiece of urban planning, the Piazza, was completed only in 1940 under Mussolini, but keeps largely to the original design, which appears in a 16th-century engraving. Despite the centuries of construction, most of Michelangelo's plans for the site were implemented. In the 16th century the collections of the Capitoline Museum increased dramatically through the acquisition of newly excavated works and donations such as the ancient works of art given by Pope Pius V with the intention of "purging the Vatican of pagan idols." The Palace of the Conservators became so crowded with sculpture that the magistrates found it difficult to carry out their official duties. In the later seventeenth century, many of the works were transferred to the recently completed New Palace, which also houses major 18th-century acquisitions such as the Dying Gaul and the Capitoline Venus, the latter now installed in a rotunda realized in the 19th-century. Since then, The Capitoline Museum has continued to expand its collection, making it one of the preeminent museum of Roman antiquities.



Anonymous drawing of the Capitoline Hill showing the Palazzo of the Senators in the center and the Palazzo of the Conservators at right, mid-16th century.