

## On “Cellini’s Blood”

### A Summary and Critique

Of all the sculptures – whether metal or stone – that we have examined thus far in this class, Cellini’s *Perseus and Medusa* is, by far, the most riveting. And after reading Michael Cole’s article, I have even more appreciation for the detail put into this work of art.

Commissioned by Duke Cosimo I, the sculpture was originally requested to be of the character Perseus only (though including the head of Medusa clutched in his hand). However, the smithy Benvenuto Cellini – a bold man – decided to use his own creative judgment with regards to how the sculpture was designed. This is why today we have a statue *on a marble base* with Perseus *and* the body of Medusa. But Cellini did not stop there: he proceeded to take liberties with the level of ghastliness by fashioning great spurts of blood that appear to be gushing forth from the limp corpse of Medusa. To the Florence of the 1500s, this gruesome use of blood was so realistic to its viewers that some even report having feelings that the “blood” was going to flow forth and soak them. Throughout the article, the idea that the “cascading” blood symbolizes the spirit leaving the body is often expressed (this is also the case in its partner-sculpture, *Judith and Holofernes*). Cellini also put great amounts of effort into the “anatomic accuracy” of the figures which only exacerbated the intensity of repulsion the viewers experienced when viewing the monument. Though, as I

said, an extremely “bold” move on Cellini’s part, this daring exploit would pay off largely for him, bringing him fame and prominence in the Florentine society.

As reported by writers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and also Cellini himself, Cellini – before receiving the Perseus commission – rose from humble beginnings as a goldsmith in Florence (which he believes prepared him for that “monumental commission”). It would seem that the adjective “bold” becomes Cellini, for in his reports of his work, he relentlessly stretched the truth about himself and the making of Perseus (“even to the point of fiction” as the text would state). Cellini contradicted himself several times in those reports, not the least laughable being his contrasting claims about casting where once he declares casting to be inferior to “modeling” but later insists that the casting pour made for the sculpture was designed and crafted by none other than himself. All of this exaggerating was Cellini’s attempt to thrust himself ahead in society and accelerate the process of achieving fame and status as an artist. Whatever his reasoning, it is doubtless that Cellini did indeed receive a high level of prominence in Florence; he even earned the title of “Florence’s new star bronze maker.”

The sculpture was not always the fascinating, renowned piece of art it is today though: it is actually reported by Cellini and others that attempts were made several times to destroy the commissioned work at different phases of its completion (including the foundry masters trying to ruin the mold and mutinous assistants making efforts to burn Cellini, his house, and his work to the ground). The text implies that reasons for these malicious attempts may have stemmed from two branches of jealousy: one being the very fact that Cellini was attracting

so much attention because of the complexity involved in his piece (the daunting process of founding that was more advanced than the founding skills of his fellow smithies), and the other being the credit withheld from Cellini's assistants (for Cellini hints that the casting was joint effort but never actually gives recognition to his associates).

Now to redirect your attention, I would like to focus on the sculpture. As I stated earlier, the sculpture was always meant to be fashioned of bronze. One reason for this would have been due to the intended location in which this piece was to be showcased. Since the site for the monument was within the Piazza della Signoria and was intended to be stationed next to Donatello's bronze *Judith and Holofernes*, the decision to craft *Perseus* in the matching metal was a natural one. This, however, was not the only reason for which bronze was chosen. Since bronze had been a popular material with which to work in Florence's ancient times, Duke Cosimo saw this (and other works of bronze) as a way to give the sculpture "life" and "revive antiquity." The article also touches on the idea of bronze symbolizing the Duke's regime's "premier pyrotechnic capacities" which would act as a way to put the spotlight on Florence's technologically advanced society. In addition, historians inform us that Cosimo was actually quite the scholar when it came to metallurgy and was consequently interested in furthering its use in 16<sup>th</sup> century art.

I very much enjoyed reading this article, and I believe the author did an excellent job composing it. Although I chose to hone in on the first half of the commentary, I was intrigued by the second half's emphasis on the why's of the

“bloodiness” of and the purpose for the base of the sculpture and found it especially helpful when the author included excerpts from Ovid’s story and quotes from Cellini and other men of that day. The amount of background (albeit borderline tedious in quantity) was also useful in understanding the history of the piece and its sculptor. With the article’s abundance of established data and multiple photos with various viewpoints (which aid in visual analysis), Cole has done a superior job of combining facts with a friendly style of writing.