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## The Gorgon's Head: A Study of Mythology Through Art

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## *The Gorgon's Head: A Study of Mythology Through Art*

By Matt Messmer

Art is always something I've been interested in. From as early as I can remember, I loved to draw and play with paints. My first formal teaching in art came from a local artist in my hometown of Phoenix, Arizona. From her I learned the basics of oil painting and drawing, focusing mainly on oil paints which have since been my medium of choice. Attached to this application are printouts of two paintings that I have done in the past. One is a still life of a pitcher and other objects that has been chosen for printing in the campus Exile magazine. The other is a master study of the Rembrandt painting *The Man in the Golden Helmet*.

As a studio art major and classical studies minor, my interest in the art of antiquity is natural. Some of my favorite paintings are those that depict the scenes of classical mythology. This kind of art appeals to me because it uses symbolism and imagery to convey the narrative of stories that are of great interest to me as a student of the classics.

Last semester I attended a class on Roman poetry which included the reading of Virgil's "Aeneid" and Ovid's "Metamorphoses." In this class we learned about Roman myths and their cultural significance. This sparked my interest in classical myth which led me in the Painting I class I was taking at the same time to briefly investigate paintings that depicted scenes from these epic poems and mythology.

This semester I am enrolled in both Drawing I and another class in the classical studies department that examines the history of the city of Rome. This class on Rome involves a 17 day trip to the city in mid May that lasts through early June. While on this trip I hope to get a first hand view of some of the artwork that I studied in my Painting

I class and to have the opportunity to experience the topics I'm studying in my Classical Civilization courses.

Drawing from all of these past and future experiences, my proposed research endeavor will combine both the study of art and classics by a joint examination of Greek and Roman mythological representations in art of the renaissance and later periods and then painting of similar subjects.

In my project I will study the myth of Perseus through representations of the myth in art, focusing mainly on the art of the renaissance and later periods. The story of Perseus is a central tale in Ovid's "Metamorphoses", a text used extensively by artists in the renaissance and later periods for the subject of mythology. Perseus has many deeds to his credit, including the slaying of Medusa and, probably his most famous deed, the freeing of Andromeda while slaying a dragon-like sea-monster (hence the constellation of Perseus and Andromeda). Many artists, such as Peter Paul Rubens in his painting *Perseus Liberating Andromeda* and Benvenuto Cellini in his bronze sculpture *Perseus*, have chosen scenes from the narrative of the myth as subjects for their work. Drawing from the study of classical and contemporary authors and painters of different periods, I will explore the myth of Perseus from a cross-cultural perspective, studying not only the myth itself, but the myth in context of the paintings and other artworks done by artists of different geographical and historical backgrounds, each with their own spin on the myth. Then, I will incorporate what I have learned and tell the narrative of the story from my own perspective through a series of paintings and drawings.

The trip to Italy in May will prove invaluable to the study of paintings first hand in museums such as the Galleria

Nazionale d'Arte Antica in Rome and the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence. The classical ruins of the cities themselves will also be a helpful source of reference as depictions of the gods and of mythic stories are abound in the architecture of ancient Rome. When I visit these sites I will take photographs using my digital camera for use later as references and as images for mixed media art. I will also take along a sketchbook in which I will take studies using pencil, inkwash, watercolor, and other easily portable mediums.

When I return to Denison I will take these photographs and sketches and, in conjunction with other reference material taken from books and texts, turn them into a series of larger drawings and artworks. These larger pieces will give me the opportunity to create work using many different media including charcoal, watercolor, pen and ink, pastel, photographic collages and mixed media works involving the digital photos I took in Italy and Photoshop. These larger studies will result in a minimum of twenty artworks in sizes ranging from 18x24 to 40x60. This will also be a time for further study of the myth of Perseus from a cross-cultural context as explained above.

The project will culminate in a final series of oil paintings and drawings in which I will tell the story of Perseus from my own point of view. These final works will include eight paintings and four drawings that depict scenes from the myth and involve the use of metaphor and symbolism to convey my ideas. All the final works will be linked by the narrative of the story and will together tell the story of Perseus and his deeds. Probable scenes include: The slaying of Medusa, rescuing Andromeda from the rock, and the battle with Phineus in addition to many others.

At the end of the project the final series of paintings and drawings will be

matted and framed for exhibition in the student gallery of Cleveland Hall in the Fall of 2003 for public viewing. This will also involve the writing of a brief summary of the project from a historical and artistic viewpoint.

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"Athena" by Matt Messmer