

Grades 6-8
LEARNING GUIDE

EXPLORE

MEDUSA IN ANCIENT ART

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FEATURED ART OBJECT

Medusa Mirror



Object Name: [Hand Mirror Decorated with the Head of Medusa](#)

Date Created: about 500-480 BCE Place

Created: South Italy

Culture: Greek (South Italian)

Material: Bronze

Maker: Unknown

Dimensions: 20.2 × 15 × 2 cm
(7 15/16 × 5 7/8 × 13/16 in.)

Image: Bruce White Photography

Gift of Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman
Getty Museum

Stories of the fearsome Gorgons are some of the earliest Greek myths. The back of this bronze mirror is decorated with the face of the most famous Gorgon, Medusa. Based on archaeological finds and art, we think the owner of this mirror was a woman. Medusa would have guarded her as the owner was looking at her reflection.

The mirror was made around 500 BCE in southern Italy, where Greeks founded colonies. There are many tales of the Gorgons. Some stories, including in Homer's [Iliad](#), say there was only one Gorgon. Some tell of

Iliad

Greek epic poem
about the Trojan War
and the hero Achilles,
told orally for centuries
and then written down
by about 700 BCE.
Attributed to the poet
Homer.



FEATURED ART OBJECT

Sickle

Curved blade for harvesting grain, used creatively by heroes in Greek myth (for example, to sever the heads of the Hydra and Medusa).

Gorgoneion

Severed head of the Gorgon Medusa (or an image of it) with protective power.

Aegis

Goatskin breastplate of Zeus and, more commonly, Athena. The gorgoneion (severed head) of Medusa lies in the center, often surrounded by snake scales. The aegis is sometimes fringed with snakes.

three Gorgon sisters born with wings, snakes for hair, and terrifying teeth.

Other later versions say Medusa was beautiful but was given snaky hair as a punishment. In most stories, Gorgon heads were so awful that the sight of them could kill. In the most familiar story today, looking into Medusa's eyes turned people to stone. But in fact, just seeing her face was enough!

Medusa was the only human Gorgon, so she could be killed. The hero Perseus cut off her head with a **sickle**, a curved blade, while she was sleeping. He avoided looking at her directly by watching her reflection in his metal shield. Her severed head, called a **gorgoneion**, could turn away evil spirits, curses, and ill wishes. Zeus attached the gorgoneion to his goatskin breastplate, the **aegis**. He used it for protection while fighting to become the chief god on Mount Olympus. His daughter Athena borrowed the *aegis*, and it



FEATURED ART OBJECT

Attribute

Object, clothing, symbol, or physical characteristic associated with a specific person, hero, or god. An attribute can identify a figure in an artwork.

became one of her most famous **attributes** (symbols) in ancient art.

The Gorgon on the mirror is the earlier of two main types of Gorgons in art, a snaky-haired monster. She has glaring eyes, a ferocious grin, and a big tongue hanging out over a short beard. Some other early Gorgons have big tusks and wings. In art from the 400s BCE on, Medusa most often had a human face. But because she offended Athena, the goddess transformed her hair into frightful snakes. (In one explanation, Medusa dared to meet Poseidon in Athena's temple. In another, she compared her beauty to Athena's.) Like the monstrous type of Gorgon, this Medusa appears in ancient art as a gorgoneion with snaky hair. Tiny wings grow from her forehead, and snakes are knotted around her neck.



FEATURED ART OBJECT

Cast

To make in a mold from liquid metal. A cast object can be hollow or solid.

Anneal

To heat metal to make it soft and pliable.

Repoussé

Technique of raising the outline of a design on metal by repeatedly heating and softening the metal and pushing the desired shapes into it from the back with a blunt tool.

Chasing

Technique of adding definition and details to an image or design on metal from the front using blunt and sharp tools.

Making the Medusa Mirror

The mirror was made in two pieces. The short handle was once inserted into another material. The **cast** bronze disk (the mirror) reflected the viewer from its polished surface. The image of Medusa was attached separately on the back. An artisan cut a circle of sheet bronze and sketched the outline and inner details of Medusa's face onto it. Then he (usually he) **annealed** (heated) the bronze in sections until it softened. The Gorgon's face was formed by slowly pushing up the soft bronze sheet from the back with a small blunt tool (this technique is called **repoussé**). Then, using fine tools, blunt and sharp, the artisan added details to the front (this technique is called **chasing**). Medusa's eyes would have been added in another material, making them more dramatic. Areas of the Gorgon's face are shiny, but most of the bronze has become a greenish color over time because of the reaction of the metal to moisture.



VOCABULARY

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TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



Closeup of Medusa Mirror



VISUAL ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Close Look at a Medusa Mirror

30
MINS

Up close looking and discussion to find out more about this mirror and the subject decorating it.

OBJECTIVES:

After completing this activity, you will be able to:

- Examine and describe an ancient work of art
- Listen to others' perspectives about an ancient work of art

Note for Teachers:

Steps 1 and 2 focus on visual analysis and therefore are most effective when used as a lead-in activity before students read about or research the focus object.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- High-resolution image of [Medusa Mirror](#)
- [Featured Art Object](#) information for Medusa Mirror

DIRECTIONS:

1. Begin by looking closely at Medusa Mirror using high-resolution images.
2. Then discuss the following questions as a class or in small groups.

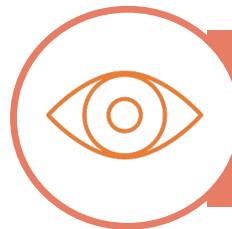


VISUAL ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Discussion Questions:

- Describe the details of both the mirror and the figure on the back of the mirror. How would you describe the mirror and the figure decorating it?
- This figure might look familiar to you—it's Medusa, a character from Greek mythology. What do you know about her (if anything)—either from the past or in stories from today? What clues might tell you it's Medusa?
- What do you imagine could be reasons why the mirror maker put an image of Medusa on the back of a mirror?

3. Finally, read the related [Featured Art Object information](#). Discuss which details you had already noticed from your visual analysis of the object.
4. Identify and write down four new pieces of information that you learned from reading about the object.



MAKING COMPARISONS

Comparing Medusa across Works of Art

45
MINS

Discover the variety of ways that artists have depicted Medusa by exploring several works of art.

OBJECTIVES:

After completing this activity, you will be able to:

- Compare and contrast several related works of art
- Describe the different ways that artists have depicted Medusa
- Understand and describe the mythology of Medusa

Did You Know?

Scientists like myths, too! “Medusa” is a type of jellyfish during a phase of its life cycle. Its rounded body has stinging tentacles — obviously, deadly snakes!

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- High-resolution image of [Medusa Mirror](#)
- [Featured Art Object information](#) description for Medusa Mirror
- Video: [Medusa Mirror](#)
- High-resolution images of the following items:
 - [Roundel with the Head of Medusa](#)
 - [Mosaic Floor with Head of Medusa](#)



MAKING COMPARISONS

- [Akroterion with Medusa](#)
- [Cameo Gem with Medusa](#)
- [Medusa](#)
- Graphic organizer (pg. 12)

DIRECTIONS:

1. Begin by watching the Medusa video. To find out more, read the related [Featured Art Object information](#).
2. As a class or in small groups, discuss the question at the end of the video:
What lessons might Medusa teach us?
3. Next, explore how different artists have told the story of Medusa through their art. Look at three or more different works of art featuring Medusa. Start with the featured object, Medusa Mirror. Then, select at least two more from the following list:

- Roundel with the Head of Medusa
- Mosaic Floor with Head of Medusa
- Akroterion with Medusa
- Cameo Gem with Medusa
- Medusa



MAKING COMPARISONS

4. Use the graphic organizer on page 12 to note your findings. Compare these depictions of Medusa, considering their details and messages. Think about the following questions:
 - What details did the artist use to tell us about Medusa?
 - What do those details say about this character?
 - What are the similarities and differences?In small groups, discuss your findings, focusing on the similarities and differences across the objects you selected.
6. As a group, identify an image or description of Medusa from contemporary culture. Discuss the similarities and differences between how Medusa is represented today versus in the objects from the past.



HANDOUT

Compare and Contrast

Object #1 _____

Object #2 _____

Object #3 _____

How are the objects alike?

How are the objects different?



RELATED LINKS

More about Featured Art Object

Video on [Remaking a Monster: Medusa from Antiquity to Today](#) from Getty Museum

More about Medusa and Gorgons

[Gorgones and Medousa](#) from Theoi Project

[Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art](#) online book from Metropolitan Museum of Art [Dangerous Beauty: Medusa in Classical Art](#)

Overview of exhibition from Metropolitan Museum of Art



STANDARDS

National Core Arts Standards:

- 6.VA:Cr1.1** Combine concepts collaboratively to generate innovative ideas for creating art.
- 6.VA:Cr2.1** Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design.
- 6.VA:Cr3** Reflect on whether personal artwork conveys the intended meaning and revise accordingly.
- 6.VA:Re7.1** Identify and interpret works of art or design that reveal how people live around the world and what they value.
- 6.VA:Cn11** Analyze how art reflects changing times, traditions, resources, and cultural uses.

Common Core English Language Arts Standards:

SL.6.1.A Come to discussions prepared, having read or studied required material; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence on the topic, text, or issue to probe and reflect on ideas under discussion.

SL.6.1.C Pose and respond to specific questions with elaboration and detail by making comments that contribute to the topic, text, or issue under discussion.

SL.6.2 Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

SL.6.4 Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.



STANDARDS

SL.6.5 Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, images, music, sound) and visual displays in presentations to clarify information.

R1.6.1 Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RI.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.

W.6.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and refocusing the inquiry when appropriate.

California Social Studies Standards:

6.4.4 Explain the significance of Greek mythology to the everyday life of people in the region.

Historical Interpretation, Grades 6-8:

3. Students explain the sources of historical continuity and how the combination of ideas and events explains the emergence of new patterns.