



Perseus Confronting Phineus..., Sebastiano Ricci

Perseus Confronting Phineus with the Head of Medusa

Sebastiano Ricci

Italian, about 1705–1710

Oil on canvas

25 3/16 x 30 5/16 in.

86.PA.591

In Greek mythology, the hero Perseus was famous for killing Medusa, the snake-haired Gorgon whose grotesque appearance turned men to stone. This painting, however, shows a later episode from the hero's life. At Perseus's wedding, the celebration was interrupted by a mob led by Phineus, an unsuccessful suitor to his fiancé Andromeda. After a fierce battle, Perseus warned his allies



to turn away their eyes while he revealed the head of Medusa to his enemies. In the midst of battle, Phineus and his cohorts are turned to stone.

Ricci depicted the fight as a forceful, vigorous battle. In the center, Perseus lunges forward, his muscles taut as he shoves the head of Medusa at Phineus and his men. One man holds up a shield, trying to reflect the horrendous image and almost losing his balance. Behind him, soldiers already turned to stone are frozen in mid-attack. All around, other men have fallen and are dead or dying. Ricci used strong diagonals and active poses to suggest energetic movement.

About the Artist

Sebastiano Ricci (Italian, 1659–1734)

One of the principal figures in the revival of Venetian painting in the 1700s, Sebastiano Ricci came from a noted family of artists. After formal artistic training in Venice, he traveled widely, working in Vienna, London, and Paris. He was known as a brilliant colorist as well as for his dramatic, vivid style, which recalled the art of Paolo Veronese (an earlier influential Venetian painter). Ricci's work appealed to royal and ecclesiastical patrons across Europe. Late in his career, Ricci often collaborated with his nephew Marco Ricci.

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Questions for Teaching

Describe what is happening in this scene. (There seems to be a battle going on in a great hall.)

Who do you think is the main character in this scene? Why? What is he doing?

What weapon is the main character using against his enemies? What appears to be happening to his enemies? (The main character holds up a head. His enemies seem to turn to stone amidst the fighting.)

In art history, an attribute is a clue or an object that is used to symbolize a person. What are the attributes of the main character in this scene? (He holds the head of the **Gorgon Medusa**; the helmet of invisibility [although he is visible] and his winged shoes were both gifts of the nymphs of the Hesperides. These attributes tell us that this is **Perseus**.)

The artist, Sebastiano Ricci, has set this scene in a great room or large hall, because in the story the this scene takes place at the wedding feast of Andromeda and Perseus. Examine the elements of the room for contradictions in the setting. If this is supposed to take place in ancient Greece, what is wrong with the room? (The sculptures along the back wall are all missing limbs and look as if they are ancient statues, not new, as they would have been if the story was set in ancient Greece.)

