

Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders, *The Head of Medusa*, c. 1617-18  
Oil on canvas, 34.5 x 44.5 in. (87.5 x 113 cm.)  
New York Private Collection

**Provenance:**

(Possibly) Nicolaas Sohier, Amsterdam;<sup>1</sup>  
Christopher Gibbs Ltd, London, 1977;  
Christies, London, 14 December 1979, Lot 128;  
Mr. and Mrs. William Llewelyn, Plas Teg House, Wales;  
Private Collection, United Kingdom.

**Literature:**

*The Burlington Magazine*, no. 119, September 1977, p. LXXIII, ill.  
J.G. van Gelder, "Das Rubens-Bild. Ein Rückblick," in: *Peter Paul Rubens, Werk, und Nachruhm*, Augsburg 1981, p. 38, no. 12.  
H. Robels, *Frans Snyders: Stilleben und Tiermaler*, Munich 1989, p. 371, no. 276B<sup>2</sup>.  
P.C. Sutton, *The Age of Rubens*, Boston, 1993, p. 247, no. 16.

According to Ovid (*Metamorphoses* IV:770), the ravishing but mortal Medusa was particularly admired for her beautiful hair. After being assaulted by Neptune in Minerva's temple, the enraged goddess transformed Medusa's strands of hair into venomous snakes and her previously pretty face becomes so horrific that the mere sight of it turns onlookers into stone. Perseus, avoiding eye contact by looking at her reflection in his mirrored shield, decapitated Medusa in her sleep and eventually gave her head to Minerva, who wore it on her shield.

Exemplifying female rage, Medusa is a misogynist projection and a fantasy of her power. When Perseus decapitates Medusa, he not only vanquishes her, but gains control over her deadly weaponry although he cannot contain the serpents disseminating evil.

There are a number of relevant precedents for *The Head of Medusa* (Fig. 1), including a lost work by Leonardo da Vinci and Caravaggio's *Tondo* (Fig. 2), that Rubens may have seen on his trip to Florence in 1600 or later. Whereas Caravaggio depicts her final cry, the present painting captures the head of a woman already deceased.

The authorship of the prototype by Rubens and the collaboration with Snyders remains unresolved. Until recently, Rubens's *Head of Medusa* (Fig. 3) on canvas in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, was considered the primary version, with possible participation by Snyders.<sup>3</sup> However, a second painting (Fig. 4), on panel, in the Moravian Gallery, Brno, until recently considered a copy, is most likely the first model.<sup>4</sup> It apparently has not been conclusively determined, however, that the Vienna painting is identical with the version owned by the Duke of Buckingham (1592-1628), already recorded in his estate in 1635. In his autobiography of 1629/30, Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687) gives an account of seeing *The Head of Medusa* by Rubens and Snyders in the

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<sup>1</sup> Recorded by Constantijn Huygens in his autobiography: S.A. Worp, 'Constantijn Huygens over de schilders van zijn tijd,' in: *Oud Holland*, vol. 9, 1891, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> As "Werkstattwiederholung und Kopien," together with Brno and Dresden paintings.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Koslow in Slive, Seymour, Cynthia P. Schneider, William W. Robinson, and Alice I. Davies, "*Shop Talk: Studies in Honor of Seymour Slive: presented on his seventy-fifth birthday*," Cambridge, MA (Harvard University Art Museum, 1995):147-149. The 1648 Antwerp sales catalogue of the collection of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham lists: 'Medusa's head with snakes [by] Rubens and Subter [a misspelling of Snyders].' Koslow believes that Rubens may have touched up some of the snakes, which was typical of his working method.

<sup>4</sup> G. Selig, *Medusa's Menagerie. Otto Marseus van Schrieck and the Scholars*, Schwerin 2017, p. 45.

collection of Nicolaas Sohier, a wealthy merchant and tax collector. Eliciting shock and a thrill of terror, it was kept behind a curtain for maximum effect. It is unclear if this is the panel painting that entered the Brno collection in 1818, since neither Huygens nor when the painting appeared in the sale of the Dowager van Warmenhuyzen on 25 July 1719 in the Hague mention the medium or dimensions.<sup>5</sup>

Rubens often collaborated with Snyders on still life elements of his paintings over the course of three decades. Although Rubens worked with many painters, it was Snyders, the first artist to develop the animal still life genre in Flanders, who was particularly capable to work on a large scale, making him a fitting partner for some of Rubens' grandest compositions.<sup>6</sup> Born in Antwerp, Snyders studied under Pieter Brueghel the Younger. In 1608 he made the requisite trip to Italy. Upon his return to Antwerp the following year, he became part of the circle that included Jacob Jordaens, Jan Brueghel the Elder, and Rubens.

Dr. Susan Koslow, after seeing the present painting in person, supports an attribution of the snakes in the present composition to the Studio of Snyders. Snyders' ideal combination of scientific accuracy and artistry is clearly demonstrated in his precise depiction of the snakes.<sup>7</sup> Although Snyders may have made studies after living species, he was probably more reliant on dead specimen, drawings in natural history treatises, and perhaps bronze casts taken from life. Most of the serpents can be identified as European grass or water snakes, but the composition also includes other creatures: a salamander, scorpion, and spiders that seem to be fictionalized. These may have been included at the request of Buckingham, who is known to have taken a keen interest in natural history. Alternatively, they may be intended as additional symbols evil and danger in the world, together communicating a message of constant vigilance.

It is unlikely that there may have been a preliminary oil sketch in which Rubens worked out the composition and determined which parts were Snyders' responsibility and which were his own, the design is not overly complicated and may not have called for preparatory drawings or sketches. Besides, the Brno panel shows *pentimenti* that are lacking in the Vienna painting, making the panel most likely the first version. A later canvas by Rubens' pupil Victor Wolfvoet (1612-1652), in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, supports the idea that perhaps the Brno or the present version remained in Rubens' studio to show visitors or inspire students.

Research:  
Mireille Mosler

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<sup>5</sup> G. Hoet, *Catalogus of naamlyst van schildryen met derselver pryzen*, II, p. 374, no. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Koslow, *The Head of Medusa by Rubens and Snyders* (Amsterdam University Press, 1995 and 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Only two other pictures by Snyders show snakes: *The Boar Hunt*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and *The Eagles and the Dead Wolf*, Musée de la Chasse, Paris. On the basis of first-hand inspection, Susan Koslow supports an attribution of the snakes to the Studio of Snyders (26 Oct. 2016).



Figure 1

Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders, *The Head of Medusa*  
Oil on canvas, c. 1617-18  
34.5 x 44.5 in. (87.5 x 113 cm.)  
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Figure 2

Michelangelo Caravaggio, *Medusa's Head on Minerva's Shield*  
Canvas on wood, 1598  
60 x 55 cm.  
Uffizi Gallery, Florence



Figure 3

Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders, *The Head of Medusa*  
Oil on canvas, c. 1617-18  
27 x 46.5 in. (68.5 x 118 cm.)  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



Figure 4

Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders, *The Head of Medusa*  
Oil on panel, c. 1617-18  
23.9 x 44.2 in. (60.8 x 112.2 cm.)  
Moravian Gallery, Brno