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The Making of Paris: Louvre Museum Critique
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Selected piece: *Persée et Andromède*, Pierre Puget (1678-1684), marble.¹

I. Formal Analysis

Persée et Andromède (Perseus and Andromeda) is a Baroque sculpture made by Pierre Puget for King Louis XIV from 1678-1684.² It measures 10'6" in height, 5'3" in length, 3'9" in depth, and is made of Carrara marble from Tuscany, Italy.³ The sculpture depicts the Greek myth of Perseus and Andromeda, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* dating from the first century AD.⁴ *Persée et Andromède* depicts the story's moment of climax, when Perseus saves Andromeda (condemned to death by Neptune) from a sea monster, by killing it with the decapitated head of Medusa.⁵

As the sculpture was originally displayed in the gardens of Versailles,⁶ some of its finer details are worn away, probably by rain. It is in high relief; the sculpture can be viewed in the round, although its back is hidden from the viewer because it is against a wall. The statue is on a roughly four foot tall stand.

Perseus is the largest figure of the piece. His head and torso are facing the viewer's left, his right arm raised above his head. In his right hand, he grasps chains, ripping them away from Andromeda's body (where she was tied to a rock, upon which he elevates his right foot towards the viewer, so that his knee is bended and his left foot is situated on a lower level of the rock, also facing the viewer). The look on

¹ "Persée et Andromède," *Musée de Louvre*,

<http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=792> (5 April 2017).

² Museum label for Pierre Puget, the Gallic Hercules, Milo of Croton, Perseus and Andromeda, Paris, Louvre, December 1994.

³ "Persée et Andromède," *Musée de Louvre*,

<http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=792> (5 April 2017).

⁴ Museum label for Pierre Puget, Perseus and Andromeda, Paris, Louvre, Petit Galerie.

⁵ "Persée et Andromède," *Musée de Louvre*,

<http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=792> (5 April 2017).

⁶ Museum label for Pierre Puget, the Gallic Hercules, Milo of Croton, Perseus and Andromeda, Paris, Louvre, December 1994.

his face is one of determination and earnestness. Perseus wears heraldic, royal clothing. He wears armor, but no shoes. There is a ribbon tied around each of his ankles. He also wears a helmet with feathers and a sword sheath on his left hip. The sword itself lies on the ground just in front of his left foot, resting atop a shield.

Supported on the right knee and left arm of Perseus is Andromeda. She does not rest her weight fully upon his body; her left foot stands on the elevated level of the rock, her right foot dangling in the air. She is almost completely naked, save for a scrap of material loosely hung around her waist, concealing her genitals and upper thighs. The rest of her body is exposed to the viewer. Her form is less rigidly defined than Perseus, who has musculature and overall more detail on his flesh, such as the veins under his skin. Her body, in totality, is much smaller than Perseus'. Her form is also limp; she is resting most of her weight on Perseus' knee, torso and arm. The look on her face is one of fear and exhaustion.

The chain that Perseus grasps hangs just to the left of his bended right knee, in the space between his body and Andromeda's left side. At the end of the chain, an infantile figure grasps onto it with raised hands. The figure faces away from the viewer, its lower half draped over the base of the rock. Its form looks as if it is being pulled and swayed by the power of Perseus' hand.

At the base of the statue, and at the feet of the figures, lie several items. To the viewer's far right, at the base of Perseus' left foot, lies Medusa's severed head, situated partially under Perseus' shield, upon which lies his sword. Her hair of snakes appear to writhe, their mouths open. Medusa herself wears a grotesque expression; her mouth is agape, her tongue hangs limply out of her mouth; her eyes are open and looking upwards. To the viewer's left of Medusa's head, also lying upon the ground, is a pair of wings. Directly behind these wings, and mostly obscured from the viewer,

looks to be two arrows, only the feathered ends of which the viewer can see. To the viewer's left of the wings and arrows lies a large, curling piece of ribbon or parchment. It stretches from the front middle of the statue and wraps around to the viewer's left side of the statue. Inscribed in this material are the words "LUDOVICO MAGNO," which translates to "Louis the Great" in Latin. All in all, this statue's forms are very dynamic. They depict swift motion and a physical struggle—both in the postures of the figures and the drapery in the scene.

II. Historical Wall Text: Historical Context

Persée et Andromède (1678-1684) was originally commissioned for King Louis XIV of France (at the behest of Jean-Baptiste Colbert) and displayed in the gardens of Versailles.⁷ The statue's slightly worn away details are evidence of its original role as an outdoor statue. It is a classic example of French Baroque sculpture,⁸ depicting the implication of movement and exaggerated forms, clearly visible in the figures of Perseus and Andromeda. Sculpted in high relief at imposing dimensions, the sculpture was clearly meant to be presented as a garden centerpiece.⁹ *Persée et Andromède* was presented to the King as the third of a series of statues, the first two being *The Gallic Hercules* (1661) and *Milo of Croton* (1682).¹⁰ Both of these statues had been well received by the King, Queen, and royal court. *Persée et Andromède* depicts the climax of a Greek myth, where Perseus saves the imprisoned Andromeda from a sea monster. Unlike Puget's former statues depicting Greek mythology, *Persée et Andromède* tells a story with a happy ending.¹¹ The grandeur of the piece, as well as the generally positive reception it (and others by Puget) received

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

are indicative of the preference for an opulent visual style at Versailles—and in court life in general—during the 17th century.¹² Originally invited to live in Paris, Puget found that grand royal life—which was so well tuned to the splendor of his works—did not agree with him, and eventually he left for Marseilles.¹³

III. Critique and Free Response

Technology in the realm of the fine art world has endless implications. Its uses as educational, curatorial, and accessibility tools have proven to serve as excellent aids for students, teachers, and the merely curious alike. With this said, however, I believe within the contexts of sculptures like *Persée et Andromède*, technology should be used as a tool of enhancement, and not replacement.

No matter the quality, the screen is no replacement for the human eye. Particularly within the frameworks of 3-dimensional works of art, the camera cannot capture the quality of depth that our eyes can. To view a sculpture on a screen in lieu of viewing it in person is a disservice to both the work and the viewer.

What struck me most about *Persée et Andromède* (and why I selected it for my critique) was its imposing scale and detail. And while technology gives us the immediate, it still cannot give us the physical. The defining aspect of a sculpture is its dimensionality. A sculpture looks different from a thousand different perspectives. To reduce it to a handheld screen is an insult to the artist's skill, and an insult to the viewer—that they should be satisfied with seeing its meager digital representation is an underestimation of the power of the viewer's ability to find meaning within physical objects.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Duchesne Senior. *Museum of Painting and Sculpture, or Collection of the Principle Pictures, Statues and Bas-Reliefs in the Public and Private Galleries of Europe* (Paris: Rignoux, 1829), 6.

Technology offers the immediate. And when we expect the immediate, the vast quantity of digital information that is offered to us quickly becomes addictive. When I was at the Louvre, the longer I looked at *Persée et Andromède*, the more I discovered. Even after spending 25 minutes with the piece, I'm sure there are still symbolisms and minute details that I missed. I could never imagine myself looking at the same image on a screen for this length of time. Part of the experience of discovery, for me, was being able to view the sculpture from different viewpoints and distances. Most technological captures of fine art do not offer this.

Although my attitude towards the relationship between technology and fine art may be critical, I can still think of ways that technology can help the viewer engage with pieces like this without replacing the pieces themselves. For example, learning about how easy it is to make 3D scans this semester (you can do it with your iPhone) has recently helped me to realize how high quality, 3D scans could, in some circumstances, allow the viewer to see a sculpture from perspectives they wouldn't be able to otherwise (for example, from above). In other circumstances, when the viewer cannot get physically close to the sculpture, 3D scans could also allow for virtual close ups. This applies as well to 2D works, such as paintings.

Technology also allows for immersive experiences that aren't possible in the real world. The relatively recent proliferation of virtual reality and augmented reality, specifically, could put works of art into contexts that help the viewer to understand the history of certain pieces. For example, *Persée et Andromède* was originally placed in the gardens of Versailles. An interactive technological experience would aid the viewer in understanding exactly what this piece looked like in its original contexts.

In sum, as I have previously mentioned, technology should be used in fine arts museums like the Louvre to enhance but not replace works of art. Sometimes, the line

between these two elements can be very fine, but I think the best part of technology is its ability to create new worlds that spark the imagination and draw complex comparisons and contrasts between the realms of history and art.