

Benvenuto casts his statue

Benvenuto Cellini was making a statue. It was a statue of an old hero called Perseus. He had made it in wax. Wax is not long lasting. He wanted to turn his wax statue into a bronze statue. Bronze is a strong metal. His statue has lasted for hundreds of years. Here is how he did it. He tells us:

First I ordered plenty of pine-wood. While it was coming I did the next job. I covered my wax statue with clay. It was like putting clothes on it. I had had the clay for a long time. The clay has to be kept a long time before it is ready to use. I put in pieces of iron to protect the wax. This was my clay mould. Then I lit a gentle fire. This was to make the clay hot. This melted the wax so that it ran out. I had put small holes in the clay so this would happen. Now only the clay was left. Inside it was empty. But there was still a little wax left. It stuck to the sides of the mould. That would spoil the statue.

To get the last little bit of wax out, I made a furnace of bricks. It was shaped like a funnel. It was all round the statue. I put on wood little by little. I kept the furnace burning for two whole days and nights. At last the clay mould was well baked. No wax was left.

Now I had to dig a pit to put the clay mould in. I set to work. When I had finished I lowered the mould. It went gently into the pit. I used ropes and windlasses. I had to go slowly. If the clay mould was jolted or dropped it might break. Next I used the earth I had taken out of the pit. I piled it up over the clay mould to make a mound. I put little tubes into the mound. At last I felt sure everything was ready. I explained to my workers what had to be done. I was sure I could rely on them.

Next I filled up the furnace. Copper went into it and other metals. The pieces of metal were carefully arranged to get hot quickly. Then the pine logs were put in. "Light the furnace!" I shouted to my men.

My furnace worked well. I had to run about putting on more fuel. It got so hot that the workshop caught fire. Then a storm of wind and rain came up. The furnace was cooled by the rain.

We had to battle on in spite of the rain. We had to keep the furnace hot. We had to stop it cooling down. It was terrible work. We were worried. Could we keep going long enough? I began to feel ill. I was getting feverish. I could not carry on. I had to go to bed. I told my assistant what needed to be done. I thought he would understand. I was so ill with fever by now that I thought I was dying. I would never see my statue.

I went to bed and tossed and turned. My kind housekeeper looked after me and told me to be brave. "You are not dying." she said. "You will soon be well again."

While I was ill a workman came into the room. "The statue is ruined!" he cried.

I jumped out of bed. I was ill but I put on my clothes. I hurried to the workshop. There were the men. They were standing still. The fire burned too low. The men were miserable. They thought they had failed their master.

"Listen to me!" I shouted, "I will tell you what to do. We can still save the statue."

My men were afraid I was dying. "We will work as hard as we can for you!" they said.

I looked at the metal. It was lumpy. It should have been smooth. The metal had begun to cool down.

"Quickly go and fetch some oak wood." I told my men. "The butcher over the road has some."

They brought it quickly and I began to fill the furnace. Oak logs make a very hot fire. They blazed well. The metal began to melt again. The roof caught fire again. I sent some men to put the fire out. It was still raining. I sent other men to rig up protection against the rain.

The men worked hard. They could see the metal was melting as it should. The furnace roared. I shouted directions. We stirred the metal up to help it melt. I forgot the pains of the fever.

Suddenly, there was a huge bang and a blinding flash. Everyone was terrified. I was terrified too. What had happened?

Then I discovered that the cap of the furnace had blown up. The metal was bubbling over. My men opened the hole in the mould at once. We took out the plug in the metal container. The melted metal began to flow into the mould. But I noticed that it was not flowing as fast as it should. The furnace had been so hot that part of the mixture had got burnt up.

“Quickly,” I shouted, “fetch all my pewter plates and dishes from the house.”

We threw them in to make up for what had been burnt away. Now we could see the metal was flowing properly again.

The mould filled up! I fell upon my knees. With all my heart I gave thanks to God.

Afterwards I went to bed. I was healthy and happy. It was nearly morning. I slept just as if I had never been ill.

After breakfast some of my men came to see me. They gave thanks to God for our success. They told me how much they had learned from what we had done. “We thought it would be impossible,” they said.

I let my statue cool for two whole days. Then I slowly began to uncover it. The first thing I found was that the head of Medusa had come out superbly. This was because of the little pipes I had put in to let out the air. The head of Perseus, was just as good. Nothing was missing. I was astonished. “God's hand has controlled this all,” I said. I went on uncovering the statue. Everything had come out in perfect order. How happy I was!