

Information on

Antoine-Louis Barye [say Ahn-twahn Loo-ee Bahr-yeey]
French, 1796–1876
Theseus Fighting the Minotaur, 1846–47
Bronze, 17 3/4 in. high
Museum Purchase, 1964.1



Subject Matter

Cast of Characters

Theseus (pronounced THEE-see-us): Son of Aethra and Aegeus, king of Athens; strove to be as strong physically as his cousin Herakles, but his strength would always be tempered by his reason, intellect, and interest in protecting the defenseless.

King Minos of Crete: His son died while in Athens in an ambush set by Aegeus. As compensation, Minos demanded that seven young men and seven young maidens be sent to Crete and sacrificed to a half-man, half-bull monster. The Minotaur was kept in an intricate labyrinth (maze) that had been designed by the court architect Daedalus. The 14 young Athenians were sent into the labyrinth and could not find their way out to escape the monster, and so never came out alive.

Minotaur (bull of Minos): The Minotaur resulted from the love of Minos's wife, Queen Pasiphae, for a beautiful white bull. (This X-rated part is not suitable for youngsters.) This fearsome monster had horns as sharp as knives, great hooves that could kick the strongest hero to death, and ate human flesh.

Ariadne: Minos's daughter, who fell in love with Theseus

The Story

The noble Theseus joined the doomed band of 14 young Athenians bound for Crete. Upon arrival in Crete, he fell in love with Ariadne; she told him to unwind a ball of thread as he entered the labyrinth so that he could use it to retrace his steps and find his way out. Once in the labyrinth, Theseus found the Minotaur asleep. He wrestled the mythical beast, killed him with his sword, and then found his way out using the string, thus saving young Athenians from this fate.

Barye's Sculpture

In Barye's sculpture of *Theseus Fighting the Minotaur*, Theseus represents rational and justifiable strength pitted against the irrational, brute force of the Minotaur. The two antagonists are locked in combat before the kill. Theseus stands firm and unflinching, undaunted by the Minotaur's claws tearing into his back. His left hand braced against the Minotaur's shoulder, his right hand aiming the blade that will strike the fatal blow. The Minotaur coils around his adversary in an effort to overpower him. Between their feet is the sheath for Theseus's sword near several fieldstones. The sheath symbolizes modern technology and civilization, while the crude stones, the primitive weapons of the Minotaur, are frequently associated with barbarism.

About the Artist

Antoine-Louis Barye was initially trained in goldsmithing, his father's occupation. At 13, he apprenticed to a die maker. Inducted into Napoleon's army at 16, he was attached to a corps of engineers and engaged in topographical modeling, a form of military sculpture. After serving in the army, he studied sculpture and painting and entered the École des Beaux-Arts in 1818. Like the painters Théodore Géricault and Eugène Delacroix, with whom he studied the animals at the Paris zoo, Barye exemplified Romanticism's preference for exotic and violent subjects; many of his bronzes depict wild beasts in combat.

At the Salon of 1831, he won a medal for *Tiger Devouring a Gavail*, a crocodile-like creature. This large-scale sculpture's subject was a radical choice, departing from the French Royal Academy's strict hierarchy, which ranked the human figure as art's noblest subject and animals as one of the lowliest. With the success of this work, Barye began working independently as a sculptor and painter. He continued submitting his animal bronzes to the Salons, where they competed on equal terms with sculptures of more traditional human subjects.

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About the Artist continued

About 1845 Barye established a foundry to produce small bronzes for France's growing middle class. He was appointed keeper of plaster casts at the Louvre and master of zoological drawing at the Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris. Finally elected to the Académie in 1868, Barye inspired a school of sculptors known as the animaliers, or animal artists.

Strategies for Tours

Primary Grades (ages 6–8): Is this a painting or a sculpture? What do you see? What do you think this sculpture is about? [Tell the story.] Could it happen in real life? Why or why not? Is there a lesson we can learn from the story?

Upper Elementary & Middle School (ages 9–11): What do you see? What do you think this sculpture is about? [Tell Theseus's story, emphasizing order and intelligence over emotion and brute physical strength.] How do the shapes in this piece help to create a feeling of stability? What shapes do the straight lines form? How are the triangles alike/different? [Define negative and positive space with students.] How does the negative space work with the positive space in this sculpture? Are the lines more curved or straight? Where do lines bump into one another? How does that reflect the action going on?

High School (ages 12–18) & Adults: [Tell Theseus's story, emphasizing order and intelligence over emotion and brute physical strength. Discuss Barye as a 19th-century Romantic artist and the greatest animalier sculptor.]

Sources Worth Consulting

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For fun: <http://www.logicmazes.com/theseus.htm>