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## Title of Object

Theseus Slaying the Centaur Bianor

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Antoine-Louis Barye; Caster: F. (Ferdinand) Barbedienne

**Date of Object:** c. 1850 (modeled, cast c. 1891)

**Accession Number:** 55.11A,B

**Material/Medium:** Bronze sculpture

**Department:** Decorative Arts, Textiles and Sculpture

**Culture:** French

**Country:** France

**File Created:** 11/14/2016

**Author of File:** Richard Lemanczykafka

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 7/18/2017

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## Tour Topics

Betrayal, Love\_Honor\_and\_Betrayal, Group 5, Highlights 1600-1850, Ancient art, Animals, Conflict, Emotions, Mythology, Nature, Sculpture, Symbolism, Neoclassicism, Romanticism, Minnesota/Local, James\_J\_Hill, Imaginations/Fantasy, Power, Stories/Storytelling, Greek hero

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

(Descriptive) "This is a full-in-the-round sculpture, so I'd like all of you to walk completely around it and examine it from all sides. Can anyone identify and describe a texture that they saw somewhere on the sculpture?" (The textured details that you have discovered reflect the artist's attention to detail and also speak to his desire to create sculptures that demonstrate his technical skills and his powers of observation. Barye, was enthralled with creating animals and humans that were as exact to real life as possible.

(Interpretive) "The title of this work is Theseus Slaying the Centaur Bianor. This is obviously a story from ancient Greek mythology in which case Theseus would be the Classic Greek Hero, representing good,

and Biane the centaur, evil. So how has the artist rendered these two figures to convey that contrasting symbolism?" (We see Theseus sculpted with the classic ideal nude male body. His posture and gaze are controlled and focused, suggesting an intelligent individual who has taken the measure of the situation and is in control. Biane's body is writhing in fear, bent and contorted, with an anguishing expression of the anticipated death blow. Thus we see a courageous and collected man about to slay a tense and chaotic-appearing beast.)

(Associative) "Since we have now witnessed the amazing detail and realism Barye incorporates into his sculpture, resulting from years of the meticulous study of animals; what stories do you know of, that contain animals that this artist might be interested in creating sculptures of?" (These could certainly be anything from other cultures' mythologies to animals in fairy tales like Little Red Riding Hood, or Goldilocks and the 3 Bears to the 3 Pigs and the Big Bad Wolf!)

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### **Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)**

During the 18th century, the excavation of ancient classic ruins at the Roman sites of Herculaneum and Pompeii inspired a renewal of interest in Greek and Roman Art and ideas. This, of course, had already been preceded by the revived interest in ancient Greek and Roman Art that had occurred during the Renaissance. Ancient works of art then were studied and a revitalized interest in discovering and learning through the observation of the real, natural world developed. (Object in Focus, Teaching the Arts)

And so this new style of Art taking form was called Neoclassicism, because it again developed and drew upon art of Greece and Rome, but now its themes were being more inspired by the classical mythology. Male nudes are still popular subjects and they again express the Greek concept of the ideal man, as one who, like the hero Theseus, balances physical and intellectual prowess. This style favors idealized forms, attention to detail, and the carefully rendering of textures, but in a calmer, more restrained way.

Romanticism starts developing in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the visual arts, and is marked by a focus on imagination and emotion in the subject matter, as well as looking to distant places (like northern Africa and the Middle East). Romanticism is often thought to be in opposition to the calm, restrained approach of Neoclassicism, but in fact, many works blend qualities of both, such as in Barye's sculpture.

A Romantic artist often depicted a turning point in a tale, making the portrayal even more melodramatic. Barye, captures the climactic moment in many of his sculptures between man and beast, and animal and animal. And although much of Barye's works reflect the high drama and narrative focus of Romanticism, he also enhanced his figures with the meticulous, idealized naturalism and attention to detail that is so characteristic of Neoclassical sculpture. (Object in Focus, Teaching the Arts)

From the label, "Barye displayed his plaster model for the sculpture in Paris in 1850. This version, however, was probably cast in 1891." In the form of our sculpture, he is also thought to have been influenced by a sculpture by the Italian Mannerist, Giambologna, of Hercules and the Centaur Nessus (Metmuseum, see prop photo).

This particular sculpture would have been cast in different sizes, from small statuettes to the larger bronze seen here. "There was a fashion in 19th-century France for animal studies. Bronzes could now be mass produced and the growing middle class was keen to collect luxury goods. Barye (1796-1875) was the first and foremost of the sculptors who specialised in this genre." (V&A) This is a large reduction of

the plaster cast that was displayed in 1850, and this cast bronze was produced by the Barbedienne Foundry after the sculptor's death. (Mia, Object in Focus)

**The story of Theseus:** Theseus was a Classic Hero in ancient Greek Mythology; a man of great accomplishments, a slayer of monstrous creatures, a civic leader (he eventually succeeded his father and became King of Athens), and a man of noble birth, (one of his parents was a Greek god). Since mythologically he was not only the son of his mother Aethra, daughter of King Pittheus of Trozen, and Aegeus, king of Athens, but also fathered by the Greek god Poseidon, he was bestowed with the special gifts of incredible strength and intelligence. Both of which were common attributes of the offspring of the gods.

While Aethra was pregnant with Theseus, king Aegeus returned to Athens. Before leaving he buried his sword and sandals under a bolder, and told Aethra that when Theseus had become a man, if he could lift the rock and retrieve the sword and sandals, that their son should come to Athens and claim his rightful place as his heir.

After being raised by his mother in her homeland, at 16 Aethra informed Theseus of who his father was and what he would need to do to become the recognized heir to the Athenian throne. Theseus raised the bolder, and retrieved the sword and sandals and then set off for Athens to claim his birth right from his mortal father. Now Theseus, being a young and courageous man, decided to go to Athens via the longer and more dangerous land route, versus the quicker and easier sea route.

And it was this choice that allowed Theseus to begin his legendary and heroic reputation, for on this journey he performed his "six labors" by vanquishing six vicious, notorious and enhanced robbers along this path that had been plaguing travelers for ages. (ie. Killed Periphete/Epidaurus the "clubber, Slew Sinis the "Giant & son of Poseidon", Killed the "Crommyonian Sow", Killed Scion the "Cliff Kicker", Crushed Ceriyon/Coercion the "Powerful Wrestler", and Killed Procrustes, the "Bed-Large-&-Small.")

Arriving in Athens incognito, Theseus was unfortunately recognized by two potential threats. One, being Aegeus' second wife Medea, who wanted her son Medus to be the next king. She first tried to eliminate Theseus by challenging him to capture the Marathonian Bull, a symbol of Cretan power, hoping that he would be killed in his attempt. Our hero succeeded and returned with the bulls head. During the celebration Medea tried to poison Theseus, but she was stopped by his father, Aegeus who suddenly recognized Theseus as his son, because of the sword and sandals he was wearing. Medea and her son fled Athens, never to return.

The other threat to Theseus was from the Pallantides, who were the sons of Pallas, and nephews to king Aegeus. They also had hoped to succeed the childless king. Theseus' appearance put this in jeopardy, so a plot was devised to eliminate him. Our hero was warned of this plot and fell upon the ambushing assassins, and slew them all.

While his father was still king a tragedy befell Athens. Either as a result of retribution to or from conquest by Crete, Athens was required to send the 7 most courageous male youth & the 7 most beautiful maidens to Crete as a tribute. There they were devoured by the Minotaur in the Labyrinth, & never seen again. This tribute was expected every 7-9 years and on the third tribute Theseus volunteered to go & bring this problem to an end, by being one of the 7 male youths. On arrival to Crete, Ariadne, King Minos' daughter, fell in love with Theseus. She assisted him by providing him with a ball of string which he could use to set down a trail into the Labyrinth & then follow it back out. He used the

string to get to the center of the Labyrinth, where he killed the Minotaur, & then followed the string trail back out. Although he loved Ariadne, a goddess told him to leave her, so he returned to Athens victorious, but without his love.

Theseus' reputation as a hero continued to grow because of such courageous acts. However, there was one Greek, who wasn't convinced of Theseus' strength and intelligence. That man was Pirithous. Pirithous, was a Prince of the Lapiths, a kingdom in Thessaly. He had heard of Theseus' amazing feats, but wanted to put him to a test himself. So he stole Theseus' herd of cattle. Theseus pursued, and upon reaching his cattle took up arms against Pirithous, who quickly conceded, realizing that Theseus was truly strong and courageous. But rather than exact retribution upon Pirithous, Theseus recognized his real intent, and believed that a man who would challenge him in such a way would be an outstanding friend. And thus it was that they became best of friends! Together they hunted and killed the ferocious Caledonian Boar!

And it was this friendship that played an important role in expanding Theseus legend. Pirithous was getting married to Hippodamia. Theseus was of course invited to the wedding, but also were the Lapith's neighbors, the Centaurs. The Centaurs, having drunk too much wine, got drunk, became unruly, and attempted to kidnap and rape the bride as well as some of the other female guests. Pirithous, other Lapiths, and especially Theseus, battled the Centaurs, slaying some of them and banishing the rest to distant lands. Theseus himself slew, Eurytus, the fiercest of all the centaurs.

Theseus was involved in other heroic deeds; slaying the Crommyonian Sow, assisting Heracles on his Labor to capture the Amazon Queen's magic girdle/belt, and descending into Hades itself, where he became immobilized and eventually was rescued by Heracles as his 12th task. In the end, Theseus was thrown off of a cliff on the island of Skyros, by Lycomedes, after he had lost favor with the Athenians, but his legend lived on among the ancient Greeks. (Wikipedia)

**Regarding the subject matter:** "The story of the Lapiths and the Centaurs was popular in Greek art as a way to picture the victory of the civilized Greeks (represented by the Lapiths) over the barbarous Persians (represented by the Centaurs) in a battle that took place in 480 BCE." (Object in Focus, Teaching the Arts)

HOOFNOTE: Genealogically speaking, "Centaurs" in Greek mythology were kindred people to the Lapiths, both inhabiting areas of Thessaly. And perhaps this explains the rationale behind Pirithous inviting them to his wedding to Hippodamia, the centaurs being his neighbors. It was believed that the god Apollo and the river nymph Stilbe, daughter of the river god Peneus, had twin sons; Lapithes and Centaurus. Lapithes was a courageous warrior who became the eponymous ancestor of the Lapith people. Centaurus was unfortunately deformed at birth, and later mated with mares, from whom the race of half-man, half-horse came to be. Thus he was the eponymous ancestor of the centaurs. The eventual battle that took place at Pirithous' wedding is referred to as the Centauromachy, and has been portrayed in art since the ancient Greeks!) (Wikipedia)

SEE other fights with centaurs, from ancient Greece to the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

The South Metopes (high reliefs) on the Doric frieze of the Parthenon 447-? BCE The frieze in the Temple of Apollo at Bassae Late 5th Cent. BC

Mausoleum of Halicarnassus 353-350 BC

Battle of Centaurs and Lapiths, By Piero di Cosimo 1500-1515

(Hercules Fighting the Centaur Nessos, By Giambologna 1599)

The Battle of Centaurs and Lapiths at Hippodamia's Wedding, By Karel Dujardin 1667

Theseus Defeats the Centaur, By Antonio Canova 1804-1819

Theseus Save Hippodamia, By Johannes Pfuhl 1906-07

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

**Artist bio:** Antoine-Louis Barye had two overriding passions: one was sculpture, and the other animals! Being the son of a goldsmith made it possible to observe his father's technical skills and aesthetic expressions in 3D form. Then, starting at the age of 13, Antoine-Louis did an apprenticeship with the French die-maker Fourier, and then with the goldsmith Biennaise, allowing him to become familiar with almost all types of metalworking, from casting to engraving. It was during these early years that Barye's interest in and passion for sculpture was ignited. But it was not until 1823, while working for the goldsmith Emile Fauconnier that he discovered his true predilection from watching the animals in the Jardin des Plantes, making vigorous studies of them in pencil drawings comparable to those of Delacroix, then modeling them in sculpture on a large or small scale. (Wikipedia)

After serving in the army from 1812 to 1814, Barye trained in the fine arts with sculptor François-Joseph Bosio (1768-1845) and painter Baron Gros (1771-1835). He then studied at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts from 1818 to 1823. His miniature medallion, *Milo of Crotona Devoured by a Lion*, won an honorable mention in metal engraving in 1819, but he failed to win the Prix de Rome. He worked as a craftsman for the goldsmith Jacques-Henri Fauconnier from 1823 to 1831, making animal figurines to earn some money, and he made his Salon debut in 1827 with a selection of busts. Barye made his critical and public mark as a sculptor four years later, in the Salon of 1831, with groups representing predatory violence in the wild. His first government commission came soon after, precisely for such a subject. The Minister of the Interior purchased Barye's monumental plaster Lion (since called Lion Crushing a Serpent), shown in 1833, and had it cast in bronze by Honoré Gonon and shown in 1836, before placing it in the public Tuileries Gardens (now Musée du Louvre, Paris)... During these same years the royal family began buying and commissioning small-scale works from Barye for their private collections. ... Barye submitted works to the Salon only rarely after the jury rejected his surtout elements in 1837. Unable to capitalize on that outlet and on royal patronage, which declined after the death of the duc d'Orléans in 1842, he embarked on a new venture that lasted his entire career. He began to market his figurative and ornamental works as small-scale serial bronzes, first through the foundry Maison Besse in 1844, then directly to the public. He then worked in partnership with entrepreneur Emile Martin from 1845 to 1857, after which he proceeded independently. This serial production provided Barye's most widespread and enduring reputation, with casts distributed throughout the United States and Europe during the artist's lifetime. (NGA and Oxford)

While Barye excelled at sculpture, he often faced financial burdens due to his lack of business knowledge. In 1848 he was forced to declare bankruptcy, and all of his work and molds were sold to a foundry. The foundry began making inferior work from 1848-1857, and his reputation suffered during this time. In 1876 (a year after his death) what remained of Barye's inventory, 125 models, were sold to

the Ferdinand Barbedienne foundry. The 1877 Barbedienne catalogue offered all of the models in bronze in variable sizes, and the Barbedienne castings were of superb quality. (Wikipedia)

When or why Antoine-Louis Barye developed a fascination for animals is not known. What is known is when they began to show up in his early works, and continued to do so for the rest of his creative life. His appetite for studying and learning as much as he could about them was endless. His approaches to acquiring that knowledge took on a formalistic nature. He studied the works and methods of the great zoologist and founder of comparative anatomy, Curvier. Barye would observe and sketch caged animals with his Romanticist friend Delacroix, at the Jardin des Plantes, and after an animal had died there, he was able to examine its' bone and muscular structure as well as the creatures articulation close up! (Oxford Art Online)

Antoine-Louis Barye attended lectures and continued the refined study of animals till he was 67, a few years before his death. (Oxford, Grove Art) All of this knowledge of animals combined with his metal crafting attributes as a sculptor, were applied to his vast creation of animalier, and afforded him the appropriate title of the "Michelangelo of the Menagerie!" (Moonan)

As Heidi Klum would say, "One day you're in, and the next day you're out!" And such was the case for Antoine-Louis Barye! Throughout his artistic career he struggled with critical acclaim and recognition from the French Academy, which held sway over the French artistic community and controlled who was recognized and who wasn't. The "Salon" held a major national exhibit every other year and the Academy determined who would be allowed to exhibit and who the winners would be. Neoclassical art was the main style supported and perpetuated through the French Salon's awards.

The Revolution of 1848 in France, swept away most of the Salon's jury that had been entrenched. Barye, as well as the unrecognized and excited vanguard of the Romanticist movement came into triumphant acknowledgment! And Barye, himself, was elected to the new 11 person jury that would now classify and place sculptural works into the Salon's exhibits! He was also named Curator of Plaster Casts at the Louvre, and even though he was only able to hold this position for four years, because of political issues, while there he improved the quality of the plaster mold collection and the castings that they produced. (Oxford and Pivar)

In 1850, Barye submitted two works to the Salon, *Jaguar Devouring a Hare* and *Theseus Combating the Centaur Bianor*. By pairing the two works, Barye "aimed to reaffirm his conviction that an image of a predator with its prey, encapsulating his own Romantic vision of nature, was worthy to stand beside an academically sanctioned mythological combat."(Oxford, Grove Art)

Barye was given the post of Professor of Zoological Drawing at his beloved Jardin des Plantes, which was part of the Museum of Natural History, in Paris. Although substantially qualified as an animalier artist, Barye lacked the pedagogical abilities needed for an exceptional instructor. Unfortunately, the most noteworthy comment that can be made during his time in this position was that he had the up and coming sculptor, Rodin as one of his students! (Oxford, Grove Art)

Although this paper is earmarked for Barye's *Theseus Slaying a Centaur*, it needs to be noted that it is his animal sculptures produced in such vast numbers that are his lasting achievement and legacy. Whether minuscule or monumental, his animal figures are vibrant and alert, even when the animal in question is at rest. And they were executed with a skill that captured every fiber of their essence; tendons, muscles, manes, and even the sheen of their coats. With his allegorical pieces like *Theseus Slaying a Centaur* or

*The Minotaur*, Barye was able to combine Romanticism through his sculptural prowess of the animal portions, and Classicism through the ideal male body of Theseus.

In closing, I would like to include some quotes from collectors, taken from the book *Antoine-Louis Barye and The American Collector* by James Graham & Sons, since I believe they speak in very articulated ways to the genius of this sculptor:

- “Barye’s early sculptures of animal combat placed him in the forefront of the Paris art world. His fascination with themes of violent passion and the exotic, epitomized the Romanticism of his contemporaries Theodore Gericault and Eugene Delacroix.” -Kate Clifford
- “I am drawn to Barye’s sculptures of animals because he portrays them just as they are, yet with a touch of nobility added.” -John A. Shrader
- “We are transported to another world as we contemplate the variety of creatures from the animal kingdom, in their beauty and brutality. It is a transcending experience to have all about one these life-like animals, captured in an assortment of poses and attitudes. One’s imagination becomes stimulated and the spirituality of life becomes infinitely enlarged.” -Arthur Ross
- “I was struck by the detailed accuracy with which the artist captured the natural beauty of his subject animal. But even more compelling to me was the way he also managed to freeze into each bronze some particular powerful and dramatic action - an eagle about to take flight, an elephant running, a lion crushing a snake, a horse rearing up, or even a tiger simply walking the way big cats do.” -Roger Moak
- “Of all the sculptors I studied, only one had a true diversity of subjects. Only one displayed a competence for animals both wild and domestic. Only one increased my interest over time. And only one I continue to collect. Barye.” -Henry Gaines

And finally, I end with a quote from the artist: “Observe nature, what other professor do you need?”  
Antoine-Louis Barye, about 1854, quoted in Stuart Pivar, *The Barye Bronzes*, 1974

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### Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Theseus, one of the great heroes of Greek myth, was asked to attend the wedding of his good friend the king of the Lapiths. The king also invited the neighbors, the half-human, half-horse Centaurs. Big mistake. The Centaurs drank too much wine and tried to kidnap the bride. Theseus quickly stepped in, fighting them off and saving her.

This subject appealed to Antoine-Louis Barye, an accomplished sculptor of animals—which he studied at the Paris zoo. Barye displayed his plaster model for the sculpture in Paris in 1850. This version, however, was probably cast in 1891, the year the railroad baron James J. Hill purchased it for his house on Summit Avenue in St. Paul.

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### Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Object in Focus, Teaching the Arts: “Theseus Slaying the Centaur Bianor”, c. 1850:

<https://new.artsmia.org/teaching-the-arts/theseus-slaying-the-centaur-bianor/greek-mythology-inspires-european-art/>

“Theseus Slaying the Centaur Bianor”, MIA Art Adv. Packets on IPE site; Heroes & Heroines World of Myths & Legends: [http://archive.artsmia.org/world-myths/viewwallart/theseus\\_keyideas.html](http://archive.artsmia.org/world-myths/viewwallart/theseus_keyideas.html)

Theseus and the Centaur Bianor, V&A, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O154696/theseus-and-the-centaur-bianor-statuettes-barye-antoine-louis/>

Barye, Theseus Slaying the Centaur Bianor, Smithsonian Museum & Research Center (Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden):

[http://provenance.si.edu/jsp/object.aspx?object\\_id=4543&tab=provenance](http://provenance.si.edu/jsp/object.aspx?object_id=4543&tab=provenance)

Barye, Theseus Fighting the Centaur Bianor, Met Museum:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/186832>

Barye, Theseus Combating the Centaur Bianor, Dahesh Museum of Art:

<http://www.daheshmuseum.org/portfolio/antoine-louis-baryetheseus-combating-the-centaur-bianor/#.WW5Z9U3rvcs>

Biography, Barye, Antoine-Louis, National Gallery of Art:

<https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/artist-info.39083.html>

Moonan, Wendy. ANTIQUES; A Sculptor Hears the Call Of the Wild, New York Times:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/18/arts/antiques-a-sculptor-hears-the-call-of-the-wild.html>

Canova, Antonio; (Bio and Sculpture; Theseus & the Centaur.) WEB GALLERY of ART:

[http://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/c/canova/2/6theseu.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/c/canova/2/6theseu.html)

“The Barye Bronzes: A Catalogue Raisonne” by Stuart Pivar

Review of “Antoine-Louis Barye and The American Collector,” by James Graham & Sons:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/06/arts/art-in-review-antoine-louis-barye-and-the-american-collector.html>

*Antoine-Louis Barye and The American Collector* by James Graham & Sons

Barye, Antoine-Louis in Oxford Art Online, Grove Art biography

From Wikipedia, entries on

- Antoine-Louis Barye
- Theseus
- Theseus Save Hippodamia by Johannes Pfuhl 1886,
- Metopes of the Parthenon
- Giambologna
- Lapiths
- Amazons
- Antiope

For props, show some copies of Barye’s multitude of works.

The sculpture by Giambologna, *Hercules Fighting the Centaur Nessus*, in Piazza della Signoria in Florence:





Canova's Theseus, WGA:

