

Antonio Canova, (1757-1822)

'Theseus and the Minotaur', 1782

Key Facts

Dimensions: 145.4 × 158.7 × 91.4 cm

Medium: Marble

Location: Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Scope of works: Leader or Participant, pre-1850: Greek Hero, future King of Athens, overcame enemy
Strong interpretation linked to conflicts between Venice and Ottoman Empire

Patron: Girolamo Zulian

Original Location: When Canova asked his patron where he wanted the group the ambassador replied 'I did not carve the group, you did, therefore make of it what you think best: I wish you well and good luck.'¹



1. Subject

When Theseus arrived in Athens after a long journey, he heard the unexpected sound of weeping and mourning throughout the city. He learned that the price of the recent Athenian defeat at the hands of the Cretans was an annual tribute of fourteen victims to feed the monstrous Minotaur. The Minotaur belonged to the tyrant King Minos, who kept the beast in the elaborate labyrinth designed by Daedalus. Theseus determined to rid the world of this monster, and it is the hero's moment of triumph that Canova intended to portray.

2. Form and Style

It might justly be considered the first neoclassical statue.² Canova began with the idea of representing the antagonists in violent combat, but Gavin Hamilton recommended that he show Theseus seated triumphantly on the body of the dead monster, contemplating his deed, thus making it conform more closely to the Greco-Roman ideal of calmness.

- Theseus appears noble and the perfection of his body indicates heroism and virtue.³
- White marble unifies figures and is associated with nobility and heroism.
- A work produced in emulation of antiquity - rather than copying it.
- Form of seated Theseus borrowed from antique statue of Hercules.
- Dominant figure, open pose, leans back with right hand on Minotaur's left thigh.
- Seated contrapposto with engaged and relaxed arms and legs, slight twist in torso.
- Head of Theseus derived from ancient sources; expression is contemplative and calm, does not engage with viewer; looks down towards defeated beast.

¹ Quoted in Hugh Honour, 'Canova's Theseus and the Minotaur', *Victoria and Albert Museum Yearbook*, I (1969), (note 28), p.5.

² Johns, p.53

³ These bullet points mostly come from AQA HART4 Mark Schemes of June 2013 and 2015.

- Theseus' torso based on study of the Belvedere Torso. Muscles activated yet body at rest, exertions over.
- Narrative clues given - the thread used by Theseus to escape from the labyrinth.
- Ancient subject representing reason conquering brute force.
- Minotaur shown in a more realistic way contrasting the idealised Theseus.

3. Materials and Techniques⁴

- Pyramidal composition with stability provided by the broad base of the single block.
- Theseus's left foot, and Minotaur's head and legs (which are crossed for support) extend beyond the stone base into viewer's space.
- Evidence of rough carving with claw chisel on base to create rock effect.
- Marble is relatively soft to carve allowing close anatomical detail evidenced through smooth carving of muscle definition, knees, and details of hands, feet and hair.
- Undercutting creates definitions and greater dramatic intensity of:
 - his triumph produced through shadowed areas under and around his body;
 - the Minotaur's death throes seen in arched back lifting away from the rock.
- Polish used on skin, so that natural translucency of marble can approximate flesh.
- Marble has a relatively low tensile strength results in arms being supported by falling drapery and club.
- A variety and contrast of textures can be seen:
 - the smoothness of Theseus's skin contrasts with the roughness of the Minotaur's head and chest.
 - folds of drapery across arm and in lap and texture of Theseus's hair.

4. Political Interpretation

Canova's biographer Countess Albrizzi claimed that the *Theseus* contained a patriotic message; his deed did not merely destroy "a private foe, but his country's" and thereby freed it "from a cruel and degrading tribute".⁵ This didactic meaning is reinforced by the realism of the hybrid Minotaur whose immediacy disturbed some of Canova's contemporaries.

5. Patriotic Feelings – Historical Context

Falier and Zulian persuaded the Venetian senate to award an annual pension to Canova, certainly an unusually generous gesture from a financially strapped government so that the artist "might in Rome perfect himself in his profession, and reflect honour on the Republic". Thus it would seem that *Theseus* did indeed embody patriotic feelings. Now at the time of its execution it could only have referred to the ongoing conflict between Venice and the Ottoman Empire:

- The Ottoman Empire was exacting from Venice "a cruel and degrading tribute".
- Venice's old colony Crete was conquered by the Turks in 1669.
- Crete was the oldest and last of Venice's Eastern Mediterranean possessions.
- Its loss was a bitter memory for Venice.
- The Ottoman government continued to take bits of Venetian territory throughout this time which substantially contributed to its economic plight.

⁴ Adapted from AQA HART1 Mark Scheme June 2014

⁵ I.T. Abrizzi, *Opere di scultura e di plastic di Antonio Canova*, 4 vols (pisa 1821-1824), I:62.

- Its last remaining stronghold on Crete was seized in 1715.
- As late as 1770 a revolt on Crete against Turkish rule was ruthlessly suppressed.
- "Theseus, in this reading, is a future hero who will lead Venice to reconquer Crete and to destroy its bestial (and infidel) rulers, represented by the Minotaur"⁶

6. Austrian Connection⁷

Zulian was transferred to Constantinople in 1783. He gifted the sculpture to Canova and generously allowed him to sell it to the Austrian count Moritz Christian von Fries for 2,000 scudi, which Hugh Honour considered 'a high price for any modern work of sculpture, and a quite exceptionally high one for the production of a young and relatively unknown artist.'⁸ Why sell it on to this Austrian?

- "In fighting the war that resulted in the loss of Crete, Venice had been rescued by Austria's decision to ally with the republic and declare war on the Ottomans."
- The treaty imposed by the victorious Austrians secured some territories for Venice and a general peace for the rest of the republic's existence.
- "The purchase of a statue by an Austrian aristocrat may give even greater resonance to the work's political meaning."

7. Wider Teaching Ideas

This work's representation of Islam as bestial and negative could be compared with Gros's use of Islamic location and light and dark in *Plague House at Jaffa*, as well as with more contemporary views of Islam, and conflict in Iraq / the Middle East.

Compare the body of Theseus with that of Napoleon in either *Plague House at Jaffa* or *Napoleon as Mars the Peacemaker*.

⁶ Johns, p.53

⁷ This section adapted from Johns p.53-54

⁸ Honour, *op. cit.* (note 28), p.11.