Statue - Theseus and the Minotaur

Object: Statue

Place of origin: Rome (made)

Date: 1782 (made)

Artist/Maker: Canova, Antonio, born 1757 - died 1822 (maker)

Materials and Techniques: Marble

Credit Line: Purchased with Art Fund support

Museum number: A.5-1962

Public access description

The legendary Greek hero Theseus sits astride the minotaur whom he has just killed. Coils of thread used by Theseus to retrace his steps from the minotaur's lair can be seen by the minotaur's left leg. This was one of Canova's earliest completed works after he left Venice to settle in Rome in 1780. The massive block of marble from which this group was carved was given to Canova by his patron Girolamo Zulian, who was Venetian ambassador in Rome in 1781. Zulian gave Canova the choice of subject for the work, and he decided on one of the stories from Ovid's Metamorphoses.

The Scottish painter, archaeologist and dealer, Gavin Hamilton (1723-1798), who was a friend of Canova, advised that he should portray Theseus and the Minotaur after their struggle. He considered that Canova would gain more favour and critical acclaim if he were to create a static group rather than a violent one. The sculpture did indeed receive widespread acclaim, and helped establish Canova's reputation as the leading European sculptor of his day. By the time Canova finished the work in 1782, his patron Zulian had moved to Constantinople, and he therefore allowed Canova to keep it. Canova sold it to an Austrian nobleman and collector, Count Moritz von Fries (1777-1826), and it was transported to Vienna. Later it was acquired by the 3rd Marquis of Londonderry and was installed in Londonderry House, probably during the 1820s. The contents of the house were sold in the 1960s prior to its demolition, when the Museum acquired the sculpture.

Descriptive line

Statue, marble, of Theseus and the Minotaur, by Antonio Canova, made in Rome, 1782

Physical description

Theseus seated on the prostrate Minotaur, holds a club in his left hand and rests his right on the left leg of his victim.

Dimensions

Height: 145.4 cm, Length: 158.7 cm, Width: 91.4 cm, Weight: 940 kg marble group, Weight: 238 kg base

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Object history note

Bought with the assistance of the National Art-Collections Fund (£1000) for £3000 from the Executor of the 7th Marquess of Londonderry (Lord Nathan).

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O96376/theseus-and-the-minotaur-statue-canova-antonio/