ANTOINE-LOUIS BARYE

THESEE COMBATTANT LE MINOTAURE (1843)

First version, refused at the Salon of 1843.

Bronze, rich brown patina

H : 45,2 cm, W : 25,8 cm, D : 16,5 cm

Artist cast and first edition (1838-1845) signed in the mould "Barye".

Circa 1843-1845

Provenance :

Barye Studio (...)

Georges Petit Gallery (...)

UDB Collection, Paris (...)

Charles Janoray Collection (...)

Princesse de Salm Collection (...)

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Barye should have had many enemies among the Salon Jury, for this first version of Thésée combattant le Minotaure was refused in 1843, like the other bull studies he also worked on during this period and were related to this theme. Yet, here we are in the most perfect example of a subject chosen in Antiquity, History or the Holy Scriptures, usually privileged by academic sculptors. Actually, romantics were refused at the Salon as early as 1834, because of the great success of this trend and the subsequent commissions following it. About Barye, Louis Philippe acquired the Lion au serpent, to which he added the Lion assis des Tuileries, and the Duc d'Orléans commissioned the impressive Surtout de table with its five hunts modelled by the artist.

Barye had to be proud of his mythological group, since in his application letter to the Fine Arts Academy, Thésée combattant the Minotaure appears in the «Collection of bronzes by Barye», and is one of the two models he highlights with Thésée combattant le centaure Biénor. Although this subject has been dealt with extensively by his confreres, it is undoubtedly Barye's version that became iconic. Perhaps it could be explained by his great ability to make credible the difficult artistic representation of the mythological couple «monster-human being». Here – in an X-shaped composition – the intelligence of the game of legs obscures the monstrosity of the Minotaur and directs the attention to the upper part of the sculpture, where the action is concentrated, with the sword and the face to face that opposes Bestiality to Civilization. This is the first version, on a rectangular terrace, with unmasked nudities. In the second version, which dates perhaps from the late 1850s, the terrace was enriched with a profile and the nudities were attenuated under the pressure of the prude bourgeoisie of the time.

We think today that Barye exploited the two versions in concomitance, and this without real success, because of the few examples produced in comparison with his second mythological group, Thésée combattant le centaure Biénor. And, because of the signature coming from the mould and its cast characteristics, we place this example in the first period of artist casts so in 1843-1845. It is the Maison Barbedienne that really popularized the model, especially at the turn of the century, and only in the second version, of which it exists also an enlargement.