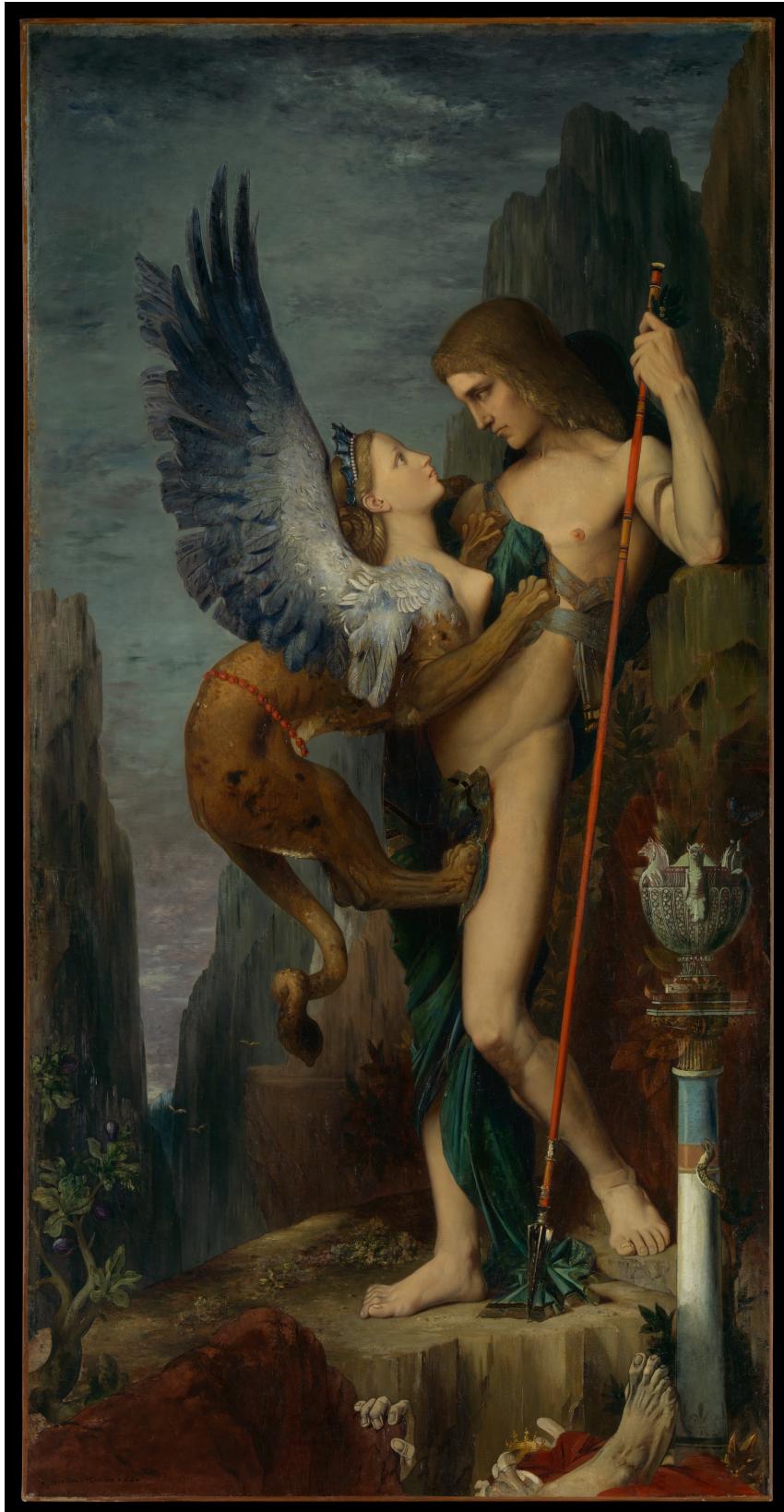


Vivek Kantamani

Gustave Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx*



Formal Analysis

Oedipus and the Sphinx is an oil on canvas painting by French symbolist and history painter Gustave Moreau, produced in 1864 for the Paris Salon, the official art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts. The piece depicts the tragic Greek hero Oedipus confronting the Sphinx, a monstrous creature with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of a bird.

The confrontation between Oedipus and the Sphinx is the subject of the classic Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. In the story, Oedipus was born to King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes. Upon receiving a prophecy that Oedipus was destined to kill his father and marry his mother, the king and queen left Oedipus to die on a mountainside, but he was found by shepherds and raised by King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth. Years later, as a young man, Oedipus leaves for Thebes upon learning of the prophecy from the oracle of Delphi so he may avoid killing the king and queen of Corinth, who he believes are his parents. On his way to Thebes, he quarrels with an old man and kills him, never learning that the old man was King Laius, his true father. Upon arriving at Thebes, Oedipus learns that the city was being terrorized by the monstrous Sphinx, and defeats the monster by answering its riddle successfully causing it to kill itself by jumping from a cliff. Oedipus learns that King Laius of Thebes had been killed, so as the hero-savior of Thebes, he marries Queen Jocasta. However, he later learns of his true parentage and Queen Jocasta hangs herself in disgust, while Oedipus blinds himself and leaves the city. The story is centered on the themes of flawed humanity and individual decisions in the face of harsh destiny.¹

Moreau focuses on the initial confrontation between Oedipus and the Sphinx, and he interpolates stylistic choices from many movements of art into his work. The subject is from classical antiquity, the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*. We see the classical nude male aesthetic in Oedipus and the nude female in the frontal portion of the Sphinx, and they are both posed in stances of movement reminiscent of Greco-Roman art – with Oedipus leaning onto his back foot and the Sphinx clutching at Oedipus' chest. Perhaps as an homage to this style, we see a Greek robe tastefully draped across Oedipus' body.

However, the style is also evocative of Renaissance aesthetics – particularly those of Raphael and Michelangelo. Both Oedipus and the Sphinx are bathed in light and shadow plays a part in highlighting both Oedipus' form (shadows behind him in the rocky crags, the shadow from his spear, and the shadow of the Sphinx highlight the contours of his body) and in defining three-dimensional space around the cliffs and objects littered in the foreground. This is reminiscent of chiaroscuro, which Raphael used to great effect in his artwork. Moreover, the contrapposto of Oedipus resting firmly on his right foot, while having a pronounced bend in his left leg and active left arm, leads to the duality of a profile view on his right side (albeit obscured by the Sphinx) and a more angled view on his left. This relationship between active and passive, profile and angled view, is similar to stylistic choices found in Michelangelo's *David*. This is not to mention the wiry and lean aesthetic of Oedipus which further amplifies the resemblance to Michelangelo's work. The leaning contrapposto of his body paralleled by his

¹ Renger, Almut Barbara. "Oedipus and the Sphinx: The Threshold Myth from Sophocles through Freud to Cocteau." University of Chicago Press. September 01, 2013. p 5-10.

spear and the cliffs behind him, is an element found in Raphael's early work. Furthermore, the lack of blood from the Sphinx's claws and the lack of an emotional response in the characters emulates the "elevated" intellectual style of Renaissance art – where viewers are meant to interpret what the work means.

Moreau also chooses to implement certain elements of Baroque style while upending other conventions, to convey a sense of relational importance. The lit figures of Oedipus and the Sphinx command the most attention in the work, with the hero and monster placed in close confrontation before a chasm, with the subject of the work arguably being the magnetic gaze exchanged between the two characters. There is also the idea of the narrative moment featuring strongly – the viewer gets the impression that the Sphinx has just leapt onto Oedipus chest and the two figures are about to face one another in conflict over the Sphinx's riddle. This alludes to conventions of the academic style of history painting advocated by the art academies of Europe, featuring a moment worth reproducing in art. However, there is no action in the scene, as both figures seem to be tranquil and locked in place. Thus, Moreau categorically rejects the Baroque sentiments of the theatrical, the extravagant, and the opulent. There is certainly a subdued character to the piece, lacking overtly expressive and theatrical emotional expression meant to convey a sense of drama. The connection between Oedipus and the Sphinx in their gaze is subdued but intense nonetheless. Moreau also rejects the dynamism and drama of the Baroque, but arguably elicits some sense of movement in that the figure of Oedipus is clearly off balance – his pose resting on the spear could never support the weight of the Sphinx, but the figures are still and composed. This narrative sense of timing and tension lend drama to the piece without relying on the theatrical. It is in this way that Moreau plays with convention to generate a style all his own.

We can now examine how Moreau examines the subject of his piece – the relationship between Oedipus and the Sphinx. The Sphinx features most strongly in the piece, as the Sphinx's eyes lies along the central vertical axis of the painting, and the gaze between Oedipus and the Sphinx command the upper half of the work. Moreover, the light that shines on the two characters is idealistic – the way shadows fall make it appear as though the light shines from the left side of the painting, but the entirety of the Sphinx's body, including the upper half is suffused in light although this shouldn't be possible. The verticality of the painting and the emphasis on this aspect of the characters makes this gaze and their relationship the focus of the work.

The gaze between the figures plays into the thematic nature of the piece as well. Following the gaze upwards, we see dark imposing cliffs above Oedipus. Following the gaze downwards, we follow the contour of the Sphinx's body and as the cliffs descend into a dark and foreboding chasm. Before the depths, however, we also see a bright point where the cliff faces seem to converge. For Oedipus, confronting the Sphinx is necessary and may lead to tragedy (the chasm) or a successful future (the bright spot land in the distance). When we follow the gaze downwards, we parallel Oedipus journey, but also draw our attention to the bottom of the piece – where a miscellany of objects litters the foreground.

The light that ethereally shines evenly upon Oedipus and the Sphinx also shines on these objects – making the viewer consider their importance to the relationship between the two characters. Peter Cooke, senior lecturer in French studies at the University of Manchester and prolific academic writer on Gustave Moreau, identifies these as symbolic of the subject of the

painting – the relationship between Oedipus and the Sphinx. It is these symbols, that reflect deeper meanings between subjects and paintings, that form an iconography that is emblematic of Symbolist style. Moreau is considered an early master of this style of art. To this effect, Cooke characterizes the various symbols appearing in the work per his readings of art historians, and his own interpretations. He describes a duality between the laurel tree behind Oedipus, which symbolizes man's achievements, compared to the fig tree found behind the Sphinx, a traditional symbol of sin. Moreover, he claims that the snake crawling up the column and the butterfly flying above the urn are interpreted as symbols for death and the soul. The hand clutching at the rock indicates the gruesome fate that Oedipus could face should he fail to answer the Sphinx's riddle correctly. Cooke himself acknowledges that there are many readings of these symbols and different art historians have different interpretations for these objects, but these interpretations ultimately settle on representing man against the physical and metaphysical (man vs monster, man vs woman, man vs desire and temptation, man vs sin), etc.²

In this way, Moreau interpolates stylistic choices while rejecting some conventions of history painting to produce a work of art with novel meaning, both as a standalone painting, and in reference to the new style of Symbolism. *Oedipus and the Sphinx* can be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Arts' 19th Century European Painting gallery. It has been stripped of its original varnish and shows little signs of damage and deterioration. However, there are some cracks in the painting and some bleeding of colors, perhaps stemming from the stripping of the varnish.

² Cooke, Peter. "Gustave Moreau and the Reinvention of History Painting." *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 90, No. 3. September 2008. p 400. Doi:10.1080/00043079.2008.10786400.

Historical Context and Transaction of the Work

Gustave Moreau – Training and Early Works

Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) was raised in the tradition of a broad, multifaceted education in the arts from a very young age. As early as age ten, he was given several volumes of neoclassical engravings by the well-respected English illustrator, John Flaxman, that depicted classic Greek tragedies, with stories from the likes of Dante, Homer, and Hesiod. By age twelve, he was assisting his father, an architect, in sketching designs for buildings per his father's specifications. Through his early journals, it is clear that he studied prints, photographs, and even illustrated encyclopedic periodicals, supplemented by frequent visits to the premier museums of Paris and Rome. He was also considered a virtuosic tenor singer and visited the Paris symphony and opera regularly.³

Art historians describe Moreau as a “prolific draftsman,” who rarely completed his oil paintings due to his perfectionism, and who tended to work on several compositions at the same time due to his displeasure at minute issues in his work. It is because of this perfectionism that he left the Ecole Royale des Beaux-Arts in 1849 at age twenty-three after twice failing to win the Prix de Rome, a premier French scholarship for arts students (painting, sculpture, architecture, etc.) that funded a three to five-year sojourn in Rome for the purpose of art education. In 1852, Moreau’s *Pietà* entered the Salon to moderate success, but Moreau was unhappy with the conventions of large-scale paintings that took prominence in the Salons of Paris and in the academic art world at the time. This displeasure, and desire to break from conventionality, would shape his career.⁴ His father funded a trip to Italy in 1857 to supplement his education, where he studied the works of the Renaissance (particularly Michelangelo and Raphael), and works of classical antiquity. During his travels, he mentored other artists like Edgar Degas, Puvis de Chavannes, and Léon Bonnat at the Villa Medici, home of the French Academy in Rome. He also traveled throughout Italy, particularly through Florence and Venice to study great masters, especially quattrocento painters like Mantegna.⁵

In 1860, Moreau returned to Paris hungry for success, but still seeking his own artistic style and character. He produced many drawings and watercolors of subjects that interested him, and dabbled in Parisian portraiture and oil paintings of religious works for wealthy clients, often under the condition of anonymity to prevent his association with what he considered generic works of art. Moreau wanted to make his mark with an original style, but also have mainstream success in the Salon and the art academies where he had failed previously. In the Salon of 1864, the official art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Moreau would make his mark with *Oedipe et le Sphinx*, or *Oedipus and the Sphinx*.⁶

³ Mathieu, Pierre-Louis. *Gustave Moreau: The Assembler of Dreams, 1826-1898*. ACR Edition, 2010. pp 5-12.

⁴ Mathieu, Pierre-Louis. *The Symbolist Generation, 1870-1910*. Skira, 1990. pp 46-58.

⁵ Clement, Russell T. *Four French Symbolists: A Sourcebook on Pierre-Puvis de Chavannes, Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, and Maurice Denis*. Greenwood Press, 1996. pp 150-158.

⁶ Lacambre, Geneviève. *Gustave Moreau: Magic and Symbols*. Harry N. Abrams, 1999. pp 22-34.

Preparation for *Oedipus and the Sphinx*

After returning to Paris in 1860, and while completing watercolor and oil paintings for wealthy patrons, Moreau resolved to elevate the art of the academies, which he saw as plaid and formulaic, and sought renown equal to that of the great Renaissance masters. This ardent desire probably stemmed from accusations that his *Pietà* in the Salon of 1852 borrowed substantially from works by Delacroix and Chassériau. In June 1860, Moreau's best friend Alexandre Destouches offered him a notebook with a bright red binding, which would be known as the "red notebook." It is in this notebook that Moreau would list potential subjects, include reference drawings, books, and paintings for later consultation.⁷

Through notes in his red notebook, Moreau's fascination with history painting becomes clear. However, it a style that had largely become restrictive in subject and expression since the standardization of artistic conventions stemming from the proliferation of Academies at the time.⁸ A review of the Salon of 1863 by art critic Théophile Gautier suggests that the public had little to no interest in history painting, going so far as to argue that "history painting is falling into disuse like tragedy."⁹

In translated excerpts from his red notebook, Moreau demonstrates a fascination with subjects related to the mythical Greek Sphinx, a creature with the head of a human and the body of a lion. In particular, his notes correspond to the ancient Greek myth of Oedipus. The story centers on Oedipus' incestuous marriage to his mother and his murder of his father following a tragic prophecy faced by the King and Queen of Thebes. The Sphinx was a monster that guarded Thebes, and Oedipus confronts this monster and defeats her in order to gain entrance to the city of Thebes. Moreau was particularly interested in the confrontation between Oedipus and the Sphinx before he enters Thebes, and its emblematic meaning.¹⁰

Moreau provides eight possible subjects that incorporate the Sphinx from the Oedipus myth and center on the confrontation between Oedipus and the Sphinx:

1. Oedipus and the Sphinx meditating
2. Oedipus and the vanquished Sphinx
3. Oedipus and the Sphinx
4. Oedipus (dead)
5. Sphinx, she looks at the sea
6. Sphinx and a Theban prostrating himself
7. Sphinx nonplussed
8. Sphinx vanquished¹¹

⁷ Kaplan, J. *The Art of Gustave Moreau: Theory, Style, and Content*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Incorporated Research Press, 1972. pp 36-40.

⁸ Ibid. p 40.

⁹ Cooke, Peter. "Gustave Moreau and the Reinvention of History Painting." *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 90, No. 3. September 2008. p 394. Doi:10.1080/00043079.2008.10786400.

¹⁰ Cooke, Peter. "Gustave Moreau's 'Oedipus and the Sphinx': archaism, temptation, and the nude at the Salon of 1864." *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 146, no. 1218, 9 Sept. 2004, pp. 610-611

¹¹ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. Gustave Moreau Inv. 500, pp. 223-225.

All Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives were accessed through the Metropolitan Museum of Art Watson Library collaborative resources. Access provided by research librarians on staff. English translation taken from translator notes provided in digital archives.

In addition to this listing of possible subjects, the Musée Gustave Moreau in Paris has many sketches and experimental studies for the work that depict a variety of poses of both Oedipus and the Sphinx that seem to correlate with the potential subjects listed by Moreau during his preparatory phase. Some studies and sketches show Oedipus sitting in contemplation, appropriate for the “Oedipus and the Sphinx meditating” subject:



12



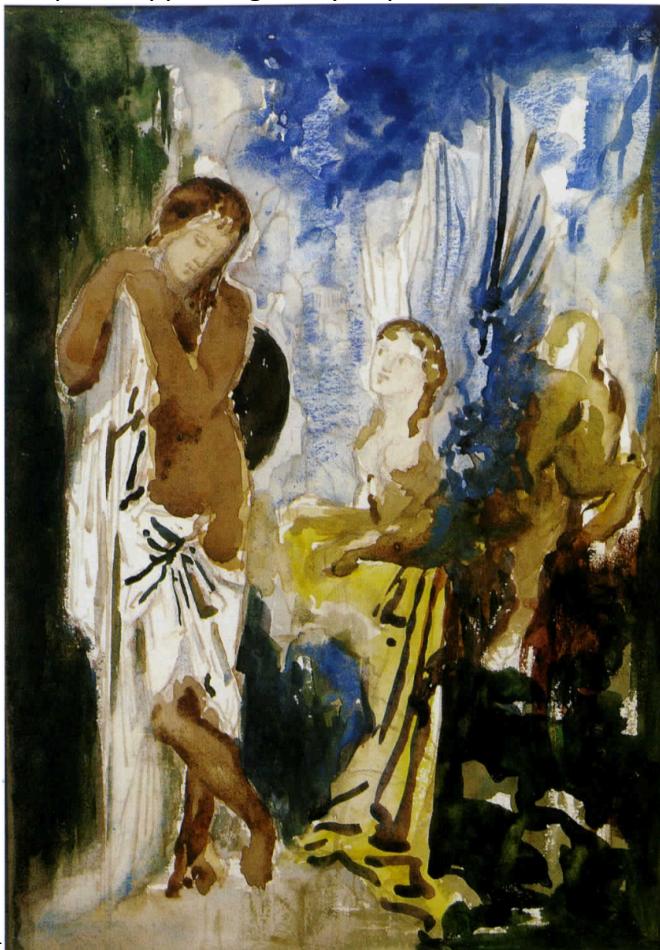
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¹² Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Study for “Oedipus and the Sphinx” (Oedipus Meditating)*. Des. 2413. This study is composed in pen, black ink, and black chalk on paper.

¹³ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Study of a Seated Man for “Oedipus and the Sphinx” (Oedipus Meditating)*. Des. 1675.

This study is composed in black chalk on paper.

By 1860, other studies show Oedipus and the Sphinx facing each other in an encounter, though the scene has a substantially different dynamic, given that Oedipus seems to be clutching himself in a closed stance, with the Sphinx appearing ready to pounce:



15

¹⁴ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Study for "Oedipus and the Sphinx"*, 1860. Des. 1673. This study is composed in black chalk on tinted paper. Inscribed notes indicate positioning and desired emotion for the subjects.

¹⁵ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Study for "Oedipus and the Sphinx"*, 1860. Cat. 569. This study is composed in watercolor over black chalk on paper.

By 1861, sketches by Moreau show the Sphinx grasping at Oedipus, with both figures occupying the positions that they will have in the completed work. Oedipus stands tall and is clearly clutching his spear (not shown in the sketches) with the Sphinx clinging to his chest:



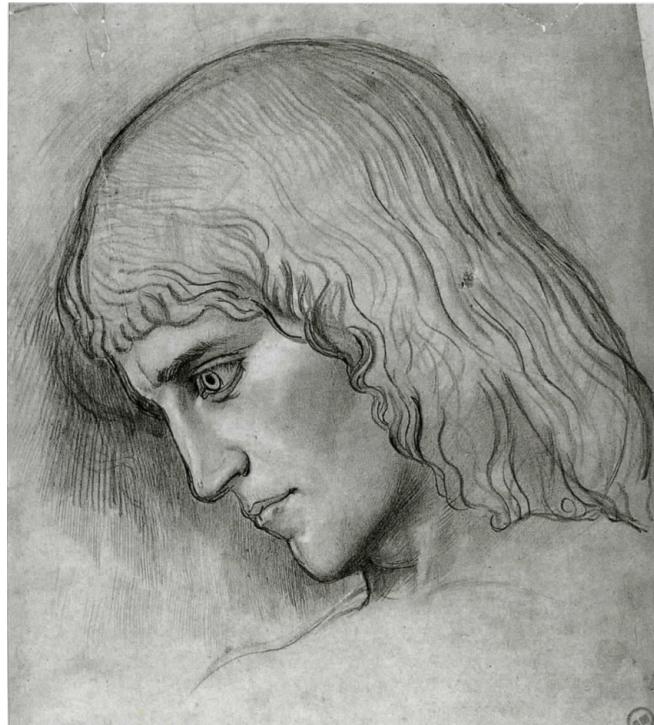
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¹⁶ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Sheet of Studies for "Oedipus and the Sphinx"*, 1861. Des. 2483. This study is composed in pen, black ink, and black chalk on tracing paper.

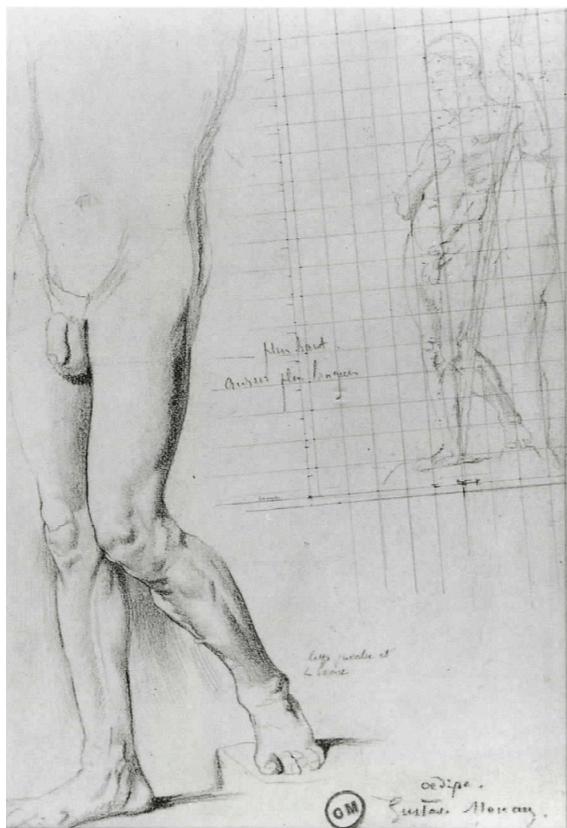
¹⁷ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Study for "Oedipus and the Sphinx"*, 1861. Des. 2437. This study is composed in pen and black ink over black chalk on tracing paper.

Perhaps as a testament to his perfectionism, Moreau practices sketching his subjects several times from an anatomical perspective, paying particular attention to the faces of Oedipus and the Sphinx given their final positions in the piece:

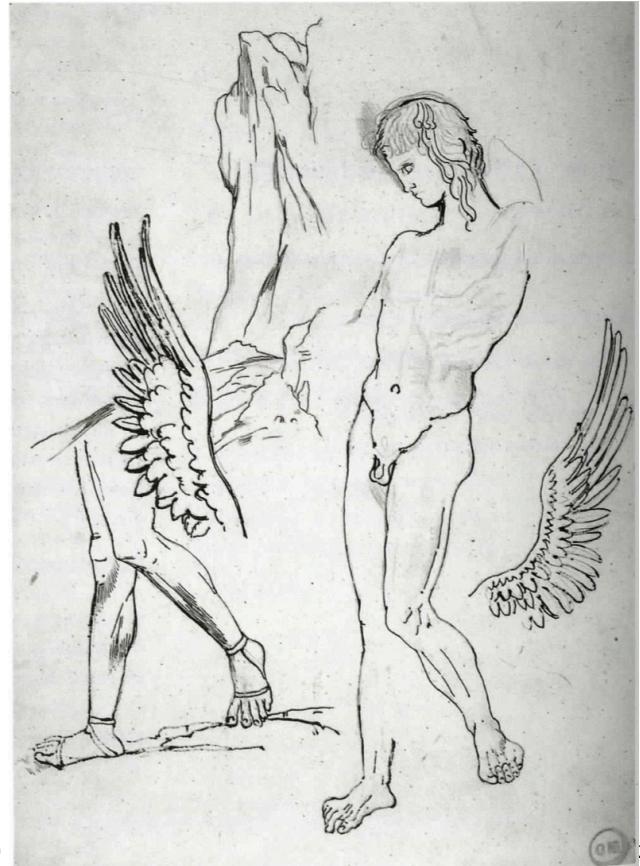


¹⁸ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Study for the Head of the Sphinx*. Des. 2431.
This study is composed in black chalk and white chalk on paper.

¹⁹ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Study for the Head of Oedipus*. Des. 2436.
This study is composed in black chalk and white chalk on tracing paper.



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²⁰ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Study for Oedipus*. Des. 2521.

This study is composed in pen, black ink, and black chalk on tracing paper.

²¹ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Sheet of Studies for "Oedipus and the Sphinx"*. Des. 2432.

This study is composed in pen and black ink over black chalk on tracing paper.

By February 1862, Moreau had finished watercolors and large cartoons that include both Oedipus and the Sphinx with the ornamentation seen in the final work. It is in these final preparatory compositions that we finally see the antique urn and colonnette that embellish the work alongside the protagonists. In particular, the urn, adorned with four griffins, is a copy of a print by Giovanni Battista Piranesi published in *Antique Marble Vases from the Collection of Richard Dalton*, published in 1778 that Moreau inherited from his father's architectural reference library.²²



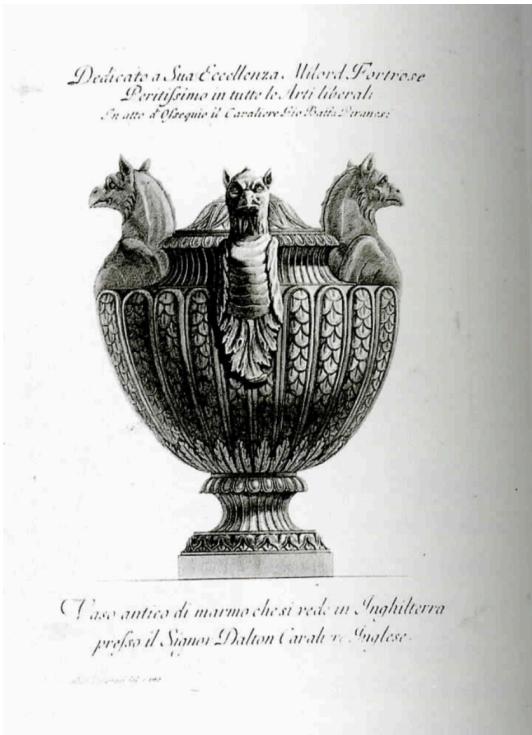
²² John Wilton-Ely. *Giovanni Battista Piranesi: The Complete Etchings*. San Francisco, 1994. Vol. 2 no. 959, p 1037. This book and reference to Piranesi's funeral urn was found through a comment in a book by Peter Cooke, *Gustave Moreau: History Painting, Spirituality, and Symbolism*, Yale University Press, 2014, p 62.

²³ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Oedipus and the Sphinx*. Cat. 517.

This study is composed in watercolor on paper. An inscription on the lower left, *Première idée*, translates to "first idea." The meaning of this is not clear according to the translators – Moreau had many versions before this.

²⁴ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, July 1862. Des. 4834.

This study is composed in black chalk and oil on canvas and laid down on cardboard.



Having completed his preparatory work by July 1862,²⁶ Moreau set out to complete the final draft of the work. It is known that Moreau completed the work on March 20, 1864, as he had Ange Ottoz (his art supplies dealer) transport the final piece to the Palais de l'industrie (an exhibition hall) for the Salon, for which we have submission records maintained by the Académie des Beaux-Arts. *Oedipus and the Sphinx* was accepted by the jury and displayed in the Salon of 1864.²⁷

²⁵ Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives. *Antique Marble Vases from the Collection of Richard Dalton*, 1778. Inv. 11919-23.

This work is engraving on paper, an excerpt from the reference book from which it is believed Moreau received the inspiration for the style of the urn on the colonnette.

²⁶ Kaplan, J. *The Art of Gustave Moreau: Theory, Style, and Content*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Incorporated Research Press, 1972. pp 39.

²⁷ Académie des Beaux-Arts. *Submission Record for Oedipus and the Sphinx*. Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives No. 512. Translated Materials. March 20, 1864.

Reception and Interpretation of the Work

This success of this work was critically important to Moreau as he had been absent from the Salon since 1852. At the time, the stylistic schools of Realism and Naturalism were in vogue, and the Salon was so crowded with works that the Salon of the previous year, the Salon of 1863, had a *Salon des refusés* – an exhibition for rejected works. Moreover, Moreau considered himself a history painter, a genre he referred to as “*le grand art*,” at a time when history painting was falling out of favor, according to Théophile Gautier, an art critic of the time.²⁸

To this effect, the art critic Drion in the *Journal du Loiret*, described the painting as a “thunderclap in the middle of the Palais de l’Industrie,” which is one of the most famous critiques associated with the work.²⁹ This characterization stems from the fact that though the work won a medal and critical acclaim, many critics accused the work of taking elements from famous styles: the imitation of symmetry and emaciated figures resemble early Renaissance quattrocento masters like Mantegna³⁰; the contrapposto found in classical antiquity; and the hieratic positioning and stylized use of light and shadow resemble archaism.³¹ One particularly scathing review by the art critic Castagnary described the work as follows:

By instinct and by reflection, I hate retrograde efforts...His Oedipus is Man himself. The painter wanted to depict for the eye the symbol, giving it its most universal meaning...To be sure, understood with sufficient breadth, the subject is beautiful, eloquent, terrible, but can it be interpreted in painting? With all sensible men, I answer: No.³²

This particular review is important because it uses the word “symbol” to describe Moreau’s interpretation of Oedipus, and Castagnary claims that the compositional choice of symbolic meaning was foolish in comparison to conventions of history painting at a time when Naturalism and realistic depiction was more common in history painting. In particular, Castagnary is comparing Moreau’s work to *Oedipus Explaining the Enigma of the Sphinx*, a work by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, whose depiction of Oedipus was considered exemplary at the time.³³

²⁸ Cooke, Peter. “Gustave Moreau and the Reinvention of History Painting.” *The Art Bulletin* Vol. 90, No. 3. September 2008. p 394. Doi:10.1080/00043079.2008.10786400.

²⁹ Lacambre, Geneviève, et al. *Gustave Moreau: between Epic and Dream*. Réunion Des Musées Nationaux, 1999. p 82.

³⁰ Phillips, Alice Miller. “The Invisible Labor: Nineteenth-Century Art, the Unconscious, and the Origins of Surrealism.” *Iowa Research Online*, Ser. 3628481, 2012, p 58. search.proquest.com/docview/1559962003?pq-origsite=summon&accounted=10226.

³¹ Cooke, Peter. “Gustave Moreau’s ‘Oedipus and the Sphinx’: archaism, temptation, and the nude at the Salon of 1864.” *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 146, no. 1218, 9 Sept. 2004, pp. 610-611.

³² Lacambre, Geneviève, et al. *Gustave Moreau: between Epic and Dream*. Réunion Des Musées Nationaux, 1999. p 81.

³³ Ibid

Peter Cooke, senior lecturer in French studies at the University of Manchester, has written many books and articles on the art of Gustave Moreau, and is, perhaps, the most prolific modern author on Gustave Moreau's oeuvre. He argues that the symbolism in Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* is a reflection his personal spiritual aspirations, and that the work's delicate handling of its subject matter reflects Moreau's ambition as an idealist artist, who shunned the decadence of the Baroque and the plaid nature of naturalism, seeking to elevate style and genre in a refined manner. This description defines the Symbolist aesthetic as a style that channels the stylistic elements of Renaissance art, classical antiquity, and iconography to delve into emotional understanding of the artist. This is reflected in Moreau's own description of *Oedipus and the Sphinx*'s true subject as the "victory over the brutal attacks of matter in his own march to the ideal," and his description of the Sphinx as a representation, specifically an "earthly Chimera, vile and attractive like matter, represented by this charming woman's head, with wings that promise the ideal and the body of the monster, of the carnivore that tears and annihilates."³⁴

This debate over Moreau's reinterpretation of history painting, and the nature of the symbolism in his works continues in articles and books published to this day. Some authors prefer to focus on examining Moreau's status as a Symbolist painter, and argue for his recognition as a master of history painting. Others focus on his symbolism and examine his characters and details of his work (like the Sphinx, the urn, the snake, the element of death prolific in his works) to further extract meaning from his symbols. Psychologists use his work as a basis for psychoanalysis of his themes and symbols. Of course, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* is canonically considered one of the first and most influential Symbolist works and appears prominently in this examination. Due to the diffuse nature of the articles and books that form the literature concerning *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, please see the Review of Literature: Annotated Bibliography section for additional perspectives on the painting.

³⁴ Cooke, Peter. "Gustave Moreau's 'Oedipus and the Sphinx': archaism, temptation, and the nude at the Salon of 1864." *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 146, no. 1218, 9 Sept. 2004, pp. 610-611.

Transaction of the Work

Moreau submitted *Oedipus and the Sphinx* to the Academy on March 20, 1864, and the Salon was due to open on May 1, 1864. Many art dealers and wealthy patrons, like Alphonse Giroux and M. de Choiseul wrote to Moreau to inquire about the price of the painting, and whether Moreau would be willing to produce reduced versions for other clients (Moreau refused these requests).³⁵

However, these inquiries came too late. In a letter to Moreau from Alexandre Destouches, his trusted friend, details of the transaction emerge. Moreau received a letter from A. Wyatt, a staff member under the personal secretary of His Imperial Highness Prince Jérôme Napoleon, stating that he would come to fetch the painting from the exhibition hall at the Palais de l'industrie in exchange for 8,000 francs. It was common at the time for the State or for royalty to purchase the exemplary pieces of art that won high accolades at the Salon, and *Oedipus and the Sphinx* had won a distinguished medal. The following is a translated excerpt from this letter:³⁶

My Dear Friend,

I spoke in confidence to Cantaloube about the Wyatt proposition. He knows this individual who is, he says, a man like him and myself, which is to say in no position to purchase a painting on his own. So clearly, he is buying it for His Highness. This information will probably reach you after you have already made a decision, but I don't want to omit anything that might prove useful to you.

I saw Tauzia this morning. I asked him how much, to his mind, you should ask for your painting, more or less than 10,000 francs. According to him, less, given that it's so to speak a debut painting; he proposed 7,000 francs as a price, to which I responded without further comment that you already had been offered 8,000.

I have just left the exhibition. I checked the wings of your butterfly and couldn't find the slightest red stain. You can go and see for yourself. Now the medals have been fixed to the frames of the winners. You are much looked at...³⁷

³⁵ Lacambre, Geneviève, et al. *Gustave Moreau: between Epic and Dream*. Réunion Des Musées Nationaux, 1999. p 80.

³⁶ Destouches, Alexandre. *Destouches Correspondence*. Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives No 324. Translated Materials. May 3, 1864.

Additional notes that accompany the translation of the letter identify Wyatt as a staff member under the personal secretary of Prince Jérôme Napoleon, and indicate that the royal family often purchased Salon pieces that won accolades.

³⁷ Ibid

Although *Oedipus and the Sphinx* was purchased by Prince Napoleon, it was requested for several other exhibitions in Vienna, Amiens, and the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris. In a letter written by the private secretary of Prince Napoleon, we learn that though the Prince once lent the work out for an exhibition in 1865 for the Bordeaux arts society (Société des amis des arts de Bordeaux), the Prince “did not want to diminish his collection by separating from it, at the very moment, when it would be most visible...”³⁸

Prince Napoleon later sold the piece in February 3, 1868. The motive of the sale is unclear – he may have grown tired of repeated requests for the work, or perhaps he was no longer interested in it. The work was sold to Paul Durand-Ruel through the art dealer Hector Brême for 14,000 francs.³⁹ This sale is of particular interest, because Paul Durand-Ruel was a French art dealer who became strongly associated with the Impressionist school, supporting his painters with stipends and solo exhibitions, which was unheard of at the time.⁴⁰

However, it would appear that Durand-Ruel was merely hoping to turn a profit on the work rather than keep it for his collections, as he sold the piece a month later to William H. Herriman, a wealthy American expatriate residing in Rome for 15,000 francs on March 6, 1868.⁴¹ He had the work installed at him home, at 93 Piazza di Spagna, Rome, by January 18, 1969 as a letter from Anatole Nancy to Moreau attests (Anatole Nancy was a mutual friend of both Herriman and Moreau).⁴²

Herriman was from Brooklyn originally, and settled in Rome in 1865. He had a great interest in supporting artists, lending them money and supporting artistic endeavors, as well as prolifically collecting art until his death in 1918. Herriman was well respected in the art community in Rome and was able to collect some very important pieces by European artists. He left over twenty pieces to the Brooklyn Museum on his death, including Jean-François Millet’s *Shepherd Tending His Flock*. He left fewer works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but his donation Moreau’s *Oedipus and the Sphinx* was incredibly important, as Moreau left all his extant paintings and manuscripts to the state of France upon his death, which formed the basis for the Musée Gustave Moreau. As a result, few of Moreau’s most famous and influential

³⁸ Ventes, *Récompenses, Palais Royal*. Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives Dossier Cat. 102. Translated Materials. January 23, 1867.

³⁹ Moreau, Gustave. *Notes on Completed Works*. Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives No. 501. Translated Materials. January 18, 1869.

In his red notebook, Moreau maintained notes on a list of completed works, and included a note about the date and sale price of *Oedipus and the Sphinx* to Durand-Ruel and, later, to Herriman – the ink from the addition of these notes is different because he would have updated this list of works as sales occurred. It’s really interesting to see history through notes like this. The translated materials give more insight into the owners of the works.

⁴⁰ Stanberg, Susan. “Durand-Ruel: The Art Dealer Who Liked Impressionists Before They Were Cool.” NPR. August 18, 2015.

⁴¹ Moreau, Gustave. *Notes on Completed Works*. Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives No. 501. Translated Materials. January 18, 1869.

⁴² Nancy, Anatole. *Correspondence from Nancy, Anatole*. Musée Gustave Moreau Digital Archives No. 654. Translated Materials. January 18, 1869.

In this letter, Nancy essentially laments to Moreau that an American owns such a wonderful work. She fears that *Oedipus and the Sphinx* will leave Rome and Paris for America – she ended up being right.

works exist outside of France. *Oedipus and the Sphinx* was bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1920 and entered the museum's collections officially by 1921.⁴³

⁴³ Tinterow et al. *The New Nineteenth-Century European Paintings and Sculpture Galleries*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993. p 40-42, 49.

Review of Literature: Annotated Bibliography

Allan, Scott C. "Interrogating Gustave Moreau's Sphinx: Myth as Artistic Metaphor in the 1864 Salon." *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-22, 19thc-artworldwide.org/39-spring08/spring08article/110-interrogating-gustave-moreaus-sphinx-myth-as-artistic-metaphor-at-the-1864-salon.

Scott Allan is the assistant curator of paintings at the J. Paul Getty Museum. He completed his Ph.D. in Art History at Princeton University with a dissertation on Gustave Moreau: "Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) and the Afterlife of French History Painting." He has worked as a curator in many museums, including the Princeton University Art Museum, and the Art Gallery of Ontario.

In this paper, Allan argues that Gustave Moreau was largely misunderstood by his contemporaries who attributed his work to be a perversion of the established decadence of French history painting. Established traditions valued realism and naturalism, and paradoxically, these characteristics in art were considered to be spiritual and intellectual. However, Moreau felt that he was a defender of idealist values and espoused a system of spiritualist/materialist dichotomies in art could be more valuable than naturalism or realism alone. Allan demonstrates how "*Oedipus and the Sphinx*" can be read as Moreau's first foray into this new interpretation of painting.

In particular, he argues that *Oedipus and the Sphinx* is a particularly vibrant statement of Moreau's ideals and aesthetic and that previous scholars have underappreciated its significance. To this effect, the Sphinx is a multivalent symbol to Moreau and it can be seen as a metaphor against 19th century art criticism, and the materialist enemy the arts must confront. When *Oedipus and the Sphinx* was first displayed, it was hailed as the savior of "le grande art" and elevated art in order to defend intellectualism in art itself. However, it also demonstrated a care for material form, and in this way combined both "thought and form," the "fusion of spiritual and material elements."

Thus, the Sphinx is representative of sensual pleasure – base materialism, sexual vice, deadly form hidden in femininity – a femme fatale. This is meant to contrast Oedipus as a paragon of "grave and severe" maturity. There is a gendered and sexualized aspect to this confrontation. Moreover, Oedipus has an emaciated affect in the Christian affect of a saint. So, Oedipus could be a figure of moral fortitude against the temptations of earthy life.

Beyond this symbolism, the Sphinx is also a critique on the female nude and its aesthetic as spiritual purity and naivety at the time. Yet the Sphinx also holds a status as a guardian of the divine in ancient cultures – is Moreau a defender of le grande art? The Sphinx also demonstrates idealism in human and beast forms, meshing both naturalistic tendencies in art with idealism and humanist notions of intent. It is also a critique of the chimera – the blending of ideas as allegory for the styles of art permissible at the time.

In this way Allan explores various narratives of the Sphinx in art and Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* itself, seeking to reinterpret many of Moreau's notes in order to demonstrate his varied approach. His analysis depicts the work as emblematic of Moreau's personal struggles and his struggles in the art world where his stylistic choices were different.

Cooke, Peter. "Gustave Moreau and the Reinvention of History Painting." *College Art Association – The Art Bulletin*, vol. 90, no. 3, Sept. 2008, pp. 394-416, www.jstor.org/stable/20619619?pq-origsite=summon&seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

Peter Cooke is a senior lecturer in French studies at the University of Manchester and a prolific writer on Gustave Moreau. He has published paper focusing on nineteenth-century French painting and literature. He has published many works including an annotated edition of Moreau's writings, and several thematic studies of Moreau's works.

Interestingly, this paper is an excerpt from Peter Cooke's book, *Gustave Moreau: History Painting, Spirituality, and Symbolism*. It is effectively the entirety of the second chapter of the book on Gustave Moreau's focus on history painting, and, as the book is divided chronologically, this is the only portion that he dedicates to discussing Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, so it is the portion of the book most pertinent to the topic of this paper.

Cooke argues that Moreau's association with Symbolism and Decadence have allowed his art to persevere given his stature in these realms of art, but that his resurgence as a history painter (contributing to "le grand art") has remained limited in scope. Cooke argues that Moreau's aesthetic is particularly intriguing because he rejects the conventions of history painting in order to create an "epic, spiritual art that is not academic" (394).

In particular, Cooke illuminates the characteristics of history painting in the nineteenth century as a dramatic staging of figures engaged in significant actions – with a sense of theatricality in a narrative moment – taking Baroque ideas. However, Moreau conveys contempt for theatricality – arguing that theater and drama in art is a childish attempt at painting. Specifically, theatricality signals the "annihilation of the pictorial form" (394). Specifically, Cooke argues that Moreau uses particular stylistic techniques from antiquity, the renaissance, and academic convention, but reinterprets them in his own way, to develop a sense of personal evolution in the works.

Cooke examines many works in detail, but we will focus on *Oedipus and the Sphinx*. Cooke argues that Moreau took aspects of archaism (wiry, linear style – characteristic of quattrocento masters like Mantegna) but uses unique iconography and an interpretation of history painting that rejects some academic conventions. Specifically, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* is an attempt to demonstrate that Ingres' version of the same subject (that emphasizes the composure of the hero and noble posturing against the lack of reason and beauty in the Sphinx) is superfluous. Moreau successfully includes the virile strength, determination, and noble ease of Ingres' Oedipus while raising the psychological tension of the encounter by placing both in close physical proximity. It is in the depth of this relationship that meaning is found – but viewers have to work harder to interpret the symbols and study the relationship. Moreau's use of symbols holds iconographic and meaning in its allegorization of the items surrounding our protagonists.

Effectively, Cooke argues that Moreau's selective use of particular elements of classical tradition, Renaissance and later styles, and dismissal of academic convention in history painting conceives an iconographic and symbolic style all his own that magnifies dynamic relationship and hints at deeper philosophical interpretation.

Cooke, Peter. "Gustave Moreau's 'Oedipus and the Sphinx': Archaism, Temptation and the Nude at the Salon of 1864." *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 146, no. 1218, 9 Sept. 2004, pp. 609-615, www.jstor.org/stable/20073689?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

Peter Cooke is a senior lecturer in French studies at the University of Manchester and a prolific writer on Gustave Moreau. He has published paper focusing on nineteenth-century French painting and literature. He has published many works including an annotated edition of Moreau's writings, and several thematic studies of Moreau's works.

In the Salon of 1864, perhaps the premier art exhibition of its time, historical and religious painting had been falling out of favor for some time, and many patrons favored genre painting. However, Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* generated critical attention and renown because it exemplified a mythological subject, severity of style, symbolism, and iconography. It ran counter to trends of decadent frivolity of the Baroque and realism (French naturalism).

Archaism refers to a period of early Renaissance painting (the early 1400s) spearheaded by the artist Mantegna, that formed an alternative counterculture to the Renaissance revival of classical antiquity. In the archivist dissection of classical antiquity, there is an emphasis on religious mysticism, and skepticism about representation itself. Rather than an emphasis on proportion and harmony in particular rules that other Renaissance artists followed, Mantegna saw romantic humanism in classical antiquity – imitating the antique and extracting a higher purpose from his work. Cooke argues that while critics of the time wrote his pre-Raphael style off as retrograde, they did not identify its moral and religious implications – they focused only on the aesthetic and not the idealistic/humanistic implications. He also says that people failed to recognize Moreau's influences also included the hard, linear style of quattrocento masters like Signorelli.

Religious art of the time had adopted a degree of stylistic archaism to exhibit the "hieratic mode" of ideas, referencing the dichotomy between sacred hieratic ideas of power and its antithesis, naturalism (paganism). Style is a choice by artists, and so Moreau's piece is a reproach of Ingres' move to more lucrative genres of portraiture and the female nude. So, Moreau's piece is a revival of "grand art."

In religious terms, Moreau evokes the mysticism and melancholy of saints and angels in a kind of medieval asceticism and mysticism (the wiry medieval fasting form of Oedipus) which does not match the story of a strong impassioned Oedipus. Moreau's notes indicate a fascination with asceticism, renunciation, and spiritual aspirations of release. Thus, Cooke argues that Moreau is an idealist artist seeking freedom in idealism and symbolism (shown by objects in the foreground) which was not possible per the naturalism/realism styles of Moreau's contemporaries.

French art of the time was seeing a moral and aesthetic debate over the proliferation of the female nude (Venus, Leda, and nymphs). Arguments against Moreau's contemporaries (In realist and naturalist schools) said that the nude was a lascivious school and grossly materialist, a form of sensual gratification. For Moreau, the nude done in 'le grand style' could be seen as erudition, leading to a higher artistic ideal and transportation of the mind and soul into the sacred realms of the imagination.

Dlugauskas, E, and Paulikiene, G. "The First Woman of Oedipus or the Metamorphoses of the Sphinx in Art." *European Psychiatry*, vol. 30, no. 1, Mar 2015, pp. 28-31.
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0924933815311834.

Edgaras Dlugauskas is a member of the clinical faculty at Vilnius University, Lithuania. She has published several works psychoanalyzing subjects from art and literature.

Greta Paulikiene is a clinical psychiatrist at the Vilnius City Mental Health Center in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Dlugauskas and Paulikiene argue that illustrations of Greek mythology can be psychoanalyzed per the paradigms of Freud's work through symbolist iconography. The Sphinx, in this context, symbolizes the vengeful and destructive nature of the prototypical female – she is the symbol of a threat, a woman able to kill. Moreau plays on the dualism between the Oedipus and the Sphinx, with the Sphinx demonstrating the multiplicity of the woman-mother figure. She has a motherly expression in treating wayfarers as children, to exhibit her authority to give instruction and punish. Oedipus killing his father effectively castrated himself, rendering the Sphinx powerless, and forcing her to throw herself over the cliff to her death.

Indrikas, Zuhre. "The Presence of Death in Gustave Moreau's Paintings." *Sylvains Les Moulins*, no. 3, 2010, pp. 69-78, search.proquest.com/docview/2061872880?pq-origsite=summon.

Zuhre Indrikas is a professor of Art History at the University of Istanbul. She has written several papers on later 19th century French Salon works, and this paper is her dissertation on "The Presence of Death in Gustave Moreau's Paintings."

Gustave Moreau is regarded as a key figure in the Symbolist movement in French art, whose images express his faith, ideas, and emotions. More recently, he is starting to be recognized as a prolific history painter by art historians, whose works demonstrate thoughts on death and immortality.

The aesthetic significance of Gustave Moreau's art can be traced in the context of the decline of history painting (*le grand art*), and its dichotomy with the rise of Romanticism and Naturalism. In France, in the middle of the 19th century, history painting was influenced by the notion of "art for art's sake," and by "ocular realism" which would later evolve into modernism. Both movements rejected the French idea of '*ut picture poësis*' – "As is painting, so is poetry" (70).

Moreau advanced Symbolist theory – "reality is not limited exclusively to that which is concrete (physical): it also incorporates thought as well. A thinking mind discovers what lies behind the visible and seeks out the cryptic meaning concealed in concrete phenomena" (70). He reinvented history painting, remaining committed to history painting's moral themes of noble and lofty sentiments while rejecting the theatricality and decadence of academic art. He used subjects with static figures and emotional restraint. He sought poetic expression and depth in traditional simplicity, which he found in the paradigms of Symbolism.

The *Oedipus and the Sphinx* demonstrates this paradigmatic shift in thinking. Oedipus represents an idealist triumphantly resisting a moral temptation leading to death. Moreau uses symbols from iconographic tradition to show this – the laurel (sacred to Apollo and indicating man's achievements), the fig tree (for sin). In early sketches, Moreau planned to represent death as a skull, which comes from the traditions of Vanitas art. Instead, below the funeral urn decorated with four gryphons, there is a snake climbing the column (representing death) and a butterfly flying off (representing the soul). Indirkas argues that Moreau expresses the death which its protagonists (Oedipus, Sphinx, father) are fated to experience with his arrangement of the iconography of the serpent, urn, and butterfly.

Indirkas goes on to analyze later works in Moreau's repertoire with the symbols that indicate a preoccupation with death in a manner similar to her analysis of *Oedipus and the Sphinx*.

Phillips, Alice Miller. "The Invisible Labor: Nineteenth-Century Art, the Unconscious, and the Origins of Surrealism." *Iowa Research Online*, ser. 3628481, 2012. 3628481, search.proquest.com/docview/1559962003?pq-origsite=summon&accounted=10226.

Alice Miller Phillips is a curator in the Office of Visual Materials for the library system of the University of Iowa. She holds a doctorate from the University of Iowa and this piece is her dissertation on late Nineteenth Century Art and the origins of surrealism.

In this dissertation, Phillips argues that the expression of the symbolic, iconographic, and dreamlike links the movement of nineteenth century symbolism with twentieth century surrealism.

The undercurrent of expressionism allowed for Symbolism to develop, with an emphasis on the rejection of materialism, decadence, and baroque tendencies. Miller argues that the release of Symbolist conscious control of subject matter and a focus on the abstract and emotional lends itself to the dreamlike emotionality of surrealism. Abstraction and automatism are the release of individual expression.

She details how Gustave Moreau, a key figure in the development of Symbolism, carefully developed techniques in abstracting oil paintings and watercolors to make aesthetic decisions that influenced later artistic movements, like Surrealism.

In particular she recognizes the decision to focus on the relationship between Oedipus and the Sphinx as a communicative confrontation and engaged eyes. Moreau's use of paradoxical tranquility, and unnatural distribution of weight lends to a sense of surrealism. In particular, the innovative placement of figures and ascetic nude in the style of paintings lent to themes of female temptation. The spiritual absorption that stems from the contemplative tranquility shared by Michelangelo's works was the impetus for a revolution in abstraction of themes that led to surrealism.

Slavkin, Mary. "Moreau's Materiality: Polymorphic Subjects, Degeneration, and Physicality." *Florida State University Libraries*, 2009,
fsu.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fsu:176178/datastream/PDF/view.

Mary Slavkin is an assistant Professor in Art History at Young Harris College. She completed her Masters in Art History at Florida State University, and her Ph.D. at CUNY before teaching at Hunter College and later joining the faculty at Young Harris College. She specializes in nineteenth-century French painting, and primarily researches artists who participated in the Paris Salons between 1862 and 1897.

In this dissertation, Slavkin analyzes materialism in the context of Moreau's body of work. She argues that over time, Moreau reevaluated his expression of materialism demonstrable through evolving compositional style and changing modes of artistic thought. Subjects have many possible interpretations depending on how they are conceived and expressed in material interpretations. In particular, Moreau depicted the immaterial using paint as a medium and studying the surfaces of his canvases.

The writers and critics who analyzed Moreau's work were particularly suggestive when compared with other artists, elaborating on his themes and their interpretations of his work. These techniques and aspects of his work resulted in themes of a man's transcendence (spiritually) and the characters of women and animals that impede this spiritual revelation. In particular, the bestiality of man and the temptation of the femme fatale figure represent the impeding qualities of the physical world on man's transcendence.