



The Lansdowne Herakles, Roman

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Unknown artist

Roman, about A.D. 125

Marble

76 3/16 in., 850 lbs.

70.AA.109

The *Lansdowne Herakles* very likely was inspired by a lost Greek statue from the fourth century B.C. Found in the 18th century in the ruins of the villa of the Roman emperor Hadrian at Tivoli outside Rome, this statue was one of numerous copies of Greek sculpture commissioned by Hadrian, who loved Greek culture. The statue was named for Lord Lansdowne, who once owned the Herakles and displayed it in his home in London. The original function of this statue in ancient times was not just as a work of art, but as a piece of religious sculpture (according to myth, Herakles became a god after his death).

In Greek and Roman art, Herakles most frequently appeared performing his 12 great labors. Beginning with Alexander the Great, rulers identified themselves with the hero, hoping their association with strength and divinity would rub off on them. Revived in the Renaissance, this practice continued into the 1600s, when the figure of Herakles was included on a cabinet by André-Charles Boulle to glorify Louis XIV's military victories

(<http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=6328>).



About Herakles

The Greek hero Herakles, known to the Romans as Hercules, played a major role in the art of classical antiquity. Identified by his attributes—which are a lion skin (a trophy from his first labor) and a club—Herakles has remained a popular subject for artists up to the present.

The son of Zeus, king of the gods, and Alkmene, a mortal woman, Herakles held a special fascination because of his supernatural strength. The most common story tells how Hera, the queen of the gods, drove Herakles mad. In a fit of insanity he killed his wife and children. As penance, Herakles had to perform 12 labors—feats so difficult that they seemed impossible. With the help of Hermes and Athena, Herakles completed the labors and became, without a doubt, Greece's greatest hero.

The Lansdowne Herakles, Roman

In this sculpture Herakles carries a club over his left shoulder and holds a lion skin in his right hand. These objects help identify the figure, since Herakles nearly always appears with a club and the skin of the Nemean Lion, a beast with impenetrable skin, which he killed as his first labor. As is typical for depictions of Greek heroes, the young Herakles is shown nude, since the Greeks used male nudity to display physical beauty. No other god or hero is as frequently depicted in Greek and Roman art as Herakles.

Questions for Teaching

Begin by describing this sculpture. What can you say about this figure just by looking at it? (The figure is a strong man holding a club and a lion skin. If the question of nudity comes up, tell students that it was typical to see gods, heroes, or athletes in the nude in ancient Greek or Roman statues. The ancient Greeks strove to attain perfection of both body and mind.)

What words would you use to describe the sculpture? (Words such as *calm*, *relaxed*, and *strong* might come up.)

Discuss the pose of the figure. Have students take this stance. Describe what is happening with the body. (This is called the ***contrapposto*** stance. This term describes the asymmetrical but balanced stance in which a straight, weight-bearing leg is opposed to a bent, resting limb. It gives the figure a casual, lively look as opposed to a figure which stands with both feet together with the knees locked. Here we see Herakles in a relaxed stance, despite the fact that he has just killed the Nemean Lion with his bare hands.)

In ancient Greece a hero was someone of half-mortal, half-divine parentage who was set apart by the great deeds of his life. What clues does the artist include to let us know this is Herakles? (The club and the lion skin, and the fact that he is shown in the nude. These clues to the subject's identity, called attributes, are objects or features that symbolize a person. The club in his left hand, and skin of the Nemean Lion are trophies from the first task that Herakles had to perform for King Eurystheus.)

List some modern-day heroes, both real and fictional. (Today a person is seen as heroic by the courageous deeds that he or she performs. We might also think of superheroes such as Superman, Spiderman, etc.) What makes them heroic?

What attributes define our modern-day heroes?

