

STUDENT HANDOUT***Herakles and Hippolyta*** for *Putting a Spin on Current Events***About Herakles (Hercules to the Romans)**

The Greek hero Herakles played a major role in the art of classical antiquity. Identified by his attributes—a lionskin (a trophy from his first labor) and a club—Herakles has remained a popular subject for artists up to the present day.

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 twelve labors for Eurystheus, king of Tiryns—feats so difficult that they seemed impossible. With the help of Hermes and Athena, Herakles completed the labors and became Greece's greatest hero.

In Greek and Roman art, Herakles most frequently appeared performing his twelve great labors. Beginning with Alexander the Great, rulers identified themselves with the hero, hoping that his 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.

About Hippolyta

According to Greek mythology, Hippolyta was the queen of the Amazons. The Amazons were a group of women warriors who descended from Ares, the god of war. In order to further their race, the Amazons would visit the men in a neighboring tribe to have children. If they gave birth to sons, they would either kill or abandon them.

In one myth, Hippolyta was kidnapped by Theseus, king of Athens, who took her as his bride when he visited the land of the Amazons. Because of Theseus's actions, a great battle between the Athenians and the Amazons ensued.

In another myth, Herakles was charged with the task of retrieving Hippolyta's girdle (a belt that symbolized her authority as queen of the Amazons) and giving it to Admete, the daughter of Eurystheus. This was Herakles' ninth labor. Hippolyta, who was impressed by Herakles' muscles and lionskin, gave him her girdle without complaint. However, Hera disguised herself as an Amazon and spread rumors across the land that Herakles was trying to kidnap Hippolyta. As the Amazons mobilized and advanced toward Herakles' ship, the hasty Herakles killed Hippolyta because he thought she had betrayed him.