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Abstract:

This essay offers a close reading of Gustave Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864), informed by the artist's statements and contemporary criticism. While traditionally the painting has been read as an allegory of spirit vs. matter, the author demonstrates that its significance may be more complex and that the sphinx may be seen as an archetypal figure for the very poetic and pictorial ideals that held the artist in thrall.

Interrogating Gustave Moreau's Sphinx: Myth as Artistic Metaphor in the 1864 Salon

by Scott C. Allan

Long celebrated as an isolated precursor of late nineteenth-century Symbolist art, Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) has in recent years been firmly situated in his generational context as an aspiring history painter who came of age in the Salons of the Second Empire (1851–1870). [1] Critical to his formation during these years was a pervasive sense among conservative critics of the decadence of French history painting. Discursively, this crisis was largely framed in agonistic terms as a struggle between idealism and materialism. Commonly cited by Salon critics as threatening the spiritual and intellectual values of *grande peinture* were numerous artistic manifestations of the regnant materialism, including the ascendancy of the lower genres in the academic hierarchy, genres in which, to those critics, mimetic skill and manual facility seemed to play a greater role than poetic or intellectual conception; the affront to taste and beauty that was Realism; the shameless sexualization and prosaic vulgarization of the Salon nude (predominantly female); and, more widely and perhaps most insidiously, the irrevocable commercialization of the Salon.[2]

In his correspondence, private notes and commentaries, Moreau consistently portrayed himself as a harried defender of idealist values, and he espoused, along with many critics, a rigidly dualist rhetoric to characterize the current artistic situation. The Spirit/Matter dichotomies he perpetuated found, moreover, direct echoes in the allegorizing readings he entertained for some of his most important compositions. Among these, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, marking the beginning of his mature career in the 1860s, stands as the most forceful, combative statement of Moreau's idealist ethic and esthetic. This interpretation of the painting, however, which other scholars have recently advanced, is too restrictive.[3] I contend here that the sphinx was an extraordinarily rich, multivalent symbol for Moreau, a richness directly informed by its competing, and hitherto overlooked, resonances as a metaphor within 19th-century art criticism. Moreau's sphinx can be read not only as the materialist enemy which the artist was set on confronting and defeating (the dominant understanding of his composition), but also as a chimerical poetic and artistic ideal to which, for better or worse, he was fatally attached. In either case, the Oedipus myth provided Moreau a suitably generalized, symbolic form in which he could project his epic ambitions—and dissemble his private anxieties—as a history painter in the public arena of the Salon.

Oedipus and the Sphinx was the major event of the 1864 Salon (fig. 1). "From the first blow, [Moreau] passes to the first rank," Jean Rousseau observed.[4] Never again would the artist be the focus of such critical attention as he was that year, which marked his first Parisian exhibition since his return in 1859 from a two-year sojourn in Italy.[5] Conservative forces defending "grand art" rallied behind Moreau, sometimes even hailing him as the long-awaited savior of French painting. Critics recognized in him a champion of "the painting of style"[6] in the most elevated sense and a defender of the prerogatives of intellectual conception. His deeply meditated work apparently came forth, like Athena from Jupiter's brow, "fully formed from the artist's brain."[7] At the same time, it was a painting that evidently placed great weight on material execution. It displayed the perfect "unity of thought and form, the intimate fusion of spiritual and material elements." [8] "Finally, here is

a work in which the thought is equal to the execution," Maxime du Camp noted; Moreau had succeeded in "idealizing an essentially material art."^[9] In short, *Oedipus* was an exemplary idealist work that did not ignore the material conditions of painting and, as such, provided a much desired counterforce to the anti-spiritualist tendencies overwhelming contemporary art. By unifying "the plastic idea" with "a moral problem"^[10] that touched on profound questions of human existence, Moreau had even surpassed in some minds the precedent of Ingres' *Oedipus Solving the Riddle of the Sphinx* (1808), which was denigrated by some as a "beautiful *académie*," for which the myth served merely as a pretext for the study of the male nude rather than as an occasion for serious reflection (fig. 2).^[11] It was claimed that Moreau, unlike Ingres, "understood his mythological subject in all its profundity; he has seen the symbol hidden behind the fable."^[12] If Ingres' domain was "the beauties of antique form," Moreau had grasped "the poetic sentiment and spirit of the legend."^[13] Given the intellectualizing pretensions of the painting's mythological subject and its stylistic archaisms reminiscent of late 15th- and early 16th-century Italian painting, critics of a more naturalist bent mocked the claims being made on Moreau's behalf. Few paintings, however, focused the debate between idealism and realism so pointedly, and Moreau's work did so in part because it thematized the struggle between Spirit and Matter through the concentrated drama of Oedipus's confrontation with the Sphinx.



Fig. 1, Gustave Moreau, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1864. Oil on canvas. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Oedipus Explaining the Enigma of the Sphinx*, 1808. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre. [\[larger image\]](#)

Moreau's private commentary on the painting reads as follows:

The painter envisages man, having arrived at the grave and severe hour of life, finding himself in the presence of the eternal enigma. It presses and grasps him with its terrible claws. But the traveler, proud and calm in his moral force, gazes upon it without trembling. It is the earthly Chimera, vile like matter, attractive like it, represented by this charming head of a woman, with wings ... promising the ideal and the body of the monster, of the devourer who rips apart and destroys.^[14]

Following an emblematic tradition associating the sphinx with sensual pleasure, Moreau indicates that the monster represents base materialism and sexual vice, deadly in their seductive feminine guise. Emblematising the equation Matter=Woman=Evil, this was the sphinx in what would be her familiar *fin-de-siècle* guise as *femme fatale*—fascinating, inscrutable and voracious, the monstrous Other to masculine reason and self-control.^[15] The gendered, sexualized aspect of Moreau's work was not lost on contemporary critics. Some read it as an allegory of man's confrontation with the enigma of Woman or the Eternal Feminine; others evoked the contemporary courtesan, citing the sphinx's brazen attitude, prettified mien and ornamental accessories.^[16] Reinforcing this association, though critics tactfully refrained from mentioning it, was the blunt affixation of the she-monster's hind legs on the hero's awkwardly draped genital region, drawing attention to her sexually predatory nature.^[17]

Moreau's misogynistic reading resonates directly with his high-minded sense of artistic purpose. Just as Oedipus represented man in his "grave and severe" maturity, Moreau sought through his Salon entry to demonstrate his new-found maturity as an artist who had passed through the crucible of Italy. Moreau had conceived of his sojourn in quasi-religious terms, giving himself over to his art with the ascetic fervor of the hermit or "cenobite,"^[18] laying stock on intensive artistic study, a diet of spiritually edifying literature, and the renunciation of worldly distractions and sensual gratifications. This sense of vocation conformed to humanist conceptions of the celibate artistic genius who sublimated his sexual energy into higher, cultural forms, and to romantic and Christian notions of a

devotional cult of art which can be traced back, in the nineteenth century, to the German Nazarenes (one of their key inspirational texts being Wackenroder's *Confessions of an Art-loving Monk*).^[19] Correspondingly, Moreau's painting may be taken to allegorize his proud ethic of self-mastery, with Oedipus figuring his resistance to worldly temptation and determined sublimation of his more earth-bound instincts in his pursuit of a spiritually-elevated art.^[20] Indeed, as Peter Cooke has noted, critics perceived a distinctly Christian aspect in Moreau's Oedipus, who seemed to have the emaciated appearance more typical of a hermit saint than a Greek hero.^[21] As La Fizelière remarked: "His Oedipus is not Greek, neither by his type nor by the ascetic expression of his features. I imagine that [Moreau] wanted to personify here the struggle of reason and morality against human passions and the excitation of the senses."^[22] Other Catholic critics promoted similar readings with a moral fervor akin to Moreau's. In Laverdant's tract, "Spirit of the 1864 Salon—Against the Sphinx and Satan; for Jesus-Christ, the Virgin Mother and Paradise," the critic saw Oedipus as a figure of moral strength stoically conquering ignoble passions and resisting the tempting illusions of earthly life.^[23] Corroborating this line of interpretation, one might add that Moreau likened the spiritual progress he felt he was making in Italy to the arduous ascent of a steep mountain, a hackneyed metaphor that finds a direct pictorial echo in the precipitous rocky backdrop of the painting.^[24] Only by overcoming the materialist sphinx could the artist attain to the moral purity and philosophical disengagement from the terrestrial world that were necessary in the pursuit of his divine calling.

As a projection of his artistic ethic, Moreau tapped into dominant themes of contemporary allegorical painting in the Salon. Cooke has suggested parallels to representations of the temptation, (inevitably coming in the form of women), of saints,^[25] to which I would add allegories directly involving artists. In theme if not in style, Moreau's *Oedipus* resonates with works like Jean-Raymond-Hippolyte Lazerges' *Genius Extinguished by Voluptuousness* (1850 Salon), in which a poet is shown having forsaken his lyre and given himself over to the pleasures of women and wine (fig. 3). Sharing the basic moral framework of such allegories, Moreau differentiated himself by emphasizing his protagonist's grim-faced resistance to the female temptress, his moral ascendancy rather than defeat.



Fig. 3, Jean-Raymond-Hippolyte Lazerges, *Genius Extinguished by Voluptuousness*, 1850. Oil on canvas. Carcassonne, Musée des beaux-arts. [\[larger image\]](#)

If Moreau's *Oedipus* served as a veiled autobiographical statement (to which one might be tempted to add some facile gloss like "Voluptuousness defeated by Genius"), it also served as a kind of public manifesto for his ideal of history painting, which he upheld against contemporary materialism. That Moreau's sphinx takes on charming coquettish form suggests that the painting engages with the erotic mythologies, particularly in the form of the female nude, so popular with the contemporary administration and industrial bourgeoisie.[26] Indeed, Moreau's painting systematically reverses the dominant terms of the Salon nude. Consider Baudry's *The Pearl and the Wave* from the 1863 Salon (fig. 4). Moreau's painting substitutes for a horizontal axis equating fleshly woman and seductive, pigmented matter a vertical, spiritualizing axis equating man with "moral force" and intellectual domination. The humid splash zone of Baudry's seashore is countered by the rarefied atmosphere of Moreau's mountains. Baudry's sensual colorism likewise gives way to Moreau's astringent linear severity and deliberate archaisms, which were inspired partly by his passion for the Italian *primitifs* whose supposed spiritual purity and naivety had been touted by Catholic art historians.[27] And where the coquettish "pearl" in Baudry's painting theatrically engages the viewer's gaze, inviting its libidinal investment, Moreau's scenario is one of extreme inward focus and concentration—as if he were emphasizing his own determination to turn away, quite literally, from a corrupt art establishment and the philistine public to whose baser passions it pandered.



Fig. 4, Paul-Jacques-Aimé Baudry, *The Pearl and the Wave*, 1862. Oil on canvas. Madrid, Museo del Prado.

[\[larger image\]](#)

The painting's stylistic severity and extreme degree of finish reinforce the deeply gendered premises of academic art theory. Painting as a liberal art had to demonstrate the dominance of an intellectual (i.e. masculine) principle over a material (i.e. feminine) principle, of thought over nature, of drawing over color. Just as critics understood Oedipus, who defeated the sphinx with brains rather than brawn, to represent the force of intellect,[28] so too did they find Moreau to represent an intellectual ideal of artistic volition and technical mastery. Critics praised the certitude that seemed to govern the painting's tight execution, and suggested that it had to have been the result of long and patient meditation—something in increasingly short supply in the commercially-driven art world with its accelerated exhibition schedule. "All the details ... as well as the general construction of the *tableau*, have been meditated, pondered and posed with intention. Each piece [of painting] ... has been seriously *willed*." [29] "Moreau has abandoned nothing to chance: everything he has done was done as he wanted it to be. Each part of his painting is seriously and carefully reasoned and pondered." [30] "Everything is ... premeditated in the work of M. Moreau: not one superfluous line, not one detail that does not bear the imprint of reflection." [31] The painting was, in short, "the work of a thinker." [32] Indeed, Moreau had placed unusual stress

on the conceptual stages of his work, taking pains to produce a highly finished, full-scale cartoon before proceeding to the painting proper, treating the modestly-sized canvas as if he were a Renaissance fresco painter (fig. 5).^[33] Such intellectual preparation was critical in the artist's coming-to-grips with what he deemed his "ferocious métier."^[34] Some of that determination, and trepidation, of an artist facing off with a demanding material practice, seems to me to be projected onto Oedipus's frozen confrontation with the Sphinx. Always insecure about his abilities, Moreau conceived of painting in agonistic terms, according to which the artist had to "struggle bodily (*corps-à-corps*) with a work."^[35]



Fig. 5, Gustave Moreau, Cartoon for *Oedipus and the Sphinx*. White chalk and charcoal. Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau, cat. 13. [\[larger image\]](#)

The allegorical readings I have outlined thus far have pivoted on Moreau's misogynist equation Matter=Woman=Evil. The sphinx, however, was a highly multivalent symbol with other associations that equally served Moreau's conception of his practice. In a draft of his commentary, he wrote:

A traveler at the severe and mysterious hour of life, man encounters the eternal enigma that presses and bruises him. But the (strong) firm spirit defies the intoxicating, brutal attacks of matter, and, trampling it underfoot, the man proceeds confidently, his eye on the ideal ... But firm and full of force, he defies, etc., etc., and having trampled it underfoot, he marches confidently towards his goal, his eye fixed on the ideal.^[36]

This passage has not received the attention it merits. At first glance, it anticipates Moreau's other text by associating the sphinx with the material forces to be overcome. Considered in view of the scenario depicted, however, his language becomes more interesting. Matter's defeat is signaled by the phrases—"trampling it underfoot" and "having trampled it underfoot"—which draw our attention to the painting's bottom edge, where Moreau has included a disconnected hand and foot, belonging to one or more presumed victims of the monster, along with various attributes: a crown, jewels, a piece of purple cloth and gold laurel branch. Two other similar phrases recur: "his eye on the ideal," "his eye fixed on the ideal." These conjure Oedipus's concentrated gaze *on the sphinx*. If the sphinx is the materialist enemy, it also seems strangely to emblemize an ideal to which the artist rivets his gaze in defiance of all else. Indeed, Moreau does not present the sphinx trampled under

foot as his use of the present and past participles ("trampling ... having trampled") would suggest, but rather emblazons it with a heraldic flourish in the center of his composition, as if he meant to place his painting under the very aegis of the sphinx.

A radically different reading of the painting begins thereby to suggest itself. Has Moreau not painted the image of the artist-hero fixed upon his ideal (in the form of the sphinx), an artist who has overcome the superficial lures of worldly fame, official honors and material success, the emblematic signs of which litter the bottom of the composition and are associated with the sphinx's victims?[37] Moreau's renunciation of such worldly ambitions (which he conventionally summarized elsewhere with the word "laurels") and his contempt for those who pursued them are recurring themes of his correspondence.[38] Indeed, all serious production was predicated upon this renunciation, because painting was a "ferocious" *métier* demanding tremendous focus and mental strength. *Oedipus* stands as a testament to that credo.

It would not have been unusual for Moreau to align the sphinx with his exigent artistic ideal, for the Oedipus myth regularly provided critics with metaphors for ambitious artistic enterprises. The painter determined to master his art or attain some ideal was frequently likened to Oedipus grappling with the enigma of the sphinx. To cite a random example, Arsène Houssaye wrote in 1860:

The sentiment of Beauty is a profoundly human sentiment: it is the aspiration towards the infinite, it is the dream of love and poetry. One who searches for Beauty in books is unworthy of art; he will never be the interpreter of God and nature, if, like Oedipus before the Sphinx, he does not wrest from his heart the solution to the enigma.[39]

An artist who had unlocked the secret of his art or reached the apogee of his practice was similarly likened to Oedipus divining the sphinx's riddle. As Alfred Nettement wrote in praise of Paul Delaroche's late religious paintings in 1862: "He discovered, like another Oedipus, the solution to the daunting enigma the Sphinx posed to him." [40] Given the currency of such metaphors, the subject of Oedipus would have been self-evident to a painter determined to proclaim his artistic maturity and lofty ambitions, to let it be known that he was an artist engaged in divining the deepest secrets of his art.

More pointedly, the myth spoke to Moreau's initiation into ancient and Renaissance art in Italy. In Egyptian culture, the sphinx assumed sacrosanct status as guardian of divine mysteries and the dead. Analogously, Moreau treated art historical tradition as a kind of mystery religion or cult of the dead, with the apprentice painter aspiring gnostically to be a hierophant or initiate into its secrets. In a painting meant to testify to Moreau's intensive interrogation of the old masters over the preceding years, Oedipus's silent interrogation of the sphinx offered the perfect subject. Critics, moreover, were quick to read it in connection to Moreau's recent studies. As Paul de Saint-Victor noted: "he traveled in Italy, searching for his path, frequenting the masters, interrogating the oracles. He returns to us today with a painting that sums up these ten years of solitary initiation." [41] Critics cast Moreau as an Oedipus facing the enigma of his art as he grappled with the contemporary crisis in painting. For Du Camp, the painting was evidence that Moreau had renounced his earlier

imitation of Delacroix and Chassériau and turned towards purer sources: "It is natural that a painter enamored of art and beauty would turn back and focus on the very sources of pictorial tradition to discover the key to the enigma for which he had interrogated the present in vain."^[42] Having turned toward the past, Moreau had embarked on the potentially perilous path of emulation. As Hector Callias conjured the painting's scene: "Moreau found himself ... pensive on the side of the path ...; he knew that to arrive at this Olympus [i.e., the heights of glory], he had to avoid mixing with the crowd, and so he searched for isolated paths of meditation. To guide his first steps on this dangerous route, he has made the choice of a master." Callias went on to remark that the severity of Moreau's linear style recalled "the austerities and caprices of the first Italian masters, who found themselves, like Oedipus and like M. Gustave Moreau, before the enigma of the Sphinx."^[43]

While many berated Moreau for his archaisms, his alleged pastiche of Mantegna and other 15th-century painters, some were more kindly, seeing in the work a statement of the doubts and hesitations of a young painter confronting the enigma of his art and still searching for his way:

Has not M. Moreau—who, after having brilliantly imitated Delacroix, disappeared for ten years to go and disinter Mantegna—in fact completely laid bare his hesitant soul here? Has he not revealed to us his aspirations, his inquietudes, his quests, his fever? Is the bold seeker that we see really Oedipus, or rather an artist tortured by the great problem of art, the solution of which he is seeking? The solemn silence and melancholy fatality that surround the son of Laius, are they not personal impressions? In a word, is not the hero really the artist here?^[44]

Moreau's most adamant defenders, on the other hand, stressed not his doubts but his newfound mastery. Because Moreau had consulted the masters as a relatively mature artist, they argued, he had been able to assimilate their lessons while maintaining his independence. Here Oedipus's ascendancy over the Sphinx implicitly figures the artist's self-possession in the face of the past. As Ernest Chesneau wrote, Moreau consulted the past "as a man and not as a child; he regarded the masters not on his knees, like a disciple, but face to face."^[45] Amédée Cantaloube similarly remarked: "To purify his style and rediscover the severe principles of epic art, too much forgotten in our day, M. G. Moreau had the courage to abandon the route of facile success ... and take himself to Italy to study the masters in order to penetrate ... their principles ... He distanced himself from the ... routine of the École to live head to head ... with the painters of the Renaissance and the fifteenth century."^[46] Moreau's subject presents just such an intensive "face to face" or "head to head" encounter, in keeping with the artist's own emphasis on the fearless confrontation with tradition. Disavowing rather too anxiously any anxiety of influence (he refused to be "dominated and compromised" by the old masters), Moreau claimed that, for him if not for others, such contact with the past could only be fortifying.^[47] As he envisaged it in *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, the artist's destiny could only be fulfilled through a fateful struggle with the "sphinx" of tradition.

Reinforcing this reading is the fact that the Oedipus myth had prompted metaphors of artistic emulation elsewhere, particularly in connection to Sophocles' drama. In an 1858 review of a new translation of *Oedipus Rex*, for example, Philoxène Boyer wrote of the fecundity of Sophocles' work, noting how the "poet-sphinx" had provided a lasting

benchmark against which modern poets, dramatists, and painters like Ingres had heroically measured themselves: "Crowned by so many works in which his talent reveals a singular power of rejuvenation, Ingres' old age is perhaps the reward for his beginnings, the prize for his courage in having measured himself against Oedipus, as Oedipus had against the Sphinx, from the first heated passage of arms."[\[48\]](#) Just as Ingres had boldly confronted the Oedipus myth and its impressive prior incarnations, so too did Moreau, yet another Oedipus, confront Ingres in the emulative chain. Moreau's timing could not have been more symbolic. Just as his work testified to his enriching experiences in Italy, Ingres had executed his work in Italy as a recipient of the *Prix de Rome* and sent it to Paris for academic approval as one of his required *envois*. Though Moreau had traveled independently at his family's expense, his painting functioned in its own way as an *envoi de Rome* to rival Ingres' painting, which had been consecrated at the 1855 Universal Exhibition and the subject of high-flown paeans.[\[49\]](#)

If the Oedipus myth provided Moreau's contemporaries, and probably the artist himself, with metaphors for the artist's interrogation of tradition, emulation of precursors, and heroic endeavors more generally, its metaphorical potential was not exhausted there. One of the most noted aspects of Moreau's painting was its dramatic intensity, the unusual manner in which the sphinx had sprung up and attached itself to Oedipus's body and magnetically transfixed his gaze. So compelling was the scenario that Moreau's painting seemed to mimic in its address to the audience the sphinx's imposition upon Oedipus. The analogy, I submit, was not fortuitous. For several years, particularly towards the end of his Italian sojourn, Moreau had been under pressure—from himself, his father, and various artist friends—to realize a definitive work that would justify their high expectations of him, impose itself on the public and establish his name and career. Writing from Paris to Moreau in Italy and referring to the 1859 Salon and the allegedly lamentable state of the arts it revealed, Cantaloube was full of encouragement:

Believe me, dear friend, the place is ... there for the taking if you set aside analysis and trust in your vigorous native temperament. You have to arrive and confound them all by imposing yourself with the first blow. Not that I counsel you to be hasty—you have to mark your place in the *salon carré* with a lion's claw. Certainly you won't be understood by everyone ...; but so many others will support you; the purest and strongest will acclaim you. There's a real thirst for new, genuine talent. I cannot tell you how feverishly we desire it and are waiting for it.[\[50\]](#)

As Cantaloube implies, only the carefully meditated and executed work could bear the noble "lion's claw" (*griffe de lion*). Moreau knew this and took ample time to complete his painting, working on it for at least two years. He was suitably praised by critics who detected the stamp (also *griffe* in French) of the true artist in certain accomplished sections of the painting.[\[51\]](#) It seems that Moreau took Cantaloube's advice more literally as well, for he spent a good amount of time actually drawing lion's paws and claws in preparation for his sphinx, whose startling presentation in the final work would indeed succeed in marking Moreau's place in the Salon (fig. 6). Just as the monster gripped Oedipus and locked his gaze, so too did the painting command its viewers' attention, the intense exchange of gazes within the painting virtually pre-programming responses to it. "The drama arrests you, dominates you."[\[52\]](#) "Oedipus ... is a work that imposes itself; the mind is absorbed by it and the eye returns to it involuntarily."[\[53\]](#) "There is ... a bilious force that takes you by the brain and

subjugates you."^[54] The painting "emits a kind of force that seizes, agitates, [and] torments you."^[55] "Immediately this composition seizes the spectator and barely leaves him ... the capacity to overcome his surprise in order to proceed freely with the analysis ... of the work."^[56] Moreau's thought "comes forth from his canvas like a kind of magnetic fluid. In contemplating these two beings who stare at each other, one is practically overwhelmed by the thoughts whirling around in these two heads and the strange struggle that is passing before you."^[57] Moreau had succeeded in making himself the artist to watch. "He wanted to be seen, [and] he has been. The eyes of the public are on him now and will no longer leave him."^[58] There is an obvious rhetorical element to these responses, cataloguing as they do the stereotypical effects any sublime work of genius was supposed to have on the spectator. As Charles Perrier wrote, genius always manifested itself "by an infallible sign, absolute domination, the imperious constraint that the artist exercises on the mind of the spectator. When, in the presence of a work of art, one is forced by the striking beauty of the work to stop, admire, and let oneself be carried away by a secret influence."^[59] Moreau's particular genius resided in a dramatic scenario that actually thematized this kind of "absolute domination," for how, indeed, could he not have been aware that the most successful painting of the Salon was commonly proclaimed the "lion" of the exhibition?^[60] This would be all the more true by a synecdoche that turned the leonine sphinx into the symbolic figure for Moreau's painting more generally. Théophile Thoré would, in fact, bitterly remark that "this sphinx will not fail to be the lion of the 1864 Salon and of official, idealist criticism."^[61]



Fig. 6, Gustave Moreau, Studies for *Oedipus and the Sphinx*. Pencil on paper. Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau, dessin 2532. [\[larger image\]](#)

As champion of the idealist cause, Moreau's sphinx was also the perfect figure for a poetically imaginative art. To paint a hybrid mythological creature in 1864 was an obvious way of repudiating the mimetic strictures of naturalism and affirming humanist notions of artistic license and fantasy. The sphinx had traditionally served as an emblem illustrating a Horatian maxim, derived from the *Ars Poetica*, that made allowances for poetic caprice, for the creation of creatures that did not exist in nature—a license that had been extended to painters by Renaissance and Mannerist art theorists.^[62] By painting a sphinx, Moreau succinctly affirmed his right to be "chimerical" in his art.^[63] Although the artistic pursuit of "chimeras" had acquired negative connotations in contemporary criticism (it implied the quixotic, deluded, or self-destructive pursuit of impossible goals), it also had positive

associations. Critics praised artists who were gripped by their particular chimera or ideal, taking this as an auspicious sign of their dedication. Gautier, for example, wrote of Jean-François Gigoux in 1852:

M. Gigoux has all the uncertainties and preoccupations of youth. He's searching, he is working, he is employing his wits, he is trying; he has the chimera of his art, a rare quality today; sometimes he fools himself and follows the wrong path, but it's always in pursuit of a superior ideal.[64]

Moreau's *Oedipus* presents an image of an artist similarly under the spell of "the chimera of his art."

That chimera was, finally, also a figure for allegory itself. From Francis Bacon to Hegel and beyond, the sphinx, in its capacity as a poser of riddles, was *the* emblem for the veiled science of allegory. Moreau's representation of the sphinx automatically placed his painting within the framework of allegory's traditionally sacred hermeneutics, declaring that his art would perforce be mysterious. Moreau laid great stock in mystery, seeing it as the key attribute of a sacred art reserved for superior spirits, for those blessed with "divination, the intuition of things." [65] The painter could penetrate the divine language, as Moreau called it, of "symbol, myth, and sign" by interrogating the old masters, and write in his turn with the "silent and mysterious characters" suited to painting. [66] Mystery protected the most elevated, divine ideas from profanation in a degrading public sphere. That mysterious character might stupefy and shock "mindless people," but it was conducive to imaginative reverie in more sympathetic spirits. [67]

The sphinx, figure of symbolic mystery *par excellence*, brazenly advertised Moreau's allegorizing intentions. She became the allegorical emblem for an allegorizing art and implicitly placed the viewer in the position of Oedipus, forcing him to divine her secrets. [68] As painting/sphinx, Moreau's work demanded prolonged meditation on the viewer's part, refusing to yield itself up in a single glance, or *coup d'oeil*, as pictorialist poetics had required since the time of Roger de Piles. The instantaneity of this kind of visual response may have become tainted for Moreau by its possible associations with the superficial modes of distracted, scattered viewing that increasingly typified people's experience at the Salon. By painting a sphinx wholly absorbing Oedipus's attention in a strangely frozen scenario, Moreau implied, and critics understood, that his painting sought to address the mind in fixing the gaze and to force one to reflect on the painting's meaning, to exercise one's intellect at a moment when painting seemed to be restricting itself more and more to the fleeting, flattering address of the senses. "It imposes itself ... this canvas makes one think," [69] Alfred Nettement nodded approvingly.

Given its links to allegory, the sphinx had acquired deeply negative associations by the nineteenth century. In the wake of a critique extending back to the Abbé Dubos in the early 18th century, [70] paintings that indulged in allegorical enigmas were stigmatized as sphinx-like or actually labeled "sphinxes" that forced themselves upon the hapless "Oedipi of the *feuilleton* [the bottom section of the first few pages in a daily newspaper that was occasionally devoted to Salon criticism]." [71] Similarly in Moreau's case, critics reacting to the supposed obscurity of his subsequent Salon paintings charged that he had unfortunately turned the

sphinx into "the emblem of his works," each composition presenting yet another rebus to test the viewer's patience.[72]

While critics opposed to allegorical art refused to assume this divinatory role before Moreau's work, it was a position that had been consecrated by the romantic, idealist esthetics of the symbol which generally defined the work of art as the formal expression of an idea. Auguste Bougot, for example, in his *Essay on Art Criticism* (1877), used the Sphinx as a metaphor for criticism, the goal of which was to reveal the "intimate thought" embodied in a work. All works of art were silent sphinxes whose secrets needed to be unlocked.[73] Moreau clearly sought to maintain this position, and *Oedipus* may be seen as its defiant manifesto.

Moreau's poetic imagination was structured according to fundamental religious and philosophical oppositions between Spirit and Matter. In the case of *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, it seems clear that he mobilized his subject matter to dramatize these oppositions and, by extension, to engage polemically in the artistic struggles of his time. He emerges as a staunch proponent of a traditional humanist, academic paradigm of painting (in which the material element of art was subordinated to the spiritual) at a time when that paradigm was coming under assault. As I have shown, Moreau's choice and treatment of the subject of *Oedipus and the Sphinx* resonated powerfully with current artistic metaphors—a fact confirmed by the ease with which critics translated Moreau's subject back into metaphor when reviewing his work. Indeed, the subsistence of the myth as a source of artistic metaphors in 19th-century criticism was one of the very conditions of possibility for Moreau's self-reflexive allegory. Rather than present the image of an artist-scholar scouring mythological dictionaries, I have tried to portray a different Moreau: one who capitalized on the currency of such metaphors to imperiously mark a space for himself in the Salon. Through the familiar fable of Oedipus, Moreau could publicly proclaim the titanic combat he sought to engage in to defend the ideal of French *grande peinture*, even while admitting an undercurrent of hesitation, doubt, and anxiety on a more private level.

I have used the word "manifesto" to describe his painting's function as a combative public statement. The word is problematic, however, because it suggests polemical intent and because it usually denotes a text rather than image. As such, it does not comfortably square with the elusive intentionality, deeper equivocations, and suggestive multivalence that I have discerned in Moreau's picture. In existing scholarship, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* has been treated as a relatively straightforward statement of Moreau's spiritualist ideals. While there is great merit to this reading, one which Moreau himself authorized in the final draft of his commentary, I believe the painting is ultimately more elusive and, indeed, sphinx-like. If the painting hints at the various ethical, esthetic, and hermeneutic principles that informed Moreau's intransigent idealism, it simultaneously refuses to reduce these into a clear-cut didactic statement. His work was determined enough to point allegorical interpretations in the right direction (many critics sensitive to Moreau's ambitions suggested readings often remarkably close to those privately entertained by the artist), but it was also capacious enough in its very overdetermination not to limit those readings and indeed to generate a range of divergent responses. Ultimately, Moreau's painting cannot be easily reduced to the rigid dualism structuring his written commentary. As we have seen, his commentary is undermined from within in his early draft, and the very existence of multiple drafts underscores the contingency of his reading. Rather than establish univocal authorial intent,

these exist more arbitrarily as *a posteriori* musings, testifying to the mythological symbol's ability to generate meaning.

Mother of all symbols, the sphinx opens the painting to equally plausible but contradictory interpretations that testify to the complexity of Moreau's poetic imagination of his practice and his position in a highly combative art world. If the sphinx represented the materialist enemy, she also was a figure for the artistic ideal holding the artist in thrall. This central equivocation speaks eloquently to Moreau's ambivalent attitude to painting itself as a "ferocious" material practice, and to the fateful struggle with which he resolved to commit himself with all the ascetic fervor of a monk.

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Notes

All translations by the author unless otherwise indicated.

[1] See particularly Geneviève Lacambre et al., *Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago; Paris: La Réunion des musées nationaux, 1998), and Peter Cooke, *Gustave Moreau et les arts jumeaux: Peinture et littérature au dix-neuvième siècle* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

[2] See the introductory chapter of my doctoral dissertation, "Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) and the Afterlife of French History Painting" (Princeton University, 2007), especially 13–35.

[3] See Peter Cooke's excellent essay, "Gustave Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx*: Archaism, Temptation and the Nude at the Salon of 1864," *The Burlington Magazine* 146, no. 1218 (September 2004): 609–15. Prior to the appearance of Cooke's essay, I had developed the germ of the present argument in a seminar paper written in the fall of 2001 in Princeton for Alastair Wright, a paper which in turn led to a conference paper entitled "Confronting the Sphinx of Tradition: Gustave Moreau's *Oedipus* in 1864," which I presented in early 2004 at a graduate student symposium hosted by the Art & Archeology Department in Princeton and then at the Frick Collection during a graduate student symposium organized by New York University's Institute of Fine Arts.

[4] Jean Rousseau, "Salon de 1864," *L'Univers illustré*, May 14, 1864, 307 ["Du premier coup, il passe au premier rang"].

[5] Moreau had exhibited, with little critical success, in the Salons of 1852 and 1853 and the Exposition Universelle of 1855. He was accused by some of being a mere *pasticheur* of Delacroix and Chassériau, criticism which likely contributed to his resolve to retreat from public exhibitions and ground his practice more solidly through the study of antique and Renaissance models in Italy.

[6] Amédée Cantaloube, "Salon de 1864," *Nouvelle revue de Paris* 2 (1864): 611 ["il est certain qu'elle a son importance ..., et qu'elle vient fort à propos à un moment où, pour cause, soit de légèreté, soit d'indifférence, la peinture du style était à peu près abandonnée"].

- [7] Ernest Chesneau, "Salon de 1864," *Le Constitutionnel*, May 3, 1864 ["cette œuvre sortie tout entière du cerveau de l'artiste"].
- [8] Francis Aubert, "Salon de 1864," *Le Pays*, June 13, 1864 ["L'unité de la pensée et celle de la forme, la fusion intime des éléments spirituel et matériel"].
- [9] Maxime Du Camp, *Le Salon de 1864* (Paris: Revue des deux mondes, 1864), 32, 35 ["voici enfin une œuvre où la pensée est égale à l'exécution"; "à idéaliser un art matériel par son essence même"].
- [10] Cantaloube, *Nouvelle revue de Paris*, (1864): 606 ["elle unit l'idée plastique à un problème moral; n'est-ce point le but le plus élevé de l'art?"]
- [11] Chesneau, *Le Constitutionnel*, ["belle académie"]. It should be recalled that Ingres' painting, executed in Rome as one of his required envois to the Academy, had as its explicit purpose the display of mastery in painting the male nude, hence Oedipus' central placement in the composition and the relegation of the sphinx to the shadows. The painting's narrative and dramatic ambitions, however, are typical of the liberties that Jacques-Louis David's students had been taking for some two decades in aspiring to elevate the exercise of the *académie* to the level of history painting.
- [12] Jean Rousseau, "Salon de 1864," *Le Figaro*, May 19, 1864 ["M. Moreau a compris son sujet mythologique dans toutes ses profondeurs; il a vu le symbole caché dans la fable"].
- [13] C. de Sault, *Le Temps*, May 12, 1864 ["À M. Ingres les beautés de la forme antique, à M. Moreau le sentiment poétique et l'esprit de la légende"].
- [14] Gustave Moreau, *Écrits sur l'art*, ed. Peter Cooke, 2 vols. (Fontfroide: Bibliothèque artistique & littéraire, 2002), 1:73 ["Le peintre suppose l'homme, arrivé à l'heure grave et sévère de la vie, se trouvant en présence de l'énigme éternelle. Elle le presse et l'étreint sous sa griffe terrible. Mais le voyageur, fier et tranquille dans sa force morale, la regarde sans trembler. C'est la Chimère terrestre, vile comme la matière, attractive comme elle, représentée [par] cette tête charmante de la femme, avec les ailes encore prometteuses de l'idéal et le corps du monstre, du carnassier qui déchire et anéantit"].
- [15] See Gilbert Lascault, *Le Monstre dans l'art occidental* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973), 367–90.
- [16] As Chesneau asked rhetorically: "l'énigme que pose cette figure blonde, insaisissable en sa légèreté, n'est-ce pas l'énigme de la femme elle-même?" *Le Constitutionnel*, May 3, 1864. Citing her diadem and red coral necklace, Du Camp noted how the sphinx was armed with "toutes les coquetteries de la femme." *Salon de 1864*, 33. Georges Lafenestre likened her to "une courtisane coquette et cruelle," in "La Peinture et la Sculpture au Salon de 1864," *Revue contemporaine*, 2nd ser., 39 (May–June 1864), 348. Albert de la Fizelière described her "tête de grisette," in his "Salon de 1864," *L'Union des arts*, no. 21 (June 18, 1864). Paul de Saint-Victor similarly described that head as "celle d'une lorette intrigant au bal." "Salon de 1864," *La Presse*, May 7, 1864.
- [17] For an interesting discussion of Moreau's composition in relation to the ancient Greek iconography of the sexually-predatory sphinx, with which Moreau seems to have been familiar through vase painting and gems, see M. Halm Tisserant, "La sphinx amoureuse: Un schéma grec dans l'œuvre de G. Moreau," *Revue des Archéologues et des Historiens d'Art de Louvain* 14 (1981): 30–70.
- [18] As Moreau wrote to his parents from Rome on December 26, 1857: "C'est ici la patrie du labeur et de la pensée, c'est bien entendu; aussi, pour moi, moins de monde que jamais, nous vivons comme deux cénobites et [Frédéric] de Courcy ne s'en plaint pas. La pensée, l'âme s'agrandissent, on aime mieux et plus fortement tout ce qui est beau et bon, et l'on serait certes entraîné à faire de grands sacrifices de bien-être et de jouissances matérielles sous l'impression et l'impulsion que vous donnent toutes ces grandes choses mortes qui vous entourent." See *Gustave Moreau: Correspondance d'Italie*, ed. Luisa Capodici (Paris: Somogy Éditions d'Art, 2002), 159.
- [19] On the monastic ideal of art-making cultivated by the Nazarenes, see Mitchell Benjamin Frank, *German Romantic Painting Redefined: Nazarene Tradition and the Narratives of Romanticism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 11–35.
- [20] This line of interpretation has been suggested by several Moreau scholars. See Julius Kaplan, *Gustave Moreau*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1974), 22; and Cooke, "Oedipus and the Sphinx," 609–15.
- [21] See Cooke, "Oedipus and the Sphinx," 611–12. As P. Challemel-Lacour asked, for instance: "la figure du héros, émaciée et grêle,... la peau par cheminée, plissée comme par une vieillesse précoce, le visage macéré, ne sont-ils pas d'un jeune ascète de la Thébàide plutôt qu'ils ne rappellent la bouillante ardeur du jeune téméraire qui, tout à l'heure, parce qu'un roi lui

disputera le chemin, va le tuer et disperser son cortège?" "Le Salon de 1864," *Revue germanique et française* 29, no. 3 (June 1, 1864): 532.

[22] La Fizelière, *L'Union des arts*, June 18, 1864 ["Son *Œdipe* n'est pas grec; il ne l'est ni par le type, ni par l'expression ascétique des traits. Je me figure qu'il a voulu personnifier ici la lutte de la raison et de la morale contre les passions humaines et l'excitation des sens"].

[23] D. Laverdant, "Esprit du Salon de 1864—Contre le Sphinx et Satan, pour Jésus-Christ, la Vierge-Mère et le paradis," *Le Mémorial catholique*, n.s., 5 (August 1864): 308–9 ["Quelle est cette énigme de la vie que l'homme païen croit pouvoir résoudre pour son salut et à sa plus grande gloire? C'est, comme nous l'avons lu dans les anciens mythes, c'est, admirablement poétisée par le peintre, la triple concupiscence, sous figure féminine, tentatrice de l'homme. La Sphinx ... rampe dans le sensualisme animal, et ... participe à l'orgueil et aux illusions de Satan"].

[24] In a draft of a letter to Eugène Lacheurié, written in late April 1859 in Rome, Moreau speaks of a need to attain "perfection morale" and "vertu pure" by ridding oneself "de besoins et d'appétits vulgaires." As he writes of this spiritual odyssey: "Que l'amour de l'art, que cette recherche sérieuse et élevée de chaque minute ... me soutienne pour m'aider à gravir la montagne escarpée." *Correspondance d'Italie*, 507, 508.

[25] Cooke, "Oedipus and the Sphinx," 612–13; For an overview of this temptation iconography in the nineteenth century, see Michele Haddad, "Isabey, Flaubert et la Tentation de saint Antoine dans la peinture française du XIXe siècle," *Revue du Louvre et des musées de France* 39, no. 4 (1989): 253–61.

[26] See Cooke, "Oedipus and the Sphinx," *passim*.

[27] *Ibid.* Key texts here were Alexis-François Rio's *De la Poésie chrétienne dans son principe, dans sa matière et dans ses formes* (Paris: Debécourt, 1836), and his subsequent *De l'Art chrétien* (Paris: A. Bray, 1855; rev. ed. 1861–67). For a summary of these revisionist Christian historiographies of Renaissance art in the mid-nineteenth century, see Bruno Foucart, *Le renouveau de la peinture religieuse en France (1800–1860)* (Paris: Arthema, 1987), 25–42.

[28] Du Camp wrote, for example: "il sait que rien, si ce n'est sa propre force intellectuelle, ne peut le sauver." He likewise recognized in Moreau's treatment of the hero "tous les signes de la force morale qui se nourrit exclusivement de sa propre substance, toujours renouvelée par le travail de la pensée." *Salon de 1864*, 32. Laverdant likewise saw in Oedipus an "idéal de la force intellectuelle" and characterized his head as being that "d'un puissant penseur." *Le Mémorial catholique* (August 1864): 311. And Sault declared: "l'Œdipe de M. Moreau ... a la noblesse de la race et celle de l'intelligence: il a la force de l'âme, mais non la force brutale d'Hercule." *Le Temps*, May 12, 1864.

[29] Chesneau, *Le Constitutionnel*, May 3, 1864 ["Tous les détails, leur forme et leur disposition aussi bien que la combinaison générale du tableau, ont été médités, réfléchis et posés avec intention. Chaque morceau de l'œuvre, du plus petit au plus grand, a été sérieusement voulu"].

[30] Du Camp, *Salon de 1864*, 32 ["M. Moreau n'a rien abandonné au hasard: tout ce qu'il a fait, il l'a voulu faire ainsi. Chaque partie de son tableau est raisonnée et pondérée avec un souci sérieux"].

[31] Saint-Victor, *La Presse*, May 7, 1864 ["Tout est concerté et prémédité dans l'œuvre de M. Moreau: pas un trait inutile, pas un détail que ne marque l'empreinte de la réflexion"].

[32] Jean Rousseau, *L'Univers illustré*, June 18, 1864, 387 ["l'œuvre d'un penseur"]. For further discussion of the eminently *willed* character detected by critics in Moreau's painting, see Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 309–10.

[33] As Moreau wrote to Eugène Fromentin on October 18, 1862: "Je m'occupe sérieusement depuis quinze jours de cet Œdipe. Je dois dire que devant un travail semblable, j'ai plutôt trop de défiance que de confiance en moi. J'ose à peine marcher. J'ai pris un carton grandeur d'exécution, achève le plus possible d'après nature, et pour la millionième fois de ma vie je me promets...de ne pas commencer avant que tout, jusqu'au moindre brin d'herbe, ne soit définitivement arrêté." Barbara Wright & Pierre Moisy, eds., *Gustave Moreau et Eugène Fromentin: Documents inédits* (La Rochelle: Quartier Latin, 1972), 138.

[34] In a letter to Eugène Lacheurié dated June 29, 1858, Moreau associated the artist's need to renounce the exterior pleasures of worldly life with the exacting demands of his metier: "Je crains de paraître singulier et d'attrister, sinon d'étonner un peu ces chers parents. C'est bien fini, me voilà peintre et entré jusqu'au col dans les exigences de ce métier féroce. Je vais vivre désormais et pour longtemps seul dans la réclusion la plus complète. Cet apprentissage m'aura enlevé, ou au moins endormi ces quelques derniers appétits pour le plaisir et pour le monde; c'est triste à en mourir." Capodiceci, *Correspondance d'Italie*, 406.

- [35] On April 3, 1856, Moreau had written to Fromentin with regard to a mutual friend: "Toutefois, il ne me semble pas assez redouter le moment où il faudra lutter corps à corps avec une œuvre, pour que je ne craigne pas parfois qu'il ne se fasse quelque illusion sur l'immense difficulté de la réalisation de cette œuvre, et des procédés très importants pour cette réalisation." In Wright & Moisy, *Moreau et Fromentin*, 72.
- [36] *Écrits* 1: 73 ["Voyageur à l'heure sévère et mystérieuse de la vie, l'homme rencontre l'énigme éternelle qui le presse et le meurtrit. Mais l'âme (forte) et ferme défie les atteintes enivrantes et brutales de la matière et, la foulant au pied, l'homme marche confiant, l'œil sur l'idéal.... Mais ferme et plein de force, il défie, etc., etc., et l'ayant foulé aux pieds, il marche confiant vers son but, l'œil fixé vers l'idéal"].
- [37] Henri Dorra intimated such a reading, but did not pursue it at length or acknowledge the interesting contradictions it posed for the allegorical interpretation of the painting. See "The Guesser Guessed: Gustave Moreau's *Oedipus*," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, 6th per., 81, no. 1250 (March 1973): 134.
- [38] He wrote, for instance, to Amédée Cantaloube from Venice in November 1858: "Vous me parlez, mon cher ami, de place à prendre et de lauriers à cueillir. Merci de vos espérances et de vos vœux pour moi; mais tout ceci, je vous assure, n'est pas mon affaire. Je ne saurais plus, à l'heure qu'il est, songer à autre chose qu'à étudier sans cesse et à faire du mieux qu'il m'est possible, mais j'ai renoncé, je vous jure, à toute pensée de succès. C'est à cette condition seule que je puis m'en faire quelque chose." Capodiecì, *Correspondance d'Italie*, 466.
- [39] Arsène Houssaye, *L'Histoire de l'art français au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: H. Plon, 1860), 9 ["Le sentiment du Beau est un sentiment profondément humain: c'est l'aspiration vers l'infini, c'est le rêve de l'amour et de la poésie. Celui-là est indigne de l'Art qui cherche le Beau dans les livres; il ne sera jamais l'interprète de Dieu et de la nature, si, comme Œdipe au sphinx, il n'arrache à son cœur le mot de l'énigme"].
- [40] Alfred Nettement, *Poètes et artistes contemporains* (Paris: J. Lecoffre, 1862), 18 ["Il a découvert, comme un autre Oedipe, le mot de cette énigme redoutable que lui posait le Sphinx"].
- [41] Saint-Victor, *La Presse*, May 7, 1864 ["Il voyageait en Italie, cherchant sa voie, fréquentant les maîtres, interrogeant les oracles. Il nous revient aujourd'hui avec un tableau qui résume ces dix années d'initiation solitaire: *Œdipe et le Sphinx*"].
- [42] Du Camp, *Salon de 1864*, 28 ["Il est naturel aussi qu'un peintre amoureux ... d'art et de beauté, ne trouvant dans les exemples qu'il avait sous les yeux rien qui put le conduire au but qu'il entrevoyait, se soit retourné violemment vers les anciens maîtres et se soit penché sur les sources mêmes de la tradition plastique pour découvrir le mot de l'énigme qu'il interrogeait vainement de nos jours"].
- [43] Hector de Callias, "Salon de 1864," *L'Artiste*, 8th ser., 4, no. 10 (May 15, 1864): 219 ["Moreau s'est trouvé ... pensif sur le bord de chemin, apercevant au loin l'impériale et lumineuse cité dont tout le monde ne peut pas être citoyen. Il a su qu'avant tout, pour arriver à cet Olympe, il faut ne pas se mêler à la foule, et il a cherché les sentiers écartés de la méditation. Pour guider ses premiers pas dans cette route dangereuse, il a fait choix d'un maître." "...les austérités et les caprices des premiers maîtres italiens, qui se trouvaient, comme Oedipe et comme M. Gustave Moreau, devant l'énigme du Sphinx"].
- [44] P.-C. Parent, *Courrier artistique* (May 15, 1864): 189 ["M. Moreau, qui, après avoir brillamment imité Delacroix, a disparu dix ans pour aller déterrer Mantegna, n'a-t-il pas en effet exposé là tout entière son âme hésitante? Sont-ce point ses aspirations, ses inquiétudes, ses recherches, sa fièvre, qu'il nous a racontées? L'audacieux chercheur que nous voyons, est-ce bien Œdipe et n'est-ce point plutôt un artiste torturé par le grand problème de l'art dont il cherche la solution? Ce silence solennel, cette fatalité mélancolique qui entourent le fils de Laïus ne sont-ils pas des impressions personnelles? Le héros, en un mot, n'est-il point ici l'auteur?"].
- [45] Chesneau, *Le Constitutionnel*, May 3, 1864 ["en homme et non en enfant, il a regardé les maîtres non à genoux, comme un disciple, mais face à face"].
- [46] Amédée Cantaloube, *Nouvelle revue de Paris* (1864): 603 ["Pour épurer son style et retrouver les principes sévères de l'art épique trop oubliés de nos jours, M. G. Moreau eut le courage d'abandonner la carrière des succès faciles, qui ne lui auraient certes pas manqué, et de se rendre en Italie pour étudier les maîtres, de façon à pénétrer, sans perdre de vue la nature, les principes des transpositions de tons et de l'idéalisation des contours. Ambitieux d'exprimer dans la plastique les grandes visions de l'âme avec le style qui doit en être la manifestation grandiose, il s'éloigna des *poncifs* ou de la routine de l'école pour vivre en tête à tête, soit avec les peintres de la Renaissance, soit avec ceux du quinzième siècle"].

[47] As Moreau wrote to his parents from Rome on February 5, 1858: "J'aurai donc, sans perdre de temps, cherché de suite auprès des maîtres à connaître les moyens, les ressources et les grandes lois de cet art qui est le mien sans pour cela m'être laissé dominer et amoindrir par eux. On me disait bien que ce danger n'était pas à craindre pour ma nature si entière, si entêtée, comme dit quelque fois papa chéri, et je n'avais rien à redouter du contact des originalités si fortes et impressionnantes." Capodiecici, *Correspondance d'Italie*, 228–29. In another letter, he wrote: "L'esprit et l'âme s'agrandissent au contact de ces belles productions de l'art et toute nature doit gagner à cette fréquentation." *Ibid.*, 326.

[48] Philoxène Boyer, review of Lacroix's translation of Sophocles' *Œdipe Roi*, in *L'Artiste*, n.s., 5, no. 14 (December 5, 1858): 210 ["La vieillesse de M. Ingres, couronnée par tant d'œuvres où son talent révèle une puissance de rajeunissement singulière, est peut-être la récompense de sons début, le prix de son courage pour s'être, dès la première passe d'armes, mesuré avec Œdipe, comme Œdipe avec le Sphinx"].

[49] See, for example, Charles Blanc, "Du Style et de M. Ingres," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 1863): 8–10.

[50] Capodiecici, *Correspondance d'Italie*, 551 ["Croyez-moi, cher ami, la place est belle, elle est à prendre, si vous vous livrez à vous-même, laissant de côté l'analyse, pour résumer votre vigoureux tempérament, vous devez arriver et les confondre tous en vous imposant du premier coup. Non que je vous conseille de vous hâter, il faut que vous marquiez votre place au salon carré avec une griffe de lion. Certainement vous ne serez pas compris de tous ... mais tant d'autres vous soutiendront, les plus purs, les plus forts vous acclameront. On a soif d'un talent nouveau et vrai, on le désire, l'attend avec je ne sais quelle fièvre"].

[51] Bathild Bouniol, after having criticized Moreau's characterization of the sphinx (he felt she was not sufficiently monstrous), admitted that "il serait injuste, cependant, de refuser à cette toile une valeur réelle; j'y trouve des morceaux fort bien peints, où l'on sent la griffe." *Revue du monde catholique* (June 10, 1864): 401–2.

[52] Charles Beaurin, "Une Date dans l'histoire de l'art, Les Salons de 1864 et de 1865," *L'Artiste*, 8th ser., 8, no. 7 (April 15, 1866): 156–57 ["Le drame vous arrête, vous domine"].

[53] Olivier de Jalin [Arsène Arnaud], "Exposition de 1864," *Le Monde illustré*, no. 374 (June 11, 1864): 380 ["Son *Œdipe*, avec toutes ses qualités et ses quelques défauts, est une œuvre qui s'impose; l'esprit s'y attache et l'œil y revient involontairement"].

[54] Jules Boisse, "Salon de 1864," *La Nation*, May 3, 1864 ["Il y a une réflexion immense, une force bilieuse qui prend au cerveau et subjugué"].

[55] Georges Lafenestre, *Revue contemporaine* (May–June 1864): 348 ["il en sort une force qui vous saisit, vous agite, vous tourmente"].

[56] La Fizelière, *L'Union des Arts*, May 7, 1864 ["Au premier abord cette composition saisit le spectateur et lui laisse à peine, tant elle est inattendue, la faculté de se débarrasser des liens de la surprise pour se livrer en toute liberté à l'analyse et à la dissection de l'œuvre"].

[57] Henri du Cleuziou, *Gazette littéraire, artistique et scientifique* (May 21, 1864): 44 ["Il se dégage de sa toile comme une espèce de fluide magnétique. À force de contempler ces deux êtres qui se regardent, on est comme épouvanté des pensées qui tourbillonnent dans ces deux cerveaux et de la lutte étrange qui se passe là devant vous"].

[58] Théophile Gautier, "Salon de 1864," *Le Moniteur universel*, May 27, 1864 ["il a voulu être regardé, il l'a été. Les yeux du public sont maintenant sur lui et ne le quitteront plus"].

[59] Charles Perrier, *Études sur les beaux-arts en France et à l'Étranger* (Paris: L. Hachette, 1863), 127 ["par un signe infailible, la domination absolue, la contrainte impérieuse que l'artiste exerce sur l'esprit du spectateur. Quand, en présence d'une œuvre d'art, on est forcé par la beauté saisissante de l'œuvre de s'arrêter, d'admirer, de se laisser entraîner à une influence secrète"].

[60] In chapter 63 of *Manette Salomon*, for example, the Goncourt brothers write of their painter-protagonist Coriolis's success at the 1853 Salon with his *Turkish Bath*: "Il fut le nom nouveau, le lion du Salon." *Manette Salomon*, new ed. (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1897), 215.

[61] William Bürger [Théophile Thoré], *L'Indépendance belge*, May 13, 1864 ["Ce sphinx ne manquera pas d'être le lion du salon de 1864 et de la critique idéaliste et officielle"]. Other critics also identified Moreau's painting as "the lion of the Salon." See, for example, Olivier Merson, "Salon de 1864," *L'Opinion nationale*, June 13, 1864.

[62] See John F. Moffitt, "An Exemplary Humanist Hybrid: Vasari's 'Fraude' with Reference to Bronzino's 'Sphinx,'" *Renaissance Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (summer 1996): 303–33.

[63] Mythographic tradition posited direct genealogical ties between Sphinx and the Chimera, some accounts having her as the offspring of the dog Orthrus and the Chimera. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. (New York, George Braziller, 1959), 2: 9. "Chimère" was also a generic label for the sphinx and hybrid mythological creatures in general.

[64] Théophile Gautier, *La Presse*, May 5, 1852 ["M. Gigoux a toutes les inquiétudes et les préoccupations de la jeunesse. Il cherche, il travaille, il s'ingénie, il essaie; il a la chimère de son art, qualité rare aujourd'hui; quelquefois il se trompe et s'égare dans les chemins de travers, mais c'est toujours au pourchas d'un idéal supérieur"].

[65] Moreau, *Écrits* 2: 229 ["La divination, l'intuition des choses appartiennent à l'artiste et au poète seuls"].

[66] *Ibid.*, 259 ["ces caractères silencieux et mystérieux"].

[67] *Ibid.* ["gens sans cervelle"].

[68] See, for instance, Etienne Arago, "Variétés. Salon de 1866," *L'Avenir national*, May 16, 1866 ["comme le sphynx de son Œdipe, les deux tableaux de M. Moreau [*Orpheus* and *Diomedes*] attirent, magnétisent, et l'on cherche à en deviner les secrets"].

[69] Alfred Nettement, "Salon de 1864," *La Semaine des familles*, no. 38 (June 11, 1864): 587 ["Il se saisit de l'attention, il s'impose....cette toile fait réfléchir"].

[70] See Allan, *Gustave Moreau (1826–1898)*, 56–58.

[71] Dubos had written: "Au lieu de s'attacher à l'imitation des passions, ils se sont plus à donner l'effort à une imagination capricieuse et à forger des chimères, dont l'allégorie mystérieuse est une énigme plus obscure que ne le furent jamais celles du Sphinx." *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1733; Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 1993), 68. Continuing this tradition of criticism in the nineteenth century, Gautier, for example, wrote of Hamon's *Human Comedy*: "[Hamon] avait proposé l'année dernière à la sagacité publique une énigme indéchiffrable.... Les Œdipes du feuilleton jetèrent leur langue aux chiens devant ce sphinx encadré, qui pourtant ne les dévora pas." "Salon de 1853," *La Presse*, June 25, 1853.

[72] As Henry Trianon looked back on Moreau's Salon career: "Il semble que le Sphinx,—son début—ait été la note dominante et la devise de ses travaux. Chacune de ses compositions est un rébus, un logogriphe, une énigme." "Exposition universelle de 1878. Beaux-arts. France.—Deuxième salle," *Le Constitutionnel*, May 21, 1878. This feeling was widespread. As Eugène Montrosier wrote in 1869: "M. Gustave Moreau continue sa peinture énigmatique.... Les yeux fixés sur le sphinx de la fable, dont il nous a donné, lui aussi, et après Ingres, un spécimen, il se dit que, depuis des milliers d'années, on cherche, malgré les prodiges d'Œdipe, à découvrir un sens nouveau à la proposition du monstre de Cithéron, et chaque année il nous soumet son énigme." "Salon de 1869," *Messenger des théâtres: édition hebdomadaire*, no. 36 (May 9, 1869): 2. And as Paul de Saint-Victor began his review of Moreau's *Young Man and Death* in 1865: "Ce n'est pas pour rien que M. Moreau a débuté par un Sphinx: il y a de la charade dans tous ses tableaux." "Salon de 1865," *La Presse*, May 7, 1865.

[73] Auguste Bougot, *Essai sur la critique d'art: ses principes, sa méthode, son histoire en France* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1877), 69.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Gustave Moreau, *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1864. Oil on canvas. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Oedipus Explaining the Enigma of the Sphinx*, 1808. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Jean-Raymond-Hippolyte Lazerges, *Genius Extinguished by Voluptuousness*, 1850. Oil on canvas. Carcassonne, Musée des beaux-arts. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Paul-Jacques-Aimé Baudry, *The Pearl and the Wave*, 1862. Oil on canvas. Madrid, Museo del Prado. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Gustave Moreau, *Cartoon for Oedipus and the Sphinx*. White chalk and charcoal. Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau, cat. 13. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Gustave Moreau, *Studies for Oedipus and the Sphinx*. Pencil on paper. Paris, Musée Gustave Moreau, dessin 2532. [\[return to text\]](#)