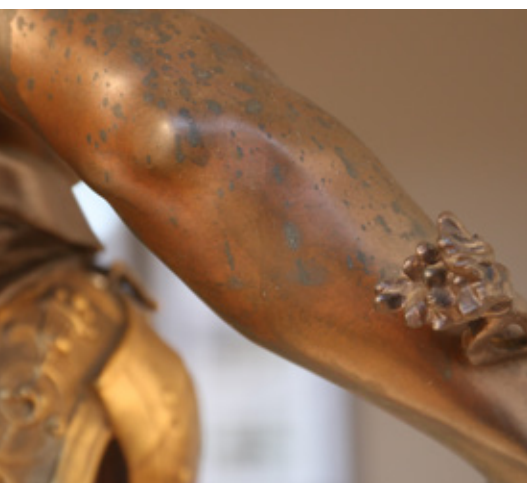




Gloria victis at the conservation studio



Gloria victis (detail) before conservation

On the base of the sculpture, a thick splotch of clear wax was found from a previous cleaning. Overall there was a thin accumulation of surface dust and dirt.

The surface of the statue and the base were cleaned by first using dry cotton swabs. Then mineral spirits was applied with cotton swabs to further reduce accumulated dirt and grime. The spotty, waxy corrosion product was locally and mechanically reduced by using a sharpened bone folder and bamboo stick. Though the residue has not been identified, it did not appear to be actively corroding the bronze. On the base of the statue, the built-up waxy residue was mechanically removed using a sharpened bone folder and mineral spirits-soaked swabs. An alkaline glycerol solution (37.5g NaOH, 250mL H₂O, 10mL glycerine) was tested as a cleaning agent on the gilt decoration of the winged figure's breastplate and on the leaves around the foot of the figure. It was found that the alkaline glycerol solution was too strong of a cleaning agent, as the test revealed that the layer of brownish substance, originally thought to be dirt, was a toned finish or varnish that was applied to unify the patinated look of the overall statue. The gilt was then cleaned with mineral spirits applied with cotton swabs. The gilt area cleaned with the alkaline glycerol solution was then retouched

with Golden Acrylic paints mixed with xylene to reproduce the look of the varnish. The statue and base were then coated with a pigmented microcrystalline wax, Boston Polish Wax, and buffed with a clean cotton cloth in order to give the surface an overall toned and even appearance and to protect the surface from further corrosion. During treatment it was found that the proper right wing was loose at the joint located at the bottom of the wing. No action was taken to correct the slight wiggle, since it was stable enough not to compromise the statue structurally and so to preserve the original patina. Straightening of the bent wing and sword was deemed impractical at this time as it would require heating the bronze, which would damage the original patina.

MEGHAN ABERCROMBIE '15



Gloria victis (detail) after conservation

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Cover: Marius-Jean-Antonin Mercié, *Gloria victis*, designed 1874. Bronze with gilding, H: 42.5 in. (108.0 cm). Casting: F. Barbedienne. The Trout Gallery, 2013.7. Photo: Andrew Bale

THE TROUT GALLERY
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GLORIA VICTIS

The Conservation of
Marius-Jean-Antonin Mercié's
Bronze Monument to the Fallen

January 15–April 9, 2016



THE TROUT GALLERY
The ART MUSEUM of Dickinson College

GLORIA VICTIS (Glory to the vanquished) was among the most popular statues in late nineteenth-century France. Designed by Marius-Jean-Antonin Mercié as a memorial to the French soldiers who died in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), the composition was widely praised and cast in various scales, from full-scale bronze monuments to smaller domestic-sized statues. Although designed to commemorate the fallen French in the Franco-Prussian War, the statue's lasting popularity stems from its ability to stand for all who die on the field of battle. This exhibition of the bronze *Gloria victis* in The Trout Gallery's collection celebrates its recent conservation by Meghan Abercrombie '15 and is the first time the statue has been on display at the museum.

ARTIST

Marius-Jean-Antonin Mercié (b. Toulouse, 1845–d. Paris, 1916) studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, with François Jouffroy and Alexandre Flaguère, where he mastered the classical vocabulary and academic training that was to provide the basis for his long and distinguished career. In 1868, he was awarded the Prix de Rome and completed his studies at the Academie de France. In Rome, Mercié received the Légion d'honneur and first-class medal for his *David Victorious*. He followed shortly thereafter with the *Gloria victis* of 1874. Both the *David Victorious* and the *Gloria victis* represent Mercié's skillful combination of Renaissance classicism and Baroque exuberance and technical complexity. Over the course of the next five decades, he became one of the most successful French sculptors of his age. Ultimately, he returned to the École des Beaux-Arts as professor and he was appointed president of the Société des Artistes Français.



Marius-Jean-Antonin Mercié, c.1916.
Photo: Université de Caen Basse-Normandie

HISTORICAL CONTEXT and ICONOGRAPHY

Mercié designed *Gloria victis* three years after France's crushing loss in the Franco-Prussian War. He intended to honor French soldiers who had fallen in the conflict, especially his friend, the artist, Henri Regnault. The project raised the complex political and artistic issues of whether or not to represent those who died in a humiliating military defeat, and if so, how? Indeed, there were those who felt that such a monument was unwarranted.

For *Gloria victis*, Mercié created an elegant and complex figure group of a winged figure bearing the nude body of a fallen soldier who clasps a broken sword. The soldier rests over the winged figure's left shoulder and glances down at his broken sword; his left arm reaches upward. Wrapped in classical dress and wearing a metal breastplate, the winged figure strides forward, balancing on one foot as it spreads its wings. On the base an owl is perched. Laurel leaves, a symbol of victory, appear trampled underfoot. The base bears the inscriptions "A. MERCIÉ" and "GLORIA VICTIS."

The title "*Gloria victis*" reworks Livy's phrase "Vae victis!" (Woe to the vanquished!; *Ab Urbe Condita*, V:48) into a phrase of homage for the vanquished fallen. Although there is some debate regarding the identity of the winged figure, the presence of the

owl, the military breastplate, and the act of removing the dead from the battlefield suggest that he is Thanatos (Death). Together with his twin brother Hypnos (Sleep), they leave their underworld abode (hence the owl) and appear on the battlefield to remove the bodies of dead heroes. Representations of this subject are common and include the Euphronios vase, which shows Sarpedon carried by Thanatos and Hypnos in the presence of Hermes. While the androgynous appearance of the winged figure in *Gloria victis* has led scholars to conclude that it represents a female, such an approach to representing the male nude appears in other works by Mercié and his contemporaries.

By representing Thanatos carrying a fallen warrior as the subject of *Gloria victis*, Mercié downplayed the issue of French defeat and bestowed honor on those who died in battle, regardless of the military outcome.



Euphronios, *Sarpedon Lifted by Hypnos and Thanatos in the Presence of Hermes*, red figure calyx-krater, 6th–5th century BCE. Museo Nazionale di Villa Giulia, Rome. Photo: Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY.

FROM PLASTER TO BRONZE

Mercié's full-size plaster model of *Gloria victis* was exhibited at the Salon of 1874, winning the Médaille d'Honneur and critical acclaim. It was hailed as one of the great works of its day, resolving aesthetic and patriotic issues in a daring, uplifting composition that balances two figures on the narrow support of one foot. The original plaster was purchased by the city of Paris for the sum of twelve-thousand francs and served as the basis for a monumental bronze, which was cast by Victor Thiébaud for eight-thousand francs. This premier bronze now stands in the central courtyard of the Hôtel de Ville, Paris. Subsequent large-scale bronzes were made and installed in Auvours, Agen, Bordeaux, Châlons-sur-Marne, Cholet, and Niort.

However, not all were pleased with the theme of the work. Fellow French sculptor, Jean Baffier, commented with characteristic tact: "We have been beaten like wheat in a barn, and we shouted: 'Glory to the losers'—And along comes some sort of bastard

artist, the pupil of a sexless school, to put up the image of our cowardice. And we cried 'Bravo!'" While lacking decorum, Baffier puts his finger on the highly-charged issue of erecting monuments in the wake of a failed military campaign.

The city of Paris, which bought the original plaster in 1874, gave rights in 1877 to the Barbedienne Foundry to reproduce *Gloria victis* in three sizes. These castings bear the inscription "F. BARBEDIENNE. FONDEUR". To promote the smaller castings, the plaster original was re-exhibited at the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878, next to bronze reductions of the group by Barbedienne. By 1900 the options increased to seven different sizes.

Casting lines are visible along key joints of the sculpture, suggesting the complex assemblage of the statue. According to research at the National Gallery of Art (DC) on its edition of the statue, the bronzes were hollow-cast in numerous sections, most likely using the lost-wax method. Evidence of an internal framework for support of the extensions is suggested by the presence of tie-rods at the base of the wings. Using X-ray fluorescence, conservators identified the metal used in casting as an amalgamation of copper, zinc, tin, lead, and iron with variations of 4-5% in the alloys throughout the bronze. The patina was applied in several layers of chemical solutions brushed onto the heated bronze in order to produce variations of dark to light browns.

THE TROUT GALLERY

CONSERVATION

A preliminary review of the bronze statue was conducted in order to identify the proper treatment plan. Small, non-invasive tests were performed in order to determine the stability and condition of the metal. This *Gloria victis* proved to be in stable condition with only inactive corrosion over the thin brown patina, determined by stereoscope analysis. The corrosion was situated in a spray pattern of spotty, raised, green, waxy residue sitting on top of the patina. The spray was observed along the back, wings, face, and arms of both figures. In other areas, the patina had been worn down due to cleaning or rubbing over time, as observed by the variation of color and sheen of the surface. The soldier's broken sword and the tip of the winged figure's proper right wing and feather on its proper left wing were identifiably bent, possibly due to a fall at some earlier date.



Marius-Jean-Antonin Mercié, *Gloria victis*, 1874. Cour de l'Hôtel de Ville, Paris.