A Shell, Two Saints, and a Bird

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During the past two years the Museum has acquired by gift and by purchase four unusual Italian bronze sculptures of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries. The earliest dates from the beginnings of the Renaissance in Italy, and is the welcome gift of Alastair Bradley Martin. It is a shell, conceived in the manner of an antique ornament, which is surmounted by the head of a winged putto. It is worked in relief, is architectural in character, and at one time was incorporated into some larger design. Possibly it served as decoration for an altar or chapel. The shell area is left comparatively rough; the head and wings are chiseled and finished with loving care. The tones of the bronze surface are a delight to the eyes of connoisseurs.

This rare sculpture is obviously Italian work of the fifteenth century. Clearly it also falls within the dominant Florentine tradition of the times. And it owes much to the example of Donatello, with whom it is not unreasonable to connect it, if only indirectly.

Such a specialist in the works of that master as Professor H. W. Janson considers it to be most nearly related to Donatello’s work of his Paduan period. It will be recalled that the Florentine master stayed in Padua for about a decade during the middle years of the fifteenth century in order to execute the great bronze figural decorations for the High Altar of the Church of Sant’ Antonio and the equestrian monument in honor of the Gattamelata. In the workshop which he set up there a number of the sculptors of that region were trained in the production of bronzes. The Museum’s new acquisition could well be the work of one of these.

As part of the record it may be noted that the bronze is said to have at one time been in the Vatican collections, and that it was lent by Mr. Martin to the exhibition of Lorenzo de’ Medici and the Arts held at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence in 1949. During its stay in Florence it was studied by Cav. Bruno Bearzi, who was in charge of cleaning the Ghiberti doors for the Baptistery, Donatello’s statue of Saint Louis of Toulouse, and other Renaissance bronzes under the care of the Soprintendenza. Signor Bearzi found the character of the metal and the method of casting the shell to be entirely typical of Italian bronzes of the mid-fifteenth century. It is to be recorded on our part that Mr. Martin’s gift is the first important Italian bronze of the fifteenth century to enter our collections.

Two other of the recent acquisitions are bronze statuettes of Saint Matthew and Saint John. Matthew is accompanied by his ever-attendant angel—a nude boy with wings—and John by his eagle. Both are eleven inches tall. They are two of the evangelists from a series which originally consisted of the risen Christ, the four evangelists, and six angels: eleven figures in all.

This series was fully described by Dr. Herbert Keutner in an article which appeared in the August 1955 issue of the Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz, that is to say, the journal of the German Institute for Art History.

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Bronze shell surmounted by the head of a winged putto. Italian, mid-xv Century. Height 15½ inches
Gift of Alastair Bradley Martin, 1958

ON THE COVER: Autre Pape, by Paul Gauguin. Woodcut. Height 8 inches
(Detail. See Notes page 240)
Rogers Fund, 1921
in Florence. It is owing to this scholar's researches that our bronzes can be identified with certainty.

Outside of Florence and overlooking the road to Siena is the great Carthusian monastery known as the Certosa at Galluzzo. In his article Dr. Keutner published records from this monastery which show that in 1596 Giovanni Bologna and his man (suo uomo) Antonio Susini were paid for making eleven bronzes to decorate the ciborium of the High Altar. And he clearly showed that this is the series from which our two evangelists come. He noted that in the quality of the modeling all four evangelists are representative of Giovanni Bologna's best work. In this respect they are far superior to the remaining seven figures in the series. It is evident then that the evangelists were designed by Bologna, the Christ and the six angels by Susini. The casting of the whole series was the work of the latter.

The eleven bronzes were described as still being in place at Galluzzo as late as 1791. During the Napoleonic disturbances they were taken from the monastery and were lost from view. They came to light nearly forty years ago in a private collection in Berlin. In recent years the series has been dispersed. Interestingly enough, one other of Bologna's evangelists, Saint Luke, has also come to America, and is now to be found in the University of Kansas Museum of Art at Lawrence, Kansas.

In both Saint Matthew and Saint John are revealed the full mastery of form, the fine and mannered elegance, and the easy control of the sculptor's craft that made Bologna so eminent in his field. And their lovely bronze surfaces, which seem to have remained untouched through the centuries, testify to Susini's rare skill as a bronze founder. They were so well produced by the cire-perdue (lost-wax) process, that virtually none of the usual post-casting corrections with chisel and file had to be made.

They are, indeed, the first statuettes definitely connected with Bologna to enter our collections. Together with his bronze relief of the Entombment, acquired in 1955, they enable us now for the first time to represent him with justice in our showing of Renaissance bronzes.

Although the fourth of our newly acquired bronzes is not by Bologna, it is a work in which his style is brilliantly reflected. In its own way it is a quite remarkable piece. It is a rooster, on port side represented in his full and splendid plumage, on starboard bare of any feathers. It is seemingly unique. This proud bird may have been made as a table decoration—a late Renaissance conversation piece. To judge by its feathery side, it is a triumphant crowing likeness; by its plucked side, a marvelously acute example of anatomical observation. Technically, also, it is something to conjure with. The tail feathers, for example, are done with great dash, yet with utter certainty of modeling. It was, by the way, originally gilded.
Visitors to Florence will recall that Giovanni Bologna created a number of birds for the grotto of the Medici villa at Castello, and that a turkey and an eagle formerly in that grotto are now in the Bargello Museum there. And it is to be noted that in the 1640s Francesco Susini, Antonio's nephew, created several fowls for the grotto of the Boboli Gardens in Florence. There are, moreover, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna a bronze ostrich, a crane, and an owl, which are believed to be the work of the latter. Our rooster would seem to be most closely related to the birds in Vienna. Whether or not actually by Francesco Susini, it clearly belongs to the select company of these extraordinary creatures.

These four newly acquired bronzes are on exhibition in Renaissance Gallery 11.

*Bronze rooster. Italian, first half of the xvii Century. Height 10 inches*

Chapman Fund, 1958
OPPOSITE: Bronze statuette of Saint John, by Giovanni Bologna (1524-1608). Height 11 inches
Pulitzer Bequest Fund, 1957

Two views of the bronze statuette of Saint Matthew, by Giovanni Bologna. Height 11 inches
Pulitzer Bequest Fund, 1957