On Collecting

In the Round

CURATOR CATHERINE HESS ON THE HUNTINGTON’S BRONZE COLLECTION

The exhibition “Beauty and Power: Renaissance and Baroque Bronzes from the Peter Marino Collection” is on view in the MaryLou and George Boone Gallery through Jan. 24, 2011. The Huntington is a natural venue for such an exhibition because Henry Huntington was one of the first private collectors of small bronzes in the United States. Hess, the chief curator of European art at The Huntington, describes the institution’s bronze collection and one of its most remarkable works, on permanent display in the Huntington Art Gallery.
How did Henry Huntington start collecting bronzes?

We can thank J. P. Morgan for the high quality of The Huntington’s collection. He began collecting bronzes around 1900, at a time when no one was collecting them in the United States. He was an American, but he kept his collection in London. He had a very astute eye, and he built what was one of the greatest private collections of small bronzes at that time. He decided to have his collection exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum around 1912, so he sent his bronzes to New York. I don’t think he ever intended for them to stay in the United States, but he died suddenly in Rome, and his son decided to sell off the collection. It was acquired by none other than Joseph Duveen, Huntington’s art dealer. Duveen approached Henry Clay Frick and Henry Huntington, both of whom were planning to turn their homes into public museums.

Frick got the first choice, but Huntington ended up with about 20 bronzes, including Giambologna’s *Nessus and Deianira*, which I daresay is one of the most important Renaissance bronzes in the United States.

What makes it so significant?

The thing about bronze casting is that you can make multiple copies of an object. Giambologna would cast several bronzes if a composition became popular, but perhaps his workshop assistants would have a large hand in completing the casting process, so they wouldn’t necessarily be signed by him. There are only three versions of this composition that are signed by Giambologna—on the band around Nessus’ head. The other two are in Paris and Dresden, so this is the only one in the United States.

What’s unique about the composition?

Giambologna developed a style that was a move beyond the Renaissance into the Baroque period, a style called Mannerism—“mannered” meaning somewhat artificial, elegant, and stylish. The whole emphasis was on the stylishness of its figures and composition.

He also developed a very inventive way of showing figures in what is called a *figura serpentinata*, or a serpentine figure, which urges the viewer to walk all the way around the sculpture because there is no primary viewpoint. Giambologna often did this with a single figure, but this practice is even more impressive with two, as in *Nessus and Deianira*.

How so?

Even though bronze has great tensile strength, it is an enormous challenge to achieve a balanced composition of not one but two bulky, struggling figures. Also, Nessus’ hefty mass is completely balanced on his two hind legs.

There’s great drama here, great movement, which is quite a feat when you are trying to express drama in metal. The story is based on a mythological tale of the centaur Nessus kidnapping Deianira. Deianira is struggling to get away and Nessus’ brow is deeply furrowed while he charges forward.

So why didn’t Frick buy the bronze?

There’s no clear answer. But I think it’s because a year or so before the Morgan bronzes came on the market, Frick acquired a composition of *Nessus and Deianira* in a larger scale, which I believe he thought was by Giambologna. So when he saw the Morgan bronze come up for sale, he figured he already had one. The upshot, however, is that years later scholars learned that Frick’s bronze was not by Giambologna but by one of his students, Pietro Tacca.

How does *Nessus and Deianira* fit into The Huntington’s collection?

It shows a fascinating moment in Mr. Huntington’s early collecting activities. A lot about this place is about collecting and taste and the desires of Henry and Arabella. At the same time we are able to present in a historically coherent
manner the development of certain chapters in art history. We have 15th-century Flemish and Florentine paintings; then it goes into 16th-century material, and we are soon going to have a 17th-century gallery; and we have a bumper crop of 18th-century material. So I think our visitors not only get to see how the Huntingtons collected but at the same time receive an interesting art history lesson—or history lesson in general—about the development of art in Europe from the 15th century onward.

*Interview conducted by Matt Stevens, editor of Huntington Frontiers.*

HENRY TO THE THIRD

by Stephen H. Grant

While Henry Huntington and Henry Clay Frick were buying up J. P. Morgan’s bronzes, Henry Folger was snapping up duplicate books from Huntington’s own library. Folger specialized in Shakespeare. Huntington displayed a wider palette; he also enjoyed deeper pockets. Huntington bought around 200 entire libraries, resulting in numerous duplicate editions. While Folger gave his spare Elizabethan books to family, friends, students, and college libraries, Huntington traded up by taking his duplicates to the auction house. From 1916 to 1925, he sold more than 8,000 of them at Anderson Galleries in New York, bringing in more than $550,000. Folger obtained from the lot more than 100 volumes printed before 1700. One man’s castoffs became another man’s treasures.

In the Huntington and Folger libraries, I examined Shakespeare quarto plays, the ones Henry H. kept and the others he sold that Henry F. acquired: *Romeo and Juliet* (1599), *Henry the Fourth* (1599), *Pericles* (1609), *Titus Andronicus* (1611), and *Hamlet* (1611). How were they different? The Huntington’s copies were all pristine. The Folger’s contained what many collectors at the time considered objectionable imperfections: writing on flyleaves, a title page in facsimile, a title page inlaid and mounted, pages torn and repaired, leaves unbound. In Henry Folger’s neat clerk’s hand appears a description from his card catalog, “a few headlines shaved.”

When Huntington reached his goal of obtaining a flawless book, he shed his imperfect copy. Folger did not require a perfect copy; he was more concerned with stretching his dollars. Ahead of his times, Folger believed that scholars would recognize the usefulness of textual variants, as indeed they do. Contemplating the departed volumes, Stephen Tabor, Huntington curator of early printed books, commented wistfully, “We wish we still had them.”

Stephen H. Grant is an independent scholar currently working on a biography of Henry and Emily Folger, founders of the Folger Shakespeare Library. His numerous articles on the Folgers appear on www.stephenhgrant.com.

Henry Folger, 1910. Photo courtesy of Stephen H. Grant.