

The Frick Collection: Detail Report



Nessus and Deianira

Pietro Tacca (Italian, 1577–1640)

Date late 16th to early 17th century

Medium Bronze

Dimensions H.: 34 3/4 in. (88.3 cm)

Credit Line Henry Clay Frick Bequest

Accession Number 1915.2.49

Currently On View

First Floor, Room 13, West Gallery

Commentary The first documented example of this famous bronze group was made by Giovanni Bologna between 1575 and 1577 for the Salviati family of Florence. The three casts signed by him differ slightly from each other, as well as from the Frick model and the many other variants, chiefly in the pose of Deianira and the arrangement of drapery; they are also only half the size of the later variants. These bronzes are an amazing tour de force of casting, with a balance so delicate it is hardly surprising that the centaur's rear legs in all three signed versions have broken in the same place—or that at some time in its past, the Frick bronze was strengthened by a lead insert in the rear right leg. Giovanni Bologna's Mercury, one of the best-known sculptures in history, is poised miraculously on the toes of one foot, but the abduction of Deianira is even more daring and dramatic. One cannot but wonder how such a minor myth, so obscure, so difficult to produce in bronze, came to be chosen for sculpture. The closest antecedent was Pollaiuolo's painting of the abduction, now in the Yale University Art Gallery. The same subject, according to his biographer Condivi, had once been proposed to Michelangelo, but he evidently never undertook such a project. Perhaps Giovanni Bologna, who seems always to have dared the seemingly impossible, deliberately sought comparison with his illustrious Florentine precursors. According to legend, the centaur Nessus tried to abduct Hercules' wife, Deianira, after offering her a ride across a turbulent river. For his treachery, Hercules killed Nessus with an arrow. The explosive outward movement of the sculpted figures is tightly contained by equally dynamic forces twisting in midair as the two struggle against each other: the terrified Deianira straining back toward her husband while the centaur leaps forward. Understandably popular, variants of this model were produced over and over by assistants and followers of Giovanni Bologna, many of them made during his lifetime and with his approval. The Frick version has been attributed variously to two of these sculptors: formerly to Adriaen de Vries, but more recently to Pietro Tacca. Tacca (1577–1640) was the last and one of the most gifted sculptors to join Giovanni Bologna's shop, in 1592. He nurtured close personal and professional ties to his master, whom he succeeded as court sculptor. Tacca was an exceptional technician, particularly noted for equestrian statues, such as those for Henri IV, Grand Duke Ferdinand I of Tuscany, and Philip III of Spain. Source: Art in The Frick Collection: Paintings, Sculpture, Decorative Arts, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996.

Collection History Private collection, Paris (1914). Duveen. Frick, 1915. Source: Sculpture in The Frick Collection: German, Netherlandish, French and British. Volume IV. New York: The Frick Collection, 1970.