Statuette - Thetis

Object: Statuette
Place of origin: Florence (made)
Date: ca. 1580-1585 (made)
Artist/Maker: Giambologna (maker, designer)
Materials and Techniques: Terracotta with painted gilt
Museum number: 7628-1861
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 62, The Foyle Foundation Gallery, case 16

Public access description
Thetis, like the terracotta sketch-model of the River God, is another of Giambologna’s works associated with the fountain garden and grotto of the Medici Villa at Pratolino. Traditionally, grotoes were considered sacred places where homage was given to the divinities of sources and water, and from the time of the Roman Empire, were also referred to as nymphaea, meaning “fountains consecrated to the nymphs.” Thetis, as a silver-footed sea nymph, would have been an ideal component of the grotto fountain and of the larger water-based garden project.

Descriptive line
Statuette of Thetis, gilded in terracotta, by Giovanni Bologna, Florence, ca. 1580-85

Physical description
Gilded terracotta figure of a seated female figure clothed in a loose dress with a girdle, wearing a wreath and fillet, with a cloak drawn up above her bared knees. She holds a wreath in her raised hand and an unidentified object in her left.

Dimensions
Height: 58.7 cm, Width: 32.5 cm approx., Depth: 32 cm, Weight: 12.48 kg

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Object history note
This figure was acquired in 1861 under a traditional attribution to Pietro Francavilla, which was retained by Robinson and, with some reserve, by Maglacan and Longhurst, but later discredited by Pope-Hennessy. Using a sketch, (published by Ginori-Conti and reproduced by Dhanens) Pope-Hennessy confirmed its attribution to Giambologna identifying it as the model for the seated figure of Prudenza Civile prepared by artist for the triumphal arch made for Joanna of Austria’s entry into Florence in 1565.

Historical significance: The figure itself is probably that which originally surmounted the fountain of the grotto of Thetis, who was a sea nymph and the mother of Achilles. This is shown by a drawing by Giovanni Guerra of about 1598 (located in Albertina, Vienna) called La Fonte di Tetide dentro, where a similar seated female figure can be seen adopting a similar pose. The fountain was also known as the Fonte de’ Nicchi, or ‘Fountain of Shells’ referring to the decoration on the base, also visible in Guerra’s sketch. The grotto was one of the small rooms inside the colossal figure of the mountain god, Appenine commissioned by Francesco de’ Medici for the fountain garden of his Villa at Pratolino, Tuscany.

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Historical context note
Thetis, like the terracotta sketch-model of the River God, is another of Giambologna’s works associated with the fountain garden and grotto of the Medici Villa at Pratolino. The villa itself was designed by Bernardo Buontalenti in 1569, and although he designed several other Medici residences, it was his expertise in hydraulics which found a match in Francesco’s preference for garden settings and his love of naturalia. While overseeing the construction of fountains and grottoes at Pratolino during the course of the grandduke’s lifetime, Buontalenti also designed the architectural housing and fountain machinery for two of Francesco’s casini in Florence, the Casino Mediceo (1574) and the Grotta Grande in the Boboli garden (1583-93), where he worked with Vasari.

Many of the themes and the decorative details found in the scenographic garden settings at Pratolino took up mythical figures and formal approaches found in the intermezzi of the Medici stage. Giambologna would have been familiar with numerous surviving examples of fountains and their mythical statues from his intensive study of sculpture in Rome between 1550-53, and again in 1572, when he was sent there by Cosimo I de’ Medici along with Vasari and his fellow sculptor Ammanati. Indeed, the Florentine Medici family's patronage of Giambologna led to a style that was closely associated with the Medici court, and which quickly spread to northern Europe.

Within the grotto settings specifically, which were formed from a variety of stones and shells, dramatic scenarios were created with the aid of
statues, like Michelangelo's Slaves, at the Grotta Grande, as well as fountains and automata, such as the Grotta di Pan e Sfinge at Pratolino. The grotto at Pratolino would have formed one of the secret places for the family to enjoy, but also somewhere that special visitors and guests would have been taken to be astounded by the glory of the Medici court.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O127796/thenis-statuette-giambologna/