Statuette - Aristaeus and Proteus

Object: Statuette

Place of origin: France (made)

Date: ca. 1695-1700 (made)

Artist/Maker: Slodtz, Sébastien, born 1655 - died 1726 (maker)
Girardon, François, born 1628 - died 1715 (designer)

Materials and Techniques: Bronze

Museum number: A.6-1963

Gallery location: Europe 1600-1815, Room 5, The Friends of the V&A Gallery, case WS

Public access description

The subject of this group is taken from Virgil’s Georgics. Aristaeus was a shepherd, son of Apollo and the nymph Cyrene, and he kept bees. He pursued the nymph Eurydice who was killed by a serpent which she disturbed when fleeing from him. In revenge, her companion Nymphs killed Aristaeus' bees. His mother advised him to ask Proteus, guardian of the sea-monsters, for advice as Proteus could foretell the future. But Proteus was elusive, frequently changing his appearance or disappearing, so he had to be tied down. It is this dramatic moment which is depicted here: Aristaeus is securing the struggling Proteus, who is accompanied by two seals. The dynamic pose of the bee-keeper is perhaps inspired by the figures of youths in the monumental ancient marble group of the Farnese Bull (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples), that was coveted by the French king, Louis XIV.

This group originated in a commission to Sebastien Slodtz, first mentioned in 1688, for a large-scale marble group of this subject for a prominent location along the central axis of the garden at Versailles. Slodtz's master, the better-known sculptor François Girardon, worked out the design which survives in a pen and wash drawing by him. Girardon exhibited a bronze of this subject at the Salon of 1704, and it is shown as being on display in engravings of his studio. It is believed that the V&A bronze was the one in these records, owned by Girardon. The composition marked a shift in sculpture at Versailles from the series of standing allegorical figures, to groups where there was movement and often drama and narrative content. A plaster cast of the full-size model was set up in the garden in 1705 but the marble was not installed there until 1723.

Sébastien Slodtz was born in Antwerp, the son of Jacqueline de Lannoy and a master carpenter. He settled in Paris, where he entered the study of François, and through marriage became the son-in-law to king Louis XIV’s gold- and silversmith, Domenico Cucci, and brother-in-law to the sculptor François Chauveau (1613-1676). Slodtz worked on a number of commissions for Louis XIV, many of which survive in Paris and at Versailles. He lived at the Louvre from 1699 until his death, and three of his sons became sculptors.

Descriptive line

Group, bronze, of Aristaeus and Proteus, by Sébastien Slodtz, after a drawing by François Girardon, French, ca. 1695-1700

Physical description

The bronze shows the figure of the shepherd and bee-keeper Aristaeus in the process of tying the sea-god Proteus to a rock. Aristaeus, loosely clad in flowing drapery with a strap across his right shoulder, reaches across the prone, naked figure of Proteus, grasping the rope that ties him. Proteus is fettered by his right wrist and left upper arm, a cloth draped over his left leg. He is accompanied by two open-mouthed seals, one crouching beneath his outstretched left leg and the other at his left side, gazing up towards him. The group is supported on a rocky base, with fleshy foliage typical of French bronzes of this period, and a curved rod.

Dimensions

Height: 876 mm, Weight: 114 kg, Width: 750 mm approx, Depth: 490 mm approx

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Object history note

This bronze was made by Sébastien Slodtz (1655-1726) in about 1695-1700, and is a reduced version of the colossal marble group commissioned from Slodtz for the park at Versailles, first mentioned in 1688, and based on a design by his master, François Girardon (1628-1715).

The commission for the marble was originally granted to Corneille Van Clève (1645-1732), who blotted his copybook by insisting on the use of a workshop in the Louvre to prepare the model. This so displeased the marquis de Louvois, the superintendent of the king’s buildings, that the commission was transferred to Slodtz. A group of Proteus in bronze is recorded in Girardon’s posthumous inventory, while in that of Slodtz there appears ‘a plaster model of the group of Proteus and Aristaeus … in the proportion of two-and-a-half feet’ and ‘a model of Proteus and Aristaeus in wax on a core of plaster’ (Souchal 1967, p.713). The reference to a plaster-filled wax suggests that further bronze casts were envisaged (Marsden, 2008-9, p.271).
According to payment records, the founder Drouart was paid to cast a group of this subject, and Slodtz also received payments between 1696-8 for a reduction ‘which he is making in bronze’ (Souchal 1967, p.588; Marsden 2008-9, p.270). No other casts of this group are known, which has convincingly led to the suggestion that this bronze is the same as that variously documented as owned by Girardon and exhibited by him at the Salon of 1704 (formerly assumed by Souchal to be different casts). It was subsequently owned by William Williams Hope (1802-1855), an Anglo-Dutch collector and heir to a banking fortune, who lived in the Rue Dominque in the Fabourg Saint-Germain. The bronze was bought by the Museum from J.L.S. Violante for £2000 in 1963.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70884/aristaeus-and-proteus-statuette-slodtz-sebastien/