

TOMASSO BROTHERS

FINE ART

BARTHÉLEMY PRIEUR (c. 1536 – 1611)

Hermes (also known as The Belvedere Antinoüs)

Bronze

23 cm (9 in.) high

10 cm (4 in.) wide

PROVENANCE

Private collection, United Kingdom

A promising young sculptor with a prodigious talent, Barthélemy Prieur was drawn to the Italian peninsula to further his studies, where it is known that he was in Rome as early as the 1550s, presumably after having finished his initial training in France (Seelig-Teuwen, 2008, pp.102-03). Prieur has been identified with the sculptor 'Bartolomeo' who was working alongside Ponce Jacquio (active 1527 – 1572) on the decorations of the Ricci-Sacchetti palace in Via Giulia (Radcliffe 1993, 275-276). Whilst his Roman activities remain scarcely documented, it has been suggested that in the 1550s he took part in the large stucco projects organised under the direction of Daniele da Volterra and Giulio Mazzoni; in the later works, his remarkable skill in the use of soft materials such as wax and clay for the models for his bronzes may indeed reflect his activity as a stuccoist (Seelig-Teuwen 2008, p.102). After several years in Rome, he moved to Turin, capital of the flourishing duchy of Savoy, where his presence is attested in October 1564. There, he became court sculptor to Duke Emmanuel-Philibert of Savoy (1528 – 1580), specializing in monumental bronze projects (Seelig-Teuwen, 1993, pp. 365-385). Drawing on his time spent in Rome with Jacquio, Prieur initiated and influenced the development of the small bronze statuette genre in France during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Warren 2010, p. 22).

Prieur had returned to Paris by the time of his marriage to Marguerite Dalencourt on 27 September 1571 and was recorded to have made some small-scale bronzes by 1583 (Grodecki 1986, pp. 129-133). When King Henri IV of France (1553 – 1610) came to the throne in 1589, he clearly took a liking to Prieur's small bronze statuettes. Realising the enormous monarchical propaganda potential that these works would have had, he appointed Prieur to the coveted post of *Sculpteur du Roi* five years later. In this capacity, he is known to have made reliefs for the *Petite Galerie* of the Louvre around 1594, alongside restoring certain antique statues for the King.

The scale, sculpting, facture, and colour of the present bronze all point towards the full authorship of Barthélemy Prieur. What is interesting to note is the idiosyncratic manner in which Prieur models the facial features, especially the eyes, so as to try and represent ancient ideals and proportions; yet, inevitably, in the finished image, it seems that the Renaissance always forces itself into the final gaze. Another pointer to the sculptor is in the beautiful modelling and almost feminine-like rendering of the elongated fingers and nails, which recall so many of Prieur's other small-scale bronzes.

This beautifully modelled bronze statuette is a fine version of the famous antique marble *Hermes* in the Museo Pio Clementino (Fig. 1, inv. 907). The idealised youth was identified for a long time as Antinoüs, the favourite of Emperor Hadrian. By April 1545, the *Hermes* was certainly in the Cortile Belvedere; however there are two main theories regarding the precise location of its initial discovery. Aldrovandi thought that it had been found on the Esquiline Hill near San Martino ai Monti, while Mercati disagreed, insisting that it had come from a garden near the Castel Sant'Angelo (Haskell and Penny 1981, p. 141). Upon its discovery, it was immediately acquired by Pope Paul III (1468 – 1549) and stood resplendent in the great Belvedere courtyard of the Vatican until 1797, when it was handed over to the French under the terms of the Treaty of Tolentino. However, the removal of the sculpture to the Louvre was to be but a brief sojourn, for, not long after the statue had been triumphantly processed through the streets of Paris in July 1798, it was returned to Rome, following the defeat of Napoleon, in January 1816 (Haskell and Penny 1981, p. 142).

The elegant antique marble *Hermes* has been regarded with the utmost reverence ever since it was discovered in the mid sixteenth century. This is demonstrated by the trend for artists and connoisseurs to have themselves depicted in the vicinity of the model. For example, Nicolas de Largillière's portraits of both Charles Le Brun (Musée du Louvre, inv. 5661) and Nicolas Coustou (Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, inv. 80.1) feature a version of the model. Similarly, in Charles Le Brun's portrait of c. 1635 (Fig. 2, Residenzgalerie, Salzburg, inv. 254), his father, the sculptor Nicolas Le Brun, is presented with a plaster cast of it. The reasons for this appear to have been as much pedagogic as they were aesthetic and socio-cultural, for Bernini had made the

remarkable statement to the Paris Academy in 1666 that ‘when I was in difficulties with my first statue, I turned to the *Antinous (Hermes)* as to the oracle’ (Wittkower [1958] 1999, p. 21).

RELATED LITERATURE

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Fig. 1 Roman, 2nd century A.D. *Hermes*, long known as *Belvedere Antinoüs*, marble. Vatican Museums, Museo Pio Clementino



Fig. 2 Charles Le Brun (1619 – 1690), *Portrait of the Sculptor Nicolas Le Brun*, ca. 1635, oil on canvas. Residenzgalerie, Salzburg