

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WASHINGTON, D.C., January 31, 1963. John Walker, Director of the National Gallery of Art, announced today that the recently recovered panels by Antonio Pollaiuolo (Poll-eye-wolo), Hercules and the Hydra (6-3/4 x 4-3/4 in.) and Hercules and Antaeus (6-1/2 x 3-1/2 in.) will be given a special installation in a glass case in Lobby D of the National Gallery, off the East Garden Court. The panels will be on view to the public from Monday, February 4, through Sunday evening, February 10, before returning to Italy.

The hours of the Gallery from February 4 on will be from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day except Sunday, when the Gallery will be open from 2:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. The eight o'clock concert on Sunday evening, February 10, will be held in the West Garden Court, as on the previous three Sundays.

A statement is attached on the history and significance of the two panels, by Dr. Luisa Becherucci, Director of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, to which the panels are being returned.

Mr. Walker said:

"These intensely powerful pictures, small as they are, are among the very few surviving paintings by one of the major contributors to a most creative chapter in the history of western art - the 15th century in Florence. I think that I can speak for the entire museum profession when I say how delighted I am that the panels have been recovered and will be returned to the Uffizi. On behalf of the American people, I wish to thank Minister Siviero and the Italian Government for allowing the pictures to be exhibited at the National Gallery of Art."

More

Black-and-white glossy photographs are available on request to J. Carter Brown, National Gallery of Art, Washington 25, D. C., REpublic 7-4215.

ANTONIO DEL POLLAIUOLO
Florentine, c.1432-1498

Hercules and the Hydra; Hercules and Antaeus
(Tempera on wood panel: 6 3/4 x 4 3/4 in.; 6 1/2 x 3 1/2 in.)

In these two exquisite panels Antonio Pollaiuolo demonstrates his passionate pursuit of movement, which his superb mastery of drawing enables him to exploit in all its physical and spiritual violence. In Hercules and the Hydra one sees, as Vasari wrote in 1550, "the poison, fire, ferocity, fury." And this extreme tension is expressed not only in the figures. The vast landscape that surrounds them is alive with the movement of light that vibrates and sparkles with the nervous course of the artist's brush until it fades away in the farthest reaches of the horizon. Man and nature are bound together in a pictorial vision, a vision elaborated by Leonardo and at the basis of modern art.

The subjects are derived from Classical mythology. Hercules, the strongest man on earth, was given the task (his second "Labor") of killing a creature with multiple heads called the Hydra. This was very hard to do because one of the heads was immortal, and when he struck off the other heads two grew up instead. However, he was helped by his nephew who brought him a burning brand with which he seared the neck as he dispatched each head so that it could not sprout again. When all had been removed he disposed of the one that was immortal by burying it under a rock. An exploit quite as difficult as most of the labors was the conquest of Antaeus, a Giant and a mighty wrestler. As long as he could touch the earth he was invincible. Hercules lifted him up and holding him in the air strangled him.
(From Mythology by Edith Hamilton)

The theme, an allegory of human energy in conflict with the obscure forces of nature, was at the same time an allegory of the strivings of Florentine artists of the mid-fifteenth century. As the artists of the beginning of the century, such as Brunelleschi and Masaccio, had created a new science of perspective for representing forms and space in their true dimensions, the younger artists sought to capture in art the unceasing transformations of reality wrought by changing light and dynamic human action.

The two little paintings came to the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence, on the 21st of August, 1789. They had evidently belonged, therefore, to the earliest Medici collections.

We cannot be sure when they were painted. In 1460, as we learn from a letter written by Antonio Pollaiuolo thirty-four years later, he and his brother painted three large canvases of the adventures of Hercules for Lorenzo the Magnificent. These canvases had disappeared by about 1600; but a Medici inventory of 1494-95 and a sixteenth-century description by Vasari prove that two of the subjects were the same as those of the small Uffizi panels, Hercules slaying the Hydra and Hercules strangling Antaeus. There is reason to believe, however, that the small paintings were neither studies for the large canvases nor replicas of them. Rather, they were probably new elaborations, painted by Antonio a decade later, about 1470. Indeed, the artist returned to the subjects a number of times in his maturity, as, for example, in the small bronze group of Hercules and Antaeus now in the Bargello Museum, Florence.

The loss of these paintings during the Second World War, when they were carried off from their refuge in a villa near Florence, was crucial for the history of art. The news that they had been found in Los Angeles was therefore greeted with great enthusiasm and the Italian Government at once sent a delegation, headed by Minister Rodolfo Siviero, to recover them. This mission has been accomplished through the intervention of authorities of the United States. To them and to all the American people the present exhibition is designed to express the deep gratitude of Italy.

DR. LUISA BECHERUCCI
Director, Galleria degli Uffizi
Florence