

T O M A S S O



Nuremberg, mid 16th century

49. Inkwell in the form of a Crab

Bronze

20.5 x 0 cm (8 1/8 x 0 inches)

£4,800

The present bronze is a fascinating and lively sixteenth century model of a crab, which has previously functioned as an inkwell. The artist achieved an astonishing level of anatomical accuracy and naturalism by employing the technique of 'live casting' around the body of a real crab. This practice, particularly popular during the Renaissance, was used for casting a variety of subjects, ranging from small creatures to the heads of notable individuals for portrait sculptures.

An impetus for employing such methods was partly classical, as it was known that similar techniques were used in antiquity, as discussed by Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis Historia*, 34.46; 35.153). Another major factor was the renewed fascination with the natural world and a thirst for knowledge across all spheres of the arts and sciences. These types of bronzetti were often collected by humanists and cognoscenti in Italy and Northern Europe during this period and were displayed on desks and shelves around their studioli.

Some examples of these bronzes, including the present work, were evidently designed, or perhaps later modified, to serve practical purposes such as inkwells, paperweights, or containers for various instruments and possessions. Consequently, several bronze crabs from the period, including the present model, feature lids, akin to those found in the Samuel H. Kress collection,¹ and the Ashmolean Museum,² with an upper carapace attached by a hinge mechanism.