

# T O M A S S O



**Italian, circa 1700**

## 17. Farnese Hercules

As the name suggests, the present bronze is a reduced version, cast in bronze, of the monumental marble statue of Hercules that once formed part of the great Farnese collection of antiquities (now preserved in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples). Standing at over three metres tall, the Farnese Hercules is thought to be a Roman copy from the third century A.D., after an original by the Greek master Lysippos.

The ancient statue was first recorded in the grounds of the Farnese family's grand Roman Palazzo in 1556 by Ulisse Aldrovandi, though it was said by the French antiquarian Jean Matal to have been discovered and unearthed ten years earlier from the Baths of Caracalla. In 1787, the majority of the Farnese collection was moved to Naples, and the Hercules was first placed in the old porcelain factory at Capodimonte, before being relocated to the Museo degli Studi in 1792, which later became the Museo Nazionale, where the statue can still be seen today.

As Francis Haskell and Nicholas Penny record in their seminal study *Taste and the Antique*, the Farnese Hercules was 'enormously admired from the time of its discovery until the end of the last century'. Artists strove to capture its magnificence, collectors avidly sought models of it, connoisseurs competed in writing the most celebratory panegyrics, and scholars passionately debated its origin and meaning. The Farnese Hercules became one of the most iconic images of the age of the Grand Tour, with versions and reductions of it adorning residences across Europe and beyond.

From the second half of the seventeenth century, it became increasingly popular for the aristocratic elite from major European countries to embark on a 'Grand Tour' of Italy, a cultural expedition across the Italian peninsula, studying the major artistic and architectural treasures that had survived from antiquity. As a result, there arose, in important centres such as Florence and Rome, along with Paris, a demand for the creation of reduced-scale bronze casts of the most famous surviving antiquities.

The huge disparity in size between this small-scale bronze and the antique original was possibly a source of levity between the artist and the knowledgeable collectors of this period, who would have likely been familiar with this most famous of ancient models.

The figure of Hercules leans his muscular frame on a club, draped with the pelt of the Nemean lion, whilst the placement of the figure's feet, one in front of the other, forms a graceful and nonchalant contrapposto, seemingly at odds with the figure's bulging musculature. To understand the figure in its entirety, one must look at the back of the figure to find the apples of the Hesperides, concealed in his right hand. Unlike most other artistic depictions of Hercules, both ancient and modern, the Farnese model catches the hero in a moment of rest; he appears pensive after having undergone one of the last of his twelve labours. The lionskin and apples serve as a visual summary for the viewer of the hero's numerous, painstaking tasks.

**Literature:**

F. Haskell & N. Penny, *Taste and the Antique: The Lure of Classical Sculpture*, London, 1981, pp. 229-232