

# MERCURY



after Giovanni Bologna Flemish, active in Italy, 1529–1608,  
*Mercury*, c. 1780/c. 1850, bronze, National Gallery of Art,  
Washington, Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.131

This sculpture, nearly six feet high, represents Mercury, the swift messenger of the ancient Roman gods. In Greek mythology he was known as Hermes. Mercury was also the patron of learning, eloquence, commerce (a word that incorporates part of his name), the arts, and diplomacy. According to the same myths, he also invented two musical instruments: the lyre and the syrinx (panpipes). The wand he carries, called a caduceus, became a symbol of peace. In a text attributed to the first-century Latin author Hyginus, Mercury is said to have extended his wand between two fighting snakes, and they stopped their conflict to twine around it.

Endowed with wings on his staff, sandals or heels, and traveler's hat, Mercury is shown here as though elevated by a puff of air blown out by the cherub whose face appears beneath his foot. This face was long believed to represent a wind god. Another interpretation, based on Aristotle's writings, would relate this representation of the god to the purification, through evaporation, of water that rises from the earth. This symbolism would be appropriate for a fountain figure. Still another idea, related to the element mercury, refers to the way it becomes vaporous when heated. This could be seen as the sculptor's allusion to molten metal, which is transmuted and exhaled through the casting process into a new creation.

The *Mercury* in the National Gallery of Art was probably made around 1780–1810, possibly as late as 1850. It was derived from a famous Florentine bronze *Mercury* that was created around 1580 by Jean Boulogne, a Flemish artist trained at first by Jacques du Broeucq, who created the altar screen of the church of Sainte-Waudru in Mons, Belgium. Around 1550 Jean Boulogne traveled to Rome to study the advances of the Italian Renaissance and the classical antiquities that inspired them. Returning north, he stopped in Florence and remained there for the rest of his life. In Italian, his name became Giovanni Bologna, which was shortened to Giambologna.

Although Michelangelo criticized Giambologna early in his Italian years for favoring surface details at the expense of inner form, his talent emerged dramatically. He won important commissions for prestigious public monuments, and he was appointed master sculptor to the Medici court in Florence. His fame was spread across Europe by the numerous casts of his smaller bronze sculptures that were often sent from Florence as diplomatic gifts, and his influence was continued by a younger generation of northern European sculptors who adapted his style. Between Michelangelo's death in 1564, and the advent of Gianlorenzo Bernini, who rose to fame by 1620, Giambologna was the foremost sculptor in Europe.

Representing Mercury as though flying was a particular challenge in sculpture because freestanding figures require stability to stand erect. Giambologna was not the first sculptor to address the subject of a figure in flight, nor was he the first to conceive Mercury as running through the air, but his elegant treatments of the problem became the most well known.

The Washington bronze was inspired by Giambologna's *Mercury*, which was cast around 1580 and sent to Rome to grace a fountain in the garden of Cardinal (later Grand Duke) Ferdinando de' Medici's villa. It is now in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence. By 1780, when Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo de' Medici had it transferred back to the Medici collections in Florence, Giambologna's "flying Mercury" was just as renowned as the most famous ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. Soon *Mercury* appeared in lists of reproductions of great sculptures that could be ordered from the Roman bronze-casting firms of Giovanni Zoffoli and Francesco Righetti. Dozens of replicas and variants of it in many sizes met a demand that continued through the nineteenth century.

The *Mercury* seen here is an exceptionally fine example of these later casts. Thermoluminescence testing of remains of the clay core preserved inside the hollow bronze showed that the sculpture was made some time between 1780 and 1850. According to the 1936 bill of sale from the art dealer Joseph Duveen to the Andrew Mellon Charitable and Educational Trust, its first recorded owner was Count Alexander Sergeievitch Stroganoff, so it should have existed by 1811, the year that he died. The same bill of sale, however, notes that the count had the work in Rome, but only his grandson, Grigorii Stroganoff, who had a sumptuous mansion in that city, spent any significant time there. Research on this aspect of the sculpture's history is continuing.

Mercury points with his index finger toward the mythological home of the ancient Roman gods, Mount Olympus, as a source of knowledge and truth, peace and comfort. The sculpture came to be seen, appropriately, as a symbol of the purposes of the National Gallery of Art. The high quality of the figure, and its prominent placement atop the fountain in the Rotunda, where its complex silhouette could be admired from many viewing points, quickly made it the Gallery's mascot, so to speak, when the West Building opened in 1941. Otto Eggers,



***Mercury* soars above the elegant marble fountain in the Rotunda, surrounded from mid-November to mid-April by magnificent floral displays made possible by The Lee and Juliet Folger Fund.**

of the firm Eggers and Higgins, designed the marble basin that *Mercury* adorns. Eggers had worked closely with John Russell Pope, the architect who conceived the West Building, and after Pope's death in 1937, he oversaw completion of the building. Levio A. Pellegrinelli, an Italian sculptor who had immigrated to the United States, carved the basin in the late 1930s.