

# Collecting Habits: Tomilson Hill's Bronzes Strike a Pose

BY DAVID MASELLO



The conversation in Tomilson Hill's Manhattan apartment is ongoing. Some might call the spirited gathering a salon of like-minded artists, and all of the guests are getting along well, despite their obvious differences. One of Francis Bacon's screaming popes appears to be chatting amicably with a Giambologna Sabine woman (despite her predicament), while a de Kooning *Clamdigger* relates well to Hubert Le Sueur's bronze *Venus*. Hercules and Antaeus pause from their wrestling match to speak with a contemplative Duccio angel, just as a boatload of rowing Rubens women fast approaches.

For Hill, one of the world's notable collectors of Renaissance and Baroque bronzes, as well as of an encyclopedic array of contemporary art, "The whole idea of this collection is to establish a dialogue — to have, for instance, a [Giuseppe] Piamontini bronze with an even earlier bronze from 1430, whose provenance we don't even know, positioned in front of a 1950s Cy Twombly." While saying this, he points to a kind of All-Time Greatest Hits array of bronze sculptures that assume poses along a dining-room ledge (among which, too, is a carved African figure). "If you're going to have a dialogue among works, you have to have a fair competition, in terms of gravitas. You can't have the junior varsity playing against the varsity league. What I'm looking for first in a bronze is quality, and if it can't stand up to a Duccio, like my *Head of an Angel*, or Rubens's *Triumph of Hope* (where the women are rowing in the wrong direction, by the way, because, I think, Rubens wanted to show off their beautiful backs), then I won't buy it."

Some of the aesthetic dialogue Hill fosters in his home is now taking place at New York City's Frick Collection, which has mounted the first public exhibition of Renaissance and Baroque bronzes owned by Janine and J. Tomilson Hill (through June 15). Organizing curator Denise Allen remarks, "In Tom's apartment, all 33 of the bronzes we're showing are in dialogue with one another, and that is exactly how Henry Clay Frick [1849-1919] collected, too, with works relating to one another, even if they don't at first appear to have that connection. For instance, our putting Tom's two Twombly paintings [both *Untitled*] and an Ed Ruscha [*Seventeenth Century*] with Ferdinando Tacca's *Ceres and Bacchus* is a way to allow the paintings and bronzes to enter into a discussion. There is a calligraphic rhythm with the Twomblys, just as the composition of the Tacca is based on an elegant linear rhythm, a pattern of movement generated by the intertwined gestures of the two figures embracing."

Elsewhere in the same gallery, Allen has positioned Piamontini's *Seated Hercules and Cerberus*, a work she cites as her favorite in the Hill collection. "It's like a craggy mountain of bronze," she says, "and it transgresses the whole idea of what a statuette is supposed to be — just as the 1959 Twombly transgresses what it means to be a painting, as it has so much paint on the canvas that it's almost a relief. There's too much power in the defeated Hercules, just as there is too much pigment on the

Ferdinando Tacca (1619-1686)

*Ceres and Bacchus*

Cast probably c. 1635-40, Bronze, 17 7/8 in. high

Photo: Maggie Nimkin



Giuseppe Piamontini (1664-1742)  
*Seated Hercules and Cerberus*  
Cast c. 1715-25, Bronze, 20 7/8 x 13 3/8 x 11 in.  
Photo: Maggie Nimkin



Twombly. And we purposely chose the paintings we did because they have a more muted palette, which allows the visitor to see that bronzes have color, too.”

As vice chairman of the hedge fund the Blackstone Group, Hill is exacting about the financial risks to take. Yet when it comes to his art collection, especially the bronzes, he calls himself “completely agnostic about whether the origin of a piece is Italian or Dutch or German. I’m totally opportunistic when it comes to finding bronzes. My wife and I have often bought bronzes even when we have no idea who made them, such as with the *Hercules and Antaeus* now attributed to Maso Finiguerra. I just like it — as I do everything and anything I decide to acquire.”

#### SOUP TO NYMPHS

Hill cites 1995 as the year he hedged his bets, so to speak, and decided to give in to a temptation he had long nurtured: to buy art. Although he became interested in sculpture as a boy thanks to his mother, who continues — at age 97 — to sculpt bronze, terra cotta, and ceramic figurative works in upstate New York, it wasn’t until 1995

that the pursuit of living with treasured objects became an enduring passion.

“At the very same time, I bought a Warhol hand-painted soup can painting and the Le Sueur bronze *Venus*,” Hill says. “I walked into the London gallery of Danny Katz and said of the *Venus* figure, ‘This is unbelievably good, and I have no idea what it is.’ I did recognize it, though, as one sexy lady, and I later found out it had been owned by Louis XIV.”

Hill’s original intent was to collect ancient Greek and Roman bronzes, but in the mid-’90s, worries about provenance were haunting that field and various attributions were being questioned. “So I asked myself: what’s wrong with the next closest thing, Renaissance bronzes, where we could actually have definitive provenances? Plus, in a New York apartment, you have only so much room, and that’s one of the many beauties of statuettes — their manageability. You can have them in a home setting.

One thing my wife and I wanted was to have a collection in a home. This is not a museum. Nothing is behind glass. Everything is accessible, and that’s why I like the approach the Frick has taken with these works. They’ve created a domestic setting similar to the way we live with the bronzes.”

Although Hill lives with these bronzes, even he can see them at the Frick in ways he cannot in his own home. Allen has purposely positioned the bronzes in the museum’s downstairs galleries so that visitors can walk around them, see them from every vantage, free-standing on pedestals without any glass vitrines. “That’s what I love about what Denise has done,” says Hill. “The real thrill of looking at these bronzes at the Frick is the ability to get actually dizzy while experiencing them, going in circles around them. I can’t look at the back of my own *de Vries*, since it’s up against a wall. Apart from seeing the backs, visitors can understand how bronzes are really all about light. These three-dimensional objects pull in light, essentially suck it in, but also, with their patinas, throw it back in your face.” He pets the points of light that appear on various thighs and kneecaps on some of the works as if the gleams are sculpted, tactile details.



Hubert Le Sueur (c. 1580-1660)

**Venus**

Cast c. 1641-60, Bronze, 17 7/8 in. high

Photo: Maggie Nimkin



At the Frick, Adriaen de Vries (c. 1545-1626), *Bacchic Man Wearing a Grotesque Mask*, Cast c. 1578-80, Bronze, 35 1/4 in. high, is seen before an untitled work by Cy Twombly (1928-2011), 1959, Oil paint, wax crayon, and lead pencil on canvas. Below: A detail of the de Vries. Photo: Michael Bodycomb



At the Frick, an installation of three different treatments of the Labors of Hercules. Photo: Michael Bodycomb





Giambologna (c. 1529–1608)

**Pacing Horse**

Cast c. 1573–77, Bronze, 9 7/8 x 11 1/4 in.

Photo: Maggie Nimkin



And just as Hill admits to being a tirelessly patient researcher of companies, investments, and business partnerships, the same dynamic prevails when buying a bronze. Within the foyer of his floor-through apartment, he introduces visitors to the two Dutchmen who reside there and appear squared off against one another: Willem de Kooning's mottled bronze *Clamdigger* and Adriaen de Vries's *Bacchic Man Wearing a Grotesque Mask*.

When Hill purchased the de Vries at a Sotheby's auction in 2008, the year he often refers to as the "height of the [economic] crisis," neither he nor experts from the Rijksmuseum, who were also competing to own this work, knew for sure if it was actually by the Dutch sculptor. "For a whole month, it was subjected to all sorts of extraterrestrial tests — it was made literally radioactive, glowing because of all the tests it underwent," says Hill. "Frits Scholten, the senior curator of sculpture at the Rijksmuseum, believed it was de Vries, but none of the core of the work jibed with the de Vries in the museum's collection."

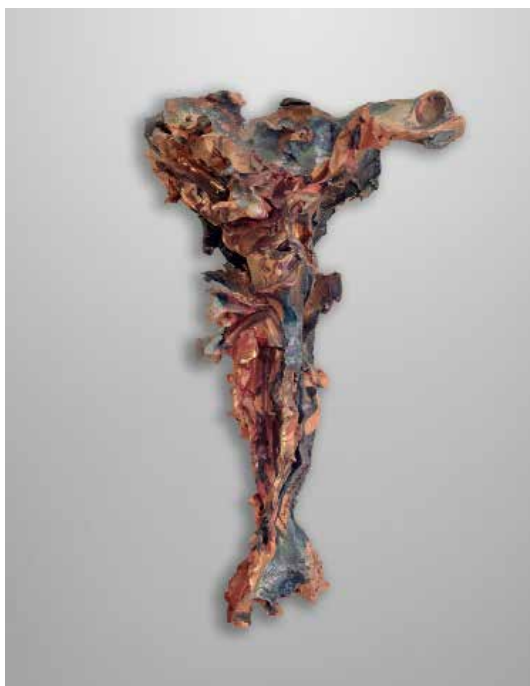
The reason the core samples did not link with the other de Vries, Hill explains, is that his was cast in Milan in 1578, a moment when the sculptor may or may not have spent time there before going to Florence and being recruited by Emperor Rudolf II as court sculptor. "The materials he used were different, and we discovered that this work used to be a fountain," he says, inserting two fingers into a hole atop Bacchus's mop of curly hair.

Citing that "crisis of 2008" again, Hill says that, ever since, he has been able to "accelerate" his purchases of Renaissance and Baroque bronzes simply because more of them have appeared on the market, though their value holds. "In a financial dislocation like 2008, a lot of these bronzes, worth two, three, four million

dollars, stayed at that value, but people who needed to sell them to raise capital didn't necessarily need them. Renaissance bronzes are, and were, incredible stores of value — much more valuable even than gold. In the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, you could put a couple of bronzes in your knapsack and cross a border in times of troubles, and they were worth a hundred times more than their weight in gold."

A defining feature of bronzes is the castings, the numbers of which Hill can immediately cite for virtually every item in his collection. He knows, for instance, that the Riccio *Strigil Bearer* is unique — that, at best, only one other version exists. The Susini *Mars* is one of eight known casts, the Caspar Gras *Roaring Lion*, *Pouncing* is one of four, and his much-coveted Giambologna *Pacing Horse* is one of two. (The other is

in Florence's Museo Nazionale del Bargello.) The Tomasso brothers, London-based dealers noted for their Renaissance bronzes, contacted Hill when they came upon the Giambologna. "They knew I already had Giambologna's autographed *Bull*," says Hill. "They called me up and said, 'We have the horse.' And when I asked where they had found something as extraordinary as that, they said they had bought it at some Australian auction, paying something like only 20,000 Australian dollars for it. They just found it online. I paid a lot more for it than that, but it didn't bother me at all, because it is that good."



Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

**Crocifisso** (Christ on the Cross)

1950–52, Glazed terracotta,  
19 5/8 x 12 3/8 x 5 in.

© Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan

Photo: Michael Bodycomb



In the Hills' home, six School of Giambologna sculptures are normally seen before *Seventeenth Century*, a 1988 acrylic on canvas by Ed Ruscha (b. 1937). Photo: Michael Bodycomb

## HEAVY METAL

Hill is unable to stand or sit still in his apartment when talking about the artworks that fill its walls and tabletops, or stand alone in the middle of spaces. He wanders from room to room to look at a statuette or a painting, to pull out from one of his floor-to-ceiling bookcases a monograph to elaborate on a point, or an auction catalogue flagged with a purchase or with, alas, one that got away. "I never grow tired of the bronzes," he says. "A bronze is always about action, about movement. Even Giambologna's horse and bull may, obviously, be stationary, caught in their pose, but they still exude a sense of motion."

Apart from the subject matter of a bronze and the number of castings made of it, Hill is adamant that the quality of that casting be perfect. "There are all sorts of differences among the various casts made of a bronze," he says. "Part of that difference might be the chasing or the mix of minerals, how much copper versus how much zinc. There's the patina to consider. It's not about getting the first or last casting of something. It's about finding the best one."

With any work he owns, though, whether it's a figurative bronze or an abstract Twombly, Rubens's *Assumption of the Virgin* or Lucio Fontana's *Crocifisso* from the early 1950s, Hill wants, as he says, "either to be seduced or to be bludgeoned. If you look at many of the male figures I own, they're each like a punch in the nose — a hollering Francis Bacon figure, a sweaty Hercules, the athlete cleaning himself with a strigil after a vigorous race. And then there are the other extremes where I want to be seduced, by a Venus or a figure of Astronomy. The Andy Warhols I have can be beautiful or, as in the case of a grieving Jackie or one of his car crashes, a punch in the nose. Andy and Francis do draw blood."

While there are few impediments to Hill's ability to buy, he admits that the one aesthetic regret he has is that he didn't buy any Giacomettis when they became available in the 1990s. "That's my single biggest collecting regret, the one missing element, but the prices for those now are so bonkers." There is, however, one other caveat; Hill admits that his wife did object to his wanting a Warhol electric chair silkscreen when their two children were still young. "I now have a little one of those," he says, "but Janine only let me buy it after our youngest was at college."

Hill suggests that he is one of only about 12 to 15 serious collectors of Renaissance bronzes in the world, naming some of them as friends, such as Peter Marino, his longtime decorator; Claudia Quentin; the late Robert H. Smith; Aga Kahn; and Prince Hans-Adam of Liechtenstein. "Occasionally, there's a walk-on," he says, "but otherwise we all know who we are. We all know what our tastes are. The auction houses know us. They have my telephone number. And there are only six top dealers in Renaissance bronzes in the world — the Tomasso brothers, Daniel Katz, Andrew Butterfield, Guy Ladreie, Patricia Wengraf, and Alain Moatti — and they contact us when something comes up."

He is close, in particular, to Claudia Quentin (whose collection was exhibited by the Frick in 2004). Hill admits that he and Quentin "often have play dates with our bronzes, whereby I'll bring a bronze over, or she'll bring one of hers over. We just each wrap it up in a towel and carry it along, so that the statuettes can play with each other."

Hill is a generous lender. Any time a museum wants to borrow something for a show, he will gladly unhinge the canvas from the wall or watch while one of the bronzes is bubble-wrapped and sent off, as many were to the Frick. "I knew when all of these bronzes departed that I was going to have a lot of holes in the apartment," he says. "I won't fill them with anything else. After all, they're like my babies."

Fortunately, the Frick is a short stroll from his apartment, and, as Hill admits, "I knew I would be visiting them there all the time. But I'm happy to know, too, that they will make some new friends while they're there." ■

**Information:** 1 East 70th Street, New York, NY 10021, 212.288.0700, [frick.org](http://frick.org). The exhibition is accompanied by a handsome catalogue, edited by Patricia Wengraf and containing a preface by Tom Hill himself. The Frick Collection's website offers a video of Tom and Janine Hill in conversation with director Ian Wardropper. On April 2, Mr. Hill will participate in a free public conversation with collector-dealer Richard Feigen and Yale University Art Gallery director Jock Reynolds.

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