

# Giambologna (Giovanni Bologna or Jean Bologne) (1529-1608)

## *Turkey, 1567*

### Key facts:

- **Size:** 62 x 50cm
- **Materials:** bronze
- **Location:** Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence
- **Patron:** Francesco I de' Medici
- **Nationality:** Flemish
- **Scope of work for Pearson Edexcel A Level:**  
Nature in art and architecture: Animals in 2D or 3D



Giambologna, Turkey, 1567, Bronze, H: 62 cm. Collection Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

### 1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

**Subject matter:** A turkey, a bird only recently introduced to Europe from the Americas. This was one of a series of life-size bronze birds, also including a peacock, an owl and an eagle, commissioned to perch among the volcanic rocks that formed the artificial vault at the grotto of Francesco I de' Medici's villa at Castello. Such groups of sculpted animals were artistic counterparts to the menagerie of real imported animals, which included eagles, lions, bears and leopards, kept at the Medici court. The strange appearance of the turkey compared with other feathered creatures appealed to the taste for the bizarre in Mannerist art, as well as culinary tastes that extended from the peacock to include the turkey on courtly menus of the time.

**Pose and morphology:** The turkey is naturalistic in its proportions, structure and texture. While its pose is also natural, the selection of pose seems anthropomorphic in intent: The turkey is shown standing upright, with neck upright and alert, its head slightly bowed and eyes focused. The tail is fanning (signifying the sexual display of a male turkey), while the concentric circles formed by the breast features evoke a courtly ruff, altogether lending the pose an air of proud display, nobility, or perhaps pomposity, alongside its unusual appearance.

**Composition and form:** The sculpture is a freestanding, balanced, compact mass. A broadly pyramidal structure is created between the upright head and two downward wingtips, which connect with the base below, offering physical support and emphasising weight and mass. The tail fan creates a large upturned circular structure that counterbalances the head at the other end (when the turkey is seen from the side) and the wings in the centre below. There is no clear vertical or horizontal axis, but instead opposing diagonals, typical of Mannerist sculpture: when seen from the side, for example, the diagonal profile of the wings crosses the line made between the tail-fan and the legs. Prominent voids break up the mass, seen below in between the wings and legs, and above between the turkey's neck and snood (the fleshy form hanging from its beak). The form and silhouette are broken up by a complex interplay of recessions and projections representing raised feathers, especially around the bird's breast and back, suggesting volume and lightness in this area and contributing to textural naturalism. The contrasts between raised and flat feathers, or between lowered wings and raised tail, also create a sense of momentary movement and dynamism in the pose.

**Space and scale:** The work is freestanding, sculpted in the round, and with multiple interesting viewpoints, including the splendid rear view of the tail. Multiple viewpoints were a hallmark of Giambologna's mature sculpture but also appropriate to the particular setting of this work, seen outdoors and interacting with natural features in the grotto. The size is no larger than a fully grown male turkey, though the large, compact masses of wings, chest and tail give the statue a monumental feel and convey the bird's power.

**Colour, light and tone:** The sculpture has no applied polychromy; the bronze has a natural patina with muted greens and browns arising from the copper in the alloy. The overall dark and relatively monochromatic colouring may have conveyed majesty and power, while the natural patina would have harmonised with the outdoor setting in the grotto at Castello. Further tonal variety and interest would have arisen through surface texture and light (see below).

**Texture, pattern, ornamentation:** The highly differentiated surface textures articulate the contrasting textures found on real turkeys, such as the scaly feet, caruncles around the head and soft feathers. The reflective quality of the bronze draws attention to the *bravura* texture and delicacy of the surface. The taut flexed energetic feathers contrast with the drooping quality of the fleshy neck. Raised features cast shadows and create a dynamic, energetic interplay of light and dark, especially if seen in moving light or from shifting angles. The combination of shadow, reflectivity and surface texture also evokes the variegated plumage of a turkey in a relatively monochromatic medium. The bronze has been polished to a high sheen in some areas, amplifying the work's expensive and precious status. The high level of finish and focus on surface pattern and decoration creates an appearance that is decorative, lavish and courtly, fitting in with the affectations and sophistication of the Mannerist style and its courtly context.

## 2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Giambologna succeeded Michelangelo as the most prominent Florentine sculptor of his day (the second half of the sixteenth century) and typified the 'Mannerist' bridge in sculpture between the early High Renaissance style of Michelangelo and the later Baroque style of Bernini. He was born and trained in Flanders, travelled to Italy in 1554 and worked for two years in Rome before settling in Florence. He became the court sculptor of the Medici family, the Dukes of Florence and Tuscany, after being introduced to Francesco de' Medici (Grand Duke of Tuscany from 1574), and sought to rival the prestige of Michelangelo, who had also begun his career under Medici patronage. He combined the influence of Michelangelo's monumental nudes with that of Greco-Roman sculptures that had been recently excavated. For example, in a statue of *Florence Triumphant over Pisa*, a pendant for Michelangelo's *Victory* commissioned for Francesco's marriage in 1565, Giambologna echoed and exaggerated the spiral composition of Michelangelo's *Victory* while piercing his own work with complex voids like those in the *Laocoön* (excavated 1506) and *Farnese Bull* (excavated 1546). Giambologna's most famous works were typified by the *figura serpentinata* or dynamic,

spiralling compositions and by his virtuoso interpenetrations of mass and void, both features that went beyond Michelangelo's more compact and uni-facial sculptures. This move towards more elaborate composition and feats of technical virtuosity fitted 'Mannerist' tastes in late sixteenth-century European courts, which prized facility and the apparently effortless resolution of difficulties in the arts, which paralleled a form of courtly grace theorised as *sprezzatura* in Castiglione's *Cortegiano* (*Courtier*) of 1528.

Giambologna's artistic pre-eminence in Florence also had wider European and political significance. Himself already a product of Italianate artistic training in his native Flanders, by 1570 he became the most influential sculptor in Europe and continued the northwards influence, with his style being especially favoured in Germany and the low countries (modern Belgium and the Netherlands). His businesslike approach made him popular with patrons. His studio was a hub of international activity, attracting pupils and assistants who in turn helped to spread his reputation. He also produced bronze statuettes of his major works that could be used as diplomatic gifts for friendly heads of state.

Giambologna's animal sculptures drew on various artistic sources, including the tradition of anthropomorphised or symbolic representations of animals in Medieval bestiaries, and recent sculptures such as Andrea Riccio's *Shepherd with a Goat* (c. 1530) and Benvenuto Cellini's *Nymph of Fontainebleau* (1542) and *Saluki Dog* (c. 1545). He had already sculpted animals as secondary decorative or narrative elements in larger works, such as the dog in his relief *Allegory of Francesco I de' Medici* (1560-1) and dolphins in his *Fountain of Neptune* in Bologna (1563-6). He also probably modelled the tortoises carrying the obelisks in the Santa Maria Novella. These instance the connection of sculpted animals to Medici rule, as the tortoise was a symbolic device used by Cosimo de' Medici, representing the maxim '*festina lente*' - 'hasten slowly'.

The Medici's interest in animals and birds was an essential part of their public life and image as European nobility. Hunting, animal baiting and gardens were established parts of courtly life and entertainment. The Medici kept a menagerie of wild, imported beasts including lions, wolves, eagles, tigers, bears, leopards and boars, which displayed the court's wealth and status. The creation of lavish gardens with fantastical grottoes (such as the Boboli gardens created behind the Medici's Palazzo Pitti) was also a common feature of fifteenth-century Italian courts. Grottoes embellished with volcanic rock, shells, sculpted flora and fauna, and fountains or hidden water 'tricks' were a particular locus for sixteenth-century courtly interests in relations between nature

and art, and in the ability of humans such as artists or alchemists to investigate, re-create or 'go beyond' nature. Francesco I was obsessed with alchemy, magic and nascent sciences; after making the birds for Francesco, Giambologna also sculpted the *Appennine* for him at the Medici villa at Pratolino, a mountain-god statue carved from a rock face and embellished with dripped stucco to make it look as if it had organically grown from the rock. The ingenuity of Giambologna's linkage between art and nature in the *Turkey* and the *Appennine* would also have appealed to courtly tastes for technical facility noted above.

### 3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

While also present in small bronzes of the quattrocento, the accomplished multi-facial composition seen in the *Turkey* is a key characteristic of late-sixteenth-century Italian sculpture and one that Giambologna in particular developed. Shortly before the *Turkey*, for example, Giambologna created his *Samson and a Philistine* (c. 1562), also for Francesco I, with a dynamic spiral composition. This departed from works by Michelangelo which tended to have a dominant face or viewing angle, even if Michelangelo remained the primary inspiration for Mannerist sculptors and his elaborated anatomies and contorted poses also influenced their compositions. The drive towards multi-faciality was partly theoretical, as sculptors like Benvenuto Cellini (in his *Treatise on Painting*, 1568, for instance) tried to raise the intellectual status of sculpture in academic debates by claiming that the need to reconcile multiple views of an object made sculpture a more challenging art than painting. Multi-facial works that prompted viewers to circumambulate around them to experience new complications and revelations would also have appealed in contemporary court contexts which prized complicated artistic performances in terms of *sprezzatura*. Finally, according to Rudolf Wittkower (*Sculpture: Processes and Principles*, 1977), Giambologna developed a multi-facial style by embracing modelling and the use of *bozzetti* (or small sketch models) as the primary creative processes, while treating carving and the creation of full-size works in marble as more mechanical processes of transfer that could be largely delegated to assistants. According to this view, the fact that small *bozzetti* could be rotated in the hand and that modelling was an additive process encouraged complex multi-facial compositions and the liberation from Michelangelo's relief-like process of working into a marble block from a primary side.

The *virtuoso* handling of form and texture in the *Turkey* bears witness to the refinement of lost-wax bronze casting techniques in the mid-sixteenth century. In Florence Giambologna would have seen Cellini's *Perseus* (1545-54), which used a direct (and therefore un-repeatable) lost-wax casting process for an elaborate monumental statue and therefore provided a celebrated recent example of daring and sophistication in bronze-work. When making the *Turkey*, Giambologna had recently designed the most technically accomplished bronze fountain of its day in terms of integrating water-works within bronze figures, the *Neptune* fountain in Bologna (1563-6). For the *Turkey*, he seems to have made the full-size model in wax (rather than clay) for casting and dripped and sliced the material to create the varied textures and organic shapes of feathers and skin, before taking a direct cast in bronze. The lost-wax bronze casting process captures delicate modelling in the final bronze cast (owing to the expansive properties of copper), and also allows complex forms with interpenetrating solids and voids, like those of the *Turkey*, to be cast whole. The high tensile strength of cooled bronze also allows virtuoso compositions in which large solid masses stand on slender points, like the wingtips and feet of the *Turkey*, a property that Giambologna also exploited in his *Flying Mercury* (1564-80). The cast of *Turkey* would have been extensively chased and polished to achieve the surface qualities noted above.

#### **4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES**

Animal sculptures like the *Turkey* would have appealed to various interests and tastes at the Medici court. Giambologna's series of birds were commissioned to perch among the volcanic rocks that formed the artificial vault of the grotto of Cosimo I's villa at Castello. As roughly life-size imitations of real birds in an environment constructed to look 'natural', they would have satisfied Mannerist court tastes for ingenuity and the integration of art and nature, and appealed to Francesco I de' Medici's interests in alchemy. Birds in Giambologna's series such as the peacock would also have been 'read' at the Medici court in terms of literary and mythological associations. (In the early 1560s, for example, Ammannati carved a pair of peacocks to flank a seated statue of the goddess Juno (whose emblem was a peacock) as part of a complex fountain commissioned by Cosimo I for the Palazzo Vecchio, symbolising good government.) The Castello grotto also included a cave with elaborate

carvings of unusual animals in different stones, including a rhinoceros, giraffe, lion and unicorn, overseen by Mannerist artist Niccolò Tribolo, which Giambologna may also have been involved with. While Giambologna was sculpting the bronze birds, Flemish artist Giovanni Stradano also executed designs (1566-77) for a monumental series of Mannerist hunting tapestries for the walls of the Medici villa at Poggio a Caiano, further demonstrating the interest in animal art at the Medici court in this time.

Giambologna's lively and sympathetic studies of birds were precursors of 'animalier' sculptors of the nineteenth century, most notably the French sculptor Antoine-Louis Barye. Like the *Turkey*, Bayre's *Lion crushing a serpent* (modelled 1832) and *Tiger devouring a gavia*, for example, were also small works showcasing consummate skill in capturing animal forms and textures in bronze, though less anthropomorphised and gestural in technique than Giambologna's piece.

#### **FURTHER READING AND LINKS**

- Olsen, Roberta J. M., *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1992
- Pope-Hennessy, John, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture*, 1963
- Shearman, John, *Mannerism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967
- Wittkower, Rudolf, *Sculpture: Processes and Principles*, 1977