Primary Maker: John Rogers
Title: Wounded Scout: A Friend in the Swamp
Date: 1864
Medium: Bronze
Dimensions: Overall: 22 1/4 x 10 1/4 x 8 1/4 in. (56.5 x 26 x 21 cm)
Credit Line: Purchase
Object Number: 1936.655

Object Name: Genre sculpture
Classification: SCULPTURE

Curatorial Remarks:
This bronze served as the master model for the plasters that Rogers sold to a broad audience of middle-class Americans. One of Rogers' best-known and most highly praised works, Wounded Scout: A Friend in the Swamp depicts a Civil War Union scout who has been shot in the arm while on a mission in Southern territory and is weak from loss of blood. An escaped slave has come to his assistance and is guiding him through the swamp. Rogers had developed a nationwide reputation in just a few years for his small narrative groups depicting Civil War themes, but up to this point they had for the most part been amusing scenes of soldiers among themselves, such as The Camp Fire: Making Friends with the Cook (1936.714), or comforting vignettes of civilian life, such as the scene of flirtation titled The Town Pump (1932.101). Wounded Scout shows a soldier in genuine peril and addresses sensitive questions of race at the forefront of American minds both during and after the war. The sculptor had recently increased the size of his groups, and here he presented a simplified composition of two standing figures.
who, though small, project a gravity and pathos that belie their size. The soldier is dressed in uniform with a "U.S." insignia clearly visible on his belt and the strap of his cartridge box. He has torn open his sleeve and made a tourniquet to stop the bleeding from his arm, and the veins of his forearm bulge from the constriction as it hangs uselessly at his side. He appears faint as he leans on the shoulder of the black man whom Rogers described as an escaped slave. In a perhaps unprecedented move, Rogers heroized the black man. Though ragged and barefoot, he is tall and muscular. He supports the soldier protectively and looks up with an alert, commanding gaze. A copperhead snake is coiled next to his left foot, which, in Rogers' words, is "raising its head to strike the negro while he is doing this friendly act." The snake was a clear reference to Northern copperheads, politicians who opposed the Union war effort. Rogers released Wounded Scout at a particularly portentous moment in the war; General Ulysses S. Grant had suspended prisoner exchanges just a few months before, and a group of Union soldiers escaped from Libby Prison only weeks earlier. Rogers' depiction of a soldier injured, vulnerable, and, until his rescue, alone, would have struck an emotional chord for those with heightened concerns about their loved ones being captured. The artist sent copies to President Abraham Lincoln and the abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher, and in appreciation Lincoln sent his often quoted reply: "I can not pretend to be a judge in such matters; but the Statuette group 'Wounded Scout'-'Friend in the Swamp' is . . . excellent as a piece of art." Rogers' daring depiction of a strong, brave, and capable African American man sparked considerable discussion and revealed American concerns about freed slaves and their role in American society. The abolitionist poet Lydia Marie Child called it "a significant lesson of human brotherhood for all the coming ages." A Brooklyn writer betrayed stubbornly entrenched paternalistic stereotypes, praising how Rogers recognized "in a noble and touching manner, the service of the hitherto despised black race," which he characterized as "faithful, helpful, and uncomplaining." The sculpture was popular for many years after war, and it remained in Rogers' sales catalogue until almost the end of his career. It continued to function not only as an imposing work of art but also an agent of political dialogue during the difficult and contentious years of Reconstruction. In 1868 the New York Evening Mail called it a "powerful argument of the rights of the negro, and has had a wider influence than the most labored speeches of [Senator Charles] Sumner, or [the abolitionist Wendell] Phillips, or [Senator Benjamin] Wade." In 1872 the art critic Benson J. Lossing felt it necessary to elevate the white man by explaining the challenges of scout duty, which was given only to the finest soldiers, and he subtly suggested that the black man could not be credited with courage or intelligence because slaves often helped Union soldiers "more through the natural kindness of his heart than from any partizan [sic] feeling." The Civil War general Joseph R. Hawley summed up its multivalent meanings and emotional force when he declared that "Nothing relating to the war in painting or sculpture" ever surpassed it.

Physical Description:
Genre figure: A bronze sculptural group featuring an escaped slave leading and protecting a wounded Union soldier who has been shot in the arm. The soldier has twisted a tourniquet around his injury and is still in his uniform. The slave is wearing ragged clothes. The bottom of the base is covered with plants from the swamp as well as a snake. Group bears Patent # 1967: June 28, 1864. Hollow second cast

Signed: Signed at center front of base: "JOHN ROGERS NEW YORK"
Markings: Inscribed at base center front: "THE WOUNDED SCOUT, FRIEND IN THE SWAMP"; "PATENTED JUNE 28, 1864"