



The head as subject matter in sculpture
by Lewis Daniel Acker

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF APPLIED ART
Montana State University
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Abstract:

The purpose of this thesis is to come to a fuller and clearer understanding of my own position in relationship to the most prominent subject matter of my work - the human head.

I hope to accomplish this by two means: 1. The study of the feelings of a variety of master sculptors towards the subject of the head; 2. The writing of my own personal convictions concerning my philosophy of sculpture in general and the place of the head as subject matter in my own work.

There is only one specific conclusion involved in this paper besides the hope that it will give me a better understanding of myself and my work and perhaps provide me with more intelligent questions. The single conclusion is that in spite of the wide variety of sculptors discussed they have one thing in common - a background built on the study of the human figure. This study is missing in much of today's art. Perhaps a new outlook towards the examination and investigation of the figure can provide a needed revitalization and direction for art on all levels.

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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

I do not consider myself a professional or amateur artist, but a student artist. As a student I have seen only glimpses of what is uniquely mine in my work instead of the influence of a teacher or master. I am curious to find out more about what is original in my work and hope to discover a few indications of these things in this thesis.

As Andre Malraux wrote in The Psychology of Art, "...what characterizes the creative process is less the abundance of the artist's means of expression than his ability to discern across a cloud of imitation, what is his very own; to discern it and to organize it."

STATEMENT OF PHILOSOPHY - SCULPTURE IN GENERAL

In sculpture as in all art it is necessary first of all for the artist to have something to say, a point of view, a philosophy of life. Without this element his work becomes mere exercises in technique, devoid of all human significance. Yet the human factor in art is the most important:

Drawing did not begin with the sketching of a figure, but with the hieroglyph; indeed it seems that the destiny of the fine arts was uniquely this: to load the sign with as much of the human element as it could bear.¹

To me the most direct way of filling my work with the human element is to express myself through the human head and figure. I believe in them as a source from which to grow. The direction this development will take can only be suggested here. But no matter what the direction, I have always believed that in the future I will be further along than I am today.

What makes sculpture itself unique is its three dimensionality. It can not only be seen, but also touched and held. It is a solid, tangible volume that becomes a presence which must be confronted rather than merely something to be viewed. Sculpture is made to be touched, for touching confirms what the eye sees and sculpture is an art of confirmation. Its substance is shape rather than color, consolidation instead of expansion, concentration in place of experimentation.

This is not meant to infer that sculpture should be neat, slick, and complete. Such an interpretation would ally it with the academic sculpture of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, each piece of work is, in a sense, a study. It is "unfinished" not because it isn't polished but be-

¹Andre Malraux; excerpts from The Psychology of Art, Department of Fine Arts, Colgate University, Hamilton, New York, 1962, (mimeographed).

cause the piece as a whole isn't complete, and never can be. For me, completeness implies a finality that produces sterile, precious sculpture in which nothing is left open to question.

The subject of the human head holds the most interest for me and is an unending study. I can never find out everything about it. Giacometti was once told that everybody knew what a head was and replied by saying, "No, nobody knows. We can only try to discover."² This searching and discovering is the most important part of the work. It is the means, not the end that is important. If one works properly the results take care of themselves.

The sculptor's material has become more important in this century. My own preference, or perhaps prejudice, is for natural materials - clay, wood, and especially stone. Not only does stone provide the greatest challenge for me, but it also makes me aware of the importance of man's relationship to nature as well as his relationship with himself and other men. My attitude towards my medium is one of respect. It is more than just a tool or vehicle, but it does not determine the form of the sculpture. I impose my conception on the material and at the same time try to work within the limits of a particular stone.

As a foundation for sculpture drawing is important, and when the subject is the head and figure, drawing is a necessity. In the words of Henry Moore, "A moderate ability to 'draw' will pass muster in a landscape or a tree, but even the untrained eye is more critical of the human figure

²John Kobler, "The Torment of Alberto Giacometti", The Saturday Evening Post, July 31, 1965, p. 71.

because it is ourselves."³ And ourselves as the most important things in our lives, form the foundation from which we can reach out to better understand others. A drawing can be just as solid as a piece of sculpture and as well constructed without being a diagram. In this respect drawing can approach a three dimensional experience which leads the way to sculpture. I draw to express myself, to learn more about the head and figure, or just for the enjoyment of drawing itself. In any case, drawing is a constant. I will never reach a point where drawings will not be necessary or significant to my work either as a preliminary step for sculpture or as an expressive medium in itself.

The next step in my background involved clay modeling as the first three dimensional experience and one that I plan to return to over and over again. Modeling is important not only because the work can be built up piece by piece, but also because it can be easily destroyed and rebuilt. It is a more spontaneous medium and lends itself to exploration.

Craftsmanship is perhaps the least important facet of sculpture for as with all the technical aspects of art it can be learned. It is important, however, as a means of becoming more involved with the material, as a help-mate towards freer expression, and as discipline.

Craftsmanship is necessary to a degree in order to give form to the artist's imagination. His imagination is helpless without the means to put it into effect.

³Herbert Read, Henry Moore, Drawings and Sculpture Since 1948, Percy Lund, Humphries, Ltd., London, 1955, p. xiv.

Knowledge of the material, its unique qualities and limitations and the acceptance of those limitations, allows the artist to make full use of it.

Discipline and preparation are, in a way, synonymous. Discipline, whether as a study of craftsmanship or the human figure, is the same as preparing one's self for a fuller and more lasting expression. Ivan Mestrovic, who felt the demise of traditional discipline in modern art very strongly, once said,

The young people of today do not wish to study, so they will not learn anatomy or carving. Money is what they want, and freedom; but they do not prepare themselves for either. They feel no reverence for art, so their work will not endure.⁴

I don't believe in years of tediously detailed anatomy lessons. Rather whatever anatomy is necessary should be given according to the student's ability to control it. Anatomy can become an integral part of a work without overwhelming it. But the fact remains that Mestrovic hit squarely upon the lack of a strong foundation in many students. Not only is the lack of a starting place missing in many cases, but also missing is the desire for any such basis. Unfortunately, efforts to stop this trend seem to be becoming more and more rare. Instead it is perhaps the common occurrence when "... mere flair is confused with disciplined growth, when it is really only a continuation of infantile or juvenile release."⁵ It may be that an outlook towards the human figure as a vital and dynamic source would add a new direction and energy to much of today's art.

⁴Malvina Hoffman, "Mestrovic", Colgate Art Gallery exhibition catalogue, Hamilton, New York, 1963.

⁵John Canaday, Embattled Critic: Views on Modern Art, Noonday Press, New York, 1959, p. 44.

The present age of abstraction holds valuable lessons, lessons which can be learned and put to use. It is not my position to cling to naturalism. Detailed portraits hold no interest for me. I believe that abstract shapes can be used to point up the main concern of a piece of sculpture. In this way they do not become ends in themselves, but means to an end. In the words of Leonard Baskin,

I do not close my eyes to the great formal discoveries of the modern movement. On the contrary, my desire is to learn those lessons and to complete them to my purpose.⁶

My purpose is to use more or less abstract forms as foils for the head in order to make the head more important and dramatic. In my thesis work (which will be discussed in more detail later) the drape and hair mass serve this purpose in the Sienna stone as do the hair mass and chest shape in the white one. There are many areas in abstraction for a student to explore, but for me I doubt if they will ever be more than subordinate to the exploration of the head and figure.

The master sculptors discussed in the following pages cover a wide area. They reach from one world to its opposite and also include several steps along the way - from "realism" to abstraction, from the Western tradition to Oriental thought. Yet in spite of their differences these artists have a common starting place in the human figure. Rodin began with the head and figure and kept them as the center of his work, and Giacometti retains the head as the center of his efforts. One of Henry Moore's aims is to learn more about the human body, and even though they became unimportant for Brancusi, the head and figure formed the basis of his early work.

⁶Selden Rodman, Conversations with Artists, Capricorn Books, New York, 1961, p. 173.

AUGUSTE RODIN (1840-1917)

To Auguste Rodin the human head was important as a reflection of an individual's inner character. He believed that the spirit of his subject could be realized in his face if one looked critically and carefully enough. In Rodin's own words, "One has only to look at a human face to find a soul...⁷ To him,

...no feature deceives; hypocrisy is as transparent as sincerity. The inclining of the brow, the least furrowing of the eyebrows, the tendency of a look may reveal the secrets of the heart.⁸

Rodin's concern was with the character of the individual. Unlike most of his predecessors and many of his contemporaries who thought of sculpture only in terms of idealized heroes, nymphs, and fawns, Rodin was interested in searching for the basic motivating feelings of a particular person. "Suffering, desire, tenderness interested him only in so far as they were expressive of an individual existence..."⁹ In this respect twentieth century sculpture owes much to him. He formed a difficult and, until recently, unappreciated transition between two eras. He discovered that "...nothing has more importance for us than our own feelings, our own intimate personality."¹⁰ He had seen "...that each one of us ... places the center of the universe in his own soul."¹¹ Rodin wished to release and reveal the hidden aspects of an individual character rather than look for a common bond among

⁷Somerville Story, Rodin, Oxford University Press, New York, 1939, p. 15.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Jean Selz, Modern Sculpture, George Braziller, Inc., New York, 1963, p. 107.

¹⁰Auguste Rodin, On Art and Artists, Philosophical Library, New York, 1957, p. 248.

¹¹Ibid.

men. He was interested in what he saw, not how he saw, and what he saw was hope or despair, joy or sorrow, conflict or serenity, desire or frustration. The search for these traits was perhaps Rodin's greatest challenge: "..... there is no artistic work which requires as much penetration as the bust and the portrait."¹² The subject of the head itself, however, did not make up the greatest part of his efforts.

The totality of the human figure formed the center of Rodin's work. To him every muscle and gesture, every movement of the body, sharpened his picture of the person's inner self:

In reality there is not a muscle of the body which does not express the inner variations of feeling. Outstretched arms, an unconstrained body, smile with as much sweetness as the eyes or lips.¹³

"The body always expresses the spirit whose envelope it is. And for him who can see, the nude offers the richest meaning."¹⁴ Truly the nude did offer the richest meaning for Rodin who brought it back to a meaningful place in art. He was constantly drawing and modeling from the models he kept moving around his studios. As they moved he would try to capture a pose that appealed to him or ask the model to hold a particular attitude while he quickly pushed the clay into shape. Rodin was a devoted student of the human figure all his life and in this area no separate part was as important as the overall attitude and movement of the whole body.

But Rodin gained most of his fame and fortune from doing portraits and busts. Many of these pieces, like "Madame X" for example, reveal the influ-

¹²Ibid., p. 137.

¹³Ibid., pp. 43-44.

¹⁴Auguste, Rodin, Art, Small, Maynard and Company, Boston, 1912, p. 165.



ences of the times which he later disregarded completely. This attempt to make stone into breathing flesh was one of the sculptor's early fascinations and compiled with the academic attitude towards material at the time. The idea was to simulate flesh, to impose skin-like qualities on the stone. This outlook strongly contrasts with the point of view of many sculptors today who feel that the material participates in the creation of a work of art. They work with the material instead of trying to manipulate it. "The Age of Bronze" as an early figure seemed so life-like to some critics that they believed it could have been cast only directly from a live model! At this time Rodin felt it necessary to transform his material into something else: "You almost expect, when you touch this body to find it warm."¹⁵ "Every masterpiece of the sculptor has the radiant appearance of living flesh."¹⁶ This goal was especially apparent with stone. Rodin rarely carved himself. He gave clay models of his conceptions to craftsmen who transferred them into marble in the style of the times. Stone carving never held the challenge that clay modeling did for Rodin and many of the stones look it. They were probably the most popular of his works during his lifetime, but did the most to ally him with the lesser sculptors among his contemporaries. Rodin himself realized this and once said of his famous piece called "The Kiss", "Undoubtedly the intertwining...is pretty, but in this group I made no discovery. It is a theme treated according to the academic tradition."¹⁷

¹⁵ John Canaday, Mainstreams of Modern Art, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1959, p. 209.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "International Comeback of a Has-Been Titan of Sculpture", Life, October 25, 1963; vol. 55, p. 89.

Rodin progressed from "Madame X" and "The Kiss" to what may have been the peak of his career with the "Monument to Balzac". He realized that imitation alone would not produce "good" sculpture. It became necessary for him to dramatize the expressive content of the face or figure at the expense of anatomical details. In Rodin's words:

First I made close studies after Nature, like "The Bronze Age". Later I understood that art required more breadth - exaggeration in fact, and my aim was then ... to find ways of exaggerating logically - that is to say by reasonable amplification of the modeling. That, also, consists in the constant reduction of the face to a geometrical figure, and the resolve to sacrifice every part of the face to the synthesis of its aspect.¹⁸

In the Balzac (1891-98) Rodin makes the dressing gown into an abstract, nearly cylindrical shape which does its own part in revealing the character of the writer as well as dramatizing the head. It is said that when Antoine Bourdelle saw the Balzac in Rodin's studio he felt that the hands were too distracting and Rodin immediately knocked them off. This probably couldn't have happened in the years before. The rough surface of the Balzac is also an innovation. "Sculpture is quite simply the art of depression and protuberance."¹⁹ Clay was the artist's favorite medium and became increasingly a means of exploration. In years to come Rodin would turn to more experimental sculpture and provide a stepping stone to twentieth century abstraction. He modeled suspended, dancing forms, and taking the human figure as the source of "... the mystery of life ..."²⁰ he experimented in joining figures and

¹⁸Somerville Story, Rodin, Oxford University Press, New York, 1939, p.14.

¹⁹Canaday, Op. cit., p. 208.

²⁰"International Comeback of a Has-Been Titan of Sculpture", Life, October 25, 1963, vol. 55, p. 91.

