

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

RUSSIAN SCULPTURE

Ayse Dietrich, Ph.D.

Overview Sculpture can have a number of roles in society, from ritual functions to representations of national figures who remind citizens of significant events in their country's history. Being three-dimensional works, sculptures often have a greater emotional impact on people than two-dimensional art forms.

The history of sculpture in Russian can be traced back to the Stone Age, and was later a part of the religion of the early pagan Russias who worshipped the sun, the earth, fire, water, stones and trees. With the introduction of Christianity in 988 the pagans were now considered 'sinners', their idols and sacred sites were destroyed, and churches built in their place. The Orthodox Church's prohibition of statuary remained in place until the late 17th century when sculpture in the style of Western Europe appeared again.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Paleolithic:

Venus of Zaraysk: Named after the site southeast of Moscow where it was discovered, this figure was found buried in a storage pit in next to a group of Kostensky-style hollowed out earth dwellings dating from the last Ice Age.

Venus of Kostienki: Carved from a mammoth tusk, this figure of a tall, pregnant, and possibly older woman, was discovered near Voronezh on the the west bank of the Don River.

Avdeevo venus: This work depicts adult women in differing stages of human reproduction and was discovered near Kursk, at Avdeevo on the Sejma River.

Bison Sculpture: One of the largest Ice Age sculptures ever discovered, this figure of a bison was carved from a mammoth tusk and tinted with red ochre.

Mesolithic Period:

Shigir Idol: Discovered in a peat bog in western Siberia near Yekaterinburg in the Middle Urals and radiocarbon dated to between 9500 and 11,000 years, the Shigir Idol is the oldest known wooden sculpture in the world.

Zbruchsky Idol: This three-meter tall, limestone statue was found near the town of Gusyatino on the Zbruch River. The statue was carved in a square column with three levels depicting from top to bottom the realm of the gods, the world of men and the underworld.

POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Due to Orthodox Church's ban on statuary, there are almost no examples of large-scale sculpture from this period. However, miniature sculpture was not included in this ban and was highly developed. Scenes from the Gospels and representations of saints with backgrounds of hills, trees and buildings were created by Russian artists using figures that were generally less than 1 ½ inches high.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Sculpture in Russia revived during the reign of Peter the Great who brought sculptors and casters from Western Europe to teach Russian artists their methods. Despite Peter's efforts, sculpture remained an art dominated by foreigners during his reign and that of his successors. Sculpture was taught at the Academy of Sciences during the reign of Catherine I, but royal court's demand for statuary was still being met by foreign artists, such as the Rococo artist Count Carlo Bartolomeo Rastrelli. Sculptors in Catherine's reign were employed primarily to produce mannerist busts and monuments in marble.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

The first Russian sculptors of note only emerged after the establishments of Arts Academies in St. Petersburg (1757) and Moscow (1832). Most were protégés of the renowned Parisian sculptor Nicolas-François Gillet, and the first to earn fame for his realistic, expressive works was Fedot Shubin. In recognition of his talent the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts appointed Ivan Vitali to the grade of professor, first degree. Other 19th century Russian sculptors included Mikhail Vrubel, Theodore Gordeev, Ivan Martos, Mikhail Kozlovsky, Fedor Shedrin.

House of Fabergé: In 1842 Gustav Fabergé established the House of Fabergé in St.Petersburg. The House of Fabergé was particularly famous for the decorative Easter eggs, intricately designed and decorated with precious jewels, they produced for the Tsars. Management of the House of Fabergé passed to Peter Carl Fabergé in 1882 and continued until 1918 when the Bolsheviks nationalized the company.

Kasli Iron Sculptures: Cast iron sculptures produced by the lost-wax process began to be produced at the Kasli Iron Works in the mid-19th century. Russian and Western European artists such as Eugene Lanceray, Peter Karlovich Klodt, M.D. Kanayev, and N.R. Bakh all produced works at Kasli.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Cubism: By fragmenting and flattening perspective, Russian sculptors were able to create entirely new types of works in three dimensions. In his sculptures Alexander Archipenko presented several simultaneous views of a figure, creating negative space that presented novel perspectives on the human figure. Vladimir Baranoff-Rossine was noted for his use of color, applying the chameleon process or camouflage techniques in his works. Jacques Lipchitz was one of the most successful sculptors in embodying the principles of Cubism in his sculptures.

Constructivism: Constructivism was the product of the merging of the political fervor of the Russian Revolution with Parisian artistic movements in the early 20th century both before and after World War I. Constructivist artists created works from industrial materials such as glass, metal and plastic. Using these materials Russian Constructivist sculptors such as Anton Pevsner, Konstantin Medunetsky, Alexander Rodchenko and Naum Gabo, in particular, created works that conveyed a sense of space without mass. Among other notable constructivist artists El Lissitzky was known for his non-objective sculptures, Ossip Nevelson for his interpretations of modern expressionism, and Louise Zadkine for her distinctive assemblage art.

Kinetic Art: Referring to art that either need motion to create its effect, or has perceptible motion in it, the Kinetic Art movement developed out of the Russian avant-garde. Naum Gabo's 1920 sculpture "Standing Wave" is considered the first work of the Russian Kinetic Art movement.

Impressionism: The first Russian Impressionist woman sculptor to be awarded the Paris Salon prize was Anna Semyonova Golubkina. She was especially known for her numerous sculptural portraits, including ones of Leo Tolstoy, Andrei Bely, Karl Marx and Alexei Remizov.

Discussion/Questions

1. In the early history of Russia the Orthodox Church banned statuary. Why did the Church accept icons as acceptable devotional objects, but not sculpture, unlike Roman Catholic Church which recognized sculpture's iconographic role?
2. How do politics affect the existence of statues? Why are statues more often treated as dangerous, political objects unlike the paintings? Why makes statues so politically effective?

Reading

1. McBurney, Erin, *Art and Power in the Reign of Catherine the Great: The State Portraits*, Thesis, Columbia University, 2014.
- 2-Rice, Tamara Talbot, *A Concise History of Russian Art*, Frederick A. Praeger Publisher, 1967, pp.189-213.