

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# NORTH AMERICAN CULTURE - SCULPTURE

*Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.*

**Overview** Sculpture has been used in the United States to commemorate, monumentalize, and to create cultural and social commentary and critique. While the earlier periods of sculpture in North America often had to do with commemorating life, death, and religious ceremony, the art of the new “American experiment” had much to do with legitimizing a culture (through echoes of Europe) and by emphasizing its importance by creating monuments to people, events, and concepts. Later, sculpture’s role became that of the communication of transformational concepts, such as how the intersection of man and machine could lead to a better world, or how changing the subject of art (instead of presidents and the rich, it became the oppressed and marginalized) could bolster human dignity and effect social justice.

### ANCIENT PERIOD

#### PreHistory

**Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC):** The Clovis were not known for sculpture, except for small carvings and rock art, carved into the sides of cliffs and in caves.

#### Classical

**Desert Southwest:** The Native Americans did not create large sculptures of wood, rock, metal or clay. However, they did create massive earthworks that bring to mind that of the Nazca Lines in Peru. There are similar gigantic human and animal figures drawn on the ground’s surface (geoglyphs and “intaglio”) in the arid parts of California near Blythe. Thanks to low rainfall, the lines have been preserved and are estimated to be as old as 100 BC. The geoglyphs were created by scraping away the surface layers of dark rocks to reveal the lighter clays below. The clays were compacted to reduce the possibility of invasion by plants. The geoglyphs depict human figures, animals (deer), birds, snakes, and mountain lions.

**Eastern Woodlands:** On a plateau near Ohio Creek in Adams County, Ohio, there is a 1,348 foot-long continuous effigy mound, which rises up 3 feet from the ground. From above, it gives the appearance of a snake, hence the name, “Serpent Mound.” However, to one not so animal-centric, it appears to be a series of sine waves, beginning (or terminating) with a spiral, and then terminating (or beginning) with a circle. Mathematically, it is more coherent in terms of explanation, than that of a shaman-tinged narrative of a snake with a curled tail. Recent dating has put its age at around 250 BC. No one really knows its purpose. It was clearly meant to be seen from above, which reinforces the notion that early civilizations had the ability to travel above the surface of the earth.

#### Colonial (Early Modern)

**Folk art** -- gravestones / tombstone, mainly in the New England. Examples – skull with wings carved on marble tombstone. The main themes and motifs included a skull flanked by wings and also depictions of Heaven (trees, leaves, fountains). They were characterized as being low-relief and utilitarian.

**Wood carvings:** Mainly religious, used in Spanish colonial from churches and missions. Example: Nuestra Senora de losdolores ... painted wood carvings of the Virgin Mary, Christ on the Cross, Three Wise Men, nativities, also the Saints.

**Italian influence:** Several American sculptors working in colonial times and in the early years of the new republic were deeply influenced by the Classical and Neo-Classical sculpture they saw in Italy. The themes and techniques were applied to statuary and building motifs, especially those used for government purposes, to contribute to the architecture that embodied the values. Sculptors included Hiram Powers, Horatio Greenough, and Thomas Crawford.

#### Nineteenth Century

**Italian Period:** The influence of Classical and Neo-Classical sculpture continued in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as state and federal governments sought to communicate the values and vision of what was considered a grand, new experiment through concrete, visual form. Many of the pieces were an integral part of buildings associated with the government. Additional sculptors included Randolph Rogers and Chauncey Ives.

**American women sculptors:** Despite the deep anxiety generated by educated women, and also women artists, there were many women sculptures working in America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most worked during the Italian period, and they produced works that are now icons of American identity, including Vinnie Ream's famous sculpture of Abraham Lincoln. Sculptors included Harriet Hosmer, Vinnie Reams, Anne Whitney, Edmonia Lewis, and Emma Stebbins. Of this group, Edmonia Lewis deserves special note. Edmonia was African-American, born in Greenbush (now Rensselaer, near Albany), of an Ojibwe-African-American mother and an Afro-Haitian father. Both parents died before Edmonia was 10 years of age, and so Edmonia lived with her Ojibwe relatives near Niagara Falls, going by the name, Wildfire. Edmonia had the good fortune to have access to education, and when she was 15, she enrolled in Oberlin College, where she changed her name to Mary Edmonia Lewis, and studied art. Perhaps her most popular work is a white marble sculpture she completed in 1867 entitled *Forever Free*, which depicts a man with broken shackles on his wrists, and a woman kneeling, face uplifted in prayer and gratitude. Not surprisingly, Edmonia had a very interesting and challenging life; the biographical details cause one to stop, pause, and reflect on society, art, and human dignity.

**Paris Years:** The last half of the nineteenth century signified a dramatic shift in influence. Instead of the NeoClassical models that were admired by sculptors of the Italian period, the emphasis was on naturalism and the dramatic style epitomized by Parisian sculptors such as Rodin and Carpeaux. The American sculptors found deep and lasting success, not only for sculpting monuments to engender reverence for American leaders and institutions, but also for their engravings which appeared on coins. Examples include Augustus Saint-Gaudens (Adams Memorial, plus \$20 gold coin), Frederick MacMonnies (Princeton Battle Monument), Daniel Chester French (Lincoln in a chair – Lincoln Memorial), and Jose De Creef.

**America trained / outsider:** Americans began to train themselves and to embrace a naturalistic style which captured the values of American expansionism and the frontier. Examples include Frederic Remington (super-energized cowboys and horses in action), Solon Borglum, and Cyrus Dallin ("Appeal to the Great Spirit" has become an icon of the West. These were highly romantic and romanticized sculptures, and they were often smaller in size and cast in bronze. Frederic Remington's work was popular in that it depicted the Western frontier with almost journalistic attention to capturing the "meaningful moment" and the historical context and values.

**Wildlife sculptors (Animaliers):** The idea of American West, and the idea of finding and capturing profound truths about the essence of existence was highly appealing to painters, photographers, and sculptors. The sculptors often depicted animals in the throes of a life-or-death struggle, or in poses that related symbolically to an identity narrative of the Americans who were exploring and developing the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, Sierras, and the deserts, salt lakes, and other unexpected natural beauties. The artists included Antoine Barye, Charles Russell, LabertLaessle, and Edward Kemeys. In Canada, beavers and moose were often juxtaposed with lions to signify the incorporation of British rule while asserting Canadian identity.

**Public monuments and Carving mountains:** The idea of the grand spectacle, and the sculpture that would communicate a compelling message "writ large" was not just interesting, but financially underwritten, by those who supported an expanding, expansionist America, not just geographically, but also economically. The underpinning driver was innovation, which translated into two different phases of Industrial Revolution, along with the discovery and exploitation of natural resources. Mount Rushmore by Gutzon Borglum is the most well-known. Others include Stone Mountain (Georgia) and the Crazy Horse Memorial

## Twentieth Century

**Modern Classicism:** Greek sculptural ideas and styles were revived in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with Art Deco, which embraced the combination of stylized Greek gods and the development of a style that paid homage to technology, sleek lines, and technocracy. Paul Manship, Paul Jennewein, and Edward McCartan are examples.

**African-American sculptors:** The Harlem Renaissance provided an opportunity for young African-American sculptors to find a receptive audience and supportive patrons. The sculptures often depicted scenes or personages from everyday life. An example is Richmond Barthe's *Boxer*.

**Abstract:** Abstract sculpture shocked American audiences with the now famous / infamous Armory Show of 1913, which echoed the values of Marinetti's "Futurist Manifesto" which stated that representational art was a slave to bourgeois "elitist" values. European sculptors such as Constantin Brancusi (Romanian) whose *Torso of Mademoiselle Pogany*, shocked the exhibit-goers, deeply inspired and influenced Americans. Others, with "found art" included French-American Marcel Duchamp, who exhibited a urinal as though it were a neo-classicist sculpture.

**Modernist:** American modernist sculpture moved away from representational, realistic art as it sought to propose an art form that represented the potential of humanity to overcome limitations on human ambition imposed by old aristocratic or religious institutions. The dominant motif of "breaking free" and also of "machine-nature-human creation" were common. Sculptures were broken into Cubist-influenced block shapes, or captured like individual frames of film, or alternatively represented as motion-machines (cars, planes, trains), or cyborg-like superhumans. Dehumanization represented liberation. Examples include Jacques Lipchitz, Alexander Calder, and Gaston Lachaise.

**Social Commentary:** The latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was populated by sculpture with a message, and usually of social commentary, subversion of institutions, or the desire for reform. Super-realistic sculpture embraced working class subjects, and defied the notions of Neo-Classical art which idealized and sought to impose classical notions of beauty. Institutions such as the Catholic church were critiqued by creating sculptures out of scatological materials (elephant dung, for example), and social inequality was depicted in a number of ways, often with the use of unusual materials, and by echoing while subverting a classical or well-known work of art, often a monument that embodied the values the artist sought to challenge (or interrogate). The sculpture took on the role of artist along with that of critic and also social architect, and his / her written commentary became as important as the physical work. In Canada, First Nations motifs have been incorporated to both honor the people, culture, and contributions.

#### Discussion/Questions

1. Mounds and geoglyphs have been found in different parts of North America. They resemble in many ways the Nazca Lines found in the desert of Peru. It has been observed that the best (and perhaps only) way to truly see these glyphs is by flying above them. Otherwise, they're not really observable or distinguishable. What are your thoughts about the earthworks (geoglyphs and lines). What might they be communicating, and what is their purpose?
2. The first Europeans in North America creates sculptures that had to do with religious ceremonies and the continuity / emotional assurance of religious beliefs and values. Please compare and contrast the use of sculptures in the early Catholic missions versus the low-relief carvings on marble tombstones in New England.
3. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the use of sculpture to assert the new American identity was used in many different places and ways. Please list three different ways in which sculpture was used and how it both affirmed a national identity and connected the individual to a sense of hope and potential self-actualization and transformation.
4. Sculpture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century began to focus on different messages than that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to identity, the messages were multiple and had to do with the role of technology in society, the capacity of technology to transform people and society for the good, the way that technology could be used to interject fear of extermination, the subversion of the "eternal verities" as represented by big government and big religion, and the substitution of consumer culture for religious or political self-actualizing aspiration. Please select three works that call into questions traditional values and explain how and why they do so.

#### Readings

Falk, Peter Hastings, ed. *Who Was Who in American Art*. Madison, Conn.: Sound View Press, 1999.

Groce, George C., and David H. Wallace, eds. *The New-York Historical Society's Dictionary of Artists in America, 1564-1860*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

Havlice, Patrice Pate, ed. *Index to Artistic Biography*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1981–.

Igoe, Lynn Moody, and James Igoe. *250 Years of Afro-American Art: An Annotated Bibliography*. New York: R.R. Bowker, 1991.

Optiz, Glenn B., ed. *Dictionary of American Sculptors: 18th Century to the Present*. Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Apollo Book, 1984.

Optiz, Glenn B., ed. *Mantle Fielding's Dictionary of American Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers*. Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Apollo Book, 1983.