

WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Sculpture

Contents

Ancient Period
Postclassical Period
Early Modern Period
19th Century
20th Century

ANCIENT PERIOD

Fragments. In tracing the earliest art works of Western Europe we find an abundance of sculptural examples dating from around the time of the cave painting explosion in south western France and northern Spain (that is, ca. 35,000 years ago.) We find these prehistoric sculptures of animals and birds scattered through caves in the mountains of Germany, while other types of sculpture—fertility figures with huge breasts and vaginas—appear throughout Europe, in rockbeds, streams, and on mountainsides. To indicate the diversity and long duration of this ancient western European art tradition, think only of the advent of Celtic metalwork sculpture, which made its way west across Europe, only in the last years of the pre Christian, between 400-100 B.C., and which brought with it metalwork designs which still awe us by their craftsmanship.

POSTCLASSICAL

Growth. Christian art tradition, in sculpture, naturally kept its head low; for as members of a proscribed religion, in ancient Rome, and as themselves a scattered and highly diverse set of religious recruits, the early Christians had little connection with sculpture except through the funereal motifs they carved on sarcophagi. This role expanded with the gradual expansion of the church form, which with the growth of the faith required larger structures for the exercise of their worship, and the early Christians proceeded to re adapt the Roman basilica into auditorium-like spaces where proto Church services could gradually be held. (Thus the beginning of a Christian sense of architecture.) Though these structures could well have served as settings for sculptural decoration, the early Christians, abhorring graven images, refused for a long time to take that path. Around the year 600, Pope Gregory declared that mural paintings should be added to churches, as ways to record sacred history, but sculptures were still avoided as graven images.

Charlemagne. Until the time of Charlemagne, in the early ninth century, sculpture was hardly to be found in Christian culture—give or take Celtic crosses with decorative motifs or the first stages of Byzantine painting. Charlemagne, however, established a vigorous art impulse and sponsored the work of many architectural projects, which inevitably, in his successors, the three Ottonian rulers, led to the gradual incorporation of sculptural work into the work of making Christian churches. The opening out of confident Christian culture was at this point awaiting the Crusades, in which Christian conquests in the Holy Land, and the return of holy relics captured in skirmishes along the way, inspired a period of intense church building in the West, where abbots and priors were competing for the talents of sculptors who could help to decorate the churches of the new Romanesque style (1000-1200).

Gothic. Gothic church construction, and the sculptural work called in for decoration and instruction, took its cues from the Romanesque, with its rounded arches and thick walls. Over time the Gothic cathedral soared gradually out into the narrow nave, high thin intricate walls, high-arching spires, and stained glass windows which we know from the cathedrals at Chartres or Notre Dame. The Cathedral was seen as a microcosm of God's creation, and in time, between 1150-1300, became a treasure house of

fine sculptural ornamentations, sculptured tales, statues of holy figures surrounded by images of the great Old Testament prophets. The summit of religious sculpture in the West is to be found on the vast cathedrals we owe to the High Gothic period.

RENAISSANCE

Renaissance The early period of Renaissance sculpture was firmly built on the work of the High Gothic period, and reflects the same exuberant historical awareness that had preceded it. If anything, the energy of stone creation is higher than before, and the Renaissance reflects in the greatest names of the early period: Ghiberti, Donatello, and Andrea del Verocchio. The period of High Renaissance Sculpture (1490-1530) was dominated by the work of Michelangelo (1475-1564), painter, sculptor, poet, and supreme genius of the Renaissance.

Baroque. Growing out from the Renaissance, the Baroque period of sculpture (1600-1700), latching onto the strong Roman Catholic Counter Revolution, with its passion to draw people back to the 'true church,' devoted all its skills to charming and delighting the faithful. Saint Peter's Square was redesigned, under the direction of the greatest sculptor of the time, Bernini, so that the columns embracing Saint Peter's himself seemed to embrace the returning worshipper. Bernini's individual pieces of sculpture, like *The Vanquished Gaul killing himself and his Wife*, captured the sculptural moment in a brilliant instantaneity, an effect both stunning and forward looking—toward increasingly illusionistic work to come in the next centuries. The Baroque, still defining as part of the Renaissance perspective, continues to unfold throughout Europe, as the Renaissance spirit, which took first wing out from north Italy, developed into other cultures which like the Italian were finding new directions in which to win friends spiritually.

Rococo. As a reaction against the severity of the baroque, sculptors in France, especially, found their ways to a lighter hearted treatment of painting and sculpture. 1700-1789 marks out the Rococo period, sophisticated and genial, as was the thinking of the court of Louis XIV at Versailles, and readily settling into academic style solutions. Director of the *Académie Française*, from 1707 on, Guillaume Coustou was the most successful sculptor of the early part of this movement, while a variety of court sculptors, many the favorites of the great ladies of the court, held sway in competition with one another. We might say, in retrospect of the Revolution which was just around the corner, that art was having fun for a hundred years before the blood letting.

Reflection. We have been moving fast, from the Neolithic art explosion, 35,000 years ago, through quiet and almost hidden early Christian art, which only gradually—but then unstoppably—outspread into monumental architecture and highly developed sculptures, both free standing and parts of narrative suites, which were to morph toward the muscular power of Renaissance pluri-genius, culminating, we might say, in the supreme works of Michelangelo's sculpture and painting, only to soften out into Baroque and Rococo stages.

Drivers. This reflection is about the nature of change in art styles. It could be styles of moral value or of domestic architecture: the central question is the same—what is the driver to change? In art historical development it is as though human consciousness initially hooks itself into a project, like that of transforming nature into some of the metaphorical meanings inherent in nature, and then, once engaged in a segment of the challenge—say the challenge to transform the mere coexisting with caves into the depicting of the cave world—from within the cave—the drive of consciousness prosecutes its effort at 'improvement,' at expressing more fully what it feels it is pursuing, until, at some point, the energy of the quest plays itself out, transforming itself, if that is the way to put it, into its replacement, as Renaissance sculpture, for example, replaces High Gothic which has already expressed what it could of the energy supplied it by its culture.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Doldrums. With the exception of Auguste Rodin, the nineteenth century, in Western Europe, was a low point in the movement forward of sculpture. In part the reasons are embedded in the historical moment. After the Revolution there was much general uncertainty about the chief directions of society. For one

thing, the Church had been severely wounded by the Revolution, throughout Western Europe, and without Church support, need, and commissions, an essential support for sculpture was missing. (Sculpture, it was realized when institutional support was absent, was an expensive art, requiring precise tools and equipment, and much personal time investment, and could not, like painting, thrive simply on the inspiration of brilliant household geniuses. It should be added that, in nineteenth century West Europe there was a marked decline in those kinds of large building projects—courthouses, cathedrals, administrative halls—which had theretofore served as launching pads for sculptural commissions.

Rodin. Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) stands out among the European sculptors of the nineteenth century, in power recalling the greatest works of his ideal, Michelangelo. As an independent spirited, and only modestly backed by fans or the wealthy, Rodin held powerfully to his conviction—wasn't it that of Michelangelo, also?—that a tenacious attention to the wonders of the human body was the only path to noble sculpture. (In this conviction he also gave his total allegiance to the spirit of such ancient Greek sculptors as Phidias and Praxiteles, whose muscular sculpted bodies are so 'realistic' they are 'ideals.')

It was in accord with this muscularity that Rodin also worshipped the tightly wrought cathedral sculptures of High Gothic.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Renovation. It is as if, with the twentieth century, Western European (and American) sculpture finds out how to shed some of its material bulk, and, at the same time, its rather limiting dependence on institutions for commissions. A reconception of sculpture is underway, which will sidestep some of the mass problems that shadowed the traditional sculptor's trade.

Revolution. The 'anthropological' put ups of such sculptors as Constantin Brancusi and Naum Gabo, portable and tactile, often wry, change the weight of the action of sculpture, which becomes less a statement than an offering. Wit is given room to enter the discourse. It might be mentioned, in relation to this turn of lightening in sculpture, that concurrently the *Ecole de Paris*, an influential working crossroads for European sculptors, was actively open to the impact of African sculpture, which was widely on view in earlier twentieth century Paris, and which opened for Western Europeans rare vistas of sculpture as color, humor, and movement.) Such Westerners as would have experienced African sculpture had been readied for such attacks on the expected, by the assaults Picasso and Braque had already undertaken, against all the canons reigning in western European art, at the time when they tossed a truly revolutionary Cubism into the ring of Western European perspectival options. Among those options, seized by many European sculptors, was the path of abstract and super real sculptures, sculptures of breakfast made of fur, mobiles that mocked the traditional weight of the sculptor, or, as in the work of Louise Nevelson, 'assemblages composed of found objects, mostly wood, sprayed in white, black, or gold paint and arranged in box like shelves occupying a wall...'

The horizons. Obvious we have been moving, here, into an horizon unanticipated by the depictive, though very diversely so, prior history of Western European sculpture. We could go on. But the dramatic point makes itself clear before us, that sculpture is only by tradition, not by necessity, limited to the stolid, direct, head on expressions of the human personality. It is clear that what inspires Rodin, in the finest of his work, like 'Balzac' or 'The Thinker,' is a frozen in life—and perfectly and deeply human--representative; it is clear that Naum and Gabo, or the pop art sculptors who follow them, are making artefacts, or letting artefacts form, that will 'make you think.'

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Sculpture was greatly boosted, in the late middle ages, by the need for it expressed by the makers of the High Gothic cathedral. What did those makers want and need from sculpture? Was sculpture needed, after that point, in its trajectory as a major Western European Art? In modern art is sculpture needed? Or is it a function of dialogue, among observers or among the elements of a sculptural complex? Would Naum and Gabo have any interest in the notion of a 'use' for sculpture?

What do you imagine as the origin of sculpture? Does it seem plausible, that the origin of sculpture might be different from that of painting, or of architecture? Is painting about representation, sculpture about presentation, architecture about occupation?

The earliest Western sculpture we have, from the ancient Mediterranean, then from the caves in Western Europe, is regularly connected with the celebration or promotion of fertility. Do you understand what the act of creating sculptures could have to do with the promotion of fertility?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Boucher, Bruce, *Italian Baroque Sculpture*, London, 1998.

Calkins, Robert G., *Monuments of Mediaeval Art*, New York, 1978.

Dodwell, C.R., *Anglo-Saxon Art: A New Perspective*, Manchester, 1982.

Olson, Roberta, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, London, 1992

Snyder, James, *Northern Renaissance Art*, New York, 1985.

Williams, Dyfri, *Masterpieces of Classical Art*, London, 2009.