

Sculpture of the Twentieth Century

Author(s): Andrew C. Ritchie

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Andrew C. Ritchie, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, assembled the large exhibition, Sculpture of the Twentieth Century, which is currently on view at the Art Institute. Including great modern works from Rodin until today, this is the first comprehensive international survey of contemporary sculpture to be seen in America. It will be shown only in Philadelphia, Chicago and New York. The following article by Mr. Ritchie is an excerpt from his forthcoming book Sculpture of the Twentieth Century to be published in April by the Museum of Modern Art. The sculpture reproduced can be seen in the exhibition.

SCULPTURE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY by Andrew C. Ritchie

Sculpture's Position Today

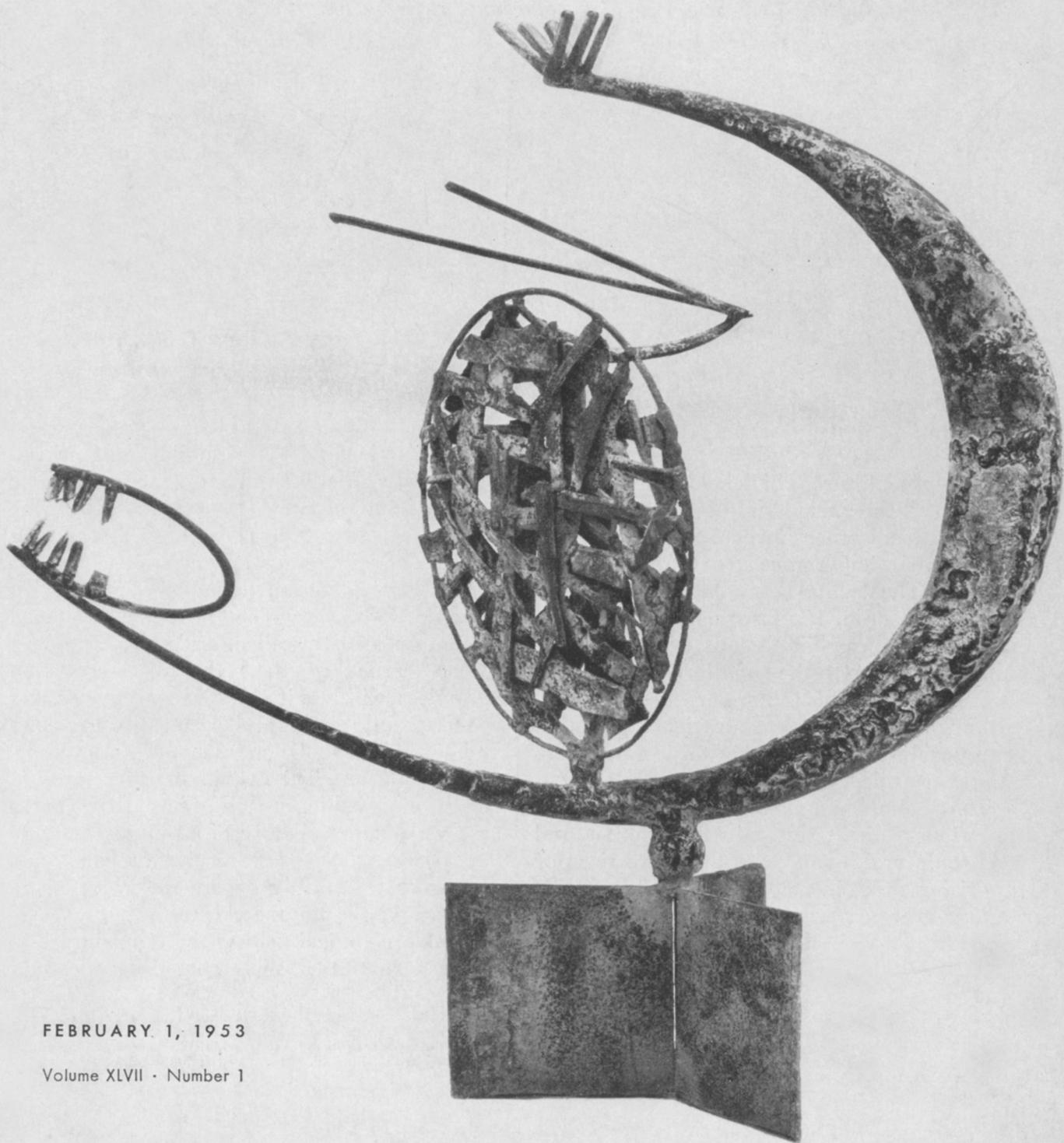
The art of sculpture, which held a predominant place in all the ancient cultures and in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, fell to a position of relative unimportance after the seventeenth century. The decline began during the Renaissance. Leonardo, if subsequent history is to be believed, won his famous argument with Michelangelo as to the superiority of painting over sculpture. This is more or less true today, although there are encouraging signs that sculpture is beginning again to take on a less subsidiary role.

The public, high, middle and low in brow, is notoriously disinterested in the architectural and sculptural monuments that have risen or are rising about it. One seldom hears a public outcry over any new building, however atrocious it may be in design. Whatever criticism there is of sculptural monuments is seldom of

an aesthetic kind. The public figure is not sufficiently life-like perhaps for the public taste; the nudity of a statue is too disturbing to those who set themselves up as the protectors of public morals; deviations from, or distortions of, accepted canons of realism on occasion produce violent resentment. Official sculptors, usually called academic, have long since learned to make the necessary compromises with their artistic consciences and consequently have received most of the commissions for public monuments or architectural sculpture. The insipid and therefore undisturbing results are all about us, in parks and on public buildings of all kinds. They do not deserve and seldom receive a second look. However technically expert they may be in execution, and no one can gainsay the academician's technical ability, the temperature of his imagination is so low he usually cannot

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Cover: Head, 1936? wrought iron by Julio Gonzalez, Spanish. The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Right: Study for Balzac Monument, about 1893. Bronze by Auguste Rodin. Lent by Jacques Seligmann & Co., New York



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give to the content of his work more than a pallid, sentimental expression. Sculpture of this kind is not our province here. It will be with us no doubt for many years to come, or just so long as official taste continues to be phlegmatic and timid.

Perhaps the speed and fluidity of the industrial age and particularly our own century are responsible for a confused and, it would almost seem, atrophied sense of form and space. The man who walks is in a position to view and to appreciate the form and color of things about him. Life in trains, automobiles and planes tends to produce a never ending series of two-dimensional images. We see only the façades of buildings, and often only a fraction of these, or a fleeting glimpse of a piece of sculpture. These unsubstantial impressions are in turn documented and re-emphasized by the moving picture and journalistic photography to a point where an appreciation of volume and space, the basic considerations of architecture and sculpture, becomes almost impossible.

To be sure, our motor driven age may be said to enjoy a new sense of space due to speed of travel. And something of the fusion of fast moving images is reflected in the work of many modern painters and sculptors. But however revolutionary our new experiences of space and time may be, we tend to sacrifice many of those visual experiences that are only possible at a leisurely, pedestrian pace. Under the strain of high speed pressures then, it becomes necessary to make a conscious effort to do more than give sculpture or architecture a superficial glance.

There are, of course, well known economic reasons for the general lack of appreciation of sculpture. Its cost in effort and materials is usually much greater than painting. Consequently there are fewer sculptors than painters. Paintings are relatively easy and cheap to transport and exhibitions are therefore frequent. Most sculpture is expensive to move and its exhibition is fairly infrequent.

Furthermore, the separation or compartmentalizing of architecture, sculpture and

painting since the Renaissance, a condition which has become even more exaggerated in our time, has had a deleterious effect on the first two. The separation of artist and patron, which has been growing during the past one hundred and fifty years, has reacted often in a perverse way to the advantage of the painter. The freedom of individual expression which has become a cardinal artistic principle in our time is obviously more possible of realization by writers and painters than by architects and sculptors. The one needs only in physical terms a typewriter and paper or paint and canvas, while the other demands either a willing client of considerable means, or, in the case of the sculptor, more or less costly or intractable materials or relatively expensive castings in bronze. The writer may spend years on a book and never find a publisher, and painters may paint for years and never sell a canvas. Nevertheless, the minimum physical requirements of their respective crafts are far and away simpler than those of sculptors and architects.

And as between architect and sculptor the latter is probably worse off. The architect, either alone or in company with others, may find a client. Until he does, planning and construction do not take place. When they do, they may, but more often do not, include a sculpture commission. The sculptor is then in the terribly exposed position of having, like the painter, to produce first, then attempt to sell, but at considerably greater expense in time and materials.

Despite sculpture's many disadvantages today, and its decline between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, it has always been a force in all the visual arts. In our time it has once more become a vital force.

Right: Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, 1913, bronze by Umberto Boccioni, Italian. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest





Sculpture and Painters

Sculpture is probably the oldest of the arts. Its technical beginnings go back to the first prehistoric man who chipped an arrow head or carved a club or spear. And from the dawn of history the sculpture and pottery (a form of applied sculpture) of all the ancient civilizations have been the chief clues to our understanding of them. The relative permanence of stone, baked clay or metal is, of course, a major factor in our dependence upon sculpture and inscriptions upon stone or clay as conveyors of historical record. By comparison, writing upon more perishable materials such as papyrus, vellum and paper is a relatively recent source of information. In the long run, however, such written records, and accompanying or derived pictorial illustration, finally undermined sculpture's supremacy and made painting of all kinds, at least in the West, the art having the widest use and popular appeal.

I think it is not too much to say, then, that the book has been the greatest enemy of sculpture and that, concomitantly, as literacy progressed, sculpture declined in value, and eventually in quality. From embodying the gods and heroes of Greece and Rome in ancient and Renaissance art, and the whole *dramatis personae* of holy writ in medieval Europe, it began to lose ground in the Renaissance, and in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was finally relegated, for the most part, to portrait busts and insipid garden and pottery statuary. Despite this decline, it was still possible for a Bernini and a Houdon to produce great works of art. At a lower level of accomplishment Rude, Barye and Carpeaux in the nineteenth century were not undistinguished in their efforts to revitalize sculpture. But they are lonely exceptions. The stellar lights during these centuries were painters.

Left: Caryatid, about 1914, limestone by Amedeo Modigliani, Italian. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund

Now no one can say that the tables have been turned in our century. But three very significant things have happened in the last hundred years. Painters have become less and less dependent upon literature for the content of their paintings. The horizons of art have been greatly enlarged to include the whole world and the dependency upon the classical and Renaissance traditions to the exclusion of all others has been broken. And finally, many of our most important painters, searching for new sources of stylistic inspiration have turned to sculpture and in considerable numbers have actually produced sculpture themselves.

The most significant factor, I presume, in the revival of sculpture in the twentieth century (and there has been a revival beyond doubt) is the diversion of the painter's interest from problems of literary illustration or interpretation to the more fundamental problems of form, space and light. The exploration of these problems has characterized in varying degrees the great revolutionary movements of our time. With the return of painting to plastic first principles, partly under the inspiration of new discoveries in the physical and biological sciences, the ground was prepared for a reunification of the three visual arts of painting, sculpture and architecture. When painting ceased being the handmaiden of literature it led the way for all the visual arts to establish a working relationship, one which had existed previously in the Renaissance, with revolutionary discoveries in science. Thus Impressionism is unthinkable without the investigations of Helmholtz and other physicists into the properties of light. The Post-Impressionists, Symbolists and Fauves, like Gauguin and Matisse, could not have investigated or been influenced by the primitive arts of Africa and Oceania without the previous researches and collections of nineteenth-century ethnologists and anthropologists. And Cubism, likewise, was dependent upon ethnographic discoveries of primitive sculpture as well as new concepts in physics concerning the interdependence of space and time.



The extraordinary development of archeological and anthropological studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has tremendously expanded our knowledge of all peoples both inside and outside the Western world. The artist seeking to break the stranglehold of academic canons based on a limited Renaissance conception of the arts of Greece and Rome, found ready to his hand and eye the revelation of many other traditions, primitive, prehistoric, pre-Columbian, Oriental, together with a better understanding of the relation of ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian art to archaic Greece. The violent and often eclectic absorption of non-Western art, represented largely, it must be repeated, by sculpture, is one of the tremendous factors underlying the artistic revolutions of the last fifty years.

The role of the painter as an absorber of non-Western traditions has been, and to some extent still continues to be, a dominant one. Largely dependent as he has been upon the sculpture of non-Western peoples for inspiration, it is not surprising that as he has experimented with new forms of expression he has often been tempted to work out his ideas by actual modeling or, more rarely, carving.

Among the painters who have made significant contributions to twentieth-century sculpture are Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, Renoir, Braque and Degas (although most of the latter's sculpture was originally executed in wax in the late nineteenth century and cast in bronze after his death). With the exception of Modigliani, all of these painters have been, in the main, modelers in plaster or wax. (The unpredictable Picasso, it is true, has made some carvings and constructions in metal and wood and has combined *objets*

Left: Shepherd Holding a Lamb, 1944, bronze by Pablo Picasso, Spanish. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. R. Sturgis Ingersoll, Penllyn, Pennsylvania

Right: The Slave, 1900-03, bronze by Henri Matisse, French. Art Institute of Chicago, Edward E. Ayer Fund



trouvés with plaster modeling, a process related to the Cubist collage.) This emphasis by painters upon modeling in a soft material rather than carving in stone or wood has several obvious explanations. Accustomed as the painter is to working in tractable pigments, the "adding on" process, as Michelangelo called it, of clay or plaster modeling comes more naturally to a painter than the laborious use of the mallet and chisel. The experimental freedom of expression which has been a characteristic of all the great modern painters must surely have been inhibited by time-consuming stone carving. The example of Rodin, the modeler, under whose influence Matisse and Picasso did their first sculptures, undoubtedly helped determine their choice of method and materials. But above all, Rodin's nervous experimental energy, which could only find immediate release in modeling, must have impressed itself most on such younger painter-sculptors. Paradoxically, given his extraordinary high-strung temperament, Modigliani studied sculpture first with Brancusi, who in partial opposition to Rodin, early turned to direct carving. The linear tradition in which Modigliani worked, a tradition in opposition to the formal analyses of his Cubist contemporaries, undoubtedly had something to do with his admiration and emulation of Brancusi's immaculately finished carvings and the inevitable linearity of their subtle contours. At the same time, his Cubist contemporaries, Lipchitz and Laurens, for example, were carvers and only later turned to modeling. Their early example undoubtedly reinforced his own predilection for the chisel.

There is one significant feature which most of the great twentieth-century painter-sculptors have in common: a considerable preoccupation with the human figure. Matisse, probably the greatest painter-sculptor of our time,

says in his *Notes of a Painter*: "What interests me most is neither still life nor landscape but the human figure. It is through it that I best succeed in expressing the nearly religious feeling that I have towards life." Degas, Renoir, Picasso, Modigliani have all given a greater emphasis to the human figure than to any other motif, and much of their interest in sculpture may well derive from this predominant interest.

All other questions aside, however, the principal contribution of the painter-sculptor in the twentieth century has been to explore and expand the whole field of formal imagery under the impact of new concepts of space, time and psychology. The great movements of modern art—Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism—have all originated with painters, and whether they practised sculpture or not, they have left their mark on all modern sculptors. That two of the greatest painters of the century, Matisse and Picasso, are sculptors also has acted simply as a tremendous reinforcement of a general influence.

Having said as much, I hasten to recall once again how much the modern painter has taken from sculpture of all periods. Matisse's and Picasso's debt to Rodin; Cézanne's to Michelangelo, Houdon and others; Gauguin's to the folk carvings of Brittany and Oceania; the Expressionists and the Cubists to African sculpture—all these and many more instances of the vitalizing effect of one art on the other go far to balance any debt that exists from one to the other. The important fact is the interaction of sculpture and painting, a healthy fusion that today, in America at least, is having important results. When modern architecture loses some of her virginal fears and reticence and joins the company of painting and sculpture, a further enrichment of all three will surely result.