THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ELEMENTAL FORMS IN SCULPTURE

A Thesis Presented for the Degree of Master of Arts

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .................................................. 1

Artist's Work .................................................. 10

Bibliography ................................................... 23

ILLUSTRATIONS

"Pieta", Michelangelo ................................. Plate 1

"Mademoiselle Pogany", Brancusi ................. Plate 2

"Queen Hat-shepsut", Egyptian, 1485 B.C. . Plate 3

Artist's Work ................................................ Plates 4-16
Sculpture today seems to be the forgotten art in our culture. Commissions for sculptural monuments are practically non-existent, and architecture has almost completely forsaken this art which heretofore had been an important part of its structure. Sculpture is not an integral phase of our life as it was in ancient Egypt where it was used as a vital part of the religion. Sculpture does not perform an organic function in our architecture as it did in the architecture of the ancient Greeks and the architecture of the Christians during the middle ages. During this period of inactivity, the sculptor has the obligation of carrying forward and developing his craft against the day that the culture will again recognize and make coherent this art medium.

The discussion in this paper and the work which it illustrates is based upon a concept of simple organic form in sculpture. This organic form is obtained by the reduction through synthesis of the varied elements that enter into any art production. The elemental form still retains the subject matter, but is transformed and related to other elements to such an extent that the form begins to justify itself on its own account. This simplified form is based upon the aesthetic principle which Mr. Dewitt Parker calls the law of "organic unity".
"By this is meant the fact that each element in a work of art is necessary to its value, that it contains no elements that are not thus necessary, and that all that are needful are there. Since everything that is necessary is there, we are not led to go beyond it to seek something to complete it; and since there are no unnecessary elements, there is nothing present to disturb its value."¹

Mr. Parker goes on to say that, "The ancient law of organic unity is the master principle of aesthetic form."²

In following, then, the above law in sculpture the artist, whose work appears here, has held to the theory that the transformation of natural forms into elemental sculptural qualities forces the artist to work in terms of large simple relationship of plane structure. This elemental sculpture can be just as expressive, if not more so, than a more detailed work. This does not mean that a refined and detailed work is not good, but as Auguste Rodin stated, "When the planes of a figure are well placed, with decision and intelligence all is done, so to speak; the whole effect is obtained; the refine-

¹ Parker, Dewitt H., The Analysis of Art, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1926, p. 34.
² Ibid., p. 36.
ments which come after might please the spectator, but they are almost superfluous. 1

People are often fond of Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures, because more than his finished ones, they reveal the basic planes and form more clearly. This point is realized more fully when we look at one of these unfinished sculptures in Plate 1. There is also the interesting point to make that if a piece of sculpture is designed well and is good without minute detail, then it is not necessary at all to execute that detail. Constantin Brancusi has experimented with simplified geometrical forms and has completely turned his back on details. Plate 2, "Mademoiselle Pogany", reveals the success he has had with this simple approach.

In sculpture, subject matter is an important ingredient, but its relative significance is often misunderstood and it is used only as representation. For instance, in memorials to historical events, uniforms and weapons are often copied with minute detail. The appeal to sentimentality and the intellect prevails. The spectator is so awed by the great display of technical proficiency

1 Rodin, Auguste, Art, Hodder and Stoughton, New York, 1912, p. 211.
PIETA
Michelangelo

Plate 1
MADEMOISELLE POGANY

Brancusi

Plate 2
and subject matter that he forgets that there should be something deeper in the work. He looks at the detail and mistakes the husk for the kernel, the shadow for the substance. But this is not entirely his fault. The artist has included more than he needed in his work, has failed to understand the meaning of fundamental shape relationship. He has used his skill to elaborate as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. Elaboration of surface may lead away from totality, from a powerful unified impression of the whole, when it is executed merely for its own sake or in order to satisfy popular taste.

Sculpture is undertaken for its own sake, and subject matter should be used merely as a point of departure. No matter how skilled one is, he cannot hope to create flesh, hair or cloth from his clay or stone. His product will still be a representation or interpretation of these things. And if sculpture is an interpretation, the artist can develop sculptural forms which would be just as significant as the exact reproduction of nature. The artist has to build up, out of the accidental and fragmentary elements in nature used for his composition, a harmonious construction of his own. This means that the artist must have freedom to attain sculptural forms.
which will be expressive. An increased sculptural quality can often be obtained by abandoning, to a certain degree, a detailed decorative quality in favor of more simplified forms. These forms can be a simplification of natural forms or geometrical equivalents interrelated and interwoven with each other.

Through this re-creation, this building up and eliminating of everything not vitally necessary, is built up a structure that is whole, is developed a harmony of sculptural form. Socrates explained to his students, "By beauty of form in sculpture I do not mean statues which have the meaning of beautiful bodies, I mean sculpture which has the meaning of geometrical forms."¹

This essential sculpture, as it might be called, is evidenced in ancient Egyptian works, an example of which is illustrated in Plate 3. In colossal Egyptian sculpture, cubic blocks are piled one above another with distinct plain surfaces, yet the work fascinates us by its grandeur of simple forms and expressiveness. This sculpture tends toward an enlargement of experience because of the imaginative organization of form. On the other hand, mere

QUEEN HAT-SHEPSUT
Egyptian

Plate 3
simplification of natural forms or geometrical equivalents will not, alone, produce a fine piece of sculpture. A good piece of sculpture is a synthesis of many factors, all of which contribute to the conveying of a definite aesthetic emotion. However, elemental forms in sculpture will reveal the very essence of a work of art. For with nothing superfluous to distract or play on one's sentimentality, the work of art will strike straight to some separate aesthetic inner being, something as close to the inner spirit of man as it is possible to penetrate.
Clay Model

Plate 4
Wood Before Carving

Plate 5
Main Forms Blocked Out

Plate 6
Finished Carving

Plate 7
Finished Carving

Plate 8
THE LIFTER

Plate 9
DANCER

Plate 10
THE WRESTLE

Plate 11
THE WRESTLE

Plate 12
JAZZ MUSICIAN

Plate 13
RECLINING FIGURE

Plate 14
MOTHER and CHILD

Plate 15
CLOWN

Plate 16
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