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Sculpture: Only Connect

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My mother would take us to New York's Museum of Natural History when I was a child. Tyrannosaurus Rex, his skeletal tail firmly on the ground, and the gargantuan blue whale, airborne as if leaping from the sea, were of course magical to a young boy. The snowbound diorama of wolves running and leaping beneath the Northern Lights terrified me, and in my bad dreams no glass intervened to protect me from their gleaming fangs. Two groups of figures in bronze loomed in the entry hall's semi-darkness, one of growling lions, faced diagonally across the huge hall by natives preparing to throw spears. I was enchanted, less by the artistry of the sculptor (I was only a kid) than by this wonderful tension, a drama unfolding right there on the Upper West Side. The reasoning now operating behind the move to take down the statue of Teddy Roosevelt on Central Park West may have been responsible for the removal of this vivid confrontation of hunters and hunted (it was unclear which would be which). On re-visiting the museum decades later, I also missed the busts by Malvina Hoffman that had graced the upper halls, including one of *Mangbetu Woman*. She was glorious, even more magnetic to a very young boy than the Tyrannosaurus or the whale. She may have been removed as we re-thought the premise of Hoffman's series, "The Races of Mankind," or because her spectacular breasts had been polished to a golden glow by young hands reaching up to touch them. While Hoffman herself might have been troubled that her piece's dark matte patina contrasted so dramatically and distractingly with the woman's shiny breasts, she may also have felt amused or even honored. For Mangbetu Woman

had very young admirers, one might almost say worshippers, paying homage or seeking comfort from an inanimate chunk of metal. This might be a tribute to mammary glands, but also to the power of sculpture. Toes of marble saints across Europe have been worn down to stubs by a similar need to bond with objects that transcend objecthood. Jules Dalou's bronze of the recumbent/tumescent Victor Noir in Paris' Pere Lachaise Cemetery was briefly fenced to prevent women from rubbing his member, made to glow with an almost supernatural radiance.

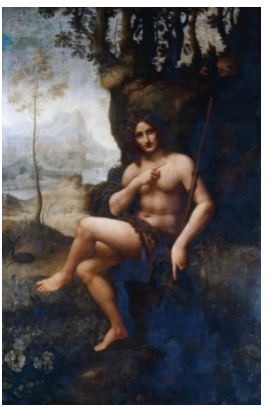
As an adult, I can't imagine I'm alone in the desire to touch, to identify or merge with tangible forms in space, be they bronze, stone, wood or flesh. Atavistic needs and memories surely come into play even with abstract sculpture, taking Jean Arp as but one example. His work recognizes these urges and perhaps even teases the viewer, or I might say the fondler. For while our eye may try to comprehend Arp's biomorphic bulbs, we respond more viscerally, somewhere between touch and a bodily identification, deep in our own sense of being. His piece lacks our symmetry, resembling a squeezed balloon bulging in unpredictable ways, but this quirky swelling might remind us intuitively of our own proclivity to move and grow.

Whether we hold such a form in our hands the way cave

dwellers held the Willendorf Venus 25 millennia ago, or stand humbly before it, some mysterious fusion or projection can take place. Surely some of this power depends on actuality, on being able to circumnavigate, say, this African sculpture in the Art Gallery of Ontario's collection. It's our loss if we stride past and dismiss her as foreign or unfamiliar, for the more time we spend in her presence the more we subtly assume her semi-squat, as if we all belong to the same gym. She being about our height, we feel as much as see her, sensing her kindred nature, with weight shifts we've experienced ourselves. Scientists call this proprioception, our awareness of location in space as a kind of sixth sense, making this figure's pinched waist, protruding belly and bent knees evoke an unconscious echo in our limbs, as if mass precedes sight or surface. For me, some of the devotional, even sacred, intensity of this female figure is shared by thousands of others across ages, continents and cultures, Venuses from Willendorf to Milo, goddesses from Giambologna to Maillol.

One could argue that an equal number of paintings have participated in this implicitly transcendent energy, this emotional glimpse of the divine. Consider umpteen Crucifixions, taking Giovanni Pisano's fragmented sculpture in Berlin's Bode Museum and Grunewald's painted altarpiece in Isenheim as exemplary, each one asking us to join Christ up there on the cross. We know this tortured man's pain in our own sympathetic nervous system, whether he is realized in three dimensions or two. Some painter friends have much less interest in sculpture than I, but I've never had an argument about which art form is "better." One of the odder debates in Florence during the High Renaissance was called "*Il Paragone*" or "the comparison," referring to the virtues of the various arts, primarily sculpture versus painting. Even a blind man could

appreciate sculpture through touch, while the sighted would have more than one view, a visceral totality, an actuality inaccessible to the painter. *Non è vero!* the painters protested, or even well, oh yeah? My friend Natalie Charkow, a fine sculptor, once observed a mind-boggling sunset with a painter friend, who turned to her and said "Sculpt that!" Leonardo da Vinci claimed vision was more noble and intellectual than touch, and besides, carving marble covered one in white powder like a baker or tradesman, though to his credit, dusty Michelangelo tended to stay out of the argument. Both these Renaissance men thought and worked in both two and three dimensions, so much so that in the 1970s, Walter Erlebacher could make sculptures based on Michelangelo's painted male nudes, just from information conveyed on the Sistine ceiling. This fellow sits on a block, free from context against a white wall, all but begging to reach the three dimensional solidity Erlebacher literalized. The counterclockwise twist of the arms is answered by the head and legs, letting the corkscrew gesture read from all angles, something true for all the nudes on that ceiling. A Leonardo from about the same time, while still highly modeled, is thought of more as a surface configuration, the man's twist serving to align his major forms with the picture plane. In other words, it has only one appeal-



ing view, and imagined in the round would only work set in a niche like a glorified relief. Leonardo's composition evokes the whirligig, a kid's propeller toy, pivoting clockwise here on the Baptist's lap. The "blades" are dark and light shapes consciously locked into the figure, one being the rock cliff's dark vertical, and two more formed by the diagonal from the little tree to the rectangle's lower right corner. Michelangelo is thinking more like a sculptor, Leonardo as a painter. True, Leonardo worked on what must have been a magnificent life-sized horse, but tragically it was used by French troops for drunken target practice, and is lost, but even the working models of his proposed weapons show Leonardo could effortlessly think in three dimensions.

If you gravitate to paintings in a museum, perhaps you'd feel more comfortable in Venice than in Florence. I'm no architect, but certainly recall how Florence's Renaissance buildings, such as the Medici Palace, loom as massive objects in space, impressive and perhaps purposely intimidating in their palpable weight. Not a delight to look at, but something to sense, with any exterior articulation more grudgingly functional than joyously decorative. Now consider the Ca'd'Oro on Venice's Grand Canal. Instead of a strong-box or safe it resembles a huge, shining jewel-box. We might imagine that a rectilinear building stands behind that glittering façade, but are hypnotized not only by the glorious fenestration and rhythmic arches, but by the light shimmering off the canal. This watery reflected luminosity, shimmering on a beautiful planar surface, was the birthright for young Venetian artists like Bellini, Giorgione and Titian.

Take a nude by the latter, and try to imagine her as a sculpture. (Though why would you want to?) If our two Florentines rendered light falling over forms, modeling in chiaroscuro the way we see actual sculpture, here the light seems to emanate from within, or be projected from behind the viewer so as to flatten the forms as large, simple color shapes. Titian is thinking like a painter, no doubt about it. If we leave aside the perspectival floor, Titian uses only bright, almost cut-out shapes to carry us in, even as far as a distant sky. The arguments about sculpture versus painting might just as well have applied to Florentine versus Venetian art: form vs. light, modelling vs. flattening, directional axiality vs. planar overlap, even hand versus eye. Oh, and gripping a chisel while sweating profusely vs. painting while dressed in gentleman's velvet. One enters Venice on that ride down the Grand Canal, a string of architectural greatest hits, then seeks out one of the most powerful traditions in world painting. You might see a sculpture here and there, but many of these were by visiting Florentines.

In working in both two and three dimensions, I don't have a dog in this race, this *paragone*, and am as likely to spend time before a painting as a sculpture in a museum. Before I started doing sculpture, I not only spent less time with objects in the round, but was less aware of what I was looking at. In the Vatican collection decades ago, I was drawn to a crude little clay couple, lovers happily ensconced on a primitive bed. Even at the time I knew it didn't have much going for it other than the tender subject. My teacher and friend, Natalie Charkow, claims that as a dyed-in-the-wool formalist

she wouldn't have even noticed the content, and only compelling forms would have caught her attention. It took me time to become more like her, perhaps by working in clay for terracotta figures, perhaps by travelling to spend time in the presence of really good sculpture. As a writer, my wife Ann knows that far more readers are likely to read for content and story, for how it all turns out, than for the subtleties of language and subtext that delight her. She'll gleefully point out the exquisitely understated strategies at work in, say, the short stories of Deborah Eisenberg or Alice Munro, inconspicuous implications unnoticed by the reader new to such work. And the same was true for me, needing to see thousands of sculptures not just to weed out the clunkers, but to realize why the good ones transcend the conventional. This took years of looking.

On first encountering Rodin, I was amazed by his terracotta girl in a jaunty beflowered hat, and fell in love with her sweet innocence, her deeply carved black eyes, her palpable tresses. Years, and many attempts to do likewise later, I found myself gravitating to Rodin's much later sketched-in head of Balzac, a massive cliff face of character, modeled as if by an impatiently forceful god. Eyebrows like rock ledges, hair no longer finely curling but massed like an avalanche ready to fall. Ann and I make a beeline to the Rodin Museum whenever in Paris, and I fondly say hello to the pretty terracotta girl, but I see her through more experienced eyes.

Clearly, Rodin himself went through a similar process, becoming dissatisfied with her charms and searching for something ruggedly powerful. His Balzac met some deep personal need, and though a major breakthrough toward what we call modernism, it was not some hot new style for a hungry and jaded art world. In fact, he was initially excoriated, but the public's outrage wasn't why Rodin knew he was onto something. Certainly, subject or content still mattered to him, as it does to Ann in her fiction, but it became integrated with a newly explosive form, finding freedom from the literal and immediately accessible. Balzac, like the girl in the hat, may be one of us, but he draws much more attention to the means used, the material thereness, what Clive Bell might have had in mind as significant form.

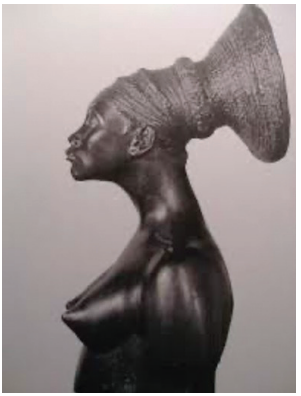
It also took me time to realize that the terracotta girl didn't yet participate in one of the hardest things to really grasp about Rodin's development. Art historians speak, correctly, of the analogy between Impressionist painting and Rodin's later work, because of the way light flickers and dances over the forms, carrying our eye up, about and around, as if on fire. Lovely as she is, the hat girl doesn't do this. Like all sculpture, she's dependent on the light that falls on her, but rather than a flowing river, light tends to pool in dark cavelike crevasses. I'm in no way saying she isn't compelling, only that it took me, and Rodin, time to evolve toward a new appreciation of how to make and look at sculpture.

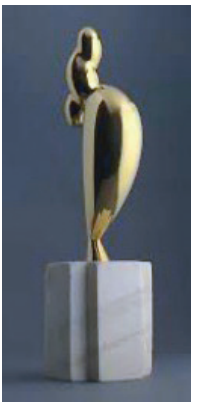
Consider equestrian statues, say Donatello's Gattamelata in Padua or St. Gauden's Shaw Memorial. I would never tell a horse lover that subject "doesn't matter" and to look at each as a formal construct of rhyming forms in space. In fact, they'd see things I can't because I haven't spent the time around horses they have. But while they were riding or feeding their beloved animal, I was in the studio or the museum, so of course I might be more aware of strategies the sculptor used in his equestrian bronze. Ann or her friend Deborah will inevitably be more cognizant of the construction of a

fine short story than I will. It may be hard to sing the praises of a short story or sculpture to those who haven't had the time, coaching or hands-on experience to figure these things out for themselves. It takes time to learn to ride, to read, to feel form in space. It may be that some will never be pulled into any given art form's orbit, just as I seem immune to poetry, and have no gift whatsoever for writing music. Given the right teacher, I might have discovered hidden talents or interests, but as it stands, no poems, no tunes spontaneously emerge from my brain pan. That doesn't keep me from enjoying the roughly four hundred hours of classical music I have on iTunes.

The power I initially addressed can manifest in words, in music, in dusty stone or powdered pigments, nor do I put much stock in *il paragone* tiffs about the superiority of any given artform. Not everything we hear or see at readings, in concert halls or museums will enchant us, and in fact may leave us cold. We live in fast forward, a problem compounded by a proliferation of digitalization, where images flatten the world visually and emotionally, seemingly superannuating touch itself. Should those kids in the Natural History Museum have stood back and appreciated Mangbetu Woman as a sculpture, and kept their greasy little hands to themselves? Should they have waited for their teacher to explain who she was, and even explicate her as a work of art? Not at all. They acted on an eminently understandable and admirable desire. A desire to bond, to touch, to be touched. Cogitation may not have entered into it, nor a need to label those majestic thrusting forms as breasts. The youngsters may have shared Pygmalion's love of his creation, Galatea. In Ovid's myth, Venus takes pity on the sculptor, so when Pygmalion kisses Galatea's cold ivory lips, they warm to life.

I would propose that more than one thing is going on in this myth, just as a story can work on a number of levels. First, Galatea manages to transcend her rough material, and becomes endowed with a form of life, a woman worth loving.





This resembles the way I first reacted to Rodin's charming clay girl, feeling a very human attraction. Then there's Pygmalion and his proprioception as he projects himself into his material, corporeally sensing and identifying with the forms he sculpts. And third, we have Venus as an unknowable mystery, the factor that mysteriously lets the figure become "a sculpture." This transformation is very difficult to describe, where an object gains independence, leaves behind content and stands as form in space. While this new entity draws us in, it ultimately becomes indifferent to our presence, self-Minoan_-_Sealstone_of_a_Bull.tif sufficient, almost an act of nature. Returning to Malvina Hoffman's bronze bust, consider this three-in-one-ness. Either consciously or not, children react to her as a woman, Galatea being summoned to life by the touching, almost kissing, adulation of those shiny breasts. But like Hoffman herself, the kids may be responding viscerally, feeling their weight, their lilt in space, as sculptural forms echoing their own bodies. And, Venus-like, the piece itself can transcend figuration and become an abstract concert of forms in space, sharing some of the logic behind African art as well as that of her contemporary, Constantine Brancusi. Hoffman may have been fortunate in encountering such a headdress, but knew she'd hit pay dirt in sculptural terms, not descriptively but as a major thrust into space, the

back rhythmically echoing the front. The very best sculpture asks to be taken in on more than one level, as well as asking us to spend serious time with some individual piece that calls to us, resonating for reasons we may or may not be able to articulate. Venus, or something godlike, may be lurking in your presence. Find the tactile in the act of seeing, and be touched, as I am, by wonder.

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