

When sculpture became more than ‘something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting’

Review of:

Christopher R. Marshall (ed.), *Sculpture and the Museum*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2011, 265 pp., 63 b. & w. illus., £55.00, hdbk, ISBN 978-1-4094-0910-6



Figure 1 Braccio Nuovo, Musei Vaticani, designed by Raffaele Stern, 1817-22. Photo © Alinari, Florence

As Christopher Marshall states in his excellent introduction to this volume ‘sculpture played a leading role as a means of articulating the museum’s grandest vision of itself as the eternal custodian of the highest expressions of culture and even of civilization itself.’ Certainly the earliest collections of classical and modern sculpture, formed by Renaissance patricians and ecclesiasts in Rome from the late 15th century onwards, reached their most glorious manifestation in the papal collections that were installed at the Vatican – in the Belvedere courtyard and the Braccio Nuovo- and eventually, in the Capitoline Museums. In these arrangements sculpture, and not painting, served as the direct link to an exemplary classical past. Archeological discoveries, antique *spoglia* and neo-classical revivals are central to these installations, and not simply inserted, as if an afterthought, between the displays of paintings or placed as decorative additions on furniture. Royal, princely and aristocratic galleries of ancient and modern sculpture came to mimic and challenge the stature and importance of these papal and ecclesiastical collections; to

name just a handful, Cosimo I de' Medici's antiquities collection, memorably installed in the Tribuna at the Uffizi and at the Museo Archeologico in Florence; the Grimani collection in Venice; Wilhelm V Wittelsbach's Antiquarium in Munich; the French royal collections, which form the basis of the Louvre's antiquities collections; the Duke of Northumberland's sculpture hall at Syon House, and even Charles Townley's collection of marbles, as captured in Johan Zoffany's painting.

By contrast this series of essays, based on the papers delivered at a conference on display held at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds in 2007, and which form part of the HMI's series, SUBJECT/OBJECT: NEW STUDIES IN SCULPTURE, addresses not those exclusive, and often private, collections, but those planned for public access, that often were formed along strictly didactic principles or even situated within the very locus of learning. Steeped in the pedagogic fervour of the 19th-century public museum, sculpture— whether original or a copy— was employed as a tool for the larger goal of instruction and enlightenment. Furthermore, it often served as means of self-aggrandizement and barely veiled self-promotion, for the sculptor as much as for the benefactor. Yet by the end of the 20th century, and certainly in the last ten or so years, the nature of sculpture, and by consequence the nature of its display (the rejection of the pedestal, the disappearance of form) has altered so fundamentally that the chapters that book-end this volume can hardly be recognized as relating to the same topic. The essays document evolving concerns about the display of sculpture over an arc of some two hundred years, and provide a fascinating overview of how much the role and meaning of sculpture within the confines of the museum continues to change.

The volume is divided into three parts, and this provides an over-arching organizational structure to the essays. The first section deals with the museums and the sculptor's legacy, and covers topics ranging from the preservation of a sculptor's oeuvre, either through the direct intervention of the artist himself and his heirs (as is the case of the supremely political Canova); to the decision by John Flaxman's sister-in-law to donate a large number of his plasters and related drawings to University College, London, rather than to a museum; to the frankly commercial enterprise of the Musée Rodin in Paris flooding the market with contemporary casts of Rodin's works. The second section is concerned with the changing attitudes to the status of sculptures in museums, following the vicissitudes of a handful of sculptures through the waxing and waning of their status within a given institution. The last section addresses the challenges of displaying new and experiential sculpture in spaces ranging from the Duveen Galleries at the Tate Gallery, Millbank, to the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, to interventions in a range of museological environments.

In the opening essay, Johannes Myssok accounts for the fluctuating critical fortune of Europe's most renowned 18th-century sculptor when competing agendas come into play. At the end of his career Canova's last studio in Rome represented not only a showroom for prospective patrons, but a proto-museum with a curated display of highly finished, large-scale plasters. Suppressing from public scrutiny

evidence of the messier, creative process, the sculptor stored his *bozzetti* and drawings out of sight, and actively intervened in editing the historical accounts of his career. After his death, in Rome he was hailed as the nation's religious sculptor, in contrast to Venice's claim to him as their national artist. Myssok traces the complicated history of the transformation of Canova's original intentions for the Tempio and the Gypsoteca in Possagno through the intervention of his half-brother and heir, Giambattista Sartori-Canova, whose religious agenda differed from the sculptor's own posthumous intentions. By locating the principal shrine to Canova in Possagno, rather than in Rome, the memory of the "new Phidias" also increasingly faded from public memory. But Carlo Scarpa's 1955 extension to the Gypsoteca, and the architect's rearrangement of the collection, has prompted what Myssok describes as a 'rediscovery of the artist as a master of form,' and as 'modern artist.' One might wonder, nonetheless, whether visitors to Possagno come principally to see Canova's works or to study Scarpa's most renowned and successful architectural achievement.

Students at University College, London, may unintentionally chance upon the elegant display in the Octagon of John Flaxman's plasters. Through the donation in 1847 of a large number of his plasters and related drawings, Maria Denman, the sculptor's sister-in-law and adopted daughter, ensured that his works would remain publically visible and central to the life of the college. Characterizing the Flaxman Gallery by its 'in between-ness,' Pauline Ann Hoath examines how the plasters have retained a lively public presence and institutional significance at UCL (that 'Godless Institution in Gower Street,' as it has been called) that may have eluded both Canova's Gypsoteca and Thorvaldsen's Museum in Copenhagen, the two most comparable monographic museums. By contrast, the Musée Rodin in Paris was from the beginning central to the proscribed tourist route of any sculpture enthusiast. Acutely aware of his posthumous legacy, in 1916 Rodin wrote in a letter that 'I would like [my works] that exist only in plaster in Meudon to be cast in bronze in order to give my oeuvre an air of permanency.' It appears that successive directors and curators of the Musée Rodin took this aspiration very much to heart through a series of frankly entrepreneurial bronze casting campaigns of major and minor of Rodin's works. Not only would the museum's holdings profit, by building up a collection of some 454 bronzes, but it benefited financially from the sale of each bronze edition since these represented the museum's main source of income. Léonce Bénédite (1859-1925), the museum's first curator, actively sold works from the collection, and a potential conflict of interest was raised as early as 1919 when some of the trustees expressed concern at the overproduction of bronzes, since 'the public would be alarmed to see a profusion of the Master's work on the market.' In part because of the gift to Britain in 1914 of several of the sculptor's most influential works, including several sculptures not represented in France, and the series of bronzes made for a Japanese client (eventually diverted to Philadelphia), it was only in the 1970s that the Musée Rodin was able to build up its own comprehensive representation of the sculptor's work. And, as Antoinette Le Norman-Romain points

out, despite increasing criticism of the posthumous casts (a criticism that persists), the more “modern” aspects of Rodin’s sculptural style illustrated in his preparatory plasters have been rediscovered in the museum’s own holdings, and through landmark exhibitions such as *Rodin Rediscovered* (1981-82).

If one sculpture can stir up controversy and change the course of a city’s self-image, then Henry Moore’s *Warrior with Shield* (1953-54) represents that work for Toronto. The Art Gallery of Ontario’s acquisition of this sculpture in 1955 represents a controversial rite of passage for the city’s transformation from a cultural backwater to the more sophisticated and enlightened modern city to which many of its civic leaders aspired. Sarah Stanners’ essay tracks the attempts of members of Toronto’s cultural elite to court Henry Moore, who capitalized on this attention as a means of exerting pressure on the Tate, to whom he planned to donate his collection: ‘I’d like the sculpture to go to London, for sentimental reasons but offers from someone else might help the Tate Gallery to make up its mind.’ Without sufficient support in London (partly through lack of space to house the collection at the Tate), the largest collection of Henry Moore sculpture, maquettes, and drawings outside Britain ended up at the AGO, in the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre, a dedicated purpose-built gallery. Thus, London’s loss was Toronto’s gain, and it remains the sacred cow of the museum, untouched in the recent reorganization of the museum. Its symbolic meaning for the city has recently been underscored in Simon Starling’s *Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore)* (2006-08), a version of Moore’s work covered in zebra mussels through submersion in the harbour. Thus ‘Moore, like the zebra mussels, has grown to become over the decades a dominant presence in an alien environment.’ The importance of sculpture for a city’s self-image was also felt in Boston in the late 19th century. Today we seek the authentic in art, but such notions of authenticity were not as compelling in the formation of the sculpture collection at the Museum of Fine Arts. Following the pedagogic model of the South Kensington Museum, and with an almost non-existent collection of sculpture available for the museum, one of the MFA’s founders, Charles Callahan Perkins, declared that: ‘Original works of art being out of our range on account of their rarity and excessive costliness (...) we are limited to the acquisitions of reproductions in plaster and other analogous materials of architectural fragments, statues (...) which are nearly as perfect as the originals from which they are taken, and quite as useful for our purposes.’ Perkins’ philosophy and his mingling of reproductions with historical and contemporary sculpture were challenged by the arrival from England of Matthew S. Prichard, who urged the display of original works of art over reproductions. Moreover, in what must be one of the most candid of museum labels, he insisted that casts be labelled: ‘THE ORIGINAL DOES NOT LOOK LIKE THIS.’ With the addition of Quincy Adam Shaw’s collection, which included Donatello’s *Madonna of the Clouds*, the MFA’s collection achieved the stature for which it is now renowned. Cambareri’s account of the various approaches to display of this collection brings to light the fascinating changes of attitude by successive directors and curators to sculpture and the “decorative arts” -

a discussion that persists to this day.

Such issues did not pertain to George Grey Barnard's *Struggle of the Two Natures in Man*, acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1896. Yet the struggle referred to in this monumental group's title is symptomatic of the challenge to find the sculpture a fitting display at the museum. Despite Barnard's report that Rodin himself had 'overpraised' the sculpture when it was shown at the Paris Salon at the Champs de Mars in 1894, American critics reacted more negatively, claiming its title to be 'portentous' (Lorado Taft, 1900), or stating that 'Memories of Angelo and Rodin come faintly to me, but not positive enough to compensate for the disappointment of the weak work...' (John Quincy Adams Ward, 1896). Based on research undertaken for a systematic catalogue of the American sculpture collection at the Metropolitan, Thayer Tolles traces the fall in and out of favour of this oversized neo-Renaissance group. Happily, this has recently culminated in its restoration to public prominence in the newly completed American Art Wing.

No greater fall from favor could be exemplified than that of Malvina Hoffman's controversial series, the Races of Mankind, commissioned during the 1930s by the Field Museum in Chicago. Responding to Louis Mumford's recommendations in his essay, 'The Marriage of Museum' (1918), about the advantages of active education, this series was intended to represent a more lively and artistic alternative to the dry historical displays characteristic of natural history museums. Though beloved by generations of Chicagoans, their dubious 'anthropological' characterization led to their discreet removal from display in 1969. Paradoxically, that same year, eleven plaster full-size replicas of representations of several African cultures from Hoffman's series were sent on short-term loan to the newly formed Malcolm X College in Chicago. There they fulfilled an educational mission outlined by the college's president, Charles Hurst. Yet despite the original agreement for these to be lent temporarily, the group remained until 2003 when their racial relevance to the college no longer pertained. Back at the Field Museum the display of several bronzes from the series along the upper floor of the museum satisfies the public demand to see these sculptures, whilst nonetheless divorcing them from their problematic original context within the museum.

In the case of an Ancient Indian bronze discovered in 1861, the Sultanganji Buddha, Suzanne MacLeod has restored the monumental bronze to its art historical place through a detailed scrutiny of the sculpture's display history at various Birmingham institutions. The earlier failure to grasp its importance resulted from what MacLeod characterizes as a separate "regime of truth" generated by art-historians about the Sultanganj Buddha over the course of the twentieth century, which would 'disempower the Buddha and counter any claim to sculptural significance or nomenclature of "art".' This resulted in the shunting of the sculpture around several museum locations in Birmingham, before its present installation in the Buddha Gallery at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, where, in the company of other objects celebrating Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism, the sculpture has become a focal point for local Buddhist communities. Ironically,

having now found its proper artistic context, it has also taken on a quasi-religious significance for the contemporary visitor.

In the final section dealing with the challenges of displaying new sculpture, Christopher Marshall's account of the troubled history of the Duveen Sculpture Galleries, inaugurated in 1937 at what was then the National Gallery, Millbank (now Tate Britain), reveals the dangers of relying on private patronage to fund construction of a public museum space— a danger made even more manifest when that patron is Joseph Duveen the Younger (1869-1939). With the need to house the collection of modern foreign sculpture recently transferred from the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection, including the Rodin bequest of 1914, tensions brewed between the director's aim for a more modernist space (citing Ragnar Östberg's Stockholm Town Hall as a model) and Duveen's desire for a more grandiose space. Finally, Duveen's appointment of John Russell-Pope, the 'star architect' of his generation and architect of the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, led to the imposing neo-classical galleries we see to this day. However, with their monumental limestone walls (reminiscent of the ground-floor sculpture galleries at the National Gallery of Art), from the beginning these galleries have presented a challenge for the installation of sculpture - a concern that eluded or was positively ignored by both Duveen and Russell-Pope, but which was immediately picked up by the press. Successive generations of directors and curators have tried to mitigate the overwhelming spaces by installing baffle walls and small show cases, until finally 'binding together... the "contemporary" and "historic"' through the interventions of contemporary sculptors, such as Richard Long and Rebecca Horn, during the 1990s. (fig. 2)



Figure 2 Duveen Sculpture Gallery, installation view of *Rebecca Horn* exhibition, 1994-95.

Photo © Tate Archive

These are the precursors to the renowned *Unilever Series* at Tate Modern. That series,

initiated in 2000, has contributed to the museum's phenomenal success and astounding visitor numbers. Central to this success is the great Turbine Hall. Like some futurist vision of Piranesi's *carceri*, this vast, industrial space has represented a challenge to the artists invited to contribute to the series. Some have responded by scaling up their works to colossal size (Whiteread, Kapoor) or by reducing the 'viewer to a Lilliputian stature,' as one critic observed, through shrinking their installation within it (Ondák); as Marshall points out, all of the artists have responded to the challenge of Gulliver versus Lilliputian. Even in the reduced-scale model for Eliasson's *The Weather Project* –the installation that most clearly appears to ignore scale by literally being an ethereal atmosphere within it– a giant human is squeezed into a 'Wendy House' of the Turbine Hall. (fig. 3)



Figure 3 Olafur Eliasson, Model for *The Weather Project*, 2003. Photo: Studio Olafur Eliasson © 2003 Olafur Eliasson

The final essay in this volume addresses interventions in both ethnographic and art museums. Embracing a post-colonial stance and adopting a torturous art-historical jargon, this rambling essay represents the exception within a volume of

well-researched and structured case studies. The quote that introduces the last essay sums up the problematic issue: 'The moment we turn our mind to the future, we are no longer concerned with the "objects" but with *projects*.' Yet, without the object there is no display, and therefore no topic.

This volume will become a standard reference work on the topic, and joins the increasingly large literature on the subject of display. The bibliography listed after each essay is especially useful as a tool for further reading on each topic. By covering such a broad spectrum of collections over a two-hundred-year period, the essays also remind the reader of the importance that sculpture has occupied in museum displays since the advent of the public museum, whether installed in discrete sculpture galleries, or integrated into a contextualized installation together with paintings and applied art, despite the fact that it might be 'something you bump into when you back up to look at a painting.'

Antonia Boström is Senior Curator of Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the J. Paul Getty Museum

abostrom@getty.edu