

SCULPTURE OFF THE PEDESTAL

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MONUMENTS AND THEIR MAKERS

JOAN B. ALTABE



Universal-Publishers
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Sculpture Off the Pedestal: Monuments and Their Makers

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FOREWORD

Twenty years ago, Joan Altabe, in her first interview with me about my sculpture, referred to me as an aesthete; I believe the exact words were, “spoken like a true aesthete.” I had recently finished graduate school and moved to Sarasota, Florida with my family to start teaching sculpture at the Ringling College of Art and Design. I did not know who this woman was.

Looking back, among other things, I *was* an aesthete, but until that time no one had pointed it out to me. Apart from making me choose my words more carefully, Joan Altabe’s writing and criticism has always surprised me. Joan takes what you think you know about an artist and makes you see it through her perspective, which is what I suppose all authors and critics try to do.

In *Sculpture Off the Pedestal*, Joan starts with a selection of the old masters of sculpture, beginning in the Quattrocento with the competition in Florence between Ghiberti and Brunelleschi for the baptismery doors. Somehow you just know that Joan still takes umbrage about the selection of Ghiberti over Brunelleschi, and had she been on the selection committee, the history of art might be different.

Joan Altabe cares deeply about what she writes and absolutely cannot do otherwise. In this book you get 25 of the best sculptors of all time, who come alive for you. Joan’s dry wit and intelligence en-

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hance the carefully researched and factual information, but for me that is beside the point. Even her selection of the modern masters is intriguing.

Why select Duchamp but not Picasso? Where is David Smith, Giacometti, or even Anthony Caro? Lists always reveal their authors. Cornell, Archipenko, and Nevelson, who are vastly underrepresented in most texts, are included along with many others who should be in the canon. What Joan finds interesting about these sculptors *is* interesting, particularly off the pedestal.

MARK ANDERSON
Sculpture professor,
Ringling College of Art and Design

INTRODUCTION

Leonardo da Vinci didn't think much of sculpture. No surprise there. The man was a painter. But his low opinion of the art form was pretty low. In his *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, he wrote:

“I am content to pronounce between painting and sculpture; saying that painting is the more beautiful and the more imaginative and the more copious, while sculpture is the more durable but it has nothing else.”¹

This from a former apprentice to sculptor Andrea di Cioni (nickname Verrocchio, meaning “true eye”). Unwittingly, Leonardo may have explained his disregard for sculpture when he called himself “omo senza lettere” – a man without letters.²

My experience with sculpture began in childhood, and it taught me a different lesson. A life-size bronze of Joan of Arc by Anna Hyatt Huntington, the first equestrian statue by a woman - rising tall in her stirrups in full battle gear, sword outstretched - stood at the foot of my street where I lived on Riverside Drive in Manhattan. Seeing it outdoors against the sun setting behind the Hudson Palisades, rather than in a museum where most art of consequence is seen, added to its momentous effect.

At first, I didn't like it. When I was in grade school, Huntington's work filled me with fear. She didn't mince hoofs: Her steed,

prancing, rearing - nostrils flaring, mane and tail flying - is intensely fiery. But when I was in secondary school, the statue changed in my eyes from scary to stirring. Visiting it dared me, spurred me on. The Maid of Orleans and the horse had turned beautiful.

Clearly, Huntington's effort was about more than "durability." To get the image just right, she made seven clay models ranging from little to life-sizes. She also consulted a medieval art expert to get the armor just right.

And she worked from a nude model to get armor to sit properly on the body. All of which earned the artist a first-place award at a 1910 exhibit in Paris until the judges took the award back, saying it was too good to have been sculpted by a woman.

But that's another story. The stories in *Sculpture Off the Pedestal* are about the works and words of 25 of the world's leading sculptors, from early Renaissance to modern times.

Each sculptor gets a write-up about his or her work. And each gets a section called "off the pedestal," which takes into account the thinking or feeling behind the work. This is gleaned either from the artists' writing or from that of their contemporaries.

But first, consider the section to follow called "Variations on a Theme."

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Through time, sculptors have been moved to tackle the same subjects, though not unexpectedly, with different outcomes. Besides being different people, one from the other, their times play a part. Even in the same artist's life, styles can vary.

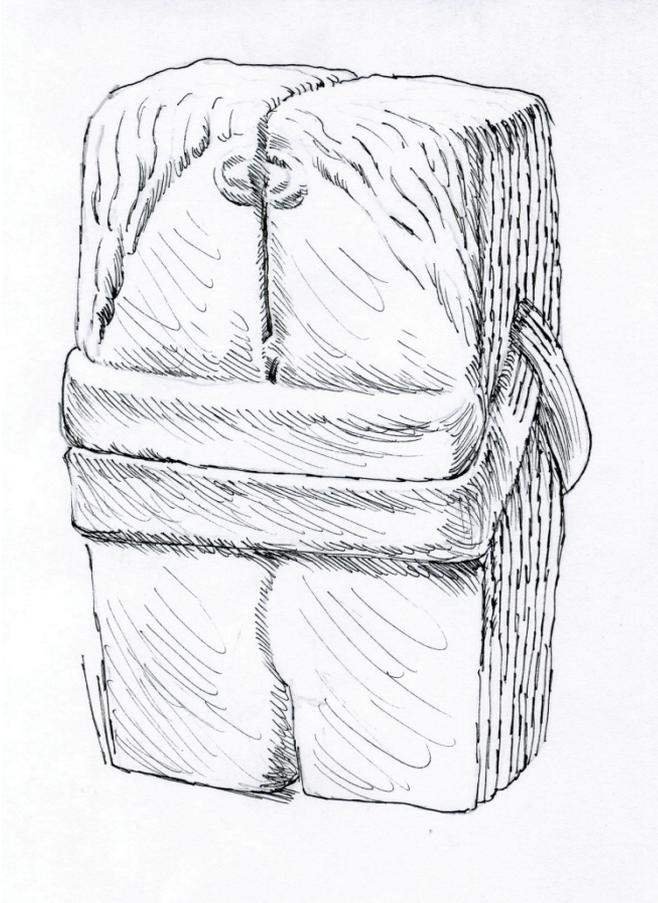
Michelangelo's bronze relief "Mary of the Stairs," for example, shows Mary holding a decidedly muscular Infant to her chest, indicating that she is nursing Him. An iconic scene of motherhood, the sculpture also tells the story of divine devotion, as if it were an earthly one. Such naturalism strengthens the illusion that a real woman is interacting with her child. And when she interacts, you become involved, too.

In contrast, Michelangelo's "Pieta," executed only eight years after "Mary of the Stairs," presents a different image of motherhood with the same figures. The child's pudgy hands are now an adult's pierced by nails. And Mary cradles her Son now crucified, no longer well-fed, but wasted.

A good example of time rearing its game-changing head lies in the difference between Rodin's "The Kiss" and Brancusi's work of the same name. Rodin's version shows a forward motion of the woman, suggesting she is taking the initiative, down to draping a leg over that of her lover.



“The Kiss” by Rodin



“The Kiss” by Brancusi

In Brancusi’s rendition the figures are so simplified and so enmeshed, they’re practically indistinguishable.

Not that time always changes things. There are sculptors who borrow styles from time past. The introspective head-down gesture in Maillol’s “Night” resembles Michelangelo’s figure of night in his sculpture of “Night and Day,” executed 475 years earlier. The fact that both artists interpret night as a woman also is notable.



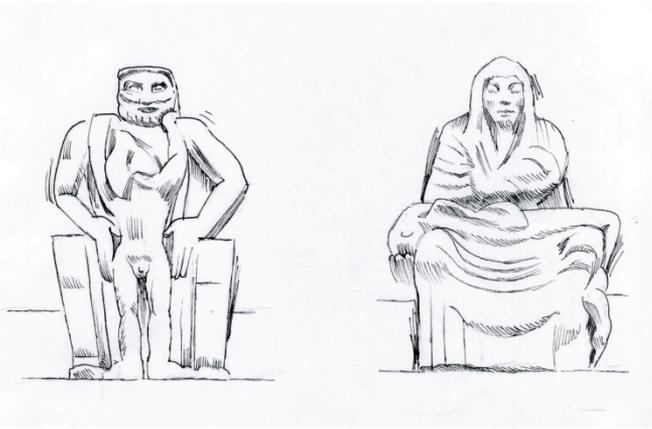
“Night” by Maillol



“Night” by Michelangelo

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In contrast, Epstein's depiction of "Day and Night" is a sign of his time. Made some 400 years after Michelangelo's "Day and Night," Epstein's did what a lot of modernists did: he dipped back to cultures beyond Europe – in his case, to Assyrian art with a little of the Old Nile Sphinx thrown in.



"Day and Night" by Jacob Epstein



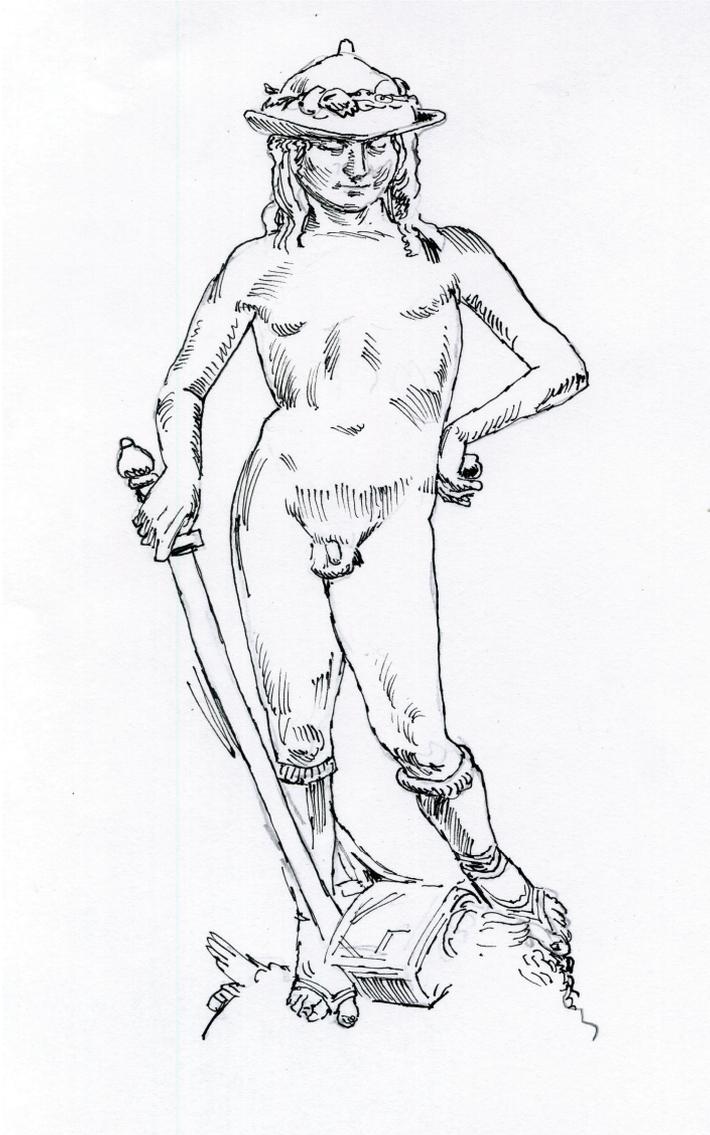
“Day” by Michelangelo

Michelangelo’s “Day” and Epstein’s (the figure on the left of his work) are as different as day and night.

And while some 60 years separate Donatello’s “David” and Michelangelo’s “David,” they describe the Biblical hero in similar ways.



“David” by Michelangelo



“David” by Donatello

Even though Donatello shows David after slaying Goliath and Michelangelo shows him before, each “David” is nude to convey vulnerability. Each also is the picture of nonchalance to show the menacing Philistine what courage looks like.

War is another subject that has inspired sculptors, and the time of war seems to matter.

Felix Deweldon’s statue of five marines and a Navy corpsman raising the flag on Iwo Jima, installed near Arlington National Cemetery, memorializes World War II.

Not far from the statue stands homage to the Viet Nam War: Maya Lin’s long black marble wall, half-buried in the earth and inscribed with the names of the dead and missing.

The difference between the two memorials is more than stylistic. It demonstrates the change in our way of viewing war. While Deweldon saw his work as a “symbol of our freedom,” Lin saw her work as an emblem of a second kind: “I had an impulse to cut open the earth, an initial violence that in time would heal, The grass would grow back, but the cut would remain.” Clearly, visual art is a silent witness to changing time.

THE OLD MASTERS

Besides the revived interest in the teachings of ancient Greece and Old Rome, the Renaissance was about new learning. An invention by Renaissance sculptor Filippo Brunelleschi makes the point. Prompted by the ancient Greco-Roman zeal for knowledge, Brunelleschi made a discovery in 1420. It was so important that it served painters and sculptors through four centuries afterwards. The discovery was a way to show depth on a flat surface, known today as one-point or linear perspective.¹

Leone Battista Alberti, a scholar and a colleague of Brunelleschi's, described the method in a treatise on painting in 1435² - the main idea being the use of a single vanishing point where the eye can no longer see. Picture-parts intended to appear in the distance are drawn in diminishing sizes to give the illusion that they are moving back and ultimately disappearing. Like receding railroad tracks, the reduced sizes of the objects are set along the viewer's sight lines to the vanishing point. Presto: the illusion of a third dimension.

Praising Brunelleschi for coming up with this new method, painter Antoni Averline, a.k.a. Filarete, said that Brunelleschi outdid the ancients: "The ancients, while very subtle, never understood perspective."³

Given the Renaissance artists' desire to illustrate Bible stories in a naturalistic style, historians agree that finding a defined way to repre-

sent near and far in art was inevitable. Rather than use symbols to tell Biblical stories, as artists did in the Middle Ages, artists of the 15th century - particularly painters – sought a way to represent three dimensions on their two-dimensional picture planes. The unexpected part of this history is that a sculptor rather than a painter discovered the necessary method.

Linear perspective served sculptors as much as painters. Brunelleschi applied it to bas relief (a form of sculpture in which figures project only slightly from the background to create believable foregrounds and backgrounds).⁴

Relief sculpture in the Middle Ages didn't try for depth any greater than the actual depth of the stone carving. But thanks to Brunelleschi, relief sculpture in the Renaissance began to take after the three-dimensional look in painting. Stone carvers modeled their figures against backgrounds in lower relief, which looked as if the backgrounds were actually receding. Before Brunelleschi's discovery, artists were only able to suggest near and far by overlapping figures, a system that created confusion.⁵

Just how important was Brunelleschi's contribution? It's been called the single most important artistic breakthrough of the Renaissance in painting. According to historian Paul Robert Walker, it's no exaggeration to say that without Brunelleschi's formulations of perspective, there would have been no Renaissance in painting at the time and place that it occurred. And there would have been no painting in the Renaissance at all until someone else discovered what Brunelleschi discovered – linear perspective.⁶

British art historian Sister Wendy Beckett has pointed out how Renaissance art stressed the human drama in the Bible by showing its characters in a natural way, as solid-looking human figures:

“The great influence of sculpture in early Renaissance painting and inherently the development of Western tradition in painting cannot be overstressed.”⁷

An example is the painting of Massaccio, deemed the father of the Renaissance for emphasizing the weight and bulk of figures. His understanding of three-dimensional form and perspective owed a great debt to the scientific achievements that Brunelleschi pioneered.

Sculptural realities lie at the heart of Renaissance painting, reaching its zenith in the monumentality of Michelangelo's art. ⁸



FILIPPO BRUNELLESCHI (1377-1446)

Brunelleschi did more than invent a way to show depth through the mechanics of perspective. He also was good at conveying feeling in his work. In 1401, a call from the Merchant Guild of Florence went out to local sculptors to create the scene of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac for the bronze Baptistry doors of the Florence Cathedral. Seven Tuscan artists were chosen and given an allotment for a year to do the job. Brunelleschi was one of them. Vasari said that Brunelleschi's interpretation, titled "The Sacrifice of Isaac," deserved the highest praise. ¹

The scene that Brunelleschi set takes place on two horizontal levels, as if one was upstairs and the other was downstairs with the main action above and the bystanders below.

Brunelleschi portrayed Abraham as a figure towering over his small son, who is shown, nude - likely to further dramatize the boy's vulnerability. (Never mind that Isaac was in his 30s at the time. Representing him as a boy heightened the drama). Abraham holds him by the chin, as though to better expose his neck for the axe. Historians Peter and Linda Murray reason that Abraham may be holding his son's jaw to cut off the flow of oxygen so he wouldn't feel the fatal blow. ² You see Abraham driving the knife blade forward with such forceful intent that an angel must grab his wrists to stop him. The sharp angle of the angel swooping from heaven, reaching to stay the execution, intensifies the drama.

The other figures in the scene - a sheep, a donkey, and a pair of servants - are set at angles. And they are contorted to stress the discomfort of the scene, which appears to explode from the panel. The idea was to break through the edges of the Gothic quatrefoil that would contain it. With all the angles and movement, Brunelleschi's version was considered the more dramatic and disturbing than all the other entries. ³

Even so, Brunelleschi didn't win the competition. Lorenzo Ghiberti did. While both sculptors broke from the static compositional formulae of the day, Brunelleschi's effort was thought the more radical because his figures weren't integrated into the scene.⁴

The judges thought so well of Brunelleschi's work, however, that they asked him if he would work with Lorenzo on the doors.⁵ Brunelleschi refused. According to the judges' representatives, Brunelleschi wanted no part of a job he didn't have complete control over. If he couldn't have it, the job could go to Ghiberti, as far as he was concerned.⁶ He gave his bronze to Cosimo de Medici, who placed it in the old sacristy of San Lorenzo, at the back of the altar. Today, it can be seen in the National Museum of the Bargello in Florence, right next to Ghiberti's panel, where it is plain to see how much more dramatic and disturbing is Brunelleschi's version.

In 1415, Brunelleschi carved and painted a crucifixion in wood that proved to be his last sculpture.⁷ He dedicated the rest of his work to architecture. The wood work shows sword-thin Christ with a sinewy neck and arms so thin, they look squeezed from a pastry tube. He is held up by bolts in his open hands and crossed feet, which knock his knees together in a tight knot, adding to the awkwardness of his position. While the work is the image of agony, the face of Christ remains calm. The way his best friend, sculptor Donatello (Donato di Niccolo) reacted to Brunelleschi's crucifixion, it's clear that the world lost a master sculptor when he switched to architecture.

OFF THE PEDESTAL

When fellow sculptor Donatello carved a wooden crucifix, he asked Brunelleschi for his opinion. It wasn't favorable. Brunelleschi said it looked like a peasant hanging on the cross. Angered, Donatello told him, "Get some wood and do it yourself."

Apparently, we would never have the carved crucifix (on view in Florence's Santa Maria Novella) if it weren't for Donatello's lost temper. Brunelleschi's crucifixion was so beautiful to Donatello that he stopped short in his tracks, dropping a load of eggs he was carrying,

transfixed by Brunelleschi's artistry. Donatello, admitting that his work was outdone, called the Brunelleschi crucifixion "a miracle."⁸

Brunelleschi's secret to the "miracle" work may be found in his remark: "Only the artist, not the fool, discovers that which naturally hides."⁹

A true Renaissance man, Brunelleschi also wrote poetry. The following sonnet was written in response to a mocking sonnet from humanist scholar Giovanni di Gherardo da Prato.¹⁰ The scholar attacked Brunelleschi as "a pit of ignorance," and called him "a miserable beast and imbecile" for thinking that uncertain things can be made visible. "There is no substance to your alchemy," he said.

Brunelleschi wrote:

When hope is given us by Heaven,
 O you ridiculous-looking beast,
 We rise above corruptible matter
 And gain the strength of clearest right.
 A fool will lose what hope he has,
 For all experience disappoints him.
 For wise men nothing that exists
 Remains unseen, they do not share
 The idle dreams of would-be scholars,
 Only the artist, not the fool
 Discovers that which nature hides
 Therefore untangle the web of your verses,
 Lest they strike sour notes in the dance
 When you're 'impossible' comes to pass.



LORENZO Ghiberti (1376-1455)

His bronze-work of Abraham sacrificing Isaac is the one that triumphed over Brunelleschi's version in an historic competition. Reportedly, a big plus in the minds of the judges was the way Ghiberti unified his figures. Despite the large number of animals and people, they come together in a smooth composition. As well, his representation of a soaring angel gives the flat surface depth.