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THE ROMANTICS TO RODIN

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Sculpture abounded by the late nineteenth-century in France.

Despite a formidable output in a time and place we fancy we know well, and indeed despite the excellence of much of the work, it remains largely unfamiliar. "The Romantics to Rodin: French Nineteenth-Century Sculpture from North American Collections,"* organized by Peter Fusco and H. W. Janson, brings together a rich sampling of this sculpture, (over two hundred works by fifty-eight artists) and should do much to reinstate it. Being confronted with this wonderful array of both monumental (in reduced versions) and more personal works produced over a goodly span of time, the viewer may perceive it, quite properly, in terms of general artistic production, a cultural phenomenon fulfilling societal needs and desires of diverse orders.

"Statuomanie" -- a mania of sculpture -- was a term invented to describe the proliferation of large-scale work in public places. Sculpture often the visual foci in city plans, was the embodiment of sanctioned concepts and official goals that all might see. In countless gardens and smaller squares homage was done history's and society's great personages; the number alone of commemorative monuments seems a self-congratulatory testimonial to cultural -- if it could not be to political -- continuity and the society's greatness. Sculpture was also enjoyed as a gracious visual and material embellishment -- the extent of exterior

* In Los Angeles until May 25, then traveling to Minneapolis, Detroit, and Indianapolis.

sculptural decoration was one way to tell a first class apartment building. Reduced versions of monumental works were frequently available for private acquisition as was a great deal of other sculpture, often produced in extended editions in a choice of size, material, and finish. Sculpture, contrived to appeal and to sell, to thrill, to reassure, and to be understood, often bore spare meanings, literate but not intellectually freighted, as sharply delimited as the sculptural presences themselves frequently were. Sculpture pleased through sentiment, its expressive humanity, its sensuality, directly through the physical materials used, and its workmanship. Meaning was usually bound up with the physical object which was often illustrative of an idea -- in this respect it was an art far different from most of that of our own day and the renegade nineteenth-century painting long studied.

But we have emerged from old trenches and have come to consider the special intricacies of painting of the nineteenth-century -- themes and content, public, official and salon art and bourgeois taste -- and now we must consider these questions further and a good deal more, as we must put sculpture into the art hopper.

For the past ten years French nineteenth-century sculpture increasingly has been studied (the authors of several doctoral dissertations are among the contributors to the present catalogue and mainly desist from unduly championing their artists), bought (a number of works in the exhibition are recent arrival to these shores), and displayed in excellent small (Ruth Butler's 1971 "Nineteenth Century French Sculpture: Monuments for the Middle Class") fascinating ("Metamorphoses in Nineteenth-Century Sculpture" at the Fogg, 1975), exhibitions.

A special strength of "The Romantics to Rodin," exhibition is the guidance provided to a better understanding of the variety of work via an installation marked by intelligence and wit (by Peter Fusco in Los Angeles), and a book-size catalogue that includes deft and excellent contributions by a number of the most knowledgeable scholars in this relatively unworked field. The catalogue enlarges on attendant issues and provides new axes of appreciation in a series of often spirited essays and will be of lasting value. Though some essays suffer somewhat from a lack of strong resolution because the themes laid out are simply too vast and complex, among the many contributors writing on what they know very well are Ruth Butler, June Hargrove, Gerald Ackerman. Most will know the exhibition through the catalogue; it is a pity there is no lasting record of the installation (a videotape pocketed with the catalogue?) from which one gains so much.

The rich sampling of works displayed in Los Angeles in a large space replete with palms and pedestals suggesting nineteenth-century Salon exhibitions, was introduced by a reduced version of Bartholdi's colossus, Liberty Enlightening the World ("The Statue of Liberty,") emblematic of France's gift to North America. Works were arranged not according to one schema, though sculpture by a single artist tended to be together, but in carefully phrased groups that propose, as the French say, numerous aspects of interest and encourage a rich interplay of ideas -- both particularly important at this stage of discovery. Thus, even though individual works were not all of the first importance, they contributed to the development of contexts of understanding.

Of prime importance, of course, is subject matter: portraits,

mythological, religious and allegorical works, each informed with peculiar nineteenth-century preoccupations and problems (how to make allegorical figures germane to present situations, for one) are presented. The many portraits, as an example, include busts, medallions, and small, full-length figures, historical figures and studies of exotic, ethnological types; and through the number alone we are led to contemplate the cultural need they satisfied. Moreover, certain figures are available in a number of versions for comparison: the newly popular Joan of Arc, delicate but armored, is represented by a number of finely fashioned examples. Rodin's Balzac (in a nude preliminary version, but already sporting a defiant air), was once rejected in favor of Falguière's sophisticated white marble head with its bemused expression; both are here and some caricatures of Balzac besides. The exhibition is generous enough and open-ended enough to include unusual works -- one of three portraits of Sarah Bernhardt is her own bizarre self-characterization as an ostrich-feathered vampire-like sphinx in the form of an inkwell -- and curiosities -- Willème's experimental wood photo-sculpture Bust of a Woman.

Rude's howling head of La Marseillaise, Barye's combating animals, Carpeaux' grimacing Ugolino and excitable genius of La Danse, a Degas dancer and wheeling horse -- the best-known sculpture in the context of the general production gathered really may be seen anew. Important but less familiar sculptors are represented by a range of work and we may note their special strengths: Dalou's sweet and self-possessed, comfortable women, Carrier-Belleuse's worldly and gleaming sculptural furnishings, and the particularity of expression in Falguière's stolid figures. A most important lesson, however, is how many projects, themes,

materials, sizes, and styles interested and were put to use by the professional nineteenth-century sculptor. Barye, for one, is represented, as we would expect, as the author of magnificent groups of fighting animals, but also a stately equestrian portrait, a fantastical abduction, and an elegantly archaizing Theseus poised à l'antique locked in embrace with the Minotaur, curious candalabra combining the grotesque and ideal, and an allegorical group.

Style may have been eclectic, but not haphazard. The Rococo revival of the 1860s and 70s influenced figure types ("le joli" or pretty) and mood (see Clésinger's Nymph and Satyr), and mannerism à la Fontainebleau seemed apt for architectural decoration. Barye's archaizing Theseus suggests the origins of the story, and as Ruth Butler points out, St. Theresa's ecstatic attitude is modeled on a style we know from sixteenth-century Spanish Baroque, an age of faith. Indeed, though works are grouped to encourage a multiplicity of contexts of understanding, large stylistic definitions and categorization by political periods are avoided.

Through the thoughtful clustering of work we are brought to see lines of progression in the articulation of formal motifs: Falguière's Hunting Nymph poised smilingly on one foot and Degas' the Grande Arabesque; Mercie's finely rendered Gloria Victis (Gustave Doré's Glory, illustrated in the catalogue), and Rodin's emphatic Call to Arms. Also by Doré (better known for his illustrations), is Acrobats (or Pyramide Humaine-Saltimbanques), with figures scrambling for position in a way that bears comparison to figures on Rodin's Gates of Hell begun in the same years.

One of the blessings, among many, conferred by the exhibition

is a better understanding of the generative currents around Rodin and his particular originality. His early Suzon, already activating surrounding space with her gaze, turned head, and half-opened mouth is shown alongside the politely contained Fantasy Bust after Mlle Sophie Croizette by Carrier-Belleuse, his teacher. (The last, represented by eleven works, has his own triumphs in the exhibition.) Though human and animal encounters and abductions (by fauns, centaurs, bears, and gorillas) is a curiously prevalent motif, a comparison of Clésinger's charming, neo-rococo Bacchante and Faun, playfully dallying and Rodin's abandonment of stylistic niceties in his unabashedly demanding Faun and frightened Nymph in Minotaur [!] Faun and Nymph is particularly informative. The exaggerations and adumbrations of forms in Rude's work and the sculptured caricatures by Dantan and Daumier may have prepared the way for Degas and Rodin to take their own expressive liberties. Unlike most other sculptors who insisted on full physical fact, Rodin synthesized and suggested. In most other works the surface is kept at a high degree of tension; in Rodin's, an inner tension bursts forth. Rodin controlled viewpoint and even sharpness of focus; he encapsulated and omitted. His extraordinary compositions with those of Préault (unfortunately his best works are not present) and Degas culminate an epoch in which we have seen bodies posed every which way.

Although efforts were made to show several versions and stages of development of sculpture -- a bronze sketch and a finished model of Carpeaux' Ugolino and His Sons, Falguière's Diana and Head of Diana (like a zoom lens view), Carrier-Belleuse's Diana Victorious (in marble and terracotta) -- more closely related exemplars illustrating more subtle variations in workmanship, quality and appearance such as

were brought together in the Fogg exhibition "Metamorphoses in Nineteenth-Century Sculpture" would have been instructive in terms of connoisseurship and pertinent. Certain production practices are discussed in the catalogue, notably in conjunction with Barye, Carpeaux, and Rodin, but in view of the surprising number of versions routinely turned-out (farmed out for manufacture) with new editions of each variant -- reduced and blown up versions in **several** sizes, excerpted figures and motifs -- motivated often by commercial exploitation not aesthetic invention, a detailed discussion would have been of service.

We are exposed to an astonishing diversity of sizes and scale -- table-top to life-size to reductions of colossi -- and a striking variety of materials. The reduced scale of many works raises questions about the effect of scale itself on meaning: violent animals become drawing room curiosities and sensual figures are literally reduced to sexual objects. Size underscores their role as objects, to be collected. But this is only one way the materiality of the sculpture is underscored. The sumptuousness and variety of materials and tended surfaces themselves charm and delight. Bronzes washed in silver, porcelain, terracotta, tinted ivory, marble, sundry patinas of bronzes, the tawny-veined jasper providing Cordier the stripes for his exotically costumed Negro -- all assert themselves with their own actuality and identity. In this company, the interest in and actuality of matière itself in Degas' Little Dancer, Fourteen Years Old, with real gauze tutu and ribbon (and originally also a wig), does not seem so unusual.

A compelling aspect of much of the work is its direct appeal even through pose, gaze, and composition, and a striving for immediacy and actuality that seems to increase towards the end of the century.

Complex compositions of multiple figures and elements often do not follow an a priori structure or, as noted, "time-honored" stances; in the interest of actuality figures tend to be lined up or, in the case of sensual figures, are put on display. In other instances, whether Barrias' The First Funeral or Rodin's Burghers of Calais with strewn-out figures, there is a paratactic rhythm which relates to twentieth-century work; figures are self-involved and isolated psychologically and this is made manifest in their physical isolation, woe for the sacra conversazione. Sometimes placement also was considered: Rodin's life-size Eve was to be exhibited on ground level with its low base hidden in the sand; Préault's Ophelia drowning (not exhibited) and Degas' woman in The Tub were to be placed to be viewed from above. The willful actuality of many works tends to belie our cherished notion of a necessary psychic distance to objects we would view as art. Gérôme's backward glancing life-like Ball Player merits comparison with Duane Hanson's super-real figures.

One of the most touching aspects of the exhibition, since we have broken with that tradition, is the great store put in the human presence, pushed to extremes in exhaustive numbers of poses, to embody so much meaning -- actual, mythological, religious and allegorical.

With so much riches it is ungrateful to find fault. But there are irritations: one is the propensity of some catalogue authors to second-guess the artist, suggesting how works might have been better or go too far rather than accepting them as given and explaining them as such. No essay really addresses itself to the works on hand. To begin to understand patterns of collecting French sculpture in North America, dates of arrival should have been included. Interpretations of eroticism

(open) run to the post-Freudian.

On the other hand, all kinds of new and important questions are broached -- such as the aptness of certain subjects for painting or sculpture. We may look forward now to making some real comparisons between painting and sculpture including a discussion of the differences of audience. Most important, through the present exhibition a vast group of work may be more readily enjoyed.