

APPRECIATING SCULPTURE

Prehistoric Sculpture.

Such primitive sculptures begin to appear in the paleolithic era (ending in about 10,000 BC). For example, there is the basalt figurine known as the Venus of Berekhat Ram, and a quartz figurine called the Venus of Tan-Tan. Both sculptures are probably over 200,000 years old, judging from carbon dating evidence. Later in the pre-history period, early humans like the Cro-Magnons began to produce simple carvings of birds, animals and other phenomena.

Small sculptures of obese females called 'venus figurines' have been unearthed at various Stone Age settlements around Europe. These figures were probably fertility symbols, and were carved from a variety of materials including clay, limestone and mammoth bone. These females all look very similar, wherever they've been found. During the Neolithic era, bronze sculptures began to appear in greater numbers, as the result of the development of more secure human settlements, which allowed for the expansion of smelting and metallurgy.

Ancient Egyptian Sculpture.

Ancient Egyptian sculptures were mostly linked to architecture and the building of temples and tombs. Temples were viewed as being the eternal resting places of the Gods. A statue of the God(s) would be hidden in the temple, within a series of closed halls, and viewed for a limited time by a select group of people. Tombs were full of sculptures; of pharaohs, their queens, and of other prominent officials.

Ancient Greek Sculpture.

Early Greek sculpture was very similar to that produced in Egypt, with a focus on rather stiff figures carved out of stone. However, a significant change came about in the Early Classical period, when more realistic sculptures began to be produced such as the Kritios Boy (c.480BC) which showed the male nude in the contrapposto position – weight resting on one leg, which is straight, with the other leg bent. This type of contrapposto male nude statue reached its apogee with Polykleitos's Spear Bearer (c.450-440BC).

Rome & Christianity.

Ancient Greek and pre-Christian Roman sculpture was produced for a variety of reasons: The figures were meant to honour the Gods, and to act as funerary items. They were also developed to celebrate the beauty of the nude body, and to emphasise the power and prestige of individual rulers. The emphasis changed to a degree with the advent of Christianity, when sculptures of warriors and Gods began to be replaced by statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

Medieval Sculpture, and Some Definitions.

Diptychs, with a religious theme, and carved in wood, ivory or other materials, were a very common feature of this time. These diptychs, and other carvings and sculptures, were reliefs

with scenes carved into a flat block, which stood out from the background. LOW RELIEF sculpture (and not just within the Medieval period) is where a scene or figure is carved out from its background – whatever the material – but only to a shallow depth. HIGH RELIEF sculpture (again, across many periods from antiquity onwards) is where the scene is carved out from the background material to a much greater depth, and may even be in-the-round, completely detached from its background.

During the subsequent Gothic period, there was a considerable expansion in the use of high relief sculptures within churches and cathedrals, often of key Biblical figures, which could appear almost free standing from the walls and other background materials behind. This monumental sculpture was combined with the increasing popularity, throughout the 17th Century, of much smaller hand-held Memento Mori sculptures (particularly in strongly catholic areas of Europe – see Activities section) and of small figurines of the Virgin Mary given to women about to be married – probably as symbols of continued piety.

The Renaissance.

Sculpture during the 14th & 15th Centuries began to encompass a broader range of topics – not just religious/Biblical narratives. There was a developing focus on sculpture which depicted classical myths, and which drew inspiration from the art of Ancient Greece and Rome. The Renaissance master sculptors were Donatello, Michelangelo, Raphael and Leonardo, and wealthy patronage was important to them all. Michelangelo had the pope, amongst others. Donatello, who worked in Florence in the early to mid-15th Century, had the fabulously wealthy and powerful Cosimo de Medici, who was a massively important

patron of aspiring painters and sculptors. For example, he commissioned Donatello to create the first free standing male nude since antiquity – ‘David’, a bronze completed between 1430-2. Of course, the presence of Michelangelo, the master sculptor, also has to be considered. Michelangelo dominated the Italian Renaissance scene, slightly later on in the 15th and early 16th Centuries, being born in 1475.

The Baroque and Rococo Styles.

Baroque sculptures were almost always in the round, and full of fluidity, movement and drama. The undisputed master of baroque sculpture was Gian Lorenzo Bernini. A visit to the Vatican City in Rome is certainly advantageous here, in order to appreciate how pivotal a figure Bernini was in the art and sculpture of the Catholic Counter Reformation.

Rococo.

Rococo sculpture places less of an emphasis on the large scale than was the case in the Renaissance and baroque periods. Instead, the stress was on small and delicate sculptures, often in porcelain rather than marble. Porcelain was an expensive and fragile commodity, recently introduced into Europe from China. As a consequence, Rococo sculptures were often the preserve of the wealthy aristocracy, and monarchs like Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

Sculpture in the 19th and 20th Century.

As with painting, impressionism became a key feature of sculpture in this period. The Renaissance focus on perfect

anatomy and narrative shifted to one highlighting personal expression, stylization and different surface textures. For example, the rough texture left on Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker* (a bronze created in 1913) was very different to the smooth surface typical of a Bernini sculpture. Rodin was one of the greatest sculptors of the 20th Century, and in his selection of surface textures, he was attempting something new and quite radical.

Modernism.

The term 'modernism' really encapsulates a variety of movements such as surrealism, minimalism, cubism, pop art and Dadaism. Marcel Duchamp, for instance, was a key Dadaist – a member of the post First World War Dada movement, which rejected most mainstream ideas of the day about what constituted 'art', and which felt largely alienated from the artistic establishment of the time. Sculptures like Duchamp's 1917 piece 'Fountain' were intentionally controversial. The sculpture was thought by many to be vulgar, and totally lacking in artistic merit – a reaction which it was intended to provoke!

Constantin Brancusi was a FUTURIST sculptor. One of his most famous pieces was called 'Bird in Space' and produced in 1923. For many, the sculpture bore little resemblance to a bird, because there were no wings at all, and, instead, the focus was entirely on a stretched body and beak. When the work was imported into the USA, customs officials refused to recognise it as a work of art at all, instead branding it as a piece of worked metal. Only after a legal battle lasting 5 years was this non-representational sculpture legally accepted as a work of art by the US court authorities.

ACTIVITIES

Task 1: Have a look at copies of both the Kritios Boy and Polykleitos's Spear Bearer (using any appropriate on-line and/or textbook sources) and compare and contrast them as sculptures. For example, you might assess their contrapposto positions, and the general complexity of each sculpture.

Task 2: Use either google or a dictionary in order to define the term 'diptych'.

Task 3: Find out a little more about Memento Mori sculptures. What were they, and why were they so popular?

Task 4: Much can be learned about the development of Michelangelo's skills as a sculptor, by comparing and contrasting his Madonna & Child (produced in 1491) with his a Pieta, created in 1497: Have a look at copies of both, and then suggest how and why a Pieta can be judged to be the more complex and skilled work of art.

Task 5: Identify how 2 Bernini sculptures of your choice can be said to show fluidity, movement and drama (for example you could look at the 'Ecstasy of Saint Teresa' completed between 1647-52, and 'Apollo & Daphne' completed between 1622-5, both of which can be easily examined via on-line and/or textbook sources).

