

A SCULPTOR'S VIEW OF HISTORY

A. MILLER

In the beginning man went forth each day, some to the chase, some to do battle, others again to dig and delve in the field, all that they might gain and live, or lose and die,—until there was found among them one differing from the rest, whose pursuits attracted him not, so he stayed by the tents with the women, and traced strange devices with a burnt stick upon a gourd. This man who took no joy in the way of his brethren, who cared not for conquest and fretted in the field, this designer of quaint patterns, this deviser of the beautiful, who perceived in nature curious carvings, as faces are seen in the fire, this dreamer apart, was the first artist. And presently there came to this man another, and in time others, of like nature, chosen by the Gods, and so they worked together, and soon they fashioned from the moist earth forms resembling the gourd, and with the power of creation—the heirloom of the artist—presently they went beyond the suggestion of nature, and the first vase was born in beautiful proportion.—WHISTLER.

THIS quotation is a convenient way of “leap-frogging” into the subject, and in Mr. Whistler’s admirable prose it gives a vivid and suggestive picture. With, however, a characteristic mid-Victorian anti-feminism, he is unduly certain as to the sex of his first artist! And so our view of history has to begin with pre-history—with that dim past in which art, history, religion and ritual are inextricably one—and this past is really the roots of the present.

Primitive man, surrounded by forces mysterious and far more powerful than himself, tried to placate these forces by means which were at once ritual, art, and religion, till gradually through ages and generations these persistent, obscure, unnameable powers were divided into beneficent and evil forces, whose help might be sought or whose anger might be appeased. The Egyptians identified these forces with animals and enthroned them into a hierarchy; the Greeks transformed them into a Pantheon of fair and concrete personalities. In this brief glance at history, through sculpture, and sculpture interpreted through history, the method of approach may be useful, even though the deductions may have to be modified by new knowledge and new discoveries.

Mr. Whistler, with brilliant persiflage, has tried to persuade us that art is purely fortuitous and sporadic, that nothing can bring

it about, that no state of society or life will make it easier or more common! I ask you to dismiss that idea as unsound; think of Athens, or of Florence, or of the communal labours which made a Gothic cathedral. It is all very well, and quite amusing, for Whistler to tell us that to say to the landscape painter he must go to nature and record what he sees is like saying to the musician that he may sit on the piano. Whistler's truths and half truths lead him from admirable propositions to very questionable inferences. In spite of his assertion that there never was an artistic period or people, I ask you to believe that there *have* been ages when art was a commoner possession and when, unlike to-day, one had not to cultivate the faculty of not seeing in order to avoid being hurt by needless ugliness.

If we can understand something of these great epochs, perhaps it may help us to discover a part, at least, of the secret of the living, vitalising power which makes a piece of Greek or medieval sculpture so significant and so potent an influence. The separation of the schools and the art schools is destructive and narrowing. I have resentful memories of my own school and art school days, mis-called education. Brought up almost within the shadow of the noble cathedral of Glasgow, I remember wandering into it about the year 1894, when already I was an apprentice woodcarver, and I was conscious that the building and its sculpture were almost meaningless to me. It was a language I did not know, "a door to which I found no key." I had been taught a great deal about the wicked Edward, the Hammer of the Scots, and about the Second Edward and the Battle of Bannockburn,—from the Scots point of view! I knew, or thought I knew, its date, but I had no idea that, when that battle was fought, thirty miles away there stood this cathedral, fresh and lovely from the mason's hands, a record and a revelation of a life and civilization no trace of which was in our school histories. I have resented that ever since. A year or two later, when I was promoted in the art school from drawing and shading casts to the wild excitements of "Antique", there was the same stupid separatism. I drew the Doryphorus, the Antinous, the Gladiator, Venus de Milo, and so on, but of the life which produced them, of the ideas which they embodied, of the impulse behind them, I knew and was told nothing. The history of art is always the record of mind superseding matter in the noblest periods, and of matter triumphing over mind in the period of decline.

Primitive man's art, and Egyptian art in its early and noblest age, are mainly a record of the conquest of difficult material by spirit. Yet after seven thousand years of Egyptian art, we can

only summarise it something like this: It has a noble sense of style, a profound expression of permanence, wonderful tranquillity, and deep reverence; yet it is still an art trammelled by routine and petrified by repetition. In the end, matter triumphed over mind. And the erection of an Egyptian temple was a work not of imaginative insight, but requiring only material, the formula of the priests, and the labour of the human builders, then—as in our own mechanistic age—considered merely as “hands”.

Egypt, it is true, made the first hierarchy of the gods. The Egyptians gave them noble form in sculpture, and then petrified these forms by repetition and routine. To pass from the Egyptian galleries of the British Museum into the Greek ones is like passing through a dim but noble vestibule, peopled with great figures of strange and often terrible aspect, into a clearly lighted hall, flooded with sunlight, rich with colour, the atmosphere charged with intellectual activity, the people and the statues of human and surpassing beauty.

Greece destroyed, by undermining it, that earlier civilization, which was based on routine, and which had changed from the theocracy of early times to a great and powerful empire under the Rameses, where life moved blindly in the rut worn by former generations. Greece destroyed that spirit and substituted a new spirit. Greek philosophy began and ended in scepticism. That scepticism which preached the sovereignty of reason as the solvent for human problems! The difference between the two civilizations is well expressed in one of Plato's dialogues where an Egyptian priest says: “In mind you Hellenes are all young; there is no *old* opinion handed down among you, nor any science that is hoary with age.” The feeling that a strong and clear intelligence can shape events and prevail over outward circumstances, that is the gift of Greece; and this intellectual vitality passed from their thoughts into every work of their hand and brain, and so transformed the world. This noble scepticism broke down the distinction between gods and men, between outward and inward, between body and spirit, ethics and aesthetics. It created in art and literature demi-gods or heroes, it invented every known form of literature, and gave the impulse which has carried the human intellect across the line which separates empirical from scientific knowledge.

This spirit, which gave the world those vast intellectual empires, could not consolidate them, a task which was attempted and begun by a race far less intellectual but with the power of organization. All this is embodied for us, stated in clear terms, in Greek art and architecture and literature. Consider their heritage. Those Semitic

Phoenicians had made the art of Egypt known among the Greek islands, and in certain ways the sculptures of the 6th and 7th centuries show constant Egyptian traits. The part those Phoenicians played in handing on the torch is not yet fully known, but however it came, the resemblance between Egyptian statues and early Greek ones is plain and marked. There is the same rigid medial line, the same wiglike hair, the same left foot forward, the same faulty articulation of the joints, especially shoulders and knees, and in the relief there is the same transposition from front view shoulders to profile head and indeterminate feet.

Curious zigzag draperies clothe the bodies of the maidens of the Acropolis, which suggest rather than represent draperies, but already a personal and individual sense of style is apparent, and presently there began that development of athletics which with growing skill and widening knowledge altered the whole course of sculpture in the western world.

Greek athleticism was one of the most potent forces in influencing sculpture. The constant sight of nude men and boys—and in Sparta the girls too, exercising, wrestling, and playing games naked and to music—gave the sculptor a continuous store of mental images, and on this basis of generalised knowledge he made his figures, for they were never individualised portraits; indeed, in our modern sense of the word, they are not portrait statues at all.

Later, with the passionate search for definition which is so characteristic of Greece, the sculptors often made statues embodying all the proportions and qualities which they considered as ideal, and these they exhibited as "Canons" of proportion. This had its counterpart in the drama, with its rules as to the Unities, but Greeks were never the slaves of theories; they moved always from a narrower conception to a broader one, just as their sculpture developed from a hard and rather formalistic type to the noblest and most ideal human form—as in the Apollo of Olympia and the Pheidian Theseus. In such figures the forms have two essentially Greek qualities; they are generalised, and they are idealised, and this summit of perfection was achieved just at the moment when Greek life was at its noblest level.

How significant is it to find that this same year which saw the great Pheidian Athena placed in the Parthenon saw also the first performance of the *Antigone* of Sophocles, with its great and moving chorus in praise of man! Sophocles sang: "Wonders are many and none more wonderful than man"—a strange contrast to the characteristic note of Hebrew literature: "What is man that thou are mindful of him?" And contrast the picture of Persian court life you will

find in the *Book of Esther*. Ahasuerus—the Xerxes of the Greek War, with his many wives, his vast harem, one concubine for each day in the year, his more than oriental splendour of courtiers and golden throne—he could describe himself as the King of Kings, the King of the Universe. He it was who first formulated the law “The King may do what he pleases”, and after his first attempt at conquest of the Greeks had been defeated (partly by a providential storm) Xerxes, high as his golden throne, had one of those gorgeous attendants whose sole duty was to stand behind the King and remind him: “Master—remember the Athenians.” He had reason to remember them.

Contrast this with the ordered, reasoned civic life of Athens, permeated by that religious outlook which made of the State a Church and of civic duties a religious ritual, so that if there was no Greek Church, the State itself was the religious focus and derived its sanctions from the gods who controlled the physical world. Yet, under these conditions of wide liberty, there were two things sovereign and supreme; *Reason* and *Law*. Here is one of Xerxes envoys reporting to the King.

For, though these people are free, yet they are not free in all things. For they have a Lord over them—even Law—whom they fear far more than thy people fear thee. At least they do what that Lord biddeth them, and what he biddeth is still the same, that they flee not before the face of any multitude in battle, but keep their order and either conquer or die.

Greek asceticism was the spiritual counterpart of the physical training, a true *askesis*, an attuning of the instrument rather than a mortification of the flesh; and, when Greek life declined, this conspicuous perfection of poise and idealism died out, not only from the outward life but from their art. Compare the noble Olympian Apollo with the slender androgynous youth of Praxiteles, and the decay is obvious. In the later Apollos the forms are soft and effeminate. The god has indeed descended to earth; the life-giving power of the Sun is now shown as a youth amusing himself tickling a lizard! Praxiteles, too, dared to represent a goddess nude, a clear indication of how far the dethroning process had gone, but still the artist had a high status. In the myth of the Soul in *Phaedrus*, that marvellous parable of man's power and destinies, Plato says: “The Soul that has seen most of truth shall come again to birth as an artist, a musician or a lover.”

This idealising tendency declined, and by the time of Theocritus the pursuit of Realism had destroyed it. You may remember

those two chattering women "like cooing doves", whose adventures in going to the festival of Adonis one may read in the 15th Idyll. Well, the Pavilion where the festival was held was decorated with sculptured groups of tragic, comic, and satyric subjects—"dressed in real clothes" says the historian, much delighted at the realism. So by the last century, B. C., Greek sculpture had travelled the full cycle back beyond the vivid fine realism of the early Egyptian theocracies, and no further development *that way* was possible.

The first three centuries of our era saw the reawakening of the East and the rise of Christianity. Hellenism had spread eastward to Petra and Palmyra, and from the third century B. C. up into India Alexander had carried it where it, left its mark on eastern art. Greek thought had taken a mystical and religious direction with the Neoplatonists, and Buddhism was transformed from a moral discipline into a theology. Then began a flowering of religious art in India, Persia, China, and at Byzantium. A new religious synthesis was arising, the old social order was dying, but the spiritual achievement was passed on and became the foundation of that medieval order in which the Catholic Church preserved and spread over Europe not only such arts of the ancient world as had survived, but also the new culture and art of the age of the Fathers.

In the early centuries the mystical tendency had made anchorites who mortified the flesh and lived as hermits; but with the development of organised religion came the great growth of the monasteries, where the monks, instead of each contemplating God from a column, were organised into communities, hives of artistic and literary industry, whilst wandering races of Goths, Ostrogoths, Visigoths and Huns broke up empires and changed all European boundaries.

Monasteries became increasingly powerful; and when men like St. Bernard and St. Benedict were the heads, their influence was all-pervading. In the four centuries from the 8th to the 12th there was developed a new rich civic religious culture in Europe, which expressed itself chiefly in two ways: in Gothic architecture and all its subsidiary arts and crafts, and in the organization of the great Catholic Church. Working from the remains of the ancient philosophies—chiefly of Aristotle and his followers preserved by the Arab civilization—the eager and brilliant minds of the 11th and 12th centuries tried to make a new intellectual synthesis as a philosophic basis for the Church. This attempt to reconcile the wide thought of ancient Greece with the authority of the Church produced subtle thinkers like Arnold of Brescia and Abelard, for whom

when kindled by emotion and inspired by the love of beauty. All these conquests, of the physical world, of the social world, were achieved by energy and daring and a persistent search for perfection. Leonardo epitomizes all the energies of his age. While Copernicus explores the heavens and finds order and law, Leonardo's eye wandered over the whole universe, and he recorded his thoughts in words, in paint and in form. Nothing was beyond his range, nothing beneath it. He noted phenomena of air, fire, water, dust, lightning, birds, beasts and plants. He wrote in his notebooks his observations, and they ranged from the too tight swaddling bands of babies to naval warfare, boats propelled by steam, and the possibility of submarines. He heated the Palace of the Sforzas by a hot water system, and designed a bridge; he invented artillery, and experimented with a flying machine. On the day when his great equestrian statue was destroyed, his patron taken prisoner, and he had to flee from Milan, homeless and penniless, with an apprentice, his diary records only some observations on the position of the wings of birds as they fly.

Leonardo died just when Magellan made the far voyage around the world: the one had circum-navigated the physical world, and the other the intellectual world.

Immense strides were made in the science of art. Light and atmosphere were observed, and new subtleties in painting made possible.

The form of man was studied anatomically just as the workings of the mind of man were studied, and his capacities examined and explored, and perspective was studied so that a new quality of relative planes appeared in art, just as man became conscious of his greatness of freedom and his smallness in the world. The artist now realized his dignity as a conscious creator, and also realized that this power was but an echo of long passed cultures, and so he became gradually conscious of the heritage of the past.

Emerson somewhere cryptically writes:—

I am the owner of the sphere,
Of the seven stars and the solar year,
Of Caesar's hand and Plato's Brain
Of Lord Christ's Heart and Shakespeare's Strain.

Meaning, I take it, that by imagination, which is concentrated race experience, we have become a part of all that has passed before! That view began to be realized at the Renaissance. The medieval man knew it now. The Renaissance culminated in Italy in Michel Angelo who stands at once, as all great leaders do, in a double re-

lation to the world, the last of an old epoch, the first of a new. He was stirred by a spiritual emotion which taxed even his power of expression and mocked even his efforts at definition. His work has the majesty of Greek work; but its serenity, and symmetry, harmony, proportion, and moderation, are never found there. He, like Blake, constantly violated the truth of nature by studied exaggerations, but he did always succeed in making the human body expressive and symbolical of emotion and thought. Individualism was so strong in him that he could brook no assistance. One after another he hired to help him with the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, but they were all contemptuously dismissed, and that mighty work was *in toto* the labour of his own hands.

Yet we cannot think of these great works as works of individual genius only, but as nourished and influenced by contemporary thought and emotion. Their spiritual agitation is the agitation of the age, when all old values were re-tested, and all old faiths were translated into new terms; the science, the intellectualism, the profound analysis and definition which were working everywhere are all embodied in the works of his hand and brain. Their melancholy was the result of a certain irresolution induced by the attempt to express more than the material would hold. No other sculpture is so charged with spiritual emotion as Michel Angelo's; yet one feels he looked at them and wished for more, and yet more spirit.

This attempt to overcharge the marble with his spirit made him unable to finish completely. He seems to have been seized by an inhibition in his older age which paralyzed his hammer stroke into irresolute and unresolved forms. In 1564 he died, and in the same year there was born another mighty intellectual force who could say of his poetry with simple and superb truth: "Not marble nor the gilded monuments of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme." In him were gathered up all the forces of his age. Romeo was born out of his passion and Hamlet out of his irresolution. To read and know him is to understand not only his age but every age, for he has seized on what is eternal and given it form. Shakespeare was as truly the culminating point of the Renaissance in England as Michel Angelo was in Italy; and after our glorious Renaissance had passed in England, it was succeeded by the age of science when men weighed and measured the stars, and discovered the infinitesimal calculus, and St. Paul's was made from the designs of the mathematician Wren.

But this scientific age produced little sculpture and, if you wish to see the attitude of even a cultivated man towards art and the age's total misunderstanding of it, read *Pepys's Diary*, —with its

ecstatic praise for a picture of an open book lying on a desk, "so like that I durst have touched it", and its genuine delight at a marble monument of a battle relief in which the *smoke* seemed "almost real". Of course Pepys thought *Twelfth Night* a poor thing and *The Tempest* a dull play, and, if you want to see what sculpture a scientific age produced, look at the Tombs in Westminster Abbey! Not all the ingenuity and skill of even a master like Grinling Gibbons can make festoons of flowers and birds and fishes and dead game and cherub heads into works which can touch the heart of future generations. Any good piece of prickly Gothic foliage has more of vital life in it than all the florists and poulterers' shops carved in St. Paul's! The 18th century worshipped Roman splendour and echoed its pompous formalities. And suddenly, amid the empty generalities of 18th century poetry, Pope, Thomson, Collins, Shennstone—and their sculptural counterparts—the long procession of perfectly properly dressed "ladies" variously entitled Hebe, Phoebe, Doris or Thetis, appeared Burns and Blake; the one with his roots in the soil, the other with his head amid the stars, making drawings and poetry which tear the heart and exalt the mind:

A Robin redbreast in a cage
Sets all heaven in a rage.

Strange that simple words can convey so much emotion! And how different from the smooth couplets of Pope's *Pastorals*! Is not one small corner of Blake's "The morning stars sang together" worth all the dreary Greek outlines of Flaxman? And after Blake came machinery—industrialism, individualism. If you are curious to see what 19th century industrialism did to one craft, just think how much pleasanter it was to die in the 17th or 18th century and have the village mason make a tombstone with its hour glass—the cherub's head and its graceful lettering—than in the middle of the 19th century (and, alas, still to-day!) where a glance at an English or even an American cemetery shows us that the masons (who now call themselves sculptors) have indeed, with their monuments, added a new terror to death.

The 20th century movements in sculpture have been a series of alarms and excursions—a revolt from Rodin's plasticity to Malliol's monumentalism or Kolbe's attenuations—cults of imitation, of Mayan art, pseudo-Chinese art, Easter Island and primitive man's art. All these movements are indicative of a defiance of tradition, and certainly even anarchic thought is better than stagnant formulae. But lately I have found some wise and beautiful words which bring solace in these days of what seems like a defiance and hatred of beauty.

They are not the words of some cloistered, aesthetic philosopher like Pater or Santayana, but the words, written in old age, of one who has spent a long life in scientific observation—whose mind is one of the sagest and most acute of our own time, with a range, a power and penetration somewhat akin to that of Goethe. I choose these words of Havelock Ellis as worthy of earnest study:

It is only beauty that counts, and beauty can never be a mere counter because it is always eternally new; the great artist is for ever enlarging the scope of human art, embracing things with love that have never been known in art before. He can only do that by making them beautiful, and the would-be artist who brings into what he calls his art things that are ugly and remain just as ugly after he has touched them is nothing in the world. . . . Man has travelled a long way through the ages, and there is no room in the treasuries of his brain for any memories of his course that are not of beauty.

Beauty, when the vision is purged to see through the outer vesture, is truth, and when we can pierce to the deepest core it is found to be Love. This is a goddess whom I have worshipped sometimes in the unlikeliest places—perhaps even where none else saw her; and she has given wine to my brain and oil to my heart and wings to my feet over the stoniest path. No doubt the herd will trample down my shrine some day. But I shall no longer be there.