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Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal in Britain, c. 1880–1930

Edited by David J. Getsy

ASHGATE

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Introduction

David J. Getsy

It has often been said that – if nothing else – British sculpture contributed to the international development of modern art in the twentieth century. Looking to figures such as Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Lynn Chadwick and Anthony Caro, such descriptions see sculpture beginning in the 1930s as British art's saving grace. There was undoubtedly an enormous wealth of sophistication and experimentation in sculpture during that period, and these innovations were tirelessly promoted as part of both individual agendas and British cultural policy in the post-war years. At the same time, however, such an assertion is reductive. It is frequently made at the expense of earlier art in Britain and distorts the complex engagements that occurred in art and visual culture, both before and after 1930. Specifically for sculpture, this heroic narrative of the mid-century effects a selective, unilinear and narrow view of the complexity and sophistication of sculpture and its place in Britain.¹

Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal in Britain, c. 1880–1930 seeks to move beyond conventional assessments of sculpture in Britain in the decades before and after 1900. First, this anthology focuses on sculpture and offers a range of perspectives on how it can be viewed historically and conceptually. In part, the place and sophistication of sculpture in Britain remain misunderstood because sculpture itself is frequently marginalized in histories of art in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second, this volume considers the place of sculpture in Britain in the important half-century before the reputed 'golden age' beginning in the 1930s. The questions of sculpture, its ideals and its future had been sources of motivation and contention for over a half-century when artists such as Moore and Hepworth came onto the scene. With a few notable exceptions that prove the rule (i.e., the foreign-born artists Jacob Epstein and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska), sculpture before the 1930s became a foil in the standard narratives of British art, caricatured and considered unworthy

of serious attention. It is this attitude that this anthology calls into question. Taking as its range the remarkable and varied developments in sculpture theory in the decades before and after 1900, *Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal* provides a series of studies that, in total, argue for the existence of an active and contentious discourse of sculpture in Britain. There is something particular – and particularly complex – about three-dimensional art produced in Britain in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the supporters of its popular mid-twentieth-century manifestations have left unacknowledged.

Beginning in the 1880s, sculpture in Britain underwent a transformation as a young generation of artists sought to develop new definitions of the medium by re-evaluating the canonical heritage of figurative statuary, by engaging with international artistic communities, by reconsidering the physical and material properties of the sculptural object, and by attending to the relationship between sculpture and spaces both public and private. The ‘New Sculpture’, as this modernizing movement became known, reoriented the practice of sculpture, rivalling the place of painting in late-nineteenth-century British art.²

Despite substantial historical evidence for the sustained engagement in Britain with ideas and ideals of modern sculpture beginning in the late nineteenth century, the history of these earlier innovations has frequently been omitted from the triumphal accounts of mid-twentieth-century sculpture. In part because the modernizing strategies of the New Sculptors were inassimilable to the example of modern sculpture built up around the reputation of Auguste Rodin and his followers, nineteenth-century sculpture in Britain was misrepresented and had its art-theoretical innovations overlooked.

In the years before and after World War I, a group of young artists and critics attempted to articulate a more self-conscious and self-evident modernism and, as the New Sculptors did decades before, rejected the art of the preceding generation. It is perhaps a historiographic anomaly that these rhetorical pronouncements by the likes of Ezra Pound and R. H. Wilenski have been largely accepted as adequate accounts of late-Victorian art rather than contextualized and critiqued. Within the smaller literature on sculpture in Britain, such an omission has meant that the wide range of experimentation by the New Sculpture and its many points of overlap with modernist sculpture theory have gone uninvestigated. At the same time, alternative modernist positions equally fell victim to the sweeping proscriptions of a select group of critics. There is no doubt there was generational rivalry and fundamental differences across the field of British art, but these rivalries have more often been filtered through standard heroic narratives of the avant-garde. Consequently, this perspective has resulted in reductive accounts that enforced a canon of acceptable mid-

century modernist sculptors who became increasingly mythologized as pioneers emerging out of what was characterized as Britain’s insular wasteland. There are numerous examples of such rhetorical positions, but a poignant instance can be found in the catalogue to the 1998 exhibition ‘Carving Mountains’ in which we find the conventional denigrations of British art used to justify and to praise the emergence of (modernist) direct carving: ‘The contribution made by stone carving to the vitality of British sculpture in this century was a highly significant one [...] *In the absence of a living tradition of English sculpture, they also looked to contemporary developments in Paris.*’³

Such complicity to the Francophilic narratives of modernist art merely reinforces the marginality of British sculpture by ignoring the active and contentious discourses of sculpture theory present since at least the 1880s. Though coming out of a desire to defend and promote modernist sculpture in Britain, such rhetorical oppositions between new and old simplify the historical complexity of the period and repeat the polemical pronouncements of only one of the many factions in Britain that debated the place and importance of sculpture.

This volume in no way attempts to sketch a seamless trajectory of modern sculpture from the experimentations of the 1880s to the emergence of Hepworth and Moore. Rather, its goal is to begin to indicate the possibilities developed over these five decades and to extrapolate from them issues pertinent to sculpture studies. Neither I nor the contributors to this book advocate the myth of a seamless tradition of ‘Britishness’ for sculpture. Rather, it is more fruitful to acknowledge that there was a diversity of positions in active and passionate competition by artists and critics living and working in Britain.

Conventionally, an unbreachable divide between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has characterized the study of modern art in Britain and of sculpture in particular. This volume denies this division and brings together seemingly divergent artists and critics from the decades before and after 1900. This is done not to equate them but rather to put into dialogue a range of equally complex positions from throughout this period. In this respect, one cannot – and should not hope to – find an essential or core set of national characteristics for these distinct artists and critics, coming as they do from a range of national, social and economic backgrounds. There are allegiances, movements and counter-movements among the sculptors of these years, and these individual and group positions cumulatively point to a uniquely deep interest in three-dimensional art and its problems that remains inadequately examined. Beyond the fact that they all largely worked in Britain (and, for the purposes of this volume, that has turned out to be, with few exceptions, London), if anything ties these artists together it is their

common aim to find a modern idiom for three-dimensional representation. Perhaps what makes Britain distinct from its neighbours with regard to sculpture is just this committed, yet diverse, long-standing debate about sculpture and its roles.

In this respect the 'ideal' of the title is far from a singular one. Neoclassicism had put forth the notion of the ideal as timeless, universal, unchanging and eternal. In this formulation, sculpture played a starring role as one of the most cogent images of ideality. The rationalized nude statue served as an illustration of both the ideal subject and of its distance from the quotidian, the contemporary and the particular. Beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, sculptors sought to renovate the very notion of the ideal, seeking a newer and more applicable connection between sculptural representation and its immediate historical context. The attempts to modernize the ideal took multiple and divergent forms. Some sculptors continued to work within familiar iconographies and subject matter, focusing their attention on other aspects of sculptural representation. Others, in turn, sought to expand the acceptable range of sculptural subjects.⁴ There was no one, easily categorized 'look' for these works, but rather what was common to all was a reconsideration of how sculpture was to be regarded.

One definition of the modern is as the future classic. That is, the modern is not just defined as a departure from the accepted and familiar but also as a projection of a new standard.⁵ With such a formulation in mind, I have used the notion of a 'pursuit of a modern ideal' to draw together this stylistically heterogeneous group of artists, some of whom would not fall into the conventional canons of modern art. Disregarding such taxonomies and the arbitrary break at 1900, this collection hopes to show that there was a range of modernizing ventures by sculptors and that these strategies sometimes look different from what is conventionally assumed of modern art. In this regard, I align the contents of this book with recent scholarship that seeks to repudiate the deprecating characterizations of art in Britain and its purported subordination to standards and value judgements derived from the received narratives of European modernism.⁶ The established narratives deploy a canon of acceptable and familiar conventions for recognizing the modern and disregard all of those artists and artworks that do not seem to fit easily. Ironically, the modernist critique of academic art was based on an attack against a similar set of exclusionary and nepotistic practices. The essays in this anthology are tied, by contrast, not by this singular model of the modern but by their emphasis on the ways in which sculpture can be reconstituted in light of new concerns, new conditions and new agendas – some of which attempt to repudiate tradition and some of which attempt to reformulate it for the future.

In their competing visions for sculpture offered from the 1880s to the 1930s, these artists strove to make sculpture modern in this more expanded

sense – that is, to grapple with the fundamental issues for three-dimensional representation and to develop innovations within the conceptualization of the medium. Whether it was through the naturalistic figure sculpture of the 1880s or the direct carving of the twentieth century, each of the artists sought to find a place for sculpture within modernity, responding or reacting to contemporary demands, issues and aims. Whether their formal vocabularies expanded upon or repudiated traditions of figurative sculpture, all of the artists pursued a new vision of sculpture, pushing its boundaries and examining its foundations. The sculptors of the nineteenth century often talked of ideals and idealization, seeking to make the human body the vehicle for humanist principles, but even once verisimilitude had given way to formalized and stylized representations of the human form, and once a universalizing humanism had waned, sculptors in the twentieth century still considered their works to be manifestations of ideal positions and prescriptions for future work.

Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal in Britain is the first collection of its kind to focus on sculpture in Britain during this contentious and pivotal half-century. The essays in this volume do not necessarily offer singular explanations for the presence of this sophisticated sculptural discourse in Britain. Instead, each of them focuses on a particular issue or historical moment (and often, an individual object), in order to provide a more in-depth examination of the ideas of sculpture debated during this time. A central focus for many of the essays is the question of the conceptual, theoretical and methodological exigencies of sculpture and its reception. Beyond their contribution to the historical literature on sculpture in Britain, the essays in this volume also draw from and contribute to sculpture studies, more widely. That is, they raise questions and outline approaches that are relevant to the study of sculpture beyond its context in Britain in the decades before and after 1900.

In this regard, the selection of topics in this volume emphasizes both a diversity of methodological positions and a range of historical issues for this period. The names of many important sculptors and critics barely appear in this volume and many readers will encounter names unfamiliar in the received accounts of British sculpture. Conversely, some artists (notably, Alfred Gilbert) are viewed from multiple perspectives. It should be stressed that this should not be taken to imply that an artist such as Gilbert is necessarily more worthy of attention. In fact, it may be slightly unfortunate that Gilbert – the one late-Victorian sculptor who has already received substantial attention – continues to loom so large in this volume. That said, close examination of his work – as with the work of many other sculptors in these pages and out – continues to reward.

The volume, in fact, begins with Gilbert's first major success, the 1882 *Perseus Arming*. Jason Edwards investigates Gilbert's self-fashioning through this piece and its deliberate mediation of multiple levels of intertextual reference. Attracted to the growing prominence of Aestheticism within the Royal Academy following the election of Frederic Leighton to President in 1878, Gilbert struggled to articulate a sculpture that was legible as Aesthetic by drawing on historical sources such as Renaissance sculpture and on contemporary discourses of the dandy as the symbol of modernity. Within this, sometimes contradictory, set of overlapping references, Gilbert's statuette – intentionally or unintentionally – provided a visualization of youthful masculinity amenable to emerging definitions of homoeroticism. Edwards's essay also succinctly outlines the impact of Aestheticism on art in Britain, and in many ways the new criteria introduced with Aestheticism facilitated the range of art-theoretical experimentation and innovation in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Not all work in these decades was explicitly indebted to Aestheticism but its propositions widened the field in which individual investigations took place.

In her discussion of Edward Burne-Jones's stained glass window designs for the Church of St Philip, Caroline Arscott discusses the complex interplay between pictorial field and medium. While not explicitly sculptural as traditionally conceived, Burne-Jones's windows offer a three-dimensional visualization of the body that has affinities with the issues central to late-Victorian sculpture. Activating the specific material qualities of stained glass, Burne-Jones pursued a sculptural logic in his rendering of the human form that added another level of meaning to these religious works. Rather than treating the lead-lines as neutral elements that merely reiterated the pictorial image, Burne-Jones deployed these solid areas to cut across the image, interlaced with it. The end result is a representation that seeks to manifest the religious image, not as flat picture but as sculptural presence.

In his excavation of the formulation of Ronald Gower's *Shakespeare Memorial*, Whitney Davis addresses the potential for homoeroticism to emerge into visibility in the sculptural body. Gower (as with Gilbert) did not seek to unabashedly represent the homoerotically available body, but rather mediated it through overlapping sets of references. For Gower, the *Shakespeare Memorial* offered the potential to recuperate his own contested reputation by re-casting himself as both Prince Hal and as Shakespeare. Unfolding the multiple and porous levels of reference that formed the justification for Gower's formal and iconographic choices, Davis reveals the figure of Prince Hal on the sculptural memorial as a palimpsest of the historical monarch, the dramatic character, the playwright Shakespeare, the sculptor Gower, England and History. The common theme asserted in each of these layers Davis demonstrates to be that of Gower himself – the transcendence of the

(sometimes dubious) past as a process of culmination, idealization and projection of that image into a future history.

Alex Potts approaches the public monument from a different angle, examining the contested reception of Alfred Gilbert's *Shaftesbury Memorial*, arguably the most recognizable of public sculptures in Britain from this period. Gilbert attempted to break away from the traditional conception of the public monument, offering instead a work that obliquely alluded to the individual it was to commemorate. Its formal and iconographic innovations, however, have engendered frequent debate. Potts argues that the instability of the *Shaftesbury Memorial* as monument called into question the very definitions of public sculpture at the end of the nineteenth century.

Sculpture in domestic spaces was equally contested during the transformations in sculpture theory in this period and Martina Droth focuses on the statuette's dual role as sculpture and as ornament. While statuettes were sometimes disregarded as secondary to more public and larger sculpture, Droth demonstrates how they grew to become a crucial site for experimentation at the turn of the century. In this development, the proximity of statuettes to decorative objects was cautiously exploited by artists and critics, and Droth explains how sculpture theory engaged with statuettes and with the requirements and potential of their placement, handling and display.

Even though sculpture began to occupy a more prominent role in the home and in the public sphere, the annual Royal Academy of Arts Summer Exhibitions continued to be the primary venue for sculptors through the Edwardian period. In my contribution to the volume, I examine the 'scandal' that erupted in 1905 when James Havard Thomas's highly experimental figurative statue *Lycidas* was rejected by the RA. Obsessively pursuing the detailed rendering of the specific forms of the model's body, Thomas created a statue that excelled in its representational fidelity but blocked the conventional strategies whereby the human form was made to convey meaning. By focusing so closely on the physical exigencies of the body and its muscular constitution, Thomas created a work that, in effect, broke with the humanist presumptions of figurative sculpture and offered an unlikely – and high profile – challenge to the RA and its norms. As the first of the media-frenzies that punctuate the history of sculpture in twentieth-century Britain, the *Lycidas* affair prompted a reconsideration of sculpture's role as the vehicle for the ideal.

Jon Wood examines one of the most well known of modernist sculptures in Britain, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*. Wood shows that the conceptualization, context and creation of this collaborative work were highly fraught. The product of competing sympathies and rivalries, the *Hieratic Head* had multiple functions for both Gaudier-Brzeska and Pound.

The work, literally, demands to be seen from multiple vantage points. Situating the portrait commission in the dynamic bohemian subculture of which Pound was a primary organizer, Wood demonstrates that rather than being either a triumphal homage to Pound or, alternatively, a joke about him, the sculpture partook of a range of ideas central to Pound's thinking at that time and which Gaudier-Brzeska incorporated into the final sculptural object. Pound's contentious self-imaging through the commission to Gaudier-Brzeska, Wood argues, is attested to by the continued importance of the work for Pound throughout his life.

Sue Malvern investigates the ways in which George Frampton's monument to Edith Cavell consolidated a set of anxieties about masculinity and femininity during and after World War I. Formally innovative in its own right, the *Cavell Monument* is unique not just because it is the only major memorial to an individual but also because it is the only World War I memorial specific to women. The story of Cavell's execution made her into a martyr during the war, and competing constituencies focused on her monument to launch arguments about gender and nation. Putting the *Cavell Monument* into the context of other World War I memorials and their struggle with the representation of the male body, Malvern shows this prominently placed sculpture to be a contradictory incursion of women into the realm of public commemoration.

In his discussion of the neglected sculptural output of J. D. Fergusson, Jonathan Blackwood examines the way in which Fergusson infused modernist style with elements appropriated from a range of sources including dance, non-Western and Celtic forms. Wilfully characterizing Celtic heritage as 'primitive', Fergusson was able to contribute to contemporary discourses of modernist sculpture while infusing them with Scottish nationalism, complicating the idea of an emerging internationalist and universalizing modernist discourse in the 1920s.

Andrew Causey uncovers the complex web of rivalries and competing beliefs that formed the immediate context for R. H. Wilenski's influential 1932 book *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture*. Wilenski's book, as Causey argues, encapsulated a dominant thread of sculptural modernism as it developed in the 1910s and 20s. Uncompromising in its attack on conventional classicism and ardent in its defence of direct carving and 'truth to materials', Wilenski's book was a strategic intervention into the debates about the place and role of tradition for sculpture in Britain. Causey discusses the genesis of its particular arguments and details the other writers against whom Wilenski pitched his attack.

In a fitting close to this volume, Penelope Curtis points towards the possible narratives of sculpture in Britain that were obscured or undeveloped in the triumphal story of the mid-century. Discussing the more varied range of

sculpture in Britain obscured by the rhetoric of writers such as Wilenski, Curtis demonstrates that there were continuities with tradition and alternatives for the future that the concept of 'direct carving' effectively stamped out. Questioning the preference for carving over modelling that has determined the narratives of sculpture in Britain, she argues that modelling also offered a sophisticated modern position for sculpture as well as more substantive affinities to modern sculpture as it was developing in continental Europe and America. Rather than the solitary contribution to international modernism, the concept of direct carving that was formulated around 1930 reinforced the notion of British art's insularity.

In total, the essays contained in this volume open new avenues for research and argue for the historical and conceptual complexity of sculpture in Britain. Sweeping aside the traditional pronouncements and denouncements about sculpture during this period and of the medium more generally, they illuminate a varied and rich field for future art-historical analysis.

The realization of this project is due in no small part to the commitment of Ashgate Publishing and, specifically, of David Peters Corbett and of Pamela Edwardes. Lucinda Lax has also been instrumental in seeing the volume to completion. On behalf of many of the authors, I would like to express my gratitude to Philip Ward-Jackson and Geoffrey Fisher of the Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, for their frequent assistance. I first conceived of this project as I started conducting my own research on nineteenth- and twentieth-century sculpture in Britain. It soon became apparent to me that the study of British sculpture had very recently been gaining a new momentum. Both emerging and established scholars had begun to focus their attention on this material, recognizing the need for a more sophisticated understanding of the historical and theoretical issues at play. There is little doubt that the pivotal role played by the Henry Moore Foundation and Institute in encouraging the study of sculpture was a primary cause of these developments. This commitment has continued, and I am grateful for the support of a Moore Foundation Publication Grant that afforded the opportunity to expand and realize this book project.

Notes

1. For a reiteration of this position, see the catalogue to the 1996 exhibition 'Un siècle de sculpture anglaise', Galerie nationale du Jeu de Paume, Paris. For commentary, see Alison Sleeman (1997), 'In the Queen's Parlour, inspired by Tea and made of Gentlemen: British Sculpture in the Twentieth Century as "Sculpture Anglaise"', *Sculpture Journal*, 1, pp. 72–9.
2. For accounts of the New Sculpture, see Susan Beattie (1983), *The New Sculpture*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press; Benedict Read (1983), *Victorian Sculpture*, New Haven and

London: Yale University Press; and my forthcoming *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

3. Sophie Bowness (1998), 'Modernist stone carving in England and "the big view of sculpture"', in *Carving Mountains: Modern stone sculpture in England 1907–37*, Cambridge: Kettle's Yard, p. 30.
4. In both these options, Hamo Thornycroft was a crucial figure in the early 1880s. He traded in his earlier formal and art-theoretical investigations for contemporary subject matter in 1884 as part of his attempts to continue to find a modern idiom for the freestanding statue. See David Getsy (2002), 'The difficult labour of Hamo Thornycroft's *Mower, 1884*', *Sculpture Journal*, 7, pp. 44–57.
5. For a concise summary of this problem and a critique of the evolutionist model of modernist history, see Antoine Compagnon (1990/1994), *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, New York: Columbia University Press, esp. pp. 3–56.
6. Exemplary of this revisionist trend are David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry, (eds) (2000), *English art 1860–1914: Modern artists and identity*, Manchester: Manchester University Press; Lisa Tickner (2000), *Modern Life & Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven: Yale University Press; and Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn (eds) (1999), *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, New Haven: Yale University Press. All of these sources contain useful discussions of the terminology of the modern with reference to British art.