

5 kilos of sculpture history

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Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present Day

Edited by Georges Duby and Jean-Lac Daval

This book is the third edition of a massive and ambitious survey, first published in 1986–91, of the history of European sculpture; it weighs in at just over 5 kg. It is in two volumes, and each is split into two parts. The first part covers Antiquity, from the 8th century BC to the 5th century AD, describing the development of first Greek, then Etruscan, and finally Roman sculpture. The second part extends this through the Middle Ages up to the 15th century, Romanesque and Gothic. The third continues up to the 18th century, the Renaissance, Mannerism, the Baroque and Rococo.

If you are unfamiliar with the meaning of these terms in the context of sculpture then the book and its illustrations will soon teach you to recognize the main characteristics of the different styles. The fourth part takes the reader up to the end of the 20th century, with separate sections on the 19th and the 20th centuries. In spite of the apparent universality of the title, *Sculpture*, the book is a history of the European tradition. This is not the book to find out about the sculptures of India, China, or elsewhere. It would have to weigh 10 kg. if it were.

The book's strength lies in the illustrations, mainly coloured, allowing the reader to see this extraordinary range of sculptural works. There are two or three on every page making about 3000 in all, from the very familiar, such as Michelangelo's *David*, or Rodin's *The Gates of Hell*, to many that are little known, such as the *Mary Magdalen* in the church of Saint-Pierre, Montluçon, or Kathe Kollwitz's *Self-Portrait*.

The illustrations are accompanied by a narrative which is on the whole readable and authoritative. Although written by 15 noted scholars, it is not scholarly in the worst sense, of being jargon-ridden or obscure, but then neither is it scholarly in the best sense. There is no bibliography, even of the briefest kind, to lead you further into the subject. There is also no index, so it is hard to find the work of a particular artist. Earlier editions did have an index of artists giving page numbers for the illustrations. It is a pity that this has been dropped. The narrative is therefore that of a guide, taking you round all this wonderful stuff and providing it with a context. On the whole it is a good introductory book, or one for those who want to locate their current knowledge of sculpture within a wider historical picture.

Having said that, I think that there are serious flaws in the narrative, particularly in the final section, that for the 19th and 20th centuries. The other sections, from the Roman period onwards, contain good surveys of sculpture throughout Europe. Not so for the 19th century. Here is a narrative overwhelmingly of the development of French sculpture in reaction to the political changes in France. This is fine and interesting in itself, but sculpture was being made elsewhere.

The less than half-page narrative on British sculpture, for example, is ludicrously oversimplified and misleading, even though it refers, strangely, to the two best sources, Ben Read and Susan Beattie. The discussion of Thomas Brock's *Victoria Memorial*, the one outside Buckingham Palace, which was in fact made in the early 20th century, refers to the influence of Gilbert and Stevens. Alfred Gilbert, author of *Eros*, in Piccadilly Circus, only features in an illustration, 28 pages later. Alfred Stevens, author of the *Wellington Memorial* in St Paul's, gets no other mention. How confusing. German sculpture is treated even more badly, getting just two sentences.

The section on the 20th century departs significantly from the tone of the rest of the book. The author of the ancient Greek section, for example, writes: 'Art itself is a political fact, among other things, and there can be no justification in divorcing the history of art from history as a whole'. In the rest of the book there is discussion, not just of aesthetics and of the sculptors, but also of the function of the sculpture in society, of the patrons, and of the political and economic background. The 20th-century narrative is largely about the originality and the genius of the avant-garde. The author writes, p.998, 'So far in this history of modern sculpture we have only discussed the artists of the avant-garde. ... To be sure a "revisionist" and "pluralistic" art history, of the kind in fashion today, criticises [this] ... and calls it "modernistic", "formalistic", and "elitist".' Enough of name-calling. In the 20th-century narrative, unlike elsewhere in the book, the history of sculpture is divorced from the turbulent history of the period.

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