Sculpture in stone: Negro mother and child

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SCULPTURE IN STONE
NEGRO MOTHER AND CHILD

by

A. Elizabeth Catlett

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, in the Department of Graphic and Plastic Arts, in the Graduate College of the State University of Iowa

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INTRODUCTION

The thesis proper consists of an original stone carving of a Negro mother and child, in Indiana limestone. The problem seemed ambitious, but to my mind, at least one large piece of sculpture in a medium other than plaster was needed to determine my eligibility for the Master of Arts degree. To create a composition of two figures, one smaller than the other, so interlaced as to be expressive of maternity, and so compact as to be suitable to stone, seemed quite a desirable problem. The implications of motherhood, especially Negro motherhood, are quite important to me, as I am a Negro as well as a woman.

This written thesis is here presented as a description of the processes involved, and as an evaluation of the benefits derived during the execution of the sculpture.
THE PROBLEM

In any carving, whether in wood or stone, there must be a definite concern with the medium. To keep the sculpture of a mother and child void of all sentimentality and subject value was also of necessary importance. Yet it was essential to create a feeling of the relationship between the two individuals as well as a relationship between the figures and the stone. A basic concern with unity, a regard for the characteristics of the medium, an interest in related masses, and an individual conception of the subject were all included in the problem.
METHODS EMPLOYED

The first step in the design was to make a number of sketches. (Plate I) These were so varied and so two dimensional that it was soon almost imperative that a few be worked out in clay. About four of them were roughly modelled in the round, and the one seemingly the most expressive was then attempted as a larger scaled clay model. This was a standing figure, supported by pipe and wire armature, and done with occasional references to the model. However, as it neared completion, it appeared to have more of the quality of bronze and so was discarded as a design for stone.

Then came a period of merely observing a mother and child in the community, in an effort to determine some natural association of the two which might aid in creating a desirable form relationship. It was quite evident that in a seated or kneeling position the two seemed always closer, always more compact, and compactness is one of the characteristics of stone. An idea began to form, and sketches were made of various angles in an attempt to get something of three dimensional form. (Plate II)

A clay model, 21 inches high, was then made, using the life model and rearranging the forms so as to work always toward a more unified and expressive design. (Plate III) This model, upon completion, was cast in plaster and a stone was ordered one and one half times the size of the
plaster cast.

During the actual carving it was necessary to enlarge the figures a half size; so measurements were occasionally taken from the plaster cast to keep the stone carving proportional. As the work progressed, and the figures developed these corresponding measurements were used less and less, as it seemed wiser to work more directly in the stone. (Plate IV)

A large piece of stone was sawed out, using pumice stone and water with an ordinary saw. Then the main masses were roughed out with a claw hammer, the head and back of the mother being established with the use of a point. From these two fixed positions and the base other points were determined, and slowly the figure began to emerge from the stone. A feeling for the medium developed with the carving, and it was evident that certain alterations had to be made. Deep hollows, which had been in the clay model, were now eliminated and the whole design became more simplified. Small details were of necessity now totally ignored.

The figure was then worked down with the use of tooth chisels and flat chisels; until in its nearly finished stage it could be shaped even more smoothly with the stone rasp.

Texture on the mother's hair originated through an accidental discovery that the large tooth chisel driven...
straight in gave an interestingly rough surface. A smaller tooth chisel gave texture to the baby's hair; and a claw hammer, used on the base, was responsible for its rough effect. The undraped sections on the mother and child were then sanded to obtain an even finish. It seemed more effective, however, to leave a little variation in the drapery, and so it was worked over with a tooth chisel and flat chisel.

These steps in the carving, here related, were not done in as orderly a manner as it might appear from the preceding statements. In reality, the head was nearly completed before the hands were thoroughly worked out as definite forms. But it was necessary to almost finish one portion first, in order that the others might be so keyed as to fit in with it.
CONCLUSION

During the preliminary designing and later in the actual carving of this piece, a great number of things about working in stone became much clearer. A realization of the qualities of stone as a medium of expression had before been quite imperfect. Stone must be worked with to be understood. Its compactness and solidity must be considered. Great patience and perseverance are included in its demands.

The use of stone carving tools is also a little better understood. A saw may be used, with water and powdered pumice, in cutting out large areas of limestone. The tool known as a point is more effective if driven straight in a series of lines, rather than hit over the surface at random. A more even surface is thus obtained, facilitating the later use of other tools. While working with the chisel it must be held at such an angle that the edge bites the surface but does not dig up the stone. More regularity is resultant when the tooth chisel is worked back and forth in different directions, combining areas by overlapping strokes. For finishing rounded parts, stone rasps can best be used with a curving motion, as just rubbing them over a section results in many flat planes. All tools must be kept sharp in order to obtain the best results.

It is my opinion now, that all experiments and trials
of arrangements of the subject should be worked out in a smaller model first, for this not only enables the sculptor to have more freedom and ease in the actual carving, but he may be almost certain of his results before he starts on the stone. This statement is not meant as a criticism of direct carving, for some of the greatest sculptors use the direct method almost exclusively. However, there must be some middle ground between direct carving and the pointing system of carving stone.

Never having used the latter method, I can neither condemn nor commend it, but it seems that a freer way would make for better results. Pointing is an exact reproduction of the plaster cast in stone. Modelling and carving are directly opposed. One is building up and the other is cutting down. The plasticity of clay is a temptation to model unessentials, but stone imposes a certain discipline which cannot be ignored.
PLATE IV
PLATE V