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Two problems in sculpture walnut and marble

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TWO PROBLEMS IN SCULPTURE
WALNUT AND MARBLE

by
Houston E. Chandler

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

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H.E.C.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Human creative activity is so complex and fluctuating, and, since the power behind it cannot be observed, it is difficult to understand and more so to explain. However, I believe as Cezanne once said to his friend Gasquet, "Art is not art at all if emotion is not its prime mover." It includes the spiritual elements of human nature, passion, and religious emotion. The sculptor conceives the world as a unity of visible phenomena and tries to convey truth by concentrating its essence into visible form. It must be the reflection of the artist who creates it and of the era in which he lives, not an echo or a memory of other days and other ways.

I believe that a work of sculpture to be successful should have vitality and not vitality displayed by outward violence. This point can best be explained through the words of Henry Moore: "Between beauty of expression and power of expression there is a difference of function. The first aims at pleasing the senses, the second has a spiritual vitality which
for me is more moving and goes deeper." The theme need not be one of revolt, struggle, resignation, or destruction. To me a clearly indicated subject as "The Cock" for which part of this thesis is about can display simultaneously the external world and that expression of inner feeling which is mine. The same can be said for "Bust" the marble piece, rendered in simple elongated shapes and inspite of its unnatural appearance reflects an intense life of its own.
CHAPTER II
THE EXECUTION OF THE SCULPTURE

A. Problem I - The Cock

As I mentioned in previous discourses, materials play a great part in the shaping of an idea. Suitable materials are often difficult to secure in this region, therefore it is wise to find the material and then plan a piece suitable to that medium. I found a portion of the upper trunk of a walnut tree, using the section with a heavy limb extending, giving the appearance of an oversized sling-shot. It was only after much study of the formation of its grain that I visualized a "Cock." Wood as a material for carving is particularly incalculable, it grows in vertical and in horizontal directions, but this typical distribution of its fibers is interrupted where branches spring from the trunk. There a knobby irregularity of the grain and inequality of hardness can be seen.

Since the shape of the wood suggested a cock, I found it necessary to familiarize myself with the actual appearance of a cock. I then visited the museum where I made a series of sketches of cocks and other fowls of
similar construction. The observation of natural objects is very important to the artist for it keeps him from working by formula only and feeds him much inspiration. After sketching from the model, I proceeded to do other sketches using the first as a starting point for ideas. Drawing is very useful as a means of generating ideas for sculpture, a means of sorting out ideas. When sketching for ideas, I never forget the medium for which I am working, and try to sketch in a manner most easily adaptable to sculpture.

A miniature model of the idea was done next in plasteline, so that the general forms could be seen in the round. The transformation from drawing to the modeled form took a drastic change, for many two-dimensional objects take on an all together changed appearance when rendered in the third dimension. I realized too, that this modeled form would go through as serious a change as the first transformation, for the final piece was to be carved and not modeled.

The next problem was to eliminate the undesirable parts of the wood and to sketch in the figure from all sides. After the figure has been blocked out, the work begins, for unexplainable jumps in the process of thought occur and the imagination plays its part. I did not try
to imitate nature in my interpretation of the cock for I believe the result, more important, provided its creation transforms the casual appearance of reality. Statues often instead of revealing character, often display trifling and minute details which are unthinkable if the imagination comprehends form and content simultaneously.

After blocking off the forms, my interest shifted to defining the desirable planes. I was then faced with the problem of arranging the system of surfaces and transposing these planes into the construction of a complete desirable form. The various planes can be recognized in the head area, the tooled area of the feathered neck, the smooth planes of the breast and wings and again in contrast with the tooled area of the feathered tail of the cock.

On account of the different directions of its growth and the inequality of its hardness, wood is a much more capricious material than stone. The form has to be very thick in comparison with natural forms, otherwise the sculpture looks frail and unstable. For that reason "The Cock" has very powerful legs and feet. First I was true to my medium and secondly, changes came about which occurred in my mind as my work progressed. As the material sometimes has hidden defects that might disturb one's ideas and compel
a change, one shouldn't cut too deeply into the wood from any one point but should penetrate from all directions. In the case of "The Cock" many checks resulted from the wood not being thoroughly dried out. As a result, many of the planes and forms naturally followed the checks in the wood. Sometimes the discovery of a defect may inspire a new idea, as in the division of the breast of "The Cock" into two sections. For the sculptor the resistance of the material is not a hindrance, on the contrary, it creates fertile energy in one's mind.
B. Problem II - "Bust"

Although the second problem was of a different medium, many of the steps and approaches can be said to be much the same, but on the other hand many of the problems were vastly different. Sketching, construction of a miniature model, elimination of superfluous materials, and blocking out of forms are all rendered in much the same manner as in execution of "The Cock", the discussion of which can be eliminated here.

The material used for "Bust" was Blue Vermont marble of known dimensions, in a solid block form, which was quite a contrast to the natural tree form of "The Cock". We can see that at the outset the two problems were quite different, for each material requires a special technical method and treatment, therefore the material dictates the style.

Unlike the walnut which because of its odd shape gave me inspiration to do a cock, the marble, to the contrary, called upon my imagination.

Through careful cutting or carving of the materials, I gradually developed the individual planes and features.
Although I had visualized to some extent the thing which I was working for, I found that as I worked many changes presented themselves and I let my imagination lead me away from the miniature model.

In the first stages of working in the stone, I used a pointer, a metal chisel with a pointed cutting edge. With this tool I was able to cut away large portions. Because the stone has a grain of almost equal density, it is possible to cut in all directions. This procedure cannot be followed in cutting wood because of its grain, traversing the line of the length, the wood opposes strong resistance and if one follows the length of the tree it splinters so the "gauge" must be used, which is a chisel with a sharp concave edge.

In developing the form of the piece, I used the toothed chisel, whose edge consists of five or six sharp teeth. It produces several equal furrows with elevated edges, without destruction to the marble. The final carving is executed with a large flat chisel to smooth the planes. The stone was then polished with differently textured stones dipped in water including carborundum and pumice stone. The piece was finally rubbed with oxalic acid and putty powder giving it a quiet sheen.
CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

I have created "The Cock" of contrasting texture, and rough tooling, as opposed to smooth planes. One of vitality and life, rendered with greatest simplicity but which remains expressive, strong and powerful. I have created a marble "Bust" of elongated forms and of great simplicity but of great feeling. Having no desire for naturalism, I have rendered forms completely from the imagination. This is the meaning of the claim that art has to be true. The artist forms the world "after his own image." It is an artistic and ethical postulate-profunder and more exactive, than the equivocal phrase that art should represent beauty.

I have gained much from working in various mediums which to me should be important to the artist. For as I have previously mentioned, the materials all create different problems, the modeling of clay, the applying of plaster, the casting of plaster, the heating of lead, the carving of wood and the chipping of stone. I think that, in order to be a well rounded and successful sculptor, one should have experience in these various mediums.
CHAPTER IV

PHOTOGRAPHS OF SUBJECTS
THE COCK VIEW I
THE COCK VIEW II
BUST