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Sculpture

Philosophy has not had a great deal to say about sculpture. There is brief mention of it in Kant's third critique, longer discussion in Schopenhauer (1969) and Hegel (1974). More recent writing with philosophical content is as often to be found in the output of theoretically minded critics and art historians as in that of professional philosophers. Nonetheless, sculpture does present genuine philosophical problems. Three candidates are particularly prominent. First, what is sculpture? The answer may seem plain: it is representing things by means of three-dimensional figures. But what of abstract sculpture, such as some of the work of Barbara Hepworth; other 3-D representations commonly given their own category, such as models and maquettes; and those items lying on the boundary between the clearly sculptural and the clearly pictorial, such as representational carving in ever lower relief? Second, what is sculptural representation? Sculptures are as capable of representing as are words, pictures, gestures, signs, or theatrical performances. But not all these things represent in the same way: representation comes in different forms. What, then, is distinctive about representation by sculpture? Third, what, if anything, is aesthetically distinctive about sculptural art? Does it offer aesthetic satisfactions not to be found elsewhere, and if so, what are the special features it offers for appreciation? Although interconnected, these questions are distinct. I will concentrate on the aesthetic question, and say a little about sculptural representation. I will not discuss the definition of sculpture.

(I) Sculptural Representation

One aspect of philosophical neglect of sculpture is that there are very few explicit accounts of sculptural representation. Hopkins (1994) offers one, and Goodman (1976) and Schier (1986) discuss the topic in passing, but most of the interesting positions have to be adapted from

accounts of the nearest parallel phenomenon, pictorial representation. In consequence, the lay of the land here is powerfully reminiscent of that in debates over picturing.

What one says about sculptural representation depends in part on where one thinks the crucial contrasts lie. One thought would be that representation by sculpture is quite different from that by language. Compare sculpturally representing a horse, say, with describing one. There are many and diverse sculptural styles, and hence a good deal of variation across possible horse-sculptures. Nonetheless, the constraints on such representation seem tighter than those on the marks able to constitute in some language, actual or possible, a horse-description. Not everyone would accept this strong contrast between sculpture and language. Goodman (1968) reduces any difference between the two to formal features of the symbol systems involved. And some of those who accept the strong contrast explicate it in their own way, as, for instance, Flint Schier (1986), who claims that grasping what a sculpture represents requires the same perceptual resources as recognizing its object in the flesh. But one broad approach to clarifying the contrast merits particular attention. It takes sculptural representation to involve a distinctive *experience* on the part of the viewer.

According to this approach, to grasp the content of a sculpture is to see it in a special way. One's experience of the sculpture is permeated by certain thoughts. These do not merely accompany the experience, they determine its phenomenology. They are thoughts of the object represented—a horse, say. Now, it is true of seeing a horse in the flesh that it is an experience permeated by thoughts of horses. For that is just what it is to be an experience with the content that a horse is before one. But it need not be part of the present approach that sculptures generate the illusion that their objects are present. When we see a horse sculpture, there is no horse before us, we do not take there to be one, and our experience does not have the phenomenology of the experience of seeing a horse. Rather, it presents us with a crafted lump of marble, bronze or whatever. But, although we see nothing but marble or bronze to be

before us, we experience that material as organized in a distinctive way. It is organized by thoughts of the sculpture's object: a prancing Arab stallion with flowing mane, and so forth.

More needs to be said about the phenomenology of this experience. The way to do this is to specify the experience's structure, to say in what way thoughts of the absent horse permeate one's experience of the marble before one. One possibility is that the experience is of the material as *resembling* a prancing horse, in some specified respects (Hopkins 1994). Another is that it is the experience of *imagining* certain things to hold of the sculpted stone (Walton 1990). And there are other options. Which is most tempting will depend in part on how far one also takes sculptural representation to contrast with representation by pictures. For what we have said so far applies with equal plausibility to pictorial representation. There too what is seen as before one, a marked surface, is experienced as organized by thoughts of the represented object. Indeed the archetype of the whole experiential approach is Richard Wollheim's (1968, 1987) account of representation in pictures. Yet *prima facie* our experience of pictures differs from that of sculpture, and it is not obvious that the two involve the same form of representation.

Some ways to flesh out the experiential approach to sculptural representation are better able than others to accommodate these differences. The experienced resemblance view is the only one to which such an accommodation comes quite naturally. It need only specify *different* resemblances experienced in the two cases. Walton's view has at least some resources available to it here, and he makes some suggestive comments about the wider range of things imagined true of sculptures, as opposed to paintings (1990 pp.63, 227, 296). However, nothing he says even gestures towards materials likely to be sufficient to account for the perceptual difference in our experience of sculptures and pictures. My suspicion is that, if his account were developed so as to do this, it would have to be done somewhat along the lines explained, outside of the context of Walton's theoretical framework and in answer to the

rather different aesthetic question, below. The illusionist position and Wollheim's account seem to preclude any significant distinction between picturing and representing sculpturally (cf. Vance 1995). And, outside the experiential approach altogether, this is equally true of Goodman's semiotic account and of Schier's perceptual resource view.

This is not the place to pursue these issues. For our purposes, it suffices to have some sense of the possible approaches to sculptural representation, and some grasp of the experiential approach in particular. We will make use below of the idea that sculpture is experienced in the light of thoughts about what is represented, without those thoughts engendering any illusion about what is present. And we will do so in addressing the other of the two questions I wish to consider.

(II) Sight, Touch and 2-D Aspects

Whatever the contrast central to the representational issue, the aesthetic question gains crucial focus from the comparison between sculpture and the pictorial arts. Sculpture seems quite different aesthetically from the literary arts, but closely akin to drawing and painting. Some, notably Lessing (1962), have gone so far as to treat sculpture and painting as one, developing an aesthetic common to both by contrasting their charms with those of literature. Unlike Lessing, I take the aesthetic question in key part to be what sculpture has to offer that painting and drawing do not.

Where might an answer lie? A natural thought is that sculpture is aesthetically distinctive in appealing to touch. Sculpture's three-dimensionality enables it to engage both sight and touch; painting's flatness leaves it appealing to sight alone. So a whole new sense is involved in appreciating sculpture—a difference on a scale appropriate to ground sculptural aesthetics. This is the view famously offered by Herbert Read (1961), and it continues to find supporters

(Vance 1995). However, an equally substantial body of work has been devoted to rejecting the thought. Thus Rhys Carpenter:

...sculpture is a visual and not a tactile art, because it is made for the eyes to contemplate and not for the fingers to feel. Moreover, just as it reaches us through the eyes and not through the finger tips, so it is created visually, no matter how the sculptor may use his hands to produce his work....sculptured form cannot be apprehended tactilely or evaluated by its tactual fidelity. (Carpenter 1960 p.34)

Despite the persistence of this debate, it is hard to discern what is at stake. I will try to clear away some of the obscuring factors.

Sculptures can be explored by sight or touch, pictures standardly only by sight. (Standardly because if pictures are made from raised ridges, they can be understood using touch: cf. Kennedy 1993, Lopes 1997.) But what is the aesthetic significance of this? The claim must be, not about what we can do, but about what we ought; about those senses deployed in the *proper appreciation of* sculpture. The theoretical space thus seems already to allow for three positions: that the sense properly deployed in appreciating sculpture is (i) touch alone; (ii) sight alone; or (iii) both. Carpenter holds (ii), Read holds (iii).

However, matters are further complicated when we ask what the sense in question is to be used for. A sense can be deployed in appreciating a work in one of two ways. It might be used to grasp those features of the work which determine its content (if any), as when I use sight to read the marks constituting a description. Or it might be used to garner what it is that those features in fact determine the work to represent, as when I draw on my past auditory experiences to recognize, in the sounds described, the noise of a steam train.

It may seem that a version of (ii) on which touch plays no role at all in appreciating sculpture is too strong for anyone to hold. Even Carpenter, for instance, allows that my current visual experience of the sculpture can be formed by drawing on past *tactile* experience, presumably of the object or properties represented. It is just that in this respect sculpture does not differ from painting:

It may be argued—and with entire warrant—that sculpture frequently involves an appeal to our sense of touch and physical contact; but so does painting. Such tactile sensations are, in either art, induced and secondary, being derivative of subjective mental association. In a painting by Titian or Bronzino, the representation of material textures such as fur and velvet may be so visually exact that it evokes in us a memory of how velvet and fur may feel when we stroke them. I do not think that sculpture's tactual appeal is very different or much stronger. Any dissenting opinion is probably inspired by the heightened physical actuality of sculptural presentation: we cannot directly sense a painted texture by touching the canvas, whereas we can actually explore with our fingers the solid sculptural shape. But the logic is faulty if it is thence inferred that sculpture is more immediately involved in the tactile sense; for, at best, we can only touch the material medium and not the artistic representation which is intended and calculated for the eye's contemplative vision. (*loc.cit*)

Stripped of its associationist philosophy of mind, and framed just a little more sharply, Carpenter's claim is that the only thing distinctive about sculpture, with respect to touch, is that the latter can be deployed to grasp the content-determining features of the representation. And why, he might ask, is that of any aesthetic interest?

However, a still stronger form of scepticism about touch's role is possible. Consider Hildebrand's (1932) much discussed view, that sculpture is primarily concerned with

presenting a series of silhouettes, or two-dimensional aspects; aspects which change as one moves around the sculpture. To the extent that these aspects are what proper aesthetic engagement with sculpture attends to, it may seem that there is no room in that engagement for touch, either as a way of discovering the content-determining features of the sculpture, or as a resource in connecting those features to the content thus determined. Perhaps it would be too much to claim that touch cannot inform us about silhouettes at all, since some empirical work suggests otherwise (Kennedy 1993). But it is certainly true that touch is far inferior to vision as way of perceiving these features. So, from Hildebrand's perspective, in our engagement with sculpture touch at best offers a poor way to do what vision does well. With respect to both the roles considered above, sight is the sense we should deploy, touch merely reproducing its benefits in reduced form.

Of course, it remains to decide whether Hildebrand's view is acceptable. But the moral to draw is really that the whole debate over sight and touch is in key part irrelevant.

Hildebrand's view has consequences for what role sight and touch play in appreciating sculpture. But it does so by making a substantive claim about what there is to appreciate therein: a series of 2-D aspects. This answers the aesthetic question about sculpture more satisfyingly than could any claim about its requiring, or not, the deployment of particular senses. For Hildebrand tells us what there is to appreciate in sculpture, not what we need to get to it. All claims of the latter sort are, at best, consequences of genuine attempts to understand the aesthetics of sculpture. And without some such substantive aesthetics, any claim about the propriety of using sight or touch amounts merely to the existential generalization that there is *some* feature, of aesthetic interest, to the appreciation of which the sense in question is the only, or best, means.

What are the merits of Hildebrand's claims? They are sometimes criticized for being founded on a mistaken account of visual perception. It is said that they presuppose that visual

experience is as of a world in two-dimensions, information about depth being supplied by learned associations between visual input and tactile experience (Martin 1976). Instead of the Berkeleian view, we are offered an account of visual experience derived from Merleau-Ponty, on which it is full-bloodedly three-dimensional, and essentially involves an awareness of one's possible movements towards, and actions on, the objects seen. But, as Donald Brook notes (1969), the Berkeleian view, although certainly influential, has been held both by those supporting and those rejecting Hildebrand's position. And it does not seem that the latter requires the Berkeleian account. For surely, even though our vision does present us with richly three-dimensional objects, we are capable of seeing, at least on occasion, the silhouettes those objects present, and that is all that is required for an art to exploit that capacity in reproducing such silhouettes for our appreciation. What is wrong with Hildebrand's account is not what it builds in, and what that inclusion commits it to, but what it leaves out. For surely an awareness of a sculpture's three-dimensional shape plays a central role in our engagement with it.

(III) Different Spaces

A quite different starting point is the thought that sculpture is distinctively related to the space in which it lies, that it interacts with that space as pictorial art does not. This is something Hegel noted (1974 p.702), and which more recent writers have amplified (eg Martin 1976). And there is certainly something attractive about the idea. Sculpture interacts with its space: it matters, to appreciating the sculpture, what sort of space it is in. If we place a statue in too small a space, it can look suffocated. Something similar is true of pictures. If we hang a painting too high on the wall, it can look cramped by the ceiling. But there is a difference. In the case of the picture, the sense of crampedness would persist even if one had not yet made out what the picture represents, or if a roughly similarly coloured and sized canvas, though one not representing anything, were put there. In the case of sculpture, at least

sometimes its fitting with, or failing to fit, the space is dependent on its representing what it does. If one were to fail to see its content, or if one substituted a roughly similarly shaped and sized non-representational object, the effect of cramping would not necessarily persist. This suggests a difference between the two, but how are we to articulate it more precisely?

We might summarize the claims of the last paragraph by saying that in the pictorial case what looks cramped is the representation, that is, the picture; whereas in the sculpture's case it is the thing represented that seems crushed by its surroundings. And this suggests the following account of the difference between the two. The space of the sculpture is the space around the representation itself, what we might, without prejudice as to its nature or location, call "gallery space". The space of the painting is distinct from gallery space, the space depicted in a picture is a separate realm from the space of the depiction and the viewer.

However, as it stands this won't do. Both picture and sculpture, the representations, exist in the space in which we perceive them. And neither the objects depicted nor those sculpturally represented exist in that space. What, then, is the difference between the two? We might essay the thought that, while the sculpted horse is not present in gallery space, it at least seems to be. But this is just illusionism, a view we have already rejected (§I). Besides, even if we could construe our experience of sculptures as somehow involving the apparent presence of their objects, we could as easily do the same for *pictorial* experience. Another response would be to note that pictures often represent spaces in a more full-blooded sense than sculptures. For a picture may show a range of objects arranged within a volume of containing space, while a sculpture presents nothing more than, say, a prancing horse, without surroundings or companions. But not only does this seem a contingent feature of some sculptures and some pictures, since sculptural groups are possible and context-free horses can be depicted; it also fails to connect with the issue in hand. Any sculpture and any picture represents a space, in representing at least one object, and the spatial relations between its

parts. Our question is whether that represented space is differently related, in the two cases, to gallery space. And on that question the reply is silent.

To make progress, we need to distinguish two senses in which spaces may be the same, or different. The first is more metaphysical. Two spaces differ in this sense if they do not form parts of a continuum. The space represented in a picture may be different from gallery space in this sense, in that it is not part of the spatial continuum of which gallery space is part. An example is the space depicted in Bellini's *Sacred Allegory*. There is no spatially continuous route, however circuitous, from the gallery to the space represented in the painting, if only because that space is not actual. Of course, matters are more complicated if, as in one of Bellotto's cityscapes of Verona, what is represented is actual space. But we can prescind from these complications: the Bellini sort of example provides the clearest possible case in which, in one sense, picture space and gallery space are not the same. The problem, of course, is that the space represented by a sculpture (eg the space occupied by the represented arm of one of Degas's sculpted dancers) is *also* different from gallery space in this sense.

The other sense of "same space" is more everyday. In this sense, the space outside a window is different from the space within the room, in that, though equally parts of one spatial continuum, the two constitute *different* parts of it; and, moreover, parts presented to us as clearly different, with different natural boundaries, organizing contours, focal points, and the like. I suggest that this second sense provides the only reasonable way to construe talk of pictorial space being different from that of the gallery, while sculptural space is the same. Setting metaphysics aside, pictorial space is different from gallery space in just the sense in which the space outside the gallery window is: it is experienced as a discrete spatial unit, with its own organizing features. Not so for the space the sculpture presents.

But what exactly is our positive account of the sculptural case? We can't say that the sculpted

object is experienced as lying within the perceived spatial unit that is gallery space, on pain of falling back into illusionism. And it is not enough to say that the sculpture itself is experienced as lying therein, for that is equally true of the picture, the representing marks themselves. Martin (1976 p.282) claims that "the space around a sculpture, although not a part of its material body, is still an essential part of the perceptible structure of that sculpture". But what does this mean?

(IV) Sculpture and Organization: Langer

The answer lies in the most sophisticated account of sculpture in the literature, that sketched by Susanne Langer in *Feeling and Form*. Her way to frame the general approach within which we have been operating is to say that sculpture creates, compared with painting and, she adds, architecture, a distinctive form of "virtual space" (86). I take this to mean that our experience of sculpture needs characterizing as having a distinctive spatial content. That content is distinctive in presenting us with a separate space in the everyday sense described above, a discrete perceptual unit, organized in a particular way (88). What is that way? Langer's answer has two parts. First, she notes that quite generally we experience our surroundings as organized around our possible movements and actions:

"...the kinetic realm of tangible volumes, or things, and free air spaces between them, is organized in each person's actual experience as his *environment*, i.e. a space whereof he is the centre; his body and the range of its free motion, its breathing space and the reach of its limbs, are his own kinetic volume, the point of orientation from which he plots the world of tangible reality—objects, distances, motions, shape and size and mass." (90)

Second, we are able to see the space around a sculpture as organized around *its* kinetic

possibilities:

"A piece of sculpture is a center of three-dimensional space. It is a virtual kinetic volume, which dominates a surrounding space, and this environment derives all proportions and relations from it, as the actual environment does from one's self." (91)

As she summarizes: "Sculpture is literally the image of kinetic volume in sensory space."
(92)

There are the ingredients here for completing our account of sculpture's and painting's differing relations to surrounding space. But Langer's ideas need careful handling, and some adapting, if they are to be of use. A central question is whether for Langer the space we experience as organized by the sculpture is gallery space, as it must be for her suggestions to bear on our problem. There are at least hints that she thinks not. But whatever Langer's actual view, the crucial claim, from our point of view, is certainly open to her. She should say that, just as, in the experience definitive of sculptural representation, we see the marble which makes up a statue as organized a particular way, organized by the thought of whatever is represented; so, in the experience she makes central to sculptural aesthetics, we see the space actually surrounding a sculpture as organized in a particular way, organized by our sense of the potential for movement and action of that represented item. Neither experience involves illusion: they are never of a kind to mislead us about the nature of our surroundings. Rather, the experiences have the structure outlined above (§I): perception itself is transformed by the organizing thoughts, though not so as to yield an experience that in any way fails to be veridical.

So, what is special about sculpture is that the experiences it supports include experiences of the gallery space—that is of certain portions, perhaps indeterminately bounded portions, of

the space around the sculpture—as organized in a distinctive way. For paintings, in contrast, the parallel phenomenon stops at the boundary of the marked surface—the marks are perceptually transformed, the surrounding space is not. In a moment, we consider the merits of this account as the core of sculptural aesthetics. Before doing that, let us tidy up one or two other issues.

First, Langer too becomes embroiled in questions about sculpture's relations to sight and touch:

"Here we have...virtual space, created in a mode quite different from that of painting, which is *scene*, the field of direct vision. Sculpture creates an equally visual space, but not a space of direct vision; for volume is really given originally to touch, both haptic touch and contact limiting bodily movement, and the business of sculpture is to translate its data into entirely visual terms, i.e. *to make tactual space visible*." (89-90)

This is not quite right. The phenomenon she makes central is indeed at least partly "tactual", for the reasons the passage cites. But it is not clear that sculpture "makes tactual space visible" as painting does not. For painting can certainly evoke an environment as organized kinetically. The differences between the two lie elsewhere, and are twofold. First, in painting the environment seen as so organized is not that actually surrounding the picture, but that depicted within it. Second, the centre around which it is organized will lie at the point of view from which the scene is depicted, a point the actual viewer imaginatively occupies. In the sculptural case, in contrast, the viewer does not see gallery space as organized around the sculpted object by imagining herself in that object's shoes: her own actual point of view remains the only relevant one. From that point of view, she experiences the space around the sculpture as shaped by the sculpted object's potential to move and act in various ways. If Langer fails to see that these are the only important differences, it may be because she, at

least, is indeed suffering from an overly Berkeleian conception of visual experience. If she fully embraced the thoughts offered in the first of the above quotations from her book, thoughts reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty, she would see that *all* visual experience is experience of "kinetic volume", i.e. is permeated by a sense of possible movement and action. And this includes pictorial experience, the experience in which we grasp the content of pictures.

However, Langer's view does have one consequence for the proper mode of appreciating sculpture. For touching the sculpture itself will hinder us from perceiving its surroundings as appropriately organized:

"..handling the figure, no matter what it gives us, is always a mere interlude in our perception of the form. We have to step back, and see it unmolested by our hands, that break into the sphere of its spatial influence." (92)

Although she does not say why this should be, it is easy to think of reasons. For one thing, to touch the sculpture is to be too near to the centre of the space around it to experience that space as appropriately organized. For that experience of organization is essentially visual, however informed by other senses and proprioception, and from up close one cannot visually take in enough of that space at one go. For another, to explore the sculpture by touch is to reinforce one's sense of one's own actual kinetic possibilities, and this may, as a matter of psychology if not of logic, necessarily reduce one's ability to see the space as constructed with another object at its kinetic centre.

Langer's account is both coherent and plausible. How far does it offer a satisfactory aesthetics of sculpture? This is a large question, and answering it lies beyond the scope of this article. A few closing observations will have to suffice.

On the positive side, Langer's view promises to explain why so much sculpture concerns itself with animal, and especially human, form. For if sculpture is "the image of kinetic volume in sensory space", one would expect it to concentrate on representing whatever can form the centre of such kinetic volumes, and that, since it is the larger creatures which dominate our experience of actual movement and action, means people and certain animals. On the other hand, by the same token the account strains to accommodate certain sculptural works, particularly more abstract ones. For, to put the point crudely, if nothing is represented, or nothing definite enough to have "kinetic potentialities", how can the sculpture organize surrounding space in the way described? Partly in recognition of this problem, Langer characterizes what a sculpture needs to support the key experience as "living" or "vital" form, the sort of unity, the fittedness of part to part and part to function, that organisms exhibit. But, insofar as it is clear what "living form" amounts to, it is not clear how the possession of it by a more abstract work makes it possible for that work to create the experience of kinetic volume on which Langer puts so much stress.

Other counter-examples suggest themselves. Can't sculptural groups be sufficiently self-contained to prevent the interaction with surrounding space which Langer describes? Can't pictures exhibit that interaction? To do so they must overcome the property they share with windows (§III), of presenting perceptually discrete spaces; but perhaps they can do so by being tailored to their surroundings, as is, for example Masaccio's *Holy Trinity*. And what of relief sculpture? One might expect that the lower the relief, the closer sculpture's limitations come to painting's. Perhaps Langer did not intend her account to apply to all sculpture and no painting. But the smaller the range of visual art which fits her claims, the less central we must take the phenomenon she identifies to be. In the end, whether it is central enough will depend on whether we find any other aesthetically distinctive features of sculpture, and on our sense of how distinctive an art it really is.

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