Problems of Art: Expression and Movement in Sculpture

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Photography, and especially instantaneous photography, are far from being the least of the odd elements that contribute today to promoting, but also disturbing, artistic sense. Insofar as photography can be and actually is damaging, it's now time to speak about it.

There is no longer any doubt that the eye and the mind of certain artists have been influenced by all those strange and never before seen poses that human and animal bodies take in motion. Designers and painters (mostly French) are already overdoing it; sculptors, who are more dependent on matter, nevertheless do not pull back from representing certain movements which they would never have attempted in the past. For example, many equestrian monuments being put on display now show the horse falling to the ground.

Such pathetic ambition can hardly be justified when compared to the reality that we see with the click of the camera; it is far from being the reality that the human eye, and as a consequence, the eye of the artist sees.

We must not forget that every impression leaves a certain and lasting mark on the retina. During that permanence, more and more impressions are superimposed (as long as the eye contemplates them), supporting each another and attuning themselves into a continuity from which the major, and inevitably most regular actions most responsive to statics, emerge.

Instantaneous photography, on the other hand, captures an isolated act that has neither a before nor an after. All of us have seen the cinematograph. The speed with which each scene happens is such that the spectator is prevented from capturing isolated poses. When once in a Milan theatre, due to a malfunction, a film being projected stopped, spectators saw the figures in such ridiculous poses that they gave themselves over to merriment and a barrage of deafening whistles. In conclusion, what happens to the ear, where harmony and melody develop in a continual fusion, with the persistence of acoustic impressions, also happens to the eye. If you listen to a piece of music while raising and lowering the palms of your hands over your ears, you will hear rapid sounds, but without any musical effect. Often, things seen in intermittent instants are similarly devoid of artistic effects. We should, then, invert Faust's exclamation made in the fleeting moment
of delight—‘Stop, you are beautiful.’ Rather, to the strange, isolated, rapid, fleeting perception of a movement, we are prompted to exclaim: ‘Don’t stop, you are ugly.’ The artist who creates a work that must be looked at over a long period of time must avoid those poses that cannot last, or at least only those poses on which a figure persists for a few minutes.

That is why we should not overlook the other phenomenon, that of time, which separates impression from perception; or rather, the time that the physical impression made by a seen object or by a heard sound takes to become a conscious impression. Moleschott, who attempted to calculate this, realized that it was much slower than what was generally believed. He deduced that even when the distance between the parts of the body was very short, the speed with which the impression became reflection was that of... a freight train. [...]

As you see, my aim is to carry on with my rigid system for judging the facts that can determine artistic impressions. I know full well that the aesthetes are of the opinion that I am a pedant who doesn’t know how to read the human psyche and who considers art as if it were greenery. But none of this pains me because I am unable to carry art outside the realm of natural phenomena, regardless of which natural phenomenon is the most splendid, the most wonderful.

Everything, even art, is part of the direct forces of nature; and the human brain is nothing other than the means and substance by which it is realized. Just like some kinds of vegetation need a specific terrain to take root or only grow if they are deep down in the sea or on mountain pastures, the plant called art will only sprout up or blossom in the substance that forms the human brain. The brain is a honing and idealizing process of luminous and artistic impressions. Hence the iron-clad laws of rhythm and harmony. Just as the harmonic combinations are rigorously fixed, and changing them leads to wrong notes, so too must the plastic combinations be if they are not to provoke disgust.

The methodical and regular elaboration of the old schools are the revelation of this postulate. Goethe once said stupendously that architecture is nothing if not a crystallized harmony. [...]

The conclusions to everything I have said seem to me clear: the aesthetic necessities of sculptors prevent an excess of motion, which also prevents an excess of sentiment. In this way, we go back to the theories of Lessing opposed to those of Winckelmann. The latter, as is well-known, said that the main character of Greek sculpture was its tranquil grandiosity and noble simplicity. So, if we take as an example the Laocoön and His Sons sculpture, he said that the expression of its pain had been limited because
the artists had wanted to show a strong and dignified soul in the figure. Winckelmann’s misinterpretation did not last long since Lessing, in his important reflections on the limits of the plastic arts in comparison to poetry, stated that [the figures in] Laocoön and His Sons do not shout or wiggle around like snakes because the artists understood the reasons of art; they understood, that is, that the excessive motion and agitation of the faces would have diminished the beauty of the figures.

But can today’s criteria be strictly those of the Greeks and the Renaissance?—No, not at all.

To be sure, there are permanent laws, but the diversity of needs and the procedures of art demand and produce new formulas. Permanent laws are those that govern the logical stability of the figures and the origin of truth. As a representation, sculpture enjoys but a single moment in space, but since its admirers persist in their contemplation that moment must not be chosen without regard for the possibility of a certain permanence.

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Note

1. [Editors’ note. Jakob Moleschott (1822–1893) was a Dutch physician who pioneered the study of the relationship between physiology and psychology. Beginning in 1861, he lived in Italy, teaching in Turin and then in Rome.]