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Fu Lei and Fu Ts’ong

Fu Lei (傅雷) is the father of Fu Ts’ong (傅聰).

Fu Ts’ong is now an internationally renowned young pianist. His skills are improving by the day and he has a bright future. Fu Lei is well known in Chinese society for he has contributed greatly to China’s culture in recent decades. In particular, his moral steadfastness, behaviour towards others, and serious work ethic as a cultural practitioner sets an example for the next generation.

Without Fu Lei there would be no Fu Ts’ong — this is true not just biologically, but also in terms of spiritual education. Part of Fu Ts’ong’s achievements today are the fruits of his hard work, and part are due to the influence of Fu Lei’s character and the teaching he instilled in his son. Fu Lei led Fu Ts’ong into the world of music and taught him the wisdom of East and West, emphasising the humanities and art. Thus, Fu Ts’ong can, at any time, recite poems and literary quotes by famous people in Chinese history. This is evidently important to him, given that he has chosen music as his lifelong career.

Many audiences in the West often ask why a Chinese is able to perform Western music so superbly and eloquently. They do not know that apart from his skilful technique, Fu Ts’ong has had a rich artistic education combined with the unique disposition of an Oriental. These were all cultivated by his father, Fu Lei.

Fu Lei once said, “Only when one has truly understood the outstanding traditional spirit of his own people and embodied its soul can one completely understand the outstanding traditions of other races and be suffused with their soul.” To reiterate, the most outstanding characteristics of the Chinese arts — from poems and paintings to operas — are joy without wantonness, sadness without despair, balance, elegance and naturalness; it is not pretentious or decadent, nor is it about meaningless ostentation. These are the universal qualities of a higher order of art.

To express the spirit of a piece of music, one would first need to understand the life and times of the composer and have a thorough comprehension of the style and meaning of every other type of work. Otherwise, one would only be scratching the surface, hearing only mixed noises, striking the keys chaotically and getting nowhere. This is why Fu
French Romantic Hector Berlioz was able to both compose music and write authoritative literature on it. The Impressionist Claude Debussy wrote graceful melodies that are as bright and rich as paintings, and he has been compared favourably with Chopin. They are masters whom Fu Lei reveres.

While Fu Ts'ong may have a fantastic music career, he has met with a setback in marriage. After deliberating for more than a year, he and his wife officially announced their separation more than two months ago. Their five-year-old son, Lingyun (凌云), was assigned to live with his mother. Fu Ts'ong's father-in-law was the internationally renowned violinist, Yehudi Menuhin. He had performed piano concertos with Fu Ts'ong many times, and these performances were widely praised by the music world. Now that each has gone his own way, one cannot help but feel great sadness.

In the last hundred years of contact with the West, China had felt its infrastructure and military to be grossly lacking. Hence, it built roads and ships, and fortified its defence and troops in the hopes of enriching the country and strengthening its people. Later, it discovered that its people were demoralised and dispirited, and that change would have to be brought about through cultural reform. Some suggested that the reforms should be a hybrid, Chinese in nature and Western in implementation, while others suggested complete Westernisation. By the time of the May Fourth Movement, such a reformation had reached a climax and everyone felt the need to study the origins of Western culture to thoroughly understand its distinct characteristics. Once understanding was achieved through comprehensive study, one could then address the weaknesses of Chinese society. Translating famous foreign works for local readers, whether they were about science and engineering or literature and art, became an urgent task. Fu Lei contributed greatly to this cause.

Fu Lei translated scores of French literary classics and artistic works. Among these, the most famous is Jean Christophe, Romain Rolland's representative work. This work of more than a thousand pages and over a million words in four thick volumes is regarded as the best novel of the century. Everyone who loves literature and music will have read it. Romain Rolland deliberately modelled the protagonist, Christophe, after Beethoven,
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deftly capturing the latter’s unhappiness, sincerity, innocence, and struggle. There are, at some parts, references to operatic composer Richard Wagner, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and others. Although there is commentary on music, literary art, love, country and society, on the whole Rolland’s work seems like a historical poem, a paean to life. Fu Lei chose to translate this monumental work not because it had won the 1915 Nobel Prize in Literature, but because this work is able to stand the test of space and time, and is immensely influential. It exposes social decadence and bleakness, and the hypocrisy and despicability of human nature; it encourages people to persevere, sacrifice and struggle to complete a divine mission. It weaves a masterpiece of love and hate, vulgarity and elegance, despair and hope. Fu Lei’s translation was published in 1933, then revised and republished in 1937. This clearly shows his meticulousness and his sense of responsibility towards his readers. Now, it is the most perfect Chinese translation of the novel. By this, I mean that his translation is elegant and fluent, accessible to Chinese readers while conveying the spirit of the original.

In the preface to Life of Beethoven, another famous work by Romain Rolland, Fu Lei writes:

To abandon without battle is hypocritical, to surpass without experiencing trials is frivolous, to avoid reality is unscrupulous; mediocrity, aimlessness and petty wisdom are our fatal wounds. This is what I have come to believe in the last 50 years thanks to enlightenment from Beethoven... It was Beethoven who cured me of my unease with society and the world as a youth, supported me in my life’s struggles, and influenced me the most in my spiritual and intellectual growth. Many a time, he picked me up when I fell and comforted me when I felt hurt; not mentioning that his next important favour to me was leading me into the world of music...

It can be seen that Fu Lei idolised Beethoven and entrusted the great composer with his soul. He offered the enlightenment and graciousness he received from Beethoven to everyone, seeking to impart vitality and tenacity. This was his objective for translating the book.

In the same book, Fu Lei included his essay, “The Works and Spirit of Beethoven” (多芬的作品及其精神), explicating the master’s contributions to cultural history and his magnificent career in music.

Fu Lei separately translated two works by Romain Rolland, Life of Michelangelo and Life of Tolstoy. Together with Life of Beethoven, they have been referred to as the three great biographies of heroes and have gained worldwide fame. The heroes herein are not influential figures in politics or war as commonly regarded by historians. Instead, they are the great souls who give spiritual consolation to the lonely, and courage to the suffering and embattled.

Apart from the works of Romain Rolland, Fu Lei most loved translating romantic and realist novels by Honoré de Balzac, a novelist of nineteenth-century French society who excelled in depicting bleak subject matter. The well-known La Comédie Humaine is the collective title for scores of novels by him. Fu Lei had planned to translate all the works but did not complete the task. Those that have been translated and published include Le Père Goriot, La Cousine Bette, Le Colonel Charbet, Ursule Mirouet, Un Ménage de Garçon, Honorine, L’Interdiction, Le Cousin Pons, Albert Savaris, Eugénie Grandet, Histoire de la Grandeur et de la Décadence de César Birotteau and Le Curé de Tours.

Works by other authors that Fu Lei translated are Mœipe ou Les Mondes Imaginaries, Sentiments et Coutumes and Voltaire by André Maurois; Civilisation by Georges Duhamel; Carmen and Colomba by Mérimée; Candide, L’Ingénue and Zadig et Autres Contes by Voltaire; The Conquest of Happiness by England’s Bertrand Russell, and a book on English paintings commissioned by the British Council.

More recently translated and published is A Philosophy of Art by the French historian and art critic, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine. It is a book with art theory and history as its focus, taking as its starting point factors like race, environment and the zeitgeist of the era. It is a classic that all art practitioners should read.

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I met Fu Lei in Paris in 1928. At that time, Liu Haisu (刘海粟), Wang Yachen (汪亚尘), Wang Jiuyuan (王济远), Zhang Xian (张弦), Pang Dongqin (庞薰琴), Georgette Chen (张荔英) and Chen Jen Hao (陈人浩), among others, were all residing in this art capital. We frequently gathered with Li Dongfang (黎东方) who was studying history, Liang Zongdai (梁宗岱) who was studying literature, and He Rulai (何如来) who wrote French poetry. At times, we sat for hours at the cafés discussing everything under the sun, but this would invariably return to the topic of literature and the arts. Later, Fu Lei and I stayed together in a Pension Famille in the Parisian suburb of Nogent Sur Marne. From then on, we saw each other every day. Thanks to his influence, I learnt much about music and literature. Because of me, he became more interested in art. Together, we visited art museums and galleries, and viewed works by famous artists. At the same time, we also went to the theatres and music halls to watch wonderful performances. All these took up a lot of our time but gave us boundless spiritual solace.

In the summer of 1929, Haisu and his family, Fu Lei, Jen Hao and I formed a small group and holidayed in Switzerland, the garden of the world. Misty Lake Léman, snowy Mont Blanc, the orderliness of Geneva, Lucerne and other towns, and the fresh appeal of towns like Saint-Gingolph and Evian all left lasting impressions. A year later, we went to Belgium for the Exposition Internationale. It was very impressive and demonstrated that small countries can have huge ambitions. As Belgium is the old hometown of Flemish art, we took the opportunity to take in all of its sights. It was indeed a pleasant experience.

When Fu Lei was in Paris, he and Madeleine, a French woman, fell in love. Perhaps one of them was passionate and devoted while the other was indecisive and had eyes for someone else, for it did not end on a happy note. Fu Lei was so deeply disappointed that he almost put a gun to his head. In reality, he was already engaged to a virtuous maiden back home by the name of Mei Fu (梅馥) (who would later become Fu Ts’ong’s mother). Mei Fu was a typical Oriental woman who had been given a modern education. She was considerate, demure and hospitable. Almost all the Chinese virtues could be found in her, and she wrote eloquently. After the bitter break with Madeleine and some deep soul-searching, Fu Lei felt that Mei Fu was more lovable and decided to be serious about her.

In 1931 Fu Lei accepted Haisu’s offer to teach art theory at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts (上海美术专科学校). This was his first time returning to China in years; by the time I returned to serve in my alma mater in 1933, he had already resigned and embarked on translation work.

During our sojourn in Shanghai, there were naturally more opportunities for us to commune with each other. At times, we drank tea; at others, we discussed painting. We also took walks in bamboo forests and played poker. However, Fu Lei is by nature forthright and hardly opportunistic — he lost every game. Nevertheless, he was enthusiastic and never admitted defeat. He always summoned his remaining courage, eventually regaining lost ground. We considered it healthy exercise and a means of passing time!

There are a few episodes to verify Fu Lei’s hot temper: one, there is a scar on the bridge of Fu Ts’ong’s nose, which is a mark left by his father. Fu Lei was disciplining his son and had thrown a porcelain plate at him. Two, after my wedding in Shanghai, Haisu hosted a feast to celebrate, an invitation which my wife and I accepted and attended. The following week, Fu Lei followed suit and invited us to another feast. As my wife was not feeling well, we declined his invitation. Feeling slighted, he flew into a rage. He also returned to me the paintings I had given him and was incommunicado for months. According to Fu Lei, his temperament came from his mother. He was the only son and his father died early; hence his doting mother had to assume the role of a stern father and was extremely strict with him. Consequently, this fostered his habit of bursting into sudden fits of temper.
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However, Fu Lei was also at times innocent and romantic. On the night of my wedding, while my wife and I were still held up at the wedding feast, he sneaked into the wedding room, poured incense powder into the ashtray, hung a shirt from the ceiling, hung a pair of leather shoes out the window and hid a record underneath the embroidered pillow... we did not know whether to laugh or to cry.

In the summer of 1935, we ascended the world-famous Mount Huang (黄山) to view its amazing peaks, lofty pine trees, sharp waterfalls, exquisite rocks and bamboo, and the sea of rolling clouds which makes one gasp in amazement. Mount Huang can be considered an exemplification of all the best elements of a Chinese landscape. However, the most important thing is that once a person falls into its embrace, he naturally feels that everything is spacious and grand, lofty and vigorous, and his mind is无限地 expanded. In other words, this sense of one's insignificance paradoxically ignites in one a greater sense of ambition.

In the winter of the same year, Fu Lei was sent by the government to Luoyang to undertake the inspection of the Longmen Grottoes (龙门石窟). The duties were onerous: to photograph, study, take measurements, draw, and write a descriptive report. There were about ten to twenty grottoes, which altogether measured more than half a li. In each grotto, there were ten to sixty or seventy statues. Fu Lei and his assistant often stayed at Longmen for up to six or seven days before they could return to the city to compile their findings and take a short break. This laborious cycle lasted some three to four months. Fu Lei had originally led a pampered life in Jiangnan. It was truly hard on him to be ordered up north at year's end, travelling to Henan and enduring the bitterly cold weather there. However, he accepted it for the sake of culture and art.

After Fu Lei was posted to Luoyang, we continued to correspond. Besides describing work developments and the usual happenings in Luoyang, there is a segment in one of his letters:

*Furthermore, I have to share with you a piece of confidence [sic]. When I read your letter, it is like reading a letter from my other good friend, Lei Yuan (雷垣). You are both alike, in humour, handwriting and sentence construction. He is now in the United States and I have not written to him for more than a year. On reflection, I have let him down. Because of this, I must be all the more affectionate to you and take this chance to write you more frequently (this is the real motive for this letter). Word of one's friends invariably lessens when apart. I am almost approaching mid-life. When I think of it, sadness appears from nowhere. This is the reason Zhang Xian's death is a severe blow to my spirit. There are two lines from the poem Su Zixiu (苏子由) wrote to his older brother, Su Dongpo (苏东坡), which I have always remembered with clarity:*  

**Life after life, brothers we will always be,**  
**And in our next life, brothers we continue to be.²**

*At this point in writing, I cannot help but heave a long sigh! I am alone, have no uncles and brothers, and even fewer friends! Yet, it is still not possible to get together even with these few confidantes. This world's desolation and bleakness has gathered here! Being in Luoyang makes me further recall two lines from an ancient poem:*  

*Have another cup of wine, dear sir, we persuade,*  
*There are no friends once you head west and out of Yangguan.³*

*Sigh! It is only today that I know how painful this feels! How many experiences there are in life; yet in the 30 years that I have journeyed, I have scarcely tasted them all! However, when I have tasted one more, I cannot help but feel that I am one step closer to the end — this is yet another horrible thought! We have known each other for six years, yet it is only now that I can look into your heart. It is difficult enough to have friends one gets along well with; it is even more difficult to have friends who truly understand each other. Moreover, is it not true that understanding each other is sometimes achieved at the price of blood and tears?*

*If Zhang Xian were still alive, I would not have had the chance to know you more deeply. Speaking of which, tears are welling in my eyes. My poor friend! Let us hope that the soul of this artist is granted eternal rest and peace in heaven.*
However, Fu Lei was also at times innocent and romantic. On the night of my wedding, while my wife and I were still held up at the wedding feast, he sneaked into the wedding room, poured incense powder into the ashtray, hung a shirt from the ceiling, hung a pair of leather shoes out the window and hid a record underneath the embroidered pillow... we did not know whether to laugh or to cry.

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Secondly, I have another matter to confide in you. Of all the friends I am now corresponding with, only you can comprehend the situation within. Please read the following poem ... can you guess who the Bianliang (汴梁) lady is? If you read carefully and pay attention to each line, you will surely understand the story within... I tell her of my past, my lovely wife, beloved son, friends, sadness and past loves. Whether this is infatuation, true love, or the drowning of one’s sorrows, do not worry, my friend! There is definitely no unfortunate outcome. I love Mei Fu too much, so there is definitely no danger. I am thankful to my Madeleine who helped me through the most difficult time of my youth. Now, it is nothing more than just drinking to seek numbness. Moreover —

Both of us have similarly ended up at the farthest corners of the world.
Since we have met, does it matter if we had known each other before?

My love for her is like that for an artwork, like that for a pitiful person, like that for a destitute girl. If I were to regard and love her as I do Mei Fu, as I did my past lover, or as I would my good friend, what wrong is there in that? To be honest, the biggest reason I love her is because she represents all who are lonely and voiceless. Kang, take it that you understand what I mean. I do not want to pretend — I am speaking the truth... If I (pity!) could compose, I would write for her a nocturne or a whole sonata. Through her, I want to release all the pent-up tenderness and sincerity in my chest. However, I can only write this pitiful poem! A creator without talent and an ambitious man without substance; this is the exact opposite of Michelangelo. Alas!

Since my blissful wedding, Mei Fu, with her grace and warmth, has enveloped me in an atmosphere like that of a greenhouse, so I have never had to write a letter like this. Kang, from here you can ascertain that I love you and love myself...

From this we can see both Fu Lei’s emotional complexity and sense of regret towards life.

On 13 August 1937, the Japanese Army attacked Shanghai, which escalated into the full-blown Sino-Japanese War. My wife and I bade farewell to good friends on the Chunshen River (春申江) and bought tickets to sail south. Little did we know that this would be a permanent parting with some of our confidantes. Little wonder then that in that letter, every word by Fu Lei was about the preciousness of friendship.

Fu Lei was used to writing long letters. It was common for his letters to be densely written, spanning four to five sheets of paper. Once he gave me a letter of 6,000–7,000 words. The writing paper, when joined, measured more than ten feet long! He concluded by saying, “This letter took six and a half hours to write. I am completely exhausted and unable to continue.” Now, I shall extract various parts [from his letters] to fill in the gaps after our parting and after I came to the south.

After your departure, our entire family went to Guilin for four months. During the resistance war (1939), I was invited to Kunming by Teng Gu (腾固), the director of Educational Administration at the Kunming National College of Arts (昆明国立艺术专科学校). I went alone and returned to Shanghai five months later. Thereafter, I lived in seclusion. After victory, from the end of 1945 to the beginning of 1946, I set up a fortnightly multi-disciplinary publication, Xinyu (新语), with friends. As it was too literary to be appreciated by the masses, it was discontinued after four months. Now when I re-read it, I still find it the magazine of the highest literary standard in the last few decades. During both the summers of 1947 and 1948, our entire family went to Mount Lu (庐山) for three months to escape the heat. I was suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis at that time, so I went there specially to recuperate. In November 1948, our family flew to Kunming. In July 1949, we flew to Hong Kong while Ts’ong stayed in Kunming to study. In November, we left Hong Kong by sea for Tianjing and then returned to Shanghai. We are staying there now. In April 1951, Ts’ong returned home from Kunming and decided to specialise in music. In 1954, we went to Mount Tiantai (天台山), and again in autumn, wandering in a leisurely manner. In May 1954, we re-ascended Mount Huang. I travelled with Mei Fu throughout. In September 1956, Ts’ong returned from Poland for vacation. We went together to Hangzhou for a short stay of five days. In June this year, I travelled with the Shanghai Municipal Society to Huainan to visit the coal mines. I also toured the two large reservoirs of Foziling (佛子岭) and Mount Mei (梅山), both of which are recent grand constructions. In March 1957, I went to Beijing again for half a month for a conference. Since my return, I have not left Shanghai. In the last four years, my health has been unusually bad and my energy has diminished. I almost do not leave the house and I...
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have no choice but to cut my working hours by half. Five to six years ago, I could work ten to eleven hours every day. Now, this has gradually decreased to about five hours. I suffer frequent attacks of neuralgia and arthritis. I am unable to sit up because my back hurts. My sight has been strained and it has deteriorated to a dangerous stage. Last spring, the specialist warned that if I did not have complete rest, I was in danger of going blind. As a result, I stopped work for three months...

In the next few years, owing to the mainland’s emphasis on reconstruction, its people could not be sufficiently looked after and the masses suffered from a lack of basic necessities. Apart from some cereal, biscuits, flour, lard and shrimp, I also continually sent Fu Lei some vitamin pills and tobacco strips. He was never without his pipe. If he did not have a pipe in his left hand, his right hand would not be able to move his pen. In other words, inspiration would not descend.

When the Second World War ended, the books which Fu Lei had given to me were lost. It was difficult to buy them here, so I requested for him to send me some copies. Hence, he started searching everywhere and wrote to Cheng Jiahe (成家和) (Siao Fong Fong’s mother, whom I had taught Western painting at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts) in Hong Kong and Fu Ts’ong in London to help purchase the books. Some titles which were out of print in Shanghai were eventually found in England and other British colonies.

The year my son Thai Ker (刘太格) completed his course in Australia and had to prepare for his graduation thesis, we troubled him to search for some relevant references on Chinese architecture in Shanghai. As a result, he and his wife rushed about for a while, searching, purchasing, packing, and posting. For some special reason, some books were prohibited for exportation. They had to explain incessantly to the relevant authorities before permission was granted. Such enthusiasm, sincerity and attentiveness is most unforgettable.

Fu Lei went out of his way to help his friends. In the course of his life, he has helped friends to organise exhibitions on three separate occasions: In Commemoration of Huang Binhong: Eightieth Birthday Exhibition (黄宾虹八秩纪念画展) in 1943, which was the only solo exhibition in Binhong’s lifetime, Pang Dongqin’s exhibition in 1947, and a posthumous exhibition for Zhang Xian in 1936, which we co-organised. At that time, Zhang Xian and I were colleagues at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts. He later returned to his hometown in Zhejiang during the summer vacation, contracted enteritis, and died.

Fu Lei said he had a wide collection of books, a small collection of paintings, and nothing else. In fact, he had more than 50 of Binhong’s best paintings. This is quite substantial. Allow me to quote a part of his letter to show his views on art and his praise of Binhong:

...based on my experience of several decades of observing paintings, except for two modern masters, Qi Baishi (齐白石) and Binhong, the rest have gained their fame through deceptive means. However, Baishi did not have much education and contact with tradition for he only worshipped works up to those done by Jin Dongxin (金冬心). Binhong studied and learnt widely, and did not adhere to any particular school or movement. He immersed himself in the great works of masters from Tang, Song and other periods throughout history, and established his own identity. It is truly admirable that he conveyed the spirit of the past masters without copying their styles. With an innovative brush technique he could manifest the essence and spirit of Jing Hao (荆浩), Guan Tong (关同) and Fan Kuan (范宽); he could convey the artistic concepts of Zi Jiu (子久), Yun Lin (云林) and Shan Qiao (山樵). His talents in life-drawing (from the sketches made during his travels) have been unmatched for the last few hundred years, not even by the famous Western-style painters of this country. His intelligence in assimilating and synthesising the best of different artists was uncommon. Hence, he had many artistic identities in his lifetime, and his success also arrived the latest. The works produced when he was 60 were still immature. It was only when he was in his 70s, 80s and 90s that he began to approach perfection. Among those who loved to synthesise from various styles, I think that after Shi Tao, there is only Binhong.

Fu Lei is famous as a translator in the Chinese literary circuit and has a few writings of his own. In 1957, he published an essay in a Beijing magazine, New Observations (新观察), entitled “Fu Ts’ong’s Growing Years” (傅聪的成长). It was on everyone’s
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When I was studying in France as a young man, I often attended concerts with friends, and my appreciation for music grew with each concert I attended. Once, the orchestra was performing Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*. It began on a melancholic note, then rose to a feverish pitch. At the choral finale, blood surged through my body like boiling water and my emotions were so intense that I burst into tears—I felt as if both my mind and body had achieved a happy climax. This may sound strange as I had not studied much music back then and did not expect to have such a reaction. It is all because Beethoven’s music symbolises humankind’s common determination and fate. He would occasionally challenge darkness and call out to the light; he gives you warm consolation and fervent encouragement. It is clear how deeply music touches us, and how all art influences us through latent and direct means. To feel the influence we do not need theory or analysis, but constant contact: in time, this will lead to some kind of resonance.

Presently, many remark that modern art is difficult to understand. This is due to the fact that it is rarely available for viewing. If exhibitions of modern art were held a few times a month and you went to all of them, you would gradually fall in love with it.

People often have the prejudice that showing art to an unschooled person is like “playing music to a cow.” Modern scientific experiments have proven, however, that if soothing music is played in the cowshed, more milk is produced. Thus, the concept underlying this idiom is no longer applicable.

Of course, with better education, one’s ability to appreciate art increases. It is also true that with a little more encouragement, one can even become addicted.

If a common man can appreciate music, it is certainly not a problem for an artist to do the same and more. This is because painting and composing music, though differing in method, have elements that are interrelated. Artists use line and colour, while musicians use sound and rhythm. Both produce the same emotional effect. The late nineteenth-century artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler once said, “It is insufficient for an outstanding painting to only describe objects. It should also invoke an understanding that would make one sing.” Modern sculptor Aristide Maillol also said, “I am using a