

*Sculpture: From the Coustou to Slodtz*

## INTRODUCTION

The place taken by sculpture in the artistic hierarchy was in general below that of painting. It is reflected in the outward circumstances, and even perhaps in the personalities, of the sculptors themselves. They remained consciously craftsmen, occupied with problems of their art and little given to theoretical pronouncements on the arts. This is largely true throughout the century. Apart from Falconet, no great sculptor in France showed any inclination to write about himself, his art, or his attitude to other sculptors.

As a result their personalities remain dim, obscured amid the dust of marble chips and made fainter by a taciturn character shared by such disparate sculptors as Lemoyne and Bouchardon. The craftsman tradition shows itself more strongly in that dynastic tendency which stretches across the whole century, and can be illustrated at its widest extent by the relationship which runs from Coyzevox, born in 1640, to his great-nephew, Guillaume Coustou II, who died in 1777. Not only are painter families like the Coypel and Van Loo less numerous than the sculptor families who include the Slodtz, the Adam, the Lemoyne, but they are basically less distinguished in their members. The emphasis on craftsmanship could be inherited and though, for example, it is usual to think of Bouchardon as a solitary figure, his father was a distinguished provincial sculptor and one of his brothers was also a talented sculptor.

Other, more important factors separated the sculptors from the painters throughout the century. The first of these was the problem connected with their medium. It must be remembered that before Clodion no sculptor worked so exclusively in terracotta and on small-scale objects. Until Houdon no sculptor specialized so totally in portraiture alone. Most sought or received large-scale commissions which required large blocks of marble which might or might not be already in the commissioner's possession. If bronze was the medium, problems of casting arose. Such problems soon became as much financial as artistic, especially when one considers the length of time that could elapse between first model and final large-scale work – often a space of many years. Pigalle received the command for what became the greatest achievement of the century, the Marshal Saxe tomb, in 1752/3; the final monument was unveiled under Louis XVI in 1777. Nor is this an isolated example.

Expense of material, and necessary length of time working on it, meant that few sculptors worked other than to commission. There could be little room, especially in the early years of the century when the Crown commissions were very important, for private fantasy and expression. No sculptor therefore is comparable to Watteau. None could

afford to go against the whole accumulated tradition of official patronage and large-scale work. The nearest equivalent is Robert Le Lorrain, himself an individual and 'difficult' character, who significantly received little official encouragement and was not much employed in Paris. Thus royal patronage, exercised through the Directeur des Bâtiments, was of vital concern to the sculptors. If withheld, it could harm a career – as Houdon learnt.

Since they were very much at the mercy of patrons, not so much forming a public as being subservient to it, sculptors had a status necessarily thought of as lower than that of painters. No sculptor was ever appointed director of the French Academy at Rome. No sculptor was honoured by the order of Saint-Michel before 1769; nor was there any post comparable to that of Premier Peintre. The prejudice, as old as Leonardo, against the mechanical aspect of sculpture continued to be felt and manifested itself openly in the history of the failure to obtain the Saint-Michel for Michel-Ange Slodtz.<sup>1</sup> One of the chief officials under Marigny at the Bâtiments told Cochin on this occasion 'qu'il y avoit bien des mécanismes dans la sculpture'; and though Cochin made a spirited reply, it remained ineffective as regards Slodtz. The subservience to painters was made quite explicit when they provided the designs from which sculptors must work – and Charles-Antoine Coypel, Boucher, even Cochin, produced drawings to be followed in this way.

Although several collectors specialized in acquiring small-scale models, small bronzes and terracottas, few in the first half of the century directly commissioned such work from the beginning. They were more likely to ask for the model, or the reduction, of a larger work executed originally for the Crown, a city, or possibly a church. Success of the original might lead to a demand for versions of it, but success was an essential ingredient. Hence the importance of exhibiting, either at the Salon or in the sculptor's studio. Clodion could afford to dispense with exhibiting at the Salon, but that marks a shift in sculptural aims and patronage. Naturally, portrait busts and portrait-style heads were in a different category; they were commissioned by anyone who could pay. Yet there too one could lose sight of the original commissioned amid the duplicates which followed – just as it often remains hard to tell which is the truly original piece. Saly's *Head of a Girl* was one of the most popular of such objects, early ceasing to be thought of as a portrait, and was executed in a variety of media [cf. 128].

The popularity of the statuette, preferably naked and preferably feminine, was given tremendous impetus at the mid century by the coincidence of Falconet, Madame de Pompadour, and the material *biscuit de Sèvres*. The result was more than a vogue and resulted in the creation of virtually a new genre. It marked a significant break with the sculptural preoccupations of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The ideal location was no longer a garden but a



56 and 57. Antoine Coyzevox: *Fame and Mercury*, 1702. Paris, Place de la Concorde

boudoir. The way was prepared for a career such as Clodion's; he never bothered to become a full academician, and though he received a Crown commission (for the very fine statue of Montesquieu) it is not by that that he is usually remembered. Once the small-scale group or single statuette became popular it was obvious that the range of patrons was increased. The sculptor could recover a sort of freedom, if only from the lengthy struggles connected with work on and payment for large-scale, semi-public monuments.

This shift to the private and unofficial is possibly of more importance and significance than the three major projects of the century which have sometimes been thought to mark changing taste: the early Crown commission for the series of statues of the 'Companions of Diana';<sup>2</sup> the mid-century project of replacing the plaster statues in the Invalides;<sup>3</sup> and the series of 'Great Men', initiated by d'Angiviller under Louis XVI. All were attempts to employ the leading sculptors at the relevant periods, and it is certainly true that the first and third may conveniently mark a change in official policy. Under Louis XIV sculpture was serving a decorative function, chiefly in the royal parks and gardens. It was for Marly that the 'Companions' were originally destined, where Coyzevox had already executed his equestrian *Fame and Mercury* [56, 57] which were to be replaced there by his nephew Guillaume I Coustou's famous *Horses*. D'Angiviller's concept was more public, overtly patriotic and even defensive, at a period when acute artistic and political crisis could be sensed in France. What was now needed was history, not

mythology or allegory. The statues erected in the gardens at Marly may fairly stand with the contemporary work of Watteau. The 'Great Men' – always destined for a museum – belong naturally in the public world of David.

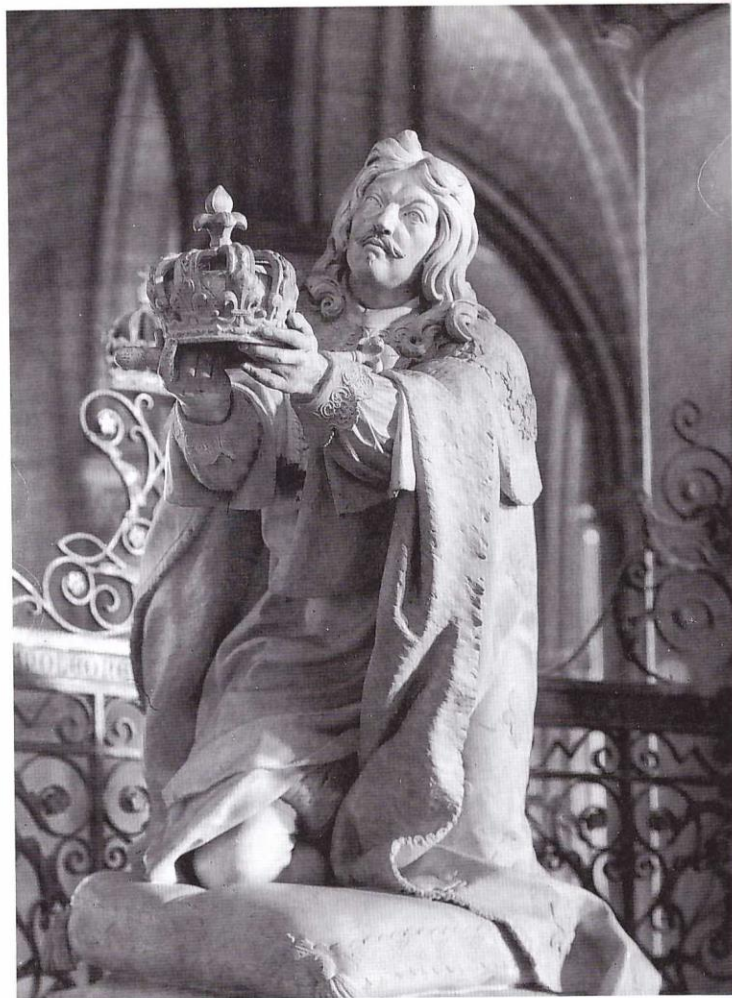
NICOLAS COUSTOU  
AND GUILLAUME COUSTOU I

Of all the distinguished sculptors at work in the eighteenth century, none was more profoundly of the *grand siècle* than the team made up by the two Coustou brothers. Sons of Coyzevox's sister Claudine and a minor sculptor in wood, François Coustou, of Lyonnais origin, the brothers together and separately carried art over that transitional period which took no account of the year 1700. Although it is a temptation to make them thus appear counterparts of their near contemporaries Largillier and Rigaud, the Coustou were really quite different in their aims, much bolder, more ambitious and less restricted in their subject matter. The younger, Nicolas, was born in 1658 and was to be commended by Louis XIV. 'Coustou est né grand sculpteur,' the king is recorded to have said.<sup>4</sup> Guillaume, born in 1677, was to achieve his greatest success in 1745, the penultimate year of

58. Antoine Coyzevox: *Bust of Marie Serre*, 1706. Paris, Louvre



59. Antoine Coyzevox: *Bust of Antoine Coppel*. Paris, Louvre



60. Guillaume Coustou I: *Louis XIII kneeling*, 1715. Paris, Notre-Dame

his life, when his *Horses* were placed beside the abreuvoir at Marly – the last significant addition to the elaborate, ever-shifting scheme of the grounds there. The year that they were installed at Marly saw Madame de Pompadour installed at Versailles.

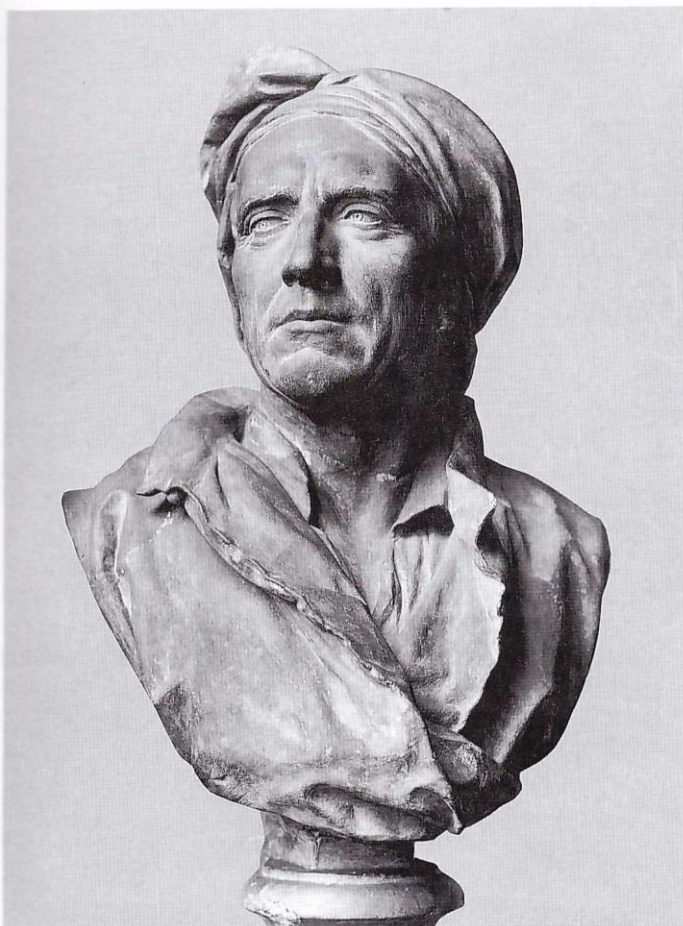
The Coustou began with the fortune of being trained by a great sculptor, one perhaps greater as portraitist than in decorative work, Coyzevox. But ultimately the distinction is invidious, for Coyzevox was truly great. His bust of Rigaud's mother, Marie Serre (Louvre, signed or inscribed and dated 1706 [58], has both directness and dignity, while that of Antoine Coppel (Louvre) [59] is perhaps more subtle still and presumably based on study from the life. There is inherent authority in the features – in the eyebrows alone, one might say – but also sensitive, unflattering record of the creased and thickening throat exposed by the unbuttoned shirt.

Both portraiture and decorative work in Coyzevox's vein were to be developed brilliantly by the Coustou, though they never produced any single, indubitable masterpiece quite so impressive as the collaborative achievement of the tomb of Cardinal Mazarin (Chapelle de l'Institut, Paris).

Like their uncle, the Coustou were centred on the court, serving Louis XIV, then the regent and his circle, and finally the young Louis XV. This closeness to the court did not, however, lead to a narrow court style. They retained much of Coyzevox's bravura combined with instinctive, commonsense grasp on personality – an almost Flemish frankness and self-confidence. Amid Baroque concepts they kept a sober tang of

actuality, and were capable of producing under the sweeping periwigs portrait faces of pungent realism. At his death in 1720 Coyzevox was said to have been 'le van Dyck de la sculpture' (*Eloge funèbre*). The Coustou might, in these terms, approximate more to Rubens. Although they lack the effortless range and sweep of his genius, they possess something of his bold imagination and vitality. Like him, they instinctively think on a grand scale, and, at their best, with an unforced sense of drama. Both are manifested in one of their few works to survive largely unmitigated and *in situ*, the *Pietà* group with Louis XIII [60] and Louis XIV on the high altar of Notre-Dame, where they collaborated with Coyzevox. Something of it can still be felt too in the Place Bellecour at Lyon where replicas of their bronze Rivers, Nicolas' *Saône* and Guillaume's *Rhône* (which were completed by 1720), are placed at the foot of François-Frédéric Lemot's *Louis XIV* in the positions occupied by the originals when the equestrian statue of the king was by Desjardins.

In such work there is often no distinction of style between the two brothers, but there is increasingly a distinction in quality which has become quite apparent by the time they received the commission for *Louis XV and Marie Leczinska as Jupiter and Juno*. By then Nicolas was old, and he was to die in 1733. From the first he had been the less versatile of the brothers – or, at least, the one less capable of evolution – though this judgement is only apparent after the event. His fame and wealth were considerable; and to Mariette he was far



the better sculptor. His portrait (Louvre) [61] by Guillaume shows him in workman's déshabillé – as the craftsman he was and always remained. The personality expressed here seems shrewd, proud, and fully confident of itself, needing no conventional trappings.<sup>5</sup>

Nicolas' career was of the pattern to be established in the eighteenth century. He won first prize at the Academy School in 1682 (receiving his gold medal from Colbert) and went the following year to Rome. There he studied the antique and dutifully executed the requisite student's copy of an antique original (and also a reduced copy of the Borghese *Gladiator*), but it was really the 'modern' idiom of Baroque Rome which, along with Coyzevox, formed his style. Orlandi names him as 'scolaro' of Bernini; and though Bernini was no longer alive, his work was there to be studied. Nicolas did not neglect to do so. Back in France in 1687, he was to present his *morceau de réception* a few years later – one of the last pieces of bas-relief and not a fully modelled statue – and to rise through the varying grades to become chancellor of the Academy in the year of his death. Guillaume's career was to be very similar. He had returned from Italy by 1703 and began to share in the commissions given to his elder brother. Some trouble – 'Quelques tracasseries de famille' – had

61. Guillaume Coustou I; *Bust of Nicolas Coustou*. Paris, Louvre

62. Nicolas Coustou: *Apollo*, 1711–14. Paris, Louvre

63. Guillaume Coustou I: *Daphne*, 1713–14. Paris, Louvre





64. Nicolas Coustou: *The Seine and Marne*, 1712. Paris, Tuileries Gardens

interfered with Guillaume's term at the Academy in Rome, and he seems to have despaired at one point of returning to France. He considered in desperation going to Constantinople, but was prevented by the friendly counsel of Frémin. His ability is revealed in the first established work, his *morceau de réception* of 1704: the *Hercules on the Pyre* (Louvre). This is intensely dramatic and forceful. Years later Cochin was rightly to single it out as one of Coustou's finest works.<sup>6</sup> It shows a talent already formed and very definite in its character.

Between them the brothers produced such statues as the decorative and dynamic pair of *Apollo* (1711–14) [62] by Nicolas and *Daphne* (1713–14) [63] by Guillaume, originally on an island in the Bassin des Carpes at Marly, now in the Louvre. The *Apollo* especially is a conscious echo of Bernini. This is sculpture vigorous and robust, fully modelled, with the emphasis on action and space – the space of the open air. The pose has to be immediately effective when approached from several angles, glimpsed against a background of trees, or, as in the case of *Apollo*, made the centrepiece of a fountain. Just as Marly itself represented rural freedom in comparison

with Versailles, so this garden sculpture escapes from any requirements of state or religion. There was nothing ludicrous in feeling amid alleys of shrubbery, or at a fountain's side, that this was the ideal setting for classical gods and goddesses. Beyond the palace and the church, for those hours when the king lost himself in hunting, there existed a rural environment where it was only fitting to encounter other hunters like *Atalanta*, *Meleager*, or *Diana*. For such sculpture, so quickly to grow weathered, a finished surface, in the sense it was conceived by Bouchardon, was not required. A coarser texture is responsible for the animation of surface, with bold, wind-blown draperies and muscular bodies, and with an energetic drama of expression. A momentary action, in which gestures almost speak, is seized upon, with a preference for the natural over the dignified. Guillaume's *Daphne*, with her desperate, gesticulating hands, looks forward to the 'natural' drama of his horses and their tamers, executed many years later.

Nicolas' group (of 1712) of the *Seine and Marne* [64], also originally for Marly and now in the Tuileries Gardens, so much admired by Mariette, shows his ability to produce straightforward allegory. It is much less wrought and refined



65. Nicolas Coustou: *Pediment of the Custom House* (cast), c. 1726. Originally Rouen, Hôtel des Douanes

than Van Clève's comparable nearby group of the *Loire and Loiret*. But it is much more satisfactorily and subtly composed, with its complementary personifications who are linked into a single whole yet gaze out in opposite directions, encouraging the spectator to walk all round. The putti at two corners serve a similar purpose, as well as being charming and lively in themselves. The work continues to compose at each angle but reveals fresh facets. Above all, it enshrines the grand-scale, yet not florid, world of the Coustou. Public without being pompous, decorative without over-refinement, effortlessly allegorical but never pedantic or cold, their sculpture has a tremendous confidence about it. It touches no particular emotions beyond vaguely stirring the spectator. It is as masculine and as commonsense as Dryden's verse. He indeed might have written a sonorous but not too serious poem to Commerce in a style akin to Nicolas Coustou's illustration of the theme for the pediment of the Custom House at Rouen [65], executed around 1726. Mercury presides over a lively bas-relief where shipping and trade take on memorable images: the nervously handled figure of the naked seaman with a corded bale, the alert scribbling putto at the far left, and the vivid dog crouched at the right – one of Nicolas' liveliest animals. At the same time all is carefully planned to fill the difficult triangular space, and the final impression is one of the seated central god, dominating as symbol and as sculpture.

The work executed by Guillaume alone shows him moving, probably unconsciously, out of *grand siècle* concepts, with increasing emphasis on nature and 'reality'. His ability as a portrait sculptor is proved by other busts as well as that of his brother, with their pungent response to personality and what seems like a delight in ironic expressions amid the official wigs and the thick folds of impressive robes. A fine example is his bust of the wealthy banker and important artistic patron Samuel Bernard (Metropolitan Museum, New York) [66], shown with wind-blown cravat and proudly wearing the order of the Saint-Michel, still vigorous and tough, even calculating, in his old age.

Altogether, Coustou was the ideal sculptor for the tomb of Cardinal Dubois – that shrewd, shabby Régence figure who managed to grasp a red hat just a year or two before his death in 1723. His weasel's face was inevitably criticized by Saint-Simon, but it is the culminating irony in Guillaume

Coustou's image of him [67]. The rest of the tomb, once in Saint-Honoré, is destroyed. It was executed about 1725 and seems from the first to have been wrongly placed. In Saint-Roch the cardinal now kneels against a wall and faces out at the spectator; what Coustou intended was to break the straightforward axis by having the head inclined towards the high altar of Saint-Honoré, as the cardinal turned to share in worship at the Mass. It is this twist of the head, even while the hands remain stiffly in prayer, which imparts so much



66. Guillaume Coustou I: *Bust of Samuel Bernard*, c. 1727. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art