

Sculpture: The Period of Houdon's Ancien Régime Career

INTRODUCTION

Houdon, born in 1741, exhibited for the first time at the Salon of 1769 – showing there earlier, that is, than some of his senior fellow-sculptors. The last Salon to which he contributed was that of 1814. Thus his active career provides a convenient section of broader study, covering historically the most eventful years of post-Renaissance Europe; in his own sculpture can be traced the end of the *ancien régime*, the rise of new men, new policies, and of course the new, republican, world of America. It is easy to think of him as somehow a parallel to David, but he is perhaps better paralleled in Goya; like Goya, Houdon mirrors an international, not merely national, climate. Since he lived to see the Allies in Paris, it is almost surprising that he, who executed a bust of the Czar Alexander I, never sculpted Wellington.

Houdon far outlived all the late-eighteenth-century French sculptors of any importance. His own career subsumes virtually the complete lifetime of Chaudet and the working life of Chinard – the two most robust and interesting sculptors to emerge on the artistic scene towards the end of the century. Well before Houdon's death, Rude (1784–1855) and David d'Angers (1785–1856) were engaged on their reliefs for the Arc de Triomphe; Barye was being employed under Fauconnier, the Duchesse de Berry's goldsmith; and in the year before Houdon died, Carpeaux was born. Indeed, Houdon's lifetime carries French sculpture so deep into the new century, itself born to unprecedented complexity compared with the calm of 1700, that he takes it beyond the scope of this volume.¹ But his own art was formed long before 1800, by which time he had in fact achieved much of his finest work.

The last quarter of the eighteenth century in France is marked by yearly knells of doom for the old political system, dying in public, and only too conscious of needing remedies.² Statesmen passed with bewildering speed. Summoned like doctors, they tinkered vainly with the body politic and then disappeared: Turgot, Necker, Calonne, and then Necker again. There was even a shadowy evocation of the great days of cardinal-ministers when the Cardinal de Brienne briefly appeared – with a revolutionary proposal to tax the privileged classes – between Calonne's fall and the return of Necker. The cardinal had to be dismissed by the king, who announced the summoning of the States-General. They met eventually at Versailles in May 1789. Thence onwards the Revolution – which came into existence almost officially with the Oath of the Tennis Court (20 June 1789) – can be charted by monthly,

not yearly events. These succeeded each other with hectic rapidity – as if the century had suddenly to make up for all those years of lethargy and apparent ease. The Republic, so dramatically established before the eyes of Europe, was itself not to survive the century, disappearing with it at the *coup d'état* of November 1799 which made Napoleon the master of France.

All that momentous history had touched sculptors as much as painters. If it did not produce a figure to rival the authority of David, it yet certainly inspired men like Jacques-Edme Dumont (1761–1844), who returned to Paris from Italy in 1793 and was soon active in giving sculptural expression to the new Republican ethos. Some of his work remained merely projected, but his plaster statue of *Liberty* (1795) was executed and set up.³ Events could divide families in almost Roman fashion; the Deseine brothers were temperamentally split in their allegiance, and while the younger brother Claude-André offered his bust of Marat to the Convention in 1793, Louis-Pierre had proclaimed his sympathies by offering Marie-Antoinette in 1790 a bust done after nature of the dauphin. The steps in the rise of Napoleon are positively charted by the busts executed by Boizot, of him as general, as first consul, and finally as emperor. Napoleon's patronage lies outside this volume's scope, and in sculpture – with his preference for Canova – virtually outside France; but probably no one more effectively and economically depicted him as naturally divine and naturally imperial than Houdon [254]. This arrogantly simple, classic mask of terracotta is of a man – but one who is master of the world. For all its positive execution in the nineteenth century, it marks an end rather than a beginning, both politically and artistically. It may legitimately find its place as the epilogue to a century which had opened with a different monarch and a different artistic style: the Coustou brothers' Baroque, which had been specifically approved by Louis XIV.

The problem years of the century, artistically, lay in the period which immediately preceded the Revolution: that rather fatigued *ancien régime* conducted during the reign of Louis XVI. During that period the greatest new sculptural talent was clearly Houdon's, but official patronage of him was very slight. His visit to America was made in much the same circumstances as Falconet's to Russia; he believed he would get the opportunity to create an equestrian statue – a monument of the type he was not commissioned to produce in France. Even in that he was, unlike Falconet, disappointed. No doubt his career in Paris was checked through the presence of Pajou, who retained under Louis XVI the favour shown him by Madame du Barry. But the lack of interest in Houdon is itself an indication of the somewhat insipid nature of patronage during Louis XVI's reign and of the resulting insipidity and uncertainty of style – so well conveyed by the work of Pajou himself. This is not entirely, and perhaps not

at all, a question of the rise of neo-classicism. Before Chaudet there was no French neo-classical sculptor – unless Bouchardon during the first half of the century.

Apart from Houdon, and leaving aside Clodion, the sculptors emerging in Louis XVI's reign were largely lacking in clear-cut adherence to any particular style. Their strongest trait was itself negative: an avoidance of the Baroque. The masterpiece in this 'styleless style', where repose and grace were the most positive qualities, was created not by Pajou but by Julien, whose seated *Girl tending a Goat* [248] perfectly expresses the aims of a basically aimless period. It was an official royal commission, an immediate popular success, decorative as well as decorous (an important point in a prudish climate which excluded Houdon's naked *Diana* from the Salon),⁴ the sculptural equivalent to a picture by Vien.

A sort of lassitude lay over the arts, at least in sculpture and painting. New idioms and new inspirations were needed – and hence, incidentally, the sense almost of relief at the arrival of David. But in sculpture there was to be nothing comparable to the *Oath of the Horatii*, and of course no sculptor to assume the prestige and power of David. Houdon is not in any way David's equivalent: he had nothing of the rebel and little even of the innovator in his nature. Although his career was to confirm that a sculptor – as Clodion's career suggested – need not depend for fame or commissions on the official and established forces of patronage, Houdon himself had no urge to opt out of the *ancien régime* system. It must always be remembered that his ambition was not at all to become a *bustier*; circumstances made him one, and in doing so they uncovered the real nature of his highly competent yet essentially uninventive talent.

An enervating mood originated in the last years of Louis XV's reign; Diderot, reporting on the state of painting at the Salon of 1767, had already prophesied gloomily 'Je crois que l'École a beaucoup déchu, et qu'elle déchéra davantage.'⁵ It was to combat such a general feeling, and to stir France out of political as well as artistic decrepitude, that the scheme of the 'grands hommes' was conceived under d'Angiviller, appointed Directeur Général des Bâtiments in 1774, the year of Louis XVI's accession. The basis of d'Angiviller's scheme was historical, rational, and patriotic.⁶ The Louvre should become a huge public museum – a notion that had long been aired – and among the objects in it would be a series of lifesize statues of the great men of France: writers, astronomers, philosophers, and artists, as well as the inevitable soldiers and statesmen. It is only one of several ironies surrounding the late years of the century that the Revolution should have precipitated the museum's existence. Under Napoleon and Louis-Philippe the scheme was in fact to continue. Yet the 'grands hommes' have never been assembled together anywhere, and are today divided into three major portions, two of them located somewhat inaccessibly for the public.

The individual statues are naturally very varied in quality, though not always in the way that might be expected. Houdon's wind-blown *Tourville* (1780–1, Versailles) is faintly absurd and undoubtedly his least successful large-scale work,⁷ while Clodion's *Montesquieu* (1778–83, also Versailles) is a surprisingly accomplished and impressive monumental achievement. The stylistic shifts in the series are not connected just with individual sculptors' merits but reveal

the same oscillation apparent elsewhere in work produced during Louis XVI's reign and the basic lack of a dominant sculptural idiom. But the overall significance of d'Angiviller's scheme is unmistakable. First it substitutes interior for exterior location – and an interior neither religious nor royal but public and fully national. The sculptors were employed not on decoration, nor on subjects of mythology, but on those of national history, 'propres à ranimer la vertu et les sentiments patriotiques'. This is a tacit admission that such feelings have sunk to a state requiring re-animation. There is a subtle avoidance of too patently monarchical themes: no evocation of the misty past of Clovis and the Frankish kings. And even when a soldier was selected, it was not simply his military achievement which gained him his place. Writing to Pierre in 1779 about the choice of subjects for statues to be ready for the Salon of 1781, d'Angiviller stated that he had the king's approval for four new figures, including the Maréchal de Catinat: 'un général de terre non moins recommandable par ses talents militaires que par son désintéressement, son humanité et son esprit philosophique'.⁸ In that phrase there is a Voltairian echo, an optimistic belief in reasonable standards which events were soon ruthlessly to destroy. France was not going to be saved by d'Angiviller's scheme for its 'grands hommes' to be sculpted in marble, and what humane and philosophic sentiments had not achieved was to be gained by violence.

The 'grands hommes' scheme was the last, the most elaborate, and perhaps the most intelligent act of *ancien régime* patronage. It made explicit ideas which may reasonably be said to be detectable, however faintly, in the mid 1730s under Orry. Its fault lay in being too consciously an effort made against an existing climate and standards; and as a result it became somewhat boring, for the sculptors one may guess as well as for the ordinary public. The most percipient comment on it came as its epitaph, provided by d'Angiviller himself, who wrote in 1790 that he had attempted to give purpose and direction to the arts, of both painting and sculpture, at a period when the category of historical work was being replaced by the inferior genres of portraiture and landscape, and when there were few decorative commissions available to artists. To some extent d'Angiviller recognized that he had failed – at least that he had not totally succeeded; and one may sympathize with his position, between a largely apathetic court and artists who were not always as eager as he thought they should be to execute his elevated commissions. Clodion, Pajou, Houdon, Julien, were basically much better employed in other directions; after all, they were artists not moral regenerators. When the Revolution came it would have its own heroes, before it learnt that there was only one hero, a single living 'grand homme' who was enshrined in the public museum when – swollen with his spoils – it became the Musée Napoléon.