

Sculpture: From the Generation of Falconet and Pigalle to Pajou

INTRODUCTION

The middle years of the century saw the emergence of a cluster of talented new sculptors in France and the striking arrival of two closely contemporary geniuses, Pigalle and Falconet. After the burst of talent at the Salon of 1737, there was no comparable revelation in painting for this period until the début of Greuze in 1755, and he was much younger than the group of sculptors born in the second decade of the century; the only remarkable names of new painters from the same period are first Vernet and then Vien.

These sculptors were becoming established in the years when French literature was producing a diversity of revolutionary, and rich, work: from the *Esprit des Lois* (1748) to *Candide* (1759). In 1750 there appeared the prospectus to *L'Encyclopédie*, and in Diderot perhaps of all eighteenth-century literary figures there are most typically assembled the contradictions, frank impulses, emotions, and rationality that make up the complexity of the age. This would remain true no doubt even if he had not shown an interest in the arts which largely separates him from Rousseau. With his reviews of the Salon, and his close friendship with Falconet – and not forgetting his ability to write – Diderot becomes relevant in a new way, quite different from that of a Caylus or Mariette.¹ It is not only his ideas – sometimes, not always, finding expression in the art of his contemporaries – which are important but his central belief in the power of art. At the Salon of 1765 he made a claim specifically for sculpture, conscious of the monuments that have survived from Antiquity: ‘Ce sont les ouvrages de sculpture qui transmettent à la postérité le progrès des beaux-arts chez une nation.’² In these years art is seen as able to possess a purpose, a moral purpose, which would have baffled the two Coustou and seemed irrelevant to Le Lorrain, as much as it must have done to the middle-aged Boucher. But the way is prepared for David.

Diderot legislated for a moral art, while Rousseau became celebrated by his crushing negative answer to the Dijon Academy’s question: ‘Si le rétablissement des Sciences et des Arts a contribué à épurer les mœurs?’ The famous prosopopoeia of Fabritius, scribbled under a tree and read in a delirium to Diderot,³ seemed to have its application to Paris rather than Rome: ‘brisez ces marbres, brûlez ces tableaux ...’. Expanded, it was to appear in 1750 as the *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, revealing Rousseau as opposed to the very civilization on which his century prided itself.

Luxury and refinement were no longer goals to seek but vices to be crushed; and in fact Rousseau was expressing – in a hectic manner – the century’s growing preference for the

‘natural’ (redefined) and the un-artificial, a preference which was to affect the arts. It is already seen where it might not superficially be expected, in the patronage exercised by Madame de Pompadour. This was to touch, sometimes briefly, sometimes significantly, all the leading sculptors of the new generation: Allegrain, Pigalle, Coustou le fils, Vassé, Falconet, and Saly. Some lingering confusion caused by nineteenth-century ideas of rouge, a mistress, and ‘douceur de vivre’ seems to have given Madame de Pompadour a reputation for artificiality and high solemnity – to which even her name may have accidentally lent some colour. The truth is very different; but the naturalness she sought in art is itself of a thoroughly eighteenth-century type. It was represented by statues of girls engaged on tasks of butter-churning and cheese-making in her dairy at Crécy. Or in being portrayed in dignified surroundings, and yet with total frankness, by Drouais [207]. It is symbolized by her action at Bellevue in arranging a midwinter garden of spring and summer flowers – but all of porcelain.

Porcelain was indeed to play its part in the new dissemination of sculpture which naturally sought more decorative and playful subjects for small-scale execution.⁴ There was a growing tendency to prefer other media to the formality and finish of marble; porcelain could be prettier, and terracotta seemed fresher. The interest in terracotta models was not quite new but it developed very much parallel to increased interest in painters’ sketches. One was closer to the artist’s original inspiration in such work – an idea that would have surprised, or left indifferent, the average *grand siècle* patron. When La Live de Jully published the catalogue of his cabinet in 1764 he explained his preference for the terracotta maquette: ‘Ces modèles’, he pointed out, ‘ont souvent plus d’avantages que les marbres parce que l’on y trouve bien mieux le feu et le véritable talent de l’artiste.’⁵ Three years later, in reviewing the 1767 Salon, Diderot was to inquire rhetorically why we prefer a fine sketch to a fine picture and to give the same answer as La Live de Jully, though at greater length.

Yet the middle years of the century, suitably enough for its complex nature, were also to see the construction of three major monuments, all royal commissions though one was from a foreign sovereign, but none set up in Paris: Falconet’s *Peter the Great* at St Petersburg, Coustou’s tomb of the dauphin at Sens, and Pigalle’s tomb of Marshal Saxe at Strasbourg. Two of these sculptors received the order of Saint-Michel, the first of their métier to be so honoured, and valuable recognition of the importance of their status in official eyes. In their different ways the three monuments heroicize, or celebrate heroicism. They continue the cult of the great man in an age growing somewhat short of great men – apart, of course, from men of genius in the arts. It was to be a minor revolution when a life-size statue of Voltaire

was subscribed for in 1770 by Madame Necker's weekly dinner guests.

Madame de Pompadour did not live to subscribe, though she might well have done so. The art she fostered was quite apart from any previously associated with the court; while she lived there was in effect a double stream of royal patronage, administered by her brother Marigny. Pigalle received, on the one hand, the public commission for the Saxe monument – enshrining masculine glory and national honour – and on the other, at the same period, commissions personal to the Pompadour: herself as Friendship, allegories of Love's education, and, most personal of all, a tender, graceful monument to her changed relationship with the king, *Love and Friendship*. The resulting statues remained her private property and were destined for her own gardens at Bellevue. The career of Falconet in France was, of all sculptors' careers, that most seriously affected, indeed diverted, by the patronage of Madame de Pompadour – just as Boucher's is the outstanding example among painters. But for some twenty years, up to her death in 1764, she offered new kinds of opportunity to all artists. Thus in sculpture the middle years of the century are, to some extent, hers artistically. She provides a bridge between the *retardataire* Baroque world of the Coustou and the softer, even sentimental climate of Houdon, Chinard, and Chaudet that brought with it a new century.

ALLEGRAIN

Of all the new generation of sculptors Christophe-Gabriel Allegrain was the oldest and probably the least exciting.⁶ He owed his advancement, such as it was, to his brother-in-law, Pigalle, who also generously helped him in the execution of his work. Son of the painter Gabriel Allegrain (1679–1748), he was born in 1710 and lived on, artistically extinct, until 1795. He seems to have been slow to develop and was slow to be recognized. His first appearance at the Salon was in 1747 with a plaster *Narcissus* of which the marble became his reception piece at the Académie in 1751 (now at the Château de Sagan). Once attributed to Pigalle, the *Narcissus* has the rather sleepy charm which is typical of Allegrain at his best, while the very subject seems to anticipate the narcissistic *Venus at the Bath* (Louvre) [120], which was probably his most famous work, and certainly his sole court commission – apart from the lost *Batteuse de beurre* executed in stone, to Boucher's design, for Madame de Pompadour's dairy at Crécy.

Commissioned in 1756 and completed some ten years later, the *Venus* was mentioned in the Salon *livret* for 1767 as available for inspection in the sculptor's studio. Diderot was eloquent about it, and angry that the artist should have been assigned a defective block of marble. This unpleasant texture of the material is perhaps partly responsible for the statue's displeasing effect, yet it is – like the *Narcissus* – somehow deficient in rhythm. Cochin was to tell Marigny, in answer to an inquiry, that he knew nothing by Allegrain except

