

SCULPTURE & NATIONAL IDENTITY.

The ways in which we look at the world are reflected in the ideas we have about it. The relationship between people and things is complex, multi-faceted and continually of importance. One aspect of this has to do with a sense of identity.

Things can be either private or public; we use things, and look them; things help us to act, surprise us and disappear when we are looking for them; things can carry the weight of profound meanings -the 'Stone of Scone' or the 'Elgin Marbles' for example -; things can be a tangible contact with others. I once found a flint spearhead; the realization that the last person to have touched it was six thousand years ago was electric.

THE SUBLIME AND THE PICTURESQUE.

In the 18th Century the idea of the landscape garden was developed. Within that garden at particular points, foci were provided. These foci were artefacts, whether displaced antique statuary, memorials or follies. Such an object was both framed by and focused a vista. The intended effect was an invitation to meditate on both human mortality and, by contrast, on the paradox of constancy and flux in nature. Also as something come upon and, perhaps, foregrounding a vista the object provide a means both of seeing the view and of viewing the landscape as metaphor for or expression of and internal state. The object mediates. Once this concept is interiorised then almost any object or piece of nature will do - Wordsworth's daffodils for example.

At the same times as tourists abroad were collecting their mementoes for the garden, the beginnings of modern scholarship and systematisations of knowledge arose.

Of particular interest, and derived from the way in which classical art, especially statuary, was looked at, is notion that art is both instructive and somehow good for you.

In a 1798 Memoir, Aloys Hirt, Historian of Ancient Architecture to Prussia's King: 'It is beneath the dignity of an ancient monument to be displayed as an ornament -... - They are a heritage for the whole of mankind -... - only by making them public and uniting them in display can they become an object of true study; and every result gained from this is a new gain for the good of mankind.'

The pre-eminence of classical statuary in this cultural enterprise had a knock-on effect, leading to an enormous increase in public and private patronage of

out-door art; a proliferation of sculpture in centres of human habitation, village, town and city squares, road, parks, building and so on.

The intended purpose of these works was obviously various - to commemorate, inspire, educate, ornament etc., but the notion that sculpture had a public place and a moral public function - in a modern sense of public- can be traced to the notion that art is both a positive good and a universal heritage.

Baudelaire, writing on the Salon of 1859 said: 'Be you the most heedless of men, the most unhappy or the vilest, a beggar or a banker, the store phantom takes possession of you for a few minutes and commands you, in the name of the past, to think of things which are not of the earth. Such is the divine role of sculpture.'

If the history of 19th Century sculpture led to things being looked at as if they were for something and the beginnings of tourism led to the landscape being appropriated to aesthetics, then a considerable part of the history of 20th Century sculpture can be seen as conducted, essentially in private, but with the intention of restoring the 'for itself to the object, through the appropriation of non-European cultures, found objects, unfamiliar materials, abstractions or whatever.

Against this, as perceivers - and to a certain extent as makers -we seem to apply different 'rules' when a sculpture enters a public space. Loosely speaking, referential work gets looked at as if it were 'for something,' and non-referential work as if it belonged to the picturesque. Neither seems very satisfactory.

It is useful at this stage to look at some examples. I have four, three executed in the 19th Century, one in the early 20th Century.

NAPOLEON I (CANOVA 1802-10)

An imperial image. Although a portrait of an historical, and, at the time of making, living personage, the sculpture bears the most minimal relation to his appearance. It is the idea of Napoleon that is represented. A naked male figure on a heroic scale in marble, the work is full of references - to the Winged Victory of Samothrace, to Michelangelo's David, to classical Greece as the foundation of Western culture, and, by analogy, to Napoleon as the bearer of that history. The outward manifestation of a physical type is a means of conveying a sense of the inner person - confident, assured, stripped of superfluity.

It is also a spoil of victory. Resting in Wellington's house on Hyde Park Corner it stands in for Napoleon, defeated. The statue itself is captured and, finally, exposed to the public. Reference is also captured. It is not Napoleon

but the victorious British who are the bearers of the history of western culture. The Elgin marbles have a similar cultural role.

STATUTE OF LIBERTY (BARTHOLDI 1885)

Standing at the entrance to New York Harbour, a gift from the free people of France to the free people of the United States; a light to guide shipping; a light to show the way; a light to shine against a darker world. She holds a book - light of understanding, reason; a spiritual as well as physical light. Impeccably sited, the burgeoning city behind exemplifying her virtues. New York and the statue of Liberty are absolutely joined in our minds. Often mocked and caricatured yet, because of the accuracy of siting, retaining some measure of potency as an image. An enormous object, very carefully made, the copper plates riveted together, the whole having an accessible and complex interior. The Statue of Liberty has two modes of being, an image and a structure. These two modes co-exist, we experience one or the other and our understanding of either is always mediated by the experience of the other.

EIFFEL TOWER (EIFFEL 1887-89)

As much a commonplace image as the Statue of Liberty. a soaring structure dizzying in height at the time it was made. A place to go to be seen and to see from. Look at me, I am made, it seems to say, a structure for its own sake, transparent, visible, understandable, practical, yet like the Statue of Liberty our knowledge of the image is modified by our awareness of structure. Remarkable in that since it is a transparent structure the opposition seems untenable. Yet there it is, an image of Pan's and of ambition and a particular, made thing.

ARTILLERY MEMORIAL (JAGGER 1926)

An enormous gun. Around the base, one on each side, four figures, one dead. On the sides images of men in action with machines. Nothing can say what happened, can be the experience of what happened but physical things can be described, a weight, an attitude, a machine. The gun is highly detailed, but, in stone, without function, a mass. The figures are types but also highly individual - the shell-carrier, for example, is a person carrying weight. Weight, mass is what is conveyed by the memorial. Look for example at the heavy coat lying across the dead man. His existence is ended his weight, his physicality has been taken away like a coat. Look also at the boots of the standing figures, the place where their physical existence meets the ground. The gun (which isn't a gun because it's made of stone) sits up there like a paperweight holding something down. If weight and its absence in the figures is a metaphor for death, the gun, paradoxically is a dead weight

its palpable physicality an assertion of materiality, a marker of place and a metaphor for life.

To consider the impact of theory of the picturesque and of the museum culture as a connection between object and its meaning is a reiteration of the opening remark -the ways in which we look at the world are reflected in the idea we have about it. The notions of authenticity which in here in much modernist art practice are subject to the same relativity.

We live in a period of fragmentation, of at best provisional truth, whether it that of the Geneva Arms Talk or of Lake district Daffodils. Value, morality, meaning are made like this. Between the world and me (each of us), along that boundary is where we can locate both language and artefact, an imprecise border zone of proposition, construction, representation, projection, desire, materiality, space. What is interesting in the four examples I chose to discuss is precisely the clarity of their various places within that border, a place maintained between often apparently conflicting, certainly complex, experiences and significations.

If it makes sense at all to concentrate two such vastly nebulous and, equally, profound areas as 'sculpture' and 'national identity' such clarity of place seems vital.