

LOOKING AT LAURENS.

The twentieth-century sculpture that I like is a sculpture in which material substance has a more or less direct bearing on the thing produced. This is not a question of truth to materials or any of that oversimplified sloganeering, but were I to construct a history of this century's sculpture, the questions as to what it was made of and how it was made would be, for me, aspects of critical importance to embed into the discussion. It is fair to say that I also think this an issue of more importance and relevance for sculptures of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than is generally allowed, but this is off the point – except insofar as it contests the assertion that variety of kinds as well as of forms is something distinctively 'modern'. The early work of Henri Laurens that is familiar to us, made of cloth, cardboard, wood, tin etc., seems to fit this discussion. At the same time these works are much less interesting than the more conventional later works. Those early constructions, and the reliefs and flat carvings that immediately followed, seem to me to be over-determined. They are not stupid works, and they do use subtle inflections of sophisticated codes. An increasingly limited means is orchestrated to propose a complex three-dimensional whole. The reliefs for example from 1919, 1920 and 1921 (*Boxer, Smoker, Musical Instruments*) have almost no volume. Paint and a shallow cutting of the surface create the suggestion of volume. This is a language of drawing where everything is determined within or against a flat surface. Coolness, brevity, control and refinement are characteristic of the works of the mid-1920s – for example the very beautiful, stone *Reclining Nude* of 1924. In these works, no longer painted, the form is suggested by the inflection of narrow volume or (as in the *Girl with a Grape Basket*, of 1924) by surface scratching.

Looking at them has a lot to do with understanding the elegance, reserve, wit and sophistication with which the means of representation are deployed. This

understanding is also a source of satisfaction, the works are the products of a graceful and intelligent mind. If I suggest that they are overdetermined then some other quality needs to be proposed. Drawing is a complex matter and at its simplest certainly involves devising ways of representing the object and its environment as well as information about the drawer and about the context. To draw, in a wide sense, is to employ a broadly flexible device which we, the viewers, are sophisticated at decoding. The motor of any drawing activity – functional, descriptive, analytic, prescriptive, illustrative etc. – is the fact that a transfer of a three- or even four-dimensional world to a two-dimensional surface is, literally, a loss. The drawn construct ameliorates this loss. As spectators of drawings at least a part of what is done is to substitute or compensate for that loss from our own experience. Thus we see the blank spaces between the shape of an eye, a fall of hair and the profile of a nose as the volumes of cheek and forehead. Those shapes themselves being signs (not objects) onto which face, appearance, volume and solidity are projected by us, the spectators (see *Reclining Woman* – bronze, 1921). When relief approaches a condition of drawing, then the surface of the relief undergoes the same kind of mental transfiguration, of being filled in.

The earliest work of Henri Laurens that I know, the 1914 *Clown* in Stockholm, is very dynamic, almost mannerist, in its disarticulation. Head, neck, trunk and pelvis are contraposed; the succession of cones forming the arms and the two cones representing the shoulder joints do not meet on one side and meet at point on the other; the contrapposto is repeated across the trunk and is echoed in the split hemispheres forming the head and the hat; fragmentary notations of costume are applied to the surfaces. *La danseuse* and *La femme à la mantille* of the following year have a similarly fractured dynamism. The *Clown* is a curious work, free of the defining back plane used in much cubist sculpture and thus more like the record of some things having passed through rather than stayed. The heads, still lifes, musical

instruments, etc., that are the subjects of the next group of works (roughly 1916–18) are, by contrast, static and in relationship to a moving observer. That observer is engaged with the classic cubist project of reconciling the paradox of the continuity of objects with the fragmentation and partiality of experience and point of view.

Increasingly the drawn or foregrounded profile or silhouette provides an essential key. Rodin's *St. John the Baptist*, which seems to be built out of a set of successive and overlapping profiles, shows the problem that results. Essentially it is one of shape against volume. The body of St. John for example is always unexpressed. Rodin either evaded the dilemma by adopting a continuous and polymorphic creativity (in *La Porte de l'enfer*) or attempted to resolve it by making a surface that would trap but not hide the volume underneath, as a fishing net might hold a shoal of fish (*Monument to Balzac*). Giacometti's later work is predicated on an engagement with a similar surface. It was a trap for Laurens. The defining back plane or corner became the relief surface. The damaging aftereffects of cubism on the work of Laurens (and Archipenko and Lipchitz) can be seen in the sculpture of the 1920s. The breaks and discontinuities of earlier work (*Clown, Dancer*) have disappeared, replaced by a smooth surface and a coherent set of marks. We are given clues from which to construct a virtual volume. Cool, brief, controlled and refined they may be, but the price was high, a resolution in Laurens' work takes ten years to appear.

"I aspire to ripeness of form. I should like to succeed in making it so full, so juicy, that nothing can be added." ('Une déclaration de Henri Laurens', *Amis de l'Art* #1 26 June 1951, translated by David Sylvester, 1971.)

We are all victims of anecdote and of the neat explanation, no more so than when we are trying to analyse recalcitrant experiences. Henri Laurens is often construed as a kind of secondary cubist whose work was rescued from a rather dry formalism by his increasing preoccupation with marine or oceanic motifs in later life. An anecdote that

always appears in his biography, is that it was not until 1937, when he was some 52 years old, that he saw the sea. Presumably because it is actually quite difficult to imagine not having seen the sea, the anecdote serves to reinforce the importance of the motif, whether in the sense of something missing or in the sense of a sudden and forceful presence. It is worth noting that Laurens' statement, at least in the translation I have, mentions many things but not water, marine life or the sea. It is also worth saying that Giacometti, in his text 'Henri Laurens: un sculpteur vu par un sculpteur' (*Labyrinthe*, no. 4, 1945), also mentions many things but not water, marine life or the sea.

As I've said, what happens when a three- or four-dimensional source is codified onto a two-dimensional surface is a loss. There is also of course a gain to do with the multiplied possibilities of inflection, reflexivity, expressiveness, abstraction etc. Confronting that loss is a component in the sculpture of Degas and Matisse. The dancers of Degas or Matisse's *Reclining Nude* (1907) or the *Decorative Figure* (1908) confront something that it is not possible to engage with as a two-dimensional surface. This is despite the evidently fruitful exchange between sculpture and painting that is so much a feature of Matisse's work, particularly around 1907–10. It is not very easy to explain, but when Laurens uses the adjective "ripeness", I imagine it expresses something close to that which Degas and Matisse confronted.

The large seated woman of 1932 retains almost no reliance on drawing, on being filled in to manifest shape and body. This is the quality that makes a number of the sculptures of the 1930s and '40s so interesting. *L'automne* for example or the large *Farewell*, *Femme à l'oiseau*, *Morning*, the *Miraculous Draught of Fishes* and some others. "Ripeness" describes a state where the outside shape is inhabited by the inner volume, the everyday experience of ordinary bodies, frustratingly fugitive in art. Perhaps this is the meaning of the sea. Far from being a universal medium and

common source it is the place where the inner and outer of bodies is most sharply defined. Fish at the fishmonger has a clarity never achieved by meat at the butcher.

If *Clown* (1914) is more like the record of some things having passed through rather than stayed, the best late works of Henri Laurens are the almost exact opposite, the record of something having stayed.

Richard Deacon, October 1992