

## Preface

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The purpose of this book is to give, with appropriate illustrations, an aesthetic of the art of sculpture. Sculpture, as I relate in the course of my argument, has always had difficulty in establishing its independence as an art, and this has been in some measure due to the lack of any clear formulation of the requisite autonomous laws.

Some of the greatest artists, such as Leonardo, have been the greatest detractors of sculpture, and until comparatively recently sculptors themselves have all too readily submitted to the rule of the architect or the painter. There have been repeated attempts to establish a free sculpture, notably those of Donatello and Michelangelo; but the full consciousness of the need for such a liberation came only with Rodin. Since Rodin's time there has arisen what is virtually a new art—a concept of a piece of sculpture as a three-dimensional mass occupying space and only to be apprehended by senses that are alive to its volume and ponderability, as well as to its visual appearance.

"This is what the sculptor must do," writes one of the greatest of contemporary sculptors. "He must strive continually to think of, and use, form in its full spatial completeness. He gets the solid shape, as it

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were, inside his head—he thinks of it, whatever its size, as if he were holding it completely enclosed in the hollow of his hand. He mentally visualizes a complex form *from all round itself*; he knows while he looks at one side what the other side is like; he identifies himself with its center of gravity, its mass, its weight; he realizes its volume, as the space that the shape displaces in the air.”<sup>1</sup>

Such an awareness of the essential nature of the art of sculpture has never until our own time been so clearly held and so clearly expressed. I shall be content if in this book I give historical support and theoretical extension to such a practical vision.<sup>2</sup> I see the sculpture of the past as often approaching and even attaining this independent character, this ideal that only the sculptors of our own time have fully realized. I do not claim that the sculpture of Rodin or Moore is on this account “greater” than the sculpture of Donatello or Michelangelo: greatness is another question, and not wholly an aesthetic one. I claim only that the sculptor now has a much clearer conception of the scope and methods of his art and is free to develop that art with a purity and power that can only make more evident whatever greatness or nobility he may possess.

That the independence of each of the arts is a good thing in itself may not be evident, but it is an inevitable condition of the arts within our civilization. In the past the arts have only occasionally been united, and then as great architecture. We have no “operatic” architecture unifying all the plastic arts, such as the Greeks or the people of the Middle Ages possessed, and it is doubtful whether the technical processes of

1. Henry Moore, “Notes on Sculpture,” New York, 1955); László Moholy-Nagy, in Herbert Read, *Henry Moore: Sculpture and Drawings* (2nd edn., New York, 1946), p. xl.

2. I do not wish to imply that I am the first to make such an attempt—I have at least three predecessors: C[arola]. Giedion-Welcker, *Modern Plastic Art*, tr. P. Morton Shand (Zurich, 1937; rev. and enl. edn. titled *Contemporary Sculpture*, New York, 1952); W. R. Valentiner, *Origins of Modern Sculpture* (New York, 1946). Andrew Carnuff Ritchie, in *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1952), gives an extensive survey of the “diverse directions sculpture has taken in our century.”

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modern building, conditioned as they are by machine production, can ever produce an architecture capable of accommodating the personal arts of painting and sculpture. The classical temples and the Gothic cathedrals were the creation of individuals, of humanists who could naturally co-operate with the sculptor and painter on the same level of aesthetic sensibility. The typical modern building is conceived in a spirit and with technical methods that call for quite a different human component—for an impersonal team of constructive engineers and scientists. The separation of the arts in our modern industrial civilization is inevitable, and consequently such arts as sculpture and painting must evolve their own aesthetic, as music in its independence has done in the past.

A first outline of this book was delivered as the Ferens Fine Art Lectures at the University of Hull in the 1951-52 session. I was restricted to four lectures and felt that I had not adequately covered the subject. When I was invited to give the A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, at the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, I recast this original material, expanding it to six lectures, and these form the basis of the text of the present volume.

I wish to express my thanks to the Senate and Council of the University of Hull, as well as to the A. W. Mellon Lectureship Committee, for without their patronage the book could never have been written or published. My debt to Mr. Huntington Cairns, the secretary of the National Gallery, extends far beyond official limits: his encouragement and enlightenment have been precious to me for many years. To the director of the National Gallery, Mr. David E. Finley, to the assistant director, Mr. Macgill James, and to Mr. Raymond S. Stites, the curator in charge of education, I am indebted for much practical help and advice.

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Finally, I should like to thank those who made my stay in Washington such a pleasant experience, above all Mr. and Mrs. Robert Richman, who extended to me all the material comforts and social delights of their home.

HERBERT READ

*Lexington, Massachusetts*  
*Spring, 1954*

## Preface to the Second Edition

In this new edition several typographical errors have been corrected and a new ascription noted (page 61), but otherwise the text is substantially the same as in the first edition.

H. R.

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## Note

For the third printing I have made no changes other than a new reference to Gabo's Manifesto, on pages 98-99.

H. R.

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*February 1968*