

In the shadow of sculpture *

N.d.A.

I began as an art book reviewer.

Having gained some experience, little by little, I started writing about artists of my choice, and certain exhibitions of antique and modern art. This activity, deliberately, was brought to a close at the time of my first solo show in the spring of 1957 at Galleria del Milione, 21 Via Bigli, in Milan. It was absolutely not possible for me to reconcile the activity as a “part-time” critic with that of the full-time sculptor.

So I almost wrote nothing more, in that sense, other than a piece for the occasion of the death of Alberto Giacometti, one for the exhibition in Milan on Medardo Rosso and a note, as yet unpublished, on Amedeo Modigliani the sculptor, in 1981-82.

In any case, I still regret not having continued to write about many other sculptors I care about and who would form, so to speak, my private imaginary museum: Benedetto Antelami, Giovanni Pisano, Arnolfo di Cambio, Tino di Camaino, Jacopo della Quercia, Agostino di Duccio, Claus Sluter; Géricault as sculptor, Daumier as sculptor; Rodin, Gaudier-Brzeska, George Minne, Ernesto De Fiori, Oskar Schlemmer, Henri Laurens, Jacques Lipchitz, Charles Despiau, Picasso as sculptor, Matisse as sculptor; Johannis Avramidis, Eduardo Chillida.

M.N.

Milan, 10 February 1985

*«All'insegna del Pesce d'Oro», Vanni Scheiwiller, Milano 1985

RENOIR AS SCULPTOR *

From river's wave I rise my head; and I am all aglow with light

Anacreon

The recent book by Paul Haesaerts *Renoir sculpteur*, published in Belgium by Hermes, documents and illustrates all the sculptural activity of Renoir: 24 pieces including busts, medallions, reliefs, maquettes, large and small statues.

An occasional activity, over a span of 12 years, from 1907, the year in which Renoir made his first sculpture, a medallion of his son Claude to adorn the fireplace of the villa at Cagnes, to 1918, the year of the *Danseuse au tamborin* and the *Joueur de flûteau*, two small high reliefs in terracotta.

Twelve years of work, then, not very many, with most pieces carried out by others (only the medallion of 1907 mentioned above, and a bust of the same son in 1908, were made directly by Renoir), because when Vollard convinced Renoir to make sculpture his chronic rheumatism had already stiffened and cramped his hands so badly that his fingernails pierced into the palms. But Vollard, having set aside an initial idea of putting Maillol to work, because in those years the latter already had a well-defined personality, found Richard Guino, a young Catalanian, 23 years old, a student of Maillol, who was able to make the most beautiful and important sculptures. Renoir supervised only the material making, done based on drawings and figures from paintings, limiting himself to indications with a stick tied to his crippled hands as to where something needed to be removed or added, simplified or enlarged. This might raise doubts regarding the authenticity of these sculptures, but the proof that they are by Renoir and his alone is provided by the fact that the personal work of Guino has a cold style, a merely decorative spirit and reflects no influence, no contact with that of the venerable painter.

Others worked for Renoir, after Guino left the studio at Cagnes, but none of them ever had such a sensitive, attentive spirit of interpretation as did this young man. The making of the most beautiful sculptures, from the small Venus to the large one, is owed to his enthusiastic and skillful work as an artisan.

It should be emphasized at this point that the passage from one artistic practice to another, from one medium of expression to another, from painting to sculpture, was a logical one for Renoir, a need he was destined to fulfill due to the great extremes of plasticity and intensity of form he had achieved with the great nudes in his painting.

So for him sculpture is not a new medium of research, in which his personality can increasingly refine itself, but a logical and unavoidable conclusion of his entire life, a sort of apotheosis, we might say – were we not afraid of certain words – of his work itself. An artistic maturity that takes concrete form in volumes, balances, syntheses and definitive, grand rhythms, because at this point they are the only possible means with which to express the rediscovered and renewed virginity of creation, and to reformulate and confirm the rebirth of Myth, the myth of the woman identified with Nature herself, understood as creative force. Now look at the statue shown here; it matters not if it represents a bather or a washerwoman. She is Water, as Renoir correctly called her. This woman on the shore becomes the water itself, the symbol of one of the elements of the world. And Renoir wanted to make, in the same size, a large *forgeron* to be entitled *Le Feu*, of which only a small model remains, dated 1916. A

* M. Negri, *Renoir scultore* [1950], in ID., *All'ombra della scultura*, Scheiwiller, Milano 1985, pp. 15-17.

blacksmith, the twin of the washerwoman, which would become the image and symbol of fire.

Now you will understand that it no longer matters to know that *La grande laveuse accroupie* was made in a shack at Cagnes, in the garden of a villa, nor does it matter if we know the epoch of its making and the name of its maker. All that matters is to understand and to sense that this sculpture could only have been conceived on the shores of the Mediterranean. It is so full of light, so harmonious in its composition, so grand and so authentically classical in its spirit and form, that it could not have come to be on any other shores but those faced and reached in the past by the Greeks.

The gesture, this closing in an arch that opens a space, these big lines of the back that converge and rise towards the marine head, the sweeping, solemn gesture of the raised arms and the cloth that descends in a curve, remind us of one of those large seashells that contain and repeat the echo of the sea.

The light that bathes her seems to become moisture, and having just emerged from the water she lingers on the shore, glorious and splendid, engaged in a normal, humble task that becomes solemn here: she seems to turn her head, arms raised, like a reminder of the sea from which she has just come forth.

ARISTIDE MAILLOL*

Reading through the diligent bibliographical note prepared by Giovanni Scheiwiller for the book on Maillol he has published,¹ we can regretfully observe that the Italians have been nearly unaware of the work of this great modern sculptor, known and considered outstanding all over the world. In fact, in this long note the Italian names are few and far between, just nine over a span of 20 years, from 1928 to 1948, and not one corresponds to a book, not even a modest one, since they are all connected with articles that have appeared in newspapers and magazines, often with foreign signatures. Having observed this, we cannot help being grateful to Giovanni Scheiwiller who has now added to his well-known series of publications this small but complete, exhaustive and carefully prepared monograph on Aristide Maillol. The critical essay is by Boris Ternovetz, conservator of the Museum of New Western Art of Moscow, with an excellent translation by Giacomo Prampolini. Ternovetz wrote the piece in 1934, and today, sixteen years later, we can still consider it valid, because the work of Maillol continues to be valid and lasting. Since that by now faraway year many things have changed and are still changing in art, but it is comforting to see how the authentic works survive, and that always, in any moment, a discussion about them can be initiated and carried forward with positive conclusions. It is only in this way that the works demonstrate that they belong to time and history.

It is not possible here to outline, step by step, the entire long essay by the Russian critic, but it will suffice to underline the objectivity, expertise and love of deeper study to assure readers of its importance and its value.

After having examined the conditions of French sculpture towards the end of the last century and at the start of ours, dominated by the genius of Rodin, Ternovetz demonstrates how the rise of Maillol's work truly constitutes the first, authentic and most complete antithesis of the art of Rodin. Then the author tells the story of Maillol and his work: we learn about his education, his activity as a ceramist and creator of rugs and *gobelins*, and his definitive shift to art as a sculptor, draftsman and illustrator of books. Gauguin looms over Maillol's youth and determines his artistic evolution: primitivism, the love of simplification, the taste for ornament are decisive factors in Maillol's background. The passage to sculpture, in which he is self-taught, happens around the age of 40 and was perhaps caused by his great love of and interest in matter, a matter that – unlike yarns and dyes that require a loom, a press, printing plates – can be directly and entirely entrusted to the hands of the artist. As a sculptor he showed work for the first time in 1903, receiving flattering and objective acknowledgment on Rodin's part; from that year onward, Ternovetz traces back through the work and documents its evolution, which always took place far from any conflict and adventure, in an always linear way, significant in its measured thoughtfulness.

The first work by Maillol contains all the premises for the last, and this fact, nowadays, is so rare and so highly estimable that it would suffice, alone, to document the authenticity and originality of the great Catalan sculptor. He might be said to be detached from time – as he indeed was – operating without haste, lost and immersed in the dream of rediscovering and reviving an ancient classicism as a modern and simple man who possesses, as particular characteristics, the reserve, the austerity, the long development of the idea, the slow perfecting of the substance, the patience and love of a true artisan, with whom he liked to compare himself when he said that he felt his effort was similar to that of a

* M. Negri, *Aristide Maillol* [1950], in ID., *All'ombra della scultura*, Scheiwiller, Milano 1985, pp. 18-22.

¹. Boris Ternovetz, *Aristide Maillol, scultore*, ed. Giovanni Scheiwiller, series «Arte Moderna Straniera», n. 16, Hoepli, Milano 1950.

potter. The “classicism” of Maillol and his reference to Greek art, however, seems to be the point that is not sufficiently investigated by Ternovetz. While not exhaustive, nevertheless, the author is very clear and explicit on this score. He speaks of an “imagined and happy antiquity.” Instead, we would say it was rediscovered and recreated, as if it had reached us, through the work of the sculptor, along underground currents brought back to light after centuries, not by chance on the shores of the Mediterranean. And Maillol reminds us of the Greeks only because, like them, in Nature he sees harmony and symmetry, and like them he possesses the equilibrium of volumes, fullness of forms, musical rhythm of movements. This is important because regarding Maillol there has often been talk of “cold classicism” and “academicism.”

This charge is unjust and superficial: the academics, the classicists, are frigid cultural remakers, while Maillol is an artist full of original, luminous and inner vitality, overflowing with a healthy sensuality, chaste and pure, of a natural order, that brings surfaces alive. Only regarding one statement do we find ourselves in total disagreement with the Russian writer, when he sees an escape “into antiquity” in the work of the French sculptor, as a way “both for him and for the class he represents” to escape from the needs of reality and to “barricade himself against contemporary problems.” Certainly Maillol is not Costantin Meunier, nor Vincenzo Vela. We believe that in art – putting aside contingent factors – one must consider and evaluate only the results, the conclusions an artist is able to reach by means of his works, and if he does or does not achieve art. When it comes to critical or artistic evaluation, only this is important, and nothing else. Aristide Maillol was a great artist, of singular force.

Where his relations with the society of his time are concerned, we think this humble old man with a Greek name generously did his part with his work, and if his eyes and soul were not directed towards current events it was because, as a true artist, he had turned them towards an ideal world of a superior order and balance, whose study and contemplation can still, even today, grant benefits to us, the offspring of a time that seems to have lost precisely the sense of any balance. In Catalan dialect, Maillol means a “small vine,” and when we learned this we were happy, as for a discovery, because we have always thought about the slow, careful effort of this sculptor, with which he produced his fruitful results, as a force of Nature, because it resembles nature in its full, fertile rhythm. Only in this way do the genuine artists insert themselves, making themselves useful and indispensable, in our lives as human beings.

HENRY MOORE

When for the first time, on the frontispiece of a small catalogue by Kurt Valentin, I saw the picture of the fascinating characters which are the “King and Queen”, I immediately thought of their potential – because of the way the artist had created them – to become the source and the protagonists of a myth.

An adventure that would be nothing new for sculpture, but certainly rare and eventful, especially in modern times. Now the *King and Queen* have found their ideal location thanks to one of those arcane but inexorable laws that rule the destiny of works of art. One could not have found a better location for their hieratic immobility, a location which is dominated, almost galvanized, by their silent presence. All thanks to the intelligence and great sensitivity of a Scottish art collector who has chosen the land of Dumfries as “their” private garden.

Such a landscape is simply perfect for Moore’s sculptures because of the lines of its horizon, which follow the gentle slope of a hill or a sinuous rise. The soft, extended contours of a valley can also be seen in Moore’s works, with that same rhythm and grandeur – just look at some of his *reclining figures*, for example.

One has to admit that having placed these two figures on a small bare and rocky area next to the downward slope of a meadow, alone in a sea of grass and with the sky as background, represents an act of courage and of faith in the power of sculpture. These two figures could also have been defeated by the enormous body of nature, which in this case is no mere park or artfully designed garden. Such a brave decision shows a full understanding, leading to certainty regarding their potential. These two figures have an unfathomable but clear feeling of solitude within themselves, and share it with the host landscape. They have an arcane detachment from the world: hieratic and in solitude, immobile and thoughtful, they seem to be consciously observant of the passing of time, the slow changing of seasons, and the faraway movement of eternal things that are neither human nor of this world.

I previously mentioned the idea that these two figures could be linked to a myth. To my mind this was so obvious that I could already see the King and Queen as characters of fables or legends told by the inhabitants of the local villages, legends that would take on justification over time. Certainly one day that meadow, pasture or estate will be known as the “King’s...” and the “Queen’s...”, and in time the two magical figures will either change the name of these places or grant them one should they be nameless, making them take on an unmistakable character. One could say that they will go back to where they were born, to the place from whence they came, by a path unusual for most modern sculpture: to a kingdom, a world of myths, fables and legends. As Moore said, the origins of this couple are linked to the fact that for many years he used to tell fables himself, stories about Kings and Queens, to his daughter.

When a work of art contains poetry, then its life and destiny unfold along unknown paths, as if in a saga. And in referring in such a vivid and fascinating way to the archaic idea of “kings”, these statues/characters find their main justification in their immobility, their being without “gestures” or without “actions”, in a fatal parallelism, together with their distant gaze and their strange absorption in their own vision.

A certain metaphysical (but not surrealistic) sense hovers over the King and Queen as and where they are now. Their fulcrum is found in the head of the King himself, a head that is head and crown at the same time, his face and beard combining in the same form. In spite of the faun-like appearance that reminds us of the god Pan, present in the King’s expressive head, the primary characteristic of ancient regal presence has not been diminished. On the contrary, such features add a more suitable appearance to the environment where the statue stands and lives, giving the crown a rustic look, as on the head of a landlord.

I would therefore like to focus more on the character of these two sculptures, but also to describe their form, the way they are – despite some of their contradictions – stylistically linked in all their parts. I would like to understand their form in their full spatial existence. However, for now I want to remind the reader (as far as *King and Queen*, *Draped Figure*, some small bronzes and *Large Warrior with Shield* are concerned), of the fact that Moore favours the more figurative aspects in his most recent art, where the research and reinvention of certain human forms are the most interesting and innovative aspect. Even if Moore is almost never totally detached from an anthropomorphic shape, in his most recent sculptures we can perceive his stronger fascination for the human body. These are the works that prove – because of their value as sculptures – that the most authentic meaning of “sculpture” is that of the “human form” from which the sculptor never manages to totally separate himself, and consequently always refers to in his work. Even though he is fascinated by forms unknown to him and has copied them, in his research this mostly proves to be neither essential, nor definite nor universal despite its validity and fascination.

I have talked about Moore’s attraction to certain forms, certain elements of human forms, and his attempt to recreate them within new aspects and new dimensions. I have also discussed the King’s head. However, I can also talk about the two figures in terms of their long thin arms, their flat hands, their concave laps and their broad, smooth shoulders. In Moore’s *Draped Reclining Figure*, where one can sense the presence of the majestic and infinite Parcae, the above-mentioned research is less evident. However, on the whole, this work of art remains, to my mind, one of Moore’s most representative sculptures because of its large and spacious construction, for the immobility which governs such a closed and blocked figure, for the rhythm of its lines, for the unusual way in which Moore designed the drape and for the kind of meditative and engrossed look which gives this figure a rather unique charm that renders it not simply a statue but something more mysterious, unexplainable as if it were not just a reclining woman seen from an archaic and primordial viewpoint, but a statue of a divinity. Is she a divinity of the Earth? This too is a reference to a certain mythology, to which Moore would like to draw our attention.

Where did that *Large Warrior* come from? Through which ancient memories, down which paths, from which battles has he managed to reach us, maimed but still so powerful? Closed and strong ganglion of embodied strength, tight fist, surviving gladiator of tragic games, mythic hero: what has he come to say to the present world? Is it a warning, a premonition? These are all questions that can be answered only over time, despite the instinctive, unconscious and unquestionable aspects present in the work of a real artist. For the moment, it is important that Moore has husbanded his forces and created with artistic meaning what he had within himself. And in this great “plastic invention” Moore has created what, in his view, has to be done by the sculptor: “He must strive continually to think of, and use, form in its full spatial completeness. He gets the solid shape, as it 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 visualises 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 centre of gravity, its mass, its weight and realises its volume, as the space that the shape displaces in the air.”

It is only in this way that those maimed arms and legs will not be perceived as stumps, but as essential and precise forms, and that the lifted shield, in mid-air, will not be an empty circle or a meaningless part, but a functional and precise integration of a whole. The whole sculpture will not be seen as a fragment but as something alive, complete and immutable. To whom does it belong? Does it belong to us? Or rather to the beginning of a new civilization? There is a lot of faith in men, in their honest, conscious strength, in this *Large Warrior with Shield*, making me think that Moore intentionally wanted to reiterate the importance of man in the world, even if it is a new world of scoriae and lava, of which we can only glimpse the beginning. Once again we can see art forerunning time, and we hope that this capability will act as a warning to us.

Maybe there are still too few of us in the present world who can see art in this way, whether it is modern or ancient.

FRITZ WOTRUBA

The works of the Austrian sculptor Fritz Wotruba will certainly have attracted the attention of visitors at the latest Biennale in Venice.

In the bright Austrian pavilion designed by Hoffmann and situated amidst a selected and representative artistic display, Wotruba's big stones or small bronzes – the sculptor had already exhibited there in 1948, 1950, 1952 – stand out from the rest of the works, be they paintings, drawings or sculptures. Now, an excellent book on Wotruba has been printed, so we can better understand his work. It also makes a valid contribution to his bibliography, both for the great care given to the volume by Bruder Rosenbaum, and the exhaustive essay written by Elias Canetti. The book has been published in response to the travelling exhibition of Wotruba's works, which was organised by the Institute of Modern Art, Boston, last April and then moved to several American cities.

Wotruba, as well as being included several times at the Venice Biennale – he first took part in it in 1932, when he was only twenty-five – has had repeated contacts with Italian artists and Italian art. I remember an exhibition organised by Ettore Gian Ferrari, a man gifted with great intuition, in his art gallery in Milan, in 1952. The exhibition did not receive great critical acclaim, but even today I can still recall some wonderful drawings and some small well-made bronze sculptures from that show. Wotruba's work was also included in the "Mostra Internazionale del Disegno" (International Drawing Exhibition) organised in Bergamo in 1950, a show which unfortunately has never been repeated. His work has also been seen in an open-air sculpture exhibition at Villa Mirabello, Varese in 1953, as well as in Rome in 1947 and 1955, during a sculpture show organised by the Austrian Cultural Centre. I would particularly like to mention the exhibition at the Kunsthalle in Basel in 1943, where Wotruba showed his works alongside those by Marino Marini, Germaine Richier and Arnold D'Altri, as well as the exhibition in Salzburg in 1952 which included works by Marino Marini and Henry Moore. I mention the contacts Wotruba had with Italy because I think it can throw some light on the interpretation of his works, and also because I am under the impression, even if these are the first few pages that an art magazine dedicates to his work, that I am talking about works of art which are not totally unknown in Italy, or at least about an artist whose name is not totally unfamiliar here.

Wotruba was born in Vienna in 1907, one of the most thriving cultural centres at the beginning of the 20th Century. He therefore had the opportunity to absorb the international cultural atmosphere around him. During the last war, he had the chance to study in Switzerland, which at that terrible time, when Europe was at war, was an oasis of peace where artists had great freedom, and the art world in Switzerland was consequently thriving. He lived as a refugee in Zug from 1938 to 1946, after which he went back to Vienna to take up the invitation to teach sculpture at the Art Academy.

To my mind, the monograph on Wotruba by Elias Canetti is not exhaustive about the first period of Wotruba's work, and the book by J.R. De Salis published by Graphis – Zurich, 1948 – offers further information. However, in the text by Canetti, the more recent output of Wotruba is well documented. I personally believe that this is the most important part of his work, the part that enables us to understand Wotruba's personality with better and more lucid logic. His personality is certainly rather unique and has allowed him to be placed, within few years, among the most

important sculptors in Europe and indeed in the world. His way of expressing his art is so personal, so different from the various “isms” of the time. I have come to believe that thanks to such unique qualities he could become – at least in Austria – the founder of a style, of a new group of sculptors. This is also supported by the spontaneous creation of a new generation of young Austrian sculptors, who cite him as an influence.

Wotruba uses stone worked with direct cutting, almost always using the tip of his tools, and therefore showing his great knowledge of both the tools and the material. His bronzes are equally modelled with great expertise and with superb results that can only be achieved by means of imagining the final sculpture before it was actually made, thanks to his deep knowledge of the use of bronze. The poetic world of Wotruba pivots around the human figure and never loses touch with it. It is a recurrent and rigorous theme capable of bearing all the potential problems of sculpture, while refusing any hedonistic attraction, established assumptions or purely formal propositions. Seated figures, bent over in silence, identify with inner pain, arms folded over the chest as if to stop a movement, a gesture which otherwise would make them seem to rave and to act improperly. The faces express a meditative state rather than a lost expression. There is such internal strength in Wotruba’s sculptures as to make one think that the force tightens the stone within itself, preventing the sculptures from expanding, from losing themselves in the friction of gestures not familiar to them, which would therefore be totally alien and not right for the painful vision Wotruba has of man and his feelings. I am talking about those stones, about those exhausted female figures which are seated, squatting, curled up or reclining with a sort of ancient adherence to the earth, from which they seem to get their energy, just as trees do. Figures that seem to contemplate a world that is human only due to the sorrow mirrored in it, mystical forms that grant the air surrounding them a mysterious, metaphysical silence. Standing men and women, like erect human cathedrals, full of strength against something that is unfamiliar both to them and to us. Immobility to them is a static condition, in spite of their attempt to make a gesture or to take a step. Their bodies stand straight, perpendicular to the ground like monolithic stones with anthropomorphic shapes. And as in the bronze or stone high reliefs, more than one figure is present, still silent and solemn like people gathering on the stage of an imaginary play, the rhythm shaping them together is nevertheless a vertical one – as it was for the Byzantine and Gothic styles.

The light which is stopped by the angular and precise profiles is the clear scaffolding that holds up these sculptures, along with its opposite: the shadow.

Deep and dark cuts like wounds, deep shadows, gashes and surfaces on which light dazzles find a balance in their common function, even though their contrasting origins seem to collide with each other. Here is where we find the great constituent lesson of Wotruba, as well as in his superb balancing of volumes, and in the rhythm that is there within those volumes. They are paced in a musical way, with a heavy, deep tone. In Wotruba’s figures we can identify a sort of “gigantism” as if they were rocks that have tumbled down into a valley from the mountaintop, contemplating the vast silence of the valley while seeming to be precariously placed.

Of whom might Wotruba remind us? Whose art is he close to? To my mind, he has the same value as artists like Sironi or Permeke.

The vibrant animation of the surfaces, the way they interact with light; the enclosed lyrical vitality; the well-defined framing, never the result of a casual act; an essential constructivist sense of a sculptor-architect; strength and inventive capability; the aggressiveness that overwhelms the artist

in his act of creation; the noble aspect that he manages to confer upon stone, which makes it eternal and immutable; the extreme limit to which the essential is taken; the formal coherence, the severity, the discipline, the rigour, the total lack of whatever form of vague intellectualism: these are the best and undeniable merits of Wotruba. We cannot deny him all these aspects, not because of a possible enthusiastic reaction to his work, but as an objective consideration of it. It is not by chance that the first and most important review of Wotruba's work was written by a true master of modern sculpture: Aristide Maillol. In 1929, Maillol went to an Austrian art exhibition at the "Jeu de Paume", where he saw a large stone torso and could not believe that such magnificent work had been made by a twenty-two-year-old. From that moment until his tragic death, Maillol never stopped being interested and following the development of the young Viennese artist's work. He had the correct perception, and Wotruba's works simply confirm it, bearing out the trust the wise elder had put in the young artist. These very acts are the signposts of the development of art, which give it a sense of continuity only time can judge.

FRAGMENTS FOR ALBERTO GIACOMETTI*

Writing about Alberto Giacometti has always seemed impossible to me: like trying to immobilize, with finite, relative words and concepts, objects that are still in a state of becoming, never finished. It feels like a betrayal of the very principle through which the latest sculpture of Giacometti has been born, or at least a way of perverting the terms with which it appears before our eyes.

Writing about his sculpture, I think I have to run the risk, after having written, of no longer being able to recognize it. Because in discourse and through discourse everything is falsified, or at least reduced to something that is to sculpture what the paraphrasing of poetry is to poetry: senseless prose, because it has been deprived of that mysterious and ineffable essence that made it poetry. Allusion, analogy, suggestion are perhaps the most suitable means. Even better, we can rely on memory and allow his strange “creatures” that at times we are unsure about calling “sculptures” because they are so alive, so true, so atremble, to return in our mind’s eye, like shadows.

We have seen and will see so many things, but I have never seen anything quite so unique as the sculptures of Giacometti, these days. To which realm do they belong, where have they come from, where are they going? They seem to belong to some unknown species, creatures of extreme fragility, materialized in bronze to not escape us and to be able to appear before us, very much alive and distinct, able to be touched, while at the same time seeming like evanescent semblances of surreal dreams; or, more precisely, not belonging to any literary genre, they are none of all this: that are only that which Giacometti truly “sees” and what he attempts to convey with his own means.

Many things are forgotten and no longer appear in the mirror of memory, but certain things linger, and memory returns to them often, as if summoned.

I cannot forget, for example, the deserted studio of Maloja, where the light pours down from big skylights, and in the deserted room lined with pale wood, the air rarified as if in a void, immobile in its white plaster stillness, there is a statue left unfinished. I know not how many years it has been there, perhaps since 1935 or more, tall, nude, slender in its elementary pose, long arms extended at the sides, like an ancient divinity in a forgotten temple. Depending on the angle of the sunlight, its shadow – the only mobile thing in so much stillness – shifts along the pale walls and over the wooden floor until it coincides, at times, with its own drawing, a study as large as the statue, traced with a brush on the wall that is the backdrop.

I saw it for a short time on a transparent September afternoon; I can see it again, as if it were here, as I write, so ‘present’ for me that if I imagine it up there, now that it is deep winter and the snow of Maloja rises to the rooftop, and through the glass screened by its thickness an even more rarified light enters, it makes me shiver, and I would like to cover it up at least for a moment, because it seems to stare at me with icy eyes. It does not stand on a conventional trestle, but as in a child’s pastime it has four small wooden wheels attached at the base, as if it were ready to depart, just as it still is, drawn on a very long, very remote journey. It is an image, an image that by now is indestructible in memory, but I know that it is a statue, a true statue, unfinished and forgotten, that exists up there where it now seems to be just a strange sundial destined to mark a time that does not pass for it.

I have never taken indiscreet looks at other people’s correspondence; but the “my dearest children” I inevitably read, to look at a small golden sculpture placed on a desk, at the start of a long letter written in clear script by a gentlewoman of 84, gave me an ineffable sense in that place of love, time and distance. The letter was headed from Maloja to Paris and its writing, the lady told me, represented the only possible way for her to be close to her faraway sons Alberto and Diego, and to spend that long Sunday afternoon with them.

In the peaceful cemetery that surrounds the small church of St. George on two sides – between

* M. Negri, *Frammenti per Alberto Giacometti* [1956], in ID., *All’ombra della scultura*, Scheiwiller, Milano 1985, pp. 70-82.

Stampa and Borgonovo in Val Bregaglia – I saw a river stone placed on a tomb. It seems like a menhir, that stone, or a small dolmen of Brittany, and instead it is a white granite rock the Maira River rolled and polished for centuries, which the loving and respectful hand of a man has completed, adorning it with a dove that quenches its thirst from a bowl. The dove and bowl are a very light relief, crafted with the sensitivity of an Egyptian stele, where the light casts no shadow but the volumes are read more with the caress of a hand than with the eyes. A very beautiful tomb, of extreme simplicity, utterly in tune with the simple grandeur of the place. It is the first sculpture by Giacometti I was able to see in his hometown, an act of love and devotion of an artist son for an artist father.

I know not how or why, but the simplicity of that work spoke to my heart like the opening words of the letter I had happened to read. The same sense of devotion, of love, of things that do not change over the course of time. Nor can I say why I have remembered these things; perhaps to seek a measure, a human sense of the man whose work I set out to discuss, perhaps to know him first as a man and then as an artist, and to trace back to his origins, if only to know where he was born, who were his parents, from whence he came. But recalling the father, the mother, the hometown also seems like a way of getting to know Alberto Giacometti and his background as an artist better.

Those who publish reproductions of Etruscan sculptures in books beside the pulsating figures of Giacometti, saying that his pieces are simply a direct cultural consequence of those works from the past, demonstrate – in my view – that they have understood neither the old nor the new.

The Etruscan sculptures – those elongated figures the good mothers of Cerveteri or Tarquinia, on the advice of soothsayers, placed beside the cradles of newborn babies as a propitiatory sign – are and remain sculptures in the round. Their unusual lengthening therefore has its roots in extra-artistic reasons. On those long stems that can be considered their bodies, intrepid little heads blossom with utterly normal proportions, in all their measurements: height, length and depth.

In those of Giacometti, on the other hand, which seem tall only because they are slender, the heads are “also” made like the bodies and belong to those bodies, and only those bodies, in an identity of style and vision that are perfectly logical and unified. The difference – and this signals the demise of the cultural reference that is often detrimentally applied to grant appeal to the rendering – lies entirely in the above-mentioned fact that the sculptures of Giacometti are not sculptures “in the round.” They are, so to speak, “perspective” sculptures, in which one dimension – depth – simultaneously “comes up short” as a real measure with respect to the others, and is in “excess” as a visual sensation.

If any relationship of affinity can exist between what Giacometti does today and what has been done in the past, to identify it we have to go far back in time to look at certain Egyptian sculptures: the figures of Echnaton, and the little queen Karomama, for example. An affinity that finds its point of contact not in a purely formal and stylistic order, or in a cultural reference, but on a much deeper and higher plane, that of the sentiment of man in the world, of his noble dignity, his unbridgeable solitude.

Giacometti’s sculpture is not immobile, it moves, it is agitated, it continuously breaks at each step on a tormented surface, full of grooves, wounds, clefts, rapidly set clots, and the light finds no peace except along the profiles that unwind the oblong silhouettes. The reason why these figures are lengthened is mysterious, as they almost seek a relationship with the surrounding environment in themselves. Giacometti has repeatedly told me that they always start out normal in their proportions and relationships, but they during the path they take in his hands to become amorphous, living and expressive things they are mutilated, losing volume and body in the attempt to conquer a place in space (almost digging it for themselves) and to identify with what the artist sees, as if they wanted to occupy space only in a vertical direction, in pursuit of a mysterious relationship of scale, of proportion, between real man and a representation the artist is induced to attempt without failing to respect those man-space relationships that exist in reality.

It is in this sense that we can also explain the reason behind the small and minimum sizes of Giacometti’s sculptures, especially some time ago. To live, the statue always requires repose around it, an empty zone; only in this way is it possible to best resolve those small sizes; for the others too much space would be needed: no longer a room, but a certain portion of unencumbered air determined by

the sculptures themselves. Obvious the center of Giacometti's research is not only the question of space – which would then be simply a problem – but as for all real artists it is mainly in the attempt to recreate an object that conveys a sensation as close as possible to the emotion felt “for the first time” by the artist himself at the sight of the subject. All the other things, the more or less theoretical problems, are simply means to achieve this goal; just like clay, plaster and water to be shaped.

The investigation Giacometti has conducted for years and years, continuously drawing from life, has led to such a deep and acute analysis (all his drawing is analytical) that his field of observation is constantly narrowed, to the point of being reduced to a few themes, always the same ones, and furthermore all of an apparent simplicity.

A standing figure, immobile, a seated figure, a figure walking, a head, a bust. It might seem like a very limited field of investigation, a thematic poverty; but what is symptomatic and counts is the way in which these themes are resolved, dug down to the bone, made essential, absolute, irreplaceable, and in which everything is so subtly calculated and resolved that nothing can be changed or moved without upsetting the entire order of the work.

So merciless was the quest that led him in his youth to investigate, to read in the face of man, that at a certain point in his long career as a tireless worker a head became for him a completely unknown object, a thing for which it was hard to find a meaning in the measurements, volumes and form. For years and years, and always twice a year, he stubbornly began two heads, always the same, without ever managing to finish them, with the sole result of putting them aside as merely studies, never as completed works. Finally, getting away from working with a model, with a far from negligible effort of will, he began to work from memory. But to his great surprise and terror he realized that in this attempt of his to remake from memory what he had seen in reality, the sculptures, in his hands and before his eyes, became inexorably smaller and smaller. Then, desperate, he began everything again, from the start, again, but in a few months he found himself at the same point, for the same reasons. A figure, a head, if it was life-size, did not seem true to him, but simply a conventional thing; and if it was small, precisely for its extreme smallness, he found it unbearable: so he continued, for months and years, until with a single blow of the chisel those small creatures ended up in dust. Then for a while he calmed down, accepting that strange and unusual size, only because heads and figures seemed more “true” to him only when they were small. But another surprise was still in store, and it came at the moment in which, in the attempt to make larger figures, he realized that for him they reached a resemblance to the real only when by dint of removing, removing and putting and then inevitably removing again, they became long and slender. So he could only “do it like that” if he did not want to betray himself and his way of seeing. What he does now is simply the result of his profound honesty, of his extreme, even risky way of keeping faith with himself.

Giacometti can draw everything, everything he sees, everything that comes within range of his vigilant, penetrating gaze; he doesn't have to arrange poses or choose objects: just one object, one series of objects placed randomly, selected only on the basis of impulse, the need to draw in that moment, and on a sheet of paper a hundred quick, precise signs are ignited, a hundred lines chase each other and intertwine, all seeking the same thing. Talking about Giacometti's drawing is like talking about his sculpture, because – and it might seem incredible – the “means” he utilizes are identical, the results interchangeable. Giacometti is a tireless draftsman, with a very sharp, aristocratic and refined sensibility. He draws – for example – trees or mountains so economically and at the same time so analytically that equivalents can only be found in the graphic work of Cézanne: such a personal, typical, unmistakable way of drawing.

Drawing – to be clear – of high quality, luminous, serendipitous, excavated on the paper almost in search of what exists behind the objects to give them volume, to place them at the correct, expressive distance. It is his clear, precise, terse, almost cold sign, without trembling and slips, in which *pentimenti* or corrections are displayed, on the surface, revealed but expressive in their own right, like the others, the correct signs, like the initial, immediate signs “on target.”

His drawings seem to begin from a preordained point, selected so carefully as to seem random, and they are laid out so well, so aptly arrayed on the white of the paper, that the white seems to have been instinctively left there as a binding element, to the proper extent, in the liveliest and most expressive relationship. He often concentrates on a particular that will represent the “focus,” the fulcrum of the page, and from there, from that minute detail, analyzed, dissected to the point of the implausible, everything begins and harmoniously constructs itself in a form that seems to have been already entirely seen and envisioned, so as to proceed quickly, seamlessly, concisely, in a clean, essential composition across the surface. I have seen insignificant, inexpressive and random objects become stupendous architectures of rhythms, lines and forms under Giacometti’s sharp pencil; I have seen the most common and normal things transformed into precious clarity in his vigorous, sensitive hands. Truly, to have a large folder of drawings by Giacometti on your lap, and to slowly leaf through it in the precious silence of the home where he was born, is an unforgettable adventure I would love to be able to experience again and again.

In Giacometti’s works the relationships of volume, form and proportion that develop between the sculptures and the bases from which they arise – they are never simply rested, but bonded by the same material – are visibly pondered and subtly resolved.

And how, in his lucid intelligence, could the artist overlook that bridge on which his sculptures pass in order to occupy space? Only in Brancusi have I seen such attention and calibration – solving a difficult problem of a plastic-architectural order – of the bases, the supports on which the sculptures are placed. For Giacometti they are a living, integral part of the work, the gauge by which those relationships that are subsequently mysteriously established between the sculpture and the space around it are measured, in a stable way, for the first time.

Inexplicably enough, I have always imagined assigning a sound, a voice, to these phantom-like yet real apparitions, born in a world made of emptiness, space, transparency, springing from the earth as from the depths of time.

Like a single cry, a monotone, that echoes in a vast space, filling it: the short, terse noise of two pieces of wood struck together in the immense *salle des pas perdus* of the Palais de Justice of Paris, or in the even larger and even more resonant hall of Palazzo della Ragione in Padua, in which a cry, behind a door that suddenly closes, moves itself like rumbling surf, immediately absorbed, absorbed on high by the stupendous hollows in which it dies, vanishing as if behind an acoustic horizon. Or the cry of the crow in the great silence of the mountains, when even a single sudden sound can suffice to break the tense balance of the snow, detaching the avalanche that with its muted thunder is simply the echo and the effect of that first, sharp cry that immediately becomes abnormal, thrown into the empty basin of silence. Thus would be the voice, were the creatures cast in bronze by Giacometti to have one. This is not stated for some facile game, but to establish in the field of sounds an imaginary relationship not unlike what happens in the field of proportions between Giacometti’s sculptures and the space they influence, and which they require to live. A space that cannot be overlooked, because they always demand it, gathering it around themselves mysteriously, with an emanation that could be said to be magnetic. Proof of this lies in the fact that it could be possible to sense the presence of a sculpture by Giacometti in a space, even were it not visible at first glance.

What more is there in the painting of Giacometti, with respect to the sculpture or the drawing? What is there that is dissimilar, not attuned, that cannot be shifted or exchanged from one field to another of his various efforts? Consistency with oneself, homogeneity, a unitary style, are rarely found today. Matisse, Braque, Picasso can pass with impunity, without losing anything, from painting to sculpture, remaining themselves, in all the uncontaminated clarity of their language. And so in Giacometti these modes of expression, which are only apparently dissimilar, remain one thing only, well rooted in his unmistakable personality. Only the means change, not the modes. His lucid and penetrating gaze remains intact, as does the rapid, essential sign. The problems remain the same, in all their urgency and their arduous solution; the light and the transparency, the sense of man, of his fatal solitude, remain the same. The only added factor is represented by the subtle, precious grays, of great variety, of the quick dark strokes, and certain deep earth tones, certain very vivid aluminizing effects.

To the question as to whether it is «still possible to make sculpture a plausible reality» (a question that for thirty years was a troublesome torment that always drove him, dissatisfied, towards multiple and often tentative experiences), Giacometti has certainly responded in a way that leaves no room for doubt, with extreme clarity, though his innate modesty, his capacity for self-critique, his constant searching still cause him to have doubts today.

«*Pendant vingt ans, j'ai eu l'impression que la semaine suivante je serais capable de faire ce que je voulais faire,*» he says, and one has the impression that deep inside he is still awaiting that “*semaine,*” because the fascination of his life lies more in seeking than in discovery: the desperate and constant act of searching satisfies him far more than the pride that might come from the hypothetical certainty of having completed a work, of having discovered a truth.

MEDARDO ROSSO*

«*Limit-infinity: the first is impossible, the second is natural*»

This exhibition is definitely not about cultural salvage or a return to fashion: it is simply a late but well-deserved act of reparation and justice that has been too long in coming, a debt that inevitably had to be paid regarding someone who was the greatest Italian artist of the modern era.

And it is also a moral duty to make his work known *de facto* to the younger generations.

The last exhibition of the works of Medardo Rosso was organized in Italy dates back to the Venice Biennale of 1950.

As opposed to the massive and crass flood of ostentatious and often excessively flattering monographs on sculptors of all kinds, the most important book on Rosso, made with modest means, dates back to the courageous period just after World War II, to 1950, published by Edizioni del Milione. That same year saw a small volume by Nino Barbantini, followed only by a short color booklet with a lively text by Marchiori in 1966. After which come only a few essays, spread over time, written by Ragghianti, Valsecchi, Caramel, Carandente, Pirovano, Fezzi.

Rosso has also been included – on a par with others, but certainly not as a leading protagonist – in several histories of Italian sculpture in the 19th century.

In other countries, however, as many museums acquired some of the few available works, his name and his oeuvre were put in their rightful place, amongst the most outstanding protagonists of what is more correctly called modern art, or the start of modern art, rather than 19th-century art. In 1963 the Museum of Modern Art of New York held a large exhibition, and that museum's publishing company issued the book *Medardo Rosso* by Margaret Scolari Barr.

Now, with the most complete exhibition possible, the aim is to demonstrate to what extent and how Rosso has been, in sculpture, not an “avant-garde” artist as people say today, but a true revolutionary, one of the very few that appear in any given century, because in practice he overturned a conception of sculpture that had lasted too long, without evolving into new developments. In his work we find effective revolutionary qualities, not delegated. Because Rosso has accomplished what no one else, perhaps, will be able to do or will dare to do for some time yet.

After him even the best, those who seemed to be the strongest, the newest, not only here in Italy but also elsewhere, have fallen back into a conception of sculpture that is again that of the Renaissance, the conception that Rosso stubbornly fought against throughout his life.

Never before, in the modern era, has matter been so painfully possessed and tamed in a new way as in the work of Rosso.

But at what price?

How much solitude, how many defeats, how many doubts and reformulations, how much despair and tension before that matter could be subjugated with such genuine spontaneity that it seems utterly natural to this great, free spirit, to his tenacious and sensitive hands?

Rosso's great accomplishment was to leave us not “museum pieces” but works of art more similar and closer to living beings than to conventional simulacra.

Furthermore, in his great effort, throughout his intense battle, with a revolutionary act he found, in soft wax, the most direct material, the most appropriate channel to interpret his vision, not caring about whether it is “eternal,” demonstrating his lack of interest in that survival, that “eternity” to which all sculptures of all ages have more or less openly aspired.

Certainly Rosso did not want to freeze his vision, to capture it in statues.

The reality he saw or the memory of it that had taken form inside him had to be reborn and exist in

* M. Negri, «*Limite-infinito: impossibile il primo, naturale il secondo*». *Testimonianza per Medardo Rosso* [1979], in *Mostra di Medardo Rosso, (1858-1928)*, catalogo, Milano, Società per le Belle Arti ed Esposizione Permanente, 1979, poi in: ID., *All'ombra della scultura*, Scheiwiller, Milano 1985, pp. 112-126.

the air naturally, as do and as did for him the figures he portrayed, as do plants and flowers. In his very personal vision and in the resulting reconstruction of reality Rosso sought and grasped the “truth” of the people that appeared before his eyes: i.e. the constant truth of existing in the guise of a human being.

In the final and very fertile years of his creative activity he performed – like few of his European contemporaries – that supreme act that is granted to a very few artists, beyond which, intact and perpetual, lie the countenance, the essence, the soul of man.

Rosso managed – he alone – to free sculpture of its bulk and weight: he made it immaterial.

An intuition nurtured at length, at the cost of years of trial and error and severe purification, taking him to the threshold of that limit beyond which the idea and the making of the work are one and the same.

His generous love and observation of the protagonists of the reality that interested him most, whether groups of persons, isolated figures, heads or busts or – in the drawings – atmospheres of places and people, twilight and afternoon, shadows and light, his way of being amidst people and nature with great love, allowed him to take his feeling, stripped of any sentimental content, beyond mere appearances in order to grasp an “absolute” of truth, and in that absolute, as a result, to grasp the true and innermost reality of things and men.

Rosso captured and made his own that ineffable substance of sculpture that is not transient, and he did so through moments, instants that at first glance appear to be the most fleeting, the most transitory possible.

But that substance is secret, like all true treasures, and imperceptible to those who observe sculpture with opaque and vulgar eyes, even the noblest sculpture such as that of Medardo Rosso.

There is no gesture, no action in him, but only presence: the human presence of the model, I mean.

Nothing issues from his sculptures, there are no protruding or dangling arms or legs that wriggle and rise, no folds, drapes or flutterings of garments, costumes and lace, posed nudes (the nude is not one of his themes) and hands, or hands holding something: there is only what is essential, his only viewpoint that goes directly to constitute the self-generating nucleus, the definitive form. In his works the accidental, the momentaneous, the transient, the unstable, the provisional, the precarious, the mutable and the mutant become formally eternal in a definite “forever.”

Rosso’s sculpture is not for those who like only episodes and contents.

He worked without chosen models – ancient or modern –, without effective masters, without canons, without pre-set schemes: because he had glimpsed a new expressive possibility in sculpture.

Having radically rejected the tradition and disinherited by it in turn, left alone and defenseless in the face of the torment of his unprecedented realization – uncertain and confused with others at the start – he was simply alone, clear, determined, profound and very certain at the end.

His affinities with the greats of antiquity were therefore not just apparent, because like them he achieved a synthesis by means of analysis.

So did we never realize how new the ancient, the substance of the ancient, the very essence of sculpture, has become in Rosso?

We should be careful, however: his is not an art of cultural derivation, not a reflection of other eras and styles.

There are no archetypes, inert sediments deposited by tradition in his work: everything is new, drawn from himself, with a daring and rebellious vision of sculpture that had never been seen before him. Never has matter gotten closer to being human as in his small and far from numerous sculptures.

All alone, then, he crossed those borders established and fortified by centuries of tradition in which sculpture was closed and confined: confines and limits, for this reason, considered definitive, insurmountable and immutable, which had therefore become and been recognized by most people as natural.

Rejecting the sculptural “convention” out of hand, starting from zero, he was able to give us solitary masterpieces with which all eras can identify, from the most remote to the most recent, to our present, to the future of the others.

He certainly did not found a new school. How could such a singular, personal, individualistic artist

have direct or indirect pupils?

His vision could not be transmitted to anyone, but had to be and remain – forever – his and his alone.

Everyday life was his model; he always and only placed himself in front of what he saw in reality, not stylemes, in front of what he encountered, alive, in the street where he so liked to go and mingle, to be a human being in the midst of human beings, in the lively bustle of the boulevards, in the warm, vivacious and witty encounters in cafes, the smoky rooms of bistros and brasseries, street corners, anxiously and curiously wandering – often at night – along the quays along the Seine or the *trottoirs* of stations, in the halls of hotels where we can imagine that he often suddenly stopped to pull from his pocket (his big pockets that contained a bit of everything) the odd piece of paper or a small notebook on which to jot down, in shorthand, those quick notations of light, dazzle, shadows, volumes in motion that are his drawings: short, quick, tiny, pithy and very intense, in which nothing is contrived but everything is the offspring of a direct view, an original spontaneity. He worked – when he worked – with great energy, with the speed of intuition, destroying much, never correcting but instead doing it again from scratch, as if the work had to issue forth in a single, apt though also tormented draft.

What is always surprising when one looks at one of his sculptures – especially and above all the last ones – is the unusual quantity of energy he was able to convey: and it is the kind of energy that generates masterpieces.

In all the sculptors of his period (with the exception of some – or even many – but not all the works of Rodin), we have the sense that they make “statues”: they design them, from sketches they proceed to the intended size by multiplying, they begin them and finish them in all their parts, above and below, in front, to the side, behind, they walk around the sculptures to see them and touch them with pride, from all sides: Rosso does none of this. He did not act in this way, though he did have the means, and the greatness of those means is demonstrated in certain instances. Medardo Rosso does not create “statues”: he only makes sculpture, without attributes.

Furthermore, he “made,” he did not “finish.” I think he never said, “I have finished,” but instead said, “I made” a new work. He created those elements of reality that had fascinated him in reality according to his own very personal vision; in him, art becomes direct experience, bearing witness to life and truth.

Rosso’s “form” is simply the mirror of his feeling, of his being a human being amongst humans, his unconventional way of looking at people: in it, he condenses and defines the poetic spirituality of his language as an artist.

Having never looked at a figure as an isolated object, on its own, but as something that in any case involves the environment and is engaged by it, what other means could he use to convey this way of seeing if not the ones he did use, unique, unrepeatable, exclusively his? Means in which the symbiosis between emotion of life and the resulting form of sculpture is absolute.

Therefore unlimited perspective, infiniteness, air, space, immateriality, light, color, reflections and counter-reflections of forms, movement of masses and volumes, expansion of boundaries, distancing and attempted appropriation of boundaries, abbreviations and variations, the sum of details and the abolitions of details: totality, not fragmentation; not closed but open forms.

That light that continuously moves and alters everything according to its angle and intensity, the physical space conquered by making sculpture, seem to be the active and shaping elements of his works, the raw materials of “his” material, in which he has injected a reserve of life and a poetry that will suffice for centuries.

The heads of children that repeatedly appear in the not very wide range of themes in Rosso’s work are not portraits – though at times the initial and contingent pretext was portraiture – but states of mind. His states of mind, the moments of truth in which this big, tender and extremely sensitive man looked at children, as at the pure age that lies at the wellsprings of life.

He looked at those children with great respect, with comprehension, wonder, love, tenderness and trembling, with extreme amazement and modesty, because only on their faces did he find something intact, uncontaminated, resembling his ideal.

He did not make them into pathetic little heads, but made them true, large, unique, almost

disembodied apparitions, because the spirit that looks forth from those faces is so light, clean and eternal; they are materialized presences of a sentiment, of a poetic vision that becomes reality through two lights: an inner light and a physical light that for a few fleeting moments comes to rest on those visages, gilding them.

This is true of his last work, *Ecce Puer*, but also of the sick child, the Jewish boy, the boy in the sunlight and the hungry child in front of the stoves: moments of existence and of Rosso's vision that cannot be erased, bearing concrete and coherent witness of how he saw and lived a reality, and not moments, though transient ones, of the life of those few children who chanced to become his models.

Form, space and light become tangible truths.

He captured the ineffable instant of a smile, the deep and sonorous breath of laughter. Very rarely in art have human masks suffered and rejoiced so truly and eternally.

Those of the ancient Greeks and Etruscans were restrained, stylized smiles, certainly quite mysterious, but so barely hinted at as to seem like emblems. In Rosso the laughter is real life, and it still echoes inside us, constantly renewed.

In the *Bambina che ride* (Laughing Girl) the light is also pale, sunny; the very lively eyes have the same expression as the very mobile lips, open in unabashed laughter. The "tondo," the circular in this small bust becomes almost total; the forehead, the skull are taut, solid, dense, becoming almost but not completely normal.

That splendid, living, laughing creature has a kinship with Donatello, with his putti, settling on the same plane of quality.

In the *Grande riense* (Laughing Woman [Large Version]) the eyes and the flesh laugh together with the mouth. A light that would appear to come from above accentuates, as never before in any of his other works, that attempt to solidly interpenetrate the space, to unite the determinate contours of the sculpture with the indeterminate environment in which it is placed. In a later version, the failure to remove part of the counter mold is an original way to forcefully convey this intention.

It is the most physical, most voluminous, most sensual, most carnal of Rosso's sculptures. Who was the woman that inspired this masterpiece in 1891? She has returned to the shadow, to that oblivion from which she resurfaces every time we look at this splendid, very lively work. Something Greek and something Lombard, together, interpenetrate in the grand light of Paris to take the "large laughing woman" back to that luminous mystery that always recurs in the history of sculpture, when it addresses the feminine countenance. Warm, full, like Parian marble touched by a Phidian, its pure state of flow makes it possible to believe in this sculpture without reservations, because what it asserts, beyond the form, has to do with the sentiments as well.

In the touching *Bambino che mastica* (Child chewing, or *All'asilo dei poveri*), the relief is reduced to a sheet without much thickness, to a flat and vertical plane that nevertheless goes into motion, turning, coming alive by means of the fragments and little morsels of light and shadow, with a tension similar or even equal to that of certain reliefs of antiquity. I am thinking – perhaps wrongly – of the large tondi, of the "half-size" statues, of the sculptures as slender as shards of Giovanni Pisano at the Baptistery in Pisa.

That biblical terribleness is certainly missing, but there is an equally daring form, an equally intense human passion, a melancholy, a *pietas* that are equally profound and authentic, and a "making" sculpture that is equally new, forthright, free of any already tested schemes.

In the gaunt *Yvette Guilbert* there is a sort of tragic way of suggesting and bringing out the character of the person, with coarse, abbreviated means, intentionally reduced to an essentiality without adjectives that shift the memory towards certain anonymous heads and severe Gothic crucifixes.

Sculpture seen as a shimmering and dynamic surface for a particularly thrilling and expressive moment of light and shadow. When did Rosso have this intuition?

It was in the passages, the dark aisles and archways of Brera, that as a very young man he had his first doubts about what a figure in space was or was not, and the first lucid intuitions of what was to

become – at least in the figures represented in a standing position – the certainty of his very personal and unique way of looking at reality. Foreshadowing, it seems to me, the use of certain methods belonging to the kind of “shots” from above used only by a few great Impressionist painters and, above all, in cinema. This makes the figures stand out from the background, making them expand as if they had wide roots, deep in the horizontal plane, from which they emerge never in a straight manner, but always slanted and oblique. I am referring to the *Uomo che legge il giornale* (Man Reading), to the *Bookmaker*, to a figure (self-portrait?) of the *Conversazione in giardino* (Conversation in a Garden), to the majestic lost figures of the *Impression de boulevard (Paris la nuit)*, so mysteriously retreating as if they were about to vanish, in a flash, into the shadows, swallowed by the night. Never before have I gazed with such moving regret at a masterpiece so tragically squandered (the war!), whose modernity will never fade, though we can only see it in a thrilling photograph that has fortunately survived.

To call Rosso an Impressionist sculptor is but a generic, convenient decision, and also an evident reduction.

His particular greatness lies in that absorption and at the same time reflection of light, experiencing it as another form of matter, not abolishing the volume but nourishing it with this new substance: this, at least, in his most dazzling period, ever since he emerged, going beyond the moment, from the realistic chronicles of Milan to reach tenets that were his alone.

The Impressionist sculptors – or, more precisely, painter-sculptors – only modified the surface of the external modeling, splashing it with light as in their paintings, breaking it up into luminous and colored *taches* while leaving its internal structure intact.

The primary substance of sculpture, then, was not altered but merely encroached upon by these artists. Furthermore, Rosso never treated the “matter” of sculpture as if it were the “matter” of painting. He operated at greater depth, radically renewing – as we have seen – the way of understanding, seeing and making sculpture, managing with the power of results achieved to raise doubts and reconsiderations in the great Rodin, who was certainly not an Impressionist sculptor.

We should be very cautious, however, when we speak of the influence of Rosso on Rodin: there is the risk of falling into a reprehensible and naive jingoism, a cultural autarkism that due to his deeply nationalist (and Fascist) character distorted and deceived Ardengo Soffici himself, who was one of the first and most authoritative champions of the greatness of Rosso.

Proof of an effective and mutual esteem between the two forerunners and clear protagonists of modern sculpture, besides that of their lengthy acquaintance that began in the studio of Dalou where they worked together as assistants, can be found in the famous exchange of works: the *Riense* for the *Male Torso* now on view at the Petit Palais.

In any case, it is undeniable that in the *Balzac* something new happened in Rodin to subvert, to modify his naturalism that bordered too closely on historical echoes, his great ease as a shaper of forms. A different approach, a way of agitating and moving the material, more completely altered and broken; a way of presenting us with this personage not as a statue, but as a physical presence without monumental canons. A realism that gives us all the physical impact of Balzac, as well as his great spiritual and moral weight. A Balzac that becomes the actor and interpreter of himself, placed in a domestic robe, almost as if to underline the perishable physical nature of man.

Of course as compared to Rodin, the great tireless modeler, Rosso made much less in terms of quantity, though certainly not in terms of quality. Auguste Rodin, a rare and authentic “natural” genius of sculpture, is the absolute master of all forms, the outstanding, most creative, fluent and vital sculptor of the 1800s, whose «hands lived the life of a thousand hands,» as Rainer M. Rilke said.

Like the water of a river, matter in his hands moves, flows, seethes and surges, becoming a natural, organic thing: archaic and modern at the same time.

The intuition and the conception seem to coexist and coincide in him without any friction with the making of the work itself. From his linear, rapid, essential drawing he shifts with confidence to the modeling, and it seems as if there is no difference or trace of difficulty for him in these two distinct genres. Everything happens in a genuine way through great exercise and, above all, by way of the great talent, the endless fertility of his personality.

Such a huge bulk of work entered the life of Rodin – and it is hard to understand how it could have

been contained there – that it could have sufficed to fill the life not of one but of many sculptors of the same ilk. I say this only as a question of time, of the ability to stand up to the fatigue. But precisely due to this great quantity of work, Rodin ran the risk of being overwhelmed, and if anything Rosso helped him to shrug off, at least for once, at least in the *Balzac*, his vehement and at times rhetorical Michelangelism, for which he paid – also by way of too many official commissions – a heavy and often unjust price.

So the work of Rosso, with his more limited output, is thus more concentrated, less split into secondary and different branches: it is more unified and consistent, though less majestic as a whole.

More subdued, more human, it possesses an innate, utterly Italian intimacy that allows us to approach it more easily, without timidity or complexes.

Finally, in Rosso there is an intransigence, a way of keeping faith with his principles that never led him, once he gained full mastery of “his” medium, to any compromises. Compromises he did not accept – and this is proof of his moral stature – even when he stopped working, continuing to live for many years almost inert, refusing to remake himself, to superimpose a manner on what had been authentic, unrepeatable creation.

Rarely has such a long and glorious career been concluded by such a profoundly honest and inflexible finale.

MODIGLIANI AS SCULPTOR *

*J'attends vos silences, espaces
pour devenir un astre pur.*

Max Jacob

Born of a curb of Molera stone pilfered in the night there rose, as pure as myth, soaring upwards to the eternal feminine, that ineffable head from 1911-12 by Amedeo Modigliani, seen again today – on 3 March 1981 – at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris.

In 20 days' time, the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville will present a major retrospective of his work.

In the certainty and regret of not being able to still be here for the occasion, returning to my hotel I try to trace back, in memory, through the entire history of Modigliani as sculptor, starting precisely with her, with that head observed, loved and re-observed in the morning with the intensity of a farewell. Like someone who has received a gift that has made him happy, I fall asleep, promising myself to no longer interrupt these reflections of mine till they have reached their conclusion.

Modigliani was a sculptor of stone, not of clay, which he called “mud”: a stonecutter, not a shaper of things with the fingertips. Legend has it that some friends gave him some oak railroad ties to sculpt. But the only head that has reached us is hesitant, amorphous if not apocryphal: in any case, it would seem to indicate that wood was not his ideal material.

Still not possessing those particular characteristics that were to emerge later, the sole specimen cast in bronze, 23 centimeters in height, at the Museum of Seattle, is undoubtedly a very youthful piece, brought perhaps from Leghorn to Paris.

I suppose that from that time on he rarely modeled clay, and it is certain that he made no more sculptures in bronze. The bronzes, made from castings of some of his stones, have been put into circulation on the market only in recent years!

Of the 25 or 26 sculptures attributed to Modigliani, how many were made by him?

It is hard to say, given the clear, undeniable differences in quality that exist between certain specimens and others. On instinct, I believe they are all authentic. And then, how many of his sculptures were destroyed, how many were lost or remained unfinished, or were finished by others?

All the sculptures are in sandstone; only one is in marble. The head belonging to an unknown collection that was shown in 1930 at the 17th Venice Biennale is the only signed piece.

The period of sculpture, for Modigliani, began in the fall of 1909 and lasted four years.

This is certainly not a parenthesis, but the very fulcrum of his personality. He sculpted by directly cutting until 1913; after which, lacking the strength that is demanded by sculpture, he shifted back to only painting, which he had never abandoned.

Even when he paints, at least until 1916, Modigliani continues to sculpt. This might seem like a paradox, but I feel it is true.

The pursuit of form is practiced in a similar way as in the sculptures, the modeling does not get weaker, nor does the color, as happens in the last exhausted paintings of his short existence. It becomes pithy, dense, highly expressive: the painted forms seem to be shaped, and even the color takes on a new intensity and an extraordinary vigor as in certain antique polychrome sculptures. The portraits are almost monochromes, where red prevails over shades of ochre and violet.

The drawing in certain oils belongs to sculpture, or at least to the way of drawing of Modigliani the sculptor. For example, in the *Portrait of Frank Burty Haviland* (1914) the head, seen in profile and bent forward, is a “form” that rests on the bright red of the shirt and the brown-violet shoulders as if on a base. The skull is stretched back, and the continuous curve of the neck and its nape – a true force line – is a necessary, indispensable static support.

The *Portrait of Henri Laurens seated* (1915) also follows sculptural modules: the neck is a cylinder, the

* M. Negri, *Modigliani scultore* [1981-1982], in ID., *All'ombra della scultura*, Scheiwiller, Milano 1985, pp. 127-147.

bust just barely touched by ochre, especially in the left part, is solid and blocked out in terms of volume like an archaic statue.

The warmth, the volume of the face, the neck, the eyes without pupils, the braids of that enchanting painting that is *L'enfant gras* (1915), which I have loved so much and returned again and again to see in the house of friends, always as if it were the first time, can also suggest the idea of a fascinating sculpture.

The *Portrait of Moïse Kisling* (1915), a sort of asymmetrical face, is entirely caught up in a fast-paced pursuit of plastic elements. The drawn structure of the image of Beatrice Hastings (1916) – I am alluding only to the head and the neck – seems like the painted transcription of one of the heads sculpted in stone, just as the *Lola de Valence* (1915), seen in profile, is a true painting-sculpture.

From 1916 on, in Modigliani, there is only the triumph of painting, as the figures are humanized, losing something of the stateliness typical of the sculptures.

He is now only a painter of portraits, of nudes with stupendous forms and bright colors, in which – unlike what happens in the sculptures – a noble, pure sensuality, never indulgent or vulgar, comes to the fore.

Alongside the true sculpture, in the entire oeuvre of Modigliani, there is a fertile production of drawings, in which the formal definition is progressive, as if striving to achieve a purification of the form; a gradual elimination, a tenacious refinement, advancing towards an unconditional, pure, total simplicity, without indulging in a mannered grace, an intentional expressivity.

Like the gouaches and watercolors, the drawings of caryatids, nudes and heads are all sculptures that could be made and unfortunately were not.

I would also say that the drawings of heads, certain profiles, certain “elevations” are those of an architect-sculptor. Of a sculptor-stonecutter, i.e. he who seeks the form through the exercise of thought, looking inside himself and on paper before arriving at the stone.

It is plausible to think that at the start of the sketching, like any other sculptor, Modigliani may have used charcoal or a stone marker to trace on the surfaces of the selected block some cursory echo of his own designs, because in his sculpture the plastic development of the forms and volumes can be sensed as having been already nurtured in drawing.

I do not want to assert that he made a drawn maquette for every sculpture, which would have put a chill on the execution: I simply want to emphasize that the development of the form came “upstream,” facilitated by the exercise, the incessant discipline of drawing. A formal preparation that in the act of implementation in the block was positively and lyrically set free in direct forms that immediately came to life.

He was not a virtuoso, and therefore I believe he rarely improvised on stone.

Certain heads seen from the front or in profile, rather than freehand seem to have been made with drafting tools: the sign is so decisive, executed, definite as to make it seem as if he had designed capitals and columns, rather than heads. In other cases, the contours are so forcefully emphasized and thickened as to make the drawing seem like a true “section.” In a head of a *Caryatid* (1911) belonging to the collection of Paul Guillaume, research on curved lines emerges that might lead to a reckless mental association with Oskar Schlemmer. Several caryatid heads are transformed into corbels, Doric or more precisely Tuscan capitals, with abacus and echinus, straight fluting, astragal and necking. The influences become more Greek than Romanesque or Gothic. Only in a few isolated heads, of men or women, can we glimpse – but only to some extent – the appeal of certain African sculptures: for example, of Bantu sculptures, the long Ngil masks of the Fang people of Gabon, the graphics of Ashanti dolls from Ghana, the heads of Guro weaving shuttles, and above all the typical grace of the “Greeks” of Africa, the Baoulé. In a Dogon lock I have owned for years, each time I look at it, even fleetingly, I can glimpse a Modigliani, though I could not say why. Perhaps it is only the suggestion of that narrow, lengthened form, its way of finishing like the prow of a dugout canoe. A persistent shamanic charm still reaches me from that object.

The drawings, gouaches, pastels and watercolors of caryatids, often in large size, are more

determined, freer, more confident and successful, perhaps, than the sole caryatid sculpted in stone in 1912-13, which in my view suffers from its small size, just 92 centimeters.

I presume that had he had the possibility, the good health and strength, many of those drawings and gouaches would have been transformed into caryatids or nudes sculpted in natural size or even larger, because this was one of the dreams of the sculptor, though unfortunately not in his fate.

The nudes of standing, kneeling or crouching women, from the years 1910, 1911, 1912, are exclusively drawings for sculptures, of true statues of women studied and specified in terms of every form and volume.

But the highest tribute, as a real masterpiece, should go to the large colored caryatids, to those sketched out in blue crayon, which he called “*colonnes de tendresse*,” in which the loftiest plastic ideals of Modigliani seem to have been approached, if not reached.

His sculpture is simultaneously mother and daughter of his drawing. As a result, we cannot talk about the drawing without putting it into relation with the sculpture; nor can we speak of the sculpture without tracing back to the drawing. Only in this way is it possible to observe his way of making sculpture with the fullest awareness.

I remember a photograph from 1912 that shows Modigliani at the Cité Falguière where he had a studio on the first floor and where, in the courtyard, he rough-hewed his stones. Modì is standing beside a large head in progress, firmly placed on a massive wooden trestle. The photograph is rather out of focus and what stands out most, also due to its pallor, is the large spherical volume of that face with its Attican air that emerges, shifting forward with density and force, from the back part, barely roughed out as a pillar. An amazing image, the space of an instant, a pose, the act of crossing the arms and looking at the camera, and everything is already finished even as it happens.

What remains, blindingly, is the fullness of that “egg” of absolute values, and the imaginary echo of the confident friction of the tools that forcefully drive into the matter to seek the form.

Though it was ordinary stone, for me it has all the crystalline glow of Parian marble.

Who initiated Modigliani in the field of sculpture?

Let's not forget that in 1909 one of the neighbors at his studio in Montparnasse, also at 24 Cité Falguière, was Costantin Brancusi, who had reached Paris in 1904, and was introduced to Modigliani by Dr. Alexandre. Driven by authentic instinct, in sculpture Modigliani acted as an autodidact, at most following a few precious, authoritative bits of advice. But I do not think there are definable influences.

The relationships with the sculpture of Brancusi – to which many try to trace back the work of Modigliani – are not particularly plausible. We might look at the portrait of the Baroness R.F. in 1909, due to some slight similarity, which is an anomaly in the output of Brancusi. Manneristically stylized, with decorative overtones, it seems to have little in common – in plastic and poetic terms – with Modigliani's “heads.” Certainly Brancusi taught him and guided him in the craft, as a great artisan, but stylistically he was never an influence, because their respective plastic and expressive concerns never converged.

Modigliani too wanted to create doors, architraves, intentional dialogues and juxtapositions of multiple sculptures arranged together; his greatest unfulfilled dream remains the “Temple of Humanity” for which he wanted to sculpt an entire series of caryatids.

These unfulfilled fantasies, these frustrated dreams, are what he has in common with Brancusi. Who only later, in 1937, was able to give concrete form to this way of making sculpture, capable of going beyond the single piece as an end in itself, to achieve something more: the silent monument of a certain vision and a certain philosophy of life, and also sculpture, but created for an audience much larger than that of a few individual admirers.

At Tîrgu Jiu, in Romania, Brancusi made an entire sculptural-architectural complex in which a precisely planned path unites the *Gate of the Kiss* with the *Infinity Column* and the *Table of Silence*. But works like *Maiistra* (1915), *Mademoiselle Pogany* in the first version (1913), *Sleeping Muse* (1910), reprised several times later, and the *Prodigal Son* (1914), to speak only of creations of the same era, are very far from the conceptions of Modigliani.

Brancusi, whose everyday reading matter was the *Life of Milarepa*, the Tibetan poet, yogi and hermit of the 11th century, was influenced by oriental philosophies and religions.

A poet in his own right, an assiduous and refined reader of the poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*, of Dante, Petrarch, Poliziano, Ariosto, Leopardi, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, D'Annunzio, Oscar Wilde and Apollinaire, Modigliani “surrounded by a compact ring of solitude”¹ stubbornly turned around his “archetype,” alone, getting closer each time, intercepting here and there what was in the air, but remaining an extreme individualist in substance, a *déraciné* who had a style in sculpture that was his alone.

Like Brancusi, after all, he remained happily inert in the face of Futurism and indifferent to – or just barely grazed by – Cubism, that glorious Cubism on which the better part of the Parisian sculptors of the day were feeding, from Archipenko to Laurens, Lipchitz to Zadkine, who all became his friends as well. Referring to Laurens, Franco Russoli correctly comments: “The friendship between the two brought about reciprocal influences that took the form of a solidity of volumes, of structural synthesis, in Modigliani.”²

At this point I believe it is not possible to pretend to ignore that Modigliani saw and admired the drawings of Rodin, the true inventor of modern drawing with pure, rapid, continuous lines.

Did he get a chance to know the work of Wilhelm Lehmbruck, of his same age, certainly with more affinities to his work than Elias Nadelman, in whom (strangely enough, to be honest) he was interested?

He knew and admired Manuel Manolo, who at the outset had forms and subjects – nudes and caryatids – similar to his.

Perhaps the early work influenced by Brancusi and the Cubists of the very young Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, six years his junior, who lived in exile in London and died in the war in 1915 at the tender age of 24, did not fail to catch his eye.

But Modigliani also met and spent time with other sculptors less in “glory,” like Léon Indenbaum of whom he made a portrait in 1915, or the Florentine Rosso Rossi, or the better-known Jacob Epstein who wrote about him, not to mention the brilliant Portuguese painter Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso, a great admirer of Modigliani’s sculpture, who hosted a true exhibition of sculptures and gouaches in his studio on Rue du Colonel Combes in 1911. They were good friends, linked by mutual esteem as well as certain stylistic affinities. Unfortunately Souza-Cardoso died in 1918, when he was just 30 years old.

In his memoirs – *Le maillet et le ciseau* – Ossip Zadkine speaks at length of Modigliani; he was the person who introduced the artist to Beatrice Hastings.

One of the most reliable and engaged witnesses to the life experiences of Modi was Jacques Lipchitz, attracted by the “melodious impetus” and beauty of Modigliani. They met in 1913 at the Luxembourg Gardens one evening at sunset, when Modi, reciting verses from the *Divina Commedia*, was strolling together with “his” Max Jacob. After that they saw a lot of each other, with reciprocal visits to respective ateliers, involving frequent discussions on the art of “removing or putting.” One day at “La Ruche” Lipchitz introduced Modigliani to Chaïm Soutine, and later, in 1916, he asked him to do a portrait of himself and his wife, Berte Kitroper, following their recent marriage. The price asked by Modi was “ten francs per session, plus liquor.”

Moïse Kisling and Conrad Moricand, at the Hôpital de la Charité on 24 or 25 January 1920, made a clumsy job of the death mask of Modigliani; it was Lipchitz who filled in the missing parts and saw to the reproduction of 12 plaster copies to distribute to the artist’s relatives and closest friends.

I regret never having had a chance to read the *Ricordo di Modigliani* by Osvaldo Licini, published in the magazine *L’Orto* in Bologna in 1934; nor have I ever managed to get my hands on the *Omaggio a Modigliani* with its precious recollections published by Giovanni Scheiwiller way back in 1930; and I know little of the *Tournant dangereux* by the painter Maurice de Vlaminck, published in Paris in 1929.

Those who say that Modigliani’s sculptures are a perfect blend of cultures, from his contemporaries to the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, the Sieneese painters and Tino di Camaino, African and Oriental art, especially that of the Khmer, are certainly far from wrong. But rather than influences, I would speak of assimilations that leave the forceful personality of Modigliani, as an independent protagonist,

1. Anna Achmatova, *Le rose di Modigliani*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1982.

2. Franco Russoli, *Tradizione e modernità dell’immagine. Valadon, Modigliani, Utrillo*, «Arte moderna», vol. III, Fabbri, Milano 1967.

quite intact.

In the end, especially where painting is concerned, only Paul Cézanne – discovered at the first Parisian retrospective in 1907 – remained his sole myth, his true elective mentor. Throughout his life this example helped him to formulate his formal language in its primary structures; it was here that he learned the fundamental concept of synthesis and structure.

I would like to again call on Franco Russoli, who in 1967 wrote with great clarity: “Modigliani yearns for an artistic expression that is both ancient and new at the same time, as rich in cultural and existential motifs as it is simple and terse in its pure linguistic module: an art that is not nimble, but absolute.”³

Aristocratic and proud, untamed and brash, impertinent and generous, lyrical and full of pathos, in Amedeo Modigliani it is impossible to separate the personality of the artist from that of the man. Few have so thoroughly lived in the same way that they drew, painted or sculpted. A bitter angel, devoured by sublime fevers, he behaved like one who has a gift and knows he cannot keep it only to himself, but has to share it with others.

He lived just as he created: poetically. His short, intense, tragic life is his foremost great, detached poem: the drawings, sculptures and paintings are merely its commentary, its trail.

He has given us a beauty that also contained painful duties. He knew he had little time, and in that short space everything in him and of him was carried out in a sublime tension. An “admirable painter of pain,” as he was defined by G. Coquiot in his book *Les indépendants* in 1926.

Who better than Amedeo Modigliani could perceive, more than others and before them, the cry and the talent of that desperate brother-in-art that was Chaïm Soutine, introducing him to the impoverished and meager *équipe* of Zborowski? Shortly before his death, Modigliani told the latter: “Don’t worry, Léopold, since I am leaving you a man of genius in Soutine.”

His aestheticizing poetic, shot through with intimate lyricism, sustained by rigorous idealism and an always intact ethical tension, sought closed, uncorrupted forms, kept taut in a monodic expression, not extraneous to a tendency towards symbol.

His heads, especially those most pregnant with meaning, suggest the tenderness of a long, heartrending, smooth caress that becomes a pure act of love for the visage of woman.

Calcareous idols, mythical stone-women, archangels of a grace and a light that are utterly spiritual, these head-sculptures return anyone who observes them, captured by their arcane beauty, to those sacred springs that are the source of all the fertile periods of sculpture.

Thus, for example, the *Head* (1911-1912) at the Tate Gallery in London: shaped like a blade, cut like a wedge, very narrow and entirely adapted to a vertical dimension deftly sustained by the straightness of the nose; the composition continues to the chin and terminates on a small and slightly convex base, undoubtedly desired by Modigliani himself. Certainly it must have had a much more specific title than the generic one of “head”; it appears that the artist called it “head for the upper part of a door.” The keystone, then, of the portal of that “temple of beauty” he had always hoped to build, in vain.

The set of the head-sculptures of Modigliani is divided into three different types.

The first contains three pieces, the most powerful, those with the fullest volumes, almost spherical, with round necks, strong as columns.

The second – only two in number – is the type where the use of a more porous stone causes a less rigorous, definite plastic volume; the facial features, not yet typified, are still almost naturalistic; maybe they were attempts at portraits, one with the bust, the other with a thick head of hair.

The third type, the most numerous and coherent, covers the typically “vertical” pieces, and here we undoubtedly have several masterpieces.

It should be pointed out that the size of these heads is constant, with an average of about 60 centimeters. This demonstrates Modigliani’s tendency to make things large, to prefer equal sizes or, more precisely, those larger than life, a frequent attitude in those who use stone as their raw material and shape it, as he did, by direct cutting, without models to be developed by enlargement.

Finally, in the sculptural output of Modigliani two other works remain to be considered, the only

³. Franco Russoli, *Tradizione e modernità dell'immagine...*, cit.

two nudes.

The first, in the G. Schindler collection of Port Washington (New York), with a height of 1.6 meters, is the largest sculpture by Modigliani. A copy of this standing nude (perhaps in cement) belongs to the Australian National Gallery in Canberra.

The compositional scheme and the research on certain details can be found in many drawings, such as the one in the Alsdorf collection of Winnetka, Illinois, or in the *Nu debout de face* (1910-1911), belonging to a private collection in Milan, or also the *Nu debout de côté* (also from 1910-1911), from a collection in Paris, and certain others.

It is the most “Asian” of Modigliani’s sculptures, due to its idol-like stateliness. The crossed arms, the small breasts placed very high, the full, spherical belly, like a cap, the wide hips, the strong, chunky legs roughly indicated, support what in my humble opinion is one of the most beautiful faces by Modigliani. A massive head, seen in relation to the proportions of the body, but very solid in its shaping, intense in its expression, with those eyes lost in meditation, thick and deep, enhanced by almost architectural moldings at the sides, making this a unique case amidst the more familiar heads.

The second nude is the *Caryatid* of the Museum of Modern Art of New York. Due to its small size, as mentioned above, perhaps it is not equal in quality to the large drawings and gouaches that address the same subject. It lacks their rhythm, harmony, their complete and wide-ranging compositional thrust.

It is the last sculptural work in chronological order (1913). It seems like a draft, interrupted, in which the stone hints at becoming “flesh” as in the paintings of nudes.

It is already naturalistic, without the architectonic stylized features of the other sculptures. In plastic terms, it has stupendous segments, but perhaps it lacks the force to support that weight it would seem to be made to support. The fragment at the top is too slender, it should have been thicker, but the sculptor ran out of stone.

I would like to add something regarding the *Head* belonging to the Jean Masurel collection of Roubaix. Made in 1911-12, it is the only one sculpted in marble.

The material, and not just the material used, makes it different from all the others.

The block from which it is made is a rather narrow, tall parallelepiped. To reduce it to the desired proportions Modigliani has drawn a corbel from the marble, from which the face, with the recess of the neck, protrudes like a mask. The sides are not sculpted but simply scraped with small parallel strokes; the workmanship varies: there is splitting, the point, the flat chisel, the toothed chisel, polishing. The material responds; it is as if Modigliani were drawing it, leaving all those signs, erasing none. He exploits the unfinished, sinking the nose and eyes, with tender touches at the hair. Everything in this face is concentric, as if that center from which everything moves was intended as the fulcrum of a mysterious message.

Modigliani has made it into one of his drawings in stone, one of the most beautiful, and from that small piece of marble a fragment of the universe has been released.

* * *

Alongside the credible and truthful texts by poets and artists that bear direct witness to his life, a great river of words has swept and flooded over the figure of Modigliani.

Pseudo-literary biographies in the form of novels, true and invented anecdotes, second-hand recollections and memoirs written simply because one day someone encountered him by chance or saw him restlessly roaming the cafes and bistros of Montparnasse.

Like all the *maudits*, he attracted and impressed many – unfortunately also the movies – a sorry fate shared with Toulouse-Lautrec, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Gaudier-Brzeska, though a talented actor like Gérard Philipe has done everything possible to enter the character.

Fascinated by the unforgettable photographs of Modigliani when he was alive, almost as if to shoot some more, I would now like to transcribe some quick signature impressions, verbal flashes that are as eloquent as those images. Leaving to legend what belongs to legend, let us listen to the voices of those

poets or artists who remembered him, in pursuit of some instants of his everyday life.

Let's summon them and read them, if only in fragments, one by one, as witnesses.

Max Jacob

«His face was open, handsome, of a dark complexion. He had the bearing of a gentleman, but dressed in rags, and Picasso said that only he was able to dress entirely in velvet, with a workman's checked shirt.»

– From a letter by Max Jacob to René Rimbart on 24 August 1923.

Ludwig Meidner

«Characters such as his cannot be modified, influenced, nor can they be induced to lead a more orderly life. [...] He never had anything, because he was incapable of conserving. [...] He had worries and difficulties on a daily basis, but this did not cast a shadow on his outgoing cheerful disposition. He loved life too much, which thus still flourished in a romantic aura.»

– From: Ludwig Meidner, *The Young Modigliani: Some Memories* (1943), published in *Burlington Magazine*, 82, April 1943.

Jacob Epstein

«At night he would place candles on the top of each [sculpture]. The effect was that of a primitive temple.»

– From: Jacob Epstein, *Let There Be Sculpture*, London 1940.

Jacques Lipchitz

«When I arrived at his studio, in the spring or summer, I found him working outside. Some stone heads – five perhaps – lay on the concrete pavement of the courtyard in front of his studio, and he tried to adapt them to each other. I can see him as if it were today, bent over his heads, absorbed as he explained to me how he had conceived of them as parts of a whole.

It seems to me that these heads were shown shortly thereafter, at the Salon d'Automne, in a stepped arrangement as if they were the pipes of an organ, to better express the musical sense he desired.»

After having recalled the agony of Modigliani on his deathbed, muttering verses in his delirium, Lipchitz movingly tells us of the death of Jeanne Hébuterne: «And then came the tragic news of the suicide of Jeanne. She was almost nine months pregnant with another child of Modigliani, and when she reached the morgue at the hospital she threw herself on Modigliani, covering his face with kisses. She struggled with the orderlies who wanted to drag her away, knowing how dangerous it was for a pregnant woman to touch the open sores that covered his face. She was a strange young woman, slender, with a long oval face that seemed almost white rather than rosy, her hair gathered in long braids; I was always struck by her almost gothic appearance. Jeanne went to her father's place – she had been disowned because she lived with Modigliani – and threw herself off the roof of the house.»

Lipchitz concludes his recollections by writing: «[Modigliani] was aware of his gifts, but the way he lived was in no way an accident. It was his choice. [...] He said to me time and again that he wanted a short but intense life – “*une vie brève mais intense*.”»

– From: Jacques Lipchitz, *Amedeo Modigliani*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1954.

Lunia Czechowska

«Enfin j'allumai une bougie et lui proposais de rester dîner avec nous. Il prenait plaisir à prendre ses repas chez nous et mon invitation arriva à le calmer. Pendant que je préparais le dîner, il me demanda de relever la tête quelques instants, et, à la lueur de la bougie, il esquissa un admirable dessin, sur lequel il écrivit: “*Life is a gift: from the few to the many: of Those who Know and Have to Those who do not Know and do not Have*.”»

– From: *Les souvenirs de Lusia Czechowska*, written in 1953 and published by Ambrogio Ceroni in *Amedeo Modigliani peintre*, Edizioni del Milione, Milano 1958.

Enzo Maiolino

«And then appears a sort of workman dressed in worn velvet, with a large hat, his waist girded by a surprising woolen scarf. He crosses the street, comes towards us, introduces himself. It is the first time we hear “Modigliani.” [...] The sun shone brightly on the day of his burial. On the morrow, at the funeral of poor Jeanne, the weather was dreadful and rainy. I put flowers on the tomb, later, with a bunch of violets whose scent I can still smell.»

– From: Enzo Maiolino, *Modigliani vivo*, Fògola Editore, Torino 1981.

Anna Achmatova

«Modigliani loved to wander in Paris at night, and often, hearing his steps in the slumbering silence of the street, I went to the window, and through the shutters I watched his shadow, as he lingered below my windows.

[...] Once we misunderstood each other about a date, and when I went to his place I found he was not at home. I decided to wait for a while. I was holding a bouquet of red roses. The window of the closed door was open. Not knowing what to do with myself, I started tossing roses into the atelier. Then, without waiting for Modigliani, I went on my way.

When we next met, he seemed utterly amazed: how had I managed to get into the closed room, when he had the only key? I explained what I had done. “But that is not possible,” he said. “The roses were scattered so perfectly.”»

– From: Anna Achmatova, *Le rose di Modigliani*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1982.