

THE VOCATION OF REPRESENTATIONAL ART IN THE SCULPTURAL PLASTICITY FROM PREHISTORY TO THE CONTEMPORARY ART

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ABSTRACT

The PhD research, which is about to be presented at the University of Art and Design Cluj-Napoca, having the title “The Vocation of Representational Art in the Sculptural Plasticity. From Prehistory to the Contemporary Art” represents, from my point of view, a responsible attempt, which I assume after many controversies and dialogues with myself regarding my possibilities to introduce an original vision of interpretation of the vast historic, artistic and epistemological process involved in the subject. To begin with, I should briefly state the reason why I approach such a subject. Although the major genre of fine arts – among which sculpture, as well – permanently had the benefit of a rich arsenal of theoretic comments, the theme of molding (shaping) has very few and mainly not relevant nor deep writings about itself. The phrase – shaped form or shaping of the form – appears rather when references are made to the expressive quality of the sculpture, which, as we know, possesses a very characteristic way of molding, sometimes firm, but other times vigorous, sensitive, refined, clear or spontaneous. In all these cases the term shaping is used as an element capable to implicitly define the temperament and the manner of work characteristic to a certain personality or to a certain artistic style.

If we leave in the search of the origin of the primary impulse of shaping in general, as a spontaneous, creative activity, with the intent of giving a face and shape to a certain content, we can assume that this impulse was born as a challenge in the front of the wet, argillaceous material where the human being first saw the traces of his hand or foot imprinted and well preserved. From this point there was only a small leap in order to be aware of this material’s capacity to be processed and whose secrets he will learn how to be put in good use.

Taking all these into account, I could state that this PhD study’s reasons are important both from an informational and conceptual point of view and from a technical one. The 1st gives me the opportunity to reconstruct the symbolic messages and valences of the sculptural forms’ creation, from the beginning till today. I admit that this was always a source of inspiration for me, but also a permanent challenge to be aware of the shaping act’s dimension, of its meaning in the field of art and culture as well as of the integration of my own effort into this creation of the human being, which understood to communicate his feelings using this method. The 2nd aims the possibility of giving a guiding material to the young artists

interested in the science of molding, a material where I synthetically put all the aspects of the sculptural form.

Therefore, animated by this double quality of being an artist and a professor as well, I organized this study starting with its fundamental reasons, the primordial necessity of the human being to communicate by creating and to put this necessity among the imperatives of the relation between Human being – World, Human being – Universe, Human being – God. The sculptor Constantin Brâncuși once said: “*We cannot reach God – but the courage to travel towards Him is important*”.

Chapter I. The Sculptural Form Creation’s Origin

I considered being necessary to systemize the 1st chapter starting with general problems regarding the nature, origin and meaning of the fundamental terms I operate with.

Over the centuries sculpture was treated as an artistic genre confronting the viewer with the 3rd dimension, situating him in an essential relation with the concept of *depth*. Regarding the act of creating the sculptural form, it is presented through 4 fundamental methods of practicing sculpture: through *molding*, *trimming – hollowing out*, *pouring* and *assembling*. Molding and assembling are additive processes consisting of adding material, while hollowing out is a defalcating process, illustrating a process that starts with material from which the surplus is extracted. Pouring is a special category involving a mould shaped after the form, where a liquid or semi-liquid material takes the mould’s shape. This classification is sustained by the specific character of the material at hand – clay or ordinary soil – being also a pattern of the human vision’s efficiency. From this point of view, according to Gilbert Durand (*Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*), the nocturnal regime gives the earth the symbols of dreaming, of intimacy, of chthonian-like depths, while the daylight regime appears connected with the dimension of a complex agricultural ritual aiming rankness, fertility and the nature’s cycle of life.

Further I divided the chapter into eight subchapters, approaching in a synthetic manner some of the aspects connected with the form’s creation, which I consider important.

The subchapter *Physis* and *Logos* presents the process defined by Martin Heidegger as a process of “*bringing into the light what is hidden and through which the hidden is made to resist*”. In other words, the process in which the form, originally utilitary becomes *a form in itself* and *logos*, reaching and outrunning the limits of utility. The form’s *logos* receives a new dimension becoming *physis*.

In the subchapter **The Symbolic Form**, I present the symbolic character of the sculptural creations as a symbol of the human being's aspirations towards "the superior state of the being".

The reason why the form is separated from her *functional* status in order to achieve the *artistic* quality and implicitly becoming carrier of a spiritual message is presented in the subchapter **The Functional and the Artistic Form**. Within this context I place the *magical image* of the Paleolithic sculptural mouldings representing a moment when the human being approaches the concept of the sculptural form, first as a magic, symbolic and "utensil" necessity and later as a decorative and aesthetic one. This is certified by the appearance of the statuettes representing human silhouettes, usually feminine, whose forms result of a simplified relation between the volumes, some exaggerated compared to others, in order to distinguish the subject's symbolic expressiveness.

There are talks about **The Natural and the Artistic Form** hinting the inspired meeting of the human being with the nature and remarking that within the natural forms' context the human representational form represented by artistic means becomes a message and a sign of communication stating the artist's personality, authenticity and style. We reach, passing through the subchapter **The Form's Meaning in Sculpture**, the prehistoric period; we reach the **The Magical Image** from the Paleolithic. We also find out what determined the archaic meaning of the man's being in the world, his relation with the divinity and the artist's motivation to find an answer regarding the mystery of the existence and a way to artistically express it.

The 1st chapter ends with another important moment in the world's history – the Antiquity where I concentrate on **The Memorial Image**. Together with the appearance of the Greek polis and the assertion of the primordial spiritual forces of man within a philosophic context aiming to pursue all things report to the human dimension, the sculptural shaping will obtain its memorial image dimension and function.

We found it necessary to continue this study with a chapter dedicated to the sculptural forms' genesis.

Chapter II. The Sculpture's Grammar

This chapter is dedicated to the sculptural forms' grammar and to the relation between material, hand and the creator's conscience. The chapter consists of a few subchapters as follows:

The Sculptural Forms' Genesis presents an analyze of the forms created by using the natural energies and rethinks the manner in which the archaic works are made, discovering in these artifacts a constructive structure followed by a plastic one. These structures are similar to those found in nature. As a consequence, there is a relation between this type of sculptural ensemble and nature. Opposite to this, another Greek-Renaissance model was presented, where there is a direct report between the forms and the whole. These two models alternatively dominated the Western sculpture, coexisting during the modern and contemporary periods.

In the chapter **Surface, Volume, Depth and Space** dedicated to the fundamental notions of the sculptural form I found it necessary to underline the fact that, beyond its diverse meanings, sculpture distinguishes itself by the paradox of being substance and space, full and vacuum, construction and concept, and occupies a place without confounding with it, but maintaining its independence that fascinates us. The repertoire of expressive means used by the craftsman or the sculptor is that helping in drawing the lines of the shaped form in order to delimit it within the natural space it tends to occupy, populate reconfigure.

In order to distinguish the sculpture's categories a double appreciation is necessary. First, we have to determine the types used in conceiving and making of each sculpted object. Then, we have to identify the genre to which the object belongs. If in the case of the 1st appreciation the observation is direct and immediately relevant, in the case of the 2nd one we need to know the historic and social context and the way the concepts connected with sculpting are interpreted in a certain moment. Therefore in the subchapter **The Sculpture's Categories and Genres** the sculpture's typology is defined based on its location, distinguishing *monumental* sculpture – integrated into an architectural ensemble and *independent* sculpture, or based on an inner criteria having *ronde-bosse* sculpture and the *relief* sculpture. Regarding the sculpture's genres, they can be memorial or sacred, portraits, allegorical, small dimension sculptures, etc.

In the subchapter entitled **The Sculpture and the Architecture – the Architecture of Clay** I paid a special attention to the links existing between sculpture and architecture, also an art of volumes and space, both manifesting from the old times. The first binnacle-like constructions made of adobe solicited the prehistoric man's shaping qualities, his sense of the forms' proportions in a direct relation to the space and the hand processing of the clay. From this point, mankind obtained in time the science of building the ziggurats and palaces of the ancient Mesopotamia. From clay they have also made the interior and exterior decorations of the Greek houses and temples. Therefore, an entire subchapter is dedicated to the building

ensembles made of clay, including the ones made of bricks, the subject being more than a return to the past, a proposition for the “green” architecture of today and tomorrow.

As an artistic environment, sculpture has a long history and it is still a challenge, nowadays sculpture using along with the classical materials (terra-cotta, wood, stone and metals), new technologies and solutions, which were not known a century ago. Let’s start with the classical ones in the subchapter called **Techniques, Materials and Instruments**. Constantin Brâncuși said: “*the sculptor must put his spirit in harmony with the material’s spirit*”, therefore it is fit to present the materials the sculptor deals with and also the instruments and the methods he uses in making a sculpture. The materials are classified according to their origin – mineral, organic or synthetic or according to the practice of their processing having materials good for moulding, others for shaping, others fit to be cut and finally metals, whose processing involves various treatments. The work presents short considerations on the physical properties and the way of working with the stone, the wood, the clay, terra cotta, sandstone, porcelain, faience, chamotte and majolica, wax, plaster and bronze.

Within this context the study presents the **Technical Aspects of the Materials’ Construction and Processing** as stone carving, wood carving, the work with the metals, the ivory carving, the moulding and casting, etc.

Starting with the own, workshop experience, the subchapter **Moulding Operations’ Syntax and the Free Workshop Exercise**, which closes the 2nd chapter, explains some of the methods that I use in my own work.

After this conceptual and technological clarification I moved on to the historic presentation of the representational art’s forms in sculpture, the 3rd chapter being **Representational Art Plasticity in Prehistory, in Antiquity and the Pre and Post Renaissance Period** and the last **Representational Art Plasticity during the Modern and Contemporary Period**.

Chapter III. Representational Art Plasticity in Prehistory, in Antiquity and the Pre and Post Renaissance Period

Without having the intention to rewrite the art history’s pages, the study presents the history of the moulding from the point of view of a privileged viewer who has the chance to visit a virtual museum, a generous space where the ancient archeological vestige meets the famous authors’ works, remaking the moulding’s evolution cycle from prehistory, antiquity to the modern and contemporary period. On this trajectory, almost as long as mankind’s history,

there are silent witnesses, which incorporate their time's thinking and spirituality and which, above their content or meaning, are works of art, capable to impress the viewer.

I gave more space to this chapter because the sculptural mouldings from prehistory and antiquity represent the form shaped in clay to which I feel the most connected in my work. Suggestive qualities such as: simplicity, refinement, spontaneity, proportion I found in the archaic art but also in the art works belonging to the ancient or pre-modern world.

I will always believe that the sculptural moulding has two alternatives belonging, both, to the human soul: it can possess magical and symbolic valences or it can possess a symbol hidden under the aesthetic ornament's impulse. All these can be found in the archaic period, important for the modern art's entire evolution, which excelled in the recuperation and the putting in good use of the ancient cultures and civilizations, as Paul Gauguin likes to say: "*The Art's soul is beyond the Parthenon's horses*".

The archaic forms' up-to-dateless – subject of the subchapter The archaic cultures – I distinguished also by a constructive aspect, that of accomplishing the sculptural act following a pattern similar to the way the planets were born in the Universe – around the core, fragments of material are gathered until the form is done. This is the anonymous craftsmen's conception in making the Neolithic figurines as those from Hamangia or Cucuteni.

The subchapter **The Mediterranean World** presents the Mediterranean cultures to which I affectively belong and in the subchapters **The Middle East** and **The Far East** the ancient cultures from Mesopotamia, China. Korea and Japan are mentioned. The pre-Columbian American and African cultures are presented in the subchapters **The Amerindian Cultures** and **The African Cultures**. By realizing the study I met the emancipated stylistic refinement of the pre-classical Greek statuettes from Crete, Cyprus or Mycenae. I also presented the tanagers, the Etruscan, Assyrian or Egyptian figurines, the Han and T'ang dynasties' representational mouldings in China or the Wei culture's in Japan, the pre-Columbian figurines from Ecuador, Columbia or Mexico, the ones in Africa or the North of Europe and the journey could go on and on. These works' creators found the appropriate material, instruments and artistic language for their times and if the first ones have not been considerably changed over the years, the terms of the artistic language were renewed with each generation of creators. The diversity of the sculptural models coming from the world's cultural patrimony, recuperated due to the archeological research and restoration, allow us today to understand the style of each historic period and to remark the admirable way of using the materials and means in order to configure an idea in a tight connection with the aesthetic value of the moulding.

Closer to us, the study presents in the subchapters referring to **The Western Middle Age** and the **Renaissance and post-Renaissance** periods, which are previous to the modern and the contemporary periods, giving the opportunity to study the *Romanic style* when sculpture is one with the construction stone, but the iconography surprises with the unusual associations between the anthropological, zoological and vegetal motifs integrated into monumental ensembles evoking the universal harmony. The study also presents the *Gothic sculpture* and after meeting the great masters of the *Renaissance* and *post Renaissance*, preoccupied to bring to life the image of the ancient human figure, *unique measure of all things* and *mirror of the nature*, effigy of God, the “traveler” ’s enthusiasm is attempered by the view of the “stillness” and of certain stylistic dogmas that lasted till the end of the 19th century.

This voyage’s conclusion is that throughout the entire history of sculpture the main, vital and obsessive subject was the one of the human body, a subject that favoured the deciphering of the symbolic mechanism, which determined the human being’s sense of existence in this world and his relation with his inner self and with God. This sacred bond will represent for artists a permanent impulse and a motivation to constantly retake, using the art’s means, the transfigured representation of their own image.

Coming back to the present days, it is impossible not to notice that the actual rebirth of the sculptural moulding is based on the artists’ capacity to ensemble, connect and associate stylistic and formal sources coming from different historic times, which recuperates and puts in good use the entire experience of the art’s history till the beginning of the 20th century. This observation synthesizes the 3rd chapter’s proportion, preparing the next and the last chapter of the study.

Chapter IV. Representational Art Plasticity during the Modern and Contemporary Period

Regarding the 4th chapter, the method of approach is selective. The chapter presents authors and works whose manner expresses diversity and large experience, inspiration from the Mediterranean world to the Middle or the Far East or the Amerindian world. The chapter’s intention was to discover and present novel sculptural conceptions today.

Starting with these artists, selected based on creative affinities; I tried to distinguish some tendencies characteristic from a conceptual and stylistic point of view to the **Pre-modernity** and **Modernity**’s spirit.

First of these tendencies would be the artists' tendency to think synthetically, contributing to the growing importance of the shaped model later reproduced in other materials. Then, related to the constant desire of changing, characteristic to the period, we presented in the subchapter **The Primitives' Temptation** the tendency to recuperate the creative impulse belonging to the ancient cultures and civilizations, which, in the light of the new artistic ideals, can be looked for in the magical resources generating the archaic artifact's expressiveness. The source of the creative energies alighting and configuring the artifact lies in the unconscious and less in reason, therefore the emotional impact of the universe's reality manifests similarly to the artistic conception and gesture of the creator either prehistoric or contemporary.

The contemporary artist discovers in the archaic art the exceptional qualities of redacting, the structural capacity to define the form, the economy of the suggestive means, the symmetrical composition and also the formal, dynamic and monumental, character. The return to the source explains the diversity of the artistic quest, the need to explore the unknown, the attempt to prefigure a new reality where art and religion might find themselves together in the aspiration for values valid for both the past and the present.

We commented in the subchapter called **The Painters' Sculptural Attempts** another renovator tendency for the sculptural moulding, a tendency generated by the painters' contribution, which chose to express themselves through moulding. Freer in the relation with the strict rules of sculpture, the painters manifested their availability to reach the idea and implicitly and form's expressiveness crossing the constraints, changing or associating diverse materials, bringing a new conception regarding the understanding of the sculptural form and its shaping.

This tendency manifests itself on the ground of the preoccupations regarding the work of art's conception and its appropriate language in the context of the new currents arrival (cubism and dadaism) leading to new means of expression capable to express a new, complex and disquieting reality. From here arises the abdication from the rigid norms of the statuary – the mimetic tradition –; the search of the form's architecture on the basis of its structure, of the plans relation; the penetration of the form in the light of a new understanding of the relations with the space, which comes an active element. These tendencies can be found at the beginning of the post war period constituting the coordinates of the new currents manifesting together with the appearance of the first signs of postmodernism. Regarding the sculptural moulding and the works of such sculptors as Lucio Fontana, Isamu Noguchi, Arturo Martini,

a short presentation is available in the subchapter **Expressive Valences of the Moulding in the Post War Sculpture**.

The subchapter **The Fragment's Aesthetics** presents the idea of the fragment's expressiveness' speculation by the forms' fragmentation and their re-composition. The image of the anthropomorphic fragment, familiar in the ancient pieces, most of them curtailed, appears frequently in the artistic creation of the modern and contemporary period. The procedure of composing the fragments represents a *habitus*, which is specific to the postmodern period.

The postmodern movement is tackled in the subchapter **Postmodernism**, which desires to be a presentation of some contemporary artists, ceramic sculptors, representative due to their expressiveness, style, vision and message. The selection of the artists was made according to the author's own preferences, to the conception, topic and expressive means. The selection of *Steve Mattison, Amanda Shelsher, Ann Roberts, Gertrud Möhwald, Daniel Pontoreau, Georges Jeanclos, Sibille Riter, Gundi Dietz, Judy Fox, Consuelo de Mont Marin* attitudes and tendencies specific to the postmodern empire.

In the middle of the postmodern period, a very open and complex period, we find out that starting with the pre-modern period and up to the present times, the shaping artists keep a constant preoccupation and interest for the newest formal systems, the availability towards the experiment and research, sculptural art being defined as a complex phenomenon, which is not reduced only to a current, school or certain personality.

I could have not end the subject of postmodernism without summarizing within the subchapter **New materials and techniques of shaping in the modern and contemporary sculpture** a series of new materials and techniques whose processing made possible the manifestation of technical performances never known before. Moreover, the artists' interest for the materials, procedures and instruments' diversification appeared in a close connection with the science and technique's discoveries.

Therefore, the plastic materials originally conceived for the industry and being made of oil, synthetic resins and their derivatives captured the artists' attention due to their qualities, some of them being easily shaped, but also resistant and easy. They come in shape of *jelly* or *paste* and can be divided into *thermoplastic materials* and *thermo resistant materials*. They are cautiously used because they are toxic and flammable.

A short presentation of the author's preoccupations and work ideas, topic over the years is made in the last subchapter - **Personal creation** – followed by a series of images representing the author's works and studies.

Conclusions

The role I have taken is ultimately that of synthesizing various information regarding the art of shaping, given by the special literature, consisting of comments about the sculptural form's genesis, aesthetics and history and also of personal comments of certain sculptural art works from the cultural patrimony. The illustrations also present some works made by myself over the years in my workshop, where I meet with my own ideas and also I meet the materials and the appropriate utensils for my profession, which is also a lifetime passion.

It would. Therefore, difficult to assume a systematic presentation of the moulding experience's evolution for each historic period, without having the feeling that something is missing to its understanding. I preferred to consider moulding a vast manifestation of the artistic creativity structured on a long tradition and which, no matter where we find ourselves in time, pays tribute to the past, though remaining open to the future experiences.