THE PROBLEM OF REALISM IN HAMO THORNYCROFT’S 1885 ROYAL ACADEMY LECTURE

by David J. Getsy

INTRODUCTION

The mid-1880s were a crucial period of transformation for sculpture in Britain, and William Hamo Thornycroft (1850–1925) was on the forefront. Beginning in the late 1870s, the practice of sculpture in London, centred on the activities of the Royal Academy of Arts, had rapidly incorporated new techniques and subject matter in a concerted effort to bring sculpture into a more substantive engagement with contemporary life. This movement, subsequently named ‘The New Sculpture’, manifested itself in greater degrees of representational fidelity, an expanded range of materials and formats for sculpture, a broader conception of sculpture’s social roles, and a reconsideration of the conventional subject matter considered appropriate for sculptural representation.1

By the time of his lecture on 19 February 1885, Thornycroft had been elected as one of the youngest Associates of the Royal Academy (in 1882) and had a series of successes with the ideal statues he had exhibited in the previous years — *Ariemis and Her Hound* (1880/82), *Teucer* (1881/82), and the *Mower* (1884). The son of the prominent Victorian sculptors Mary and Thomas Thornycroft and the grandson of the sculptor John Francis, Thornycroft had longed been primed for his early success. Not only did he, early on, learn the techniques and routines of the professional sculptor, but he also — under the influence of his teacher Frederic Leighton — grew to be critical of the highly conventionalized style that had dominated British sculpture through the mid-1870s. After his initial successes spurred the momentum of British sculpture in the early 1880s, Thornycroft went through a period of transition in 1883–85.2 His 1884 *Mower* was one of the first life-size statues of a contemporary laborer in the nineteenth century, but Thornycroft’s introduction of ‘realist’ subject matter was contentious and incited criticism.

It is the question of ‘realism’ that preoccupied Thornycroft in this lecture written just six months after the *Mower* had been seen at the Royal Academy Summer exhibition. From the outset, it should be said that ‘realism’ has a particular valence for sculpture in Britain that Thornycroft’s lecture helps to expose. By the 1880s in Britain, ‘realism’ was a general term applied to sculpture to mean a high degree of representational fidelity and verisimilitude. Nevertheless, as Thornycroft’s lecture implies repeatedly, realism carried a set of negative connotations of excessive voluptuous-ness, sensuosity, and dubious moral implications. The traditional nude statue had been insulated from accusations of immorality by conventionalism and stylization, but by the last decades of the nineteenth century French sculptors had begun to highlight the details of actual naked bodies. The New Sculpture was predicated on an introduction of these techniques of heightened verisimilitude into sculpture, but tempered by a deep reservation about the moral implications of that attention to the corporeal. New Sculptors sought to find ways to activate the sculptural body, making it appear life-like and vital while nevertheless distancing it from the mere display of flesh. It is this
central tension that Thomycroft attempted to navigate in his lecture, and his sometimes moralistic
statements about the ‘evils’ of excessive imitation drew on this context.

Thomycroft’s lecture also provides a clear statement of the central problematic of representa­
tional sculpture in the nineteenth century: the balance between the formal organization of
sculptural structure and the accurate depiction of the particularities of the bodies represented. The
intellectual presumptions of sculptural production were tied up with the notions of form, order,
harmony, balance, and grace, making ancient Greek and Roman sculpture the exemplary image of
the Enlightenment ideal. Yet, as realism became a viable and vibrant option for other art forms such
as painting and literature in the nineteenth century, sculpture, too, sought to reflect more accu­
rately the lived world of which it partook. Unlike painting and literature, however, sculptural
realism was much harder won, for a realistic sculpture (especially on the scale of 1:1) became
physically equivalent to that which it represented in all but material. 3 Thomycroft’s use of the
waxwork as the foil for proper sculpture exemplifies the problem, for him, of a too-thorough
imitation of life. Throughout his lecture, Thomycroft performed this difficult task of arguing for
the potency of realistic techniques while warning his students to avoid too aggressively embracing
‘imitation’.

Within this argument about appropriate sculptural style and handling, Thomycroft introduced
the related topic of bringing new subjects to the medium of sculpture, much as he had done himself
with his Mower. In the references to works exhibited at the French Salon and in his discussion
of clothing, Thomycroft showed himself to be attentive to subjects that had traditionally been
excluded from sculptural representation. Sculpture laboured under the presumption of ideality
and civic function — to memorialize an image in the expensive, durable, and bulky materials
of marble or bronze was to enshrine the subject of that statue for posterity. By arguing that
the sculptor should be sensitive to the variety of possible subjects in his or her contemporary
milieu, Thomycroft offered a progressive intervention into the genre of the ideal, life-size
statue. 4

Beyond the deeper theoretical questions of mimetic fidelity and contemporary subject matter,
Thomycroft’s lecture also contains much useful practical and technical advice to sculptors
that, although largely tangential from the central theme of realism, is nevertheless useful for an
understanding of the day-to-day practice of nineteenth-century sculpture.

Thomycroft’s lecture is a significant primary document for understanding such issues for
sculptural representation in the late nineteenth century. Art History has provided detailed accounts
of the vicissitudes of painting and its issues, but sculpture followed a different path in the nineteenth
century. Across Europe, the shift to realism and the depiction of contemporary life came much
later than it had in painting. This was not a case of sculpture lagging behind due to a lack
of innovation. Rather, sculpture struggled under a different set of art-theoretical conditions that
determined a different course of development. Taking place in 1885, Thomycroft’s lecture was
very much on the forefront of these developments, slightly preceding the innovations in sculptural
subject matter set in motion by artists such as Constantin Meunier in Belgium and contemporary
with the rapid changes in sculptural style being spearheaded by Auguste Rodin in France. While
not an exemplary work of literature or rhetoric, Thomycroft’s lecture nevertheless registers the
tensions between idealism and realism that determined the parameters of European sculpture in this
period.
HAMO THORNYCROFT'S 1885 ROYAL ACADEMY LECTURE

NOTES


3 The interrelationship between materiality and representation is, I argue, a fundamental issue in the formulation and development of modern sculpture, in particular, from the late nineteenth century onwards. For further on these issues, see Getsy, *Body Doubles* (see note 1 above); David Getsy, 'Privileging the Object of Sculpture: Actuality and Harry Bates's Pandora of 1890', *Art History*, 28, no. 1, 2005, pp. 74-95.

W. HAMO THORNYCROFT, LECTURE TO THE SCULPTURE STUDENTS OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY, 1885

On more than one occasion we have lately heard it stated within these walls, and on no less an authority than that of our President, that the work of the Sculptor Students has shown in recent years a considerable and sustained advance. This opinion, which is confirmed on all sides by current criticism, is one which cannot fail to be extremely gratifying to those who take a real interest in the Plastic Art.

If we examine the causes of this advance, we find it due, I think, to a closer study of nature than was recommended in the last generation, and to the increased opportunities for that study which are now open to the student in our public schools of Art.

This closer study of nature leading to the production of work of a more realistic character than used to be admired, has of course not been confined to the Schools of the Royal Academy. The Annual Exhibitions of modern work both here and in most foreign countries, but especially in France, have shown that artists all over the world have been aiming at a closer imitation of nature than was usual 50 years ago.

The pursuit of exactitude, indeed, has been carried so far as sometimes to exceed the bounds within which this imitation should properly be confined. It is this universal tendency towards realism in the most vital schools of recent Sculpture which has suggested the central idea of my lecture to you this evening.

In the face of this general movement, I feel it is necessary for us to ask ourselves what the bounds of imitation are, and how far this devotion to realism is praiseworthy.

We all admit that a complete subjection of our aims to it would result in the production of work worthy only of a Wax-work Exhibition, ingenious and mechanical reproduction of objects, which might amuse us for a moment, but which would obviously fail to satisfy our artistic cravings.

The fact that Sculpture, or the formative Art[,] is in one respect essentially imitative is, I think, a source of considerable danger to students of it, and the tendency to which I have referred and which has shown itself in all the Arts, namely to seek resemblance to individual forms of nature, although a step in the right direction, may lead to serious evil and Sculpture be degraded by a misconception of the ends of Art.

In the history of Art there have been epochs which we, who are at a sufficient distance to judge fairly, do consider as debased and bad in many ways. The character of the work of such epochs has generally been due to the misuse of Art in the attempt to make it express what was not within its field, for the extension of this field was evidently considered to show cleverness and originality then, as in our day.

I need perhaps only recall to you the work of Bernini and the sculptors who followed him, to show to what an evil end extravagance can lead sculpture.

The Trevi Fountain in Rome, erected from the designs of Nicola Salvi in 1735, consists of a large florid Architectural façade, from the centre of which a colossal figure of Neptune drives his car and horses and attendant Tritons over a mass of rocks and streams of water: the whole composition covering an area much larger than this lecture-room. This work has been well described as a 'pompous confusion of fable and fact, Gods and ediles, aqueducts and sea-monsters.' But the most remarkable example is near Naples and represents the Classic fable of Diana and her nymphs discovered bathing by Actaeon. This work cannot of course be called a group. It is situated in a palace garden and consists of hundreds of tons of rocks and a flowing stream and at least ten or twelve marble nymphs scattered about, all of them more or less agitated at being perceived by the shepherd Actaeon in the distance.

This is only a characteristic example of the use to which sculpture was put during this period, in the attempt to make it rival the scenic effect produced by a picture. It was an effort in the direction of realism, in so far as the figures were relatively placed as a number of figures in Nature might be.

Editorial Note

This text is taken from the presentation holograph of the lecture in the Henry Moore Institute Archive, Leeds (Thornycroft Papers Y3-2). All notes are the editor's. At points where significant information was altered or deleted, sections of the draft version of the lecture (Thornycroft Papers Y2-1) have been added in the notes.
In our own Westminster Abbey, we have sad specimens of this utter absence of the sense of what is within the range of Sculpture, for even a man of great genius like Roubiliac could not resist the temptation to make his work pictorial, going so far as to carve marble clouds above his statues.

The pursuit of novelty, which is also a characteristic of our own time, is no doubt an influence which carries Art further and further in new directions and now especially in the direction of realism. Let us certainly have truth to nature, for Art cannot be good without it, but let us not merely aim at the imitation of individual forms without thought or selection just as opportunities for showing the dexterity with which we can handle our material.

Sir Joshua Reynolds, in one of his admirable discourses says 'Imitation is the means not the End of Art.' These are words which it is important to recollect for they contain the truth of the whole matter and should be a guide to you at your work, either when studying from nature or designing without it.

In this age of scientific accuracy the artist has especial need to keep before him the Means and End of Art; for as yet that vigorous child of our century, Modern Science, although she ultimately will help him, does little at present but confuse the artist. She shows him so much in Nature that he knows not what to choose.

The time was when the artist could impose upon the spectator to a considerable extent and say that such and such a representation of nature was true, and did not violate Nature's laws. He might in fact draw on his imagination and by new combinations construct works that excited amazement. But I need hardly trouble to remind you that matters are now changed; it would be impossible now-a-days for a painter to produce works so far removed from realistic forms as were those of Fuseli or Blake.

Science now with the sun's immediate aid makes an accurate drawing of an object in the fraction of a second, and any artist who attempts to make a drawing by hand of such an object is brought to task and the accuracy of his drawing tested by comparison with the work of the unbiased eye of the camera; which, although not giving the proper value of tone, is accurate, as regards scale and position, in its transfer to the picture of the minutest details. However hard a trial this is to the artist it is still beneficial and has its lesson; it teaches him to draw more truthfully, while on the other hand it proves to him that Art must have an aim of its own, and that that aim cannot be mere copying with scientific exactness.

This was fairly demonstrated in a lecture given in this room just three years ago, when the American photographer Mr. Muybridge, exhibited a series of instantaneous photographs taken of a horse in rapid movement. There were, I think, about twenty outline pictures taken consecutively during a single stride of the animal when at a gallop, from the commencement of the stride to its completion, so that it was possible to follow the action of any limb through its entire movement until the same movement or step began again. In each of these twenty silhouettes, for there was nothing within the outline, the action of the limbs at a particular instant was exactly given; yet scarcely one of them gave to an observer the impression of the action of a horse; most of them were quite ludicrously false to the optical effect. The grace and rhythm of movement of a gallop were not in the least expressed.

The fact is that the impression the eye receives of rapid movement is a combination of successive actions, and to give that impression in a motionless form, as in a picture or statue, more than one instant of the action must be rendered and the difficult limbs arranged to express those different successive instants.

It is, I think, an acknowledged fact that it is much easier to give apparent movement in making a drawing or statue of a horse or any quadruped galloping or running, than in attempting the same with a man running. The latter is liable to look as if suspended in air like a pair of compasses; with two limbs it is possible to express two moments of a stride, but that is a limited power, whereas in the quadruped four moments of the stride can be suggested which will more adequately express the successive positions of the legs during the stride.

The more the student has observed the action of horses the more will he be able to know what moments of action to select in order to give apparent movement. Science teaches man how to make use of the forces and laws in nature and shows him their perfect consistency and harmony. But it is by means of Art that the ever-changing and evanescent forms and effects in nature, which are constantly before man and which astonish and perplex him, can alone be arrested & permanently expressed. Art can thus interpret nature to man and teach him to perceive her beauty.
The Art of Sculpture is a language whose special province is the expression of beauty of Form. Its secondary province is the expression of sentiment & character. In order to remind you of the force of this language as an exponent of the beauty of the Forms of nature, I will only ask you to call to mind almost any authentic piece of Greek Sculpture, but more especially the statues from the pediments of the Parthenon in the British Museum and the Venus of Melos in the Louvre. It is by the imitation of nature’s forms that these works speak to us.

The extent to which this imitation can be carried is the great difficulty the Sculptor has to meet, and is the subject which I now wish to consider.

The question is, what are the forms in nature which are the best material for the Sculptor’s language, and how closely is he to imitate them?

The forms which constitute nature’s highest organism, Man, are of course the first and most important; next comes man’s raiment or that which clothes him; and then the forms of the lower animals. Now how closely we are to imitate the forms in nature is extremely difficult to say, for the reason that the possibility of imitation is almost unlimited by certain mechanical methods, such as by moulding directly from nature and casting. A cast from nature however, as we admit, is not satisfactory, not altogether because it is a mechanical cast, for a slavish copy made by hand might have a like effect. We should feel this latter to be a wonderful achievement and a feat of skill, yet there would be something wanting. There would be in the work an entire absence of the individual impress of the Sculptor or his school, and in its place a preponderance of the individual peculiarities of the particular model cast or copied. Scientifically interesting, but not artistically so. Indeed we should not allow it to rank as a work of art.

At the other extreme it is possible to generalize and to imitate only the structural and essential forms, eliminating the individual and accidental in favour of the usual and typical, and this is the fault to which English Sculpture in the earlier part of this century was particularly liable.

So we see that two dangers lie on either hand of us, the temptation to produce an absolute copy of nature, and the tendency to generalize until our work is so conventionalized as to be devoid of all value and character. These dangers more especially beset the Sculptor in the branches of his work other than portraiture, in which the individual and accidental are obviously essential.

But by what means are we to use the forms of nature to make our language of Sculpture most eloquent and intelligible and to fulfill the high aims which we consider as its providence, the expression of beauty and grace, of sentiment & character?

Obviously, we must follow the forms of nature closely in order to interest the spectator, selecting those we think best for the purpose before us, combining them to make a harmonious composition, but never making a combination which would be impossible in nature, unless it be in the case of some well-recognized convention, such as when the wings of birds are attached to human backs to express super-human powers of movement. But for such deviation the artist must always have an intelligent reason.

Sometimes owing to colour or transparency the effect of nature is not at all represented by form; as for instance in the human eye, to express which, the sculptor must flatten the convexity of the eyeball, or if he wishes to make a realistic portrait of the eye, he must cut a cavity in his model of it in order to form a shadow indicating the dark of the pupil.

A mass of hair which is partially transparent cannot be represented by means of a solid material of the same size. It must necessarily be made less and often thinned down in order to indicate the form beneath.

A sculptor ceases to imitate also, when the form is such as to be unsuitable of reproduction in his material, perhaps impossible to be wrought out in it, or at any rate requiring an endless amount of labour to achieve an end, which may again be easily destroyed. It may indeed be taken as a rule that we should not attempt in Sculpture forms and effects which can be more adequately and at the same time more permanently rendered in another art. What may be a wonderful feat of labour and painstaking, may prove at last to be an execrable work of art.

I remember when a boy being taken to see some famous china works in Staffordshire, and in the showroom of the establishment there were arranged all the sample cups and saucers and prettily painted dessert-dishes and such like but in the place of honour trembling beneath a high glass-shade sat a perfectly white Bird of Paradise, life size in porcelain china. This was pointed out as the wonder of the place. The delicacy of the workmanship I can well remember as extraordinary, for every detail of the elaborate creature had been built up bit by bit and
the long tail hung like a delicate frosted twig and all in burnt china clay. I was told that it was not quite finished as the workman had died before he could complete it, and that to do so, had been the one idea of his life. The story seemed sad to me then but it seems sadder now.

Only a few months ago I was in a little china shop in Hammersmith looking over some odd pieces of ware when in one corner I noticed a big, dusty glass-shade and under it, dusty too, broken and without tail sat my old elaborate friend the china Bird of Paradise but only a mere shattered skeleton of his former self. I thought of the good fellow who made it but never completed it and I felt glad that he could no longer see it. This story seems to me to teach a lesson to the Sculptor to be careful not to spend his time on the representation of what can be more readily and permanently expressed in another art. If a work in sculpture is fragile and easily damaged it might have been a better subject for a painter on whose flat canvas can be put the lightest and most delicate and where they certainly would fall away, and so would obscure them. The form of the folds in nature could not be thus produced for the reason that the Sculptor, in making the masterpiece of Art to which I have alluded, obtains dresses that are practically the same in form and texture as those used by the Athenian Sculptor, and it is also possible, in England, to obtain models that are physically not unlike the Greeks. But the effect produced is like that which nature might be imagined to assume under the most favorable conditions.

We can see an instance of this in the lovely group of the Fates from the Parthenon, where the flesh-forms are covered with a thin muslin-like drapery, arranged and treated with consummate skill so as to still show the figure and the movements of it. In these draperies the effect of nature is so truthfully represented in the detail and small forms that the spectator in his admiration and excited interest overlooks the liberties the sculptor has taken with the manner in which the larger folds of the draperies fall. These he has kept close to the limbs, where in nature they certainly would fall away, and so would obscure them. The form of the folds in nature could never be exactly like these carved ones, but the effect produced is like that which nature might be imagined to assume under the most favorable conditions.

In looking at this group, one becomes convinced that the sculptor who made it had an ideal within him which he sought to express by the selection and representation of the most beautiful forms in nature at his disposal. He translated into the permanent material of marble nothing without the leave of nature, and accommodated nature to the material. Although the large forms of the figure are visible almost throughout the group, still there is no appearance of the scantiness of drapery, so perfect is the judgment with which the folds are arranged and massed. Even in its present fragmentary state, headless and almost armless it seems to me by far the most beautiful group in the world: but how magnificent it must have been, when above the delicate drapery, rose the two lovely Greek heads side by side, one sympathetically touching the other, and a little lower contrasting with the minuteness of the muslin folds, imagine the generous rounded arms adding the proper complement of flesh, and a balance of mass to the composition of the group.

If we attempt to get an effect similar to a Greek statue or relief by placing a carefully made muslin Greek dress upon a living model, we soon discover the impossibility of it. This can be made a fair test for it is possible to obtain dresses that are practically the same in form and texture as those used by the Athenian Sculptor, and it is also possible, in England, to obtain models that are physically not unlike the Greeks. But the effect, I say, cannot be thus produced for the reason that the Sculptor, in making the masterpiece of Art to which I have alluded,
selected and modified the folds of the real dress. He realistically adhered to the forms of nature with regard to the flesh, but not in the folds of garment. These are kept in subserviency yet not allowed to appear meagre and thin. The projection of the highest part of the folds away from the flesh is generally true to what it might be in nature but the shadows are deeper. This is a convention of course, arrived at, no doubt, in order to express the feeling which the spectator has when looking at nature, of the presence of the figure beneath the garment, which presence is given, in a living figure, by the slight movements and swaying of the folds, just revealing from time to time the important and structural forms.

Since the Greeks employed such conventions and with such admirable effect, and which I argue are legitimate to express nature truly, we may surely be forgiven if, in our effort to represent the impression which the human figure gives us, we select and modify the garments worn now-a-days.

Before the reign of Charles II it may be said that in England all costume represented in Art was that of the time in which the work was produced. But during the reign of that monarch it became customary in sculpture to represent a person of important position, dressed either in the toga of the Roman civilian or, if he were a soldier, in the dress of a Caesar. This peculiar custom has been revived from time to time up to the beginning of our century, as we may see by the many of the statues in some of the private squares in London, but of late there has been a bold stand made against it and there at last seems to be a hope that we may again have sculpture that shall be a real representation of an Englishman as he lives.

All good art is representative of the age that produces it, so manifestly in representing that in which we live, we ought not to drape our statues as either the Greeks or Romans did. We know that the dress of the figures forming the procession of the Athenians in the Frieze of the Parthenon was the Athenian dress; and it seems to me that it is our duty to express in Art the dress of our own time even though it may be difficult in so many cases to satisfy ourselves that it is aesthetically beautiful. We need not follow fashion from year to year. I would go so far as to advise that we should choose the dress for a statue (if it is an ideal & modern subject) from any costume that has been customary during any part of our life. We ought at any rate to have seen the dress worn in its home.

I would like to remind you of the numerous fine works of Sculpture which have been produced in France of late, by the just treatment of contemporary costume. Although we are sometimes startled, and annoyed perhaps, at the extremes of realistic work often to be seen in Paris, yet one can not but admire, with enthusiasm, such portrait statues as those by Chapu and De la Planche. Also the allegorical groups by Barrias in which modern costume is boldly employed. Several of these groups are commemorative of the defense which certain cities in France made against their enemies during the war of 1870.

Subjects of everyday life have been modelled with a fine judgment and with success, by Coutan, Albert Le Feuvre, Pech, and others. Le Feuvre's statue entitled 'Bread' is an excellent example of a realistic yet sculpturesque rendering of a robust and handsome young peasant woman carrying loaves of bread. We find that the most sculpturesque garments we possess now-a-days are those in which fashion has least force, and where the dress has adapted itself most naturally to the occupation of the wearer, and the longer it has been worn the more worthy it is of your study. The folds instead of falling accidentally first in this direction and then in that, have discovered their proper place and fall there with a certainty that has become a principle.

Even the thickest and most stubborn of materials, such as leather, becomes valuable to the artist when worn long enough; it is not necessary to accentuate the patches and holes and ugliness; these are accidental while the folds are essential. It is quite extraordinary how the human figure will assert its form through clothing after long wear; the effect assumed is of course the typical and for that very reason of most value to the sculptor. In this way a statue can be clothed and the form still be sufficiently visible to retain its proportion and action.

The proper and true depth of fold and consequent shadow in the various parts of a garment covering the human figure can only be studied in that which is well worn. To attempt to do so in clothing that is at all new is soon found to be hopeless.

Even in London one sees, not infrequently, among the navvies, or those workmen who dig out the foundations of buildings, men who look sculpturesque in their wrinkled corduroy trousers, buckled in at the knee with a strap, with a loosely-fitting shirt, soft and pliable, not made into a hard white board to be worn in front like a sandwich-man's placard. The navvies' dress is adapted to his work & is I should think but little affected by fashion.
As an instance of an improvement in costume in our own time, an improvement by reason that it is better adapted to the occupation of the wearer, I will cite that of the cricketer, who, 50 years ago when playing an important match, did not wear on his head the close-fitting cap now customary but in its place wore that tall cylindrical box with which we are so well acquainted, and which we designate a chimney pot, but which our friends the Americans prefer to call a long-sleeved hat.

The countryman is still in many places sculpturesque and may be, I think, often realistically treated, though with him one need not imitate the textures of his dress and their contrasts; these essentially belong to the painter's art. They do not consist of form that we can call tangible, so are not for the sculptor. Often from the ease with which an effect can be obtained by their imitation, though imperfect, of textures, to give contrast, an inexperienced student often employs this means to the neglect of the proper form, of which the textures are the mere surface. Texture is closely allied to colour about the use of which in sculpture I now which to say a word as that is another element in the imitation of nature.

Polychromatic or many coloured sculpture seems to have been used in every age, and at first thought it perhaps appears to us, as if it might be a means to accomplish the end of adding the charm of colour to that of form, and so make sculpture more than a partial representation of nature. It more-over has the argument in its favor of having been used by the Greeks, probably at the best period of their art. But we must bear in mind in what position it was used and for what purpose.

It was used decoratively in the frieze of the Parthenon at a height of 40 feet above the spectator, at which elevation it was probably necessary to accentuate the flow of the design and at the same time to harmonize with the highly-coloured building. This frieze as you well know was a continuous mural decoration running round the entire inner wall or cells of the temple, and for the figures to have had sufficient effect at that height without colour, would have necessitated making the projection and depth of relief so great as to destroy the apparent structure of the wall which carries the super-imposed roof.

The ceremonies connected with the Polytheistic worship of the Greeks were sumptuous and brilliant, and as in the Roman Catholic Churches of the present day, the greater number of the statues immediately near the shrine or altar were coloured, which would necessarily bring before the mind of the worshipper the presence of the deity, more distinctly than the abstract and partial representation given by a colourless statue.

I have said that the sculptor ceases to imitate nature closely when the material does not admit of it, so that we get conventions due to material used in representation. A convention which is admirable in one material would not perhaps be so in another. For instance, a support in the form of a stump of a tree or some accessory (although the subject might not require it) might be necessary in a marble statue to give sufficient strength, but would not be at all required in a bronze one. Also for the sake of compactness and consequent strength, the limbs in a marble statue should not be extended so as to become weak and unsupported; but in bronze there is no occasion for this restriction. So that bronze can be more extravagant more elaborate, can be built up piece by piece, can undertake a greater variety of subject, be more picturesque, more dramatic, more realistic than marble — but since its dark colour does not admit of the delicate gradations and harmonies of form being perfectly seen, it will ever be the less of the sculptor's material for the most beautiful and therefore the highest class of subject than statuary marble.

There is something about a block of marble that fascinates and almost invites a man to become a sculptor; our first attempts with the hammer and chisel, however, prove that it is a serious matter to become even skillful in handling these tools.

This is nevertheless a training of the hand, which every sculptor student ought, I think, to undergo. It is, I believe, a fact that a great number of those students who have taken the highest honours in sculpture in these schools, have been good carvers of marble. It does not follow that every good carver is a good designer, but he will be a better designer if he can carve and his work will be more workmanlike & solid.

Whilst on the question of materials, perhaps I may say a word or two about terra-cotta. We have examples, annually produced, in which the dictum of Sir Joshua when we started, seems to be reversed and 'Imitation is made the End of Art.'

It is owing to the facility with which much realism can be given in this material, and the consequent ease with which a meretricious effect can be obtained therein, which tempts many who are somewhat inexperienced in Art to model in it. The shrinking of the clay about 1/10 of the linear measurement during
firing in the furnace, and the chance of contortion and breakage, make this material unfavorable for employ­ment. Although its field is wide and beauty can sometimes be expressed in it, yet it is only really successful in portraying strongly marked character, which does not lose by somewhat unattractive surface of the dry, burnt clay. There have, however, been both lately and during the Renaissance, extremely fine portrait busts made in it; a great number of these latter have a somewhat smoother surface than the modern ones. This smoothness depends considerably on the character of the clay and the amount of firing to which it is submitted, and although the effect is not so crisp and sharp as that of our modern examples, yet it is well to remember that a smooth surface is durable, and can be cleaned, whereas I fear many of the modern works of art in this material require a glass shade over them to preserve their charm. But I think we have come to dislike glass shades and to prefer that sculptures large and small be permanent & not fragile.

In small pieces of sculpture there is a great pleasure in being able to take the work into one's hand and examine it at will; this of course necessitates a durable material and a fairly smooth surface. Small bronzes have a great advantage in this respect and happily the more a bronze is handled the more pleasant is it to look at, unless it is an antique, and has a corroded surface, that is that the bronze is changed into an oxide of copper and so is beautiful in its delicacy of colour. This lovely green is of course the beauty of decay. How far it is advisable to reproduce this effect in modern bronzes is a question; to do so is, perhaps, rather like a painter attempting to make old masters. The surface of bronze should be beautiful, but it should be made so by its form, and not by its colour.

I can imagine our modem houses containing with advantage a far greater number of small sculptures than they do at present. The walls of most houses are covered with modern pictorial art in some form or other, but our rooms are devoid of sculpture, our mantle-shelves and pieces of furniture are not decorated with it. Blue plates balanced on their edge in constant peril of their homogeneous existence, occupy these sites. It is one of the duties of the Sculptor to try and displace these blue plates and put small bronzes in their stead; he has only to make really good small statues and he will do it, or at any rate he will get his small statues standing in front of the blue plates which will serve as a good background for them.

You will find that wax is the best material in which to model small sketches and small statuettes. It is sufficiently rigid to require but little support, yet plastic enough to be fashioned into any form that the sculptor's mind can conceive and is capable of being finished in point of surface to the minutest detail. It can be moulded and cast in bronze while the original model remains. This is not the case with clay which must usually be destroyed during moulding.

Before concluding, let us once more consider what is the right procedure for a sculptor to pursue, should he attempt to make a statue possessing Beauty and Grace.

It is to be hoped that he has an idea or faint vision in his mind of what he is going to do before beginning his sketch. But let us suppose his sketch made and carried sufficiently far to indicate the idea and composition of the work. The frame or skeleton for the clay figure is to set up and the model appears and tries to take the position of the sketch at the direction of the Sculptor.

The model, though perhaps excellent in proportion and good in detail of form, fails to embody what the Sculptor has imagined and moreover cannot perhaps assume the action suggested in the sketch. This is often a sad moment for the Sculptor, for if he has not conceived his design truthfully he suddenly becomes aware of the fact.

Now what is he to do? Is he, in making his statue, to cast away his idea and sketch and imitate the form of the model before him to the uttermost of his power? Or is he merely to enlarge his sketch to the size of his statue and refer only to the model to correct serious errors of proportion?

The first method would lead to nothing but what a perfect cast from nature would give us, and would be at best only a study. The second would result in a work essentially conventional and mannered, constructed on knowledge previously acquired, and probably from the antique, and would not possess a sufficiency of nature in it to excite human interest.

One sees examples in sculpture of both methods but the true course lies between these extremes.

When you have conceived an idea for a statue, and have fixed your idea in a wax sketch, then have nature before you as much as your purse will afford, and should you find that your sketch is essentially untrue, and structurally impossible, let it give way to what nature dictates; you will gradually perceive that your idea can be
Hamo Thornycroft's 1885 Royal Academy Lecture

expressed by an action that is possible to the model. Do not confine yourself to one model alone, for your object, in this case, is not to make a portrait; but let every form possess the impression of having been worked out from nature and let your good taste be shown by the selection of the forms employed.

And lastly as regards the subject which you should choose, I will only say a word. Let it be worthy of representation, and not merely dependent on a passing fashion or to satisfy the vulgar love of novelty. As sculptors and co-workers with the men who made those inspiring statues 23 centuries ago, set your faces against anything that would tend to make your art other than what would be an ennobling influence to your fellow men.

NOTES

1 Thornycroft began writing the lecture in the closing months of 1884 (Letter from Edmund Gosse to Hamo Thornycroft, 31 December 1884, Gosse Papers, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds), but it was delivered on 19 February 1885, as confirmed by Thornycroft's 1885 datebook (Thornycroft Papers, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, D4). There has been some confusion in the published record about the date of Thornycroft's lecture, to which I have unfortunately contributed. I erroneously cited the lecture as occurring in 1884 in my study of Thornycroft. Errata should be noted for David Getsy, Body Doubles: Sculpture in Belief, 1877-1925, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, subsequently cited below as Getsy, Body Doubles, pp. 47, 51, 63, 77, 97. 195 n. 16, 95 n. 26, 96 n. 45, 97 n. 96, 99 n. 24.

2 Frederic Leighton, 1st Baron Leighton of Stratton (1830-96), British painter and sculptor, President of the Royal Academy of Arts, 1878-96.


4 The waxwork exhibition, popularized in the spectacles of Madame Tussaud's, was often cited as the antiethos to art. There has been some confusion in the published record about the date of Thornycroft's lecture, to which I have unfortunately contributed. I erroneously cited the lecture as occurring in 1884 in my study of Thornycroft. Errata should be noted for David Getsy, Body Doubles: Sculpture in Belief, 1877-1925, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, subsequently cited below as Getsy, Body Doubles, pp. 47, 51, 63, 77, 97. 195 n. 16, 95 n. 26, 96 n. 45, 97 n. 96, 99 n. 24.

5 Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), Italian sculptor and architect considered exemplary of the Baroque style. Born by Nicola Salvi (1697-1751) in 1732, the Trevi Fountain sits before the Palazzo Poli in Rome. The central figure is not Neptune but Oceanus, and was created by Giovanni Battista Maini (1690-1752), who collaborated with Salvi on the fountain from 1733. Pietro Bacci (1700-72) later executed related marble statues for the fountain, which was complete by 1760.

6 Begun by Nicola Salvi in 1732, the Trevi Fountain sits before the Palazzo Poli in Rome. The central figure is not Neptune but Oceanus, and was created by Giovanni Battista Maini (1690-1752), who collaborated with

7 Fountain of Diana and Actaeon, on the grounds of the Palazzo Reale in Caserta, Italy, designed by Luigi Vanvitelli (1700-73) around 1770 and executed posthumously by Paolo Perisco, Angelo Brunelli, and Pietro Solari.

8 This paragraph and the preceding sentence on Bernini were a late alteration to the lecture. Initially, it read: 'The Antique group of Dirce tied to the Bull's horns, in the museum at Naples, is a work of late and debased Classic Art; but the most remarkable examples of extravagance in sculpture were executed in the 17th and early part of the 18th Century, which produced such monstrous works as the Trevi fountain in Rome which in its attempt at scenic effect results only in a mass of confused rocks and statues.' Thornycroft had left himself some blank space, presumably to provide another example. Instead, he crossed out this paragraph, thus omitting from the final lecture the reference to the Roman sculptural group known as the Farnese Bull in which the sons of Antiope, Zethus and Amphion, are tying the offending Dirce [Dirke] to an enraged bull. Originally made for the Baths of Caracalla, the sculpture is an AD third-century copy of a first- or second-century BC sculpture attributed to Apollonios and Tauriskos of Rhodes and described by Pliny the Elder.

9 This large marble group was restored and moved in 1546 to the Palazzo Farnese and is now in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples.


12 Henry Fuseli (Johann Heinrich Füssli, 1741-1825), Swiss painter, active in England; and William Blake (1757-1827), English printmaker, painter, and poet.


14 Edweard Muybridge (1830-1904), English photographer active in the United States. The experiments in motion

14 A marginal note indicates that, at one point, Thornycroft considered using an illustration of the horses' limbs on the Parthenon frieze from the British Museum.

15 In the draft version, Thornycroft struck through the continuation of this sentence: 'And next comes Man's raiment or that which clothes him, & then the forms of the lower animals whose beauty & character & value to the sculptor are so well expressed not only in Greek work but also in the Assyrian slabs of alabaster carved 3000 years ago.'

16 The tension between mechanical processes of representation (three-dimensional or otherwise) and the activity of the artist was a central concern in the nineteenth century. An interesting case is the brief vogue for and subsequent denigration of the process called 'Photosculpture' that developed in France and the United States. It used a series of photographs to create highly accurate sculptural portraits. See Robert Sobieszek, 'Sculpture as the Sum of Its Profiles: François Willerne and Photosculpture in France, 1859–1869', Art Bulletin, 62, no. 4, 1980, pp. 617–30; Michele Bogart, 'Photosculpture', Art History, 4, no. 1, 1981, pp. 54–65.

17 Thornycroft himself was a harsh critic of the conventionalized style of British sculpture, which remained indebted to the persistent influence of neoclassicism through to the late 1870s. See Getsy, Body Doubles, pp. 45–47.

18 Anecdotal detail in portrait sculpture has been popularized in the previous decade by Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm (1834–90), English sculptor (b. Austria) and Sculptor-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria (1880–90). Boehm was often the solitary proponent of 'realism' in sculpture prior to the New Sculpture, though this reputation was most associated with his portrait busts and statues. See Mark Stocker, Royalty and Realist: The Life and Work of Sir Joseph Edgar Boehm, New York and London: Garland, 1986.


20 With this story, Thornycroft was not so much warning against the use of fragile materials as he was the choice of subject matter and its treatment in three dimensions. The intricate delicacy of the long-tailed Bird of Paradise, though able to be appreciated in porcelain, was nevertheless unsuccessful in Thornycroft's eyes because it lacked the stability, unity, and clarity of formal structure he demanded of sculpture. It broke, in other words, not because it relied on a fragile material but because the artist struggled to represent in three dimensions an overly-delicat image that was an inappropriate subject for three-dimensional representation in a solid material. Thornycroft was advocating, by contrast, the careful consideration of the subjects chosen to be rendered in sculpture, leading into the following paragraph on the human form.

21 Ilissus and Theseus were the names given to fragmentary recumbent figures from the Western and Eastern pediments, respectively, of the Parthenon (447–32 BC, British Museum). The Venus de Milo from the Hellenistic Cyclades (c. 100 BC, Louvre) was one of Thornycroft's most loved exemplars. It should be noted that all of the well-known Ancient examples Thornycroft marshalled in support of sculpture's superior rendering of the human body were fragments, including the Herm of Praxiteles (argued now to be a late Hellenistic copy after fourth century BC original, Archaeological Museum, Olympia) and the Belvedere Torso (first century BC, Vatican).

22 On the question of the Ancient sculptural fragment as model for Thornycroft and, in particular, on his admiration for the Venus de Milo, see Getsy, Body Doubles, pp. 57–62.

23 The phrase 'scantness of drapery' replaced the word 'nudity', which Thornycroft had crossed out.

24 The phrase 'to the flesh' followed subservience' but was crossed out.

25 Init. 'forms of the figure'.

26 In his own statue of a fieldworker, The Mower (1884; bronze cast from 1894 in Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool), Thornycroft was committed to the accuracy of certain aspects of his figure's clothing (e.g., the lace-up boots, which were acquired from his brother-in-law Harold Cox). Nevertheless, he altered the clothing in order to better display the underlying human form. See Getsy, Body Doubles, pp. 75–84.


28 Henri-Michel-Antoine Chapu (1833–91) and Eugène Delaplanche (1836–91), French sculptors.


Bread was exhibited in plaster (no. 4054). The marble was subsequently commissioned by the state in 1885, and is now in the Place du Drapeau, Parthenay, France. In addition, Thornycroft most probably had in mind Coutan's Bread Carrier, also exhibited at the Salon of 1882 (no. 4248), and Pech's Last Vision from the Salon of 1883 (no. 4052).

31 Crossed out in final manuscript: 'and he is indifferent to fashion.' The draft version of this paragraph read: 'Even in London, one not infrequently sees a workman, even in London, whose dress makes one amongst the navvies or those workmen who dig out the foundations of buildings men whose aspect is & who I fear almost are the only men who have not adopted the hard hat & black [word illegible] coat costume; one sees; men who look sculpturesque in their wrinkled corduroy trousers, tied buckled in at the knee with a strap; with a loosely fitting shirt soft & pliable not made into a white hard board to be worn in front like a sandwich man's placard. The navvies' dress seems adapted to their work & not to fashion' (Y2-1, ff. 27–28).


36 Thornycroft made this point because many nineteenth-century sculptors left the carving of marbles to highly-skilled praticiens, seeing themselves as responsible primarily for the creation of the clay model. This division of labour was characteristic of the sculptural profession and its collaborative procedures, be the object marble or bronze. This practice was made more problematic in the subsequent years by Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), often considered the originator of modern European sculpture. A frequent joke among sculptors was that Rodin's many signs of artistic process such as unfinished chisel marks were simulated by a team of assistants. Thornycroft himself remarked on this late in his life: 'Rodin as a modeler was I think never surpassed, & he knew what form would look right in marble & got men to elaborately [sic] point & carve it — but I believe never carved himself. His modelling was so complete that it could be copied by skilled Italians in Paris, & the unfinished pieces & bits of the block were purposely left rough, & gave the contrast & enhanced the perfect surface of the finished part, & impressed the ignorant public saying, "how wonderful" "his carving is so wonderful"! This wonderful carving continued some time after death however!' (Thornycroft Papers, Sketchbook Til-S3, entry for 7 January 1920).


39 A helpful summary of the procedures of Victorian sculpture can be found in B. Read, Victorian Sculpture, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982, pp. 55–56.

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Fig. 44 The Fates, from the east pediment of the Parthenon, 447–432 BC (British Museum; photo: David Getty)