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## **Lettre sur la sculpture**

**a M. Theodore de Smeth, former President of the Aldermen of the town of Amsterdam**

Frans Hemsterhuis

Sir, some time ago you asked me to share my ideas about sculpture with you. As soon as I had a little spare time, I wondered how I might satisfy your request.

I thought that it would be better to examine the purpose, the principles, and the perfection of sculpture first, in order to explore afterwards its various modifications in different centuries and amongst different nations. But when I began to put these thoughts down on paper, I found that they were so bound up with ideas that are either more general in character, or more specific to other spheres of knowledge, and to other arts, that I realised that it would be quicker to deal first with the arts in general before returning to sculpture more directly in due course.

The first purpose of all the arts is to imitate nature. The second purpose is to surpass nature by producing effects that she generates only with difficulty or not at all.

Therefore, first we must examine how this imitation of nature is achieved, and then what it means to outdo and surpass nature, which will lead us to an understanding of beauty.

As far as possible, I will keep to those arts that have a direct relationship with the organ of sight. I will not speak of other arts unless it proves necessary in order to reveal or demonstrate some universal principle.

I will begin with a reflection that in due course will seem essential to the clarification of some things that until now have been dealt with in a rather vague fashion. This reflection can serve as an axiom: thanks to extensive experience, and to the cooperation of our different senses, we have managed to distinguish objects from each other at a fundamental level, through the application of only one of our senses. For example, without having recourse to touch or hearing, I can distinguish a vase from a man, or a tree, or a sceptre etc., using sight alone, such that whatever proportions, or whatever modifications I might give to the figure of a sceptre, it will never give me the idea of a vase, unless the form of the sceptre is entirely obliterated, and so on.

From here it follows that we have implicitly divided all visible objects – both those produced by art and those produced by nature – into well-defined classes. And any object that does not belong to one of these classes, or which belongs at the same time to several, such as an unknown animal, or a centaur or satyr etc., we call monstrous.

Let us turn now to the question of how far it is possible to imitate a visible object.

We distinguish visible objects by their visible contours, by the way in which their form modifies both light and shade, and finally by their colour. Indeed, it could be said that all this happens only as a result of their contour, since colour is nothing more than an incidental quality, and since the modification of light or of shade is nothing more than the consequence of a profile that is not seen.

For example, in Fig. 1 [here fig. 6], in cone A the line a-b marks the limit of the shadow and the light, or of a certain intensity of light or shade, and at the same time marks the contour of a profile that is seen only in B.

If it is now a question of imitating cone A, it is evident that whoever draws it as an outline will do so imperfectly, because standing at B he sees a triangle, at C a circle, at D an ellipse, and so on. But the painter, by modulating the shadow, gives me the impression of many contours that otherwise could not be seen, and the more of these hidden contours he represents, the better his imitation will be. It follows, therefore, that for a perfect imitation of the cone, all the contours must be captured, which is only possible in sculpture. Enough has now been said on imitation in relation to the second investigation that I intended to pursue, that is, to know what it means to surpass nature by art.

I have often scrutinised the drawings made by young children, that is to say of bright children who entertain themselves by drawing spontaneously without a tutor's help. One such child once drew a horse for me, and in truth nothing was lacking: all the elements could be identified, even down to the nails in the horse shoes. But at the same time neither the mane nor the tail was in the proper place. I took the child with his drawing to see a real horse, and he seemed astonished that I did not see a perfect resemblance between the two.

Let us consider, if you will indulge me, what was happening in the head of that child.

As you know, sir, from the application of the rules of optics to the structure of our eye, in any one moment we have a distinct idea of almost only one visible point that is fixed clearly on the retina. If I want to get a clear idea of a whole object, therefore, I must move the axis of the eye along the contours of this object, in such a way that all the points that compose this contour come to be fixed one after another upon the back of the eye with all the requisite clarity. Subsequently, the mind connects all these elementary points, and finally grasps the idea of the contour in its entirety. Now, without doubt the establishment of this connection is an act, which the mind requires time to complete, and it will take more time if the eye is less experienced in running over the objects in question. The eye of the child, alighting only slowly and at random on the contours of the horse, dwells in an irregular fashion on everything that presents itself during its passage, not least on the

more heterogeneous points of the object, and it is precisely these points - such as the nails of the harness and horse shoes - that he has best retained and represented in his drawing without proper regard to the local relationships between these parts.

On this basis, I made the following experiment. I drew two vases, A and B, approximately in the style that you see them in Fig. 2 [here figs 7 and 8], and I showed them to several people, including a man of good sense but without even a mediocre understanding of the arts. All, when I asked them which was the most beautiful of these vases, replied that it was vase A; and when I asked the latter why this should be the case, he replied, after a moment's reflection, that he was more powerfully impressed by vase A, than by vase B. I have therefore considered the force with which this man was impressed as the impact of my vases upon his mind, and I have divided this action into intensity and duration. Let us now see in what respect this intensity consists in figures A and B. It is the figures themselves in so far as they are visible quantities: it is all the black lines, a, b, c, d, etc., not in so far as they constitute the contours, or complete and circumscribe an object, nor in so far as they curve, conjoin, or are arranged together in a certain fashion, but in so far as they contain a certain quantity of visible points. Now if in vases A and B the same intensity is assumed - that is to say, the visible quantity is equal in both cases - then it follows that vase A acted with greater speed on the mind of my subject than vase B. In other words, that he was able to connect the visible points in A more quickly than in B; or, similarly, that he acquired an idea of A in its entirety more rapidly than of B.

Does it not follow, sir, in a quite geometrical manner, that the mind judges what it can apprehend in the shortest space of time to be more beautiful? But that being so, the mind should, therefore, prefer a single black spot on a white background to the richest and most beautiful of compositions. Indeed, if you give the choice between these two to a man weakened by long illness, he will not hesitate in preferring the spot to the composition. But the numbing of his senses leads him to this judgement. A sound and tranquil mind, in a healthy body, will choose the composition, because it offers a greater number of simultaneous ideas.

The mind naturally wants, therefore, to acquire a large number of impressions in the shortest possible span of time, and from this is born ornament. Were that not the case all ornament would be an unnecessary accessory, offending established practice, good sense, and nature. For what relationship is there, in vase A, between the head of a ram and the handle of a vase, or Hercules battling Hippolytus, and between the various grooves that serve to channel the movement of the viewer's eye?

It is for this very reason that we love great harmonies in music, and that we love good sonnets in poetry, because the entire sonnet is concentrated in the turn. In short, it is for this reason that

epigrams are so stimulating. Everything that we call sublime in Homer, Demosthenes, or Cicero, derives from this.

Since most of what I intend to say below depends on the reliability of this principle, I hope you will allow me, sir, to extend my analysis even further.

We see, therefore, that it is through the successive connection of the parts of the object that the mind acquires the first distinct idea of the thing itself. But let us add here that the mind possesses the ability of reproducing the idea of the object as a whole, and that this mental representation is realised in a manner quite different to that of the reproduction of the idea arising directly from the object itself. The latter is born out of the continual succession of the constituent parts of the object, whereas the former is created immediately as a whole and without the succession of parts, such that if I want to embody this mental representation in painting, sculpture or poetry, I must decompose it into its constituent parts, which must then follow one another in order to represent the whole. It is easy to see that this lengthy process will inevitably reduce much of the splendour of the idea. At any rate, I could demonstrate to you with a great number of examples, drawn from orators, poets, painters, sculptors, and musicians, that the things we call grand, sublime, and of good taste are all great totalities. Indeed, the parts are so artistically composed that the soul can link them together in an instant, and without effort (a). Our judgment will not differ except in proportion to our ability to unite promptly the parts of the whole in each art, and in proportion to their moral value with respect to the thing being represented. For example, when a man who has escaped a shipwreck sees the painting of a shipwreck, he will be more affected than others. When Cicero defends Ligarius, everyone admires it, but it is Caesar who goes pale and trembles; a clear sign that he experienced a greater quantity of concentrated and coexisting ideas in the words of Pompey and Pharsalus, than the rest of the audience.

Let us move on to the representation of the idea conceived or reproduced in the mind, and let us suppose that Raphael wants to paint a Venus. Evidently, any Venus conceived in the mind of Raphael will be thoroughly worthy of her altars at Paphos and at Cnidos. But before the painter has completed half his work, he will have already imagined twenty Venuses. Perhaps I err in taking as an example this illustrious genius of painting, since it does not seem impossible to me that he could conserve a great idea long enough in all its parts and in all its majesty in order to sketch out its contour. But it is at least true that in the average painter the head, the arms, and the legs of Venus will belong to just as many different Venuses. I would like the young to be taught to draw with their eyes blindfolded. This would be the best method, I believe, of obtaining excellent compositions because, in truth, the eye does more bad than good in initial sketches. This can be seen from how

the majority of painters continually alter them, which would not be necessary had they managed to represent their initial, well-conceived idea. The initial distinct and well-conceived idea of a man of genius, who is absorbed by the subject at hand, is not only good, but already well beyond expression.

Here, I must make an observation in passing, that preliminary sketches most please the man of genius and the true connoisseur, and this for two different reasons. Firstly, because they maintain more of that divine vivacity of the first idea conceived than is found in finished works and those which have taken a great deal of time. But secondly and principally because they activate the poetic and reproductive faculty of the mind, which immediately finishes and perfects what is only sketched. For that reason, sketches are very similar to the arts of public oratory and poetry, which – using signs and words rather than pencils and brushes - act uniquely on the reproductive faculty of the mind and, as a result, produce effects far greater than even the most perfect painting or sculpture could engender. A brilliant passage from some great orator or poet makes the heart pound, makes one go pale, makes one tremble and rattles one's whole constitution; something which will not happen on seeing the most beautiful painting, nor the most beautiful statue. It seems that the celebrated Leonardo da Vinci may have considered sketches in roughly the same way, when he expressed the wish that painters should fix their attention on haphazardly stained walls and surfaces, the irregular blemishes of which often give birth in the mind to landscapes of the most articulate composition. If you are unpersuaded that sketches produce the same effect in all the arts, recall the *quos ego...* of Virgil, which depicts much better the vehemence of Neptune's threat than Virgil himself could have expressed had he added something more forceful. A significant proportion of the sublime in the exhortations of Cicero is in sketch form. Indeed, how many dramatic works there are where an eloquent silence says more than beautiful verses! (b) How many military speeches consisting of no more than a few words, which often lack the appearance of sense, have given birth and coexistence to ideas so strong as to lead to the most unlikely victories!

We have seen that what is beautiful in all the arts should give us the greatest possible number of ideas, in the briefest possible span of time. From there it follows that the artist will be able to attain beauty along two different paths. Through the fineness and fluency of the contour, he can give me in an instant, for example, the idea of beauty, but in a state of rest, as in the Medici Venus or in your Galatea. But if, with a contour equally fine and graceful, he were to represent an Andromeda with her hopes and fears evident in all her limbs, he would offer me in the same instant not only the idea of beauty, but also the idea of Andromeda's peril, which would arouse my pity as well as my admiration. I would maintain that any passion expressed in a figure of any sort must diminish a little this fine quality of the contour that permits the easy passage of the eye. But at least in putting some

action and some passion into a figure, one will have more ways of concentrating a greater number of ideas within the same span of time. It seems that Michelangelo, in the group *Hercules and Antaeus*, was more inclined to achieve this *optimum* by augmenting the *maximum* quantity of ideas through the perfect expression of the action of Hercules and the suffering of Antaeus, than by diminishing the *minimum* time that we require to look over the group, through the use of a very fluid contour that does not at all impede the passage of the eye. In contrast, it seems that Giambologna, in his *Rape of the Sabines*, has instead sought this *optimum* by reducing the *minimum* time through the skill of his contours, which enclose almost as many different and well-contrasted members as it is possible to imagine in a composition of three figures. When one examines these two works from a great distance, that of *Hercules and Antaeus* is decidedly inferior, because the power of expression is incapable of reaching across a great distance, leaving only the quantity of ideas that a few poorly contrasting members are able to offer. The *Rape of the Sabines* will have precisely the opposite effect.

In works of art, what proves most detrimental to this *optimum* is internal contradiction found in the work as a whole, as much between the parts of the contour, as between those that express the actions and passions.

In order to show you what I call contradiction in the contour, I have copied, in Fig. 3 [here fig. 6], an engraving from the collection of the King of France. Even the most practiced eye finds it hard to distinguish the figure of the anvil from that of the young boy, or that of the rock from the leg of Vulcan, and so on. The contours are so ambiguous that you never know quite where you are within the composition when wanting to grasp the idea of the whole work. It is true that there are far worse compositions, but I believe that this example suffices to develop my idea (c). In order to understand what I call contradiction in expression, you only need to imagine in the *Farnese Hercules* some muscle that is excessively tense, and that upsets the equilibrium and calm that was Glykon's sole aim, or to imagine in the group of the *Laocoon* some limb or facial feature that manifests elation. Indeed, if you require a perfect example, one that demonstrates this latter contradiction above all, you need do no more than look at your ivory statue of *Mars* which will perfectly express my idea.

Artists do not fall into this error except through what I said above: the mind needs both time and the succession of parts when, having conceived a beautiful idea, it seeks to render, realise, or execute it by hand or in words.

To my mind, it follows clearly from everything that I have just said, that it is quite possible - as far as beauty is concerned - to surpass nature. This is because it would be a truly exceptional coincidence

were a certain number of parts found in such a combination as to deliver this *optimum* that I desire, which corresponds, moreover, not to the essence of objects themselves, but to the effect of the relationship that exists between objects and the construction of my senses. If you change objects in themselves, the nature of our ideas of the beautiful will remain the same. But if you change the essence of our senses, or the nature of their constitution, all of our current ideas of beauty will be obliterated immediately.

There is one further observation to make, which is in truth quite humiliating, but which proves incontestably that the beautiful does not have any reality in and of itself. Take on the one hand a group or a vase that possesses, as far as possible, all the principles of ugliness. Take another that possesses all the principles of beauty. Observe them from all sides every day for several hours in succession. The first effect of this tiresome experience will be disgust. But when the desire returns to compare these two objects, you will be astonished to find that your sensitivity to their different degrees of beauty will be markedly diminished, and will even seem to have changed its nature. You will find yourself somehow hesitant in making a choice between these two objects, even though they are totally different from each other. The reason for this disgust derives from a quality of the mind about which I will speak to you on another occasion. But the source of this alteration in our judgement consists in the fact that the eye, during this experience, has become so practiced in proceeding along the contours of the group whose composition was poor, that it finishes its course almost in the same span of time required to gain a clear idea of the other object. And, vice versa, in running such a large number of times over the beautiful object, the eye has discovered nooks and crannies over which it had slid with ease at first glance, but which now impede its passage. The same experience will produce the same effect in all the arts.

We have learned from nature, to recognise things and by experience to distinguish them. The idea of the beauty of things, however, is but a necessary consequence of this singular quality of the mind that I have just demonstrated.

In concluding this somewhat metaphysical section of my letter, I note, in passing, that from this quality it seems incontestable that there is something in our mind that loathes anything to do with what we call succession or duration.

And now we reach sculpture. Of all the methods of imitating visible things, it is preeminent because it is the most perfect. Painting follows immediately after, or rather that intermediary genre between these two, which is called sculpture in low relief, to which I will dedicate a short section in its own right at the end of my letter.



I would suggest that sculpture came into existence before painting, because it seems to me more natural that, as soon as one desires to imitate, one might want to imitate the whole thing, so to speak, rather than to imitate an object in the round on a flat surface (something which requires a much greater level of abstraction than one might believe at first glance). In any case, this abstract idea of the contour was absolutely necessary in order to give birth to drawing and painting. Its acquisition requires a certain perfection – a certain degree of practice – with the faculty of sight. Now, it seems that touch was perfected before sight, and as a consequence it must have served much sooner as the basis for the imitation of ideas acquired through that sense rather than through vision. I realise of course that this account runs contrary to the story of that young lady who first with charcoal fixed the shadow of her lover on the wall. But when one speaks of a wall, it already presupposes architecture. Now architecture is demonstrably an art of imitation like all others. And just as all direct imitation of visible things requires a knowledge of design, it follows that drawing pre-existed the young lady, and that her story is simply a pleasingly imagined fable.

As far as the antiquity of sculpture is concerned, nothing can be said with certainty. On the one hand, it is claimed that before Daedalus there were schools at Sicyon and elsewhere. On the other hand, it seems that Daedalus was the first to introduce a gap at the base of his statues in order to represent the legs, so that it was said that his statues seemed to walk and to run. On this basis what idea can be formed of these schools?

Let us set aside, therefore, the investigation of sculpture's ancient origins, and consider instead what spirit governed it in Asia or amongst the Egyptians, in the centuries of Phidias and Lysippus, amongst the Etruscans, and the Romans, amongst the Goths and, finally, in our centuries of the rebirth of the arts.

If we consider the political state of the world in the most remote times, we see nothing but patriarchs and despots, who differed from each other only in the immensity of the populations and the territory under their control. It was only natural that amongst these populations grandeur and immensity should constitute beauty. And, limited as they were, in imitating nature, they believed in going well beyond it, driving it towards an immensity that led them not towards truth, but towards the extraordinary. In addition, it was the extraordinary that became the general spirit of their arts and of their sciences, and everything that still remains of them carries its mark. Everything resembles these populations themselves; everything is a great mass, without composition or subdivision. I believe that you will be convinced that this is true in examining even the smallest Egyptian statue, that is to say one of those that survive from earliest antiquity, from before the Greek style began to manifest itself to a greater or lesser extent in their works.

When it is said that the Greeks were the disciples of the Egyptians, I believe that we must understand by this that the Greeks heard about the existence of the arts from the Egyptians, and that they learned from them the basic use of certain tools. This is evident from examining closely their oldest coins from Athens, which are apparently extremely close copies of coins even more ancient. You will find that the engraving on them is, I confess, as primitive and as mediocre as possible, but at least there is no trace of Egyptian taste. This consideration leads me to believe that the Greeks never copied the works of the Egyptians, and that one can proceed as if the arts had actually been born amongst them. As we will soon see, nations that begin by imitating others arrive at their version of perfection by a very different route than that followed by the Greeks.

Amongst the people of antiquity of whom I have just spoken, the class of essential and truly dynamic individuals consisted of no more than a small number of despots. The rest of humanity was as nothing. Amongst the Greeks, divided into small monarchies and republics, every individual became essential. These small states in such close proximity continuously made war with each other, which made the Greeks dynamic, and greatly increased their knowledge as a consequence. This dynamism equipped the Greeks with a refinement of the mind which has no equal. The preceding centuries had been rather unenlightened and had provided, as a result, few interesting experiences. Moreover, the mathematical sciences had barely yet developed. And so this refined mind, unable to find adequate nutrition in this nascent understanding of the physical world, withdrew into itself, excavating the human heart, and there brought to fruition that moral sentiment that was to be the common spirit of all their sciences and arts.

I note here that the idea that they formed of their gods bore a quite different spirit to the Egyptians. They considered their Minerva to be wisdom, and in representing her they conferred on her an air of wisdom, and their Hercules to be strength, and gave him a robust and vigorous appearance. The Egyptians, in order to depict the equivalent deities, would have placed on the torso of a human figure the head of a dog, a lion, or a sparrow hawk, which would have been the symbol of wisdom or of strength. The Egyptians conferred on the figures of their gods this symbolic and supernatural spirit, which made them senseless monstrosities. The Greeks, meanwhile, for the reasons I have set out above, having acquired profound ideas of the independence of a virile and active virtue, of honour, and of patriotism, passed easily in their enthusiasm to the deification of their own kind. They did not therefore admit any other difference between gods and men than a degree of perfection. In such a way, in representing Apollo, Minerva or Venus, they naturally tried to embody the greatest possible beauty. And since the most important task of the sculptor consisted in representing divinities, he was professionally obliged to seek throughout nature in pursuit of the most scrupulous investigation of beauty, and in order, subsequently, to surpass nature herself.

The Greeks, in their exercises, in their bath houses, and in their festivals, had continually before their eyes naked bodies whose beauty was perfected even further by exercise and by bathing. And please note that since agility and strength were prized in all these exercises, it was entirely natural that artists, in choosing a general proportion for their figures, should have selected the proportion best suited to strength and agility, in other words, the mean.

You will rapidly see that a people who begin by imitating another nation will hardly ever make this choice. It is therefore inevitable that the Greeks, after having exhausted the beauty of nature, discovered that ideal beauty which became the model for so many inimitable masterpieces. An incontrovertible indication that these masterpieces are their creation lies in their excellence in the composition of monstrous figures. Look at their centaurs, their nereids, their satyrs – all of Greek creation – and tell me whether any century, or any nation, has even achieved mediocrity in this genre, which they by contrast brought to the greatest perfection.

As far as the Etruscans are concerned, it is quite clear from the large number of their surviving monuments that they imitated the Egyptians. We know so little about these people that it is impossible to conclude anything about their art on the basis of their history, character, or political state. But it is equally without doubt that they were a civilised people, and that they had a distinctive taste, things which say a great deal on their behalf. Both characteristics are visible in their vases and in their engraved stones, over which they took infinite care. Although little is known about their religion or their gods, it would appear from the figures that are found on their vases that their heaven was not nearly as joyful and pleasing as that of the Greeks, since these images often represent absurd monsters and primitive compositions typical of a symbolic and superstitious religion. From this it follows that they were not compelled like the Greeks to seek beauty over and above nature. As well as imitating Egyptian works, and comparing these continuously with nature, they became accustomed to measuring the gulf between the two. As a consequence, they considered nature to be the limit and boundary of perfection beyond which there was nothing. Therefore, it follows that they took servile imitation as the only standard, an attitude that is clearly expressed in the aridity of all their works. Yet, when one adopts servile imitation as a goal, one wants to imitate objects full of reproducible detail. In other words, it will be preferable to imitate a body with visible muscles than one with a smooth and polished skin. Therefore, they took as models figures that were spare and thin, and consequently very tall. What they gained by selecting this proportion is a truly admirable knowledge of anatomy. Only one of the two magnificent engravings conserved in the study of the Prince of Orange is necessary in order to convince you. It represents Achilles as he stoops to take up his quiver: the level of refinement was never taken so far amongst the Greeks as in this engraving. It is badly rendered in the book of the illustrious comte de Caylus, to

whom it previously belonged. One still hears much talk of the beauty of Etruscan vases, and even of the elegance of their contours. But in examining these contours with all the necessary attention, you will often find that they consistently lack something, and this is precisely what marks out a spirit that is subservient, imitative, limited and fearful.

Amongst the Romans, in terms of imitation, in general one finds nothing but a mixture of the Greek (d) and the Etruscan. But the tone that appears dominant to me in their most typical works, seems to maintain the gravity and bluntness of their character at the time of the Republic. As you are well aware, sir, if it is a matter of judging the Romans on what survives of their arts of oratory, poetry and architecture, we would have to judge them differently, since these arts were in greater consonance with their political state (that is to say, the art of oratory in the final phases of the Republic, and poetry and architecture under the emperors).

In so far as the Goths are concerned, I have very little to say to you. What remains of their sculpture resembles a great deal the child's horse that I mentioned earlier as an example. In speaking of the arts, I have said almost nothing of architecture. In its origins it is a form of imitation (e), but in its perfection it is an entirely human creation. I mention this only in relation to the Goths because almost everything that survives of theirs belongs to this art. In order to advance a judgement about them, one could say that they considered the whole to be merely the sum of its parts, and that they decorated these parts, according to their abilities. In this way they imagined that they had decorated the whole. This is also the reasoning of my child.

After the decadence of the Roman Empire, this would have been the state of the arts, had not the abuses that altered the simplicity and purity of our religion contributed to their rebirth. The people who had just devastated Europe, had nothing in their character, political state, or religion, that might have led them quickly to the culture of the fine arts. The Christian religion required temples and images, but there were no more Apollos, Bacchuses, or Venuses to be represented. There were instead the dead in Purgatory, saints undergoing tortures, and penitents or martyrs.

The Greek artist, in order to create an Apollo, surpassed the limits of nature by means of the beautiful ideal, and truly represented gods that he believed were representable. The Christian artist, however, had such an abstract idea of these divine beings that he had to depict, an idea so disengaged from the senses, that any real imitation was absurd. As a result, he could not but represent them as they had once been visible on earth. But the artist was impeded even further from attaining even that natural beauty by the spirit of Christian humility that led him, not to the simple truth, but to a low and popular form of truth. And since he never had to represent anything but the passions in order to portray martyrs, penitents and the dying, he only needed a more or less

good knowledge of the effects of the muscles. Famished mendicants served him as models, and in studying these undernourished bodies for the representation of his saints and his martyrs, the general proportions of his figures became excessively long and his work spare in style. This is why there is an air of resemblance between good Etruscan works and work produced in the earliest periods of the rebirth of the arts in our own era.

Sculpture existed, certainly, but with a manner more pitiful and awkward than she had ever possessed in ancient times during the fair centuries of Athens.

If we follow this path to its end, we can see that as religion became politics, as the church became powerful, and as priests became kings, all the arts that had some role within religious worship necessarily benefitted from it. Wealth gave rise to emulation, and it seems likely that when beauty came to be desired, it was sought for a long time in an abundance of ornament. Ornament applied by hands of such little ability, however, was not integral to the ornamented object, and when one compares these ornamented things to the simple beauties of the Greeks, the veil falls.

We started to imitate the Greeks. We imitated their gods when representing our saints. We gave back to Apollo the rays of his glory, and under some other name he was venerated anew. Enormous progress was made in the imitation of the ancients, and one could say that Michelangelo - that astonishing genius who, had he been born in Athens, would have been worthy of her and of Pericles - raised sculpture to a level hardly inferior to antiquity, when in all its splendour it delighted Greece. In my view, it is not necessary to seek this degree of superiority in the expression of actions and passions amongst the Greeks, since in this respect the moderns are in no way inferior to their masters, but rather in that free and simple quality of the contour. If you were to ask me the reason, I believe that one could locate it to a large extent in the general spirit of our era, which is the spirit of symmetry, or the spirit of geometry. And this in truth damages that bold freedom, which is the soul of the arts, just as much as the general spirit of the Greeks was favourable to it. In order to bring to a conclusion the comparison between Greek and modern artists, I beg you to pay attention to the representation of the devil. This is the only subject that is truly our own, and which could not have been taken from the ancients. Our artists deal with it not only in the most hideous manner, but also in the most ridiculous. If the Greeks had dealt with the same subject, they would have given him a consistent form, which would have impressed, would have aroused interest, and would have had the characteristics of the Lucifer described by Vondel or by Milton. In this respect, it is true that poets have a great advantage over the sculptor and the painter. This is for two reasons. In the first place, in representing the devil they are able to work on a gigantic scale and to borrow Gaia's offspring, the Cyclopes, infernal divinities etc., from the ancients. In the second place, they can make him act, and

through the enormity of his actions and the grandeur of things that surround him, render the idea of this being who fought Michael on the plains of heaven.

At this point, sir, I am going to consider sculpture in more detail, in order to analyse how it differs from the other arts. According to its nature, what are its limits and what subjects should it address?

Sculpture is divided into two types: sculpture in the round and low relief. Only the first can be considered an art in its own right. It represents its subject perfectly, in depicting its whole contour and solidity. It is satisfying to two senses at one and the same time: to touch and to sight. There is no need to consider modelling in order to seek the limits and principles of sculpture. In modelling one uses such malleable materials, that the same capacity for composition is possible as in painting. In painting, I can make a picture that contains twenty rich compositions, which together form a great general composition. But in works of sculpture one normally employs metal, marble, or some other precious material. Moreover, this art demands much greater labour, and the negotiation of many more difficulties than painting. As a result, it will never comprehend as many subjects. Sculpture ordinarily imitates its chosen subjects at their natural scale or sometimes larger. Therefore, the cost and hardness of the material constrain it to seek greater unity, and for this reason it is naturally limited to the representation of a single figure, or of a composition of a few, very simplified figures. This means that unity or simplicity is its necessary principle. But given its nature, the beauty of sculpture shines out in all directions, and from all possible profiles. And so it is both desirable and necessary that it please from a distance just as much as from close-to, or perhaps even more so. For this reason, I believe that sculpture should seek all the more to achieve the *minimum* of time that I require in order arrive at an idea of the object through the fluency and excellence of its contours, rather than increasing to the *maximum* the number of ideas through the perfect expression of actions and passions. And this being so, it follows that calm and majesty truly befit it. In terms of the subjects that sculpture can address, there are two main reasons that reduce their number. Firstly, the idea that any representation gives to me of a subject must either be analogous or conform to the idea that the reproductive faculty of my mind would have given me of the same subject, if I had wanted to think about it without a representation. Secondly, sculpture must reach audiences in the distant future, and therefore must speak the language of nature. So it follows that several subjects drawn from Holy Scripture, above all those that concern the Supreme Being, as well as a great number of qualities, of personified virtues and vices, and all drapery and clothing belonging to a particular era or nation, should be banished from sculpture.

Therefore, if the unity or the simplicity of the subject, and the fluid and fine quality of the overall contour, constitute in sculpture the principal foundations, then the sculptor who wants to reach the

greatest perfection in his art by the easiest route must represent a single figure. That figure must be beautiful, almost in a position of calm, in a natural attitude. It must present itself with grace. It should be turned in such a way that I see from every angle as many different parts of its body as is possible at the same time. A little drapery should be applied for reasons of decorum, and its folds arranged with dignity so that they contribute both to an increase in the number of my ideas, and to the creation of contrast with the rounded contour of the body. And in order to render the contrast even more striking, the artist should include some portion of a column, or vase, or pedestal, whose regularity might make the beautiful irregularity of the figure even more apparent. Finally, with all these qualities, the total contour of every profile must be almost of the same length and - at the same time – as short as possible.

If the artist wants to represent a group, let him choose an impressive subject that has some majesty and grandeur. Let his figures, as far as possible, differ in sex, age and proportion. Let the action be unified and simple, and let all the parts of the group move together to reinforce it. Let there be in all the visible profiles as many limbs, or projecting elements, in a natural attitude, as is possible. If he wants to arouse horror, or terror, he must temper it with the beauty of some striking figure that attracts me. And let him never introduce anything disgusting. I remember seeing a group that represented Tereus tearing out Philomena's tongue. What an idea for sculpture! A woman can cry and be beautiful, but this action of Tereus's produced frightful contortions. Painting can sometimes employ disgusting subject matter in order to increase the sense of horror, since its compositions are extensive enough to mitigate it elsewhere. But within the limits of a sculptural group, it overpowers everything. In the group of *Amphion*, Dirce is enchanting, even though she is tied to the horns of a bull. Finally, let the artist be a painter as much as he wants in expressing the action, but let him be a sculptor when it comes to enriching, equally and as much as possible, the profiles, so that in measuring the total contour of each profile, one finds them more or less of equal length and, at the same time, as short as possible.

You will say that on this basis there exists almost no perfect large group in sculpture. I do not doubt it, and I dare to add that the two masterpieces of those illustrious Rhodians – I speak of the *Laocoon* and the *Amphion* – belong more to painting than to sculpture (f). In fact, although one can hardly accuse the Greeks of this defect, our modern sculptors are too much like painters, just as Greek painters were apparently too much like sculptors.

As far as sculpture in low relief is concerned, it is actually a difficult genre of painting. If the artist, for example, wants to represent the sphere E, in fig. D [here fig. 6], on the plane F, and if he puts on this plane half of the sphere, his imitation will be perfect. He will be a sculptor in the round. But he must,

as one sees in G, render with false contours the diminution of the shadows caused by the true contours of the actual sphere. It would require a profound geometry in order to carry out an extensive piece in this genre, given that when I mix true contours and projecting parts, I work in the round.

One hardly comes across any true pieces in low relief except on medals and cameos, or in works of intaglio engraving. This latter art only employs a very low relief because as soon as one attempts to execute parts that project too much, one confuses or destroys the fineness of the contour. Although I certainly know that some Greek artists, and amongst us MM. Natter, Costanzi and others, have often committed this error, it occurs when they have sought to astonish their audience with difficult execution, rather than to please true connoisseurs by wisely confining themselves within the natural limits of their art.

Since this art has been treated in depth by the comte de Caylus and by M. Mariette, and since your magnificent collection has taught you much more than what I would be able to tell you, I will have merely tried your patience. I end my letter, therefore, assuring you of my profound devotion with which I am

Sir

Your very humble and obedient servant

Hemsterhuis, the younger.

The Hague, 20 Nov. 1765.



## REMARKS

a) For example, Homer, in speaking in the *Iliad* about the battle of the Gods, says:

Ἀμφὶ δὲ σάλπιγγεν μέγας οὐρανὸς οὐλύμπου τε, . . .

Ἐδδειςεν δ' ὑπένερθεν ἄναξ ἐνέρων Αἰδωνεύς .

Δείσας δ' ἐκ θρόνου ἄλτο, καὶ ἴαχε, μή οἱ ὕπερθε

Γαῖαν ἀνναρρήξειε Ποσειδάων ἐνοίχθων,

Ὅικία δὲ θνητοῖσι καὶ ἀθανάτοισι φανείν,

Σμερδαλέ', εὐρώεντα, τά τε στυγέουσι θεοί πες.

'And seized with fear in the world below was Aidoneus, lord of the shades, and in fear he leapt from his throne and cried aloud lest above him the earth be split open by Poseidon, the shaker of earth, and his house be made plain to view for mortals and immortals—the dread and dank house which even the gods loath.'<sup>1</sup>

Should we not admit that this admirable tableau encompasses the greatest possible totality? In a few lines, Homer not only depicts the most important parts of the universe, but sets them in dreadful motion, yet in a very natural fashion. It is true that you could find more refined tableaux, depicted with greater delicacy, in Virgil and in Homer himself. But never one that embraces so many great objects at once. They are like miniatures by Rosalba placed alongside the Last Judgement of Michelangelo.

Here are compositions that in truth are not as rich, but which are even more striking for the great distance between their constituent ideas, which are linked together, nevertheless, without any difficulty.

Lucan speaking of Caesar and Pompey says:

Quis justius induit arma,

scire nefas: magno se iudice quisque tuetur:

victrix causa diis placuit, sed victa Catoni.'

['Which had the fairer pretext for warfare, we may not know: each has high authority to support him; for, if the victor had the gods on his side, the vanquished had Cato.']\*<sup>2</sup>

Here Cato and the gods are brought together without any absurdity or contradiction. I cannot use Brébeuf's translation here since it ruins this beautiful passage in seeking to reinforce it. He says:

'The Gods serve Caesar, and Cato follows Pompey.'

Lucan only wanted to draw Cato closer to the gods, which is very great and very wise, but Brébeuf begins by putting the Gods a long way below Caesar. Then he puts Cato behind Pompey, and so outside the action, which throws the scene into horrible confusion. Cato, who in Lucan is dominant, becomes in Brébeuf the least interesting part of all. I have deliberately taken this passage from Lucan in order to compare it with another of the same kind and by the same author.

Caesar, finding himself near to Marseilles, desired that a sacred wood be cut down. Lucan after having depicted the sombre horror of this forest, which was inhabited by demons so appalling,

'the priest himself dreads their approach and fears to surprise the lord of the grove'<sup>3</sup>

says that Caesar, whose soldiers dared not touch these trees, took an axe himself, and led them along the path, saying to them:

Credite me fecisse nefas. Tunc paruit omnis  
imperiiis non sublato securâ pavore  
turba, sed expensa Superorum ac Caesaris ira.

["Believe that I am guilty of sacrilege, and thenceforth none of you need fear to cut down the trees." Then all the men obeyed his bidding; they were not easy in their minds, nor had their fears been removed; but they had weighed Caesar's wrath against the wrath of heaven.]<sup>4</sup>

This passage is even better than the previous one. In the first passage, by comparing Cato to the gods, Lucan considers only the way in which they judge a cause differently, something which inevitably draws together two ideas that are in truth quite distant. But here Caesar's soldiers, weighing up the reality of the consequences of his anger against that of the gods, found Caesar's anger more terrible. This is more effective. What is more, in the first passage the thing remains undecided, and Lucan leaves the effort of making a very difficult judgement to his reader. It is only the immense fame of Cato that makes the juxtaposition here of the two ideas feel natural. Because in substituting for this great character some little known name, such as Piso, Milo, etc., the distance of the two ideas would have increased. But Lucan would also have missed the goal he gives himself in this verse: he would never have arrived at any comparison. In the second passage, there are competent judges who decide the question, and in order to render this decision even more vividly, Lucan uses the image of a scale, and in this manner, it seems that before our very eyes we see it tilt in Caesar's favour. Replace Caesar with the name of any of his captains, and this passage will still be

more or less effective. I cannot use Brébeuf's translation here either, because this beautiful idea is painfully mangled. It is utterly impossible to translate sublimity of this order and of this sort. In order to copy a thing well, it is not only necessary that I do what the first author did, but I must also adopt the same tools and the same material. Yet, in the arts where one employs signs and words, the expression of a thought acts on the reproductive faculty of the mind. Now, suppose the spirit of the author and that of the translator proceed in exactly the same way, but with the latter using totally different tools and material. Add to this that the measure, the volubility of the sound, and the fluidity of a happy series of consonants and vowels have all arisen from the original idea and are part of its essence.

b) In the tragedy Hecuba by Euripides, Talthybius comes seeking this unfortunate queen in order to tell her of new misfortunes. She has just lost her husband, her sons, her crown, her country and her liberty. Talthybius asks her women where she is, and they show her to him lying on the ground, with her head wrapped in a cloth. Talthybius, struck by the horror of this spectacle, says: ὦ Ζεῦ, τί λέξω; 'O Jupiter, what shall I say?'<sup>5</sup> This sketch makes us feel to the core the nullity of the human condition, without Talthybius having to underline it with an impiety by adding:

πότερα σ' ἀνθρώπεις ὀρᾶν,

ἢ δόξαν ἄλλως τήνδε κεκτῆσθαι μάτην,

Ψευδῆ δοκοῦντας δαιμόνων εἶναι γένος,

Τύχην δὲ πάντα τὰν βροτοῖς ἐπισκοπεῖν;

'Shall I say, Jupiter, that you intervene in human affairs, or that chance governs the universe and that belief in the existence of the gods is a mistake?''<sup>6</sup>

I have chosen this example because Euripides has thought it worth giving the sketch and the tableau at the same time.

c) There are objects whose contours are all ambiguous, and which are nevertheless infinitely pleasing: good works in mosaic, which are for the most part built up out of polyhedrons. One can compare them to a musical concert, and they are not so much compositions of parts, as compositions of wholes. In this type of work each part can be the principal part, and participate in many different wholes, regular, and perfect, and the most imperceptible movement of the eye causes the idea of the whole to change, which produces an astonishing abundance of objects.

d) In this mix the Etruscan dominates, but one could also note another mix of Greek and Etruscan in Sicilian works, where the Greek dominates by far.

e) Man, needing to defend himself from the worst of the weather, from a fiery sun or excessive cold, had only two ways of achieving this, namely, hiding in caves, or finding refuge below the thick foliage of trees. As men perfected their ideas, and as their pleasures, desires and needs multiplied, they finally needed architecture, and it is only natural that they took one of these means as a model. It is even more natural that in climates where only caves were sufficient to protect them from the heat of the sun or from the rigours of winter, caves were to become the principle of architecture. This gave rise to the huts of the Hottentots and of the people of the north, and eventually to the pyramids of Egypt. Similarly, in temperate climates, where the shade of the foliage was sufficient shelter from uncomfortable heat, men should have taken these trees as the principle of their method of construction. And if we follow the path that they naturally would have taken, we will see how, with very little effort, nature provided their sublime ideas of beautiful architecture, and even taught them the distinction between all the parts of the different orders.

f) It must be noted, however, that in ivory statues or groups, which are of small dimensions, it is permissible to be a little more like a painter, because the beholder sees them from greater proximity, and as a consequence expression may play a greater role. Furthermore, in speaking of the groups of the *Laocoon* and the *Amphion*, I consider them as belonging uniquely to sculpture in the round. In thinking of them as having been constructed in order to decorate niches, they approach the genre of the low relief, and therefore of painting. That is when one must judge them almost entirely according to the principles of this art, given that the great distance required in order to behold these two works properly restricts us to almost one point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> Where Hemsterhuis gives the quote in the original language this has been maintained here and subsequently. Where the translation is not supplied by Hemsterhuis, it is provided in square brackets after the quote. English translation taken from Homer, *Iliad, Volume II: Books 13-24*, A. T. Murray (trans) and William F. Wyatt (revised), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1925, p. 371 (20: 61-65).

<sup>2</sup> English translation taken from Lucan, *The Civil War (Pharsalia)*, J. D. Duff (trans), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1928, p. 13 (1:126-128).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145 (3: 124-25).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.147 (3: 136-39).

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<sup>5</sup> Euripides, *Hekabe*, George Theodoridis, 2007:

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Hekabe.php> (consulted 31 May 2018). This translation provides a better fit for Hemsterhuis's French than the Loeb edition.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.