

# The Human Body In Sculpture: From Glorified Idealism, Stark Realism To Pathological Nihilism

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## Abstract

From the glorified idealism of Classical Antiquity and the perfect proportions of the Renaissance, to the stark realism and bio-morphic surrealism of the Modern period, and the blood-stained nihilism of contemporary body-pain art, the human figure has been the subject and inspiration of art works from time immemorial. The human figure offers a common vehicle for the expression of aesthetic judgement alluding to how humans are, and should be, both inwardly and outwardly. Apart from its depiction of physical attributes, the human body provides a vehicle for deliberation on the human condition and the existential nature of reality. This paper explores the representation of the human figure throughout the history of sculpture by tracing its metamorphosis and transmutation from its former glorified idealism to its contemporary distortion and disfiguration. This historical analysis questions conventional conceptions of beauty which to a large extent still pervade aesthetic taste and judgement through idealised representations of the human body and romanticised views of the human condition. This idealisation, envisioning aesthetics as to what is pleasing to the senses hinders us from the full acknowledgement and realisation of the fragility of our bodies and the precarious conditions of reality; the bleak reality that after all; “we are born and we die, and that’s it... we are potential carcasses” (Bacon, 1966).

**Keywords:** *Human Body, Sculpture, Idealism, Realism, Nihilism*

## The Human Body: A Medium of Inspiration

Humanity and the existential human condition have preoccupied artists since time immemorial. Such preoccupation has often translated itself into various representations of the human body in both sculpture and other artistic media. From the heroic Classical and Hellenistic sculptures to the reclining nudes of the Renaissance and flamboyance of Baroque, to the stark realism and surrealism in Modern art and the blood-stained contemporary installations and performance art, the human figure has been the subject and the inspiration of art works from all

periods and movements. As a result, the human figure is observed to be utilised as a common vehicle to express aesthetic judgement on the human condition across time and space.

The human figure, particularly in its nude form, remains the pre-eminent subject for art. The persistence of the human form in sculpture from pre-historic to post-modern times argues for humanity's need to define and re-create itself. Throughout history, sculpture has granted to the human body an infinite variety of interpretations. As a result, the human form has been as flexible as human imagination and taste, and history seems to both support and negate absolute and eternal standards of the good, the true and the beautiful. Until recently, the human body was idealised in such a way that humanity was portrayed not as it is but as it should be. This idealisation extends to the existential condition, which through its anthropocentric symbolism tends to hide the frailty and the more sombre aspect of humanity's existence. Yet, as attested by the following brief historical overview of the main artistic stages which have been influential in the transmutation and metamorphosis of the human figure and the human condition in sculpture, from its glorified idealism to its stark realism and subsequent pathological nihilism, this revered representation was not to last. This paper provides an exposition of this metamorphosis and transmutation with the aim of providing a contextualised commentary on aesthetics; a concept which remains elusive till the present day. On the basis of this discussion and in critique to dominant conceptions of aesthetics, the paper postulates for the legitimisation of an aesthetics of anti-aesthetics.

### **The Human Body: Its Metamorphosis and Transmutation**

The Classical Period is renowned for the triumph of idealistic anthropomorphic representation. The human body was studied specifically for its aesthetic value, with the object of art being the body itself. Figures often depicted representations of deities utilising the human body in its most glorious form.

Archaic rigid statues were replaced with bodies in dynamic poses, rendering a more realistic rendition of the human form. Suppression of emotions was held as a noble characteristic, depicted through solemn facial expression that betray no displays of barbarism.

Beauty depended on harmony, "the proportion...of the parts and of all the other parts to each other" (Galen n.d. cited in De LaCroix and Tansey 1986, p. 161). The classical Apollo (c.460 B.C.) by Phidias offers the ideal representation of the human figure according to the classical Greek tradition; perfect proportions, solemn facial features, and qualities of youth, rationality and moderation, a harmonious counterpoise between spirit and form.

Hellenistic art developed a more realistic representation, such that while retaining visible idealised traits, compared to the Classical Apollo, the Hellenistic 'Apollo

Belvedere' (late 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) is more human and less godly. While Classical figures are uniformly beautiful, Hellenistic statuary became more concerned with individualisation through ethos and the expression of pathos. This trend continued in the Roman period, such that while the Greeks idealised their images, the Romans preferred the verisimilitude of subjects.

Art in the Medieval period was inseparable from religion. The domination of the Church in both the Romanesque and Byzantine styles led to the repudiation of the pagan idealisation of the human figure of the Classical period, flattening it into a two-dimensional linear style that de-emphasised the flesh, focusing instead on the spirit. The human representation in sculpture consisted mainly of religious figures, which as a form of icon veneration and idolatry, during the iconoclastic controversy was banned or destroyed.

Notwithstanding the disregard towards the body, yet the tomb effigy often attempted to present an idealised image of the deceased, as if the person was asleep. Despite its gradual development towards greater realism, the human figure in the Middle Ages still did not evoke pathos, retaining instead a sense of serene dignity and rigidity. This move towards greater naturalism became more pronounced in the International Gothic style of the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in the rebirth of the Classical era.

Through its rediscovery of humanism and the rebirth of the Classical tradition, Renaissance led to a more realistic yet highly idealistic rendition of the human form. Humanism elevated the human to a higher being. The human figure was ascribed as the tangible manifestation of a higher beauty, that of divine splendour. Beauty was conceived on the basis of laws of proportion and symmetry and aspired not only to imitate nature, but also to correct and surpass it.

Michelangelo (1471-1564), historically renowned for the complete mastery of the human body emulates the Renaissance aesthetic in his grand portrayal of the human figure. The greatest master for Michelangelo was God, the Creator and Michelangelo regarded sculpture, as the ideal means by which one could surpass nature's own composition. Yet, as attested by 'The David' (1501-1504) physical beauty was not an end in itself but intended to reflect spiritual beauty, embody virtues and elevate the thoughts of the beholder above material things. Through body posturing, Michelangelo enriched the figure's expressive repertoire to convey interior states such that even in death, as in 'The Dying Slave' (1514-1516), the human figure retains its splendour and glory.

In Mannerism, classical canons of perfect proportions and harmony were 'naturally extended' through the elongation of figures and exaggerated musculature resulting in undue elegance and inflated emotional drama. Baroque, coinciding with the Counter-Reformation and Period of Absolutism took idealism over realism to new heights, emphasising detail, movement, emotional drama and flamboyance in the search for beauty and grandiosity, as in Bernini's (1598-1680) 'Apollo and Daphne' (1622-1624).

As time passed, the ostentatiousness of Baroque and Rococo was discarded in favour of the earlier, simpler art of the Classical style. Neoclassicism, as the artistic component of the Enlightenment, was similarly idealistic, attributing the human figure, as evinced in 'Cupid and Psyche' (1793) by Canova (1757-1827), a sense of purity, serenity, calm grandeur and rational and noble spirituality.

Just as Neo-Classicism rejected the flamboyance of Baroque, so did Romanticism reject the aesthetic notions of Neoclassicism and the rationalism of the enlightenment. Romanticism led to a deepened expression of emotion and passion as reflected in the relief sculptures of Preault (1809-1879) in pre-emption to Realism.

As life became drastically transformed by industrialisation, the representation of humanity was also radically reformed by Realism through a more truthful representation of bodies and everyday realities. The human figure was stripped down of its idealism, nobility and 'calm grandeur' as evidenced from the hesitant and despairing gestures of Rodin's (1840-1917) 'The Vanquished', (1877), the physical imperfections of 'Honore' de Balzac' (1897) and the brutish execution and dehumanisation of 'The Thinker' (1880-1885). Even heroes are defrocked of glorification, as unlike traditional war memorials, 'The Burghers of Calais' (1894-1886) express emotional trauma and melancholy. The headless and armless 'Walking Man' (1878-1880) proclaimed the partial figure as a self-sufficient entity, challenging classical ideals of beauty and perfection based on proportion, harmony and completion.

Beauty converted to the truthful depiction of inner and outer states, rather than ideal representation. Rodin's truthful representation of the human figure indeed led to the accusation of life-casting the sculptures and of creating "the first authentically 'ugly' work of modern art" (Hamilton 1967, p. 68). Similarly, Degas' (1834-1917), 'Little Dancer of 14 Years' (1881), displayed with real hair and actual clothing was deeply disturbing to its first audiences due to its disdain for beauty and realistic representation.

Realism renounced allegory and symbolism by depicting the actual rather than the ideal, yet it remained still largely loyal to the traditional representation of the human form, a move which was brought forth with the abstraction of modernity.

The rejection of traditional subject matters, styles and techniques led to the creation of forms for their own sake and drastically revised traditional conventions of aesthetics. It also led to the embracement of other influences, such as primitive cultures, which had previously been considered derisive by traditional aesthetic standards.

In the nineteenth century, technological innovations radically altered society, inspiring hopes for a better future. By the beginning of World War I, the situation changed drastically, spoiling the hope of a more humane humanity. The war did not inspire the most renowned sculptors to hide reality by idealising heroism or calls for patriotism, conversely, they exposed its horrors and devastation. The focus moved from capturing appearance to the expression of intuitive inner feelings. As carrier

of pathos, the human figure was frequently exaggerated, distorted and disfigured. Lehmbruck (1881-1919) for example, produced various moving sculptures of disillusion and dying. In his 'Seated Youth' (1918), 'Standing Youth' (1913) and 'Fallen Youth' (1916), it seems that "Faith and love are all destroyed, and death lies on every path!" (Lehmbruck 1918).

Yet, the expressiveness of the human figure was still considered too figurative and representational by other emerging artistic movements, such as Dadaism, Cubism, Vorticism, Futurism and Surrealism which aimed to make works of art more abstractive and self-sufficient.

In the post-world-war I period, art for the Dadaists became a remonstrance at the insanity of the war which rendered existing moral and aesthetic standards meaningless; a protest against the art establishment and its conventional aesthetic criteria. During the same period, Cubism broke away from these criteria, by embodying the principle that a work of art need not be restricted to the phenomenal appearance of the represented object. In Cubism, the human figure lost its curvature and became geometric as in Picasso's (1881-1973) 'Head of a Woman' (1909-1910). Lipchitz's (1891-1973) 'A Standing Person' (1916) dispenses altogether with the human body's resemblance to appearance becoming; "less attached to Mother Nature...a pure invention of the human imagination" (Elsen 1981, p. 349).

The Futurists, Constructivists and Vorticists developed further this geometric rationalisation, with the human body becoming "often entirely non-vital and distorted to fit into stiff lines and cubical shapes" (Hulme 1924 cited in Hamilton, 1967, p.295). The human figure became restructured to represent the rationalisation and technologisation of modernity, emulating the appearance of machines as in Epstein's (1880-1959) 'The Rock Drill' (1912-13), else reshaped into its more elementary primitive forms as in Gaudier-Brzeska's (1891-1915) 'Red Stone Dancer' (1913). The striding figure in the 'Unique Forms of Continuity in Space' (1913) by Boccioni (1882-1916) represents "not the construction of the body, but the construction of the action of the body" (Hamilton 1967, p.286), symbolising how the human body will be reshaped by the fast pace of modernity, transforming into a 'superman of the future'. The 'Gondolier' (1914) by Archipenko (1887-1964) defined how a modern human sculpture should look; simplified, geometric and mechanistic, smooth and streamlined since in "the intersection of the planes ... there is more truth than in all the tangles of muscles, in all the breasts and thighs of the heroes and Venuses" (Boccioni 1921 cited in Hohl 2002, p. 978).

Surrealism, flourishing in the 1930s breached further the historical traditional of rendering the human form by introducing the idea of fusion, through the creation of organic, hybrid forms in the process of metamorphosis; 'biomorphs'. In critique of anthropocentrism Arp's 'Growth' (1938) highlights the analogies in nature and makes no definite distinctions between plant, animal and human form, in the belief that; "Man should once again become part of nature" (Arp 1938 cited in Elsen 1981, p. 292). Similarly, Brancusi's works (1876-1957) challenged classical conceptions of

beauty based upon the harmonious relationship of parts by creating forms through a continuous unbroken whole, in the process uncomplicating art through simpler geometric forms, as in 'Torso of a Youth' (1922), Pogany' (1912) and 'New Born' (1920).

The aftermath of World War II led to a return to the expressive potential of the human figure. The departure from external appearance to a more in-depth psychological exploration, moved the human form further into metaphorical imagery. The figure in sculpture, like the human body became attributed to have its own psychological presence. Influenced by the existentialist movement of the 1950's, many works sustained the view that life was inherently meaningless, evoking disturbing anxieties suggestive of fear, devastation and physical and emotional trauma. In rejection of the ideal as it might be, in favour of what it really is, many sculptors of the era such as Marini (1901-1980), Manzu' (1908-1991), Zuniga (1912-1998) and others, depicted figures through distorted and disfigured anatomy "not to reproduce reality, but to create a reality of the same intensity" (Giacometti n.d. in Park Adam 2020). Whilst Giacometti's (1901-1966), 'City Square' (1948-49) conveying anonymous figures of exaggerated length and thinness portrays a sense of existential indifference, other works of his portray a more disturbing and disfiguring imagery, as can be observed in 'Woman with her throat cut' (1932). Due to its disturbing presence, Lipchitz' 'Figure' (1926-1930) is indeed renowned for having been returned back by its patron as it was 'unbearable' to live with.

By the 1960s, the ideas and styles that had transformed modern art begun to wane, and artists started reacting against the metanarratives of modernity. In protest to sculpture's place as a commodity, conceptualism gave precedence to the artist's ideas, often dispensing with tangible creations through performance art and minimalist work. During the 1980s, sculptors began moving away from the austerity of minimalism and conceptualism. Whilst several styles co-existed leading to a wider and more inclusive approach, the post-modern era is defined by the 'determination to belong to no movement' (Read 1964, p. 230). The human figure re-emerged in a multitude of shapes and forms to express an endless array of ideas, emotions, moods and narratives, but mostly conveying a cynical commentary on existence. For example, Shea's 'Post Balzac' (1991) depicts Balzac's attire without its being, a wry commentary on the spiritual emptiness of the post-modern era. Conversely, by taking plaster casts as in 'Man Walking' (1966), Segal (1934-2021) attempted to capture as faithfully as possible the human impression, such that the "disembodied spirit, [remains] inseparable from the fleshy corporeal details of the figure" (Elsen 1981, p. 356).

Performance artists, utilised their own bodies as a direct medium of disillusionment and protest, through exhibitions of public pain and the use of blood as a creative force. The body became itself the work of art, as declared by Bourgeois; "For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture" (cited in Chadwick 1998, p. 13). Similarly, feminist artists such as Sherman (1954-) mobilised the female body as

an emblem of sexual and cultural revolution, using the body to deconstruct the male gaze and challenge patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality.

An installation which has caused much controversy for breaking down with traditional representation of the human body is Von Hagens' (1945-) exhibition of preserved mutilated human corpses, 'The Worlds of the Body' (1995). Criticised for being offensive, undignified and distasteful, its objective is to make people become aware of both the beauty and the fragility of the human body (Von Hagen 1995) - an apt signifier of the human body's metamorphosis and transmutation, and its unadulterated unification of glorified idealism, stark realism and pathological nihilism.

### **Aesthetics: Idealism, Realism or Nihilism?**

This brief exposition of the metamorphosis of the human figure in sculpture shows that its descent from its pedestal of idealisation and heroism, ensued through a steady evolutionary process.

The classical Greeks defined and perfected the depiction of the human form as idealised embodiments of aesthetic values. The function of art was that of shaping the environment in a pleasant way and create canons of exemplary ideations of existence typified by beauty, harmony, unity and perfection, and a romanticised and glorified view of the human condition. This was the general praxis in aesthetics previous to the Modern period as exemplified by the resonance of these canons in the Renaissance, Baroque and Neo-Classical eras. Until this time, the human being was the measure of all things.

Modern sculpture aimed at reversing this trend. The shift from androcentrism towards a more world-centred view, permitted a more subjective approach to the representation of the human form and human condition. Realism broke off with the classical tradition by depicting the figure realistically and without allusion to romanticise reality. Modern sculpture strove to represent the hero and the ideal in its own terms, rather than through previous aesthetic criteria, gradually coming to refute the ideal and heroic, to favouring the victim and antihero, the ugly and deformed. This celebration of unheroic disfiguration led to the development of more expressionist styles, a trend sustained by post-modern and contemporary artistic movements.

However, what the figure lost in terms of idealisation and glorification, it gained in terms of realism, expressionism and symbolism, widening interpretations of human form and substance. By reinventing the figure according to personal rather than established aesthetic criteria, the ideal is deconstructed and subjectively re-enacted. The body becomes a medium of contradictions, challenging distinctions between the physical and spiritual, intellect and sentiment, reality and hyperreality and between beauty and the grotesque.

Today, virtually no ideal subject is feasible and any interpretation is tenable, when it comes to the representation of the human form and the human condition in sculpture.

## **An Aesthetics of Anti-Aesthetics**

The evolution of the human form in sculpture indeed illustrates that aesthetics cannot solely be based on ideal representations of beauty and harmony and what is pleasing to the senses. The criterion of beauty would eliminate great masterpieces, some of which have been referred to in this brief historical overview. But if not beauty, what then defines art?

As the human form was subjected to metamorphosis and transmutation, so has the meaning of beauty mutated throughout history. Plato (n.d. in Richter 1967, p. 28) described beauty as 'unity, integrity and clarity'. Similarly, Battista Alberti argued that beauty could only be attained by "a kind of harmony and concord of all the parts to form a whole which is constructed to a fixed number and a certain relation and order as symmetry the highest and perfect law of nature demands" (cited in Blunt 1940, p. 15). This aesthetic concern with harmony, symmetry and perfection exemplifies pre-modern representations of the human form.

Yet, the move from idealisation to a more realist and conceivably nihilist representation of humanity coincides with a bleaker definition of aesthetics. In repudiation of the beauty of perfection, for example, Bacon (1625) upheld that; "There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion." Similarly, Baudelaire (1930 cited in Isherwood 2006, p. 41) claimed that; "That which is not slightly distorted lacks sensible appeal; from which it follows that irregularity; that is to say, the unexpected, surprise and astonishment, are an essential part and characteristic of beauty". Moving further away from classical canons of beauty, of both harmony and perfection, Breton stated; "La beute' sera convulsive au ne sera pas" - "Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all" (Breton 1935, p. 5). Beauty has now turned to being violent, sudden and frantic, a far cry from St. Aquinas' (n.d. in Richter 1967, p. 9) idea that "Beauty is that which gives us pleasure when we behold it."

These shifting definitions of beauty highlight the relativistic and subjective nature of aesthetics, such that beauty not only lies in the eye of the beholder but permeates beyond corporeal appearance. Such view proposes that, at that point that something raises one's sensibilities and consciousness, it becomes a work of art. Thus, other than beautification, a more 'useful' function of art is that of providing insight into the nature of existence. Such insight might be one that questions and challenges the validity of our present perceptions and which helps us come to better terms with reality through a more truthful depiction of that same reality. This reality also includes the representation of bodily imperfections and some of the disturbing and distasteful facts of life that we are all, unfortunate enough to have to come to terms with.



Many artworks referred to in the previous section have in their own time been described as ugly, offensive and without any aesthetic and artistic value. However, such terms belie the value laden and subjective nature of aesthetics, since despite the fact that Classical idealism has created a durable and influential aesthetic norm, it never had complete hegemony. Indeed, apart from the fact that the inherent creative impulse of art tends to deviate from the expected norm, even influential artists of the era, defied the same aesthetic criteria they themselves helped to establish. For example, some of Michelangelo's later works paradoxically deconstruct the representation of beauty and perfection and demonstrate significant concern with human frailty and fallibility as exemplified through 'The Rondanini Pieta' (1552-1564). Objective standards of truth and beauty belie the subjectiveness and dynamic nature of aesthetics. In this regard, Constable said, "I never saw an ugly thing in my life; for let the form of an object be what it may, light, shade and perspective will always make it beautiful" (cited in Leslie 1843).

A growing number of modern and contemporary artists have come to recognise that aesthetics is not an obligatory or intrinsic aspect of art. Rosenthal (2012) holds that these "artists have a 'totally new and radical attitude to realism,' and even 'a new and radical attitude to life itself.'" Through its bleak and pessimistic commentary on contemporary life and society, and its repudiation of romanticism and idealism, such attitude conveys a more realistic and meaningful narrative of humanity's existence.

The search for beauty as to what is pleasing to the senses, thus might cause us to miss more elusive, and by implication, more profound aspects of our existence. According to Rosenthal (2012), artists "have a responsibility to draw attention to that elusive thing we call reality, which may, when fused with fantasy and personal obsession, bring forth something which may be recognised as art." Through this perspective, the role and responsibility of the artist becomes the "conquest of new territory and new taboos" (Rosenthal 1997). For a long number of years in the artistic field, portraying non-idealistic and un-romanticised views of humanity have been considered such a taboo.

The violation of these taboos has indeed led to enwidening conventional criteria of aesthetics, epitomising a deeper and more insightful appreciation of reality. As stated by Moore; "Beauty, in the later Greek or Renaissance sense, is not the aim of my sculpture...Because a work does not aim at reproducing natural appearances it is not, therefore, an escape from life, but may be a penetration into reality" (in Read and Bowness 1957, p. xxxi). This 'penetration into reality' presumes a more critical analysis of the crises of existence, in a way that the meaning and meaninglessness of life, the hard daily struggle for survival, decline, disintegration and death, alienation and isolation, emptiness and silence emerge as prominent themes. The dying, the isolated, the lonely, the searching and the struggling human being thus became a focal point for the development of an aesthetics of anti-aesthetics, where beauty traverses the visible and material world.

Yet, in spite of these vital developments, it remains the case that we are still greatly influenced by Classical standards of beauty, and anything else is judged on the basis of these canons. Indeed, despite the evolutionary metamorphosis and transmutation of the human figure in sculpture, even in the post-modern era, ideal and romanticised representations of the human figure and human condition permeate and remain dominant, if not totally hegemonic, as evinced from the objectification, commercialisation and commodification of the human body in mainstream and commercial media.

Many contemporary artworks remain severely criticised and abhorred for their style, technique and subject matter, disparaged by both critics and the public as being ugly, repulsive, offensive and without any aesthetic value. Yet, the fact that such works and concepts are not appreciated by most people does not render them invalid. On the other hand, whether most people like it or not, the fundamental and undeniable truth about the human condition are, at their core often very disturbing. Throughout history, humanity has and is still witnessing several wide-scale horrors apart from unending personal and existential turmoil, in a way that the denial of this aspect of reality portends a total denial of the fundamental constitution of life. A very important aspect of art thus lies in uncovering these partial and false representations, through the portrayal of a more truthful and critical analysis of reality. Confronted with the critique of his work as ugly and horrendous, Bacon (n.d. cited in Hinton 1985) replies;

“What horror? What could I make to compete with what goes on every single day?...Except that I have tried to make images of it. I have tried to recreate it and make, not the horror, but I’ve tried to make images of realism.”

An aesthetics of anti-aesthetics through art works which represent disturbing and disfiguring representations of the human body and existence can thus provide us with truth and insight about our human condition, by acting as reminders of our fragile structure through which we experience the daily condition of existence: our body. Embracing an aesthetics of anti-aesthetics thus provides an avenue for confronting the taboos of our fallibilities and imperfections, whilst more serenely endure the reality of the terrors and insults of life. From this aesthetics of anti-aesthetics, the idealisation of the human body and the human condition in sculpture, and in art in general, thus hinders us from coming to terms with the circumstances of life; the bleak reality that after all; “we are all meat...We are born and we die, and that’s it” (Bacon 1985 cited in Pearce 2021, para. 2).



*David (1501-1504)*  
Michelangelo Buonarroti



*The Vanquished One (1877)*  
Auguste Rodin



*The Worlds of the Body (1995-)*  
Gunther Von Hagens

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