

“On Reflection and Retrospection in the History of the Modern Portrait Bust”

From a lecture at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in connection with the exhibition “A Century of Modern Sculpture: The Patsy and Raymond Nasher Collection,” September 17, 1987

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As you may have gathered from the kind words of Nan Rosenthal, curator of this exhibition, Modern Art is far beyond my usual chronological horizon, so you must regard me as just a bit of light hors-d'oeuvres before the more substantial fare you will be getting in later lectures of this series. Still, I must confess that I felt not only very daunted but also rather challenged by the invitation to provide an introduction to the Nasher sculptures. Every historian, no matter how remote his interests, and whether he admits it or not, has one foot in the present. A particular obsession of mine has been the history of sculpture in the Renaissance, and I am grateful for the inducement to try at least once to articulate some of those vague but insistent premonitions that have been implicit in my work and, who knows, perhaps even motivated it from the outset.

I shouldn't wonder if some people thought it peculiar that, having been asked to talk about the historical background of modern sculpture, I should have chosen portraiture, of all things, for my subject. After all, compared with the age of Rembrandt, or even compared say, with Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century, portraiture is not exactly among the leading art-genres of our time. Of course, from Picasso's Gertrude Stein to Warhol's Marilyn Monroe, portraits dot the landscape of modern art as major images—but we tend to think of them less in terms of what they tell us about the people they depict than about their significance as works of art. Photography, one might say, has rendered portraiture in other media obsolete.

Yet portraiture can also be viewed as a crucial focal point of the basic issues of the modern movement precisely because it is about representation, if anything is, and because modernism itself is about representation, if anything is. In portraiture, as nowhere else, representation and abstraction meet head on. There is another, concomitant issue of which portraiture is the very center—namely the view of modern art in general and of abstraction in

particular as a dehumanization of art—to borrow Ortega y Gasset's famous lament—and therefore, to some at least, a product of and sad testimony to the decadence of capitalist society. Portraiture is thus a kind of test case the essential point of which was formulated in a simple observation by Goethe in an age when portraiture was one of the artist's primary tasks. He wrote that looking at a portrait is like looking into a mirror—man sees himself reflected. Herein I think lies the peculiar fascination, "magic" I am tempted to say, of portraiture, which is shared by no other art form. The history of portraiture is a kind of collective autobiography of the human race, a major chapter of which is constituted by the sculptured bust.

A portion of this lecture, omitted here, summarized the arguments of three papers by the writer on the history of the sculptured portrait bust from the early Renaissance to Bernini: "On the Sources and Meaning of the Renaissance Portrait Bust," *Art Quarterly*, XXXIII, 1970, 207-26 ([PDF](#)); "On Illusion and Allusion in Italian Sixteenth-Century Portrait Busts," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, CXIX, 1975, 353-62 ([PDF](#)); "Bernini's Image of the Ideal Christian Monarch," in John W. O'Malley, et al., eds., *The Jesuits: Cultures, the Sciences, and the Arts, 1540-1773*, Toronto, 1999, 442-79 ([PDF](#)).

My purpose so far has been to illustrate the emergence and development of the portrait bust from early Renaissance until it became, in the hands of Bernini, an instrument of physical and psychological expression and personal commemoration that we still recognize as peculiarly modern. It could be argued that over the next 250 years, until the turn of the present century, two major transformations of this tradition occurred, at opposite ends of a conceptual scale. The neoclassical revival at the end of the eighteenth century rejected the buoyancy, transitoriness and hyper-individuality of Bernini's version of the Roman bust type, in favor of a Greek type known as the herm. The body is assimilated to a rectangular pillar-pedestal by being sliced through vertically and symmetrically at the shoulders. The body is motionless, resting literally four-square solid on the support without a base, and with generalized features that evoke the serenity and perfection of a remote and ideal past associated with Greek, as opposed to Roman antiquity. At the opposite end of the scale is the "buste en-négligée," in which the particularized likeness, the irregular outline with hidden edges, the fluid movement and airy expression, suggest a vividly immediate if fleeting presence.

These alternatives and variants between them persisted until Rodin, who revolutionized the field by transforming them both into what I would call philosophical, or indeed metaphysical

fragments. On the one hand, the torso of the herm type grows to great bulk and the edge is dissimulated as transition to the raw stone block from which the figure appears to emerge. Such works allude explicitly to the unfinished sculptures of the “Divine” Michelangelo and serve as a visual pun on the nature and source of human creativity. Rodin also created an equal and opposite kind of fragment in which the head is shown alone with little or no neck and the edges irregularly cut as if broken from a larger whole, and deprived of a stable support (**Fig. 1**). In both cases the metaphor is material, as it were, referring in the former case to the stone from which the head is hewn, in the latter to the metal from which the head is broken away. Through this emphasis on the materiality, the objectness of the sculpture, the image acquires a physical presence it had never had before. The grounds of the traditional combination of illusion and allusion have thus been radically shifted and greatly enriched—we are made aware not only of the person represented but also of the representing person, the creator of this half artificial, half natural form

What follows now is a survey of forms. The Nasher collection—90 sculptures, 15 portraits or heads, from Rodin, 1897, to Lichtenstein, 1965. Some I have chosen to illustrate as they illuminate with rare clarity the emergence and development in portrait sculpture of the modernist movement—that twentieth-century century crusade, hell-bent, we are told, on destroying tradition and creating a contemporary idiom, one of the prime objectives of which was precisely to avoid the meretricious fictions of illusion and allusion, and express instead the pure forms inherent in the materials themselves. This is already evident in Medardo Rosso’s *Ecce Puer* (This is the Boy) of 1906 (**Fig. 2**), where we feel the waxiness of the wax, unlike traditional wax sculpture in which the material, because it could be subtly tinted, was used for purposes of extreme realism. The fluidity and translucence of the wax serves another purpose as well, however, suggesting a veil behind which one senses the presence of the symbolic, sacrosanct youth. The title, in fact, puns on the biblical *Ecce Homo*, This is Man, in reference to the Mocking of Christ.

By now I trust you will be expert enough in our subject to see what Matisse was after in his *Head with Necklace*, 1907 (**Fig. 3**). He followed neither the Greek nor the Roman nor the Renaissance type but an earlier, pre-Roman/Etruscan form from which the Renaissance type may have been derived—cut off just below the shoulders, head absolutely frontal and immobile.

Duchamp-Villon, for his portrayal of *Baudelaire*, 1911 (**Fig. 4**), seems with equal deliberation to have adopted another Etruscan type, used especially for votive and funerary terracottas: cut off at the neck and placed atop a cinerary urn, the type focuses on the head as the seat of thought and the object of special veneration. The choice, consciously or not was a fitting one for the great national poet.

Duchamp Villon's *Maggy*, 1912 (**Fig. 5**), clearly revives the Greek herm. The torso is sliced vertically at the shoulders, front and back, becoming rectangular or square in plan. The design, and the rigid frontality are not simply matters of abstraction, but explicitly refer to the bust type the Greeks reserved for gods and quasi-mythic heroes. In this case it is the form that confers an awesome venerability on the sitter, rather than vice-versa.

Duchamp-Villon's *Dr. Gosset*, 1918 (**Fig. 6**), belongs in a special category—a self-contained head without a neck. The design, together with the smooth shapes and deep recesses, suggests one of the *dissecta membra* of a human being in its most essential, skeletal form. There was a long tradition of skull sculptures intended to encourage the viewer to remember death and thus to contemplate, both literally and figuratively, the “inner” man. (Pre-columbian skulls)

In Brancusi's *Portrait of Mme. Nancy Cunard*, 1925-27 (**Fig. 7**), the frontal axial, rigid head with a portion of the neck, is placed on a base and transformed into a smooth, elegant form that expands and contracts upward to a billowing chignon—as though Nancy Cunard literally had her head in the clouds. The humor and wit of this gravity-defying light-headedness is also deeply serious, suggesting as well the flight of the human spirit, capable of transforming crude matter into its ethereal opposite. I feel sure Brancusi studied the swelling, rising forms of Giambologna's sculptures in the sixteenth century, like the famous flying Mercury, and that the portrait of Nancy Cunard relates to certain busts of the same period which levitate from a small point; sometimes they are actually borne aloft on metaphorical wings—Mercury's sandals in one case, the wings of an angel in this portrait of Pope Gregory XIV (1590-91) by Sebastiano Torrigiani (**Fig. 8**). Masse's *Tiari* (Tahitian gardenia), 1930 (**Fig. 9**), recalls a particular Etruscan type whose ground plan does not follow the accidents of human form but describes a regular oval. The smooth, rounded shapes rise as with Brancusi, except that here they do not suggest a streamlined air-borne bird in flight but rather a ballooning, pneumatically tense membrane filled with inner spirit.

Picasso's *Marie Therese Walter*, 1931-2 (**Fig. 10**), is a rare instance of a built-in base, and of a head-and-neck type placed on a base, with which it practically merges. This is specifically associated with Etruscan urns and medieval reliquaries, except that here the base is actually a cast of the stand on which it was modeled. It thus provides a record of the creative process, like Rodin's unfinished marbles or Rosso's liquid waxes. The design raises Marie Therese Walter to the level of some awe-inspiring, primordial goddess, and documents the conceptual and physical journey from the artist's studio to the empyrean dwelling of this mythic creature.

Giacometti's, *Cubist Head* (skull), 1934 (**Fig. 11**), is a self-contained object without neck or base, again related to the skull tradition. The forms suggest the inner structure of the head and cranium, so that the process of abstraction itself becomes a metaphor for man's inner nature. In this respect it calls to mind the life—or should one say death—size crystal skulls made by Aztec craftsmen, most likely in the colonial period and under Western influence.

Giacometti, *Diego*, 1954 (**Fig. 12**), overtly revived the Renaissance type cut through to the waist. The massive torso specifically recalls the inflated busts of sixteenth-century Venice, but with the volume diminishing in two planes—the figure gets smaller and narrower as it rises—a way of compressing and elongating mass he surely learned from early Etruscan sculpture. Giacometti's, *Diego in a Sweater*, 1954 (**Fig. 13**), also revives a relatively rare Renaissance type showing both arms, and the figure cut at or below waist.

Lichtenstein's *Ceramic Head with Blue Shadow*, 1965 (**Fig. 14**), with bright colors and smooth, lacquered surface recalls eighteenth-century porcelains, as does the portrayal of a sweet young maiden as the embodiment of innocence. On the other hand, the rigidity and frontality and the neck turning into a rounded base recall the medieval saint's reliquary, the females often painted white, or silvered, as here, to suggest purity. The wide-eyed stare and absolute superficiality convert the conventional charm and preciousness into a tragic image of the modern psyche in its forlorn search for identity.

Having taken this rapid tour of Nasher sculptures, it is perhaps astonishing to discover that the portrait not only survived but flourished, and that there is even such a thing as a modern sculptured portrait type—just as there was a Greek type, a Roman type and a Renaissance type. In every case the sculpture is conceived in-the-round—it is an independent, fully three-dimensional object, without an “invisible” back side, as in the Roman type. Furthermore, except

for the cranium type, which has a special kind of presence, none of the busts is rounded or shaped at the bottom so as to be separate from the support; they stand on their own, as it were. In no case, finally, is there any motion or action; the “sitters” are impassive, immobile and expressionless.

One might be tempted to conclude that we have been confronted by a series of quite self-sufficient art-works whose reference to human beings is at best vestigial. Yet, in each case we have been profoundly moved—from the soft, shapely allure of Matisse’s lady with the tiara and the lilting charm of Nancy Cunard, to the brutal eternal feminine of Marie Therese Walter and the anxious plea of Lichtenstein’s Ceramic Head with Blue Shadow; in each case these works express an inner life no less forcefully and no less meaningfully than did their pre-modern predecessors. The great difference, of course, is that the reference has shifted from the particular to the universal, from the individual to the species, from human being to humanity. Indeed, it could be said that the process of abstraction and “modernization” has not made these images of people less human at all, but on the contrary has served to intensify the very paradox that underlay the development of the portrait bust since the Renaissance—that what is there evokes what is not there, that there is more than meets the eye.

I realize that I have gone far beyond my allotted time but I cannot resist explaining that the last slide you have been contemplating is the latest addition to the Nasher collection in our domain, acquired after this lecture was prepared—an original plaster of Picasso’s famous Head of a Woman of 1909 (**Fig. 15**). A great monument of twentieth-century art, to my mind, precisely because it makes explicit the intellectual and psychological relationship between form and content I have been trying to describe in all these works. In its mood of profound introspection the head seems actually to meditate upon the devastating reconstruction of the nature of reality represented by the sculpture itself, in which the outer surfaces of flesh and hair, and the inner structures of bone and muscle, become interpenetrating and interdependent facets of one, integral whole



Fig 1 Auguste Rodin, *Head of Balzac*, 1897

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Fig. 2 Medardo Rosso, *Ecce Puer (This is the Boy)*, 1906
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Fig. 3 Henri Matisse, *Head with Necklace*, 1907

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Fig. 4 Raymond Duchamp-Villon, *Baudelaire*, 1911

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Fig. 5 Raymond Duchamp-Villon, *Maggie*, 1912

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Fig. 6 Raymond Duchamp-Villon, *Portrait of Professor Gosset*, 1918

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Fig. 7 Constantin Brancusi, *Portrait of Mme. Nancy Cunard*, 1925-27

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Fig. 8 Sebastiano Torrigiani, *Bust of Pope Gregory XIV*, 1590-91, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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Fig. 9 Henri Matisse, *Tiari* (Tahitian gardenia), 1930



Fig. 10 Pablo Picasso, *Head of a Woman (Marie Theresa Walter)*, 1931-2

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Fig. 11 Alberto Giacometti, *Cubist Head (Skull)*, 1934

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Fig. 12 Alberto Giacometti, *Bust of Diego*, 1954

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Fig. 13 Alberto Giacometti, *Diego in a Sweater*, 1954

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Fig. 14 Roy Lichtenstein, *Ceramic Head with Blue Shadow*, 1965

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Fig. 15 Picasso, *Head of a Woman*, plaster cast, 1931

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