

“ART VERSUS ARTIFACT”

Introduction and Summary

Symposium, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, September 28, 1985

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Introduction

I want to begin today's deliberations by showing you a sequence of three slides of sculptures that are on display in the new building we are here to celebrate (**Figs. 1, 2**). The first is a figure carved by a Haida Indian in British Columbia in the nineteenth-century; the second is a figure of a Baseball Player, probably a shop sign, about 1880; the third is a Female Nude by Henry Laurens, dated 1921 (**Fig. 3**).

I trust you will agree that all three represent striking and curiously similar transformations of the infinitely variable human form into stiff, frontally posed, god-like idols. They might serve as ritual objects in some mystical cult—whether that of the shaman, or that of a sports hero, or that of the goddess of Art.

Ideally this provocative juxtaposition would not have been possible before today, since the sculptures would have been kept in separate repositories of ethnographic materials, of folk craft, or of art proper. Indeed, those of you who have had a chance to read Jacquelynn Baas's thoughtful and delightful introduction to the new handbook of the Hood Museum, will have realized that the dedication marks the culmination of a 200 year development toward a full evaluation and a permanent home for the collections of Dartmouth College. I use the phrase full evaluation and permanent home advisedly because it refers to the convergence of two previously quite independent variables in the history of the college. No structure had ever been built at Dartmouth devoted entirely to the preservation and display of works of art; nor had all the college's collections, including both works of art and ethnographic artifacts, ever been placed under the tutelage of one individual administration. The convergence might seem purely coincidental, or perpetrated for purely practical reasons of management; but in fact,

combining the collections and erecting a building to contain them are ideas related in a much more profound way, which reflects a momentous shift in man's understanding of his place in the universe at large.

I first met this remarkable young woman who has shepherded this remarkable new museum to completion a very few years ago as she was just beginning to think about the dedication. When she told me the plan was to bring the ethnographic and art collections under one roof, I blithely suggested that an interesting way to celebrate the event would be to organize a symposium devoted to that very subject, which has long been a preoccupation of mine—namely, the relationship between art and artifact, between the sophisticated and the primitive, as these categories are traditionally conceived. Angel that she is, Jackie rushed in where wise men would fear to tread and, in addition to everything else, she has managed to bring together today under the same roof this remarkable collection of scholarly specimens representing a wide variety of disciplines, to discuss one of the vexed cultural issues of our time.

Summary

Rather than attempt to summarize what has been said so eloquently by our speakers and discussants today, I should like to take a few moments—30 of them to be exact—to formulate something of my own sense of what the new Hood Museum represents with respect to the past, and what I hope it may signify for the future.

On the screens now are examples of graphic art that do not belong to Dartmouth, although I know Jackie would give her eyeteeth to have them if she could (**Figs. 4, 5**). They are portrait drawings by one of the greatest Italian artists of the seventeenth century, Gianlorenzo Bernini, of one of his greatest patrons, Cardinal Scipione Borghese. One is what you might call a “straight” or “high style” drawing made in preparation for a sculptured bust, which you will be seeing presently. The other is a caricature drawing, one of the earliest that has come down to us, made as a work of art unto itself, in which Bernini deliberately reduces, simplifies and exaggerates not only the features of the

Cardinal but also the technique of high style drawing, to achieve a comic effect. In the latter case, whether knowingly or not (and I suspect knowingly), he has drawn very close to the kind of low-brow art represented by the graffiti scrawled on the walls of ancient Roman buildings—latrines, military barracks, and the like—for which I know Jackie would also give her eyeteeth if she had to (**Fig. 6**).

The fact that all these drawings could find an honored reception here implies that works that seem crude or primitive in execution might officially be raised to the category of objects of art, worthy of a place alongside creations of great refinement. On the other hand, it also implies that works of high art may be seen in the broad context of human creativity in general and not confined to the context of sophisticated culture alone.

Two major traditions may be said to lie behind this conjunction of stylistic opposites (**Figs. 7, 8**) One originated in the late Medieval collections known as the *Kunst- und Wunderkammer*, or Cabinet of Artifacts and Curiosities, which might include everything from unusual animal, vegetable and mineral specimens—“naturalia” they were called—to exotic man-made works, or “artificialia.” Perhaps the main point of such collections lay precisely in their vast, indeed encyclopedic scope. They were designed, as the very name *Kunst- und Wunderkammer* suggests, to illustrate in microcosm the macrocosm of the universe, in which the prodigies produced by nature and mankind bear witness to the miracle of divine creation. The second tradition originated in the Renaissance collections of Greek and Roman antiquities. Inspired largely by the fabled art collections described by the classical writers, Renaissance patrons soon included works by contemporary masters as well.

In each case the subsequent development might be described as one of the progressive specialization and disintegration, along different but analogous lines. The *Kunst- und Wunderkammer* became subdivided according to the emergence of the natural and social sciences, including anthropology and ethnography, with the objects distributed through the various departments of what was often called Museum of Natural History. This latter term itself betrays a certain coincidence with the fate of art collections which, following the development of the historical disciplines ramified into the complex genealogies of period styles, national schools and artists that characterize our great modern art-historical museums.

Consider now what has happened at Dartmouth. The naturalia were isolated from the rest of the collections and ultimately “deaccessioned.” While the “artificialia” from primitive to modern are now brought together and exhibited under a single and altogether singular roof. Clearly what has taken place in the Hood reflects a partial merger in our time of the great parallel traditions that emerged after the Middle Ages: the social sciences represented in the natural history museum have begun to join hands with the historical disciplines embodied in the art museum, enabling us to see and appreciate the common ground between these widely divergent, high and low-culture products of the human spirit. So far as I know, only the French have a name for this merger, *La Science Humaine*—a phrase that comprehends the meanings of both our words human and humane.

To be sure, we have lost something in this process of reordering our perception of art. In particular, we have forsaken the unitarian view that saw a mystical inner link between the animate and the inanimate worlds. On the other hand, I hope our new orientation may help us to regain another, no less fundamental aspect of the old view that has also been obscured by the rise of scientific historicism, namely, the sense of wonder evinced by the very term *Kunst-und Wunderkammer*. To illustrate what I mean I want to cite the comments of two writers concerning objects from even further reaches of the wonderworld we have been exploring.

The first citation comes from a famous episode in the history of art when Bernini was making the bust of Cardinal Borghese I referred to earlier (**Figs. 9, 10**). When the work was nearly finished a flaw appeared in the marble that resulted in a disfiguring black line across the forehead. In order not to disappoint the Cardinal, working day and night, Bernini produced a second, nearly identical bust in record time. The two portraits are so warm and spontaneous and so perfectly in the spirit of the sitter, that a contemporary writer who actually witnessed the sculptures being carved was moved to exclaim, “unbelievable if one couldn’t see that both really exist!” My second example comes from a book published in 1972 on the subject of Flint (Walter Shepherd, *Flint, its Origin, Properties and Uses*, London, 1972, p. 154), a material harder and more fractious by far than marble, among the first substances used by mankind in shaping his environment (**Figs. 11, 12**). The writer says of such astonishing works of prehistoric

sculpture (I use the term advisedly)—so thin you can almost see through them, so sharp you could shave with them (**Figs. 13, 14**), some so large and unwieldy, others so fine and delicate they can only have been made for ceremonial purposes—“Were it not for such specimens we should hardly have credited that such control could ever be obtained over so hard and wayward a material as flint.” The writers in both cases have glimpsed beyond the works' immediate functions—to portray a human being, or to serve as a weapon or tool—and expressed sheer awe at the creative achievements into which these recalcitrant pieces of stone have been transformed.

For the most part the kind of linkages we have been discussing must be made across such vast stretches of time and space—from British Vancouver to Henri Laurens—as to test our credence in the continuity of the heritage they represent. On rare occasions, however, the tradition persists into our own times, and I want to conclude by sharing one such instance with you. I returned only yesterday from a visit to a remote and peaceful spot in northeast England known as Grimes Graves. In fact it must be one of the most extraordinary places on earth because there you can descend into the very pits where the flintstones used for such works were quarried by Englishmen from neolithic times until the last flint miner died in 1960. In the nearby town of Brandon the flints have been worked for various purposes continuously into our own era. I have brought back a short film about the Brandon flintknappers as their profession is called, which I hope will fill the next 15 minutes and 20 seconds of your life, and the last of this meeting, with as much magic as they have mine (<http://www.eafa.org.uk/catalogue/196>).



Fig. 1 Male wooden figure carved by Haida Indians , British Columbia, 19th century.
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH

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Fig. 2 Unknown American (New York, New York), Baseball Player (shop sign), painted wood, about 1880.
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH

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Fig. 3 Henri Laurens, Standing Female Nude, unglazed buff terracotta, 1921.
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH
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Fig. 4 Bernini, Cardinal Scipione Borghese, drawing. Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

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Fig. 5 Bernini, Caricature of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, drawing. Biblioteca Vaticana, MS Chigi P. VI. 4, fol. 15.

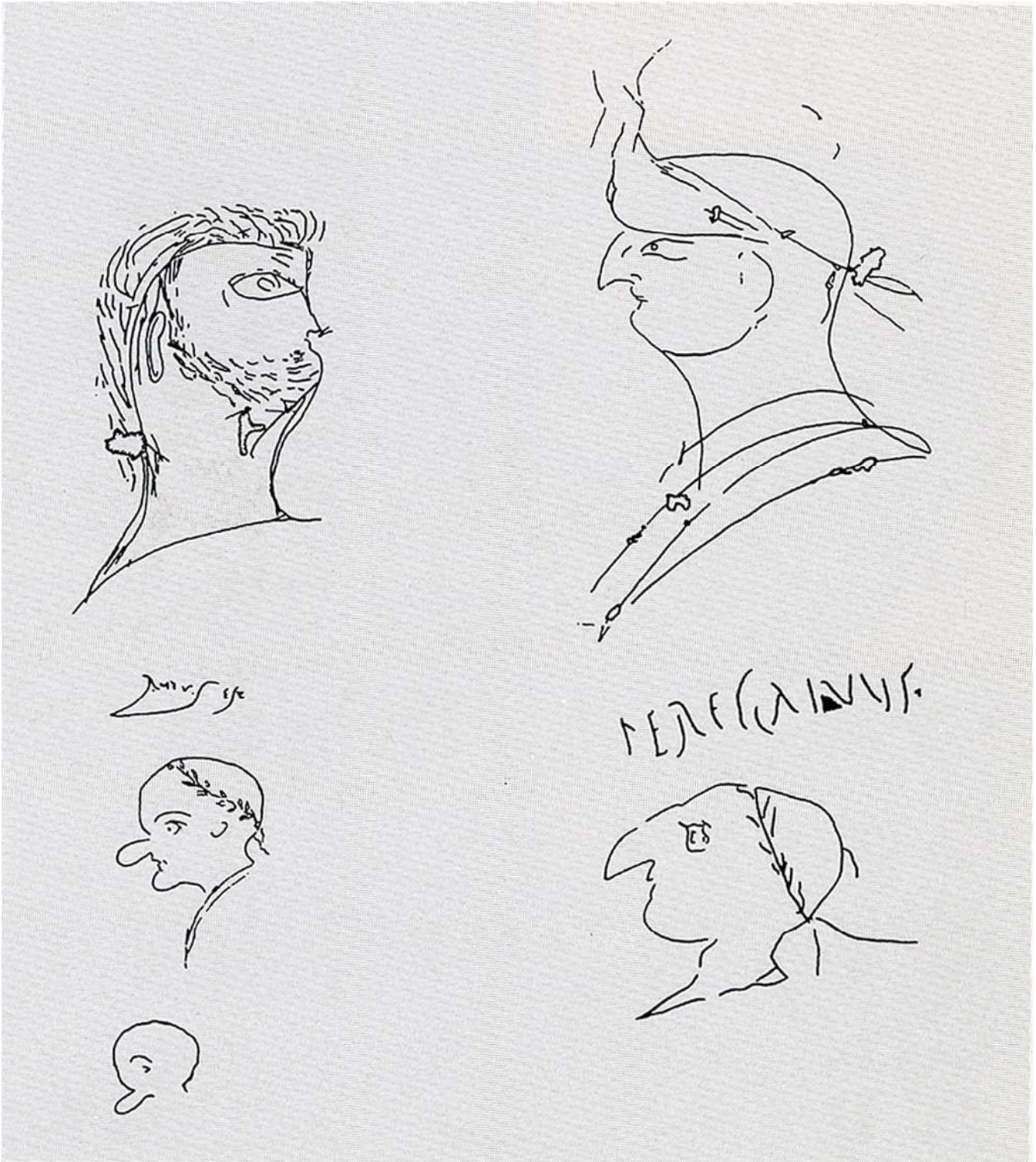


Fig. 6 Ancient Roman Graffiti on the walls of buildings of Rome and Pompeii

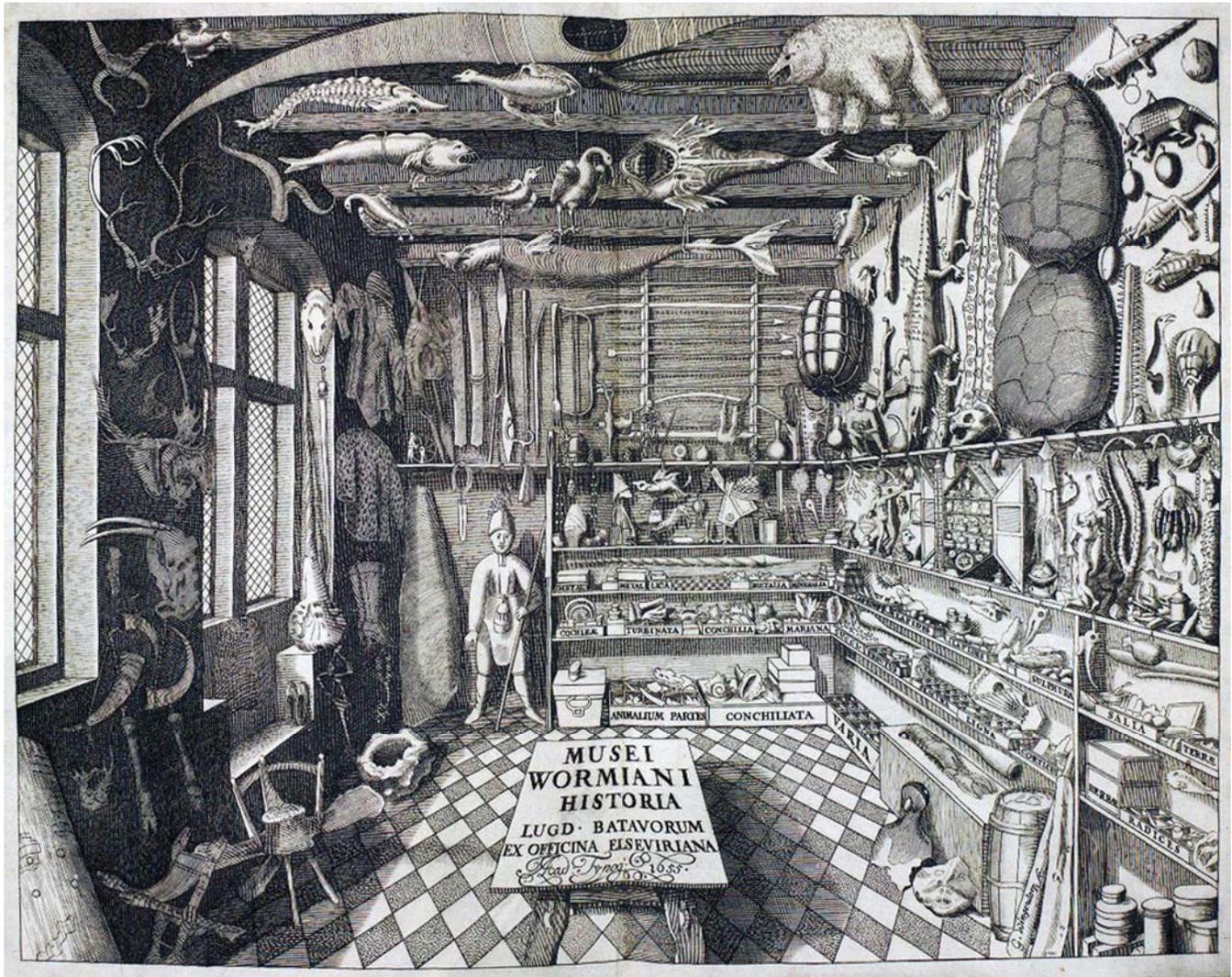


Fig. 7 Ole Worm, Museum Wormianum, Leiden, 1655, frontispiece



Fig. 8 Frans Francken the Younger, Kunstkamer, 1636. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Fig. 9 Bernini, Bust of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, 1632, marble. Villa Borghese, Rome.

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Fig. 10 Bernini, Bust of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, 1632, marble. Villa Borghese, Rome.

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Fig. 11 "Neolithic arrow-heads showing delicate workmanship." Walter Shepherd, *Flint, its Origin, Properties and Uses*, London, 1972, pl. XXVI



Fig. 12 Three flint implements: sickle, dagger, gouge, Scandinavia, ca. 2200-2300 B. C. British Museum, London.



Fig. 13 Axehead, jadelite, Canterbury, Kent, ca. 3000 B. C. British Museum, London.

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Fig. 14 Axehead, Museo civico archeologico di Bologna.

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