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Marble and Marzipan

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Roman Baroque Sculpture: The Industry of Art

by Jennifer Montagu

Yale University Press, 244 pp., \$45.00

When the French jurist Charles de Brosses wrote, in 1740, the letters from Rome that were later to be widely read, he remarked that the population of the city was composed of one quarter priests, one quarter statues, one quarter those who do scarcely any work, and one quarter those who do nothing at all. Anyone who walks from the Tiber to Saint Peter's today will get the same impression, at least as far as statues go. Ten angels holding the instruments of Christ's passion grace the Ponte Sant' Angelo; ninety statues crown the skyline of Bernini's colonnade, thirteen colossi are to be seen on the top of the façade of Saint Peter's, and many more in the niches of the interior, not to mention the dozens of dreamy-eyed allegories on the many papal tombs. The decorations executed in the nave of Saint Peter's in 1647–1648 included fifty-six large medallions of the early popes, 192 cherubs each over four feet high, twelve giant allegories in the spandrels of the arches, and 104 very large doves, the heraldic bird of Innocent X, the pope who commissioned it all. Critics called it a pigeon coop.

The other churches of the city house an uncountable number of statues. And yet all this is a fragment of what there once was. Hundreds or thousands of ancient statues have migrated to Naples, Florence, Paris, and almost every other capital. Almost no silver sculpture survives, and there have been great losses in smaller bronzes as well. Many statues had lives that were tantalizingly brief, such as those on the catafalques erected over the biers of the great, or on the pyrotechnic displays set alight in the Piazza di Spagna, or in the huge apparatuses constructed in churches like the Gesù to venerate the Eucharist during the Forty Hours' devotion. No aristocrat could drive through the streets without the help of statues, but to get an idea today of the panoply of angels and allegorical figures that seemed to pick up baroque coaches and lift them over potholes, we have to go to the carriage museum in Lisbon.

Jennifer Montagu writes about what she calls the industry of sculpture that produced all this work. A genteel and slightly more traditional title might have been the profession of sculpture, but Montagu wants to give the men who did the heavy physical work their due. She is after the total picture, both of the sculpture and the men who carved it:

The [sculptural industry] was extensive and ranged manifold, and ranged from the great monuments of Saint Peter's to a sugar bird on a dinner table or a pile of smouldering ashes in the Piazza di Spagna.

The great geniuses of baroque sculpture make an appearance in Montagu's book, including Bernini and especially Algardi, about whom she has recently written an excellent monograph.* But she also writes about artists further down the ladder of success, including some on the lowest rung.

Baroque Rome, as we know it, depends upon this sculptural proletariat, this pool of competent workmen whose sculptural work seldom receives a second glance but, should we sit at a cafe in the piazza and let our eyes wander over it, will not disappoint us.

Such artists cannot be resurrected from an armchair. But their ghosts sit in the archives and in a vast library of specialist literature that Montagu has been examining patiently for many years. Her book is full of information on the economics and sociology of sculpture and one could even call it an *Annales* school study, except that it is written with wit and it never once mentions the *longue durée*. She wants to describe not only the hundreds of artists, craftsmen, and workmen, but also the suppliers and middlemen that made the entire system work in a way that had not happened since ancient Rome and Aphrodisias.

No great baroque artist had the good fortune to be born in Rome, and so Montagu's first problem is to show how sculptors managed to get there. She writes about the aspiring artists who found their way to Rome from Florence or Naples, and also about the families of stonecutters in Carrara and near Lake Como who produced a great many competent and sometimes brilliant architects, sculptors, and stucco craftsmen, most of whom had to leave their villages to find work. The Baratta family from Massa, for example, sent all its sons to Rome, where one of them, Giovanni Maria, became the favorite architect of the Pamphilj family, while his brothers found sculptural commissions in his churches or in Bernini's vast enterprises. Montagu also has much to say about the Dickensian conditions under which apprentices worked, and the somewhat more refined environment of the academies set up by the French and the Medici to teach sculpture.

A second question is how the marble got to Rome, and Montagu takes us to Carrara, where her hero, Algardi, went to choose his blocks, and where middlemen and companies specializing in stone supplied the needs of most of the craftsmen and sculptors of baroque Rome. This kind of enterprise was little explored before Montagu's book, and the techniques of bronze casting were even less so. Montagu has a very informative chapter on bronze casters, who intermarried and formed clans that lasted for centuries, providing the many specialized craftsmen needed to produce a piece of monumental metal sculpture. These men poured the bronze, whacked it out of the molds, and often did the chasing. More surprisingly,

they sometimes obtained a commission for a statue themselves and then found a sculptor who would produce a model to their specifications. Montagu has fascinating passages on casting from nature, in which real leaves and insects are combined with wax models and then cast in what has been called the “lost lizard” process. Rarely do sculptors undertake their own foundry work, but Montagu has much sympathy for Francesco Mochi, one of the few who did. After he was commissioned by the Farnese to do a pair of equestrian statues for their capital of Piacenza, he quarreled with the founders and took over the casting himself. Not for nothing was Mochi a Tuscan, and in the Florence of his youth the casting traditions of Giambologna’s workshop were very much alive.

The most famous piece of monumental bronze sculpture in Rome is Bernini’s baldachin in Saint Peter’s. To read Bernini’s own account of it one would think he sweated over the streams of molten bronze as they came hissing out into the molds. So it comes as something of a surprise to find out that Bernini actually used the best founders in the business, in fact two separate firms, who treated each pair of bronze columns in a slightly different way. Montagu writes about the difference in technique between the columns, heavy cannons of bronze filled with a concrete core, and the superstructure, a light wooden armature with thin plates of brass hammered over it. The skillfulness of the illusion prevents most people from noticing that the angels standing over the columns are heavy cast creatures dating from the first phase of work, while the *putti* flying around the superstructure are an entirely different kind of sculpture, made out of hollow beaten brass and much lighter.

Most sculpture involves a great deal of physical labor and necessarily involves teamwork and assistants. It hardly makes sense to use the word “autograph” for both a small easel painting and a large papal tomb. But since patrons then as now wanted everything to be autograph, contracts for major sculptures still say *di sua propria mano* even though we know that the marble was blocked out by the quarrymen, shaped by studio assistants, and later smoothed by professional polishers. And then there were the specialized carvers who were called in for virtuoso work. Not every art historian sits up at the name of Giuliano Finelli, though some will know that he was the man who did most of the sculpture in the chapel containing the blood of San Gennaro in the cathedral of Naples. But every undergraduate has admired his work without knowing it, since Finelli was the specialist carver used by Bernini to transform hard and brittle marble into the roots, twigs, and windswept hair of the famous *Daphne* in the Borghese Gallery in Rome. Finelli went sulking off to Naples because he got no credit, but there were dozens of other specialists who longed for a chance to work on one of Bernini’s teams. For the tomb of Alexander VII the aging master only retouched the pope’s face, leaving all else in the hands of interchangeable assistants. Of course this division of labor meant that the great man was free to undertake projects closer to his patron’s heart, like a golden rose for the pope’s diplomatic presents or the annual papal medal.

In this specialized world sculptures could be designed by a painter or an architect and then

carried out by a competent carver who might lack imagination but not skill. And, as Montagu shows, this combination sometimes led to something better than either party could have hoped to produce in isolation. Giuseppe Giorgetti's statue of San Sebastiano in the church of that name near the catacombs is one of the most moving renderings of a martyred saint in any baroque church, and yet Giorgetti could rise to such heights only because Ciro Ferri designed the statue for him.

The armies of sculptors who made baroque Rome what it is are the subject of a chapter entitled "The Boys." Such sculptors are called *i giovani* in the documents, but they are not always all that young. Often they were men who had failed to fulfill their initial promise and who, as Montagu puts it, had slipped ever further behind in the rat race. They were competent workmen who would realize the general intentions of a master in their own manner. Every *giovane* hoped to graduate to the level of maestro, a recognized master in his own right who worked from his own inventions, but middle age or worse overtook many of the boys before this happened. Montagu considers the team of thirty-nine *giovani* who were working on the marble incrustation of Saint Peter's in 1647–1649, and also at the smaller group of thirteen *giovani* who were taken off that job to do the reliefs in the nave of the Lateran basilica in time for the Holy Year of 1650. She produces a fascinating document by Virgilio Spada, the priest who administered these projects, who says that teamwork on this scale would have been impossible in the past, but in this golden age of sculpture the leading sculptors had produced so many competent students that such feats could be pulled off. Did the students produce great art? Hardly, but it was not at all bad either. Montagu wants us to know how such works of sculpture came into being, and to spare a thought for the "boys" who carved them.

From Augustine to John Donne theologians have worried about the logistics of the Second Coming. What will happen to the bodies of people who have lost blood or limbs in foreign lands, or been devoured by man-eating fish? And what happens to cannibals and their victims at the Last Judgment? After reading Montagu's book one realizes that a Second Coming for statues would be no less chaotic. The fate of some metal statues was to be melted down and made into others, and the fate of many an antique fragment was to be *rimodernata*, incorporated into a new work, sometimes by the most innovative modern masters. A chapter with the witty title "The Influence of the Baroque on Classical Antiquity" shows how the goal was sometimes to restore the statue as it was felt to have been in antiquity, but often it was just the opposite. The Ludovisi *Ares*, which dates from about 460 BC, has a *putto* by Bernini sitting at his feet that nobody could mistake for an antique, and the same artist did a mattress for Cardinal Borghese's newly found *Hermaphrodite* which is more softly sensual than anything in ancient art.

Nicolas Cordier's *Gypsies* are striking examples of the re-use of ancient pieces in ways quite foreign to their original purpose, as is the splendid *Seneca Committing Suicide in His Bath*,

which was fabricated out of an old fisherman. Pagan idols were used as Christian saints, a process of conversion like that imposed on the obelisks and triumphal columns, and torsos of emperors were re-used for military men employed by the Pope, such as Carlo Barberini. Montagu shows how it would have been no more expensive to make an entirely new statue and she wonders if the old fragments were possibly re-used because they had something numinous about them, a glow or a patina which was meant to be transferred to the modern hero.

Montagu ends her book with, literally, dessert. Splendid temporary decorations were used in Rome on every possible occasion, and sculptors were frequently employed to work in ephemeral materials such as marzipan and papier mâché. Prints and drawings give us an idea of what Rome looked like when processional floats wound their way through the city, when multiple canonizations took place in Saint Peter's, when the great fireworks machines went off, when the candles were lit on the Forty Hours' apparatuses, or when a catafalque went up over the bier of a famous man. Sculptors were called in for all such events, and Montagu gives a fine account of them. She also explores the regal but unwittingly comic world of baroque banquets, where sugar sculptures called *trionfi* graced the tables. Some showed mythological themes like the phoenix or Apollo and Daphne, others scenes from the hunt, like sugar dogs pointing at the game the guests are about to eat, or sugar hunters throwing nets over it.

Sculptors worked on such materials as butter, or called in their friends from the foundry to cast images in jelly, ice, or sugar. Michelangelo made a snowman only once but baroque sculptors produced *trionfi* as part of the game of making a living, and one remembers that Claude Lorrain came to Rome originally as a pastry cook. Solemn banquets had their own solemn decorum. Cardinals and prelates would dine with sugar statuettes of angels holding the instruments of the passion or scenes from the Garden of Gethsemane. Ancestors of the wedding cake, *trionfi* came to be exaggeratedly complex and delicate. Now and then a voice would be raised against real sculpture for going too far in the same direction, as Montagu shows when she reinterprets critics who took Bernini's equestrian statue of Constantine to task, saying "the whole horse seems a *trionfo* of marzipan and meringue."

Montagu has written a rich and witty book, food for thought in more ways than one. In it baroque sculptors appear less as master theologians and more as real men trying to make both a living and art in a complicated world. Yale University Press has done well by her work, especially in the excellent photographs. The footnotes are still the usual Yale microchip size, but they are amusing and contain much new information, sometimes on great artists, sometimes on lesser known works, such as a recent portrait of Margaret Thatcher made of salmon pâté with vermicelli hair.

1. *

Jennifer Montagu, *Alessandro Algardi* (Yale University Press, 1985). ↩

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