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What's Past Is Prologue: Inaugurating Landmarks with the Metropolitan Sculptures

With the arrival of twenty-eight modern sculptures on long-term loan from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Landmarks program has begun. Their installation throughout the Austin campus offers a remarkable opportunity to survey some of the major trends in art during the second half of the twentieth century. These sculptures allow us to witness the distinctly modern dialogue between representation and abstraction, as well as the contest between natural and industrial materials. Most of all, we can celebrate their presence as an unprecedented chance to experience works of art first-hand—to appreciate their forms and to understand the underlying ideas.

The Landmarks program perpetuates in Austin one of civilization's oldest and most enduring traditions: the placing of art in public areas, accessible to nearly everyone and expressive of collectively held ideas. More than five thousand years ago, the cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia produced sculptures for urban plazas, government buildings, and places of worship to express political, secular, and religious values. Grand monuments endorsed the ruling elite and commemorated military victories, while images of deities symbolized spiritual beliefs. The original purposes of public art were primarily ideological and didactic, but what has endured through the ages is the physical beauty of the art.

In modern times the contexts and goals for public art have changed considerably. In many parts of the world democracy and egalitarianism have supplanted absolute rulers, and explicit religious power has yielded to secular humanism. During the mid-to-late twentieth century (the era when the Metropolitan's sculptures were created), globalization has redefined the entire world. Societies in Europe and the Americas have become so diverse that cultural authorities can no longer be sure of which systems of meaning and which values, let alone which individuals, should be honored in the traditional ways of public art.

A schism has developed between traditionalists and modernists. In a rapidly changing world those who wanted to preserve the familiar in art have continued to commission representational statues. Modernists, on the other hand, have embraced change and gladly jettisoned the old ways in favor of abstraction. The schism is exemplified by two famous memorials in Washington, D.C., both intended to commemorate the heroic sacrifices of American armed forces. The *Marine Corps Memorial* (1954) consists of a superbly realistic representation of soldiers struggling to raise the American flag on Iwo Jima in 1945. In contrast, the *Vietnam Memorial* (1982) consists of a massive V-shaped wedge of polished black stone inscribed with

the names of the dead. At the time it was inaugurated, this monument shocked nearly everyone outside the art world and outraged many of those it intended to commemorate. In response, a group of bronze figures of soldiers was added. But soon, precisely because of its universal form and absence of imagery, the original memorial became a powerful place where all Americans could go to grieve, remember, and pay homage. To most of the art world, this demonstrated beyond a doubt the viability of abstract sculpture for public places.

With America's increasing wealth and social consciousness in the 1960s many towns began to institute programs of commissioning sculptures for public places. By requiring that 1 or 2 percent of each building's construction budget be used for art, urban planners sought to improve the living and working environment for millions of people. The main difficulty was agreeing on what kind of art was visually pleasing and, just as important, potentially meaningful to the general public. Two highly publicized examples were the huge, abstract, metal sculptures by Pablo Picasso and Alexander Calder, in Chicago and Grand Rapids respectively, which at first provoked derision but gradually became a source of community identity and pride.

One way to approach works of art is to consider the historical context in which they were created. During the first half of the twentieth century, life and art underwent radical transformations. Industrial manufacturing supplanted agriculture as the dominant mode of production, people migrated from rural areas to urban centers, women and minorities gained equal rights, warfare expanded to an unprecedented global scale, and technology accelerated the pace of life—and art changed in tandem.

ABSTRACTION

Early in the modern era, many artists believed that a new visual language was needed to replace the Greco-Roman classical figurative traditions that had persisted through two millennia. Photography had made mimesis (accurate depiction of reality) unnecessary in painting and sculpture for the first time in history. Artists were free to conceive radically new approaches, and so abstraction was born, emerging from 1910 to 1920 in Europe. Initially artists simplified and stylized observed reality into organic and angular forms. That first phase soon evolved into making “pure” abstractions with no recognizable sources. From the outset, abstract art carried implicit meanings recognized by artists and informed viewers but largely lost on the general public.

Early abstractionists intended their art to convey their commitment to an ongoing transformation of society. Like Morse code in telegraphy and other new modes of communication fundamentally different from the traditional written word, abstract forms in art could convey meanings—not narrative or literal ones but broad ideas that could speak to an international audience and help advance human consciousness.

During the 1920s and 1930s, artists developed two broad types of abstraction: *geometric* and *biomorphic*. *Geometry* denotes mathematics and suggests such related disciplines as architecture, design, engineering, and logic as well as intangible qualities like analytical thinking and precision—desirable attributes for a rational, communal society. Artists devised a new

language of geometry in art: horizontal and vertical elements can convey calm, harmony, and stability (see *Harmonious Triad* by Beverly Pepper), while rising diagonals can suggest energy and optimism (see *Column of Peace* by Antoine Pevsner and *Square Tilt* by Joel Perlman).

In contrast to geometric abstraction, a number of artists favored softer forms and curving contours. Inspired by sources in nature, biomorphic abstractions evoke natural phenomena, biological processes, growth, and ambiguity (see *Big Indian Mountain* by Raoul Hague, *Source* by Hans Hokanson, and *Untitled [Seven Mountains]* by Ursula von Rydingsvard). Such works stand in general opposition to the industrial and technological aspects of modern life; they remind us of the fundamental importance of the natural world. Biomorphism was invented and advocated by the surrealists, who believed in the importance of the unconscious mind in creating and understanding modern art. Relying on the Freudian concept of free association, such artists expect viewers to generate their own unique responses to abstract art.

The two types of abstraction began as competing and opposing philosophies, but by the 1950s many artists expertly combined them to suit their expressive needs (see the rhythmic contours of *Veduggio Glimpse* by Anthony Caro and the disconcerting, hulking forms of *Catacombs* and *Guardian* by Seymour Lipton).

By the 1960s, the original philosophical meanings underlying abstraction had mostly faded away, leaving “formalist” aesthetics: the creation and appreciation of pure nonreferential beauty. Formalism dominated much artistic practice from the 1950s through the 1970s, particularly in the United States in the circle around the critic Clement Greenberg. Geometric sculptures became ubiquitous in public places—some complex and sophisticated and some merely competent. A group known as the minimalists advocated an intellectually rigorous, austere reductivist approach (see *Amaryllis* by Tony Smith). Other artists went in the opposite direction, toward complexity and a decorative verve (see *Kingfish* by Peter Reginato). From those extremes emerged the postminimalists, who infused organic vitality into simple, singular forms (see *Curve and Shadow No. 2* by Juan Hamilton).

FIGURATION

Despite the enthusiasm for abstraction in midcentury, a number of artists insisted on maintaining recognizable human content in their works. Abstraction had alienated many viewers who found it remote or incomprehensible. Yet few artists returned to traditional realism, preferring instead to explore new and evocative modes of representation.

The strongest resurgence occurred in the aftermath of World War II. Many artists, especially in Europe, wanted to pay homage to the sufferings experienced by so many people during the war and to their struggles to rebuild their lives and societies amidst the new fears engendered by the nuclear age and the Cold War. This atmosphere of postwar existential anxiety was poignantly expressed in two museum exhibitions in the 1950s: models for a never-realized *Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner* at London’s Tate Gallery in 1953 and the avowedly humanist theme of the *New Images of Man* installation at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1959.

Many postwar sculptors expressed their angst by portraying figures or fragments of bodies as falling, broken, injured, or partially robotic (see *Augustus* by Bernard Meadows and *Figure* by Eduardo Paolozzi). Some erudite artists reinterpreted classical myths, particularly those in which a hero challenged the gods and were punished: Icarus, Hephaestus, Prometheus, Sisyphus (see works by Koren der Harootian and Frederick Kiesler). Seymour Lipton created a particularly effective amalgam of figure references within abstract forms that harbor dark inner spaces (see *Pioneer*, *Catacombs*, and *Guardian*).

Representational sculpture was submerged by the tidal wave of abstraction in the 1960s and 1970s, but a new generation insisted on a legible humanist content in art, addressing issues of personal identity and isolation in an impersonal world (see *Eyes* by Louise Bourgeois and *Figure on a Trunk* by Magdalena Abakanowicz).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Modern sculptors also introduced a new language of materials and methods. In the late nineteenth century, sculpture making had entered a new phase of mass production made possible through technology: bronzes could be produced in large editions by skilled technicians from an artist's original. *The Thinker* by Auguste Rodin, for example, was made in several editions, ranging from a dozen life-size bronzes to hundreds of smaller casts. This mechanization and concomitant commodification of art prompted a reaction. Appearing simultaneously in several countries, the "direct carve" movement advocated older craft-based methods and sought to enhance the intrinsic characteristics of natural materials: the color and grain of exotic woods or the veining and crystalline structure of unusual stones. By the 1920s, this aesthetic had gained international prominence, and it persists to this day.

The first generation of direct carvers admired prehistoric, African, Oceanic, and indigenous American artifacts. By adapting the hieratic frontality and stylized forms of those sources to the sleekly refined forms of abstraction, modern sculptors could represent simplified figures linked in sophisticated linear rhythms (see works by Koren der Harootian and Anita Weschler). Recent artists of this orientation tend to work on a larger scale and may roughly cut and hew wood to achieve expressionistic textures (see works by Hans Hokanson and Ursula von Rydingsvard).

Carvers remained a relatively small minority in modern sculpture, far outnumbered by "direct metal" sculptors. Their approach emerged in prewar Europe and burgeoned into an international movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Seeking materials and methods appropriate to the modern Machine Age, artists looked to engineering and construction for inspiration. Instead of using chisels to carve wood and stone, constructivists preferred welding torches to cut and join pieces of metal. Their structures ranged from elegant abstractions to assemblages of cast-off objects.

The industrial analogy and model extended to the sculptors' own studios, which resembled factory spaces with heavy-duty equipment. Some—like Anthony Caro, Willard Boepple, and Robert Murray—found inspiration in working spontaneously and experimentally with sheet

metal: cutting, folding, rolling, welding, soldering, and sometimes painting or burnishing it. Other sculptors, notably Tony Smith, were comfortable with sending models to factories for professional fabrication. Both methods were considered appropriate for a modern world that had been so fundamentally reshaped by industrial manufacture.

In contrast, many sculptors preferred to make assemblages from miscellaneous bits and pieces of scrap, sometimes irreverently called “junk sculpture.” Although artists had experimented with this approach as early as the 1910s, it became a widespread tendency only decades later in the 1950s and 1960s, when sculptors made three-dimensional collages from the detritus of industrial manufacture and mass consumption: rusty machinery, old car parts, squished used paint tubes, broken musical instruments, virtually anything. The motivations for using trash range from simple necessity (when an artist has no money to buy new materials) to antimaterialistic social criticism and environmentalism (sculptors started recycling long before the idea occurred to others).

Regardless of the motivations, a found-object sculpture possesses an inherent dual identity: its former reality as a useful thing and its new reality as art. That dualism inevitably poses an intellectual and visual conundrum for us. Do we see Deborah Butterfield’s *Vermillion* primarily as a lifelike depiction of a horse or as a composition of rusty, crumpled bits of metal thrown out by a wasteful consumerist society? And what are we to understand from Donald Lipski’s seemingly abstract *The West*, which consists of decontextualized harbor buoys and lots of corroded pennies? The artists offer clues and hope that we will use our own eyes, intellect, intuition, and imagination to make connections and create meanings.

LANDMARKS: SCULPTURES FOR INQUIRING MINDS

Unlike works in private collections or even museums, public sculptures exist in our daily environment, interact with our activities, and enter our awareness repeatedly and variously. Beyond the pleasure they bring to viewers already acquainted with art, they can stimulate curiosity and spark new perceptions in the minds of passersby who might otherwise not have much aesthetic experience. As the university’s population seeks knowledge in classes, libraries, and laboratories, the Landmark sculptures can offer other kinds of discoveries. Visitors to the Perry Castañeda-Library, the Nano Science Technology Building, the School of Law, and elsewhere on the campus can now see immediately that the visual arts have a prominent place and come away enriched. Very few campuses or cities can boast so many sculptures of such quality that are free and accessible to all. The twenty-eight sculptures from the Metropolitan Museum of Art proclaim the broad purpose of the Landmarks program: to bring an important new dimension to the life of the university, to the everyday experience of its students, faculty and staff, the citizens of Austin and beyond, and to any person who just crosses the campus.

*Valerie J. Fletcher, Senior Curator of Modern Art
Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution*