

THE ARTS

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FORBES WATSON, *Editor*

WILLIAM A. ROBB, *Manager*

VIRGIL BARKER, *European Editor*

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THE TEACHINGS OF MAILLOL

FROM A PARIS DIARY

By ARNOLD RONNEBECK

IN 1911 the spirit of contemporary sculpture seemed still to be dominated by the naturalism of Rodin who was then in the seventieth year of his life. However, when one visited the sombre and dusty shop of Vollard's on the Rue Lafitte, one discovered, hidden behind a Gauguin or a Cézanne, or lying on the floor, wonderful little bronze statuettes of the greatest simplification of form and astonishing in their monumentality. Their creator was Maillol. And then there was another sculptor's name which one heard more and more often: Emile-Antoine Bourdelle, to whom I shall refer in later extracts from my diary.

Both were pupils, collaborators and intimate friends of Rodin. Both, in a certain sense continued his efforts and built upon his fundamental idea. Each one, however, was striving for an aim very distinctly his own, and opposed to Rodin's conception of form. The great merit of Rodin was to have again proved to the sculptor the fundamental necessity of the closest study of nature.

But his life-size and over-life-size figures like St. John the Baptist, Les Bourgeois de Calais, or The Kiss, are lost in detail and are not monumental. They are masterpieces in the treatment of light and shadow and surface, but in spite of that, they are not in the true and traditional sense, plastic art. They are more painting than sculpture. They are not thought for a certain material; the material is not an inherent part of the idea.

Rodin's essentially emotional nature blew up the block of marble, burst it open for the sake of the "*grand geste*," the great gesture of love and passion. Intensely dramatic his power of expression went beyond the possibilities of his material. His Victor Hugo in the garden of the Palais Royale is not a monument at all; seen from a distance it is a chaotic mass of white marble and the wide outstretched arm has to be supported by an unhewn pillar of marble.

But it seems that whenever decay or decomposition of some sort threatens art, there appears a redeeming spirit like a saviour. This time he came in the person of Aristide Mail-

lol. Already in 1896 he sent his first statuettes to the Salon. The jury did not place them in the section of sculpture, but in the section of arts and crafts. They were all sold. A German collector, gifted with true sensibility and artistic vision for the meaning of those small things, gave about a dozen of them to the National Gallery in Berlin, and it is due to the influence and propaganda of men like Meyer-Graefe, Osthaus and Count Kessler that Germany not only possesses the greatest number of Maillol's works, but that it was that country where he was first understood and appreciated.

The serene calm of ancient Greece, the powerful monumentality of its temples, is embodied in his statues. They are unlike the Gothic which were always conceived in close relation to architecture, to a niche, or the porch of a cathedral. They are not created to be seen from only one standpoint; each side is a front view. They are round. Each has a life of its own. They exist for nothing but the sake of their own being. They are majestically lonely. A superior joy of life is in them, sublimated in the pure form of powerful women like columns and blocks of animated life. There is never a gesture which is not controlled and subordinated to the architectonic whole. An arm that is lifted never leaves the column or block out of which the whole figure is carved, and which invisibly seems to surround it still in order to protect and to restrain and to dam up its accumulated and pulsing life.

I went to Paris in the fall of 1908 because I had read in the papers that an academy had just opened in Montmartre which gave its pupils the opportunity to come in personal touch with the so-called post-impressionist masters. The teachers of sculpture were Maillol and Lacombe, and of painting, Odilon Redon, Bonnard, Valoton, Theo van Rhysselberghe and Serusier. I was one of the first to enter the class of sculpture and soon Maillol came for the first time for a criticism.

He was very simple, almost awkward in manners and speech, but sociable and human.

He comes from a peasant family in southern France. He had certain difficulties in making himself understood by the spoken word. Usually he would compress his criticism of our work and his advice within the words:

"You must simplify what you see in nature; nature is always simpler than we think it is; it never has holes and bumps."

He did not give a positive instruction as to how we should simplify, because he did not consciously work after any preconceived theory. Giving himself entirely up to his own unflinching feeling for style, he arrived, as it seemed, naturally, from within himself, at the synthesis of form. But, nevertheless, he was conscious of the role of the intellect in all artistic production, and repeatedly he said:

"You must just work, work, but always under the control of your intellect. The sculptor must draw his model again and again from all sides."

Before becoming a sculptor Maillol had made very beautiful designs for tapestries which he executed himself at the weaver's loom. Following old recipes he had distilled the colors from plants which he collected in the woods of his country, and in the houses of his peasant countrymen he found the wool threads for his *gobelins*. In every handicraft, in every *métier*, he was a perfect master. If it was a question of the glaze of a terra-cotta, the preparative constructions for a new work of sculpture, its plaster cast or the last finish of the bronze—he dominated every technique.

When one day I went to see him in his studio in Marly-le-Roi, he was just chiselling at the stone original of that wonderful work, the picture of which it immediately conjured up when one hears the name Maillol, and which has made him world famous.* It was the statue of the quietly resting female figure, which, supporting its elbow by the raised knee, leans its head against its hand. The figure stood in the open under the blossoming trees of his little orchard. From the heights on which the little shed was lying that he used as a studio, one overlooked the hills covered with blossoming fruit trees as with snow. Beyond was St. Germain-en-Laye, and the glimmering Seine valley. Still further away deep on the horizon a heavy

* This figure, together with many other figures and drawings by Maillol, is reproduced in *THE ARTS* for February, 1924.

brownish bed of misty vapor, and above, a thin pointed, iron armature was developing high into the skies: Paris and the Eiffel Tower.

When I saw this simple man with the the beautiful archaic profile chiselling at one of the greatest masterpieces of our time, he made me think of the heroes of Homer and the great masters of Greece. In fact this figure not only appears as the most perfect work of Maillol's but positively the purest plastic work of all contemporary sculpture. His unerring feeling, this in-born, and assiduously cultivated instinct for the proportion of volumes, for calmness, roundness and simplicity of contour, has reached its climax in this figure.

Relying on the most intimate study of nature, and led by the absolute certainty of his taste, he arrives at a synthesis. He invents, so to speak, for each figure, for each head, its own architectonic construction, and with that: its style. Unconsciously knowing, intelligent without intellectualism, sometimes touchingly childlike, he appears as one of the great primitives, and—since by the wise restraint of his means he arrives at the most noble harmony—as a direct spiritual descendant of the Greeks, as the last real classic.

When I entered his little garden and asked him if I might watch him work, he said that by watching alone I could not learn. I should help him. Of course, I answered that I was afraid to touch his work, but he smiled: "You just want some courage." And he gave me hammer and chisel and pointed out a place where I could chop off some superfluous material without risk of damaging his work. After we had been working for quite a while he put down his chisel and felt tenderly with his hand over the places which he had just finished. Then he took my own hand, led it over the knee of the statue, and said:

"Close your eyes! What do you feel?"

I seemed to be touching a living body.

"Well," he said, "You see, that is how our figures must be—full of life. Full of life, only *mastered by style!*"

Later, at table, when his wife was serving the supper, and handing us the plates, I noticed how strong her wrists were, how athletic her arms and shoulders, and how like a column her beautiful neck, how simple the

features of this handsome country-like face. Did I not already know these magnificent and pure forms?

In the course of that summer I went to see him often at Marly-le-Roi, because it was just in these hours of intimate collaboration that he unconsciously and profusely gave of the richness of his human kindness and

artistic experience. When he came to the criticism as a teacher he was usually embarrassed. He could not say anything about a pupil's work. The process of his own creating was so natural to him that there was nothing to speak about. And that is why he could hardly give any practical advice to his pupils.



THE CAFÉ GRECO, ROME
Courtesy of The Albert Roullier Galleries

JOHN COPLEY