

SHAPING IDEAS: THE VISUAL FORMING OF MEANING

By Bruce Arnott



A sculpture has been defined as — ‘something you bump into when you stand back to look at a painting’. Nowadays the thing that you tread in when you step back to admire a sculpture might very well be a painting, or a print in the form of a frozen chicken or a chocolate body part. That is good. Such developments extend the boundaries of art.

Nevertheless that old definition of sculpture is more useful than one might suppose, because it emphasizes the qualities of ‘solidity’ and ‘thingness’ that still describe the essentials of the art form. It reminds us that sculpture is fundamentally concerned with mass (therefore with gravity), with volume (therefore with space), with the object (therefore with materiality and identity).

There have been some moralistic attacks on the commodification of the ‘object’, but art objects have not noticeably diminished. The fruits of trade still subvent our salaries.

It should also be remembered that we look to objects for clues to the origins of art. In the archaeological record, lumps of patterned ochre, or fragments of carved and incised mammoth ivory, are understood to hint at the ordering of the human mind, or the celebration of shamanic sorceries. These objects, classified by ethnographers as ‘portables’, are really proto-sculptures that possibly predate the diffused traditions of palaeolithic rock painting and engraving.

Present day readings of cave and rock art in Western Europe, and in Southern Africa (as elsewhere), indicate that the artists who made these works knew precisely what they were doing; that ‘portable’ and mural images were integral to ritual practice; and that they very likely mark attempts to resolve problems of consciousness and survival; to influence natural processes — even if only symbolically.

Studies of San social structures enumerate classes of shaman — including shamans of the game, shamans of the rain, shamans of the sick, shamans to propitiate the spirits of the dead. It must be assumed that these offices point to ancient practices that ease psychological survival. Many of the rock art images describing this material refer to trance-associated experiences; and were made with divinatory and prophetic purposes in mind.¹

In the intellectual traditions of Western high art, where processes of art making are not primarily communal, there is less certainty about the societal functions of art than exists in the primitive model. There is a lingering sense of having lost the way. Robert Motherwell, for example, expressed the concern that it is more difficult for a modern artist to know what to make, than to know how to make it.²

There is a line of argument that suggests that, in Western Europe, the tradition of Romanesque sculpture was evidence of a healthy recovery from the barbarian depredations of the Dark Ages. That is, until the year 1260, when Nicola Pisano perversely shifted the paradigm by quoting Classical art in his marble pulpit for the Baptistery in Pisa.

This signalled the end of the anonymous medievalism of Romanesque and early Gothic sculpture; and the beginning of the self-conscious creative processes of Renaissance art — individualistic, intellectual and modern.

Unfortunately, the artistic flowering of the Renaissance did not give birth to significant developments in the language of form. In embracing the intellectual traditions of Greek classicism (including the notion of Man as the measure of all things), the sculptors of the Renaissance locked onto the habits of Classical representation — adopting an essentially idealised naturalism.

¹ David Lewis-Williams, *The mind in the cave* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002): 133.

² Robert Hughes, *The shock of the new: Art and the century of change* (London: BBC, 1980): 161.

Neoplatonism was the dominant philosophy in Europe from the third to the thirteenth centuries, and was revived in Italy in the fifteenth century.³ This doctrine ascribed moral value to beauty, and therefore significantly encouraged the making of art. It also endorsed the notion of the supremacy of Classical ideals. The court of Lorenzo de Medici, the brilliant patron of Michelangelo, was particularly interested in the Platonic doctrine of Ideal Forms; the view that all things aspire to the perfection of ideal archetypes.

Plato distinguished between ‘relative’ and ‘absolute’ form. He saw *relative* form as “form whose beauty is inherent in the nature of living things”;⁴ and *absolute* form as shapes and abstractions (straight lines, curves, and the surfaces or solid forms), produced from the analysis of living things by geometrical means. This is also known as symbolic form.

Painters of the Renaissance tended to apply an understanding of both relative and absolute form in composing their works of art. The sculptors, however, may be seen to have persisted in the pursuit of classical form and content. As far as sculpture was concerned, therefore, the innovations of Nicola Pisano were intellectual and psychological — not formal. This bias persisted from the time of the Renaissance, through the stylistic developments of the Baroque and Rococo, to Neoclassicism and Romanticism — from the mid-thirteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

A ‘modern’ self-consciousness, that preferred subjective strategies to communal values, is revealed in the rugged individualism portrayed by Donatello’s sculpture of the *condottiere Gattamelata* (1453), even though the work also looks back to the Middle Ages; Michelangelo’s *Youthful Captive* (1534) introduces an eroticised emotional form that anticipates the Baroque energies of Bernini’s *Apollo and Daphne* (1624), which in turn pre-shadows the elegant Neoclassical form and classical allusion

³ Antony Flew, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Pan Books; Macmillan, 1979): 227.

⁴ Herbert Read, *The meaning of art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin; Faber & Faber, 1956): 46-47.

of Canova's *Paulina Borghese as Venus* (1807).

All of these works contribute, in one way or another, to the expressive abstract physicality of Rodin's *Walking Man*, completed in 1911.

For some centuries, then, the limits to stylistic innovation in sculptural form were set by Bernini's emotionalism on the one hand, and Canova's intellectualism on the other. Otherwise, the gaze remained fixed on Classical, Hellenistic and Roman models. Sculptures were made in rhetorical service to Church or State or as votives to a Moral Beauty.

Classical tradition still has an impact on our thinking. But if we look at the really big picture (30 000 BC to 300 AD), this episode in Western cultural history may be characterized as a brilliant but flawed deflection from a mainstream of artistic expression.

In Western Europe that mainstream might be described as art with roots in the pre-historic, pre-literate, ancient, tribal and folkloristic; pre-Classical and therefore pre-Christian.

It would include accomplished early works such as the marble Cycladic *Figure* from the Syros group, dated at about 2500 BC; and a Late Minoan *Goddess* of the thirteenth century BC, from Knossos in Crete. It would also embrace the archaic Greek traditions, the art of the Celts, and vestiges of these origins in Romanesque and early Gothic art.

All of these forms may be categorized as primitive - that is to say, both primordial and original (but certainly not inferior). They are concerned with the expression of group values, and they are characterized by a synthesis of relative and absolute form — an acknowledgement of natural form expressed in innate geometries (symbolic form), in which detail may be manipulated in the interests of the iconic.⁵

In broad terms, these qualities are common to widespread material cultures, including those of North America, South and Central

⁵ Lewis-Williams, *The mind in the cave*, 204–207.

America, Australasia, Oceania, West and Central Africa; and (of particular interest) Southern Africa — particularly in the rock paintings and engravings of the San, and their antecedents.

These qualities are reflected in the structure of such works as this traditional West African mask from the Ivory Coast; and in the formal innovations and signifying detail of San images. These are objects and ideas that would not have met the needs of Florentine merchant princes, nor found a place in the political convolutions of the Counter Reformation, nor the rationalistic ethos of the Enlightenment. However, they did provide an antidote to the dead hand of Classical formalism in Western sculpture.

Van Gogh and Gauguin were largely responsible for recognizing a submerged mainstream of art. They discovered evidence of such a phenomenon in antiquarian and ethnographic artifacts and art objects that surfaced in France at the Paris World's Fair of 1889. In short, they were responsible for generating a wide enthusiasm for a 'pre-literate, "primitive" tribal antiquity",⁶ for precisely those values that had been by-passed by revivals of Classical form. Their point of view became known as Primitivism.

Anthony Blunt described Primitivism, more broadly, as "an international taste, rooted in English romanticism, in the writings of Rousseau", and in the doctrines of David's pupils'; a "revolution against civilization, stimulated in the second half of the 19th century by a growing dislike of industrialism".⁷ He saw it as "the motive behind the medievalism of William Morris and Gauguin's move to Tahiti", that found a voice in Van Gogh's letters and Picasso's *Arte Joven*.

Pre-Cubist responses to primitive art are to be found at an Expressionist/post-Expressionist interface, in the work of Kirchner and Gauguin. Responses to African sculpture in particular, were

⁶ Hughes, *The shock of the new*, 259.

⁷ Anthony Blunt & Phoebe Pool, *Picasso: the formative years* (London: Studio, 1962).

reflected in robust execution, a degree of abstraction and the use of emotional colour and form. Cubist and post-Cubist painting, collage and sculpture reveal less sentimental responses to Primitivism, a more intellectual analysis of structure and creative process, and an unapologetic appropriation of stylistic detail.

John Golding explains that Picasso initially responded to the rational qualities of certain African sculptures — particularly geometrical abstraction. This is reflected in works such as *Head of a man*, which he made in 1930, in collaboration with Gonzalez, while his *Woman carrying a child* (1953), demonstrates an understanding that ‘ultimately the process of creation is one of intuitively balancing formal elements; [that] in the case of the most abstract sculpture, the finished product has the quality not of representation but a symbol — a re-creation rather than a reinterpretation’.⁸

The subtle geometries of African art had a catalytic affect on European art, from 1905 onwards. As far as sculpture is concerned this is where rational form caught up with intellectual content, but without losing touch with feeling.

Brancusi’s radical abstractions equalled Picasso’s innovations. Works such as Brancusi’s *Princess X* (1916) in polished bronze; or, the *Portrait of Nancy Cunard* of 1928, approach the perfection implicit in the Platonic notion of Ideal Form.

Subsequent developments in modern sculpture may be followed through the works of the likes of Jacques Lipchitz and Isamu Noguchi, in the evolution of a formalism that was rational, geometric and symbolic.

Israel (Lippy) Lipshitz, who taught sculpture at the Michaelis from 1950 to 1968,⁹ was an important link to this ethos. He studied in Paris

⁸ John Golding, *Cubism: A history and an analysis, 1907-1914* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959): 59.

⁹ Bruce Arnott, *Lippy Lipshitz: A biographical commentary and documentation of the years 1903-1968, with a catalogue raisonné of sculptures* (Cape Town: AA Balkema, 1969).

under Antoine Bourdelle, the leading pupil of Rodin; he was directly influenced by the Postcubist work of Ossip Zadkine; and he was inspired by the spirit of Primitivism that was still prevalent in the School of Paris in the late 1920s.

It should be noted that, in later developments, the Figure shares the stage with the Ambiguous Object (favoured by Dadaists and Surrealists such as Duchamp, Man Ray and Oppenheim); and that both figure and object were challenged by Non-objectivism and Conceptualism.

Ultimately this pluralism enriched the formal resources of modern sculpture in general. It led to the elegant constructivism of Caro, the ethically 'green' strategies of Joseph Beuys, and to Jeff Koons' sophisticated Pop.

Evolution in the visual arts is driven by heterodox and often iconoclastic impulses. These are not necessarily the iconoclasm that have the frenzied sculptor smashing a path through the park like a marauding Ostrogoth (although some of the soapstone objects in Kirstenbosch Gardens invite such attention). As civilized beings we remind ourselves that it is not necessary to physically eliminate offending images; that it is possible to defeat them by subtler strategies.

Satire, comedy and absurdism in Art are rooted in spontaneous acts of subversion of the authoritative text, or the orthodox point of view. Acts of seditious comedy occur throughout the history of theatre where buffoonery, comic dance and mimicry run counter to the core script — relieving or testing it (as in Greek 'new' comedy of the fourth century BC). This tendency occurs in other early art forms, to lesser but still significant degrees — as droll marginalia in medieval manuscripts, autonomous detail in Romanesque and Gothic stone carvings, in medieval mural and panel painting, and in graffiti daubed by painters, or scratched into walls by sculptors at Delphi or Pompeii.

In 1964 I came across an inscription in an Oxford pub: 'balls to Picasso'. It has probably since been enshrined in anthologies of mural art, but I like to think that I once stood before the original — a brittle

Oxonian gloss on Cubism. It records that Picasso put the lid on Classicism.

An inscription, ‘There’s a naartjie in our sosatie’, on the wall of the Deanery in Orange Street in the mid-70s signalled the collapse of Empire. It encapsulates the political frustration and anger of the time. It also reminds us why anarchistic tendencies still lurk behind much contemporary art in South Africa.

Anarchism has a place in the dynamics of creative polemics. Although it might be the preserve of young poets and snake-oil salesmen, we must also be reminded that breaking rules is part of the fun of testing the bounds.

How important are innovation and originality? We can argue with the semiologists that every work of art is a ‘text-like collection of signs’; that details are ‘cultural messages’; and that ‘style is coded culturally and historically’.

If we accept that it is “the notion of the ‘original’ that is perverse”, that “all texts are ‘copies’ in an infinite regress, it follows that any single text is only a point of entry into all texts”; therefore that “the concept of ‘originality’ has been replaced by one of ‘borrowings’ or the meeting of texts”.¹⁰

My own sculptures, for better or worse, are referentially complex. This comes from being an academic and an artist (but not, I hope, an academic artist). One is concerned with making fresh and meaningful metaphors, but as part of a continuum.

Reference is made to my own works on the assumption that all sculptures are ‘points of entry’ into the great sculptural megatext.

I made the sculpture, titled *Sphinx*, in 1977 (Figure 1). It is cast in bronze, and is 1.2 meters long. The work was commissioned by the late

¹⁰ Carl Goldstein, *Teaching art: Academies and schools from Vasari to Albers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Jack Barnett, the architect of the Baxter Theatre, and is positioned as a fountainhead at the top of the ramp to the theatre's northern entrance. It alludes to classical Greek thought and to the enigmatic Theban *Sphinx*, whose riddle Oedipus famously answered.



Figure 1.¹¹

The Baxter *Sphinx* did not evolve from any classical model, although human, leonine and winged forms have been abstracted. Its mood is essentially benign, whereas Classical sphinxes are often dramatic and threatening.

My large *Numinous Beast* (Figure 2) was commissioned to be cast in bronze for the SA National Gallery in 1979. It is 2.8 meters high, stands on a granite plinth, and faces the entrance to the Gallery. I made the first sketches for this work in December 1976.

¹¹ Bruce Arnott, *Sphinx*, bronze, University of Cape Town (1976-77).



Figure 2.¹²

The sculpture refers to San therianthropic imagery, in particular to a small painting of a karossed, antelope-headed figure on Whale Rock, at the foot of Mpongweni mountain in the South Eastern Drakensberg. With hindsight it is possible to speculate that the germinal image depicted a shaman-of-the-game; a “kaross-clad figure with an antelope-eared cap, whose function it was to entice animals towards the waiting hunters’ bows”.¹³ Works such as this have led scholars to understand that form and content in San art often have metaphoric functions; that they are capable of holding complex meaning. But it was more the ritualistic undertones in an ambiguous confluence of human and animal attributes that inspired the *Numinous beast* — a subjective reading of the semiotics.

¹² Bruce Arnott, *Numinous beast*, bronze, South African National Gallery (1976-79).

¹³ David Lewis-Williams & T. A. Dowson, *Contested images: Diversity in Southern African rock art research* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994): 209.

~ *Shaping ideas: The visual forming of meaning* ~

My large bronze *Alma Mater* (or *Caryatid figure*) (Figure 3) was commissioned by the University of Cape Town, and installed in 1996. The sculpture is 2.88 meters high, mounted on a column 6.4 meters high, and located outside the Kramer building on the Middle Campus. The fact that the sculpture was made for the Faculty of Education and now guards the Faculty of Law is only mildly confusing.



Figure 3.¹⁴

¹⁴ Bruce Arnott, *Alma Mater*, bronze, University of Cape Town (1996).

This work alludes to the caryatid figures that support the entablature of the *Erechtheion* on the Acropolis in Athens. Originally an Ionic temple (built between 421 and 405 BC), the *Erechtheion* became a church in the 7th century, and was occupied by the harem of the Turkish commandant during the Ottoman occupation in the 15th century. The caryatid porch is itself probably a reference to the Archaic period, when female figures had been used as columns in Delphi.¹⁵ This architectural conceit points to the interdependence of systems, and historic continuity – the contemporary concern of the *Alma Mater* sculpture.

The formal language of the bronze caryatid is one in which a volumetric geometry replaces the linearity of the marble caryatids. The sculptural mood of *Alma Mater* (as suggested also by the fragment of entablature) reflects Doric sobriety rather than Ionic elegance.

However, rhetoric is strategically destabilised by the inclusion in the composition of two chameleons that “provide a counter drama to the stasis and solemnity of the figure”.¹⁶ One chameleon is perched on the apex of the sculpture, the other moves up the column, tying this supporting element to the whole. These details challenge the ruling order of the composition — and allude to change.

Titled *Swansong of the sausage dog* (Figures 4 & 5), this small work (38 cm high), was commissioned by the University of the Witwatersrand about 1990. It is included in the collections of the university’s Gertrude Posel Gallery.

I modelled the sculpture directly in wax, for casting in bronze. It depicts an enigmatic top-hatted figure jumping a sausage-dog through an impossibly high hoop, a knife and fork held ominously behind his back (figure 5). The work is absurd and obsessive.

¹⁵ Christopher Mee and Antony Spawforth, *Greece, an Oxford Archaeological Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 52-53.

¹⁶ Bruce Arnott, *Artworks in progress: The yearbook of the staff of the Michaelis School of Fine Art*, 5 (Cape Town: Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, 1998): 3.



Figures 4 & 5.¹⁷

My sculpture acknowledges some of the formalisms of Daumier's (1850) figurine of *Ratapail*, the geriatric dandy of the French Comedy in top hat and frock coat. This small bronze sculpture, also modelled directly in the wax, has a fluent expressionistic style that anticipates the work of both Rodin and Medardo Rosso (1858-1928). Daumier's humorous intentions are as craftily delineated in the round as in any of his lithographic caricatures. He also looks back to the drawings of Callot.

Trickster (Figure 6) is a bronze sculpture, 1.4 meters high, mounted on a granite plinth 84 cm high. I made this work for the Department of Psychology at UCT in 1987. It was originally sited in the foyer of the

¹⁷ Bruce Arnott, *Swansong of the sausage dog* [front and back views](1990), bronze, University of the Witwatersrand.

P.D. Hahn building, but was relocated to the courtyard of the Graduate School in Humanities when the department moved in 2001.

This sculpture is linked to a series of *Punch* sculptures. Like the previous piece, it acknowledges the Italian and French Comedies, Callot and Daumier.

The *Trickster* makes specific reference to Alfred Jarry's (appropriated) Ubu character; and to the 'psycho-sexual fantasy of mechanical power', in his absurdist novella *Supermâle*, published in 1902. In that narrative the 'Superman'¹⁸ falls in love with an electric chair – the only device that can satisfy his passions. Jarry's works influenced the Dadaists and the Surrealists, notably Picabia and Duchamp.



Figure 6.¹⁹

¹⁸ Hughes, *The shock of the new*, 51.

¹⁹ Bruce Arnott, *Trickster*, bronze, University of Cape Town (1987).

Cyril Connolly wrote that “Ubu’s appeal, like Mr Punch’s, is universal, he is the Id in action”.²⁰ My *Trickster* sculpture looked to gloss the ambiguous symbolisms of *Ubu* and the *Supermâle*; the quaint monocycle and ineffectual weapon propose to subvert Jarry’s proto-Futurism. The *Trickster* as anti-hero flirts with the monstrous Ubu/Punch.

I remember a wonderful production of *King Ubu* at the Little Theatre in the late 60s; the indelible image — *Ubu*, the butcher, swathed in sausages.

Citizen (Figure 7) is a monumental bronze sculpture, 2.25 meters high, mounted on a stone-clad plinth. It is sited at the entrance to the Johannesburg Art Gallery in Joubert Park. My maquette for this work was an award winning entry to the Johannesburg Centenary Sculpture competition in 1985.



Figure 7.²¹

²⁰ Cyril Connolly, *The Modern Movement* (London: André Deutsch; Hamish Hamilton, 1965): 22-23.

²¹ Bruce Arnott, *Citizen*, bronze, Johannesburg Art Gallery (1978).

The sculpture is an ironic gloss on the *genre* of the heroic monumental statue — in part a response to the paternalism of Anton van Wouw's *Kruger* in Pretoria.

Citizen wears a bowler hat, a morning coat, and a rosette in his lapel. He flourishes his cane and carries a rolled copy of the *Financial Times* under his arm. These are attributes of entrepreneurial power. The figure strides confidently into the future, a tank-like image with rifling on his cigar. *Citizen* is a modern day *condottiere*, without a horse.

In pursuing that simile, it was tempting to quote Verrocchio's *Colleoni* of 1467, but it is too ripely Renaissance for my theme. And, in fact, it has roots in an earlier, distinctly more primitive work of art, Paolo Uccello's *Hawkwood* made in 1436. This 7 meter high fresco, painted by Uccello in the Cathedral in Florence, is a commemorative monument to Sir John Hawkwood, an English professional soldier formerly in the hire of the state. James Beck notes that the painting "is not so much a portrait of a warrior as a portrait of an imagined bronze monument", and that "the *Hawkwood* survives as a powerful image in which Uccello's perspectival interests are united with ideas about reality".²² In citing the Uccello *Hawkwood* my intention is to draw attention to a consummate sculpture encoded in painterly conceits, and to the juicy ironies that can attend the practice of making Art about Art.

Soon after the installation of the *Citizen*, I was informed that the sculpture had elicited an unhappy response from the politicians at Shell House, just up the road. "Come the revolution," they muttered, "that sculpture will be the first thing to go!" They had, it seems, missed the point.

The sculpture is still there, nearly twenty years later. The bronze has acquired a patina of grilled sausage from the street vendors encamped at its feet. The solid brass cane has been regularly liberated by the scrap-metal collectors, and carefully restored by the Gallery, in a reciprocal exchange of wealth and culture that suggests a subliminal understanding of some of its precepts. Perhaps the good spin-doctors

²² John Beck, *Italian Renaissance painting* (Köln: Kröneman, 1999): 87.

have come to admire mercenary daring; and now emulate the merchant princes of Italy - those wily patrons of the Arts.

Plato was disinclined to admit artists to his ideal Republic. Apparently he doubted that art could 'embody and communicate knowledge and truth'.²³ That might have been valid in an age of Postpericlean rhetoric. If we turn to the primitives, however, it is evident that symbolic form can hold and impart profound meaning. *Their* lesson is that the making of art is a celebration of the imagination - a moral, and far from frivolous pursuit.



BRUCE MURRAY ARNOTT, sculptor, was born in Highflats, Kwa-Zulu-Natal and studied at Michaelis School of Fine Art (University of Cape Town) and the Courtauld Institute of Art (London). He worked at the South African National Gallery as Assistant Director and taught at the University of Cape Town where he was a Professor of Fine Art, Director of the Michaelis School of Fine Art, and is a University Life Fellow and Emeritus Professor. He is interested in Western and African art and has published and exhibited mainly in South Africa.



²³ Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 6.