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A Short Guide to Writing about Art

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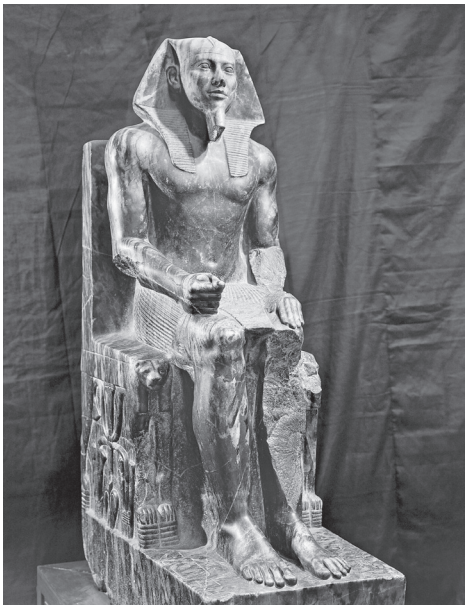

Statue of Khafre. Giza Valley Temple of Khafre. Dynasty 4 c. 2520–2494 B.C. The Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photographer: DeAgostini/SuperStock.

Are certain bodily features or forms distorted? If so, why? (In most African equestrian sculpture, the rider—usually a chief or an ancestor—dwarfs the horse in order to indicate the rider's high status.)

If the sculpture is a bust, what sort of **truncation** (termination of the image) has the sculptor used? Does a straight horizontal line run below the shoulders, or does the bare or draped chest end in a curve in imitation of an ancient bust? Does the sitter's garment establish the termination, perhaps with flowing draperies that lend animation? Or is the termination deliberately irregular, perhaps emphasizing the bust as a work of art rather than as a realistic reproduction of the subject? Does the head seem to emerge from a base of uncarved stone or wood?

What do the **medium** and the **techniques** by which the piece was shaped contribute?* Clay is different from stone or wood, and stone or wood can be rough or they can be polished. Would the statue of Khafre have the same effect if it were in clay instead of in highly polished diorite? Because diorite is hard, it requires a great deal of work to carve it; thus, a statue of

*Media and techniques are lucidly discussed by Nicholas Penny in *The Materials of Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Also useful is a brief treatment, Jane Bassett and Peggy Fogelman, *Looking at European Sculpture: A Guide to Technical Terms* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 1997).

diorite expressed wealth and enduring power. Can one imagine Daniel Chester French's marble statue of Lincoln, in the Lincoln Memorial, done in stainless steel? What are the associations of the material? For instance, early in the twentieth century welded iron suggested heavy-duty industry, in contrast with bronze and marble, which suggested nobility, the classical world, and great wealth. In the late twentieth century, many sculptors used fragile nontraditional material—in a moment we will discuss such a work by Eva Hesse that uses bedsheets and cord—partly to mock the idea that art is precious and enduring. Perhaps the extreme example is Dieter Roth's sculpture made of dirt and rabbit feces at Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum.

Even more important, what is the effect of the **tactile qualities,** for example, polished wood versus terra cotta? Notice that the tactile qualities result not only from the medium but also from the **facture**—that is, the process of working on the medium with certain tools, the manu-*facture* (hand-*making*) of the work. An archaic Greek *kouros* ("youth") may have a soft, warm look not only because of the porous marble but also because of traces left, even after the surface was smoothed with abrasives, by the sculptor's bronze punches and (probably) chisels.

Consider especially the distinction between **carving,** which is subtractive, and **modeling,** which is additive; that is, the difference between cutting away, to release the figure from the stone, wood, or ivory, and, on the other hand, building up or modeling, to create the figure out of a pliable material such as lumps of clay, wax, or plaster.* Rodin's *Walking Man* (see page 221), built up by modeling clay and then cast in bronze, recalls in every square inch of the light-catching surface a sense of the energy that is expressed by the figure. Can one imagine Michelangelo's *David* (see page 86), carved in marble, with a similar surface? Even assuming that a chisel could imitate the effects of modeling, would the surface thus produced catch the light as Rodin's does? And would such a surface suit the pose and the facial expression of *David?*

Compare *King Khafre* (see page 115) with Giovanni da Bologna's *Mercury* (see page 54). *King Khafre* was carved; the sculptor, so to speak, cut away from the block everything that did not look like Khafre. *Mercury* was modeled—built up—in clay or wax and then cast in bronze. The massiveness or stability of *King Khafre* partakes of the solidity of stone, whereas the elegant motion of *Mercury* suggests the pliability of clay, and wax, and the tensile strength of bronze.

In looking at any sculpture depicting a clothed figure, consider the extent to which the **drapery** is independent of the body. Does it express or diminish the **volumes** (enclosed spaces, e.g., breasts, knees) that it covers?

*"Modeling" is also used to refer to the treatment of volumes in a sculpture. Deep modeling, characterized by conspicuous projections and recesses, for instance, in drapery, creates strong contrasts in highlights and shadows. On the other hand, shallow modeling creates a relatively unified surface.

Does it draw attention to specific points of focus, such as the head or hands? Does it indicate bodily motion, or does it provide an independent harmony? What does it contribute to whatever the work expresses? If the piece is a wall or niche sculpture, does the pattern of the drapery help to integrate the work into the façade of the architecture?

What is the effect of **color,** either of the material or of gilding or paint? Is color used for realism or for symbolism? Why, for example, in the tomb of Urban VIII, did Gian Lorenzo Bernini use bronze for the sarcophagus (coffin), the pope, and Death, but white marble for the figures of Charity and Justice? The whiteness of classical stone sculpture is usually regarded as suggesting idealized form (though in fact the Greeks tinted the stone and painted in the eyes), but what is the effect—the emotional resonance—of the whiteness of George Segal's plaster casts (see page 118) of ordinary figures in ordinary situations, in this instance of a man sitting on a real stool and a woman standing beneath a real fluorescent light and behind a real counter, set off by a deep-red panel at the back wall? Blankness? Melancholy? Alienation?

What is the **scale** (size in relation to something else, usually to the subject in real life, or to the viewer)? Obviously the impact of a larger-than-life image differs from the impact of a miniature.

What was the original **location** or **site** or physical context (e.g., a pediment, a niche, a public square)?

Is the **pedestal** or **base** something added by a museum in order to let viewers see the piece, or is it a part of the sculpture (e.g., rocks, or a tree trunk that helps to support the figure), and, if so, is it expressive as well as functional? George Grey Barnard's *Lincoln—the Man,* a bronze figure in a park in Cincinnati, stands not on the tall classical pedestal commonly used for public monuments but on a low boulder—a real one, not a bronze copy—emphasizing Lincoln's accessibility, his down-to-earthness. Almost at the other extreme, the flying *Mercury* (see page 54) stands tiptoe on a gust of wind, and at the very extreme, Marino Marini's *Juggler* is suspended above the base, emphasizing the subject's airy skill.

Notice, too, that some sculpture does not have a base. George Segal's *The Diner* (page 102) is an example of what has come to be called "environmental sculpture," an image or images placed within a specific location. Talking about his own work, Segal said: "What was considered revolutionary about it was taking sculpture off the old plywood box and making it the center of a specifically constructed installation." Similarly, Richard Serra has said that getting rid of the pedestal was "the biggest move of the century." For a sculpture without a pedestal, see the work by Eva Hesse (page 120).

Where is the best place (or where are the best places) to stand in order to experience the work? Do you think that the sculpture is intended to be seen from multiple views, all of which are equally interesting and important? Or is the work strongly oriented toward a single viewpoint, as is the case with a sculpture set within a deep niche? If so, are frontality,

George Segal, *The Diner*. 1964–1966. Plaster, wood, chrome, laminated plastic, masonite, fluorescent lamp, glass, paper. 9 ¾ × 144 ¼ × 96 inches. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Gift of the T. B. Walker Foundation, 1966. Art © The George and Helen Segal Foundation / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

rigidity, and stasis important parts of the meaning? Or does the image seem to burst forward from the niche?* Keep in mind, too, the effect of the location of the work; a freestanding sculpture placed in the middle of a room may seem more active than a sculpture placed against a wall.

How close do you want to get? Why?

A Note on Nonobjective or Nonrepresentational Sculpture. Until the twentieth century, sculpture used traditional materials—chiefly stone, wood, and clay—and was representational, imitating human beings or animals by means of masses of material. Sometimes the masses were created by cutting away (as in stone and wooden sculpture), sometimes they were created by adding on (as in clay sculpture, which then might serve as a model for a work cast in bronze), but in both cases the end result was a representation.

Twentieth-century sculpture, however, is of a different sort. For one thing, it is often made out of industrial products—Plexiglas, celluloid, fluorescent lights, cardboard, brushed aluminum, galvanized steel, wire, and so forth—rather than made out of traditional materials, notably wood, stone, clay, and bronze. Second, instead of representing human beings or animals or

*Many older works of sculpture were placed relatively high, for example in temples and cathedrals. Sometimes the sculptors took account of this placement, elongating the torsos and enlarging the heads so that the figures look "natural" when seen from below. If such a sculpture is placed at eye level, it may seem ineptly carved.

perhaps ideals such as peace or war or death (ideals that in the past were often represented allegorically through images of figures), much twentieth-century sculpture is concerned with creating spaces. Instead of cutting away (carving) or building up (modeling) material to create representational masses, the sculptors join material (**assemblage**)* to explore spaces or movement in space. Unlike traditional sculpture, which is usually mounted on a pedestal, announcing that it is a work of art, something to be contemplated as a thing apart from us, the more recent works we are now talking about may rest directly on the floor or ground, as part of the environment in which we move, or they may project from a wall or be suspended by a wire.

Let's look at a nonrepresentational work, Eva Hesse's *Hang-Up* (1966), shown on page 120. Hesse, who died of a brain tumor in 1970 at the age of thirty-four, began as a painter but then turned to sculpture, and it is for her work as a sculptor that she is most highly regarded. Her materials were not those of traditional sculpture; Hesse used string, balloons, wire, latex-coated cloth, rubber tubing, and other "nonart" materials to create works that (in her words) seem "silly" and "absurd." Only occasionally did Hesse create the sense of mass and sturdiness common in traditional sculpture; usually, as in *Hang-Up,* she creates a sense that fragile things have been put together, assembled only temporarily. In *Hang-Up,* a wooden frame is wrapped with bedsheets, and a half-inch metal tube, wrapped with cord, sweeps out (or straggles out) from the upper right and into the viewer's space, and then returns to the frame at the lower left. The whole, painted in varying shades of gray, has an ethereal look.

Taking a cue from Hesse, who in an interview with Cindy Nemser in *Artforum* (May 1970) said that she tried "to find the most absurd opposites or extreme opposites" and that she wanted to "take order versus chaos, stringy versus mass, huge versus small," we can see an evident opposition in the rigid, rectangular frame and the sprawling wire. There are also oppositions between the hard frame and its cloth wrapping or bandaging, and between the metal tubing and its cord wrapping. Further, there is an opposition or contradiction in a frame that hangs on a wall but that contains no picture. In fact, a viewer at first wonders if the frame *does* contain a panel painted the same color as the wall, and so the mind is stimulated by thoughts of illusion and reality. And although the work does not obviously represent any form found in the real world, the bandaging, the tubing, and perhaps our knowledge of Hesse's illness, may put us in mind of the world of hospitals, of bodies in pain. (The materials that Hesse commonly used, such as latex and fiberglass, often suggest the feel and color of flesh.) In *Hang-Up,* the tube, connected at each end to opposite extremes of the swathed frame, may suggest a life-support system.

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*_Art Journal_ 67.1 (Spring 2008) has several essays on artworks of this kind.