

Sculpture: a visual language

by Raimondo Puccinelli

In their search for order, men try to see in a harmonious, progressive fashion into and around space, moving from the finite to the infinite, or from the infinite to the finite. To evoke symbolic images which are a visual plastic language is the calling of the architect and the sculptor.

Sculpture is often thought of as being architectural while architecture is often thought of as being sculptural. Each is a three-dimensional art of measure, proportion, rhythm, form and space. The two arts have always lived together, the use of sculpture having been a matter of aesthetic necessity. Sculpture and architecture share the great glory of past periods. And in the greatest, these three-dimensional expressions are the incarnation of energy and life containing a human spirit.

However, public sinners in the recent past have included among habitual offenders architects and sculptors – architecture and sculpture being the most public of the arts. Today a college, hotel, office building or a church is often approached and presented in the same manner. Generally flat and of a glacial appearance, there is nothing in the environs or in the shapes to indicate future use or function. Lacking symbols, they seem all of one mould and standardized. In spite of the utility they may serve, they do not touch our imagination. We are without symbols, yet we need them today as much as did ancient cultures.

It is significant that many Americans travel to foreign lands every year. I am sure that their desire to travel is often in order to seek works of art in their own environment – otherwise a trip to a museum at home would suffice. To these thousands the arts are not a strange language that speaks only to the few. It seems that everyone consciously or unconsciously needs to experience artistic expression. “Is art necessary” is not the question at all, but rather “is there enough art in people’s surroundings to fill this universal need?”

Few solid and fundamental ideas have revolutionized the architecture of our time. In the 1800’s, ornament and decoration became tired and decadent; even the brave attempt of “art nouveau” now seems very dated. In fact, ornament and decoration became so decadent that they had to be eliminated, having become a superficial afterthought – a screen for ugly structure. It is well that changes came about. The words “ornament” and “decoration” will have to be completely restudied and reclassified, becoming integrated thought and not after thought.

Ornament which merely decorates surface is a thing of the past. The same is true of stark and puritanical surroundings. Sculpture now is more desirable than ever before. And it is much needed. Its implications are manifold and unmistakable: it serves in multiple ways and modes.

Where an effect would otherwise be dull, the employment of sculpture adds lustre and impressiveness. Variety and dynamics, so much sought after today, are at our disposal in the scope of sculptural language. Serving as an emblem and a symbol, it lends import and consequence to its surroundings. It gives us a tangible approach to meaning and causes us to pause and reflect. As a focal point and as a point of reference in space, sculpture invests us with a sensation of scale relationship and proportion and endows us with well-being. It offers variety in unity as well as contrast to otherwise unbroken mechanistic horizontality and verticality. It accounts to our innermost sensations of both levity and gravity. With a “human touch”, it adds a sense of magnanimity and bountifulness with a minimum of expenditure.

In judging space, we visualize it as including an “object in place” within that space. The ancients realized this. We create space with form; we create form with space: inseparable ideas. Mathematical imagination builds up where we may not expect it. We are geometers when we gauge the world about us, not simply with quantitative but also with qualitative and aesthetic judgment. For centuries, innumerable modes of being have been intertwined with mathematics. The are hidden variants which make up the great arts of mankind. An empty hall becomes completely transformed by the placement of objects in direct and proper relationship to the volume of space. Sculpture, serving as a focal point, will give meaning to space, both symbolically and physically.

A complete sense of this integrated rhythm may be noted in all great periods: the Egyptian with its avenues of sculpture in related surrounding, the Parthenon, or a Baroque church. Our reception of these works is emotional as well as intellectual. Depth becomes a reality, and our imaginations begin to play upon our intuitive sense of the logical and inevitable. Immensity alone cannot give us amplitude and vastness and may lack the magnificence it seeks. A large form surrounded by large forms loses magnitude. We need lesser variable units setting up relationships in order to experience infinity.

We are constantly grappling with visual manifestations and our feeling for kinetics surpasses this discussion when we consider space-time movement senses of the blind. Recently, on a train in Italy I sat across from a blind girl. She was describing in vivid language the beauties of Florence which she had just experienced in terms of form and space. Environment affects us all. One feels different when walking through slums than when walking through a park. We identify ourselves with the world around us, often without realizing that we “feel ourselves into” our surroundings through empathy – imaginatively projecting ourselves.

In medieval and in oriental landscapes we often find what is generally called “inverted perspective” wherein the artist feels himself to be within the scene he is portraying. The result is that we feel ourselves to be within the landscape rather than looking at it from the outside.

In planning our national capital, L’Enfant and Jefferson thought in terms of “symbol”. The Washington Monument is a symbol that keeps alive for Americans the heroic qualities of a man unique in our history. Such a monument gives form to – a visible sign of – invisible qualities more powerful than words. The sculpture of George Washington in front of the old

Treasury Building in New York is another example which intensifies for us the qualities of a great man.

We have few fountains. Yet a well placed fountain changes the entire countenance of an otherwise barren area, the entire site taking on delightful meanings in a new and interesting set of relationships. The dazzling effect of water jetting into the air and dropping rhythmically into a pool evokes the imagination.

The artist and the architect are dedicated in their attitude toward creating an environment which is in scale physically and spiritually. Cultivation of the eye and the understanding mind will lead to a sense of form, thereby nurturing maturity. Knowledge, cognisance, appreciation, awareness, insight and integration of these and other qualities are not mechanically taught. They are learned and acquired in numerous ways. Of instrumental importance is a worthy atmosphere, inspiring thought and learning.

Our society claims great things of us. Economic maturity demands spiritual maturity. We have momentous choices to make and many of these simply cannot be capricious expediences. A serious attitude toward the visual language of the whole of art is a primary requirement for our survival as a civilization.

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with photos of Puccinelli's sculptures: Medea in bronze, Sirena in bronze, Panther in polished black diorite