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Rezensionen

JACQUES DE CASO, *David d'Angers: L'Avenir de la Mémoire*. Paris, Flammarion 1988; 223 pp., 151 illus.

Jacques de Caso provides us with the first modern critical assessment of the remarkable sculptor, David d'Angers (1788—1856). This neglected artist was — as this book convincingly demonstrates — one of the most fertile minds ever to take up the art of sculpture. There has been a need for a modern study of this artist for a very long time. The only significant previous one dates from 1878, namely, Henri Jouin's study of life and works. De Caso does not seek to provide an updated version of Jouin, whose extremely useful text serves as an important resource but suffers from pronounced political and cultural biases (which de Caso analyzes at some length). In his account of

the sculptor, de Caso discusses specific works of art in the context of salient theoretical and critical issues that are pertinent to the art of David as well as to French romantic sculpture in general. He places David's art, and the work of his contemporaries, within the context of cultural history and the history of ideas. An intellectual biography, the book follows David's career principally in chronological order, yet rather than depend upon a standard biographical model, de Caso has organized each chapter conceptually around a set of works and a configuration of ideas. One remarkable and difficult facet of the book is de Caso's writing style which is extraordinarily condensed. Many paragraphs could be expanded into lengthy essays. This type of intellectual richness and intensity presents a challenge to the reader but is well-worth the reader's effort for the illumination it brings to the extremely complex and until now little-explored subject of French sculpture and theory during the romantic period.

One of the principal objectives of this study is to reveal the breadth and range of David's sculptural ideas. To this end de Caso weaves passages of David's writings — many of them published for the first time — into discussions of his visual works and demonstrates the contrapuntal relationship between text and sculpture in the art of David. He justifiably attends to the hitherto completely neglected written works of David d'Angers who was an outstanding writer (praised by Delacroix for his eloquence). The range and quality of the ideas expressed in the sculptor's articles, letters and notebooks, are nothing short of astonishing (de Caso justly calls attention to the serious flaws of the transcriptions of the artist's texts published by Jouin and Bruel).

Because of his interest in theory as well as practice, de Caso examines the 18th-century sources that informed the art of David and of an entire generation of French romantic sculptors. In particular, he emphasizes the importance of the developing social, cultural and political uses of public sculpture and its didactic function as a form of mass communication. De Caso convincingly defines the public monument as a political sign embodying a plethora of cultural as well as aesthetic ideas and ideals. And he traces the emerging independence of sculptors in the late 18th century vis-à-vis the public monument. Major issues in the public monument during this period concerned who was to be commemorated and how. In particular, D'Angiviller's important commission for the series of "Grands hommes" in the 1770's engendered debates that go to the heart of neoclassical and romantic theory and practice, especially those related to classical nudity versus costume (and, by extension, naturalism versus the ideal). De Caso examines in some detail the impact of these debates on the theory and practice of romantic sculpture, offering David d'Angers as a paradigmatic example for the understanding of these issues.

In his examination of the 18th-century background, de Caso also discusses a number of important and influential texts concerned with the cult of the statue, including those of Diderot and Falconet. We might expect to learn of the importance of these authors, but, in addition, de Caso reveals an unexpected source, Octave de Guasco's neglected and highly eccentric study, *De l'usage des statues chez les anciens* (Paris, 1768), a work that helped to redefine public sculpture during the neoclassical and romantic period.

Of necessity de Caso uses late 18th-century developments as a background for the evolution of romantic sculpture. His condensed examination, however, serves to signal

the importance of this fascinating and complex transitional moment in French sculpture which merits a full-length study in its own right (the traditional term "neoclassical" used to define this period is too restrictive and falsifies our understanding of the complex developments in sculpture of this time). The great diversity in subject matter and style found in the works of eminent sculptors of this period such as Houdon, Julien and Pajou, among others, needs to be studied in the context of the fervent and often vehement critical responses to "modern" works exhibited at the Salons as well as in relation to the theoretical writings on ancient art by prominent archaeologists and critics such as Quatremère de Quincy and Emeric-David, who established opposing ideals and objectives and who directed their discourse to an audience of contemporary artists. A number of sculptors dramatically transformed the style in which they worked in response to new ideas in sculptural theory. A remarkable and inexplicably neglected development in French sculpture circa 1800 is that of classical realism, a stylistic direction profoundly influenced by a resurgent interest in anatomy and physiology. A pronounced emphasis on anatomical accuracy in figures inspired by classical sources would lead to very important developments in the art of David d'Angers and his contemporaries.

Remarkably, one of the most important figures for the development of classical realism in late 18th and early 19th-century French sculpture was Jacques-Louis David. His crucial role in the propaedeutics of painting and sculpture at the Institut and his self-conscious and direct impact on early romantic sculpture have not yet been examined. J.-L. David was a mentor to David d'Angers who studied in his atelier, and to several other romantic sculptors of the same generation, such as Rude. David d'Angers, who remained fervently devoted to Louis David throughout his career, was a direct heir to many of his aesthetic and political ideas. De Caso is the first to emphasize the critical importance of Louis David for David d'Angers and his contemporaries, principally through the impact of Louis David's project for a monument to the French people, a work whose legacy to 19th-century romantic sculpture and theory was profound. De Caso describes the project's importance during the 1830's and he relates its influence to the development of "statuomanie".

In his examination of the salient moments of David d'Angers' student career, de Caso makes a compelling case for the sculptor's sojourn at the French Academy in Rome as a crucial period of germination for ideas he would later develop. He appositely contrasts certain of David d'Angers' early artistic choices with those of Canova and of his exact contemporaries and schoolmates — Rude and Pradier — who, together with David constitute the most significant artists of the first generation of French romantic sculptors. These sculptors, who developed in remarkably diverse directions, exemplify the diapason of thematic and stylistic possibilities encompassed by romantic sculpture. Pradier, for example, represents the opposite extreme from David, for he devoted his entire career to sculpting principally what David would refuse to depict — namely, mythological themes. De Caso examines the emphasis on mythic subjects in romantic sculpture, which David would almost completely reject (one of the most eloquent examples he uses is Bra's neglected masterpiece, *Ulysses*). This discussion could be expanded even further for David d'Angers, in his rejection of myth, profoundly opposed a principal direction in the art of his time. Mythological themes, in fact, dominated

sculpture as well as painting in works exhibited at the Salons during the first two decades of the 19th century. This sudden and remarkable resurgence of mythic subjects remains to be examined. Artists drew inspiration from certain types of mythic themes which were being reinterpreted in the intellectual discourse of the time, especially those which seemed to have a particular relevance or message for the modern individual. This message, which was interpreted by archaeologists, mythographers, art critics, aestheticians and writers of all categories as well as painters and sculptors, had to do with the communicative force of myth for modern experience. The power of myth was defined in terms of its symbolic simplicity and elemental content. Myth revealed the essential truths of human nature and development and expressed an entire range of problems, conflicts, emotions and ideas inherent in the human condition.

Why did David d'Angers excise the mythic subject from his work precisely at the height of its reevaluation? This self-conscious decision was related to particular philosophical and aesthetic objectives described in his writings and realized in his sculpted oeuvre. As de Caso demonstrates, David decided to dedicate his career to the creation of a "mythologie moderne" in which he commemorated illustrious individuals who offered moral and didactic contributions to the ameliorization of civilization. The sculptor created his own pantheon of about thirty monumental statues, one hundred busts and seven hundred medallions of modern heroic individuals. De Caso explores selected examples, beginning with the sculptor's first public commission, the highly controversial, indubitable masterpiece, the *Grand Condé*. Executed for the Restoration's program for the Pont de la Concorde, this colossal figure announces many of the future directions of David's art in terms of iconography, composition and style but also in terms of his continual conflicts with the political and artistic conservatism of those who commissioned public sculpture. Experimentation and diversity characterize David's subsequent monuments in the 1820's, including the highly personal, almost autobiographical monument to General Bonchamps, the ecclesiastical tomb of Fénelon and the innovative figures of Racine and Corneille.

De Caso emphasizes the predominant political motivations that inform many of these works. He uses the colossal funerary monument to General Foy, 1826, as a paradigmatic example of the political engagement of David's art and describes how it functioned polemically as a political statement whose impact was analogous to that of literature and the press. A principal objective of this study is to analyze the ardent republicanism of David which was particularly evident in his artistic choices for the extremely controversial pediment of the Pantheon, begun in 1830. De Caso recounts in detail David's ideological conflict with the July Monarchy which commissioned the pediment and his resistance to governmental pressure concerning its iconographical program which was to represent the achievements, legacy and historiography of the French Revolution. In the course of his analysis he also examines the significant stylistic innovations brought to its monumental relief format. Indeed, throughout the book, de Caso addresses the importance of the relief in David's art and he emphasizes in particular the sculptor's idiosyncratic use of this genre in the pedestals of his major monuments. He demonstrates that the relief forms a stylistic, iconographic and thematic counterpoint to the effigy of the "hero" sculpted in the round. The self-conscious

stylistic "primitivism" of David's reliefs, as de Caso reveals, is directly related to a specific didactic function which he assigns to this genre. A system of signs akin to folk art and inspired by the fetishism of "primitive" cultures, expressed in sculptures found in Bretagne, Tahiti and Easter Island, the relief is intended to communicate directly with the "people" and to constitute, therefore, an art that is truly democratic, legible and accessible to all. David's valuation of the primitive, in fact, anticipates by several decades that of Gauguin and his contemporaries who will turn to many of the same sources for inspiration.

The book concludes with an exploration of a wide variety of questions and problems. These include an account of David's innovations in religious sculpture and the sculpted group, his unusual private monuments and his fascinating corpus of drawings whose function and relationship to his sculpted oeuvre are akin to his literary production in terms of an elaboration of ideas and thematic possibilities in art. De Caso compares David's extraordinary, visionary drawings to those of an extremely strange, original and neglected sculptor of the period, Théophile Bra. Bra's highly eccentric and astonishingly modern looking "automatic" drawings and writings, which de Caso relates to a romantic interest in semiology, also constitute a body of work independent from his sculpted oeuvre. This brief discussion of romantic semiology is extremely rich and provocative for semiological interests are grounds on which David and Bra can meet. Semiological concepts, in fact, permeate the writings of David who was influenced considerably by European romantic literature concerned with the mystical hieroglyphics of nature (his attraction for and contact with Germany, virtually unique in France during this period, attests to this).

The concluding chapter further serves to emphasize what I believe to be one of the book's principal achievements. This study is much more than a major re-evaluation of the neglected master David d'Angers. It serves as a profound study of romantic sculpture in France (almost half of the works that appear in the text are illustrated for the first time) and it firmly demonstrates that sculpture was a major component of French romanticism. This brilliant book will remain an indispensable resource and inspiration for all future scholars of this most fascinating period.

Dorothy Johnson

Varia

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Sina Hofmann. Figuren und Köpfe. Malerei, Objekte, Arbeiten auf Papier. Ausst. Kat. Galerie Verein Berliner Künstler, Berlin, 8. 8.—30. 8. 1990, mit zahlr. Farb- u. s/w Abb.

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