

“Those [who were inclined to express and represent... the bodies brought forth by nature] would at times observe in tree trunks, clumps of earth or other objects of this sort, certain outlines [*lineamenta*] which through some light changes could be made to resemble a natural shape.”

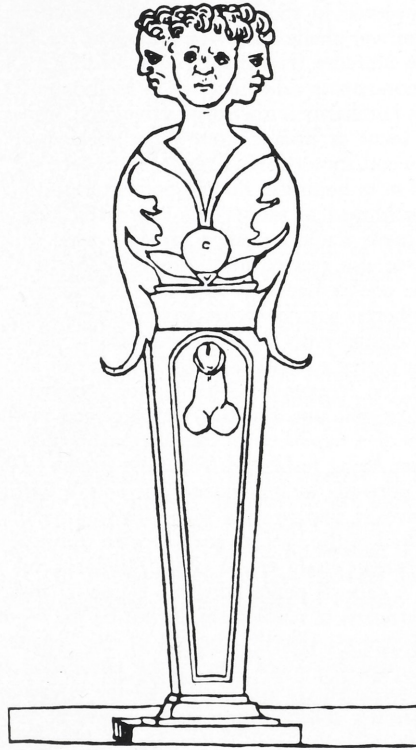
L.B. Alberti, *De Statua*¹

Art historians sometimes follow trends in contemporary art. Modern artists' interest in spontaneously created images and *objets trouvés* for instance, has attracted the attention to the antecedents of this practice. Gombrich has shown that the practice of cloud painting based on amorphous inkblots can be traced to various antique authors' observations of the shapes of clouds and to Leonardo's practical advice on the inspiration which a painter may draw not only from clouds and muddy waters but also from damp stains on a wall.² The late Professor Janson associated these *precetti* with Alberti's introduction to his treatise on sculpture, where he suggests that its mimetic tendency (i.e., the pursuit of human likeness) originated in the primitive sculptors' discovery of seemingly anthropomorphic shapes in tree trunks and clods of earth.³ Although this remarkable theory had some repercussions in contemporary painting, most notably in the forms of ancient trees among which Piero di Cosimo set his scenes from the “early history of man”⁴, the parallel between the essentially flat accidental images referred to by Leonardo and Alberti's *objets trouvés* is by no means evident, since in fact they involve different kinds of perceptual phenomena.

The visual perception of imaginary shapes in clouds and stained walls is basically a mental illusion that may be explained as a Gestalt effect⁵ while Alberti's observation on the anthropomorphic shapes of trees and clods of earth anticipates the theory of the beholder's empathy with three-dimensional objects. The haptic experience which may be reinforced by a “set” of intentions and expectations, is described as a spontaneous enrichment of cognitive impressions by subjective data drawn from the repertory of the beholder's earlier physical sensations.⁶ The effect, said to be especially noticeable in sculpture, also occurs in non-artistic contexts. The concept of empathy, originally defined as intuitive projection of the beholder's inner sensations upon an inanimate object (*Einfühlung* or “feeling into”), was in fact proposed by the German philosopher Theodor Lipps as an explanation of the spectator's animistic apprehension of non-representational forms.⁷

The empathy-like perception of human appearances in stones and tree trunks is so common an experience that one can easily suppose that it was familiar to Alberti. The haptic suggestiveness of natural rock formations seems already to have been exploited by prehistoric cave artists⁸ while the evolution of the so-called primitive art styles, especially in African sculpture, is intimately related to the inherent form of tree trunks. This influence is most strongly evident in the ancestral posts that were normally carved out of freshly felled trees (before the wood hardenes)⁹, but the fact that such sculptures were sometimes found in groves implies the use of living trees. Though the wooden memorials are seldom more than a few decades old, their adherence to a venerable tradition is confirmed by much older stone fetishes whose trunk-like forms imply that they follow ancient wooden prototypes.¹⁰ Alberti's theory of the role played by trees in the history of sculpture is also supported by the stylistic analysis of early Greek statuary, suggesting that as with the African fetishes, figures carved in marble were copied from earlier models carved in wood (*xoana*).¹¹ However, since Alberti's knowledge of antique sculpture was presumably restricted to Roman art (or Roman copies of Hellenistic statues)¹² one must infer that his concept of the earliest representational sculpture evolving from tree trunks was not derived from Archaic or other types of primitive wooden sculpture.

Like all humanists Alberti relied on classical literature to broaden his perspective of antique art, but the seminal role that he attributes to natural *objets trouvés* diverges from the more rationalistic opinions of the classic authors. Quintilian and Pliny ascribed the evolution of artistic mimicry to the copying of cast shadows, a procedure that according to Pliny was also the source of sculptorial realism (*N.H.* 35:151-152). Alberti's concept of the wooden origins of sculpture may however be related to another text in Pliny, who in discussing of the various kinds of trees, says that in primitive country places a tree of exceptional height may be dedicated to a god, and that the oldest images of the deities were carved from trees (*N.H.* 12:1). Janson suggested that Alberti's theory was the result of an arbitrary association of Pliny's information about the antiquity of wooden sculpture with the same writer's remark on the suggestiveness of clouds (*N.H.* 2:61).¹³ He also pointed out that the humanistic interest in chance images is reflected in some clouds painted by Mantegna¹⁴, while a more direct reference to suggestive tree trunks may be seen in an anthropomorphic tree, perhaps representing Daphne in the role of *Mater Virtutum* in the same artist's “Expulsion of Vices from the Grove of Virtue”.¹⁵ The arboreal personification of Virtue is also related to a *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* woodcut ascribed to the school of



1 A. Mantegna (?), Monster Roughly Carved in Wood. Woodcut, in: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Venice 1499.

Mantegna, showing classical nymphs metamorphosed into trees.¹⁶ The famous humanistic textbook, which according to some scholars, is the final version of an earlier draft inspired by Alberti and presumably composed at the time when he was writing his treatise on sculpture¹⁷, may therefore provide some additional insight into the origins of Alberti's concept of the evolution of primitive statuary.

The strong impact of Alberti's enthusiastic study of the Antique is very obvious in the *Hypnerotomachia* illustrations, many of which depict imaginary classical monuments.¹⁸ One of these is a woodcut showing a squared shaft with an "ithyphallic sign" supporting a three headed bust adorned with acanthus leaves which, according to the text, represents "a gilt monster roughly carved in wood" (Fig. 1).¹⁹ Although the term monster (*monstro*), means a fantastic or irrational apparition, in the Renaissance it was frequently used as a synonym for a primitive pagan idol. As such it recalls prophet Isaiah's passionate diatribe against idolatry, where he describes a "carpenter" who having carefully selected a cedar, a cypress or an oak, fashions it into "a graven image after a figure of man" which he then beseeches as his protector (*Is.* 44:33ff.).

A humanist would no doubt associate Isaiah's description with the criticism of idolatry in one of Horace's *Satires* where a sacred statue declares: "Once upon a time I was a fig-wood stem, a worthless log, when a carpenter doubtful whether to make me [into] a stool or a Priapus, chose that I be god."²⁰ The fashioning of a priapic idol out of a fig tree, a traditional emblem of fecundity, whose soft wood is easy to carve, suggests a primitive type of sculpture. The god who in remote antiquity was worshipped in tree trunks roughly hewn into a body²¹ was even believed to have the capacity of transforming human beings into trees. According to Ovid, he exercised his power turning nymph Lotis into a tree (*Met.* 9:355ff.).

The "archaic" character of the *Hypnerotomachia* "monster" is implied by the three heads, which probably allude to its apotropaic intent²², but its composite structure recalls the memorials which the Romans erected to commemorate famous writers and philosophers, setting their effigies, sometimes with two faces facing in opposite directions, on vertical shafts that seem like incomplete human bodies lacking arms and feet. The shafts

commemorating male personages sprouted in the middle, a male member which in antiquity was considered a vestige of a pre-classical (i.e., primitive) phallic cult. The author of the *Hypnerotomachia* alludes (on the same page) to a Greek herm dedicated to Mercury (Hermes), who according to classical writers was associated with Priapus and venerated by phallic monuments called *hermae* in his honour.²³ The tapering shaft in the *Hypnerotomachia* illustration even suggests familiarity with a distinctive type of marble herm which in the Renaissance was sometimes represented as the focus of priapic rites²⁴, but the fact that the description explicitly states that the “monster” was carved in wood shows that Alberti, or the later writer who used his draft, must have been aware that before their adoption in honorific Roman portraiture primitive wooden herms vaguely reminiscent of the human body were worshipped as idols. This idea is to some extent supported by the fact that in Italian the truncated body of a herm would be called *tronco* (trunk) which means both a human torso and a tree trunk.²⁵ Wooden columns were also erected to Dionysus, whose myth features various phallic allusions, including a fig tree phallus that the god consecrated to mark his resurrection.²⁶ The legend was later evoked in Dionysian rites by decorating his herms with branches and greenery. Representations of such herms in Greek vase painting (Fig. 2)²⁷ have some affinity with the *Hypnerotomachia* illustration where the “antique” foliage presumably alludes to the ithyphallic statue’s association with the cult of anthropomorphic trees. All this allows one to contend that the author of the *Hypnerotomachia* not only recognized in the hybrid form of Roman herms a vestige of a pre-classical tree cult but also that he perceived in the seemingly incomplete bodies of the marble monuments a suggestion of a hypothetical transformation of trees into human figures. Thus when Alberti wrote about primitive statues being fashioned from tree trunks he had the antique herms in mind — in the hybrid form of the Roman portraits he recognized not only a vestige of the primordial tree cult but also an artistic formula that preserves a vestige of a suggestive natural form from which it evolved.

Since the role which Alberti ascribed to the evocativeness of tree trunks arose from his observation of surviving Roman herms together with a careful study of the classical writers, his aethiological theory of the origins of sculpture may be recognized as a case of penetrating art historical insight, or rather as creative empathy motivated not by the chance suggestiveness of natural objects but by the cognitive “set” of intellectual curiosity about an unusual type of antique statuary. Alberti’s concept of the “chance image” was therefore essentially different from Leonardo’s practical *precetti* — not only is the perception of imaginary forms in tree trunks an empathic-like experience rather than a merely visual one, but the reference to tree trunks was itself inspired by works of art. Further, since Alberti’s observation was not meant to be used in actual artistic practice, it also differs from the modern artists’ effective use of spontaneously created images and *objets trouvés*.



2 Villa Giulia Painter, Dionysian Cult Scene. Greek vase painting, 450 B.C. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts (after Buckert [n. 23], Fig. 8).

NOTES

- ¹ The English version is quoted from *H.W. Janson*, *The Image Made by Chance in Renaissance Thought*, in: *M. Meiss* (ed.), *De Artibus Opuscula*, XL Essays in Honour of Erwin Panofsky, New York 1961, vol. I, p. 254. For the original Latin and a somewhat different translation, see: *C. Grayson* (ed.), *L. B. Alberti: "On Painting" and "On Sculpture"*, London 1972, pp. 121-122.
- ² *E.H. Gombrich*, *The Image in the Clouds*, in: *Art and Illusion*, London 1962, pp. 154ff. For Leonardo's texts see: *A.P. McMahon* (ed.), *Treatise on Painting*, Codex Urbinas Latinus 1270, Princeton 1956, vol. I, pp. 50 (35v), 59 (33v). Leonardo's remarks may also be compared with a modern interpretation of the viewer's apprehension of imaginary objects in non-representative pictorial compositions, cf. *H. Kreitler*, *On the Psychology of Tachism*, in: *Keshet*, vol. 2, 1960, pp. 82-85 (Hebrew); also in German: *Bilder die der Beschauer malt*, *Forum*, vol. 7, 1960, p. 300-302.
- ³ *Janson* (n. 1). A contemporary but substantially different interest in the evocativeness of natural objects is also shown by Cennino Cennini, who advised painters to use stones as models for the representation of mountains, cf. *D.V. Thompson, Jr.* (ed.), *Cennino d'Andrea Cennini: The Craftsman's Handbook: The Italian 'Il Libro dell'Arte'*, New York n.d., p. 57. On the humanistic interest in *objets trouvés* see also: *N. Dolev*, *Such Shaping Phantasies: The Found Object in the Thought and Practice of the Late Renaissance*, in: *L. Sleptzoff* (ed.), *Norms and Variations in Art: Essays in Honour of Moshe Barasch*, Jerusalem 1983, pp. 104-129.
- ⁴ The Worcester Art Museum *Discovery of Honey and The Misfortunes of Silenus* in the Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Mass., both dated 1498, cf. *Janson* (n. 1), p. 261. On the anthropological content of these paintings see: *E. Panofsky*, *The Early History of Man in Two Cycles of Paintings by Piero di Cosimo*, in: *Studies in Iconology*, New York 1972, p. 52, pls. XVII, XVIII.
- ⁵ On Gestalt effects in pictorial imagery see: *R. Arnheim*, *Art and Visual Perception*, London 1969, p. 7 *et passim*; and *H. and S. Kreitler*, *Psychology of the Arts*, Durham, N.C. 1972, pp. 80-108.
- ⁶ On the various aspects of empathy see: *Kreitler* (n. 5), pp. 264-281.
- ⁷ *T. Lipps*, *Aesthetik: Psychologie des Schönen und der Kunst*, 2 vols., Hamburg/Leipzig 1903-1906, vol. I, p. 117; vol. II, p. 295 *et passim*. See also: *id.*, *Empathy, Inner Imitation and Sense-Feeling*, in: *M. Rader* (ed.), *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, New York 1966, pp. 374-384, and *Arnheim* (n. 5), p. 427.
- ⁸ The role of evocative chance rock formations in prehistoric art has been noted by *H. Kubn*, *Die Felsbilder Europas*, Stuttgart 1959, pp. 32f., and *P. Graziosi*, *L'arte dell'antica età di pietra*, Florence 1956, p. 274, pls. 267-273.
- ⁹ Formost examples are the vigango monuments of the Majikenda in Kenya and Tanzania, cf. *W. Gillon*, *A Short History of African Art*, Harmondsworth 1986, pp. 326f., Fig. 238. See also *J.C. Goodale, J.D. Koss*, *The Cultural Content of Creativity Among Tiwi*, in: *C.M. Otten* (ed.), *Anthropology and Art*, Garden City, N.Y. 1971, pp. 187-190, pl. 9. The rigid stance of the sculptures reflects the use of vertical trunks, in some cases however, a twisted tree trunk may result in a *figura serpentinata*, cf. *F. Willett*, *African Art*, London 1985, p. 106, Fig. 95.
- ¹⁰ *Willett* (n. 9), p. 50, Fig. 28.
- ¹¹ The primitive wooden statues ascribed to the legendary sculptor Dedalus were also known as *daidala*. On the transition from wood to stone carving see: *G.M.A. Richter*, *The Sculpture and Sculptors of the Greeks*, New Haven 1950, p. 135, and *S. Adam*, *The Technique of Greek Sculpture*, London 1966, p. 3.
- ¹² On antique sculptures which were available to Renaissance artists see: *F. Haskell*, *Taste of the Antique*, New Haven/London 1981; *E. Pogany-Balas*, *The Influence of Antique Monumental Sculptures on the Great Masterpieces of the Renaissance*, Budapest 1980, and, more recently, *P.P. Bober, R. Rubinstein*, *Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture*, London 1986, *passim*.
- ¹³ *Janson* (n. 1), p. 255.
- ¹⁴ The best example is the cloud representing "a horseman" in St. Sebastian (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), discussed by *Janson* (n. 1), p. 262, and in *R. Lightbrown*, *Mantegna*, Oxford 1986, pp. 43-45.
- ¹⁵ The hybrid tree-woman was presumably related to the humanistic interpretation of Daphne as "virtue", cf. *Janson* (n. 1), p. 259, Fig. 1. On the painting's historical context see: *Lightbrown* (n. 14), p. 102.
- ¹⁶ *G. Pozzi, L.A. Ciapponi* (eds.), *Francesco Colonna: Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, 2 vols., Padua 1980, vol. I, p. 166.

- ¹⁷ Francesco Colonna is said to have been responsible only for the 1499 *editio princeps* published in Venice by Aldus Mantius. The Hypnerotomachia authorship has been questioned by various scholars, who have suggested that the text was originally written by somebody else. The names which have been mentioned in this context include, besides Alberti, also Eliseo Giani, Giovanni Campano, Pico della Mirandola, Lorenzo de' Medici and another Francesco Colonna who was the Roman prince of Palestrina and Zagarolo; cf. Pozzi, in *Pozzi/Ciapponi* (n. 16), vol. II, p. 3. One of the hypotheses states that the first, presumably Latin, draft was composed about 1467 by an anonymous humanist, tentatively identified with "Polyphilo", whose work may subsequently have been elaborated by Alberti. According to another version "Polyphilo" is the pseudonym of Alberti's friend Cardinal Prospero Colonna, but the text itself is a result of a collaboration between three erudite authors: Leon Battista Alberti, Lorenzo de' Medici and Prince Francesco Colonna; cf. E. Kretzulesco-Quaranta, *Les Jardins du Songe*, Paris 1976, pp. 418-425. Alberti died in 1472, his unfinished treatise on sculpture is now considered as later than his books on painting (written in 1435) and architecture (1452) and is tentatively dated to the middle sixties (1464?). See: M. Picchio-Simmonelli, On Alberti's Treatises on Art and Their Chronological Relationship, in: *Italian Studies Annual*, Toronto 1971, quoted by F. Borsi, *Leon Battista Alberti*, Oxford 1975, p. 304.
- ¹⁸ In addition to Mantegna, or perhaps his workshop, the illustrations have been ascribed to various Renaissance artists including Botticelli, Bertoldo di Giovanni, Leonardo and also Alberti himself, cf. *Kretzulesco-Quaranta* (n. 17), p. 421.
- ¹⁹ "...Uno monstro rudemente exciso in ligno et inaurato, effigiato humano vestito dal tricapo fina alla diaphragma solamente; il residuo, in quadrato acuminantise alla parte infernate demigrava in una gulatura basiale cum uno lastrello cum una antiqua foliatura nel sito brachiale, cum uno pomo al pecto; et nel medio dil quadrato nella parte piu lata appareva lo ithyphallico signo..." in: *Pozzi/Ciapponi* (n. 16), vol. I, p. 338.
- ²⁰ "Olim truncus eram ficulnus inutile lignum cum faber, incertus scamnum facersene Priapum malruit esse deum; deus inde ego..." (Sat. I. 8.1-2), English translation by H. Rushton Fairclough, Horace, Cambridge, Mass. 1947, p. 97. *Editio princeps* of Horace printed in Italy about 1470, was followed by several 16th cent. versions, see: *Rushton Fairclough*, p. xxii. For a commentary of Horace's satire see: N. Rudd, *The Satires of Horace*, Cambridge, Mass. 1966, pp. 67ff. On the comparison between the texts of Isaiah and Horace see: M. Barasch, *Theories of Art from Plato to Winkelmann*, New York 1985, p. 49.
- ²¹ On the cult of Priapus see: H. Herter, *De Priapo*, Giessen 1932, pp. 351ff., and H.J. Rose, s.v. Priapus, in: *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Oxford 1984. See also *Rudd* (n. 20), p. 68.
- ²² Anth. graec. IV:234, cf. *Pozzi/Ciapponi* (n. 16), vol. II, p. 221, n. 4. A three-headed personification depicted by Pisanello on the reverse of his medal of Lionello d'Este dated to 1440-1444, has been interpreted as an allegory of Prudence, or as "a defender of peace and prosperity", cf. G.F. Hill, G. Pollard, *Renaissance Medals*, London 1967, p. 8, cat. 6.
- ²³ H. Marwitz, s.v. "Hermae", in: *Der Kleine Pauly*, Munich 1979, vol. 2, p. 1065; P. Devambez, s.v. "Hermae", *A Dictionary of Ancient Greek Civilization*, London 1970, p. 235; see also H.J. Rose, C.M. Robertson, s.v. "Hermes", in: *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. According to Herodotus (2.51) this type of monument was imported into Athens from the Pelasgians. Modern scholars have compared herms with the Babylonian boundary posts (*kudurru*), cf. W. Buckert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, Berkeley 1983, p. 58.
- ²⁴ One of the *Hypnerotomachia* woodcuts depicts a priapic sacrifice of an ass before a phallic herm, described in the text as *rude simulacro del hortulano custode*, which alludes to Priapus as guardian of gardens, cf. *Pozzi/Ciapponi* (n. 16), vol. I, pp. 188f. The text refers to the herm as *Iano* (Janus) implying some familiarity with two-headed Roman herms, which were known to Renaissance artists, see: E. Mandowsky, C. Mitchell, *Pirro Ligorio's Roman Antiquities*, London 1963, pp. 87-88, cat. 71-81. A similar herm also appears in Pirro Ligorio's sketches of a pseudo-antique gem with a scene of a priapic cult, cat. 140-140.
- ²⁵ The association between human and tree trunks and the *tronci* mentioned in Alberti's treatise on sculpture, has been proposed as an explanation of Mantegna's allegory of Virtue; cf. *Janson* (n. 1), pp. 259f. The association between fig trees and ityphallic idols also survives in the Italian *fare la fica*, an obscene gesture of a closed fist with the thumb tucked between the first and second fingers. On the cognizance of the expression in the Renaissance see: J.A. Phillips, Michelangelo's Eve in the Sistine 'Temptation', in: M.M. Gedo (ed.), *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art*, 3, 1088, pp. 24-27.
- ²⁶ Although Dionysus himself was never represented as ityphallic the phallus was carried as his symbol in the "phallophoria", cf. *Buckert* (n. 23), p. 235, and N.M. Persson Nilsen et al., s.v. Dionysus, in: *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.
- ²⁷ A red figure stamnos by the Villa Giulia painter, 450 B.C., Boston Museum of Fine Arts, cf. *Buckert* (n. 23), p. 235, fig. 7.