

# Jacques Lipchitz

## A life in sculpture

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public intégré à son environnement. Mais aussi ce concept est apparu de façon définitive pour des raisons d'unicité de structure, dont l'essentiel se compose de trois parties, soit deux verticales et une horizontale, elles-mêmes génératrices de multiples interprétations symboliques. Portes de villes murées, de territoires délimités dans le temps et l'espace, où des hommes se sont protégés contre l'inconnu. Puis portes isolées dans la Cité après la destruction de ses murs d'enceinte. Portes et Arcs de tous les triomphes, ceux de Titus, de Septime Sévère, de Constantin, et l'Arc quadrifrons dit de Janus, et les Portes d'Asie, de Chine et de Corée. Porte de l'enfer romantique et du désespoir de Rodin. Porte cubiste et décorative de Brancusi, et toutes ces portes grandes ou petites, ouvertes ou fermées, auxquelles nous sommes chaque jour confrontés, portes innombrables et toujours présentes.

Le Symposium de Sculpture de Nagyatád possède un caractère de manifestation internationale et le grand nombre d'œuvres qui y furent réalisées depuis quinze ans en font un haut lieu de l'histoire de la sculpture pour cette période. Cependant, nous croyons que le choix de l'emplacement du parc de sculptures ne répond pas à des critères adéquats de présentation. Situé à environ deux milles de Nagyatád, l'ensemble est en dehors des grandes voies de communication et surtout d'un centre dynamique qui justifierait un tel regroupement de sculptures. Ainsi, l'endroit étant très peu publicisé n'attire qu'un nombre restreint de visiteurs. On a alors l'impression que ces œuvres de qualité ayant été placées là, au hasard, ne peuvent générer d'échanges culturels durables.

Pourtant depuis quelques années, une nouvelle solution fut mise de l'avant, plus vivante, plus dynamique et qui consiste à placer les nouvelles sculptures dans la ville même de Nagyatád, dans des lieux publics où le sculpteur est invité à tenir compte de certaines contraintes d'espace. Cette approche est à notre avis la meilleure. Les œuvres n'étant plus isolées participent à la vie urbaine. Ponctuant les espaces, elles sont les points de repère de toutes les circulations. Placées dans un parc, à un carrefour, ou s'intégrant à l'espace d'édifices, ces sculptures ont une meilleure facilité d'accès, leur présentation étant planifiée pour plus de visibilité. D'autre part, le bois qui est le matériau employé demande un entretien permanent, et une approche technique pour sa conservation est d'en peindre les surfaces comme on le fait pour toutes les parties extérieures en bois d'une maison. Laisse sans protection le bois ne résistera pas aux intempéries. Plusieurs sculptures réalisées en chêne il y a une dizaine d'années sont gravement détériorées et l'on observe le même phénomène de dégradation sur d'autres essences. Malgré les vernis et les huiles employés à l'origine, le bois devient avec le temps d'un gris plus ou moins uniforme, ramenant les ensembles à une grisaille terne et monotone. Pourtant, la polychromie intégrée à la sculpture agit à la fois sur la plastique et la longévité de l'œuvre.

Nous retiendrons de ce séjour hongrois de cinq semaines qu'il fut une magnifique occasion de réaliser une œuvre monumentale. Durant ce séjour, il y eut des échanges riches avec les sculpteurs participants et visiteurs mais aussi avec une population hautement raffinée et intéressée à l'art depuis toujours. ♦

# JACQUES LIPCHITZ; A LIFE IN SCULPTURE

THE ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO

John K. Grande

Jacques Lipchitz is a paradoxical sculptor, one whose work has at all times confounded critics and historians. Part of the reason for this is his unmitigated individualism, and the complete absence, later in his life, of any relation to contemporary developments in sculpture.

The current retrospective, curated by Alan Wilkinson, is the most comprehensive since the 1972 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Spanning over 60 years of this prodigious sculptors' career, it is rambling and eclectic, an attempt by its curator to redress a much maligned reputation.

Sir Roland Penrose once commented that Cubism was «a movement among painters towards the sculptors three-dimensional problems». The succinct sculptural evidence of these intentions were evident in Picasso's *Head of a Woman* (1909), the first Cubist sculpture, and in Boccioni's *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1913) which contain a directness, a pure vitality of artistic exploration that we find in the most integral Cubist painting of the period. One of the problems of finding a historic relevance for Lipchitz' early work is precisely that it epitomizes the language of Cubism, but exclusively through sculpture. There is a reductive feeling to much of his work, as though the artist learned the style without discovering it, adapted it without exploring it, using it as a kind of aesthetic Esperanto.

While for Juan Gris, with whom he worked in close association between 1916 and 1922, sculpture was seen as a part of the painterly exploration, for Lipchitz it was his main art. In looking at the fine selection of Lipchitz' early works on view, we feel that he drew from Cubist prototypes in painting for his style, applying Picasso's persuasive regimen with a pedantic, almost academic caution. Perhaps, Lipchitz' sentiment for Picasso's new dimensional vocabulary was at odds with the primeval expressionist forces at work beneath this layering of Cubist style that Lipchitz adapted to the universal, human themes of joy and suffering that would preoccupy him for his entire career. In practice, his works bear a closer relation to those of Henri Laurens for their overt mannerist incubation of the Cubist idiom. For sheer physicality of force, and a hermetic balancing of mass with spatial elements, Lipchitz' best works express an anguish, violence and tortured expressionism that is expressly his own.



Jacques Lipchitz, *Chimène*, 1930.  
Bronze (unique). H. 36,8 cm.  
Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

At the outset, this show documents extensively Lipchitz' early development as a sculptor, amid the furor of early Cubism in Paris, where he arrived as a young Lithuanian novice at the age of 18. In the earliest of Lipchitz' Cubist inspired works such as *Sailor with Guitar* (1914), Cubist angles are set into a fundamentally realist sculpted form, with a kind of art deco application of multi-faceted angles. The process of dimensionalizing form into the picture plane is reversed here, and creates a twofold distancing of subject from reality.

*Detachable Figure: Seated Musician* (1915), a painted wood



construction, reveals Lipchitz' complete assimilation into Cubist non-objectivism. While it is a superb little work, the form still seems to be illustrative and descriptive, rather than part of a functional, expressive aesthetic.

Lipchitz continued to adapt and transform the Cubist vocabulary throughout the 20's. It was at this time, in his small-scale bronzes, called "Transparents", most of which were unique casts, that an inherent vitality, a stronger collage exploration of positive and negative values, material mass and void begins to appear. He becomes less of a Cubist stylist, more completely the master of his own creative destiny and later wrote that he was «escaping from the iron rule of syntactical cubist discipline».² Lipchitz describes *Chimène*, one of the last of the "Transparents" executed in 1930 as «a woman's head and hand, like a plant or a flower».³ For its free, fluid style this work has a graceful monumentality that surpasses the heavy-handed compression of form, and quasi-religious thematic that he sought in his large-scale public commissions.

Adjacent to the "Transparents" are Lipchitz' monumental "subject sculptures" of the 20's and 30's whose expressive anguished forms vary greatly in quality. *Figure* (1926-30), *Joy of Life* (1927) and *The Cry* (1928) are strong, expressive works, whose sculpted mass and spatial interplay achieve a contiguous harmony. On the other hand, *Reclining Woman* (1921) or *Meditation* (1925) have an exaggerated expression combined with an overblown workmanship that overwhelms, and confuses the viewer.

In looking at the diverse array of works from the post-war years when Lipchitz moved to America, we become aware of how lengthy his career was, and how prolific an artist he became. He outlived his generation, and his immense energies seemed caught in a dilemma, returning to previous themes, adopting earlier forms, dropping them, experimenting with maquettes, playing with the ideas which had preoccupied him in Europe. There is a strong vision in the astonishing variety of work here, but the styles vary, are inconsistent in quality, and ultimately

reveal an indecisiveness, a lack of direction. It led Clement Greenberg to state that Lipchitz was «unable to develop a principle of inner consistency; none of the different paths he takes seem to lead to the next one».⁴ Curator Alan Wilkinson suggests that this inconsistency was merely the evidence of an explosive imagination, an uncontrollable vitality that was the driving force behind Lipchitz' vision. The comprehensive, consistent forms of Alberto Giacometti, Jean Arp or Henry Moore are nowhere evident in Lipchitz' work. Whether this is a weakness or a strength may finally depend on how strongly our view of the history of art must rely on a basic consistency of individual aesthetic as a measure of relevance.

Of all the later works, it is the small bronzes, the spontaneous interpretive allegorical pieces that seem the most fascinating. They are imaginative, delicate forms, and have none of the Baroque gaudiness, the justification of material mass for its own sake, that we find in the later monuments such as *Notre-Dame de Liesse* (New Harmony, Indiana) and *Our Tree of Life* (Mount Scopus, Israel). The *Beautiful One* (1962) is an example of this open freedom of expression that can no longer be called Picasso-esque. For these later works of Lipchitz' do deserve attention, if only to counter the others. They are indeed evidence that Lipchitz continued, later in life, to seek a new language of expression.

And so, at the end of this exhibition, we are left grasping to understand, straining to lift the weight of this artist's idealism to find the pure expressions of beauty which lay beneath. These inner turmoils, seen in the strength and mercurial variation of Lipchitz' life's work did indeed cause him to defy any clear, historical categorization in his later life, and more often to his detriment of late. This, as much as his early work, undoubtedly cast him into the mould of that vague, ill-defined, catch-all phrase "true Cubist" expounded so cleverly in the Tate Gallery's 1983 show *The Essential Cubism 1907-20: Braque, Picasso, and their Friends*.

This show will be on at the Art Gallery of Ontario until March 11, 1990. It will travel to the Winnipeg Art Gallery (May 13 - Aug. 12, 1990), the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City (Oct. 6th - Nov. 25, 1990), and The Jewish Museum, New York (Jan. 16 - April 15, 1991). ♦

1. H. H. Arnason & Jacques Lipchitz, *My Life in Sculpture*. New York: Viking Press, 1972, p. 85.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

4. Clement Greenberg, *Art & Culture; Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, p. 201.

# ROBERT PRENOVAULT AT THE CANAL COMPLEX

Nov. 1 - 30, 1989

Kim Sawchuk

Robert Prenovault has set himself a challenge. A sculptor, who for many years shunned representational art for more abstract formalism, Prenovault sees the body not simply as a vessel with symbolic or social significance, but as matter and volume. «I've introduced the body into my work to replace another element. I used to work with elements where there was an organic shape interacting with a very linear geometric shape. I've replaced these organic shapes with the body thinking that's all I was doing.» His recent show at the Canal Complex, *Concretizations*, is a manifestation of this vision and this innocence: the body cannot avoid signification because it is at the centre of so many contentious discourses. The show presents a series of cement figures that have been made by moulding a live body in plaster. The result, replications of live bodies, are placed in juxtaposition with elements symbolic of our industrial era.

Although the five pieces in his show are representational on the surface, they play on many borders: the line between abstraction and figuration, of nature and technology, visibility and invisibility, of the transition of liquids to solids. As he says in a recent interview: «I'm approaching this whole process on the line between these questions to see what happens on that line...» As the title suggests, concretization refers to the process of objectification that occurs in thought, the concrete or cement that has been used as the primary material, and the process of transforming the cement from a liquid to a solid.

In fact, the artist's statement does not address the body per se, but the metamorphosis of liquid to solid. It is the material, wet plaster, and the time involved in the procedure that gives the body moulds the appearance of passivity and liquidity. The body must be relaxed to hold a pose for at least one hour. As the sculptor explains: «When it is applied, the body becomes a liquid form, but very rapidly the plaster hardens and the body disappears. It becomes like a stone. But it still looks like water.» This transformation of liquid to solid, of the softness of flesh to the hardness of stone, is very much alive in these works.

According to Robert Prenovault, the bodies are