

**Sidney Geist, *The Kiss*. New York, Harper & Row, 1978, 111 pp.,  
66 illus.**

**Zdenka Volavka**

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Au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle, citons les textes de Roger Fry et Germain Bazin et les études chronologiques et stylistiques de Michèle Beaulieu publiées dans le cadre de l'exposition des sculptures de Degas provenant du musée du Louvre, présentées à l'Orangerie durant l'été de 1969.

La thèse de Charles Millard repose sur deux présupposés : premièrement, l'évolution de la sculpture, au xix<sup>e</sup> siècle, est entièrement distincte de celle de la peinture et deuxièmement, l'œuvre sculptural de Degas constitue un microcosme de cette évolution. Parce qu'elle reflète « a thorough knowledge of tradition combined with the most exploratory thinking », son œuvre « raised issues that needed to be illuminated before any clear picture could be formed of the transformation of sculpture in the modern world ». Ces deux présupposés amènent Millard à rechercher une méthode d'évaluation critique de la production du xix<sup>e</sup> siècle en France, méthode qu'il développe dans son chapitre *Aspects of French Nineteenth Century Sculptural Style*. Pour catégoriser ces aspects, il a recours à trois constituants fondamentaux du style et qui représentent des courants hérités du passé, courants qui s'interpénètrent à différents degrés et selon différentes modalités suivant les cas : le courant de la grande tradition, la Renaissance, lié au concept du « monumental » de Michel-Ange; le rococo/néo-classique du xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle, et finalement le baroque du xvii<sup>e</sup> siècle qu'il qualifie de « berninesque ».

La démonstration de la présence de ces trois constituants chez Degas, étayée par de nombreux exemples, est convaincante. D'ailleurs, on saisit d'emblée sa logique : comme le peintre, le sculpteur du xix<sup>e</sup> siècle est l'héritier d'un passé qui informe *nolens volens* sa démarche créatrice. C'est spécialement dans le traitement des chevaux que Millard reconnaît la présence du courant classique renaissant et, au-delà, de l'Antiquité (p. 59 sq.). Ainsi, le cheval debout de l'œuvre picturale *Sémiramis construisant Babylone*, emprunté à un bas-relief classique, est repris dans l'œuvre sculpturale *Le Mustang* (fig. 1, 2, 5, 6). Cependant le traitement du corps humain révèle également cette présence : *L'Écolière* reprend la pose du *David* de Donatello (fig. 32, 33). Le cou-

rant berninesque est présent dans la célèbre *Petite danseuse* (planche couleur, p. 62). L'addition d'étoffe (qui surprie ses contemporains et provoqua l'ironie de certains critiques), le théâtral voulu de l'attitude (frontalité du visage) non moins que la polychromie, autant de traits destinés à provoquer l'étonnement et à aboutir à un naturalisme que l'on ne saurait qualifier que d'anti-classique : le refus de l'idéalisation (jambes maigres, visage ingrat) est ici évident. Millard va jusqu'à rapprocher la *Petite danseuse* des figures religieuses des xvii<sup>e</sup> et xviii<sup>e</sup> siècles, présentes par exemple dans les crèches (on sait que Degas, qui faisait de fréquents voyages à Naples, possédait une collection de ces figures).

C'est peut-être lorsqu'il en vient au courant Rococo que Millard est le moins convaincant. Il se réfère avant tout à un « érotisme lascif ». Il est vrai que cet érotisme se retrouve chez le peintre autant que le sculpteur; la femme et la jeune fille occupant, comme chez Renoir, une place privilégiée. Cependant, cet érotisme est-il uniquement rococo ? N'y a-t-il pas un érotisme maniériste, un érotisme romantique, un érotisme impressionniste ? L'érotisme représente une constante de l'art occidental, en tous cas depuis la Renaissance. Un exemple cité, celui de la *Femme arrangeant sa chevelure* (fig. 107) – sujet également traité par le peintre Renoir – peut aussi bien être rapproché des nombreuses Vénus antiques, me semble-t-il.

Dans son dernier chapitre, Charles Millard souhaite dépasser cette étude des influences et aborde à juste titre la question de l'apport personnel de Degas à la modernité (p. 111 ff., *The Search for a Modernist Sculpture*). Toutefois, ce chapitre servant de conclusion est de loin le plus court : seulement six pages. Il traite de deux concepts intimement liés : le mouvement et le temps. Le mouvement, nous dit Millard, est maintenant conçu en fonction d'une progression dans le temps autant que dans l'espace : « Western art since the Renaissance has traditionally concerned itself with fixing a moment in time or creating a moment outside of time... In the nineteenth century only Degas, led on by his interest in movement and his powerful ability to synthesize, developed a sustained sculptural

expression based on temporal simultaneity ». Le problème de l'introduction d'une dimension temporelle dans l'objet sculpté est un ancien problème qui aurait sans doute mérité une plus longue étude. L'analyse de la « simultanéité temporelle » chez Degas – « the impression of the passage of time within the object itself » – (p. 117) est tout juste esquissée, et c'est dommage. Quant à l'analogie avec la notion de temps pour Joyce, notamment dans *Ulysses*, elle rappelle par trop certains commentaires de Sypher ou de Praz qui, vu la disparité des media (non-verbal/verbal), n'offrent hélas aucune prise à l'objectivation.

En conclusion : s'appuyant sur une documentation d'une grande richesse et fort bien illustrée, Charles Millard a atteint avant tout, je pense, l'objectif qui consistait à démontrer l'utilisation par Degas de différents aspects de son art explorés par les générations précédentes, aspects que l'on peut grouper sous l'étiquette « académisme » pour la plupart, et l'aboutissement paradoxal à un art non académique.

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SIDNEY GEIST *The Kiss*. New York, Harper & Row, 1978, 111 pp., 66 illus.

To his important study of Brancusi's sculpture (1968) and his useful catalogue of Brancusi's sculpture and drawings (1975), Sidney Geist has now added *The Kiss*. The discussion of this delightful yet complex and confusing theme involving the version of *The Kiss* which is now in the Museum at Craiova (Fig. 5) and which is designated by Geist as the first one, as well as all Brancusi's further variants of the subject, both three- and two-dimensional, is of great interest for the specialist. However, the small, handsome book embracing thirty-eight of Brancusi's creative years will undoubtedly also be a pleasure for any intelligent reader whose interest in modern art goes beyond visiting art shows.

Monothematic books focusing either on an iconographic subject



FIGURE 5. Brancusi, *The Kiss*, Craiova. From Geist.

or on a single work of art provide, in art historiography, a well-tested method of complementing the synthesized view of a monograph. Providing more opportunity for extensive analysis as well as for more intensive demonstration of evidence than the apparatus of a monograph can encompass, monothematic publications proved also to be rewarding in the study of modern sculpture (e.g. Elsen's *Gates of Hell*, 1960, or A. Spear's *Brancusi's Birds*, 1969). Important for the weight of the corollaries of such a book is the significance of the chosen work or iconographic subject either for the artist's *œuvre* or for the epoch. It is Geist's argument that the Craiova *Kiss*, while playing a prominent role in Brancusi's own work, is also the cornerstone of a major body of sculpture in our time. The former conclusion ensues convincingly from various passages dispersed in the entire book where Geist successfully carries out in more detail an earlier hypothesis (1968, pp. 18-19, 29) concerning the 'autobiographical' connotations of the piece. On the other hand, the latter significance of the Craiova *Kiss* seems rather postulated and is not strengthened by the analogue drawn with Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*.

Geist's book is structured in three chapters entitled 'Theme,' 'Variations,' and 'In Time,' followed by an appendix on the measurements of the variations of the *Kiss* showing

the proportional consistency of all the versions. The book also contains notes, a list of illustrations (in which the editor left redundant printing errors on pp. 105-108), and an index.

The first and longest chapter deals with special aspects of the sculptor's working process implied in the method of direct carving in stone, a formal analysis of the Craiova *Kiss*, and the iconography pertinent to the motif of the kiss. The first issue is crucial to support the commonly accepted thesis (which is shared by Geist) that Brancusi's work started moving towards the apex of its historical importance by 1907. Both the thesis and date coincide with the artist's own statements made later on, such as 'Everything I do is a seeking after form. I can create "beefsteaks" but I left all that in 1907.'<sup>1</sup>

It is to 1907 that Geist dates a female head (lost<sup>2</sup>), designated by Brancusi as *Première pierre directe*, and the Craiova *Kiss*, which is also a direct carving in stone. Geist pays more attention to the latter issue than in his previous writings on Brancusi. He sees the absence of a model of any kind and of the use of the pointing machine as two major characteristics of the direct-carving procedure. The omission of any reference to Adolf Hildebrand's *Das Problem der Form in der bildenden Kunst* (1893) is puzzling, especially in those passages dealing with the question of the interference of these technical innovations in the creative process, and consequent alteration of form. The French translation of Hildebrand's book appeared in 1903, and there seems to have been wide knowledge among Parisian artists of the book before and after World War I. After all, the *prima facie* evidence is the fact that the name of the procedure itself was coined by Hildebrand in his book, which also brought the first definition and interpretation of the implications for both working and creative processes. Certain statements in Geist's discussion on the process of direct cutting I find historically rather vague, as it is not clear which period of its application he refers to. When it is noted, for instance, that the term 'direct carving' is never applied to carving in wood, it might apply to the first decade of the century, but this is not the case in

the 1920s when, for instance, Zadkine's woods, among many others, were shown at the exhibitions of the *Taille directe* movement. Mateo Hernandez and Joseph Bernard, who are mentioned as practising direct carving at the beginning of the century, also belonged to two different periods; the latter promoting the process in the first decade, the former, a Spanish animalist working mainly in diorite and basalts, belonging to the *Taille directe* movement formed as late as the postwar years.

Geist's summation of the discussions on direct carving downplays its consequences for Brancusi and for modern sculpture. Its effects are viewed as 'polemical and heuristic' and the method is designated 'a mystique rather than a logical principle.' It does not seem to coincide with the author's valuable observations on the rupture which had arisen in Brancusi's work with his *Première pierre directe* from 1907 on.

The analysis of the Craiova *Kiss* demonstrates Geist's long experience with and intimate knowledge of Brancusi's work. The differences of treatment of both façades and both sides of the piece are examined and tight correlations between form and meaning found. Male and female distinctions of the embracing couple and their personal features readable on one of the façades are interpreted as not interfering with a conception geared to iconic essence rather than individual resemblance. The comprehensive discussion on iconography includes a large number of three- and two-dimensional images of the kiss in European art over a long time span ranging from the Iberian second century B.C. to the beginning of the twentieth century. Of the two non-European examples, the Ashanti goldweight is, in my opinion, a straightforward representation of intercourse rather than of a kiss, as is not infrequent in sub-Saharan African art. Historically closest to Brancusi's *Kiss* is *Chapiteau des Baisers* by Emil Derré shown in 1906; Geist logically presumes that Brancusi knew it from

<sup>1</sup> Russell Warren Howe, 'Constantin Brancusi: Man Who Doesn't Like Michelangelo. Interview,' *Apollo*, May 1949, 124.

the Jardins du Luxembourg where it found its home. The stimuli most akin visually are discerned by Geist in a group within the study for the painting by Matisse, *Music* (1907), in Gauguin's sculpture *Hina and te Fatou* (ca. 1893), and in Derain's *Crouching Figure* (1907). All three works were shown in Paris in 1906-07 in one way or another according to the evidence offered by Geist. The rich iconographic documentation might, though it need not, be extended by some small additions such as a genre group in clay, *Departure for Work*, made in Paris by Rodin's Czech pupil Josef Maratka in 1901. However, what I think is really missing are four versions of *L'Étreinte* by Josef Bernard dating back to 1906-07 and which are very pertinent to the progressive compression of the composition into the angular block; leaving aside five of the sculptor's pieces from 1898-1905 which do not relate to a kiss by their titles but do by the motif of togetherness of male and female bodies. At the conclusion of the chapter, the thematic link is established between the Craiova *Kiss* and Brancusi's earlier group entitled by Geist *The Rebuff* (lost) and its relation to Brancusi's frustrating love story in his early Parisian years is discussed.

In the chapter on 'Variations,' the motif of the kiss is investigated in a series of some fourteen of Brancusi's sculptural works including the *Column of the Kiss* (1916-18) and the *Gate of the Kiss* (1935-37) for Tirgu Jiu in Rumania, as well as in the two-dimensional sketches and a painting. Considering the Craiova *Kiss* as the point of departure, modifications of increasing lapidary robustness are studied along with the mutating meaning of the very personalized icon. Exploring the slight gestural and typological alterations, Geist reads them as being

cogently meaningful for the theme. Consistent with his earlier writing, Geist challenges Brancusi's own statement made *post factum* (1926), relying rather upon the testimony of Margit Pogany, and views *The Kiss* of Montparnasse Cemetery (1909) as far less sensual and rationalized than the one in Craiova, which he characterizes as earthly and pagan in the frankness of the representation of the sexual act. *The Boundary Marker*, which repeats in principle the compositional pattern of the Montparnasse group, is explained as displaying geometry and a mechanical quality. Geist's dating of the latter work to 1945 relies on André Salmon's testimony and is related to the artist's response to the unjust territorial arrangement of the Rumanian boundary towards the end of the war. More convincing, however, is the interpretation and dating suggested by V.G. Paleolog in a small publication of limited distribution.<sup>2</sup> He points to 1940 as the year of the drastic division of Rumania of which some results were then only confirmed before the end of the war.

In connection with the early versions of the *Kiss* and their inspiration, Geist introduces the term *Fauve sculpture*, which had not previously been used by art historiography. Referring to the sculpture of Matisse, Derain's *Crouching Figure*, Brancusi's *La Sagesse* (1908), *Caryatid* (ca. 1909) and two versions of *The Kiss* (Craiova 1907, Diamond Collection ca. 1908), Geist proposes the definition of the term, imputing bold design, freshness, and immediacy of touch to these works. Having the suggested group in mind, I am unable to see *Fauve sculpture* as a plausible working term encompassing a visually congruent body of works. That which some of Matisse's sixty sculptures such as *La Vie* (1906) or *La Serpentine* (1909) stand for in terms of the method of realization, Derain's piece or Brancusi's *Sagesse* negate. The level of explicitness of Matisse's free modelling and immediacy of rendering ('je transmettais en terre l'équivalence de ma sensation'<sup>3</sup>) clearly contrasts with all that was implied in the revolt against the *coup de pousse* and which is, among others, manifested in *Crouching Figure* as well as in Brancusi's works from 1907. Since then, 'Modelling

is not sculpture,' it is so neither for Brancusi nor for all sculptors attacking the *coup de pousse* such as Duchamp Villon (1913). If Geist wants to keep the term *Fauve Sculpture*, he undoubtedly will come back to its postulation in one of his future writings.

In the short chapter called 'In Time,' the material is comprised of exhibitions, responses, effects, and echoes of all kinds of versions of *The Kiss*. Once again, as in the previous chapter on the variants, Geist's most respectable Brancusian scholarship is displayed in a painstaking effort not to overlook any detail in the historical data collectable on the artist and his work. *The Kiss* of 1912, purchased on 1916 by John Quinn and acquired later for the Arensberg collection, is shown as the most widely known version until the first *Kiss* (in Craiova, 1907) was exhibited outside of Rumania in the 1960s. The influence of the later versions is found in Lehbruck's piece *Liebende Köpfe* (1918), in *The Kiss* (1930) by Julio Gonzalez, in William Zorach's *Embrace* (1933), and in the alabaster *Kiss* (1947) by Isamu Noguchi, one of the two sculptors who worked for a short time in Brancusi's studio.

Sidney Geist's new book is, indeed, a further substantial contribution to the bibliography of the 'sculptor of tomorrow' (Paul Morand), of 'a man who saved sculpture by having carved in stone' (Etienne Hadju), and one whose studio 'exhaled a magic feeling of eternity mixed with the beloved stone and stone dust' (Barbara Hepworth).<sup>4</sup>

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MARGARET MEDLEY *The Chinese Potter: A Practical History of Chinese Ceramics*. Oxford, Phaidon Press, 1976. 288 pp., illus.

The teaching of the history of Chinese ceramics has long been handicapped by the lack of a suitable text, since most comprehensive works on Chinese pottery date to the early twentieth century, the latest being published in 1945. Beginning students had to resort to

<sup>2</sup> V.G. Paleolog, 'Piatra di Hotar,' *despre un inedit iconografie din opera lui C. Brancusi* (Craiova, 1965).

<sup>3</sup> André Verdet, *Prestiges de Matisse* (Paris, 1952), 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Brancusi* (Exhibition, Brummer Gallery, New York, 17 Nov.-15 Dec. 1926), introduction by Paul Morand; Etienne Hadju, *Cahiers d'art*, xxx (1955), 214; Barbara Hepworth, *Carvings and Drawings* (London: Lund Humphries, 1952), 2.