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Public Sculpture—A City's Most Pervasive Art

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

I AM not the person to judge the statues in the Metropolitan Museum's show on "New York City Public Sculpture" (through Sept. 29) as art, because they are all my friends. Besides, my competence runs more to how public art affects public space.

I have been a street wanderer since childhood, and most of these heroic bronzes and marbles are familiar individuals for whom I feel a surprising warmth. It wasn't until I developed "taste" and studied art that I found I wasn't supposed to like them — not really. The Union Square equestrian statue of George Washington by Henry Kirke Brown is not the Colleoni, and Bernini would have laughed at the Maine monument. The standards of verisimilitude and representation of virtues larger than life had become esthetic unmentionables.

And so the reviewer of this 19th-century public sculpture by American artists is in trouble. He can have a ball with it as camp or a problem with it as art, since it is impossible now to approach it in terms of its original intentions. It is hard to accept it philosophically and grossly unfair to judge it any other way, even while applying the absolute yardstick that the critic must carry. Skills serve philosophy, and the simplistic promotion of heroic ideals and the perfectable nobility of man as beloved by the Victorians and considered the perfect accent for city spaces has succumbed to the realities of the age of the anti-hero.

That is why attempts at representational heroic sculpture today are instantly doomed; without belief there is no art. And it is therefore a wrenching effort to evaluate the success or failure of these 19th-century monuments as sculpture alone. Even though it has become fashionable to admire and admit the emotional impact of the Lincoln Memorial — we now acknowledge the moving quality of Daniel Chester French's giant seated figure within Henry Bacon's classical temple — few fully embrace the genre, the period (which extended well into the 20th century) and the product.

This step has been taken wholeheartedly, however, by the director of the museum's show, Lewis I. Sharp, who is also responsible for the commendable catalogue (produced with a grant, quite properly, from the Plaza Hotel, on whose doorstep both Augustus Saint-Gaudens's General Sherman and Karl Bitter's Pomona, Goddess of Abundance, stand).

Mr. Sharp has mounted a most sensitive and delightful presentation of 22 examples of New York statuary. They range from the handsome totality of the architecturally planned space at the entrance to Brooklyn's Prospect Park by Stanford White, with the collaborating effort of a galaxy of sculptors, to John Quincy Adams Ward's Horace Greeley brooding over City Hall Park in a fringed chair.

In some cases, the public spaces were designed or carefully considered at the same time. In others, the statue was placed almost arbitrarily, with much debate over site. In almost all instances, the architect was commissioned for the base as carefully as the sculptor was commissioned for the figure and was a man of equal reputation.

Saint-Gaudens, for example was consistently partnered with Stanford White, and Ward and Richard Morris Hunt were a repeated team. And until you've seen a really bad base, like the awkward highrise of the equally awkward Daniel Webster in Central Park (whose pompsity affords a certain delight), you may not be aware of the difference this can make.

To consider this work in terms of urban design is a distinct relief. Although I must confess to an increasing admiration for Saint-Gaudens, whether it is inspired by his elegant and ladylike "Victory" leading Sherman appropriately toward Bergdorf Goodman's, or by the unexpected discovery of his superbly massed and fluid "Puritan" in Salem, Mass.

The Plaza, properly called Grand Army Plaza, just south of Central Park at 59th Street and abutting Fifth Avenue, is a close-to-perfect city space. Even the unpardonable mutilation provided by the General Motors Plaza across the street, an object lesson in a plaza in the wrong place and in contrasting commercial banality, has failed to destroy its integrity.

Bergdorf's now stands in place of the Vanderbilt mansion, but its classily unpretentious modern style is a fine backdrop for Bitter's Fountain of Abundance, with its serene Renaissance basins. To beat a marble horse, the General Motors building, with its provincial posh, is the only fall from grace. It replaced the Savoy Plaza. Henry Hardenbergh's Plaza Hotel still spells substance and quality.

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The fronting plaza itself is the work of the architect Thomas Hastings, of Carrere and Hastings, who completed it in 1916. He united the concept of the sculptor, Karl Bitter, and the presence of Sherman. The result is eloquent proof that excellence and elegance — elitism if you will — can also be popular. No public space in New York City has more universal appeal.

The monuments count as much as the spaces. They create the ambience, the character and sense of place. People flock to them. At the least, they are places to sit down; for the more thoughtful, they are places to contemplete change. They also offer certain kinds of enduring human presence and intimations of glory and pleasure. It does not matter if the glory is hollow (Sherman left the South in ashes, after all) or if the pleasure is evoked in stone (abundance may only be in Bergdorf's windows). One does not live by art alone.

Today's plazas are made as much by zoning regulations as by the architect's creative impulses. And what the architect puts in — for he almost universally controls the urban and esthetic product —may elevate those voids to fine public spaces or be gratuitous decoration. But that was true in the 19th century, as well.

The difference now is that the vision is coolly abstract and the philosophy rests on the beauty of geometric elementals rather than with the evocations of natural form. There is no warming recognition, no identity of human purposes. Sometimes, however, the result is excellent, full of the power of successful spatial and sculptural relationships.

The scale and style of the plaza of Gordon Bunshaft's sleek 140 Broadway, with its dramatic accent of Noguchi's upended red cube, is a fine example of architect as patron. Bernard Rosenthal's large work at Astor Place elvated its ordinary "found space" setting from mere traffic flow to public space. Louise Nevelson's handsome piece is meaningless on upper Park Avenue, because it neither creates nor complements space worthy of the name.

When the pool in front of the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center has water, the Henry Moore provides that essential, fulfilling element of style and definition that raises the whole complex to urban art. Not least is the strong, evocative sensuosity of the work, as opposed to geometric abstraction. There is an extra dimension of implied human reference that does much to make people relate to the space. That all-important result must usually be achieved in the modernist esthetic by finesse of proportions and scale.

The use of space and sculpture is traditionally one of man's most creative contributions where it counts most: as a three-dimensional part of the functioning city scene and of the activity of life. More people experience art here than in galleries and museums. The art of the city is the most pervasive art of all.

Karl Bitter's Pomona, Goddess of Abundance, at 58th Street and Fifth Avenue—"No public space in New York City has more universal appeal."

Bob Zucker

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