

Toya Shigeo “A History of Sculpture Without Rodin: Part 3”

Surfaces and Folds

Reversal of Inside and Outside

In my student days, I happened to pick up a book on the ruins of Pompeii, and a plaster figure of a person lying on its side caught my eye. At the time I was only flipping through the pages and thought it was a sculpture, but I eventually learned that it was a plaster cast of the buried “husk” of a person who died in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD.

The bodies of people buried in the pyroclastic flow vanished, leaving behind voids in the volcanic ash that retained the same shape as when they died. By pouring plaster into the voids, which had been negative spaces for well over a thousand years, the human figure was revived as a positive presence.

We usually feel that our physical bodies are presences, and that the spaces around us are empty. Under the volcanic ash of Pompeii, however, this relationship was inverted. The surfaces of bodies, surfaces that should have been in contact with space, became the surfaces of spaces, with the interior hollowed out. If we think of this situation in terms of the opposing relationship of interior and exterior, these can be inverted in either direction, with a single surface forming the boundary. In other words, the surface is the boundary between the other world and our own, and we can freely move back and forth between the two. This issue of “surface” as vital to consideration of sculpture, and gave the title *POMPEII • • 79* to my first solo exhibition in 1974.

The feeling that your skin alone separates you from the world around is probably of Western origin. This is a dualistic worldview that separates the individual (interior) from the world (exterior). On the other hand, Japanese people seem to have a sense of skin in which inside and outside are intermingled. This difference seems to derive from the difference in climate between desert and forest, which I mentioned last time in my discussion of vantage points.

The sense of space in the forest is imbued a certain thickness. Rather than a complete divergence of interior and exterior, the forest as a whole as a space beneath the sky, and the interior space rising up between the trees from the ground, share a boundary that oscillates within the amplitude of the forest. From a broader perspective, the surface of the Japanese islands is covered with folds where mountains and valleys intermingle. The thoughts and sensibilities that emerge in these complex overlapping folds may be quite different from those that emerge from a space with an unobstructed horizon, like a desert.

What Abundant Folds Enfold

Let us turn our attention to folds in sculpture. In Greek sculpture, most garments cling tightly to the body as if they were wet. This is probably due to the belief that the beauty of an ideal body should not be covered by unnecessary things such as the folds of a robe. In later Western sculpture, too, the basic mode of expression was conveying the impression of flesh and bone within the garments, though not to the extent of Greek sculpture. However, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, a sculpture by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), is a singular example of the exact opposite of this.

This Baroque sculpture, which majestically adorns a Roman chapel, is riveting for its dramatic depiction of rays of light emanating from the dove of the Holy Spirit in gilded bronze, and for the saint's facial expression of ecstasy, but the most remarkable aspect of the sculpture is the abundantly draped folds of the vestments.

At the very bottom of the statue, the left ankle protrudes from the robe, but upon closer inspection, the upper leg from where the left knee should be to the waist is abnormally long. From a sculptor's perspective, the proportions of the figure are absurd. It is hard to believe there is a body with flesh and bone beneath these folds, which almost completely obliterate the flesh. The main character here is the garment (i.e. the folds), to which face, arms and legs are only attached almost like an afterthought.

The sculpture as a whole is unified by folds, which sometimes close up tightly and sometimes fall open softly. This state is comparable to that of origami. What would be the yardage of this fabric if the folds were flattened and the garment was laid out? What we see on the surface is only a small part of the fabric, and darkness and voids are enfolded inside the folds. It is a complex sculpture that conceals invisible darkness.

A Flower Garden Reflected on the Nude Body

Thus far I have discussed "a history of sculpture without Rodin" with a focus on Western sculpture, which from Greek to modern times has been based on centripetally unified forms. In contrast, the possibilities I have been considering are for *another form of* sculpture, with the sculpture's surface as a key issue. I wondered if it would be possible to create sculpture as a continuum of various surfaces. In conventional sculpture, the surface is merely the boundary between inside and outside, but by causing vibrations or cracks in the surface, *another* surface emerges. Let me conclude this talk by discussing a work by a Japanese sculptor that is very suggestive of this idea.

Many Japanese sculptors were influenced by Rodin, including Ogiwara Morie (1879-1910) and Takamura Kotaro (1883-1956). Among them, only Hashimoto Heihachi, who was born in 1897 and died young in 1935 at the age of 38, seems to have turned away from Rodin.

Having studied sculpture in Tokyo with Sato Chozan (1888-1963), a pupil of Antoine Bourdelle, Heihachi was also well aware of trends in modern Western sculpture and appreciated Bourdelle and Maillol more than he did Rodin. However, he did not find modern art theory to be a good fit, with the exception of Brancusi's abstraction, which was an influence on him. At the age of 29, Heihachi returned to his home village of Asakuma, Mie Prefecture (now Asakuma-cho, Ise City), where he studied Egyptian sculpture and Asuka Buddhist statuary, and created carved wood sculpture that could be considered his unique spiritual practice. It was Heihachi who, in his later years, identified the Buddhist statuary of Enku as "sculpture."

Heihachi wrote, "Sculpture is a mountain." Because mountains are inhabited by the spirit of *sen* (as embodied by *sennin*, immortal mountain sages), if you go deep into their depths, you will feel purified and remember that the mountain is not static. In Heihachi's words, "*Sen* is motion. Motion is the end of stillness. In other words, motion within stillness." This expresses his unique way of looking at sculpture.

Such a spirit of *sen* can be seen in, for example, Heihachi's *Celestial Nymph Playing in the Flower Garden*. First of all, one is astounded that the girl's entire body is engraved with petals and butterflies. The flowers and butterflies that surround the girl are reflected on the surface of her nude body. In contrast to Bernini's work, in which darkness and hollow spaces are enfolded within the folds of the vestments, in this wood sculpture, the external space is folded directly onto the surface of the body. The "object" as a presence and the "space" around it are multi-layered on the same sculptural surface.

It is also important to note that the girl, with her knees bent and only her head tilting to the left, has her hand over her right ear. The sounds of the outside world have seeped into the girl's body and are echoing within it. Here too, the surface into which the exterior space is folded, and the surface of the inner space where the sound that has seeped into the body reverberates, share the same boundary/surface.

The figure of *Celestial Nymph Playing in the Flower Garden* also evokes Basho's haiku: *Shizukesa ya iwa ni shimi-iru semi no koe* (In the quiet, penetrating the rock, the cry of a cicada.) The sound of a cicada filling the space seeps into the rock, and the rock becomes a

space, or conversely, the rock seeps out into space.

A “mass” of space, filled with the quietness of mutual interpenetration: this is what I would call sculpture. [Talk by Toya Shigeo]

Translated by Christopher Stephens

First appeared in the March 2023 issue of Geijutsu Shincho, SHINCHOSHA Publishing Co.,Ltd.