Toya Shigeo "A History of Sculpture Without Rodin: Part 1"
Reexamining the Act of Making from the Ground Up

Rodin is known as the "father of modern sculpture," but there are surely abundant possibilities for sculpture along different paths than those laid down by the "father"…

In this three-part series, a sculptor who has been asking the question "what is sculpture?" in practical terms presents an alternative perspective on sculpture, from cave paintings through the Greeks and Michelangelo to contemporary sculpture.

Was Rodin the Beginning or the End?

For nearly the past 50 years, since my first solo exhibition in 1974, what I have been pursuing while sculpting is *another form of* sculpture. The desire to create another form of sculpture arose from my discomfort with existing sculptural forms, which in turn prompted me to reexamine the act of making things from its very foundations in my practice. Here I would like to discuss some of my own thoughts on *another* history of sculpture, one where there is no Rodin.

Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) is often described as the father of modern sculpture, and its starting point. Personally, however, since I first encountered his works (albeit only in photographs) when I read Takamura Kotaro's *Rodin no Kotoba* (Auguste Rodin's Words) as a teenager, I have never felt they related to what I want to express, and have never internalized them.

For one thing, Rodin is not only the *first* modern sculptor but also the *last* of the sculptors of the past. Modern painting, as pioneered by Manet, Cezanne and others, left the traditional subject matter of religion and authority figures behind to discover the world anew with fresh eyes. In contrast, in a work like *The Gates of Hell*, Rodin is nothing more than an artist taking a subjectivist approach to themes prevalent up to the 19th century. While the raw physicality and dynamic vitality of Rodin's work can certainly be said to mark the beginning of modern sculpture, in this work there is a separation between the subject matter and the mode of expression.

At the same time, without Rodin there would be no Antoine Bourdelle, and without Bourdelle there would be no Alberto Giacometti. Without such relationships between teacher and pupil, there would be no modern and contemporary sculpture as we know it today. Here, however, let us put aside Rodin's massive presence in order to examine the process of making from

the very beginning, from the ground up.

The Cave as the Origin of Sculpture

In 1969 I enrolled in art school with the goal of making figurative sculptures, and for this reason the 10th Tokyo Biennale, held the following year in 1970, had a powerful impact. The theme of the exhibition was “Between Man and Matter,” and in addition to works by Japanese artists such as those of Mono-ha (the “School of Things”), I was able to see firsthand works by overseas artists affiliated with movements such as Arte Povera (lit. “impoverished art”). However, there was almost no use of the sculptural vocabulary with which we are familiar today, such as “installation” and “conceptual.” For a shy and retiring student like me, the show came as a shock. While it was fresh and surprising, at the same time I felt a certain antipathy, and I wondered if this brave new world would allow me to continue making figurative sculpture. Before I knew it, debates were raging all around, and making “forms” itself had come to be frowned upon.

But was the age of sculpture truly over? What had ended was only one way of telling the story of sculpture, but the vocabulary of sculpture itself had not been lost. With this thought in mind, I chose with some trepidation to make sculpture and entered graduate school, where I came across Yoshimoto Takaaki’s essay “Incomprehensibility of Sculpture.” Let me quote the beginning of the essay:

“The mentality applied to making a relief is different from that applied to a three-dimensional statue. In relief, the world already exists beforehand, so all that remains is to carve something into it. In sculpture, the goal above all is to create a world... Why go to such lengths to create a world out of hard and unyielding matter?”

This made me think about the difference between relief and sculpture that Yoshimoto describes, and I interpreted his essay in terms of my own question, “Why do humans make sculptures even though the world is already there?" I began to think that to answer this we should go back to primal works of creation, to the human act of representation before it was even called art.

For example, there is the act of “making marks” in space, as in the engraving of lines on the rock walls of a prehistoric cave, or the placement of a rock at some boundary. Or the act of projecting an image in one’s mind onto something in nature and making that thing *stand in for* something else. The origins of art seem to lie in such acts.

Around 25 years ago, the caves at Lascaux were still open to some visitors. Later people were completely banned from entering the cave, but at the time tours of the cave were available to a limited number of people. As we listened to the curator's comments and looked at the various wall paintings in a range of sizes, it became clear that not only were the volumes of the animals represented pictorially, but also the shadows created by the forms of the cave's interior walls were used to *stand in for* the volumetric bodies of cows and horses. The cave is illuminated from below, for example when a bonfire is lit. When a concave wall is illuminated by light from below, it appears to bulge out in the opposite direction due to the optical illusion created by the shadows. And some lines carved into the wall trace the outlines of pictures generated in this way. **[Fig.1]** The incised lines seemed to me to *mark* the boundary line separating the image of the animal from the surrounding outside world: on one side there is external space, and on the other, the inside, is the reality of the thing depicted. The boundary between the two is marked by the engraved lines.

When I think about the origins of sculpture, I am reminded of my experience at the cave of Lascaux. At that time, I felt that the relationship between the object or image and the space surrounding it gave rise to relief as a prototypical form of sculpture.

A sculpture is not only composed of matter, not only an *object* as we usually perceive it to be. Underlying the "object-ness" is a pictorial illusion, a gestalt that encompasses the surrounding space, and this can be seen as the site of the sculpture's emergence. A sculpture is an object like a relief in a cave that has detached itself from the wall, become freestanding, and taken on solid form outside the cave. One could say that the relief-like surface of the cave wall was the starting point for the works of Giacometti, and that the illusionistic quality of this surface went on to evolve into painting, while its character as an object went on to evolve into sculpture. Giacometti's works are a good example of the relationship between the two in the present age, but that is a topic for another time.

Perfection in the 5th Century BC

It can be said that if we go back to the origins of art, we run into shadows. One of humankind's earliest creative activities was to place the palm of the hand against rock or another surface and spray pigment over it to leave a handprint (shadow). On the other hand, shadows can also be seen as memories or monuments. For example, when a loved one was ritually sacrificed to counteract various threats from the natural world and the fear that they inspire, or to appease the gods. The loved one was lost, but if a stone was placed or a tree planted at a site as a sign that they existed, the stone or tree represented the memory of that which had been lost. At first it was just a single stone, but stones subsequently came to be carved

or painted, and images were born. Portraits in sculpture and painting are an extension of this process.

In *Natural History*, the ancient Roman text by Pliny the Elder, the origin of painting is described in a story of tracing a shadow on a wall in an attempt to preserve the visage of a lover on his way to war. The light source that creates the shadow is interchangeable with a single line of sight. In the case of Egyptian reliefs two lines of sight (two vantage points) are combined, with the face and lower half of the figure facing sideways and the torso facing forward. Naturally, a small number of lines of sight does not necessarily make something aesthetically inferior, but as sight-lines directed toward "shadows" gradually diversified, the rendering of the human figure became more complete, reaching a peak with ancient Greek sculpture. For example, the Riace bronzes of the 5th century BC **[Fig.2]**, two figures of warriors that were discovered about 50 years ago submerged in the sea off the coast of Riace, Italy, are precious original castings of Greek bronzes.

Some say they represent heroes of the battle of Marathon by Phidias, or King Agamemnon and one of his generals. Either way, they are perfect representations of the idealized human figure no matter what angle they are viewed from. If such sculpture is created, what is to be done by those who come after? The history of Western sculpture has been the story of people trying to transfigure this form in new ways in each new era. What sculptors of each period confronted was not so much the problem of the composer as that of the performer.

Far from Completion and Structure

In many of the works of Michelangelo (1475-1564), dynamic movement of the human figure's bones and muscles is imbued with overflowing vitality. This is another variation on Greek sculpture, but it is his final work, the Rondanini Pietà **[Fig.3]**, that deserves special attention here. I remember that when I visited Milan, I hurried to Castello Sforzesco to see this work. There it was, an actual hunk of matter in front of me.

There is none of Michelangelo's usual muscularity in this marble statue. Indeed, it does not even show the usual story of the Pietà. Unlike the Pietà at St. Peter's Basilica, where Mary holds the dead Christ across both knees, here the body of Christ somehow inhabits and becomes one with the body of Mary, who supports him from behind. The materiality of the marble overpowers the image as a representation, and the image is no longer important. In the rough traces of carving, one can almost hear Michelangelo breathing. At the end of his life, it appears that he sought something different from the "perfection" of a smoothly polished surface, and he single-mindedly carved away, focusing on the relationship between the stone

and the chisel in the hands. He continued to the point where if he carved any further, the sculpture would become a relief.

In sculpture, materiality tends to fade as the image is brought to life, and until a certain point in time, the only endgame available to sculpture was that of replacing materiality with image. However, one sculptor who fused the two was the Italian Medardo Rosso (1858-1928). In his soft forms that seem to approach clay and wax playfully, image and material waver back and forth and merge. **[Fig.4]** From the ancient Greeks up until Rodin and Bourdelle, sculptures had bones and flesh inside them, what you might call a proper architectural framework. This was where it derived its strength, but in Rosso's case there is no internal structure—the shifting surface is almost all there is.

Rosso's work, which could be described as ghostly, represents the possibility of *another* sculpture, one that differs from both the Rondanini Pietà and the classic path that sculptors have taken since ancient Greece. [Talk by Toya Shigeo]

[Fig.1]

A large black auroch on the wall of the cave at Lascaux is said to have been painted by carving the outline, then painting the body black, and then carving the outline further. Painted on a wall three meters above the ground in a space called the nave, with a six- to seven-meter ceiling, the auroch stands 2.15 meters tall.
Photo: UNIPHOTO PRESS

[Fig.2]

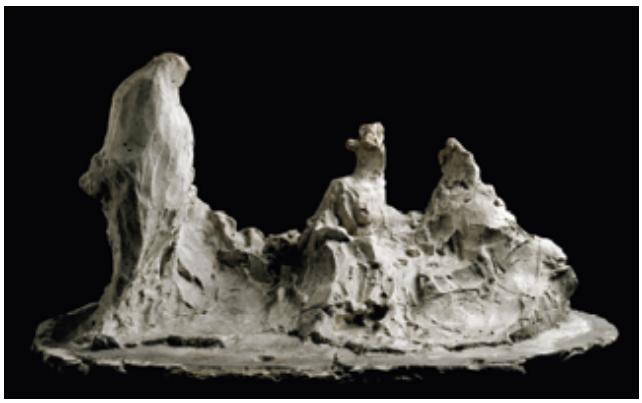
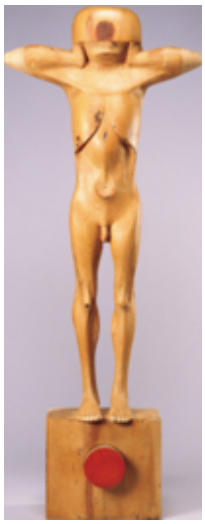
Riace bronzes Statue A, bc.460-450, bronze, 198cm, Collection of Museo Nazionale della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabria

Anatomically accurate and a paragon of Greek sculpture, this is one of two statues of men salvaged from the coast of Riace, off the southernmost tip of Italy, in 1972. Both were originally believed to be generals who ought to be holding weapons, but some have specifically identified this one as Agamemnon, King of Mycenae.
Photo: UNIPHOTO PRESS

[Fig.3]

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Rondanini Pietà*, 1552-64, 195cm, Collection of Castello Sforzesco

This is the last work by Michelangelo, who continued to wield a chisel until his death at the age of 88. On the columnar section on the left, only the right arm of Christ, which was originally sculpted, has been removed. The figure of the Virgin Mary embracing Christ from behind is a common image in the Pietà tradition, but it is unusual for Christ to appear as if he were carrying Mary on his back.
Photo: UNIPHOTO PRESS

[Fig.4] 	Medardo Rosso, *Conversation in a Garden Sculpture*, 1896, 32x66.5x41.5cm, Collection of Museo Medardo Rosso Photo: UNIPHOTO PRESS
[Ref.1] 	Shigeo Toya, *Death of the Kiln of the Elephant of the Wood*, 1989, wood, ash, acrylic, 230×560×62cm, Collection of Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo Toya once said of the surface of his sculpture carved with a chainsaw to create a narrow, tunnel-like cavity inside, “I was conscious of creating a sculpture in which life and death, interior and exterior, are not opposites, but rather oscillate together on the surface of the work” (from this magazine, February 1993). Photo: Tadasu Yamamoto
[Ref.2] 	Shigeo Toya, *Container Ⅲ*, 1973, wood, 200x76x60cm, Collection of Aichi University of Arts While a student at Aichi University of the Arts, Toya studied cadavers in the anatomy department of Nagoya University. His graduation project was a self-portrait, which he created after the painful realization that he had no choice but to “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” during the Vietnam War era.

“Toya Shigeo Sculpture”

Nagano Prefectural Art Museum: 11 Nov 2022 – 29 Jan 2023

The Museum of Modern Art, Saitama: 25 Feb – 14 May 2023

The concept of the first gallery at the Nagano venue was “the world of death.”

This solo exhibition is being held at art museums in Toya’s home prefecture of Nagano and in Saitama Prefecture, where he works. The exhibition examines Toya’s works from multiple perspectives, with some of the works at each venue replaced with others at the other venue. The Nagano venue featured approximately 30 works, including representative works from his early days to recent years, exhibited not in chronological order but in accordance with concepts such as “the world of death,” “the origin of sculpture,” “surfaces/structures and vocabulary.” The Saitama venue sheds light on the exploration leading up to his signature *Woods* series. At each venue, visitors engage with the core of the sculpture that Toya, who started out as a sculptor at a time when the prevailing ethos was the antithesis of conventional painting and sculpture, has pursued across regional and temporal boundaries.

To commemorate this exhibition, the book *Toya Shigeo: Sculpture* (T&M Projects, 6,500 yen), which covers all of his major works, was published in December 2022.

Toya Shigeo was born in 1947 in Nagano. Since his first solo exhibition in 1974 while still a student in the Aichi University of the Arts graduate sculpture program, he has fundamentally questioned the principles and structure of sculpture and opening up new possibilities through his practice, notably of carving wood with a chainsaw. He received the Art Encouragement Prize of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan in 2004, and the Medal of Honor with Purple Ribbon in 2009. He is a Professor Emeritus in the Sculpture Department of Musashino Art University.

Translated by Christopher Stephens

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