The NATURE of ART
Pliny the Elder on Materials
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BREPOLS
The NATURE of ART

Pliny the Elder on Materials
This book is dedicated to the memory of Irving Lavin
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POSTFACE
Pliny’s History of Materials and its Readers
From «ex uno lapide» to Bernini’s figura serpentinata

In a study published some twenty years ago («Ex Uno Lapide: The Renaissance Sculptor’s Tour de Force», in M. Winner, B. Andreae, C. Pietrangeli [ed. by], Il cortile delle statue. Der Statuenhof des Belvedere im Vatikan, Mainz am Rhein, 1998, pp. 191-210), I sought to show that a passage in the Elder Pliny’s Natural History praising extravagantly the ability of certain sculptors to create monumental, complicated, indeed multi-figured works from a single block of marble, «ex uno lapide», played a crucial role in establishing the reputation and self-definition of Renaissance sculptors. Pliny uses the phrase to describe the achievements of three sculptors who created the famous group of Laocoön and his two sons struggling and intertwined with two enormous serpents sent by Poseidon to avenge their betrayal of the Trojan horse. Single block sculptures were the norm in the Middle Ages and acquired a moral and professional status for Renaissance artists who sought to equal or surpass in emulation of their ancient progenitors. The emblematic ideal of Pliny’s judgment became a critical challenge in 1506 when a magnificent monumental group of the titanic anguish of Laocoön and his sons was discovered in the Baths of Titus (Fig. 1). Among the first to examine the discovery of a sculpture that Pliny had praised in the highest terms was Michelangelo who, fresh from carving his monumental, monolithic figure of David, pronounced it a miracle of art. In fact, it was noted immediately that the sculpture consisted of several pieces fitted together in seams that were practically invisible. Either Pliny was deceived, it was said, or he wanted to deceive others, to make the work more admirable. For it was impossible to make stable three statues of just stature, interlocked in a single stone, with many, and so admirable groups of serpents, without any sort of instruments. Of course the phrase «ex uno lapide» may have other meanings: ‘of a single kind of stone’, for example, which would allow for, but not entail multiple figures or the use of splints and stents.

Nevertheless, despite the ambiguities between fact versus meaning, the primary sense, sanctioned by both Aristotle and Plato (as has been articulated by Winckelmann in the Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums, 1776), predominated in the early Renaissance, especially in the thought and work of Michelangelo. His attitude was most movingly expressed in the opening quatrain of his most famous sonnet: «Non ha l’ottimo artista alcun concetto / c’un marmo solo in sé non circonscriva / col suo superchio, e solo a quello arriva / la man che ubbidisce all’intelletto». The idea is most graphically expressed by Vasari in the description of Michelangelo’s working procedure in his biography of the artist:

Ma quattro prigioni bozzati, che possano insegnare a cavare dei marmi le figure con un modo sicuro da non istoriare i sassi; che il modo è questo: che se e’ si pigliassi una figura di cera o d’altra materia dura, e si mettessi a diacere in una conca d’acqua, la quale acqua, essendo per sua natura nella sua sommità piana e pari, alzando la detta
figura a poco a poco del pari, così vengono a scoprirsì prima le parti più rilevate, ed a
nascondersi i fondi, cioè le parti più basse della figura tanto che nel fine ella cosi viene
scoperta tutta. Nel medesimo modo si devono cavare con lo scarpello le figure dei
marmi; prima scoprendo le parti più rilevate, e di mano in mano le più basse.

The integrity of the block became more than a matter of procedure, however, more even than
an aesthetic ideal; it became a veritable ethical imperative, a testimony not only to the bravura
of the artist but also to his personal integrity. For Vasari, patching a work of stone sculpture
by adding pieces was a «most vile and ugly thing and greatly to be blamed» («cosa villissima e
brutta e di grandissimo biasimo»). With respect to composing a figure (or figures), he recom-
mitted an animated, twisting, flame-like pose, which he called *serpentinata*, perhaps in refer-
ce to the *Laocoön*. Michelangelo died on his own terms with the *Laocoön* in the four-figured
composition of the Pietà for his own tomb, where the zig-zag dynamic of Christ’s body would
have been greatly enhanced by the missing left leg. Thenceforth, in the sixteenth century the
*figura serpentinata*, with multiple, valid views became a new ideal for sculptures truly in motion,
in-the-round, and self-contained. Giovanni Bologna famously declared that a free-standing
figure should have forty equally valid views, which he demonstrated in the tightly compacted
vertically interlacing three-figured group of the *Rape of the Sabine* in the Loggia dei Lanzi in
Florence (1583).

I think that Rudolph Wittkower in his magisterial monograph on the sculpture of Bernini
(*Gian Lorenzo Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque*, London, 1955), was the first to observe
that Bernini early in his career returned to the dominant frontal view that characterised classi-
cal sculpture, which he studied assiduously from his earliest youth. The break with Mannerist
tradition was radical and permanent, for it provided a more focused and powerful dramatic
effect. This effect depended not only on the vivid depiction of the figures in action, but also
on his adaptation and transformation of the Mannerist *figura serpentinata* itself. The effect is
evident in Bernini’s *David*, whose powerful upward swing climbs from lower right to lean far
over the base to the left, and suddenly turns back to the right at the head with the famous tight-
lipped squint. The sculpture now stands in the middle of the room but was originally set against
the wall. Perhaps the most crucial, central, and most dangerous passage in the work is the sling,
the device with which the young David, brilliantly and divinely inspired, was able to dispatch
the Philistine giant from a safe distance. It might be said that the entire statue was designed
to give its due to the simple tool used by the shepherd in pasturing his flock. For the first time
in the history of art, this seemingly minor detail appears as the absolutely fundamental key
to the divine inspiration that motivated the young shepherd David’s achievement. The sling
conspicuously displays a strut in the middle (which has evidently been broken and repaired
or replaced). And it might be said too, that the unabashed strut made possible Bernini’s utter
abandonment of the *uno lapide* tradition.

In subsequent years the frontal *figura serpentinata* became Bernini’s virtual trademark,
increasingly bold, dynamic, and expressive of the life and vitality of an immediate action. The
*serpentinata* is the embodiment of divine inspiration in the figure of Daniel saved by an angel
from the lion’s den in the Chigi chapel in S. Maria del Popolo, Rome. Something between a
picture and a sculpture, the figure admits of no frontal plane and the angel seems to respond
to Daniel’s devotion from the space above and outside the niche. It can be said, I think, that the
increasingly bold serpentine movement together with the splicing together of multiple pieces
in over-life sized works helped him escape the prison of the single block. In the gigantic figure of Saint Longinus in St. Peter's, consisting of four pieces, the blind centurion's lilting rhythm and outstretched arms imitate the glorious triumph of the Cross on which he pierced Christ's side and was converted, his sight restored. Bernini began to challenge the isolationist ideal of Mannerism early on but his alternate solution appears full-blown in a newly discovered drawing of a tomb monument from Bernini's workshop in the Princeton University Art Museum (Fig. 2): the sculpture faces the spectator directly for maximum impact, while also enhancing its effect with a vigorous twisting movement in the frontal plane. This splendid display of grace and high energy would have appeared in heavenly light in a drawing by Bernini of 1657 that depicts an explosive Archangel Michael swooping down from heaven to bestow the Keys of Saint Peter and the Papal tiara on the Papal throne of Saint Peter in the apse of St. Peter's. Considering this project's location as the central focus in the largest church in Christendom, the figure would have been a truly brilliant, gigantic climax.

The underlying theme we have been tracing had a lasting legacy. Hogarth in the mid-eighteenth century composed a treatise, the Analysis of Beauty, illustrated by two deliberately popular and simple-minded engravings, in one of which a central feature was what he called the «serpentine line of beauty» (Fig. 3). Finally, the theme appears as far afield as the Hopi Indian nation in Arizona, which was celebrated for its annual ritual snake dance. A shaman enacted with a live rattlesnake a prayer to the great rain god, that is, the thunder, lightning, and rain. Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was the scion of the great Warburg banking family and founder of the famous Warburg library and institute of Kulturwissenschaft and the modern discipline of the study of symbols, that is, of iconology. Warburg had developed a debilitating psychological problem and retired to a famous Swiss sanatorium in Kreutzlingen. He had heard of the Hopi ritual and in 1886 determined to go to the Hopi settlement and see for himself. He asked a number of the young tribesmen to make a picture of what they had experienced at the dance ceremony. Several of them drew pictures of the clouds and rain, while others drew compositions of wavy serpentine arrows that suggested in an abstract way lightning striking from the clouds to the earth: in other words, symbols that were traditional in the tribe's self-representation. When Warburg returned to the sanatorium and gave a lecture about his experience, the physicians declared him fit to go home. To the English edition of the book in which he published this lecture, he added an immortal couplet that epitomized his entire Kulturwissenschaftliche philosophy: «It is a lesson from an old book: the kinship of Athens and Oraibi» («Es ist ein altes Buch zu blättern, / Athen-Oraibi, alles Vetter»).
Fig. 1
Group of *Laocoön*, ca. 40–20 BCE, marble, 24.2 cm. Città del Vaticano, Museo Pio-Clementino, Cortile Ottagono, no.1509 (© Creative Commons)

Fig. 2
Gian Lorenzo Bernini (workshop of), *Design for the Tomb Monument of a Military Officer*, ca.1670, pen and brown ink with brush and gray wash on cream laid paper. Princeton University Art Museum, Gift of Charles Scribner III (© Princeton University Art Museum)

Fig. 3