

**Between Painting and Sculpture: the relevance of relief art
in the twentieth century**

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Abstract

This dissertation is a formalist study of the development of relief sculpture in the period 1880-1940. As well as for sculpture in the round, painting, and the other arts, this period wrought a fundamental change in the way in which the relief was perceived and utilised as an art form. However, no history exists of the relief as such even though the importance of many individual reliefs has been well documented. My argument is therefore twofold. Firstly I have tried to show that the abstract relief shares a tendency in common with painting and sculpture away from the representational norms of the pre-Modernist period. Secondly I have argued that by endorsing Modernist criteria, artists employing the relief have brought a new freedom to the ways in which the values of sculpture might be employed. I see the consequence of this being an increased interest in relief art forms being shown by artists from the forties to the present day.

Introduction

It is the aim of this dissertation to discuss the principle ways in which the course of relief art changed at the turn of the century, and to look at some of the consequences of this in the work of the succeeding generation. The latter part of this century has witnessed a fundamental debate on the nature of sculpture and the validity of the art object and many works are no longer simply classifiable as being purely sculptural or purely painterly, or indeed as purely 'art'. Wholly new considerations have come into play during the course of the twentieth century, and this debate is reflected with a particular acuteness by the role of the relief.

The concept of a single-sided piece of sculpture was, in the pre-Modernist period, related to the more decorative concerns of the minor arts. However, since 1948 the proliferation and diversification of relief art forms, in media, concept and style, indicates an unprecedented transference of values between painting and sculpture in Western art.

In trying to sort out what has happened to make this possible, I have found it more useful to concentrate on abstract works, in themselves a modern phenomenon as figurative works have tended to remain within more easily definable sculptural conventions. I have also chosen to bypass issues of monochrome/polychrome as I am more concerned to examine the structural aspects of sculptural relief; after all, the relief has its roots in the sculpted surface, and some of the more fundamental innovations have been concerned with space rather than colour. The modern response to polychrome sculpture would be worthy of a separate investigation. The third parameter I have had to impose has been to concentrate on the turning points of Modernist invention. The major advances were all made within the first forty years of this century, works after the Second World War being generally extensions and expansions of precedents already laid down.

Behind the rationale of this dissertation lie two assumptions. The modern relief belongs partly to the traditional marriage of painting and sculpture which has not been in common use in the west since the Gothic period. Secondly, relief has become an independent form. On the one hand it has broken away from its traditional dependence on architecture, and on the other, it has broken away from the conventions of sculpture by rejecting traditional premises on materials and colour with the advent of abstraction and constructivism. It will be clear that by 'relevance' I am referring to the new status relief work has gained in its relationship with painting and sculpture.

One problem in assessing the relative importance of relief art lies in the critical tradition of assuming painting and sculpture to be mutually divergent art forms, any mixing of media being at best a hybrid, and at worst a dilution of a purist ethic. While the post-Renaissance tradition has encouraged such separation to the advantage of both arts, like all thoroughbreds, painting, and particularly sculpture, have also both suffered from this rarefication. The emergence of 'Academy' art has frequently led artists into the sterility of stylistic formalism and a consequent loss of that magic which some historians and critics

believe to be the main source of worthwhile art.¹ But the phenomenon which is currently flowering in the hands of such diverse artists such as John Latham, Mark Boyle and Stephen Cox is still perhaps too new to have made its point in the minds of established critics.² Very few contemporary critical writers seem prepared to accept the relief as a significant medium in its own right, and I am particularly indebted to Albert Elsen and Rosalind Kraus for their stimulating material on the subject.

Image:

The Bible and Voltaire. John Latham, 1959.

<http://www.lavoixdunord.fr/region/john-latham-un-artiste-militant-qui-vise-l-emancipation-jna33b0n624694>

Image:

Shepherd's Bush, London. Mark Boyle and Joan Hills, 1966.

http://www.wienlukatsch.de/gallery_exhibition.php?archive=15

Image:

View from the Loggia after Turner. Stephen Cox, 1983.

Image:

The Wolves. Etienne Hajdu, 1953.

Image:

April 1955 (Celtic). Ben Nicholson, 1955.

Image:

Banlieu des Anges. Zoltan Kemeny, 1958.

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/539446861585676977/>

Image:

Gate. Ellsworth Kelly, 1958.

<http://www.artsconnected.org/resource/85683/gate>

Image:

Octave. Robert Rauschenberg, 1960.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/35237104136@N01/4697128662/>

Image:

Dawn's Wedding Mirror. Louise Nevelson, 1959.

<http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/contemporary-curated-n09316/lot.31.html>

¹ Ernst Fischer in *The Necessity of Art* (Penguin, 1963) offers a highly plausible account of the earliest arts of mankind and the need for magic symbols.

² These artists were exhibited at the Royal Academy, "British Art in the 20th Century", and at the Tate Gallery, "Forty Years of Modern Art".

Between Painting and Sculpture: the relevance of relief art in the twentieth century

In 1953, in the introduction to an exhibition of his work, the sculptor Etienne Hajdu wrote:

I have abandoned the sculpture-object, which by its form and content is incapable of expressing the manifold aspects of life. I have turned to bas-relief, which allows one to reunite technically many contrary elements and to ensure their interaction.³

This statement, which rejects the validity of sculpture in the round is mirrored by the words of the painter Ben Nicholson:

Painting arises out of something much more like the cave paintings of primitive man, in which he becomes interested in constructing a piece of reality (out of his experiences of living) by making marks and placing colour on a surface, on any form which he finds related to his idea, to his poetic idea, which to him is a reason for living; such a form will very seldom be rectangular or on a stretched canvas or even a flat surface because he is dealing with life and not with a sophisticated convention.⁴

Both Hajdu and Nicholson, by refuting the conventional polarisation between pure sculpture and pure painting, have allowed once medium to influence the other. While the work of each artist adheres to his own most fundamental concern with either the form or the colour of the surface material, Nicholson's paintings have a tactile surface while Hajdu's reliefs (and his extremely frontal sculptures) are pictorial and painterly. As Clement Greenberg points out, painting and sculpture have always enjoyed a stylistic cross-fertilisation, but have perhaps never before assumed so many of each other's values.⁵

Certainly during the fifties and sixties distinctions between the two arts were completely blurred in the profusion of different types of relief art. Ellsworth Kelly's free-standing painted screens, Robert Rauschenberg's combine-paintings, and the painted frames and screens of Louise Nevelson are a few examples of the pictorial sculptures, or sculptural paintings that were being made. Edward Trier points to Zoltan Kemeny as a 'difficult borderline case':⁶

Are his metal reliefs paintings with a special emphasis on the materiality of the medium, or should the collection of miniature blocks and interstices between them be considered as a sculptural composition?⁷

It may appear confusing that the new reliefs are less exclusively sculptural than in previous centuries, however Trier, in common with other writers, while placing the relief between

³ Herschel B. Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art*. (U.C.P. 1968) p. 605.

⁴ Norbert Lynton, intro. Ben Nicholson *New Reliefs* (Marlborough Fine Art 1971) p.7.

⁵ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Sculpture, Its Pictorial Past,' *Art and Culture*. (T & H, 1973) pp. 158 - 165.

⁶ Edward Trier, *Form and Space* (T & H, 1968) p.32.

⁷ *ibid*, p.32.

painting and sculpture, attributes much of the overlapping tendency in this century to the initiative of painters.⁸ Nonetheless these critics of modern sculpture claim the relief as their own preserve and a separate issue from the textural coloured surfaces of, say, Jean Dubuffet, Lucio Fontana, or indeed Nicholson. There are two basic distinctions that can be made. Firstly, with a relief-painting the degree of technical handcrafting of the structural materials is less evident and of lesser consequence than the colour relationships. With *otage* of course, it is the depth of pigment itself which provides the surface texture. Secondly, many of those relief sculptors who have used polychrome have often preferred to apply colours 'one to a plane, in order to affirm that plane's existence by demarcation from its neighbours.'⁹ In such cases colour is used primarily to increase the contrast, and only secondarily as a pictorial value; a case in point being the sculpto-paintings of Archipenko. Relief sculptures then, are generally considered in the light of their sculptural qualities of form, irrespective of their chromatic values.

Andre Malraux's definition of painting as an art of illusory space, and sculpture of illusory movement is a useful guideline.¹⁰ However the perspectival view itself may also be termed as a pictorial description of space, whether the medium is drawn or modelled. A painting might therefore be termed as 'zero relief.' Malraux's definition makes better sense when considered alongside the earlier theory of Gottfried Lessing which includes both painting and sculpture as being primarily concerned with space although qualified by time.¹¹ The concept of sculpture as illusory movement or arrested time is no less true of mimetic painting, indeed the art of mimesis requires references to both space and time for it to be rationally convincing. However Modernism has brought a change in the attitude of western artists towards mimesis, the representation of the external world having a subsidiary interest. But, although there is a vast cultural and stylistic gulf between the rationality of nineteenth century neoclassical reliefs, such as the works of say, Francois Rude or Constantin Meunier, and the conceptual works of this century, they are linked together by a traceable chain of influence; a continuity which, I propose, stems from the very origins of the visual arts.

Relief art has a rather special history in that, unlike painting or sculpture, it has tended to move in and out of fashion over the centuries, according to the relative dominance of its sister arts. It has been particularly out of fashion since the Renaissance; one reason for this being its close association with the decorative requirements of architects and interior decorators, the relief often appearing to be a part of its structural support. Furthermore compared with painting, the use of relief has been limited by both logistic and financial constraints, particularly where any degree of sophistication has been sought for large areas of wall space. However, it is a very ancient art form and in the light of the crucial role played by tribal and archaeological art during the twentieth century, it is pertinent to note, as George Rickey points out, that few primitive cultures have not employed it in some

⁸ See also the following in their chapters on relief: Michel Seuphor, *Sculpture of this Century*. (Zwemmer, 1959); George Rickey, *Constructivism* (Studio Vista, 1968); W. J. Strachan, *Towards Sculpture*. (T&H, 1996); Albert Elsen, *Origins of Modern Sculpture*. (Phaidon, 1974); Albert Elsen, *Modern European Sculpture 1918 - 45*. (Brazillier, 1979).

⁹ *Origins of Modern Sculpture* p.106.

¹⁰ This was pointed out in conversation with David Baxter.

¹¹ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*. (T&H, 1977) p.3.

manner.¹² Drawings of animals incised in stone are found among artefacts from pre-historic dwellings, tablets of carved figures and script survive from the earliest known agrarian cultures, and both the ancient Egyptian and Chinese cultures used painted reliefs to serve as both didactic religious decorations and as public records.

During the early Christian era it appears that reliefs in stone virtually competed with both the mosaic and the fresco for precedence in the decoration of buildings. However, after the brief ascendancy of sculpture in the round during the Gothic period and the flowering of iconic painting on glass, the supremacy of painting became an established fact of Europe's cultural development. There are several reasons for this, not least the discovery of a reliable system for depicting architectural perspectives and the introduction of oil for panel painting, both of which together gave painting the greater facility for representing the natural world, in both the appearance of form and colour; but also, to satisfy a cultural demand. Painting, 'could exploit the post-medieval taste for the greatest possible tension between that which was imitated and the medium that did the imitating.'¹³ This in turn has led, from the Renaissance onwards, to a polarisation between painting and sculpture as pure and distinct arts, the one a depiction of illusion upon a single surface plane, the other creating an illusion through 'the deployment of bodies in space.'¹⁴ Lying between them relief art, coloured or plain, became relegated to the status of a decorative art to be used by furniture makers and architects, and occasionally, as a kind of sub-text to large public sculptures. That the relief has survived at all as a fine art form in the tradition of Donatello and Ghiberti must be partly due to this latter use in serving a social demand for commemorative art. But, such small panels as these not only display the advantages of a sophisticated system of representation, they may also highlight its shortcomings.

The example shown in Figure 10 is surmounted by an imposing statue of Garibaldi. The bronze panel shows a scene of figures in a landscape, and the subject of the statue can be seen in context. In this, the relief panel works just as a painting would, by presenting an illusionistic space in which a dramatic action takes place. The principal optical difference from a painting however, is that instead of being drawn on one single surface plane, the modelling lies between two planes, the back plane of the material and an imaginary frontal plane. However in this example the central figure of Garibaldi, having been modelled in the round and cast separately, extends outwards beyond the frontal plane of the panel. While this serves to focus attention on the central figure it also poses a perspectival ambiguity, for the shadow cast by the figure of Garibaldi is wholly out of scale with the background. The relief is flawed by a visual inconsistency; the projecting figure destroys the 'artistic' integrity of the panel, while the shadow cast on the back plane destroys the credibility of the perspective.¹⁵

¹² Rickey, p.117.

¹³ Greenberg, p. 140.

¹⁴ Krauss, p.3.

¹⁵ *Origins of Modern Sculpture*, pp. 131-32. Albert Elsen is quoting from Adolf von Hildebrand's *The Problem of Form* (Strasburg, 1893).

Fig. 10:



The Departure of Garibaldi for Italy. Artist unknown.

Image:

The Gates of Hell. Rodin.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/gustavothomastheatre/5701500335/>

Image:

Tuerie. Auguste Preault, 1834.

<http://www.19thcenturyart-facos.com/artwork/tuerie-slaughter>

And yet this factor has been one of the great challenges offered by the relief for twentieth century visual art. The potential for spatial ambiguity allows for more than one reading of pictorial space, an important consideration in Cubism in its first transition away from literal representation. The employment of such relativistic values is also to be noted in early Modernist literature and poetry, a parallel development without any one single source, out as in the visual arts, the product of a common interest. However for this problem of relief art, relativistic concepts provided a unique solution, for where the components of the motif are incompatible in scale, out of scale shadows do not pose a problem of credibility.¹⁶

The Garibaldi relief also demonstrates another aspect of post-Renaissance pictorial art in its narrative representation. It focuses on a single moment in time, the occasion of Garibaldi's return to Italy in 1870, and it was with this convention in mind that Rodin began the *Gates of Hell* in 1880. The *Gates of Hell* are a key work in the recent history of relief sculpture. Firstly because they ran counter to the traditional decorum and secondly because they have been a major influence on succeeding generations of artists. Although figural, they demand

¹⁶ *Origins of Modern Sculpture*, p.146.

discussion here on account of Rodin's fresh interpretation of pictorial drama in sculpture, but also because of his innovatory method of handling space. His preliminary drawings reflect Ghiberti's fifteenth century doors for the Florence Baptistery in their use of separate narrative panels.¹⁷ But, Rodin quickly dropped the restrictive convention and worked instead towards a 'field of restless bodies' that would reflect the emotional quality of Hell rather than simply illustrate sequences from Dante's *Inferno* as he had originally intended.¹⁸ Indeed, in the final plaster, only two groups of figures remain that relate directly to the *Inferno*, Paolo and Francesca and Ugolino and his sons, and their narrative distinction is blurred by the repetition of Paolo's form as one of Ugolino's children.¹⁹

To represent a sensory experience of Hell, Rodin explored two approaches. The first, that of emotion being expressed solely through the human body, followed a metaphoric tradition already well established in French Romantic art.²⁰ The second approach, to reject the accepted mimetic formula, had not been attempted in post-Renaissance sculpture before Rodin, except by his compatriot Auguste Preault. The lack of a sequential narrative frame in the *Gates of Hell* and the repetition of figural forms across the surface denies the viewer a time reference in the work. Furthermore, Rodin shaped the back-plane into an undulating non-illusionistic mass in which the figures are partially buried, thus rejecting spatial perspective.²¹ Rodin's main contribution to the modern relief was then, to reject the neoclassical rationalism, based on co-ordinates of space and time, which had anchored the visual arts for so long. While this conceptual innovation had been precocious in his own culture we can now see that his example was not to remain an isolated aberration.

It is interesting that this should concur with the findings of the anthropologist Jacques Maquet in his analysis of primitive West African reliefs. Maquet equates the use of 'vanishing point perspective' with a 'man orientated world view', whereas the 'ontological' or metaphysical perspective, which in the *Gates of Hell* is expressed in the opacity of its background, denotes a 'God orientated world view' through which Rodin conveys his concept of hellishness.²²

The application of figures and half-figures cast in the round onto the surface of the *Gates of Hell* further emphasises Rodin's desire to transcend the accepted values of representation. Out of scale shadows exaggerate the tonality of the whole. However, what had begun as an attempt to rival 'large scale chiaroscuro historical painting' in sculpture, had an unexpected (and possibly undervalued) influence upon a succeeding generation of artists.²³ The restricted plane of the background of the *Gates of Hell* and the subordination of the whole to the expression of its details, foreshadowed 'Cubist space, collage and the simultaneous viewing of different facets of one solid.'²⁴

¹⁷ Catherine Lampert, *Rodin Sculpture and Drawings*, (Arts Council, 1986) p.43.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p.43.

¹⁹ Krauss, p.15

²⁰ Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, (T &H, 1983) p.35.

²¹ Krauss, p.23.

²² Jacques Maquet, *The Aesthetic Experience* (Yale University Press,1986) p.232.

²³ Lampert, p.74.

²⁴ Lampert, p.80.

'Cubist space' has justifiably been researched at great length for it is an important key to understanding the avant-garde painting and sculpture of this century. It is an influence that is still with us in the eighties, even though it is now, as it were, a part of our pattern of thought. However, prior to the first world war it had had a revolutionary effect on the consciousness of artists as they sought to assimilate the explosion of Symbolist, Expressionist, Naive and tribal arts. I have suggested that Rodin's contribution to Cubism has been undervalued, since the development of this mode of spatial perception is most usually attributed to Cezanne, who, in his late paintings, had redefined the integrity of paint and canvas by negating the illusion of depth. Following Cezanne's lead in reducing the degree of apparent volume through the emphasis of flat angular planes, Braque and Picasso, between 1907 and 1911, furthered the process by fragmenting volumes into networks of coloured planes, until all that remained of their original subject matter was a barely legible 'transcription of reality'.²⁵ Within a minimal depth of perspectival illusion, the surface planes in their paintings of this period were subtly tilted forward or backward from the plane of the canvas.²⁶ The effect of this was a facility for presenting different views of an object at the same time; and even more radical, to present a non-rational juxtaposition of the component parts of the subject matter. Such simultaneity of vision, apparent in Rodin's pictorial sculpture, gained a new meaning in the formalistic paintings of the Analytic period, which in turn led to the use of collage and relief.

D.H. Kahnweiler, in an introduction to Picasso's sculpture, wrote that the Cubists had turned to sculpture 'in order to overcome painting's relative inability to represent volume.'²⁷ And Clement Greenberg, in his essay 'Collage', points to the constriction of the flatness of collage as the catalyst which prompted Picasso to use relief.²⁸ In their concern for the identity of Cubism as such, both critics would appear to be analysing sculptural modes solely in terms of a relationship to the painted surface. Somewhat differently, Albert Elsen, suspecting that Picasso's first reliefs may have preceded his first use of collage, suggests that the use of relief by Cubist and post-Cubist painters and sculptors was born out of a positive reasoning appropriate to the period, and not simply from a dissatisfaction with available means.²⁹ It is worth quoting him in full to appreciate the breadth of his claim.

The new history of relief which begins in 1912 resulted from positive incentives and not dissatisfaction with contemporary answers to old questions [...] Evidence of fresh conceptual thinking is found in the pervasiveness of reform: adulteration and vernacularisation of materials as opposed to the homogeneity of stone and bronze; the use of varieties of polychromy that are inconsistently descriptive or abstract; the absence of a rectangular frame and sandwich-like planes to which the composition may be referable; the replacement of figural forms by objects, materials, and abstract shapes; and independence from architecture that influences scale, composition, and the means by which the relief is supported. Simplified formalistic views of modern art's history by which painting and sculpture are viewed as

²⁵ Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art*, (Harry N. Abrams, 1976) p.46.

²⁶ Alfred H. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, (Secker & Warburg, 1975) p.42.

²⁷ Quoted by Isabelle Monod-Fontaine; *The Sculpture of Henri Matisse*, (T&H, 1984) p.18

²⁸ Greenberg, p.79.

²⁹ *Origins of Modern Sculpture*, pp.54 and 142.

irrevocably trending to exclusivity of each other cannot cope with the reliefs made by painters and sculptors who disdained hardening of the categories as art disease.³⁰

Image:

Guitar. Picasso, 1912.

<http://www.wikiart.org/en/pablo-picasso/guitar-1912>

Image:

Head with Large Eyes. Julio Gonzalez, c.1930.

Image:

African Figure of the Bakota.

<http://www.hamillgallery.com/BAKOTA/BakotaGuardians3/Bakota27.html>

In particular Elsen cites the 1911-12 *Guitar*, (Fig. 15) of Picasso, and its original cardboard version, as ‘extensions of Picasso’s drawings and oils’ of the period;³¹ a process he describes as the building of compositional elements ‘not into depth, but into the space of the room.’³² Picasso’s conceptual advance in broaching the third dimension was then, to actually realize ‘the previously implied shallow space’ of the Analytic paintings.³³ However, at the same time, by placing a sculptural object on a wall Picasso divested his sculpture of a profile reading of its form and, by restricting the viewer to a frontal reading, ensured that its surfaces would be read in a pictorial way. This I propose has been one of the most influential experiments to have encouraged artists to explore the interface between the second and third dimensions.

The works which most directly parallel Picasso’s *Guitar* and his subsequent Cubist reliefs are the African relief figures which had begun to influence the Parisian art world a few years after the turn of the century. African sculpture had been of great stylistic importance to both the Fauve and the early Cubist painters but the mask in particular had a very specific relevance for Cubist and post-Cubist reliefs, those of Julio Gonzalez in the late twenties being just one example of a direct reference. The majority of African sculptures cited in critical studies of the period are West African masks, and whether of carved wood or beaten metal, all display the same characteristic features:³⁴ a very flat surface structure, generalised figurative details, and abstract decorative markings. Figure 15, a Bakota funerary fetish of beaten brass on wood, is a geometricised human figure designed to be seen from the front. Its features are reduced to simplified notations of headdress, face, torso and limbs, the whole piece acting as a centripetal background to the principal features of the nose and eyes, which are raised a little above the main surface.

³⁰ *ibid*, pp.142-44.

³¹ *ibid*, p.54.

³² *ibid*, p.146

³³ Hickey, p.117.

³⁴ See for example: *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art*, Fig 10, p.24; *Cubism and Abstract Art*, Fig 15, p.32; E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, (Phaidon, 1973) Fig. 367, p.448; Norbert Lynton, *The Story of Modern Art*, (Phaidon, 1982) Figs. 15a & 15b, p.29.

Robert Rosenblum points to the inspiration that such figures gave to Picasso's paintings of 1907, for example *Les Femmes d'Alger* and *Dancer*, partly because of the 'terrifying power and suggestion of a super-natural presence' that these figures have.³⁵ However if we were to consider the Bakota fetish simply as an isolated relief in a modern European museum, it would be difficult to assess its meaning without additional information being supplied, for we would be seeing it deprived of its original context.³⁶ Within the tradition of western relief art the back space of the relief, whether integral or separate, has provided the contextual meaning of the central subject matter. For example, the architecture of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris supplies a context for Francois Rude's *La Marseillaise*, 1833-36; or at the other end of the scale, the impressionistic modelling of the back-ground in Auguste Preault's *Ophelia*, 1843-76, helps to give a meaning to the figure, no matter how fully the figure fills the space. But in Picasso's *Guitar*, as in a number of his reliefs, the background has been discarded altogether, or alternatively as in *Musical Instruments*, 1914, (Fig. 17) merely hinted at by the relatively ambiguous position of a single rectangle of flat wood that the other pieces are attached to. At the very least the absence of a contextual back space in Picasso's reliefs seems to make a direct visual reference to African reliefs like the Bakota fetish. However in her discussion of Picasso's reliefs Rosalind Krauss states that 'the fragments of descriptive language fail to integrate the separate planes of the constructions into a single, coherent object,' and further, that the components, like the words in Cubist collages, 'turn into inert objects' and become 'merely decorative.'³⁷ Yet the visual similarity between the two forms, (at 27¾" the Bakota figure is less than three inches shorter than the *Guitar*) is too close for it not to suggest a possible equivalence of meaning. Indeed all of the exterior lines of the *Guitar* devolve centripetally upon the central sound hole – the mouth of the instrument. By presenting an object with no other contextual reference but its title, Picasso is offering the viewer an image as forceful yet also equally enigmatic as the Bakota figure, a fetish of twentieth century culture.

Image:

Ophelia. Auguste Preault, 1843-76.

http://athena.unige.ch/athena/ophelia/prea_oph.html

Image:

Musical Instruments. Picasso, 1910.

<http://newabstraction.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/mandolin-1914.jpg>

Image:

Development of a Bottle in Space. Boccioni.

http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81178

Image:

Corner Relief. Tatlin, 1915.

³⁵ *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art*, p.25.

³⁶ David Baxter has pointed out to me that the Cubists had sought out primitive carvings solely for their visual qualities.

³⁷ Krauss, pp.48-51.

https://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/IMRC/course_website/slides12/tatli008_1200w.htm

William Seitz, writing of 'collage and related modes of construction' is quite clear on the motivation that underlies creative works of art; 'Every work of art is an incarnation: an investment of matter with spirit.'³⁸ However, a more intellectualist approach was explored by the Constructivists and Futurists in their adaptation of cubist theories. In particular the corner relief was developed to further expand the possibilities of abstract space that had been opened up by the rejection of conventional assumptions over what was, and what was not, art. Being more concerned with architectural concepts than with pictorial representations, Tatlin and Gabo produced architectonic works in a relief format to exploit new materials and techniques. But their advance was preceded by the research of Boccioni, in particular, after his encounter with the works of the Parisian Cubists in 1911.³⁹

Boccioni's *Development of a Bottle in Space*, 1912, (Fig. 18) is remarkable as a free standing three dimensional sculpture which demands to be seen in terms of the relief. The abruptness of its outer contours implies the open section of a cube (thus prefiguring Gabo's stereometry) giving it an architectonic quality. The corner configuration creates a vortex effect which draws the viewer's perception into its central space, such that the mind's eye finds itself involved within the space of the sculpture. By engaging the viewer in this way Boccioni can control the viewer's angle of sight to encourage a conceptual motion both upwards and around the bottle, following the curved planes and slopes of the objects. Boccioni's intention, as described in the Futurist Manifesto of 1909, was to portray the 'absolute motion' of the object, or the interface of time and space. However Boccioni's interest in simultaneity of vision should also be noted, for, as in Picasso's *Guitar*, the subject matter of *Bottle in Space* has been opened up to demonstrate its component facets.⁴⁰

Vladimir Tatlin was possibly already aware of the *Futurist Manifesto* by the time he met Picasso in 1913.⁴¹ Like Picasso and Boccioni, Tatlin dissected the object, but perhaps achieved a tighter use of metaphor by employing forms and textures according to their similarity with the object described, as in, for example, *The Bottle* of 1913.⁴² However in the more radical corner reliefs of 1915, he rejected Boccioni's implied spatial support for the real and actual support of an architectural setting. *The Corner Relief*, 1915, (Fig. 19) utilises the axes of two walls to demonstrate that the work of art could be 'continuous with the space of the world and dependent upon it for its meaning.'⁴³ It seems natural that this distinction should have brought him from the artifice of his early theatre designs towards radical forms of architecture, for his experimentation with space had primarily been directed towards creating an environment of psychological influence.

³⁸ William Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage*, (M.O.M.A., 1961) p.10.

³⁹ Krauss, p.47.

⁴⁰ Krauss, pp. 41-47.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.53.

⁴² Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment' in Art: 1863-1922*, (T & H, 1996) p179

⁴³ Krauss, p.55.

On the other hand, Naum Gabo, less concerned with bringing together the disparate elements of the arts and social politics, proposed a medium for uniting art with science.⁴⁴ Before turning to purely abstract forms during the twenties, Gabo had developed his stereometric theory of structure through a series of constructed heads. The *Head of a Woman*, 1916-17, (Fig. 20) shares with Boccioni's *Bottle in Space*, the use of an angular back space, but here the axial walls intersect the figure itself and continue beyond it.⁴⁵ This demonstrates Gabo's perception of structure as expanding outwards from a knowable centre to the finite limit of the figure's form, a factor that he was able to state far more definitively through his later use of transparent materials. Using clear plastics and wire enabled him to simulate volume without any part of the form being obscured by its mass.

Image:

Head of a Woman. Naum Gabo, c.1917-28.

http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81440

Image:

Observing Head, Tete. Giacometti, 1927.

http://www.yoshiigallery.com/exhibitions/view.php?work_id=15

Image:

An Anxious Friend. Max Ernst, 1944.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bergfotos/4180738976/>

While some of the challenging proposals of Cubism and the Modernist outlook towards sources and materials had found their expression through a revitalised relief format, not all early modernist reliefs were aimed at simulating the powerful presence of tribal works of art, nor at challenging architectural assumptions about the role of the relief. A number of progressive artists, including Picasso, from 1912 onwards sought to reflect the ideas and images of their culture, or aesthetic commitment, from a modern point of view and employing contemporary references. In some cases the relief acted as a means of transcending the two dimensional surface while still retaining an essentially pictorial format. For other artists the relief served as a starting point, or testing ground, for sculptural work in three dimensions where the pictorial element might still be paramount. Many such sculptures have a distinctly frontal quality to them. Not that frontality and pictorialism are synonymous but the principal concern, in which both concepts overlap, seems to have been the desire to attain maximum visibility of the form while still employing sculptural mass. A further reason behind the frontality of certain sculptures and the relief, is the need to control the angle at which the viewer must encounter a work, a factor which is normally self-evident with paintings. Rosalind Krauss, with reference to the *Gates of Hell*, states that 'the frontality of the relief [...] guarantees that the effect of the composition will in no way be diluted.'⁴⁶ Such dilution may be the inclination of the viewer to regard the profile, which

⁴⁴ *Modern European Sculpture 1918-45*, p.121.

⁴⁵ Krauss, p. 58.

⁴⁶ Krauss, p.12.

is more or less governed by environmental conditions, as being of greater importance than either the quality of the surface as texture, or the relationships of the forms within any given plane of the work.

Between the wars Giacometti produced several three dimensional sculptures which might otherwise be referred to as free-standing reliefs, for their content is predominantly on one single side. In, for example, *Observing Head*, 1928 c. (Fig. 21) the thin slab of marble set on an angular pedestal would, seen from one side only, read as head and neck even if it lay just fractionally away from an integral background; the lines of its profile are sufficiently distinctive. Seen end-on however, the slab becomes an architectonic form, for its details are absorbed by its mass and it loses its anthropomorphic nature. Only the side shown here, with its characterising surface depressions gives a sensible reading of the material as a head. On the other hand in *An Anxious Friend*, 1944, (Fig. 22) by Max Ernst, the vertical stature of the work suggests an anthropomorphic reading from any angle of view, but like the *Observing Head* all the important information about the nature of the figure is contained on one side. The details on the face side appear to project outwards in parallel, along a horizontal axis aimed at the viewer, as if to confront him or her with a mirror image of themselves. Nothing happens outside of that frontal perspective.

Another example of an essentially frontal format in a three dimensional work is Lipchitz's *Reclining Woman with Guitar*, 1928, (Fig. 23) which Albert Elsen describes as being 'a work so frontal as to suggest its appropriateness for a relief.'⁴⁷ Jacques Lipchitz himself commented on the piece as 'conceived with a strong sense of frontality [...] involving a movement in and out of depth.'⁴⁸ It is the optimal degree of visibility that such a frontal design gives that allows Lipchitz to merge the human figure with the guitar-object so completely, the one being fully assimilated in the other. In his autobiography (*My Life in Sculpture*, 1972) he notes how adding bases to some of the Cubist relief maquettes he had made during the twenties stimulated him to pursue this 'severe frontality' in his later works.⁴⁹ His flexibility of presentation is interesting, for the first maquette of *Song of Songs*, 1944, (Arnason, No. 130) is set upon a circular base; a second from 1945 is on a short stand (Jenkins, T 03439), while a third maquette, of 1946 (Jenkins, T 03532) was made to hang on a wall. In the final enlarged version, 1946, *Song of Songs* (Hammacher, Jacques Lipchitz, Fig. 129) becomes 'a free standing sculpture that suggests a relief form.'⁵⁰

Image:

Reclining Nude with Guitar. Jacques Lipchitz, 1928.

http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81083

Image:

Song of Songs. Jacques Lipchitz, 1966.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lipchitz-song-of-songs-t03489>

⁴⁷ *Modern European Sculpture*, p.120. Elsen refers to this work as *Reclining Nude with Guitar*.

⁴⁸ Quoted in *The Lipchitz Gift*, D.F. Jenkins & D. Pullen, (The Tate Gallery, 1986) p.46.

⁴⁹ Jenkins, p.80.

⁵⁰ Jenkins, p. 80.

Image:

Portrait of Tristan Tzara. Arp, 1916.

https://www.flickr.com/photos/musee_imaginaire-carolina_schneider/3270962672

Image:

Objet Poeme, Poem Object. Andre Breton, 1941.

http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=81121

Image:

Anchored Cross. Antoine Pevsner, 1933.

<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artwork/3405>

Image:

Bell and Navels. Arp, 1931.

https://www.moma.org/collection/provenance/provenance_object.php?object_id=81163

Image:

Head with Annoying Objects. Arp, 1938.

<https://www.usc.edu/schools/annenberg/asc/projects/comm544/library/images/320.html>

During the first half of this century there was possibly no artist to use the relief form as consistently as Jean Arp who, 'disgusted with oil painting' had made his first reliefs in 1914 and continued until his death in 1966.⁵¹ His career as a relief artist always ran concurrently with his work as a poet, printer and collagist, and after 1930, with his production of free standing sculpture. Albert Elsen wrote of Arp that he was the 'first sculptor to build an art on automatism,' and further that 'it was by means of his reliefs or "constructed pictures" as he called them, that Arp brought whimsical free association into modern sculpture.'⁵² His poetic imagery of biomorphic forms changed little throughout his career, gaining in refinement of form and breadth of vocabulary as he matured. Indeed his consistency may be partly responsible for the wide influence he has had on later artists.

Arp's technique of applying layers of shaped wood – cut by saw for Dadaist impersonality⁵³ is essentially a form of collage, differing only in the degree of its extension from the back plane, and in the visual limitation of applying plain or painted wood to wood as opposed to using pre-printed or painted images which already contain their own impressions of illusionistic depth. Herbert Read points out that Arp's reliefs overlap with the twentieth century phenomenon of assemblage art in that they are not cut or modelled out of a single fabric but assembled from pre-cut forms, as in for example, *Portrait of Tristan Tzara*, 1916, (Fig. 25).⁵⁴ However Arp himself referred to them as reliefs,⁵⁵ and like many assemblages and constructions of the period (eg. *Objet Poeme*, 1941, Andre Breton; *Anchored Cross*, 1933, Antoine Pevsner) they are yet a further extension of the potential of relief art.

⁵¹ Seitz, p.81

⁵² *Modern European Sculpture, 1918-65*, p.26 and p.104.

⁵³ *Origins of Modern Sculpture*, p.151.

⁵⁴ Herbert Read, *Arp*, (T & H, 1968) pp.69-70.

⁵⁵ Strachan, p.62.

As Giacometti had done in his series of board games of the early thirties, Arp experimented with horizontal reliefs. *Bell and Navels*, 1931, might well be referred to as a sculpture-with-pedestal, but *Head with Annoying Objects*, 1930, is more obviously designed to be seen from above and in relief terms. The organic shapes which lie upon the main mass of the sculpture appear to belong to that surface, as a nose might be said to belong to a face. Yet because such reliefs lie flat and are not hung on a wall they also take on more complex connotations of environmental sculpture. These two works share with *Shell Profiles*, 1930, (Fig. 30) and *Handfruit*, 1930, an apparently transitional quality between the reliefs and the sculptures in the round by their incorporation of contrasting values, the horizontal and the vertical. Many of Arp's late sculptures in the round maintain a link with his reliefs by employing the negative shapes of the cut-out, the clearest example of this being the *Forest Wheel* series of the early sixties.

Image:

Shell Profiles. Arp, 1938.

Image:

Forest Wheel 2. Arp, 1961.

Image:

Crown of Buds 1. Arp, 1936.

Image:

Relief-sculpture. Arp, 1959.

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/280489883015925534/>

Forest Wheel 2, 1961, (Fig. 31) gives an all around reading of curves and profiles, and even though the single plane faces are edged by a smooth perimeter band, the overall impression is no less that of an organic sculpture than say, *Crown of Buds*, 1936, a work which also employs a central hollow space. However the very clear reference to relief made by the use of the cut-out technique brings the work sharply back to two dimensionality, a point which he had already made in the title of a similar work of 1959, *Relief-sculpture*. One not only sees through a pierced sculpture, one also sees into a relief as if into a frame that interacts with whatever context its environment offers. One is prompted to ask whether or not these works present an answer to the problem posed by Picasso's *Guitar*, that of finding the interface between the second and third dimensions, for Arp's free standing *Forest Wheel* series are at once both sculptural and pictorial.

Conclusion

While the above mentioned artists had each added considerably towards freeing the relief format from the mimetic requirements of a post-Renaissance culture, by experimenting with new conceptual criteria and by utilising an unprecedented range of materials, none of them, apart perhaps from Jean Arp, continued to use the relief mode as their primary means of expression. It would not be possible in a dissertation to consider all the artists who have found a valid exploratory vehicle in the new forms of relief, like for example Oscar Schlemmer or Francis Picabia, nor all the avenues that were examined, for indeed there have been few major artists in this century who have not used the relief format at some time in their careers. This in itself is a novel phenomenon, if one considers that in recent centuries very few painters ever did more than the occasional design for a relief, such as the silver dish sketched by Rubens for Charles I, or a single thematic experiment, such as the two panels of *Les Emigrants*, 1871 c. by Daumier.

However, both the extension from the second to the third dimension as 'a viable way to go beyond painting,' and the process of condensing a three dimensional form into is a relief image have proved widely popular in the last eighty years.⁵⁶ This I take to be indicative of the Modernist thirst for barrier breaking, as well as being a validation of the potential of relief forms, but it also highlights a frustration with the received convention of mathematical linear perspective that has come down to us from Brunelleschi and Donatello. This pictorial aid to representation to which the public, according to Norbert Lynton, had become addicted, has been rejected by painters of many diverse styles and convictions, Cubist, Dadaist, Abstractionist, Surrealist and so on, and has been the focus of much of the literature of twentieth century art history.⁵⁷

As far as sculpture has been concerned however, the issue of pictorialism and therefore also, of relief art, has been given less consideration, the major concern of critics being to trace the Modernist development of sculpture in the round in terms of *après Rodin* or *après Picasso*. This is quite valid in itself, but it tends to presuppose the continuing dependency of relief to the criteria of painting and sculpture in the round. While it used to be the case that relief art lay in debt to its sister arts, I have argued that the modernist aesthetic, in particular the advent of non-representational and non-rational forms of visual expression, has in fact been dependent upon the relief mode for some of its most original advances. The use of relief as an exploratory vehicle was exemplified by the thirty five years that Rodin employed the *Gates of Hell* as both 'private laboratory and library'.⁵⁸ But it is a use that has been a consistent stimulus to each Modernist wave acting interdependently between painting and sculpture.

⁵⁶ *Modern European Sculpture 1918-45*. p.121.

⁵⁷ Lynton. p.150.

⁵⁸ Lampert, p.43.

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