

# **On the Path of The Blue Rider**

Expressive sculpture in 20<sup>th</sup> century universal and Hungarian art and its  
continuation after the change of the millennia

**Theses of the DLA dissertation**

**2009**

**László Szunyogh**

## **Topic**

The topic of my dissertation is expressive sculpture. It is a fundamental question in my view as a contemporary artist how the heritage of expressive sculpture can be sustained. I am dealing with the question whether the existence of the tendency is justified, whether a valid answer can be given from a poetic premise to the affairs of the world. I am not examining expressionism as a style of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, since this has already been successfully done by art historians. Rather, I am focusing on subjectivism, the senses, as artistic driving force that places them in the foreground. As a result, I have made an attempt in my essay to define the presence of what type of form-related characteristics are necessary in order for us to be able to identify a sculpture as expressive.

Due to my age, in my case writing this DLA dissertation is associated with a sort of reckoning, as I have placed my works this far on the balance, with my pieces created during my DLA courses in special prominence. When analyzing my sculptures, I determine how much the attributes of an expressive viewpoint are relevant to my pieces and how much they deviate from it.

## **The analysis of expressive sculpture**

### **The tendency of expressive sculpture in art before the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

Two distinct tendencies can be defined in the history of art. One assigns priority to depiction, which is the realistic Greco-Renaissance-Classicist line, whereas the other gives preference to expression, which is the expressive line. The former tendency has more explicit conformity to each other's requirements, which is guaranteed by the outward form-related attributes. The other line is defined more by internal identity, an effort to point beyond realistic appearance in a transcendent direction. Expressive efforts appear in more

colorful outward form and have the essence more in common. Expressionists themselves who identify their predecessors provide the best plumb line for the definition of this. The eras of religious art are included, specifically, the ancient Egyptian, the Indian, the Chinese and, most primarily, medieval Christian art. The roots of the viewpoints of expressive sculpture were revealed by Wilhelm Worringer who, in his work entitled *Abstraction and Empathy*, demonstrated that in case of expressive type pieces the dominant factor is the will to create art, not the intention to capture visible reality. Accordingly, the expressive artist is motivated by an internal vision, which he predominantly manifests in a manner that overwrites the anatomical laws of humanity. Michelangelo's pietas created in his old age are excellent examples of this attitude, which can be considered unique for that age, inasmuch as they depart from the renaissance ideal and reach back to the gothic precursors.

Creations of the baroque era can be fitted into the line of expressive sculpture, despite the fact that baroque sculptures manifest transcendent world view in a naturalistic shroud. Bernini's *Ecstasy of Santa Teresa* is an outstanding illustration of this, where passionately swirling drapes are pointing to the transcendent dimension, from which the realistically formed body parts of the saint emanate. Worringer points out this duality in relation to this gothic sculpture.

We can mention here from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the blurred sculptures of M. Rosso or those of Bourdelle with the jagged surfaces, which have gone to the greatest extent in dematerializing sculpture and in making them capable of conveying emotion in an abstract form of language. These solutions represent significant steps in the development of the viewpoint that emphasizes the dominance and spiritualism of expression. In reality, Matisse is the first who, in his arabesques, submits figure to expression essentially entirely. Completely dematerialized figure, however, only appears with Giacometti.

### **Masters of expressive sculpture and their works in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

In case of the representatives of universal art, it was primarily the art of Lehmbruck, Barlach, Marino Marini and Giacometti where expressivity was realized with a program-like deliberateness. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, expressionism was unable to become a mature style in the art of Hungarian artists, due to the social conditions that were lagging far behind—as it is pointed out by Márta Kovalovszky when analyzing the activity of the generation of Birman Bokros. Of the contemporary sculptors, Attila Mata and

György Chesslay follow the efforts of neo-expressionism. Their works are characterized by the application of expressive surface treatment and dominant colors. István Drabik deconstructs his sculptures, which are welded together from iron pieces, with a flame-cut whereby he creates sculptures with expressive, distressed surfaces.

### **The problem of expressive form**

In view of the artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the views of theorists related to form-creation we can observe that the attitude related to form is becoming increasingly less material and reflects an increasingly sublimated form ideal. The form ideal of László Moholy-Nagy shifts from block-like through broken formations to the virtual form. These virtual forms are created by light through the act of projection. This change enables form to become the carrier of inner values.

Erwin Panofsky provides a guide to the definition of expressive form indirectly, who blames expressionists for skewing human proportions arbitrarily. This procedure does not seem to agree with Panofsky's artistic ideals, albeit distortion happens to be the norm with the fundamental expressive approach.

### **Distortion of form**

#### *The background aspect of distortion*

Distortion and reiteration of form are an indispensable preconditions of sculpting with an internally guided motivation, as natural form is not adequate (or only limitedly adequate) for the conveyance of impulsive contents. Expressive forms can be generated only by intuitions that induce catharsis. Emotions that arise in connection with faith or love (sexuality) are worthy of this mission.

#### *Distortion of form and the sculptural metaphor*

In comparison to the realistic world of forms, forms shifted towards the extreme shapes and proportions are considered distorted. In general, *elongated*, *flattened* and *jagged-creased* forms can be called expressive. I intend to demonstrate these form-related attributes in the works of Brancusi, Norbert Kricke, Dubuffet and Tamás Körösényi.

The skewed (devoid of mimesis) forms become the basis of the metaphoric conveyance of thought. This is how it becomes possible to morph human shapes and the forms of

mountain ranges in Henry Moore's sculptures. I also applied the metaphoric morphing of forms in my bronze statuette *Figure with Blade* created in 2004.

### **Jagged surfaces, the gesture**

I deem the presence of traces of the creator's person an indispensable precondition in the creation of an expressive sculpture. Focillon calls the direct traces of formation by hand "touche." Matter preserves the traces of the flow and outbreak of emotions, they help us recognize the inner feelings and impulses. Of the traditional materials of sculpture, pliable, formable materials are most suitable to preserve the traces of the action of hands and to reflect the eruptive power of formation. Kooning's statuette *Untitled 6* created in 1969 in pliable material then cast in bronze can be noted as an example of impulsive formation, or György Chesselay's terracotta *Salome* and *Samson* created in 2004.

Since in case of the solid materials of sculpture formation by hand is impossible, we must acquiesce to traces of implements guided by human hands as traces of passionate human self-expression. The rustic-surfaced wooden statuettes carved by Baselitz with a chainsaw can be mentioned as examples of this, as well as, from contemporary Hungarian sculpture, Attila Mata's works, which were created with the same technique. In these cases, the material is not touched by hand, but the saw, as amplifier of the shaping capability of the human hands, result in live work and shaping traces, which is the redeemer of expressive effect. It is precisely due to the absence of human touch that I have excluded conceptual works, such as Duchamp's ready-mades, from the scope of the subjects of my essay.

### **Coloring sculptures**

Coloring sculptures is nothing new in the various eras of the history of sculpture. When applied in the case of expressive sculptures, however, it greatly enhances the power of expression. I can refer primarily to the colored wooden sculptures of Mario Marini here, in which Marini emphasizes the different elements of the structures with the coloring. The contemporary sculptor Attila Mata progresses along the same line with his colored bronze sculptures. Baselitz implements a dramatic coloring independent of the structure on his rustic wooden sculptures. Color effects can also be achieved by treatments of various characters on the different parts and surfaces of the bronze. The rough, the smooth and the

shiny surfaces do not only represent factorial differences but can result in actual color differences as well. In addition to coloring the surfaces and using colorful materials, we can also talk of indirect coloring, when the effects of the differences in the quality of the various materials result in various hue accords. Such is the use of concrete and wire together in the statues of Erzsébet Schaár.

### **Expressive composition**

We can define compositions expressive whose internal structure is submitted to dynamic, expression-centered formation. Expressivity is not necessarily manifested in the distressed treatment of surfaces in these cases but, rather, in the unique joining of the different parts. Barlach's *The Avenger* (1914) was created with this approach, where the edges of the cloak covering the figure are all pointing in the same direction, in the direction of the forward movement of the figure. With relation to the sculptures of Attila Mata, György Jovánovics identifies two kinds of formation processes. He uses the term *compositional expressionism* with relation to Mata's works, as opposed to the cases when *thematic* (psychological) elements convey expressivity. In concurrence with this, Tibor Wehner also derives Mata's expressivity from the *spatial drawing* of the constructional elements, that is, from the composition. The presence of the human figure can be considered a thematic element in sculptural compositions. For me, the dilemma of the creative work is finding the balance of the two. My sculptures are on the border between the two worlds, that of abstraction and figural elements.

### **The melody of form and the line**

It can be observed in the case of Giacometti's sculptures that the sculptor simplifies human figure to the point of linearity. In his works, the figures transformed to lines appear to be making a stepping motion with erect bodies leaning forward. However, Giacometti also has a unique creation, his *Collapsing Man*, made in 1950. The forward-leaning figure's legs are bent at the knees, and the entire line of the figure is gently curved in an S, its arms also taking the same melodically undulating motion. This sculpture, together with his *Dog* created in 1951, differs from the frontal approach of his earlier figures. This lyrical composition is made possible by the notion of human figures simplified to a line, which is

of high importance to me, as I have built on linearity in my earlier works and hope much of lines as tools of expression in my future works.

### **Silhouette and space**

The reverse of the previous is when expression is carried by silhouette, disbursing in space the internal powers of the sculpture. It is characteristic that the sculpture in these cases comes very close to becoming a two-dimensional figure and assumes a sheet-like appearance. Such two-aspect statues are Étienne Hajdu's abstract organic works, which are often enriched by holes broken through. It is also among Hajdu's works that we find examples where the statues are created from a juxtaposition of linear elements, whose thin tendrils are reaching into space like tentacles. Read calls these works linear sculptures, which are open constructions placed in opposition to the earlier body and dimension approach.

### **The attributes of expressivity in my works**

#### **Medals in a traditional form**

In the beginning of my career I mostly created medals made of bronze, and I have continued this activity up to this day. Numismatics is an art form that appears to be on the fringes of today's Hungarian applied arts, which is primarily due to the small size of medals. Medals have departed from their originally intended function and shape by today to such an extent that the term medal has become inadequate to describe the present efforts; it would be more suitable to talk of medal-objects or medal-statuettes. Medals in their traditional sense are reliefs. It was in this approach that I created my medals *Self-portrait with Rain* (2003) and *Self-portrait with Grin* (2003), whereby, I believe, I arrived at the limitations of the possibilities offered to me by traditional medals. This was when my interest turned more strongly to the process of lost wax medal creation, whose possibilities I had already experienced in my series entitled *Prodigal* (2001).

#### **Medals open to space**

Medals created with the lost wax technique afford more freedom in the creation of space; they make it possible to apply plastic elements as additions and thereby the

achievement of special effects of space. Medals created with the lost wax technique can be skewed, open-edged and broken through, which opens the doors for the conquering of another dimension of space. In the case of such medals open to space, the technique of formation carries the expressivity, as opposed to my earlier works, where the topic seemed to make for the expressivity.

In *Pierced Plates* (2005), I cut through thin plates cast in wax, and I bent the thus cut out plates out into space. On the other side of the plates I used supports to accomplish the effect that spatiality would be the most prominent characteristic of these medal-objects. In my *Train Window with Landscape* (2006) series I made use of the conclusions I had drawn in my previous series, and I placed the plastic elements referring to the landscape into the windows.

### **Couple sculptures**

My bronze statuettes *Couple I-V* (1986-1995) and *Woman with Young (Wedding 1995)* represent the premise to the series *Salome Transcripts I-V* (2006), which were made as the summary of my DLA studies. On the couple-statues the attributes whereby they can be called expressive can be observed. Such attributes are the transformation of the male figures into flat sheets or stick-like linear figures. The female figures align to this reduced form-related order, except they are softer and more melodic. I explore the ritual nature of the male-female relationship, so I attempt to shed light on these relationships in metaphors.

In the Salome sculptures I attempted to demonstrate the relationship between man and woman, sexuality, fitted into the more universal order of nature. I formed the female figure to be reminiscent of the vines of a plant, in order to refer to the sprouting of plants, to growth with an elemental power and to proliferation, with this metaphor. This statuette series of mine is more playful and casual in comparison with my couple-themed sculptures. I revealed the male-female relationship more cheerfully, more liberally, with the former struggling tone left behind. This is contributed to by the stylized world of forms, the vine-like shape of the woman, as well as the upside down triangle shape of the male figures. Basic forms are repeated; the pieces of the series only differ in the shades of their meanings. There is only one element left in the composition that can be called dramatic: the male shinbone borrowed from Dürer and Rembrandt, which is the interpreted variation of the relevant scenes of *The Prodigal Son*.

## **Sower**

In addition to the problem of the prodigal, the other side of the father-son relationship also greatly intrigues me; that is, the Abrahamic figure of the man who thrusts his offspring into being. This problem is surveyed by the larger sized (173 cm, in plaster) sculpture composition consisting of two pieces created in 1990. The male figure is a slim form bent backwards like an arrow and consisting of thin digits, which shoots forward a stylized phallus placed on a thin column. I created the also strongly rewritten but quite figurative variation of this topic in connection with the Millennium, at the public square of my birth-town Tatabánya, in the course of a redesign of the square.

## **Side song (Train Window with Landscape)**

During the course of my DLA studies I created my bronze statuettes called *Train Window with Landscape I-II*. I have been commuting between Tatabánya (my home) and Győr (my work place) for over ten years. The experience of the train rides is captured in my statues. The compositions are sign-like, humanless interiors, accompanied by the separate elements of the landscape in motion, which is placed in the order of ribbons.

## **Summary**

In connection with the definition of expressive forms, the conclusion of my study is that the attributes of expressive sculpture cannot be defined clearly, merely based on the form-related factors. We can define a few form-related attributes that generally characterize expressive sculpture, but content-related reference is also necessary for creating a definition. It is distinctly graspable that the presence of emotions distort the forms, realistic forms are altered towards the extremes, are elongated, thinned and may receive jagged surfaces. Therefore, the tendency that I identify as expressive can also only be characterized with specific examples, descriptions and distinctions.

While conducting my studies I sensed that the expressive tendency is explicitly present in 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporary art. Examining the conquest of technical civilization, I deem that this ancient attitude model must continue to be present in the upcoming eras of art as well, which primarily builds on the expression of emotions. It seemed that, due to the media-centeredness existing in our time, the traditional art forms such as sculpture have



been placed on the back burner. On the contrary—due to the presence of personal communication, the value of gesture and touch have been amplified. I trust that there are still reserves in the traditional art forms, and that through them it is possible to provide answers to the questions posed by this age.

The presence of expressionism can be attributed to my works only partially. This is due to the fact that I do not allow an unlimited free way to the manifestation of emotions. In my works the tendency to abstraction and a sort of constructivism is present, which applies a counter-effect on pure expressionism.