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Eyes: Identity and Commemoration in British 18th and 19th Century Sculpture

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While staring right at us, the varied representations of eyes in sculpture have largely gone unrecognised. Their consideration is essential, however, for the contemporary viewer's perception of, and identification with, the political and mythology subjects of eighteenth and nineteenth century statuary. A historical overview of the depiction of eyes reveals contradictions in neo-classical sculptural practices: a move from the emulation of the antique, with coloured eyes, to the presentation of uncarved marble eyeballs. This is highly significant for the individualisation of a statue is most achieved through the expression of the eyes both in facial appearance and gaze.

Eyes have the power of expression: their representation in sculpture can make the viewer identify with a piece of cold stone or metal. How eyes are sculpted is distinctively varied in regards to their shape, possible colouring or inlays of precious stones. Some eyeballs are deeply carved to represent the pupil, others show carefully rendered low relief carvings. From an early age humans learn to interpret facial expressions as a process of socialisation. The reading of the gaze depends on individual and contextual factors especially because the face and eyes of a human are habitually in motion. The fixation of eyes in sculpture is in comparison unnaturally transfixed and stiff, but does not necessarily appear as such. The exact choice concerning the representation of eyes is ultimately the sculptor's. His intention might vary from depicting a person to his or her likeness to idealising the human appearance in order to elevate a person's dignity and grace for the purpose of heroic commemoration.

After a broad description of how eyes have been depicted in sculpture throughout history the techniques and theories which lead to different sculptural representations will be ascertained. The look and facial features are the key to an identifiable

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appearance allowing the artistic remembrance of a famous person long passed away.The neo-classicist ideals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century strengthened the grandeur and respectability of depicted personalities in sculptural practices.

Ancient Egyptian sculpted eyes in statues and busts were usually left uncarved because they were coloured after completion of the sculpture. Some Egyptian granite statuary had inlays in the eyes, which over time have fallen out and are now missing.[1] As the English sculptor John Flaxman pointed out in his 1829 lectures, Greek sculpture had been derived from the Egyptian model.[2] This is for instance apparent in the representation of eyes; in Egyptian as in Greek sculpture the eyeballs are mostly left blank without any decorative carvings to serve the purpose of a naturalistic style achieved through polychrome colouring.

Peter Stewart argues that the majority of Roman full-length statues present heads which show an individual's identity while the bodies retain repetitively formalised, or are even pre-fabricated. The necessary identification of a figure was essentially achieved through facial features and expression while an idealised body created a framework of more general grandeur. Portrait statues were used as "funerary memorials, marks of honour of deity and individual; they were public, honorific rewards or gifts by state, community, clients, or associates. Portrait busts [...] increased the expressive potential of the portrait", which is also the case in eighteenth and nineteenth century sculpture.[3] The commemorative function of classical sculpture is mirrored in sculptors Francis Legatt Flaxman's and John Chantrey's time since classical sculpture was a means of presenting power and status for political and religious purposes.[4] In Hellenistic Athens "the decree of public honorific statues and other honours [...] have been seen as the state's means of reinforcing wealthy

1 T. G. H. James and W. V. Davies, *Egyptian Sculpture* (London: British Museum Publications, 1983).

2 John Flaxman, *Lectures on Sculpture* (London: J. Murray, 1829); James and Davies, Egyptian Sculpture.

3 Peter Stewart, *Statues in Roman Society: Representation and Response* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 83.

4 Sir Francis Legatt Chantrey (1782 - 1841) and John Flaxman (1755 - 1826) were English sculptors and members of the Royal Academy. Further influential contemporaries were Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Wedgwood.

individuals' psychological [...] investment in the community".[5] Sculpture can generate an ideal representation through the illusion of beauty created by standardised proportions, simplicity and symmetry. For Flaxman hundreds of years after antiquity, sculpture still had the function of propaganda to celebrate and commemorate national heroes and patriots.[6]

The Middle Ages were seen by the sculptors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a dark age of primitive art. Flaxman believed that the ancient Britons were unable to progress: in his thought they were not capable of developing 'high' sculpture except for coins. "[T]he Goths, Franks and Lombards, and other uncivilised nations, had nearly exterminated the liberal arts in Europe."[7] He argued that the Romans brought 'culture' to Britain which was then copied by the Britons. This statement is not accepted anymore; but from consulting illustrations of sculptures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it becomes clear, however, that classical carved eyes were now being represented alongside uncarved eyeballs. The more local and native traditions of carved eyeballs merged with the classical approach.

During the Middle Ages the knowledge that classical sculpture was mostly polychrome became lost. By the time of the Renaissance, excavated Roman statues were seen as an ideal model for contemporary sculpture. The eyeballs left blank were imitated from the antique as an ideal of beauty. The German theorist Johann Joachim Winckelmann acknowledged in 1762 that Roman sculpture found in the excavations of Herculaneum was more beautiful and refined than any sculpture presently produced.[8] Winckelmann said explicitly that ancient art is superior to the art of his own day.[9] Although Martin von Wagner discovered in 1817 that antique sculpture was painted, the whiteness of marble and the representation of eyes left blank was already an established and commonly accepted matter of taste since the Renaissance.[10]

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5 Stewart, *Statues in Roman Society*, 29; all sculptural illustrations in this book are represented with eyes left blank, as far as it can be seen from the images.

6 Flaxman, *Lectures on Sculpture*

7 Ibid., 8.

8 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Johann Winckelmann's Sendschreiben von der Herculanischen Entdeckungen. An den hochgebohren Herrn, Herrn Heinrich Reichsgraften von Brühl* (Dreszden: George Conrad Walther, königlicher Hofbuchhändler, 1762).

9 See *Art History and its Methods*, Eric Fernie, ed. (London: Paidon, 1995), 70.

10 See e.g, Andreas Blühm, Wolfgang Drost and June Hargrove, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, *The Colour of Sculpture, 1840-1910* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1996).

Recommendations for eighteenth and nineteenth century sculptors on how to carve eyes are rare to find. The institutionalised British training practice for sculptors was based on continental neo-classicist methods. Winckelmann for example gave some instruction on the proportions of the eye and its surrounding: the size of the eye is dependent on the shape of the cranial bones which enclose the eye-socket. He recommended setting the eye deeper than in 'nature' to aim for more significance when seen from afar. The obtained elevation of the forehead is on the one hand meant to be perceived as intellectual superiority; on the other it shows an introvert individuality and privacy.[11] Along with other writers Winckelmann created the theoretical background of the German period of the Weimarer Klassik. His work gained popularity and was soon translated into English.[12] His contemporary, the cleric Johann Kaspar Lavater, wrote a treatise about physiognomy in which he explained the importance of the eyes in analysing character traits. His assumptions are based on the idea that God made man to equal him. Therefore the perfect physical appearance is considered most godlike, and the ideal body most beautiful. The most attractive body is the most morally sophisticated and the ugliest the immoral.[13] For Lavater the eyes played an important role in the unity between body and soul since for him they are the mirror of the psyche, the essence of the character.

Winckelmann and Lavater pointed out that it is central for the interpretation of eyes, that the eyeball itself does not solely constitute the 'eye'. The surrounding, the eye socket, the shadows under the eye and the eyebrows, are distinctive features of reading the expression of the living and sculpted eye. Although a sculpted eye with a carved pupil allows the spectator to get hold of the figure's gaze, all facial features collectively reveal the emotional expression. Uncarved, pupils left blank appear more anonymous and idealised since the spectator is unable to identify with the figure's look, but nevertheless the facial features convey enough emotion which can be read without the distinct gaze of the eyes.

11 Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Karl Ludwig Fernow, et al. *Winckelmann's Werke* (Dresden: George Conrad Walther, königlicher Hofbuchhändler, 1808), 189.

12 Johann Heinrich Füßli translated Winckelmann's *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greek* in 1765. Johann Kasper Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* from 1772 were also translated by Füßli from 1789 to 1798.

13 Johann Caspar Lavater and Ernst Staehelin, *Ausgewählte Werke* (Zürich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1943).

Flaxman in England like Lavater in Switzerland believed in the unity of appearance and inner feeling:

> *Every passion, sentiment, virtue, or vice, have their corresponding signs in the face, body, and limbs, which are understood by the skilful physician and physiognomist, when not confused by the working of contrary affections or hidden by dissimulation.*[14]

He recommends in his lecture on beauty that emotions should be mirrored in the representation of a sculpture's face. Variety of expression is possible through the modification of beautiful elements. Beauty is, for him, the Greek model in its simplicity and directness:

> *Our present purpose particularly requires we should consider the sentiments of the most celebrated Greeks on beauty, the connection of mental and bodily beauty, and their expression in the human form.*[15]

In eighteenth and nineteenth century British marble sculpture carved pupils were especially common in sculptural busts while uncarved eyes were more often found in life-size statues. Busts were smaller and usually displayed at eye level. By and large, busts show individuals while full-length sculpture habitually depicts a part of a mythical narrative as for instance Canova's Three Graces or a public monumental figure of a politician or national hero which is represented high above the spectator.[16] The further the statue's face is from the viewer the lesser is the effect of the representation of eyes. Busts fulfil the purpose of recognition and identification while full body statues aim for heroic grandeur through idealised form. The uncarved eyes were not just created on the classical model but also served the fashionable taste of idealised beauty of the time. The carving of pupils adds individuality, while uncarved eyeballs appear as typified. The politics of the gaze are an important instrument in creating an interaction between spectator and artwork. Full-length statues propagating power gain more identification with the viewer or a crowd by

14 Flaxman, *Lectures on Sculpture*, 141.

15 Ibid., 144.

16 Antonio Canova, *Three Graces*, marble sculpture, 1814-17, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

generalising the gaze; through leaving the eyes uncarved the look opens up to any direction and space.

William Pitt the Younger, the highly celebrated British Prime Minister from 1783 until 1801 and from 1804 to his death in 1806, was represented by the sculptors of his time in many statues and busts. Pitt was a figure of power. The full-length statue of him by Chantrey is situated in Hanover Square, London, and was erected in 1831. It stands high up, is monumental and dignified. The eyes are hardly seen but it can be conjectured from documentation that they are left blank, similarly to most of Chantrey's full-length statues. Flaxman's representation in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow shows Pitt in life-size scale. The face is closer to the spectator although Pitt is elevated on a pedestal. The statue's eyeballs are carved so that the figure's gaze is pointing in one direction. It seems that Pitt is indefinitely looking into the distance instead of catching the spectator's attention by looking at him. The carving of pupils in this case serves to both, individualise and distance Pitt in his shown pose as orator. While Chantrey's sculpture overlooks a square from a high viewpoint, Flaxman's Pitt is situated inside, spot lit with artificial bright light.

In Joseph Nollekens' bust of William Pitt he is shown as an aged man. His facial features are sagging — his eyelids, his cheeks and the corners of his closed mouth, even the hair concealing parts of his ear follow the sloping shape of his shoulders. His facial expressions make him appear critical, knowledgeable and reflective. His representation is less enthusiastic, powerful and youthful in comparison to the other statues. Noellekens does not idealise a man of power; he depicts a wise but resigned man. The eyeballs are slightly carved to indicate a gaze as opposed to achieving a staring look. Pitt seems introspective. Strongly carved pupils would give him a notion of extroversion.

British sculpture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries disengaged from the (neo-) classical model: the representation of eyes in diverse forms is an example of how important the expressivity of the face in a naturalistic manner was in contrast to the creation of idealised form which Winckelmann had proclaimed in his famous expletive "stille Einfalt, edle Größe".[17] Although the nineteenth century discourse

17 Translates as "quiet simplicity, noble grandeur". This can be found in Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst. Deutsche Litteraturdenkmale des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (B. Seuffert. Berlin, B. Behr's Verlag. 20, 1885), 25.

about polychrome sculpture had no far-reaching impact on the sculptors' practices it had broadened the knowledge about antique statues and revealed the notion of classical naturalism. The neo-classical paradigm of idealisation, and its construct of beauty, was superseded by a subjectified naturalism which is visible in the diverse representation of eyes in eighteenth and nineteenth century British sculpture.

From these three examples it becomes clear that patterns in the representation of eyes do not necessarily lead to any generalised conclusion. How we perceive the expressions of a face also depends on learned ways of looking. Adopting a psychological analysis of human facial features is crucial for an accurate interpretation of sculptural representation in terms of spectatorship and the politics of the gaze. Lavater's suggestions about physiognomy were an early attempt to classify facial features. But although the face is still seen as a mirror of emotions it does not evidentially provide clues about inner feelings, not even to speak about personality traits. Even in psychology the meaning and impact of facial expressions is a highly contested area. For an analysis of the depiction of eyes in sculpture this means that individual cases need to be considered in a more or less subjective way: what the art historian reads into a sculpted face depends on his or her experiences and social education. However, there are a few valuable points to be considered in regard to the observation and interpretation of eyes. Light, setting and spatial atmosphere change the appearance of a sculpture. The techniques used enhance the stylistic features and create either a realistic likeness or an idealisation of the depicted figure. The dimensions of the sculpture have an impact on the viewer's response to it. How eyes are carved is a matter of function aimed at a certain expression.

In classical antiquity, as far as is known, coloured eyes left blank were the standard representation. During the Middle Ages different types of eye representations merged, carved and uncarved, coloured or low relief. In the periods following, the classical ideal of naturalistic idealism intermittently was taken up, but the representation of eyes remained varied. Especially in British eighteenth and nineteenth century sculpture, the carving of sculpted eyes was more often evident in the individualised representations of national celebrities; allowing the viewer to identify with the commemorated. Today eyes left blank still seem idealised but in fact they are more realistic in comparison to their carved counterpart as the human eyeball is plain itself.

This perceptive contradiction stems from the time of the Renaissance when the representation of eyes was transferred from the antique model. The response to the representation of eyes is a socio-contextual phenomenon based on the tradition of facial interpretation. Today's public is used to viewing living images through visual media which detach us from stone or bronze sculpture. Time moves on, but although the representations of figures from our history are still found in our cities they are arguably less seen, recognised and experienced by the crowd.

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