MARTON VARO

BY Edward Lucie-Smith

Any sculptor working in the Western tradition must be aware of the heritage of the Greeks. The question is, what is he to do with it? Is he to embrace it, reject it, distort it or in some way subvert it? Marton Varo comes of Hungarian stock. He was born and brought up in a frontier region, in a part of Transylvania which was then Hungarian territory and which is now part of Romania. This must surely have sharpened his feelings about the finer nuances of cultural similarity and cultural difference. The region he comes from has other characteristics as well. Like other parts of Central Europe it has a strongly developed craft tradition. During summers spend in a small village in Transylvania he absorbed the local skills in carving wood. In addition, since the area had once been a Roman province, he absorbed the impact of Roman provincial sculpture, which survives abundantly in Transylvania. These influences were to do much to shape his work.

There was also the fact, however, that he was an artist fascinated by modernism, who was forced at first to make his way under a communist government. The twentieth century exemplars he turned to were artists like Constantin Brancusi, Henry Moore, Louise Nevelson and Isamu Noguchi. Of all these, the Romanian-born Brancusi was obviously the nearest in spirit and in cultural tradition. One remarkable thing about Brancusi was the way in which he combined elements from folk tradition with an extremely refined and sophisticated approach to form. Another was his sheer skill in handling materials: stone, wood and metal. And yet another was the way in which he borrowed ideas from ancient civilizations and managed to turn them into something entirely new. Moore, most of all in the early part of his career, when he carved sculpture directly from the block, and Noguchi, Brancusi's only pupil, shared some of the same qualities.

Varo, however, did not share the taste of these sculptors for ancient sculpture in its most primitive and simplifying phase. His great love was the developed Greek art of the mid-fifth century B.C., and especially for the sculptures associated with the name of Phidias, architect of the Parthenon. A major part of Varo's sculptural output consists of draped female torsos and female figures. These are obviously inspired by Greek sculptures of similar subjects, but they are never merely imitative. Varo comes to subjects of this sort through the cult of the fragment which has existed in European sculpture since the time of the Renaissance — one recalls Michelangelo's reaction to Belvedere Torso: "This is the work of a man who knew more than Nature itself." This cult intensified at the beginning of the present century in the work of Rodin and Maillol, it is possible

to catch echoes of both these sculptures in some the things which Varo himself produces. An example is the limestone figure Breaking Free, where a beautiful young woman seems to be in the process of stepping out of the block which until then has contained her.

The idea that the figure actually lives already within the stone, and that a sculptor's task is to free it rather than create it is once again something which originated, not with the Greeks but with Michelangelo.

Varo, nevertheless, treats the idea of the fragmentary in a much more radical fashion than any of his predecessors. One of the striking things about the Parthenon marbles, as one now sees them displayed in the British Museum, is that the majority of the sculptures rescued from the ruined temple are reliefs rather than carvings in three dimensions. The Parthenon frieze offers complete slabs, but also shattered fragments, where the coherence of the design is lost. This effect becomes more marked in fragments from other Greek monuments, where the reliefs have been more roughly treated. One example, also in the British Museum, is the frieze from the mausoleum of Halicarnassus, also in the British Museum, which is supposed to have been designed, at least in part, by Scopas, one of the leading Greek sculptors in the generation which followed that of Phidias. Varo has taken hints from these shattered slabs to create his own reliefs, which are abstractions based on Greek drapery. The intermittent, stuttering rhythms he creates are from Nevelson, who is the most unexpected of his declared influences.

Nevelson was the poet of a modern city, New York. It was the perpetuated turmoil of construction and demolition in New York which both inspired her most typical sculptures and actually supplied her with her basic materials. Varo uses stone, not wood, and, it must be said, uses it in a much more virtuoso fashion than Nevelson ever attempted. One pleasure to be derived from his work is pleasure in the sheer skill with which intractable substances are handled. One danger with virtuosity is that it tends to blind the spectator to the qualities actually inherent in materials — in much nineteenth century sculpture, carved by extremely skillful artisans following models made by others in plaster or clay. Stone simply loses its stoniness, and becomes something bland and slippery. Here the way blocks are fitted together, some carved, others completely unadorned, serves as a constant reminder of the nature of the stone itself.

There is another factor as well. Some of Varo's reliefs of this type look a little like the old engravings which record the condition of the Greek monuments before the archaeologists got at them. Carved blocks were often incorporated at random, sideways or upside down, into later structures. A case in point was the medieval fortress at Bodrum, formerly Halicarnassus.

These echoes and cross-references make Varo a typically post-modern artist. Post-Modernism has been defined as the propensity to recombine elements from existing artistic languages in new ways, rather than striving to invent languages which are completely new. What he lacks, fortunately, is the cynicism which informs so much Post-Modernist art. All his work shows his eye for finely calculated formal relationships. But always, even in the works which are apparently entirely non-figurative, there is a feeling for flesh — in particular for the ripeness of the female body. The fact that Varo prefers to depict this draped rather than nude is perhaps a symbol of his reverence for the mysteries this image contains.
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