

BRONZE & IVORY FIGURES

A freedom of expression hitherto unknown was demanded by the sculptors of the 1890s. Previously, the route to artistic acclaim required that they follow a rigid classical tradition. Young artists, desperately needing government patronage, had continued to interpret the Old Masters in a classical idiom, because only by so doing could they hope to have work accepted for public display at the prestigious annual Salon exhibitions, where large institutions made purchases and placed commissions.

Gradually, demand from the public for private ownership of sculpture for the home was increasing, thus affording an alternative outlet for the energies of the emerging artists. This was recognized by the bronze founders who exploited this new market by making use of a new invention called a Pantograph - a type of tracing machine, use of which enabled them to reproduce accurately scaled down models of large marble sculpture to domestic proportions. The model, cut from a soft plaster blank, could then be cast in bronze.

The Barbedienne founders made substantial profits by reproducing limited editions of bronzes cast from classical marble statuary. Thankfully they also recognized and catered to the growing demand for Romantic sculpture, thus providing a forum for those artists whose work had previously been eschewed by the Salons. The artists in turn could depend less on commissions for unique pieces, and rely more on the royalties accruing from the multiple production of their work.

The beginning of the 20th century saw the burgeoning of Art Nouveau design. One of the more obvious images was the portrayal of 'woman'. Freed from the constraints of a 19th century literary tradition which portrayed her as stiflingly respectable, and liberated physically from her rigid corsets, she now danced with gay abandon. The fluid, sensual sculptures of Agathon Leonard, the mysterious 'Le Secret', by Maurice Bouval, and the oft-repeated image of the American dancer LoYe Fuller most notably portrayed by Raoul Larche, are amongst the more typical and desirable of Art Nouveau sculpture.

The electric light bulb was still a novelty and many artists engaged its properties. It was to be found concealed within the scarf held above the head of LoYe Fuller as she danced, illuminating 'The Milky Way' - a blue and opal glass globe clutched by the pensive female sculpted by Leo Laporte Blairsy, secreted into nautilus shells held aloft by a mermaid, or often replacing stamens in the flowerheads of a myriad of lamps which combined the images of women and plant forms.

By the 1920s, life had changed markedly. The rigours of war, the birth of the machine

age, and the discovery of Tutenkhamun's tomb in 1921, were amongst the influences reflected in the work of Art Deco artists and sculptors. The woman they portrayed was bolder, stylish, more self-assured.

Bruno Zach's ladies were often erotic, scantily clad and provocative. They were modelled in their underwear, holding whips, dressed in trousers or smoking cigarettes. 'Airwoman' by Ferdinand Preiss was almost certainly modelled on Amy Johnson, and was undoubtedly a celebration of her achievements. The image, cast in bronze, her hands plunged deep into the pockets of her cold-painted red flying suit, and her neat facial features captured in carved ivory, indicate the changing status of women.

While never portrayed covered in the mud of the trenches, artists such as Pierre Le Faguays and Marcel Bouraine did cast some females symbolically in the role of noble warriors. Although still scantily clad, they could be seen throwing spears or dancing in victory while waving daggers and shields. Lorenzi, meanwhile, was busy modelling females in a highly stylized and elongated fashion. His ladies were long and lithe, young and flawless. They danced, largely naked, but often waving scarves or balancing hoops on their exaggerated outstretched limbs.

Theatrical images inspired by the birth of Hollywood pervaded the sculpture of the period. 'Lighter than Air', by Preiss, was modelled on Miss Ada May, who appeared in the C. B. Cochran review of 1930. Much of the later work of Demetre H. Chiparus was based on the theatre and ballet. The Ballet Russe inspired many of his works, in particular 'Russian Dancers', which depicted Nijinsky and Ida Rubinstein in their roles in 'Scheherazade'.

The opening of the Pharaoh's tomb in the early 1920s was a terrific source of inspiration for Chiparus. He modelled Egyptian dancers in bronze, and also bronze and ivory, embellishing the bronze of their costumes and headdresses with beaded and jewelled decorative detail, which was then highlighted in the cold-painting process with appropriately vivid colours.

Casting in bronze has always been expensive, whether the process of lost wax or sand-casting is employed. Extensive highly skilled and labour intensive techniques are required to ensure a fine quality end result. The stages of production begin once the sculptor has made a model of the subject, usually in clay or terracotta, which he takes along to a founder. In the 1920s those founders known to produce the highest quality work allied themselves to the leading sculptors of the day. On Art Deco figures

particularly, a founder's seal, together with an artist's signature, usually denotes work of a high standard.

When casting figures it was not unusual for separate moulds to be made for the limbs, head and torso. A more complicated model required more pieces to be cast separately and assembled later. The bronze that is removed from the moulds has quite a rough surface and lacks much of the fine detail of the original model. Following preparatory retouching, it is the task of the chaser, using an engraving tool called a Burin, to painstakingly recreate that lost detail. This process is one that the sculptor may choose to oversee.

Finally, the required finish, or patina, is applied. On many Art Nouveau sculptures this finish was achieved by painting a solution of mineral salts and acids on to the surface and applying heat with a torch to accelerate the chemical reaction. Most were applied with colours ranging from verdigris to rich chocolate, although it is not unusual to see gilding. The sculptors of the Art Deco period experimented much more with their finishes. Electroplating, cold-painting, gilding and enamelling were used in various combinations to create exciting and colourful images.

Ivory was used for the head and exposed limbs of a figure which, of course, had to be carved and fitted to the bronze. Much of this was individually carved by hand. Even when the preliminary carving was done by machine, the fine detailing of the final stages would be hand-crafted.

Sadly, relatively few artists today work in bronze. Given the procedures outlined above, it is not difficult to see that the costs of the processes involved are now prohibitive.

Bronze sculpture from the first half of the 20th century has a unique flavour. It is dramatic and totally evocative of the age. The charm and spirit it exudes, together with the exquisite quality and craftsmanship it often displays, have ensured increasing attention from a growing body of discerning collectors. Despite the high prices commanded by the most desirable pieces, in terms relevant to the cost of current production many are still affordable. However, the supply is finite. The short-lived Art Nouveau movement managed only to span two decades at the turn of the century. Its romantic languid images could hardly survive once the nation's thoughts had turned to war.

The Art Deco movement emerged after WWI. A considerable amount of the artistic output, and records relating to it, were lost or

destroyed during the devastation of Europe, cities in WWII. Art Deco style has grown so much in popularity over the last couple of decades that today the immense appeal of it instantly recognizable forms can be seen reproduced on a mass scale. The market for original pieces is stronger than ever, and the escalation in price is correspondingly impressive. Apart from a short time at the end of 1987, and during 1988, when prices surged wildly and then fell back, growth has been constant.

In 1983 it was possible to buy medium size! Art Deco bronze figures by one of the more popular and prolific artists such as Lorenzi, for between £100 and £200. In 1995 collector could expect to pay in the region of £800-1,200 for a similar piece. Today that price would be more like £1,200-1,800. Fine and highly stylized examples of bronze and ivory figures by Colinet, Philippe, Chiparus, Preiss, Descomps, Zach and others, have seen percentage increases in their market value that are equally impressive.

Those Art Deco figures made in the 1930s from less expensive materials such as spelter: (a metal containing zinc and lead, plated to resemble bronze and silver) and manufactured using simpler and cheaper processes, have seen some increase in price, but these have been less marked. A pair of spelter figure bookends which sold in 1983 for £60-90 and would have cost £150-175 in 1995, can still be found for sums in the low hundreds. Large spelter groups, depicting women and birds or women and small animals, mounted on marble bases, were made in abundance in the 1930s to satiate the demand for the style at all social levels. The market value of such pieces in 1983 would have been in the order of £125-250. The most shining examples (and many are not!) could still be found for around £400-500 in 1995. There has been little change in the price of such pieces over the past five years.

Collectors should always endeavour to buy bronzes that display the talent of the artist and the skill of the founder. Discerning buyers will always seek out the finer pieces. As seen above, time does not improve the quality or desirability of poor examples.

It has never been my policy to market bronzes based purely on their investment potential, but it is comforting, and not at all surprising, to see that long term they have proved to be more than competitive and a whole lot more attractive to look at than a bank book.

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