David J. Getsy
Augustus Saint-Gaudens in (and beyond) American art


Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907) rightfully holds a central position in the history of American sculpture. Of all the sculptors of his generation, he most successfully brought the art into line with contemporary modernizations in figurative sculpture occurring in Europe. Furthermore, he created some of the most iconic of monuments of the American Civil War such as the Abraham Lincoln memorial (1905) in Chicago and Boston’s Robert Gould Shaw memorial (1884–97). Henry Duffy and John Dryfhout’s concise exhibition catalogue provides an overview of the sculptor’s work and milieu. Both Duffy and Dryfhout have been associated with the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site in New Hampshire, where the sculptor’s studio is preserved, and Dryfhout had previously written the 1982 catalogue raisonné. They bring their considerable expertise on the artist to the catalogue, and it contains much useful information about the sculptor’s work and life.

This exhibition is notable as the first major travelling retrospective of the artist’s work, and the goal of this catalogue and exhibition was clearly to introduce Saint-Gaudens to a wider public. However useful an introduction this catalogue is, it would have better served the artist’s work had it been prepared to initiate that public in how to look at his sculpture and, more ambitiously, sought to analyse Saint-Gaudens’ innovations in relation to contemporary developments on both sides of the Atlantic.

The primary interpretive framework used by the authors is to set Saint-Gaudens as the exemplar of an emergent maturity in American sculpture, catalysed by French influences. While this general trend may very well be accurate and relevant to the contextualization of this sculptor’s work, there nevertheless lacks a sustained analysis of Saint-Gaudens’ work, methods or particularities. We are treated to numerous anecdotes about the ‘modernism’ of Saint-Gaudens, but rarely is there an attempt to provide any but the most superficial clues as to how and why his work is compelling. This catalogue successfully packages Saint-Gaudens’s work in a narrative of American self-realization. However, it fails to provide the context that most viewers and readers will lack – an adequate introduction to how to approach sculpture and how it changed throughout the nineteenth century. The reader is hard-pressed to find any sustained discussions of individual works and, as such, is left without the tools to evaluate that which the authors repeatedly assert makes Saint-Gaudens interesting – his skill.

It is not unexpected that Americanness is one of the first contexts put into play in a discussion of Saint-Gaudens. Granted, this nationalist theme has been a central preoccupation of many studies of nineteenth-century art in America. As an Irish-born artist with a French name, the question of American identity no doubt was crucial to Saint-Gaudens’s own self-image, and the authors repeatedly stress the ways in which he deepened his commitment to an American school of sculpture over the course of his career. The catalogue, however, relies too heavily on this question (however fundamental), leaving the reader with few other angles from which to understand this complex artist. Again and again, we are told about the novelty of Saint-Gaudens’s work but given few concrete discussions of how it was novel; we are reminded of his profound contribution to art education, yet there is next to no sustained analysis of his legacy; and we are asked to appreciate his technical facility and symbolic gravitas without an understanding of how these differed from other artists both prior and contemporary.

It seems to me that, rather than relying on Saint-Gaudens’s Americanness as the sole interpretive lens for his work, it is ultimately more fruitful to put him into the wider context of contemporary Western sculpture with which he was very familiar. How does, for instance, Saint-Gaudens’s work relate to that of Jean-Alexandre Falguière? Both reconstituted the classical subjects common to sculpture in terms of modern techniques, creating works with some striking morphological similarities. We are told of Saint-Gaudens’s involvement in a major work of Antoine-Louis Barye,
but how do this older sculptor’s works inform our understanding of Saint-Gaudens? Through his involvement in the international exhibitions, Saint-Gaudens had a reputation and network of contacts that extended throughout Europe. For instance, in late November 1884, while on a lecture tour in America, the writer and art critic Edmund Gosse visited Saint-Gaudens’s studio. Gosse was the central critic of British sculpture during its transformation in the 1880s, and he provided a point of contact between Saint-Gaudens and other artists such as Hamo Thornycroft, who were also attempting to renovate figurative sculpture. Through the latter’s efforts, Saint-Gaudens was elected to the Royal Academy in 1906. It is precisely this more far-reaching contextualization of Saint-Gaudens’s achievements that is most needed – both to argue for his importance on an international scene and to clarify the sophistication of his work.

Saint-Gaudens deserves to stand with his European contemporaries, rather than being content to play the role of the singular innovator in a country that came to appreciate sculpture late. For instance, the allegorical figure from the Adams memorial (1886–91) closely relates to the emerging symbolist tone of late-nineteenth-century figurative sculpture. His Puritan (Deacon Samuel Chapin memorial, 1887) deploys the visual vocabulary of figurative sculpture to convey the sternness and determination (even determinism) of the early American religious leaders. Most of all, his remarkable relief sculpture portraits (such as those of William Merritt Chase and Robert Louis Stevenson) evince a complexity and facility that rivals some of the best of late-nineteenth-century European sculpture.

In the extensive revisions to art history’s, or what are sometimes called art histories’, procedures and intellectual priorities, which have been the meat of numerous publications, conferences and controversies over the last thirty years or so, sculptors, sculpture and writings on sculpture have almost never been subject to revisionist scrutiny.1 One factor in the comparative neglect of sculpture is that debate about methods has left the established canon of what art history studies by and large untouched. Painters and painting remain its primary focus and sculpture a rather marginal area, much as it has been since the Renaissance when painters struggling for status distanced themselves from sculpture as a manual occupation, not an intellectual pursuit. But recent art history’s comparative neglect of sculpture is more surprising when the high visibility of sculpture in contemporary culture is taken into account.2

A number of factors might have contributed to the currency of sculpture. It includes continuing debate about Minimalism and the questions it posed about sculptural encounters. Contemporary art is primarily preoccupied with forms of object making and installation (and compared to any decade from the 1950s to the 1990s, painters are relatively rare) that are more productively examined within rhetoric arising from sculptural procedure. Sculpture also has a public status that painting and other gallery-based work does not share. Since the 1990s there has been a resurgence of memorial-making and other public objects. Currently that includes a public debate about the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square which is part of contestation about who claims public space and in whose interests. The Public Monuments and Sculpture Association’s (PMSA) cataloguing of public sculpture in Britain on a regional and city basis (the National Recording Project, published by Liverpool University Press) which parallels Pevsner’s Buildings of England, also under revision, is a symptom of this general interest and has been financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Then there is also the sense that since Henry Moore, in Britain at least, the nation’s visual cultural capital is invested primarily in its sculptors. The genealogy might run from Moore to Anthony Caro, Barry Flanagan and Rachel Whiteread.

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1 Such an assessment was begun in the catalogue for the exhibition at the Musée des Augustins in Toulouse in 1999, Augustus Saint-Gaudens 1848–1907: A Master of American Sculpture, Paris: Éditions Somogy, 1999, which emphasized the French influences on Saint-Gaudens. Connections to European sculpture (including and in addition to the French) are precisely what the 2003 exhibition inadequately introduced to its American audience.

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Sue Malvern
Monographs, canons, omissions


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