DEANNA FERNIE

HAWTHORNE, SCULPTURE, AND THE QUESTION OF AMERICAN ART


Reviewed by Yvette Piggush

In scholarship on the literary reception of sculpture, nineteenth-century Americans have long been represented as caring for nothing but the fig leaf. While sculptors such as Horatio Greenough, Harriet Hosmer, and Hiram Powers toiled abroad, so the story goes, their puritanical countrymen avoided serious engagement with sculpture back home. Deanna Fernie demolishes this myth by using the short stories and novels of one of the Puritans’ most famous descendents: Nathaniel Hawthorne. In doing so, she also enlarges our knowledge of the relation between literature and the fine arts in nineteenth-century America. In previous interdisciplinary studies ranging from Leo Marx’s The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (1964) through Laura Rigal’s American Manufactory: Art, Labor, and the World of Things in the Early Republic (2001), the art examined has almost always been painting. Aided by scholarship on sculpture and on the role of the ruined fragment in British and Continental literature, Fernie demonstrates that sculpture gave Hawthorne a way of understanding the creative process in his own writing. In the unfinished work of sculpture, Fernie argues, Hawthorne found formal models and fictional content that allowed him to blur the boundaries between Platonic idealism and more materialist views of art, between artisan and academic artist, and between writing and sculpture as modes of representation (20).

Sculpture would seem to be the most rigid and highly finished of artistic forms. Through his encounters with sculpture, however, the Hawthorne presented by Fernie came to understand the creative process as flexible, open-ended, and unfinished. In the opening chapter, Fernie
explains how Hawthorne, Emerson, Melville, and Whitman all tested the efficacy of sculpture as a form of representation by staging in their writings a competition or \textit{paragone} between sculpture and literature. Though the fragmentary forms of Emerson’s essays and Whitman’s free verse seem antithetical to the highly finished neoclassical sculptures of Powers or Greenough, Fernie not only finds American writers often referring to sculpture but also shows that their written works had a deep kinship with the sculptural arts (53). In chapter two, Fernie argues that like Friedrich Schlegel’s concept of the fragment as both ruin and project, Hawthorne’s “fictional unfinished works of sculpture” also troubled the boundary between incompletion and destruction (72). In chapter three, Fernie links the representation of American wood carving in the short story “Drowne’s Wooden Image” to the works and aesthetic theories of Michelangelo. In this story, she argues, Hawthorne demonstrates that both writing and sculpture are more authentic when they show the work coming into being like one of Michelangelo’s half-finished sculptures. Pursuing the theme of incompleteness, chapter four highlights the role of the sketch as both project and ruin in Hawthorne’s fiction. By pitting sketching and sculpting against each other, she argues, Hawthorne tries to show how far a work of literature can be left incomplete (193). The final chapter examines Hawthorne’s best-known investigation of sculpting: his account of Donatello’s bust in his last novel \textit{The Marble Faun} (1860). In the unfinished bust of an obscure Italian, Fernie argues, Hawthorne finds a sculptural form whose stony substance paradigmatically exemplifies “process and moral development” (207).

Illustrating her arguments with black-and-white reproductions of nineteenth-century engravings, photographs of statues, and paintings mentioned in the text, Fernie insightfully scrutinizes a number of Hawthorne’s little-known short stories from the \textit{Twice-Told Tales} (1837 and 1851), \textit{The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales} (1852), and \textit{Mosses from an Old
Manse (1854). Her readings join these texts to a broad range of contexts. The works of sculpture she treats include a transatlantic mix of figures by Hawthorne’s American contemporaries, such as Power’s The Greek Slave, and works Hawthorne encountered during his travels abroad. Drawing extensively on Hawthorne’s travel notebooks, Fernie fascinatingly argues that he construed the works of Donatello and Michelangelo in terms of the difference between artisanal craftsman and artist. Donatello’s work in a variety of sculptural media—wood, bronze, clay, and marble—evoked for Hawthorne the practice of medieval artisans. By contrast, because Michelangelo worked only in flawless white marble, he symbolized the artist as a privileged figure (225-6). The Marble Faun clearly favors the work of the artisan: unlike a chiselled form, it suggests, the clay model is the intimate product of an artisan and an intermediate part of the statue-making process rather than a finished product (237).

Besides sculpture, unfinished paintings by the early nineteenth-century American artists Gilbert Stuart and Washington Allston provide visual parallels for what Hawthorne later thought about incompleteness in his writing. Using these paintings, Fernie sets Hawthorne’s writings within the context of a larger American project: the artistic exploration of the unfinished. Fernie also treats carved wooden ship figureheads extensively since they were America’s artisanal answer to marble figures. Thus she studies American literature not only in terms of the classical canon of marble and bronze sculpture, but also in terms of artisanal traditions in the plastic arts of carving and molding.

For all its richly intuitive linking of text and context, however, this book skimps on detail about the historical, institutional, and material links that bind them together. Methodologically, the book seems torn between studying the development of a particular writer and surveying the cultural history of American art. As a result, it sometimes knits text and context through
Hawthorne’s biography and, at other times, draws them together by formal similarities or historical coincidence. For example, Hawthorne’s own reading and travel link his work to the aesthetic theories of Michelangelo, Lessing, Schlegel, Coleridge, and Keats. But as if Fernie cared little about Hawthorne’s artistic development, she buries in a footnote (110n88) the key biographical evidence for Hawthorne’s encounters with most of these authors. Furthermore, the book’s arguments about Hawthorne’s response to the larger culture of American art rest chiefly on analogy. Texts and their sculptural contexts—i.e. works of sculpture—have metaphorical resemblances, “resonate with” one another, or are “not unlike” each other (83, 87). I repeatedly wanted Fernie not just to tell me that two “parallel structures” were like one another (57), but also to explain how one might have led to the other in the course of time, or how both might have sprung from a common source. Do particular texts and sculptures descend from the same historical matrix? Do they sometimes represent aesthetic or technological responses to one specific set of historical or social pressures? Fernie ducks these questions in her comments on Hawthorne’s short story “Chippings with a Chisel.” While she notes the similarities between tombstone carving and writing in the story, she does not address the relationship between sculpting and book making. Like statues, the components of books—print types, engraved illustrations, and leather bindings—must all be carved or molded. Hawthorne’s ways of arranging his short-story collections, which Fernie does not address, indicate that he gave a good deal of thought to the transformation of hand-written manuscripts into finished, three-dimensional books. By treating all of Hawthorne’s works as two-dimensional writings, Fernie overlooks the nineteenth-century printed book as a three-dimensional object that shared technology with sculpture.
Also missing from this book is what Fernie’s published articles on Hawthorne, Washington Irving, and Washington Allston have already demonstrated: her capacity to link visual art to the work of several authors. This book does connect Hawthorne’s work with samples of what writers such as Emerson, Melville, and Henry James wrote on sculpture. The samples, however, show that nineteenth-century literature about sculpture was complex and voluminous. It included, for example, Emerson’s essay “Art” and his lecture on Michelangelo, Melville’s many references to whiteness and carving in *Moby Dick*, James’s biography of the sculptor William Wetmore Story and his novel about a sculptor, *Roderick Hudson*. These and the many other works mentioned in this book merit more analysis than Fernie’s focus on Hawthorne can allow. Furthermore, she tends to slight female sculptors and female writers alike. She notes that American sculptures frequently featured women and also that Margaret Fuller, the Transcendentalist writer and the probable model for some of Hawthorne’s female characters, drowned at sea in 1850 while returning from Italy in a ship bearing tons of Carrara marble and a copy of a statue by Hiram Powers (160). But Fernie does not examine what was written about the creative process of sculpting by Fuller; by Sophia Peabody, the painter who became Hawthorne’s wife; or by Louise Lander, the American sculptor who modeled Hawthorne’s bust. Also, since wax working was the form of sculpture taught in female academies and since waxworks were chiefly produced by female artists, more attention to women in this book would have enabled Fernie to give waxworks the attention they deserve as an important component of the plastic arts in America.

Nevertheless, Fernie’s book should be appreciated for what it does. To use her guiding metaphor, it is a project, not a ruin. Fernie demonstrates that the relationship between the plastic arts and fiction writing is a fertile topic for both literary analysis and art history and also that
there is much more work waiting to be done. Following studies such as Lori Merish’s *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2000) and Nick Yablon’s *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity, 1819-1919* (2009), Fernie’s work takes its place in the growing body of scholarship on the role of three-dimensional objects in nineteenth-century American literature and culture. By drawing together a wide variety of texts and objects from both sides of the Atlantic, she assembles a very suggestive collection of materials for her own and other scholars’ future work on the plastic arts in literature. This book, therefore, will be most useful to specialists in nineteenth-century American literature, culture, and art history. Fernie’s research opens an exciting discussion about literature and the sculptural arts in the early United States and I hope other scholars will find ways to continue this conversation.

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