Paper prepared for the Third Euroacademia International Conference

Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

Lucca, Italy

19 – 20 June 2015

This paper is a draft

Please do not cite

The Illustrated Interview as Self-Portrait: Portraying British Women Sculptors

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Abstract:
This paper considers the role of the illustrated interview as a representation of British women sculptors in the first half of the twentieth century. It addresses both language and photographic imagery as mechanisms through which these artists were positioned as women undertaking a supposedly "masculine" practice. The physical aspects of the sculptor's work were routinely contrasted with the supposed limitations of the female maker, and much emphasis was placed on their living situation and locale as the source of their creativity and the "natural" home for their art. In this way their sculpture was often couched in terms of its potential domestic role. The interviews usually appeared in mass circulation magazines and thus addressed non-specialist audiences. The role of photography in creating a viewer's understanding of an artist and their work is of great interest and will underpin this discussion. A range of sculptors will be included, but with particular emphasis on the work and reception of Kathleen Scott (1878-1947).

Key words: British. Female. Sculptors. Interviews. Photography.

In this paper I will look at the context for British women sculptors at the beginning of the twentieth century; the use of photography and journalism to present such sculptors to an audience; and the domestication of sculpture through the production of the statuette. I will briefly include a number of female sculptors in the first half of my paper to show how they were commonly presented in the popular press and then use Kathleen Scott (1878-1947) as my main case study.

Between 1851 and 1951 women represented about one third of all active British sculptors, a surprising figure. Very few have left written archives and surviving sculpturesare often held in regional collections, are not on display, or are dispersed amongst the artist's family and heirs.The popular press illustrated review of women sculptors is one of the most common forms through which we can see their work and read their words, with much emphasis on their domestic context. The supposed limitations imposed by their gender were frequently commented on and, worryingly,sexist perceptions have not disappeared. In a 1988 radio conversation with Mary Spencer Watson (1913-2006) the interviewer stated that he could see in his mind a vision of a "petite 12-year old girl working away with massive tools on a great block of stone", referring to Spencer Watson's early interest in working with Purbeck stone, both in the quarries themselves and in her studio.[i]**Fig. 1**shows a young Spencer Watson at work.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century there was a move away from neoclassical sculptural styles in the form of the so-called "New Sculpture", a term invented by critic Edmund Gosse in a series of articles written in 1894,with this trend continuing through into the 1930s.[ii] It not only had stylistic implications, in its broad rejection of neoclassical norms, but there was also an expansion of genres and an interest in blurring the boundaries between so-called "high" and "decorative" art. In response,some sculptorspursued the route of experimentation, whilst many remained committed to established styles and concerns. The latter individuals became marginalized in the writing of a largely modernist account of twentieth century British art. David Getsy, who has written extensively about early twentieth century modernist sculpture, draws particular attention toone female sculptor, Kathleen Scott, as exhibiting a commitment to professional sculpture and a steadiness in the face of conflicting trends.[iii]A notable example is this work, *The Kingdom is Within* (1925-6)(**Fig. 2**).

The presentation of modernist practices as the dominant narrative in the writing of twentieth century art history is regrettable and simplistic, suggesting an artificial division between works that are either "modern" or "traditional", ignoring the fact that artistic influences and interests merge and shift. Whereas one might usefully make comparisons between the work of Kathleen Scott and that of Rodin there was also a popular strand of practice which combined an Arts and Crafts aesthetic with a keen interest in early Renaissance forms, as can be seen in the work of Ellen Mary Rope (1855-1934).**Fig. 3** shows one of her works,*David Playing Before Saul*, from the mid 1880s. However in an interview for *Woman at Home* Rope said there was little opportunity for women to have a career in sculpture:

> "'On the whole, men are not much inclined to encourage women in this department of art … The woman-sculptor has often to earn a good part of her income by teaching. The class to which she appeals is small and select, and even after she has gained her name, there may be long intervals between commissions… sculpture is not a very hopeful 'women's employment.'"[iv]

Photographic images are framed, both visually and textually. Images of the sculptor's studio encourage us to seek relationships between the objects on display, and with their creator. In the case of women sculptors, the presentation seems to have the effect of "domesticating" the sculptures in this private space. Whereas images of male sculptors

with their work seem to resist this effect and instead emphasize the sculptor's ownership of his works. **Fig. 4** shows the sculptor Anne Acheson in 1929. This image is quite striking in its modesty, in terms of her relaxed pose, her distance from her sculptures and the setting being apparently a very ordinary corner of a living room. The sculptor and the sculptures do not seem to merge in the way that they do in images of male sculptors such as Henry Moore. **Fig. 5** shows Moore in his studio, a photograph reproduced in *Vogue* in 1955. In part this may have something to do with the gender of the sculptor and the small-scale of Acheson's work. But in the photograph of Moore we are left in absolutely no doubt that he is the master of these sculptures. It isthe way in which these womensculptors stand (or frequently sit) that renders them more passive and less commanding over their creations.**Fig. 6**shows Elsie March (1884-1974) in her studio (date unknown). There is a modesty about these photographs that is most striking. In many instances the women look slightly uncomfortable at being asked to pose in this manner with their works.

Some images are more workmanlike, such as this of Barbara Hepworth (1903-75) at work on her sculpture*Contrapuntal Forms* (1950) for the 1951 Festival of Britain (**Fig. 7**).Hepworth was frequently shown in this manner, possibly to continue her alignment with Henry Moore, reinforcing that she too, even though a woman, was capable of the hard work necessary to carve a large piece of wood or stone.Gertrude Hermes (1901-83) was often shown pausing to look at the camera, or else engrossed in her work. These images present us with a rather more convincing relationship between the artist and her practice.**Fig. 8** shows Hermes in the studio of Leon Underwood in the mid 1920s.In 1968 a visitor to Hermes' house attempted a common approach of trying to draw comparisons between the sculptor and her work, suggesting that there was:"no trace of sentimentality in … her work, which is clean and clear-cut – a little like the artist, who is tall, slim and attractive, with cropped hair. Before I arrived, she had been working on a bust … and was clad in a sweater, cardigan, trousers and men's bedroom slippers."'[v]At times the gendered extremes displayed by photographs of female sculptors are very noticeable. **Fig. 9** shows Angela Sykes (1911-84) with her sculpture *Mother and Child*, illustrated in *Good Housekeeping* in 1931. Here the sculptor is truly dwarfed by her production: if the intent was to make heroic her achievement, then it is unfortunate that the effect is to make Sykes appear the opposite. This sculpture was completed when she was only 16 years old.

Mary Spencer Watson lived and worked for 70 years in rural Dorset, remaining relatively unknown. **Fig. 10**shows her in her studio in 1950, surrounded by her sculptures, many apparently in progress. Much of her larger work was intended for a garden setting and the sculptures seem best to fit an outdoor rather than indoor environment, particularly when made from her favourite local material of Purbeck stone.[vi]**Fig. 11** shows Spencer Watson's late 1930s sculpture *Young Beast.*A reviewer for *Country Life*in 2004 wrote:"When I met her at Dunshay Manor, the mellow 15th century house where she has lived since 1923, I was struck by her animated blue eyes, thick mop of silvery hair and strong, sculptural hands. This is a woman in her nineties who reveals no hint of frailty."[vii]**Fig. 12**is an undated photograph of Spencer Watson at work in her garden from the late twentieth century.Elizabeth Muntz (1894–1979) lived near Spencer Watson. She showed with the London Group, including at their Open Air Sculpture exhibition on Selfridge's roof garden in 1930 when her *Child with a Fawn* was particularly selected for praiseas: "a jolly thing for a garden … in which genre the artist specialises".[viii]**Fig. 13** shows this work from 1925-7. A 1949 illustrated article described Muntz in terms appropriate for "Thomas Hardy country" recounting how:

> "Along the lonely cliff road overlooking the sea that in the distance pounds the bleak headland of Portland Bill, comes a shaggy brown pony. Astride it, in a duffle coat and gum boots, with scarf flapping in the chilly north-west wind, is Elizabeth Muntz. Bounding through the dead bracken and the grass beside the pony and rider comes Rumple, a black and white spaniel."

Muntz was on her way to carving a stone memorial in situ.**Fig. 14**is ofthis review in the journal *Illustrated.*

In Edmund Gosse's 1895 essay "The Place of Sculpture in Daily Life", he urged the public to decorate their homes with fashionable bronze statuettes, this being an opportunity to supply an unlimited number of original works.[ix]Arts and Crafts ideas were also promoted through a number of periodicals and magazines such as *The Studio*. Art magazines and home decorating manualscontained illustrations of how sculptures might appear when placed in fashionable home interiors, and this emphasis on "lifestyle" encouraged a new buying public to acquire art as a way to display their taste. Women in particular were targeted with advice on home décor, and thus writings on female sculptors were likely to especially appeal to them. Part of the ethos of The New Sculpture movement was to blur the boundaries between a statue and a statuette, the latter theoretically could be mass-produced yet still bear the imprint of the sculptor's hand. For women sculptors this new interest in small-scale works offered a great opportunity and could in part explain the marked increase in prominent women sculptors at the end of the nineteenth century. This move to an intimate sculpture, and an emphasis on modelling and detail, was in opposition to the grandeur of preceding statues. The viewer was required to move closer, and these works became regarded as innately "domestic", as the boundary between the private home and the public exhibition became less clear-cut.

The statuette's adaptability gave it commercial appeal, whilst it was positioned as a higher quality alternative to mass-produced decorative objects,[x]and could be sold through commercial outlets such as department stores, which of course worried some observers concerned about artistic value and autonomy.[xi]Ultimately the production of British statuettes

proved too expensive, but they remained important in maintaining artistic experimentation in the early twentieth century in their demonstration of a vital connection between material and form. The notion of the home as a site for sculptural display would be developed in the 1940s and 1950s with the series of *Sculpture in the Home* exhibitions, but these are beyond the scope of this paper, although in their aim to widen ownership of domestic sculpture they can be seen as continuing one of the aspirations of the Arts and Crafts Movement, as well as the ethos of the statuette.

Kathleen Scott was continually interviewed and reviewed during the interwar years. After the death of her first husband, Scott of the Antarctic, she married Hilton Young MP, later Lord Kennet. In 1927 the family moved to a house overlooking Kensington Gardens. Here she became very busy, climbing up immense scaffolding, shifting clay and statues about on a purpose-built little railway.[xii] She exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy and the Paris Salon, and even questioned her work rate:

> "Why does it matter what one has in the foolish RA? Of course it doesn't and yet … one goes on until one's limbs ache and one's eyes are dim. I am not ambitious – I want nothing – certainly not money, nor honours – I suppose I must want admiration – The *Illustrated London News* had a whole page of my bust of the King – and I am pleased. How silly to be pleased, it does not make me a good sculptor because the ILN reproduces my work."[xiii]

Scott was photographed many times, often depicted at work, even if at times rather improbably dressed. Her eye contact with her work is also interesting, producing the effect of an exchange between sculptor and sculpture. **Fig. 15**shows her working on a bust of *Lord David Cecil* (1934) and **Fig. 16** shows her sculpture of *King George V* (1935) referred to previously.In some instances it is her status as a society figure which is conveyed in the photograph, as in**Fig. 17.**Her critical and academic status was matched by popular interest, most notably in newspaper and women's magazine articles. An example from *The Sketch* in 1922 announced she was to re-marry, and the illustration comprised a somewhat intense, Pre-Raphaelite style, photograph of the sculptor surrounded by her works, in the centre of which was a head-and-shoulders portrait of her fiancé[xiv](**Fig. 18**.)A review from 12 years later showing her with her husband and sons presented this interesting reworking of the "family portrait" genre(**Fig. 19**).Coverage of Scott in the popular press emphasised her status as a mother and also as a member of the social elite.**Figs. 20, 21**and **22**show such examples. In 1932 Derek Patmore wrote about Scott in *Queen*magazine. After the routine comment about how remarkable it was for a woman to gain world-wide fame in the arduous art of sculpture, he proceeded to describe in great detail her home and studio:"Her art is mature and individual, and she has a rare gift for portraiture … No wonder Rodin greatly admired her work, and even deigned to call her "colleague!" The article occupied a double-page spread in the magazine. **Fig. 23**shows some of the images.Patmore referred to the long list of Kathleen Scott's achievements and stated that she stood in the front rank of English sculptors. He pointed to one of her works which stood in the lily pond, of a young man entitled *These Had Most to give*(1922-3) which Scott told him represented the sacrifice of young men in the War, with the outstretched arms unconsciously forming a crucifix(**Fig. 24**).Patmore commented that this piece was typical of her work since:

> "she has captured all the lyrical idealism and nobility of mankind and immortalised it for eternity in bronze. Inside Lady Hilton Young's charming house there are constant reminders of her art. The drawing room with its wide windows overlooking the Park and the paved garden behind, makes one feel that one is in the country instead of in Town, and its simple cream walls and comfortable armchairs and settee … form an effective background for the pieces of sculpture placed about the room…"

Patmore described how at one end of the dining room was placed one of the sculptor's most important works, a bronze statue of a blindfolded young man, originally designed to be a War Memorial (*The Kingdom is Within*). **Fig. 25**shows further photographs from this extensively illustrated review. They give us a reasonably dispassionate perspective: they do not "orchestrate" our understanding of her work. The sculptures here operate as décor: they are domesticated through context.

In 1928 Scott commented specifically on sculpture in a domestic setting, recommending its impact as decoration of a house, and particularly its garden. She deplored the fact that people did not look at sculpture, describing how at crowded events at the Royal Academy, people only entered the sculpture rooms in order to sit down, because there was no room anywhere else. She recommended that people choose sculpture for themselves, contacting a sculptor directly if they saw their work and wanted something similar – "they … should tell him what they wanted, just as they would tell a dressmaker what they wanted."[xv] In 1934 *Country Life* ran a lengthy article on Scott's decorative sculpture(**Fig. 26**).*The Kingdom is Within* was again noted, this time as a suitable figure for placement in a garden where its "solemn impressiveness would be increased if seen against a wall at the end of an alley". *Chita*, shown on the left in the photograph was highly praised as being: "the very embodiment of lithe, acrobatic grace… and … on a larger scale, would form an ideal centrepiece for a fountain, basin or flower bed."[xvi]

During the 1930s Scott's work comprised two broad categories. The first was her idealised statues of male youths, sometimes also used as war memorials. The second group of work was her portraiture which attracted more critical and public praise. Scott preferred male subjects since she felt that men's features suggested either power or intellect, and given her social milieu she was in a perfect position to find such sitters. She was also strongly anti-feminist,

seemingly arising from a lingering Victorian conservatism as well as a wish not to make a special case for herself. But it is puzzling given her strength of character and clear ambition. Nonetheless the issue of gender arose frequently in appraisals of Scott. For example: “Sculptors are almost invariably big, powerfully-built men, but Lady Hilton Young is rather petite. She is exceptionally strong, however, for one of her sex, and keeps fit with outdoor exercise.”[xvii] It was noted how:

> “Smashing away at marble with chisel and mallet, Mrs. Hilton Young … is winning for her sex a triumph over the most arduous branch of the most arduous art… the widow of the dauntless Antarctic hero faces the rough block received from the mason with a courage, and chisels it with a strength and facility that some of the strongest of the best sculptors must envy.”[xviii]

Given her divided life as wife, mother and socialite, she was remarkably productive, delegating very little work apart from casting.She produced many statuettes of her sitters, as well as busts. **Fig. 27**shows her porcelain statuette of *Colonel T. E. Lawrence* (1921). Many of her idealised nude male figures were also editioned as statuettes, such as *Ad Astra* (c1937) (**Fig. 28**). In all she made twelve such sculptures in a variety of sizes. A comparison has been made with Jacob Epstein, whose more creative work was essentially funded by his lucrative portraiture, and it is for the former that he is most admired. With Scott, the reverse is true, her bronze heads of famous men being best known.[xix]A good example is this striking bust of George Bernard Shaw from 1938 (**Fig. 29**).However Scott was thoroughly committed to her ideal nude sculpture, saying “’really the only thing I’ve cared about are young male objects.’”[xx]She was very unusual in this scrutiny of the male body and it seems that her admiration of the young male was uncomplicated and idealised, certainly not intended as a threat to male identity and power.[xxi]Returning to *These Had Most to Give*, this work is arguably Scott’s most important ideal sculpture, and it was her favourite work (Fig. 24).There was some opposition to this sculpture when it was donated to the the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge as it was thought to refer too much to death and martyrdom. The site is also rather unsatisfactory as the sculpture is placed on a narrow strip of ground between the building and the road. But its modelling evokes the fluidity and naturalism of Rodin’s *The Age of Bronze* (1877) and the poseclearly evokes Christian sacrifice.

We can draw several conclusions as to why Kathleen Scott has become marginalized within art history. Firstly she belonged to the generation of sculptors that came between the New Sculpture practitioners and modernists such as Moore and Hepworth. Too often Scott’s work has been dismissed as competent, rather academic and therefore, by implication, of not much interest. This seems an unreasonable assessment of these fluidly accomplished works. I have shown just a few examples of other British women sculptors’ work in the broad period from the 1880s to the 1940s: I believe they are of great interest and that their invisibility within British art history has largely been due to a lack of serious academic writing and significant exhibitions, a continuing gender prejudice and still a bias towards work that is seen as first and foremost innovative. I also strongly believe in the value of journalism as a primary source for the art historian, as a clear indication of contemporary perspectives, but it is also clear that such writings can have a negative effect in trivialising their subjects, and in the case of the women sculptors I have discussed, of “domesticating” their practice. In the final analysis I would argue that art history’s previous obsession with “the new” has masked work of real quality, whatever area or period of art history we examine.

3,877 words

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Pauline Rose is Professor of Art History at The Arts University Bournemouth, UK. Her 2013 book *Henry Moore in America: Art, Business and the Special Relationship* (I. B. Tauris) was based on her PhD thesis, and was supported by an author’s award from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. Her second book, *British Women Sculptors c1890 – 1951*,is being prepared for publication. She has also worked with Tate Britain, providing two essays “Henry Moore: American Patrons and Commissions” and“Henry Moore in New York”,for their forthcoming online research publication *Henry Moore: Sculptural Process and Public Identity* (2015/16). Previous publications include: “Henry Moore in America: The Role of Journalism and Photography” in Rebecca Peabody (ed) *Anglo-American Exchange in Postwar Sculpture, 1945 – 1975*, 2011, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, on www.gettypublications.org; “Photography and Sculpture: Portraying Henry Moore” in Veronica Bogdan (ed) *The Artist’s Portrait and Self-Portrait*, 2010, Moscow Academy of Fine Arts; “Henry Moore in Dallas”, *The Sculpture Journal*, 17, 1, 2008, Liverpool University Press & The Public Monuments and Sculpture Association; “Man-Made Landscapes: Reassessing Peter Lanyon”.*Visual Culture in Britain*, 1, 2000, Ashgate Publishing. She has delivered numerous international conference papers.

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