THE PLACE OF SCULPTURE IN DAILY LIFE

BY EDMUND GOSSE

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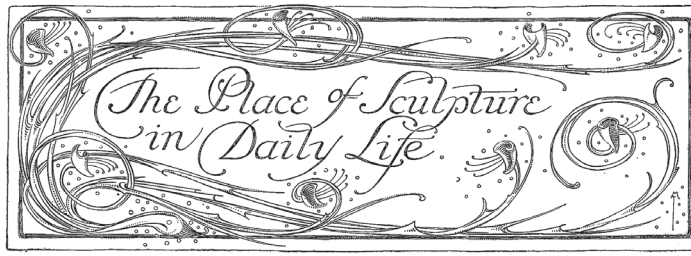
EDMUND GOSSE AND SCULPTURE IN DAILY LIFE

BY MARTINA DROTH

Published in 1895, this quirky set of essays made a case for sculpture's relevance to modern life. Written by the poet, author, and critic Edmund Gosse (1849–1928), the essays argued that sculpture, far from being remote or elite, should be embraced as a "popular" art, with a place in ordinary homes, on building façades, and in public spaces. Gosse, who began his career as a librarian, had come to the attention of London's artistic and literary circles early on through his poetic works. He was friendly with the likes of Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, and the Brownings. He socialized with painters, sculptors, and illustrators, and his works in criticism often developed in response to these friendships. During the 1880s and 1890s, he became preoccupied with sculpture, thanks in great part to his close relationship with the sculptor Hamo Thornycroft. Eager to support his friend and other emerging sculptors, Gosse praised the efforts



I. Certain Fallacies

(Drawn by Charles Ricketts.)

About fifteen years have passed since the art of sculpture visibly revived amongst us. Warmed into vitality by the neighbourhood of the fire of France, British sculpture, which had so long lain sunken in a deadly chill, like Demeter swooning beside the well of Celeus, felt the blood stir again in its veins, lost its wrinkled semblance of old age, and rose up active and young again among the arts. The only journalistic formula of our youth, "there is, as usual, nothing which need detain us in the sculpture galleries," gave place to an ever-increasing eager and respectful consideration of the fresh beautiful work exhibited year after year by the new race of sculptors. It became obvious that this art was flourishing in England as it had

not flourished since the days of Flaxman.[1] All the honours of fictitious popularity came to the new men—they were interviewed; their works were multiplied in the illustrated magazines; the Royal Academy hastened to select them to its honours. With all this, they sank to nothing common or vulgar: their statuettes and their reliefs were notable for distinction and purity. It seemed to many of us that of all artists in England the sculptors were those who were moving along the healthiest lines. What has been the result?

Several sculptors have become famous, it is certain, but has sculpture become popular? Have these fifteen years formed a period in which sculpture has made a stride forward as a recognised element in the life of the civilized citizen? I am afraid that no one who is acquainted with the facts can venture to answer these questions in the affirmative. Sculpture is praised much more than it used to be, but it is not more bought or commissioned. Vast wealth is expended on the beautification of our streets and our houses, but sculpture seems less and less to reap advantage from this golden shower, and at a period when our modelling schools are full of talented and learned young men, it is more perilous to adopt the profession of a sculptor than it was in the old wooden days of Gibson and Behnes.[2] Such a condition of things is in the highest degree anomalous. We profess to be extremely enlightened and to cultivate a jealous appreciation of the arts, and yet here is an art, perhaps the most noble and most exquisite of all, where the supply is abundant and the demand infinitesimal. It is certain that future

JAMES II
(From the Statue attributed to Grinling Gibbons in Whitehall Gardens.)

be confessed at once, that the heroic forms of the art are exceedingly costly. The rise in the value of labour has cruelly handicapped the sculptors, who are forced to employ skilled and unskilled artisans in the conduct of their productions. The nobler sculpture could only thrive in countries where gangs of slaves could be set to work without cost for an indefinite space of time. The marbles of Ægina and of

the Parthenon could not have been executed in an age and a country in which manual labour was not cheap.[9] But the whole object of this series of papers will be to lead away the attention of those who read them from "heroic" sculpture, which must be left for the future mainly to millionaires and to the State, and to concentrate it on the varieties of what may be called practicable sculpture—work, that is, which is within the scope of whose who are able to indulge themselves reasonably in artistic pleasures. For such persons there is no reason at all why sculpture should be expensive. I shall indicate various modes in which sculpture may be made to give pleasure analogous to that obtained from painting, and on terms by no means less reasonable.

A statuette by the most eminent sculptor of the day would be a much less costly indulgence than a cabinet picture by a painter of equal or less repute. It is impossible to understand why it should give less satisfaction to the owner, and if his eyes were opened it would not do so. The finest bust to be obtained to-day in England would cost less than a painted portrait by any one of a dozen fashionable portrait painters, and would be absolutely durable while liable to no such depreciation from the modes of dress and fashions of technique as threatens an oil-painting. A medallion portrait in bronze or a marble or alabaster head in low-relief may be one of the most refined and exquisite possessions possible, and yet be less expensive than a water-colour drawing. In fact, where the difficulty of wages for skilled labour does not come in to disturb the calculation, no art can be enjoyed at

so reasonable a rate as sculpture, for the very obvious and somewhat pathetic reason that the demand is so small that the artist is obliged to keep his prices rigorously low. People with a little money to spare persist in imagining that if they spend some of it on sculpture, they will be obliged to order a life-sized Venus which will make their parlour-maid give warning, or a group of the Graces which it will be impossible to shunt through the front door.[10]

The decline of the bust in England is a deplorable thing. Whether art is at a high or low level, there is generally some iconic talent to be found in the studios. Portraiture is less affected by changes of taste than any other kind of art, and it is rarely indeed that, even in the darkest ages of decadence, good heads have not been executed. The "bustos" of Nollekens[11]—broad, effective, faithful transcripts of living models; works which are neither precious nor picturesque, but learned, vital, and practiced—retain their value while the painting of Fuseli and Hamilton and Howard is forgotten.[12] In the earlier part of the reign of George III, busts were greatly in fashion, and we may still, in old country houses, come upon periwigged heads shrewdly set on admirably modelled necks and shoulders, faces from which the wit and capacity of an earlier generation beam genially forth. Those accomplished and dignified specimens of a neglected art are signed by Roubiliac or Wilton, Bacon or Carlini, and they remind us, as with a shock, of what was done in England a hundred years ago and more by men of whose merit we now take little cognizance.[13] There is no form of