

Curator Martina Droth and a team of collaborators attempt to explore the commonalities between the fine art of sculpture, with its lofty subjects and form, and the decorative arts, synonymous with craftsmanship and function. This intersection of sculpture and ornament provides a fertile ground for new ways of thinking about uniqueness, status, scale, and design.

For instance, an examination of the Getty’s pair of bronze groups by Gaspard Marsy and François Girardon, replicating larger sculptures designed for the Gardens of Versailles, reveals that the pedestals upon which they sit, designed by André-Charles Boulle, are actually more worthy of attention than the derivative small-scale sculptures they display.

The Taking Shape exhibition asked viewers to directly approach the visual aspects and construction materials of these objects of art, taking them out of their usual environments and divorcing them, somewhat, from their historical context. In contrast, each of the forty catalog entries offers detailed analysis and rich historical context for the objects, whose prevalent material is wood and bronze, often gilded. For this reason, the sixteen-page spread of lavish installation-view photos, displaying the stark white walls and fire-red pedestals throughout the Getty galleries, are essential to understanding many of Droth’s assertions. A large section of the catalogue is devoted to graphic representations of three-dimensional objects.

Four additional essays are compiled at the end of the volume and are differentiated from the rest of the catalog by thinner, non-glossy paper stock and poorer-quality images. Droth introduces these four essays as engaging the more speculative ideas of the exhibition, such as, “the metaphoric potential of sculptural decoration”, and “the spatial expressiveness of ornament.” Mimi Hellman’s “The Decorated Flame: Firedogs and the Tensions of the Hearth” touches on the new consumer demand of this era and the multiple modes of signification for the fireplace within the residence of elite French families. Droth also highlights the exquisite firedogs represented in the exhibition, explaining that these aesthetic objects had only the conceit of function.

The bibliography and catalog notes are comprehensive, appealing to a scholarly audience. This book is recommended for a research library that collects material on the Late Baroque (1690-1750) and the Rococo period (1725-1775).

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