
Da Vinci, in his Paragone, was less than kind to sculpture/sculptors. He stated that sculpture was a “limited reality” whereas painting allowed for a full range of optical effects (p. 69). Yet, da Vinci created notebooks devoted to sculptural studies, produced outstanding sculptures which are not widely acknowledged, and planned enormous and technologically advanced equestrian statues. What caused this psychological rift concerning sculpture? We cannot know for sure, but Radke, Professor of Fine Arts at Syracuse University, and fellow contributors delve into this mystery and provide enlightening discussion and theories.

Readers get a luxurious feel upon opening this book. Paper quality is good, and illustrations help guide the reader through the text to achieve clearer understanding of subject matter. In addition to Radke, contributions are made by additional documented scholars. Subject matter is unique and not replicated in the literature. Notes and references are complete and support the text.

Radke’s lead chapter explores the relationship between Leonardo, the sculpture-rich city of Florence, and those artists who came before and after him. Verrochio was his teacher and an examination of “Beheading of St. John the Baptist” is one of the highlights. From Verrochio, Leonardo learned to accentuate gesture/expression, and how to charm the audience. After elaborating on how da Vinci shows light falling on even the darkest folds of drape, how he used clay molds with linen drapes as a tool for modeling, and how back sides of the components vary in detail, readers see exactly why Radke attributes components as he does.

Another engaging chapter describes the ‘Sforza horse’, slated to be almost twenty-four feet tall, with a finished weight of seventy tons. Plans for this behemoth spanned two decades, and work is well-documented, largely in the Madrid Codices. Plans for casting, costs, materials estimates, and artistic influences are mind-boggling. Undertaking a project of this magnitude caused da Vinci to reinvent the entire foundry system and many of his ideas for producing this colossal bronze were advanced for his time. Influence of the ongoing war, economy, and politics at the foundry had impact, and the final sculpture never materialized.

Why, then did Leonardo favor painting over sculpture when he seemed well-versed in both? Perhaps it was because he was “unlucky” in sculpture (p. 80); many of his sculptural plans were never realized. Perhaps it was inflexibility in the face of pressures from the Sforza court, a very human response. Whatever the reason, Radke and contributors allow us to relish in the way da Vinci brought together plasticity and abstract concepts, and for that we can be grateful.

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