

NUDE SCULPTURE

5,000 YEARS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID FINN
ESSAY BY VICKI GOLDBERG

2331/613

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Photographs by
DAVID FINN

Essay by
VICKI GOLDBERG

HARRY N. ABRAMS, INC., PUBLISHERS

Editor: ELAINE M. STANTON
Designer: RAYMOND P. HOOPER

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Goldberg Vicki.

Nude sculpture : 5,000 years / by Vicki Goldberg ; with photographs by David Finn.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8109-3346-2 (hc)

I. Photography of the nude. 2. Photography of sculpture. 3. Finn, David, 1921- I.

Finn, David, 1921- II. Title.

TR675 .G55 2000

779'.9731821—dc21

00-25152

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Published in 2000 by Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York

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Frontispiece: Arthur Lee, *Volupté* (pl. 194)

Printed and bound in Hong Kong



HARRY N. ABRAMS, INC.
100 FIFTH AVENUE
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10011
www.abramsbooks.com

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PHOTOGRAPHER'S PREFACE

By David Finn

Some years ago, when I read Kenneth Clark's book, *The Nude*, I was surprised by his scornful characterization of Canova's nude sculpture as "ridiculous . . . fashion plate . . . a meaningless discipline in academies of art." Later, in an essay by the connoisseur Mario Praz, I found that he thought Canova's sculptures were cold, even icy. But when I looked through my camera lens at details of these nudes, I saw something very different. To me the limbs and torsos, hands and feet, breasts and buttocks of Canova's figures seemed wonderfully lifelike. I thought his rendition of flesh was uniquely subtle, delicate, and sensuous. Those qualities were certainly evident in the prints that I made. Years later, I had an opportunity to show some of those prints both to Clark and to Praz and had the pleasure of hearing them say that my photographs had changed their thinking. Both of them said that if they had seen my photographs beforehand, they would never have written what they had. Their change of thinking taught me that the camera could enable me, or anyone, to discover qualities in a work of art that might not be immediately apparent even to a knowledgeable and critical viewer.

Exploring the beauty of the human body in the work of great sculptors through my camera lens has been a passion of mine for almost forty years. It has led me to publish more than sixty-five books on sculpture, with photographs taken on five continents of works from virtually all periods of

recorded history. Many elements of those sculptures have moved me deeply. I have marveled at the way the best ancient Greek sculptors represented veins in the body, demonstrating that they were not only masters of perception but almost magicians in their command of their tools. I have been dazzled by the eroticism of Indian sculpture, the nobility of Egyptian figures, and the pristine geometry of Oriental works. The remarkable fourteenth-century relief sculptures by Maitani on the facade of the cathedral of Orvieto were a revelation to me. I felt that the great Renaissance and Baroque masters—Michelangelo, Cellini, Giambologna, Bernini—each loved the human body in a different way, but that the vision of each was astonishingly powerful. The nineteenth century is rich in sensuous representations of the figure; besides Canova there are Hiram Powers in America, Giovanni Duprè in Italy, and many others. Finally, the twentieth-century masters—Rodin, Brancusi, Epstein, Moore, Marini and a host of less well-known sculptors such as Vigeland, Hasselberg, and Gaudier-Brzeska—all revealed in their work aspects of the human figure that no one had shown in quite the same way before.

Rarely do photographs of a complete sculpture show the superb quality evident in the rendition of the nude. Too often the stylistic details of other parts of the work seem dated and distracting. But the human body itself is eternal when portrayed in stone and bronze and wood. It is not the body of

an individual who lives and dies, but of all of us who are part of the continuing stream of humanity. We are all basically the same, and when a sculptor shows us different parts of the human body in a compelling way, he or she is showing us something about ourselves and our loved ones that can move us deeply.

Photographs of sculptures of the nude and photographs of actual nude bodies are utterly different. When looking through the camera lens at a work of sculpture, one can discover marvelous compositions of forms that the artist created out of his own vision of the human body. No matter how realistic the sculpture may be, what we see has been created through the eye and hand of the artist who molded or carved the piece. The sculpture is a direct product of the artist's senses and only indirectly of the subject portrayed. If the sculptor is a great artist, what one sees in all aspects of the figure are elements of a great work of art. I believe that the photographer's eye can compose those elements in the viewfinder in a way that reveals the qualities of their greatness and thereby can produce a photograph that in itself may be a fine work of art. Many technical and creative resources can help produce that result—lighting, lenses, choice of film, developing and printing in the darkroom. But it is the work of two artists, the sculptor and the photographer, that ultimately determines the quality of the photographic image.

Photographing living persons in the nude is a very different process. Here there is only one artist at work—the photographer. The human figure is much the same as a landscape. There are an infinite number of elements that one can look at through the camera lens, and making a selection of those elements and capturing them on film is a judgment the

photographer makes on his or her own. That judgment, together with the developing process, is responsible for the aesthetic quality of the final print.

Thus, in one case the work of two artists is involved, and in the other the work of only one artist. The results may look similar on the surface, but they are in fact not in any way comparable.

Over the years, I have taken many thousands of photographs of sculptures of the nude. In preparation for this book, Tom Draper, who has been working on my archives for many years, and I made a selection of those images that we thought might be considered for this book. We went through the archives of our negatives with Vicki Goldberg, the author, and Elaine Stainton, the editor, to choose those that should be printed and reviewed for a final choice. When I was finished printing them, Vicki, Elaine and I sat down together to make a final selection. My invaluable assistant, Susan Slack, researched most of the information for the captions.

I have long admired Vicki Goldberg's knowledgeable and insightful writings on photography and feel privileged that she has written the text for this book. Elaine Stainton has been my editor for several books published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., and I have always been most grateful for her sensitive and knowing guidance. And I owe much of the satisfaction I have had as a widely published photographer and author to the friendship and critical judgment of Paul Gottlieb, the president of Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

A book on five thousand years of sculpture of the nude has been one of my dreams for a long time. I am extraordinarily pleased that this dream has now been realized.

PLEASURES OF THE STONE BODY

SIGHT AND TOUCH *By Vicki Goldberg*

Photographs of the body show us what we desire and fear; photographs of statues of the body show us what we have dreamed of and how we would reconstruct ourselves if we could. The images in this book suggest we can refashion not only how we look but how we see.

What we desire is wholly evident here, an extravaganza of exquisite breasts and bottoms, hips and genitals, staged by great sculptors the world over. What we fear is really the same, the body's relentless attraction, as well as its ineluctable destruction by time and accident (see pls. 154 and 176–80). A few cultures have so feared both face and body that they proscribed human depiction, and many in the Christian West have made elaborate excuses for any lack of clothes. An American writer in the nineteenth century explained that Hiram Powers's *The Greek Slave* (pl. 151) was "clothed all over with sentiment, sheltered, protected by it, from every profane eye."¹

Most contemporary cultures, no longer anxious about profane eyes, gaze at just about everything. Some feminist writers, noting that sight is more important to men in sexual matters than it is to women, have branded the gaze male property and declared that visual productions, especially if sexually charged, have been designed primarily for men. Women were, indeed, left out of the equation for centuries, and most of the sculptures here were made with men's eyes in mind, but women and their desires can no longer be ignored. By now it is clear

they *like* to look, probably at both male and female bodies. For me, at least, it seems impossible to look through this collection of pictures without experiencing some level of desire—actually multiple, overlapping desires, what with appeals to the senses of sight and touch, the heady pleasure that accompanies high artistic achievement, and the inescapable seduction of the body.

By and large, the bodies here are intact. A few of the statues are fragments, but time has been unusually kind to the objects that excite David Finn's eye. What interests me most, however, are the details that make up the majority of the photographs and tend to be radical, new, extreme views that others have not seen, much less photographed.

The detail is in effect a symptom of photography. All photographs are excerpts, pieces cut from a larger world, component parts of a building, a battle, a community, some whole that may very well be unknown to the viewer. Finn's details are so strikingly excerpted and dramatically conceived that even when the entire work is known or easy to grasp the image can be surprising: a new way of looking as well as a new way of seeing something you thought you knew. Yet the form of the photographs—a close-up on a tiny fraction of a statue—is familiar on two counts: as an example (perhaps eccentric, even immoderate) of the kind of photographic detail that fostered and expanded the study of art history, and also as a fragment of sculpture.

Art history did not exist as a discipline until



*Auguste Rodin. Walking Man, 1900. Bronze, 33 x 20¹/₄ x 20" (84 x 51.5 x 50.8 cm).
Collection of Iris and B. Gerald Cantor*

some years after the invention of photography, and even today most students (and most people generally) know art primarily through photographs. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century attempts to define the oeuvre of earlier artists depended on the near-photographic memories of men like Giovanni Morelli-Lermolieff and Bernard Berenson for signature details of style: ears, fingers, drapery folds. Photographs were a big improvement on memory, photographs of details better still. Finn's fragments, at least the ones here, are less explanatory, more the product of personal response and the will to create a new form than the illustrative details that usually appear in textbooks and catalogues. Still, someone with a good eye and a well-stocked mental archive might recognize many a hand, shoulder, and gesture in these photographs, either because the statue is so familiar or because artists do have stylistic signatures and write their names repeatedly in the least parts of their creations.

A few of these sculptures are fragments themselves, broken, truncated, mutilated remnants of time and fate, or in one or two cases a *bozzetto*, or sketch, still incomplete, for a statue that would eventually retrieve its essential body parts. The fragment as an independent work of art is a dual invention, of time or fortune and of art. Time created it, art launched it on a new career (and the camera reenvisioned it).

For most of history, sculptors made entire figures. The Greeks abhorred incompleteness; even the bust portrait, an invention of the Romans, would have been unthinkable in ancient Greece. According to Linda Nochlin, the fragment as an independent entity came into its own and acquired significance as an emblem of modernity at the time of the French Revolution, when destruction of the past was seen as paving the way to the future.² Some years later,

fragments began to appear in photographs, which could not entirely avoid them. They were discovered anew in Japanese prints and found their way into Western painting.

It was Rodin who put the fragmentary figure on a pedestal, sometimes literally, with works like headless, one-armed *Iris* and headless, no-armed *Walking Man* (p. 9 and pls. 155, 157). He inscribed the sculptural fragment in the canon of contemporary possibilities, and there it has stayed ever since.³ Perhaps sculpture and photography have played off each other here, partial sculptures making photographic details seem all the more natural, photographic details returning the favor.

Some of Finn's photographs view sculpture from unusual angles or light it in a dramatic manner.



Giambologna. Ocean (see pl. 100)

We are accustomed to sculpture's being framed by photographs, but the details present views available solely to a camera, the human visual field not being rectangular. Sometimes, by coming in so close and staring so hard, he points out or discovers complexities scarcely noticeable in the whole. The criss-crossing pose of the hands of a work by Giambologna, the subtle ripples of the flesh, and the flower-like form of the genitals

above a stone plant that rises to support a thigh become counterposed decorative moments in a photographic print of a single, silvery tonality. Weathering has made its own comments on another of Giambologna's works, *The Rape of a Sabine* (pls. 93–95), already an amazingly complicated sculpture, by drawing clever patterns over a leg and writing expressive lines across the torso.

These works of art have been reenvisioned, seen in a way perceptible only to Finn himself before his prints made it accessible to us. He is a kind of appropriator, using works of art to make new works of art—not Canova's or Clodion's marbles them-

selves, but David Finn's photographic vision of them. This is an issue whenever art is photographed: how true to the original is it? With painting the terms are somewhat different, as angle is not in question but color is. With sculpture, the straight-on, full-figure record of the work from several angles (which Finn also makes) most closely approximates the way we ordinarily encounter the work, and is generally accepted as the best replica of the sculptor's intentions and the viewer's experience. It could be argued that Finn's photographs, beautiful as they are on their own, are faithful neither to the originals nor to our perceptions and should be judged as independent works of art rather than records of sculpture, an argument that would be hard to counter.

On the other hand, Finn has registered something extraordinary about many of these sculptors, whether well known or anonymous, and that is the depth and glory of both their talent and technique, which are as evident in the slightest minutiae of muscle, flesh, and hair and as telling in the off-center view as in the impressions of the entire sculpture we more commonly carry in memory. One of the more remarkable gifts that photography has made to the study of art is precisely this awareness that great works of art withstand the most minute scrutiny.

It seems to me that Finn also conveys something akin to the sculptor's perceptions during the process of creation. I like to think of sculptors walking around their works, bending to look up, peering through the space left by a bent marble arm, checking to see if the line of the leg looks as good from the bottom up as it does from the side. So few sculptors carve today that this may well be incorrect, but if it is right, David Finn is merely reenacting a procedure built into the making of art. And it is not so hard to imagine a sculptor, whether modeling in clay or wielding a chisel on stone, rapt in intense concentration on a small detail.

The Greeks worked on the entire figure at any one time, successively removing one narrow layer of stone after another. Other sculptors must have at least a mental picture of the full figure as it goes

through various states. But somewhere near completion the energy of creation is likely to be hotly directed at small and circumscribed spots: here, the slight lift of the rib cage, there the soft slide of flesh across the stomach. In the most delicate nuances of the moment, the eyes (and mind) would focus on a narrow area, magnified beyond reason by proximity and the fierce drive of attentiveness.

And when it comes to the viewer's perception of sculpture, something may be going on in these photographs (and others by photographers who take a similar approach) that speaks to an almost unacknowledged aspect of the experience of sculpture: the haptic sense and its ties to the visual. The senses anyway are so entwined that they cannot easily be disentangled; looking at velvet or satin automatically conjures the way the material feels. Sculpture often invites the hand to run over it while the mind registers the smoothness of marble, the sleekness of bronze, the silkiness of polished wood. Many nude statues are all the more delicious for waking a related hunger to experience the soft drift of a curve, the clamped power of a muscle in material that is a mere surrogate for flesh yet can tantalize the fingertips.

In 1812, a contemporary of Canova's wrote to a friend about the sculptor's *Venus Italica*: "I must, in a state of trembling—and I am not one to tremble—speak to you of Canova's Venus. . . . I have visited and revisited, and loved, and kissed, and—don't let anyone know—I even once caressed, this new Venus."⁴ Loving and kissing may be chaste but some caresses are not, and still the sculpture tempts. Finn's photographs understand this implicitly, and it is the very precision of textures and surfaces, combined with views that are sometimes puzzling yet clearly parts of the human body, that visually translate the subtle seductions of touch.

If the sight of a statue, indeed the mere photograph of a statue, can call up the sense of touch and stir up sexual desire, what does that say about our connections to art? In *The Power of Images*, David Freedberg argues that we respond to images in much the same way we do to the objects they represent, an

argument buttressed by such phenomena as the various religious strictures against representation, the erotic desires of men for representations of female nudes, the old custom of carrying religious pictures before the eyes of a condemned man all the way to his execution.⁵ The ability of representations of the body to stand in for the body itself is undeniable, as the history of pornography and the briefer history of the pinup attest. A number of reports and fables testify to the power of sculpture to arouse desire, devotion, even, apparently, love. (Painted images have this capacity as well, but sculpture outdoes them by its sheer physicality, its rounded approximation of a living human being.)

Antiquity produced several tales of men who fell in love with statues, including one Greek so aroused by Praxiteles' Cnidian Venus that after nightfall he entered her precinct and had intercourse with her.⁶ In the Middle Ages in Europe, many stories were told of a man who put a ring on the finger of a statue of Venus, only to discover that the statue took him seriously and would not let him near his human bride. Similar stories crop up all over the world. (In Europe, the Virgin Mary soon replaced Venus, giving the story a rather different slant.)⁷ Although tales of women stricken with lust for masculine images are less common, they do exist: a ribald novella of the sixteenth century tells of a woman who, when her husband was traveling, was so irresistibly attracted to a statue of a naked man, which was rather inexplicably sporting an erection, that she threw off her clothes to copulate with it and was discovered, still at it, by a crowd that gathered to watch the next morning.⁸

Then there's Pygmalion, who fell so in love with his own creation that he asked Venus to give her life and had his wish granted; one hopes they lived happily ever after. This famous fable illustrates the extent to which art was supposed to mirror nature and the deepness of the artist's involvement with his (back then, always *his*) own act of creation, but it also says a good deal about the relationship of the male sculptor to the female nude. Brassai reported visit-

ing Maillol in his studio, where his harem of naked female figures surrounded him: "His eye travels over their rounded bodies, his hands caress a budding breast, the column of a thigh, and linger over the curve of a knee or calf, the crease of a hip still covered with a damp cloth, or a swelling pair of buttocks. 'I love to caress buttocks, lovely full buttocks. They're the most beautiful shape nature ever created!'"⁹ Maillol provides *prima facie* evidence of the synesthesia of sight and touch; the Pygmalion story extends this into an intense desire for the transformation of stone into flesh.

It is not hard to imagine other sculptors experiencing something similar. Could a man give such juiciness to curves, such suppleness to flesh, such eloquence to undulation if he did not love bodies at least as well as stone? Once again Finn's photographs, in their intimate intensity, suggest that we are privy not to our experience alone but to the sculptor's as well.

Beauty is lovable enough, and beauty that one creates must have a certain extra charge. In Greece, and again in the Renaissance, beauty was considered a step on the pathway to divine love, but humans being what they are, spiritual and physical loves may be hard to separate. The word "ecstasy" applies to both; one has only to read St. Theresa or look at Bernini's treatment of her to see how close the two can be. Not being a sculptor, I cannot say for sure, but I strongly suspect that the glistening marble flesh and rippling stone curves brought nearly to life by the sculptor's hand arouse at least a hint of the pleasure (however sublimated) associated with physical love, especially since the artist should be simultaneously experiencing the satisfaction of successful achievement. Nor are either heterosexual or homosexual artists exempt from admiration of the beauty of bodies they would not want to bed.

Finn's photographs are often enough lover's views, momentary glimpses of odd parts of the body from distances so close that everything else is blotted from sight. Perhaps only artists and photographers, and possibly doctors, have the privilege

of seeing bodies this way outside of what is commonly called the act of love.

* * *

These photographs recompose and stylize our perceptions of statues, but before the photographer came in, the sculptors had already remodeled the human body. It is astonishing to what degree the full body (never mind fragments) can be stylized, abstracted, reduced to the merest suggestion and still remain recognizable. The body is so important, so essential, and so familiar that a bare outline or diagram is instantly understood: stick figures in ancient caves or from the hands of children. Cycladic sculpture can turn the body into a compact fertility shape; no trouble recognizing that. Oceanic and African sculpture deals with the body as a concept, with abstractions and conventions that come from ideas of what the body is and how it works: the legs of a male figure from the South Pacific hang from an extended horizontal, as if he were a skeleton, and that, too, is recognizable (pl. 47). Twentieth-century sculptors—Henri Laurens, Gaston Lachaise—could safely take the body to extreme levels of abstraction, knowing that the eye would eagerly seek a relation to what it knew.

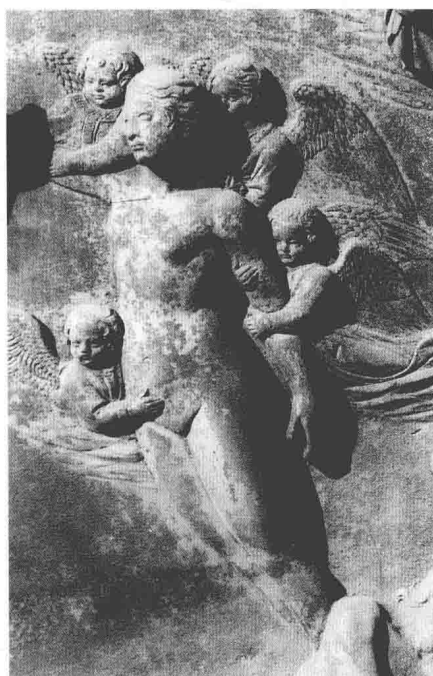
All sculpture is stylized to one degree or another. Art in effect consists of imposing some sort of order or idea on nature and materials; in most Western and Eastern traditions the human body has been repeatedly idealized in art to bring it closer to some approximation of godly or human perfection. Various countries and continents and times have all had their own ideas about what is beautiful, and Western artists have continually modulated the notion of perfection in response to the changing fashion of the fickle world. (Many Eastern countries

have been much more conservative on this score, maintaining a standard with only minor variations for centuries.)

The Greeks initially had one basic male body type, which in later times became softer and more elongated and was joined by a new, much sturdier and more muscular type, sometimes indicating excess. Greek sculptors did not invent the notion of an ideal body, already apparent in Egypt, but they formalized it with mathematical canons of proportions more highly detailed than any worked out by their gods. Despite the rigor of Greek athletic training, it is unlikely that every hero

achieved the geometric nicety that would have been thought to approach divinity. Ah well, ideals exist to aspire to, to dream of, perhaps to envy.

In post-Renaissance Europe the ideal varied so from time to time and country to country that a man or woman could outlive or outravel his or her beauty in very little time. The century that separates Ghiberti's slender, half-formed Eve (left and pls. 66–67) from Michelangelo's worn and muscular *Night* (who expresses not merely the weariness of time but a sense of disillusion that had



Lorenzo Ghiberti. *Eve* (detail)

invaded Michelangelo's work) (pls. 70–71), produced no changes (or variants) greater than those within the career of a single sculptor, Bandinelli.

The aggressive torso of Bandinelli's *Cacus* (pls. 79–80) is exaggeratedly and appropriately strong. (A monster killed by Hercules, in certain texts he had three heads and breathed flame.) His chest and abdomen constitute a brute force, as if the latent power of his muscles were a warning sign. Bandinelli's Adam, on the other hand, admittedly not renowned for his strength, is all sheen and sway and silk (pls. 81–82), while Eve with her impossibly long waist and high breasts seems to have been