Sources for two early reliefs by Puget

BY HENRY KEAZOR

Two damaged wooden relief carvings of the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Adoration of the Magi by Pierre Puget (Figs. 30 and 31), recently exhibited in the monographic exhibition at Marseille, are among the earliest known sculptures by the artist. The carved inscription "PUGET 1633" appears on the recto of both panels, while the versos are inscribed in ink (probably not in Puget's own hand) "PETRUS PUGET DEL SCULP FECIT AQUAE SEXTIUS A.D. 1633". Although the circumstances of their creation have yet to be established—it is not known for whom they were made or if they formed part of a larger cycle of sculpted decoration—they do provide hitherto overlooked evidence of the interests and working methods of the young artist. There has been a tendency among scholars to trace influences on Puget's early work more from the available biographical data than from direct visual evidence. The name of Pietro da Cortona, in whose Roman workshop Puget is said to have worked in 1641, is often invoked in this context, and Klaus Herding has detected what he terms "lingering Italian reminiscences" in the two Adoration reliefs under consideration here, citing François Duquesnoy and Alessandro Algardi as possible models in addition to Cortona. But although Puget's technique may well have been affected by his Roman experiences, both these reliefs in fact show him copying directly from other sources.

The Adoration of the Shepherds looks back to the Cinquecento for inspiration, being based on a composition by Polidoro da Caravaggio which was widely available through sixteenth-century copies and engravings. Polidoro's autograph drawing survives in Madrid (Fig. 29), but it is clear that Puget must have depended on an engraving in the reverse sense, such as that by Girardo Fredo Fontana of 1579 (Fig. 28). Despite the composition's popularity in the Cinquecento, it is most unusual, if not unique, to find it used by an artist in the following century. Puget transcribed the two-dimensional image faithfully, if somewhat awkwardly, into his relief, taking over, with one exception, the poses and gestures of the shepherds with their fluttering drapery, as well as such details from Fontana's engraving as the plant behind the foot of the hurrying shepherd at the right and the voussoirs of the arch behind, though only the legs of the figure kneeling above now survive in the mutilated relief.

In the Adoration of the Magi on the other hand the "Italian reminiscences" take on a slightly different form for, although the composition is ultimately derived from a work executed in Rome in 1633 (Fig. 33), the artist was Puget's compatriot Poussin, and Henri d'Avicenne's printing which served as Puget's primary source was published in Paris (Fig. 32). In adapting this composition as a relief, Puget took rather greater liberties than he had in the Adoration of the Shepherds, where on the whole he respected the relative spatial locations of the figures, although the nature of the three-dimensional plastic relief encouraged him to show the foreground figure at centre-right more in profile than in the print, strengthening the implicit grouping of these two figures at the right to balance the single kneeling figure on the left. When adapting Poussin's Adoration of the Magi, however, he considerably simplified the more complicated spatial relationships between the figures in the print, particularly at the left, where he...


omitted two figures, perhaps finding this closely intertwined group too difficult to translate into the new medium.

It is worth remarking that Puget seems to be the earliest sculptor to adapt a composition by Poussin into a carved relief: the other known examples—those after Poussin’s Hartford Crucifixion, the Copenhagen Eudamidas, and the Richmond Achilles—all date from after the French painter’s death in 1665. When Puget carved his panel in 1653, Poussin was not only still alive, but Henri d’Aville’s print must have been hot off the press. Puget is also most unusual in making use of an early composition by Poussin, other sculptors tending to prefer works dating from after 1640.

Until the patronage and original destination of the two panels is known, we can only speculate about the precise reasons for Puget’s pairing of these two Adorations after Poussin and Polidoro, which have similar settings within a framework of ruined classical architecture. It may be that Puget, who was a habitual borrower when working as a painter, simply chose prints which were to hand, but it is a pleasing coincidence that Polidoro should have been an artist much admired by Poussin and that Poussin and Puget would later be linked within the French academic tradition as the founders of the true French style in their respective media..setHeader tegen


D’Aville’s engraving is dated 1653-55 by Wildenstein, loc.cit. at note 5 above, and the Puget panel now enables us to narrow this down to 1653.

For some examples, see the references in note 6 above. See alsoウォルTON [1967], cited at note 3 above, p.11: ‘there is considerable evidence to suggest that throughout his career as a painter he frequently, if not always, borrowed details or whole compositions from others, taking a minimum of trouble to disguise his borrowings’.


See, for example, the busts of Poussin and Puget by Michel-Louis Victor Mercier of 1838 flanking the entrance of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris (the present examples were recarved after 1890 following the ruined original); W. Bouleau-Rabaud: Inventaire des sculptures décoratives et éléments d’architecture de l’Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, Paris [1973], p.11, no.1.