

WALL TEXTS

OUTSTANDING! THE RELIEF FROM RODIN TO PICASSO

24 MAY TO 17 SEPTEMBER 2023

Exhibition annex

Introduction

Is it painting or sculpture, surface or space? Hardly any artistic medium challenges our sense of sight like the relief. We can contemplate a relief as we would a painting, while at the same time our eyes scan its surface as they would a sculpture.

In antiquity the relief served primarily to decorate architecture. In the Renaissance it played an important role in the competition between painters and sculptors over which medium best imitates reality. When the relief began to figure increasingly in art-theory debates around 1800, it was referred to as an intermediate medium among the arts. In the zone between the second and third dimension, however, it remained a primarily sculptural endeavour.

As time went on, a new artistic interest in overcoming the traditional boundaries between the mediums took hold. Painters made sculptures; sculptors preoccupied themselves with painting. In that context, the relief became a laboratory for experimentation with new forms, materials and techniques. Reliefs were no longer made primarily of the classical materials—that is, stone, clay, plaster or bronze. Artists began using everyday and found objects to open surfaces out into the third dimension. Whether glued or nailed, whether made with natural sponges or a soup ladle, the relief took on entirely new manifestations. Its significance for society grew with the cataclysmic changes of the early twentieth century: the relief became a place of utopias and a mirror of the departure for a new world.

The exhibition explores the tremendous scope of the relief between 1800 and 1970 in thirteen sections, some spanning the entire period, others zooming in on shorter phases. Each in its own way, the sections examine the unique possibilities and limitations of relief art above and beyond historical development lines and conventional stylistic categories.

Sculptural Narration

Reliefs are encountered in a wide range of spatial and thematic contexts: on and in public buildings, on monuments and at burial sites. In these functions they often recall historical events or serve as universal symbols. They can appear as individual works or as series made up of several segments.

Owing to their even, shallow elevation or recession vis-à-vis the support plate, the works by Bertel Thorvaldsen and Hermann Blumenthal on view here convey a calm sense of homogeneity. In the works by Jules Dalou and Christian Daniel Rauch, on the other hand, individual figures stand out strongly from the surface. The degree of modelling and striving towards the light corresponds to the figure's relative thematic significance. The deliberate arrangement of the elements on the respective spatial plane is typical for the means by which a relief can tell a story in images.

Polychrome Reliefs

Already the artists of antiquity painted their sculptures and reliefs to reinforce their three-dimensionality and heighten their illusionism. In the nineteenth century, this long-forgotten practice increasingly caught the attention of archaeologists. The scholarly-scientific preoccupation with the subject in turn prompted contemporary artists to colour their reliefs as well. They had various means at their disposal: from the classical application of paint to the use of different-coloured materials to the targeted colouring of the material. About half of the reliefs on display in this section were carried out by artists like Arnold Böcklin, Maurice Denis and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner—that is, artists otherwise at home in the painting medium, for whom the vibrant colouring of their sculptural works would therefore have seemed natural. Also featured here are works by sculptors such as Adolf von Hildebrand, Artur Volkmann and Albert Marque, who availed themselves of a reductive colour spectrum or worked with the natural colouration of the chosen material.

The Parthenon Reliefs and Their Echo

More than 100 equestrian figures worked in low relief joined to form the depiction of a procession 160 metres in length. From the fifth century BC onwards, they graced all four sides of the Parthenon temple on the Athenian Acropolis. In the early nineteenth century, substantial sections of this sculptural decoration found their way to London by highly questionable routes; they have been in the British Museum since 1816.

From that moment onwards, the Parthenon was considered the quintessential symbol of classical Greek civilization and culture. In view of its characteristic formal qualities, it also came to serve artists as a model. The extremely shallow depth of the relief, the sophisticated staggering of its figures, the omission of any illusion of depth in favour of the base line as a strict visual reference—these attributes resounded through time

like echoes of the Parthenon. Depending on the possibilities available to them, artists studied the reliefs in the original or, frequently, in plaster casts, reproductions and photos. As is highlighted by the works of Johann Gottfried Schadow, Edgar Degas and Hermann Blumenthal here on view, their approaches varied immensely, the spectrum ranging from the faithful copy to the slight variation to the free quotation.

Approximating Nature

An interplay of elevations and depressions, the artistic relief is reminiscent of the earth's surface with its highlands and lowlands. So it is hardly surprising that artists have repeatedly turned to the relief as a medium for capturing their impressions of their surroundings in a wide variety of ways, and thus for creating artificial images of nature. The artists gathered in this room approached the theme of landscape by way of the rigorous structuring of surfaces, the use of natural materials such as sand and sponges, or the incorporation of steep perspectives. In their hands, the relief became a medium for artistic re-creations of natural spaces that invite us to immerse ourselves in worlds as vastly different as the forest and the ocean floor.

Optical Illusion in the Relief

Already sculptural or still planar? Already relief or still painting? At the transition from the second dimension to the third, relief depictions sometimes put our powers of perception to the test. As far back as the Early Modern age, painters and sculptors engaged in the competition between the arts, the so-called *paragone*, vying to achieve the better imitation of nature and representation of corporality. The most characteristic example of this tradition is Philipp Otto Runge's stone-coloured roundelay of putti, in which he used the means of painting to create a seemingly haptic relief. Deceptively real-looking still lifes (*trompe-l'œil*s) likewise lend themselves to the illusionistic depiction of all kinds of materials. And already in antiquity, the curtain motif—pictured in our exhibition by Gerhard Richter—was the quintessence of consummate deception in the contest between artistic mediums. The quest for the most skilful optical illusion has again and again prompted artists to explore the possibilities offered by the relief. In the resulting works, the sensory stimulus lures us to touch, to verify the visual impression with our fingertips, but also to reflect on our visual reception of the artworks.

Faces in Relief

From eyebrows to chin crease: protrusions and recessions shape the appearance and facial expression of every individual. Human beings have always wanted to preserve their countenances for eternity. The modelling of the face in three-dimensional but nevertheless surface-bound manner is accordingly one of the most

traditional artistic exercises. Since antiquity, particularly the profile view has been the established form for portraits in relief, and to this day it is the standard depiction mode for small-scale sculptural plaquettes, medals and coins. Artists such as Käthe Kollwitz and Pablo Picasso, on the other hand, liberated themselves from the confinement of that rigorous view from the side. Instead they adopted the hollow form of the mask, which demands to be viewed from the front, and tested it as a medium for representing emotions. Alberto Giacometti and Constantin Brancusi, for their part, employed incisions and hatching to sketch the faces of their sculptures, while Eugène Leroy used a thick colour paste to form his self-portrait on the surface of the canvas. From the medal to the “material picture”, the multifarious artistic possibilities offered by the relief prove to be a productive experimental laboratory for capturing faces in their uniqueness.

Penetrating Space, Embracing Space

Mass, volume, weight and self-contained form were long considered the chief attributes of sculptures and three-dimensional works. This conception would change fundamentally in the early decades of the twentieth century. Now artists increasingly incorporated space into the composition. The relief can extend beyond the support surface in all directions. In some cases, cut-out sections and voids grant a view of what is behind, thus enhancing the two-dimensional work through the introduction of an additional plane. Elsewhere, dynamic constructions protrude so far from the surface that they embrace the space in front of them and enclose it within themselves, as in the works of Antoine Pevsner and Lee Bontecou. At the same time, the nature of real space lies beyond the sphere of artistic influence. Properties such as the colour of the wall are subject to chance but contribute significantly to determining the work’s appearance. Omissions and volumes complement one another in reliefs. By moving in front of the work, the viewer experiences what is perceived as negative form and what as positive in the interplay between the two.

Penetrating Space, Embracing Space

The reliefs on display here once again embark on the interplay between volume and void, positive form and negative form. The freestanding sculptures by Naum Gabo and Hans Arp introduce yet another aspect. In them, the hollow forms at the centre and the surrounding elements are in almost perfectly balanced relationship. They no longer owe their relief quality to any direct reference to the wall, but to the planar inner form, which in turn corresponds to the expanse of the space.

The small-scale work by Hermann Glöckner—an exponent of classical modernism who was late to receive recognition—forms an antithesis to the greatest possible opening and expansion of the works into space. By overpainting the glued-on strips

of tissue-paper, he incorporated the three-dimensional elements into the surface of the picture support, forcing what had originally been a relief back into self-contained two-dimensionality.

Structure and All-Over

Evenly structured surfaces, serially arranged everyday objects, colouration reduced to the point of monochromy—these are the attributes characterizing many of the works in this room. As we contemplate the reliefs by Piero Manzoni, Adolf Luther, Peter Roehr, Jan Schoonhoven and others, we often discover the finely tuned interaction between nuanced spatial qualities and the subtle play of light only on closer inspection. Particularly artists of the 1950s and '60s explored the impact of reductive colouration and material—frequently in the form of repeating patterns and shapes—on the viewers' perception.

In our mind's eye, the structures of these works can continue seamlessly onto the surface of the wall. Reflections and the incidence of the light can moreover bring about expansion into the third dimension. Object, wall and space thus engage in intense interrelationship. In his colourful Eggboard, Hans Arp had already conceptualized the idea of an “all-over”—that is, a structure lacking a main motif and spreading across the entire surface—back in the 1920s. The Bauhaus wallpapers of the same period also made an important early contribution to the discussion of the aesthetic impact of structured wall surfaces.

Designs of the World

The early twentieth century was shaped by fundamental transformations encompassing all areas of society. Groundbreaking scientific developments, massive industrialization and technical progress posed new challenges for humankind. In many places, the outbreak of World War I in 1914 led to the collapse of political systems. Throughout Europe, artists now sought to participate in the shaping of a new society—or critically question the existing one—by way of their art. Across national boundaries, they turned to the relief, which played as important a role in the works of the Russian Constructivists Vladimir Tatlin and Ivan Puni as in those coming out of the Bauhaus in Germany and the Dada movement around Hans Arp, Christian Schad and Kurt Schwitters. What they had in common was the departure from representationalism through the employment of geometric elements. Human beings lived in a new reality of progress, technology and the machine, and their world was to be constituted accordingly. Many artists thus worked with found materials, combining them in object assemblages. Relief art and painting engaged in productive interchange. Reliefs had painted surfaces; paintings incorporated relief-like structures or glued-on objects.

Monumental Tasks

Following the horrendous destruction brought about by World War II, the reconstruction of buildings and cities got underway all over Europe. These projects usually went hand in hand with locally or regionally funded commissions for art in and on architecture. Thanks to the role it played in this context, the relief experienced a substantial boom in post-war modernism. Germany's division among four occupying powers created an exceptional situation. The Allies initially set about trying to influence the population—including the artists—with various measures such as denazification and re-education. In England, one of the tasks of the British Council was to link this policy with culture, for example in the form of major exhibitions. To this end, it propagated artists like Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. All three had already tended towards abstraction in the 1920s. That made them representatives of both the pre-war modernism vilified by the Nazis and post-war contemporary art. Through their participation in the first documenta exhibitions they made a perceivable mark on the German Democratic Republican art scene. In conception and execution alike, monumental wall reliefs present challenges of their own. Abrupt shifts between dimensions and materials demand to be taken into account. Place-specific conditions are another major factor, as we see in this room in the preliminary versions and large-scale photos of finished works.

Contained Forms

Since time immemorial, the frame has served to protect an artwork as well as to give it an artistically appropriate setting. Yet it also fulfils a function with regard to content: it creates a space for the pictorial field while at the same time setting its boundaries to the outside: it defines the work's interior and exterior and thus makes the artwork an autonomous entity. Whether or not the frame belongs to the work or the surrounding space, for example as an architectural setting, differs from one case to the next. In this room, we show four examples to illustrate an aspect peculiar to the relief: the motif field and what envelops it can be made of the same material—here wood, lead and plaster. A part of its conception and realization from the very start, the frame is thus clearly an essential element of the work.

Polyviewability

In the early twentieth century, the relief underwent an expansion. Three-dimensional works began to take on the artistic qualities of the relief. For example, artists made freestanding works that linked attributes of sculpture in the round with the surface-emphasizing perspective actually reserved for the relief. Cubism was the most important catalyst for this development. It broke up form and pictorial space and depicted objects or figures from various perspectives at once. Volumes became

planes. In sculpture, this effect was achieved through the interpenetration and interlocking of forms. The viewer was now called upon to adopt different vantage points and then unite the multifarious sensory perceptions in a single overall impression. Artists such as Alexander Archipenko, Henri Laurens and Jacques Lipchitz played with the relief-like flattening of the three-dimensional in their works, thus forging a link to Cubist painting, represented in this room in works by Pablo Picasso.