

# JACQUES LIPCHITZ

## his life in sculpture

through September 12

The rare opportunity of seeing and hearing an artist discuss his works is offered by the Museum's current exhibition of the sculpture of Jacques Lipchitz. A charming and articulate raconteur, Lipchitz has cooperated in a series of interviews, filmed by television producer Bruce Bassett, which have been incorporated into a special educational installation that makes use of the most up-to-date audiovisual techniques. Throughout the show, the works of art are accompanied by Mr. Lipchitz's own words, telling the story behind their creation, their place in the evolution of his style, and the ideas that inspired them. This material provides insight into Lipchitz's career, which spans the twentieth century, and into his aesthetic aspirations.

Most of the commentary presented in the show is included in *My Life in Sculpture* (The Viking Press, 1972), an autobiography by Lipchitz with Harvard H. Arnason, art historian and guest curator of the exhibition. The following passages adapted from the book give the flavor of Lipchitz's candid analysis of his life and sculpture.

**The period during the First World War was a very exciting time in Paris, with artists, philosophers, and poets continually discussing and arguing about the work with which they were involved.** Although I myself am little concerned with abstract theory, I certainly do think of cubism as a form of emancipation essentially different from artistic movements that had preceded it. Thus, impressionism, while it was a revolutionary technique, was still an essentially naturalistic movement concerned with a precise examination of the nature of light and the effect of changing lights on representational scenes and objects. Cubism did add a new dimension to painting and sculpture, a dimension that changed our way of looking at nature and the work of art. This fact, which is now, in the 1970s, accepted as a commonplace, was then a tremendous revelation to me and to the others who participated in cubism.

I am frequently asked about the relationship of my cubist sculpture to the cubist paintings of Picasso, Braque, Gris, and others. Certainly I was influenced in my ideas by cubist painting which had preceded me, particularly by that of Picasso. When artists are living and working as closely together as we were in those years, they are all obviously influenced in some degree by one another; they all derive motifs from one another. I remember one day when Juan Gris told me about a bunch of grapes he had seen in a painting by Picasso. The next day these grapes appeared in a painting by Gris, this time in a bowl; and the day after, the bowl appeared in a painting by Picasso. This was not simply imitation; we were all working with a common language and exploring the vocabulary of that language together. But I must reiterate that

the ideas of cubist sculpture were essentially different from those of cubist paintings, in some ways simpler and more direct, since cubism lent itself so naturally to sculptural construction.

**It is natural that we should have been interested in machines, not only because we were seeking in our painting and sculpture something of the clarity and precision of machine forms but because this was a moment in history when the machine loomed very large in our consciousness.** It was the beginning of modern technology and much of modern industrial expansion. I was never interested, like the futurists, in machine forms as symbols of speed and power, but rather as models for a kind of clarity and order. This was also the approach of Léger in his machine paintings. We tended to angularity of design not only as a consequence of the machine aesthetic but as a reaction against the soft, curvilinear emphases of art nouveau.

I remember in 1915 when I was deeply involved in cubist sculpture but was still in many ways not certain of what I was doing, I had a visit from the writer Jules Romains, and he asked me what I was trying to do. I answered, "I would like to make an art as pure as a crystal." And he answered in a slightly mocking way, "What do you know about crystals?" At first I was upset by this remark and his attitude, but then, as I began to think about it, I realized that I knew nothing about crystals except that they were a form of inorganic life and that this was not what I wanted to make. In my cubist sculpture I always wanted to retain the sense of *organic* life, of humanity. I think that Romains wanted only to warn me as a young artist that my thinking was too simple, and his warning worked.

**By the early 1920s I knew that I needed to move beyond the simple cubist vocabulary I had learned and to find a new content, a new personal expression. Abstraction was never enough for me.**

This was not a conscious program of changing from one thing to another. I did not deliberately set out to develop a new subject matter. I was, in fact, strongly against what I consider the excesses of fantastic subject that the surrealists were beginning to

explore. To me, fantasy has a particular and somewhat disagreeable connotation, that of uncontrolled Freudian experience. I oppose to it what I think of as imagination or content, which I was seeking and have continued to seek, but imagination with a human base and the control of my hard-earned formal vocabulary. I recognize that there is an element of surrealist expression in the art of many different cultures. Even so traditional a work as the Venus de Milo is, in fact, greatly distorted in terms of human proportions, and could be called surreal. This is even truer of the highly elongated Romanesque sculptures; we could argue that a table, which is made out of a wood tree trunk but changed out of all recognition, is a surrealist object.

I have even experimented with a kind of semi-automatism. I remember an assistant of mine, Isadore Grossman, who was also attending school and who reported that a professor of his had dropped a lump of clay on the floor and then, picking it up, said, "That's a Lipchitz." This intrigued me to the point where I started taking melting pieces of wax, cooling them in a basin of cold water, and then molding them blindly with my hands to see what happened. Sometimes some extremely interesting images emerged, but the crucial point was that I then had to take these first suggestions and, with the knowledge and control I possessed, transform them into a work of sculpture.

But I still go back to this question of a personal vocabulary which the artist must learn, which must become an innate part of him, whether he realizes it or not, and which then controls or directs everything that he does. I never deserted the subject, even in my most abstract, cubist sculptures, because I have always believed that there must be communication between the artist and the spectator. The spectator must in the last analysis be able to see the human image in the sculpture, to be able – even though it requires a long and painful process of education such

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*Overleaf: Jacques Lipchitz and an assistant in his studio at Hastings-on-Hudson, a few miles up the Hudson River from New York City. It was built after his New York studio was destroyed by fire in 1952. Photograph: George Moffett – Lensgroup*





as the artist had to go through in making the piece – to come to an understanding, a meeting of the minds.

**Although I had been collecting African sculpture ( whenever I had any money ) ever since I first came to Paris, there are few of my works in which I feel a definite influence from Negro art.** I have never believed that African primitive art had much real influence in the development of cubism. Certainly Picasso, Braque, and others, including myself, saw and were intrigued by examples of primitive art in the Ethnological Museum; and Picasso and Braque, particularly in their protocubist paintings, used some details from primitive art, as in the masklike heads in the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*. But the greatest source for cubism was unquestionably in the late works of Cézanne; you can see immediately the relationship between these works and the first precubist paintings of Braque and Picasso.

My collection of objects from all periods in history is of immense importance to me, even if some of the pieces in it are not so important, so significant in themselves; but it is like a university to me. I have learned something from every work, something that has helped me to understand certain things about sculpture in general and about my own sculpture in particular. It is a sculptor's collection, and this is why I hope it can be kept together. I think that future generations of artists and art students can learn about themselves and their own work by studying it.

When I speak of my learning from the collection, I do not, of course, mean taking subjects or even motifs. Rather, what I have learned by constantly handling these objects and looking at them, living with them, are such things as forms, techniques, the ways in which an ancient or primitive sculptor-artist approached his material.

For instance, I am continually fascinated by the ways that ancient and primitive peoples experimented with bronze; how frequently daring and imaginative they could be in their handling of the material, much more so than many bronze sculptors of Renaissance and modern times. I have been a bronze worker now for over sixty years, constantly in foundries, since bronze is a material I love, and I think I have seen and

myself experimented with almost everything that can be done in bronze. Yet, when I say this, I realize that I am constantly finding new possibilities. I have tried other metals, such as aluminum, but bronze is my first and continuing love because it is so alive, so direct, warm, and fluid. Each piece has my fingerprints all over it.

**One of the greatest tragedies of my life was the burning of my New York studio in 1952.** It was on a Saturday and I was in Hastings with two visitors when, about seven o'clock, there was a call from the New York police department saying that my studio had burned and that I had better come at once to see what could be saved. This was the fifth of January, 1952. One of my visitors drove me to New York but we could not go into the building that evening because it was too dangerous, so we returned early the next morning and it was horrible; the studio was practically nothing except a hole in the ground. Almost everything in the studio had burned away, and some parts of plaster that had not burned were demolished. I had some bronzes stored in adjoining rooms and these, fortunately, were untouched, but the studio no longer existed. Papers and paintings, including a Courbet I had recently bought, had been thrown out onto a balcony by the firemen. My pieces from my collection, some of my best African pieces that had not yet been unpacked, were destroyed along with a portfolio of drawings, such things as three Cézannes, a Goya ink drawing, and others by Poussin and Gris. My first reaction was that of horror, as though my entire life, all my children, had been destroyed, but then this changed to a kind of fury, a passionate need to begin working again to recover all the lost years.

**I do not come to my studio and wait for inspiration, for angels to speak to me and tell me what to do.** Every day I begin to work immediately, real and important work, work that involves things and learning and teaching other people. If the result is successful it is not through any accident but through the experience of a long life of thought, experiment, and continual hard work.