CHAPTER - XIII
Mava Sculpture:

During the Central American tour, Huxley could see a great deal of Maya sculpture. The Mayas\(^1\), he says, with only stone implements, were as highly accomplished as the best equipped statuaries of the age of steel. He wonders how, using neolithic tools, the Maya sculptors could have carved their twenty-foot monoliths as a Chinese craftsman might a piece of ivory.\(^2\)

Distortion of Figures:

Speaking of Mayan sculpture, Huxley remarks that most of the figures carved by American Indians tend to be distorted in the same fashion, being stumpy, short-limbed, steep-featured. While the figures of primitive sculpture are, generally, often stumpy, the head—the focus of interest—being disproportionately enlarged, the Guatemalan\(^3\) distortion was perhaps dictated by an ancient

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1. Mayas, ancient race of Central American Indians. Theirs was the first highly developed culture in Central America.
3. Guatemala, Central American republic. Its original inhabitants, the Mayas, were conquered in 1525 by the Spaniards.
artistic tradition, which distorted human figures to fit them into the square frame-work of hieroglyphs. In order that it may fill a rectangular frame, a head must be flattened above and below, and steepened fore and aft, as if it had gone "through the cotton-bale-making machine." 1

Sculpture and Spotlights:

Today, Huxley observes, magical effects can be produced by turning the spot-lights on to sculptured stone. Fuseli 2 could only see the statues on Monte Cavallo by the light of the setting sun, or when illuminated by lightning flashes at midnight. Today we can illuminate our statues from whatever angle we choose, and with practically any desired degree of intensity. Sculpture, in consequence, has revealed fresh meanings and unsuspected beauties.

It follows that the past is not something fixed and unalterable 3. Today, thanks to recent advances in the technology of lighting, we have been able not only to re-interpret the great sculptures of the past, but actually

2. Johann Heinrich Fuselli (1741-1825), Swiss artist and writer. He studied art in Italy and then settled in London, where he was known by the name of Henry Fuseli; famous for his dramatic drawings; a friend of Blake.
succeeded in altering their physical appearance. Greek statues, when thus illuminated, bear almost no resemblance to the Greek statues seen by art critics in the past. The aim of the classical artist was to impart order to the chaos of experience, to present a comprehensible, rational picture of reality in which all the parts are clearly seen and coherently related. To us this ideal of rational orderliness makes no appeal, and we use all the means in our power to make them look like something which they are not, and were never meant to be. So, from a work whose whole point is its unity of conception, we select a single feature on which to focus our spotlight. By such means we can de-classicize the severest classic. "A Pheidias\(^1\) becomes a piece of Gothic expressionism, a Praxiteles\(^2\) is turned into a fascinating surrealist object." This may be bad art history, Huxley grimly comments, but it is certainly enormous fun!\(^3\)

*Mortuary Sculpture:*

The skeleton invariably accompanied a Baroque tomb, says Huxley. It had been invisible in the happy

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days of pagan art, and remained invisible, in spite of Christianity, for most of the centuries that followed. No skulls adorn the medieval tombs, no bones, no grisly repears.

The middle of the sixteenth century, however, saw a change. The effigy, once asleep on a bed, no longer sleeps; and at its base, below the Latin inscription, there is often a little skull, in bone-white marble, to remind us of what we ourselves will soon be, "of what the original of the figure has already become."

In the course of time, these miniatures become full-blown death-sized replicas. The skull is no longer adequate as a memento mori; there must be the entire skeleton.

Bernini's Skeletons:

The most grandiose of these reminders of our mortality are the mighty skeletons which Bernini\(^1\) made for the tombs of Urban VIII\(^2\) and Alexander\(^3\) in St. Peter's. The emphasis here is not on heaven, hell and purgatory, but on physical dissolution and the grave.

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1. Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), Italian architect and sculptor.
Bernini's tombs, Huxley observes, are by no means unique. The Roman churches are full of cautionary skeletons. In one church there is a small monument commemorating a lawyer. Below his bust there is a long catalogue, in Latin, of the dead man's claims upon the attention of posterity. But the bust is being held in an almost amorous embrace by a great skeleton in high relief!

**Intentions:**

Looking at these tombs, Huxley muses on the possible intentions of the kinsmen of the departed. All these baroque tombs, he concludes, were doctrinally sound. The glories of one's distinguished forbears must be expensively celebrated; but the monuments must also emphatically state the Christian theme of the transience of earthly greatness and the vanity of human wishes. The men of the Baroque, Huxley sarcastically comments, liked an art that harps on death and corruption, and were neither better nor worse than we who are reticent about such things.

In the eighteenth century, these gruesome images are replaced by broken columns, extinguished torches, weeping angels and muses. Even in the nineteenth century, which was an age of stylistic revivals, there is no return to the Baroque's mortuary fashions. During the last two centuries, death has been handled in literature oftener
than in painting or sculpture.  

Greek Influence on Buddhist Sculpture:

At Taxila\(^2\), Huxley found, round the base of the stupa\(^3\) and in niches in the cloisters, a quantity of sculpture in stone, stucco and clay, intact and in position; and he also found the Greek influence evident in this work of the third century A.D. The Hellenistic\(^4\) leaven, he thinks, must have been active for centuries, until many barbarian invasions had quite eradicated the Greek influence.

The quality of the work at Taxila, says Huxley, is not particularly high; far finer carving has been found elsewhere in North-Western India. At the Peshawar Museum, Huxley was specially struck by some scenes from the life of the Buddha represented in high relief on a series of small stone panels; and he saw in them the vigour and dramatic force, with much of the beauty of composition characteristic of Italian Gothic sculpture.\(^5\)

1. 'Variations on a Baroque Tomb': Themes and Variations; Chatto & Windus, 1954; pp.159-68.
2. Taxila, an ancient seat of Buddhist learning in North-Western India.
3. Stupa, a Buddhist sacred monumental structure, commemorating some event or marking some spot.
4. Hellenistic, term applied to art produced under Greek influence in Alexandria and Asia Minor from the third century B.C.
Gandharan Art:

Huxley's erudite eye was right; for what he saw at Taxila and Peshawar were specimens of Gandharan art. According to the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-Tsang, who visited the Buddhist sites of India in the early seventh century A.D., the kingdom of Gandhāra occupied what we now know as the Peshawar Valley, with some hilly districts to the north and extending on the east to the Indus River. Gandhāra was conquered by Alexander the Great in 327-26 B.C. But though it was under Greek rule for only about twenty years, it was responsible for producing a kind of art in which the meeting of East and West is dramatically evidenced. From Gandhāra the influence of what were originally Hellenistic styles of drapery and figuration spread throughout the Far East, transforming the symbolic representation of the Buddha into his now familiar human representation.1