

The Florentine Revival of Late Nineteenth-Century French Sculpture Perspectives from the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (1861-81)

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to show how French sculpture briefly resumed the impasse in which it was stuck in the middle of the nineteenth century thanks to the reliance on fifteenth-century Florentine sculpture. An analysis of the commentaries made by the critics of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, which was the first journal to assess and promote neo-Florentine sculptors in the 1860s and 1870s, allows to better grasp the evolution and failure of the trend, as well as the various issues that were at stake, such as originality and naturalism in sculpture. This revival provided French art with a new generation of successful sculptors and inspiring works that eventually lead to the unprecedented – and short-lived – triumph of sculpture at the Exposition Universelle of 1878.

Keywords Nineteenth-century sculpture. Florence. Salon. Gazette des Beaux-Arts. Donatello. Giambologna. Paul Dubois. Antonin Mercié. Alexandre Falguière. Paul Mantz. Tradition. Revival. Neo-Florentine. Renaissance. Quattrocento.

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1 Introduction

In 1846, Charles Baudelaire went to the Paris Salon and wrote a now famous review entitled “Why sculpture is boring”, in which he argued that sculpture was vague and elusive, and lacked the authority of painting and architecture (Baudelaire 1846, 115-19). But a few years later, in 1859, he dedicated his poem *The Mask* to the French sculptor Ernest Christophe, which first verse is the following:

Contemplons ce trésor de grâces
florentines ;
Dans l’ondulation de ce corps musculeux

L’Élégance et la Force abondent, sœurs
divines.

Let us gaze at this gem of Florentine
beauty;
In the undulation of this brawny body
Those divine sisters, Gracefulness and
Strength, abound. (Baudelaire 1859)

This poem alluded to the work *The Human Comedy*, which represents a woman holding a mask with a joyful expression before her desperate face



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[fig. 1].¹ By inviting the reader to “gaze at this gem of Florentine beauty”, Baudelaire brings together the forms of Christophe’s statue with the works of Florentine Renaissance sculptors. Therefore, this statue, which no longer appears “boring” to Baudelaire, seems to have been saved through the reference to an artistic style from the past.

The aim of this paper is to show how French sculpture briefly resumed the impasse in which it was stuck in the middle of the nineteenth century thanks to the reliance on fifteenth-century Florentine sculpture. Analyzing the commentaries written during the 1860s and 1870s by the critics of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, which was the first jour-

nal to assess and promote neo-Florentine sculptors – as they labelled them –, will allow to better understand the evolution of the trend and the various issues at stake. These sculptors did not receive a lot of attention yet, especially compared to the neo-gothic and neo-baroque trends that more or less circumscribe the Florentine phenomenon,² and only few studies are entirely devoted to them.³ The instability of the movement and the quick re-conversion of most neo-Florentine sculptors might explain the lack of investigation despite the fact that it contributed to the unprecedented triumph of sculpture at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1878.

2 The Renewed Interest in Florentine Sculpture at the End of the Nineteenth Century

Generally speaking, the nineteenth century was turned towards history and devoted a nostalgic cult to the past. The term and notion of ‘Renaissance’ as a cultural and political phenomenon were forged in a determined manner at that time by historians,⁴ and French painters and architects eagerly looked at Italian Quattrocento for further models to refer to.⁵ In essays and discussions, a particular emphasis was put on Florence (Taubert 2015), and the city became a centre of attraction for the residents of the French Academy in Rome (Le Normand-Romain 1986, 56). What appears to be a global reconsideration of Florentine artists of the Quattrocento was undertaken more particularly in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, founded by Charles Blanc in 1859, in which several articles about the great sculptors of that time were published on a regular basis in the 1860s and 70s.⁶ Moreover, from a practical point of view, the small Florentine-inspired statuary was brought up to date by the great dynasties of founders (Rionnet 2003; 2016, 12-17). In this context, several French sculptors drew their attention to Florentine art and imbued their works with it, as Baudelaire had noticed with Ernest Christophe. It is quite appealing to notice that, for the French critics of the *Ga-*

zette des Beaux-Arts, Italian Florentine sculpture of the Quattrocento was considered at that time to be a ‘good’ style of the past, as opposed to the Italian Baroque sculpture of the Seicento that was considered to be ‘bad’:

L’Italie cherche en ce moment à renaître à la vie artistique ; mais les artistes reprennent la tradition de leur pays dans sa période de décadence, au lieu de revenir aux principes de l’école dans son mouvement ascendant : il se font les continuateurs de Bernin plutôt que de Donatello.

At the moment Italy is trying to revive artistic life, but the artists are returning to the tradition of their country in its period of decadence, instead of returning to the principles of the school in its upward movement: they are following in the footsteps of Bernini rather than Donatello. (Ménard 1871, 439)

In the eye of those critics, French sculptors therefore made the ‘right’ choice by looking at fifteenth-century Florentine sculpture, embodied by Donatello, and by neglecting seventeenth-century

1 Baudelaire saw a plaster statuette of *The Human Comedy* in Christophe’s workshop in 1858. The statuette was then exhibited at the 1859 Salon. On Baudelaire and Christophe, see Guégan 2003.

2 See for example the extended studies by Lapaire 2017 and Peigné 2005; 2012.

3 Moreover, none of the sculptors addressed in this paper has been the subject of a monographic study. On neo-Florentine sculptors, see Lombardi 1995; 2012; 2018; Absalon 2007.

4 For a short introduction on this vast topic and further bibliography to be referred to, see Karge 2015.

5 The phenomenon in French painting concerns above all Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and his students. On their interest for Italian painters of the fifteenth century, see Ternois 1993; Montchal 2010. On the importance of Italian Renaissance in nineteenth-century French architecture, see Garric 2004; Parizet 2015; and for a more nuanced look, Levine 2018.

6 See Perkins 1868a; 1868b; de Rayssac 1874; Mantz 1875; Guillaume 1876.



Figure 1 Ernest Christophe, *The Human Comedy*. 1876. Marble, 245 × 85 × 72 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.
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Figure 2 Paul Dubois, *Narcissus*. 1867. Marble, 185.2 × 67 × 62 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.
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roman sculpture, represented by Bernini. The first appreciations for this growing *fiorentinità* of certain contemporary works appeared precisely in

the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, and concerned above all Paul Dubois.

3 Paul Dubois, Distinction, and the Revival of Florentine Forms

Paul Dubois was one of the first sculptors to shift interest from the Greek models, which largely prevailed in the art of statuary at the time, to the Florentine models. With his family's financial support, he went from 1859 to 1863 to Italy and undertook numerous trips to Florence, where he discovered with enthusiasm the works of painters and sculptors from the Quattrocento.⁷ His work *Narcissus* [fig. 2], exhibited at the Salon of 1863, was unanimously acclaimed and provided the sculptor with a second-medal class.⁸ In the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Paul Mantz applauded the "excellent sense of beautiful lines and great taste", the "pure, harmonious line", and the work's "most distinguished feeling" (Mantz 1863, 51-2).⁹ And he added: "sans reproduire l'antique, sans imiter la statuaire florentine, elle en a l'exquise saveur" (without reproducing the ancient, without imitating the Florentine statuary, it has the exquisite flavour of it. Mantz 1863, 52). Thus, the critic made a rather general connection with 'Florentine statuary', which was understood as a whole, and not identified through a single artist. The still discreet perception of this Florentine statuary in Dubois' work was clearly seen as something positive. The use of the formula "of a most distinguished feeling" employed by Mantz is crucial because the concept of 'distinction' will allow to better understand why the revival of a past tradition could have been the starting point of such a dazzling artistic renewal. In fact, the same year, Léon Lagrange specified what was to be understood by 'distinction' in art. He argued that:

Produire une œuvre distinguée, voilà pour nos peintres la grande affaire. [...] Pour qu'une beauté soit distinguée, il faut qu'une certaine fleur de nouveauté la signale à l'attention; il faut qu'un voile d'agrément l'enveloppe et lui prête un éclat séduisant; [...] notez que la distinction n'entraîne pas l'originalité. [...] Les romantiques d'avant 1830 cherchaient l'origina-

lité à tout prix. Nos éclectiques, corrigés, s'en tiennent à la distinction.

Producing a distinguished work, that's the big deal for our artists. [...] For a beauty to be distinguished, a certain flower of novelty must draw attention to it; a veil of approval must envelop it and confer it a seductive glow; [...] note that distinction does not lead to originality. [...] The Romantics before 1830 sought originality at all costs. Our eclectics, corrected, stick to distinction. (Lagrange 1861, 260-2)

We therefore understand that it was no longer necessary for artists to be 'original', a task that was becoming increasingly difficult, but that it was enough to grab attention through some form of novelty that could be taken from elsewhere. A few years later, in 1865, Paul Dubois exhibited a new work entitled *The Florentine Singer* [fig. 3], and Paul Mantz's commentary about it highlights the idea that this "flower of novelty" could indeed come from a forgotten past:

L'inquiétude du nouveau, cherché en dehors des voies académiques, est évidemment au premier rang des préoccupations de M. Paul Dubois. Or, on l'a dit il y a longtemps, quoi de plus nouveau que ce qui est oublié ? Une promenade en Italie est, sous ce rapport, plein de révélation. [...] M. Dubois a eu le bonheur de ne pas traverser l'ancienne école des beaux-arts; [...] il est entré en communion directe avec les maîtres, [...] aussi a-t-il pu étudier, sans parti pris, Donatello, Verrocchio et tous ces grands inventeurs de la seconde moitié du XVe siècle, qui ont mis, dans le bronze ou dans le marbre, une si farouche élégance, une émotion si éternellement humaine.

The anxiety of the newcomer, sought outside academic channels, is obviously at the forefront of Mr. Paul Dubois' concerns. Now, as was said a

⁷ Meaning Dubois operated 'outside' the circle of students whom had followed the usual course of instruction at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and won the Prix de Rome. On Paul Dubois, see Delahaye 1975; *La sculpture française au XIXe siècle* 1986, 60-6 ; *The Romantics to Rodin* 1980, 242-6.

⁸ Alongside the *St. John the Baptist* (1861) that Dubois presented the same year.

⁹ "Un si excellent sentiment des belles lignes et un si grand goût", "une ligne harmonieuse et pure", "d'un sentiment des plus distingués".



Figure 3 Paul Dubois, *Florentine Singer*. 1865. Silver-plated bronze, 155 × 58 × 58 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay), photo Michel Urtado

long time ago, what could be newer than what is forgotten? A walk in Italy is, in this respect, full of revelation. [...] Mr. Dubois was fortunate not to pass through the old Ecole des Beaux-Arts; [...] he entered into direct communion with the masters, [...] so he was able to study, without bias, Donatello, Verrocchio and all those great inventors of the second half of the fifteenth century, who transferred into bronze or marble such a fierce elegance, such an eternally human emotion. (Mantz 1865, 34)

It is quite clear that the novelty was provided by the Florentine tradition, and that Paul Mantz's commentary is once again eloquent and encouraging. Knowing that sculpture was then generally perceived as 'boring', it is worth mentioning that such positive comments were rather rare at the time. The choice

of the subject – a Florentine singer – is also revealing, since Dubois obviously took advantage of the popularity of Florentine statuary among his contemporaries. The work was in fact awarded the medal of honor at the Salon of 1865 and even inspired a play, just like *The Mask* did with Baudelaire's poem: *Le Passant* by François Coppé, which was performed at the Odéon Theatre in 1869 (Banville 1866, 137-8; Pinget 2000, 40). It is also revealing that the novelty evoked in Mantz's commentary, based on an art of the past, was opposed to the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the academic art that prevailed at the time. This opposition actually frames the ambivalence embodied by neo-Florentine sculptors: they escaped the mold of the French academic tradition by diving into that of another tradition, that was both chronologically and geographically distant.

4 Rejecting the French Academic Tradition, Welcoming the Florentine Tradition

This idea was constantly put forward by the authors of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. For example, Paul Mantz wrote that:

Lorsqu'on étudie la sculpture française dans son ensemble, on reconnaît que, sans mettre en lumière des inventeurs bien hardis, elle est chercheuse et savante. Elle réussit à merveille le morceau; dans les attitudes qu'elle donne à ses figures, elle fait à la vérité la part qui lui revient: notre école s'écarte de plus en plus des types consacrés auxquels elle a été condamnée si longtemps; l'idéal académique est renié.

When one studies French sculpture as a whole, one recognizes that, without highlighting any bold inventors, it is a researcher and a scholar. It succeeds marvelously [...]: our school is moving further and further away from the consecrated types to which it has been condemned for so long; the academic ideal has been rejected. (Mantz 1867, 344)

Mantz welcomed this 'liberation' of French sculpture, and he admitted that although French sculptors weren't creating anything original, they were nevertheless very successful, which echoes what has been seen about the concept of distinction. Five years later, Mantz continued with his idea:

Ce qui se passe depuis quelques années, chacun peut le voir. Il y a vingt ou trente ans, la sculpture ennuyeuse ne révoltait personne [...].

Cette période académique est achevée. D'audacieux artistes se sont hasardés jusqu'à Florence, et ils en ont rapporté cette conviction que le quinzième siècle n'est pas aussi gothique qu'on l'a voulu dire.

What has been going on for a few years now, everyone can see it. Twenty or thirty years ago, boring sculpture didn't revolt anyone [...]. This academic period is over. Daring artists ventured as far as Florence, and they brought back with them the conviction that the fifteenth century is not as gothic as it was meant to be. (Mantz 1872, 58)

The critic therefore pretends that the academic period was over due to neo-Florentine sculptors and, as a matter of fact, the Ecole des Beaux-Arts was not fond of the influence of the Italian Renaissance on young sculptors. In that regard, a commission of professors warned the young Antonin Mercié – a future neo-Florentine as we shall see – about a relief he sent from Rome in 1872, stating that his inclination towards the Renaissance masters might "sans lui donner plus d'individualité, l'éloigner du but que se propose la statuaire, c'est-à-dire la grandeur" (without giving him more individuality, distance him from the goal of statuary, that is greatness. Le Normand-Romain 1986, 56-7). In the 1870s though, more and more works were being compared to Florentine sculptures, and it became clear that artists deliberately referred to them in their quest for success. This was nota-

bly the case of Alexandre Falguière, who won the Prix de Rome in 1859.¹⁰ At the Salon of 1864, he earned a medal for his bronze *The Winner of the Cockfight* [fig. 4], whose resemblance to Giambologna's *Mercury* [fig. 5] was emphasized by René Menard in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*:

Certes, personne ne se plaindra de retrouver cette charmante statue, dont l'attitude rappelle vaguement le Mercure de Jean de Bologne, mais qui se distingue entre toutes par un vrai sentiment des chairs jeunes et des palpitations de la vie.

Certainly no one will complain about finding this charming statue, whose attitude vaguely reminds us of the *Mercury* of Giambologna, but which is distinguished above all by a true feeling of young flesh and the palpitations of life. (Ménard 1870, 63)

It must be noted that, this time, distinction was no longer provided by the reference to Florentine sculpture but rather by the 'naturalism' of the work, translated by an increased anatomical precision that was absent in academic statuary, which will be discussed below. At the Salon of 1872, Antonin Mercié, which also won a Prix de Rome, sent a piece that referred to Florentine statuary in an even more evident way: his *David* [fig. 6]. Not only did the work win a first-class medal, but it also brought Mercié the distinction of being the only artist to receive the Cross of the Legion of Honor while still a student at the French Academy in Rome.¹¹ It is in fact difficult not to think of Donatello's bronze *David* [fig. 7] before Mercié's work, as most of his contemporaries noted, including Paul Mantz who stated that:

Donatello est pour beaucoup dans l'invention de M. Mercié : des deux *David*, que garde le musée des Offices, le jeune artiste a surtout étudié l'exemplaire en bronze, celui où le petit héros foule du pied gauche la tête du géant vaincu. Ce détail, qui motive l'inflexion du corps, n'est pas le seul que M. Mercié ait emprunté au vieux maître [...] bien que le *David* ne soit point une création originale, il fait grand honneur à M. Mercié.

Donatello has a lot to do with Mr. Mercié's invention: of the two *David*'s, kept by the Galleria degli Uffizi, the young artist has above all studied the bronze copy, the one in which the little hero treads on the head of the defeated giant with his left foot. This detail, which motivates the inflection of the body, is not the only one that Mr. Mercié borrowed from the old master [...] although the *David* is not an original creation, it does great honor to Mr. Mercié. (Mantz 1872, 59)

This last sentence truly embodies the phenomenon brought up by neo-Florentine sculptors. It reveals that these artists were not totally original and did not invent new concepts because they relied on an artistic style of the past, which meant using well-known forms and inventions that had already been thought up by others, such as the marked *contraposto* made possible by the inflection of the leg resting on Goliath's head present in both Donatello's and Mercié's works. Therefore, they did not contribute to the progress of art, but were nonetheless appreciated because they brought back elements that had been forgotten.¹² This is why Mantz asserted that the *David* did a great honor to Mercié. The reference to the Florentine sculptural tradition of the fifteenth century created a revival that made it possible to depart from the academic models that were considered as too conventional. In this respect, Mantz emphasized another point in his criticism:

Dans son *David*, les reins, les cuisses, les jambes, sont étudiés de très-près sur le modèle vivant, la tête a le caractère d'un portrait.

In his *David*, the kidneys, thighs and legs are studied very closely on the live model, the head has the character of a portrait. (Mantz 1872, 59)

This revival thus involved references to well-known forms as well as – and perhaps above all – a strong interest in nature, which led to the development of naturalism in sculpture under the guise of a reference to the tradition of Florentine masters such as Donatello.

¹⁰ On Alexandre Falguière, see *The Romantics to Rodin* 1890, 255-64; Peigné 2012, 233-44; Corpataux 2012, 206-36.

¹¹ On Antonin Mercié, see *The Romantics to Rodin* 1980, 303-6; Vogt 1986; Peigné 2012, 359-68.

¹² The critics also did not seem to mind the slightly orientalized and decorative elements that Mercié added to his *David*, such as the turban, necklace and sheath.



Figure 4 Alexandre Falguière, *The Winner of the Cockfight*. 1864. Bronze, 164 × 100 × 82 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) photo Gérard Blot, Christian Jean



Figure 5 Giambologna, *Mercury*. 1580. Bronze, 180 × 100 × 40 cm. Florence, Museo del Bargello. Courtesy of Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali e per il turismo – Museo Nazionale del Bargello



Figure 6 Antonin Mercié, *David*. 1872. Bronze, 184.1 × 76.8 × 83.2 cm. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.
© RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay), photo Adrien Didierjean

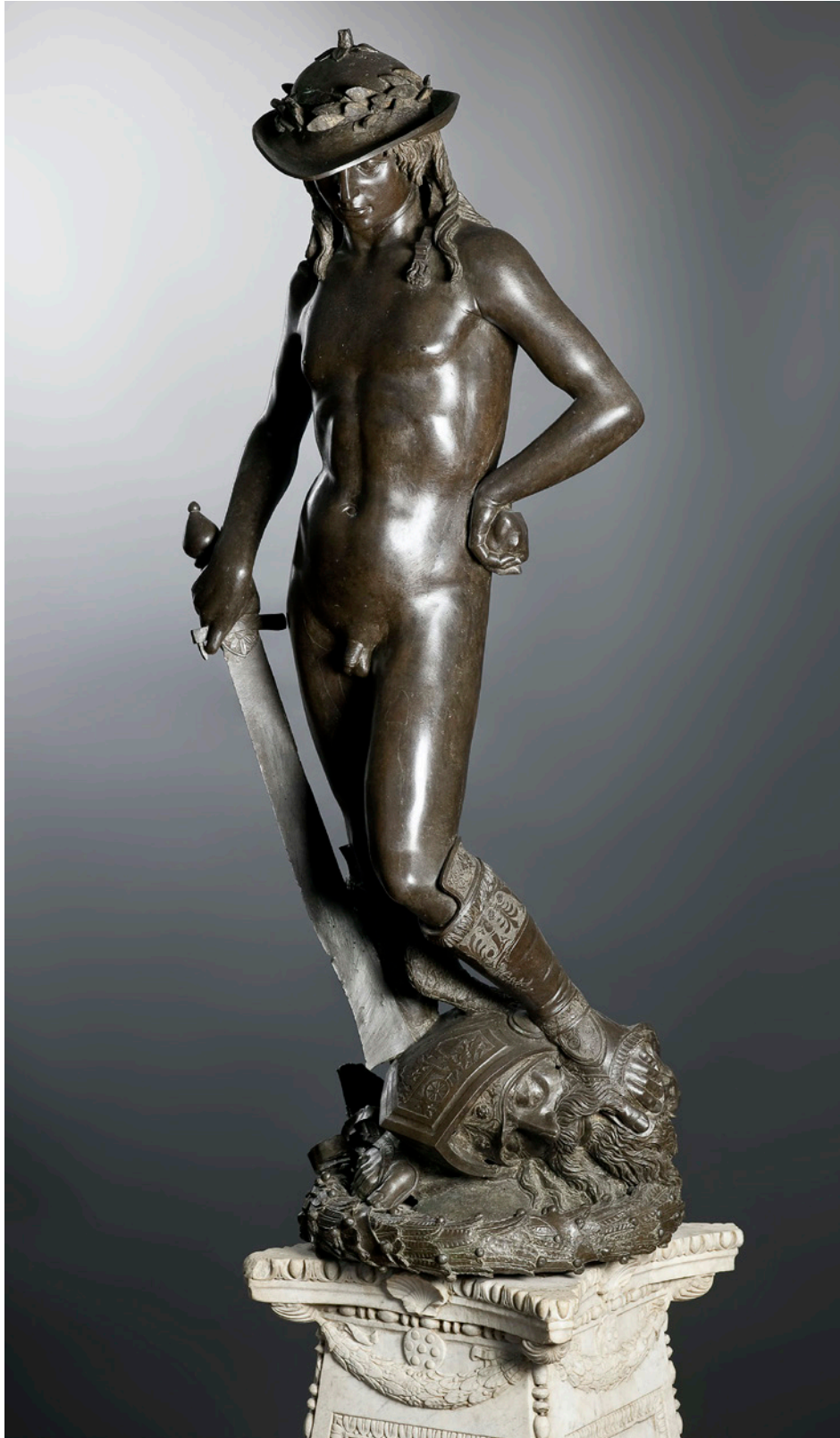


Figure 7 Donatello, *David*. 1440 c. Bronze, h. 158 cm. Florence, Museo del Bargello. Courtesy of Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali e per il turismo – Museo Nazionale del Bargello

5 *Fiorentinità* and Naturalism

Reading the articles of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, it seems obvious that the authors of the journal set the French academic tradition against naturalism in sculpture on the one hand, and associated on the other hand this new artistic trend with the interest of their sculptors in fifteenth-century Florentine tradition. The observation of nature at the expenses of French tradition can be clearly grasped in the writing of Paul Mantz in 1869:

Pas de respects serviles pour des traditions qui, mal comprises, sont devenues tyranniques et menteuses. Regardez d'un œil loyal la nature immortelle, empruntez-lui un peu de son éloquence, mêlez votre cœur à la grande âme mystérieuse, et si, dans vos entretiens avec l'éternelle donneuse de conseils, vous avez appris quelque chose, venez nous le dire franchement et tout haut, comme au temps où les artistes étaient des semeurs d'idées.

No slavish respect for traditions which, misunderstood, have become tyrannical and lying. Look at immortal nature with a loyal eye, borrow a little of her eloquence, mix your heart with the great mysterious soul, and if, in your talks with the eternal giver of advice, you have learned something, come and tell us frankly and out loud, as in the days when artists were sowers of ideas. (Mantz 1869, 23)

One year later, René Ménard emphasized this idea and made the parallel between the Florentines and

the precise rendering of the flesh even more obvious:

L'étude de la renaissance italienne semble absorber nos sculpteurs, et l'antiquité classique a moins d'adeptes qu'autrefois. En examinant nos statues, nous avons été séduit plus souvent par les frémissements de la vie et les délicatesses de l'épiderme que par le grand caractère de l'ensemble.

The study of the Italian Renaissance seems to absorb our sculptors, and classical antiquity has fewer followers than in the past. In examining our statues, we have been seduced more often by the thrill of life and the delicacy of the skin than by the great character of the whole. (Ménard 1870, 63, 71)

For nineteenth-century critics, Quattrocento Florentine sculpture embodied the new interest in the study of anatomy and the human body that was emerging in the art of statuary. This parallel reached its climax when the *fiorentinità* eventually became literally synonymous with naturalism under the pen of Charles Timbal when he wrote, about Gustave Doré's *Fate and Love*, that "les mains de la Parque sont galbées avec une maestria toute florentine" (the hands of the Fate are curved with a Florentine mastery, Timbal 1877, 544). By 'Florentine mastery', Timbal was of course referring to the remarkable precision with which the sculptor rendered the folds, joints and veins of the figure's hands.

6 The Triumph of Sculpture over Painting

At the same time, sculpture enjoyed a dazzling and unprecedented success in France, thanks in particular to the neo-Florentine sculptors whose works were constantly praised. It was even declared that sculpture had taken precedence over painting, which is truly exceptional. For the first time, in the 1877 issue of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, the first article of the Salon was devoted to sculpture, whereas it always used to come last, after painting (Timbal 1877). Moreover, this announced the hierarchical shift in the appreciation of these two techniques, since in this article Charles Timbal stated that:

Il n'est pas facile de nier que la sculpture ne prenne décidément le pas sur la peinture. C'est

un fait que plusieurs expositions ont démontré déjà. [...] Toute cette froideur et toute cette indifférence ont fait place à une faveur nouvelle, croissante, qui touche presque à l'engouement. [...] Oui, aujourd'hui un sculpteur est célèbre à l'égal presque d'un peintre.

It is not easy to deny that sculpture definitely takes precedence over painting. This is a fact that several exhibitions have already demonstrated. [...] All this coldness and indifference has given way to a new, growing favour, which almost appeals to enthusiasm. [...] Yes, today a sculptor is famous almost as much as a painter. (Timbal 1877, 529-30)

This statement is remarkable since sculpture has always been the unloved art of the crowds, and was now propelled to the forefront of the stage.¹³ It is all the more important as the following year, the *Exposition Universelle* took place in Paris and French sculpture was once again brought to the fore. At this occasion, Anatole de Montaiglon wrote:

On a remarqué depuis bien des Salons combien la moyenne de la sculpture était plus régulière et plus élevée que celle de la peinture [...]. Cette année la réunion des œuvres de quelques années permet mieux de porter un jugement d'ensemble [...]. La sculpture française est plus forte que la peinture; elle est de même au-dessus des autres écoles de sculpture, et sa primauté n'est pas en danger.

Since many Salons, it has been noticed how the average of sculpture is much more regular and higher than that of painting [...]. This year the gathering of works from several years ago makes it easier to express an overall judgement [...]. French sculpture is stronger than painting; it is likewise above other schools of sculpture, and its primacy is not in danger. (Montaiglon 1878a, 31)

However, let us not forget that those words were written during the *Exposition Universelle*, and that the French critics of the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* were of course complacent in their perception of their artists. In this respect, a curious phenomenon occurred between the pages of the journal in 1878. Paul Dubois, who was considered to be the neo-Florentine artist *par excellence*, who had been one of the first to rely on fifteenth-century Italian art, showed his most famous works at the *Exposition*, notably the *Narcissus* [fig. 2] and the *Florentine Singer* [fig. 3] that were already discussed. However, in his commentary on the sculptor, Anatole de Montaiglon hardly mentioned these works that had been so acclaimed years before. Better still, he wrote:

M. Paul Dubois est aussi d'un pays de sculpteurs. Il est Champenois et il ne contredit pas aux caractères de l'ancienne école, à laquelle il vient ajouter sa valeur. [...] M. Dubois a par-

mi ses dons la jeunesse et la grâce, naturelle à ses origines.

Mr. Paul Dubois is also from a country of sculptors. He is a Champenois and he does not contradict the characters of the old school, to which he adds his value. [...] Mr. Dubois has among his gifts youth and grace, natural to his origins. (Montaiglon 1878b, 343)

De Montaiglon endeavored to erase all traces of references to fifteenth-century Florentine sculpture and put forward the French origins of the sculptor, to whom he allegedly owed his gifts. The *Exposition Universelle* was, after all, a competition between nations. It might have seemed unfortunate to celebrate French works that had succeeded so well not thanks to a local tradition but to that of another, moreover rival, country. During this exhibition, Dubois showed, among other things, the newly created *Military Courage* for the *Monument to the Memory of General Juchault de Lamoricière* [fig. 8], which was acclaimed from all sides by virtue of Dubois' very 'French' qualities. Yet, two years earlier¹⁴ in this same journal, Charles Yriarte had written something very different about this particular work:

[Le *Courage militaire*] fait certainement penser à la chapelle des Médicis, mais sans qu'on puisse exactement définir quel est le mouvement dont l'artiste s'est souvenu. C'est une ressemblance de caste, l'accent des nobles familles qui se transmet et mêle à la mâle beauté des fils le reflet glorieux de la vertu guerrière de leur père.

[The *Military Courage*] certainly reminds us of the Medici chapel, but without being able to define exactly what movement the artist remembered. It is a resemblance of caste, the accent of the noble families that is transmitted and mixes the male beauty of the sons with the glorious reflection of their father's warlike virtue. (Yriarte 1876, 122)

The forms of the *Military Courage* refer without a doubt to Michelangelo's *Lorenzo de' Medici* in San Lorenzo, which widely circulated in France as reduced reproductions edited by the Barbedienne

¹³ In 1878, Charles Blanc wrote that "La sculpture est l'art pour lequel l'Ecole française a le plus d'aptitude, et le public français le moins de goût !" (Sculpture is the art for which the French School has the most aptitude, and the French public the least taste! Blanc 1878, 83).

¹⁴ Dubois created four allegorical works in order to adorn the corners of the *Monument: Charity, Military Courage, Faith and Meditation*. At the Salon of 1876, he exhibited the *Charity* and *Military Courage* separately as plaster models.



Figure 8 Reduced copy by the Barbedienne Foundry after Paul Dubois, *Military Courage*. 1876. Bronze, 38 × 16 × 17 cm. Private collection. © Expertissim



Figure 9 Reduced copy by the Barbedienne Foundry after Michelangelo, *Lorenzo de' Medici*. 1880. Bronze, 47 × 16.5 × 18 cm. Private collection. © Expertissim

Foundry and was very well known [fig. 9] (Rionnet 2016, 227-8).¹⁵ Therefore, it can be argued that the Italian driving force behind the renewal of French

sculpture in the 1860s and 70s was completely ignored at the *Exposition Universelle* in favor of a renewed attachment to a local tradition.

7 Failure of Florentine Models and fall of French sculpture

The *fiorentinità* of previous French works was completely erased from the minds of the artists, so that they no longer looked at Florentine statuary as a source of inspiration. Furthermore, sculpture experienced a rapid and dramatic decline no less than a year after the *Exposition Universelle*. The chronicles of 1880 and 1881 sadly document this development. Olivier Rayet wrote:

Les envois [de cette année] ont été pour moi, et sans doute pas pour moi seul, de véritables déceptions. [...] On le voit, dans cette revue des artistes qui sont de longue date en possession de la confiance publique et des œuvres desquels on s'enquiert tout d'abord, nous avons regretté quelques abstentions, déploré quelques défaillances passagères, loué aussi çà et là un effort méritoire; mais rarement nous avons été complètement satisfaits.

[This year's] works have been for me, and probably not for me alone, real disappointments. [...] As you can see, in this review of artists who have long been in the public trust and whose works we are inquiring first about, we have regretted a few abstentions, deplored a few temporary shortcomings, praised here and there a meritorious effort; but rarely have we been completely satisfied. (Rayet 1880, 536, 542)

A year later, in an even more explicit way, Jules Buisson wondered:

Jusqu'à ces dernières années, la sculpture française, envisagée dans son ensemble, avait conservé, dans nos expositions, une réelle supériorité de tenue sur la peinture. [...] Pourquoi donc, à partir de 1879, ces signes d'affaiblissement, dont les expositions de 1880 et 1881 redoublent les témoignages, marquant par leur répétition le commencement d'un déclin ?

Until the last few years, French sculpture, considered as a whole, had retained, in our exhi-

bitions, a real superiority over painting. [...] What is the reason then, from 1879 onwards, of these signs of weakening, which the exhibitions of 1880 and 1881 witness to more than once, marking by their repetition the beginning of a decline? (Buisson 1881, 210-11)

The 'failure' of the Florentine models during the *Exposition Universelle* and the following downfall of French sculpture actually concurs with the development of a burning debate about the origins of the Renaissance in France. In fact, during the 1870s and 80s, French historians attempted to deny any form of Italian influence on their country, which eventually contributed to the development of a nationalistic approach in art history (Bresc-Bautier 2008; Vaisse 2008). Following the rejection of the Florentine models – and yet again the downgrading of sculpture behind painting –, a new aesthetic flourished under the Third Republic: the more exuberant 'neo-baroque' trend, in which Falguière and Mercié also participated.¹⁶ This new style owed part of his success precisely to an ambient nationalism, and in 1890 Gaston Schéfer interpreted the stylistic evolution of his fellow sculptors as a salutary return to national sources:

Ils se sont d'abord arrêtés à Florence et en ont rapporté un sentiment de l'expression plus individuel, plus énergique. Mais le génie florentin est un fruit qui souvent agace les dents. [...] L'influence florentine parut donc un peu sombre à notre aimable public de Paris, alors charmé par les souvenirs du dix-huitième siècle. [...] [Les sculpteurs] découvrirent, eux aussi, tout ce qu'il y a d'originalité profonde, de personnalité exquise dans cet art que l'on appelle, on ne sait pourquoi, un art de décadence, et qui fut, en réalité, le plus jeune, le plus frais, le plus français de ceux qui ont passé en France depuis la Renaissance.

They first stopped in Florence and brought back a more individual, more energetic sense of ex-

¹⁵ The Ecole des Beaux-Arts allowed the Barbedienne Foundry to reproduce its plaster copy of the *Lorenzo de' Medici*, then located in the chapel des Petits-Augustins, in 1850. The reduced copy of the *Lorenzo de' Medici* appeared in the Barbedienne sales catalogue from 1855 onwards, see Rionnet 2016, 134.

¹⁶ On néo-baroque French sculptors and trend, see Peigné 2005; 2012.

pression. But the Florentine genius is a fruit that often irritates the teeth. [...] The Florentine influence thus appeared a little dark to our amiable Parisian public, then charmed by the memories of the eighteenth century. [...] [The sculptors] also discovered all that there is of deep originality, of exquisite personality in this art which one calls, one does not know why, an art of decadence, and which was, in reality, the youngest, the freshest, the most French of those which passed in France since the Renaissance. (Schéfer 1890, 342)

In this regard, it is worth noting that Paul Dubois can be considered as the only 'constant' neo-Florentine sculptor who looked at Florentine models throughout his career, whereas other artists such as Falguière or Mercié only briefly adopted the trend. The Florentine revival was therefore a limited phenomenon, that nonetheless enabled French sculpture to experiment a short golden age and allowed young sculptors to emerge and accomplish a brilliant career. Dubois became assistant cura-

tor at the Musée du Luxembourg in 1873 and then director of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1878 until his death; Falguière became professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1882 and was elected to membership in the Académie des Beaux-Arts; Mercié was elected to the Institut de France in 1889, named as professor at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts as well as promoted to the rank of grand officier in the Legion of Honor in 1900, and elected president of the Société des Artistes Français in 1913. Even if these artists did not entirely pursue with the neo-Florentine trend, their early productions inspired other sculptors during many Salons¹⁷ and quickly became long-lasting successes of small-scale statuary: the reduced bronze versions edited by the Barbedienne Foundry of Paul Dubois's *Florentine singer* and *Military Courage*¹⁸ as well as Antonin Mercié's *David* remained the firm's best sellers until the Second World War (Rionnet 2016, 116, 198).¹⁹ In the end, the (short) journey of the Florentine revival allowed French sculpture to completely renew itself, even without creating works considered as original.

¹⁷ For example, Dubois's *Narcissus* inspired *Pyram's Death* by Jean de Coulon (1880) and his *Florentine Singer* led to the creation of René de Saint-Marceaux's *Arlequin* (1880) and Emile Boisseau's *Oysel le Troubadour* (1886). See Peigné 2012, 82; 141; 433.

¹⁸ *The Military Courage* was even taken under contract with the Barbedienne Foundry two years before the inauguration of the *Monument to the Memory of General Juchault de Lamoricière* (Rionnet 2016, 179).

¹⁹ At some point the *David* and the *Military Courage* were read as patriotic sculptures, which can further explain the thrilling success of their reproductions in the first half of the twentieth century (Rionnet 2016, 124).

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