

# ON THE PECULIAR ROLE OF SIGHT IN THE APPRECIATION OF NUDE SCULPTURES COVERED BY WET DRAPERY (IN HERDER'S *SCULPTURE*)

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## Introduction

The eye plays a peculiar role in the appreciation of nude sculptures covered by wet drapery in Herder's *Sculpture*. First, it is surprising to note that Herder even grants a positive role for the eye in the appreciation of a piece of sculpture. He writes, "Sight destroys beautiful sculpture rather than creating it . . . It is impossible, then, that sight can be the *mother of this art*" (S 41). He further warns that "the more something is *proper* to a particular art form, and the more *native* it is to the most powerful effects of that art, the less it can be simply carried over and applied to a different art form without the most dreadful consequences" (S 42-43). Sight is proper to painting, whereas touch is proper to sculpture. For sight, "The rounded *form* becomes a mere *figure*, the *statue* a flat *engraving*" (S 38). Whereas sight gives us dreams and illusions, the sense of touch gives us truth. However, in dealing with the issue of wet drapery in sculptures, Herder argues that the sense of sight works in tandem with the sense of touch, so that the essence of sculpture is preserved and revealed to the latter sense. It is as if the illusion of sight gives way and makes possible the truth of touch. Here, the eye plays a peculiar role, which is described enigmatically by Herder as follows: "the eye . . . now *touches* in the same way as the hand" (S 51, emphasis added). In this essay, I will explore this peculiar role played by the eye in its collaboration with the sense of touch. It will also be suggested that the unusual role played by the eye in this particular case helps us understand better what Herder might have meant by the sense of "*touch*." If the eye *touches* in the same way as the hand, through the aid of sight the sense of touch is *enhanced*. It is not just that the sense of sight comes to the aid of that of touch, but rather the "eye" rightly intervenes to reveal a deeper meaning about what "touch" itself might mean.

## Truth and Dream: Touch and Sight

Sight, Herder claims, reveals only shapes; this is its superficiality. The depth of touch is that it reveals bodies. But *how?*—not by adopting a particular viewpoint. Rather, touch "explores everything in the dark, following the shapes of limbs and forms" (S 93). Painting, in contrast, adopts a single viewpoint and thus depicts "something that is given and that can be taken in all at once" (S 93). Sight is dependent upon the givenness of a whole, which it then illuminates on its own terms from a particular viewpoint. Sight reveals *what it does*; that is, it reveals what light itself has illumined as the given whole. It gives to itself what it has given to itself. Sight is oblivious to that which lies in the dark, of that which is not illumined by light. This is its surface-like superficiality. On the other hand, the sense of touch which operates in the dark, does not just treat the given something as if it can be taken in all at once. This givenness itself is an unfathomable issue for it, and so it struggles and stays with this given something, as if it were repeatedly puzzling whether what is given is given for once and for all. Sculpture, therefore, gives the impression of "*greatness and awe, of an immeasurable form that can be known externally but cannot be grasped as a whole*" (S 93). Unlike sight, touch does not, as it were, elevate above the given to reveal *what it can*. Since touch does not depend

upon an external source of light, it continuously explores the *form* of the given, reaching out to and feeling those dark places of the body which light cannot reveal without compromising this very darkness. This is its mode of revelation.

Herder likens the sense of touch to an “inner sense” derived from one’s feeling of one’s own body.<sup>1</sup> Touch reveals bodies because it *concretely* gives the bodies to one’s sense. A child cannot be taught about bodies, sizes, distance, etc. by mere explanation; it has to *experience* these concepts in concrete life. Similarly, a body is given concretely only in touch; sight merely shows the surface. Touch gives a sense of *immediate reality*; it *presents* the object. The concreteness of the object felt lies in that, it is *graspable* even if the hand is unable to touch the entire object or grasp its entire form all at once.<sup>2</sup> A sculpted object is presented in the unity of its wholeness as a strong, independent body.<sup>3</sup> Herder remarks, “nothing deceives less than what speaks of the *body as a whole*, above all, when it speaks to the sense of touch” (S 86). The non-fragmented unity of the whole body thus presented “arms us against dreams and sophistry, and especially against a one-sided dependence on a *single* form or a *single* feature that can lead us far from the truth” (S 86). This living, embodied truth of three-dimensional space of angles, form, and volume cannot be learnt from sight. Hence Herder: “This is all the more true of the essence of sculpture, *beautiful* form and *beautiful* shape, for this is not a matter of color, or of the play of proportion and symmetry, or of light and shadow, but of *physically present, tangible truth*” (S 40). What sculpture presents stands and endures in reality. Its body and weight bind the object to earth, and the object itself is available to the grasping hand. Unlike painting, which can present only the outside frame for the feeling hand to grasp, irrespective of what is being painted within the confines of that frame, sculpture presents the created artwork itself for the appreciating hand.

It is in this sense that the sense of touch gives us “truth,” which cannot be equated to faithful representation (or presentation) of the actual.<sup>4</sup> Sculpture does not necessarily create a colossal mythological figure faithfully according to the conditions in which this figure actually lived. For example, Apollo did not return from his victory over the python unclothed, but the artist still presented him in the nude.<sup>5</sup> The “truth” of Apollo’s sculpture would have been lost if a burdening cloak compromised the presentation of “the god, the youth, the conqueror with his beautiful thighs, his free breast and youthful trunk” (S 46). It is important to note here that the truth of sculpture is not necessarily incongruous with a certain unfaithful depiction of the actual situations of the created figure. Depending on the historical figure that is being sculpted, a little *deception*<sup>6</sup> actually becomes necessary to preserve the truth of sculpture. Here, deception works *positively* to preserve the essence of sculpture. The purpose of sculpture is to represent the “*embodied soul— . . . gods, human beings, and noble animals*” (S 45). Sculpture’s truth consists in its depiction of soul as it is expressed through the body, and wherever the soul animates the body, the latter appears in its fully-grown abundance, as solid, healthy, and as having “*independent existence*” (S 45). Truth here is concerned, more with genuineness or concreteness than with correctness or faithful representation. Sculpture increases our feeling for the object dispensing with all fabrications and adornments, which might thwart the vitality of this feeling; thus in its truth sculpture lets one to take hold of the body *as* body.<sup>7</sup>

of sight.<sup>13</sup> In showing itself, in its act of revelation, it essentially conceals. All these features belong to sight and to the realm of painting, and not to touch or sculpture. Hence, Herder notes that sculpture does not allow bodies to be clothed.<sup>14</sup> Touch finds the clothing draped over sculptures oppressive and absurd. For the feeling hand, the item of clothing “is a rock with cavities and protuberances, a hanging clump of stone” (S 47). Hence, Herder claims, the Greeks preferred to sculpt their figures in the nude. However, on occasions the Greeks were compelled to clothe their statues for various obligatory reasons. But the Greeks were inventive enough to come up with a solution, which preserved the truth of their sculptures. The Greeks exploited the eye and its power to create illusions to *deceive the hand which touches*. Since clothing, which veils, is proper only to sight, it is precisely the sense of sight, which comes to preserve the truth of sculpture. The Greeks resorted to *wet* drapery because wetness is precisely a quality that can be detected by the eye, not by the hand that feels. The wet drapery ensures that the burdensome clothing clothes in such a way that nothing is hidden *for the eye*. However, this is the astonishing result: The illusory effect created by the wet drapery through the aid of sight preserves the truth of the sculpture for the *sense of touch*. How can one fathom this enigma? For even if the eyes of the appreciator inform him or her that the nude body can be *seen through* the draped clothing, how does this information aid the appreciator’s *hand*, which *feels* that the sculpted body is solid and three-dimensional, as if there were no clothing over the nude body? How can the eye, which can see through the clothing, compensate for the fact that for touch an item of clothing is always felt as an absurd clump of stone?

I suggest that in this peculiar case the eye not only comes to the aid of touch, but it also *enhances* this sense in that here it *touches like the hand*. The anomalous nature of this case can be seen as providing a deeper understanding of what Herder might have meant by the sense of “touch.” Herder describes the eye as the *foreign* judge, which assists the sense of touch. Nothing can show through in sculpture because it is something that is solid made for touch, not sight. Yet, says Herder, “If the hand that is deceived, believing that it touches both clothing and the body at once, the *foreign* judge, the eye, must follow” (S 50). The hand is deceived for its own good.<sup>15</sup> The hand is made to “believe” that it is touching both clothing and the body at the same time, so that the feeling for the fullness of the body is not compromised by the absurd feeling of draped clothing. But how can the hand be deceived in this way? The fact that clothing is wet is revealed to the eye, not to touch. The hand should *still* feel the oppressive formlessness of the apparel, not the fullness of the naked body. How is the wetness or the transparency of clothing *revealed* to touch?

Herder’s answer is that the eye comes to the rescue of the hand by *touching* in the same way as the hand.<sup>16</sup> But how does the eye touch? We should recall one of the points made in the previous section. There, it was suggested that while sight (and painting) hides that which is revealed, touch (and sculpture) reveals that which is hidden. Touch can do this because it operates and explores in darkness. But if the eye touches like the hand, it should also be able to operate in darkness. It should reveal that which is hidden. This is precisely what is going on with wet drapery. The strangeness of wet drapery is that it involves a *double layer of deception*. Plain drapery, in itself, because it veils and hides

This compatibility between truth and deception in sculpture is important because Herder describes painting (and sight) as providing dreams and illusions. So one cannot understand sculpture as completely avoiding deception (or illusion), in contrast to painting. The illusion of painting consists in that it *represents* its subject matter, whereas sculpture's truth is in the *presentation* of its subject matter.<sup>8</sup> The illusion of painting consists not in *what* it depicts, but in *how* it depicts. The reason is that painting relies on sight illuminating what it can from a particular viewpoint. Painting reveals *what* it actually does reveal to the eye, casting light precisely on that which *appears* in the light. In contrast, the deception of sculpture depends more on *what* it depicts or ignores to depict.<sup>9</sup> Therefore in sculpture, deception or illusion works *positively* in preserving its truth. If sculpture takes the aid of deception, it is for the sake of its truth. The deception of sculpture is its truth.<sup>10</sup>

These roles are reversed in painting. Here "truth" works for the sake of illusion, which means the truth of painting is its illusion. I will explain this claim in detail. The "truth" of painting is not the same as the "truth" of sculpture. In fact, Herder does not even directly talk about the "truth of painting." He talks about the dream-like quality of painting and of sight. Herder: "painting is an enchanted panel for a corrupted sense that seduces us, unconstrained by any limits . . . [it is a] beautiful illusion, a sovereign workshop of light and color" (S 52). The truth of painting is created in this fantastic realm, within which it rightfully operates and should operate.<sup>11</sup> The illusion of painting is not in that it depicts its object as it is *not* in itself; but rather, what it depicts is what it *chooses* to depict, to shed light on. Through representation, "painting opens to the imagination a wide field and entices us into her colored and perfumed garden of pleasure" (S 52). Since sight does not reveal that which light cannot illuminate, painting essentially betrays itself in representing its object. It focuses on the "highlights," as it were, and conceals the darkness of the object, creating a kind of magical, dream-like soothing effect. Hence, painting creates "beautiful *appearances*." The truth of painting is in its very appearance and dream-like quality. The word "appearance" suggests something like a "veil" or "fabrication." By embellishing what is revealed with the brightness of light, the latter covers up precisely that which it reveals. Therefore, painting *hides that which is revealed*, whereas sculpture *reveals that which is hidden* (by exploring in the dark). Painting is a "magnificent story, the dream of a dream" (S 45). This is not an accidental failure of painting; rather, this limitation belongs to its very nature. In this sense, the illusion of painting consists in the "how" of its representation, in the *mode* in which it represents its object. Illusion belongs *essentially* to painting *as its truth*, irrespective of what object is being depicted. Whereas in sculpture deception will come into play depending on *what* object is being created<sup>12</sup>, in painting illusion occurs *prior even to the representation of any particular object*.

### Wet Drapery over Nude Sculpture

The conclusions drawn above are vital because, for Herder, the clothing over a sculpted figure precisely corresponds to the superficiality which is characteristic of painting and sight. Clothing gives to the *eye* the "*appearance* of truth, decorum, splendor, and adornment" (S 51). In its very essence, clothing is something which is made for the sense

5. S 48.

6. Here the term "illusion" would have been equally suitable. Herder, in his treatise, does not exclusively speak about the deception or illusion of sculpture, whereas he does speak about the deception and/or illusion of painting. The former concept is one I am introducing by drawing it out of Herder's text. The term at issue here is the German word *Schein* which can mean either "illusion" as in mere covering over or as how something appears, or it can mean something more negative like "deception" or "disguise," although Herder himself is not particularly careful in drawing a clear distinction between these two meanings. I will distinguish between these two possible meanings of the term *Schein* when discussing painting (or the sense of sight). But since, as I want to argue, in sculpture any possible deception/illusion works *positively* to preserve the truth of the sculpted object, the issue of strictly distinguishing between deception and illusion in sculpture does not really come up. Deception/illusion, just as the "truth" of sculpture, has different meanings than those attributable to painting. This has to be borne in mind for the remainder of the essay.

7. Although truth as concreteness is the sense of truth which is directly relevant to the main arguments to be made in this essay, there is also another sense of truth which can be fleshed out of Herder's text, which Herder himself does not discuss in detail. Herder remarks, for instance that "a philosopher, a Cybele, or a hundred-year-old matron should be presented fully clothed" (S 49). This is because it is not necessary for a philosopher to stand before us like a youthful warrior revealing the abundant strength of his body. Neither is it necessary that the unfortunate mother, Niobe, is depicted in the nude; for the purpose of this sculpture would be to depict the helplessness of the mother and her children, and for that purpose it is preferable that the sculpted bodies are draped. Similarly, Juno should be sculpted clothed, as she should awaken reverence in us, not love. In all these cases, one might say the "truth" of sculpture is preserved if the statues are draped, rather than presented naked. Hence, in these cases, the criterion of truth is *not* the concrete presentation of the solid, three-dimensional body for the touching hand to feel and grasp. In these examples, Herder seems to be pointing to a different sense of truth, where truth is more concerned with *meaning*, and a faithful *expression* of the spirit of the original character in the individual sculpted figure. A philosopher or a Juno stand for certain ideals, and the aim of sculpture is fulfilled if these ideals find their proper expression in the sculpted statues, even if that means that the latter have to be draped by layers of clothing. One might see parallels with this somewhat different notion of truth in sculptures with Hegel's views about the proper aim of sculpture. For Hegel, the main purpose of the sculpted figure is to uphold, bear, and completely express an ideal, spiritual content. Hegel too suggests that in many cases statues are better left draped, since the principal aim of sculpture is not to depict the human figure in its merely natural form, but to express the ideal spirit (A 726). Hence, the parts of body, which are not really suitable to express the meaning of the genuine ideal, are better left clothed in a statue as they may unnecessarily lure the spectator with their sensuous beauty, grace, and charm.

8. While discussing painting (or the sense of sight), I want to reserve the term "illusion" to mere appearance, as in how something appears in its mode of revelation. I will reserve the term "deception" to a more negative meaning of "disguise." Initially, Herder's description of the dream-like quality of painting or the sense of sight refers mainly to "illusion." However, I will demonstrate how "illusion" turns into "deception" as this change is relevant to the special case of wet drapery over nude sculptures we are interested in.

9. Like the clothes of Apollo, or the full body of a philosopher which is left out in favor of his head or bust.

10. This point is crucial when we discuss, below, the role of the eye in the appreciation of wet drapery in sculptures.

11. S 52.

12. Which means this deception occurs, in a sense, *internal* to the presentation of the object.

13. That is, its very nature consists in deception and hiding.

14. S 47.

15. Here, again, we see how in the case of sculpture deception has a positive role to play in preserving the truth of the sculpted piece.

belongs to the realm of sight. Its truth lies in its illusory power. But with wet drapery, the illusory effect of drapery is just not plainly negated, such that the sculpture becomes naked for the feeling hand. This is why the hand needs the eye. The wetness creates a layer of deception for the eye *over and above* the deception introduced by plain drapery. It is as if with plain drapery the sense of sight imposes its illusory effects on sculpture, and hence it oversteps its proper limits. When the limits are so transgressed, *illusion is transformed into a negative deception*, and hence the truth of sculpture is compromised. But when the drapery is made wet, the sense of sight *compensates* for this error (by touching like a hand) by confining its deceptions within its limits. The deception of wetness works against the deception of drapery. In one sense, the eye deceives its own deception. Negative deception is converted back into mere illusion, as drapery now becomes only “so to speak drapery.” The deceptive veil of drapery is unveiled. The drapery in revealing itself hides the naked body, but the wetness of drapery reveals what is thus hidden by drapery. Dry drapery reveals itself in the light by hiding the naked body of sculpture. It also compromises the sense of touch since the hand now cannot feel the solid form of the sculpture. But when the drapery is wet it *creates the effect* of revealing that, which is not lit by light—the nude body that shows through the drapery. The dream-like deceptive truth of eyesight is thus inverted.<sup>17</sup> Here, the deceptive tendency of sight is made to work *positively* for the sake of truth; its deceptive truth is changed into truthful deception. Eyesight here functions like the sense of touch. Hence, “touch” does not just refer to something that can be done by the hand or the extending body alone, but even the eye can “touch” by undoing its own deceptive representation. The hand that grasps and feels does not by itself know that the layer of apparel on the body of sculpture is a deceptive veil. The deceptive veil of plain drapery is foreign to the kind of deception that sculpture is capable of handling, as this kind of deception is in the “how” of its representation. The hand that feels treats the deceptive as real and thus feels the oppressiveness of the layer of apparel. However, the eye that touches enhances the sense of “touch” by revealing the deceptive drapery *as* deceptive.<sup>18</sup> The eye restores the truth of sculpture, such that the hand can be “presented with drapery that is only *so to speak* drapery, a cloud, a veil, a mist” (S 51). The sense of touch now recognizes the deceptive as such, so that it can genuinely feel the fullness of the body. The role played by the eye is indispensable for achieving this purpose.

## NOTES

1. Johann Gottfried Herder, Johann Gottfried *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream* (S). Trans. Jason Gaiger. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002) 36.

2. S 94.

3. Only then, for Herder, “beauty takes on *force and meaning* in every part of the body” (S 79).

4. One might raise objections against my use of the term “representation” here by arguing that Herder denies that sculpture is a “representation” at all, and that he contrasts sculpture with painting by arguing that while the form “presents” its object, the latter “represents”. However, this objection can be countered by arguing that Herder’s distinction between “representation” and “presentation” itself takes place within the realm opened up by all art forms in general, where all art forms essentially “represent.” It is this latter (still unclarified) sense of “representation” that is operative in the above sentence.

16. S 51.

17. And therefore, representation is converted back to presentation.

18. The sense of touch of a blind person is in this sense limited.

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