

Sophia Vari: a critical response

Dr Klairi Angelou



This exhibition at Waddington Custot covers the past 20 years of Sophia Vari's oeuvre. It offers insights into different facets of this truly remarkable artist through works in various media; sculptures in marble, bronze and silver, together with oils, collages and watercolours on canvas.

Primarily celebrated as a sculptor, Vari's three-dimensional work has been included in over 100 international exhibitions. Testifying to her global recognition, examples are present in museum collections worldwide (Italy, China, France, Greece), while Vari's monumental sculptures have been installed in numerous public locations (Paris, Beijing, Monte Carlo, Madrid, Athens). Most recently, in October 2023, 12 monumental pieces were displayed along Park Avenue in New York. Recurring throughout her practice, and evident in every media she worked with, is Vari's interest in themes of proportion, monumentality, balance, colour and light, as well as a keen awareness of the relationship between her art and its audience.

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'I want to touch, I want volume, I want to move around the work, I want to use the space I create in, I want [the work] to truly exist. And then, maybe, I will feel like I exist'.¹

The above quote from Sophia Vari is indicative of how she approached the medium of sculpture. It simultaneously indicates how we, also, should approach her work. Vari invites the viewer to physically engage with it, knowing that only when one moves around her sculptures will their complexity be fully revealed.

Despite her achievements in the field, sculpture was not the medium Vari initially chose to express herself through, but rather one she became captivated with later on. Born in Athens, Greece, Vari moved to Paris to study painting, graduating from the École des Beaux Arts in 1958:

'I was incredibly fascinated by painting, less so by sculpture. This is perhaps because in Greece large collections of paintings were lacking. I wanted to be a painter and paint humanity's anxiety'.²

Unlike her later explorations, Vari's painting at that time was not characterised by an emphasis on abstraction, but rather by figuration and symmetry. Yet despite this desire to paint, growing up in Greece and visiting the country frequently throughout her lifetime gave Vari a unique opportunity to become familiar with Classical sculpture:

'I would spend whole hours, during my Greek summers, admiring Greek and Roman archaeological sculptures, attempting to immerse myself in this 'beauty canon', the perfect technique, the warmth of the marbles, the unique patina of the bronzes, the most harmonious composition, the 'midiana', the enigmatic smiles on their faces without looking at anything specific that exude such nobility and mystery'.³

Nevertheless, when she did start sculpting in 1978 it was not only her Greek heritage that Vari drew on. Having, over the course of her career, studios in France, Italy, Colombia, Mexico, Monaco and Greece, Vari connected with different cultures, finding inspiration in their creativity; in Paris she became familiar with Cubism and Surrealism; in Medellin, Colombia and Mexico she learnt of the Olmec and Mayan traditions of South America; working in Pietrasanta, Italy, a place famous for its historic marble production but also important bronze foundries, deepened her understanding of these media and their unique qualities. Drawing inspiration from these civilisations, as well as Mediterranean culture and her Greek heritage, Vari developed a singular and coherent visual language.

One early acquaintance that played a pivotal role in Vari's eventual turn to sculpture was that with British artist Henry Moore (1893–1986), in 1969.⁴ Vari has described the great effect this encounter had on her, how it shaped her oeuvre and how generous Moore was in sharing his ideas on sculpture, inviting her to his studio. There, Vari discovered the importance of purity of materials and the role of light in sculpture. Moore's approach

¹ Marisa Oropesa, 'Sophia Vari: The Search For Beauty' in *Sophia Vari – Sculptures and Paintings* (exh. cat.), Pera Muzesi, Istanbul, 2013, p.9.

² Fernando Castrto Florez, 'La abstraction sensual de Sophia Vari' in *Sophia Vari: Esculturas–Oleos–Acuarelas*, Granada, 2005, p.13.

³ Ibid., p.17–8.

⁴ Although it was nine years between her encounter with Moore and Vari's move to sculpture, the visit to his studio stayed fresh in her mind and was influential in the development of her aesthetic language.

to sculpture and material considered how a ‘*perfect sculptural expression could be achieved*’. He emphasised that ‘*a sculptor should understand his material and be aware of its possibilities and structural nature*’. He went further, explaining that despite the physical limitations of a material, a sculptor should be able to ‘*transform it into a synthesis with a complete structural existence*’.⁵

Looking closely at Vari’s approach to her chosen materials and techniques, one can see that she quickly adopted Moore’s modernist attitude. Certainly, her direct carving, the piercing of stone and staying ‘true to the materials’ fulfil the doctrines of modernist vocabulary.⁶ Yet for Vari, direct carving was rather understood as looking back to non-Classical, non-Western traditions, particularly pre-Colombian ones:

‘*At first, we are greatly influenced by the old masters that we admire and then we do what we love. I was influenced by Brâncusi, Arp, Jean de Boulogne, Laurens and Botero, naturally. And all of this unknowingly. It is this cocktail of passion that makes us who we are with our own convictions*’. She continued: ‘*Fernando [Botero] introduced me to Latin America for the first time. First, Colombia, his country, and then Mexico. I needed this exuberance, this dramatic carelessness. The joy of loving with all its extremes, the wonderful nature. I love Latin America, she is very dear to my heart*’.⁷

This cultural blend can be seen in the sculptures ‘Standing Man’ (2007) and ‘Maternité 2’ (2007), both in bronze, where links to Romanian sculptor Constantin Brâncusi (1876–1957) accompany totem Mayan aesthetics; the arrangement of the elements in both sculptures favours a vertical development and an upwards movement. ‘Birth’ (2008) and ‘Equinoxe’ (2011), also in bronze, are perfect examples of pieces where the influence of Moore’s framework is evident. Favouring a horizontal development instead, with their inflated intersecting planes these pieces move towards 20th-Century Mexican murals. While Vari’s work may not carry the social and political messages of those murals, it employs a similar robustness of structure and form to the works of Ramón Alva de le Canal (1892–1985), Rufino Tamayo (1899–1991) and Diego Rivera (1886–1957). The latter couple of sculptures reveal another interest of Vari’s, that of the relationships between shape and surface, solid form and void. She further explored these dialectics in her marble sculptures; ‘Trouble Essentiel’ (2005), ‘Ordre Secret’ (2013), ‘Vérité cristalline’ (2016) and ‘Constellation’ (2021) are fine examples of interlocking shapes and voids, where the smooth, pumped-up surfaces of the white Thassos stone bring to the fore Vari’s preoccupation with light and shade. This exploration was extended in ‘Fue Fugitif’ (2012) and ‘Pas de Danse’ (2016); both in silver, their highly reflective finishes accentuate light and movement.

A bold endeavour by Vari was the use of colour on her sculptures, variously red, blue, yellow and white.⁸ While there is always a danger that colour might negate the plastic values of sculpture, Vari used it as an inherent component of making. In this way, she transformed the dialectic between solid and empty space into a play of chromatic contrasts, not only

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Penelope Curtis, ‘Barbara Hepworth and the Avant-Garde of the Twenties’ in *Barbara Hepworth. A Retrospective*, Tate, Penelope Curtis and Alan Wilkinson, Liverpool, 1994, p.11.

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The structure, as well as the titles, of Vari’s works, for instance ‘Equinoxe’ (2011), also indicate an awareness of Barbara Hepworth’s modernist work.

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Oropesa, 2013, p.9.

8
Margaret Talbot, ‘The Myth of White in Classical Sculpture’, in *The New Yorker*, 22 October 2018.

reinforcing the plastic qualities but giving them tension and vitality. In Vari's hands, colour became a vehicle to underline changes of volume, to simplify and reduce the most complex of shapes to their bare essentials. It was through her oils, collages and watercolours on canvas that Vari first explored colour and its meanings. Depending on the country in which she painted, Vari used different sets of colours to respond to specific qualities of light. For example, in 'Portrait d'Hiver' (2006), 'Signe du Couchant' (2007) and 'Rosée Tardive' (2008), Vari has used deep reds and oranges, as well as pinks and yellows, colours she typically selected when working in Colombia and Mexico. In paintings such as 'I Love Greece' (2009) and 'Ciel egrene' (2016), different shades of blue are indicative of her work completed in Greece. With her paintings, Vari similarly considered the relationship between her work and the viewer: just like her sculptural pieces, they should not be seen from a single point of view but rather examined from all angles.

Vari's sculptures range in size, varying from tabletop pieces, such as 'Fleur de Nuit' (2011), to monumental works like 'Trouble Essentiel' (1993) and 'La Reine' (2000), which stands over 3 metres high. Vari's long preoccupation with monumentality started in 1978, while in Egypt on a transformative visit. There, she encountered the colossal Sphinx, as well as numerous statues characterised by a formal, stylised frontality and painted in vivid colours. From then on, not only did Vari abstract her forms and adopt marble and bronze as preferred materials, she embraced the concept of size, believing that:

'Every sculpture should have a feeling of monumentality, even those with a smaller dimension, but not all sculptures are necessarily monumental'. She continued: 'I was able to make monumental sculptures. It wasn't just the conception that was complex, but also the structure itself, the foundries, and the executional costs. [...] To take over the space by using the monumental aspect of the shapes and compositions, as well as dominating the environment is the ultimate goal for an open-air sculpture'.⁹

Despite Vari's effortless treatment of modernist and indigenous aesthetics, her experiments with abstract vocabulary, work in marble and use of colour in sculpture have been repeatedly contextualised in relation to ancient Greek (especially Classical) art and her work has hardly (or superficially only) been read outside this framework. Writers have clumsily focused on Vari's origin – her Greekness – when interpreting her work, which is subsequently seen simply as a response to her Greek identity, or just an inevitable consequence of it; by implication this suggests a passive rather than a critical attitude.

For Vari, however, culture wasn't something she absorbed passively but rather a critical departure point that connected the past with modernism and to contemporary aesthetics:

'Of all the approaches and discoveries, it was towards the Cycladic figurines I felt the most drawn, incredibly modern in their simplicity and purity of form. Today the objective of my research holds into account this simplicity, its limitation of means to achieve the essential'.¹⁰

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Oropesa, 2013, p.11.

Also: Christina Orban, 'Vari' in *Sophia Vari Sculptures Monumentales*, Skira Flammarion, Monaco, 2008.

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Florez, 2005, p.14.

The power and strength of women is another prominent theme that runs through Vari's work, a response, perhaps, to being a sculptor. Active in the era of second-wave feminism, Vari contended with the long-held belief – one retained well into the 1990s – that sculpture was a muscular medium best suited to men. As a result, she encountered prejudice in male-dominated spaces like foundries; today, the bronze casting facility in Pietrasanta that fabricates Vari's large-scale public artworks is nearby another that rejected her business 20 years ago. 'La Reine', a sculpture of monumental dimensions that has been exhibited globally, can be read as a testament by Vari to the overcoming of obstacles in the development of her artistic language and international recognition. Unfortunately, despite the strength of Vari's work, the use of gendered vocabulary in discussions of it is frequently found, with writers referencing the delicacy of her sculpting 'with great sensitivity'. There are even instances where special reference is made to her physical appearance and personal character, comments that can hardly be found in discussions of the work of her male peers.

Sophia Vari is the epitome of an international artist, one who looked both inwards, towards her own history, and out to other cultures, all the while responding to contemporaneous aesthetic trends. Although the erroneous connection of Vari's work to ancient Greek art, as well as the use of gendered vocabulary has done injustice to the diversity and experimental nature of her work, this re-contextualisation shows that not only did Vari defy the passive character projected onto her, she emphasised an active role in her avant-garde approach to sculpture, and life. As can be seen in both this exhibition and her oeuvre as a whole, Vari herself was a synthesis of identities (not conflicting, but rather a productive culmination of ideas). Consequently, Vari's practice is one of inclusion, where cultural dialogue and exchange are most prominent.

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