

Give and take: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska's *Coffer for Wilfrid Scawen Blunt* and Ezra Pound's homosocial modernism in 1914

Beginning almost immediately after his early death in World War I, there has been a sustained attempt to cast Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915) as a prodigy of modernist sculpture.¹ Ezra Pound's mythologizing memoir of him took the lead and characterized Gaudier as the prototypical bohemian artist whose defining trait was a fierce and uncompromising individuality.² Because Gaudier's death in the trenches ended his short career, the fascination with his maverick reputation has been based primarily on the accounts of his life and on a select group of works within his oeuvre. Gaudier also created a number of awkward decorative and functional objects that have proved more difficult to bring into accord with the artist's reputation.³ The *Coffer for Wilfrid Scawen Blunt* (figs. 1–3) is a prime example of such an overlooked work and has rarely been considered worthy of sustained attention. This small marble casket – along with many of Gaudier's other 'decorative' works – is frequently passed over in preference for his statuary, despite its importance as a commission from Ezra Pound. For instance, Roger Cole dismissed the *Blunt Coffer* 'as a commercial piece of work which adds little to our understanding of the artist'.⁴ It is, I will argue, precisely its vexed status as a 'commercial piece' that makes it significant. An examination of this object and its place in the formulation of a modernist subculture in Britain sheds light on those traits of Gaudier's artistic persona that, like this object, do not easily fit – namely, his irreverent and sexualized mockery of his own status as a producer of objects for others. Central to this question will be Pound, who was both patron and friend to Gaudier. In the commercial exchange of the artistic commission, Gaudier introduced in-jokes that both bound together and made fun of the players in that transaction.

The *Blunt Coffer* resulted from a hurried commission given to Gaudier by Pound in 1914. The box was presented as a gift to the poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840–1922) on the occasion of what became known as the 'Peacock Dinner' on 18 January 1914. In the years before World War I, Pound worked energetically to establish modernism in Britain and encouraged the development of an avant-garde subculture in London. Though still in the early stages of his own career, he acted as impresario for the new movement and sought ways to increase its momentum on multiple fronts. The 'Peacock Dinner' was one attempt to solidify the notion of the new generation.⁵ Gathering together a group of eight poets, including W. B. Yeats, F. S. Flint and Richard Aldington, Pound, with the encouragement of Blunt's former lover Lady Gregory, organized a lavish luncheon

at which roast peacock was 'served up in full plumage' and speeches were made in honour of the 74-year-old Blunt.⁶ The event culminated in Pound presenting Gaudier's small marble box, which contained a group of poems by the attendees.

As much as for his writing, Blunt had been chosen for this tribute because of his reputation as an anti-imperial activist, for which he had been imprisoned in 1887. At the event, Blunt expressed diffidence about his writing, saying that he was 'to a certain extent an imposter. I have really never been a poet. I have been all sorts of other things.'⁷ In fact, he remarked a few days after the event, 'All this is very curious considering that I have not published a line of verse for the last dozen years nor has my name been mentioned anywhere in connection with poetry.'⁸ Nevertheless, Pound had orchestrated this event to establish a literary genealogy in which Blunt would be a forebear. The appeal of the older poet for Pound, however, was equally if not primarily based on his oppositional politics, his celebrity, and his frequent flouting of Victorian social norms. Pound supplied a dedicatory poem for the event. In it, he fashioned Blunt as a precursor for the new generation's own independent attitudes, with little regard for Blunt's actual political concerns.

Because you have gone your individual gait,
Written fine verses, made mock of the world,
Swung the grand style, not made a trade of art,
Upheld Mazzini and detested institutions;
We, who are little given to respect,
Respect you, and having no better way to show it,
Bring you this stone to be some record of it.⁹

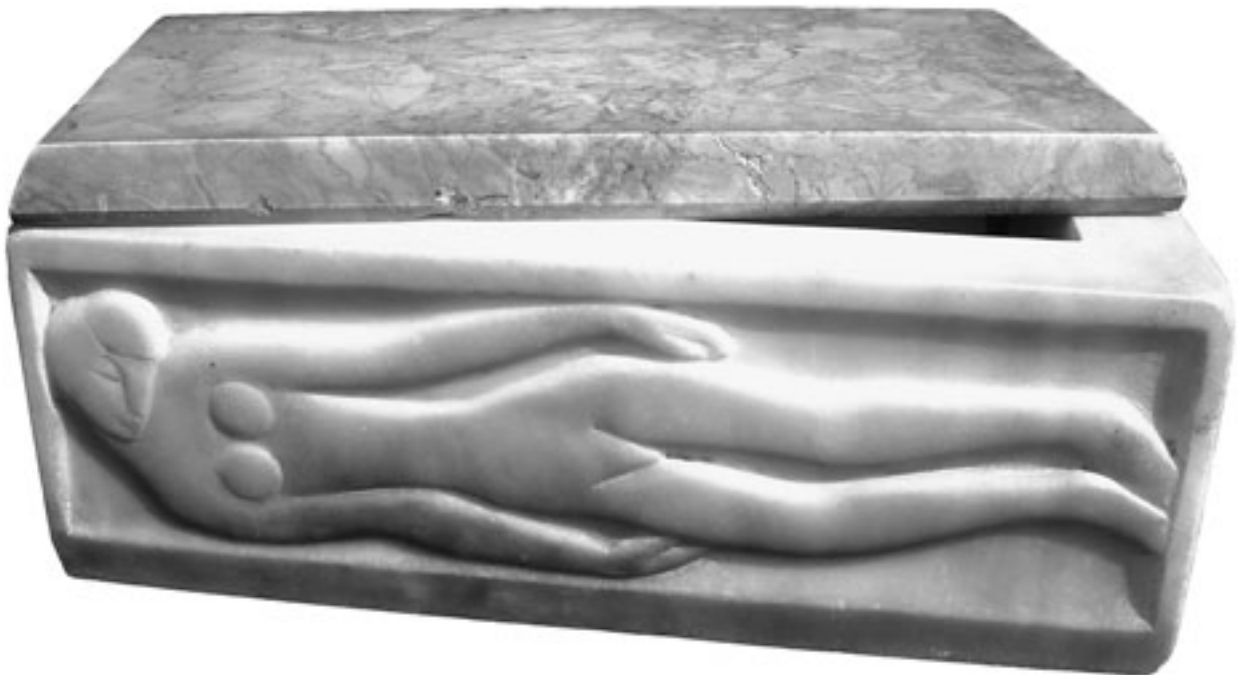
1. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Coffer for Wilfrid Scawen Blunt*, 1914. Pentelic marble with lid in grey, pink-veined Sienese marble, 11.4 × 26.3 × 12.2 cm. Private collection (photo © J. Lytton)



The other contents of the box were holographs of Frederic Manning's 'Koré', Victor Plarr's 'Epitaphium Cytheristriae', T. Sturge Moore's 'The Dying Swan', John Masefield's 'Truth', F. S. Flint's 'Third Poem in Unrhymed Cadence' ['The Swan'], Richard Aldington's 'In the Via Sistina', W. B. Yeats's 'When Helen Lived', and Pound's 'The Return'.

Pound's orchestration of the event may even have extended to suggesting the poems by each writer to be included in the box. In a letter to F. S. Flint, he wrote 'Bring a hand written and signed copy of your Swan, last version, that's all you'll need to bother about, we are each to put one mss poem into the marble coffer.'¹⁰ Flint seems to have been ambivalent, and Aldington was given the charge of ensuring his participation. Aldington wrote to him, 'That Blunt affair is to come off on Sunday, 18th. We are all to go down to Blunt's place for lunch. I am instructed to see that you turn up. All expenses of the committee are paid.'¹¹ Even after the event, Flint apparently felt slighted and believed that Pound invited him not as a poet but as a mere reporter. Blunt, on the other hand, seemed to like Flint and invited him for a return visit.¹² Overall, Flint's ambivalence may have had much more to do with Pound's difficult and authoritarian personality. After the event, the tension about the reasons for Pound's inclusion of Flint in the group came to the surface. Flint was adept at shorthand and apparently transcribed the speeches by Blunt and Yeats, giving the typescript to Aldington for use in the latter's article on the event. Pound, who came to understand that the event needed to be recorded for posterity, clearly had a hand in assigning the task to Flint. Pound continued to manage the situation in the following weeks, writing to Flint to 'let up that yawp about "reporter fellow" etc. elected to the glorious fellowship of Plarr and Sturge Moore to lend lustre etc.'¹³

2. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Coffer for Wilfrid Scawen Blunt* (secondary view), 1914. Pentelic marble with lid in grey, pink-veined Sienese marble, 11.4 × 26.3 × 12.2 cm. Private collection (photo © J. Lytton)



There is no doubt that the contrived event appeared somewhat curious to Blunt as well. He nevertheless enjoyed the attention and the company. In his diary, he described the scene:

They arrived quite punctually by motor at 12.30, six of them under Yeats' escort bringing with them a small marble coffer with an inscription 'Homage to W. S. Blunt', and an absurd futurist relief of a naked Egyptian woman the work of a Franco-Pole sculptor coming into fashion. Inside there was an address signed by the poets in a kind of futurist verse without rhyme or metre or much reason with bits of verse in the handwriting of each . . . queer looking young men with shock heads of hair but capital fellows as it turned out, intelligent, and with a great knowledge of literature ancient and modern also some wit and as far as I could judge good hearts.¹⁴

The poets – Imagists and others such as the older Yeats – were all to some degree reconsidering poetic conventions. Their experimentalism, however, failed to impress Blunt. In the speech accepting the honour, his response was both joking and frank: 'I very much appreciate the verses that you have written to me – if they are verses. I could not quite make out whether they were or not. I waited for a rhyme that did not seem to come. I am old-fashioned enough to expect rhyme in verse.'¹⁵

Blunt seems to have liked Gaudier's box even less than the poems, but he did not similarly joke about the coffer. The 'absurd' relief decorating one side was the source of his contention, and he wrote to Sidney Cockerell a week later: 'I have been obliged to turn [it] with its face to the wall'.¹⁶ The coffer itself is a relatively humble object at just over 26 cm in length. All but two sides are blank. On one, Gaudier inscribed a dedication to Blunt: HOMAGE TO W.S. BLUNT, and on the other he carved a reclining female nude (figs. 1, 2). The figure has been treated in a schematic manner and contorted to fill the rectangular side of the box. The sinuous body appears to be devoid of conventional indications of skeletal structure, and any natural proportions of the human figure have been wilfully ignored. Blunt's use of the term 'Egyptian' refers to the twisting of the head and body effected in Gaudier's relief, and it is clear that he did not approve of the non-naturalistic, 'futurist', as he called it, rendering.

The style of the carving partook of the emerging modernist trend of simplified, flattened, low-relief stone carving in Britain which was being developed by Gaudier, by Jacob Epstein, for example in his *Birth* (1913, Art Gallery of Ontario), by Eric Gill, as in *Votes for Women* (1910, whereabouts unknown), and others. For Gaudier, the *Blunt Coffin* expanded upon the style he developed in works from the same period, such as the carved alabaster *Man and Woman*, sometimes called *Odalisque*, from 1912–13 (Leeds City Art Gallery) and the modelled *Women Carrying Sacks* from 1913 (Kettle's Yard, Cambridge). Both these works depict, in their own ways, the spatial compression of figures seen on the *Blunt Coffin*. These earlier works differ, however, in their implication of space to the side or below the figures, such as with the representation of the man in *Man and Woman*, whose body is below the ledge on which the woman sits. In the *Blunt Coffin*, Gaudier decreased the depth and roundness of his relief carving, as he also did with the *Wrestlers* of 1913–14. More importantly, he expanded upon the idea of spatial compression from his earlier reliefs, depicting the *Blunt Coffin* female nude as held within her frame.

With this figure, Gaudier elongated its arms and torso while narrowing the waist, making the legs appear thick and clumsy. Perhaps the most striking adaptation of the body occurred at the head and neck, which seems stretched to lean against the side of the box itself. Consequently, the body appears to be simultaneously reclining and fully frontal, conflating the conventional format of the reclining nude with an unfettered visual accessibility. Gaudier reiterated this display of the female body through the regularized shapes of the secondary sex characteristics. Despite the approximated and deliberately crude handling of the figure, he made sure to signify its sex clearly through the addition of perfectly circular breasts. Rather than just leaving the pelvis blank, Gaudier furthermore chose to call attention to the pubis by inscribing a 'V' shape that matches the breasts in its frontality and geometric regularity.

Instead of merely decorating the face of the box, Gaudier's relief plays with the limitations imposed by the shape and proportions of the actual stone object from which it is carved. On the side with the relief image, Gaudier bent and twisted the female body in order to accommodate it to the rectangular face. All relief sculptors and decorators must cope with constrictions when working in such formats, but Gaudier's awkward handling of this relation calls undue attention to the limitations imposed by the rectilinearity of the box. This has the effect of parodying the attempt to decorate such a surface with figurative relief. Relief sculpture has been used for millennia to adorn flat surfaces with varying degrees of illusionism and patterning, from the deployment of linear perspective to purely non-representational or geometric arrays. Rather than using one of these many options, Gaudier chose instead to make the flat surface of the box into an image that itself calls attention to its subservient relationship to the functional object it adorns. Gaudier's female nude parrots a compositional format characteristic of the genre of the female nude in painting, but squeezes it onto a surface that depicts no spatial recession. This is not simply an exploration of flatness in the creation of the relief image. It is, more pointedly, an evocation and subsequent refusal of pictoriality. The sculptured relief is neither simply a decorative adornment to the object's shape nor an image that incites us to overlook its functional support. Neither Islamic geometric decoration nor Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* (to choose two extreme options for decorative relief sculpture), the image on Gaudier's *Blunt Coffin* never fails to remind us that it has been forced to accommodate itself, ill-fittingly, into its service to the marble box.

In addition, by so stressing the ways in which the figure is held by this shape, the question of the box's contents comes to the fore. There is a suggestion that one could be seeing into its contents.¹⁷ The compression of the female figure to the rectangular format raises the implication that such a figure or form is also somehow contained within the casket itself. Such a suggestion is not as speculative as it might appear from photographs of the box. In fact, this small object was regularly referred to as if it were a coffin or other bodily container. Pound variously called the work a 'sarcophagus',¹⁸ a 'pyx',¹⁹ or a 'reliquary'.²⁰ If this small box is such a bodily container, the compressed figure on the side not only decorated the surface but also gave an indication as to what kind of body might be inside.

Similar conjunctions of boxes and female nudes had been used for decades as the iconographic attributes of Pandora, and such an allusion would probably have suggested itself to Gaudier, Pound and Blunt. Recognizing this, Evelyn Silber nominated one prominent late-Victorian example as a possible prototype for Gaudier's work in her catalogue raisonné – Harry Bates's 1890 statue, *Pandora*.²¹ There is, in fact, a strong morphological similarity between the female figure atop the ivory and bronze casket held by Bates's statue and that on Gaudier's *Blunt Coffin*. It should be noted, however, that while Silber claims that Gaudier 'appropriated shamelessly'²² from Bates, there is no supporting archival evidence beyond their visual similarity.²³ Despite the lack of any evidentiary 'smoking gun', it nevertheless remains possible that Gaudier did look to Bates's sculpture as he completed the rushed commission for Pound. Bates's *Pandora* was purchased for the British nation through the Chantrey Bequest in 1891 and appears to have been regularly on view in the years before World War I. The Tate exhibition records are inconclusive for these years, but the work is listed in the selected handbook of works on view at Millbank that was published in the year before Gaudier executed the *Coffin* in 1914.²⁴ It might be objected that Gaudier was a vocal critic of late-Victorian sculpture, but there is evidence in his published writings and other correspondence that he had a more nuanced understanding of it than is usually assumed, allowing him to distinguish between divergent trends within the so-called 'academic' style.²⁵ Given the similarities between the figures on the two sculptures, therefore, it is not inconceivable that Gaudier adopted this high-profile late-Victorian precedent in completing this commission meant to honour a personality from that era – Blunt. While the connection between the two works must remain speculative, the issue does point to the ways in which the *Blunt Coffin* can be seen in relation to an existing sculptural format for the representation of Pandora's Box. The *Blunt Coffin's* conflation of female nude and marble box readily lends itself to this interpretation. For instance, in her biography of Blunt, Elizabeth Longford hinted at this interpretation of the *Blunt Coffin* when she noted that Blunt was not impressed by 'the marble box that contained all this Pandora treasure'.²⁶

The Pandora legend itself has endured, in part, because of the widespread analogy between women's bodies and containers or vessels.²⁷ This trope manifests itself in competing vocabularies of femininity, from conventional mythology down to vulgar slang. An example contemporary to Gaudier's *Blunt Coffin* can be found in the writings of Sigmund Freud. In the 1909 edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (first published in 1900), he noted with regard to dream imagery, 'Boxes, cases, chests, cupboards and ovens represent the uterus . . . Rooms in dreams are also usually women (*Frauenzimmer*); if the various ways in and out of them are represented, this interpretation is scarcely open to doubt.'²⁸ He stated a similar view in 1913, when he interpreted a scene from William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* with such metaphoric substitutions in mind: 'If what we were concerned with were a dream, it would occur to us at once that the caskets are also women, symbols of what is essential in woman, and therefore of a woman herself – like coffers, boxes, cases, baskets, and so on.'²⁹ Gaudier's ostentatious compression of the figure to the side of the casket and its consequent implication

of the female nude as being both part of the box and contained by the box contributed another example of this widespread pattern of equating boxes with the bodies of women.

Regardless of the degree to which the *Blunt Coffers*' amenability to the Pandora myth might be recognized immediately by the handler, at the very least Gaudier's decoration established a direct association between the physical object and the image of the naked female. Even if the viewer or handler of this object never paused to think about the awkwardness of this image in relation to the material object that is its support, a quick glance at the image leaves little doubt as to what this image is. One effect of this association, surely not lost on Gaudier, was that the act of opening the box gained a degree of titillation and anticipation. The decoration of the box, like the poems it contained, took advantage of the sexual as a sign of the modern, overturning the presumed prudery characteristic of Gaudier and Pound's Victorian forebears. In the context of an event orchestrated specifically as a manifesto of the modern refusal of Victorian norms, the overtly sexed decorative image lent this further connotation to the material object.

Blunt himself had become notorious for his philandering over the years, and Lucy McDiarmid has suggested that this contributed to Pound's interest in honouring him. She contends that the orchestration of the Peacock Dinner as an all-male event 'affirmed several affiliations: one among the young men, one between the older man and the group of younger men, and one between all the men and womankind in her sexual aspect'.³⁰ In the homosocial exchange that determined the Peacock Dinner, Gaudier's coffer served as the object that made the sexual theme most visible. Homosociality often relies upon the objectification, exchange, or circulation of women (or their images) as a means of bonding men while potentially forestalling the threat of the misreading of those bonds as erotic.³¹ The masculine tenor of the event facilitated the sexual themes that were voiced in some of the enclosed poems, notably Aldington's and Pound's contributions. Later, Lord Osbourne Beauclerk, a friend of Blunt's present at the event on his request, recalled how Blunt had contributed to the conversation by reading a poem in translation about Don Juan, 'prefacing it with the remark that he hoped they wouldn't be too shocked. When we read Ezra Pound's and Aldington's compositions the next day, we realized how unnecessary W.B.'s fear had been.'³² While Blunt's reading of the Don Juan poem may have been an attempt to endear himself to what he perceived as the younger generation's interest in liberty, it could not rival the frank display of the naked female on the box. Of all of the contributions and their joking attitude towards women and sex, it was Gaudier's box that seemed, strangely, to have gone too far – or, more likely, to have been too obvious. The side of the box with the naked female was quickly hidden against the wall by Blunt soon after the event. However much he may have enjoyed the company of these 'capital fellows', Gaudier's relief carving was not something he could accept so lightheartedly. In short, whether or not Blunt grasped the sexual innuendo of the *Coffer* and its attempts both to coyly mock the seriousness of the event and to bond the all-male gathering together in the exchange, it seems that it was an in-joke better left obscured in the future.

One should be cautious of assuming that Gaudier and Pound were in complete agreement about the *Coffer* and its innuendo. The French-born sculptor was, after all, entirely alien to the complex social network of the Peacock Dinner and the literary allegiances Pound hoped to orchestrate. The thoroughly bohemian sculptor would have had no place at that table. Pound's machinations for the Peacock Dinner were manipulative and controlling, and he dispatched numerous missives to the attendees to guarantee their obedient cooperation.³³ By contrast, Gaudier's personality rebelled against any such authority, even that of his allies. As Pound remarked, it was both Gaudier's youth and 'truculence' that gave him such a sense of self-assuredness.³⁴ With a short period of execution for the coffer, Pound could not have hoped to exercise the same amount of control over the sculptor's work as he had with the poets. He was not entirely sure how the young artist would meet the challenge. Writing earlier to Lady Gregory, Pound expressed concern about the box for this important event, saying 'I hope his decoration won't be too ultra-modern'.³⁵

Gaudier had known Pound less than a year when the poet asked the sculptor to make the box in under a fortnight. Gaudier had an ambivalent attitude towards commissions, and in particular for decorative work. He wrote in 1913, '[What] I really want to do is to sculpt a large statue in hard stone, and for that I must first get a commission. All this year I have been reduced to doing little statues in plaster and bronze, and portraits, which haven't in the least satisfied my desires or my ability'.³⁶ Gaudier had a strong, if not inflated, sense of his own artistic worth, and commissions seemed like a necessary evil in many ways – especially minor ones for decorative objects. He was, nevertheless, very enthusiastic about Pound's interest in his work, in part because it began with a sale, and found in the poet someone who could assist in his desire to belong to the avant-garde subculture of London. For instance, they joined forces to criticize in print Aldington's defence of the neoclassical figurative traditions in modern art.³⁷ Each increasingly found the other to be an important confirmation of his own position as a modernist, and Gaudier's portrait of Pound and Pound's memoir of Gaudier attest to that mutual identification.³⁸ Nevertheless, Gaudier could not see himself as a subservient artisan, even for Pound. In both this work, and in the other main commission for a portrait of Pound, Gaudier made sure to maintain a degree of independence by introducing insider jokes of a sexual nature that Pound could share while nevertheless – as the patron – being their target.

The *Blunt Coffer* operates in this way through the titillating act of opening the box decorated with a naked female, a female that appears to be inside as well as outside. The suggestion is that opening this particular box will allow greater access to the female nude, as being both the sign of the contents and possibly the contents itself. The ambiguity of the figure's spatial relation to the box and its contents lends a degree of anticipation to the discovery of what lies within it, and the work operates as a joking conflation of the terms of the Pandora myth, in which the opening of the box was made analogous to a perilous sexual act. This jest was overtly sexist in that it uncritically traded on the hackneyed formula of woman as lure and trap for men's desire. That is, the joke (and a poor one at that) hinges on the recasting of the stereotypical role of the female body as the dual



4. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Doorknocker*, 1914. Brass, 17.7 cm. Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge

site of desire and danger. Pound may have appreciated the easy sexism of this innuendo, seeing it as part of the homosocial exchange that determined the Peacock Dinner more generally, but nevertheless it made Gaudier's contribution to the dinner contentious.

Gaudier 'had a great sense of the comic', as Ford Madox Ford recalled in 1919.³⁹ The ribald allusion of the *Blunt Coffin* is a manifestation of this and was consistent with the still-youthful Gaudier's infamous irreverence, puckish behaviour, and predilection for sexual humour. He frequently used sexual topics and jokes to amuse himself and embarrass others, and there are numerous instances of this attitude throughout the published remembrances of him. One particularly disturbing example is provided by Horace Brodzky (1885–1969), who recounts the story of one such 'joke' in which Gaudier enacted mock sexual violence on a life-size female nude in clay he had been sculpting. Dissatisfied with the figure, he decided to destroy it in an elaborate impromptu performance for Brodzky and Sophie Brzeska. Brodzky recalled:

It took on the nature of rapine and indecency. He took modelling tools and gouges, and climbing on to the dais before the figure he commenced scooping out of the soft clay a channel suggestive of an obstetrical operation. He was highly amused. I am sure that he would not have acted so had he been alone. But something in him made him crazy, or perhaps he thought it

amusing. I am sure it was the latter, for he had a queer and obscene sense of humour. He had often produced works quite pornographic, and others indecent, thinking them very amusing. He would always destroy these after showing them to me.⁴⁰

Gaudier concluded this 'very amusing' performance by dismembering the figure and slicing off its breasts. Brodzky's recollection of this scene received a far more detailed recounting than any other anecdote in his biography, and there is little doubt that this is due to the impression it left on him. While this instance is particularly extreme and problematic, such performances were a central component of Gaudier's self-fashioning and attest to the irreverence and crudity of his humour.

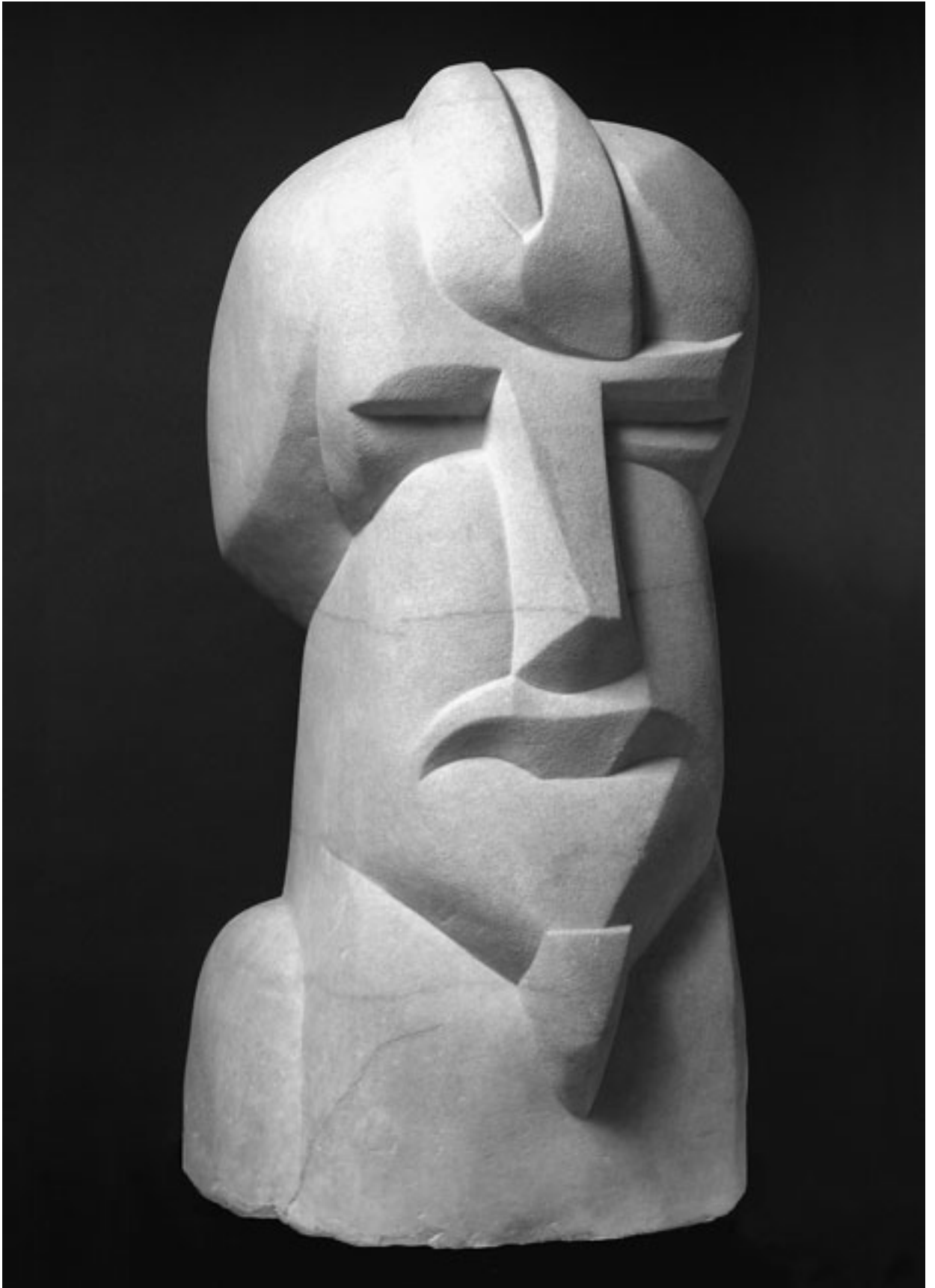
Returning to the *Blunt Coffin*, we may at first think that such an adolescent jest would be out of place in Gaudier's response to Pound's serious commission. On the contrary, Pound and Gaudier's relationship frequently took as its theme a celebration of masculinity and heterosexuality as fundamental characteristics of modernism. In general, the rhetoric of English modernism invoked and relied

upon an exaggerated defence of heterosexual masculinity, as Lisa Tickner has amply demonstrated.⁴¹ Other sculptures by Gaudier further reflected this tendency to lace his decorative and functional works with innuendo. For instance, he made another small decorative object in 1914 – a doorknocker based on a Maori *tiki* (fig. 4).⁴² Making a similarly crude jest, he equated the act of knocking on a door with sexual penetration, as can be seen from the erect phallus prominently placed at the base of the doorknocker – just where one would hold it in order to request entry.

Especially in the case of Pound, the sexual innuendo proved to be central to the ways in which Gaudier balanced his own sense of artistic integrity and the demands of work-for-hire. In the fast intimacy that had emerged between the poet and the sculptor, Gaudier's jests served as a way to maintain a degree of independence from his patron-friend. At the same time, the ribald allusions sanctioned the enthusiasm each had for the other. As Pound wrote the year after Gaudier's death in 1915, 'He was certainly the best company in the world, and some of my best days, the happiest and the most interesting, were spent in his uncomfortable mud-floored studio'.⁴³ Gaudier's influence on Pound helped shift his concerns more to the visual arts and to Vorticism, and Pound proved to be Gaudier's most loyal advocate. In this period from late 1913 to early 1914, they were closely linked professionally and personally. To be clear: I am not suggesting here that Pound and Gaudier's mutual excitement towards each other was erotic. Rather, in this case, the sexualized jokes served to safeguard their friendship from that possible misreading while at the same time providing a counter-balance to the unequal distribution of power that was generated by their patron–artist relationship. The close homosociality of Pound and Gaudier's modernism, that is, was aided by Gaudier's puckish distancing and chummy bonding via the practice of crude innuendo in his work.

The most infamous of Gaudier's sexualized sculptures is undoubtedly the other work commissioned by Pound in the same month as the *Blunt Coffin*. The *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* (fig. 5) reduced Pound's features to a totemic pillar much like the well-known Orongo figure from Easter Island in the British Museum. However, as Percy Wyndham Lewis noted, it was also 'Ezra in the form of a marble phallus'.⁴⁴ Brodzky recalled that 'its purpose and beginnings were entirely pornographic. Both the sculptor and the sitter had decided upon that. Brzeska informed me of the fact that it was to be a phallus'.⁴⁵ Even Pound remarked to his fiancée, Dorothy Shakespear, '[Gaudier's] column gets more gravely beautiful and more phallic each week'.⁴⁶ Gaudier began this – Pound's second commission – immediately after finishing the *Blunt Coffin*, and both were intended as polemically modernist works that attested to the homosocial acts of bonding between poet and artist as they cultivated a modernist subculture. For both, Pound seems to have been a good sport, even though the jokes were, literally and figuratively, at his expense. Each object sexualizes sculptural form by alluding, directly or obliquely, to male or female genitalia, and both emerged from that intense period of collaborative activity in the early months of 1914 in which the poet and the sculptor enjoyed each other's enthusiasm. The *Blunt Coffin* can thus be regarded as foreshadowing the phallic *Hieratic Head*, which, like its antecedent, deployed sexual innuendo to complicate Gaudier's fulfilling of

5. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*, 1914. Pentelic marble, 91.4 × 61cm. Nasher Sculpture Center (photo: David Heald)



Pound's commission while strengthening their alliance. Both may seem like simplistic jokes, but in both cases the deployment of innuendo and humour was strategic.

For all the idiosyncrasies of his personality, Gaudier had a strong sense of his own individuality, artistic talent, and drive. He harshly criticized others for the pettiness of their work and their subservience to conventions and patrons. When confronted with the economic necessity of taking commissions for decorative objects or portraits, however, Gaudier too risked compromising his purported autonomy. Such a conundrum is an all-too-common component of an artist's career, when the financing of artistic activity requires the creation of a product for a paying customer. Pound was no ordinary customer, however, and Gaudier's reaction to him mixed friendship and rivalry. The use of insider jokes and sexual innuendo by Gaudier should not be disregarded as merely symptomatic of his youth or rebelliousness. It was, rather, a targeted assertion of a degree of independence from his patron, as well as a way of confirming the pair's homosocial bonds within the context of an emerging modernism that emphasized heterosexual masculinity as one of its key traits. Both of these aims came together in the 'absurd' 'commercial' work Gaudier supplied for Pound's big event.

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1 For a historiographic assessment of Gaudier, see S. Shalgosky, R. Brookes, and J. Beckett, 'Henri Gaudier: art history and the "Savage Messiah"', in J. Lewison (ed.), *Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Sculptor 1891-1915*, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 21-28.

2 E. Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* [1916], New York, 1970.

3 A crucial recent exception is J. Wood, 'Ornaments, talismans and toys: the hand-held sculptures of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska', in J. Black (ed.), *Blasting the Future! Vorticism in Britain 1910-1920*, London, 2004, pp. 41-48. Wood's grouping of these works is based on their hand-held scale, and thus both functional (e.g. *Doorknocker*) and non-functional (e.g. *Torpedo Fish*) objects are linked together. Consequently, the *Blunt Coffer* is not discussed in this analysis, though it is briefly discussed in

J. Wood, 'Heads and tales: Gaudier-Brzeska's *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* and the making of an avant-garde homage', in D. Getsy (ed.), *Sculpture and the Pursuit of a Modern Ideal in Britain, c. 1880-1930*, Aldershot, 2004, pp. 191-218.

4 R. Cole, *Burning to Speak: The Life and Art of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska*, Oxford, 1978, p. 101.

5 Lucy McDiarmid provides an extensive analysis of the Peacock Dinner's significance for the history of modern literature in Britain in 'A Box for Wilfrid Blunt', *PMLA*, CXX, 1, 2005, pp. 163-80.

6 W. S. Blunt diary quoted in E. Longford, *A Pilgrimage of Passion: The Life of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt*, London, 1979, p. 394. For an account of Blunt's acceptance speech at the Peacock Dinner, see R. Aldington, 'Presentation to Mr W. S. Blunt', *The Egoist*, I, 3, 1914, pp. 56-57. Frederic Manning and John Masefield were absent from the event itself but contributed poems to the coffer. Blunt filled their places with Lord Osborne Beauclerk and Hilaire Belloc.

7 W. S. Blunt, address at the Peacock Dinner, 18 January 1914, transcribed by F. S. Flint (F. S. Flint Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin).

8 W. S. Blunt, 20 January 1914, quoted in McDiarmid, as at note 5, p. 163. In part in response to the Peacock Dinner, Blunt would publish his complete poems later that year at the urging of Lady Gregory. For discussion see L. McDiarmid, 'Lady Gregory, Wilfrid Blunt, and London Table Talk',

Irish University Review, XXXIV, 1, 2004, pp. 67-80.

9 Printed in E. Pound, 'Homage to Wilfrid Blunt', *Poetry*, III, 6, 1914, pp. 220-23. The reference to the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini and his fight for democratic self-rule is an erroneous replacement of Blunt's support for Ahmed Urabi and his fervent opposition to Ottoman and British economic imperialism in Egypt. Blunt expressed reservations about the extent to which the younger poets understood his work. See Longford, as at note 6, pp. 396-97.

10 Ezra Pound to F. S. Flint, n.d. [December-January 1914], F. S. Flint Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

11 Richard Aldington to F. S. Flint, 8 January 1914; *ibid.* McDiarmid interprets the tone of this letter as, in addition, an assertion of the hierarchical organization of the event; as at note 5, p. 172.

12 Ezra Pound to F. S. Flint, postcard, 21 July 1914; as at note 10.

13 Ezra Pound to F. S. Flint, n.d. [January-February 1914]; *ibid.*

14 Blunt diary, 18 January 1914, quoted in Longford, as at note 6, p. 394.

15 Transcript of W. S. Blunt's address to the Peacock Dinner, 18 January 1914; as at note 10. This version differs from the edited account that appeared in Aldington, as at note 6, pp. 56-57.

16 W. S. Blunt to S. Cockerell, 23 January 1914, quoted in Longford, as at note 6, p. 396. At some subsequent date the relief was presented

facing outwards, as there is evidence of smoke-staining. I am grateful to John Lytton for his recollections of the placement of the *Coffer* in Blunt's house. As he remembered it, the relief had always faced the wall. John Lytton to the author, 23 July 2002.

17 Anne Wagner has recently argued that W. C. Roentgen's discovery of the X-ray in 1895 opened up new possibilities for conceiving vision as seeing-into and that Vorticism (in her example, Jacob Epstein) drew upon these conceptions. See A. Wagner, *Mother Stone: The Vitality of Modern British Sculpture*, New Haven and London, 2005, p. 66.

18 Pound to Dorothy Shakespear, 14 January 1914, in Omar Pound and A. Walton Litz (eds.), *Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear: Their Letters: 1909-1914*, London, 1984, p. 303.

19 Pound, as at note 2, p. 129.

20 Ezra Pound to Lady Gregory, 4 January 1914, quoted in Longford, as at note 6, p. 394.

21 For a discussion of this work, see D. Getsy, 'Privileging the object of sculpture: actuality and Harry Bates's *Pandora* of 1890', *Art History*, XXVIII, 1, 2005, pp. 74-95.

22 E. Silber, *Gaudier-Brzeska: Life and Art*, London, 1996, p. 101.

23 Evelyn Silber to the author (email), 28 February 2003.

24 Tate Gallery, *The Tate Gallery Illustrated Catalogue*, London, 1913, p. 126.

25 See D. Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877-1905*, New Haven and London, 2004, pp. 179-87 and, for further context, D. Getsy, 'Punks and professionals: the identity of the sculptor 1900-1925', in P. Curtis

et al. (eds.), *Sculpture in 20th-Century Britain*, Leeds, 2003, pp. 9–20.

26 Longford, as at note 6, p. 396.

27 For an extended discussion of the Pandora legend and its iconographies, see D. Panofsky and E. Panofsky, *Pandora's Box: The Changing Aspects of a Mythical Symbol*, 2nd edn, New York, 1962.

28 S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. J. Strachey, New York, 1965, p. 389 (section VI, E).

29 'The Theme of the Three Caskets' [1913] in J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XII, London, 1958, p. 292.

30 McDiarmid, as at note 5, p. 164.

31 The foundation discussion of homosociality in this expanded sense is E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, 1985.

32 Quoted in Longford, as at note 6, p. 396. Blunt read a translation of the

Comte de Gobineau's 'Leporello', calling it 'Don Juan's Good-Night'. For more on this choice of Blunt's, see McDiarmid, as at note 5, p. 176.

33 For a discussion of the hierarchical organization of the event, see McDiarmid, as at note 5.

34 Pound, as at note 2, p. 46.

35 Ezra Pound to Lady Gregory, 4 January 1914, quoted in Silber, as at note 22, p. 268.

36 Henri Gaudier-Brzeska to Dr Uhlemayr, 6 January 1913, quoted in H. S. Ede, *Savage Messiah* [1931], London, 1972, p. 132.

37 The exchange was sparked by R. Aldington, 'Anti-Hellenism: A Note on Some Modern Art', the *Egoist*, I, 2, 1914, pp. 35–36 and came to include E. Pound, 'The New Sculpture', the *Egoist*, I, 4, 1914, pp. 67–68; Auceps [Richard Aldington], 'The New Art', the *Egoist*, I, 5, 1914, p. 97; Ezra Pound, 'The Caressability of the Greeks', the *Egoist*, I, 6, 1914, p. 117; H. Gaudier-

Brzeska, 'Mr Gaudier-Brzeska on "The New Sculpture"', the *Egoist*, I, 6, 1914, pp. 117–18; Auceps [Richard Aldington], 'The New Sculpture', the *Egoist*, I, 7, 1914, pp. 137–38.

38 Pound enthusiastically recalled this intense period of friendship and collaboration in Pound, as at note 2, pp. 45–50. For an important discussion of the Pound–Gaudier collaboration, see Wood, 'Heads and tales', as at note 3, pp. 191–218.

39 F. Madox Hueffer, 'Henri Gaudier: the story of a low tea-shop', *English Review*, 1919, p. 297.

40 H. Brodzky, *Henri Gaudier-Brzeska 1891–1915*, London, 1933, p. 82.

41 L. Tickner, 'Now and then: the Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound', *Oxford Art Journal*, XVI, 2, 1993, pp. 55–61;

L. Tickner, 'Men's work? Masculinity and modernism', in N. Bryson, M. A. Holly and K. Moxey (eds.), *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1994,

pp. 42–82; L. Tickner, *Modern Life & Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London, 2000.

42 See A. Wilkinson, 'Paris and London: Modigliani, Lipchitz, Epstein, and Gaudier-Brzeska', in W. Rubin (ed.), 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: *Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, New York, 1984, Vol. II, pp. 445–47. See also Brodzky, as at note 40, p. 90.

43 Pound, as at note 2, p. 47.

44 Quoted in R. Cork, *Vorticism and Abstract Art in the First Machine Age*, London, 1976, Vol. I, p. 182.

45 Brodzky, as at note 40, pp. 58–59.

46 Pound to Dorothy Shakespear, 10 March 1914, in Pound and Litz (eds.), as at note 18, p. 323. For further discussion of the phallic representation of Pound, see Wood, 'Heads and tales', as at note 4, and Tickner, 'Now and then', as at note 41.