

“My desire has been to indicate the most practical modes in which we can employ the noblest and the most refined of the plastic arts in the adornment of our streets and public buildings on the one hand, and of our private houses on the other.”

—EDMUND GOSSE

Author, translator, librarian, and scholar EDMUND GOSSE (1849–1928) was one of the most important art critics writing about sculpture in late-nineteenth century Britain. In 1895, he published *The Place of Sculpture in Daily Life*, a quirky, four-part series of essays that ran in the *Magazine of Art* under the headings “Certain Fallacies,” “Sculpture in the House,” “Monuments,” and “Decoration.”

Often cited but never before reprinted, Gosse’s essays sought to demystify sculpture and to promote its patronage and appreciation. Martina Droth’s introduction and commentary contextualize the essays in their era, providing insight into the world of late-Victorian sculpture. David J. Getsy’s afterword connects the essays’ themes to the present, offering a resonant perspective on the sculpture of today.

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EDMUND GOSSE

THE PLACE OF SCULPTURE IN DAILY LIFE

SOBERSCOVE PRESS

# THE PLACE OF SCULPTURE IN DAILY LIFE

BY EDMUND GOSSE

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY MARTINA DROTH

AFTERWORD BY DAVID J. GETSY

**AFTERWORD:  
TOWARD A PRACTICABLE SCULPTURE**

**BY DAVID J. GETSY**

These were odd texts, even at the moment of their publication in 1895. In earnest, Edmund Gosse wrote on behalf of sculptors, whom he cast as innovative but underfunded. He made his case through detailing the ways in which his readers encountered and could encounter sculptural objects in the streets, on their buildings, and in their homes. These essays on “Sculpture in Daily Life” contended for the future of sculpture, which they posited as not just a civic and public art but a potentially personal one as well. They came on the heels of another four-part article series that ardently and not impartially put forth evidence of a coherent history of innovation in sculpture in Britain over the previous two decades.<sup>1</sup> Gosse had been writing sculpture criticism for the past fifteen years for the *Saturday Review*, but in these years he more strategically became a polemicist on behalf of the medium.

Why care so much? And, more specifically, why write these texts that seemed to scold readers even as they sought to cultivate them into patrons? One answer surely lies in Gosse's own personal involvement with the medium, wrapped up in his youthful and unrequited love for the sculptor he made the harbinger of new, modern sculpture—Hamo Thornycroft. While his passions had long since cooled, Gosse nevertheless held on to deep attachments to Thornycroft and, specifically, to memories of the sculptor's friendship at a moment when Gosse was discovering his own confidence and the world outside his previously more delimited one.<sup>2</sup> Gosse wrote in 1883 about the end of these years (marked by the sculptor's engagement to Agatha Cox), saying "[A]t this crisis of our lives my one great thought is one of gratitude for these four wonderful years, the summer of my life, which I have spent in a sort of morning-glory walking by your side."<sup>3</sup> At the time, Gosse had made Thornycroft into his own internal object, through which he began to re-engage the world. In a sustained displacement, Hamo's labor became Edmund's love. The pride of place that Thornycroft's statuette of the *Mower* has in these articles is indicative of how much the sculptor continued to play the role of a sort of muse for Gosse's critical practice. By no means the only sculptor for whom Gosse advocated, Thornycroft and his ongoing friendship nevertheless set the terms for many of Gosse's attitudes and enthusiasms.<sup>4</sup> Thornycroft came from a family of sculptors (his parents were the prominent mid-Victorian artists Mary and Thomas Thornycroft), and Gosse had ingratiated himself into that family's life during the "summer" of his life.<sup>5</sup> Their home really was an experience of sculpture as daily life, and Gosse remembered it with love and affection.

I'm emphasizing the importance of love and its memory for these essays precisely because they argue such an ardent case for making

contemporary sculpture a part of one's life—a companion present in the drawing room and on the avenues. Gosse wanted his readers to embrace and to care for sculpture, not thinking of it as something distant and authoritative but as related to them, near them, and for them. For this reason, he argued for the financial and commercial support for sculptors, pleading with readers to support the medium and its practitioners. He often overstated his case, but nevertheless he sought to protect sculpture by widening the network of those who could be its patrons and admirers. Gosse, out of love, wanted to nurture and share the excitement that he felt for sculpture—excitement that drew its energy from Thornycroft's work, home, and companionship, still.

Soon after these essays, the type of sculpture that Gosse endorsed became embattled and out of step with changes in modern life. For the previous two decades, the medium had experienced waves of popular and critical acclaim and the deepening of sculptors' self-reflexive engagements with its theories and practices. However, with the end of the Victorian Age and the march into the twentieth century, the representational precision and coordinated materiality that late-Victorian sculpture had explored as modernizing came to be superseded by the stylizing and abstracting attitudes of a more self-conscious modernism. In the subsequent half century, the monument began to fade as a site of experimentation, architecture became increasingly unadorned and streamlined, and the figurative statue was cast as the symbol of the denial of modernity's pace. Indeed, the next generations of British sculptors focused on the tabletop and the domestic scale for their works, seeing—like Gosse—the home as a viable site for an intimate and long-term relationship with sculpture.<sup>6</sup> Many of the best early works of artists such as Barbara Hepworth and Henry

Moore aimed for domestic interiors. The semi-abstract biomorphism of their styles was produced through a renewed emphasis on direct carving, which resulted in compact works that could be seen just as well in the drawing room as the gallery. Zooming out to the broad history of European and American sculpture in the twentieth century, one can see how such sculptures signaled the expansion of abstraction and sidelined genres such as the portrait bust and the “Great Man” monument, which had previously been the sculptor’s main occupation. Instead, increasingly abstract works vied for attention, monuments become democratized, and new materials and methods (from welding to assemblage to industrial fabrication) all brought sculpture further and further away from its role as the official medium for figuring authority—in the form of a statue of a leader marking a public square or thoroughfare. In 1979, Rosalind Krauss wrote about this move away from the logic of the monument as a means of understanding just how far sculpture had come since the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Sites, installations, impermanent structures, and even human bodies were, by Krauss’s time, enveloped in the category of “sculpture,” and the medium became predicated on a blurring of the boundaries between art and life.

Gosse’s essays presage such later developments. He longed for the monument to be redirected away from the politician and toward the anonymous laborer. He wanted the domestic-scale statuette to be a prized possession and daily spur to contemplation. He saw sculpture in the streets as a public art for all, visible on every building and at every turn. The love he encouraged for sculpture in and as daily life was a way of urging people to find new homes, new uses, and new relationships for the medium. Sculpture, he implied, could be *everywhere* and for *everyone*. That is, even

though the representational style of his favored artists would be cast as the foil against which modernism marched, Gosse's dream of sculpture's ubiquity might be considered (with a little irony) as one of the initial steps into the "expanded field." While such a claim is intentionally absurd, unhistorical, and provocative, I make it to highlight how Gosse's ardent wish to activate the daily experience of sculpture as something outside a museum or gallery can be related to analogous impulses that produced such varied later practices as the earthwork, Joseph Beuys's social sculpture, Michael Asher's displacements, Lygia Clark's *Bichos*, Scott Burton's chairs, or Oscar Tuazon's constructions—just to name a few. Such moves into life require hope and care, and they are accompanied by the risk taken by the sculptor in putting their work into the pulse of the everyday. Gosse saw that risk and countered it by encouraging love and by authorizing his readers to adopt sculpture as personal and intimate. He dreamed of a time when sculpture had a wider, more accessible audience. He wanted people of all kinds to make it their own and make its appreciation a daily experience and a regular practice, or, as he called it, "practicable sculpture." Readers today, it wouldn't be too far-fetched to say, could still benefit from such encouragements.

#### NOTES

- 1 Gosse's series "The New Sculpture" appeared in the *Art Journal* in May, July, September, and October of 1894. For discussion, see Susan Beattie, *The New Sculpture* (Yale University Press, 1983), and Mark Stocker, "Edmund Gosse on Sculpture," *University of Leeds Review* 28 (1985–86), pp. 283–310.
- 2 On the Gosse–Thornycroft relationship, see David Getsy, *Body Doubles: Sculpture in Britain, 1877–1905* (Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 65–68. For further on Gosse and the context of homoeroticism, see Michael Hatt, "Near and Far: Homoeroticism, Labour and Hamo Thornycroft's *Mower*," *Art History* 26.1 (February 2003), pp. 26–55; David Getsy, "Recognizing the Homoerotic: The Uses of Intersubjectivity in John Addington Symonds's 1887 *Essays on Art*," *Visual Culture in Britain* 8.1 (2007), pp. 37–57; John

- Younger, "Ten Unpublished Letters by John Addington Symonds at Duke University," *The Victorian Newsletter* 95 (Spring 1999); Rupert Croft-Cooke, *Feasting with Panthers: A New Consideration of Some Late Victorian Writers* (W. H. Allen, 1967).
- 3 Edmund Gosse to Hamo Thornycroft, 2 July 1883, Gosse Archives, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.
  - 4 Beyond the importance of Thornycroft as catalyst, there were further affections and identifications that contributed to Gosse's engagement with sculpture. Jason Edwards has recently made a compelling and far-reaching case for how much the shape of Gosse's sculpture criticism was fueled by personal histories and familial bonds. In what is the most sensitive and complex reading of Gosse's art criticism to date, Edwards demonstrates how the writer offers an exemplary methodological and historiographic touchstone for new accounts of British art. See Jason Edwards, "Generations of Modernism, or, a Queer Variety of Natural History: Edmund Gosse and Sculptural Modernity," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 14.2 (2015): n.p. See further his "Edmund Gosse and the Victorian Nude," *History Today* 51.11 (November 2001), pp. 29–35.
  - 5 For an account of the Thornycroft family, see Elfrida Manning, *Marble and Bronze: The Art and Life of Hamo Thornycroft* (Trefoil Books and Eastview Editions, 1982). The standard biography of Gosse is Ann Thwaite, *Edmund Gosse: A Literary Landscape, 1849–1928* (Secker and Warburg, 1984).
  - 6 For more on the context of the statuette for Gosse, see Jason Edwards, "'An Entirely Unimportant Deviation?': Aestheticism and the Critical Location of the Statuette in *Fin-De-Siècle* England," *Sculpture Journal* 7 (2002), pp. 58–69.
  - 7 Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," *October* 8 (1979), pp. 30–44.

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