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ROUBILIAC: SOME PROBLEMS

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Despite the familiarity of much of his best work and the many discoveries made by recent scholars like Malcolm Baker and Tessa Murdoch, Roubiliac remains an unusually problematic artist. The problems can be placed under two headings: the origins of his art and his place in English sculpture. The known facts of his career before his mid-30s can be stated in one sentence. He was born in Lyons probably in 1702: he won 2nd prize at the French Salon of 1730 for a sculpture of a Biblical subject and by 1735 he had arrived in England. Everything else is a matter of conjecture for all contemporary accounts, especially those of Vertue, are full of contradictions. We do not know for certain the master or masters to whom he was apprenticed, nor in which cities. There are no securely attributed sculptures before *Handel* for the Vauxhall Gardens of 1738, by which time he had been in England for at least three years and possibly several more.

His mature career is more visible but there are still mysteries: how did he obtain the Vauxhall commission without apparently any previous reputation? How then did he receive the very important commission for the monument to Bishop Hough in Worcester Cathedral in the early 1740s, and most remarkable of all, how did he snatch the great commission for the Argyll monument in Westminster Abbey from Rysbrack, the best-established sculptor of the day who had submitted a number of drawings for it? When Roubiliac completed the Argyll and later monuments in Westminster Abbey he was fulsomely acclaimed, but there still remains a problem in accounting for the success of such exuberant and emotional works in the supposedly rational climate of mid-

18th-century England. Much of the darkness which surrounds Roubiliac's life may be attributed to his Huguenot connections, for these would have thwarted any early ambitions for a career in France while in England they would have tended to confine him to relatively narrow circles, though the groups around the St Martin's Lane Academy would have been open to him. It is perhaps significant that though Vertue was a close friend of Rysbrack he had only a passing acquaintance with Roubiliac.

Evidence has been emerging recently, however, which casts some light on Roubiliac's career before he arrived in England. The central and much-disputed question is whether the main features of his later style can be accounted for by assuming that his training was entirely French or within a French context, or whether he had been directly subjected at a formative age to Italian or Central European influences.¹ Of modern scholars Mrs Esdaile² and Margaret Whinney³ were firm in their belief that Roubiliac spent time in Dresden as an assistant to Balthasar Permoser working on the Zwinger, while Mrs Webb⁴ strongly denied such a possibility. Vertue, though he refers several times to Roubiliac's early life, seems to have been in a state of utter confusion, connecting him with Switzerland, Normandy and Liège, though he does finally realise that he was born in Lyons. Vertue does not mention Dresden but J. T. Smith does, stating that he was 'a pupil of Balthazar Dresden'.⁵ J. T. Smith is an infuriatingly unreliable source but he did have some reason to know in this case because his father was Roubiliac's assistant. Furthermore the story has an inherent plausibility, for Huguenots were often to be found in the German courts, particularly Berlin and Sweden, and the immensity of the Zwinger as a sculptural project could have been a big attraction for a young and ambitious sculptor. Malcolm Baker has recently found a fascinating reference in a book published in 1895 by Gustav Otto Müller called *Vergessene und halbvergessene Künstler des Vorigen Jahrhunderts* in which it is claimed that Roubiliac had an uncle at the Dresden court who was a 'büchfuhrer' or accountant. I visited Dresden last year and was

1. The most recent and complete discussion of the question is to be found in Malcolm Baker 'Roubiliac and his European Background', *Apollo*, August 1984, pp. 106-13.

2. Katherine A. Esdaile, *The Life and Works of Louis François Roubiliac*, 1928.

3. Margaret Whinney, *Sculpture in Britain, 1530-1830*, 1964, p. 102.

4. M. I. Webb, 'The French antecedents of L. F. Roubiliac', *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, 1957, p. 84.

5. J. T. Smith, *Nollekens and his Times*, 2nd ed., 1829, Vol 2, p. 96.

6. I am grateful to Dr M. Raumschüssel, Director of the Skulpturenabteilung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden and Drs Joachim and Ingelore Menzhausen for their help with this matter.

7. Private letter to the present writer.

8. Malcolm Baker, *op. cit.* pp. 106f.

9. Tessa Murdoch, 'Roubiliac as an Architect?' *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 122, Jan. 1980, pp. 40-46.

10. Malcolm Baker, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-3.

informed that the accounts of the building of the Zwinger were destroyed as a space-saving measure about 1905, and none of the Dresden scholars working on the Zwinger has found any early reference to either Roubiliac or his work.⁶ Furthermore Dr Peter Betthausen has very kindly made a search for references to the 'Buchführer Roubiliac' in the Dresden archives but his report is discouraging: 'As I promised I have looked through (from 1729) all the volumes of the *Hof-und-Staatskalender* available at the Sachsische Landesbibliothek in Dresden. Unfortunately they did not mention Roubiliac. By the way there was no post of Buchführer at the Dresden court until 1736. There are no manuscripts of any previous Kalender (i.e. in manuscript) before 1729'.⁷

It seems unlikely then that Dresden is going to yield any more information but it is hard to believe that there is not something in Müller's account; certainly the pointers are strong enough to make it more likely than not that he did spend some time there. It is, however, an important question for if he had spent time in Central Europe it would provide a background to some of the tendencies in his art; the dramatic movement and his intense concern with the lighting and setting of his sculpture. There is a persistent hint in his sculptures of the *theatrum sacrum* so popular in Southern Germany and Eastern Europe in the first half of the 18th century.⁸ Though his desires were often frustrated, he seems to have taken every opportunity to control as far as possible the light sources for his sculptures even, as Tessa Murdoch has shown, designing a chancel himself for the Warkton tombs.⁹ Of course the *theatrum sacrum* has its origins in the Roman Baroque and a youthful visit to Rome by Roubiliac is worth considering. There were, after all, French sculptors like Monnot and Legros working on Papal tombs in Rome, and it is possible to suggest intriguing parallels with some of Roubiliac's English monuments.¹⁰ But, against this, there seems to be some agreement in the sources that his visit to Rome in 1751 was his first and it is hard to see why a youthful visit to Rome would not have been known given that it was such an obvious credential for a sculptor. Against the argu-

ment that he must have travelled outside France is the fact that certain kinds of *theatrum sacrum* like the *pompes funèbres* on the occasion of a great funeral were known in France. Furthermore engravings of Roman and some Central European sculptural schemes were published almost immediately; e.g. an engraving of Fischer von Erlach's *Mitrovitz* tomb in Prague appeared in England in 1730.¹¹

Whether or not Roubiliac spent time in Dresden or Rome he must have had a period of training in France to have been able to enter for a prize at the French Academy in 1730. Lyons his birthplace was noted for producing and training sculptors, and there was a well established family network of Lyonnais sculptors who did much work for the French court. Coysevox was the greatest but he had died in 1720 passing on the mantle to his nephew Nicholas Coustou who remains the most likely candidate to have been Roubiliac's master though he might have worked with others on the Lyons network. His prospects would have been poor if he had become known in France as a Huguenot and he could have heard of opportunities in London. Mrs Esdaile in her otherwise useful biography of 1928 unfortunately follows Cunningham in postulating that Roubiliac came to England in the mid-1720s and compounds the mischief by creating an œuvre to cover the early years before the *Handel* statue of 1738. Not one of these works could possibly be by Roubiliac and no sculptures by him can be securely dated before the *Handel* statue itself.

The *Handel* clearly made a great impression and it became the subject of 'puffing' by laudatory poems in newspapers. This resulted in some portrait bust commissions and confirmed his involvement with the St Martin's Lane set including Hogarth. He next emerges in the mid-1740s as the author of the magnificent monument to Bishop Hough in Worcester. This was commissioned by Hough's father-in-law John Byrche after the bishop's death in 1743, and according to the bishop's biography, the monument was ordered from Roubiliac as the best sculptor of the age 'on account of his monument to Newton and others of equal

11. J. B. Fischer von Erlach, trans. by Thomas Lediard, *A Plan of Civil and Historical Architecture*, 1730. See Book IV 'Plates of Modern Structures, invented, and in part executed by the Author'. The book was originally published in Leipzig in 1725.

12. J. Wilmot, *The Life of the Rev. John Hough, D. D.*, 1812, pp. 92-93.

celebrity'.¹² As Newton's monument was in fact by Rysbrack and Roubiliac had, as far as we know, done no other monuments by this time it would be interesting to know why the sculptor was chosen. Certainly he cannot have been an obvious candidate despite the success of the *Handel*, given the large practices of Rysbrack and Scheemakers at this time. From this provincial success there is another inexplicable leap to the winning of one of the greatest sculptural projects of the age, for the Argyll monument in Westminster Abbey, the contract for which he signed in 1745. By this time the Hough monument would certainly not have been finished and we know that Rysbrack had every hope of gaining the commission for as many as 22 drawings for the scheme have been identified: yet he was beaten by a relatively inexperienced monumental sculptor. It is usual, but, I would argue, question-begging, to see the decision on the part of the Duke's executors as representing a shift of taste away from Rysbrack towards a more novel style. This can hardly have been the only explanation, and we must conjecture that Roubiliac had some powerful support from somewhere and that there was a background of intrigue behind this commission of which we have lost sight.

Vertue tells us that the Argyll monument was rapturously received; but he also notes with surprise that a relative unknown had snatched the commission: 'In this Month of May 1749 was finisht and erected in Westminster Abbey church the Monument of the Duke of Argyle which being the work of F. L. Rubilliac. ... Born in France but came to settle here at least 20 years past haveing but small encouragement at first improveing here in practice study & reputation-, whilst Mr Rysbrack statuary had all the most considerable employments of that kind- and after him Mr Scheemaker had also the run of Busines in making Monuments with other works after he had done the Monument of Shakespear. This Mr Rubilliac scarce had any considerable Capital work till this noble Mont. of the Duke of Argyle which being of a grand composition strikes the spectators with admiration, for its work

and loftiness – the beautys and richness of the Marbles etc. is beyond all others, but to speak of the Sculptors skill and Artful performance. I observe the whole is masterly, in the design Noble & Grand – the attitudes of the statues each well disposed and contrasted – at the Top. writeing the Epitaph the action of this figure light gentil and expressive'. Vertue also notes particularly the naturalness and realism of the draperies: 'really more like silk than Marble'.¹³

Vertue was equally complimentary about the next major monument by Roubiliac in the Abbey, to Field Marshal Wade in the nave above the door to the cloister, which he described as a 'noble monument ... being much commended for the excellency of its performance being esteemd as a capital work of Modern Sculpture'.¹⁴ Now the Argyll and Wade monuments are stylistically the most conservative of the seven monuments by Roubiliac in the Abbey; the Argyll is conceived broadly within the conventions of a Roman papal tomb and the figures are unusual in Roubiliac's work for their lack of dramatic connection with each other. The Wade though innovatory in its imagery of Time and Fame engaged in unequal combat, is frieze-like in composition and lacks the brilliant repoussoir effects of the later monuments, like Fleming and Hargrave. Both the Argyll and Wade monuments could be seen to balance nobility against realism and Vertue's praise of them suggests an ideal which seeks in monumental sculpture elevation and a certain gravity combined with a vivid and animated treatment of the surface. Vertue died before he could see the more dramatic conceptions of the Hargrave and Nightingale monuments so we do not know whether he would have been disturbed by their emotional power and their direct appeal to the spectator's desire to identify with the deceased. These two later monuments clearly represent a reaction against the relative remoteness from human experience of his earlier and more formal tombs in the Abbey: that this difference was perceived by others is made clear by Wesley's commendations of the two monuments. Wesley remarked in his journal for 16 March 1764, 'I

13. *Walpole Society, Vertue III*, pp. 148-49.

14. *Walpole Society, Vertue III*, p. 153.

15. See D. Bindman, 'Roubiliac in Westminster Abbey', *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. IV no. 2, Nov. 1981, p. 10.

once more took a serious walk through the tombs in Westminster Abbey. What heaps of unmeaning stone and marble. But there was one tomb which showed common sense; that beautiful figure of Mr Nightingale endeavouring to screen his lovely wife from death. Here indeed the marble seems to speak, and the statues appear only not alive'.¹⁵ This change in style and vocabulary in Roubiliac's tomb sculpture in the mid-1750s might simply reflect a shift in taste but it could also suggest an active response on Roubiliac's part to changing expectations of the rôle of sculptured imagery and new religious attitudes towards death. The comments of Vertue and Wesley on Roubiliac represent two different though not necessarily incompatible ways of looking at tomb sculpture and they might suggest a sympathy in Roubiliac's later life with Wesley's own reaction against the rational spirit of the early 18th-century Church of England. This change in Roubiliac's art has, of course, been observed before, but has been usually attributed entirely to a new enthusiasm for the High Baroque created by his first recorded visit to Rome in 1751.

The final question I want to raise is particularly appropriate to the present context: in what sense was Roubiliac a rococo sculptor? A definition of the rococo would be difficult but some observations on the possible limits of its application are surely permissible. We have no difficulty in seeing decorative objects which follow certain patterns as rococo, but with sculpture we are more likely to take into account function, setting and mood rather than just the form of the work. The Vauxhall *Handel*, for example, might be seen as rococo in that it was conceived within a context which would dictate or encourage wit and lightness of conception. Yet taken as an object apart from its original setting it would be hard to make a broad distinction between the style of the *Handel* and that of garden sculptures made by the brothers Coustou and even Coysevox. Yet these can hardly be described unequivocally as rococo; rather they come at a point where, it may be argued, the late Baroque is moving towards the rococo. In fact compared to such predecessors as Nicholas Coustou's *Adonis* and Coysevox's

Duchess de Bourgogne both of 1710 and Guillaume Coustou's *Maria Leczinska as Juno*, 1725-31, the *Handel* is relatively sedate and lacking the instantaneous movement so often seen as a characteristic of the rococo. The *Handel* distinguishes itself from its predecessors not so much in its lightness of touch as in its relative realism: a close observation of the minutiae of physiognomy or dress rather than mouvementé forms. Yet such realism is hard to reconcile with one's understanding of the rococo as above all an artificial style, associated with pleasure and artifice. Handel's negligently undone buttons and the hanging or fallen slippers can be seen as a witty retort to more serious portrayals of an artist receiving inspiration, but such realism is also a feature of many of Roubiliac's mourning figures. In the Lynn (Southwick), Montagu (Warkton) and Shannon (Walton-on-Thames) monuments the widow in each case has her shoe hanging off, presumably to signify the agitation of loss or perhaps a desire to flee the earthly bonds to join the husband in heaven. In any case such actuality surely follows from the sculptor's concern to involve the spectator in the action of the sculpture, to make the mourner leaning against the tomb act as a bridge between the spectator's reality and the reality established within the sculpture, a connection achieved often in Roubiliac's monuments by control of the light source and viewpoint. Such control of the sculpture's setting is again essentially High Baroque and the conviction with which Roubiliac pursued such objectives tends to confirm Malcolm Baker's theory that he did indeed have knowledge of South German sculpture and perhaps even such spectacularly illusionistic works as the Asam altarpiece at Rohr, which I would also claim to be not rococo but entirely High Baroque in spirit.

If labels are important to us, then it might be more accurate to call Roubiliac a Late Baroque realist, for there is nothing in the movement or rhythm of his busts which goes beyond the limits set by Coysevox or the Coustou brothers; on the other hand he is capable of an almost brutal directness, as in the bust of Martin Folkes, which must owe something to Hogarth's portraits,

16. Esdaile, 1928, p. 139.

especially *Captain Coram* of 1740. Hogarth himself kept a certain distance from the Vauxhall Gardens project and his social concerns and chauvinism mark him off from the more Francophile tendencies of the St Martin's Lane group. Despite his French nationality it seems probable that Roubiliac was in close sympathy with Hogarth. His only published writing was a poem in support of the Society of Artists exhibition in Spring Gardens in 1761,¹⁶ for which Hogarth had made a design in the catalogue showing a connoisseur as an overdressed monkey watering dead trees. Roubiliac, writing in French, attacks connoisseurs who ignorantly admire antiquity at the expense of local talent in words which, were they in English and more pungently phrased, could have been written by Hogarth himself. The kind of realism represented by the bust of Folkes and Hogarth's portraits is almost defiantly anti-French in spirit and contains an implied criticism of French affectation and artificiality.

I have cast some doubts in this paper on whether Roubiliac can be called a rococo sculptor but I do not mean to deny that there is any sculpture which can be called rococo. Ironically perhaps, there is little French sculpture which seems to deserve the name though there are certainly examples in Central Europe which have the lightness of touch and conscious artificiality which I would regard as the *sine qua non* of any definition of rococo. Here I am thinking of the works of Ferdinand Dietz in the gardens of Veitshöchheim near Würzburg, but it can also be observed occasionally in sculptures within a religious context as in the extraordinary wooden sculptures of the Lemberg (Lvov) sculptor Polajowski in a church in Sandomierz in Eastern Poland. Here the figures are poised elegantly almost on the points of their feet and they are unified by an abstract sense of rhythm: in some cases the hair of the individual figures is shaped like a rococo console. In such works it can be difficult to separate the figural elements from the decorative. If a definition of the rococo has to encompass also the realism of Roubiliac's portrait busts, then it is difficult to see how it can have any meaning at all.