Portrait of the Artist--Elie Nadelman

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In 1908, when Henri Matisse opened his studio on the Boulevard d'Orléans to students, he put up a notice on the wall. "Défense de parler de Nadelman ici!"--It is forbidden to speak of Nadelman here!--the sign declared.

Why was the Polish sculptor Elie Nadelman, then 26 years old, so controversial and at the same time so popular that Matisse felt forced to admonish his students against even uttering the name? Born in Warsaw, and having studied art in Munich, Nadelman had only arrived in Paris in 1904. But in four years, he had already had his impact. His work combined intense culture with an appearance of naiveté. It was Classical yet stylishly contemporary, traditional with the effrontery of modernism. Nadelman had incorporated aspects of Greek sculpture and Canova as well as Seurat into his fascinating drawings and marble busts that also suggested the fragmentation of Cubism.

These are some of the reasons that no one could quite place or evaluate Nadelman. Yet everyone struggled in vain for labels and conclusions--which has been the situation ever since. By the time Matisse issued his stern directive, Archipenko had declared the sculptor as a sort of avatar of modernism. Alexandre and Thadée Natanson, both influential patrons, had already introduced André Gide and the novelist Octave Mirabeau to the work.

Moreover, Leo Stein had taken Picasso to Nadelman's studio. Observers as astute as Alfred Barr and Lincoln Kirstein would eventually see the influence of that visit in correct proportion, as guiding Picasso to refine certain developments already well under way, but Nadelman himself regarded his significance with almost delusional grandeur, declaring of his early drawings that they "have completely revolutionized the art of our time. They introduced into painting and sculpture abstract form, until then wholly lacking. Cubism was only an imitation of these drawings and did not attain their plastic significance."

Meanwhile, if Nadelman had no lack of self-esteem, there were those who thought otherwise. When the sculptor had his first major exhibition at Druet's on the Rue Royale in 1909, Gide, who was among le tout Paris at the vernissage, wrote a particularly deprecatory text. He made the man sound totally pathetic: "Shut up in his dirty den, he seems to have nourished himself on plaster alone. Balzac could have invented him. I saw him again yesterday in a little blue suit which doubtless he was wearing for the first time, talking with a very ordinary and ugly lady." As for the art, Gide pronounced that it "as yet has only technique, and that rudimentary." The writer, pointing out that Leo Stein had purchased a lot of the exhibition, maintained that this was because the work "can be assimilated without effort." He declared one plaster as "at least the plan for a head, with no eyes, no mouth, no nose, about as much formed as a duck of three days incubation."

Yet Nadelman's simplification and stylization had its proponents. The show at Druet's was considered the most exciting sculpture exhibition in Paris since Rodin's at the International Exposition of 1900; Bernard Berenson was so impressed that he sent important colleagues to see it. Gertrude Stein wrote of his "profound sensitiveness to lyrical beauty." But Stein also identified Nadelman's "finicky choking sense of beauty." She declared the sculptor as having "no profundity of emotion," while contrarily asserting that he was "one who was a great man and his head showed this thing showed he did thinking." His work has consistently evoked such division of sentiment.

In 1911 Helena Rubenstein bought an entire group of Nadelman's marble heads from a show in London and subsequently placed them in her beauty salons in various locations. Twelve Nadelman drawings and a plaster head were selected in 1913 for the Armory Show. When war broke out, Nadelman sailed on the Lusitania to New York; after setting up his studio in Helena Rubenstein's garage in Rye, he became the only sculptor other than Brancusi to show at Steiglitz's 291 Gallery.

Nadelman's fortunes rose and fell for the rest of his life--as they have ever since his death. In 1920 he married a widow wealthy enough for them to assemble a major collection of American folk art which opened to the public in 1926; these anonymous objects clearly influenced Nadelman's own work. This was the era in which he created his masterful pieces in cherrywood like Host and Tango, undertook prestigious portrait

commissions, and continued to create marble busts. The pieces at times idealized the human form; in other instances, especially the figures of men in top-hats and women in cinch-waist dresses, they evoked the jaunty worldliness of the 1920s.

But the stock market crash had its effect. The Nadelmans were forced to sell their folk art collection to the New York Historical Society, and Nadelman's output became more modest just as his life did; except for a few architectural commissions, he began to work on a small scale in plaster, ceramic, and terracotta. During World War II the man who had been the talk of Paris thirty-five years earlier could be found at the Bronx Veteran's Hospital where he helped wounded soldiers make sculpture as part of their rehabilitation. At the time of his death in 1946, he was living modestly and with far less renown than he had once enjoyed.

People still haven't entirely made up their minds about Elie Nadelman. When Philip Johnson's New York State Theater opened at Lincoln Center in 1964, the architect had two 19 foot high pairs of Nadelman figures carved from Carrara marble--the largest blocks of stone sent from Italy to date--and installed in the foyer. But the work was so controversial that some viewers urged its removal, and to this day the oversized figures inspire both praise and invective.

The person who had led Philip Johnson to Nadelman's work was Lincoln Kirstein. The insightful if pugnacious Kirstein had almost a lifelong obsession with the sculptor, about whom he

wrote several books and whom he championed on many fronts. Jan Nadelman, Elie's son, reports, however, that, surprisingly, his father and Kirstein never actually met. Their sole direct communication occurred in the late 1920s when Kirstein wrote Nadelman requesting the loan of work to an exhibition at his pioneering and influential Harvard Society for Contemporary Art; "the exchange was completed when my father wrote him back and said 'no'." Then, Jan Nadelman explains, "In 1946, when my father died, as you might have expected there was an obituary. This alerted Kirstein to the death of the artist he had admired but had never met." Kirstein called on Nadelman's widow, which resulted in Kirstein and his wife Fidelma regularly staying in the Nadelmans' house in Riverdale, which became a sort of refuge in the Kirsteins' otherwise tumultuous lives.

Kirstein's fealty to Nadelman's work helped alert the larger public to its qualities, as did the Museum of Modern Art solo exhibition in 1947 and a larger show at the Whitney and the National Gallery in ___. Additionally, starting in the early 1960s, Virginia Zabriskie began showing Nadelman in her gallery. Zabriskie, who mounted "eight or nine exhibitions" between then and the early 1990s, says she "probably placed more Nadelmans than anyone in the world over the years." Under Zabriskie's guidance, "the loyal collector was Joe Hirshhorn"--to whom she sold "a dozen pieces" now at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington.

While the receptiveness to, and market for, Nadelman's work has perpetually fluctuated, it seems currently at a high. A

couple of years ago, the Whitney paid $3.5 million for the two-figure wooden Tango. Then, in February of 1996, Jan Nadelman hired the Salander O'Reilly Gallery as the first exclusive representative of his father's work. The artist's son made this move having heard high praise for Salander O'Reilly from John Pierce, the head of the Gaston Lachaise Foundation, and feeling that he could no longer "do as much for the art as I should. I had not previously found a gallery which had the artillery--if you will--to handle major things."

Lawrence Salander sees Nadelman in the upper echelon of modern sculptors. Salander deems his prices strong for an American but not where they should be given his significance internationally. "No one is any better, including Giacometti and Brancusi," Salander offers with a dealer's enthusiasm. "He's an extremely important artist. The problems he's had would be as if a Brancusi or a Matisse or a Picasso moved to America." Salander feels that while the public has come to understand Nadelman's wooden pieces, that the marble and papier-maché pieces are still under-valued. The estate has quite a number of these, as it does of Nadelman's work in plaster and terra cotta, with some bronzes as well.

A major Nadelman exhibition will be organized by the American Federation of Art in 1999. And Jan Nadelman is finding a surge of interest in his father's work from "young people, young artists and critics. They recognize that it has a place in modern art. A lot of young artists have told me their work has been

influenced by his even if it doesn't show." A resurrection of Nadelman's reputation is taking place in Poland, and a lot is being written elsewhere as well, with Jan and his daughter Cynthia Nadelman, a former editor at ARTNews, as steward's of the artist's reputation and the scholarship on his work. Not everyone shares the view of Nadelman's family and dealer that he is on a par with Brancusi, and the 1915 Reclining Stag offered at auction a couple of years ago with a low estimate of $400,000 ended up being bought in, but other major sculptures have recently been sold at auction for prices ranging from $35,000 to $245,000. In any case, whatever the variables in the public's take, one thing is for certain: it isn't forbidden to talk of Nadelman anymore.