A PROJECT IN PORTRAITURE IN SCULPTURE

By

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A TERMINAL PROJECT

Presented to the School of Architecture and
Allied Arts and the Graduate School of the
University of Oregon in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

June 1957

APPROVED:

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(Adviser for the Thesis)

The portrayal of man or woman in visual form seems to be one of the oldest heritages in art. From the early beginnings of art to the primitive art produced today, we see what can perhaps be called an instinctive urge to reproduce ourselves. These reproductions may not seem to be portraits to us, but they were meaningful and real to the people who created them. Just as we see ourselves primarily as individuals with unique qualities, ancient man saw himself as part of a higher order which joined man to beast, and so in his portraits he linked himself to both. Later, through the Greek classical influence, he related himself only to the gods. This is the influence that has continued through the baroque and neo-classical periods and is a part of the idealistic sculpture of today. The opposition to this view has always arisen when the common man has demanded to be portrayed, or when the strict demands of religion have lessened. It is then that man no longer takes on a god-like appearance but becomes real and particular. These two ways of seeing and reproducing man are as true today as they have been in the past, but today they exist simultaneously, with each artist choosing his own way, and the greater artist encompassing both. Since the existence of these two choices influences anyone who attempts to create, I feel it necessary to explore this problem in order to better understand it.

The point of the portraiture problem, to me, lies in
the ability of the artist to capture that which gives the
person his "life". If so, the portrait must be not merely
a physical replica of the person, but a selective choice and
combination of the characteristics of that person. The por-
traitist must select these characteristics much as a cara-
caturist does, the difference being that the caracaturist
emphasizes and separates these qualities in order to make
the person grotesque, and by so dcing he eliminates subtlety,
while the portraitist incorporates these characteristics
into a total conception. The caracaturist divides while the
artist unifies. The caracaturist is a journalist and is
impersonal, while the artist is highly involved and perso-
nal. His feelings about his subject differ very much from
the next artist, for his portrait reveals his attitudes and
ideals. The portraits of Despiau, for instance, show an
ideal which is highly sophisticated and reserved. He ele-
vates the human over the animal by concentrating on the in-
dividual spirit with its infinite subtleties, and the mys-
terious inner qualities of each person. In contrast to
Despiau, Epstein brings out our common earthiness and hu-
manity, making the individual into a physical, as well as
spiritual force.

The problem of interpretation becomes, not that of
"making" the person, but of "remaking" him. The "remaking"

may come from a preconception of the artist into which the person might fit, so that the individual becomes the embodiment of a type or idea.. In that case the artist must sometimes adjust some of the particularities of the individual to suit his idea. This is not a great sacrifice if the idea is strong enough. One artist seeks the impression of the individual, while another might look for his prototype or his ideal. Actually, they both seek the same end of portraying a human being as one and yet all. Each artist experiences and constantly works with both approaches. Sometimes he regards the work done from a particular situation as a study which he uses only as preliminary to a more crystallized and complete conception. At other times the study becomes an end in itself, as truly representing a particular and sometimes momentary movement or expression. Both of these aspects were combined in Rodin, for instance, in whom the curiosity and experimentation which led him to feel the force of each person can be contrasted to a deep searching which expressed itself in the "Gate of Hell"

Portraiture, then, can take into account an enormous range - from a Brancusi "Madame Pogony" to the Jean Goujon portrait of Diana de Poitier as Diana the Huntress, or the Canova portrait of Paulina Borghese as a reclining Venus. In these last two portraits the translation of the individual in terms of allegory and symbol illustrates the ex-

tremes of idealization. Here the individual becomes trans-
formed into a symbol meaningful to us, perhaps Eve, perhaps
the Divine Mother or Christ, and in the case of the Goujon
and Canova portraits, the Greek ideal.

Although the great artist eventually formulates an
ideal or strong preconceptions which guide him, he always
seems to turn to the individual for freshness and truth.
It is Epstein who, in commenting about one of his portraits,
said that at one time, if he were doing the same portrait,
he would have styalized the hair into a simplified sculp-
tural mass.[1] Instead of simplifying, however, he used the
unique rhythm of the hair to make his design richer. Per-
haps Epstein comes close to a baroque attitude of being too
interested in variation - but I believe that what is valua-
ble in this attitude is his understanding that oversimp-
lification can take the life out of art.

The value of this statement also can lie in the fact
that it was made by a modeller. A carver might have ap-
proached the problem in a completely different manner.
To Epstein the modelling process calls for its own solu-
tions, which involve using the material in the most supple
and advantageous way. Such an attitude, I believe, leads
to a greater understanding of the plastic materials as a

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[1] Goldwater and Treves, Artists on Art (New York, Pan-
theon Books, 1945), p. 464.

means toward more dynamic portraiture.

The question of interpretation, though foremost in the execution of any creative work, assumes the control of the artist over his materials and means. It implies, as far as I am concerned, a deliberate attempt of the artist to select the effect he desires from the chaos of infinite possibilities. It is through this control that the artist manifests his power and status as a conscious and skillful interpreter.

My project began as a means of concretizing and furthering my knowledge of the materials I worked with and the means I used in producing sculpture. My aim was to be more conscious of the methods of working directly from the human figure, and the head, particularly, by staying within the relatively restrictive area of portraiture. Thus in my first studies, all of which were portrait heads, I concentrated chiefly on anatomy and the most effective means of establishing anatomical correctness. After imposing what I considered a necessary discipline upon myself in these studies, I felt able to apply some of this knowledge and experience in less strict and more spontaneous essays. In these later studies, which are chronologically, the Girl with Raised Arms, the Italian Girl, and the Young Girl, I expanded my investigations from those concerning the head to include the partial or fragmented portrait, the clothed portrait, and the use of gesture.

Preliminary to the execution of most of my portraits I referred to an academic treatise on modelling procedure by Lanteri.[1] The author explained certain basic measurements and proportions which I later found useful in situations where my eye measurements were doubtful. The basic measurements he recommends to start with are seven in number and are the following: distance from ear to ear (measuring from the deep notch and noting its position in height from the tip of the nose), distance from the ear to the nose and the central part of the face, distance from the tip of the nose to the projecting part of the chin, distance from the ear to the chin, distance from the ear to the hairline, from both sides, and the distance from the chin to the eyebrows. Another measurement which I found particularly useful in locating and drawing the eye was that of measuring from inner corner to inner corner of the eye, and rectifying that by another measurement from the extremities of the nostrils. The measurement of the outer corner is similar except that since the eye follows the sweep of the cheekbone, the outer corners will always be higher than the inner corners. I found it useful to illustrate the material from this treatise with diagrams and drawings from casts of sculpture, especially in reference to the struc-

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[1] Lanteri, E., Modelling, A Guide for Teachers and Students, Vol.I, (London, Chapman and Hall, LTD, 1902).

ture of the features of the head.

The choosing of the model whose portrait I wished to execute was a pleasant task, for it was purely personal and unrestricted. I asked people whom I knew well and whose personalities and expressions interested me. They were people who would enjoy watching the process and therefore would not mind sitting. This was an important consideration for my own ease. Both Inga and Ray were individuals who seemed to be challenging because their faces were very alive and mobile, with constantly changing expressions. However, they presented an excellent contrast, for Ray reminded me of a classic type, while Inga had an almost archaic look to the pattern formed by her raised eyebrows and smiling lips. Each of her features, to me, were interesting, for individually they were composed of tiny, delicate planes, and were far from regular. The head of the young man, on the other hand, was more regularly featured but was extremely sculptural to me in the clarity of its muscle formations. Apart from their facial differences, each of the individuals had a characteristic manner of bearing himself and a distinctly different shape of head.

I began my portrait on paper. That is to say, before I actually began the construction of the head, I made large drawings, life-size or over, of profile, three-quarter and front views of the model. These large drawings helped me to visualize relationships in almost the same scale as I

would use for the portrait. The next consideration was choosing a material for the portrait and setting up the appropriate armature. It is hard to separate the choice of a material from the manner in which the portrait is to be executed. In my case it was sometimes a matter of desiring to work with a certain material and conceiving the forms in terms of that material. At other times the forms of the head of the sitter suggested a material. After choosing the young man as model for the Portrait of a Young Man (plate 2), I had decided on the material of direct plaster. My conception of the young man's face as angular, with clearly defined muscles and planes, for the most part controlled this choice, for I felt that plaster would suit this relatively structural conception better than would clay. The choice was demanding in that it was my first attempt at using plaster for a direct study. Although it seemed more difficult to control than clay, familiarity with it proved that it was extremely flexible and easy to manipulate. This is especially true if the spatula can be handled in the same sensitive manner as is a wire tool or a finger in clay modelling. The reason for using the material of terra cotta for the Portrait of Inga (plate 4), was to become familiar with its possibilities for portraiture. I found that terra cotta can be controlled in a similar way to clay, except that it has a different range of textural possibilities, due to its stonier consistency. The armatures that

I constructed for the clay studies consisted of wire loops, sometimes wound with burlap and dipped in plaster, attached to a sturdy pipe. For the armature of the direct plaster portrait I used wire mesh which was cut and bent into shape.

The most important decisions which I made before proceeding with the actual modelling, concerned the size of the piece and the pose in which I placed the model. In the study of direct plaster these decisions were necessarily made beforehand, in order to construct a fairly precise armature. In my clay studies I usually made my ultimate decisions during the first sittings.

Most of the portraits are life-size or a little over, except for the small sketch entitled Portrait of Ann (plate 3). The reason for the scaling was simply that it was most within my grasp and most logical to me. My first portraits, done before I came here, were more heroic in size. Though such a size is fine for monuments, it is too formidable for portraits in the intimate sense. Also, I wished to understand the near life-size portrait, for I knew that it was quite a bit easier to enlarge than to translate without magnifying the details too greatly. In beginning the Portrait of Ray (plate 5), I worked with the model very close to the study and then attempted to make the portrait smaller than life-size. I found myself totally confused, for in order to diminish the size, I soon discovered that the model

should be placed at the distance which will create the corresponding diminished effect. This did not hold true for the very small sketch, where such extreme dimunition could be more easily comprehended. The sketch size was very pleasant to work with, since the study could be held in the hand and modelled almost entirely in a tactile manner. It may be that the use of a sketch as preparatory to a portrait would allow one to treat the final study more directly.

In my choice of poses I was concerned with keeping my problem as uncomplicated as possible. I wished to work within the confines of a simple frontal pose, which I allowed to vary only slightly in the tilt. I was interested in bringing out the distinct mood of each portrait through subtle differences in the pose and expression. Each circumstance implied a means of terminating the neck. The graceful, delicate quality which I tried to express in the Portrait of Inga (plate 4), seemed to call for the termination of the neck in a sort of ruff, which moved around rhythmically, repeating the tilt of her smile. The Portrait of Ray (plate 5), terminates in a short, cylindrical neck, which repeats the feeling of volume in the head. The pose of the study entitled Portrait of a Young Man (plate 2), is unsatisfying to me in its method of termination, for the ending seems to accentuate the stiffness which already marks the pose. In my Self-Portrait (plate I), I wished to emphasize the deep depression at the

base of the neck and the tautness and thinness of the neck as opposed to the fullness of the head. In order to keep the effect of the pose I had to mount each study with attention to the angle at which it was poised, and to the size and proportion of the base, so that the mounting would enhance rather than distract from the portrait.

An awareness of the effects of lighting has been a fairly new discovery for me. Its importance for portraiture became clear only when I actually began observing from the model. I found that a light from the side or from directly above will show the greatest amount of contrast in the forms of the head. A strong light from either of these directions will result in a sharp contrast of light and shade. This light best reveals the directions of the large forms, and is especially good for bringing forms together. A softer light will bring out more of the subtle details of form. The model and the study should be placed in relatively the same light.

As soon as the actual modelling was underway, the conscious decision-making of the previous steps was subordinated to an acute awareness of the presence of the individual. I judged quickly by eye, and tried to comprehend the relation of all parts at once, though I did not succeed in doing this. In all my studies I preferred to establish relationships by adding to, rather than subtracting from, a larger mass. When the model was not posing I checked on doubtful

measurements and viewed the crossection of the study from above and below, in order to check on balance and the direction of forms. The drawing of the features will fit quite naturally into the skull when the directions of the planes have been clearly established. I found that if in translating the features I enlarged them slightly, it immediately seemed to make them more sculpturally effective. Perhaps one reason for this is that, in this way, the features no longer seem to float, but become tightly bound to the surrounding forms.

In my next three pieces I attempted to extend my studies from that of the portrait head to the portrait bust and half-length figure. Though the head still remained a focal point in these studies, I intended that the revelation of the character of the model should depend chiefly on the pose. This is less true in the Girl with Raised Arms (plate 6), which was a classroom study where the pose was contrived rather than natural. It was, however, a fine opportunity to study the combination of what I feel, for my purposes, are the most expressive parts of the body, the head and the arms. The value of this exercise was revealed in the portraits of the Italian Girl (plate 7) and the Young Girl (plate 8), where I incorporated these parts into a more complete expression. In these studies I worked toward obtaining the spirit of the model through her characteristic large shapes, as in the simplified hair of the Italian Girl, which forms the mass

of the large head and frames the face. The Italian Girl and the Young Girl were both done from models in whom the proportion of large head to small body was unusual. They each presented a different problem, for one to me was massive, quiet and reposed, while the other seemed to call for a linear movement which was graceful, yet buoyant. I welcomed the later problem too, as a chance to return to direct plaster, which I felt would be appropriate to the thin and spacial quality I desired. The material also afforded a discipline in setting up an armature, which I did by nailing a wood board to act as the cross piece for shoulders, to a vertical support which extended the height of the piece, and to it attached wires for the arms and head. To build up the mass of the piece, I laid handfuls of excelsior that had been dampened and then dipped in plaster, onto the shellacked armature. This method is particularly useful for its speed and the fact that it produces a piece which is comparatively light in weight. In this study, as in the clay studies, I depended on the additive process, using a spatula rather than a rasp to attain my surface texture.

My last three studies are experiments in the idea of portraying a part of the figure only. Through them I have come to see how carefully fragmentation must be used to avoid an arbitrary or severed look, or one which is poor in design. The design also must be considered in mounting the piece, for

it is important that the illusion created by the termination is continued. Such a problem arose in the study of the Girl with Raised Arms (plate 6). The difficulty was to mount the sculpture so that it kept a lightness of feeling and yet had the stability that its full forms required. The problem was solved by the use of a graduated base, which seemed to elevate the piece. I feel that my studies have only been beginnings in exploring the manifold possibilities of fragmentation in portraiture.

I have worked with the clothed figure in but two of the studies and I have described the clothing only at a minimum. Even then I felt that the neckline and sleeve lines were valuable additions to the repeat pattern of the design, as well as contributing a good deal toward emphasizing volume. I have only slightly indicated folds on the blouse of the Italian Girl (plate 7), but on the Young Girl (plate 8), I have gone further, making the web formed by the pull of the sleeve an essential part of the design. In using a sweater for the garment of the later study I tried to make the clothing indicative of personality, in this case, as typical of the young girl type.

The pattern formed by the indication of clothing brought to mind another possibility which was heretofore unexplored by me, that of using varied color. The application of polychrome in the Italian Girl seemed to me appropriate, as it

was consistent with the warmth and glow that I felt to
be characteristic of the model. The large masses seemed
to call for two or three colors to differentiate them rather
than blend them together, as one color would have done. I
used related colors which were warm and rich and had a var-
nished rather than a dry look. I also used a strong green
color on the Girl with Raised Arms and experimented with a
pearly buff-blue color on the Portrait of Ray. From these
last pieces I began to understand the real possibilities of
color on plaster and the best manner of application. I
found that almost any color may be used on a piece of sculp-
ture providing that the lightness or darkness is controlled
according to the strength of the modelling or the surface
of the piece. The color should be a blend of warm and cool
tones, for a colorful effect which will adapt itself to dif-
ferent lighting situations. One way I tried to achieve this
effect was to apply a base coat of color, followed by an
application(when this was dry) of a color which was perhaps
complementary, or modifying in tone. I rubbed carefully
while applying this last coat of paint and allowed the tones
of the undercoat to show through the surface and so give it
visual depth. The paint used may be an oil base paint for
the first coat and tempera for the second, or tempera on
top of a coat of tempera which has been fixed, or oil paints
for both coats. The color may be fixed with a plastic spray
or heightened with a suitable wax.

The foregoing observations were attempts to record some of the practical experience gained in executing my project. They are far from complete, but they do represent a fairly new-born consciousness of my means. Hence, these studies, of all my work, past and present, were least surprising to me in their end result. It is not that I wish to predict the outcome of a study, but that I wish the power of means to realize my conception with as little compromise as possible. By "means" I do not imply mechanical method, but an awareness of possibilities through knowledge.

The aim of my project was to further my knowledge in two main concerns, that is, the structure of the human form and the design elements involved in the portrayal of the human figure in sculpture. In my portrait heads I wished to keep my design simple, almost non-existent, while in my studies of the partial figure I was seeking effective design more than convincing portraiture. In the first phase of my study I feel I neglected some of the spontaneity and directness I attained in my later pieces. My last studies, on the other hand, are lacking in more precise observation and subtle treatment of details.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

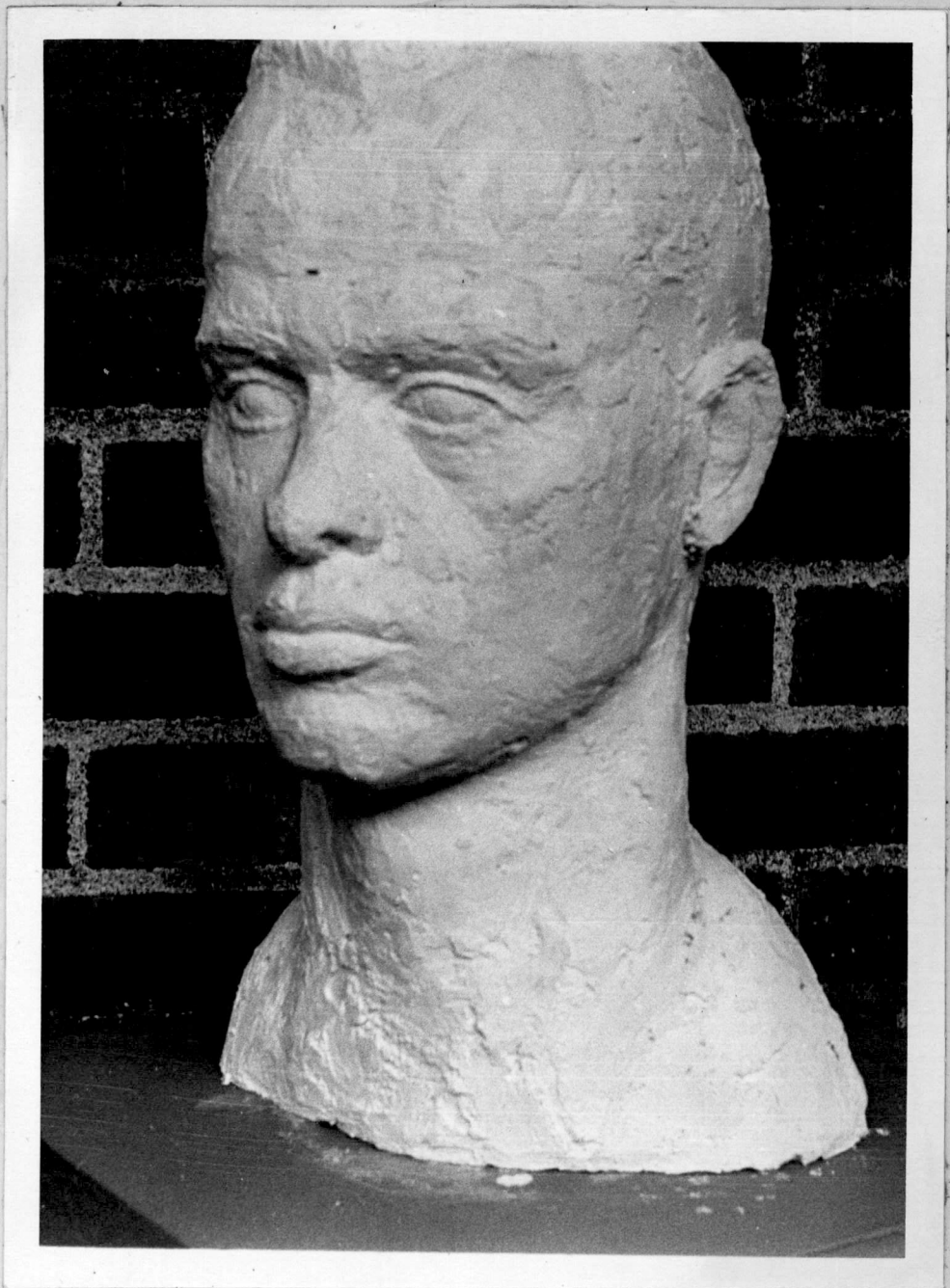Lanteri, E., _Modelling, A Guide for Teachers and Students_, London, Chapman and Hall, LTD., 1902

Phaidon Edition, _Roman Portraits_, Oxford University Press

Goldwater and Treves, _Artists on Art_, New York, Pantheon Books, 1945

Self-Portrait 14"h. cast plaster

Plate I

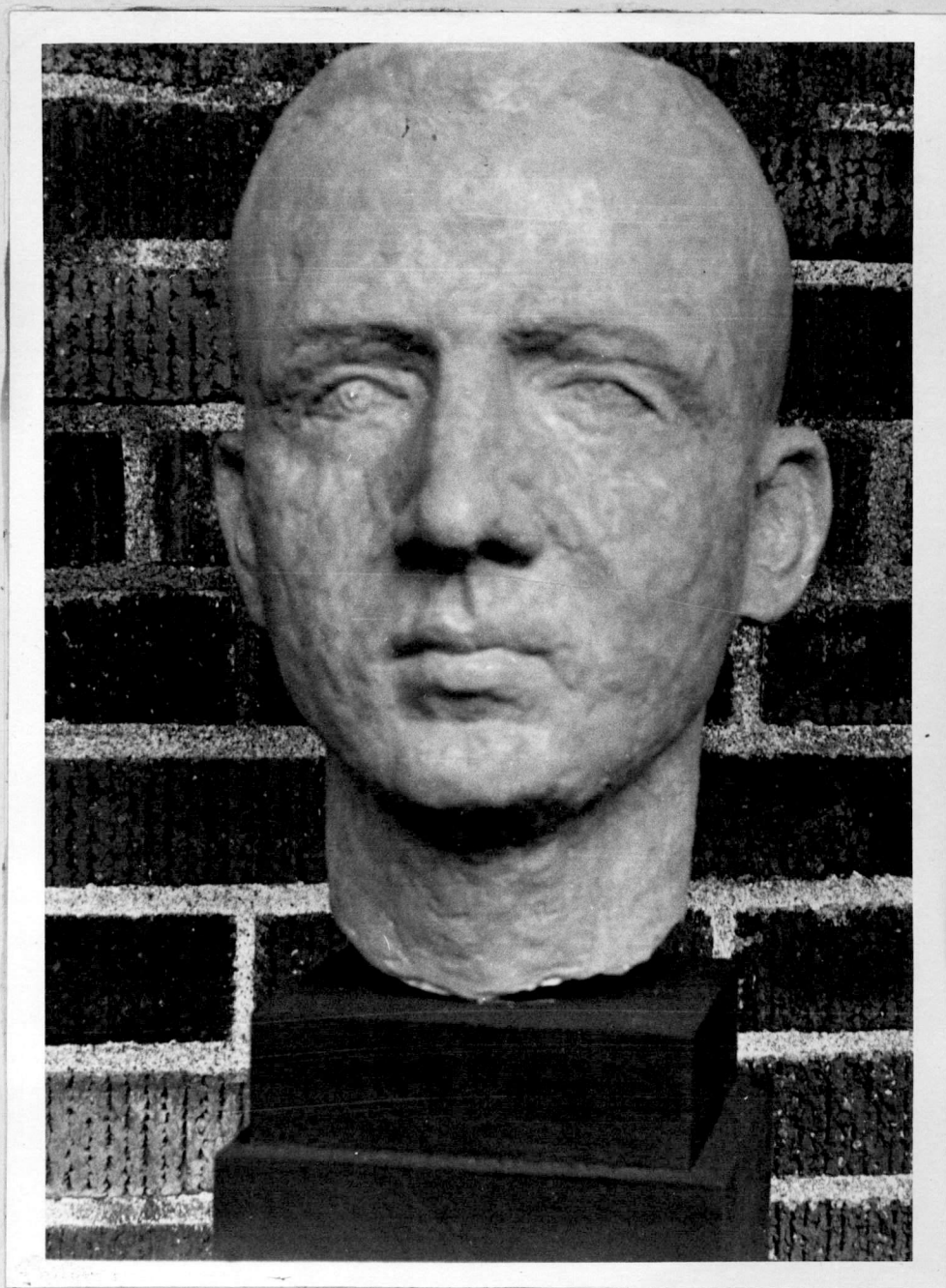Portrait of a Young Man   15 1/4"h. direct plaster

Plate 2

Portrait of Ann 5 1/2"h. cast plaster

Plate 3

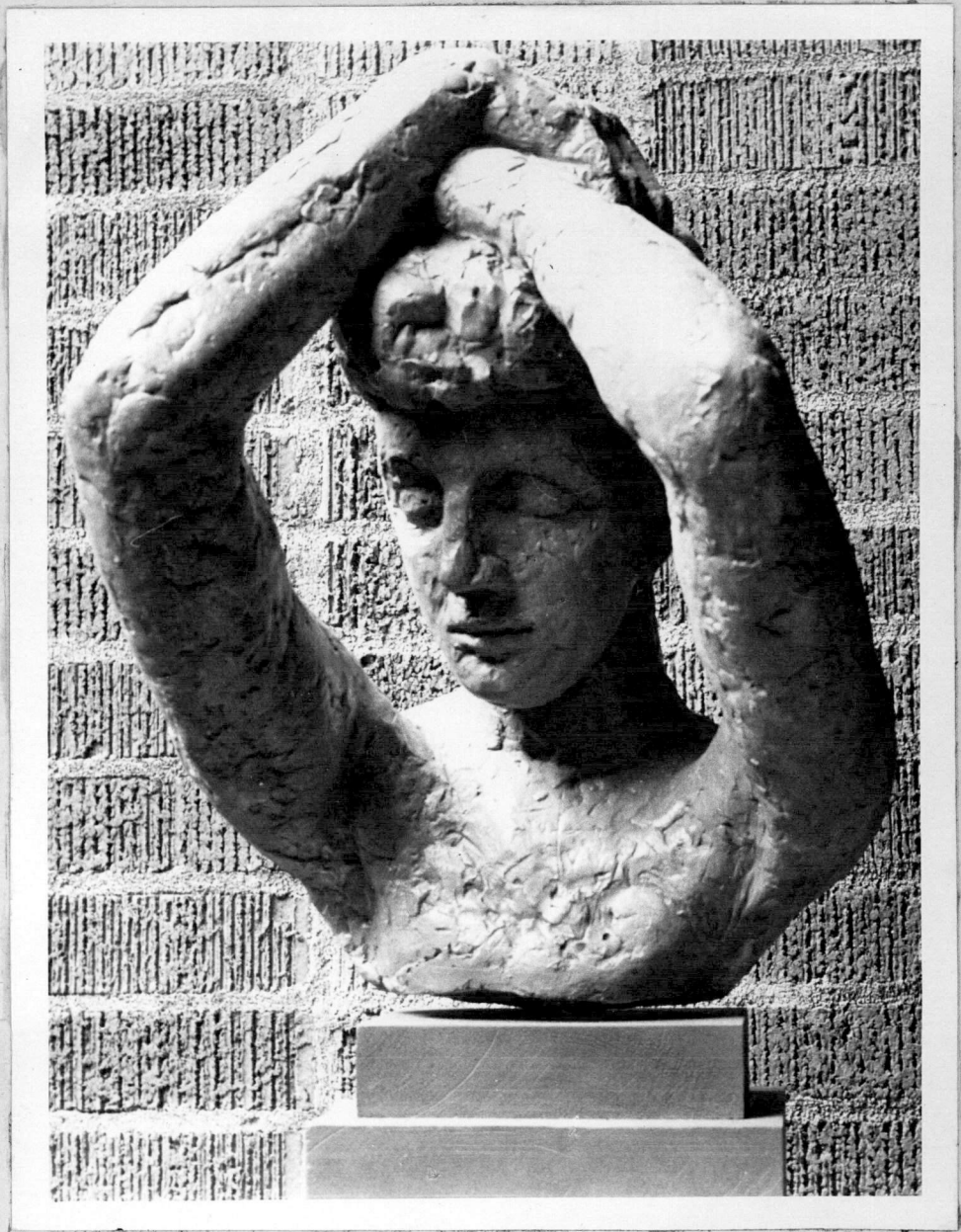Portrait of Inga   11 3/4"h.   terra cotta
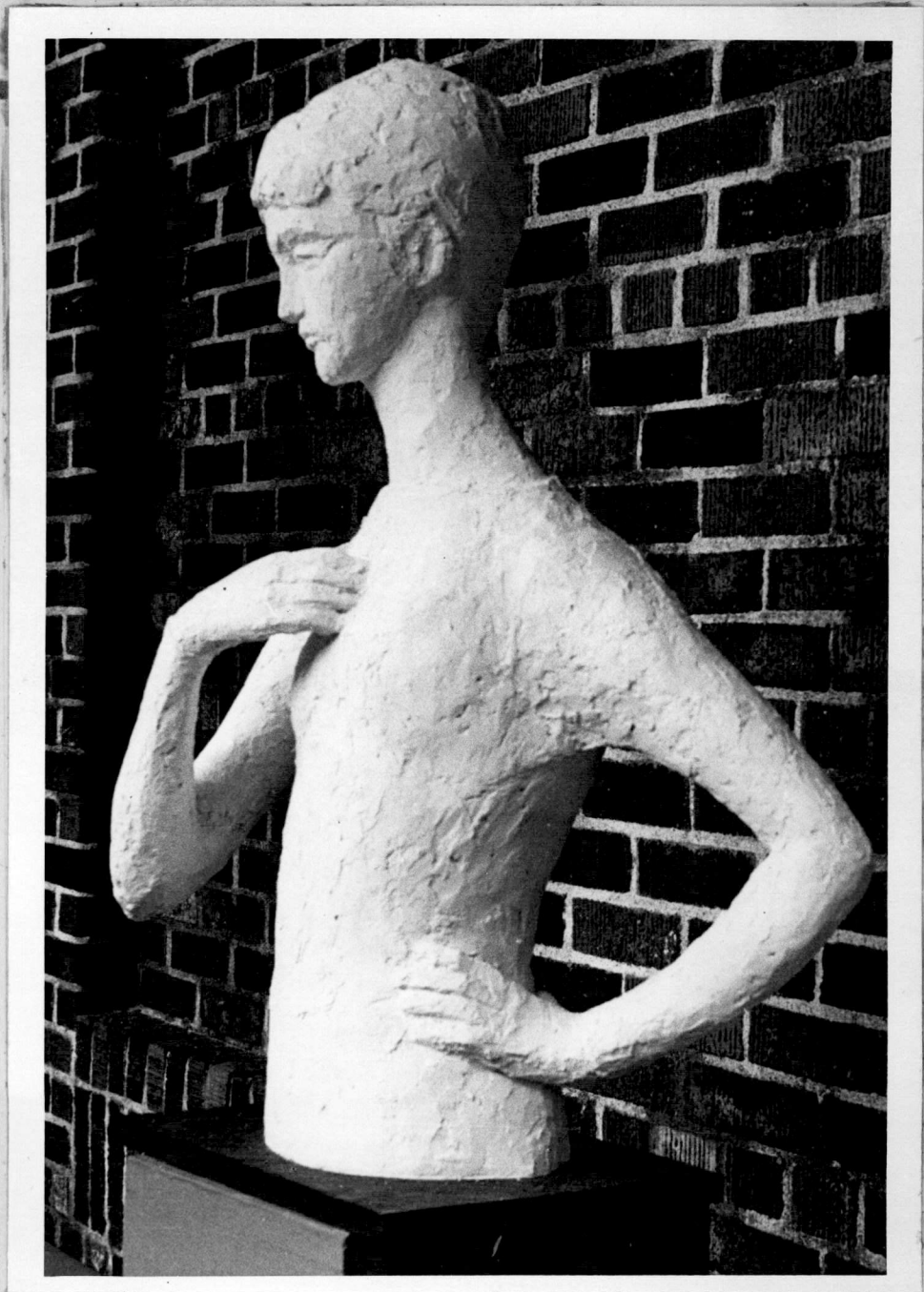
Plate 4

Portrait of Ray 11 3/4"h. cast plaster

Plate 5

Girl with Raised Arms   18"h.   cast plaster

Plate 6

Italian Girl   25 1/2"h.   cast plaster

Plate 7

Young Girl   31 1/2"h.   direct plaster

Plate 8