

The Sculpture of Oscar Jaspers in an International Context

From Wieske Baseleer to Little Leda



*I want to translate the human form
into the immobility of stone.*

Oscar Jaspers

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[JOSÉ BOYENS]

The oeuvre of the Flemish sculptor Oscar Jaspers (1887-1970) can easily be divided into a number of periods. These periods coincide with the major developments in European sculpture until about 1935, after which they begin to follow a course of their own. When Jaspers prematurely terminated his academic studies in Antwerp in 1911, the dominant movement in the art world was Impressionism. The most brilliant exponent of Impressionism was Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), whose atmospheric figures were often imbued with symbolic significance. Just look at Oscar Jaspers's head of *Wieske Baseleer* from 1913, formed in plaster and later cast in bronze (cat. 5), and you immediately notice the refined atmospheric mood of Impressionism that is so closely aligned with Rodin.⁽¹⁾

According to art critic G.D. Gratama, the influence of Impressionism can also be seen in 'a very Impressionistic portrait of Mia Carpentier',⁽²⁾ which was shown at the Second Belgian Salon at the Pulchri Studio in The Hague in March 1914. But this was already a transitional work. The hair could, with a bit of good will, be called Impressionistic, but that can hardly be said of the strong facets of the nose. These are closer to Parisian Cubism, as are other works from these early years.⁽³⁾ This shows that Jaspers's interest in Parisian Cubism had already been aroused before he became acquainted, in July 1914, with the fervent anti-Impressionist poet Paul van Ostaïjen (1896-1928), with whom he formed a very close friendship. - Mia Carpentier, the subject of this work, became his wife on 1 April 1916; she would support and encourage him for the rest of her life.

Jaspers had already become known as an artist in search of his own path when he broke with his art school instructor Thomas Vinçotte in 1911. Vin-

Engel, grafmonument voor de dichter Paul van Ostaijen
(Angel, Memorial Stone for the Poet Paul van Ostaijen), 1932, bluestone, 63 x 165 x 60 cm.
City Cemetery Schoonselhof, Antwerpen



Left

Wieske Baseleer, 1913, plaster,
25 x 17 x 22 cm. Various collections

cotte had taught him to treat all materials in exactly the same way, be it white marble, clay or plaster. The young Jaspers became more and more convinced, however, that each kind of material had its own unique character which had to be taken as the point of departure for the work itself, and that consequently each material deserved its own handling. This respect for the unique character of the material – stone, wood or clay – would lead to the emergence of a highly personal oeuvre that would be recognised both nationally and internationally (though international recognition was for a long time rather scarce).

Cubism

In 1918, '19 and '20, Oscar Jaspers replaced the cautious inch-by-inch Cubism of *Mia Carpentier* with a much more daring form that followed the synthetic Cubism of the paintings by Braque and Picasso and the sculptures of Henri Laurens and Jacques Lipchitz from the years 1916 to 1918. A powerful sculpture from that period is *De dode* (The Deceased) from 1918, which was inspired by the death of Jaspers's father.^[4] Although Paul van Ostaijen thought a great deal of this Cubist work, the sculptor himself eventually became dissatisfied with it and destroyed it. He was unable to do the same with *Frieda*^[5] because he had given this Cubist figure away as a gift to his friends René and Frieda Victor-De Meulemeester. Later on, Jaspers called these three years his 'laboratory period'^[6], a time in which he said he had strayed too far from his own core.

In late October 1918 Paul van Ostaijen fled to Berlin, because he feared that as a Flemish activist he was in danger of being arrested: he and a few others had publicly hissed at the Francophile Cardinal Mercier for his offensive opinion about the use of the Flemish language in Belgium. Van Ostaijen had become a staunch defender of Cubism, and while in Berlin he maintained contact with

his Flemish friends, especially with Oscar Jespers.^[7] An intensive collaborative relationship developed between them as they worked together on the experimental typography of Van Ostaijen's *Bezette stad* (Occupied City); this would be the first book of Dadaist poetry in the Dutch language. Oscar Jespers provided the experimental typography, as outlined by Van Ostaijen. Working with unusual dedication, he himself published the book at his own firm *Het Sienjaal* in Antwerp in 1921. A second important subject in their correspondence is the publication of the magazine *Sienjaal*, which was announced by Paul van Ostaijen as the organ of emancipated Cubism, but in the end it was never realised.^[8]

De pottendraaier (The Potter) is a distinctly Cubist sculpture executed in Euville stone in 1921, 41 cm. high. It shows a certain affinity with André Derain's pre-Cubist *Gehurkte figuur* (Crouching Figure) from 1907, but it is not certain whether Jespers ever saw this work. The stone sculpture by the Parisian painter is disarming in its clumsiness, while *De pottendraaier* is clearly the work of a magister artium by comparison. Jespers contrasted the many rectangles and cubes with five arched forms. As Paul van Ostaijen wrote, here the cube has become the measure of all things.^[9] In later exhibitions both at home and abroad (after 1921), *De pottendraaier* often served as the triumphant starting point. The unique thing about Jespers's Cubism, compared with that of the Paris sculptors, was that after making *Frieda* in 1919 he no longer fragmented the human figure. Above all else, Jespers's more synthetic and less dogmatic view of the human figure makes a more vital impression.

This sculpture was followed in the 1920s by a series of animals, a few dozen character heads and some female nudes, all witnessing to a similarly powerful and personal Cubism. The figures were constrained within the rectangular shape of the stone or the cylinder of the tree trunk, and they form a sculptural oeuvre in and of themselves by virtue of their authenticity. In recent years, es-



De pottendraaier (The Potter), 1921,
Euville stone, 41 x 33 x 25 cm.
Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht

pecially since 2000, the sculptures from 1921 to 1930 have been classified more and more frequently as works of international modernism due to their severe architecture and rigid forms.

One quite unusual character head is *Perle fine*, which was carved in white marble and shows a secret affinity with Cubism: its height, 22.5 cm., is exactly the same as its depth.^[10] Yet this sculpture, in which Jaspers made such successful use of asymmetry (in the chin and mouth, for example), is formed for the most part by the expressive intuition that can be seen in the works of Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), whom he greatly admired. This Romanian sculptor would become a new reference point for many artists after Rodin. He exhibited in 1926 in Antwerp, and Jaspers would later visit him in his studio in Paris.

In the twenties Oscar Jaspers designed a number of reliefs. Reliefs by their very nature are closer to decorative art. The composition of Jaspers's reliefs was so complicated that he preferred to start by making a drawing and three-dimensional sketches. That was true with *Kleine ruiter* (Small Horseman), for which he made two sketches in 1924, both 37.5 cm high. In 1924-25, he chiselled the figures of the mother with her child on the hobby horse in white marble, 94 x 72 cm.^[11] A detail like the mother's unrealistically high instep links this unusual work with international Art Deco, which had just experienced its apex in the heart of Paris with the famous International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts, from April to October 1925. Other references to Art Deco are the filling of the entire sculpted surface, the stylisation of the forms and the hair style of the mother, modelled after the wig of an Egyptian courtier from the Age of the Dynasties. The frontal presentation of the eyes of the mother and child, even though both are seen from the side, also shows the influence of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Art Deco took such an extraordinary interest in Egyptian art because the discovery of the tomb of King Tutankhamen in 1922 and the decorative riches found there were being followed with great excitement all over the world.



Perle fine, 1925,
plaster, 22,5 x 11 x 22,5 cm.
Musée de Grenoble

Expressionism

As the thirties approached, Cubist figures began to acquire an inner power: Expressionism was breaking through. Expressionism concentrated on the representation of the essential moments of human existence as they present themselves in lived experiences. Love, birth and ecstasy were therefore permanent themes, along with their opposites: despair, fear and feelings of abandonment. Such essential aspects of life should be expressed as directly as possible without the deliberation of the artisan. Jaspers looked to the person of Vincent van Gogh as an important example, which is evident in his early drawings. But he also knew and admired the Expressionist artists of Der Blaue Reiter. Kandinsky once visited his studio. In his own country, Belgium, he had exhibited along with the painters Gustave De Smet (1877-1943), Frits van den Berghe (1883-1939) and Constant Permeke (1886-1952), all of them his friends. There were no sculptors, however, who could inspire him with the Expressionist spirit. So he was forced to find his own way as an Expressionist, and right from the start he displayed a mastery that would remain unequalled in the world of European sculpture.

Even the titles of Jaspers's Expressionist works indicate his desire to represent the vitality of life: *Geboorte* (Birth), 1932; *Moederschap* (Motherhood), 1930;



Broer en zus
(Brother and Sister), 1934,
bluestone, 56 x 30 x 25
cm. Koninklijk Museum
voor Schone Kunsten,
Antwerp

Wiegenkind (Nursling), 1930; *Worstelaar* (Wrestler), 1933. Flemish Expressionism, including that of the painters, was marked by his positive attitude to life.

In all his Expressionist sculptures, including the monumental *Engel, grafmonument voor de dichter Paul van Ostaïjen* (Angel, Memorial Stone for the Poet Paul van Ostaïjen), 1931-32, the swelling of the stone, no matter how expansively suggested, is strongly restrained by the basic Cubist form. Like most of the sculptures from Jaspers's Expressionist period, this memorial stone is cut from Belgian bluestone, a type of limestone, which filled his studio with a long-lasting and penetrating stench whenever he worked with it. The angel mourns the untimely death of a very gifted poet and keeps watch over his grave.

Broer en zus (Brother and Sister) shows the two of them in their own closed world; it is a sculpture of 56 cm. high, also rendered in bluestone^[12] from 1934. The sculpture was first exhibited in 1934 and purchased that same year by the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp. All the contours are closed. Nowhere in the volume of the stone is there evidence of an opening. The limbs of the brother and sister are at rest, either vertically or horizontally. The older girl holds her arm around her little brother in a protective gesture; what makes this sculpture Expressionist is the affection and solidarity between the two. It is Expressionism in retreat, however. When the sculptor conceived this work he can only have had one thing in mind: his little daughter, born in 1922, who died unexpectedly in 1927 – the great sorrow of his life – and his son born in 1929. Seen frontally, *Brother and Sister* makes a strong appeal to the viewer. It is a sculpture that radiates a monumental power. In its closed and static character it demonstrates a fundamental kinship with the art of ancient Egypt.

Purity

In 1935 Oscar Jaspers began receiving commissions from the Belgian government for monumental decorative works that were mostly destined for world exhibitions. In 1927 he had been appointed professor of monumental and decorative arts at the Institut Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs in Brussels, where architect and designer Henry van de Velde (1863-1957) was the director. None of the designs that Jaspers made at this time surpasses *België aan het werk* (Belgium at Work) from 1936-37, executed in embossed yellow copper and measuring 6 x 6 metres.^[13] It was intended for the World's Fair of 1937 in Paris, where it dominated the hall of honour of the Belgian Pavillon. The figures in this work who are practising their profession to such a lively rhythm resonate with the Expressionist figures painted by Jaspers's friends Gustave De Smet, Constant Permeke and Frits van den Berghe. They also approximate the human forms in the paintings of Dutch magical realism. Compared with the autonomous figures carved by Jaspers in Belgian bluestone during his Expressionist period, which ended in 1934, those in *Belgium at Work* are less extreme. This need for a more comprehensible art could also be felt internationally in both the visual arts and literature in the decade before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Oscar Jaspers was rather late in discovering the authenticity of the classical sculpture of Aristide Maillol (1861-1944). This French artist, who went to Athens to admire the caryatids of the Erechtheion with his own eyes, helped Jaspers realise that his view of the human figure represented something of lasting



België aan de arbeid (Belgium at Work), 1936-1937, embossed yellow copper, 600 x 600 cm. Stadsschouwburg, Antwerpen (Maria Pijpelinxstraat). Commission for the World Exhibition, Paris, 1937

value. This led to the creation of female figures such as *Opschik* (Figure) in 1939 and 1942,^[14] and to the highly unusual *Pureté* in 1945, which Jespers first moulded in clay, which he fired, and later had cast in bronze.^[15] These sculptures, and *Pureté* in particular, epitomise what the art historian Emile Langui wrote in 1961 about the work of Oscar Jespers: that 'the purity of the plastic idea was not contaminated by pictorial or literary tendencies'.^[16] Because the head and arms are missing in *Pureté*, as with so many figures from Greek and Roman antiquity that were found during excavations, the image retains a higher degree of abstraction than either of the other sculptures. The extremely slender *Pureté* is full of inner life.

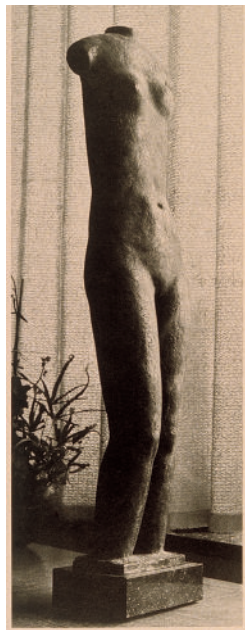
Having first been moulded in clay and later cast in bronze, *Pureté* constitutes the transition to the next phase in Jespers's development: that of the bronze female figures from the period 1946 to 1953. Maillol provided inspiration for these works, as did the Italian sculptor Marino Marini (1901-1980) with his heavy, fertile Pomonas. The three female figures that Oscar Jespers called *In de zon* (In the sun) in 1946 and 1947 are all aiming for the spherical, writes art critic Lambert Tegenbosch. 'It is striking how noiseless Jespers is: so silent that even an ecstasy like *In de zon* seems to have become internalised'.^[17] The same counts for *Leunende vrouw* (Leaning Woman) of 1950. Indeed, these figures demonstrate delight in a deeply silent way; what they represent is not reality but a myth, a myth of completeness and fecundity.

A sculptor's sculptor

In the last working period of his life, from 1953 to 1968, Oscar Jespers returned to stone, his material of preference. In *Kleine Leda met de zwaan* (Little Leda and the Swan) from 1965, which is only 34 cm. high, as well as in other sculptures from this period, Maillol's statement is most apt: 'je tache de faire blond'. Jespers explained this statement in 1949: 'that is to say without depths, by which the blondness of the whole could easily violate the unity of the play of light.'⁽¹⁸⁾ The seated Leda clasps the body of the swan, her lover according to Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, with her arms and legs. The sculpture combines not only 'sensitivity and grandeur' but also two characteristics that rarely go together: strength and sweetness. What *Kleine Leda* has in common with the Expressionist sculptures are the block shape, the static quality and the massive, earth-grounded weight, as well as the representation of a purely vital, non-reflective existence. It does not fit in with the contemporary artistic character of the age, however, so it could be regarded as Post-Expressionist. In *Kleine Leda met de zwaan* Oscar Jespers translated, as in almost all his work, the human form into the immobility of stone.⁽¹⁹⁾

It was during the years before 1935 that Oscar Jespers participated so intensively in the developments taking place in international sculpture. But this happened at a distance and with little direct international contact. In Paris he was relatively unknown. However, sculptors who themselves were masters in their art regarded him as superior. In this sense he was also 'a sculptor's sculptor'. ■

Translated by Nancy Forest-Flier



Pureté, 1945, terracotta/bronze,
78 x 18 x 13 cm
Various collections



Leunende vrouw (Leaning Woman), 1950, bronze,
104 x 45 x 58 cm. Koninklijke Musea voor Schone
Kunsten van België, Brussel

Kleine Leda met de zwaan
(Little Leda with the Swan), 1965,
white marble, 30.5 x 23.5 x 21.5 cm.
Private collection, The Netherlands



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NOTES

1. Cat. 5 refers to the number of the sculpture in the catalogue raisonné containing all the sculpted works of Oscar Jaspers in *Oscar Jaspers, beeldhouwer en tekenaar, 1887-1970* by José Boyens, 2013, pp. 30, 33 and 322.
2. *Onze Kunst*, 1914, XXVI, vol. 13, p. 186. Cat. 4.
3. *Walter Stevens*, kop from 1916, plaster, cat. 21, and *Wim*, 1919, plaster, cat. 37.
4. The sculptor Emile Jaspers, 1862-1918. The relief *De dode* was built up in plaster, 350 cm. high, cat. 29.
5. Black painted plaster / bronze (posthumous), 79 cm., cat. 35.
6. Oscar Jaspers used this term to refer to his experimental sculptures from the years 1918 through 1920 in a letter of 30 June 1944 to the writer and poet Gaston Burssens.
7. The nineteen letters from Oscar to Paul van Ostaijen were published in 1995 by Pandora in Antwerp in *De genesis van Bezette stad: Ik spreek met de mannen en regel alles wel*, edited by José Boyens. All Paul van Ostaijen's return letters have been lost.
8. See Boyens, note 1, p. 54. The basic text of the announcement folder was printed on grass green paper, as Oscar wrote.
9. Paul van Ostaijen, *Oskar Jaspers* in *Vlaamsche Arbeid* 1924, vol. 24, no. 12, p. 168.
10. See Boyens, note 1, pp. 140-145 and 354-355.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-134 and 355.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 216-218 and 389.
13. Now in Antwerp, placed along the side wall of the city theatre on Maria Pijpelincxstraat. See Boyens, note 1, pp. 235-238 and 395-396.
14. The *Opschik* from 1939, 81 cm. high, as well as that from 1943, were executed in terracotta and in bronze. The version from 1943 is 53 cm. high. During the Second World War it was difficult for sculptors to get hold of good quality stone. Clay was more easily available.
15. All three sculptures are now parts of different collections.
16. Introduction to the catalogue for the exhibition *Oscar Jaspers* at the Albert Landry Gallery, New York 1961.
17. 'Beelden zijn blokken bij Oscar Jaspers', in *de Volkskrant* of 4 January 1964.
18. O. Jaspers in *Het vormprobleem van het beeld*, Brussels 1949 (Mededelingen Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie; afdeling Schone Kunsten, vol. 11, no. 1), p. 13.
19. Oscar Jaspers in an interview with José Boyens in 1963, in *Raam*.