

**A.E. Duffey, *Anton van Wouw: The smaller works***

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*Anton van Wouw the smaller works* is, as its title implies, concerned with the generally lesser-known smaller works of Dutch-born sculptor, Anton van Wouw. Using the measure of “half life-size and smaller” as a guideline, author Alexander Duffey provides a comprehensive and well-illustrated overview of the many full-length small sculptures, busts, relief panels and maquettes produced by Van Wouw between 1881 (nine years prior to his arrival in South Africa at the age of 28) and 1940. Naturalistically sculpted and generally cast in bronze, these smaller works are wide-ranging in their subject matter, depicting innocuous, commonplace scenes alongside aspects of Afrikaner history, representations of Boer and British leaders, and so-called “native studies” (p 11).

The monumental works for which Van Wouw are perhaps better known (including the Kruger Monument on Church Square, Pretoria, and the National Women’s Memorial in Bloemfontein) are listed, but not discussed at length, except by way of their maquettes. Also listed are Van Wouw’s thirty-two larger busts: although these fall outside of the scope of the publication due to their scale, they are nevertheless illustrated without commentary in a fourteen-page section entitled “Gallery of Van Wouw’s larger busts” (pp 138-151). Despite its focus, *Anton van Wouw the smaller works* is thus also a catalogue of Van Wouw’s general oeuvre, containing quality black-and-white reproductions of the works discussed, as

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7 References: R S Nelson and R Shiff (eds), *Critical terms for art history* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996); L Nochlin, *Realism and tradition in art 1848-1900: Sources and documents* (Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1966); C Rosen and H Zerner, *Romanticism and realism: The mythology of nineteenth century art* (Faber and Faber, London, 1984)

well as interesting historical photographs of Van Wouw's studio and of various works in progress.

On the inside cover of this 236-page book, Duffey – whose previous publications include *Anton van Wouw 1862-1945 en die Van Wouwhuis* (Butterworth, 1981) – is described as “the most prominent expert on the work of Anton van Wouw”. *Anton van Wouw the smaller works* also demonstrates Duffey's expertise in conducting in-depth primary research: his insights are gleaned from various published sources on the artist (including local newspapers and periodicals that reported frequently on Van Wouw's latest works), as well as Duffey's personal handling of many of the sculptures (including “rogue” castings produced illegitimately after Van Wouw's death) and contact with people who knew the artist. In considering his sources, one of Duffey's motives has been to accurately date and authenticate the many bronze castings of Van Wouw's smaller works – especially when details about the production and/or castings of the works are ambiguous or scarce.

As a piece of “good detective work” (p 13) aimed at providing a pedigree for each sculpture discussed, *Anton van Wouw the smaller works* is thus of primary benefit to the existing or aspirant collector, who is looking to buy a quality casting, rather than a “pig in a poke” (p 13). The concluding chapter on “Criteria for evaluating the small sculptures of Van Wouw” (pp 210-215), which offers guidelines for the potential collector, effectively bears this out. Understandably, Duffey's focus in this respect is on the “value” of one casting over another (and of Van Wouw's artistry in general) in terms of predominantly formal and/or aesthetic qualities like type of bronze, finish, size, complexity, identification marks and so forth. Questions of ideology and meaning have little place in discussions of this sort, and on this “safe” ground. Duffey writes comfortably and confidently.

To his own detriment, however, Duffey also wishes to address an additional – and somewhat trickier – aspect of Van Wouw's artistic production: as stated in the “Introduction”, he hopes to “reinterpret him [Van Wouw] in the light of his time” (p 9) and to consider how the smaller works “throw a completely new light on Van Wouw and the colonial context within which he worked” (p 10). These aspirations are both welcome and necessary, especially with regard to Van Wouw's “native studies” (p 11) which clearly “frame” their subjects in accordance with prevailing colonial stereotypes about the exotic “other”. Unfortunately, and despite Duffey's admirable intentions, his exposé of Van Wouw's “colonial context”, never really gets off the ground, and the “completely new light” that he hopes to shed on Van Wouw's smaller works, remains more of an occasional glimmer.

Works such as *The Dagga Smoker* (1907), for example, are undoubtedly far from neutral or innocent in their depiction of “the local natives” as a “romantic peculiarity” (p 206). Duffey describes this sculpture as “a figure of an almost nude, black man who crouches forward to smoke from a reed in the ground” (p 61). The figure's near-nakedness, combined with his subservient, kneeling pose, render him vulnerable as an object of colonial mastery and/or scrutiny. There is ample “evidence” here of Van Wouw's ideological predisposition, and one would think that Duffey might seize the opportunity to “reinterpret” Van Wouw's *Dagga Smoker* accordingly.

Alas, Duffey's reading of *The Dagga Smoker* makes no mention of its incriminating ideology, preferring to discuss the work in terms of noncommittal

“aesthetics”. So, for Duffey, the figure’s nakedness amounts to little more than a “contrast between the smooth skin texture of the figure and the coarse hair on his head, as well as the roughness of the ground on which he bends” (p 61); the subservient pose means only that “Van Wouw has played with the triangle” – in fact, claims Duffey, the sculpture “can be simplified to total abstraction” (p 61).

Similarly, Duffey’s account of Van Wouw’s *Hunter Drinking* (1907) – which depicts another near-naked “African (not a Bushman [sic]) bending forward on a rocky incline, near the water’s edge” and drinking “like a wild animal” (p 68) – seems impervious to the sculpture’s blatantly colonialist orientation. In this work, Van Wouw’s less-than-innocent conflation of black African people and wild animals seems hard to ignore: the hunter is literally portrayed as crouching on “all fours”, his mouth directly to the surface of the pool, but Duffey’s description refuses to see this as problematic. Instead the tone of his writing tends towards the same, compromising romanticism that renders the sculpture’s subject matter questionable to begin with.

Albeit for different reasons, Van Wouw’s depictions of Afrikaner or British “heroes” are also highly indicative of his “colonial context” (p 10) and incriminating in their ideological bias. Like the “native studies”, these portraits seem to offer rich grounds for the kinds of reinterpretation that Duffey ostensibly aspires to, and yet here too, the potential for a *critical* reappraisal of Van Wouw is left unrealised. Duffey’s discussion of *Kruger in Exile* (1907) is a case in point. Produced at about the same time as *The Dagga Smoker* and *Hunter Drinking*, the sculpture shows a “dejected President Kruger” (p 50) – fully clothed, of course, and seated in a large easy chair. Tellingly, this work is *not* discussed in terms of “textures” and “triangles”. Rather, Duffey asserts: “With this small sculpture Van Wouw gives us a glimpse into the soul of the lonely old President, far from his homeland, sad and alone with his bible on his lap”.

The suggestion that Van Wouw’s portraits of prominent individuals disclose the very essence of their souls, recurs throughout Duffey’s text. So one reads, for example, that Van Wouw communicated “the personality” of Jan F. Celliers, editor of *De Volkstem* (p 28), the “strong willpower” of President Kruger (p 118), the “patriarchal dignity” of General Koos de la Rey (p 121), the “inner strength and pride” of General C.R. de Wet (p 125), and the radiating “wisdom” of President M.T. Steyn (p 132). A critical apprehension of these works might be inclined to suggest that Van Wouw’s “heroes” have been deliberately idealised in accordance with his own ideological leanings; yet Duffey seems adamant that the portraits are no more or less than an “innocent” reflection of the sitters’ essential qualities – Van Wouw has merely revealed through his artistry what had already been there.

In these and other instances, Duffey’s assertion that “few works of art are devoid of an ideological statement” (p 49) rings hollow. “Van Wouw was not only making art, he was also making meaning!”, declares an indignant Duffey (p 49), and yet the possible “meaning” behind Van Wouw’s artistic decisions is either categorically avoided or taken at face-value as ideologically “innocent”. This is not only with respect to Van Wouw’s questionable portrayal of other “races” as “romantic peculiarities”, but also with respect to his equally suspect idealisation of prominent white men as uncompromising heroes. In both cases – and, indeed, throughout this publication – one gets the sense that Duffey is struggling with an awkward and taxing dilemma. On the one hand, he wishes to pay homage to an artist he greatly admires, and to celebrate, in the works he discusses, the “heights of sculptural expression”

(p 9) attained by Van Wouw. On the other hand, he recognises that Van Wouw's colonialist perspective cannot be condoned uncritically.

Evidence of Duffey's dilemma is rife. On page 209, for example, he concedes that Van Wouw "was a colonial artist who saw the African through European eyes, conditioned by Dutch values and prejudices", but the blow is softened immediately by Duffey's insistence, in the very next sentence, on Van Wouw's ostensibly "deep understanding of the psychology of the people he portrayed" (p 209). Exploitation is thus balanced with empathy, and the reader is left with the impression that Van Wouw really meant no harm, despite his inherent prejudice.

In Duffey's description of *The Basuto Witness* (1907) – which has also gone by such names as *The Accused* and the highly derogatory *Kaffergetuigte* (p 66) – he similarly insists on Van Wouw's genuine empathy with his subject, referring to the work as nothing short of a "study in compassion" (p 66). Completely overlooked is the fact that the work implicitly trades on an odious but popular binary: "civilisation" – represented here by the system of Western law – is set against its opposite – the "Basuto mineworker" in a "baglike vest" who has "landed in a Western court as a witness or even an accused", and even though the mineworker is portrayed in a compromising fashion – "one can read the incomprehension on his face. He has no idea what is going on around him" (p 66) – Duffey nonetheless optimistically asserts that the work is a triumph of "his pride, courage and dignity" (p 66).

Arguably, Duffey's suggestion that Van Wouw depicted his subject with "compassion" is meant to dilute the colonial prejudice implicit in the work. In contrast, Jeanne Hugo's 1938 description of *The Basuto Witness* highlights the mineworker's incomprehension and contains none of Duffey's optimism about "pride, courage and dignity". In an endnote (p 219, note 15), Duffey castigates Hugo for what he perceives as her "insensitive colonial view of the stupidity of the African", and goes on to quote from the offending description which he translates as follows: "'the Accused' represents for us all the pathos of the primitive mentality who is confronted with the incomprehensibility of the white man's civilised system of law without understanding anything about it" (pp 219-229, note 15). Interestingly, Duffey's indignant disapproval of Hugo's words would seem to imply that the problem lies with crass and insensitive descriptions of the work, rather than with the work itself: colonialist prejudice is in the eye of the beholder, and if one chooses not to see it, then it simply is not there.

Duffey further "chooses not to see" the ideological underpinnings at play here by reading Van Wouw's work through the forgiving lens of "realism", according to which Van Wouw simply and unwittingly portrayed things "as they were". Throughout the publication, Duffey maintains that "Van Wouw was above all a realist" (p 12), whose work "is simple, direct, sober and always true to nature" (p 206). In effect, this is also a means of limiting Van Wouw's accountability: if his works are seen as bearing witness to the "truth" of people and situations, then they are "guilty", at best, of a certain naïve attachment to nature (and not to ideology).

Consequently, Van Wouw's eccentric predilection for naked or near-naked black bodies, for instance, can be sanctioned under the auspices of his "realist approach" (p 185): "his excellent knowledge of anatomy (realism)" and his fondness for "texture detail" (p 61). The fact that his "native" models were "mainly black men who worked for him in the garden" (p 206) is politely disregarded, as is the fact that

Van Wouw literally stripped and recast these men in a number of elaborately romanticised and *unreal* “dramas” – as an accused mineworker, a kneeling dagga smoker, a hunter drinking like an animal, a “bushman” with bow in hand, “a black man sleeping like a log” (p 207). In his portrayal of the “other”, Van Wouw’s apparent “truth to nature” is quite deliberately manipulated and staged.

In this instance, at least, one might conclude that the label of “realist” seems far from accurate, if only because “Realism” – as a nineteenth-century reaction to the idealistic tendencies of Romanticism – is premised on the detached “acceptance of trivial, banal material and the refusal to ennoble it, idealize it, or even make it picturesque”.<sup>8</sup> For Rosen and Zerner, the picturesque, contra realism, “emphasizes aspects of life that are exotic, quaint, outlandish”; it claims that ordinary life must be “romantically transfigured in order to be made worthy of art”; and it “manipulates reality before the act of painting [or sculpting] begins”.<sup>9</sup> Like romanticism, and unlike realism, the picturesque “dresses life”.<sup>10</sup>

If Van Wouw’s monuments and portraits of colonial and Afrikaner “heroes” tend towards idealisation by their very nature, then the “native studies”, along with many of his other works, may be seen as inclined towards the picturesque. In “dressing life”, they involuntarily take up a position in relation to it – they forfeit their designation as “realist”, and with it the assumption of a detached, unbiased neutrality. In this sense, Van Wouw’s smaller works do not simply or solely provide us “with a visual record the people of President Kruger’s Pretoria, the magnates and workers of the mining world of early twentieth-century Johannesburg and the pivotal figures in the rise of Afrikaner nationalism during and after the First World War” (p 12), as Duffey claims is the case. Despite their naturalistic rendering, they are far more than objective “visual records” or detached, impersonal documents.

Unfortunately, what Duffey appears to miss, is the extent to which Van Wouw’s works are an active and imaginative interpretation (rather than a passive record) of Van Wouw’s colonial context. Ironically, this “small” detail is pivotal. In spite of the many sound observations made by Duffey throughout his text, and regardless of his unquestionable expertise, his interpretation of Van Wouw’s works falls short primarily, because he seems too readily convinced by their realist veneer: he takes the meaning of the works at face value, because he assumes that the works themselves are “simple, direct, sober and always true to nature” (p 206). Had he started with a different premise – namely that the works, despite appearances, are complex, indirect, driven by desire and fascination, and true to the picturesque impetus to “dress life” – his *Anton van Wouw the smaller works* might have shed an altogether different light on the life and work of this historically important artist.

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8 Rosen & Zerner, *Romanticism and realism*, p 148

9 Rosen & Zerner, *Romanticism and realism*, p 167

10 Rosen & Zerner, *Romanticism and realism*, p 167