At this time of year, packages arrive daily, in piles, the UPS man staggering to our door like a circus performer, combination strongman and juggler. When opened, these boxes seem to fall into two general categories. In some we find products tightly, perfectly ensconced in their boxes, and in others, friends have let their wrapped gifts float free in a sea of Styrofoam peanuts. Perhaps oddly, this has made me think about two sculptors, Adolf von Hildebrand and Auguste Rodin, roughly contemporaries, whose approaches to sculpture read almost as caricatures of their respective nationalities. We have the German, his product clearly reminding us of the stone box in which it came and from which it was carved, and his nemesis, the Frenchman, whose sensuously juxtaposed forms, modeled from clay, are blissfully indifferent to Adolf’s box. Their sculpture points in two radically opposed directions, with ramifications for the larger world, and perhaps for how we lead our individual lives. Which man’s conception of the world comes closer to our perhaps unarticulated assumptions about life?

We might start with an allegorical figure from Hildebrand’s fountain in Munich, completed 1895. (If you have access to a search engine, try finding an image for “Adolf von Hildebrand,
Europa” to see his large, semi-nude woman sitting on a bull.) All the major planes remind us of the large block from which it emerged, almost as if a relief were carved more and more deeply until the back plane was dispensed with. He preferred doing reliefs, a format that necessitates a frontal view, like a painting whose forms recede from a foreground plane. In his *Europa’s* case the front view is primary, the back secondary, and the end views almost incidental. That’s the way Hildebrand conceived of sculpture; it should reassure us with memories of the block, orienting and ordering our experience, controlling our view in an almost Platonic way. In *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture* (1897), he stresses that we all move in air the way fish exist in water, subliminally aware of our surrounding space, even with our eyes closed. To extend the UPS analogy, even somewhat complex gifts (an espresso maker!!) usually arrive in 3-D Styrofoam jigsaw pieces that keep the parts from rattling around, and this is how Hildebrand conceives of the unity between positive and negative space, which it is the artist’s job to make tangible. He derides the *Farnese Bull*, the massive Hellenistic sculpture now in Naples, saying, “The artist has failed to transform his fully formed figures together with the volumes of air lying between them into factors of a unitary, ideal space. Instead we find real air spaces holding the various figures apart until these appear like so many stone men and animals grouped, it would seem, quite accidentally.” (Find images of the *Farnese Bull* on the web and you’ll immediately see what he means.) While the huge Farnese figure group is carved in marble, Hildebrand has great reservations about modeling in clay as well, finding it inherently liable to the same kind of problems. Without guidance from an initial block, adding clay to an armature tends toward mere imitation, at worst a glorified wax dummy. We’re disoriented, forced to move around the form to make sense of it as best we can; it might as well be the thing itself, for no art has been involved. True, Hildebrand says, modeling is good for studying isolated forms or parts in nature, but it lacks the inherently pictorial, and immediately comprehensible, nature of stone carving.

Those familiar with the work of Rodin will see what’s coming; the critique of the *Farnese Bull* might just as well be addressed to, say, Rodin’s *Ugolino and His Children*. (Find “Rodin, Ugolino” on the
web and any number of views should appear, though be aware that Carpeaux’s clearly pyramidal version is incorrectly and misleadingly mixed in with Rodin’s comparatively haphazard Ugolino.)

Beyond Christmas presents shaken helter-skelter in a cardboard box, we have the equivalent of a street bombing whose aftermath is stunned chaos. Rodin has made a mélange of old plasters parts, heads upsettingly out of scale with their foreign bodies, intuition his only guide. One can almost hear Hildebrand hyperventilating, seeing the death of Western civilization in front of his very eyes. With no orderly grid, no echoing planarities, it rubs our faces in dislocation and tumbling violence. But Rodin knew what he was doing, and wanted to require us to move around his figures to make sense of them, implicating us as participants in such works as the Burghers of Calais, where we’re asked to join the tragic parade. Hildebrand called the proliferation of outdoor statuary in Europe barbarous: “Can such work rank higher than convict labor?” He considered the public square a spatial wasteland, and blamed “the uncultured mind” for a misguided faith that such empty areas have some organic unity. Rodin upped the ante in his Burghers, for they trudge like doomed pedestrians in a rough circle at eye level, stressing the democratic, aleatory nature of public space. Nor would Rodin have been bothered by the accusation that modeling lent itself to the study of parts, for he had a warehouse of plaster heads, hands, and torsos that he kept experimentally adding to his Gates of Hell. Hildebrand claims that the foremost plane in relief matters most for legibility – otherwise it looks as though forms have been arbitrarily stuck on a panel. Bring it on, Rodin might have said.

Form itself makes the point. Yes, Hildebrand’s majestic woman rides a stately bull in an allegory of the beneficial effects of water, but we would immediately know what message is being sent: Western art can and should bring order to life’s haphazard unpredictability. Rodin’s forms do the talking as well. Yes, this is Ugolino, the count who Dante tells us ate his own children, but we don’t need the story to realize that the mishmash of parts is intentional; it wants to remind us of anarchic suffering. One could argue for flexibility, that an artist might tailor his or her forms depending on the subject, but that isn’t usually how it works. Poussin had theories about different modes for different subjects and emo-
tional states, but his sense of the world is embedded in everything he created. Hildebrand’s work embodies his carefully articulated formal ideas, his desire for clear, distant, visible planes, and his conviction that forms should be thought of as sandwiched between panes of glass perpendicular to our line of sight. Rodin’s oeuvre, by contrast, is almost seat-of-the-pants, a sensual immersion in the hands-on, tactile immediacy of clay, in fluid mutability and a disdain for relief. Take this extended statement from Rodin:

The principles of art were first pointed out to me not by a celebrated sculptor or by a teacher of authority but by a fellow workman, a humble artisan. . . . I was at the beginning of my career, earning six francs a day, our models were leaves and flowers which we picked in the garden. I was carving a capital when Constance Simon said to me, “You don’t go about that correctly. You make all your leaves flatwise. Turn them, on the contrary, with the tips facing you. Execute them in depth and not in relief. Always work in that manner so that a surface will never seem other than the termination of a mass. Only thus can you achieve success in sculpture.” I understood at once. Since then I’ve discovered other things, but that rule has remained my absolute basis.

Hildebrand and Rodin, two gifted men, both clear thinkers, and they couldn’t be more different. The carver’s work is subtractive and visual, the modeler’s additive and tactile. The polarities mount up: relief/in the round; planarity/depth; distant/up close; normative/eccentric. We could argue that their temperaments were opposed, and leave it at that, or we might expand the issue by referencing Norris K. Smith’s writing on the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, which in turn draws heavily on the work of Thorlief Boman. They both find a dichotomy between Hellenic and Hebraic thinking, as in this set of oppositions:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Hellenic</th>
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<td>abstraction</td>
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<td>evidence, science</td>
<td>personal experience, history</td>
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<td>logic, mathematics</td>
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<td>mechanical, geometric</td>
<td>biological, organic</td>
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<td>form as ideal</td>
<td>materials as real</td>
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seeing
objective, pure
normative tranquillity
classical
being

hearing, touching
subjective, messy
extremes
Romantic
becoming

While such dichotomies always elicit exceptions, a gratifying number of these categories apply to our two artists’ approach to sculpture.

It might be time to rethink the UPS man’s boxes, since Rodin never thought of his work in terms of the box. It might be fruitful to imagine a cube, and then picture a piece of coral. The five Platonic solids (one of which is the cube) embodied abstract, even cosmic truth for the Greeks, who considered their perfect symmetry to be mesmerizingly ideal models for all we experience. Coral is asymmetrical and accretive, growing in response to local factors rather than matching a preexisting plan. Hildebrand might consider the forms of coral worth studying as a series of parts, but as inherently defying clear visual comprehension. Rodin might see Michelangelo as reminding us, wonderfully, of the cubic form of his stone, but would have felt the Platonic cube best left to “the teachers of authority.” The German might have thought coral vulgarly random, the Frenchman might consider the cube restrictive and inorganic.

Back to the issue of individual temperament: do these two sculptors personify more general approaches to life? Western thought combines both columns in our list, for Christianity drew on both the Hebrew Bible and the classical world. In art, because the Hebrews forbade graven images, the art and architecture of Greece and Rome were ready-made models, though anti-classicism runs all through our tradition as well. Both threads find champions in any given age: Raphael and Grunewald, Poussin and Rembrandt, Ingres and Delacroix, Cézanne and Monet, Mondrian and Picasso. A Hebraic immersion in history might insist the name “classical” applies only to a given historical period, so that a resurgence or revival is necessarily “neoclassicism.” A more Greek approach might see this as wordplay, for the ideals may manifest with new conditions while remaining essentially the same. This makes
Raphael, Poussin, Ingres, and Mondrian kindred spirits, believers in normative tranquillity and visual order. This is not to say that Ingres looks like a proto-Mondrian, or that superficial resemblance means identical spirit: the Parthenon is not the Seagram’s Building. But if we look to find ourselves in such polarities, even given their messy borders, we learn something of where we stand. One could get carried away, of course, throwing Hellenic/Hebraic polarities around indiscriminately, applying them to, say, drones versus AK47’s, but if we reflect on our daily assumptions and behavior, they might be helpful. After hearing about a tribe in Brazil that has no words for left and right, but refers to “up river” and “down river,” a friend said she identified more with them than with her husband’s reliance on the abstractions of “north” or “south.” I see no real value judgment attached to either pole, and, like the culture at large, draw on both as I live my life and make my sculpture. That may be a problem, a desire to have it all, a promiscuous appreciation of almost all the art of our tradition. But in learning and stealing from that tradition, it helps to have rough guidelines to make sense of what we’re looking at. There I just drew on Hildebrand, the man with the glass box. He writes in *The Problem of Form* that the guiding pictorial impression, always present in carving, has to be applied after the fact when modeling, like a critic, for “it has not been a factor in the conception.” I would argue that we act as critics throughout the entire process, regardless of our approach. In fact, reading Hildebrand gave me a conceptual framework for being critical of some of Rodin’s work, such as his crowd-pleasing women’s heads (which he didn’t carve himself) arbitrarily emerging from the marble like a hernia. I’m critical of Hildebrand through Rodin’s eyes as well, for in loving most of the Frenchman’s work, I find the German a much less inspiring artist. Hildebrand is a clear thinker, while many of Rodin’s statements seem vague, sentimental, and at times silly, but the proof is ultimately in the work itself.

We can find descendants of both these men in subsequent sculpture. Hildebrand’s book was extremely influential; just look at international art deco and you’ll sense the box all those relief-like pieces came in. Brancusi, Maillol, and Bourdelle all owed as much to Hildebrand as to Rodin. We might safely say that Hildebrand’s philosophical/aesthetic assumptions were congenial to at
least half the major sculptors of the past century. Rodin's study of the Western sculptural tradition was omnivorous, and his influence unarguable, even on such unexpected artists as Picasso, who shared a good deal of Rodin’s “let’s just try adding this to that and see what happens” approach. Jean Arp’s sexily biomorphic abstractions from the thirties seem to share some of Rodin's worldview and form sense, and you might even find Ugolino’s ghost in some of the Happenings of 1960s New York. Neither man might like some of his putative descendants. Arno Becker, Hitler’s favorite sculptor, is a creepily brittle exaggeration of all the authoritarianism latent in Hildebrand’s form sense, and much minimalism (see Donald Judd’s boxes) is proud of its cold, Germanic austerity. What might Rodin make of installation art such as that of Martin Kippenberger, whose museum space full of used office furniture might, unfairly, claim to be kindred to Rodin’s additive conglomerations? Surely Hildebrand would see such sculptors as Duane Hansen, John De Andrea, Jamie Salmon, and Ron Mueck as the culmination of his most dire prediction, that modeled sculpture would degenerate into glorified Madame Tussaud’s waxworks. But can we imagine Rodin approving of their hyperrealism? In its negation of formal concerns, today’s art raises the commonalities between the German and the Frenchman. Both believed that the point of sculpture was form, and considered the public’s reliance on content a misreading of art. Both thought carefully about the intellectual and emotional implications of space itself. Whether or not the classical or Romantic frame of mind recurs over time, I find it hard to imagine either man feeling at home in today’s art world, which is for the most part hostile to considerations of form and space.

In one corner of the art world, however, where form and space mean what they once did, Hildebrand’s ideation and Rodin’s practice are still in evidence. Consider the work of Natalie Charkow, a carver of limestone reliefs. (You’ll get a frustratingly partial view of her achievement by Googling her name.) Her work is extremely pictorial, often leaving enough of the front plane’s stone to frame the recession and assert itself like a screen through which we read. How happy Hildebrand would be that such a wonderful working artist shares aspects of his sensibility! His sandwich of glass here identifies with the foreground forms, making us acutely aware of
the block itself, both as object and as conceptual scaffolding. His call to establish pictorially legible foreground shapes, then to carve back to subsequent layers and shapes deeper within until one reaches the back plane is here answered. In fact, Charkow has been known to keep going so far that she has to glue another piece of stone on the back or she’ll have an inadvertent sculpture in the round. Hildebrand points out that shallow and deep relief are not causally related, because the latter depends more heavily on the intensity and distribution of shadows. Charkow paints a sculptural picture with careful distribution of darks, and here the foreground figures are like musical notes with an architectural rhythm, played off against the organic melody of the foliage above. Her early work in metal was indebted to Bach, aspiring to “frozen music,” as Goethe said about architecture, and her darks and lights continue to sing.

Often she works from a beloved image, such as Piero della Francesca’s *Flagellation* (Piero’s and Natalie’s versions are available on Google Images), with experimental symphonic variations on the theme. Piero, of course, is a kindred spirit, in that he organizes in stage flats that recede for the most part parallel to the picture plane. Apart from the sheer, daring virtuosity of carving such forms in limestone, observe Charkow’s clear spatial thinking in each radically different panel. Natalie, once my teacher and now a dear friend, is an invaluable critic of both sculpture and painting, so I can stress how intuitive her thought is, how she reacts to form first then searches for words to convey what she knows viscerally to be so. Though endlessly helpful in looking at
sculpture in the round, she has something of an aversion to it, and also shares Hildebrand’s formalism, often not even seeing what a work is “about.” This makes the old harangues about abstraction versus figuration pointless, and allows her both great freedom and restraint. Like burrowing animals, we enter these crevices and crannies, finding shelter while getting a bit lost in the maze, all in a highly metaphoric way; Plato’s cave is a favorite referent. When Charkow’s reliefs are built flush into a wall, both the pictorial and the architectural character of her work is emphasized, and we’re drawn in closer, like Alice going through the looking-glass.

If Charkow aligns in many ways with Hildebrand, Manuel Neri comes to mind as inheriting some of Rodin’s sensibility. He models additively in plaster on armatures, occasionally adding splashes of paint. Like Rodin, his formalism is tempered by an obsession with the nude female form, to which he has returned for decades. Look at one of his reliefs (many of which can be seen on Google images) and we can see which camp he’s in, remembering Rodin’s Gates of Hell and Hildebrand’s disdain for figures stuck on a panel with no reference to the glass sandwich. The German might see Neri’s yellow and black paint applied to some of Neri’s reliefs as a way to undercut the potential for making “stone people” as in the Farnese Bull, hoping artifice will temper realism. Or this may be a product of the painterly (as opposed to pictorial) milieu of West Coast art, the circle of Richard Diebenkorn and David Parks. In any case, Hildebrand would be horrified.

While we might see echoes of Greek marble figures in Neri’s
work, we never sense the glass box as origin or corrective. But that’s not to say there are no guiding conceptual underpinnings to help Neri organize and activate space. For Hildebrand’s book has a significant omission: his dicta never consider alternatives to planar thinking. He never acknowledges axial organization, even as a possibility. He never imagines that one might cut into a block with planes that don’t sit parallel to the stone’s cubic faces. Nor does he acknowledge that modelers think axially from the beginning. Set up an armature and you’ve staked a claim to the space that surrounds it, with any number of ways to articulate the parts. Take two of Neri’s female torsos, both based on an undulating vertical axis. One culminates centripetally and the other centrifugally, one contracts while the other expands. We sense a sort of energy field around the figures, which, contrary to Hildebrand’s warnings, neither are wax figurines that might just as well be life casts nor lack an organizing principle. (As an aside, the cut-and-paste Rodin would appreciate the breasts Neri has slapped on like a hurried plastic surgeon.)

Painters are, of course, thinking spatially as well. Ingres thought from the outside in, finding a silhouette for his forms and then shading as minimally as possible, as if in low relief, to model the forms without chiaroscuro, and in this he resembles Hildebrand. Corot worked from the inside out, more like Rodin, starting with a general form then letting it expand, coming to rest as a kind of
solidified fog. Ingres’s nemesis, Delacroix, returned to the approach of Rubens, whose spaces are constructed with sweeping diagonal thrusts. Consider Rubens’s *Elevation of the Cross* (easily accessed on the web), which is based on a massive tetrahedron, (another Platonic solid), one ridge of which determines the cross itself. Perhaps Hildebrand would have condemned such axial organization as pictorial apostasy, but in his book he militantly overlooks half the spatial options available to the artist. Pyramidal form shows up over and over in the history of sculpture (loosely appearing in Rodin’s *Ugolino*), conveying as much reassuring solidity as the cube. Hildebrand might have considered a plane shearing away at an angle as no longer pictorial, arguing that just as we would never hang a picture on a tilted wall we must face the world at right angles.

In a badly lit cabinet in the Rodin Museum in Paris, seen through an overly reflective glass pane, lies one of the most sensuous forms in Western art. Search “Rodin, Adele” and the web will reward you with endless views of this twisting, ecstatic form, a distillation of passion. She might be emblematic of Rodin’s entire oeuvre, embodying his ability to model what feels to be a living, breathing object. The rejection of planarities or stable referents is intentional, the wrenching torsion almost a gauntlet thrown down to Hildebrand. Neri picks it up in his small, semi-abstract plaster, a younger sister to Adele. We feel such helix-like convolutions in our bodies, not as a pictorial image. Hildebrand was right to make the distinction, but he seems to throw the baby out with the bathwater in failing to appreciate the gut-wrenching body identification we can also experience with good sculpture.

I’ve never met Manuel Neri, and can’t say how he feels about
Hildebrand’s ideas or Rodin’s work, or know whether his character bears some relation to his form sense. But in knowing Natalie Charkow for forty-five years, I do find a consistency in her life and work, and while not in any one camp or another, she shows remarkable integrity when it comes to quality in art. At the same time her work embodies the order and clarity of classicism, she’s about the most Hebraic person I know, reacting intuitively to context and materials. I would say that “up and down river” makes more sense to her than “east and west,” and that generalizations make her fingernails itch. I’m not wildly optimistic either about the direction our society is taking or the likelihood that young artists will hearken to Charkow or Neri, both of whom belong to an older generation. But it gives me comfort to believe in kindred spirits, to think that certain structural possibilities have been formulated, taken seriously, and well applied over time, and might emerge again. On that note, I leave with two last reproductions that speak eloquently for themselves. One is Charkow’s relief based on Matisse’s Faun in a Forest, the other Manuel Neri’s plaster of a woman. They surely participate in the discussion of dichotomy, in their beautiful demonstration of the endless varieties of form and space.