

**Who does decide the posterity  
or the future of Art Works?**

Diderot and Falconet as Promethean Pygmalion.

Akira BABA

群馬県立女子大学紀要 第34号 別刷

2013年2月

Reprinted from

BULLETIN OF GUNMA PREFECTURAL WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY No. 34

FEBRUARY 2013

JAPAN

# Who does decide the posterity or the future of Art Works?

Diderot and Falconet as Promethean Pygmalion<sup>1</sup>.

Akira BABA

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story about Pygmalion, mythical man of Cyprus, was not necessarily to admire the genius power in Art: it is rather thanks to his religious reverence for Venus that his statue could be animated. But in the 18th century, as in the fifth Act of *Le Triomphe des Arts*, Opera Ballet by De La Motte (1700), the story becomes explicitly directed to the «récompense» for the «art» of Pygmalion: «C'est ainsi que ton Art reçoit sa récompense» (DLM, 189). Hence the association of Pygmalion story with an another ancient story about Alexander's grant of his beloved to the painter Apelles, association as in the said Opera Ballet<sup>2</sup> and in the two successive works by Falconet, *Pygmalion au pied de la statue* (1763) and *Alexandre, Apelle, et Campaspe* (1765). The animation of his statue symbolizes then the public honour given to the genius in Art.

It seems in this light that present themselves the objects of our paper, discourses by 18<sup>th</sup> century French sculptor Etienne-Maurice Falconet and his friend Denis Diderot. Our final intention, however, does not so much consist in confirming simply the modern aesthetic ideology thus based on the divine genius. But rather we would like to focus on a somewhat hidden context of the controversy between Diderot and this French Pygmalion about the «postérité».

## 1. From representative Rococo Artist to Promethean Pygmalion in Art.

At first, let's confirm that it is Diderot and his association with Enlightenment supporters that permitted Falconet to become such a new Pygmalion. In a well-known remark of his *Salon de 1763*, praising the expression of the Cyprian sculptor in Falconet's Pygmalion group sculpture, Diderot addresses this latter: «Émule des dieux, s'ils ont animé la statue, tu en as renouvelé le miracle en animant le statuaire. [...] mais crains que coupable du crime de Prométhée, un vautour ne t'attend aussi» (XIII, 410). He suggests thus to identify Falconet as genius sculptor or his contemporary Pygmalion further with Prometheus, Titanic hero defying the Gods to liberate human beings. In a sense it is by this introduction of the rebellious hero that Diderot's review becomes original to other contemporary common reading of the Falconet's work in the context of love victory as did Mathon de la Cour<sup>3</sup>. Here let's emphasize two points.

Firstly it is a suggested complicity or alliance of this sculptor with the Philosophes. In this light the battle of Prometheus against the Gods may symbolize their opposition to the Church and the established corrupt powers, as clearly exemplified by Voltaire's not represented «opéra» *Pandore* (written around 1740). Falconet himself didn't miss the opportunities accorded by this

powerful support, favorable for the invitation from Catherine II of Russia, grand protector of philosophes, and in particular for his participation in *Encyclopédie* (art. «Sculpture») and for the public approval of his discursive competence much enough to debate among the «littérateurs» or the «philosophes». And, according to Diderot, not only Falconet who «pétrit la terre et le marbre», «lit et médite», but also «il est philosophe» and «il ne croit rien» (XIV, 289), the last sentence of which might confirm the remark by Weinshenker for Falconet's sympathy with the atheism<sup>4</sup>. Hence a further possibility of this contemporary Promethean sculptor's becoming as a materialist Pygmalion: in fact the author of the *Rêve de d'Alembert*, shall employ a copy of Falconet's sculpture in order to explain his materialistic perspective<sup>5</sup>.

Secondly, with such an alliance with the Encyclopédistes as powerful opinion-leaders of that time, this 18<sup>th</sup> century Pygmalion becomes more easily Prometheus for his colleague sculptors. As is well known, the Pygmalion story for the visual arts has promoted the «paragone» between painting and sculpture since Castiglione especially in favour for the former<sup>6</sup>. Then here may be found a more important motive for the successive productions by Falconet about those Pygmalion and Alexandre-Apelles stories: he succeeds in recapturing the former sculptor's story so to speak usurped until then by the painters, and further tries to prove the superiority of sculptor over painter by depicting through relief-sculpture this celebrating story for the genius painter. But our sculptor is not satisfied at saving his colleagues from the losing battle against the painters. He shall advance to develop his Promethean battle against «hommes des lettres» or «littérateurs» inseparable from the Encyclopédistes including ironically of course his friend Diderot, who contributes to his friend sculptor's transformation into Promethean Pygmalion.

## 2. Controversy about the «postérité» between Diderot and Falconet.

In the *Salon de 1765*, two years after the review about Falconet's Pygmalion sculpture, Diderot has already remarked ironically his friend's indifference to the posterior enjoyment of his works, indifference which was to launch their famous controversy: «il y n'y a pas d'homme [...] plus indifférent sur celui de la postérité» (XIV, 290). This controversy in their correspondence from December 1765 to February 1767, is based on their opposition about the Artworks reception in posterity. Contrary to Diderot who asserts for genius artist and his creation not only «les génuflexions d'un monde actuel» but «cette foule d'adorateurs illimitée qui puisse satisfaire un esprit dont les élans sont toujours vers l'infini» (XV, 4), Falconet's negative position never changes: such praises from the «postérité» which «n'est [...] pas en notre pouvoir» is in fact not other than «une loterie même assez maussade pour les intéressés» (XV, 7). But why does he deny so persistently?

As is often noted, behind their controversy and especially Falconet's distrust against the posterity can be found certain echo of the «Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes». In fact Falconet criticizes severely blind admiration for the antiquity Cultures, for example, for the celebrated equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. And his critic reaches these admirations' ancient literary sources such as *Naturalis Historia* by Plinius etc. But he puts here in question not only Plinius' personal incompetence for proper art judgement. In this sense, the

«anti-anciens» position of Falconet who «n'adopte pas le système outré de Charles Perrault contre les anciens» (FOC, II, 15) can not be easily identified with that of this representative writer of the «Modernes».

Rather he has transformed the 17<sup>th</sup> century controversy so profoundly as to put in question the hegemony of these writers itself. As Promethean Pygmalion for plastic Artists, Falconet denounces these writers or «littérateurs» in general because of their self-overestimation for impartial visual art judgement. Then his severe critique isn't oriented solely to Plinius as «petit radoteur» and Pausanias as stupid admirer of the gigantesque seated statue of Jupiter by Phidias (XV, 15-6). More seriously, it extends to his contemporary writers such as Voltaire (XV, 83-8) and even Diderot who doesn't conceal his reverence for these ancient writers: then Falconet refuses Diderot's interpretation about a lost picture by Polygnotos, Greek painter of antiquity, interpretation not only based on ancient Pausanias' description but also amplified by Diderotian poetic imagination (XV, 211-2). And what offends deeply Falconet in the controversy with Diderot is his following remark: «tu subsisteras éternellement, ou dans un fragment de marbre, ou plus sûrement encore dans quelques-unes de nos lignes» (XV, 9). Our sculptor can never miss in Diderot's «lignes» or writing the same miserable risks as the absurd evaluations for the Antiquity Culture by the «lignes» of ancient and modern «littérateurs»<sup>7</sup>.

Then much naturally Diderot's intervention in Falconet's artistic creation might be refused definitively by him. In fact, concerning his suggestion about Falconet's sculptural project for Peter the Great statue, he manifests rather a distrust because of Diderot's «poésie» introducing, for example, some allegories around this statue<sup>8</sup>. And can be easily supposed his antipathy towards Diderot's famous suggestion with a following too naive comment in the *Salon de 1763* to his Pygmalion group statue: «Il me semble que ma pensée est plus neuve, plus rare, et plus énergique que celle de Falconet» (XIII, 411).

Of course, in course of this correspondence, Diderot himself who «ne regrettrait ni un loui ni deux, ni trois, ni quatre [...] pour rendre votre Pygmalion et plusieurs de vos ouvrages à jamais invulnérables par la main du temps» (XV, 19) must have felt sadly such a possible antipathy for his sympathetic comment on the Falconet's masterpiece. In fact, it is by evoking his contribution favourable for its reputation that he tries in vain to persuade Falconet of important awareness for his «enfants» or sculptural works posterity: «Est-ce que tu n'es pas père [des ouvrages comme Pygmalion etc.]? est-ce que tes enfants ne sont pas de chair? Est-ce que quand tu t'es épuisé sur un morceau qui te satisfait, après le souris d'approbation, ne te vient-il pas un soupir regret sur la lèvre que, passé le présent tribut précaire du jour, tout sera fini demain pour l'ouvrier et pour l'ouvrage?» (XV, 19). However as if forgetting such friendly services, our sculptor responds to him coldly: «Le génie, ce pur don de la nature est la cause unique des grandes productions. [...] Et sans ce don, j'aurais beau voir une foule d'approbateurs futurs préparer des éloges; cette vision ne me donnerait pas la vertu productive; le plus grand désir d'avoir une belle lignée; la forte image d'une jolie demi-douzaine d'enfants qui caressent un papa chéri, n'ont jamais rendu un impuisable habile à procréer» (XV, 21-2). In a way, in order to refute Diderot basing himself on historical continuity of posterity, he has recourse rather to non-historical discontinuity of original genius in a modern sense, as is remarked by Dieckmann<sup>9</sup>. This 18<sup>th</sup> century Pygmalion has thus become so radically Promethean for visual

artists as to revolt against our «philosophe» as his godfather.

### 3. Modernity context behind this controversy: Art circulation and the «public»

But we will rather underline a global modernity context of this controversy, irreducible to the traditional opposition since Renaissance of visual artists to «littérateurs»: contemporary economico-social contexts around the fine arts.

In this sense we cannot too overestimate a new situation for the presentation and circulation of Falconet's Art works and Diderot's art discourses. Falconet's works, the Pygmalion group statue included, were often presented in the Salon, public exhibition annually held in Louvre Palace. And Diderot's reviews *Salons* promoted even unconsciously Art investment. In fact, Russian Catherine, as is well-known, so attached to Falconet's Pygmalion work through her reading of Diderot's reviews in the *Correspondance littéraire*, was making great profit by buying and reselling Art works. And, in spite of Diderot's vain hope for Salon's new mission to avoid the degradation by Art speculation, according to A. Becq<sup>10</sup>, the Salons serve ironically to enhance blindly not only reputation of excellent artists but also prices of their works. Falconet himself as director of Sèvres manufacture<sup>11</sup> reproduced and multiplied his Salon works including the Pygmalion work. But, especially for Diderot, the verbal circulation and information of Art works, possibly inseparable from this market, might serve to the authority of «littérateurs» thanks to the rapid evolution in this century of the correspondence system and the printing technique: «Il y a deux grandes inventions; la poste qui porte presque en six semaines une découverte de l'équateur au pôle, et l'imprimerie qu la fixe à jamais» (XV, 9).

But we must not miss the potential destination of this circulation and Art market: anonymous people who can not necessarily concern directly such an Art investment but rather enjoy Art works to form the public judgements and «value» of these works. It is these people who surged towards the Salon, and as is well-known they caused in both Diderot and Falconet aversion and anxiety about their bad judgements<sup>12</sup>. However their existence must not be easily neglected in particular in this century's Art discourses. Here for us will be much helpful J-B Dubos's influential writing, familiar to Diderot and Faconet. The author of the *Réflexions critiques...* (1719) insisted on the final rightness of the public opinion: it is the «public's» «sentiment» or «sixième sens» that, free from the particular interests by «connaisseurs» and «gens du métier» or artists, can lead to the impartial judgement about Artworks (DB, Part. II, sec. 22, 26)<sup>13</sup>. Especially it is the trails of time or «postérité» that will reveal finally its rightness (DB, Part. II, sec. 28)<sup>14</sup>:

By the way, as Hilsum remarks it<sup>15</sup>, Diderot never abandoned the future possibility that his contemporary public may become again «juge redoutable» as «le peuple de l'antiquité» through their enlightenment by these Salons (XIII, 340). Rather in almost Dubosian perspective, the diachronic purification supports the Diderotian authenticity of «le bon goût» as well as «l'éloge de la postérité»<sup>16</sup>: in fact the «voix publique» of «cette cohue mêlée de gens de toute espèce qui va tumultueusement au parterre siffler un chef-d'œuvre, élever la poussière» «prédomine à la longue et forme l'opinion générale» that is to say «ce jugement sain, tranquille et réfléchi d'une

nation entière, jugement qui reste lorsque tous les petits intérêts particuliers se sont tus» (XV, 165).

But more problematic or nuanced is the case of Falconet, who disagrees manifestly with Dubosian «public»<sup>17</sup>. Here, we must note, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the increasing importance of this «public» might be linked with the transformed aesthetic hierarchy in favour of visual and physical arts including sculpture. Firstly, since Dubos' writing, has been established the pictorial or visual paradigm based on the superiority of visual simultaneousness over verbal successiveness (DB, Part. I, sec. 40). Secondly, especially through the Molyneux problem, tactile certainty has become so crucial for Condillac, Rousseau and Herder, the last of whom was to insist on the inferiority of pictorial art to tactile art, sculpture. Such visual arts promotion which might serve to reinforce Falconet's Promethean activity against Diderot and «littérateurs» could at the same time coincide more favourably with the «sentiment» of Dubosian «public» rather than more intellectual and technical judgement of art specialists or «connaisseurs», Diderot and his colleagues included. Therefore, could be found a latent complicity of the Dubosian «public» with our sculptor. Hence we must reconsider the fact that Falconet had a earnest desire to publish the correspondence with Diderot, desire to communicate and eternize his ideas to more global readers, including contemporary and possibly future «public». But, more interesting, the author of the *Réflexions sur la sculpture* had to concede the indispensability of the «sentiment» so deeply connected to those «public»'s judgements about Arts: «Les connaissances acquises ne sont que particulières, mais le sentiment est à tous les hommes; il est universel: à cet égard, tous les hommes sont juges de nos ouvrages» (FOC, I, 31). Then, contrary to Weinshenker's negative interpretation about this passage based on Falconet's constant reserve that the «public» can never enjoy exactly the sculpture's technical aspects<sup>18</sup>, we may rather say however, in fact for our sculptor the Dubosian «public»'s presence has become so inevitable.

#### 4. Conclusion.

Let's return to our paper's title question: who does decide the posterity of Art works? For Diderot and Falconet, positively or negatively according to each of them, it seems first of all the «littérateurs» who have until then dominated verbally the circulations of Art works' evaluations. However, as Dubos underlines it, if the «postérité» proves the final rightness of the «public»? Even though it shall be excessive or rather a mistake to conclude easily the «public»'s perfect domination of Artworks posterity, we have confirmed however, behind their controversy the «public» may well come to assert even in a low voice its presence. And especially for Falconet who came to play through Diderot a role of Promethean Pygmalion, liberator artist, a conscious solidarity with the «public» might have led to far nuanced discussions with Diderot.

Interestingly enough, almost simultaneously, an another Promethean Pygmalion, J.-J. Rousseau however critical of Prometheus as Enlightenment promoter symbol, will elaborate a more complicated strategy for this anonymous and indefinite posterity formed by this «public» through his famous «mélodrame» or «scène lyrique» *Pygmalion* and its making public probably

inseparable from his autobiographical attempts. But this will be an another story.

### **References for this paper.**

(As regards directly cited or referred texts and studies except Diderot's ones, we use their abbreviation signs shown here at the beginning)

#### **Texts of 18<sup>th</sup> century**

BOUREAU-DESLANDES, *Pygmalion ou la statue animée*, in *Pygmalion des Lumières*, pres. by H. COULET, Paris, Desjonquières, 1998.

DLM: H. DE LA MOTTE, *Le triomphe des arts*, in *Œuvres*, t. VI, Paris, chez Prault l'ainé, 1754, 10 vol.

D. DIDEROT, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Hermann, 1975-.

DB: J.-B. DUBOS, *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture*, Paris, chez Pissot, 1770, 3 vol. (Reprint, Genève-Paris, Slatkine, 1993) (first ed., 1719).

FOC: E.-M. FALCONET, *Œuvres*, Lausanne, chez La Société Typographique, 1781, 6 vol.

VOLTAIRE, *Pandore* (opéra (=tragédie lyrique) en cinq actes), in *Œuvres complètes*, t. III (Théâtre-2), ed. by L. Moland, 1877, 52 vol.

#### **Studies**

##### **—Pygmalion and Prometheus themes**

A. BLÜHM, *Pygmalion die Ikonographie eines Künstlermythos zwischen 1500 und 1900*, Frankfurt am Main etc., Peter Lang, 1988.

J.L. CARR, «Pygmalion and the philosophes, the animated Statue in eighteenth-century France», *Journal of the Warburg and the Courtauld Institutes*, 23, 1960.

*Pygmalion die Geschichte des Mythos in der abendländischen Kultur*, ed. by M. MAYER etc., Rombach, Freiburg, 1997.

O. RAGGIO, «The myth of Prometheus: its survival and metamorphoses up to the eighteenth century», *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 21, 1958.

R. TROUSSON, *Le thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne* (first ed., 1964), Genève, Droz, 2001.

##### **—Diderot, Falconet and their controversy about the «postérité»**

M. BEAULIEU, «Les “écrits” de Falconet sur la sculpture», *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de l'art français*, 1992 (année 1991).

BENOT, Introduction for his edition of *Le Pour et le Contre* de Diderot et de Falconet, Paris, les Editeurs Français Réunis, 1958.

H. DIECKMANN and J. SEZNEC, «The horse of Marcus Aurelius», *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 15, 1965.

DIECKMANN: H. DIECKMANN, Introduction for his edition (with SezneC) of *Diderot et Falconet*, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1959.

H. DOWLEY, «Falconet's attitude towards antiquity and his theory of reliefs», *The Art Quarterly*, 31-2, 1968.

HILSUM: M. HILSUM, «Sur une représentation absente: le philosophe et la pratique à l'épreuve du langage», *Revue des sciences humaines*, 182, 1981-2.

G. LEVITINE, *The Sculpture of Falconet*, Greenwich, New York Graphic Society LTD., 1972.

Ch. MICHEL, «Les conseillers artistiques de Diderot», *Revue de l'art*, 66, 1984.

REAU: L. REAU, *Etienne-Maurice Falconet*, Paris, Demotte, 1922, 2 vol.

SCHENKER: M. SCHENKER, *The Bronze Horseman: Falconet's monument to Peter the great*, New Haven and London, Yale Univ. Pr., 2003.

J. SEZNEC, «Falconet, Voltaire et Diderot», *Studies on Voltaire and the 18th century*, 2, 1956.

VILLECHENON: M.-N. PINOT DE VILLECHENON, «Un sculpteur au royaume de la porcelaine», *Falconet à Sèvres ou l'art de plaire*, Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, 2001.

### —Aesthetics in the 18<sup>th</sup> century France

BECQ: A. BECQ, *La genèse de l'esthétique française moderne*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1994 (first ed., 1984).

### Notes

- 
- 1 This paper, based partly on my Japanese one («A case of the Promethean Sculptor in the 18th century», *Journal of The Gunma Prefectural Women's University*, n.28, 2007), was read at the 13<sup>th</sup> International Congress for 18<sup>th</sup> Century Study (29 July, 2011, Graz/Austria). As for the citations of Diderot's texts, including the controversy between Diderot and Falconet (*Le Pour et le Contre*), we use without any sign but only with the volume number (Roman numerals) and the page number (Arabic numerals) of the Hermann edition's *Œuvres complètes de Diderot*. As for the citations of the other authors including their texts' abbreviation signs, see our References list shown at the end of this paper.
  - 2 It is its «Acte IV» about Alexandre, Apelle, and Campaspe that presupposes its final «Acte V» about the animation of the Statue by Vénus as divine grant to Pygmalion.
  - 3 «Ceux mêmes qui n'ont jamais aimé comprennent, en voyant ce morceau, ce que peut être pour un amant que l'instant où une femme insensible s'attendrit, cet instant qu'on n'oublie jamais où son cœur s'ouvre au sentiment et où ses yeux embarrassés commencent à l'exprimer» (MATHON DE LA COUR, *Lettre à Madame... sur les peintures, les sculptures et les gravures exposées dans le Salon du Louvre en 1763*, cited by Reau (REAU, 204)).
  - 4 See WEINSHENKER, 119-20.
  - 5 «[Diderot]... Je prends la statue que vous voyez; je la mets dans un mortier; et à grands coups de pilon... [D'Alembert] Doucement s'il vous plaît. C'est le chef d'œuvre de Falconet» (XVII, 93).
  - 6 See BLUHM, 34-49. The painters can use more sophisticated and intellectual techniques such as perspective, clair-obscur and colouring, while the sculptors are limited by more toiling materiality without any opportunity of representing the transformation from whiteness of marble to flesh colour.
  - 7 «Cela posé, je vous demande, si nous voyions de mauvais ouvrages de Phidias, d'Appelles ou de tel autre, croirions-nous bien fermement aux éloges qui sont dans Pausanias et dans Pline? [...] J'en suis fâché pour vos lignes; elles feraient tout aussi peu de croyants, si nos bons ouvrages périssaient et que les mauvais restassent. Et fiez-vous aux lignes qui passent à la postérité» (XV,



- 15).
- 8 Contrary to Diderot's suggestion, according to Falconet, «l'exécution sera simple. La barbarie, l'amour des peuples, et le symbole de la nation n'y seront point. Ces figures eussent peut-être jeté plus de poésie dans l'ouvrage. Mais, dans mon métier, [...] il faut simplifier la pièce, ...» (XV, 195-6).
- 9 See DIECKMANN, 14.
- 10 See BECQ, 766-7.
- 11 See VILLECHENON, 18-22.
- 12 For Diderot, «le peuple regarde tout, et ne s'entend à rien» (XIII, 353). And, citing Zeuxis against even the judgement of the general public as «la nation la plus sensible et la plus connaisseuse» Falconet also is not less severe to them: «C'est la fange de l'art qu'ils admirent, s'écrivait Zeuxis avec indignation, et il ôta son tableau» (FOC, II, 83).
- 13 «Non seulement le public juge d'un ouvrage sans intérêt, mais il en juge encore ainsi qu'il en faut décider en général, c'est-à-dire par la voie du sentiment...» (DB, II, 339 (Part. II, sec. 22)); «Il faut bien que les gens du métier se trompent souvent, puisque leurs jugements sont ordinairement cassés par ceux du public dont la voix fit toujours la destinée des ouvrages» (DB, II, 393 (Part. II, sec. 26)).
- 14 «Racine a-t-il mis au jour une tragédie dont on n'ait pas imprimé une critique qui la rabaisserait au rang des pièces médiocres [...]? [...] La postérité équitable s'est soulevée en leur faveur. [...] Le public tire peu à peu le procès d'entre leurs mains, et l'examinant lui-même, il rend à chacun la justice qui lui est due» (DB, II, 411 (Part. II, sec. 28)).
- 15 See HILSUM, 96.
- 16 «Ce n'est ni moi, ni Pierre, ni Paul, ni Jean qui nous loue; c'est le bon goût et le bon goût est un être abstrait qui ne meurt point: sa voix se fait entendre sans discontinuer, par des organes successifs qui se succèdent les uns aux autres» (XIII, 5).
- 17 See WEINSCHENKER, 69-75.
- 18 See *ibid.*, 72-3.