Daniel Mazori

Melanie Ventilla

Art Humanities, Section 22

October 1, 2007

With a Child on Top

The Alice in Wonderland Monument in Central Park (on East 74th Street near 5th Avenue) does its title justice, for it inspires a sense of wonder in whoever views it objectively. The most striking feature of the sculpture (early in the morning, before it has any visitors) is the disunity of its main characters—a consequence of how they are arranged, both vertically and horizontally. From the vertical perspective, the young Alice commands the sculpture's center. The Mad Hatter lies to her east; the March Hare, her west. Such spatial individuality divides the sculpture into separate vertical sections—one central and two peripheral—with no commonality. The sculpture is also halved horizontally by the head of the central mushroom. As such, Alice exists completely in the upper half, while the Mad Hatter and the March Hare lie noticeably beneath her. That the three do not even share common ground leaves the viewer, from his very first glance, with the impression that the sculpture is incohesive.

And yet there is more to blame for the sculpture's divisions than the physical voids between its characters. The fact that no character emotionally, let alone physically, penetrates the space occupied by another also plays a role. The March Hare ignores the Mad Hatter and directly faces Alice. But rather than looking back, she gazes downward—toward neither the hatter nor the hare. The Mad Hatter also avoids looking at both the hare and Alice and instead stares blankly into the southwest. Because of this

maze of unreciprocated—but mostly failed—facial acknowledgment, the characters are emotionally disconnected from each other.

The proportions of the monument are as noteworthy as the ways by which it delineates space. The central mushroom, on top of which Alice sits, is itself realistic (qua a mushroom). What is unrealistic, however, is its relationship to Alice. The stalk of this mushroom is neither wide nor tall enough to actually support her weight. Such a degree of unrealism stands in stark contrast to the other occupant-mushroom pairing in the sculpture. In it, the small mouse actually looks as if it could rest on top of the mushroom—and without collapsing it. Alice, on the other hand, is much less convincing.

These feelings of wonder continue as the viewer looks at the compositional anomalies dispersed throughout the sculpture. First, all of the main characters are positioned so uncomfortably. The March Hare holds up a large pocket watch—a physically taxing maneuver—towards Alice. She sits with both of her knees bent to one side, a pose that instantaneously strains one's legs. But Alice's most bizarre anatomical quality is found in her arms, hands and fingers. By sticking them out from her sides, she most closely resembles a person attempting to regain balance. If this is true, and Alice is truly composing herself, why is there no sign of discomfort in her face? The Mad Hatter is similarly stoical, forcibly bending his left knee without expressing pain. Oddly enough, the hare's pocket watch, Alice's arms and the hatter's left knee glow as gold, while the rest of the sculpture is much darker.

And why is the mouse seated—amidst mushrooms that are conveniently organized by increasing height—so closely to the Mad Hatter? After all, the hatter's gnarling jaw and protruding, rotten teeth frighten even the viewer. The mouse's tail is

also curiously curved. But perhaps the most perplexing object in the sculpture is the contorted tree that is behind the central mushroom. Despite the irregularity of its frame, the fungus on its bark strangely happens to create a short spiral.

"It's a staircase!" exclaims a young girl to her mother. She then tiptoes across the fungi as if they were tiny steps until she reaches the top of the central mushroom. And therein is the rationale behind the sculpture's details, proportions and space: it was neither aesthetic nor realistic, but rather practical. The sculpture was built to function for its audience: children from New York City and the world that come to climb it. The positioning of the mouse, for example, is strategic: when in front of the Mad Hatter, it serves as a handle—with a curved tail for a hook—to support children as they climb the sculpture from a staircase of mushrooms on its southern end. The mouse's feelings towards the Mad Hatter should not even be taken into account; the mouse is not placed in the sculpture to feel, just to function.

A similar sense of purpose elucidates why Alice, the March Hare and the Mad Hatter strike painful poses. The position of the hatter's left leg, although anatomically awkward, creates another staircase in the sculpture. His body is not meant to realistically represent someone at rest, but rather a set of stairs. The hare holds out his pocket watch for the exact same reason. In its staircase, a child must first run up along its arched back, grab onto its popped collar and ultimately step on the watch before meeting Alice. She, in fact, stretches her arms out not to regain balance, but to physically lend a hand to the climbing children. And Alice sits the way she does in order to elongate her body and invite more children to sit on her. In this light, it is not odd that the brightest parts of the

sculpture are those which children most often use to ascend it, and thus have experienced the most wear.

When children take their place in the sculpture, the viewer can also finally justify the unrealistic dimensions of the central mushroom's stalk. If it were any taller, so too would be the head of the mushroom and Alice, making it less accessible for children to climb. If the stalk were any wider, the sculpture's lower half would have to shrink spatially. But the cave-like underside of the central mushroom is an equally important part of the sculpture. It entertains babies and the youngest of children who are too short to climb up top—and the sculpture is for children of all heights and ages to enjoy. As a result, the central stalk of the mushroom is just tall enough for children to feel a sense of accomplishment once they reach Alice, but not so tall that the endeavor is too daunting for them—and their parents. The width of the stalk is as realistic as possible, but not too realistic (and thus too wide) to overshadow the lower half of the sculpture. Once again, youthful function is favored over realistic aesthetics.

Most significantly, however, the presence of children unifies the sculpture as a whole. Actual children are meant to fill both the vertical and horizontal voids that break up the sculpture's characters. They complete the scene, unifying Alice, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare through the one characteristic they have in common: to function as a jungle gym. But the viewer is also able to perceive this newfound cohesion through aesthetics. He no longer questions Alice's awkward arms because with children in place, it appears as if she naturally embraces them—allowing the calm in her face to finally feel appropriate. The children also substantiate the fact that none of the main characters acknowledge one another. For like a child who climbs to the very top of Alice's head—

and experiences a panoramic view of Central Park—Alice, the Mad Hatter and the March Hare each gaze at a different aspect of the park. Alas, without a child on top, the Alice in Wonderland Monument cannot be analyzed appropriately. It is the epitome of public architecture—a living building—and should only be appreciated as such.