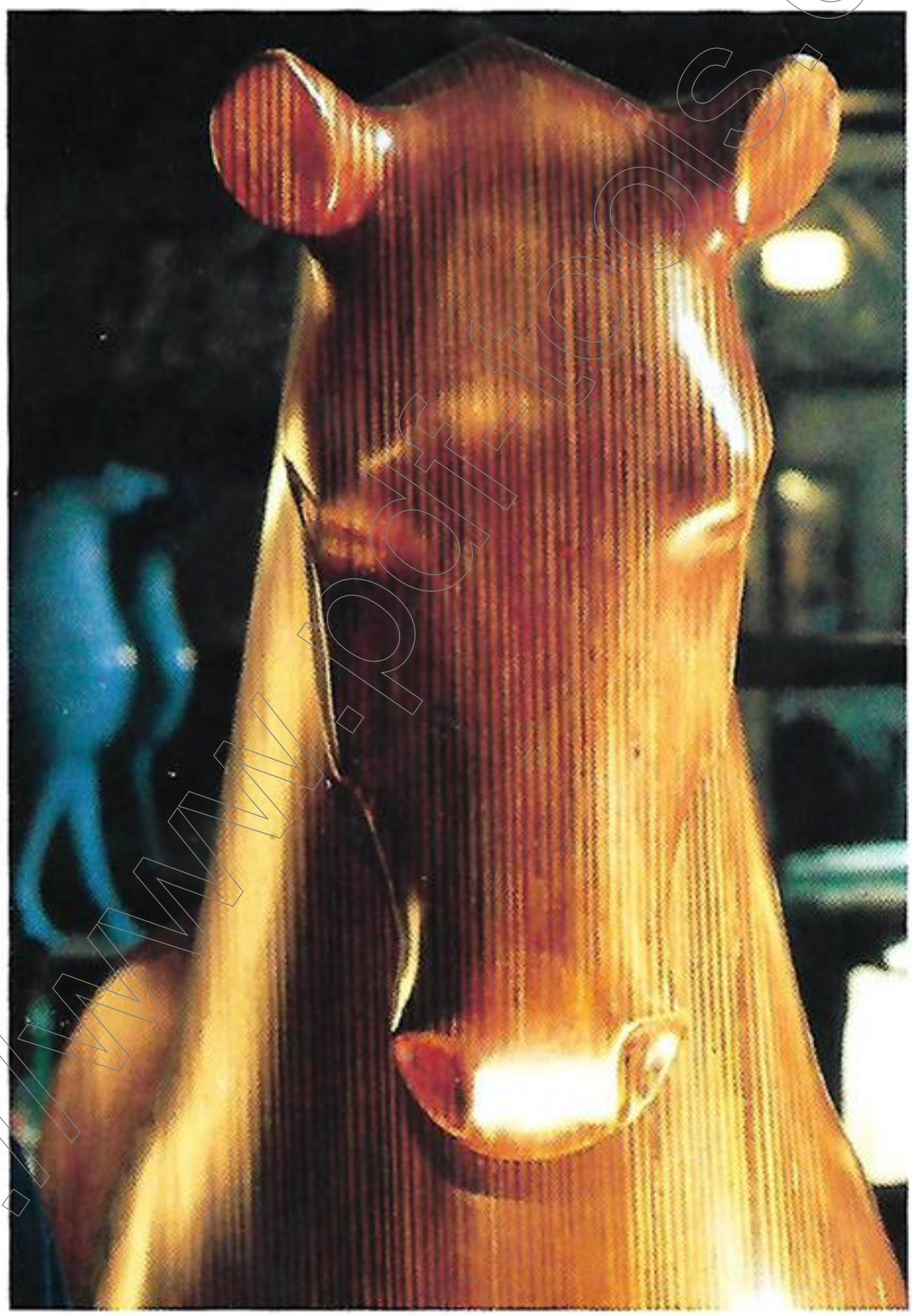
Antonio Monroy

ANGELO BARCELLA

Introduction by Flavio Caroli



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IDEA BOOKS

"FORMAL ABSOLUTES"
by Flavio Caroli

My first meeting with Angelo Barcella brought to the fore some magical memories. Suddenly the Rome of twenty years ago came alive again, and I was once more aware of the mysterious human constellations that beamed down on the dinners that took place in a house near Corso Vittorio. There it all was: I could even see the twinkles in eyes that in time have become splendid independent kids. Those were times of powerful attractions and repulsions whose inner fire still burns in our memories and warms our individual and collective identities.

Our private gods can still perform such miracles. Yet there was more to it than this. For twenty years a particular image has been ever-present in my mind: that of the full, rounded belly of a woman nearing the end of pregnancy, an almost abstract form captured in a photograph that must have penetrated the primary secrets of my sensibility, my perception of the world. It was Barcella who took that picture. The man I had just met for the first time in Milan was actually responsible for an emotion whose first vivid impact is still as strong as it was all those years ago.

Within the space of no time it all became clear. What so fascinated me about Barcella's contemporary sculpture derived from that image. The perfect sculptural turgor of pregnancy was also to be seen in his pictures of Tuscan hillsides with their smoothly rounded forms. Likewise, the polished wooden surfaces of his horses embody the same sense of volume, structure and spatial depth, to the extent that they practically devour their surroundings. How far removed they are from

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Mario Ceroli's pale theatrical forms with their aura of bygone times and their scent of the sawmill. What Barcella conjures up are sculptural values of the sort exalted by Bernard Berenson and the Tuscany-centred critics of the Twenties: formal absolutes that become the focus of the space they occupy, creating perspectives that feast on form and thereby establish the vital hierarchy of all the other spatial relationships.

Such is the wonder of the Florentine creative tradition, from Giotto to Michelangelo.

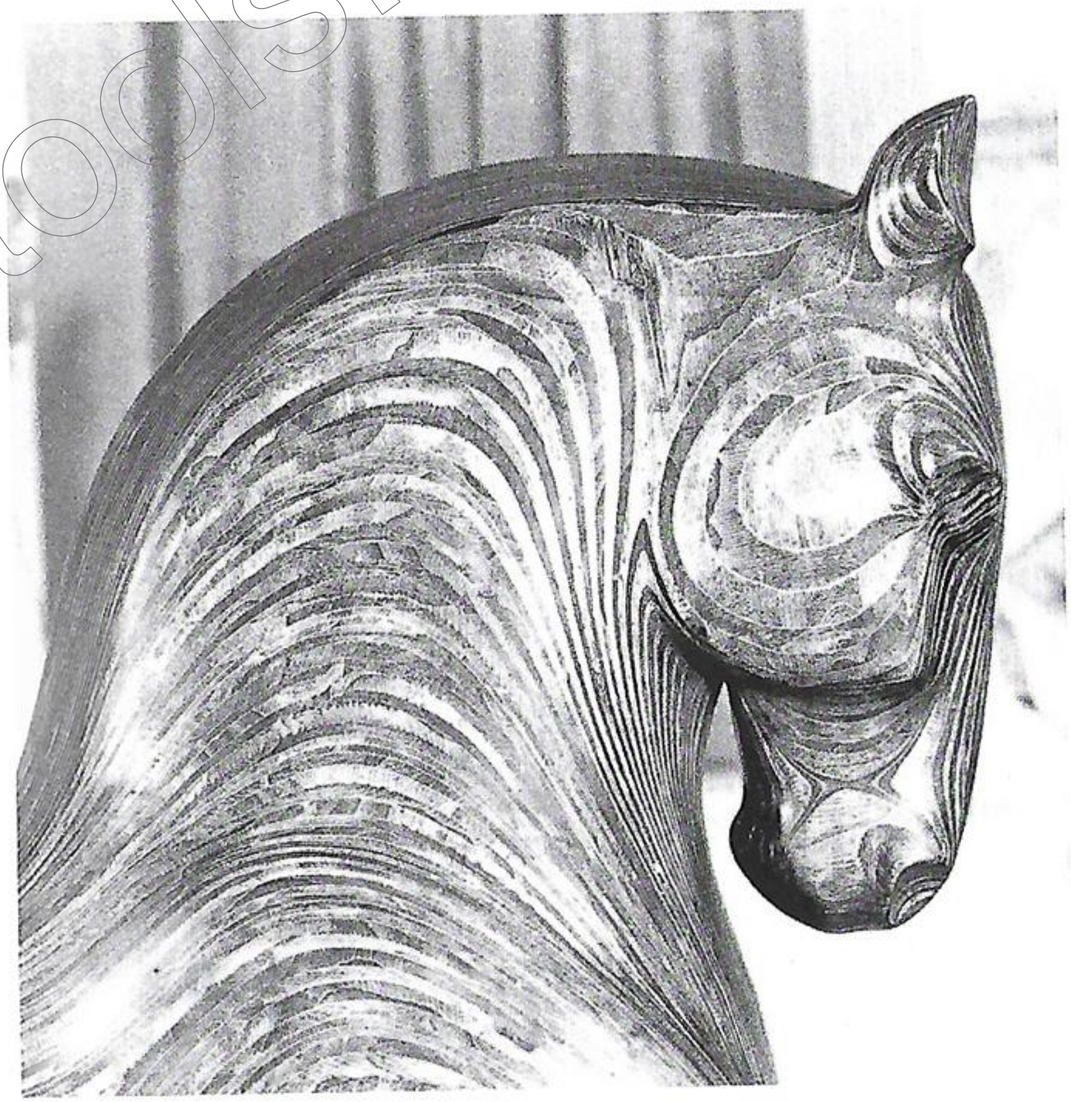
But why on earth, I wondered, should someone as quintessentially Lombard as Barcella prove to be so Florentine in his art? Then I immediately realised that Barcella's creations have the splendid gift of immediacy, a directness that belies a whole wealth of subtleties and suggestions.

And I've still said nothing of Barcella's materials. Photographs can never capture the true colours and material characteristics that are as essential to the way he creates as they are to his creations. The wonderful lacquers that impregnate the skins of his formal archetypes may well owe something to India. And the emerald greens, the stripy silvers and the glistening bricks that make visiting his studio so unforgettable are perhaps indirectly indebted to the East. Yet surely behind all this glorious but restless wealth of colour and form is the taste for the vivid surface that is typical of gothic art in general, and of the "ouvraige de Lombardie" in particular. It is as though the Tuscan handling of perspective had travelled north until it met up with naturalistic aestheticism, creating a vision that was then also shaped by the suspended atmospheres and hieratic portent of modern metaphysical art.

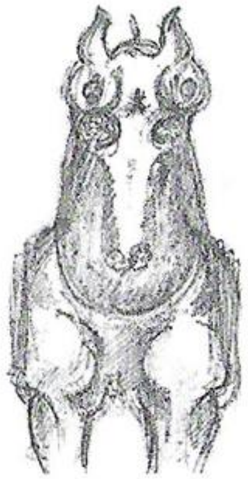
In my view Barcella's recent paintings make this whole process perfectly explicit. They are both Florentine and mannerist, as well as being spectral, neo-gothic and heady in their use of colour. The thoughtful harmony of his landscapes is undermined by the visionary content that projects his works into a disconcertingly surreal realm. Only apparently does the artist handle his subjects in the manner of the early 20th century primitive painters. The light with which he imbues his scenes transcends our normal daily universe, reaching out to the sidereal unknown beyond.

Barcella was bound to be a difficult artist. Once he felt that he had achieved what was right for him, he opted out. Thus when he first came to the public eye he already had a wealth of experience behind him. He has never forsaken it, but rather added to it with his customary elegance and exciting individuality. An art scene that tends to be self-obsessed ad inward-looking can only benefit from his contribution.

Mira, 1979, cm. 185x170x55, detail.



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BEHIND THE SCULPTURE

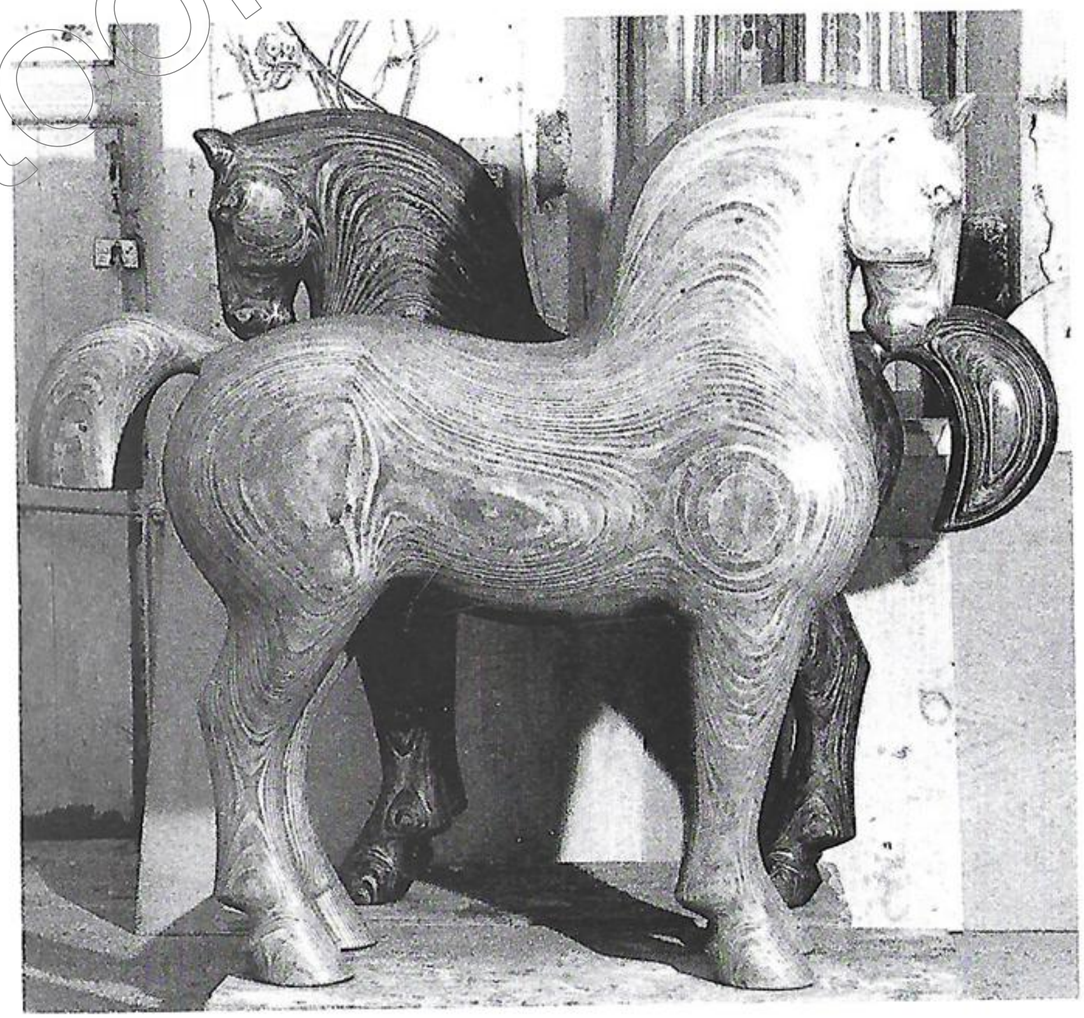
It's convenient to talk about Angelo Barcella's "horses", but what we really mean is a whole wealth of different models and forms. Of course, the form of the horse is "total", as is that of the naked human body: a furless creature whose taut skin reveals the tense, vibrant muscles beneath; an animal that embodies a whole universe of symbols and allusions. Suffice it to consider the way it features in the history of art and portrayal. Yet Barcella's horses are no mere imitations of the natural model, and nor are they echoes of classical creations, from the Greeks to De Chirico. Barcella may even be fairly indifferent to the splendid animal. Yet he is certainly fascinated by particular details of horses as they appear in famous sculptures and paintings. He analyses them with detachment, learns from them, sees ways they can help him resolve certain formal problems that may arise during the creative process.

There's a reason for all of this that involves the artist's focus on his materials and their expressive potential. Barcella works in wood, shaping it by hand and with the help of fairly sophisticated machinery. He thus brings together craftsmanship and technology, treating both with absolute equanimity. Other artist's have made the tools they use part of their artistic identity. Barcella's approach is quite different: he has a particular form in mind and one tool or technique is as good as another when it comes to turning idea into reality. Strictly speaking his works are not actually sculptures, in the sense that he doesn't cut into his chosen material in order to draw out what he has in mind. In fact they are more like constructions that are born of matter, techniques and procedures subject to inflexible laws. What Barcella finds so interesting are these very laws. He studies them carefully so that he can achieve the desired formal outcome. There is little room for transgression or error: everything has to be designed or minutely planned first, even if the result is still an unknown quantity.

The tempi and rhythms of this process are also dictated by the chosen material. It is no coincidence that Barcella begins with a miniature model that embodies

opposite, *Teodora* and *Indra*, 1982, cm. 195x180x58.





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all the techniques applied: the shaped layers of wood, the glue, the way they are put together, the filing, and so on. Yet this model is no more than a sketch of the finished product, a device that allows the artist to cut down the risk of failure when it comes to working on the full-scale creation.

There's a great divide between the model and the horse sculpture that conceals myriad potential facts and random phenomena that could well put the artist off course. Thus the final work is clearly not just a large-scale version of the model, a sort of mechanical enlargement. To the contrary, the final sculpture is the last step in a much longer and more complex process that culminates in the way the object relates to its surrounding space.



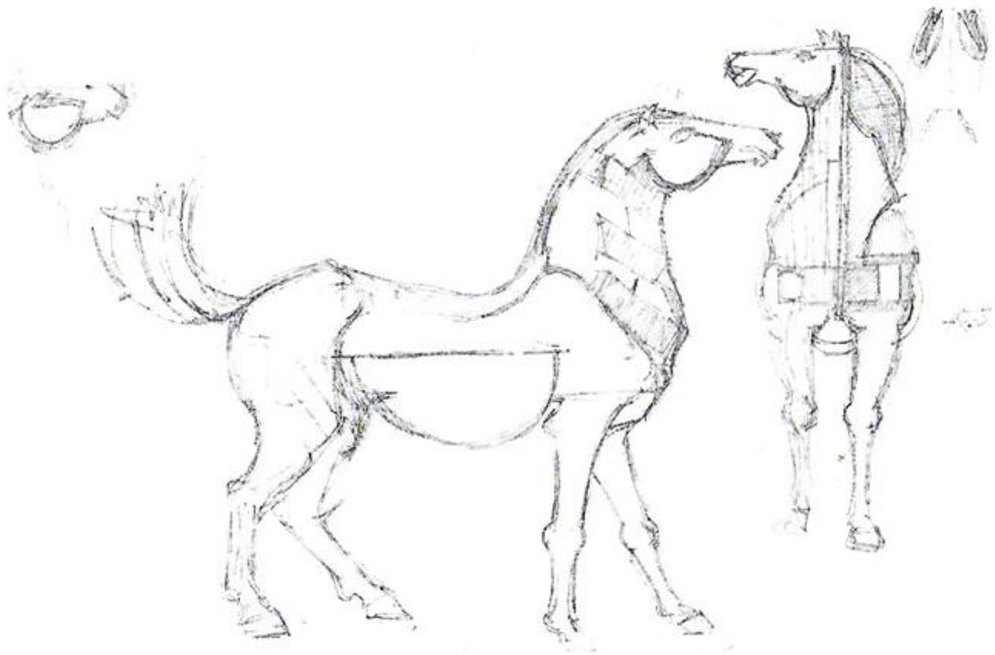
Barcella's works achieve their full expressive and formal potential through their inherent material characteristics. These comprise not only visual and sculptural qualities, but also tactile and spatial ones. Indeed, the technical procedure involved actually also embodies a creative medium that can be extraordinarily varied and surprising. The way the wood is cut reveals its grain and structural qualities, so that it can be put together and filed in such a way that it conjures up the "flesh, muscle and bone" of a horse. As we have said, this is no mere process of imitation, but a formal analogy and careful abstraction. The outcome is like a sort of parallel reality that relates to tangible objects rather as an expressive language relates to physical phenomena. The taut muscles of the horse veiled by the layer of skin/varnish conjure up an image of reality by means of formal abstraction as opposed to imitation. We all tend to succumb to the organic charm of wood. Its grain and texture, its fibrous warmth draw the hand as much as the eye. It is an essentially sensuous material to which Barcella responds by withdrawing to establish his perception of it, and then subtly interweaving its sensual messages: what is tactile is perceived by the eye; its signs can be touched as well as read. The ensuing ambiguity befits our varied culture and the wealth of our visual heritage.

Barcella's horses continue to upset our perceptive

Honey, 1976, cm. 180x160x48.

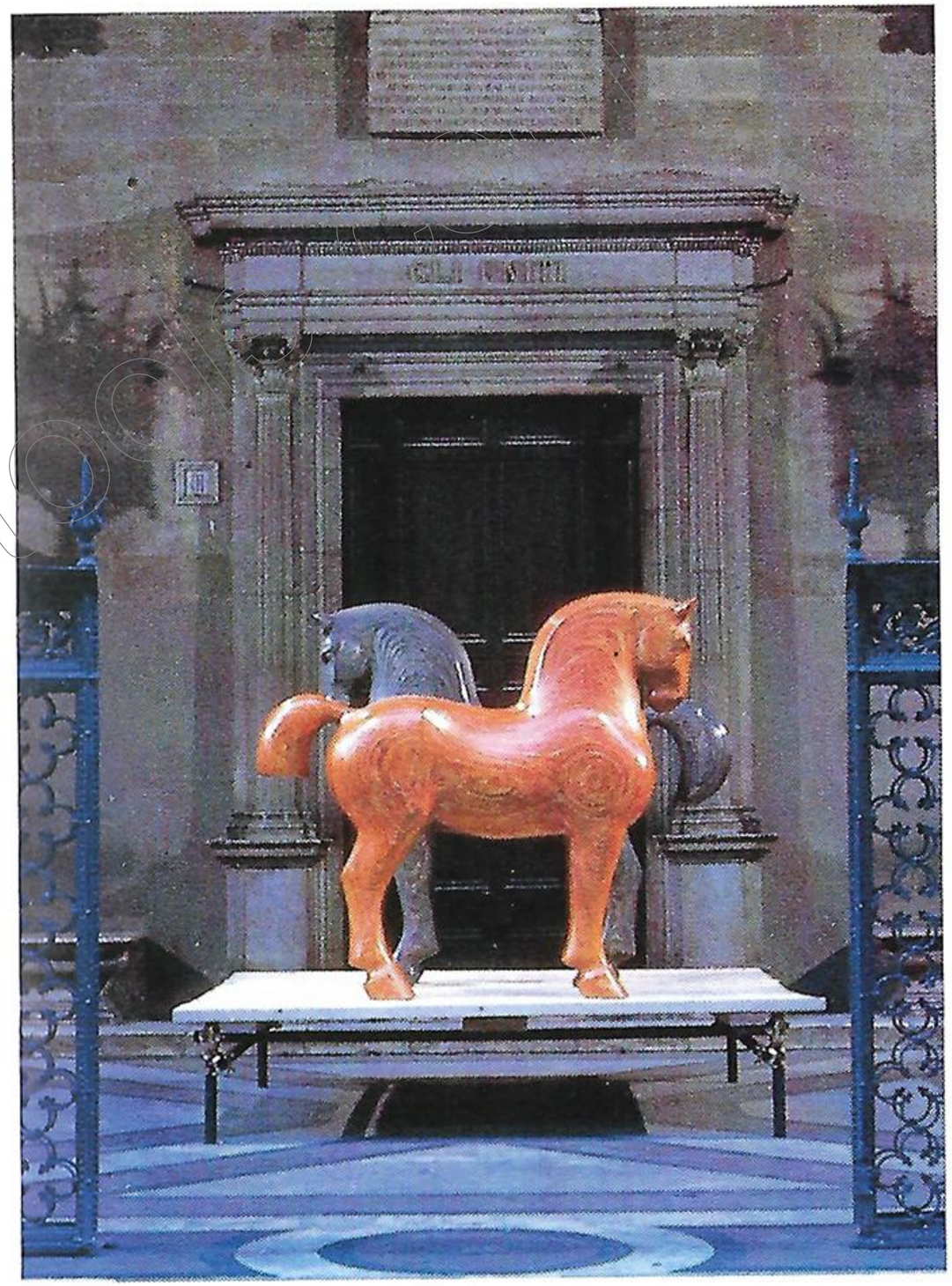


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categories once they are placed in space. They are not objects that can be fully "taken in" from any particular vantage point for the very fact that they change in relation to what surrounds them. Indeed, they become a dynamic part of their surroundings, in their turn shaping the space that shapes them. In this respect they cast both a formal and a spatial spell over the observer and their surroundings.

opposite, *Teodora* and *Indra*.



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