

Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure*, elmwood, 6'4" long, exhibited 3rd Sculpture International, Philadelphia, 1949, courtesy Buchholz Gallery.

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Contemporary Sculpture: A Renaissance

THE phenomenon of a renaissance in sculpture comes to most of us as a surprise. Owing to the lack of a particular interest on the part of informed curatorial staffs to offset the difficulty most museums and educational institutions have in meeting the costs of assembling comprehensive exhibitions of sculpture, we lack familiarity with contemporary trends in this medium.

The annual exhibition of sculpture at the Whitney Museum and the increasing number of other important exhibitions, such as *Sculpture Since Rodin* at the Yale University Art Gallery, *Sculpture at the Crossroads* at the Worcester Art Museum, the summer exhibition of sculpture at the University of Iowa and particularly the comprehensive Third Sculpture International of the Fairmount Park Art Association at the Philadelphia Museum of Art have again projected sculpture into public consciousness and have provided hitherto unequalled opportunities for its evaluation.

For decades sculpture had fallen into a preoccupation with classical narcissism, chauvinism and hero worship. Sculptors were almost entirely concerned with immortalizing in stone or bronze tyrant, tycoon, politician or whoever had both the cash and vanity to provide patronage; the spiritual and social obligations of the artist-thinker were virtually excluded from their work and thought. Inevitably

a public which toiled and struggled was led to the conclusion that sculpture had outlived the communal inspiration and expression it had known in earlier periods.

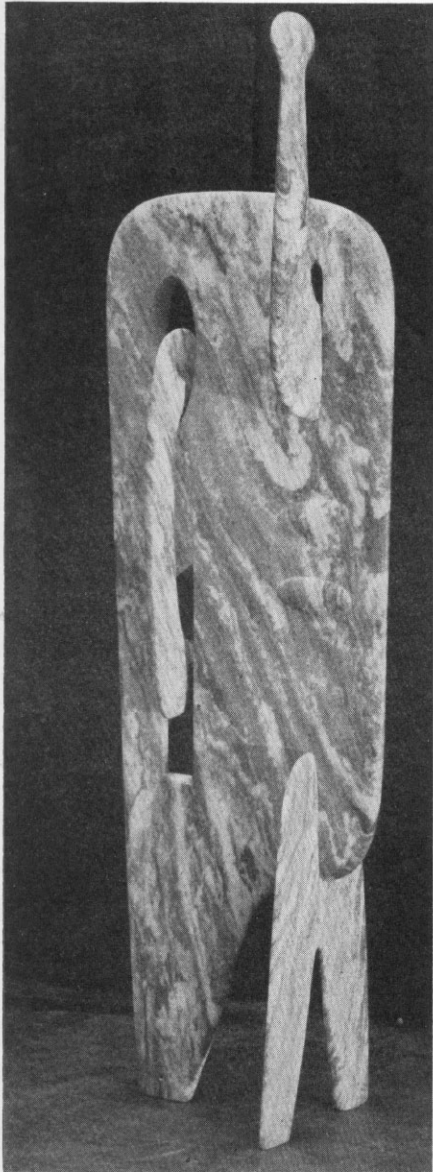
The renewed quest for beauty and simplicity, classical serenity and expression in form which Rodin and his followers inspired largely overcame this decadence. Soon thereafter sculpture gained still more momentum with the neoclassicism and expressionism of the French and German schools. Despiau, Barlach, Lehmbruck, Marcks, Maillol and other leaders in turn inspired sculptors such as Laurent, Lachaise, Zorach and Hord in the United States.

Concurrent with this search for vitality in the classical idiom other sculptors chose to follow more revolutionary paths. Spurred on by an era of scientific research, coupled with an expanded concept of cultural anthropology, the fathers of the modern movement in sculpture saw the challenge of our time: if in medicine, law, engineering, sociology, politics and other aspects of our cultural structure we were undergoing a period of reorientation, there must also exist somewhere within the imagination of man a language of form expressing our time and its dynamics. This, stated briefly, was the task as they saw it.

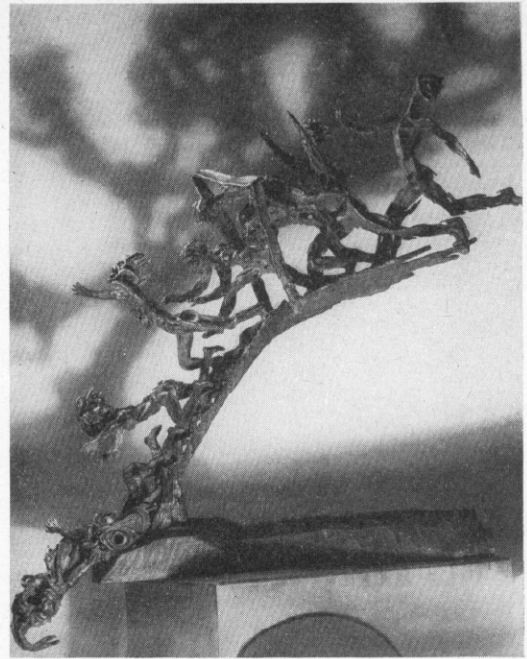
These early aspects of the modern movement in sculpture, however, also alienated the public. To eyes and minds untrained in its idiom, the works of that period

appeared trivial, decorative, cerebral and scientific. To a degree this was true. Finding a new freedom and an awareness of a broader concept of form, sculptors went all out in their experimentation with form and theory. To the trained observer and lover of sculpture, however, these early aspects of modern sculpture were historically and esthetically important in that they were to provide succeeding generations of sculptors with the tools for a deeper interpretation of form.

This crisis of modern sculpture has now been passed. The earlier aspects of its revolution have crystallized into a sound, logically inspired era of sculpture wherein the early experiments have proved themselves to be the sources of a concept of form essential to the intensity with which the sculptor of today wishes to speak. What at first impression may appear as a disjointed babel of form, on closer study and deeper reflection reveals itself as a well-correlated and tangible artistic and philosophical whole, employing concrete forms with the force and symmetry needed for a re-assertion of definite spiritual values.



*Isamu Noguchi,
Man,
Georgia marble,
60" high,
exhibited
State University
of Iowa,
Iowa City, 1949.*

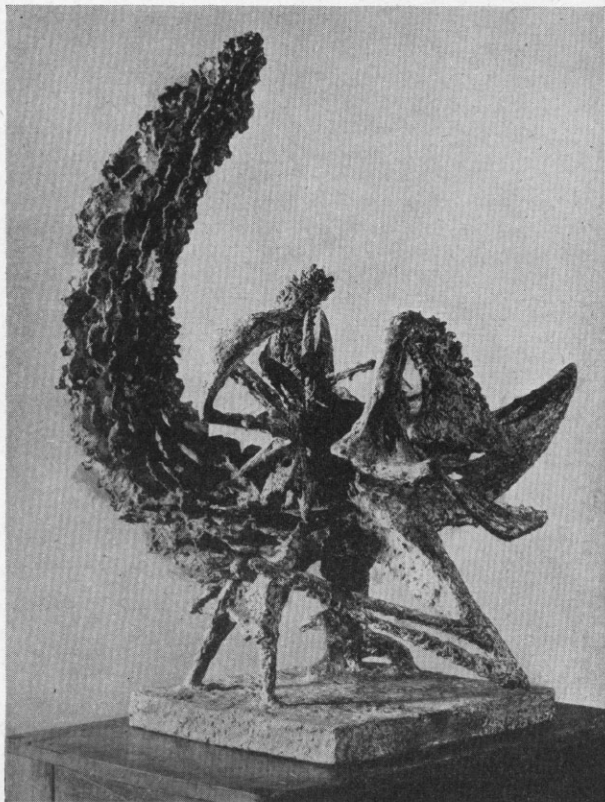


*Randolph W. Johnston, Panic, bronze, 42" high,
exhibited Whitney Museum of American Art, 1949.*

It is imperative that we recognize the fact that the senses of beauty are many. Beauty may be a thing of specified form imitating nature or striving for illusion, or it may also be a means of expressing man's striving for desirable social ends. It is this latter sense of beauty with which present esthetic directions are primarily concerned.

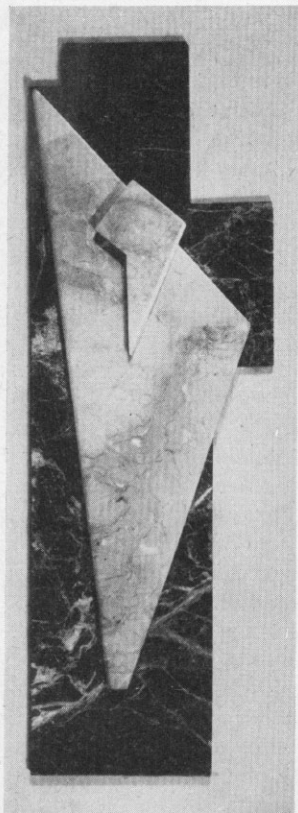
The sculptural idioms that mirror most clearly and affirmatively our time and its attributes, tragedies and aspirations in a language of strength, inventiveness and intensity are those of expressionism, abstract expressionism and abstract classicism. (In the latter group I would include constructivism.) Shrugged off as transitory but two decades ago, these directions have now accomplished the transition from anonymity of form to a language of form eloquent in its reflection of our civilization's identity and collective consciousness.

Within this century our historical evolution has become so vastly accelerated that we are faced with social and moral challenges without parallel in previous history. These challenges provide the predominant themes in the individual expressions and over-all esthetic of contemporary sculpture. For sculptors of today to present their appeals for desirable social ends, for renewed spiritual equilibrium based on cultural potency and the a-political affinities of man, in the traditional figure of a nude bearing a bowl of fruit on her head, would be like addressing the Congress on a controversial issue by reading to its members a charming but irrelevant poem of the Brownings. In both cases strong language and stronger convictions are absolute prerequisites. Just as the orator searches his vocabulary for bold, dynamic and unequivocal expressions, so the sculptor of today seeks these same qualities in the language of form. Form, like other things, becomes memory with repetition. To provoke the maximum esthetic reaction, therefore, sculptors must strive for forms of sufficient fire or lyricism to penetrate the psyche beyond memory.



Theodore J. Roszak, *Spectre of Kitty Hawk*, welded steel and brass, 40½" high, exhibited 3rd Sculpture International, Philadelphia, 1949.

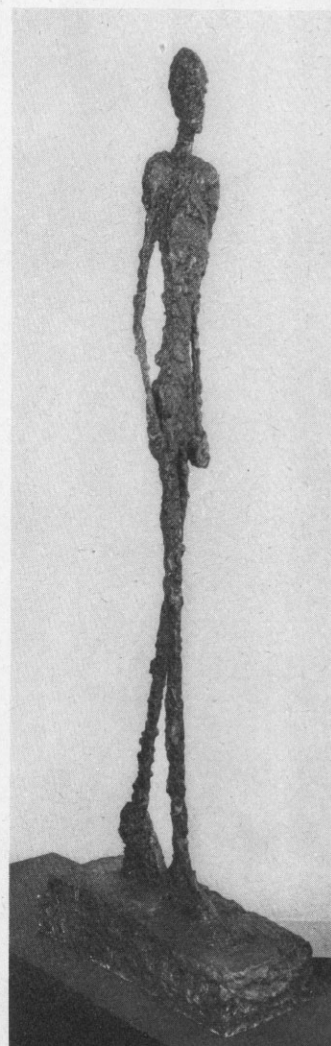
Stuart Halden, *Crucifix*, sienna and verde antico marbles, 28½" high, exhibited American Abstract Artists, New York, 1949.



Since the abstract or imaginatively conceived and the expressionistically or emotionally conceived works predominate in sculpture today, it must be remembered that their balance is a relative quality. The harmony of a naturalistically conceived work is, of course, relative to naturalism. Conversely, the harmony of an imaginatively or expressionistically conceived work is relative to the imagination inspiring it or the emotional expression desired. This reciprocity of form and theme is the crux of the problem of understanding contemporary sculpture. Bearing in mind the relation between subject and object in a piece of sculpture based on a bird, for example, the question is not how closely it resembles a bird, but whether or not it integrates and interprets the qualities of a bird into a design. Does it succeed in accentuating or translating the grace of the bird, its mobility, the tragic frailty of its skeleton, its spirit of independence, or the imagination, symbolism or allegory which may have inspired the sculptor to present the bird in that manner?

Language—whether the language of form or the language of the printed word—is the essential tool of communication. Since his caveman beginnings man has spoken in a language of form. A greater literacy in this language and a greater dynamic use of its sculptural and spiritual poten-

Alberto Giacometti, *Man Walking*, bronze, 67½" high, exhibited 3rd Sculpture International, Philadelphia, 1949, courtesy Pierre Matisse.



tial are prerequisites for a broadened understanding of life. Literacy in form, by the same token, must also be the concern of the public who would participate in the arts. Language is never static; on the contrary, both word and form develop new expressions and thematic directions in accordance with the needs of current society, just as English spoken during Elizabethan times differs from that spoken today.

The first stylistic direction with which I shall concern myself here is *abstract classicism*. To refer to abstraction as classical may shock those who think of classicism only in terms of its Greek and Roman equivalents. Abstract sculpture, however, merits this description if the word "classic" implies broad universal acceptance and integration, formal elegance, simplicity and dignity of style.

A broader interpretation of formal beauty is the most significant aspect of abstract classicism. Just as new values are revealed to us in our scientific research, so new formal values are revealed to the sculptor. These explorations of differing worlds of form are inextricably related to all experiences of man. The human mind in every phase of society—whether physics, medicine, biology, philosophy or art—is ever restless, ever seeking further revelation of the phenomena of nature and reality. In view of the sterility into which naturalism had fallen it was only logical that nature should lead the sculptor deeper into the secrets of its beauty, so that with revitalized forms he might again serve in the role of artist-thinker.

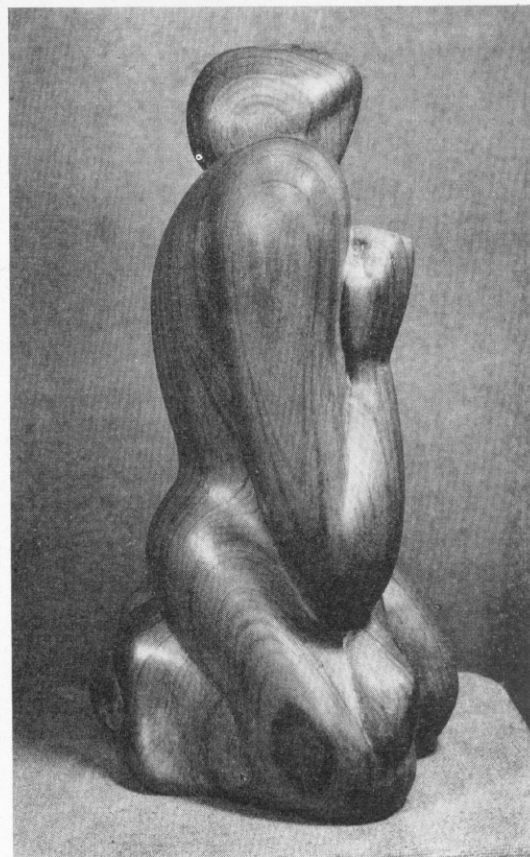
These are the essentials for an understanding of classically beautiful form considered in its enlarged definition and interpretation. The works of Constantin Brancusi, Barbara Hepworth, Alexander Calder, Jean Arp, Ben Nicholson, Ibram Lassaw, Richard Lippold, José de Rivera strive for spatial and geometric symmetry and harmony of design. Their objective is the subtlety and simplicity of poetry in pure form. Some, like Brancusi and Arp, will begin with an idea based on naturalism, reducing and abstracting its resemblance to nature until they obtain the interpretation in design most pleasing to their esthetic sensibilities. Others like Calder, Nicholson, Hepworth, De Rivera and Lippold work purely with design without reference to subject. We need but look at nature to find substantiation of the ideals of beauty and harmony advanced by these sculptors. Furthermore, when we consider the myriad of form and form combinations in geology, plant life and the innumerable creatures inhabiting this earth and the seas, we must realize that the sculptor is only beginning to awaken to the ultimate potential of the beauty that nature offers. Whatever forms the sculptor can ever create or devise have their counterparts in nature. Nature reveals itself in response to the artist's search for beauty and expression in form in the same manner as nature rewards the patient scientist seeking further analyses of chemical or physical elements.

Abstract classicism is of course not limited to pure design or even to extreme abstraction. With the revitalized imagination of the contemporary sculptor, it is appropriate that he concern himself with man as well.

Jacques Lipchitz, *Sacrifice*, bronze, 50" high, exhibited 3rd Sculpture International, Philadelphia, 1949.



OCTOBER, 1949



Blanche Dombek, *Prayer*, mahogany, 28" high, courtesy Sculptors Gallery, New York.

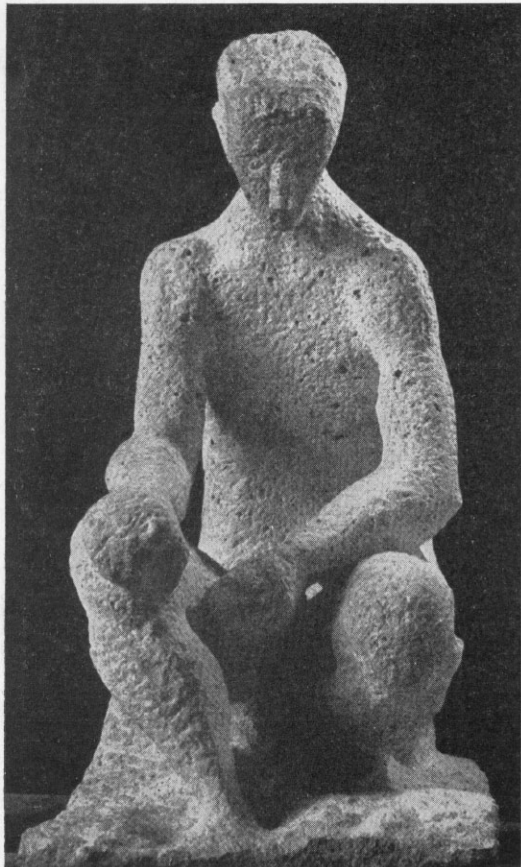
The dignity of man and his imagination are inextricably interwoven. It was man's imagination that elevated him from a near-animal state to his present complex self. The conscious vigor of Henry Moore's *Reclining Figure* impresses the spectator and reminds him of man's dignity, of man's supreme importance in this world. To depict man in the usual naturalistic manner would not serve the purpose of this artist, who would rekindle an interest in man through his design concept—a concept and design so admirably fused with that of other sculptural epochs that one feels it has always existed. In Blanche Dombek's fine monolithic figure *Prayer* we again find the principle of simplified forms giving a new eloquence to a hackneyed theme. Other sculptors such as Leo Amino, Alexander Archipenko or Humbert Albrizio also concentrate on man. Sculptured in simple dignity and sensitive symmetry, their work serves as an eloquent reminder of the importance of the human equation and the need for its re-emphasis in contemporary life.

Another phase of the classically abstract is constructivism. This mode of expression, which previously has been almost entirely cerebral, has also found new leaders and a new energy. Judging by the work of Isamu Noguchi and Stuart Halden this tendency also is undergoing considerable change in its integration of thematically vital statements. Noguchi's *Man*, like Henry Moore's *Reclining Figure*, presents man with a challenging vigor and mystery of design. Stuart Halden takes the theme of *Crucifix* and revives a subject long dead, artistically speaking, through his poetic simplicity of design and inventive sculptural presentation.



Marino Marini, *Susanna*, 1943, bronze, 27" high, exhibited State University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1949.

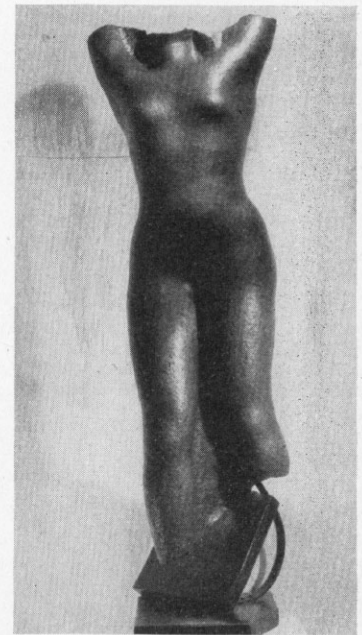
Fritz Wotruba, *Seated Man*, limestone, 44" high, exhibited 3rd Sculpture International, Philadelphia, 1949.



In contrast to the serene power of abstract classicism, *expressionism* and *abstract expressionism* strike notes of appropriate turbulence.

Our world revolves around man. Man, considered in the full spiritual sense of the word, is not only his narcissistic self but a complex of many factors. Inseparable from his physical self are his intellectual and spiritual faculties, sensibilities and experiences. In the light of this realization contemporary sculptors present contemporary man not only in the traditional nudity of body but in a completely revealing psychological nudity of both body and soul.

The expressionist and abstract expressionist groups carry to poetic heights their impassioned tragic and heroic appeals in works forcefully designed to shock us into a recapitulation of man's ideals, of man's history and man's aspirations.



Saul Baizerman, *Ugesie*, hammered copper, 60" high, exhibited State University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1949.

Fritz Wotruba in his excellent carving *Seated Man* achieves a remarkable statement of depression and bewilderment. Jacques Lipchitz in his poetic *Sacrifice* forcefully recalls to our minds the sacrifices we have all made—not so that we may further lament them, but to point out the errant ways of man which have necessitated their repetition throughout history.

Randolph W. Johnston in his eloquent bronze *Panic* likewise expresses concern over man. Stricken with fear, his figures plunge into a void, seeking to escape man-made terrors and destruction—a pattern of destruction becoming increasingly bestial and apocalyptic as man's range of knowledge and science broadens.

It is a sad world which Marino Marini's figure *Susanna* contemplates. In this very simple sculpture the artist presents a subtle but forceful comment on our failure to assert the nobler side of man when the pattern of history so clearly demonstrates its need.

Alberto Giacometti's *Man Walking* also recalls the pattern of history and man's recurrent suffering. This skeletonized figure strides out of our time, out of all time to

confront us with our lack of conscience and courage, our lack of basic humanistic understanding, our failure to concentrate all man's energies and knowledge towards peace and understanding.

Sculptures such as these and the many other works of sculptors close to expressionism, but retaining the human form in recognizable design, are in turn complemented by abstract expressionism. By transforming still further the human or animal figure into designs of passionate and tortuous symmetry they seek to express even greater intensity. With a terrifying inventive rhythm of skeletal forms these artists seek also to sear into the conscience of current society the past four decades of catastrophe.

Theodore J. Roszak, Herbert Ferber, David Smith, Seymour Lipton, to mention but a few, succeed admirably in this respect, both in the inventiveness of their forms and in the vitality given to their themes.

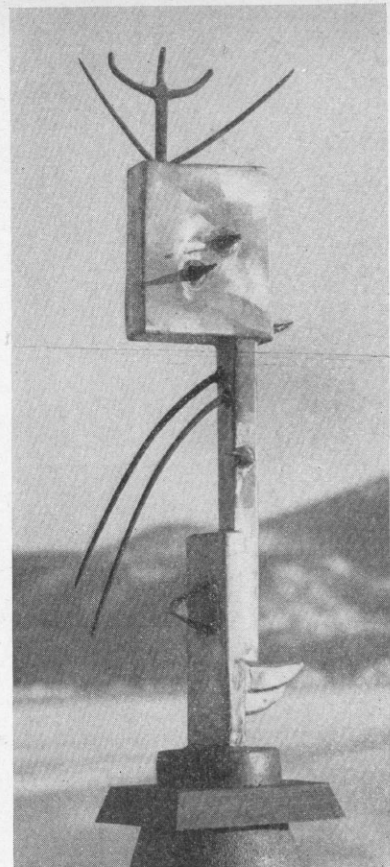
Of primary significance and timeliness is Roszak's magnificent *Spectre of Kitty Hawk*. Icarus' beautiful dream of flight has ever been in the hearts of men. But the dream of Icarus and the work of the Wright brothers have been distorted and applied to speedier mass destruction (as in another medium Marc Blitzstein has reminded us in his *Airborne Symphony*), making flight indeed a spectre.

The sculptors mentioned and others working in the expressionist and abstract expressionist styles have achieved a remarkable fusion of the techniques of modeling and construction. Their use of metals and welding techniques and their departure from monolithic limitations to polymorphous design, wherein space becomes an inseparable part of their scheme, has opened still further the stylistic and thematic possibilities of contemporary sculpture.

This expansion of our horizons of form applies equally to abstract classicism. The world of form upon which it may draw is imbued with the promise of work of great vitality and poetic lyricism. We may likewise speculate on the future of the trend which incorporates a fusion of constructivist techniques, geometric design and assimilation of social themes. Unquestionably the further exploitation of these qualities promises still more intense presentation in sculpture of the social and philosophical aspects of our time.

In summarizing I should like to put these questions to the reader: Do the physical and thematic aspects of contemporary sculpture challenge us with their vigor and their analogies to contemporary history? Do they arrest men's minds with their power, arousing us from our apathy towards human needs? Do they awaken the demand for human dignity? Do they protest the dangers of dehumanization in contemporary materialistic society? Do they rekindle an interest in man, an interest of sufficient fervor to counter man's present position of subservience to the machine?

The presence of these qualities in contemporary sculpture has led me to the conclusion that sculpture today has achieved a renaissance. In their formal statement and in the themes inspiring them, these works are in complete accord and sympathy with current ideals and aspirations. Their sculptors do not create a false picture in the manner of the artist or the historian who caters to patronage or an indoctrinated "ism." Their statements are the free expressions of profound social and spiritual fervor appealing for an a-political humanism, a humanism transcending political



David Smith,
Aggressive Character,
wrought iron & stainless
steel, 34½" high,
courtesy Willard Gallery.

and racial nationalism or sectarian separatism. This tendency and its poignant statements in contemporary form achieve the artistic and historical interrelation and the esthetic vitality which justify our regarding the contemporary movement in sculpture as a renaissance.

Richard Lippold, *Embrace*, brass wire, 40" high,
exhibited 3rd Sculpture International, Philadelphia, 1949.

