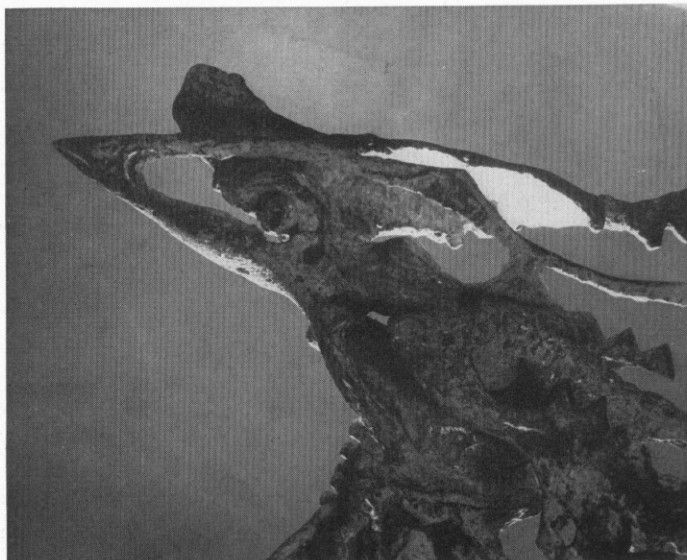


Some Problems of Modern Sculpture



Scavenger, detail, 1946-47, steel, 10 x 18".

THE problems and solutions of the contemporary sculptor are less often discussed than those of the painter. In order to raise some of these problems and to get one artist's answers, the *Magazine* submitted a group of questions to Theodore Roszak. They and his answers follow, illustrated by his sculpture.

Ever since the reaction to the work of Rodin, there has been a great deal of talk among sculptors on the necessity of "truth to materials." The idea has resulted in very different kinds of work: for example, that of Flannagan, Brancusi or Henry Moore. What is your own feeling about this question?

"Truth to materials" is an old dictum which is re-examined periodically. Of course, such a concern is an indispensable part of all honest workmanship involving materials and tools, from that of the simple craftsman to the architect, engineer and artist. For the sculptor, it becomes an important consideration in shaping an attitude towards his craft. His consciousness of it results in renewed exploration, discovery and exploitation of all the plastic suggestions inherent in materials and their processing, and thus leads to new insights of a purely formal character.

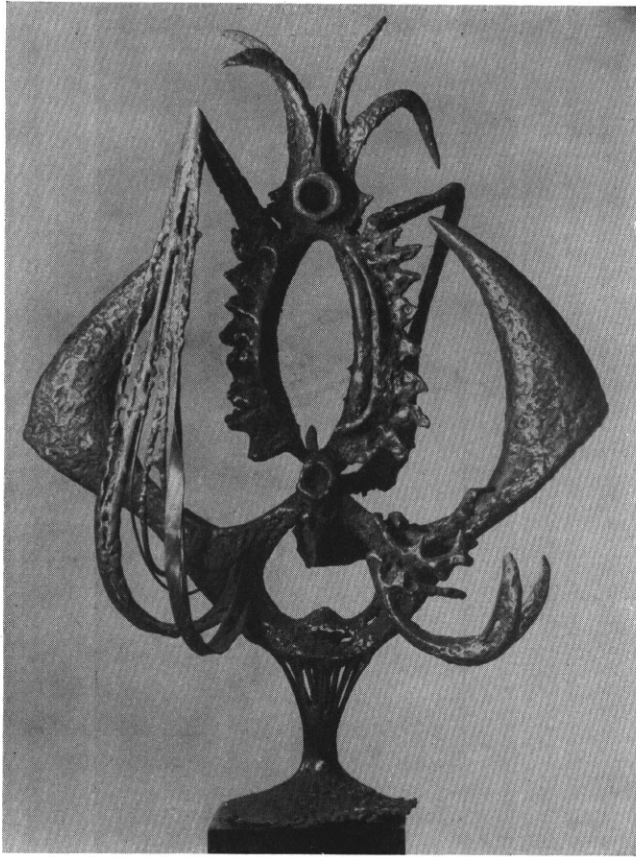
But it is clear that truthfulness to materials does not alone explain the work of Brancusi, Flannagan and Moore, else they would be similar, whereas they are in fact widely different. For instance, in the schematic evolution of these three sculptors we have the equivalent in plastic terms of the life cycle: conception and germination (the egg form of Brancusi); foetal development and emergence, the breaking up of the simple organic cell and the mystic invo-

cation of life (Flannagan); the interaction of more dynamic tensions expressing maturity and the growth of the separately related forms of the family group (Moore). While I use the work of these three artists collectively as illustration, it does not follow that this evolutionary parallel takes into account their individual success as artists; but it does suggest one kind of growth pattern represented by plastic ideas.

I would choose to investigate—in order better to understand their personal qualities and the distinct plastic order that each of them represents—the manner in which each was individually affected by the prevailing atmosphere of plastic resurgence, rather than the relevant but lesser consideration of truth to materials.

There has also been among twentieth-century sculptors, at least until recently, a strong feeling that the true sculptor is a carver rather than a modeler—that is to say, a Michelangelo rather than a Rodin. Do you think that cut stone is closer to the essentials of sculpture than modeling and casting?

Modeling, to me, is a legitimate means of expressing sculptural ideas. Its specific technical advantage lies in its malleability; its weakness resides in its limited physical properties and its requirement of armature, "props" and translation into more durable material. Direct carving has the advantage of generating form directly in terms of its own physical properties, thus producing a consistent evolution of forms and surfaces. While some carvers heighten the sense of space by deep cuts and perforations, I have preferred to avoid what seems to me its stolid obedience to physical limitations. Despite my obvious bias, I have seen



Invocation, 1946-47, steel, 24 x 18".

too many fine pieces of carved sculpture to let technical considerations interfere with my enjoyment of them. Nevertheless, I feel that sculpture today demands a medium embodying a combination of malleability and tensile strength exceeding the possibilities of both clay and stone.

Modern technology has made possible the use of metals with a great deal of flexibility. Today an obstinate material like steel, which formerly yielded only under great pressure, can be handled as easily as wax. It has the added advantage of permitting greater control coupled with tremendously increased tensile and compressive strength. The interplay of surfaces brazed with alloys adds a further plastic variant. These technical possibilities permit the expression of new plastic ideas and experiences.

Drawing, painting and the building of constructions all have a direct bearing upon my liking for metal, and I suspect my affinity for welded and brazed steel lies partially in the ability of this medium to assimilate my total creative experience and yet lose none of its own organic unity. My own method of work is to make a drawing of an idea which, when translated three-dimensionally in steel wire, establishes an interrelation of lines, contours and tensions. These may multiply or diminish as work continues, but ultimately they determine the primary character of planes and masses. Spatial expression is thus *simultaneously evolved*, enlisting all the plastic elements available at the same instant.

It seems to me that one of the vital and essential qualities of sculpture is an attitude that embodies the most extensive persuasive accumulation of plastic experiences

and sets up tensions that constantly assert themselves in terms of space and in turn become one with it.

In modern painting, there is probably a more conscious interaction between materials and ideas than ever before. That is to say, the modern painters are quite willing to allow themselves to be influenced by the work itself as it grows under their hands and to take suggestions (though of course not finished forms) from accidents of materials. Is this same attitude to be found among modern sculptors, and do you consider it a legitimate method of creating works of art?

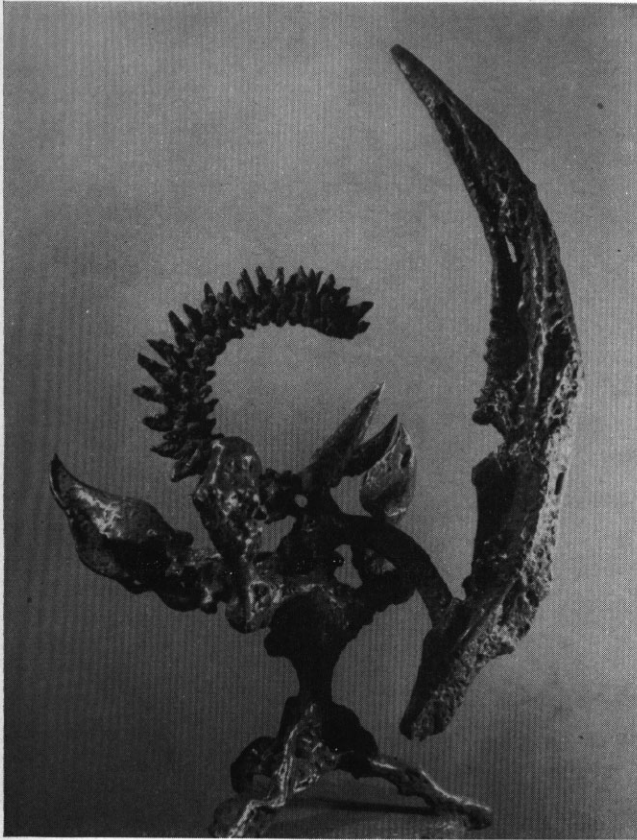
The conscious interaction between materials and ideas has not escaped me and, in a different way and to a lesser degree than some painters, I am aware of the possibilities that arise from "accidents" that the work in hand may suggest. For me these accidents become legitimized only when they find their proper relation to the whole. In a finally resolved work of art, "accidents" and effects that were accidental in origin lose their meaning, and it is probable that they have served only as reminders substantiated by previous experience. That is, accidents may awaken dormant responses that can be plastically useful and that might otherwise have been neglected, but I should not care to stake my creative life upon the exclusive use of such chance procedures. Their suggestions are helpful only within the essential framework of consciously directed effort.

It will doubtless be agreed that the contemporary artistic atmosphere is more favorable to painting than to sculpture. And it might be said that many sculptors, even among the best and the best known, have had their vision strongly influenced by the esthetics of painting. What is your reaction to this state of affairs?

It is not in our time alone that the artistic atmosphere has been more favorable to painting; this has been true for over four hundred years. Ever since the renaissance, painting has enjoyed a leadership of ideas and a numerical advantage and has been paramount in influencing and shaping the character and values of the visual world. From Verrocchio to Rodin, one can cite an almost endless number of cases in which painting left its mark upon sculpture. The social disunity following the renaissance produced an atmosphere more favorable to painting than to the other arts, and it is to the discredit of painting as a cultural agent that it corrupted sculpture and practically destroyed architecture—until the present respite that sculpture and architecture are now "enjoying." In this connection, it is interesting to observe the inertia that seems to me recently to have come over painting. And while this is perhaps momentary, indicative of a transition to new forms and accomplishments, there are nevertheless many signs that a cancelling out of ideas is taking place, due to a generally felt lack of ability to sustain the initiative that painting enjoyed at the beginning of this century.

Allied with this situation is a generally felt lack of sculpture and sculptors. Would you say that this is due more to the esthetic bias just outlined or to a pure lack of physical and financial opportunity for the sculptor to do his work?

In a very immediate sense, the lack of sculptors and sculpture is related to the reason for that esthetic bias



suggested in the preceding question, creating a set of social circumstances unfavorable to the sculptor. Although he is constantly plagued by questions of heavy materials, express charges and lack of space, a more fundamental reason for his plight lies in the circumstances peculiar to the present stage of civilization. The last vital span of sculpture

occurred at the richest period of Christian theology, between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries, when the artist could work within an assured collective unity perhaps never to be regained. It is in a climate of such largely unified social forces that architecture and sculpture flourish, and any widespread practice and resurrection of sculpture, comparable to the great periods of China, India and Greece, can result only from similar forms of social integration.

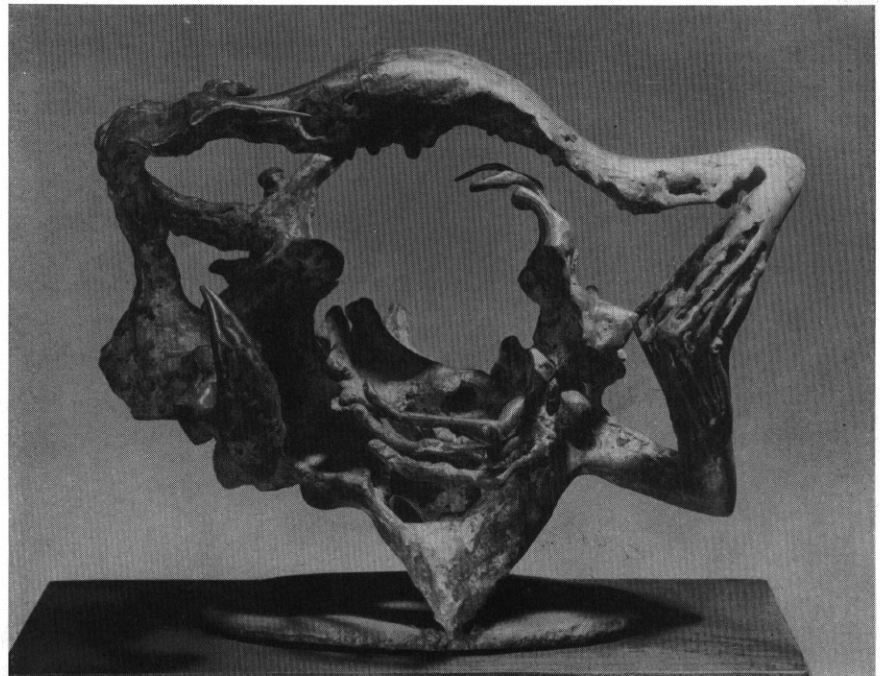
Allied with this in turn are continuing attempts to expand the area in which the sculptor may work. Do you feel it profitable, for example, to attempt to convince architects that they should include a place for sculpture in their designs?

It would undoubtedly be economically profitable for the sculptor if the architect would bear sculpture in mind when working out his designs, and there have been many instances of such collaboration. The results, however, have often been so unsatisfactory that I question its having been of genuine value either to the sculptor or to the architect, except in rare cases. Although this question refers to the welfare of the sculptor, the fundamental problem is architectural. I am afraid that any intelligent planning on the part of architect and engineer sufficiently broad in scope to allow for an organic acceptance of sculpture in architecture would be impossible under present conditions. The prospect of supplementing architecture with sculpture in a way that would permit the integration of their respective spacial orbits within a consistent community environment would be little short of miraculous.

In your work you have at various times done both abstractions and pieces with narrative subject matter. Does a change from one to the other imply an evolution of your style, or do you feel that both tendencies can be carried on with success together?

I do not believe that a visual expression is ever totally beholden to an exact transcription of nature, nor is it ever

Above, Thorn Blossom, 1948,
steel and nickel (brazed), 32 x 20",
collection Whitney Museum of American Art.



Right, Sea Quarry, 1947,
steel and brass (brazed), 10 x 12".

completely removed from it. Art is always arrived at through some process of abstraction, and the divergence from nature which we perceive or feel is merely a question of degree and kind. I have yet to see any work, however "abstract," that has not already had its counterpart in nature or in the man-made world. The most rigid geometry in contemporary art pales when we take time to explore geometric formations in mineral and other crystalline structures. Microscopic observation reveals a world of geometric and amorphous structures that dispels at a glance the myth that abstract art bears no indebtedness to nature.

This process of abstraction applies as much to the evolution and sequence of historical styles as it does to the work of an individual artist. His work may parallel the progression of styles from the renaissance to the present day by beginning with the recording of the object and then tending towards an increasingly formal order; and at our stage within this development we find it proper and consistent to explore all possible mutations of the formal order. This process has been strengthened because the artist, forced by the social circumstance of an apparently growing isolation, prefers to recede into his own plastic world and recreate it. He finds additional support for his conviction because (as has by now become a commonplace) this "discipline" was for a time lost sight of and needs to be reaffirmed.

Direct visual sensation may occur at any level of "abstraction" and part of our seeing experience finds its most telling impact when this becomes a plastic exchange. Our sensibilities are by now so conditioned that we respond in terms of sensation to any level of abstraction as we would to narrative subject matter. I therefore regard any single piece of my work—into whatever category it seems at first glance to fit—as part of the total fabric of my development, having been dictated by my special predilections.

Recently many sculptors have attempted to expand their activity both economically and esthetically by the use of new materials. Does this sort of thing seem propitious to you?

New materials suggest possibilities that upon occasion make for a genuine contribution, and their use deserves encouragement. I think it extremely difficult to judge the esthetic validity of experiments at this point, but these materials are a lively and provocative part of our present interest in extending our plastic vocabulary.

In my own work, I have investigated the varying

means by which these materials could be processed. This required training in the use of both the hand and powered tools common to our industrial life; as well as an understanding of the manifold ways in which new materials could function, not only esthetically but also in terms of industry.

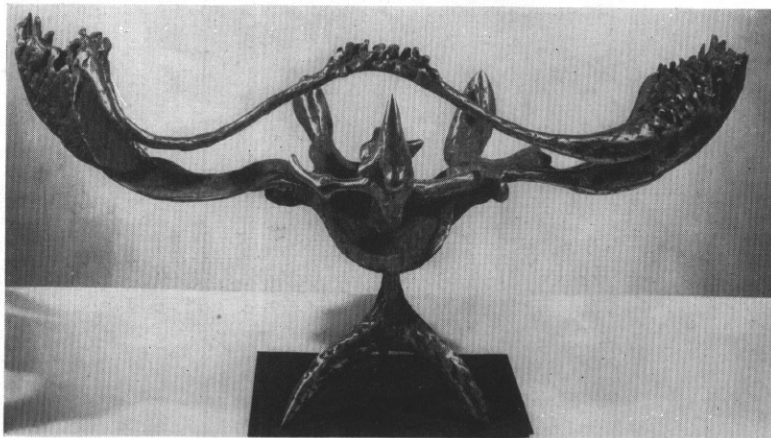
It may be relevant to recall that the constructivist position in modern art assumes a total interaction with life, theoretically and in direct engagement. This in turn suggests that the sculptor could assume the multiple rôle of artist-designer-technician and so forth, implying a creative life beneficial to society through industrial channels, one in which industry would reciprocate by supplying incentive and opportunity.

My personal opinion, however, is that at the present time such economic and esthetic activity are incompatible. Industry today cannot absorb any genuine esthetic values; the values inherent in it cannot begin to supplement a creative life that demands, among other things, an unequivocal devotion and the highest moral integrity.

Would you say that it is better for the artist, if he must earn a living, to do it in an occupation in no way connected with his art or in one, like teaching or the applied arts, that is allied with it?

This is the perennial question of doing art with a crutch. Except in rare instances of economic independence, most artists must have supplementary work, and the kind chosen is largely a matter of personal adaptability. One point of view holds that the artist's creative ability may be harmed by work or ideas that, by invading his creative domain, vitiate his vision and energy. It is simple to support this view by instances where such an invasion has been disastrous; on the other hand, one can cite historic examples to dispel it. For example, the renaissance artist dispersed his creative energy in many directions; and among contemporary artists, Klee and Kandinsky devoted many years to teaching and writing.

Of one thing I feel sure: no supplementary activity will have a final bearing upon a creative act. An artist accepts such work by accident or design; but he will soon know how well it is suited to him and will make the necessary adjustments. Having myself done many kinds of work, I have discovered that teaching in an institution with an atmosphere of liberal ideas serves me best. In many ways, the American college is becoming the only place where it is possible to combine an interchange of ideas with some degree of economic security.



Raven, 1947, steel, 18 x 24".