

Mandrake. 1951. Steel, copper. Collection Pierre Matisse, New York.

Upon every occasion that I am asked to talk about sculpture I realize once again how notoriously difficult it is to relate words to visual experience. So I have long ago given up the idea of trying verbally to define sculpture. Yet, this is not to say that sculpture cannot be defined in effect. It has been defined in the past, and subsequent generations will continue to re-define it. A definition comes about in the only way that sculpture can be read, and that is by means of the visual form itself. When we are confronted by sculpture and are receptive to its many attributes, we are in effect sharing in the reading, and in the writing, of its definition. It seems to me that one speaks most plausibly for sculpture by direct commitment to the work itself.

I should like, in the further interest of clarification, to point up the present character of my work by first retracing the ideas behind my former work in sculpture when it was chiefly concerned with the Constructivist point of view, and show how it relates to the work that I am doing now.

As you know, the Constructivist world assumes a complete interaction with life. And since our larger conduct of society is governed by technology, all the accoutrements of scientific jargon and the attending products and by-products of technology feed and sustain our world in its materialistic vision. Obviously, to accept this condition and, moreover, to work creatively in it meant, finally, to approve the present state of society as a sufficiently balanced one, where transition from the Muse of the Production Manager offered no terrifying obstacle. What a disarming and innocent illusion!

Theodor Roszak

In Pursuit

of an Image

Lecture delivered before the students body at the Art Institute of Chicago. March 1955.

It became increasingly apparent to me that however exacting the requirements of Constructivist sculpture, it bore little relationship to practical design, for that still suffers from outmoded restrictions, codes and industrial competition, and the constant gearing of quality to the dubious standards of the consumer. Now, I am sure, there are many individuals who can supply the needs of such restrictive demands. But for the sculptor, they spell stultification, if not ultimate suicide.

My final parting of the ways with Constructivism did not come from a recognition of this schizoid alliance alone, but more importantly it came from the realization that incomplete values were inherent in its structure and denied a large area of human experience. A credo that is centrally geared to a set of contemporary values largely motivated by the power principle must finally give way to an imbalance in the development of the human personality—that is, if vital areas of the human structure remain unrealized or ignored. Such a credo must end ultimately in distorting, and finally paralyzing, the sensibilities of those to whom it addresses itself.

The artist has always fought against standardization, yet ironically enough this century has seen wholesale capitulation of the artist to the machine-made image. The tool is useful when it becomes the extension of the human hand, but I believe it is completely misapplied when it usurps the place of the human personality. This holds for our society as for any other.

If the Constructivist sculptor chooses to pay homage to a technological deity, he does so at the risk of compromising the fullness of his vision and at the peril of surrendering man's spirit to a brittle and fragmentary existence. The integration of man based upon the armature of technology can be accomplished only at a period when man no longer regards the machine as omnipotent, or as an instrument of salvation.

### *Is Content Found in Material?*

Now, my predicament at this time called for a drastic revision, a re-evaluation of instruments and ideas. I could no longer accept the flagrant abuse of that pragmatic mentality which, because it discovers moral and spiritual values irrelevant to its larger purpose, casts them aside.

I asked myself—what is one to do? And what would be the most valued alternative? Was the obvious predominance of formal unity enough? Could the exploitation of any given material or media automatically give rise to mature content in form? For me, this apparently was no longer so. Unity, yes! But what kind? Certainly, not the kind that produces uniformity. We already know too much about that kind's paralyzing effect. The longer I considered these questions, the more it became apparent that Art must find its role within the area of the human personality. I believe that aided by its visual and plastic inheritance, and with renewed purpose, Art can revitalize and broaden man's vision by a vigorous and affirmative statement of forms.

The work that I am now doing constitutes an almost complete reversal of ideas and feelings found in my former work. Instead of looking at densely populated man-made cities, it now begins by contemplating the clearing. Instead of sharp and confident edges, its lines and shapes are now gnarled and knotted, even hesitant. Instead of serving up slick chromium, its surfaces are scorched and coarsely pitted. The only reminder of my earlier experiences that I have retained is the over-ruling structure and concept of Space—no longer buoyant, but unobtrusively concealed, where I now think it properly belongs.

Let us say that basically what a sculpture has to offer the viewer is Form, which is communicated on a primary level through direct visual sensation. Were this the whole of the communication, then all non-visual attributes in the artist's work would be extraneous, and the encounter limited to the laws of optics and the phenomenal structure of the eye. I do not agree with this widely held view of the significance of Form as offering "visual sensation," for I am quite sure that we see not only with the eye, but with our total sensibility. Otherwise one could not represent the moon, for the risk it be "seen" as a billiard ball.

I reject the notion that calls for playing or experimenting with a variety of materials, after which let us even assume some plastic coherence has been arrived at, and one looks at it, and wonders what has happened, and why one did it. A lot of good suggestion can come from such a method of work. But, I think it is extremely important to feel and know what one is doing and what one expects to say.

Personally, of course, I prefer to appeal to what may be termed the psychology of the imagination, where concentration on the experiences one wishes to convey ultimately invokes an image of the forms in one's mind ... *only after which*, one gets down to work. This attitude in no way rejects the notion of plastic suggestion, or possibly accidents arising out of characteristics inherent in the medium. On the contrary, it takes such experiences for granted since it assumes they have already happened, and that such experiences are now assimilated within the mainstream of one's perceptions.

Instead of working my media for ideas, I prefer to have an idea before working. This distinction is central and decisive as an approach to my work. Should one look for historic precedent in the way that these two attitudes of work relate themselves to one another, we should find the best answer supported by way of concrete example in the work of the Sculptor and Painter of the past. In particular, the oriental artist understood the need for a free and unhampered excursion into the realm of his intuitions. And at this stage of his development, he gave full play to the exploration of his chosen medium. By invading—and freely exploiting—his material, he calligraphically pointed up and charted the texture of his sensibilities. This calligraphic experience served as a means, not as an end. It served as a forerunner to his considered and mature forms.

I know it is not terribly fashionable to quote Benedetto Croce.

Nevertheless, he made a statement that established a point of continuity for me and perhaps quoting him will help to clarify what I like to regard as “retaining the fullest intensity of an image.” In the words of Croce, “The artist is one who never makes a stroke without having previously seen it in his imagination.” And he remarks further that “the externalization of a work of art implies a vigilant will, which persists in not allowing certain visions, intuitions, or conceptions to be lost.”

In its own way, Modern Psychology recognizes this process and interprets it as “the willed introversion of the creative act.”

This attitude, obviously, is contrary to the one that sets store on the exploitation of the medium alone. In a strictly plastic sense I revolt against the persistent limitations implied by the dictating drive of the material itself. And, I believe continued practice of this procedure, by its overt denial if not contempt for fuller communication, risks its own emasculation. Material dominance must be restrained and re-directed, not only within the area of the arts, but on all levels of society as well.

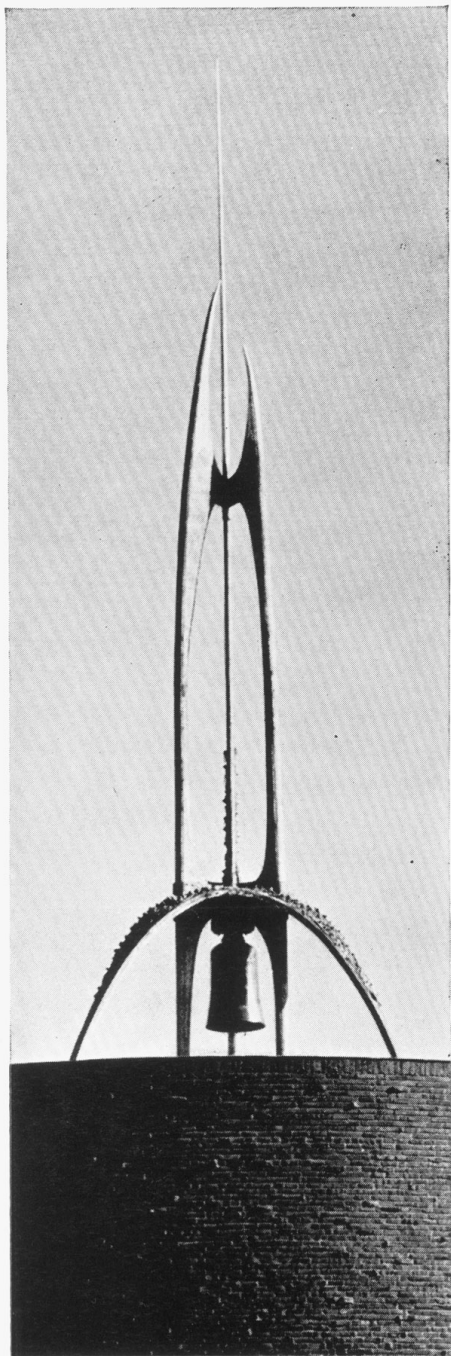
### *Life-Giving Values Are Primal*

The forms that I find necessary to assert, are meant to be blunt reminders of primordial strife and struggle, reminiscent of those brute forces that not only produced life, but in turn threatened to destroy it. I feel that if necessary, one must be ready to summon one's total being with an all-consuming rage against those forces that are blind to the primacy of life-giving values. Perhaps by this sheer dedication, one may yet merge force and grace.

It is altogether possible that society may be on the threshold of a great transformation—and while its external circumstances may remain relatively unchanged, I believe we will witness vast shifts in emotional and moral outlook. It is not without possibility, too, that in the next most important phase of our century we will again see the emergence and meaning of the Baroque symbol, revealing a psychic life of organic growth, that itself has the power of regeneration and transcendence.

It seems to me, that the Baroque symbol may be interpreted from either of two aspects. The early phase, when the budding is most closely related to the sharp Gothic thrust, the herald of its appearance; or the latterly phase, when the ripe fruit, ready to fall, disintegrates and deposits its seed again.

My interest and feeling for the Baroque is for that of its inception, when it is closest to the Gothic thrust. In contemporary visual terms, it expresses itself at once as—sharp and undulating—assertive and pulsating—defiant and hopeful. The rhythm between the discipline of the Classic and the emotional stirring of the Baroque may well establish a new synthesis toward the completeness of man and his hopes for the fullness of life.



Spire and Bell Tower. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge (Mass.). 1953. Aluminium.

*Content vs. Subject Matter*

Sculpture and Architecture have always symbolized unified institutions and a unified man. Painting with its subtle mutations of change and broad versatility flourishes best within an atmosphere of suspension and discord. This explains in part why painting is still the dominant voice in these times. But, I believe we are faced with the prospect of an impending cycle of social change that is already indicated by the growing presence of a New Architecture and New Sculpture.

Malraux describes in his *Twilight of the Absolute* the necessity for the contemporary artist to discover his moral values through his own work. Personally, I think this has always been the case in the past as it is now — with this exception — that the contemporary western artist is faced with the more exacting problem of choices, as compared with his predecessors who had their range circumscribed by the “absolute doctrine” of religious and moral values. If art is called upon to uphold the conscience of those who practice it, as Malraux suggests it may, then surely it must contain more than the “self-sufficiency” of plastic values inherent in the media, alone.

It seems to me that the sculptor as well as the painter must strive to break through the variety of change (that can take place in any period and generally does) and try to arrive at a significant value, basic and indestructible, for the widest range of human sensibility.

Malraux’s statement obliquely supports the larger question of the relationship between form and subject matter, and in the light of my past experience, particularly with my former use of non-objective forms, I have frequently been asked how I feel about subject matter for the modern sculptor. I would like to talk briefly about this question, by referring to a specific work, and I feel that the *Whaler of Nantucket* may serve as a familiar jumping-off point. But first I would like to replace the term “subject matter” with the word, “content” and for this reason: Subject matter as we have come to know it tends to relate itself to an immediate external — one might say a superficial aspect of an object or event. For me, it suggests a fleeting, fragmentary kind of identity. Content, on the other hand, bears upon the core structure of an experience and grows from the center out, whether it be in terms of formal space building, or whether it is central to an orientation of feeling, quality of mood, or direction of an expression.

Content seen this way, suggests organic growth and becomes an endless source of visual suggestion for the sculptor. But, does such distinction between content and subject matter affect the artist and his work today?

Well, the fact that we are living at an historic moment that in part expresses itself in valid forms of an eclectic nature, would seem to suggest many possibilities. For my part, visual ideas must contain and transcend formal limits. The consideration of content as related

to subject matter not only implies planting a seed of structural and spatial extension, it also precludes operation of an emotional apparatus that reaches out toward growth, is adaptable to change, and finally evolves toward maturity. Obviously, this transformation cannot be accomplished automatically, by the plastic possibilities of the medium, alone. One has to work at it. One has to bring it up to other and wider areas of human experience. One has to think and feel through a whole body of accumulated attitudes until one conjures a vivid sense of the total quality of the form, and invokes its image in the mind. I would say at this point, that one is finally guided by an intuitional sense of order that prods the imagination into action. Its first intimations are felt through one's own psychological requirements that subsequently link larger patterns of social and cultural reference. In purely visual terms, it is really a question of coming to grips with, and challenging, the stuff of the imagination. In this sense, there are many sources and centers that can be tapped. One may well be asking now, but where can — or should — the artist today look for this evocative form?

When I think of our cultural heritage, I must admit that I am not nearly so much moved by our Painting and Sculpture tradition, as I am by the quality of order and range of sensibility that comes through to us with our writers and poets. For it is here, that we find a source of abundant imagery and great creative strength. In this connection, I would regard Melville, one of the most richly endowed artists that this country has produced, as one whose meaning for us has not been fully explored ... not only in terms of American lore, but as one of the few Americans that could assimilate far-reaching influences of ancient and occult origin and weave these seemingly strange allusions into the fabric of his national experience.

From him, we can learn much. Melville's problems as an artist could be studied with profit by anyone seriously concerned with expressing ideas, and particularly the American artist. We have here an example of a selfless and disinterested individual, trying desperately to integrate his regional heritage with a world image of human experience ... the spiritual journey upon which Melville embarked could in no way begin, if he were merely involved in the gratification of a personal ego or the demands of a circumscribed regional culture. His conception of a world image was oriented to the timelessness of the holy scriptures and the demands of his spirit were sparked by the mystic incantations of Polynesian ritual ... . Summing up these qualities, from another point of view, he gives us a sense of the scope of his vision when we consider that it took no less than the vast arena of the sea to play out his drama.

In Melville's life, I believe that a crucial moment occurred when he could no longer clearly separate the area of his own pursuit from the enveloping wrath of his protagonist. In his great novel, *Moby*

#### *Melville as Creative Artist*



Whaler of Nantucket. Steel. 1952-53.  
Art Institute of Chicago. (Photo Flair  
Studios, New York.)

*Dick*, he traces the invisible lines of this conflict at a point when Ahab and the whale become increasingly indistinguishable, until finally they become one. For unlike Jonah who was swallowed by the whale and was reborn, Melville was denied spiritual passage. Nevertheless, I like to think that the manner in which our American hero insinuated himself through one of the great American legends (that he also helped to build) would indicate that, after all, the final victory was his.

Perhaps, you can see why I find this particular man of letters and his work related to the problems of the artist today; I became very much interested in the pattern that all his qualities suggested, with the taut lines that crossed and re-crossed the broadly spaced areas of Melville's world, and regarded it, not literally, but as a climate for nurturing visual signs.

Having decided to act upon this material, my intention, then was to express a quality of sharp urgency that could be reconstructed in sculpture, in the name and symbol of the Whaler.

Some of you may be interested to know, that in my sculpture of *The Whaler of Nantucket* I tried through forms to project symbolically the pursuer and the pursued, an enigma that I fear is still with us in the modern world, as it has been in the past.

A further question has been asked me: Would my sculpture of the Whaler have any meaning to anyone who did not know of Melville or had not read *Moby Dick*? Well, I hope so. After all, I was not interested in translating Melville or in illustrating *Moby Dick*! I tried to find a symbol in sculpture that would sum up the life of Melville and the protean imagery of his work ... but strictly on my own terms, shaping a visual metaphor that if successful, would speak for itself.

What I have said of Melville indicates the kind of emotional crises that he had to assimilate and shape in the imagery of his art; he also, to varying degrees epitomizes, too, the same self-searching needs commonly felt by modern man. His life and work taken as a whole was of epic proportions and could by the very nature of its ambiguities and legendary content relate to the poetic process, the very stuff that in turn nurtures the seed, and gives both life and the image to sculpture.

I believe there is an amazingly strong analogy to be drawn between the content of poetry and the content that I speak of as related to sculpture. In sculpture, we are dealing with a form that presents visual meaning within a changing source of light and the movement of the spectator. It constantly produces illusions of shifting shapes and images. Hence, like poetry, sculpture is fraught with structural and visual ambiguities that are revolved by reconciling opposites in its constant pursuit of a visual metaphor.

I think, then, that a medium such as sculpture, able to integrate diverse poles of meaning, can reveal significant suggestions of imagery that cross or fuse from one generation to another the rich source material of Legend and Myth.

We must remember that since Myth deals with a timebinding core of human experience, its strength and conspicuous content lies in a regenerated psyche. It invokes images of the mind that speak of human trials in crossing the difficult threshold to spiritual transformation ... in its own terms, and within the proscribed boundaries of a visual order. This also happens within the forms of sculpture, before it reveals its plastic image. While we tend to look upon sculpture, today, as a totally independent activity, it is well to remember, from time to time, that it is also an organic part of a complex social and cultural whole. It is a projection of a constantly recurring dream built upon the hopes and despairs of Man. The life abundance that is suggested is of no less importance than the inexhaustible store of shapes, masses and space.

*Time Ties Men*



These relationships are not a happy accident of chance. They are bound by the same laws of nature that unite our physical world and give meaning to the recurrent content of our legends.

Sculpture is the language of visual content in space, and its unique power to move us is not contingent upon an imposed and extraneous subject matter. The meaning of forms must evolve from the same organic source as the content within forms. Does this mean that form is isolated in a void? Does it mean that it must be likened to some unknown denizen in an endless space? I should think not... I will not say that form can have meaning, because if it does not have meaning, it also cannot be form.

Finally, Form has a quality and significance that transcend any verbal or written attribute that we may give it. Yet, we can say that the direction it takes, and the special magic that it uses to seduce us, is determined at the core of its content. It is at this point of inception, as it is shaped by the life of the mind and the recurrent promptings of legend, that it shall sustain our vision and perhaps mold the image of our art.



Sea Quarry. Steel. Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach (Florida).  
(Photo Flair Studios, New York.)