



*Thorn Blossom*, 1947, steel brazed with nickel silver, 32" by 20" by 19".

# THEODORE ROSZAK: CRAFTSMAN AND VISIONARY

BY MARTICA SAWIN

THEODORE ROSZAK has risen rapidly in the last decade to a position of prominence among American sculptors, and his stature has recently been increased by a major architectural sculpture, the beautiful and unusual bell tower and spire which he designed and executed for Saarinen's chapel at M.I.T. The Walker Art Center and the Whitney Museum have collaborated in presenting not only a large selection\* of the welded steel sculptures on which his reputation is chiefly based, but a long backward glance over the paintings of the artist's formative years and the ingenious constructions which occupied him from 1937 to 1943. It is a strange exhibition in its absolute and clear-cut division into the before and after—actually, the prewar and the postwar (during the war he worked as an aircraft builder and teacher of aircraft mechanics)—and the absence of any intermediate works to mark the transition from the severe geometry of constructivism to the turbulent forms and expressionistic force of his sculptures in steel.

The paintings which cover the years between 1930 and 1947 seem rather extraneous to the exhibition in that they have little or no bearing on the sculptures and are not in themselves of particular interest. They do reveal an artist endeavoring to submerge an essentially romantic bent beneath the discipline of a rigid formality. One might be ready to dismiss them as merely eclectic, save for the fact that each is a serious attempt in a prolonged struggle to resolve on canvas the artist's apparently irreconcilable concern with subject matter and the inclination to pure form. Constructivism provided at least a temporary escape from these difficulties. Roszak had been exposed to Bauhaus theories on his travels to Germany and Czechoslovakia, and in 1938 he became associated with Moholy-Nagy's Design Laboratory in New York. An exciting sense of design and fecundity of imagination distinguish his constructions from the host of similar works produced during these years. The boldness and ingenuity of these inventions as well as the striking dramatization of the forms seem to promise important achievements to come, once the boundaries imposed by constructivism were broken.

The adaptation of industrial welding methods to metal sculpture marks a technical revolution unparalleled in the entire history of art. Still young in terms of years, this new medium in the hands of such artists as Roszak, David Smith and Ibram Lassaw has given rise to a virtually new art with a potential for the future which appears to be without limit. Roszak brings to this medium a strong sense of sculptural tradition and a demand for the unity of form and concept as well as a stupendous craftsmanship, all of which combine to give his work a richness and power lacking in many of the contemporary experiments with welded sculpture. Although the resolution of the conflicting forces which hampered Roszak was long in coming, once the means of synthesis had been established, both through the artist's inner growth and development and through the discovery of his natural medium, the fully realized sculptures of his mature period took shape rapidly, and the flow of new images and new forms has continued unabated from the mid-forties to the present.

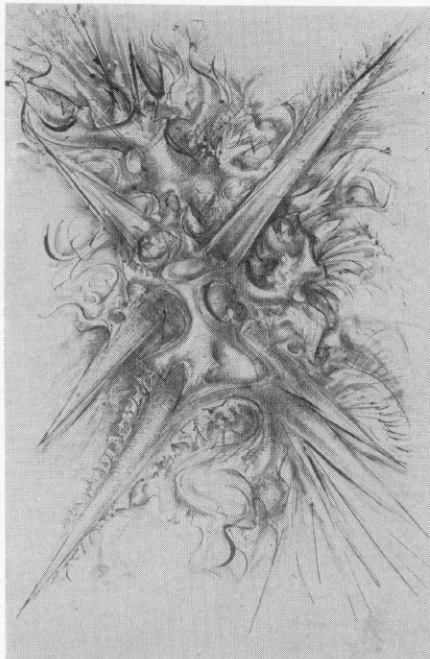
A sense of composure is impossible in the midst of these thrusting, aggressive presences which demand the most intense physical and emotional response. There is a menacing, painful aspect to the violent gestures and piercing prongs, particularly

in the bird forms, *Scavenger* and *Sea Sentinel*, or in the terrifying image of *The Spectre of Kitty Hawk*. The violence is also present in the explosive force of the drawings with their impressive scale and wondrous draftsmanship, which has a cold and steel-like quality. This coldness relates in part to the sculpture—it is the bone, not the flesh, which the artist loves, the armed aggressor rather than the vulnerable being, the howl of the *Hound of Hell* and the scream of the bird of prey rather than the tender lyric. Even *Cradle Song* in the tremendous upward thrust of the crescent speaks more of peril than of peace, and *Thorn Blossom*, while suggesting a delicate flower, makes clear that it cannot survive without the protective shield of thorns.

In the same way that many of Roszak's images have a timeless quality—at once echoes of a remote past and harbingers of the future—so the actual material of the sculptures has an ageless look. There is neither shiny newness nor encrusted age, but an appearance of having evolved over a long period of time in an almost organic fashion. They have evolved in this way in one sense, for although the essential structure is predetermined by numerous preparatory designs, the final colors and textures emerge gradually under the welder's torch, as the steel is brazed with copper, nickel silver or bronze to give richly colored, roughened surfaces which suggest the erosion of centuries rather than the processes of modern industry.

The two aspects of Roszak, the craftsman of consummate skill and the romantic visionary, alternately ascendant throughout his career, seem now to have been permanently fused to offer a contribution of the utmost value to American sculpture. Nor does this retrospective exhibition seem in any way to be an end point; rather it points toward growth and innovation on an ever increasing scale.

*Nova No. 1*, 1952, ink on paper, 20½" by 27¼".



\*The exhibition will be on view at the Whitney Museum through November 11, and at the Walker Art Center from December 16 to January 20.