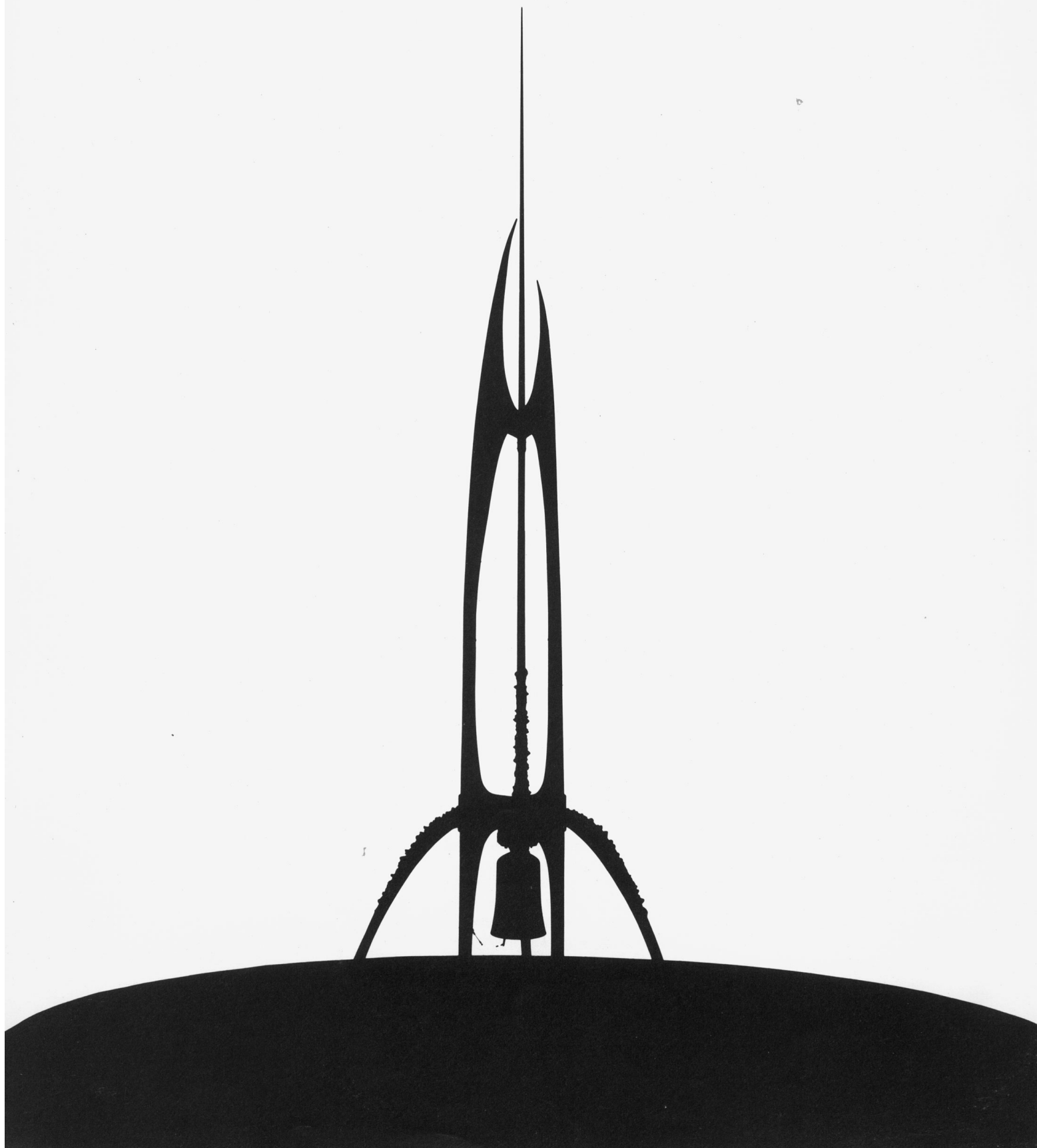
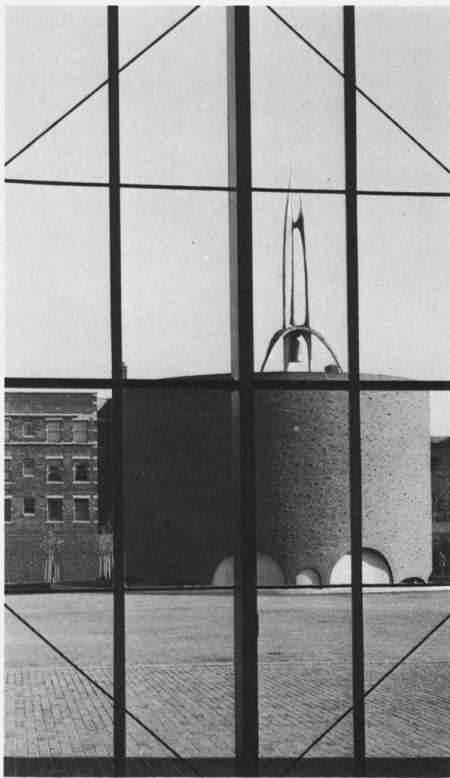


Theodore Roszak  
Drawings for Constructions, 1931-1945  
and  
Preparatory Sketches, Models and  
Castings for the MIT Bell Tower, 1955

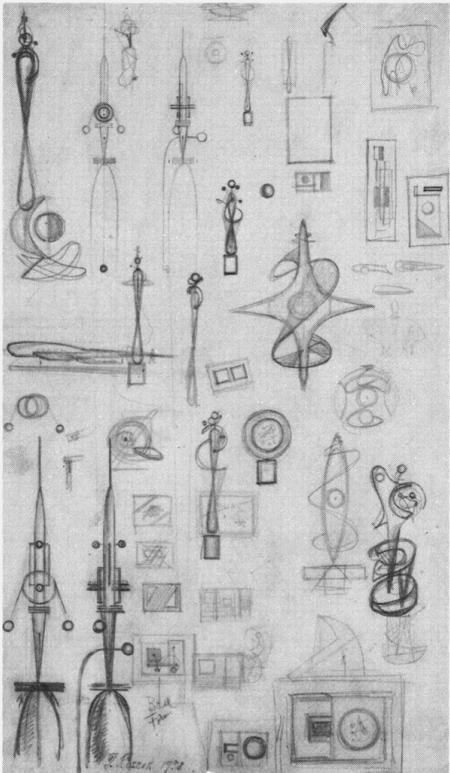
November 17-December 31, 1979  
Hayden Corridor Gallery and  
Hayden Memorial Library  
160 Memorial Drive  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Organized by the MIT Committee on the  
Visual Arts  
Guest curated by Lois Fichner-Rathus





Roszak's Bell Tower seen through window of MIT's Kresge Auditorium



Studies for constructions, 1938

## Acknowledgements

The Reference Collection, a part of the MIT Permanent Collection, is designed to illuminate the artist's creative process and to illustrate the technical means by which works of art come to completion. This collection—consisting of preliminary drawings, maquettes and engineering plans—was enriched immeasurably by the addition of over sixty works documenting the design, fabrication and installation of Theodore Roszak's Bell Tower for the MIT Chapel. Consequently, we are indebted to Mr. Roszak for both his artistry and generosity which have enhanced the visual and scholastic environment.

Given Roszak's sensitivity to the educational needs of students and scholars, it is fitting that this exhibition was initiated and curated by Lois Fichner-Rathus, a doctoral candidate in the History, Theory and Criticism of Art program at MIT. In tracing Roszak's persistent search for a mode of representation compatible with his social and aesthetic interests, Ms. Fichner-Rathus interviewed the artist and found his responsiveness and humility inspiring.

We also are grateful for the cooperation of the Zabriskie Gallery which loaned us Roszak's early drawings and provided pertinent background information.

It is my hope that this exhibition—a fusion of artistic and didactic concerns—will be followed by others which make use of materials from MIT's art collections and are curated by students of art history.

Kathy Halbreich  
Director of Exhibitions

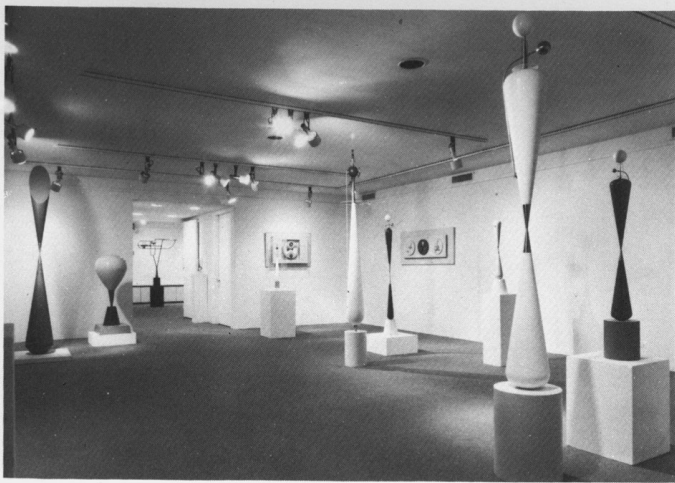
Theodore Roszak is best known for the symbolic and tortuous sculptures he executed as a participant in the Abstract Expressionist movement. But he began his career in the 1920s as a painter of romantic subjects, and from 1932 to 1945 turned to pure geometric abstraction, under the influence of European Constructivism. In 1945, satiated with non-objective art, he began to combine expressionism with the structural devices of abstraction when, like many artists working in New York in the 1940s, he rejected realist painting and geometric abstraction in favor of a more spontaneous mode of representation. Roszak also shared with the Abstract Expressionists an interest in the possibilities of new materials and techniques, and in the mid-forties began experimenting with welded steel sculpture. The medium proved a successful one, freeing him to work on a much larger scale, and allowing for contrasts between the smoothest and crudest of forms as well as the subtlest variations in texture and color acquired by brazing steel with different alloys.

**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. (1949)**

Roszak's entire body of work is characterized by contrasts and abrupt stylistic changes. Yet these reversals of ideas have in common the search for a unity of form, the desire to feel and to extend the capabilities of the medium, and a striving for the resolution of form and content.

**For the sculptor [truth to materials] becomes an important consideration in shaping an attitude towards his craft. His consciousness of its 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. (1949)**

In many respects, Roszak's drawings are the most exciting and informative aspect of his work. By observing his ideas, as near to their conception as hand is to paper, the viewer becomes aware of the artist's thinking process and often can recognize links between works which, in their final state, appear disparate in style.



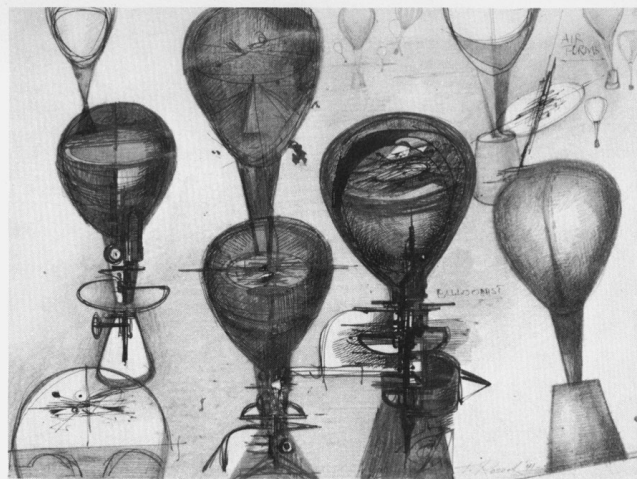
Installation at Zabriskie Gallery, New York City, 1978

**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. (1945)**

The drawings for constructions and the preparatory sketches for the Bell Tower atop the MIT chapel offer a beautiful and fascinating record of the sculptures in process. Countless variations on a single theme can be observed, along with complete reversals of ideas.

Drawings are of particular importance to Roszak, who feels that his sketches illustrate the organic process of the development of a work. He views the sketches as a "clearing-house for errors," from which he gains as much awareness of the piece as possible before its completion. The drawings constantly suggest new possibilities to him, and he relates these different ideas to a certain unity toward which he is striving. The result is a completed sculpture, the style of which is, at times, far beyond his preconceived ideas about the work.

**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. (1949)**



Study for The Balloonist, 1941

Rozsak was born in Poland in 1907 and immigrated with his parents to the United States at the age of two. He began classes at the Chicago Art Institute as a teenager and at the age of twenty-one held his first one-man exhibition and began teaching at the Art Institute School. Later, in addition to studying at the National Academy of Design in New York and at Columbia University, he worked privately with George Luks, the American realist painter. From 1929 to 1931 he traveled throughout Europe with funds from an Anna Louise Raymond Fellowship, and since then has been the recipient of many awards and grants.

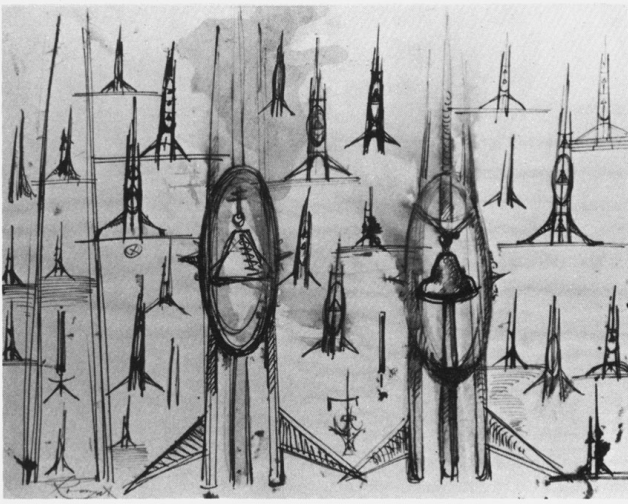
Rozsak began making constructions consistently in 1936, although the seeds for the adaptation of this style were planted during this European trip. Although his sojourn included studies in Italy, Germany, and France, it was exposure to the strict geometricism of Constructivism in Czechoslovakia which, at this point, was a decisive influence on his work. The movement, born in Russia around 1913, emphasized structure and truth to materials and called attention to the functional, utilitarian aspects of artistic production.

**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 role 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. (1949)**

Rozsak was fascinated by the Constructivist credo of the interrelationship between the artist and society, and curious about the possibility of adapting it to the industrial scene in the United States. Although he found such a merger between economics and aesthetics unfeasible (1949), he adopted the constructivist style in removing traditional subject matter from his work and concentrating instead on the relationships of pure geometric forms. He settled in New York in 1931, after his trip abroad, and from 1938 to 1940 worked as an instructor at the Design Laboratory in New York under the Constructivist, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

It was during this period of roughly a decade that Rozsak's energies were poured into the pursuit of pure geometric abstraction under the stylistic aegis of Constructivism. His "constructions" from about 1932 to 1945 consist of both relief and free-standing sculptures, using geometric forms as well as machine-inspired imagery. In these works, the relationships of part to part and part to whole are clearly and precisely established, a characteristic throughout his body of work.

The drawings of this period offer exercises in the composition of geometric shapes, for the most part executed on graph paper. The ideas are carried to varying degrees of completion, from the barest sketches of fleeting thoughts, to highly detailed preparatory sketches for existing sculptures. Geometric forms appear to be suspended in closely parallel planes within the shallow space of the relief construction; cast shadows indicate the three-dimensionality of forms in the final sculpture.



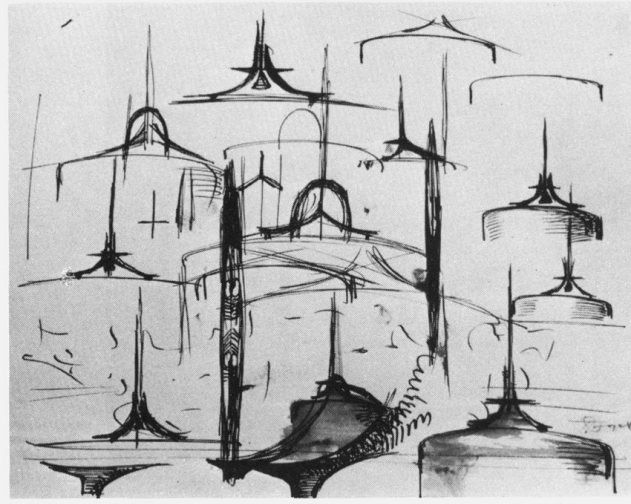
Preparatory Sketch for MIT Bell Tower, 1953-55

**When I make a drawing, it is not so much the foreground as the drawing suggested in the background that is important. Often that background drawing will be the next sculpture that will emerge. The details half-hidden, as it were, in the drawing may suddenly assume for me a meaning and this, to me, is a source of pleasure and surprise. An insignificant part of the drawing, some bit I had not noticed at the time, may give rise to a complex set of relationships, and to another drawing, and then after that to another piece of sculpture. It is self-propulsive. (1956)**

In addition to the severely geometric shapes, one can observe in the drawings machine imagery resembling anachronistic predictions of future technologies and numerous sketches of airplanes. Interestingly, Roszak worked as a builder of aircraft and an instructor of aircraft mechanics during the war years, and has cited these experiences as influential in some respects.

By the mid-forties, Roszak had all but abandoned the constructivist style for a more expressionistic technique, reconciling the dichotomy between the rigid formalism of geometric abstraction and the unleashed passion of Surrealism. These sculptures are characterized by a strong sense of structure and menacing forms of fantastic plant and animal life.

**The work that I am now doing constitutes an almost complete reversal of ideas and feelings, from 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. (1952)**



Preparatory Sketch for MIT Bell Tower, 1953-55

Whereas Roszak turned his attentions to formal considerations in order to purge his early paintings of romantic subject matter and later abandoned Constructivism for a more expressionistic style laden with symbolic content, the Bell Tower for Eero Saarinen's chapel at MIT of 1955 is, in many respects, both a paring-down and consolidation of these disparate styles.

Roszak wanted the form of the bell tower to be different from any traditional, time-honored ones. It was his first major architectural commission and the opportunity to work on a non-denominational chapel provided him with a chance to explore the various stages of religious experience throughout history. The tower, in its final form, possesses both the timelessness of an ancient cult symbol and a relevance to religious worship in a contemporary society. The three smooth verticals rising from the encrusted arches of the base represent major religious persuasions—Judaic, Catholic and Protestant. The spires reach heavenward, as a rocket pausing impatiently on a launching pad, but remain earthbound, guarding, as it were, against a potential threat from the air. Roszak sees the overall form of the sculpture as also related to the Gothic gargoyle, guarding against danger to the house of God. Most interesting, perhaps, is the relationship of both the chapel and bell tower to religious models of some primitive societies. Saarinen's plan for the chapel reaches back to the use of a circle within a limited space to delineate a holy place, and Roszak's spire is totemic in form.

The preparatory sketches for the Bell Tower offer designs vastly different from one another as well as many variations on the chosen form. They also indicate a preoccupation with the relationship of the sculpture to the chapel, and one senses a desire to establish an organic unity between the two underlying the varying stages of design.

**The prospect of supplementing architecture with sculpture in a way that would permit the integration of their respective spatial orbits within a consistent community environment would be little short of miraculous. (1949)**

The MIT community has been fortunate to have the Bell Tower as part of its impressive sculpture collection for nearly a quarter of a century. Now, through the generosity of the artist, students and campus guests have the opportunity to observe the artist's work on the sculpture from its conception to its birth, in addition to learning about the background from which it was created.

Lois Fichner-Rathus

In addition to personal interviews with the artist, information was gathered from the following sources:

Arnason, H.H. Theodore Roszak. Exhibition catalogue, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1956.

Goldwater, Robert and Roszak, Theodore, "Some Problems in Modern Sculpture," Magazine of Art, February, 1949, pp.53-56.

Griffin, Howard, "Totems in Steel," Art News, October, 1956, pp. 34-35.