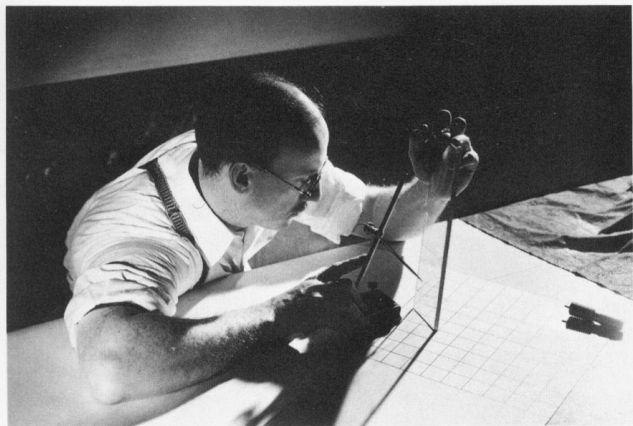


## THEODORE ROSZAK



Born 1907 in Poznan, Poland; died 1981 in New York City. Arrived in the United States in 1909; became U.S. citizen in 1919. Studied at Art Institute of Chicago, 1922–26, 1927–29; National Academy of Design, New York, 1926.

When he was two years old, Theodore Roszak's family settled in Chicago, where he attended public schools. Having taken evening classes in painting at The Art Institute of Chicago until his graduation from high school, he enrolled there as a full-time day student in 1925. The following year he went to New York and briefly studied painting with Charles Hawthorne at the National Academy of Design before beginning private instruction with George Luks. He also attended classes in logic and philosophy at Columbia University. Returning to Chicago in 1927, he resumed the study of painting and lithography at the Art Institute. Roszak's first one-artist exhibition of lithographs was held at the Allerton Gallery, Chicago, in 1928; he also began at this time to teach drawing and lithography at the Art Institute.

Roszak's first awareness of abstract painting and Constructivist trends in sculpture occurred in 1929 when a fellowship gave him the opportunity to study in Europe for two years. Most of his time was spent in Czechoslovakia, but he also visited other countries, and in Paris was introduced to the works of Picasso, Miró, and de Chirico. The latter's Metaphysical paintings had the most immediate impact on his work. While in Czechoslovakia, Roszak learned of new developments in architecture and was introduced to the concept of the artist as a potential molder of industrialized society. Although he did not visit the Bauhaus, his contacts with Czech Constructivists made him aware of the school's utopian ideology. Before returning to the United States in 1931, he purchased a copy of the first English edition of László Moholy-Nagy's *The New Vision*, a book that was to have a profound impact on the first generation of American Constructivists.<sup>1</sup>

After settling in New York, Roszak continued his painting, which during this period reflected the influence of artists discovered during his years abroad. He was included in the first Biennial of the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1932. Roszak also began his experimentation with sculpture in plaster and clay, but quickly lost interest in this method and turned to direct metal construction, taking courses in tool-making and designing. In 1934 he set up his own shop.

Among his early three-dimensional works is *Large Rectilinear Space Construction*, 1932 (cat. no. 118). An asymmetrical composition of intersecting planes and linear elements, this sculpture is evidence of his technical mastery of various metals and his growing interest in the machine aesthetics of the Bauhaus. Freestanding objects of metal were followed by brightly painted wall reliefs that were fabricated through his skillful use of both hand and power tools.

Roszak's early constructions exemplify his exploration of

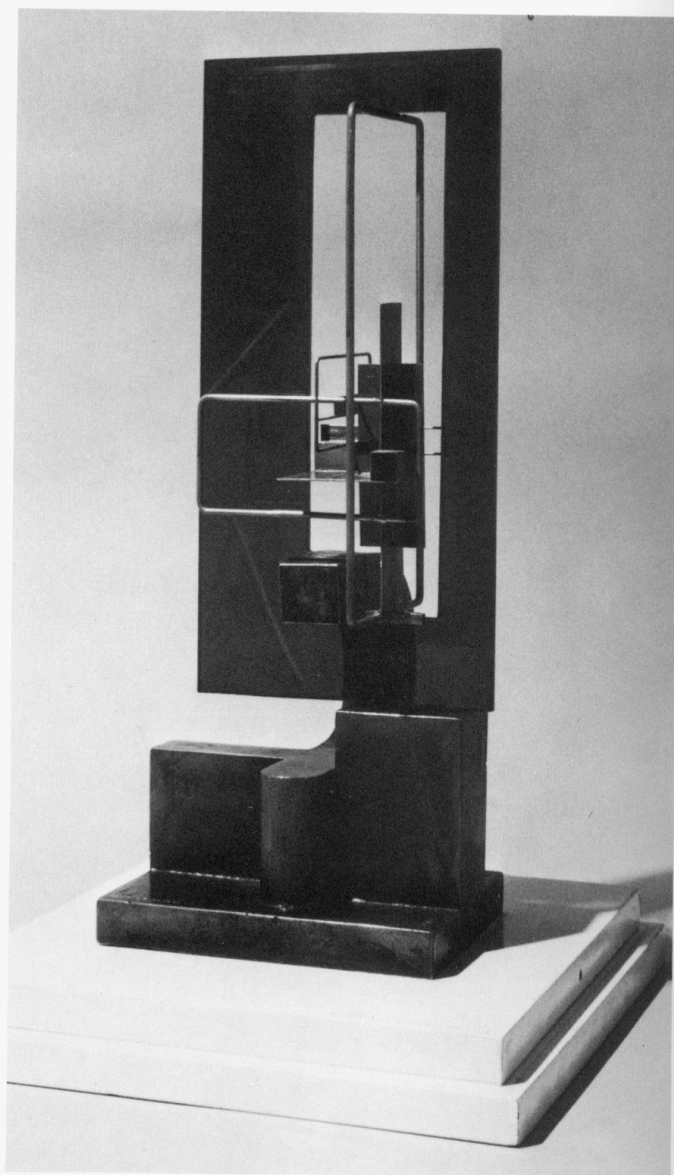


CAT. NO. 117. THEODORE ROSZAK  
*Airport Structure*, 1932  
 Copper, aluminum, steel, and brass  
 23 in. (58.4 cm.)  
 The Newark Museum; The Members Fund Purchase 1977

diverse approaches to the use of machines, both as technical devices and as sources for new imagery. Later the sculptor recalled that for him "the machine was a tool, not an ideological entity." In the fabrication of his work, the machine was the "handmaiden" for the creation of ideal or fantastic forms.<sup>2</sup>

*Airport Structure*, 1932 (cat. no. 117), marks a transition

CAT. NO. 118. THEODORE ROSZAK  
*Large Rectilinear Space Construction*, 1932  
 Bronze, copper, and plastic  
 23 × 10¼ × 10 in. (58.4 × 26 × 25.4 cm.)  
 Private Collection

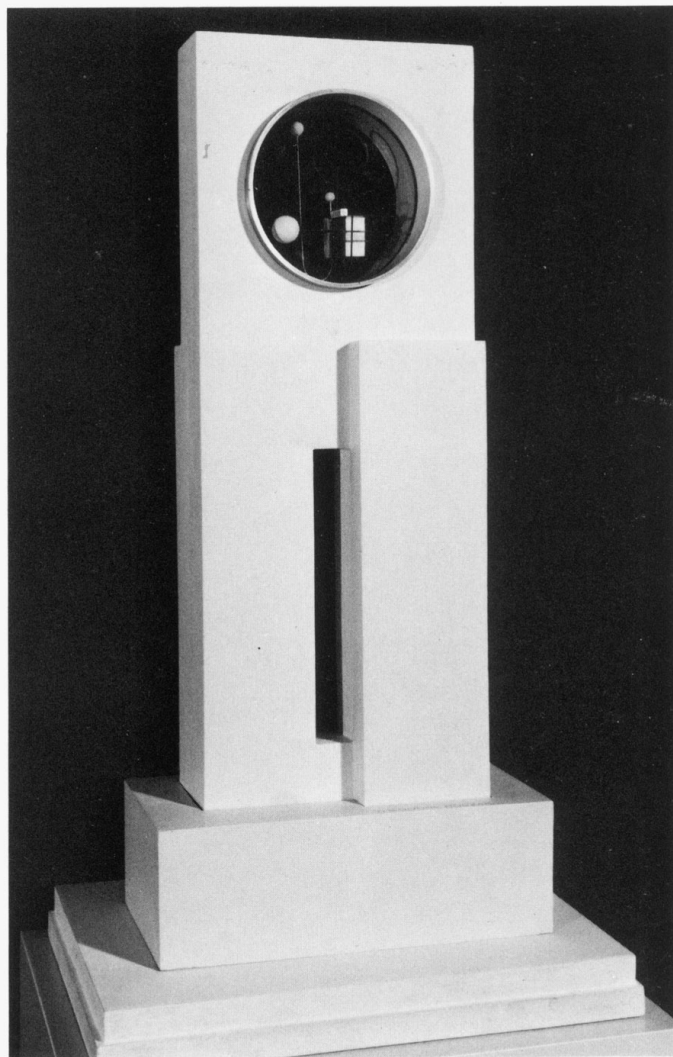


from his earlier anthropomorphic forms in bronze and attests to Roszak's fascination with the turbines and aviation instruments that were a part of the mechanical age. (Later, during World War II, Roszak taught aircraft mechanics and built airplanes at Brewster Aircraft Corporation.) Not only are such works undeniably machine-made, but they have the appearance of industrial forms that could actually function. The majority of Roszak's painted constructions date from 1936 to 1945. The serious, machine-derived Constructivist approach of the earlier works was modified by a playful spirit that is to be found in *Trajectories*, 1938 (cat. no. 119), and *Ascension*, 1939 (cat. no. 120). In some of these works Roszak seems stimulated by the fantastic forms of Miró and Arp, but *Trajectories* combines a Schlemmer-inspired abstraction of a human head with the suggestion of orbiting planetary bodies or atomic particles. *Trajectories* may allude to celestial mechanics, phenomena also found in the constructions of Alexander Calder during these years, or the wooden spheres attached to wires may also relate to contemporary diagrams of atoms. Roszak's suggestion of erratic orbital paths may be connected with Werner Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle," expounded in 1927. The scientist theorized that it was impossible to know simultaneously the momentum and position of an electron with sufficient precision to draw a picture of this element in a particular energy level. The sculptor may be referring to this principle in his presentation of small wooden spheres in no fixed "orbit" around a larger sphere.

*Ascension* exemplifies Roszak's lifelong interest in aviation, which he shared with many other artists of the thirties, including José de Rivera, Arshile Gorky, and J. Wallace Kelly. As a reader of science fiction, Roszak was undoubtedly aware of illustrations and descriptions of interplanetary vessels and space stations. *Ascension* is one of a series of vertical painted constructions that has been described as "crazy rockets about to be launched into space."<sup>3</sup> In 1939, Roszak also collaborated with Norman Bel Geddes on the Futurama diorama at the General Motors pavilion at the New York World's Fair.

The major event of the previous year for Roszak had been his first meeting with Moholy-Nagy and his appointment as instructor in composition and design at the Design Laboratory in New York, a school founded by Moholy-Nagy and dedicated to the perpetuation of the principles and methods of the Bauhaus. *Watchtower*, ca. 1939–40 (cat. no. 121), represents an attempt to monumentalize his earlier constructions and appears to be a model for a larger public sculpture.

In any consideration of the thirties, Roszak is significant as the first American artist to assimilate the machine aesthetics of the Bauhaus and to create a coherent body of work based on the Constructivist ideology. By the mid-forties, his Con-



CAT. NO. 121. THEODORE ROSZAK  
*Watchtower*, ca. 1939–40  
 Wood, plastic, metal, and paint  
 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (58.6 × 26.3 × 13.3 cm.)  
 Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh; Fine Arts Discretionary Fund, 1982

structivist approach was replaced by organic, more expressionistic forms welded in steel or created in brazed alloys.

Roszak taught at Sarah Lawrence College from 1940 to 1956 and at Columbia University from 1970 to 1972.

Joan Marter

<sup>1</sup>For more information on the influence of Moholy-Nagy's *The New Vision* on American artists, see Joan Marter, "Constructivism in America: The 1930s," *Arts* 56 (June 1982): 73–80.

<sup>2</sup>Theodore Roszak, interview with Joan Marter, New York, 24 January 1979. See also Joan Marter, "Theodore Roszak's Early Constructions: The Machine as Creator of Fantastic and Ideal Forms," *Arts* 54 (November 1979): 110–13.

<sup>3</sup>Hilton Kramer, "Roszak Evokes Spirit of Bauhaus," *New York Times*, 1 December 1978.

