

# SCULPTURAL EXPRESSIONS

Seven Artists

in Metal and Drawing

1947-1960

Herbert Ferber  
David Hare  
Ibram Lassaw  
Seymour Lipton  
Reuben Nakian  
Theodore Roszak  
David Smith

Sarah Lawrence College Gallery  
Bronxville, New York  
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# THEODORE ROSZAK

*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.*<sup>1</sup>

The Second World War triggered an immediate and passionate response in Theodore Roszak's art. No longer did the cool geometry which had preoccupied him during the late 1930s and early forties hold validity. "The constructivist's position, historically, with its influence upon architectural and engineering design has been and is an important one. . . . At the same time that these 'constructive' purposes and intentions exist, the world is fundamentally and seriously disquieted and it is difficult to remain unmoved and complacent in its midst."<sup>2</sup> His wartime employment in an aircraft factory gave Roszak direct experience with mechanisms for lethal destruction from the air and with their technological means of production. *Spectre of Kitty Hawk*, 1946-47 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York), gives horrifying testament to the dramatic extent of Roszak's reassessment in purpose and method. Even more explicitly menacing is its preparatory drawing (The Museum of Modern Art, New York) in which a demonic monster strides forward in ruinous determination; it commands the space and lashes out toward the edges of the paper. Forty years after the Wright brothers' wondrous achievement, the ghost of their invention returned to haunt a society sobered by the destruction raining from the air.

*Raven*, 1947, extends this specifically grotesque commentary to a more general and universal realm. The rich connotations of this bird-symbol engage the broad concept of flight, in its positive as well as negative dimensions, and free the sculptural form to embrace a more abstract presence. Even *Study for Raven* suggests Roszak's expanded scope—a view of flight which non-judgmentally encompasses its total capabilities: an animate being, an object, a weapon. Now Roszak could reintroduce the wonder and curiosity about flight which had initially intrigued him in many pre-World War II works carrying visual and verbal references aloft. Tempered and invigorated by subsequent events, the

subject reaches out to the complexity and nuance of a mature realization; it does not reject one extreme for the other but holds all possibilities, from mechanical to expressive. "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."<sup>3</sup>

A "fullness of vision" is realized in *Firebird*, 1950-51. Only the title telescopes the reference to a particular creature as the sculpture releases arcs and angles from a diagonal axis that barely contains their dynamic thrusts. Allusive suggestion of the mythic phoenix serves only to launch myriad emotive responses, not bounded by any physical limits. "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."<sup>4</sup>

If negative impulses give impetus to Roszak's mature sculptural definition of flight, he still harbors optimistic belief in the life force—which is, however, never immune to potential menace. The dynamic opposition of jagged curves in *Thorn Blossom*, 1948, shields a small frail bud.<sup>5</sup> These extremes are locked in contest; but we are left to speculate whether this bud must assail its thorny surround in order to grow, or these tendrils must ward off outside threats to insure growth. The very fabric of the work sets these considerations in motion as its silhouettes jab and swell, its brazen bronze surface crinkles and erupts. "I like to feel that material which can be shaped at white heat and is subject to various nuances of chemical action is the best means for implementing the spirit embodied in the work . . ."<sup>6</sup>

While acknowledging the need for a new formal vocabulary, Roszak recognized that it still must engage the cultural inheritance, "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. . . . 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."<sup>7</sup> The Titan, *Prometheus*, 1956—who stole fire from the



*Voyage to Crete*, 1960  
Bronze, 40 x 36 x 18 inches  
Mr. and Mrs. Edward H. Michaelson, Old  
Greenwich, CT

gods to give to man, who saw the future and suffered Zeus's vengeful anger for it—sparks an abstract sculptural tribute. Diagonal thrusts and crescents surrounding starbursts teeter in precarious bilateral symmetry, the conceptual invocation of this giant. In this modern form they renew the ancient story and revitalize its message.

“Instead of working my media for ideas, I prefer to have an idea before working.”<sup>8</sup> This position liberates Roszak's drawing as well as his sculpture for independent and varied innovation. It may chart a specific sculptural territory, though neither mimics the other—Study for *Raven*; it may explore a sculptural theme on its own pictorial terms in delicate and fragile ink lines—*Invocation*, 1952; and it may exist independently in explosive ink and wash.

Theodore Roszak's art tenuously balances the recognition of man's destructive capabilities and the belief in natural rejuvenation. His work synthesizes these counterforces in forms of beautiful terror which can hold the power of renewal: “. . . the role that art must perform is to link itself more firmly 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.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed it is these forms that must carry the message, not of their finite nature but of a transcendent content.

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Roszak, “In Pursuit of an Image” [transcript of a lecture delivered to the students at the Art Institute of Chicago, March 1955], *Quadrum*, 2 (November 1956), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> From a statement by Roszak in *Fourteen Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1946), p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Roszak, “In Pursuit of an Image,” p. 50.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

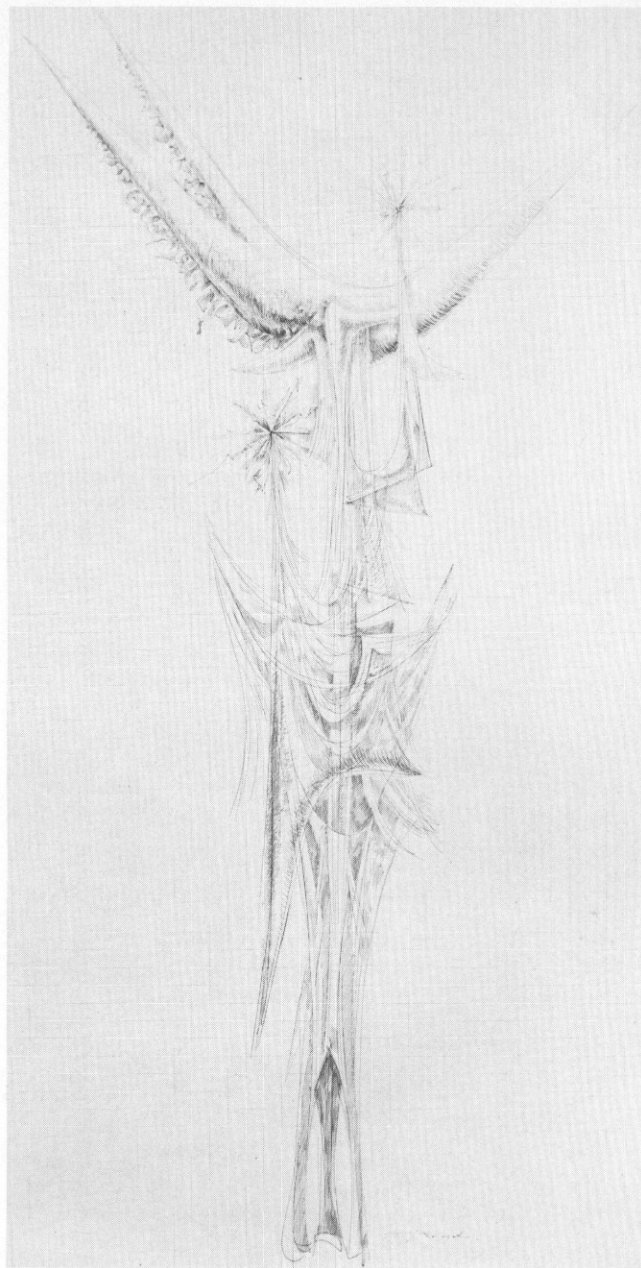
<sup>5</sup> H.H. Arnason, *Theodore Roszak* (Minneapolis: The Walker Art Center, 1956), p. 33, notes that *Thorn Blossom* “was made on the eve of the birth of the artist's daughter, Sara-Jane, and involves a highly personal emotion.”

<sup>6</sup> From a statement by Roszak in *Fourteen Americans*, p. 59.

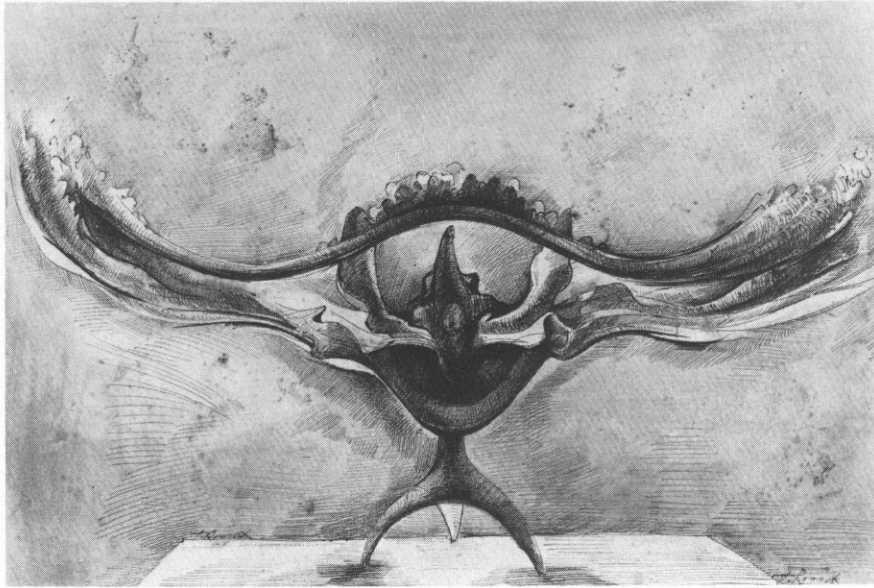
<sup>7</sup> Roszak, “In Pursuit of an Image,” p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> From the transcript of a statement made during “The New Sculpture,” a symposium held at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1952, p. 15. The symposium, moderated by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, also included Herbert Ferber, Richard Lippold, and David Smith. Copyright, The Museum of Modern Art.



*Invocation*, 1952  
Ink on paper, 39½ x 20⅞ inches  
Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Neysa McMein Purchase Award 77.29



Study for *Raven*, 1947  
Ink and wash with watercolor, 12 x 18 inches  
Estate of Theodore Roszak. Courtesy Zabriskie  
Gallery, New York



*Raven*, 1947  
Bronze, 14 x 25 x 9½ inches  
Courtesy Sara-Jane Roszak



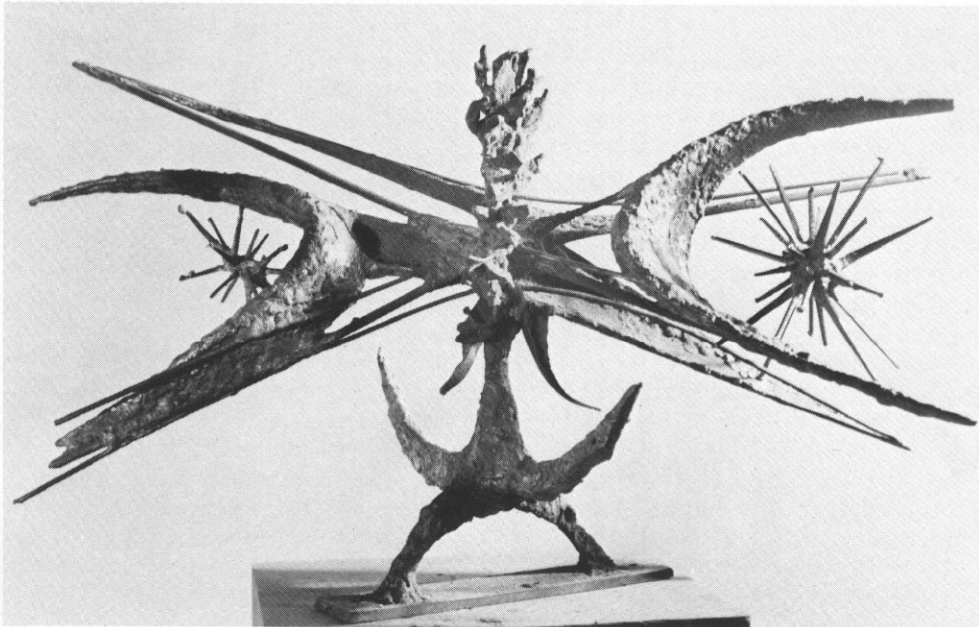
*Thorn Blossom*, 1948  
Nickel-silver and steel, 33 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 18 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
Collection of Whitney Museum of American  
Art, New York. Purchase 48.6



*Firebird*, 1950-51  
Iron brazed with bronze and brass, 31 x 41 x  
27 inches  
Collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York. Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman in  
memory of the artist. The MURIEL KALLIS  
STEINBERG NEWMAN Collection, 1982



*Untitled*, 1959  
Pen and ink, brush and wash on paper, 22 x  
30 inches  
Estate of Theodore Roszak. Courtesy Zabriskie  
Gallery, New York



*Prometheus I*, 1955-56  
Steel brazed with nickel-silver, 16 x 24 x 8  
inches  
Estate of Theodore Roszak. Courtesy Zabriskie  
Gallery, New York