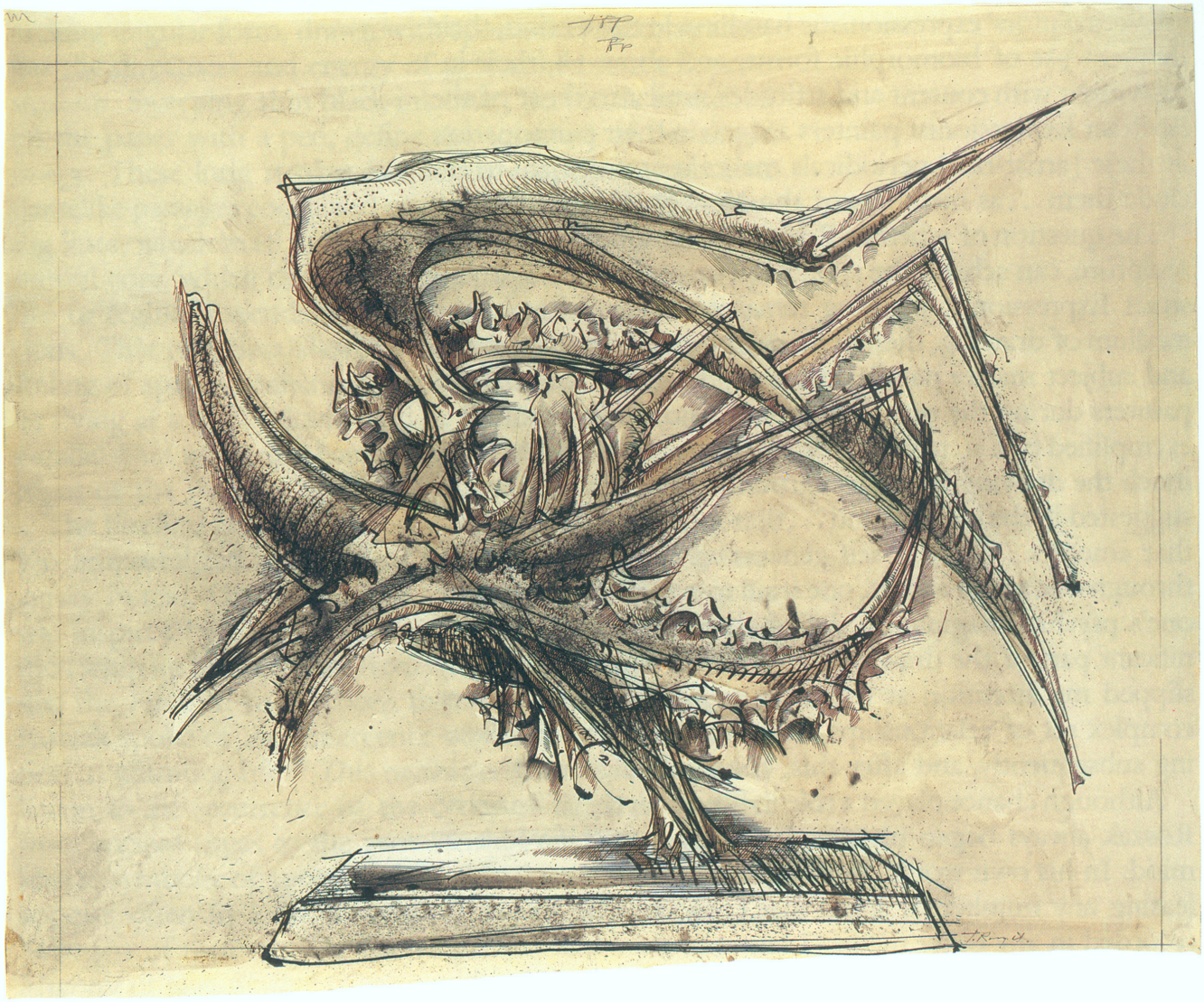

41. Study for *Firebird*, 1950

Theodore Roszak
1907–1981

41. Study for *Firebird,* 1950
Pen and ink, brush and ink, watercolor, and pencil on paper
28⅞ × 35 in. (73.3 × 88.9 cm)
The MURIEL KALLIS STEINBERG NEWMAN COLLECTION, Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman, in memory of the artist, 1982 (1982.16.2)

Theodore Roszak studied at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago and at the National Academy of Design in New York City during the early to the late 1920s, and he was then working as a painter and lithographer. His skill as a draftsman was already in evidence in 1922–25, in the representational student work he made in Chicago. While on a trip to Europe in 1929, Roszak purchased László Moholy-Nagy's book *New Vision.* Although he did not visit the Bauhaus in Germany, he was thus exposed to Bauhaus-inspired machine art, whose influence is reflected in his drawings from the 1930s. In 1931, he moved permanently to New York City and began to experiment with geometric sculptures and plaster reliefs while he also painted in a similar vein. By 1937, he was producing constructivist sculptures of wood and metal that followed the geo-mechanical thrust of Bauhaus design espoused by Moholy-Nagy, a recent émigré from Europe and the director of the New Bauhaus in Chicago, whom Roszak met in New York in 1938.

From 1940 until his death in 1981, sculpture dominated Roszak's creative output. After World War II, his work changed dramatically, and he began making expressionistic welded-steel sculptures that resemble abstracted prehistoric birds and other monstrous forms. His earlier geometric constructions, based on utopian ideals, no longer seemed appropriate for a world in which war, fueled by new technology, had resulted in so much devastation. In 1952, Roszak noted that his forms became "gnarled and knotted," their surfaces "scorched and coarsely pitted," and that the works 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."[1] It is these works that place Roszak within the context of Abstract Expressionism. Referring to Roszak, and to sculptors working with related intentions during the 1940s, including Herbert Ferber, David Hare, Ibram Lassaw, Richard Lippold, Seymour Lipton, and David Smith, Ann Gibson wrote: "these sculptors' expressionistic handling in this period, their frequent use of biomorphic forms, and above all, their involvement with content and attitudes similar to those of the Abstract Expressionist painters as seen in their participation in these [artist-run] periodicals makes it appropriate to include them . . . as members of the New York School."[2]

The question of whether Roszak's sculpture, or any other sculpture, can achieve the spontaneity and directness of Abstract Expressionist painting remains at issue,[3] but in the medium of drawing, there is no doubt that Roszak's process and subject matter parallel those of the New York School painters during the postwar years. This common ground is exemplified by a statement Roszak made in 1956: "It is not so much the drawing in the foreground as the drawing that is suggested in the background . . . that . . . is the next sculpture that emerges. . . . It is a self-generating process, by which, through one's own efforts, one tried to scrape the bottom of one's psychic imagination. I find that very often an insignificant part of the drawing, some detail which completely slipped my attention at the moment, gives rise to a very complex set of relationships, and another drawing following subsequently, and after this, another sculpture."[4]

Although chance played a role in his discovery of imagery, Roszak always began his drawings with a specific idea in mind. In his own words, drawing "serves as a means of releasing any number of ideas that could not be so readily recorded in any other media. I know of no other way that one can record one's experiences and impressions so quickly, effectively, and efficiently, than drawing. . . . It acts as an agent by which one can clarify one's thinking and distill many ideas, perhaps even improve on the work itself, by making the mistakes in drawing, so that the drawing becomes a filtering process and a means of selecting ideas, shapes, relationships, and even attitudes."[5] Roszak's drawing methodology changed during the mid-1940s, when his sculpted imagery changed. He no longer sketched the same subject many times on a single sheet, as he had done during the 1930s; instead, he now made one large image at the center of the page and repeated the form in successive drawings to clarify various

elements of it. Drawing to work out the forms for his sculptures, Roszak first made small sketches, then larger studies, next full-size drawings, and finally "blueprints" marked with measurements that were used to fabricate the metal sculpture.[6]

Study for *Firebird* of 1950 (fig. 41) is a nearly full-size rendering of the brazed-iron sculpture *Firebird,* which is also in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.[7] The arching angular form, drawn with spontaneous exuberance, has the directness and energy of gestural Abstract Expressionism. Sweeping thin black-ink lines, nervously scratched on the paper with a pen, define the contours of the single image. These long strokes frequently erupt into turbulent flamelike passages composed of series of short broken curving lines, which mass at the vortex of the form. Out of this central core, which thrusts upward diagonally, many winglike or leglike appendages splay outward in various directions. This relentless allover movement with its attendant feeling of speed is enhanced by the ink spatters that seem to be flying at a high velocity and by the finely drawn halo of parallel lines and cross-hatchings that shimmer around the edges of the form.

The Firebird is a mythic creature from Russian folklore; it was immortalized in the music of the composer Igor Stravinsky in 1910. On hearing this music, Roszak said that he was inspired by the "smoldering chords that accelerate and then whip up into a terrific frenzy of sound."[8] Like the Phoenix, the Firebird rises reborn from the fires of extinction; Roszak spoke of its "emergence out of a complete desolation . . . affirming life."[9] This mythic creature becomes an allusion to the recurrence of the cycles of death and rebirth from ancient times to the post-World War II present. The bird as symbolic of apocalyptic destruction and resurrection appears often in Roszak's work from 1946 to 1951, in *The Scavenger* of 1946–47, *The Spectre of Kitty Hawk* of 1946–47, *Migrant* of 1950, *Skylark* of 1950–51, and *Mandrake* of 1951, for example.[10] The use of myth to convey such meaning through semiabstract forms was prevalent in Abstract Expressionist painting of the 1940s, and the sources for Roszak's work reflect the confluence of ideas that circulated among these painters. He shared their great interest in primitive cultures and in Surrealism, and like many of them, he studied the scientific displays and prehistoric skeletons at New York's Museum of Natural History. Such visual references were accompanied by ideas gleaned from existential philosophy and contemporary literature, for example.

In Study for *Firebird,* the writhing form rises out of a

base that clearly demonstrates its intended transformation into a solid object in three-dimensional space. The spontaneity and energy of the drawing suggest its creation from inner conflict. In the sculpture *Firebird,* the contorted form has solidified, the sensation of anguish made concrete through the tactility of the charred and pitted surface. In both media, Roszak strove to convey an underlying content, which, as he defined it, "bears upon the core structure of an experience and grows from the center out . . . an orientation of feeling, quality of mood, or direction of an expression."[11]

1. Theodore Roszak, quoted from a symposium titled "The New Sculpture," Museum of Modern Art, 1952; published in Belle Krasne, "A Theodore Roszak Profile," *Art Digest* 27, no. 2 (October 15, 1952), p. 18.

2. Ann Eden Gibson, "Introduction," *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1990), p. 3.

3. For various opinions, see Mary Delahoyd, "Sculptural Expressions," *Sculptural Expressions: Seven Artists in Metal and Drawing, 1947–1960,* exh. cat., Sarah Lawrence College Gallery (Bronxville, New York, 1985), p. 6; Lisa Phillips, *The Third Dimension: Sculpture of the New York School,* exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, 1984); Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); Carter Ratcliff, "Domesticated Nightmares," *Art in America* (May 1985), pp. 144–51; and Clifford Ross, ed., "Preface," *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics—An Anthology* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), pp. 11–12.

4. Roszak, quoted from a taped interview with James Elliott, 1956; typescript in Archives of American Art, New York, pp. 37–38.

5. Ibid., p. 36.

6. Krasne, p. 9.

7. Both works were given to the Museum in 1982 by Muriel Kallis Newman. The sculpture measures 31 × 41 × 27 inches (accession number 1982.16.1).

8. Roszak, interview with Elliott, p. 20.

9. Ibid.

10. *The Scavenger,* 1946–47, steel and bronze, 17½ × 16 × 12 in., private collection; *The Spectre of Kitty Hawk,* 1946–47, steel, bronze, and brass, h. 40½ in., Museum of Modern Art, New York; *Migrant,* 1950, steel and copper, h. 28½ in., collection College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois, Urbana; *Skylark,* 1950–51, steel, h. 99 in., collection Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York; *Mandrake,* 1951, steel and copper, h. 25½ in., Cleveland Museum of Art.

11. Roszak, *In Pursuit of an Image,* no. 2 (Chicago: Time to Time Publications of The Art Institute of Chicago, 1955), p. 10.