

World War II completely altered Theodore Roszak's worldview and the direction of his art. Death, destruction, and the devastation of two Japanese cities revealed the darker side of technological progress. What previously had been a positivistic embrace of utopian systems was seriously in question by the end of the war. Roszak's shattered faith in science and technology was replaced by a renewed faith in nature, in change and transformation, and in atavistic motifs that reaffirmed basic values. He wanted his work to ask questions (rather than posit definitive answers), to provoke, disturb, even rankle. He also wanted it to evoke archetypal themes and embody a life force that was destructive as well as constructive. In Roszak's rejection of Constructivism and conversion to Expressionism, drawing played a catalytic role.

Roszak's sculptural conception was inseparable from drawing. "Instead of working the medium for ideas," he said during the "The New Sculpture Symposium," "I prefer to have an idea before working."¹ A piece might undergo dramatic changes during its construction, but the basic character of its image, derived from a drawing, usually remained intact. The insistent linearity of Roszak's postwar work, coupled with his method of constructing welded-steel armatures covered, or partially covered, with sheets of brazed steel, was a direct extension of drawing. A facile draftsman who preferred various pens and nibs, he first drew the basic outline of an image, then further articulated the interior with a variety of strokes, dots, dashes, cross-hatching, and brushed-in washes. Any given image often contains secondary and tertiary imagery, a fascinating aspect of Roszak's drawings, whose scale varies from modest notebook sketches to monumental sheets extending more than 6 feet across.

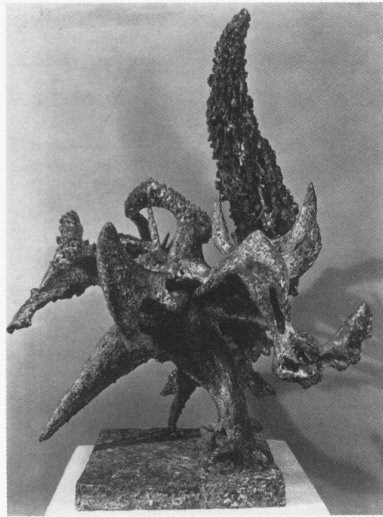
Drawing was the backbone of Roszak's life work, and he recalled doing it by the time he was five or six. "Drawing was one of my earliest responses," he told Harlan Phillips, "it was automatic. It was simple to do. It was available. There was always paper and something to scratch with, and I began drawing very, very early in life."² For Roszak, the product of a lower-middle-class Polish family that immigrated to Chicago in 1907, drawing provided a creative outlet for many adolescent frustrations. At that time he must have realized its expressive potential, and during the war years it functioned in a similar capacity. Between 1943 and 1946, when a scarcity of material made it virtually impossible to create sculpture, he channeled his creative energy into an extended

series of about sixty-five gouaches. Most of these works were never exhibited during the artist's life time; like other aspects of his work, including the photograms, certain drawings and paintings, they remained in his studio.³

The gouaches (CATS. 108, 109, 112), which mark Roszak's transition from Constructivism to welded-steel sculpture, are distinguished by their combination of drawing and painting. Just as painting combined with plaster relief had been a transition toward freestanding constructions during the 1930s, now, combined with drawing, it functioned similarly as a means of generating expressionistic images whose extensions were also sculptural. Roszak had used gouache in some of his earlier drawings and pochoirs. That he took it up again, at this juncture, was both an act of necessity and emulation. Unlike steel and other industrial materials, gouache and paper were easy to obtain. Also, drawing was something he could do in his spare time, when he was not working as an aircraft mechanic at Brewster Aeronautical Corporation, in Newark, New Jersey, or as a navigational and engineering draftsman at the Stevens Institute of Technology, in Hoboken. These gouaches are disturbing works, whose horrific images remind one of Jacques Lipchitz's wartime gouaches, a selection of which supplemented his exhibitions at Curt Valentin's Buchholz Gallery in 1942 and 1943. The expressionistic sculpture Lipchitz made after his arrival in New York had a profound influence on Roszak. So did his gouaches, which became an impetus for Roszak's own investigations.

Roszak's gouaches introduce many of the themes—invocation, fertility, hybrid figuration—that characterize his work from the late 1940s until his death. Strutting vaginallike shapes with extended arms (Fig. 23), which recall Lipchitz's *Blossoming I* and *II* (1941-42), *Yara* and *Myrah* (both 1942), evolve into *Invocation I* and *II*. A pair of squat legs, as seen in these gouaches and *Study for "Thistle in the Dream"* (CAT. 123), or the suggestion of an anthropomorphic tripod base, are the first signs of a more overt figuration. And in other images, such as *Study for "Thorn Blossom"* (Fig. 24), the crescent shape—one of the earliest motifs in Roszak's iconography—is transformed within a more expressionistic image. The crescent became one of the most ubiquitous forms in Roszak's work, reappearing in various sculptures, drawings, and prints from 1932 on. The implications of the crescent shape, depending on its context and the way it was handled, changed dramatically.⁴

The gouaches also signify Roszak's return to nature, natural forms, and organic configurations. During the 1930s his rapport with the natural environment had been subordinate to his infatuation with the metropolis. But the gouaches, with their proliferation of fossil and bonelike forms, revert back to nature at a primordial level. "You come up with these references back to nature," Roszak recalled, "because this is what you feel hasn't been making any kind of inroads or developing within the self, and it is a sure way of starting all over again."⁵ Starting all over meant finding new ways to express old themes.



25. Theodore Roszak
Spectre of Kitty Hawk, 1946–47
 Welded and hammered steel
 brazed with with bronze and
 brass, 40 ¼ x 18 x 15 in.
 The Museum of Modern Art,
 New York. Purchase.
 (Not in the exhibition)

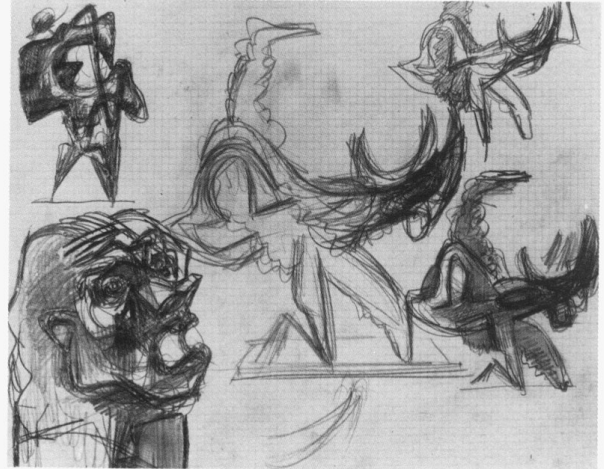
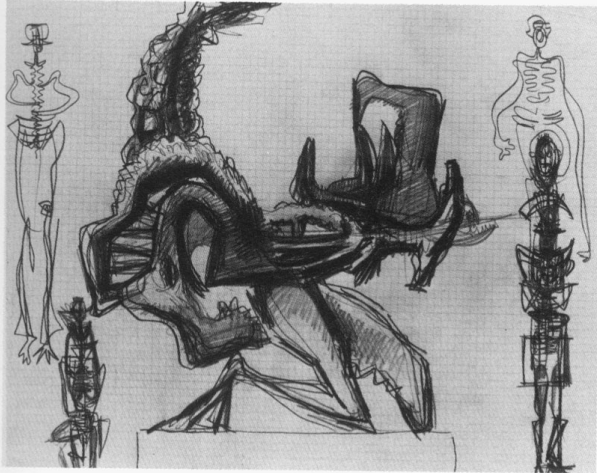
As a result of the war, Roszak reworked certain themes with intense concentration and formal invention.⁶ Flight, a central theme, underwent a dramatic metamorphosis in the late 1940s. What had been a positivistic projection in earlier constructions, where chromium finish and streamlined torsos signified a machine-age culture going places, discovering new planets and galaxies, took on more sinister connotations. *Spectre of Kitty Hawk* (1946–47; Fig. 25) is not only a manifestation of Roszak's rage, but his response to the spirit of flight as a death-dealing instrument.⁷ *Spectre* was also an archetypal incarnation of the prehistoric pterodactyl, who prowled the primordial skies terrorizing all life below, as well as a phoenix that rose from the ashes of atomic fallout. These were some of the ways Roszak described *Spectre*. But its identity as a spectral image in which male and female principles are reconciled is more evident in its preliminary drawings.

Roszak recorded his first ideas for *Spectre* in a suite of five graphite sketches on 8-by-10-inch sheets of graph paper (Figs. 26, 27). Never seen during the artist's life time, these explicit renderings make one thing clear: *Spectre* evolved from the image of a man-thing (a typical surrealist motif—half-bird, half-beast) on its knees leaning backward, with a large phallic projection. In some of the drawings, the animal's head is conceived as an elongated beak and in one instance as a cranial orifice, redrawn, as a detail, at the bottom of the same sheet. That Roszak was dealing from the beginning with a figurative entity is reinforced in two sketches by a series of marginal images—totemic and skeletal personages. In each of these sketches, the recurring motif of a projecting phallus supporting smaller crescent shapes intimates the synthesis of masculine and feminine elements in the finished sculpture.

If these five sketches represent *Spectre of Kitty Hawk's* more masculine and militaristic side, another series of ink and wash drawings made about the same time (Fig. 28) embodies its feminine counterpart. In these drawings, the spectre, no longer on its knees, stands upright and defiant, completely exposed. The crescent has uncoiled into a labial slit running the full length of the body and terminating in a barbed tail. The spectre's wings, splayed and scorched as they extend to either side, emphasize the vertical axis that dominates this ferociously feminine image.

The projection and resolution of opposites reflect a dialectical orientation germane to Roszak's way of working. By the early 1940s the psychological dynamics of his work had a strong Jungian inflection. Although he may have encountered Jung's ideas about the anima and animus through Joseph Campbell at Sarah Lawrence College, where he taught in the art department from 1941 to 1955, already by the late 1930s he had intuitively formulated a point of view that reflected similar principles.

Roszak drew phallic images to signify aggressive and death dealing forces, as well as a psychological state struggling for balance and integration. In two studies for *Monument to an Unknown Political*

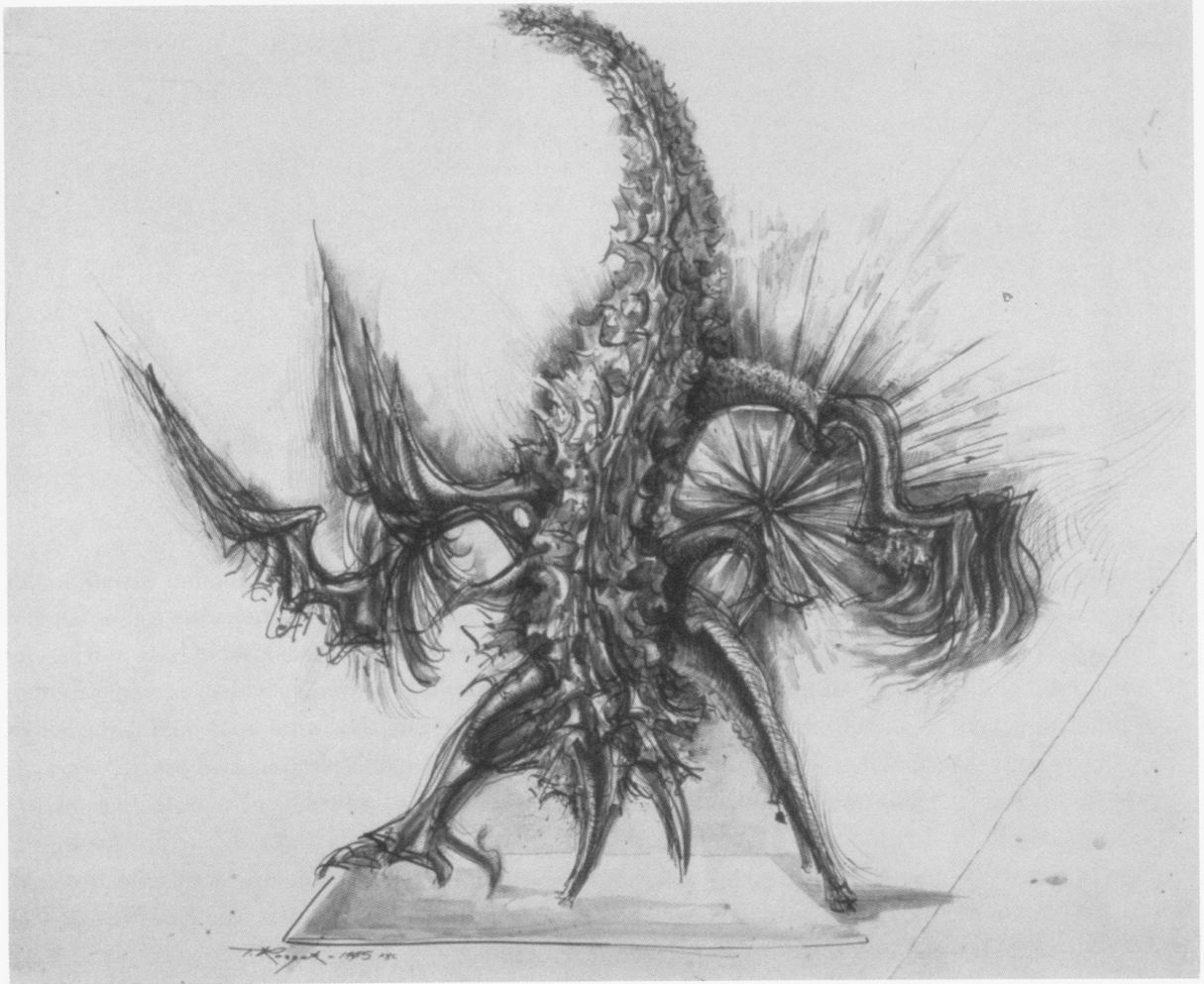


Prisoner (CATS. 117, 118; Fig. 29), he pursued another variation, this time for a potential war memorial.⁸ In both drawings the figure is conceived atop an elevated mound, which serves as a kind of base and resembles a launching pad. Some of the earliest studies had an ancient prototype: the Nike of Samothrace, whose massive wing span and airborne posture provided an appropriate symbol for liberation. In these drawings, though, one wing, reversed, becomes the figure's head, a protective shield, and a flaming barrage of metal jetsam. At its lower abdomen appears a phallic extension—barbed and armored—a projectile, a missile, a weapon that strikes out. Wanting to avoid an image that was passive and resigned, incarcerated, and therefore incapable of affirmative action, Roszak gave his figure a phallic spike. In doing so he made its defense its liberation.

The figure stands out as a leitmotif in Roszak's development. It was his fundamental connection to a sculptural tradition, which he saw revitalized through its conflation with surrealist anatomies, mythical themes, and literary sources. Although he also explored more abstract configurations, and a series of "Star Bursts" and "Novas" (PL. IV) are significant for their remarkably intricate execution and as analogues for disintegration, holocaust, and catastrophe, these abstract designs are secondary to more representational images in which the figure is a central proponent. The origins of a monumental figuration can be found in Roszak's late constructions, the 8-foot high "bipolar" forms he fabricated after the war, and in the margins of his earliest sketches for *Spectre of Kitty Hawk*, where the preoccupation with a more totemic and primitivistic personage is already evident.

During the 1950s these possibilities were pursued in a series that began with *Skylark* (1950-51). In two studies (CATS. 113, 114; Fig. 30), Roszak developed the basic anatomy for a life-size personage whose flailing extremities and fragile constitution reflect an inherent dilemma: a desire for flight but an inability to rise. In both drawings the figure is stripped to its skeletal core. Its deformed features, especially its emaci-

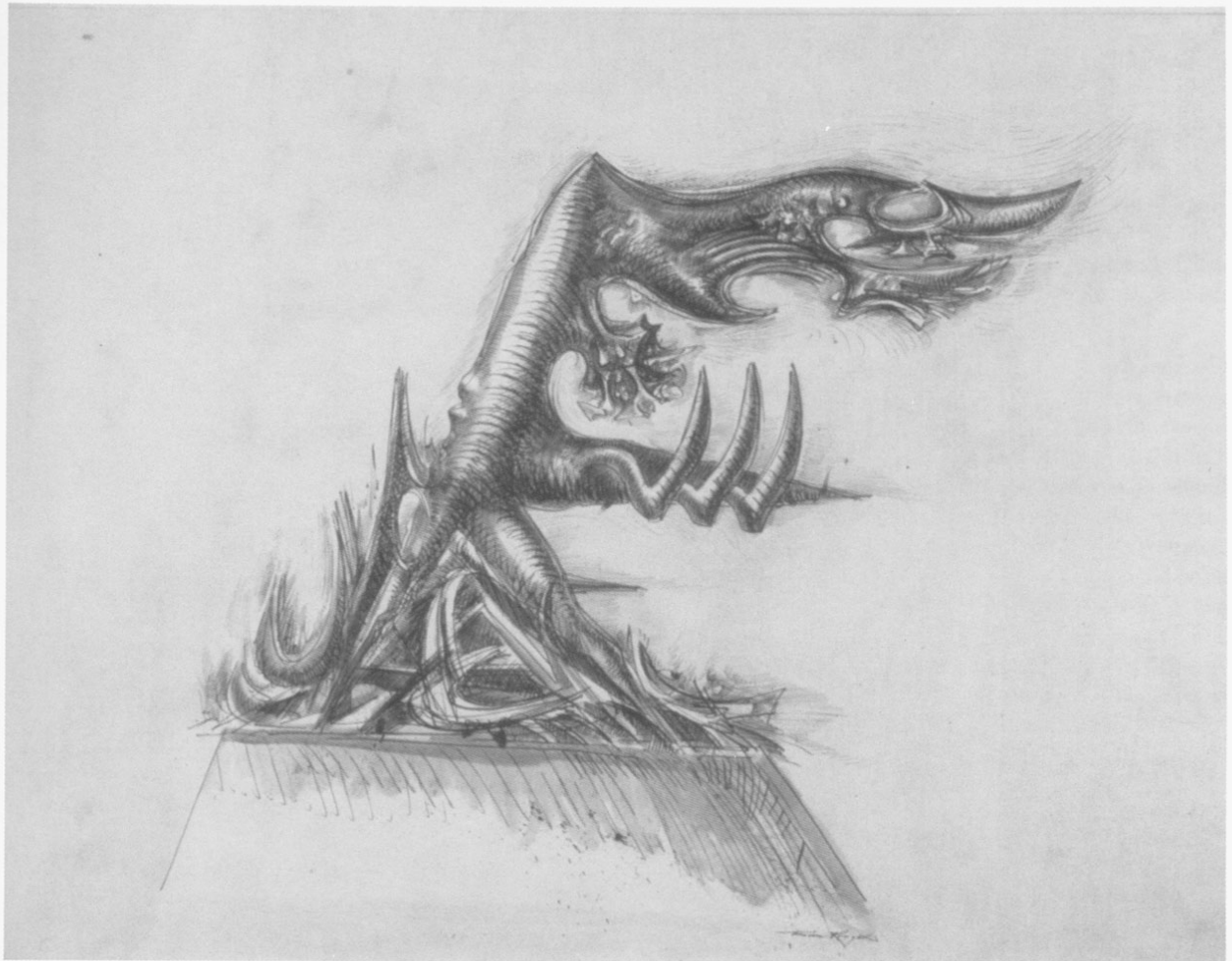
26. Theodore Roszak
Study for "Spectre of Kitty Hawk," about 1946-47
 Pencil on graph paper,
 8½ x 11 in.
 Private collection
 (Not in the exhibition)
27. Theodore Roszak
Study for "Spectre of Kitty Hawk," about 1946-47
 Pencil on graph paper,
 8½ x 11 in.
 Theodore Roszak Estate
 (Not in the exhibition)



ated abdomen, spindly legs, and hooked feet preoccupied Roszak in his preliminary conception of the piece. Based on a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Skylark* was described by Roszak as an archetypal entity, “like Icarus in flight and his downfall....his constant rise and fall, very much like Sisyphus in the process of doing it all over again....a Christ figure and a devil.”⁹ In another interview, he described the sculpture as “Mephistophelian” and “Promethean,” as “man descended from his Promethean heights, captivated within the bonds of civilization, and reduced to the ashes of his own bones, a very powerful allusion to the spiritual plight of man.”¹⁰

What united Icarus, Sisyphus, Mephistopheles, Prometheus, and Christ, in Roszak’s mind, was their heroic and tragic nature; they were all entrapped between heaven and earth, the spiritual and the corporeal. One could also see *Skylark* as the mythic counterpart to Albert Giacometti’s postwar effigies, particularly his *Man Pointing* (1947), which Roszak saw exhibited at the Pierre Matisse Gallery in 1948. There is the same sense of fragility and vulnerability, ambivalence and tension, morbidity and destitution. Giacometti conceived of the figure—whole or partial—as a

28. Theodore Roszak
Study for “Spectre of Kitty
Hawk,” 1945
CAT. 110



29. Theodore Roszak
*Study for "Monument to an
Unknown Political Prisoner,"*
about 1952
CAT. 117

battleground of perceptual forces. Although such an approach was not entirely new to Roszak, Giacometti's conception offered him a sculptural analogue for a phenomenological condition: the figure stripped to its essential being; the figure as a spiritual and psychological casualty; a victim of political circumstances; a personage existing somewhere between being and becoming, physicality and dissolution.

The drawings for *Skylark*, one series among the many figurative images Roszak executed during the 1950s, epitomize his postwar sensibility. They are an amalgam of personal and collective experiences; they reflect a cross-fertilization of ideas—from mythology and literature to poetry and anthropology—and a comprehensive overview of art, seen as a continuum extending backward and forward; and they reaffirm the primacy of the psyche as the ultimate source of visual ideas. Roszak, like other sculptors in this exhibition, set out after the war to revitalize monumental figurative sculpture. The new figuration, however, had a disquieting edge and posed difficult questions. It also challenged sculptors to find ways of combining abstraction and representation without compromising the work's humanism and formal integrity.

NOTES

1. Theodore Roszak, "The New Sculpture Symposium," February 12, 1952, transcript, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, p. 16.
2. Harlan B. Phillips, "Theodore Roszak Reminisces: As Recorded in Talks with Dr. Harlan B. Phillips," 1964, transcript, pp. 1-15. Theodore Roszak Estate.
3. Roszak included some of his first gouaches in Dorothy C. Miller's 1946 "Fourteen Americans" exhibition, listed in the catalogue on p. 79, no. 24, as *Studies for Sculpture*, 1945-46; and later in his 1956-57 Walker Art Center retrospective, listed in the catalogue on p. 50, nos. 54-56, as *Carcass*, *Frost-Covered Rocks*, and *High Altitude*, all of 1947.
4. Roszak saw the crescent as embodying the kind of significance that animated all form. Its origin was twofold, relating on the one hand to the crescent moon that bears the Virgin as a sign of her Immaculate Conception, and, on the other, to the essential shape of a microscope or an astronomical instrument, such as a ring dial. During the 1930s, the half-moon, C-shaped configuration signifies what is essentially Constructivist, technological, and geometric. In later postwar works, it is more anthropomorphic, a female principle, a concave pocket, a passive receptor, a yielding shield that receives rather than deflects. The crescent shape could be both male and female, projective and recessive, aggressive and passive; it could encompass a vast terrain, from the microscopic world of cellular biology to the extraterrestrial world of stars and planets; see Douglas Dreishpoon, "Theodore Roszak (1907-1981): Painting and Sculpture," Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1993, chap. 2.
5. Phillips, "Theodore Roszak Reminisces," pp. 388-89.
6. The iconographic parameters of Roszak's sculpture, which were fairly well established by the mid-1950s, are discussed in detail in Joan Seeman Robinson, "The Sculpture of Theodore Roszak: 1932-1952," Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1979.
7. Robinson 1979, pp. 102-08, discusses the affinity of Roszak's *Spectre of Kitty Hawk* with contemporary war planes and primordial beasts.
8. *Monument to an Unknown Political Prisoner* was selected, in 1953, as one of nine finalists to represent the United States in an international competition sponsored by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The 22-inch maquette was subsequently bought by The Tate Gallery for its permanent collection.
9. Phillips, "Theodore Roszak Reminisces," pp. 472-73.
10. James Elliott, "Interview with Theodore Roszak," February 15, 1956, transcript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., p. 74.