Theodore Roszak (American, born in Poland, 1907–1981)

28. *Study for "Firebird."* 1950

Pen, brush and ink, watercolor, and pencil on paper
28⅞ x 34⅞ in. (73.3 x 88.6 cm)
Signed l.r: *T. Roszak*
The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection, Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman, in memory of the artist, 1982

1982.16.2

PROVENANCE
Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York; purchased from Pierre Matisse Gallery by Muriel Kallis Steinberg, Chicago, February 24, 1953; her gift to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982

EXHIBITIONS
"Roszak Drawings," Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, February 1953, no. 8; "14 artistas norteamericanos," organized by Art in the Embassies Program, U.S. Department of State, and shown in the U.S. Embassy, Guatemala, 1966–70 [cat., p. 7, no. 16]; "An American Choice: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection," MMA, May 21–September 27, 1981 [cat. ed. by William S. Lieberman, p. 156, ill. p. 72]; "The Artist's Perception, 1948/1984: 1948, Between Art and Political Action; 1984, Progress and Access," Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York, March 23–May 6, 1984 [cat., n.p. (essay by Alison de Lima Greene), no. 16, ill.]; "Relationships: Paintings, Sculpture, and Drawings from the Twentieth Century Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art," Art Gallery, Herbert H. Lehman College, City University of New York, Bronx, November 16, 1984–January 6, 1985 [cat. by Greta Berman, fig. 32]; "Abstract Expressionism, Works on Paper: Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art," High Museum of Art, Atlanta, January 26–April 4, 1993, and MMA, May 4–November 7, 1993 [cat. by Lisa Mintz Messinger, pp. 106–10, no. 41, fig. 41]; "Abstract Expressionism, Works on Paper: Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art," National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, March 11–June 4, 1995 [cat. (in Japanese) by Lisa Mintz Messinger, pp. 89, 90, 91, no. 55, ill.]; "Expresionismo abstracto, obra sobre papel: Colección The Metropolitan Museum of Art," Fundación Juan March, Madrid, May 8–July 2, 2000 [cat. by Lisa Mintz Messinger, pp. 108–10, 153, no. 50, ill.]

REFERENCES
Holland Carter, "Abstract Expressionism: The Lighter, Quieter Side," *New York Times*, June 4, 1993, p. c24 (review of the "Abstract Expressionism, Works on Paper" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum); Joan Marter, *Theodore Roszak: The Drawings* (New York: Drawing Society; Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1992), pp. 23–24, ill.

29. *Firebird.* 1950–51

Iron brazed with bronze and brass
31 x 41 x 27 in. (78.7 x 104.1 x 68.6 cm)
Signed on top: *T. J. Roszak*
The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection, Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman, in memory of the artist, 1982

1982.16.1

PROVENANCE
Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York; purchased from Pierre Matisse Gallery by Muriel Kallis Steinberg, Chicago, October 20, 1951; her gift to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982

EXHIBITIONS
"12 Peintres et sculpteurs américains contemporains," Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, April–June 1953 [cat., no. 67, pl. 20]; "62nd American Exhibition: Paintings and Sculpture," Art Institute of Chicago, January 17–March 3, 1957 [cat., p. 30, no. 107]; "50 Ans d'art moderne," Universal and International Exhibition, Palais International des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, April 17–October 19, 1958 [cat., no. 277, pl. 196]; "Birds in Contemporary Art," Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., February 12–March 31, 1966 [cat., no. 31]; "An American Choice: The Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection," MMA, May 21–September 27, 1981 [cat. ed. by William S. Lieberman, p. 156, ill. p. 73]; "20th Century Sculpture: Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art," Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, New York, May 18–October 31, 1984 [cat. by David Collens, Lowery S. Sims, and William S. Lieberman, ill.]; "Relationships: Paintings, Sculpture, and Drawings from the Twentieth Century Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art," Art Gallery, Herbert H. Lehman College, City University of New York, Bronx, November 16, 1984–January 6, 1985 [cat. by Greta Berman, fig. 31]; "Sculptural Expressions: Seven Artists in Metal and Drawing, 1947–1960," Sarah Lawrence College Gallery, Bronxville, New York, October 8–November 17, 1985 [cat., pp. 5, 52, ill. p. 56]; "Abstract Sculpture in America, 1930–70," Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida, February 7–March 31, 1991, Museum of Arts and Sciences, Macon, Georgia, April 19–June 30, 1991, Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio, August 24–October 20, 1991, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, Fort Wayne, Indiana, November 9, 1991–January 4, 1992, Musée du Québec, Quebec City, January 25–March 21, 1992, and Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago, April 11–June 7, 1992 [cat. by P. Andrew Spahr, pp. 19–20, 67, no. 12, ill.]

REFERENCES
Carola Giedion-Welcker, *Contemporary Sculpture: An Evolution in Volume and Space* (New York: George Wittenborn, 1955), p. xxvii, ill. p. 216; *The Artist's Perception, 1948/1984: 1948, Between Art and Political Action; 1984, Progess and Access*, exh. cat. (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1984), n.p. (essay by Alison de Lima Greene), no. 17; Lisa Mintz Messinger, *Abstract Expressionism, Works on Paper: Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 1992), pp. 109, 110; William M. Griswold and Jennifer Tonkovich, *Pierre Matisse and His Artists*, exh. cat. (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 2001), pp. 224–25

Theodore Roszak's career spanned more than five decades, from the late 1920s, when he was a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, until his death in New York City, in 1981. Like other vanguard twentieth-century sculptors—namely David Smith, Herbert Ferber, Louise Bourgeois, and Alberto Giacometti—Roszak began as a painter and continued to paint even after sculpture became his main preoccupation.

Throughout his life he explored various options for developing ideas. Cross-fertilization among media characterized his way of working, with drawing the pulse of a creative process whose fruits included paintings, sculptures, prints, and photograms.

Firebird, a welded-iron sculpture with a brazed skin of bronze and brass, epitomizes Roszak's transition from the 1940s to the 1950s, from Constructivism to Expressionism, from an inherently positivistic to a decidedly skeptical worldview. World War II had a profound impact on visual artists; in the case of Roszak, it significantly altered the direction of his art. Death and destruction in Europe and Asia and especially the devastation of two Japanese cities revealed the darker side of technological progress. The artist's belief in utopian systems was seriously in question by the war's end. His 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. After 1945 Roszak wanted his work to ask questions rather than posit definitive answers, to provoke, disturb, even rankle. He also wanted it to evoke archetypes and to embody a life force that was destructive as well as constructive. In his rejection of Constructivism and conversion to Expressionism, drawing played a catalytic role.

During the war years, when steel, aluminum, bronze, and copper were earmarked for the military and hard to come by for artists, many sculptors were sustained by drawing. This was certainly true for Roszak. "Instead of working the medium for ideas," he proposed during "The New Sculpture Symposium" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1952, "I prefer to have an idea before working."[1] It was in drawings that he developed such ideas. Thus, *Firebird* probably underwent spontaneous changes during its construction, but its basic character, derived from a drawing, remained intact. Moreover, the inherent linearity of Roszak's postwar work, typified in *Firebird,* coupled with his preferred method of constructing welded-steel armatures covered, or partially covered, by sheets of brazed steel, can be seen as a direct extension of drawing. A facile draftsman who deployed various pens and nibs, he first drew the basic outline of an image, as seen in the *Study for "Firebird,"* before articulating its interior with a variety of strokes, dots, dashes, cross-hatching, and brushed-in washes. The scale of the works on paper varies from modest notebook sketches to monumental sheets extending more than six feet across, and many contain fascinating secondary and tertiary imagery.

After the war certain themes were reworked with intense concentration and formal invention. Flight, a central theme, underwent a dramatic metamorphosis during the late 1940s. What had been a progressive projection in earlier constructions, where chromium finish and abstract streamlined forms signified a machine-age culture discovering new planets and galaxies, assumed mythic associations in more representational modes, as we see in *Firebird.* "This is the *Firebird,*" Roszak explained to James Elliott during an extensive interview at his New York studio:

> It is Chinese . . . a Chinese allusion. I came upon it in Stravinsky, the wonderful piece of music he had written around it. He has these slow smoldering chords that accelerate and then whip up into a terrific frenzy of sound. To me that was important, plus the fact that it had bearing on the other half of the world. It wasn't purely a local experience in even the European sense, but it embodied a kind of ritualistic experience that found its habitat in practically any part of the world that has lived long enough to go through this smoldering and phoenix-like emergence out of a complete desolation and affirming its position all over again in terms of affirming life.[2]

Renowned for its brilliant plumage, melodious cry, and powers of rebirth, the phoenix or a kindred creature appears in Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Egyptian, and Native American mythology. The bird's archetypal significance appealed to Roszak, who embraced the monomyth as a sculptural trope with multiple incarnations.[3] In Chinese and Japanese mythology the fêng huang or houou symbolizes the union of yin and yang, the male and female principles. Roszak's sculptural conception of *Firebird* as a hybrid entity—part bird, part male; part insect, part female—with open and closed, spiky and smooth forms, aspires to a similar union of opposites, metaphorically embodied in the crescent form.

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The crescent, one of the most frequently encountered motifs in Roszak's formal repertoire, appears in various sculptures, drawings, and prints from 1932 onward. Depending on its context, the way it is conceived, the implications of the form evolve dramatically. In *Crescent Throat,* 1932, it is quintessentially Constructivist, geometric and technological in effect, serving as a supportive base for a series of planar elements that crisscross within its arch. In postwar sculptures such as *Thorn Blossom,* 1947, *Invocation II,* 1950–51, *Invocation V,* 1957, and *Thistle in the Dream,* 1955–56, it becomes anthropomorphic, a female principle, a concave pocket, a passive receptor or shield that receives rather than deflects. In both the preliminary study for *Firebird* and the final sculpture, it functions as a dual principle: male and female, projective and recessive, aggressive and passive.

Roszak's *Firebird* assumes an identity befitting the tumultuous circumstances of its conception. Death hovers around its encrusted body and its scythelike tail, and still the possibility for transcendence through rebirth persists. *Firebird* speaks to the timeless relevance of myth. It also speaks to Roszak's persistent embrace of humanistic content, figuration, dream imagery, and literary associations at a time when the influential critic Clement Greenberg declared such subject matter European and *retardataire.*[4] Undeterred, Roszak refused to make the transition from an art that was figurative and humanistic to one that was entirely formal and abstract. Humanism and formalism had always coexisted as two sides of the same sensibility for him, and neither popular taste nor critical polemic could cause him to change.

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1. Theodore Roszak, "The New Sculpture Symposium," February 12, 1952, transcript, p. 16, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
2. James H. Elliott, "Interview with Theodore Roszak," February 13, 1956, transcript, p. 73, Theodore Roszak Papers, 1928–1981, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
3. Roszak's interest in the monomyth was probably fueled by his introduction to Joseph Campbell at Sarah Lawrence College. By the time Roszak arrived there as a faculty member of the art department in 1941, Campbell, one of a small group of intellectuals studying the interrelationships among mythology, literature, and anthropology, had been teaching in the literature department for seven years. Campbell's investigations of myth, especially the monomyth and the psychodynamics of creativity, offered Roszak a fresh perspective on his own creative process.
4. When it came to tracking the state of postwar American sculpture, no one was more attentive or dogmatic than Greenberg. In "The New Sculpture," his most definitive statement, he established the ground rules; see Clement Greenberg, "The New Sculpture," *Partisan Review* 16 (June 1949), pp. 637–42, reprinted in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism,* ed. John O'Brian, vol. 2 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 313–19. On almost all counts, Roszak's postwar work was antithetical to Greenberg's criteria.