# Roszak Reclaimed Chicagoan Melded Painting And Sculpture

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NEW YORK — Theodore Roszak (1905-1981), the son of Polish-American immigrants, was one of the most celebrated students and teachers at Chicago`s Art Institute in the 1920s and ultimately became a leading figure of the post World War II New York school of modern sculpture.

He has lately been rediscovered, and rightly so. He was a singular man, a singular artist and possessed of a singular idea: that painting and sculpture are essentially one and the same thing, differing only to the degree of an extra dimension.

His own works, on public view this month at New York`s Hirschl and Adler Galleries, certainly bear him out. He was fascinated with machines, the urban experience and architectual forms. Even his people seem designed by an architect.

In his latter years, his sculpture could fit with ease into his painting; his paintings seem two-dimensional views of three-dimensional objects. One feels that, just by stepping slightly to the side, one could see the other planes and surfaces of the objects depicted. In the case of one work, his 1932 multi-dimensional ``Musical Still Life,`` the painted wood, caning and plaster protrude from within the frame. The piece is both painting and sculpture.

This ingenious, machine-age modernist might have lived his life simply as a Polish farmer, as did his father and grandfather before him. His life was changed by an event in 1905, when an uprising in the capital of the Russian Empire led Czar Nicholas II to take repressive measures throughout his domain, with special severity in the then-Russian province of Poland. Terrible violence and bloodshed ensued, and tens of thousands of Poles fled to the United States, many of them settling in Chicago, where Roszak arrived in 1907 at the age of two.

His father`s family were farm folk from Poznan, but Roszak`s mother was a noted dress designer from Berlin; her father was an organist, composer and mathematics professor; and her brother was an artist notable for his historical illustrations.

When Roszak`s own talents for drawing and music began to show themselves in childhood, they were encouraged. He was a night school student at the Art Institute while still in high school, and a star full-time student there afterwards, joining the faculty in 1927, when he was just 22.

The art world of Chicago at that time was something of a madhouse.

The epochal battle between the traditionalist establishment and modernist rebels occupied center stage, but many Chicago artists simply sought to go their own way. Roszak and his Art Institute fellows remained somewhat cloistered from all the chaos and foreign influences, but pursued new ideas and techniques within their own group, learning from one another.

Roszak did not really become exposed to the exciting new developments in European art until 1929, when, as a young star of the Art Institute`s Graduate Atelier, he traveled abroad as one of the first winners of the prestigious Anna Louise Raymond Fellowships.

He went everywhere in Europe, taking in everything-indeed, so much that his impressions must have been something of a blur. As works like his boldly colored and focused 1930 ``Self Portrait`` show, he was somewhat influenced by the Surrealists, but though his style changed, it remained always his own.

Returning from Europe, he settled on Staten Island, and then later moved to Manhattan.

It was as a New York painter and sculptor that he became best known.

As his career advanced, his paintings seemed to flatten. In the early 1930s, he was noted for his elongated human figures, which often looked as though carved from wood and which usually appeared in architectural settings with weird landscapes in the background-sometimes accompanied by flying saucers (he was in many ways a space age artist before his times).

By the mid-`30s, his paintings took on more two-dimensional, geometric forms, as he became more and more entranced with machinery and the

relationships of objects.

One of his most popular paintings, ``Fisherman`s Bride`` (1934), is of a partially clad couple in midnight embrace, but they ride a vessel composed of geometric figures with tiny, jewel-like lights in the background that might be the Manhattan shore as seen from Staten Island.

Roszak`s ``Girl at the Piano: Recording Sound`` (1935) is a high-tech abstraction in which the recording machine is rendered as an object of great linear beauty, while the girl seems herself a device and rather grotesque.

Curiously, Roszak`s moody, somber and brilliantly arranged study for that picture is much more representational and a more successful and pleasing work-indeed, probably his finest. It is one of the centerpieces of the Hirschl and Adler exhibition.

Roszak was honored with a major Museum of Modern Art exhibition in the 1950s.

It is well to remember him again. He was a most significant Chicagoan.

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