

## The Roszak Exhibition at the Whitney Shows Trend to Metal Forms

By HOWARD DEVREE

**T**HE retrospective exhibition of sculpture, painting and drawing by Theodore Roszak at the Whitney Museum is sufficiently interesting in its own right. But it is more than just an exhibition, for it focuses attention on a whole aspect of contemporary art.

The fact that the show has been organized by the Walker Art Center of Minneapolis in collaboration with the Whitney and is to be circulated to a number of other museums emphasizes the widespread preoccupation of sculptors today with metal mediums and the welding process as distinguished from the classical direct carving and modeling methods. Nor is the distinction merely in materials—it extends to the themes undertaken and in many cases to the artist's whole approach not only to art but to life itself.

Much of today's metal sculpture, as Carola Giedion-Welcker has discerningly pointed out in her "Contemporary Sculpture," seems to be concerned with a kind of fierce possession of space, and in that writer's words, "the dynamic process occurs under our very eyes. The result is a many-faceted whole in full process of evolution which the spectator does not comprehend by summing up the views from successive angles; it is the very openness or transparency that enables him to grasp the whole simultaneously from within and without."

### Forms and Meanings

Moreover, with tools derived from modern construction, it is small wonder that much of this work promises a renewed relation with architecture. At the same time tools and materials have lent themselves to spiky, savage, threatening forms which reflect vividly the unease of so many present-day artists to world tensions and the mechanizing of life through technological means. By a curious logic of their own, since both thought and art have continuity, many of the sculptors have been led to look back, or feel back, to times when the threat to man came from nature and they embody in their metal sculpture suggestion of primitive plant or under-sea forms, primeval animals, or totemic images and ritual masks, and to evolve non-figurative constructions to embody their reactions toward the conceived threats of life today. So much of the metal sculpture is undeniably and essentially a product of our time.

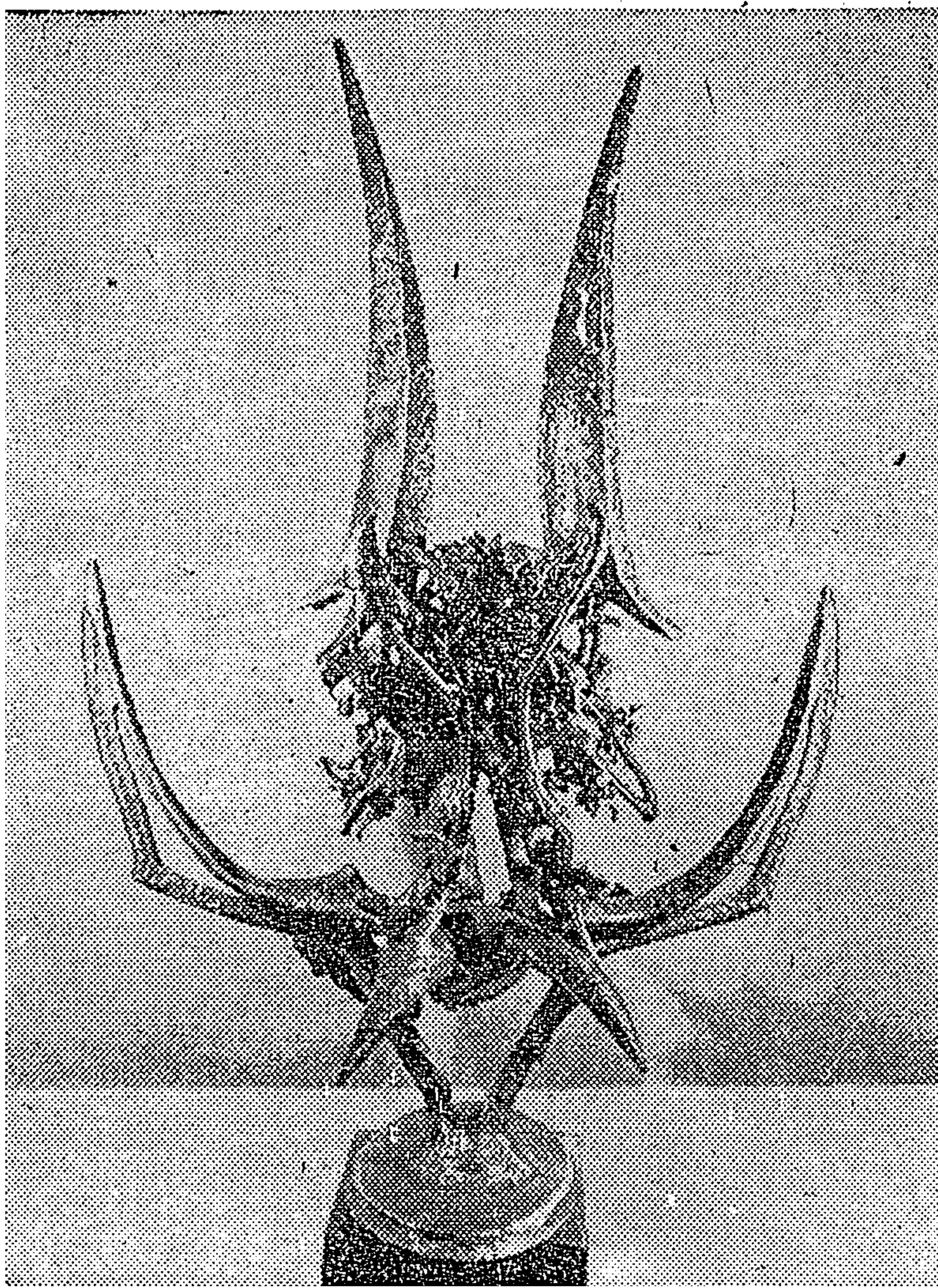
Rozzak, who is more verbally clear than many artists, has indicated something of this in explanation. "The forms that I find necessary to assert," he has said, "are meant to be blunt reminders of primordial strife and struggle, reminiscent of those brute forces that not only produced life but in turn threatened to destroy it. \* \* \* 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." And he has indicated that he perhaps looks for a fusion of "the discipline of the classic and the emotional stirring of the baroque" in the sculpture of the future.

### Disciplined and Diverse

Rozzak's work, as shown at the Whitney, certainly achieves a very considerable discipline over baroque form. There are bird form and flight; there are strange suggestions of sprawling plant shapes as in "Recollection of the Southwest" and "Mandrake"; there are menacing specters such as "Hound of Heaven" (could this have been inspired by Francis Thompson's intensely religious poem?); and there are the upward spiraling symbolism and architectural feeling in "Thistle in the Dream," dedicated to the memory of architect Louis Sullivan, as well as in the bell tower designed for Eero Saarinen's chapel at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, as proof of the architectural possibilities of the new sculpture.

While the main line of development is clearly discernible in Roszak's sculpture, he has innovated in such ways as the use of brazing for color and surface effects and the incidental use of other metals than his basic steel. Despite certain recurrence of shapes, such as a sickle-like blade, there is no monotony.

Early paintings reveal Roszak's initiation into the modern movement and already forecast certain interests. Constructions involving plastics in the Nineteen Thirties are quite nonfigurative and tend toward the geometric and mechanistic in abstraction. A group of large drawings are technically beautiful, both sketches for sculpture and others that are sheer fantasy such as "Cosmic Landscape." Due in no small part to the remarkable discipline of this work the show has far more impact than most of the analogous abstract expressionist painting of late. With few exceptions it is very memorable work.



"Thistle in the Dream," 1955-56, lent by the Matisse Gallery, and, below, "Sea Quarry," 1949, lent by the Norton School of Art for Theodore Roszak's show.

