

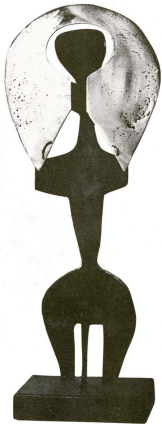


Sculpture by John Rhoden
Birmingham Museum of Art
□ Birmingham, Alabama □

Sculpture by John Rhoden
January 20 - March 17, 1985
Birmingham Museum of Art

The Birmingham Museum of Art is privileged to exhibit a selection of works of art by the sculptor John Rhoden who was born in this city on 13 March 1918. Here he attended Parker High School where his sculpture of the former principal, Arthur H. Parker, continues to remain on view, a portrait bust of formidable presence. The work is a tribute to a fine educational leader and to the talent of a sixteen-year old art student. While in high school, Rhoden met two men who were to encourage him to become an artist—William Grant and Lamar Dodd. Grant was a well-to-do sculptor from Scotland who is fondly remembered for the portraits he made of Birmingham's elite, while evidently supplementing his income creating decorative plaster motifs for the elegant homes in the city. Rhoden recalls being invited into the artist's storefront studio and having been given a lump of clay to model. His kindness and support as well as that of Lamar Dodd, an artist who lived in Birmingham after having studied at the Art Students League in New York City in the late 1920s, gave Rhoden the courage he needed to strive for greatness. Many years later, Dodd and Rhoden were two of the four artists selected to travel to Russia under the auspices of the U.S. Department of State, and Dodd again showed his support when, during his tenure at the University of Georgia, Rhoden was honored with a top prize in sculpture.

After high school, Rhoden received an art scholarship to attend the nearby Talladega College, studying there for two years before leaving for New York City in 1938. In Manhattan, he continued his art training with the prominent realist sculptor Richmond Barthé who is best known for his busts of theatrical personalities. Barthé, no doubt, gave Rhoden sufficient additional instruction to lead to several commissions of portraits of Generals during the younger artist's three years in the armed service. Immediately following his tour of duty, Rhoden enrolled in the School of Painting and Sculpture at Columbia University, studying with Orazio Maddaleni, Hugo Rabus and William Zorach. Rhoden recalls being particularly inspired by Maddaleni whose art reflects a stylized adoption of Maillol's handling of the figure. He was able to communicate to Rhoden an understanding of anatomy and of the movement of the human figure, especially the female nude, even as sculpted in marble. *Reclining Figure*, 1947 (illustrated), carved by Rhoden in French limestone is particularly reminiscent of his teacher's sensuous approach.



Priest of the Borealis

John Rhoden is the recipient of numerous awards and honors. In 1947, he was given the Rosenwald Fellowship and first prize in sculpture by Columbia University, a prize bestowed upon him again in 1948 and 1950. 1950 was also the year Rhoden received a scholarship from the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, a Tiffany Award in sculpture and a prize and honorable mention from the Painters and Sculptors Society of New Jersey. The following year he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship and the Prix de Rome Fellowship, which was renewed from 1952 to 1954.

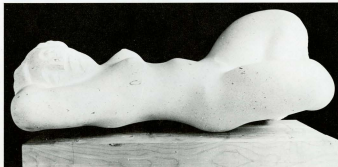
The University of Georgia awarded Rhoden first prize in sculpture in 1955 and at that time Rhoden began a two-year exhibition tour under the auspices of the United States Department of State to Iceland, Ireland, Finland, Norway, Italy, Germany, Turkey, Egypt, Kenya, Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, Uganda, Tanganyika and Zanzibar.

As a member of a four-party artist delegation, Rhoden traveled throughout the Soviet Union, Poland and Yugoslavia in 1959 and the next year he was invited to participate in another tour with the Department of State to visit India, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Korea, Japan and the Philippines.

In 1961, Howard University awarded Rhoden an honorarium and Medal Pro Sculpture Egregia and that same year he received a Guggenheim Fellowship. A Rockefeller grant in 1962 enabled the artist to travel to Indonesia where he spent much of his time carving from the fine woods indigenous to the area.

His commissions for public sculpture reflect the esteem with which Rhoden's sculpture is held in the art world. Between 1968 and 1976 Rhoden created major works for Harlem Hospital, Metropolitan Hospital, and Bellevue Hospital in New York City, I.S. 223 in Queens, Clifton Senior High School in Baltimore and the Afro-American Museum in Philadelphia. Rhoden has exhibited in most of the museums in the northeast including the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Brooklyn Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Academy, Soidenberg Gallery, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York as well as the Afro-American Museum in Philadelphia, Frick Museum in Pittsburgh and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts.

John Rhoden has sought for more than four decades a means of wedding myth and form to his own personal expression. His sculpture, while based on realistic subject matter, most often the human figure, is as varied as his technique and media. The titles of the works acknowledge his sources—Native American, African, Indonesian—the societies which he has visited during his extensive travels. By examining the primordial relationships manifested in the art of these cultures as well as our own, Rhoden has struggled to discover the dynamics of male to female, of shaman or priest to ritual, of the human being to the animal. Myth, while defined as having no existence in fact, has long been



Reclining Figure



African King & Queen

held as one source of our earliest history. Legends were told throughout the generations as a means of preserving our past and understanding our future. Thus, through his sculpture, Rhoden continues this quest into contemporary times.

Works such as *Skyfather*, *Earthmother from the Navaho*, 1967, and *Pow Wow*, 1976, have the two-dimensional appearance of Navaho sand painting. Rhoden acknowledges his interest in Native American imagery is a result of his marriage to Richanda who is a member of that culture.¹ The totemic imagery of these bronzes reflect the methods in which Rhoden prefers to work. He approaches sculpture much as the abstract expressionists approached painting, his interest is in the process. Solving problems as he works, he takes delight in letting the material dictate the form.

African references are most easily perceived in his art. *African King and Queen*, 1968, *Priest of the Borealis*, 1980 (both illustrated), and *African Dancers*, 1974, are indicative of this large body of work obviously inspired by Rhoden's travels throughout Africa and his personal relationship, as an Afro-American, to the culture. For the most part, these sources appear to be

eclectic in nature, yet one of the most striking comparisons can be made between the *African King and Queen* by Rhoden with the early pair of bronze figures from Western Nigeria dated by Frank Willett in his book *Life in the History of West African Sculpture* between the tenth and fourteenth centuries. Although Rhoden's sculpture is much more abstract, the male and female can easily be discerned and it is significant that the cone shaped decoration of the male headdress is identical to that of the life work. Most interesting is the similarity in pose—in both bronzes the inside legs of the man and woman, as they stand side by side, are intertwined. Upon close examination, it becomes evident that the artists have chosen to sculpt only three legs, a sign of intimacy and bonding that Rhoden reaffirms in our present-day society.

Perhaps the most powerful of these African inspired works is *Priest of the Borealis*, 1980. The glowing bronze of the large circular headdress and the angularity of the figure recall the powerful Bakata funerary figures, a traditional African sculptural form. As a guardian of the spirit, it was placed atop containers which held the skulls and other principal bones of the ancestors of the family or clan. The abstract body forms most often used by Rhoden are reduced to their essential parts so that in this work as well as in the traditional piece, there is an economy of form and a stark frontality which confronts the viewer, lending a strong psychological impact. The power of the spirit is captured in this sculpture.

Rhoden continues to search for new meanings and to create three-dimensional forms which challenge the limits of our knowledge. His fascination with myth as the archetypal reference, as the source of humanity's most basic knowledge, is embodied in his sculpture, allowing one access to many of the mysteries of life.

Ruth Ann Appelhof
Curator of Paintings, Sculpture and
Graphic Arts

¹ Richanda Rhoden is Winnebago on her mother's side and Cherokee on her father's side of the family.

Acknowledgments

The Birmingham Museum of Art is honored to exhibit the work of John Rhoden, a native of this city whose work is celebrated nationally. Over the last several years many individuals have been instrumental in this project and to them the museum wishes to express its gratitude. Mayor Richard Arrington and the City Council have generously provided support. From the beginning David Herring, president of the City Council, has nurtured the idea of a Rhoden exhibition and has been a firm supporter of the artist. Without his interest in the arts the exhibition would not have been possible. John Roden and his wife, Richanda, have given generously of their time and provided invaluable information reflecting the full course of Rhoden's development over the decades.

Ellen Elsas, Gail Trechsel and Ruth Appelhof of the museum staff have all worked with Rhoden and visited his studio. Their involvement in the selection process and documentation of his career has provided invaluable insights. Virginia Hillhouse has edited; Portia Stallworth has prepared the manuscript; Terry Beckham has designed the installation of the exhibition, and Scott Fuller designed the catalogue. Syd Burgess, former employee, and Mike D'Ambrà of Birmingham Cable Communications, a division of American Television and Communications Corporation, have provided a generous grant to subvise some of the cost of the exhibition and have provided funds for the opening reception honoring the sculptor. We appreciate their corporation's support and also thank the New York affiliate of Birmingham Cable Communications for producing the informative video tape that can be viewed in conjunction with the exhibition.

Douglas K.S. Hyland
Director

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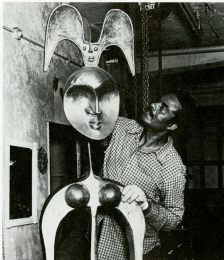
Installation at Bellevue Hospital, New York City

Catalogue of the Exhibition

All works of art in the exhibition are from the collection of the artist. Measurement is in inches. Height precedes width in the dimensions. The paper size is given for drawings, image size for prints.

Sculpture (arranged chronologically):

1. *Reclining Figure*, 1947
French limestone
28 x 18
2. *Abstract Bull*, 1952
Bronze
10 x 13
3. *Reclining Bull*, 1952
Bronze
16 x 10
4. *Dedicated/Public Servant*, 1958
Bronze
40 x 12
5. *Quarter Horse*, 1958
Bronze
24 x 16
6. *Agility*, 1958
Bronze
18 x 21
7. *7 Out of 10 Miles*, 1958
Bronze
34 x 10
8. *Safari*, 1958
Bronze
27 x 38
9. *Portrait of Richards*, 1961
Teakwood
12 x 26
10. *Blue Eyes, Indonesian Legend*, 1962
Teakwood
46 x 42
11. *The Victim*, 1966
Bronze
31 x 13
12. *Skyliner; Earthmother from the Navaho*, 1967
Bronze
11 x 30
13. *African King and Queen*, 1968
Bronze and jewel glass
19 x 13
14. *Gambian*, 1970
Bronze
30 x 30
15. *Model for Believe*, 1970
Bronze
42 x 66 (2" to 1")
16. *Three Women*, 1970
Bronze
10 x 25
17. *African Dancers*, 1974
Bronze
6 x 40
18. *Sphere of Life*, 1975
Bronze
44 x 45
19. *Low How*, 1975
Bronze and jewel glass
24 x 35



20. *Sketches of Nwaoko*, 1976
Bronze
7 x 20
 21. *Finalist*, 1978
Bronze and jewel glass
32 x 40
 22. *Metropolis*, 1980
Bronze
23 x 12
 23. *Friest of the Bonoko*, 1980
Bronze
29 x 30
 24. *Ritual of Circumcision*, 1980
Bronze
21 x 22
 25. *Sacred Figure*, 1984
Bronze
38 x 20
- Works on Paper (arranged alphabetically)
26. *African King and Queen*
Silk screen print
21 x 15 1/4
 27. *Afro-American Historical Museum, First Sketch*
Blueprint with watercolor and pencil
19 x 24
 28. *Bronze for Clifton High School, Baltimore, Maryland*
Pen and ink with watercolor
20 x 25
 29. *Marlen Hospital, New York City*
for Bronze and Corten Steel, 25 x 12"
Pen and ink with wash
24 x 18
 30. *Metropolitan Hospital, New York City*
for Bronze and Corten Steel, 12 x 10"
Pen and ink and watercolor
26 x 20
 31. *Proposal for New York State Building, Harlem, New York City*
Blueprint
29 x 19 1/4
 32. *Proposal for Roebling Housemaster*
(Designer, Builder—Brooklyn Bridge)
Pen and ink
17 1/4 x 18 1/4
 33. *Solomon Fisherman*
Woodcut
18 1/2 x 11