

Spotlight Presentation by Walter Gendell, April 2019

Tentative de Metal V  
Etienne Hajdu, 1962, duralumin



### **Artist's Background:**

### **Education, Training and Experience:**

- Etienne Hajdu, French sculptor was born Istvan Hajdu on August 2, 1907 to Hungarian parents of Jewish descent, in Romanian Transylvania.
- At age 16 he attended a vocational school for two years (The School of Vocational Training of the Wood Industry) in preparation for work in the timber industry. Three years later, his passion and talent for woodwork led him to a short period of study at Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts.
- At age 20 he relocated to Paris and continued his studies at:
  - the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere (1927) as a pupil under Emile-Antoine Bourdelle where he got his classical training in sculpture and drawing (for six months he drew nudes),
  - the Ecole des arts decoratifs (1928)
  - the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (1928) under Paul-Francois Niclausse.
- In 1930 Hajdu obtained his French citizenship and served in the army from 1931 to 1932 and again from 1939 to 1940. Between his tours of military service, he traveled for study: classical sculpture in Crete and Greece where he was impressed by archaic and Cycladic sculpture, Piet Mondrian's

paintings in the Netherlands, and the Romanesque sculpture and structures within the French countryside. During this time Hajdu also met other artists and was a member of a surrealist youth group Les Amis du Monde. Each experience had an indelible effect on Hajdu's art.

- Hajdu was demobilized after the armistice of 1940 (Nazi occupation of France) and worked in an aluminum factory and then as a stonecutter in a Pyrenean marble factory. His exploration of different stones – onyx, marble, and slate provided him a wealth of experience as he began producing marble sculptures, his first original works beginning in 1944. In 1945 Hajdu returns to Paris and a year later has his first solo exhibition.

### **Early Influences:**

Hajdu lived in his native country until he was twenty when in 1927 he moved to Paris to study. Developing his art during this period was not an easy journey for him, and as you can see from above covered a period of many years. Hajdu himself wrote with feeling about his long apprenticeship:

“I came to Paris at the end of cubism and in the full flowering of surrealism and abstract art. I was in a state of the most absolute confusion. For two years I abandoned sculpture and tried to understand. I read a great deal, I associated with artists, I visited studios and I was affected by many influences.” He goes on to say “The world was a chaos in me and I wanted to get order, order in my head. I had to start from the very beginning” <sup>1</sup>

Then in 1930, three years after he arrived in Paris he was utterly overwhelmed by an exhibition of Fernand Leger's modernist abstractions and decides to abandon his formal education. Leger's machines and cubistic cityscapes seemed to speak the language of the present, and Hajdu resolved to find an idiom that would speak the present too. <sup>2</sup> However, I believe it was Leger's gradual change starting in the late 1920's away from the mechanistic, geometric objects to more organic and irregular forms that most influenced Hajdu throughout his career – as best seen in a comparison of Leger's *Two Sisters* (1932) with Hajdu's *Lelia* (1966).

Hajdu was also influenced by Constantin Brancusi – considered the patriarch of modern sculpture. Brancusi's decision to create non-representational sculptures was a deliberate and bold artistic choice. For him, the concept of “being real” is about a lot more than looking like nature. Brancusi's first commissioned piece, *The Prayer* (a young woman crossing herself as she kneels), marked his first step toward abstracted, non-literal representation, and shows his drive to depict “not the outer form but the idea, the essence of things.” <sup>3</sup>

I believe it is Brancusi's move away from the traditional representation of the human form (or any form for that matter – such as his *Bird in Space*) to a more non-representational style that Hajdu found most compelling. He was very much taken with Leger's abstract paintings. It is not surprising that Brancusi's non-representational style would also resonate with him. When viewing Hajdu's work, one can see a certain precision and simplicity of form, reflective material, smooth surfaces and sensual lines reminiscent of this master.

### **Art Movement:**

Hajdu was part of the post-war Abstract Art. "Postwar advances in machinery and technology led to experimentation in aluminum, copper, and bronze, along with welding, hammering, and riveting. Modeling metal with his characteristic sinuous contours, Hajdu created freestanding sculptures and large reliefs that echo the body within their abstract, almost sublime, compositions." <sup>4</sup>

Hajdu's sculptures can also be described as organic abstraction – the use of rounded abstract forms based on those found in nature. <sup>5</sup> Hajdu was passionate about biology (in the 1930's he attended biology classes) and drew much of his inspiration from nature. Through his use of curved and spiral-like lines, he created strong and dynamic organic shapes. This art form was used by many different artists in the 1940's and 1950's such as Jean Arp (whom Hajdu was greatly influenced by) and Henry Moore. Hilton Kramer, in a published article in *Art in America*, 1969 compared Hajdu's metal reliefs to Leger's *Contrast of Forms* series "with their easy, lyric rhythms and "organic" abstract forms."

### **Medium:**

This particular piece is made of duralumin, which is a strong, hard, lightweight alloy of aluminum, widely used in aircraft construction. It was discovered in 1906 and patented in 1909 by Alfred Wilm, a German metallurgist. It was originally made only at the company Durener Metallwerke (the name is a contraction of Durener and aluminum). Duralumin alloys are relatively soft, ductile, and workable in the normal state; they may be rolled, forged, extruded, or drawn into a variety of shapes and products.

Hajdu also worked with a number of other materials – most notably marble. In fact, there is another piece owned by the Palm Springs Art Museum by Hajdu that is made of pink marble done in 1956 and is *Untitled*.

### **Technique and Methodology:**

For his standing sculptures, Hajdu made innumerable drawings until the right design emerges. Unlike many abstract expressionists, he never allowed accident to dictate his course. He worked with different materials and has experimented

continuously. When working with marble he carved from his design, then polishes by hand. The duralumin, too, is carved (similar to marble) rather than welded or hammered. He utilized duralumin only when the design called for a looping intricacy that the marble could not withstand.

### **Artist's Impact on the Art World:**

Hajdu was a world-renowned sculptor and is often compared to some of the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century sculptors including Jean Arp, Constantin Brancusi and Fernand Leger (in fact he taught sculpture in 1947 in Leger's studio). These masters had a tremendous influence on Hajdu's sculpture. However, it wasn't until he came "into his own" in the 1950's did he begin to make an original contribution to art. His break with traditional forms of sculpture and a move to abstract sculpture, along with his use of metal was considered ground-breaking. Hajdu likes to say "The great question is to express what is human in an entirely different way from the artists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. With invented forms I would like to express the reality of man, the human presence."

Hajdu's sculpture has been featured in important museum exhibitions throughout the world. His first exhibition was in 1939 at the Galerie Jeanne Bucher in Paris. In the decades that followed, he had numerous individual and group exhibitions. His work is in a number of museums besides PSAM – The Guggenheim, The Museum of Modern Art in New York and The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden to name a few.

### **Your analysis of the artwork at PSAM:**

Hajdu came of age as an artist at a time when the world was experiencing change on so many levels. He said, "in Paris life around me was different: machines were invading all the professions, cars and aircraft were changing customs, the new vision of the world was dawning, and the pulsations of the machines enticed the poets away towards a new sensibility." He went on to say, "If marble is fitting for the slow and sensitive passage of light and shadows, the new vision demanded a new medium. New sculpture could only be in metal." For many, metal has been the turning point of contemporary sculpture.

"In this postwar period a perfectly smooth road lay ahead of the newcomers to sculpture in metal, but they were conscious of the risk that sculpture, thus freely handled in any kind of material, might become nothing more than an object – a machine – to the very degree that its form becomes abstract." <sup>6</sup> To some degree, that is how I feel about Calder and his mobiles.

However, with Hajdu's sculptures one has a sense of emotion. He carved shapes that evoked a feeling rather than trying to represent something. His sculptures are sensual rather than flat. The polished metal is not merely a material to be used for purposes of making a sculpture, but it is his use of light and shadow that becomes an essential element of the overall piece, the reflection helping to incorporate the space inside the sculpture. What makes his work particularly modern to me is his use of negative space in conjunction with this reflective nature of the metal – a move away from the more traditional form of sculpture.

I particularly have come to appreciate exhibiting Hajdu's piece in the Montgomery to Modernism exhibit. The juxtaposition of his use of duralumin alongside more traditional materials (leather, wood, bronze, etc.) used by Montgomery beautifully highlights the shift into contemporary, modern art. His piece stands out as light bounces off this reflective, shiny material compared to other pieces that are absorbing, "eating up" the light. Looking at a bronze statue of Montgomery's and Hajdu's *Tentative de Metal* couldn't make the contrast more striking.

### **Compare and Contrast Artworks:**

The museum owns another piece by Hajdu called *Untitled* done in 1956 in pink marble. Hajdu worked extensively in marble and capitalized on his work as a stonecutter where he perfected his skill in cutting and polishing marble. This work predates his metal sculptures but has many of the same characteristics – an abstract form that is highly polished to allow for an effective use of light and shadows playing on the marble.

Another museum piece is Jean Arp's *Growth*, 1938 Bronze with gold patina. Hajdu is often compared with Arp – who did have a tremendous influence on this artist. Hajdu's *Tentative de Metal* series has the same free-standing bulging, round shape as *Growth* along with this sense that the artist is stretching the piece – in some cases upwards and in others sideways. Both artists use "undulating shapes that seem to rise, bend, and twist in motion."

Another interesting comparison is also found in the Montgomery to Modernism exhibit - Eva Zeisel's Hallcraft Century ceramic dishware. Zeisel and Hajdu were contemporaries in the 50's and 60's and both had a penchant for creating works that were modern, contemporary (outside of the norm), yet simple in design. The white porcelain in Zeisel's china has the same sensuous rounded curves found in Hajdu's *Tentative de Metal*. I believe they were both experimenting with form (somewhat organic) and the use materials coming into the modern age. For Hajdu that would be duralumin – and for Zeisel a white, modern and refined porcelain.

A final contrast would be any number of sculptures by Henry Moore. Quite simply – where many of Moore's works are all volume, dark and bulky – Hajdu's pieces

are more about space, the reaction of light on metal or polished marble, and shapes found in nature. I think there is a playfulness to Hajdu's works that I find very appealing.

### **How to tour this artwork:**

In viewing this piece, I would of course provide background information on the artist and more significantly talk about the time period he was creating his work and the changes occurring throughout the world and the arts community in particular. I would then focus on the piece, the shape, the use of negative space and the material.

- Does the piece remind you of anything?
- Would you feel differently about the sculpture if there was no negative space – the empty area around the sculpture – but instead it was solid?
- Why do you think the artist used this new material – duralumin – instead of bronze or lead, or even marble?
- If this piece was done in marble how do you think it would “read” differently?
- What was your first thing you noticed about this artwork?
- Why do you think it was included in the Montgomery to Modernism exhibit?
- What do you like about this artwork – and conversely what don't you like about it?
- Are there any other pieces in this exhibit that you would compare Hajdu's sculpture to?

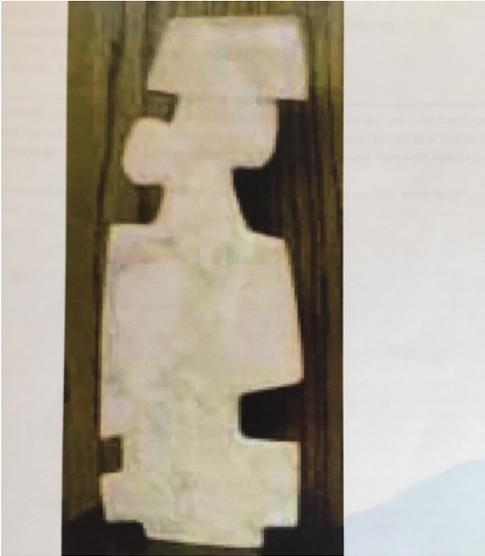
### **Museum Owned:**

This piece, along with the other Hajdu work was a gift of Mr. and Mrs. E.V. Staude. The Staude's were early collectors in the 1970's along with Hirshhorn and Weiner. They were encouraged to establish a “fine arts” collection and move to modern art.

### **Bibliography:**

- <sup>1</sup> Art in America, March-April 1, 1969 pg. 98-101 Hilton Kramer
- <sup>2</sup> Time, Inc, 1962 Vol. 80 issue 18, p 96 Conversation Piece (Portrait Painting)
- <sup>3</sup> Wikipedia, Constantin Brancusi (edited February 1, 2019) Retrieved from: ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantin\\_Brancusi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantin_Brancusi))
- <sup>4</sup> Guggenheim (<https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/etienne-hajdu>)
- <sup>5</sup> Amy Dempsey, *Modern Art*, Thames & Hudson 2018
- <sup>6</sup> Hajdu – Recent Sculptures by Dora Vallier, 1969

Etienne Hajdu, *Untitled* in pink marble, 1956



Etienne Hajdu, *Semiha* 1969



Fernand Leger, *Two Sisters* 1932



Etienne Hajdu, *Lelia* 1966



Eva Zeisel, *Hall China* 1957



Brancusi, *The Prayer* 1907



Jean Arp, *Growth* 1938



Brancusi, *Bird in Space* 1928

