

“Centaur,” 1955-56, Dimitri Hadzi, Spotlight Paper by Paul Zak, 2019

Dimitri Hadzi - 1921-2006 American Sculptor



“I often equate the sculptural experience with basic geological phenomena. It is not unlike the layering of sediment deposits – the metamorphic phase where those sediments (experience) are compressed by time (contemplation) and action to convert or transform (crystallize) ideas into new images. Then, of course, the igneous or volcanic, the violent upheavals or the internal pressures that completely and dramatically alter and transfix concepts into solid reality. Therefore, creativity goes in various directions, some slow, some rapid, but always changing.” (Dimitri Hadzi, 1987)

“Hadzi’s sculpture reconciles the competing claims of figuration and abstraction; expressionism and emotional restraint; intimate scale and monumentality; delicacy and mass. His comprehensive knowledge of ancient cultures and Greco-Roman art led to the development of a personal lexicon of forms that reflect the past and simultaneously contribute to the evolution of 20th century sculpture.”

(Danese Corey Gallery, NYC, Dimitri Hadzi, “Alternate Measures: The Small Sculptures of Dimitri Hadzi,” November, 2013. Youtube Video)

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Title: Centaur

Work Completed: 1955-56

Artist: Dimitri Hadzi (1921-2006)

Medium: Cast Bronze, edition 3/4

Dimensions: 25 1/2 x 28 3/4 x 20 3/4 inches

Owned by: Collection of Gwendolyn Weiner, on loan

(Photo: courtesy of T. Santora)

Hadzi's Background:

Dimitri Hadzi was an American figurative/abstract sculptor, born in New York City, the second of five children. His parents were Greek-American immigrants. His father was a furrier and lost his business in the Great Depression of 1929.

As a child, he attended a Greek after-school program, where he learned language, mythology, history, and theater. His knowledge of Greek mythology often informed his work. He studied chemistry at Brooklyn Technical High School and Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute, and was also known for his drawing ability. Throughout his younger years, he worked at odd jobs to both support his family and put himself through school. He worked variously as a shoe shiner, grocery clerk, model, and chemistry lab assistant.

In 1942 he joined the army, where he continued drawing in his spare time, making mostly sketches of his fellow soldiers. He credited reading Lust for Life, a novel about Van Gogh, with turning his interest toward a career in art. Upon his returning to New York City from the South Pacific, he studied painting and sculpture at Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art (known as Cooper Union) (1946-1950).

After graduating with honors from Cooper Union in 1950, and receiving a Fulbright Fellowship, he went to Athens, where he studied at the Polytechnion (1950-51). He studied the history of Greco-Roman sculpture. He went to Rome in 1952 and studied at the Scuola Belle Arte and the Museo Artistico e Industriale until 1953. In Rome he also studied bronze casting at the Nicci Foundry. He made his home in Italy for the next 25 years.

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Eventually, returning to the United States, he became professor of visual and environmental studies (VES) at Harvard University, where he taught sculpture and printmaking from 1975 to 1989. He was married twice, and had two children. He died of kidney failure in 2006.

Hadzi's work can be found in the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and many other institutions. His work appears in public squares, concert halls, federal and private plazas, and universities throughout the world.

Hadzi was the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship, a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, the Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, and the St. Gaudens Award from Cooper Union. He was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a member of the National Academy. He represented the United States at the Venice Biennales in 1956, 1958, and 1962.

Overview of Hadzi’s Work:

As an artist, Hadzi is best known for his miniature as well as monumental, abstract or semi-abstract sculptures, in bronze, stone, and ceramic, often with Greek or Roman titles. His tall and imposing work suggests figuration, incorporating long, columnar forms that can suggest the limbs of people or animals. His smaller works are often more intimate but nonetheless powerful. His sculptures evoked the past while exploring connections to the present. “A sustained dialogue between figuration and abstraction energized them.” (Harvard Gazette, June 11, 2009). He was also a painter and printmaker.

“He infuses his sculpture with reminiscences of the past and a keen awareness of spatial dimension. His work is intense and dramatic; his shapes are condensed but alive. Hadzi brings new meaning to historical vision.” (Works in Bronze: A Modern Survey, Bates, Moulton, p.10)

Quotations by the Artist:

“I am Greek and Greeks have to carve.” (Harvard Gazette, June 11, 2009)

“And thus, when you step back and years later you go to look at something you’re conscious suddenly of something that was part of the process originally....After all, in my lifetime, I’ve had lots of experience....all that stuff’s been stashed away in that big bank up there and little by little it’s coming out. And I think that’s the exciting part about being an artist. And not completely understanding what you do right at the moment.” (Interview, Brown, Smithsonian, 1981)

One aspect of making art is, according to Hadzi, “the risk-taking gamble.” He goes on to say: “Often I couldn’t resolve a certain solution to a piece of sculpture...so I’d just drop it, bingo! On the floor and pick it up and there’s a big flat plane already. And so

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all of these things start happening with that, so you establish a start...very often you get too involved with something, and you have to do something dramatic, see?" (Interview, Brown, Smithsonian, 1981)

Influences and Art Movement:

Hadzi fits squarely within the mainstream of Post World War II Expressionist sculpture. He was influenced by some of the mainstays of his contemporary sculptural world.

One of his biggest influences was Henry Moore. Hadzi stated: "He established what a modern artist is...and also how he worked, with the drawings, the whole procedure of drawing, working from drawings and making maquettes..." (Interview 1981, 1990, Smithsonian Archives of American Art). He was also influenced by George Kratina and Jacques Lipchitz. Other influences were Marino Marini, Germaine Richier, Herbert Ferber, Isamu Noguchi, and Ibram Lassaw. They employed heavily worked bronze forms, suggesting a fantasy or dream state. "The basic sculptural language is figurative, but with a Surrealist spirit." (A Passionate Eye, p. 70). He was also influenced by Picasso and Cubism, which he described as "the underlying force in all of my work." (Selz, Dimitri Hadzi, interview with Albert Elsen, 1987).

His early sculptures were largely figurative, but in the late 1950s he began to move into abstraction, while working on his entry for an Auschwitz monument competition, which he lost.

His ability to work in large and small scale and move effortlessly between them is a distinguishing feature. "Only a few artists of our time—Calder, Giacometti, Moore among them—shared Hadzi's facility" in this regard (Danese Corey Gallery, NYC. 2013. See Youtube reference)

Now let us turn to an examination of the specific work which is the subject of this Spotlight paper.

Centaur

There is some confusion about dating this work. The preferred date is 1955-56. Sometimes, however, it is listed as having been completed in 1957-58. The latter dates may indicate when the work was cast into bronze. Hadzi produced variations on this composition, including a larger plaster model. This particular sculpture is edition 3/4.

If one were simply to look at this work without viewing the title, one might conclude that it portrays a dance or some acrobatic feat in progress. In fact that was my initial reaction. But the title, "Centaur," reveals that something else is happening here.

The theme of this work reflects Hadzi's Greek heritage and study of mythology. From this he undoubtedly knew the myth of the battle of the Centaurs and the Lapiths. As you may recall, Centaurs were beings that were half horse and half human. Briefly, the wedding of the King of the Lapiths, Pirithous, was disrupted by the unruly and violent

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Centaurs. After consuming too much wine, the Centaur Eurytion attempted to abduct the bride of the King, Hippodameia. All of the other Centaurs then tried to sexually conquer the other women and boys present. Theseus came to the rescue and defeated the Centaurs. As Greek myth became more mediated through philosophy, the battle between Lapiths and Centaurs took on aspects of the struggle between the Greeks and the barbarians, and then a more interior struggle between civilized and wild behavior within the person. (“Lapiths,” [Wikipedia](#)). Hadzi used this Centaur theme in many sculptures and drawings.

This sculpture portrays the struggle between a Centaur and the Lapith bride at the moment of abduction. She struggles in vain against the more powerful Centaur, who clearly controls and subdues her. “Centaur is clearly interpretable as a scene of intense action in which a centaur rears up on its hind legs and grasps the hands and feet of a convulsed woman who is curled over backwards.” ([A Passionate Eye](#), p.70). The work, while powerful, even brutish, is at the same time, sensual and alluring. There is dynamic tension between the struggle enacted and the beauty of artistic form. Faces are indistinct; the power is in the story, the myth, but even more, in the sweeping movement captured by the piece.

There are varying textures to this work. The arms are softer and rounder (as in Henry Moore) while the Centaur’s torso, legs and tail are jagged and heavily textured (Lipchitz). In technique and execution, it is almost as if 2 sculptures were fused. Both the positive and negative spaces here are vital to the overall effect of this piece, with the negative space forming a sort of figure 8 or infinity symbol, contributing to the graceful flow of the work. The tail is reminiscent of a cubist work or a Lipchitz sculpture with its rough, textured, angular forms. Aside from the stated theme, however, one can view this piece also as a beautiful and powerful interplay of forms, light, shadow, and movement, the various textures adding to the power of the work. The sculpture flows toward the upper right (in our current display), signifying energy and motion.

Hadzi uses a tripod form for the hind legs and tail. The tripod figures prominently in his work, as a stabilizing element but also because it was used in ancient Greece for ceremonial purposes, thus invoking Greek and mythic allusions.

The finish is natural, aged bronze. Hadzi preferred a dark finish to his bronzes, as “black helps tighten the form...everything becomes much crisper and it gets this taut feeling about it” (Interview, Brown, Smithsonian, 1981). His background in chemistry influenced his use of colored patinas in later works.

As a final note, the overall impact of “Centaur” is somewhat diminished by its placement in the gallery. The viewer is unable to walk around the work and see it from all sides. Such complete viewing enhances the power of any sculpture, but would be especially helpful for this one.

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Plaster version of “Centaur,” Hadzi’s Studio, Via Eleonora Pimentel, Rome, 1950s
This is likely the original from which 4 bronze casts were made.



Compare and Contrast with other artworks in the PSAM Collection:

Marino Marini, “Horse and Rider” (A Passionate Eye, p. 98). Marini was influenced by ancient heroic equestrian sculpture. This work, Like Centaur, portrays struggle. The horse’s head is strained up and to the side. The rider is placed awkwardly upon the horse, appearing about to be thrown. Like Centaur, there is force, power, and disequilibrium.

Jacques Lipchitz, “Hagar in the Desert.” This is a tumultuous work, depicting the Biblical theme of the banishment of Hagar and her son, Ishmael to the desert. Heavy, rounded shapes intertwine. Like “Centaur,” there is tension, drama, and a powerful sense of foreboding. Like “Centaur,” the artist used the historical lexicon with which he was familiar.

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Germaine Richier, “Large Horse with Six Heads.” The theme of struggle predominates. The heads are emaciated, the necks skeletal. “The impression is one of frenzy and some unknown tortuous forces at work.” (A Passionate Eye, p. 147). The emotional tone evokes “Centaur.”

Jean Arp, “Growth.” Thematically, in contrast to Centaur, Arp deals with themes of fertility, growth, and regeneration (A Passionate Eye, p.44). Smooth curves predominate, giving the appearance of fluidity and upward motion (similar to a plant growing). The interplay of light and shadow produce a softness of form. The overall impression is the antithesis of the kind of struggle we see in Marini and Richier.

Miguel Felguérez, “Contrition.” (A Passionate Eye, pp 66-67). This work is smooth, organic, as if motion were frozen for a moment. Positive and negative spaces are in dialogue in this abstract piece, as in “Centaur.” This piece also recalls the smooth, organic forms of Henry Moore and Jean Arp.

Some of Hadzi’s Works

- *Centaur* (1954), in the garden of Prospect House, Princeton, NJ
- *K. 458 The Hunt* (1966), Avery Fisher Hall, New York City, refers to Mozart's String Quartet in B flat, K. 458
- *River Legend* (1976), Edith Green - Wendell Wyatt Federal Building, Portland, Oregon, a free-standing monumental stone arch
- *Thermopylae* (1968), John F. Kennedy Federal Building, Boston
- *Propylaea* (1982), a sculptural fountain in Toledo, OH
- *Omphalos* (1985), Rockport, MA
- *Helmet V*, (1959-1961) Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC
- *Red Mountains* (1991) Hugo L. Black US Courthouse, Birmingham, AL. The sculpture was removed due to fear it could shield an attacker.
- *Elmo V* (1961), The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Art Collection, Albany, NY

In addition to the named works, a 60-foot high sculptural fountain designed by him for Copley Square, Boston, was completely demolished and removed circa 2014, despite protests by his widow and others.

Awards

- 1957 Guggenheim Fellow
- 1962 Venice Biennale
- 1969 Artist in Residence - Dartmouth College, New Hampshire
- 1973-74 Artist in Residence - American Academy, Rome
- 1974 Rome Prize
- 1975-76 Artist in Residence - Harvard University, Massachusetts
- 1990 National Academy of Design, Associate member
- 1994 National Academy of Design, full Academician

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Examples of Hadzi's Work:

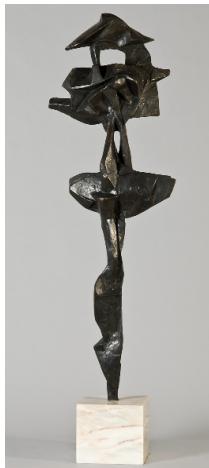
Elmo V, 1962, Bronze



Auschwitz Model, 1957-58, Bronze



S.P.Q.R., 1959,
Bronze



Pillars of
Hercules, 1972,
Bronze



Danae, 2003, wood-
fired stoneware



Gilgamesh, 1984, mixed granites

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Suggested Questions for Touring “Centaur”:

If you didn't know the title of this work, you might simply react to the form and motion, and see it as an acrobatic feat or a dance in progress, the joy of pure movement.

So, I would begin by saying:

Don't look at the label, just ponder the work itself. Let's discuss what you see first.

- what textures do you notice?
- what overall sense of motion emerges?
- what are the 2 figures doing?
- Is there an emotional tone here? How would you describe it?

The title is “Centaur”

1. Who or what is portrayed here? (2 figures—woman, human/animal)
2. Knowing the title, does that change anything in the way you see the work? What and why?
3. What kind of scene are we looking at? (idea of struggle)
4. Does anyone know who Centaurs were in Greek mythology? (Lapith story)
5. Why might the artist choose this as a theme (half-horse/ half-man. Picasso was fascinated as well) (human struggle with darker impulses?)
6. What makes this work so powerful in your observation?
7. Does this remind you of any other sculpture you have seen in the Museum? (Moore, Lipchitz, Arp)

A word about the Weiner Family Collection:

The Palm Springs Art Museum has been a custodian of artworks from the Weiner Family Collection since the late 1960s, when Ted Weiner served on the Board of Trustees. Weiner was a self-made oil baron who had an eye for art and built a substantial collection. Works from the collection have been on continuous display since 1978, and featured in numerous exhibitions. Dr. Steven Nash, former museum Executive Director, solidified the relationship between the Weiner Family and PSAM. Gwendolyn Weiner, daughter of Ted and Lucile, has continued the artistic relationship begun by her parents. She has made donations of key artworks to the museum, and for that we are extremely grateful.

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Nash, S.A., A Passionate Eye: The Weiner Family Collection, Palm Springs Art Museum, Palm Springs, CA, 2015.

Palm Springs Desert Museum, Modern Sculpture from the Weiner Palm Springs Collection, Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1970.

Santora, T., discussion of “Centaur” *in situ*. Since much of our training has been engaging in conversation about art, I asked T. to view the work with me. We were both captivated by this work.

Selz, P., et.al., Dimitri Hadzi, Hudson Hills Press, New York, 1996.

[www.Wikipedia.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dimitri_Hadzi), “Dimitri Hadzi.”

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