Jack Zajac SCULPTURE 1954–1987

THE OAKLAND MUSEUM

Preface/Acknowledgments

The Oakland Museum is pleased to present this exhibition representing more than three decades of work by the internationally acclaimed sculptor Jack Zajac. The sources of Zajac's imagery are rooted in ancient rituals, symbols and forms of both eastern and western cultures. Intuition and knowledge of and respect for his chosen materials of marble and bronze are summoned to create works employing a wide array of subjects; they are visual metaphors for what the artist wishes to express, and range from bound goats representing sacrifice to tall columns of water which symbolize mysterious life forces.

I want to thank Jack Zajac for generously sharing his work and thoughts in preparation for this exhibition. Thanks go also to Associate Curator Terry St. John for his services as curator of the exhibition. On behalf of the museum I want to express appreciation to Miriam and Bernard West, Roselyne and Richard Swig, John Martin Shea, Joseph Jaffee, Dr. and Mrs. Herbert Boyer and Mildred and Paul Berg for their generous support of this exhibition. Also, I wish to thank the Stephen Wirtz Gallery for support of the exhibition, and to thank graphic designer Gordon Chun and editorial assistant Mary Jean Haley for their work on the catalog.

The work of the art department has been essential to the organization of this exhibition. I want to thank the following staff members for their exemplary service: Arthur Monroe and Christine Droll for the procurement and shipping of the sculptures; Gail Bernstein, Kathy Borgogno and Kate Ware for their attention to organizational details, and Donald Grant and Susan Newton for the design and installation of the exhibition.

Philip E. Linhares
Chief Curator of Art

Jack Zajac Sculpture
1954–1987

The Oakland Museum
April 14–June 17, 1990

Falling Water, Santa Cruz Series XV
1987
Bronze, silver gilt
114"
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco

Jack Zajac Sculpture: 1954–1987

Jack Zajac, one of the most versatile and accomplished sculptors working with figurative imagery in America today, has produced a remarkably large body of work in a wide variety of media and styles. His prodigious versatility precludes the neat pigeonholing of his oeuvre into a convenient, historical niche. While certain conceptual relationships can be seen in works as diverse as his monumental *Big Skulls* series and his quiet, flowing *Falling Water* pieces, his continuous exploration of imagery, materials, and meaning defies analysis that attempts too close a linkage. Zajac also returns at times to subjects or materials he has abandoned for many years, confounding any attempt to describe his work as a linear progression.

Zajac initially surfaced as an extraordinarily promising young painter at Scripps College in the early 1950s. He launched into a career as a sculptor as a Prix-de-Rome fellow in 1954 when he produced his first sculptural piece, *Standing Lamb.* Since then he has steadily evolved as a master of bronze and marble sculpture, occasionally pursuing an off-and-on-again career as a painter of note. In each phase of his career, and with each new medium, Zajac has produced highly original works whose wide-ranging imagery lends itself as visual metaphor to equally wide-ranging thematic exploration.

Although this exhibition cannot be inclusive of all the evolutionary steps Zajac has explored, it does scan many of the most important phases of his career, using key pieces selected for this exhibition to demonstrate two distinct approaches in Zajac's work. The first is illustrated by rough-hewn, deftly modeled pieces expressionistically executed on various scales, mostly conceived romantically with wrenching emotion. Many of them use images of goats awaiting sacrifice or of oversized ram heads with broken horns and other large fragments of apparently disastrous, prehistoric encounters. The second thematic approach was developed in the early 1960s and features quiet, eloquent pieces with smoothly polished marble or metal surfaces. These works use a serene, rhythmic flowing movement, often without beginning or end, to define such subjects as waves, swans, and columns of falling water.

Zajac's career as an artist traces a remarkable story of talent, drive, and intelligence. Born into a first-generation Czechoslovakian family in Youngstown, Ohio, in 1929, Zajac moved with his family to Southern California in 1946. He studied art in high school and continued to paint on his own after graduation while he worked full time at Kaiser Steel Mill in Fontana.

Zajac's high school art teacher brought his paintings to the attention of Millard Sheets, the well-known Southern California watercolorist who taught art at Scripps College. Sheets recognized the raw talent in the young artist's work and offered him the use of studio space and critiques at the college. As an unofficial undergraduate, Zajac studied with Henry McPhee, Phillip Dike, Sueo Serisawa, and Jean Goodwin Ames: solid early Southern California modernists. A First Prize scholarship in painting at the California State Fair student exhibition in 1948 enabled him to enroll officially at Scripps. His development was so rapid that in 1951 he had a one-person exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum. The beginning of his association with the Felix Landau Gallery in Los Angeles the same year was another decisive advance. Landau brought Zajac's work to an audience outside the immediate Los Angeles area, introducing it to curators around America.

Although Zajac had already experienced notable early success, the most significant event of his young career occurred in 1954 when he received the Prix de Rome in painting, along with architect Robert Venturi, novelist Ralph Ellison, poets Richard Wilbur

and Anthony Hecht, art historian William MacDonald, and composer Bill Jim Layton. As a Prix-de-Rome recipient from 1954 to 1957, Zajac established roots in Italy that have lasted throughout his life. There he was able to develop artistically in an atmosphere that nourished creativity in a way that was impossible in Southern California, where the most stimulating event was a "shootout" between artists Rico Lebrun and Lorser Feitelson.

The ambience of Rome at the time was particularly conducive for broadening the aesthetic base of a young artist. Zajac met Eugene Berman, the American Surrealist painter, who became very supportive, and was introduced to a group of highly creative Italian artists of that decade, including Marino Marini, Antonio Scordia, Giacomo Manzu, Renzo Vestignani, and Afro. Other American and European artists he met in Italy included Jacques Lipchitz, Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston, Alberto Giacometti, and Henry Moore. As involved as Zajac was with painting when he first went to Italy, he had a craving for three-dimensional form that was not being met. One night in 1954, he spontaneously turned to a pile of clay that artist Carl Milles had left in his studio. With intuitive skill, he created his first sculpture, rapidly modeling in one evening the image of a lamb that he had seen earlier on a trip to the countryside. He was surprised and encouraged by the positive responses of his colleagues to *Standing Lamb*. Although Zajac continued to paint, he made three more lamb sculptures the first year in Rome and six in the second. These pieces were created very quickly and intuitively.

During his second and third years in Rome, the artist became fascinated with an image of sacrificial goats, which he had first seen at an Easter pageant in Greece. The artist emphasized that these animals are not dead, but are awaiting an imminent death. "If they were dead, the drama would be over."[1] Zajac's inclusion of the stake to which the goats are attached heightens the dramatic impact of the pieces.

The iconography and symbolism of his early sculpture draws upon traditional Christian symbols about redemption through sacrifice. The work of this period does not have the greatly elaborate forms and shapes that emerged later. While Zajac maintains a delicate interaction between abstract and realistic configurations, he usually chooses more literal statements to comment on the human condition. Although he was in Italy for much of the 1950s, his use of figurative imagery parallels a resurgence of representationalism in those years in many parts of America, including the San Francisco Bay Area.

Compared to his painting, the sculptures emerged in a spontaneous, creative outpouring, conceived with an ingenuousness that the artist found lacking in his painting. Zajac said he was relieved that sculpture gave him fewer visual components to deal with, thus freeing him to concentrate on the principal subject. As in his paintings, Zajac's first sculptures employed striking profiles with strongly dark and light contrasts. Although he doesn't usually use drawings as a basis for his sculpture, these images were inspired by the drawings he was doing at the time, which were in turn inspired by the work of Francisco Goya.[2]

After a visit to the Prado in 1954, he became interested in Goya's *Pinturas Negras* as well as the etchings of the *Disasters of War*. These works by the great Spanish master feature ominous, foreboding imagery contained in strong, silhouetted outlines with abrupt contrasts of light and dark in the figure groupings.

In 1957 Zajac became interested in the theme of the deposition from the cross, that moment when the body of Christ is removed

from the cross. He made large-scale pieces on this theme from 1957 to 1959, and smaller works between 1961 and 1967. By 1959 the artist was dealing with increasingly complex visual material and producing highly creative images as he worked with this traditional Christian theme. *Deposition,* 1960, which is in The Oakland Museum collection, shows him using groups of figures in thrusting, contrapuntal movements. In this *Deposition* anonymous figures support a generalized Christ in a frenzy of activity that heightens the drama of the horrible event. While The Oakland Museum *Deposition* is more open in its purely gestural activity, the smaller works, *Depostion I,* 1962, and *Deposition II,* 1962, are more self-contained with more specific figures emphasizing the crush of weight, the force of gravity.

Although he remained grounded in Western culture and influenced by Goya, Zajac was excited by things he saw during his travels to Asia and Africa. As his work became more complex and his vocabulary of forms grew in the 1950s and 1960s, he drew inspiration from such disparate sources as southern India bronzes, Chinese sculpture from the Han and Wei periods, pre-Columbian art, African tribal art—particularly Guro—and early Cycladic figures.

In Zajac's later sculpture, figurative anatomy grows more complicated, even though it is created from memory and imagination and not from studio work with models. The anatomical structuring occurs spontaneously as the artist executes the pieces in a great rush of creative activity. Particularly important to Zajac is the enrichment of profile imagery to reinforce solidity, density, and weight. For him, when a piece begins to come together, interesting silhouettes form, a balance emerges, and he feels a sense of equilibrium.[3]

In all of Zajac's art, certain dominantly curving and volumetric forms and shapes reappear and are incorporated into new pieces in novel and inventive ways which the artist finds satisfying. Images become beautiful without being sweet, and an underlying tension is maintained by an almost subliminal sense of effort and awkwardness.

Zajac views returning to earlier creative modes or subjects as an opportunity to use more recently learned skills and refinements to reveal new aspects of problems that he did not feel he had fully resolved in earlier explorations. The artist resists the temptation to stick with familiar solutions and displays an amazing variety of approaches as he reexamines old themes. He is clearly intrigued by the possibilities of new sculptural directions and relishes trial and error, challenge and defeat.

An example of how Zajac innovatively explores artistic approaches can be seen in his two *Big Skull* series. These huge heads first emerged in 1964. By making colossal pieces Zajac expands his previous vocabulary of forms. The greatly enlarged skull, larger than any living animal's head could be, sets perception dramatically askew. Scale alone enhances the descriptive power of the piece and its sculptural impact. These huge skulls can be read as masks or as giant remnants of a long-ago cataclysmic event. Even in disintegration they retain a quality of triumph, a quiet strength and poise.

As *Big Skull, December,* 1975, demonstrates, when Zajac returns to the big skulls in the 1970s, the rough-hewn forms still have a powerful presence, and they use the shapes explored in the earlier skull pieces in creative ways. However, in reexamining his large skull pieces, the artist is able to rework them more to his liking, solving a host of visual problems by using various skills that were unavailable to him at the time of the earlier works.

Another set of ideas that Zajac returned to examine after a break of almost ten years is shown in the series of five life-sized goats he made in 1973, each named for the day of the week on which it was begun. These pieces,

which are more specific in their imagery than the earlier series, show evidence of Zajac's ever-increasing vocabulary of sculptural forms and the greater range of sculptural skills at his command. He began with the idea of doing only one piece. Instead, a series of goats emerged, bringing to completion his involvement with the earlier goat series of the 1960s, which he had often thought was never fully concluded.[4]

After the first series of *Big Skull* pieces in the early 1960s, Zajac explored another approach that offered greater sculptural opportunities. He began to break off pieces of works in progress and to reprocess them, reconstructing the skulls from broken pieces. The large, fragmented images allowed him to employ a great variety of shapes with large and small twisting parts in explosive combination, suggesting the detritus of apocalyptic encounters of creatures of the past.

In *Ram Skull with Broken Horn V*, the thrusting shape of the skull is on an axis opposed to the attached broken horn. This piece is first perceived as a great, forceful, non-objective presence; on second glance its dynamically asymmetrical form and shapes coalesce into a strong image of an oversized and desiccated skull.

Zajac's later work with broken shapes is metaphorically different from the earlier work where the creatures are still alive or unfragmented. As in all of his work, he balances representation and abstraction by using forms and modeling that leave much to the imagination, implying what has transpired without spelling out or replicating the actual event in a naturalistic way.

The *Falling Water* pieces began with a specific, natural image that launched Zajac's work in an entirely new direction. This period was one of sacrifice for the artist because it meant discarding skills learned from earlier works. It was a full-blown change in his working processes and methods.

These pieces, which were inspired by a frozen river he saw from a train while he was visiting Connecticut on a teaching assignment, abandon the human and existential metaphors of his earlier work. At first the artist thought he would do a horizontal sculpture representing the surface of the water and suggesting a convergence of streams under it. It was an image he found beautiful, and he intended to do only one panel. However, as is almost always the case in Zajac's work, one thing led to another.

After two years of working on the water pieces, and some forty unsuccessful attempts that were discarded in the Claremont dump, he finally finished the first piece that he felt was worth keeping in 1967. Zajac says one reason he had such difficulty was that he was working with a new sculptural concept and there was no other art dealing with the direct force of water to which he could refer.

Unlike the rough-hewn quality of his bronze pieces, the *Falling Water* sculptures called for materials that lent themselves to the depiction of water, materials with greater polish and reflective qualities. He first modeled the plaster, clay, or wax on the same scale as the final piece. Depending on the structural qualities, the piece was either cast in bronze or cut in marble.[5]

The marble *Falling Water* sculptures were carved by the greatly skilled Carrara marble cutters, whose tradition of workmanship goes back to the Renaissance. Sculptors Henry Moore, Isamu Noguchi, and Jacques Lipchitz, to name some of the most important, had also used the Carrara workmen. Although Zajac does not do the actual cutting, he controls it very carefully. The cutters work precisely to his plaster model, and the artist often makes final adjustments with a grinding stone or flexible disc grinder after the marble cutters are finished with their work.[6]

The successful *Falling Water* pieces have

a serene fluidity and a quiet strength and clarity which were initially suggested to the artist by the inherent properties of the subject. The pieces were at first illusionistic, with the top of the column flattened and attached to a panel so that they seemed to flow from a source. As Zajac experimented, the later *Falling Water* pieces, such as those in this exhibition, are broken off, so that they are no longer so obvious a naturalistic representation. The forms are not literal, but suggestive, offering connotations of female figures or serpentine shapes.[7]

After a successful series of *Falling Water* pieces, Zajac extended his work in new directions, including that represented by *Black Swan*, 1968. This piece includes a submerged body and an emerging wing blade which shapes the flowing water in undulating swells as it rushes past. A rather atypical marble piece *Large Split Almond*, 1967, is part of a small group of works done within a larger series of marble works. The artist was intrigued by the beauty of a perfectly split almond he saw while having lunch with a composer friend who had just married. (Almonds are a traditional wedding snack in Italy.) As with most of Zajac's work, much trial and error occurred, and he made more than twenty pieces before he completed the small series of three that satisfied him.[8]

Throughout Zajac's work the themes of before the sacrifice, after the cataclysm, and flowing harmony arise, are abandoned, and return again. They move through the artist's work not in progression but as a cycle; explored, discarded, and reexamined through a growing vocabulary of sculptural forms and an ever-increasing range of sculptural skills.

Terry St. John
Associate Curator

Notes:

1. Geoffrey Nunberg, *Jack Zajac, Falling Water: 1962–1987,* Stephen Wirtz Gallery, 1987, p. 4.

2. Terry St. John, interview with Jack Zajac, Santa Cruz, CA, 1989.

3. Terry St. John interview.

4. David S. Stevens Schaff, "An Interview with Jack Zajac," *Art International,* vol. XIX, No. 8, p. 40.

5. Stevens Schaff interview with Jack Zajac, pp. 35–39.

6. Terry St. John interview.

7. Nunberg, pp. 35–39.

8. Terry St. John interview.

Jack Zajac Biography

Born: December 13, 1929, Youngstown, Ohio

Education: Scripps College, Claremont, CA, 1949–1953

Resides: Santa Cruz, faculty member at University of California since 1974

SELECTED ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS

Pasadena City College, CA, 1988
Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 1987, 1984
Mekler Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 1983, 1979
James Willis Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 1977, 1974
Galeria L'Obelisco, Rome, Italy, 1973
Jodi Scully Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 1977, 1975, 1973
Galleria Margherita, Rome, Italy, 1972
Forum Gallery, New York, NY, 1983, 1978, 1974, 1971
Fairweather Hardin Gallery, Chicago, IL, 1970
Landau-Alan Gallery, New York, NY, 1968, 1966
Galleria Pogliani, Rome, Italy, 1963
California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, CA, 1963
Mills College Art Gallery, Oakland, CA, 1963
Roland, Browse and Delbanco Gallery, London, England, 1960
Downtown Gallery, New York, NY, 1960
Galleria Il Segno, Rome, Italy, 1957
Schneider Gallery, Rome, Italy, 1961, 1955
Pasadena Art Museum, CA, 1951
Felix Landau Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 1969, 1967, 1964, 1962, 1960, 1958, 1954, 1953, 1951

RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITIONS

Civic Center Plaza, Irvine, CA, 1989
El Paso Museum of Art, TX, 1984
Fresno Arts Center, CA, 1981
California State University, Los Angeles, CA, 1978
Palm Springs Desert Museum, CA, 1977
Fortress of Albornoz, Orvieto, Italy, 1976
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA, 1975
Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, CA, 1975
Dartmouth College, Jaffe-Friede Gallery, Hanover, NH, 1970
California Institute of Technology, Baxter Art Gallery, Claremont, CA, 1969
The Galleries of Temple University, Tyler School of Art, Rome, Italy, 1968
Newport Pavilion Gallery, Balboa, CA, 1965

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Painting and Sculpture from the Museum's Permanent Collection, Palm Springs Desert Museum, CA, 1987
The Menagerie, San Francisco International Airport, CA 1986
Works in Bronze: A Modern Survey, University of California, Mary Porter Sesnon Art Gallery, Santa Cruz, CA, 1986
Forgotten Dimension: A Survey of Small Sculpture in California Now, Fresno Arts Center, CA, 1982
Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA, 1975
Four American Artists: Paul Suttman, Elisse Suttman, Corda Iby, Jack Zajac, United States Information Service, (traveled to seven cities in the Middle East), 1973–74
Biennale di Roma, Palazzo Nazionale, Rome, Italy, 1968
Four Artists in Five Media José Luis Cuevas, Paul Horiuchi, Conrad Marca-Relli, Jack Zajac, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Museum of Art, Utica, New York, 1965
Pittsburgh International, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, PA, 1965
Recent Prints, The Brooklyn Museum, NY, 1963
60 Scultori, Galeria Toninelli, Milan, Italy, 1963
Chadwisk, Moore, Zajac: Small Works, Knoedler & Co., New York, NY, 1963
Recent Painting, U.S.A.: The Figure, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, 1962
Fifty California Artists, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 1962
American Painters Today, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 1962
Modern Sculpture from the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Collection, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, 1962
American Sculpture, Galerie Claude Bernard, Paris, France, 1960
Recent Sculpture , U.S.A., Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, 1959
63rd American Exhibition, The Art Institute of Chicago, IL, 1959
Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 1959

cont.

Small Deposition I
1962
Bronze
13 1/2 x 11 x 9"
Collection of the artist

Biannual, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA, 1959
Festival of Two Worlds, Spoleto Festival, Spoleto, Italy, 1958
Young America, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 1957
Recent Drawings , U.S.A., Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, 1955
Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA, 1955
Pacific Coast Art, IIIrd Biennial of São Paolo, Brazil, 1955
Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture, University of Illinois, Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, IL, 1952
Annual, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA, 1951
Artists You Should Know, Los Angeles Art Association, CA, 1950

WORK IN SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ
Banco di Roma, Rome, Italy
The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, OH
Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, CO
Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, CA
Gibraltar Savings and Loan Association, Beverly Hills, CA
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC
Honolulu Academy of Arts, HI
Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA
Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse, NY
Lytton Savings and Loan Association, Los Angeles, CA
McCrory Corporation, New York, NY
Milwaukee Art Center, WI
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, NY
Museum of Modern Art, NY
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO
Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA
The Oakland Museum, CA
Palm Springs Desert Museum, CA
Pasadena Art Museum, CA
Pasadena City College, CA
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA
Scripps College, Claremont, CA
Seattle Art Museum, WA
University of Nebraska, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln, NB
Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, CA
U.S. Embassy, Ankara, Turkey
Times-Mirror Company, Los Angeles, CA
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY

Bound Goat, Thursday
1973
Bronze
28 x 41 x 22"
Collection of the artist

Exhibition Checklist

Standing Lamb
1954
Bronze
14 x 21 x 9"
Collection of the artist

Deposition
1960
Bronze
28 1/2 x 20 1/2 x 16"
The Oakland Museum, gift of the Collectors Gallery

Small Deposition I
1962
Bronze
13 1/2 x 11 x 9"
Collection of the artist

Small Deposition II
1962
Bronze
12 x 15 x 12"
Collection of the artist

Ram Skull with Broken Horn V
1963
Bronze
56 x 60 x 48"
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco

Big Skull in Two Parts IV
1963–64
Bronze
33 x 82 x 20"
Collection of the artist

Big Open Skull
1966–67
Bronze
42 x 57 x 28"
Collection of the artist

Large Split Almond
1967
Black Belgian marble
9 x 41 x 17"
Courtesy of the artist and Jan Turner Gallery, Los Angeles

Black Swan
1968
Black Belgian marble
5 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 14"
Collection of the artist

Swan and Its Wake I
1968
Bronze
18 x 29 x 12"
Collection of the artist

Bound Goat, Monday
1973
Bronze
26 x 51 x 17"
Collection of the artist

Bound Goat, Wednesday
1973
Bronze
29 x 26 x 22"
Courtesy of the artist and Jan Turner Gallery, Los Angeles

Bound Goat, Thursday
1973
Bronze
28 x 41 x 22"
Collection of the artist

Big Skull, October
1975
Bronze
44 x 65 x 34"
Collection of the artist

Big Skull, December
1975
Bronze
68 x 116 x 36"
Courtesy of the artist and Jan Turner Gallery, Los Angeles

Falling Water, Santa Cruz Series VIII
1985
Marble
67"
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco

Falling Water, Santa Cruz Series XI
1987
Bronze
109"
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco

Falling Water, Santa Cruz Series XV
1987
Bronze, silver gilt
114"
Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco

Big Skull, December
1975
Bronze
68 x 116 x 36"
Courtesy of the artist and
Jan Turner Gallery, Los Angeles

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