

MARCH  
1965

# American Artist

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85 CENTS



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*Containing Art School Directory*

# American Artist

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## What is an Art School For?

In recent years we have visited many art schools, art departments in colleges and universities, and numerous private classes conducted by various individual artists. Facilities have never been more abundant nor do students seem to lack the ordinary material and tools, and many appear to have and to use extravagantly the best that the market affords.

Yet for all this — fine buildings, competent faculties, matériel — there is something seriously lacking that money cannot buy, that endowments cannot ensure. And that something has a dual fault: One edge of the dull blade is poor discipline; the other is indifferent dedication.

Such a charge is going to nettle, if not irritate, a lot of people, yet one has only to read the daily newspaper to know — and be alarmed — that the unmoral climate in which we find ourselves is unfortunately common to American education in general, not to art schools in particular. *Real character in every facet of our time is in short supply.*

Too many young people enter art school because it looks like an easy way to occupy their time — that is, when they are not engaged in a coffee break or cooking up some silly extra-curricular activity. As a result of these distractions, clock watching, and in too many cases downright laziness, their craftsmanship is sloppy, and their manners are even worse.

Yet no respected artist we know, or know about, has ever been guilty of advocating that really learning his craft was easy. To the contrary, the ones who really count say it is hard work, that it requires painstaking effort and singular concentration.

It might be difficult to operate an art school with the rigid discipline and the exacting standards of a West

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*A recent photo of the sculptor  
Courtesy, the Hudson Dispatch, New Jersey*

## MY WOOD SCULPTURE

BY ENID BELL

STANDARD SCULPTURE TRAINING in the late Twenties, both in British and American art schools, consisted almost exclusively of clay modeling, beginning with the copying of Classic and Renaissance casts, and advancing to studies of the head and figure from life. The schools that I attended—the Glasgow School of Art and the Art Students League—gave no instruction in carving, or even designing for a carved medium; neither did my private teacher, the late Sir W. Reid Dick, R. A., although I was allowed to watch his Italian carver at work in the studio. Pupils in the Art Students League sculpture classes were not required to compose and execute reliefs, to prepare scale models, or to undertake even the most elementary casting. The more enterprising students did independent work of this kind without guidance other than what books could supply. Direct work in metal was, of course, unheard of at that time. The training, because of its very narrow scope, was woefully unbalanced and inadequate. By and large, today's schooling is far more comprehensive and creatively stimulating. However, there is a tendency to omit or give very little time to studies from life, thus depriving the student of a valuable discipline that would promote sustained effort, visual acuity and memory, analysis of form, and most important, self-criticism.

Today, the student's desire to produce rather than

practice is unduly encouraged, so that millions of tons of ineptitudes are preserved. Far too many mediocre pieces are given a place of honor in the home which would be more fitly occupied by purchased work of able contemporaries or by the first-class reproductions that are now available.

Formerly, the academic practice was to throw all classroom work back in the clay bin, no matter how much time and effort had gone into it. Actually, this was of necessity rather than choice, as armatures were always used for clay studies.

My first work in stone was for my mother's grave. I felt that, instead of settling for a stereotyped commercial product, I should make a personal tribute with my own hands, even though they had never before held a chisel. The old-timers in that line of business, not yet mechanized, were outraged at my presumption in undertaking a task for which they considered many years of apprenticeship a prerequisite. This is the usual attitude of artisans who overrate the value of speedy, skillful execution, no matter how valueless the design. My design was a simple one of draped figures in low relief, easily cut in Portland stone, with an incised inscription. I proceeded cautiously, making no mistakes in rendering the full size, so that the result was satisfactory.

My first woodcarving, similarly undertaken, without any "trial runs," was of a figure I had cast in plaster.

The slow pace of execution, due to inexperience and timidity, was actually beneficial, allowing time to decide on changes and modifications in accordance with the character of the wood. Hasty cutting is a hazard to the novice, too often leading to fatal errors while he is "carried away" by the easy satisfaction of the manual process. For the same reason, numerous tools are likely to be a hindrance rather than a help. Great things have been done by the simplest means. The well calculated decision, not elaborate equipment, is essential.

The materials of sculpture are now so diverse that only a versatile, inventive genius would have the urge or the ability to utilize all of them. Most of us, after experimentation with many, confine ourselves to a few media that seem the most suitable embodiment of our concepts. Others may spend a lifetime working with only one medium. With me, wood has held first place because of its warm tone, light weight, agreeable responsiveness to a sharp chisel, and the ease with which it may be shaped without prolonged manual labor.

To the clay, marble, stone, wood, wax, and plaster that sculptors have shaped from time immemorial, according to their desires, have been added, in recent times, prefabricated metals that can be formed by



DANCER MAHOGANY 28"

*All single dimensions indicate heights*



DUET HAZELWOOD 26"

cutting, welding, forging, and soldering, giving rise to a whole new realm of three-dimensional design. The search to find a substitute for costly bronze casting requiring the work of skilled artisans may have prompted the development of these direct metal techniques. Then there are numerous casting materials, ranging from plastics to lightweight mixtures resembling stone in texture.

The possibilities of clay alone have not yet been exhausted. It is mistakenly regarded as a primary modeling material, whereas in the leather-dry stage it has excellent carving properties. It can be readily cut with any kind of sharp implement, sliced with a thin wire, and concavities and perforations are easily effected. I find clay in this state, as a carving material, to be a happy medium between its acquiescence in the plastic condition and the obduracy of stone or wood, permitting a special style of formation.

As for wood, pieces suitable for sculpture are today increasingly difficult to obtain; no time is allowed for the seasoning process, or it is done artificially by

chemical application. There are still a few firms, mainly in the New York metropolitan area, that supply logs of "exotic" hardwood and mahogany, specifically for sculptors. For those who adhere to the vogue for "working big," regardless of splits and knots, the world is full of tree trunks. Huge sculptural carpentries, such as have recently appeared on the scene, can be constructed from pre-shaped "found" forms and every kind of lumber. Those who prefer to make carvings of portable size, in wood that will not split disastrously, can resort to scavenging. The debris of demolished buildings, particularly substantial mansions, may yield porch and other columns, stair posts, and beams of solid aged wood. Such treasures may also be ferreted out in demolition yards. Table tops, excellent for relief carving, can often be found in used furniture and junk shops. Redwood beams up to twelve inches square are stocked in some lumber yards. Few dealers, however, can be induced to sell a single twelve-foot length at retail. Any other wood larger than four-by-four inches that is not oozing with sap, and guaranteed to fall apart,



TACKLE, mahogany, 22" high



VEILED WOMAN, redwood, 25" high



PILGRIM, whitewood, 27 1/2" high



SISTERS WHITE PINE 12"



THE CATCHER SUGAR PINE 15"

can seldom be found in any carpenter's shop or lumber yard.

I have obtained much of my wood from unorthodox sources: a splendid ebony log thirteen inches in diameter from the widow of a collecting sea captain; a five-foot-high, fourteen-inch wide, solid whitewood column (preserved by countless coats of paint) from a demolished mansion; a fourteen-inch square, three-foot-high fir block from a wrecker's yard; redwood beams six by eight inches thick, from a remodeled house in Santa Fe. I have had laminated blocks of pine made by a native carving shop in Quebec, and others from a now extinct woodworking shop of a New York settlement house. Laminated panels made for me by a hat block manufacturer in Connecticut thirty years ago are still without a split, whereas those put together more recently by a cabinetmaker have opened up, giving me no end of trouble in repairing.

As for stone and marble, a trip to Vermont many years ago yielded many discarded but sound blocks found in a quarry area. I have not yet attacked what remains in my stockpile of marble table tops, slate slabs, sandstone and limestone steps similarly acquired.

The starting point of many of my pieces is a tiny three dimensional model, very rapidly shaped in clay or plasticine, indicating (but only to my eyes) the

essential masses, contours, divisions of form, and movement, whether of a predetermined subject, or a more or less accidental configuration. Other sculptures are germinated by the shape of a piece of wood or stone which, on concentrated attention, reveals a form worth developing.

Any commissioned work, of course, has to be carefully planned, and a comprehensive idea of its final appearance conveyed in the preliminary or scale model presented for the client's approval. Relief pieces are usually based on a calculated composition, positively drawn in its essentials, though full development as well as minor changes may evolve during the execution.

It seems to me that the difficulties inherent in three-dimensional carving are minimized if the material is kept as level in surface as possible, from the initial blocking out stage all the way to completion. This can be done by using the shallowest of gouges. Those that bite deeply chop up the surface into a confusion of ruts in which the envisioned form tends to be obscured or irretrievably lost. Then, too, there is a difficulty in estimating the actual volume that will remain after levelling. Needless to say, whatever chisels are used must be kept razor sharp (though time out for sharpening is irksome), otherwise the wood will come to look as if chewed by a beaver.

The rasp is a most useful, often essential tool. The temptation is to use it prematurely as a shortcut or substitute for decisive carving. The result may have a kind of flaccidity, as if overlaid with fat; the ultimate form seems not to have been quite revealed.

Also, I have found that the emerging sculpture, in its three-dimensional totality and the continuity of its parts can best be kept in a state of integrated development if worked on as much as possible in a position permitting it to be seen in the round. Nothing leads more inevitably to fatal errors than placing what is to be, for example, a standing figure in a horizontal working position, looking down at it, and over developing the front, back, and sides separately. A vertical piece can be secured upright, after preliminary blocking out, to a square of board several inches larger than its base, by means of long screws inserted near

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UNDULA WHITE MAHOGANY 15"

*Private Collection*

## ENID BELL



DARK CONTINENT EBONY 20"

The Fine Arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art; Portland State College, Stetson University, Syracuse University, and University of Oregon.

He has won many awards for lithography, oil and watercolor. These include Harry A. Frank Prize, 1928; Art Institute of Chicago Woman's Club Prize, 1928; \$1000 prize, 1928, Art Institute of Chicago; Chicago Galleries Association, 1928; William Randolph Hearst Prize, 1929, Art Institute of Chicago; Hjalgarten Prize, 1930, National Academy of Design; Tuthill Prize, 1930, International Watercolor Exhibition, Art Institute of Chicago; Martin B. Cahn Prize, 1931, American Show, Art Institute of Chicago; Logan Medal, 1933, Art Institute of Chicago; Carr Prize, 1935, Art Institute of Chicago; Artist's Ball Prize, 1936, American Show, Art Institute of Chicago; Bower Prize, 1938, Art Institute of Chicago; Norman Waite Harris Medal, 1939, American Show, Art Institute of Chicago; Jennie Sesnan Medal, 1939, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; "Artists for Victory" prize, 1942, Metropolitan Museum; M.V. Kohnstamm Prize, 1943, American Show, Art Institute of Chicago; First Prize, 1946, The Print Club, Philadelphia; Jury Award, 1948, Library of Congress Print Exhibition; The Philadelphia

Watercolor Prize, 1948, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; Old Northwest Territory Exhibit, award for oil, 1949; Pauline Palmer Prize, 1950, Art Institute of Chicago; Clusmann Prize, 1951, Art Institute of Chicago; \$1250 Prize, 1952, Terry Art Institute, Miami, Florida; Dana Watercolor Medal, 1953, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; William A. Clarke Medal, 1953, Corcoran Biennial, Washington, D.C.

#### ENID BELL (from page 39)

the center. This provides a platform that can be clamped to a table corner or stand. There must also be a means of securing the carving in a horizontal position when that again becomes necessary. This may be by means of a large vice, wedging between pegs in a carpenter's bench, or pushing against a corner of right-angled boards high enough to prevent the carving from slipping out of place. The means of securing the wood must be adequate, for many a cut finger has resulted from carelessness in this regard.

In my opinion, surface finish should be that which most enhances form, scale, general design, or material, and is sympathetic to the subject. Generally, a chiseled texture is "right" for pieces not dependent on sharply de-

fined planes or absolute clarity of details; it has a vital mobility of light and shade akin to the brush stroke in painting.

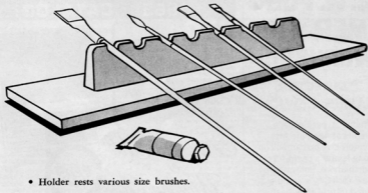
I don't think that the texture and color of wood sculpture is enhanced by applying shellac, varnish, lacquer, or any kind of sealer, because they all seem to produce a rather sticky-looking, hard shine which, if rubbed down, remains in the indentations. I prefer the soft gloss obtained by applying neutral (transparent) shoe polish, which is free from the whitish residue present in all paste and liquid waxes except the old formula of beeswax and turpentine. But where can one buy beeswax nowadays? Rubbing with a soft cloth produces an agreeable gloss, and many coats of polish may be applied over the years.

I have tinted parts of decorative carvings, such as screens and reliefs, with a transparent wash of watercolor which does not obliterate the texture of the wood, and treated others with a combination polish and dye. But for free-standing pieces, the natural color of the wood seems appropriate.

Most woods, except those naturally deep in color, such as ebony and teakwood, darken with age when exposed to light, unless, as in furniture, they are sealed in an impenetrable hard

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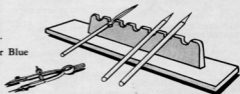
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coating. There seems to be no way of preventing this. A white pine sculpture, for example, will in the course of five years, darken perceptively — even if frequently polished — and in fifteen years will turn to the warm brown of mahogany. White-wood, like paper, will yellow with age. Maple, though unsympathetic to carve because of its texture, which is more like vulcanized rubber than wood, and likely to split even when thoroughly dry, has nevertheless the advantage of retaining its beautiful blonde tone, luminous in shadows, for a very long period.

I find it necessary to mark a wood-carving with guide lines in chalk or pencil, and re-establish them when cut away, right up to near completion, when removal may become a problem if the wood is a soft variety and comparatively light in color, such as red-wood, mahogany, or pine. Anything used for marking these woods will, in handling, smear over the surface and penetrate into the grain. Even the natural moisture of the hands, added to the ever-present grime, will cause discoloration, so that it is sometimes advisable to wear gloves during the last stages of chiseling.

Like most contemporary artists, I

have passed through phases of pre-occupation with a particular theme, configuration, material, technique, or style. This is probably because today we are all exposed to the bewildering proliferation of art reproductions in books and magazines, combined with easier access to exhibitions.

Now, in retrospect, I can see that my work has been oriented, separately or together, to three different objectives. These are: the humanistic-expressive, the decorative, and the abstract. By the latter I mean pure sculptural form, apart from context. In recent years I have been impelled, intermittently, to attempt what seems to me the most difficult objective of all, that of imbuing a basically abstract design of sharp-edged, flat, and curved planes, projecting and concave, with humanistic expression, or "presence."

Sculpture receives only a fraction of the attention presently accorded painting. Its practitioners are little known not only because of this, but for the reason that much of their work has always been architectural and monumental. Yet sculpture, particularly when planned for private ownership, has a unique property which is seldom exploited or even pointed out by critics and dealers. Perhaps, because this special feature is so


obvious, it is taken for granted. A free-standing sculpture, unlike a painting or drawing, presents a different aspect with every change of light or position. Even a relief looks different when lighted from a different side, or from top or bottom. Thus, pleasure in a too-familiar piece of sculpture may be renewed and heightened by a change of lighting or position.

Often, the contemporary sculpture which receives the lion's share of gallery space and critical acclaim does so by sheer force of its impressive size. The impact of heroic proportions is felt by every one; yet since fashions change in art as rapidly as in clothing, the sensitive, small-scale work may again come to be regarded as highly as the big and bombastic.

DUVENECK (from page 45)

that an artist draws in accordance with his own physique. As an example, he cited his friend, Sargent. "Sargent," he said, "is a slim fellow, and he draws a slim figure." (On this psychological principle, Duvencek's physical amplitude might bear a significant relation to the lush breadth of his brushwork. In these communicative moments, he evinced, too, a playful sense of humor — telling per-

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