

*"There is no abstract art.
You must always start with something."*

Pablo Picasso to Christian Zervos,
editor of *Cahiers d'Art*
1935

The Sculpture Internationals But Is It Art?



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E. Quigley
**[Carl Paul
Jennewein's]
Armillary Sphere at
first Sculpture
International
Exhibition**
photograph 1933

Hundreds of works were exhibited, examined, admired, and ridiculed at the three Sculpture Internationals sponsored by the Fairmount Park Art Association in 1933, 1940, and 1949. These exhibitions came about because Ellen Phillips Samuel (1849–1913) left her residuary estate in trust to the Art Association, specifying that the income be used to create a series of sculptures along the Schuylkill River “emblematical of the history of America—ranging in time from the earliest settlers of America to the present era.” Mrs. Samuel was a descendant of the earliest Sephardic Jewish settlers in America, and her family life was characterized by a long tradition of patriotism and philanthropy.

Although funds would not become available until the death of her husband, J. Bunford Samuel, in 1929, during his lifetime Mr. Samuel took an active interest in the project and commissioned the Icelandic sculptor Einar Jonsson's *Thorfinn Karlsefni* (4-09), with the intention that this

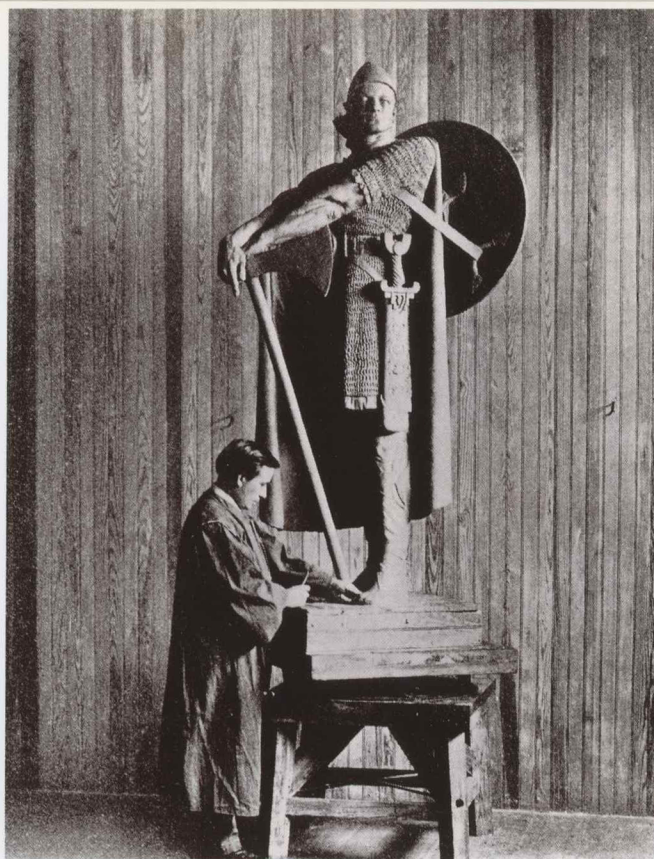
work would begin a sequence of historical sculptures erected at intervals of 200 feet along the river. However, as the art critic Dorothy Graffy later noted, Mrs. Samuel had proposed a 19th-century idea for the 20th century. By the time the last sculpture was dedicated in 1961, the Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial was as much a monument to the confusion about what constituted modern public art as a tribute to Mrs. Samuel's unprecedented generosity.

When Mrs. Samuel's will was executed in 1907, the site she had selected was a gravel road used primarily by pedestrians. By the time the Art Association received the funds in 1929, the East River (now Kelly) Drive was a blacktop thoroughfare. The committee established to carry out the terms of the bequest abandoned the original idea of a row of portrait sculptures or

allegorical statuary and agreed that the project should be a more contemporary "expression of the ideas, the motivations, the spiritual forces, and the yearnings that have created America." Paul Cret, a member of the city's Art Jury and a professor of architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, designed a setting of three terraces. Once the central unit had been completed, the Art Association embarked on the ambitious program that would result in the commissioning of works by 16 artists over a period of almost thirty years.

Each terrace was to have an overall theme, the South Terrace representing the settlement of the east coast and the development of the democratic nation; the Central Terrace, America's westward expansion and the extension of liberty through the freeing of slaves and the welcoming of immigrants; and the North Terrace, the spiritual values that have shaped American life (4-32-4-47).

In her will, Mrs. Samuel had requested that notices be placed in newspapers around the world, asking for designs and offering to pay shipping costs. In that spirit, the Art Association organized three international exhibitions to permit the Samuel Committee to review the field of contemporary sculpture and select artists who would represent the spirit of the times. For the first Sculpture International exhibition in 1933, the Art Association cooperated with the Philadelphia Art Alliance and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, in whose courtyard, Great Hall, and adjacent galleries the exhibition would take place from May through September. Sculptors around the world were invited to submit photographs of their work for



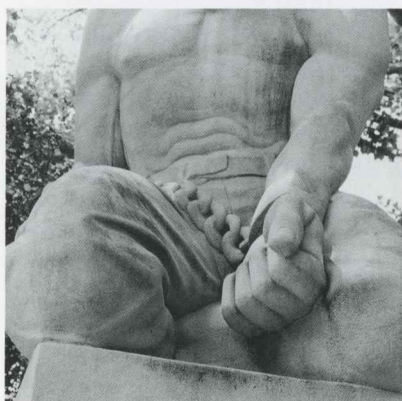
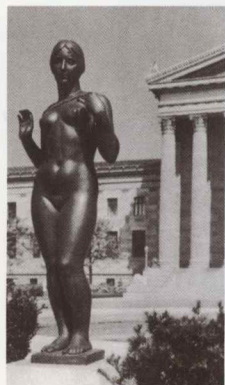
review, and the Art Association paid for insuring and transporting the selected works.

In a time of worldwide depression, artists found the prospect of exhibition and subsequent commission most desirable. Also appealing was the fact that the sculptors were to be chosen on general merit, rather than as a result of a specific competition. In May 1933, 364 works by 105 sculptors were exhibited, representing the foremost sculptors in America, as well as those from Russia, Germany, France, Romania, England, and Spain. Because of its size, setting, and comprehensive presentation of "classical" and "modern" works alongside one another, newspapers nationwide declared it the most significant American sculpture exhibition of the century. Museum attendance doubled. In the *Public*

Reuben Goldberg
[Aristide Maillol's]
Venus at second
Sculpture
International
Exhibition
photograph 1940

Helene Sardeau
The Slave
(below)
1940 4-37

John Flannagan
The Miner
1938 4-34



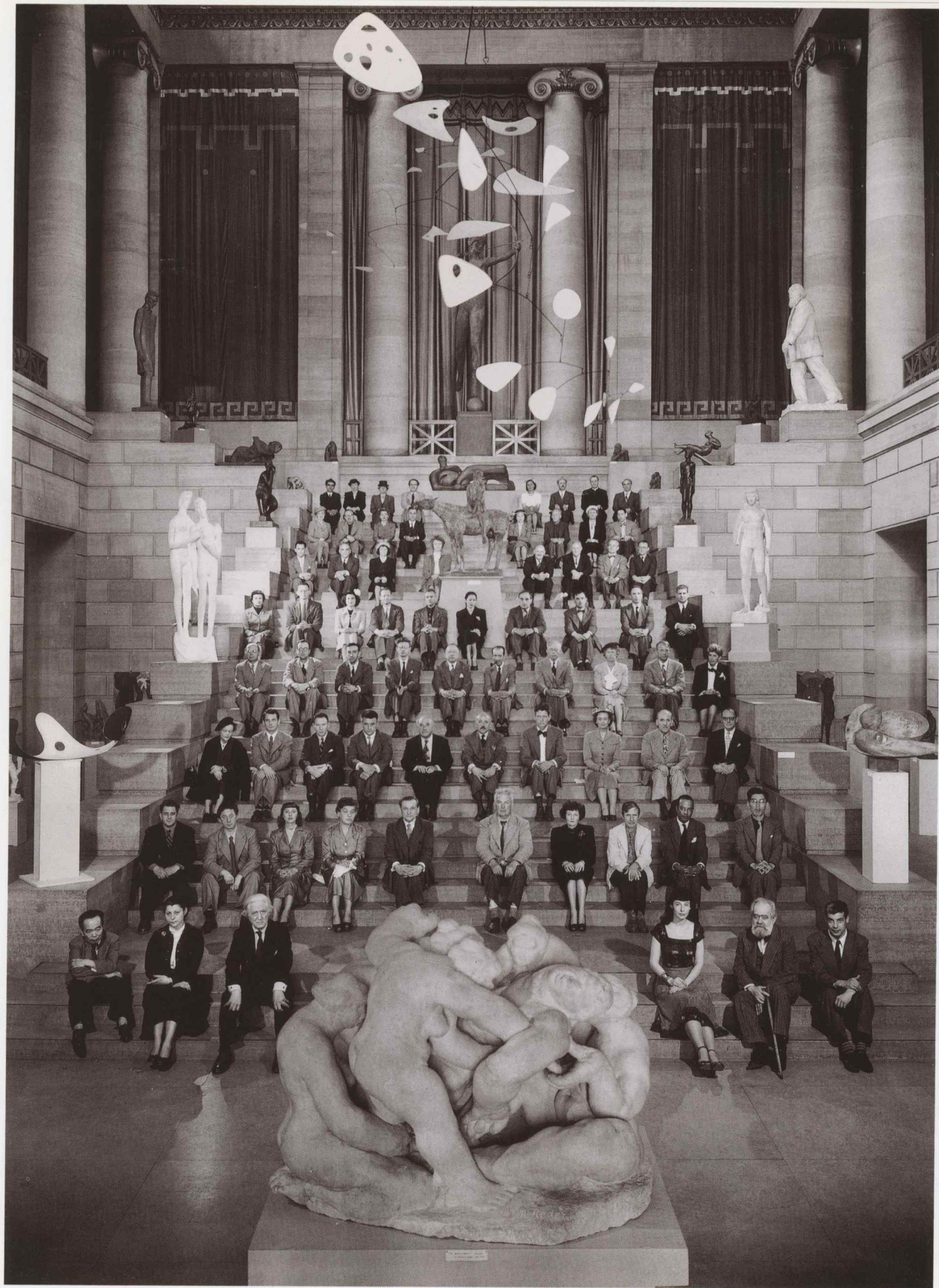
Ledger's "straw vote" ballot, newspaper readers chose (in order) Walker Hancock, Carl Milles, Harry Rosin, Alexander Stirling Calder, William Zorach, and Albert Laessle—all of whom would eventually have their work represented in Philadelphia's vast collection of public art. But the Samuel Committee selected none of those artists. Robert Laurent and Maurice Sterne (replacing Gaston Lachaise) were selected to create bronze groupings (4-32, 4-35), and John Flannagan, Wallace Kelly, Helene Sardeau, and Heinz Warneke were commissioned to create limestone figures (4-33, 4-34, 4-36, and 4-37). Archipenko, Lipchitz, Maillol, Matisse, and Noguchi exhibited, but these artists—who were to become enormously influential—appeared on neither the popular nor the designated list.

The second Sculpture International exhibition was on view during the summer of 1940. Because of the war, most of the works in the foreign section were on loan from U.S. museums, dealers, and collectors. The Whitney Museum of American Art lent works from its permanent collection for the American section, and others were on loan from government agencies employing artists: the Treasury Department's Fine Arts Section and the Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration (originally the Works Progress Administration, WPA). Materials used in the 431 exhibited works ranged from the familiar bronze, marble, and stone to wood, fieldstone, sandstone, cast cement, cast iron, aluminum, and stainless steel. Many artists were developing an interest in "direct carving" as well as experimental assembly. The war had created a shortage

of certain metals, and with decreased financial resources, it is not surprising that artists turned to materials that were more readily available.

Ninety WPA guides wearing blue smocks conducted tours of the exhibition. These previously unemployed workers had been trained to point out that many of the works were created to reveal motion, balance, color, and form. "But is it art?" asked the press. Alexander Calder's two mobiles caused a sensation, hinting at the birth of a new kinetic art form and drawing the curious attention of children while their parents retreated toward something more recognizable. Brancusi's *Miracle*—a smooth white marble form upon which he based his later work, *The Seal*—revolved on a platform just inside the Museum's entrance, posing immediate questions to those entering the building. And, among the artists themselves, there was a lively debate between those who sought an analogical relationship to the natural world in their work and those who sought the pure investigation of form through abstraction.

From the exhibiting sculptors, Wheeler Williams, Harry Rosin, Henry Kreis, and Erwin Frey were selected for the second round of commissions (4-39-4-42). Committee member R. Sturgis Ingersoll later acknowledged that for the South Terrace the committee chose more "established" artists than those who had created the works for the Central Terrace. In his opinion, the resulting work was inferior to the first group, "markedly static and



serious, perhaps too serious, lacking any romantic touch." But those were serious times, and the war may have "inspired a certain solemnity."

Work on the memorial was largely suspended once the United States entered the war. In 1949 the third international exhibition was held to select artists for the third (and last) terrace. Attendance was extraordinary: over 250,000 people came to see the 252 works on exhibition. The event was widely covered in the national press, the caption accompanying a double-page photograph in *Life* magazine calling it "the world's biggest sculpture show." Seventy visiting artists were photographed seated on the grand staircase of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, including gray-haired Alexander Calder seated in the center of the second row, and Jacques Lipchitz, with hands folded, to his left. Said one of the artists, Jo Davidson, "Never had so many sculptors been scrubbed and assembled in one place before." Davidson sits on the first row, second from the right, with his monument to Walt Whitman striding across the upper right of the photograph.

For the first time, the works were officially offered for sale, at prices ranging from \$125 to \$24,000. The first four sculptures of Revolutionary War heroes commissioned for the Reilly Memorial (4-56-4-61) were exhibited, the artists having no doubt been selected as a result of the exposure of their work in the 1940 International. The Art Association pledged an additional \$20,000 to purchase works from the exhibition, including Sylvia Shaw Judson's granite *Lambs*, now installed in the Horticultural Center in Fairmount Park; *Reverence* by Wharton Esherick, on view at the

Esherick Museum in Paoli; and Gerhard Marcks's *Maja* (4-51) on the Art Museum's East Terrace.

An abstract plaster *Cock* by Brancusi, a stone *Reclining Figure* by Henry Moore, and a huge sheet aluminum *International Mobile* by Alexander Calder were created especially for the exhibition. (Ingersoll had hoped that Brancusi's work would be cast in stainless steel by a special formula of the local Budd Company and placed permanently along the Parkway.) Also exhibiting were Georges Braque, Jacob Epstein, Alberto Giacometti, Barbara Hepworth, Jacques Lipchitz, Seymour Lipton, Marino Marini, Pablo Picasso, and David Smith. All were exploring the three-dimensionality of sculpture, departing from the primarily frontal view that had characterized so many earlier works.

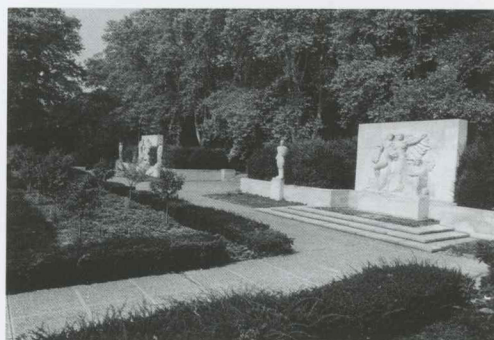
The Samuel commissions for four stone figures were awarded to foreign-born artists: Waldemar Raemisch (Germany), Koren der Harootian (Armenia), José de Creeft (Spain), and Ahron Ben-Shmuel (North Africa) (4-45-4-46). Jacques Lipchitz, a Russian living in New York, and Jacob Epstein, a New Yorker living in London, received the major bronze commissions (4-38, 4-66). The end of the war permitted, and perhaps encouraged, the selection of what Ingersoll called "an artistic League of Nations."

The members of the Samuel Committee faced the issues of their time with responsibility and ingenuity. Issues of site, artist selection, and public opinion were addressed with sensitivity but, perhaps, without commensurate boldness. Although

Peter Solmssen
**Jacques Lipchitz with
 maquette for *The
 Spirit of Enterprise***
 photograph c. 1956



Paul Cret, architect, and
 various sculptors
**Ellen Phillips Samuel
 Memorial: Central,
 South, and North
 terraces**
 4-32-4-47



the architectural setting and the thematic program were designed to intrude as little as possible on the anticipated sculpture, in the end the imposed restrictions severely limited the artists' creative possibilities. In selecting the artists, the committee felt ethically bound to respect the wishes of its benefactress and maintain the human figure as a reference. The most powerful and successful work, Lipchitz's *Spirit of Enterprise* (4-38), is also the one that made the most dramatic departure from the human body. One could even say that its preeminence has grown over the years, contributing to the decision to remove it from its contemporaries and relocate it in 1986 to a more prominent position on the Central Terrace.

Virtually anyone who has contemplated the Samuel Memorial, even in passing, can sense that there is something unsettling about the choice of sculpture. From 1933 to 1949, American culture was being transformed by a depression and a world war. The Samuel Memorial is emblematic of that period of turmoil and transition when artists and patrons were in search of new forms and meaning in an increasingly volatile world.