Over the years Bertoia’s vast output of creative endeavor has taken such varied forms as drawings, paintings, graphics, jewelry, furniture design, and sculpture, the latter both architecturally functional and purely for aesthetic enjoyment. Since 1953 all other media of expression have given way to sculpture, but the earlier work has been very influential in determining its character. The rhythmically repeated lines and forms of his monoprints are seen again and again in his chairs and screens. The inherent nature of jewelry, his early work in metal, is reflected in the essential frontalität of much of his sculpture. Even the textured surfaces of his molten bronzes were previewed in some of his silver work. (See plate 15, second from bottom, right hand column.) Bertoia’s early preoccupation with light and space and their illusionary and three-dimensional effects has stamped its mark on all that comes out of his studio.

Since his student days Bertoia has always worked in the abstract. Aesthetic ideas and intellectual concepts have led him to create abstract forms which were later identified with such things in nature as bushes, trees, flowers, dandelions, dogwood, sunbursts, galaxies, reeds, and straw. But it should be noted that the names were applied after creation, not before, and usually by someone other than Bertoia who translated the abstract into his own familiar terms or applied the label as a convenient reference. Like other nonobjective painters and sculptors, Bertoia had his difficulties with the slow public acceptance of this form of artistic expression. One notable hassle was created by the Dallas Public Library screen, which was installed, removed, and reinstalled, as mayor, city councilmen, architect, taxpayers, and devotees of modern art argued over its merit.

The reactions of professional art critics have not always been favorable either. One reviewer climaxed an unflattering description of Bertoia’s sculptures with this statement: “In any context they are execrably banal, but if they are sculpture they lack any formal embellishment, content to emulate the structure of natural form in a totally imitative way.” The addition of color to his work made it “almost cheap” for another critic. Still another wrote the following subtly uncomplimentary report:
Harry Bertoia’s metal sculpture projects a sense of installed decoration; as such it represents a kind of contemporary Victorianaism for an over-industrialized bourgeoisie, steel and bronze counterparts of the aspidistra and the potted palm. A dry-cleaned marsh of singing bronze reeds; a stainless steel puff-ball eight feet high; metallic shrubs and sycamores all seem to spring from the humus of marble lobbies and the photosynthesis of fluorescent lighting. They suggest the glinting frontage of sun-shot office buildings, the coolly sagacious precincts of executive anterooms, the echoing vault between the revolving door and the information desk. It is always some kind of delight to see a perfect manifestation, perfectly related; in this case we have the aesthetic of a realm whose perfect expression is Fortune magazine, the universe of burnished Lucidity. Bertoia’s work reflects the brilliant clean summary of the neutral engineering that structures and decries the Xanadus of affluent society.4

This erudite rhetoric, which endeavors to condemn by association, demonstrates a kind of condescension that has often been lavished on artists who, like Bertoia, have sometimes worked on functional objects such as architectural screens or furniture. It reflects a romantic attitude prevalent in twentieth century America that “the artist must be isolated from society and its needs.” As pointed out in a recent article by B. H. Friedman, “for many established artists...the idea of a commission is anathema. The adjective ‘decorative’ has become increasingly pejorative....The American artist has tended to pride himself in his own uselessness.” All this, “despite Picasso’s pottery; Giacometti’s lamps; Calder’s kitchen utensils; surrealists’ chess sets; etc.”5

For some critics Bertoia’s work with architects has tainted all his output with the horrid stain of “commercialism.” For others, the results of many of his collaborations have been eminently successful without compromising his artistic integrity or that of the architect. This has influenced debates current in the art world concerning the possibility of a new Golden Age incorporating the perfect synthesis of all the arts, as in ancient Athens or the Middle Ages. Whereas some historians believe that modern architecture precludes sculpture, others say that the post-Renaissance concept of individualism has made each artist too eager to demonstrate his own uniqueness to allow for the required cooperation.6 Still others take a more optimistic view.

Bertoia took part in one of these debates, a colloquium conducted by mail among such figures of the modern art world as Pietro Belluschi, Reg Butler, Eduardo Chillida, Jimmy Ernst, Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Richard Lippold, for the Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In it he revealed a belief in the possibilities of the present as being equal to those of the past, the past having been helped toward its apparent unity by the selectiveness of time. Also apparent in his writings during this 1960 debate-by-mail is a strong belief in the capabilities of modern man to use creatively the materials of his own era. “Man’s deepest thoughts,” he wrote,
"perhaps remain unexpressed, but he surely can exercise his intelligence for choosing, among the various media, the one best suited in coming closest to what he wants to say." For the most part undisturbed by the controversy and disinclined to assert his own will over others, Bertoia prefers to continue his investigations into the ideas and materials which interest him and leave the judgments to time. The high professional regard in which he is held by the architects with whom he has worked gives answer enough to his critics.

"An intellectual exercise" is perhaps the one phrase best suited to generalize about the whole of Bertoia's work to date. For each of his sculptures originated in the mind—from a well formulated but constantly evolving idea or concept based on his perception, not on observation of nature—and was brought to fulfillment through the exercise of his intelligence in making decisions during the process of creation. This is why his work has such a strong appeal to the intellect. It represents an intellectual process leading toward the universal in art. Much of it is obviously willed, brought about by engineering, carefully calculated. It is the product of a modern man's use of his sensitivity and intelligence on materials which are specifically related to his twentieth century world—industrial materials, mass produced where possible, metals that have been refined and extruded into flat sheets, rods, wires, shot. In some cases, machined parts have been designed and utilized—but always designed. Bertoia rarely uses junk, found objects, or parts originally made for other purposes.

"Precision" is a word that has been applied to Bertoia's sculpture and it is aptly descriptive. His work reveals the precision that went into it, not merely in the mental calculations of engineering details, such as stresses and strains and perfect balance, but in the finishing details of craftsmanship. Patinas, sprays, lacquers are used to advantage, and he has been known to spend weeks cleaning a finished stainless steel sculpture of the black marks left by the industrial process of extrusion of the wire. His pieces gleam where they are meant to do so and have a dry, matte surface where it is willed so. Bertoia's hand craftsmanship, an unusual blend of "tender, loving care" applied to precisely chosen modern industrial materials, adds the warmth of personal attention to what otherwise might seem cold and inhuman. His sensitivity to aesthetic considerations such as color and texture, proportion and balance, makes itself felt in every piece.

There is a baroque quality, too, in most of Bertoia's work, which keeps it from being categorized as coldly calculating. The voluptuous curves of the Philadelphia and Buffalo fountains are obvious examples; so also are the painterly details of his poured bronzes—all seemingly so disparate as to be incomparable to the straight lines and rectilinear forms of the architectural screens, particularly the most recent example in Brooklyn. But here, color is the most important factor, adding a touch of flamboyance to the squares, which are otherwise so ascetic as to seem allied to the minimal trend in sculpture. A look at other
Concepts

49

49

An experimenter by nature, Bertoia was encouraged along these lines by the Cranbrook atmosphere. Reflecting this freedom in its variety, his work has always been characterized by its refusal to be kept within rigid bounds. “Breaking arbitrary fences is one of my delights,” he says, “I enjoy doing that.” For instance, he sees no reason why color cannot be an element of sculpture—or sculpture an element of painting.

The hues Bertoia most frequently uses are yellows and blues, with yellow generally predominating and ranging from light brassy tones through brilliant golds to deep bronzes, with occasional digressions toward oranges and reds. His blues tend toward turquoise or blue-green, the natural colors of weather-oxidized bronze. Whether in paintings, monoprints or sculpture, the colors associated with metals have always been preferred. This may be a result of his happy boyhood experience of watching gypsies repair copper and brass utensils over an open fire near his home in Italy.

Sound and motion, too, are incorporated in many of Bertoia’s works. Most of these are related to the early studies in vertical balance which began to intrigue him nearly twenty years ago. The actual, physical motion of the rods of the sculpture creates the sound, which is related to the avant-garde music of the twentieth century, while evoking thoughts of the primeval in its echoing sonorousness. Bertoia’s appeal to the aural as well as the visual sense is unusual in sculpture and stems from a desire to involve all of man’s senses in aesthetic enjoyment. In some sculptures motion alone is the object, and in still others only the illusionary effect of motion is created by designs based on changing light conditions.

Another essential of music, rhythm, is an important characteristic of all Bertoia sculptures. The repeated modulus or line, straight or curved, is always very carefully controlled by the composer-conductor, even where it seems most random. Repetition is the key to the unity demonstrated in his more successful pieces.

All Bertoia’s sculptures have an overwhelming appeal to the tactile sense. They are obviously meant to be touched or rubbed. Their alternately uneven or smooth surfaces convey a feeling of the primitive (plates 22, 29, 65) or a sense of delicate, refined elegance (plates 25, 27, 69). In either case, the palms itch and the fingertips respond pleasurably to the invited investigation.

Bertoia is also very much concerned with space and the interplay of void and matter. Many of his works tend to be airy, some even lacy in appearance. His studies in density, in which he incorporates the voids into a sculpture made of criss-crossed wires or rods, culminated in the mammoth Northwestern National piece, a closeup of which reveals it to be the counterpart in sculpture of a Jackson Pollock painting (see
One of the first such studies in density was a rather remarkable head done about 1958 or 1959, now owned by Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Leibowitz of Rydal, Pennsylvania (plate 73). Like Picasso’s Cubist head of 1909 and Naum Gabo’s Constructivist head of 1916, it was an experiment in a new sculptural concept. The planes of the hair, forehead, nose, cheeks, mouth, and chin are recognizably outlined in space, and the actual volumes are created “out of thin air.” Its four tiny gold feet are a whimsical finishing touch. This head is notable as the only Bertoia sculpture intended to be representational.

The constructed screens, too, incorporate space as an element of design. “Component parts held together as if by a magnetic force,” Bertoia once called them. Light, with the changing shadows it induces, is always a prime consideration in his sculptures. Even the works in molten bronze are affected by his feeling for light and space, with their jagged holes and the cast shadows of the inserted rocks and crusty projections.

Much of Bertoia’s work is designed for places where it can be viewed only frontally (see plates 25-27, 39). Even many that can be walked around are forced by architectural conditions to have essentially a back view and a front view rather than a continuing motion in the round (see plates 21, 22). This preponderance of frontality in his sculpture to date, while it is determined by the placement of the pieces, is attributable to his early work in paintings, monoprints, and jewelry, and to his first three-dimensional studies in light effects. For it was this work which prompted his first architectural commission and many of those which followed were along similar lines. Exceptions are the Princeton globe, the so-called bushes and dandelions, and the River Oaks, Philadelphia, and Buffalo fountains—indications that in his later work he is getting away from this restriction.

These, then, are the components of Bertoia’s sculptures—metals, texture, color, light, sound, motion, rhythm, line, and modulus—all related to the surrounding and incorporated space, making it seem almost tangible. The essential spirit with which they are imbued is an exuberance of life, of dynamic energy. Some are blatantly gay, made for sheer delight in the beholding. Many have a shimmering quality developed with color, light, and motion. His bronzes are more elemental. Composed of fire, water, air, and earth, they seem mysterious and are meant to evoke thoughts of man’s beginnings and of the dark recesses of his soul or inner spirit. These two types—the joyful, the bright, and the stark, the elemental—demonstrate Bertoia’s abiding interest in dualities, such as the two infinities. To him, the bright and open ones have to do with the sky, whereas the dark and crusty ones pertain to the earth. Individual sculptures combine other dualities, or paradoxes, such as power and gentleness, strength and delicacy, massiveness and airiness.

Bertoia feels strongly that an artist should not allow himself to be a man set apart from the society in which he lives. He is very much
concerned with the modern world, its new sensations, and its new materials and techniques. He seeks always to use to best advantage the materials and methods of our industrial society to produce “life-enhancing” objects—objects of beauty and interest to modern man. Essentially abstract and nonfigural, his sculptures are nevertheless very much concerned with relating man to his immediate environment as well as to his universe.