Harry Bertoia, Sculptor

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Quite naturally some of Bertoia's commissions were more successful than others, and this applies also to the hundreds of smaller sculptures he created during the same period. One characteristic, however, that stands out among them all is their variety which, paradoxically enough, is particularly evident in whole groups of sculptures having great similarity, like the screens or the series of small bush-like forms. Like musical variations on a theme, they display the sculptor's virtuosity. For Bertoia does work principally in only four major areas or themes, into which almost every one of his sculptures can be categorized. "The validity of an idea is tested each time it takes physical shape. As long as new shapes keep forming, the idea has not yet reached fulfillment," he says, and his work attests to his continuing investigations into those concepts which, from the beginning, have interested him the most.

First are his studies in light and space which began with the monoprints and their "movable type" method of using repeated small forms. This technique led to the three-dimensional experiments described and illustrated above (plate 17). The introduction of metal for the screens kept the work monochromatic for a while, but light and its changing effects were always important (plates 21, 22, 25). The Staempfli Gallery's Hollow Forms is another result of these studies (plate 57), as is the small screen owned by the Theodore Lyman Wright Art Center at Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin. The latter was shown in a remarkably representative though succinct exhibition, "Sculpture 1950-1958" (twenty-three pieces), at the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio. In his catalog commentary Forbes Whiteside alluded to Bertoia's work:

Open constructions, which so strongly suggest steel and glass-enclosed buildings, have this in common with modern architecture: both are more concerned with modulating space than mass. If some sculptured works seem to lack a proper amount of bulk, contemplate the negative as well as the positive masses. Rods and bars define the edges and corners of the masses while each thin plate establishes the position and angle of one plane of a transparent volume.¹

Later experiments in light and space became airier and airier as the modulus itself became a textured rod. While maintaining a basic
monotone, Bertoia brought some color into play in the Northwestern National piece (plate 39) and in the one for W. Hawkins Ferry (plate 51), as well as in the Golden Screen owned by Robert W. Sarnoff (plate 58) and another small one owned by the Graham Foundation of Chicago, which Bertoia considers the most successful of all. From the St. Louis Airport screen of 1955 (plate 76) to the Brooklyn Federal Court screen of 1967 (plate 43), color has added further interest as his studies in light and space continue. In a rare speech given in 1955 at the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado, Bertoia revealed some of his thoughts with regard to color:

What happens when structure and color get together? Exploration of the possibilities of color leads to a new and very significant function. Structure enables color to attain higher intensities. It gives color a chance to receive light from more than one direction. The reflective possibilities attain an unbelievable degree of intensity and opalescence.

Architecture can benefit greatly by the use of color in ways that can give poetic expression to the thinking mind.²

A second investigation has been conducted over the years into the possibilities of both sound and motion in sculpture. Stemming from his lifelong interest and that of his family in music, Bertoia's experiments along these lines have elicited sculptures which produce sound as they shiver and shake when rubbed or touched by the wind or any slight disturbance. The River Oaks fountain was a not completely successful large-scale attempt in this direction (plate 41), but many smaller sculptures, like the untitled bronze in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Irving Castle (plate 59), reverberate for a long time, setting up a strange cacophony as of ocean waves crashing and receding in a metal cave. In his show at the Staempfl Gallery in the spring of 1968, several musical sculptures were grouped together (plate 61). Each one produced a different sound when set into motion by a touch and the gallery was kept ringing with a variety of mellow tones. His experiments with various materials—bronze and beryllium copper rods and nickel alloys, to mention a few—have revealed that sculpture can produce musical sound, a fact which was effectively demonstrated in the soundtrack for Clifford B. West's film on Bertoia.

These experiments have also produced pieces like the one in the Joseph H. Hirshhorn collection—a forty-eight inch high sheaf of stainless steel wires embedded in the center of a fourteen-inch diameter steel-encircled concrete base. A half-inch wide steel collar with an adjustable key can be slid down to create a spreading motion at the top, like that of a slowly opening flower. The sheared ends of the released wires catch pinpoints of light as they wave to and fro to the accompaniment of a light metallic rattle. Other sculptures made of sheaves of wires are also designed to move slowly and gracefully when touched, like the one in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Roaman
A third theme which has interested Bertoia for a long time has to do with the concept of "the interpenetration of space." It involves the arrangement of points in space which, by their juxtaposition, appear to form a contour line, although no actual physical surface exists. Explorations of this idea have led Bertoia to create an enormous series of generally somewhat spherical sculptures, like the one at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School (plate 29), Small Bush owned by Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Jaffe (plate 63), and others (plate 64). In these pieces the rods radiating from a central core have globules on their outer ends, which form the illusion if not the actuality of a surface plane. Bertoia says these sculptures attempt to deal in a mathematical sense with what he calls "the two infinities"—one of his initial thoughts in this concept. "No one knows where the center (the one infinity) is," he says, "and the rods proceeding from this source could be extended to fill the cosmos (the other infinity)." The "bushes" and the Princeton globe are also attempts to get closer to the basic relationship between light, space, and structure.

In one series based on this theme, some of which were called Dogwood, the sculptures look more like trees than bushes, being somewhat taller and bearing larger forms at the ends of their radiating rods. Such a one is the forty-inch high steel, bronze, and chrome piece entitled Flower, included in the Museum of Modern Art’s traveling exhibition, "Recent Sculpture USA," of 1958. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts’ Gold Tree (plates 65, 66), first exhibited in the American Pavilion at the Brussels World’s Fair, is another. The entire group of so-called dandelion sculptures—ranging from the twenty-foot tall former Beverly Hills installation to the forty-four inch one owned by the Des Moines Art Center, and including the eight-foot one in the artist’s possession (plate 67)—comes from these investigations, though it bears the mark also of his work in sound and motion, and his interest in vertical balance.

A drawing of a proposed fountain for the McCormick Building in Chicago (never executed) shows a mammoth "dandelion" about forty feet tall, to judge from the man at its base (plate 68). The proposal was for water to be pumped up the stem into the central orb and from there, under pressure, out each of the radiating tubes to nozzles at their outer ends. Each nozzle was to function like an ordinary lawn sprinkler spraying the water in radiating directions in a fine mist. A seven-foot sculpture done previously, owned by Mrs. Florence Knoll Bassett, creates the spray effect with wire (plate 69).

The Philadelphia and Buffalo fountains (plates 45, 48), on the other hand, begin to define space in terms of an actual surface formed by a membrane. The convolutions of this surface produce positive and negative spaces which are really the same space looked at from one or the other side of the membrane. The aesthetics of these fountains lies
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somewhere between the concept of the interpenetration of space and a fourth long-standing area of interest which Bertoia has called the concept of "interior space."

This involves the idea of a dark and restful interior place, having no relationship with what is outside and therefore providing a kind of sanctuary. He describes what he envisions as "like being inside an egg." While no actual large-scale work has yet been done along these lines, the idea is embodied in a drawing on his study wall showing a globular form with an underground entrance. One would go downstairs and come up again into a windowless interior. Such a method of entrance would help insure a subdued atmosphere and provide the feeling of detachment and humility necessary to a sanctuary. A glimpse of what it might be like inside such a globe can be obtained by peering into a small bluish-green model whose surrounding membrane is constructed of fused metal shot, creating a bumpy surface inside and out, with a few tiny irregular holes allowing the penetration of small spots of light here and there. From this model it can be readily seen that an atmosphere of hushed reverence results from the subdued light, not unlike that experienced on entering Capri’s Blue Grotto or the crypt of the Church of St. Francis at Assisi.

More work needs to be done along these lines, Bertoia feels, but the idea, which has been with him for a long time, is slowly taking shape.

A fifth area in which Bertoia is interested involves a medium rather than a concept—the medium of working bronze while in its liquid state, as described previously. Though he has spent less time on this activity than on any other, he considers his large panel for the Dulles International Airport his best work to date (plate 26). His ability with molten bronze is confirmed by many smaller works done both before and since, such as Furrow, 1962, at the Cranbrook Academy of Art, and Spring, 1965 (plate 70), in the collection of the Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A., and shown in the 1966 annual Whitney Museum sculpture exhibition.

The medium is an exacting as well as an expensive one, requiring large quantities of molten metal. The nature of the process produces a mural-like result. The artist’s role is much like that of a watercolor painter in that all direct work must be done in the few minutes which elapse between the pouring and the hardening of the bronze. The accidental effect must be quickly turned to advantage or the process must begin all over again. Bertoia’s method of using water and rocks helps to give these pieces their look of association with man’s basic primeval environment. Their encrusted surfaces look like cave interiors with dark cul-de-sacs and unexpected openings. There is an aura of mystery about them. It is an intriguing medium for Bertoia and he expects to do more in this field. But meanwhile other ideas crowd his fertile imagination.

One old idea that keeps returning, and may yet some day have its consummation, is a group of earth-bound bells with long antennae
protruding like flagpoles from their tops many feet into the air (plate 71). This model was made as a proposal for a church whose overseers did not go through with it. The sound of the bells would come from a reverberation of the rods, which would be set into motion from the ground. The installation is envisioned for a park-like area in front of a church where people could walk around and touch the bells. The model for the bells is related to his studies of vertical balance which began nearly twenty years ago.

Bertoia’s studies of sound in sculpture, he feels, have only just begun. Currently he and his brother Oreste are continuing experiments with rods and wires of different metals in an effort to produce a full range of tones bearing no relationship to our present musical scale. They have cleared out the barn at his home in Barto and it has been refinished inside to serve as a sounding box (surrounding, rather than within these instruments of music). Bertoia has constructed sculptures of varying metals, thicknesses, and heights, which have been placed inside the barn for further experiments with a tape recorder “to develop the range, autonomy, rhythm, and continuity of the sounds” (plate 72). A concert is the goal.

Among specific works projected for the future are a sculpture for a public school in Baltimore and a huge indoor piece for Yamasaki’s World Trade Center in New York. Then Bertoia plans to turn his attention to some ideas he has for the embellishment of his own environment—the woods and fields surrounding his home.

When asked if he ever expects to design any more furniture, Bertoia at first said “No,” feeling that for some time now he has known where he is going as a sculptor. On reflection, however, he said that if he ever did design again, it would be some type of disposable furniture. This is an outgrowth of his recent concern over the unsightliness of automobile graveyards and other junk heaps containing the refuse of modern civilization. He feels that when we are through with the things we use, like automobiles and furniture, we should be able to burn them or otherwise dispose of them in a manner that will not create an ugly sight for the eyes of future generations.

Ideas such as these abound in Bertoia’s creative imagination. Where each will lead he does not now know, but the longer they stay with him, the more likely it is that they will come to fruition.