

CHAIM GROSS

1904-1991

BY ALLEN GINSBERG

FOR HIS seventieth birthday Chaim Gross told *New York Times* reporter Israel Shenker, "Art gives me great happiness." Persistent happiness and its transmutation to art, his abiding bequest. Youngest of ten children with half his family wiped out in a diphtheria epidemic, he witnessed firsthand Cossacks abusing his parents, and at aged twelve was impressed by the Austro-Hungarian army into picking up the battlefield dead. Chaim's early life cataloged misfortunes of Eastern Europe, volatile then as today. Deported from Hungary to Austria, then Austria to Poland. The son of a timber appraiser, following his father to the timber yards in remote Galicia in the forests of the Carpathian Mountains, he grew up watching the local peasant families whittling figures in wood, so it's natural that he would develop a particular affinity for direct wood carving.

After arrival in America with a wave of brother & sister immigrants he suffered years of extraordinary poverty, first doing a variety of odd jobs (delivery boy, floor cleaner, dish washer) to support his art, sometimes in the late 'twenties and early 'thirties living entirely hand-to-mouth. When the apple and pear were missing from the still-life class at his Educational Alliance, home-away-from-home, friends assumed that Chaim must've eaten them. More bittersweet circumstance, the sale of two watercolors and one sculpture, his first sale in the early 'thirties. Disheartened, he left town with a note ("Good-bye boys"), assumed to be a suicide missive.

The sale took place in the interim. Ninety dollars! Imagine the surprise when the artist “came back from the dead!”

“Don’t wait till the muse wakes you up at night and says do this and that. Make a point of working all the time,” he advised his students. “I’m a sculptor not a painter but I’m one of those sculptors who knows how to draw and how to paint,” was his own clear self-appraisal. Chaim’s articulate understanding of his own processes made him a sympathetic consummate teacher at the Alliance and the New School whose faculty he joined in ’48. His book, *The Technique of Wood Sculpture* (1957), remains over thirty years after its publication a useful compendium and primer.

In earlier decades he enjoyed the company of his fellow artists — lifelong friends the Soyer brothers (Isaac, Moses, and Raphael), Peter Blume, Barney Newman, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, Ben Shahn and Philip Evergood thru significant years at the Alliance where he was first pupil, then teacher, even of Louise Nevelson, for almost seven decades. He was blessed with a fortunate marriage to wife Renee & fathered a remarkable daughter, painter Mimi Gross.

Recognition of his own work came slowly. His first one-man drawing and sculpture show took place in 1932 at Manfred Schwarz’s 144 Gallery on West 13th Street. Earlier he’d contributed to group shows at Edith Halpert’s Downtown Gallery (one of the first New York galleries to handle contemporary American art) but quit when he came in one day and discovered his sculpture used as a doorstep. The Depression Thirties represented the breakthrough decade in Chaim’s art, but didn’t translate into sales or money. By 1942 he could still count on his fingers the number of sculptures he’d sold. No matter that the work was appearing in some significant collections: The Museum of Modern Art acquired his typically graceful and exuberant study in balance, *Handlebar Riders*, and in

1942, the Metropolitan Museum of Art awarded him a \$3000 purchase prize for his *Lillian Leitzel*, a similarly sensuous figure sculpture.

The celebration of the human figure was to be one of Chaim's most prominent themes. At the 1939 World's Fair he worked on a fourteen-foot-high family group for the French Pavilion, as well as the figure of a linesman for the Finland building. He was also "on display" himself, demonstrating his craft. He may not have sold many sculptures at this time but his singularity was assured, for even in the era of Social Realism, Chaim was thematically somewhat at odds. For all their apparent context, his figures, the daring acrobats, say, posited not so much a social program as a commitment to each other, the *human* quality, the interdependence of the *human*—his abiding theme. Similarly in the 'fifties and after when the emphasis shifted to the artist's individual subjective vision, Chaim's art stood unaffected, he was what he was.

Representative works like the ten foot *Birds of Peace*, commissioned for Hebrew University in the late 'fifties and early 'sixties and *The Ten Commandments* (unveiled 1972 at the International Synagogue at Kennedy Airport) show his command of an ambitious scale. But Chaim's drawings were the key to his art. An inveterate draughtsman throughout his life, from earliest days of exile to his last days here in New York, he filled countless sketchbooks and hundreds of sheets with accomplished pencil, pen and ink, ink, and wash studies—on nature, studies of the human form, "fantasy drawings" (a collection of these appeared in book form under that title in 1956), unmediated examinations of his own psyche, dark in the early years and increasingly lyrical, erotic & surrealist in character as he finally revealed his own nature. A major retrospective of his work at the Jewish Museum in 1977 showed his astonishing versatility & fecundity, and in his remaining fourteen years he kept on working.

Visitors to his house were always amazed at the richness & range of his own collection of others' work—an intelligence & energy of travel & socializing that went way beyond the quiet emotional white-haired man that I knew in the last few decades. At his house (once a hat factory), a good meal prepared by Renee, his wife—chicken soup, potato pancakes—was served at a table surrounded by authentic artifacts by Chagall, Evergood, Peter Blume, his favorite Federico Castellon, the Soyers, Jack Levine, Max Weber, David Burliuk, Max Ernst, Louis Guggenheim, George Grosz, Horace Pippin, Adolph Gottlieb, and Matta. Altogether a vast home collection, including small works by de Kooning, gouaches, drawings, lithos by Toulouse-Lautrec, Klee, Dufy, Leger, Modigliani, Picasso, Rodin, a Renoir bronze, a Maillol, John Marin, Orozco, Pascin, Stuart Davis—as well as a huge selection of West African sculpture, Ashanti gold weights, Oceanic and Pre-Columbian art. So he's now sitting drinking tea with old acquaintances Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, & the Soyer Boys in heaven or whatever Shul their shades attend.