

AVIAN IMAGERY AND FLIGHT

Lipton, personally fascinated by birds and by flight, was a proud member of the Audubon Society. He wrote, “The aerial force is part and parcel of a general mood I have felt about our time, and in nature . . . art is fundamentally the language of the spirit.”

Avian imagery plays a significant role in the history of American sculpture. In the early decades of the twentieth century, direct carvers such as John Flannagan, Chaim Gross, and William Zorach produced avian forms in both wood and stone. The direct carvers inspired other artists both formally and in their attention to images of flight, even as many of them moved from carving in wood to working in metal.

Throughout the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, artists sculpted avian forms in both realistic and abstract styles. Henry Moore, for example, often considered avian imagery; Leonard Baskin created sculptures based on the bird in various materials; and Alexander Calder’s famous mobiles hover overhead and move gracefully in space like birds in flight. In images of birds and flight, Abstract Expressionist sculptors also found a subject with which to treat many prominent themes of the period, including prehistory, contemporary literature, and renewal. Theodore Roszak produced numerous sculptures dedicated to avian imagery with such titles as *Raven*, *Firebird*, and *Skylark*, and many of David Smith’s works are similarly avian in concept, including his *Raven* series. Like his contemporaries, Lipton by the late 1940s began to create sculptures in metal inspired by birds and flight.

Variations on the avian form appeared throughout Lipton’s mature and late career. In the 1960s, he abandoned the prehistoric quality of his previous avian forms and produced simple yet elegant abstractions of flight. These works included *Arctic Bird*, 1960, and *Archangel*, 1963–1964. The visually enticing sculptures *Angel* and *Bird* both produced in 1975 and the late-career work *Icarus*, 1983, revisited the theme of flight.

Although *Archangel*, a sculpture for Lincoln Center’s Avery Fisher Hall, and *Angel* do not depict birds, they both relate to flight and the free spirit. *Bird* acts as a metaphor of flight. Lipton indicated that while making *Bird*, “I immediately had a sense of flight and airiness.”

As a major Abstract Expressionist, Lipton’s avian forms derive from common aesthetic and contextual sources. While they explore the formal considerations of his era, the avian pieces are also grounded in themes prevalent in postwar society: prehistory, rebirth, transformation, and mythology.