

Alexander Archipenko Vision and Continuity

Alexander Archipenko's artistic journey began in Kyiv, Ukraine, where he was born on May 30, 1887. He studied painting and sculpture at the Kyiv art school from 1902 to 1905, and absorbed the rich panoply of Ukrainian culture that helped define his artistic identity.

In 1906, Archipenko traveled to Moscow, where in 1908 he viewed an exhibition of recent French art at the first Golden Fleece Salon. Inspired by this experience, he moved to Paris later that year, where his genius for invention was challenged and inspired by that city's brilliant artistic milieu. He translated new ideas into revolutionary works of art that redefined the nature of sculpture. His seminal innovations included the exploration of convex/concave forms, the volume/space transference, the reintroduction of color to sculpture, mixed-media constructions, and the invention of sculpto-painting. Archipenko rapidly gained international prominence and was championed by Guillaume Apollinaire, Paris's leading critic. In 1920 he was honored with a solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale.

Archipenko spent the war years (1914—1918) in Nice. In 1921 he settled in Berlin, where he lived until 1923, when he moved permanently to America. In 1929 he purchased a stone quarry in Bearsville, New York, which served as his home, studio, and art school.

Archipenko stayed true to his revolutionary ideas during his forty-year career in America (he died on February 25, 1964). In 1927 he invented *Archipentura*, a machine that introduced movement in painting. In the 1940s and 1950s he experimented with new materials such as Plexiglas, bakelite, and Formica.

Archipenko exhibited and taught extensively. In 1936 he participated in the influential exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and in 1937 he was on the faculty of the New Bauhaus in Chicago.

With his clearly defined vision, Archipenko steered clear of subsequent movements such as Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. His earlier position in Paris as a progenitor of newness was now supplanted by others. From the perspective of time, however, Archipenko's career represents a cohesive whole — intellectually rigorous, technically skilled, and visually compelling.

This exhibition affords an opportunity to experience the creative breadth and sheer beauty of the art of one of the twentieth century's most influential and innovative sculptors.

The four divisions of this exhibition — Content into Form; Form and Space; Motion and Stasis; and Construction, Material, Color — are guideposts for the viewer. Many works incorporate two or more of these rubrics, emphasizing Archipenko's cohesive vision that cuts across time and across formal and thematic issues.

Jaroslav Leshko, Exhibition Curator
Professor Emeritus of Art, Smith College

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Content into Form

Archipenko's formal inventions are enriched by an extensive and varied subject matter. In his elemental and exotic early work *Sorrow* (Tristesse) 1909, he addresses the prevailing interest at the time in sculpture from Africa and Oceania and pays homage to the art of Paul Gauguin; archaizing and primitivism tendencies are also evident in *Woman (Head on Knee)* of 1909 and *Woman with Cat* (1911). In depicting sorrow, he taps into a rich emotional vein of subjects dealing with the human condition, among them *Family Life* (1912), *The Past* (1926), and *Mâ-Meditation* (1932). Religious and spiritual themes, evident in his early *Adam and Eve* (1909) and *Madonna of the Rocks* (1912), would be of continuous interest to him, as in his later experimental works in Plexiglas such as *Ascension* (1950). In the artist's stylized *Vase Woman II* (1919) and the naturalistic *Figure (Standing Female Nude)* 1921, he experiments with two distinct approaches to the human form and through them comments on the nature of woman.

Archipenko's early revolutionary works done in Paris are steeped in that city's world of entertainment. *The Dance* (1912—1913) brings to mind the sensational success of the Ballets Russes. *Boxers* (1914) reflects a passion for the sport at the time. The circus performers, *Médrano I* (1912—1914) and *Médrano II* (1913—1914?), celebrate a subject favored by avant-garde artists including Pablo Picasso. In Archipenko's exuberant late work *Festive* (1961), he evokes the vital energy of these early works.

Archipenko's sculptures are thus deeply enriched by the meaning with which the artist imbues them. His extensive writings on art further underscore the theoretical and philosophical basis of his innovations. The sustained way that form and content inform each other is a central continuity of Archipenko's art.

Form and Space

Archipenko's most radical and far-reaching contribution to the vocabulary of modernism is the penetration of the human form at its most volumetric part, such as the head or the torso. The transformation of volume into open, defined space was more than a formal device for the artist. He writes of "the creative consciousness producing a form of space with symbolic meaning." This resolution at once challenges the integrity of the human form and redefines its identity. *Geometric Statuette* (1914) is the artist's earliest documented example of this radical solution. It is most fully resolved in works such as *Walking* (1914—1915) and *Seated Woman* (Geometric Figure Seated) 1920. *Queen of Sheba* (1961), a late work by the artist, is a culmination of his research in this area. Archipenko's breakthrough would be reflected in the work of many twentieth century artists, perhaps most comprehensively in the figures of Henry Moore.

Archipenko's concurrent exploration of convex/concave forms, evident in works like *Statue on Triangular Base* (1914) and *Seated Black Concave* (Seated Figure) 1916, would become a sustaining interest for the artist in every phase of his career. *Woman Combing Her Hair* (1915), perhaps Archipenko's best known work, effectively combines the convex/concave principle in the graceful orchestration of the body with the penetration of the head.

Motion and Stasis

Archipenko's interest in movement evolved during his Paris years. It reflects a general interest at the time in defining modernity through motion — a concept enunciated most boldly in the Futurist Manifesto of 1909. It also speaks to his restless, inventive temperament fascinated with the vitality and variety of human form in motion. In choosing themes such as dancers, circus performers, and boxers, he makes motion an imperative in his art. The movable right arm in *Médrano I* was an early example of kineticism in sculpture. Archipenko's *Walking* (1914—1915) introduced a motif that recurs in every decade of his career, each time brilliantly transformed.

Archipenko's interest in movement has a counterpoint in his concept of stasis. Sculptures such as *Vase Woman II* (1919), *Torso in Space* (1935), *The Ray* (1956), and *Dignity* (1961) are still, iconic, contemplative. On one level, this dichotomy reflects the dual influences of the West and Byzantium on his artistic evolution.

In certain works, such as *Penché* (1913—1914), *Gondolier* (1914), and *Walking Soldier* (1917), Archipenko achieves a state of equilibrium between motion and stasis. In them, the act of bending, gliding through water, and walking is expressed in an image where motion is suggested but not depicted.

Construction, Material, Color

Archipenko's challenge to the process of sculpture and its traditional materials was boldly announced in his construction *Médrano I* (1912—1914), a figure made of wood, glass, paint, sheet metal, and wire, whose whereabouts are unknown. His fascination with various materials, startlingly juxtaposed, continued and evolved throughout his career, and he constantly incorporated new processes and materials such as Plexiglas, bakelite, and Formica. *Woman (Metal Lady)* 1923, reflects the artist's interest in the machine age aesthetic and is an important example of the use of variously colored metals in a single image. The three versions of *Torso in Space* (1935—1936) are of different materials: aluminum, bronze, and terra-cotta (metalized with bronze). *Mâ-Meditation* (seen in the exhibition in the 1937 version) represents an exceptional technical feat of firing a life-size terra-cotta figure.

During the 1950s Archipenko turned once again to his early invention of sculpto-painting, but now utilized new materials such as bakelite and Formica in such works as *Oval Figure* (1957) and *Cleopatra* (1957). The expressive orchestrations of color in these works make them among his best late creations. No other sculptor of the twentieth century used color as insistently and consistently as Archipenko. As he wrote, "In our daily mobile environment colors change into forms and forms into colors and there are no forms without colors."

Bronze Reliefs

Of the series of polychromed bronze reliefs done c. 1957—1960, nearly all are transformations of Archipenko's early sculpto-paintings, an invention from his war years in Nice (1914—1918) in which the artist combines properties of painting and relief sculpture.

The material property of the bronze reliefs with multiple color patinations differs from the delicate hand-painted quality of the early sculpto-paintings constructed of multiple materials. The artist's interest in probing how a similar composition will yield distinct results using different creative processes speaks to Archipenko's restless creative spirit. This experiment across decades emphasizes the powerful continuities in his art.

Late Bronzes

The main body of work that Archipenko produced in the 1960s was executed in bronze, much of it polychromed. It ranges in type, subject, and scale, yet shares a clarity of vision. The works are serious and celebratory and touch on themes ranging from the Old Testament to Asian culture.

In the simple, eloquent reductive form of *Dignity* (1961), one is inspired to search for deeper meaning. In wonderful contrast is a work such as *Festive* (1961). Its undulating rhythms and multicolored and textured dress infect the surroundings with an air of celebration, reminiscent of Archipenko's early works of dancers and circus performers.

In his Asian works, the artist contrasts the graceful and inviting openness of *Linear Oriental* (1961) with the bold, dramatic impact of *Kimono* (1961), whose title belies its forceful energy.

Archipenko's most impressive and important late works are the thematically linked *Queen of Sheba* (1961) and *King Solomon* (1963). The expansive, generous *Queen of Sheba* embodies the female principle, and the sharp-angled image of King Solomon represents the male principle. Both works share the hegemony of Cubism. King Solomon's jagged shapes transform the cubist facet into a powerful architectonic structure, while the open, interactive shape of *Queen of Sheba* gives generous play to the elusiveness of cubist space.

This body of work from the seventh decade of the artist's life speaks to Archipenko's indomitable spirit and, as importantly, impresses with its visual eloquence and maturity of purpose.

Text with 2 images

Médrano

Médrano I (1912—1914) and *Médrano II* (1913—1914?) are among Archipenko's earliest constructions and greatest achievements. Sadly, today *Medrano I* is known only through black and white photographs, one of which is shown on the left. Too fragile to travel, *Médrano II* is also presented here in a photograph, generously provided by the Guggenheim Museum. Thematically the two sculptures refer to Paris's famous *Cirque Médrano* and depict, respectively, a juggler and a dancer. In choosing circus performers as the subject for some of his most radical works, Archipenko shows his awareness of the critical link between the world of entertainment and art. The use in these works of multiple materials, including wood, glass, and sheet metal, which had its origin in Picasso's constructions such as his celebrated *Guitar* (1912), and polychromy, was highly innovative at the time. In *Medrano I* Archipenko particularly astonished viewers by including a real ball and a movable right arm to make the act of juggling more explicit. This is one of the very early examples of the use of real objects and of kineticism in sculpture. In 1914, Guillaume Apollinaire wrote of *Médrano II* that "It represents a very great effort to go beyond the conventional in sculpture."

Labels below images:

Médrano I, 1912-14

Médrano II, 1913—14?

Text with 2 images

Archipentura

In 1927 Archipenko received a patent for his invention of a movable painting machine known as *Archipentura*, which he dedicated to Thomas Edison and Albert Einstein. The process of depicting movement in painting was most famously addressed by Marcel Duchamp in his celebrated *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) in which he combines the faceting of Analytic Cubism with the simultaneity of the futurists. *Archipentura* goes beyond the depiction of movement and introduces actual movement into painting. For Archipenko it was “the most perfect form of modern art, for it has solved the problem of dynamism.”

Archipenko describes the machine as follows:

“This machine had a box-like shape, two opposite sides of it are three feet by seven feet. Each of these sides consists of 110 narrow metallic strips, three feet long and one-half inch thick. The strips are installed one on top of another, similar to a Venetian blind. These two sides become the panels for the display of paintings. They are about two feet from each other, and 110 pieces of strong canvas, running horizontally, encircle two oppositely fixed strips. Both ends of the canvases are fastened in the central frame located between two display panels. By mechanically moving the central frame, all 110 canvases simultaneously slide over all the metallic strips, making both panels gradually change their entire surface on which an object is painted. A new portion of specially painted canvas constantly appears. This produces the effect of true motion.”

The idea of creating an actual moving painting proved irresistible to an artist who considered invention a key component of his artistic mission. He had already investigated the zone between painting and sculpture in the sculpto-paintings done during his Nice period (1914—1918). Archipenko clearly viewed his invention as a vehicle to reestablish in New York his position in the vanguard of new ideas that he had held during his Paris years. *Archipentura*, which is lost today, did not capture the public imagination as the artist had hoped, yet it remains a compelling testament to the power of invention in Archipenko’s art.

Labels below images:

Patented drawings of the *Method of Decorating Changeable Display Apparatus*, April 26, 1927. Courtesy of the Archipenko Archives, The Archipenko Foundation.

Archipentura (Apparatus for Displaying Changeable Pictures), 1927. Courtesy of the Archipenko Archives, The Archipenko Foundation.

Text with 3 images

Experiment in Plexiglas

During the late 1940s, Archipenko experimented extensively with Plexiglas, a material used by other artists such as Naum Gabo and László Moholy-Nagy. Archipenko carved his images from a thick block of Plexiglas with a machine he created that, according to the artist, rotated 60,000 times a minute. The carved, frosted edges define the image, which is often penetrated. By adhering to the limitations of the block, the artist finds solutions at once simple and complex. Critical in this context is the use of electric light in the base of the sculpture, which, when illuminated, effectively transforms the image, so that straightforward subjects such as *Seated Figure* (1947), *Onward* (1947), take on a special aura. Light moves through the translucent Plexiglas and is arrested by the frosted passages that define the edges and the penetrated areas of the work.

In some of his most ambitious works in Plexiglas, such as *Ascension* (1950), Archipenko recognizes the medium's power to address religious and spiritual themes. *Ascension* is a tall, slender shaft of light penetrated by space — symmetrical, frontal, and erect. It is suggestive of the human form but also of its spirit. It evokes the hypnotic quality of icons from Archipenko's Byzantine heritage.

Labels below images:

Onward, 1947, Plexiglass, 23 1/2 x 5 1/4 x 10 1/2 in.

Seated Figure, 1947, Plexiglass, 23 1/2 x 9 x 2 1/5 in.

Ascension, 1950, Plexiglass, 43 3/8 x 6 x 2 1/8 in.

Photos courtesy of the Archipenko Archives, The Archipenko Foundation.