

NAT BURWASH

THE BIOGRAPHY OF A SCULPTOR



WOOD SCULPTURES
BY NAT BURWASH

BIOGRAPHY
BY STEVEN SPITZER



Portrait of
Nat Burwash
by John Brook
1952





"Rooster"
applewood
20 1/4" 1952

UP A TREE

Young boys are drawn to trees. To climb a tree is to find a place above it all. Getting up is the challenging part: a destination to be arrived at through balance, strength and the courage to go out on a limb. But once you have arrived and are perched on high that is something else again. Secure in the embrace of those branches, a new world is discovered – a refuge from the turmoil below that moves freely in the breeze yet remains deeply rooted in and connected to the earth.

As a youngster growing up in Los Angeles at the beginning of the century, Nat Burwash discovered the mystery and personality of trees by climbing them. Peach, fig and nectarines were likely candidates but two particular trees were favorites: a majestic pepper tree on the way to school (sticky to climb but a wondrous escape) and the eucalyptus in a nearby lot. If the breeze was right you could climb the eucalyptus and “it would just rock you.” What better way to get above it all while nestled in the very bosom of nature herself?

This is where Nat Burwash’s love affair with wood began. It has been an enduring passion that has given direction and shape to his creative energies for eight decades. Yet the secret to the vibrant sculptures that Burwash has carved can only be fully grasped by focusing on the relationship between the artist and his medium. In the hands of a sensitive and skilled artist like Nat Burwash, wood can find its own voice. The distinctive quality of this voice is that it sings of the mysteries of nature, man and the evolving connection between the two.

LISTENING TO WOOD’S VOICE

Howard Mumford Jones has written:

Close study of Burwash’s figures show how completely they obey the laws of their substance. He does not impose himself on the material, nor does he allow the material to impose upon him. His success rather arises from a dynamic functioning of the worker and the material together, the wood continually offering new obstacles, new suggestions, new idiosyncrasies which, properly grasped, will enrich the work but which might otherwise ruin it.



"Owl"
maple
19" 1955

The organic character of the wood is central to the dialectical process that yields Burwash's creations. As John Durston has observed "unlike other materials of sculpture, wood has lived and breathed, has grown, has developed character." The life that the wood has lived before it came into his hands is directly tied to the "rebirth" that Burwash offers in his sculpture. Burwash's method begins with the recognition that each piece of wood has been born (where? how long ago?), grown up (under what conditions?), declined (weather, insects, disease), and died (naturally or at the hands of man) in its own unique way. And because he respects and honors this history – including man's place in it – his medium is given a clear and decisive say in its own transformation. To the extent that "wood speaks for itself" the artist becomes an accomplice in nature's work and as such offers a creative inscription that blends the message contained within the "uncarved block" with his own.

Listening to wood's voice not only takes patience, skill, and confidence in your ability, but an appreciation of the discordant note. Where others see "flaws" and "imperfections" in the raw wood, Burwash rejoices in the stories that his hands and tools can coax these "defects" to tell. Knots, wormholes, sap-wood, discolorations, saw marks and other "deviations" from the perfect form are as vital to Burwash's creations as the rich grain, symmetrical connections and poetic balance that nature has hidden in its pristine trees. He has found that despite indications to the contrary the "road less traveled" and the unexpected journey is sometimes the best way home.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

While geometry tells us that the most efficient way to travel between two points is a straight line, directions taken in life rarely have much to do with what is efficient or linear. This is especially true with respect to creativity – a "force of nature" which seems to obey its own, very different, laws. In the case of Nat Burwash's life and work it is clear that the biographic elements that combined to produce his skill, technique and original contributions as a sculptor resist formulaic interpretations. His travels into the wood and the process of artistic self-discovery associated with these travels have led him along a path that was often meandering and always dimly lit.

When he was 11 years of age, Nat quickly learned that life could not be lived in a straight line. His refuge in the trees of Los Angeles was uprooted when he and his family moved across the country to his grandparent's farm in New York State. Upon arrival, Nat found himself saddled with the responsibilities

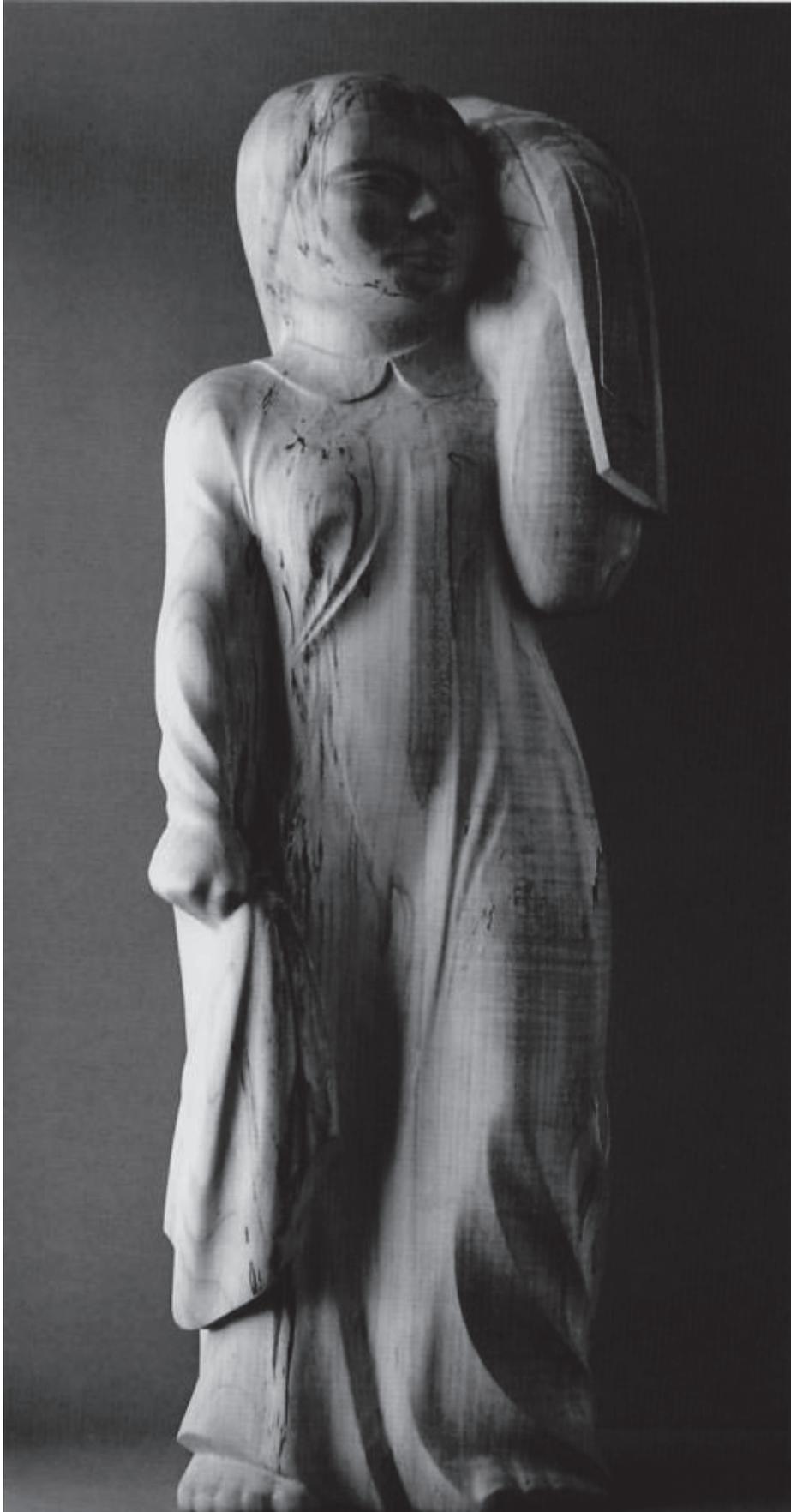


“Spider
Monkey”
cupape
10 ¼”
1957

It was only many year later, when Nat’s sculptural repertoire began to include animals, that he was finally able to address and work through many of these feelings. Nat has found that while his communion with the animal world has been profoundly healing, it has also been an important part of his discovery of nature’s majesty and love.

Although life on the farm proved difficult in many ways, it was valuable in building Nat’s confidence in his physical abilities and a life-long commitment to hard work. Formal schooling, on the other hand, was a source of ongoing frustration and sometimes undermined his belief in himself Far more at home with copying portraits of movie actors than reading and writing, Nat was assigned to an “ungraded” classroom in elementary school. Drawing and painting were Nat’s first love, but there was little place for the development of visual talent in the educational system of his day. In consequence, he found himself swimming against the tide during much of his early schooling. His family provided little support for his artistic adventures, as they would even laugh at his drawings of horses and other subjects.

Through the attention of a dedicated teacher at the second level rural school that he attended, things began to improve for Nat. High school presented many new difficulties in both the educational and social arena. Nat recalls an incident where one of his teachers suggested that he was more suited to “weeding the onions” than succeeding in school. Overall, “it was a make or break environment” but Nat began to study more diligently and eventually succeeded in passing the NY State Regents examination in High School. A cousin of Nat’s mother took him aside upon graduation from high school and offered a stipend of \$500 if Nat would go to engineering or architectural school. He chose the Mechanics Institute in Rochester, NY. There he once again confronted the gap between the expectations of formalized, programmatic training and his own more intuitive inclinations. He excelled in mechanical drawing and the shop courses but struggled with advanced mathematics. His apprenticeship at the Gleason Gear Factory as a wood pattern-maker was to prove crucial to his professional development, yet something else was tugging at his sleeve. Signing up for a painting course at night, his teacher said “Nat, you can become an artist if you want to take it seriously; but don’t misread the word serious.” This was 1929, a turning point in Nat’s life. Awakening to his skills as an artist, Nat was also blossoming as a highly proficient pattern-maker. It was as if his train was running down two tracks at once – one requiring exacting skill in the service of applied problem-solving, the other involved the development of his “subconscious” side as an independent creative artist. The story of the convergence and divergence of those tracks over life’s terrain is the story of how Nat discovered and harnessed his creative energies – energies that motivated his development as a painter, technician, teacher, and sculptor.



“Young Woman
with Bird”
maple
26”
1965

IDA

Another important turning point in Nat's life was his meeting of Ida Brass, his companion and soul mate for 52 years. In 1932 Nat was exhibiting his watercolors at an outdoor show in Washington Square, New York with two other artists. Ida introduced herself and when they were leaving she said, "Isn't anybody going to give me a kiss"? Their eyes met and then their lips. That single moment sealed a loving partnership that lasted until Ida's death in 1984.

Throughout their time together Ida provided invaluable emotional and moral support, nourishing and reinforcing Nat's commitment to his work. More comfortable expressing himself with his hands than with words, Nat found Ida's convivial nature and skills as a social worker an indispensable asset.

Ida's death was the end of a beautiful relationship; but it was also a beginning for Nat. Nat feels that after Ida's death he began reaching out in many new ways. As part of this process, he found himself engaged and sustained by a growing circle of friends. These friends, as well as his expanded teaching activities, have supported a developing concern and awareness about mankind and nature.

Reflected in his most recent work, these sensibilities are a fitting testimony to a life that has been lived with passion, compassion and growth, the very qualities that Burwash's sculpture captures and communicates to us in so many ways.

AGAINST THE GRAIN

In September 1929, Nat received his certificate marking the completion of four years of apprenticeship as a wood pattern-maker at the Gleason Gear Works. During his apprenticeship, Nat's passion for art was nourished through night painting classes taken with Fritz Trautman and Harwood Steiger at the Mechanics Institute in Rochester. Upon graduation, on the eve of the Great Depression, Nat stood at a critical crossroad. He had to decide just how pivotal art was to be in his life.

Harwood Steiger and a friend at the Philadelphia Art Institute invited Nat to spend the summer of 1930 at a log cabin in Nova Scotia to draw and paint. This is where Nat dates the true beginning of his training in art. Throughout the thirties it was not pattern-making but drawing and watercolors that gave direction to his life.

Nat embraced the adventure and struggles of the painter's life during the 1930s in New York, Europe, the Balkan States, New Orleans, and finally at a cabin he built for himself and his wife Ida in New Hampshire.



"Day
Dreaming"
applewood
39 1/2" 1973

What is perhaps most interesting and curious about this pursuit, is that painting was a two dimensional medium – a form of artistic expression that stood in vivid contrast to the three-dimensional work that defined his chosen trade. Yet it was this very contrast and the tension surrounding it that seems to have stimulated Nat’s artistic development at this stage.

Pattern-making made direct use of his skills in perceiving, measuring and representing shapes and relationships, but the rigid specification and accuracy that it demanded seemed to stand in opposition to Nat’s intuitive inclinations. His love of physical labor was based on a practical aptitude for “hands on” manipulation of the material world and the transformation of plans into tangible products. Nat’s journey into the world of painting allowed for the acceptance of the impractical and, in so doing, gave permission for movement in a more instinctive direction.

When Nat shifted his artistic interests from painting to carving in the late 1940s – a shift for which he was unwittingly apprenticing in his career as a pattern-maker – the separation between work and art was still intact. Carving for art and carving for machines were initially experienced as relatively independent activities, each honoring very different sides of Nat’s talent. Only later in his life was he able to begin the process of integrating and borrowing from the combined strengths of these two tendencies – strengths that permitted the fusion of the rational and the irrational, the conscious and the subconscious.

As a mature artist, Burwash successfully unifies his love of wood, “ways of seeing” and creative spirit. His technical expertise as a pattern-maker has given him an ability to use precision and proportion in remarkable ways. And as these skills have been increasingly harnessed in the service of invention rather than replication, imagination has taken the reins. The resulting collection of diverse and highly accomplished renderings in wood over five decades reveals how an artist can achieve a synthesis on a number of different levels – a synthesis that has been made possible by discipline, persistence of vision and a willingness to work “against the grain.”

CARVING, CONSERVATION AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS

Nat feels that what is commonly credited to fate in his life can be traced directly to the workings of the subconscious, the intuitive. In 1931, Nat studied painting with George Grosz at the Art Students’ League in New York. He was most impressed by one thing that Grosz said: “Be sure that when you think you have made a mistake that it is not your subconscious speaking.” In a sense, this is a commentary on the development of Burwash’s life as a sculptor, much of it unintended and unforeseen, but it is also a statement about his method,



“Teresa”
applewood
14 ¼”
1990

his willingness to trust and follow the revelations that cannot be glimpsed now but always remain “just around the bend.” Thoreau might have had this insight in mind when he said: “there is always some accident in the best things, whether thoughts or expressions or deeds. The memorable thought, the happy expression, the admirable deed are only partly ours.”

The forces of nature are beyond our control, yet we continually try to fool ourselves into believing that we are in charge. This arrogance operates on the social plane whenever we try to “rationally” appropriate, manipulate, or otherwise rape the earth for our own purposes. The diversion of rivers, removal of deposits under the soil, destruction of the atmosphere, and cutting down the rain forests are only the most visible parts of this folly. Internally, the same type of struggle is going on. We believe that the ego, the rational part of our self, is in the director’s chair. But deep within we are creatures of nature and must obey its unknown and unknowable laws.

Nat Burwash believes that our insensitivity to nature without and nature within is at the heart of the crisis that our world faces today. His sculpture attempts to redress this distortion by bringing both of these issues to the fore. In part, his work represents an expression of and surrender to his own internal nature: an ability to trust those impulses and inspirations that lie beyond the engineer’s blueprint and the pattern-maker’s design. Yet there are more to these creations than the ebbs and flows in the inner life of a talented sculptor. Another voice echoes in the crevices, grain, and movement of the wood – it is the voice of nature herself. That this voice is rarely heard or listened to is a sad truism. But in Burwash’s work nature not only whispers of its mysteries and beauties, it also hints at the ways in which the bond between man and nature, although badly strained, can be restored.

The tree’s personality gives direction and substance to Burwash’s sculpting process. Each tree, whether it be rosewood, butternut, apple or cocobolo, has its own unique character. His completed works of art honor this character with a simple message: think endangered. For a sculpture to be born, a tree must die. The resurrection offered in Burwash’s work is thus much more than artistic transformation per se. It is also a direct and passionate plea for us to learn more about the wood and wood products that we take for granted. The cycle of birth, death and rebirth has been disturbed by what is sometimes called “civilization.” Yet Burwash’s efforts to communicate through wood, to bring it back to life in a way that pays homage to its history and place in our world, remind us that it may not be too late for humanity after all. The blossoming of Nat’s creative life after his “retirement” at age 67 – a period during which he has completed some 200 sculptures – is itself a testimony to the fact that it is never too late to discover and express what nature has to offer us in life.



“Coat of Arms”
butternut
13 ½”
1992

THE GIFTS OF NATURE

Nat Burwash's sculpture is a celebration of the simplicity and poetry of nature. Nature was his constant companion and confidant during his residence at the simple camp that he and his wife Ida built and occupied in Washington, New Hampshire between 1934 and 1941. In 1933, Nat signed onto the program for artists administered by the Works Progress Administration in New York City. The following year he was able to move to New Hampshire and continue his development as a water colorist under the auspices of the Treasury Relief Project. This project allowed artists to work where they chose. At the urging of their friend Henry Iram, Nat and Ida moved to a site of an old sugar orchard in New Hampshire and took up a very different life.

Iram, an old friend of Ida's, was well known to the artistic community through his experiments at the so-called "Hobo Ranch" – a refuge for artists, Bohemians, radicals and other denizens of the progressive community in the Depression era. Iram had impressive radical credentials, having served a jail term in the First World War as a conscientious objector. The Hobo Ranch operated on principles very different from the outside world: one paid what they could and shared in what was available. The ranch and the visions of brotherhood that it was based upon served as a model for the camp that was to become home for Nat and Ida shortly after they arrived.

During the New Hampshire years, Nat spent a good deal of his time "counting trees." This exercise had nothing to do with counting in a numerical sense but offered peaceful and meditative periods during which Nat was able to explore the qualities and mysteries of the primary subject matter of his paintings—"the woods." The primal and transcendent experience of the woods has never left Burwash or his work, receiving its most refined expression in his wood carving – an artistic idiom that draws energy and inspiration from the gifts of trees.

In addition to painting many watercolors during this period, Nat and Ida were preoccupied with the most elemental aspects of survival. Cutting fire wood, moving rocks, gardening, picking wild berries, digging a well and otherwise harvesting nature's bounty were essential to living in this harsh yet deeply rewarding environment. On the social and political level, Nat and Ida believed in waging "the good fight" and stayed involved in the progressive community on a number of different levels. They signed a petition to put a Communist on the ballot in New Hampshire in 1939. Later, in 1941, Nat donated one of his water colors to the Committee for Emergency Aid to Refugees. This gift, exemplifying Nat's commitment to the work of saving human lives, was received with critical acclaim by such important members of the activist cultural community as Dwight MacDonald and Clement Greenberg.



*"Evocation
black walnut
19 1/2" 1993*

This act of giving offers an excellent insight into what Nat Burwash's art is all about. His sculpture is a product of a deep and intimate relationship with nature. As such, his lovingly rendered "poems in wood" are intended to restore an imbalance between man and nature in a world that has forsaken both. The "gift" that Burwash's sculpture offers us is therefore twofold: on the one hand, his sculpture alerts us to the ways in which our "taking" has disturbed the primal relationship between man and nature; on the other hand, his "offerings" represent one of the most direct and respectful ways that we can pay nature back. The principles of exchange reflected in Burwash's work stand squarely outside of the market. He teaches us that instead of being a commodity art is, at its core, an expression of the creative spirit that binds us together and to nature. The poetry embodied in Burwash's work is thus much like the poetry of Pablo Neruda who has characterized his own contributions as an attempt "to give something resinous, earthlike, and fragrant in exchange for human brotherhood."



"Evocation"
black walnut
19 1/2"
1993

BURWASH TIMELINE

- 1906 Born in Los Angeles, California
- 1916 Moved to family farm in Hudson Falls, NY
- 1925-29 Mechanics Institute in Rochester, NY
- 1930 Nova Scotia and European Travels
- 1931 Study with George Grosz at Art Student's League in New York
- 1932 Met Ida Brass, his lifelong companion
- 1933 W P.A. and Treasury Relief Project for Artists
- 1934 "HOBO RANCH" and Building Camp in Washington, NH
- 1934-41 "COUNTING TREES" in New Hampshire
- 1936 Painting Exhibition at Whitney Museum of American Art, NY
- 1936-40 Painting Exhibitions at Currier Gallery in Manchester, NH
- 1939 Exhibitions at Brooklyn Museum and Art Institute of Chicago
- 1942 Moved to Cambridge, MA, Began Wood Pattern Making for M.I.T.
- 1946 First of Five Shows at Boris Mirski Gallery, Boston, MA (1946-1971)
- 1948 First of many trips to Na Blom (Mayan Dig in Oaxaca, Mexico)
- 1953 Sculpture exhibition at Decordova-Dana Museum
- 1954 Sculpture exhibit at University of New Hampshire, Durham
- 1959 Began working in Teaching Design at M.L.T. (Educational Services Inc.)
- 1964-71 Director of Design Lab of Educational Development Center
- 1965 St. Lawrence University begins major collection of sculpture
- 1966 Worked in Entebbe, Uganda designing objects for elementary Science Teaching
- 1971 "RETIREMENT" from E.D.C.
- 1973-77 Teaching Sculpture at New England Craftsmanship Center
- 1976-78 Shore Gallery, Boston, MA
- 1980 Sold New Hampshire Camp
- 1984 Ida dies
- 1986-94 Teaching at Decordova-Dana Museum School
- 1988-93 Summer trips to Clear Lake, Washington and its forests
- 1990-94 Sculpture exhibitions at The Copley Society, Boston, MA
- 1993 Completion and casting of "NEW DAWN"
- 1994 Inauguration of the Burwash Collection at the Zevin Gardens

SPECIAL THANKS for their generosity and support to Georgiana Druchy, Barbara Lawthers, John McKee and Alan Jay Rom.

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PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

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FRONT COVER:

"Bantam"
butternut
15 ½"
1965

BACK COVER:

"Axe Marks"
rosewood
18" and 12"
1994

