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Robert Fishko, *Director*

CHAIM GROSS
(1902-1991)

Acrobats Balancing, 1953

carved ebony wood

40 1/2 x 9 x 5 1/2 inches

signed & dated on front, left of base "*Chaim Gross, 1953*"

Provenance

The Artist, New York

Private Collection, Orlando, Florida

Private Collection, Bellevue, Nebraska

(daughter of previous owner, by descent from the above)



Exhibited

Chaim Gross Memorial Exhibition, October 27 – November 26, 1994, no. 20

Celebration of 55 Years of Modern and Contemporary Art, Forum Gallery, New York, NY,
February 17 - March 18, 2017

Literature

Getlein, Frank. Chaim Gross, Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York, 1974, plate 135
(illustrated in color)

Essay

"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."
(Allen Ginsberg. *A Tribute to Chaim Gross*, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, 1991)

Chaim Gross' life journey is nothing less than extraordinary, a true testament to the human spirit. He came from a small town called Wolowa in the Carpathian Mountains of an Eastern Europe territory once known as Galicia or Polish Austria. While at the time of his birth it was under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, after two world wars and countless political upheavals, the region now falls within the western limits of Ukraine. Chaim's childhood was hard but happy. His adolescence was horrific. The youngest of the five out of ten surviving children of Moses and Leah Gross, Chaim never forgot the closeness of his family, the Chasidic traditions they held and Jewish holidays they celebrated. Annually in Summer the magic circus would come to the mountain villages. He fell in love with its colorful displays and acrobatic performances.

The forest was his home; his father was in the lumber trade; Chaim grew up understanding and appreciating wood.

The nightmare began with the onset of World War I. In 1914 Russia invaded Austria from the East. Cossacks plundered the Gross home and abused his parents. The family dispersed, fled, hid, then regrouped in Austrian Silesia. For a time in 1916 Chaim was drafted by the Austrian army into retrieving and burying its battlefield dead. Temporary relief came in the form of the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Bolsheviks' withdrawal from the war. However, Italy's defeat of Austria in 1918 ended WWI and precipitated the collapse of the entire Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Grosses were refugees, momentarily out of danger under a provisional Socialist government in Budapest, where Chaim actually managed to study art. However, once again safety was fleeting as Hitler's future ally Miklós Horthy came to power. Chaim, his brother Abraham, were imprisoned, then deported to Vienna. On April 14, 1921, seven years after the mayhem began, Chaim and his brother arrived in New York City where they were reunited with their eldest brother Naftoli. The odyssey was over.

Penniless but safe, at last Chaim was able to focus on his passion for sculpting wood, which he did by way of "direct carving". This technique was novel and mostly employed in relation to marble. Constantin Brancusi's 1907 *The Kiss* is generally considered to be the earliest example, followed in the United States by the direct marble carvings of William Zorach, John Flanagan, and José de Creeft. The process rejected the use of carefully worked-out preliminary clay or wax models which were then scaled for transfer to marble or wood. Consistent with the improvisational tendencies of 20th century Modernism, the sculptor instead carved directly into his "block" without visual aids, spontaneously proceeding towards conclusion. In 1927 at the Art Students League, French-born sculptor Robert Laurent taught Chaim Gross how to apply the methodology to wood.

Over the years Chaim Gross' productivity was tremendous and exceeded all other 20th century artists in its consistency, except perhaps for the output of the German Expressionist sculptor Ernst Barlach. Gross' greatest representational love always remained the acrobatic circus figures of his childhood. They were amongst his earliest subjects, which he continued to carve even in later years when he was dedicating his time to bronze commissions. As exemplified by the 1953 ebony sculpture *Acrobats Balancing*, his curvilinear forms tend towards wide hips and thin waists. Their proportions are distorted or exaggerated, truncated or simplified. And the figures organically amass upwards as totemic columns, their sinuous motion implied but their individual personalities preserved.

"Movement is an important factor in Gross' sculpture. Fascinated by the circus since childhood, he has consistently used acrobats, tumblers, and trapeze performers as subjects for his studies of the body, especially of women, in rhythmic action. {...} Although simplifications and distortions emphasize balance and dramatize major movements, the immediately sensed rhythm of the body remains a vital part of his work; there is a continuous and expressive interplay between an association with natural bodily movement and the abstract play of lines and curves." (Flint, Janet A. Chaim Gross: Sculpture and Drawings exhibition catalog, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 1974, p 10)

Gross overcame the tragedy of his early life through his sculpture. His figures are assertions of the positive in people and in their capacity for togetherness, harmony, and peace. Gross devoted himself to his craft with the same spirituality and religiosity with which he embraced his own two children and beautiful marriage of six decades. His association with New York's Educational Art Alliance began in 1927 and remarkably lasted a half century. For a time, classes there were given in Yiddish, the *lingua franca* of the immigrant Jewish population to the United States, which Chaim spoke along with German, Swabian, Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, and Hebrew. His most acclaimed artists friends included the sculptors Alexander

Calder, Jacques Lipchitz, Ossip Zadkine, Gaston Lachaise and painters Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Marc Chagall and Max Ernst. With examples of his sculpture already in major institutional collections about the United States and in Israel, in 1977 the Jewish Museum of New York gave Chaim Gross (then aged 73) a retrospective of his sculpture, paintings, watercolors, and prints. Such was the realization of the life journey of a young boy from a rustic mountain village in the vast forests of Eastern Europe.



Gross, *My Sister Sarah -- In Memoriam*, 1947, carved cocobolo wood of his sister and child who perished in the Holocaust (coll. The Renee & Chaim Gross Foundation, New York)



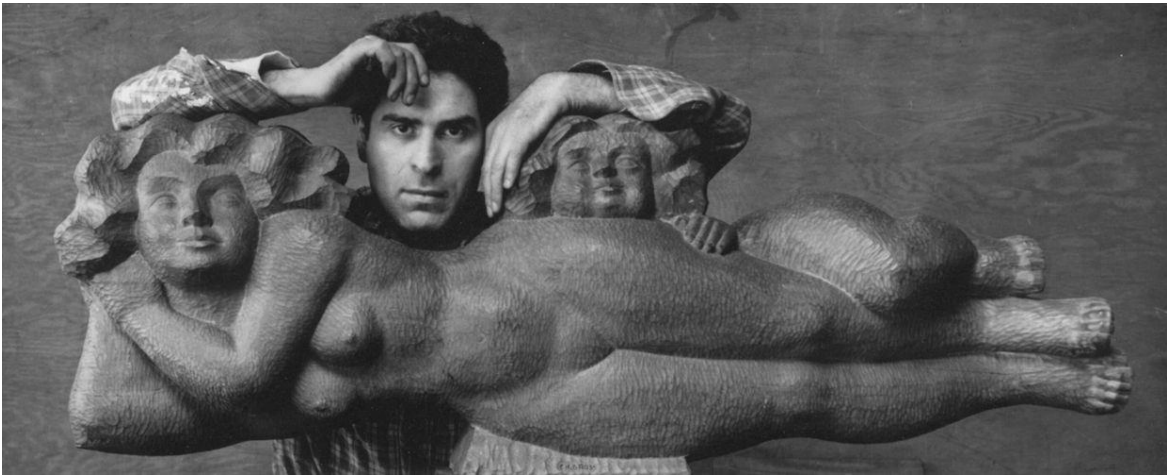
Gross, *Aerialist*, 1935 Sabicu wood (coll. Estate of the artist)



Robert Laurent, *Flirtation*, 1921, carved mahogany (Private Collection)



Lumber remains a major business today in the Carpathian Mountains where Chaim Gross grew up



Gross with *Happy Mother*, 1931 (photograph courtesy Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, New York)