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Robert Fishko, *Director*

CHAIM GROSS
(1902-1991)

Acrobatic Performers, 1942

mahogany

37 1/4 h x 15 3/8 w x 6 5/8 d inches (at base)

inscribed on base: "CHAIM GROSS 1942"

Cast in bronze in 1956

Provenance

The Artist

Collection of Reeves Lewenthal, New York, NY
(acquired directly from the artist, 1942)

The Artist (reacquired from the above, after 1949)

The Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, New York, NY
(bequeathed by the artist, 1991)

Exhibited

Chaim Gross, Associated American Artists Gallery, New York, NY, December 1-22, 1942

The Figure in Modern Sculpture: Works by Alexander Archipenko, Chaim Gross, Gaston Lachaise, Jacques Lipchitz, Elie Nadelman and John Storrs, curated by Kenneth Wayne, Ph.D., Forum Gallery, New York, NY, May 10 – June 23, 2012 (Illustrated in catalogue)

Landmarks of 20th Century American Art, Forum Gallery, New York, NY
November 8, 2018 – January 5, 2019

Literature

Getlein, Frank. *Chaim Gross*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, NY, 1974, no. 33
(bronze version illustrated in color, p. 38).

Brooker, Niccolo. *Landmarks of 20th Century American Art*, Forum Gallery, New York, NY, 2018, pp. 52-55 and p. 53, Illustrated.



Note

In 1934 Reeves Lewenthal, the first owner of *Acrobatic Performers*, founded Associated American Artists (AAA) at 20 West 57th Street in Manhattan. From 1942 to 1952, the gallery held seven one-man Chaim Gross exhibitions. While Lewenthal included *Acrobatic Performers* in the first of these, the sculpture remained in his personal collection until 1949 when Gross requested to purchase it back from him.

Essay

The year when Chaim Gross carved his mahogany *Acrobatic Performers* may well have been the most important of his career. Not only did Associated American Artists hold his first one-man exhibition, but the Whitney Museum of American Art purchased his ebony sculpture *Acrobatic Dancers* and the Museum of Modern Art his lignum vitae *Handle Bar Riders*. Also in 1942, the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its Artists for Victory Exhibition (in December) which it billed as an assertion of America's vitality, diversity, and strength versus the existential foreign threat. With jurists including Alfred H. Barr (MoMA) and Juliana Force (Whitney), the Metropolitan awarded Gross a purchase prize by acquiring his ebony wood submission of the Ringling Brothers' acrobat *Lillian Leitzel*. In 1927 Gross had learned the technique of direct carving (*taille directe*) from the immigrant French master Robert Laurent. By 1942, he was poised for widespread recognition as the 20th Century American artist most responsible for reviving the significance of wood as a fundamental sculptural medium.



Gross, *Lillian Leitzel*, 1938, Macassar ebony (purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1942)



Gross, *Acrobatic Dancers*, 1942, ebony (purchased by Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1942)



Gross, *Handlebar Riders*, 1935, lignum vitae (purchased by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1942)

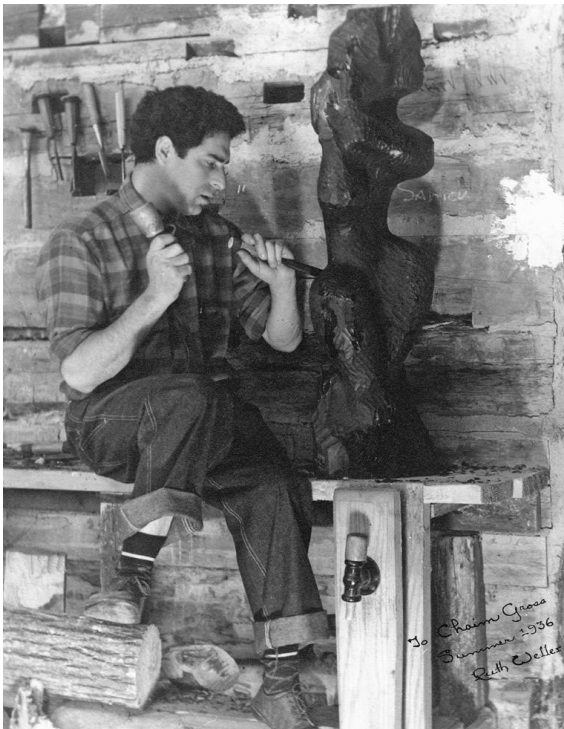
Gross' father Moses was the controller and appraiser for a timber company. As a child, Chaim would accompany him as he surveyed lumber yards in the remote Carpathian Mountain region of Eastern Europe where the family lived. Early on Chaim recognized his own penchant for particularly dense wood, appreciating its resistance to cleaving as testimony to its true, immutable essence. Its defiance to permutation well-suited Gross, since he was solely interested in the expressive qualities of the material as an artistic *end* instead of a *means*. Hence, his handling of wood as a medium in and of itself, rather than as a truncated support for further application, is the essence of Gross' contribution in sculpture. These varied hardwoods on which Chaim Gross arduously worked would be the mainstay of his life. It is astonishing to recognize that by 1930 he had already carved *forty* distinct kinds of

wood. As his father had done in another world, Gross used to visit New York lumber yards, whenever and wherever possible obtaining hardwoods which he could repurpose to his sculptural vision. From all about the globe these included: *mahogany* from Cuba and Central America; *ebony* from West Africa, India and Indonesia (particularly from Macassar, the provincial capital of South Sulawesi); *imbuia* from Brazil; *cocobolo* from Central Africa; *ipil* from South Africa to the South Pacific; *palo blanco* from Mexico; *beefwood* from Australia and *lignum vitae* from the West Indies and Central America.

Using an old-style mallet and chisel, Gross “the woodchopper” (as the father of his wife Renee once called him) derived psycho-aesthetic pleasure from extracting form from wood. As in *Acrobatic Performers*, his figures soar out of their medium, usually upwards, delicately balanced, jubilantly liberated.

Gross transcribed his ingenuity in wood to marble, both white and pink, and to serpentine and lithium stone. His later bronzes are sometimes translations of his wood and marble sculpting, if not casts made directly from their images. Working in bronze, however, is an additive process, while ultimately Chaim was pursuing the reductive nature of wood carving. He exposed wood’s textures and grains as part of its intrinsic variegations, a total reversal of the extrinsic gesso and gilt applied to the softwood backings of traditional religious retables. Equally dissimilar to the nature of his sculpture is the appropriation of wood for conceptual inquiry, as did his prized student Louise Nevelson. For Chaim Gross his work was an unadulterated homage to the material he found most life-affirming, which reflected his own optimism and the family togetherness he experienced in both pre and post cataclysmic times—the very material which made him most happy.

“Out of this intrinsic physical feature of wood Gross has fashioned a means for the enhancement of form. In a way, this deliberate use of the grain is a surface embellishment of the sculptural form related to the polychrome and gilt used by earlier sculptors. But it is in every sense more profound than that, for it comes, after all, out of the material itself: it is essentially a resource of the material. Modern wood carving, as Gross perfected and refined it, takes advantage of the grain not to embellish form, as paint and gilt do, but to reveal it with added force.”
(Getlein, Frank. Chaim Gross, Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, New York, 1974, p. 25)



Chaim Gross carving *Black Figure* at the Cumington School, Cumington, MA, 1935. (photograph by Ruth Weller)