



FREDERICK HART - *Sculpture*

Text from: [The Artist the Art World Couldn't See](#) by Tom Wolfe / NYTimes

Frederick Hart died at the age of 55 on Aug. 13, two days after a team of doctors discovered he had lung cancer, abruptly concluding one of the most bizarre stories in the history of 20th-century art. While still in his 20's, Hart consciously, pointedly, aimed for the ultimate in the Western tradition of sculpture, achieved it in a single stroke, then became invisible, and remained invisible, as invisible as Ralph Ellison's invisible man, who was invisible "simply because people refuse to see me."

Not even Giotto, the 12-year-old shepherd boy who was out in the meadow with the flock one day circa 1270 using a piece of flint to draw a picture of sheep on the face of a boulder when the vacationing Florentine artist Cimabue happened to stroll by and discover the baby genius — not even Giotto could match Frederick Hart's storybook rise from obscurity.

Hart was born in Atlanta to a failed actress and a couldn't-be-bothered newspaper reporter. He was only 3 when his mother died, whereupon he was packed off to an aunt in a part of rural South Carolina where people ate peanuts boiled in salty water. He developed into an incorrigible Conway, S.C., juvenile delinquent, failed the ninth grade on his first try and got thrown out of school on his second. Yet at the age of 16, by then a high-school dropout, he managed, to universal or at least Conway-wide amazement, to gain admission to the University of South Carolina by scoring a composite 35 out of a maximum 36 on an A.C.T. college entrance test, the equivalent of a 1560 on the College Boards.

He lasted six months. He became the lone white student to join 250 black students in a civil rights protest, was arrested, then expelled from the university. Informed that the Ku Klux Klan was looking for him, he fled to Washington.

In Washington he managed to get a job as a clerk at the Washington National Cathedral, a stupendous stone structure built in the Middle English Gothic style. The cathedral employed a crew of Italian masons full time, and Hart became intrigued with their skill at stone carving. Several times he asked the master carver, an Italian named Roger Morigi, to take him on as an apprentice but got nowhere. There was no one on the job but experienced Italians. By and by, Hart got to know the crew and took to borrowing tools and having a go at discarded pieces of stone. Morigi was so surprised by his aptitude, he made him an apprentice after all, and soon began urging him to become a sculptor. Hart turned out to have Giotto's seemingly God-given genius -- Giotto was a sculptor as well as a painter — for pulling perfectly formed human figures out of stone and clay at

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will and rapidly.

In 1971, Hart learned that the cathedral was holding an international competition to find a sculptor to adorn the building's west facade with a vast and elaborate spread of deep bas reliefs and statuary on the theme of the Creation. Morigi urged Hart to enter. He entered and won. A working-class boy nobody had ever heard of, an apprentice stone carver, had won what would turn out to be the biggest and most prestigious commission for religious sculpture in America in the 20th century.

The project brought him unimaginable dividends. The erstwhile juvenile delinquent from Conway, S.C., was a creature of hot passions, a handsome, slender boy with long, wavy light brown hair, an artist by night with a rebellious hairdo and a rebellious attitude who was a big hit with the girls. In the late afternoons he had taken to hanging about Dupont Circle in Washington, which had become something of a bohemian quarter. Afternoon after afternoon he saw the same ravishing young woman walking home from work down Connecticut Avenue. His hot Hart flame lit, he introduced himself and asked her if she would pose for his rendition of the Creation, an array of idealized young men and women rising nude from out of the chaotic swirl of Creation's dawn. She posed. They married. Great artists and the models they fell in love with already accounted for the most romantic part of art history. But probably no model in all that lengthy, not to say lubricious, lore was ever so stunningly beautiful as Lindy Lain Hart. Her face and figure were to recur in his work throughout his career.

The hot-blooded boy's passion, as Hart developed his vision of the Creation, could not be consummated by Woman alone. He fell in love with God. For Hart, the process began with his at first purely pragmatic research into the biblical story of the Creation in the Book of Genesis. He had been baptized in the Presbyterian Church, and he was working for the Episcopal Church at the Washington National Cathedral. But by the 1970's, neither of these proper, old-line, in-town Protestant faiths offered the strong wine a boy who was in love with God was looking for. He became a Roman Catholic and began to regard his talent as a charisma, a gift from God. He dedicated his work to the idealization of possibilities God offered man.

From his conception of "Ex Nihilo," as he called the centerpiece of his huge Creation design (literally, "out of nothing"; figuratively, out of the chaos that preceded Creation), to the first small-scale clay model, through to the final carving of the stone — all this took 11 years.

In 1982, "Ex Nihilo" was unveiled in a dedication ceremony. The next day, Hart scanned the newspapers for reviews . . . The Washington Post . . . The New York Times . . . nothing . . . nothing the next day, either . . . nor the next week . . . nor the week after that. The one mention of any sort was an obiter dictum in The Post's Style (read: Women's) section indicating that the west facade of the cathedral now had some new but earnestly traditional (read: old-fashioned) decoration. So Hart started monitoring the art magazines. Months went by . . .

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nothing. It reached the point that he began yearning for a single paragraph by an art critic who would say how much he loathed “Ex Nihilo” . . . anything, anything at all! . . . to prove there was someone out there in the art world who in some way, however slightly or rudely, cared.

The truth was, no one did, not in the least. “Ex Nihilo” never got ex nihilo simply because art worldlings refused to see it.

Hart had become so absorbed in his “triumph” that he had next to no comprehension of the American art world as it existed in the 1980’s. In fact, the art world was strictly the New York art world, and it was scarcely a world, if world was meant to connote a great many people. In the one sociological study of the subject, “The Painted Word,” the author estimated that the entire art “world” consisted of some 3,000 curators, dealers, collectors, scholars, critics and artists in New York. Art critics, even in the most remote outbacks of the heartland, were perfectly content to be obedient couriers of the word as received from New York. And the word was that school-of-Renaissance sculpture like Hart’s was nonart. Art worldlings just couldn’t see it.

The art magazines opened Hart’s eyes until they were bleary with bafflement. Classical statues were “pictures in the air.” They used a devious means — skill — to fool the eye into believing that bronze or stone had turned into human flesh. Therefore, they were artificial, false, meretricious. By 1982, no ambitious artist was going to display skill, even if he had it. The great sculptors of the time did things like have unionized elves put arrangements of rocks and bricks flat on the ground, objects they, the artists, hadn’t laid a finger on (Carl Andre), or prop up slabs of Cor-Ten steel straight from the foundry, edgewise (Richard Serra); or they took G.E. fluorescent light tubes straight out of the box from the hardware store and arranged them this way and that (Dan Flavin); or they welded I-beams and scraps of metal together (Anthony Caro). This expressed the material’s true nature, its “gravity” (no stone pictures floating in the air), its “objectness.”

This was greatness in sculpture. As Tom Stoppard put it in his play “Artist Descending a Staircase,” “Imagination without skill gives us contemporary art.”

Hart lurched from bafflement to shock, then to outrage. He would force the art world to see what great sculpture looked like.

By 1982, he was already involved in another competition for a huge piece of public sculpture in Washington. A group of Vietnam veterans had just obtained Congressional approval for a memorial that would pay long-delayed tribute to those who had fought in Vietnam with honor and courage in a lost and highly unpopular cause. They had chosen a jury of architects and art worldlings to make a blind selection in an open competition; that is, anyone could enter, and no one could put his name on his entry. Every proposal had to include something — a wall, a plinth, a column — on which a hired engraver could inscribe the names of all 57,000-plus

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members of the American military who had died in Vietnam. Nine of the top 10 choices were abstract designs that could be executed without resorting to that devious and accursed bit of trickery: skill. Only the No. 3 choice was representational. Up on one end of a semicircular wall bearing the 57,000 names was an infantryman on his knees beside a fallen comrade, looking about for help. At the other end, a third infantryman had begun to run along the top of the wall toward them. The sculptor was Frederick Hart.

The winning entry was by a young Yale undergraduate architectural student named Maya Lin. Her proposal was a V-shaped wall, period, a wall of polished black granite inscribed only with the names; no mention of honor, courage or gratitude; not even a flag. Absolutely skillproof, it was.

Many veterans were furious. They regarded her wall as a gigantic pitiless tombstone that said, "Your so-called service was an absolutely pointless disaster." They made so much noise that a compromise was struck. An American flag and statue would be added to the site. Hart was chosen to do the statue. He came up with a group of three soldiers, realistic down to the aglets of their boot strings, who appear to have just emerged from the jungle into a clearing, where they are startled to see Lin's V-shaped black wall bearing the names of their dead comrades.

Naturally enough, Lin was miffed at the intrusion, and so a make-peace get-together was arranged in Plainview, N.Y., where the foundry had just completed casting the soldiers. Doing her best to play the part, Lin asked Hart — as Hart recounted it — if the young men used as models for the three soldiers had complained of any pain when the plaster casts were removed from their faces and arms. Hart couldn't imagine what she was talking about. Then it dawned on him. She assumed that he had followed the lead of the ingenious art worldling George Segal, who had contrived a way of sculpturing the human figure without any skill whatsoever: by covering the model's body in wet plaster and removing it when it began to harden. No artist of her generation (she was 21) could even conceive of a sculptor starting out solely with a picture in his head, a stylus, a brick of moist clay and some armature wire. No artist of her generation dared even speculate about . . . skill.

President Ronald Reagan presided at a dedication ceremony unveiling Hart's "Three Soldiers" on Veterans Day 1984. The next day, Hart looked for the art reviews . . . in The Washington Post . . . The New York Times . . . and, as time went by, the magazines. And once more, nothing . . . not even the inside-out tribute known as savaging. "Three Soldiers" received only so-called civic reviews, the sort of news or feature items or picture captions that say, in effect, "This thing is big, and it's outdoors, and you may see it on the way to work, and so we should probably tell you what it is." Civic reviews of outdoor representational sculpture often don't even mention the name of the sculptor. Why mention the artist — since it's nonart by definition?

Hart was by no means alone. In 1980, a sculptor named Eric Parks completed a statue of Elvis Presley for

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downtown Memphis. It was unveiled before a crowd of thousands of sobbing women; it became, and remains, a tremendous tourist attraction; civic reviews only. And who remembers the name Eric Parks? In 1985, a sculptor named Raymond J. Kaskey completed the second-biggest copper sculpture in America — the Statue of Liberty is the biggest — an immense Classical figure of a goddess in a toga with her right hand outstretched toward the multitudes. “Portlandia” she was called. Tens of thousands of citizens of Portland, Ore., turned out on a Sunday to see her arrive by barge on the Willamette River and get towed downtown. Parents lifted their children so they could touch her fingertips as she was hoisted up to her place atop the porte-cochere of the new Portland Public Services Building; civic reviews only. In 1992, Audrey Flack completed “Civitas,” four Classical goddesses, one for each corner of a highway intersection just outside a moribund mill town, Rock Hill, S.C. Has been a major tourist attraction ever since; cars come from all directions to see the goddesses lit up at night; nearby fallow cotton field claiming to be an “industrial park” suddenly a sellout; Rock Hill comes alive; civic reviews only.

Over the last 15 years of his life, Hart did something that, in art-world terms, was even more infra dig than “Ex Nihilo” and “Three Soldiers”: he became America’s most popular living sculptor. He developed a technique for casting sculptures in acrylic resin. The result resembled Lalique glass. Many of his smaller pieces were nudes, using Lindy as a model, so lyrical and sensual that Hart’s Classicism began to take on the contours of Art Nouveau. The gross sales of his acrylic castings have gone well over \$100 million. None were ever reviewed.

Art worldlings regarded popularity as skill’s live-in slut. Popularity meant shallowness. Rejection by the public meant depth. And truly hostile rejection very likely meant greatness. Richard Serra’s “Tilted Arc,” a leaning wall of rusting steel smack in the middle of Federal Plaza in New York, was so loathed by the building’s employees that 1,300 of them, including many federal judges, signed a petition calling for its removal. They were angry and determined, and eventually the wall was removed. Serra thereby achieved an eminence of immaculate purity: his work involved absolutely no skill and was despised by everyone outside the art world who saw it. Today many art worldlings regard him as America’s greatest sculptor.

In 1987, Hart moved 75 miles northwest of Washington to a 135-acre estate in the Virginia horse country and built a Greek Revival mansion featuring double-decked porches with 12 columns each; bought horses for himself, Lindy and their two sons, Lain and Alexander; stocked the place with tweeds, twills, tack and bench-made boots; grew a beard like the King of Diamonds; and rode to the hounds — all the while turning out new work at a prolific rate.

In his last years he began to summon to his estate a cadre of like-minded souls, a handful of artists, poets and philosophers, a dedicated little derri re garde (to borrow a term from the composer Stefania de Kenessey) to gird for the battle to take art back from the Modernists. They called themselves the Centerists.

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It wasn't going to be easy to get a new generation of artists to plunge into the fray yodeling, "Onward! To the center!" Nevertheless, Hart persevered. In the four months since his death certain . . . signs . . . have begun, as a 60's song once put it, blowing in the wind . . . the sudden serious consideration, by the art world itself, of Norman Rockwell as a Classical artist dealing in American mythology . . . the edgy buzz, to use two 90's words, over the recent sellout show at the Hirschl & Adler Gallery of six young representational painters known as "the Paint Group," five of them graduates of America's only Classical, derrière-garde art school, the New York Academy of Art . . . the tendency of a generation of serious young collectors, flush with new Wall Street money, to discard the tastes of their elders and to collect "pleasant" and often figurative art instead of the abstract, distorted or "wounded" art of the Modern tradition . . . the soaring interest of their elders in the work of the once-ridiculed French "academic" artists Bougereau, Meissonier and Gérôme and the French "fashion painter" Tissot. The art historian Gregory Hedberg, Hirschl & Adler's director for European art, says that with metronomic regularity the dawn of each new century has seen a collapse of one reigning taste and the establishment of another. In the early 1600's, the Mannerist giants (for example, El Greco) came down off fashionable walls, and the Baroque became all the rage; in the early 1700's, the Baroque giants (Rembrandt) came down, and the Rococo went up; in the early 1800's, the Rococo giants (Watteau) came down, and the neo-Classicalists went up; and in the early 20th century, the Modern movement turned the neo-Classical academic giants Bougereau, Meissonier and Gérôme into joke figures in less than 25 years.

And at the dawn of the 21st? In the summer of 1985, the author of "The Painted Word" gave a lecture at the Parrish Museum in Southampton, N.Y., entitled "Picasso: The Bougereau of the Year 2020." Should such turn out to be the case, Frederick Hart will not have been the first major artist to have died 10 minutes before history absolved him and proved him right.

Tom Wolfe

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