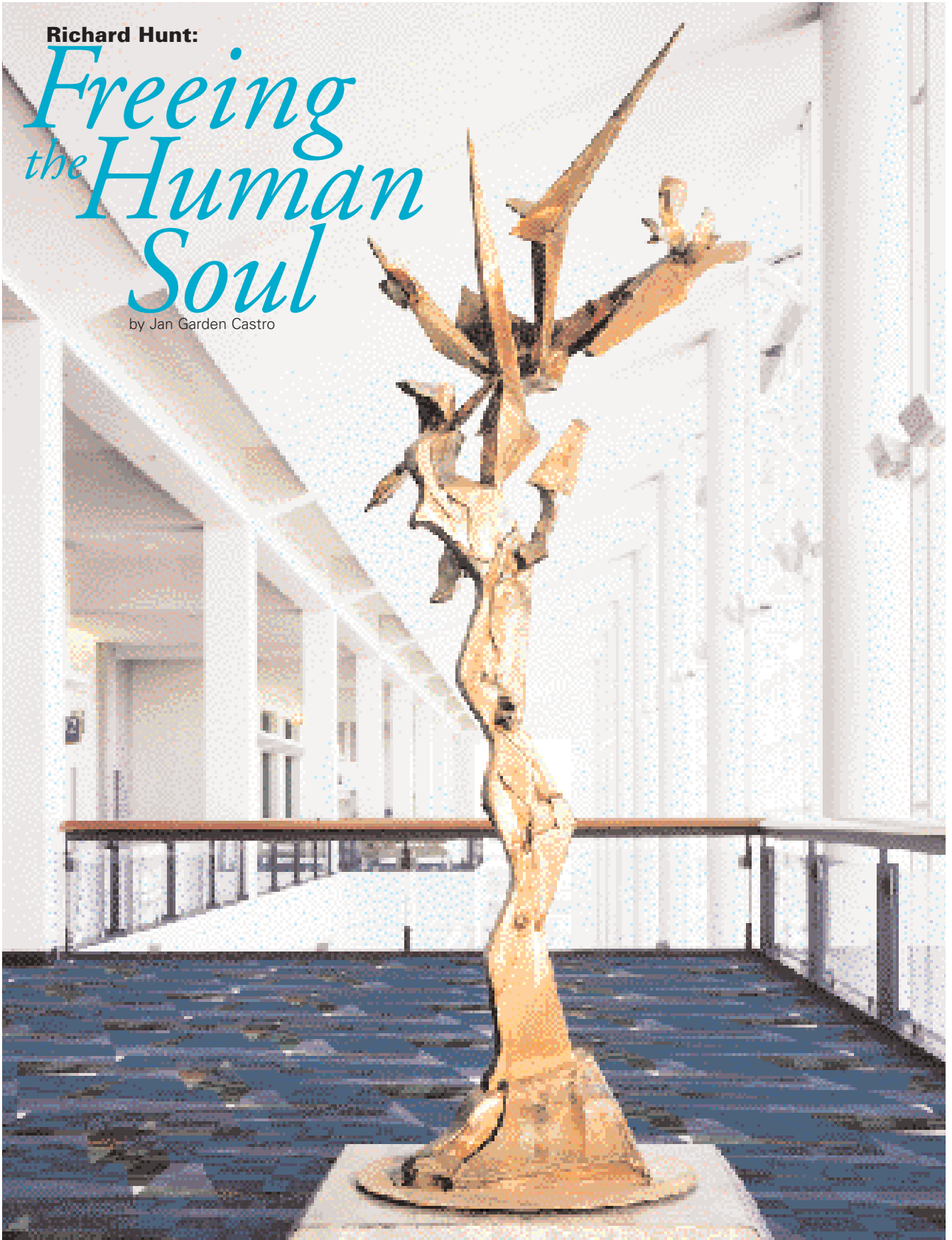


Richard Hunt:

Freeing the Human Soul

by Jan Garden Castro



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As a public artist, Richard Hunt is known as a creator of abstract metal works, each a unique shrine to the human spirit. With over 30 public works in the Chicago area alone, one Hunt aficionado noted, “you kind of bump into them all the time.” In Chicago, Jacob’s Ladder, an indoor commission for the south side’s Carter G. Woodson Public Library, and Freeform (1992), an outdoor commission on a glass wall of the restored State of Illinois office building on LaSalle Street, illustrate Hunt’s range and vision. There is even a public map of the Hunt sites in Chicago. Hunt’s work is also in public collections in New York City, Washington D.C., Cleveland, and Chattanooga, and in college towns such as Storrs, Connecticut, and Kalamazoo, Michigan. In Memphis, I Have Been to the Mountain (1977) graces the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. In Atlanta, Hunt’s Wisdom Bridge (1990), a commission for the Atlanta Public Library, demonstrates the artist’s expertise at developing potent themes into durable outdoor art.

Hunt’s public art, with its images of strength, endurance, and wit, balances his studio sculpture, which is more intimate, intricate, and enigmatic. He recently had a retrospective at the Studio Museum in Harlem, as well as concurrent exhibitions at the Museum of African-American History and the G.R. N’Namdi Gallery in the Detroit area. An exhibition of work has also traveled in Africa through the auspices of the United States Information Service. The following interview was conducted in St. Louis during the installation and dedication of Wingways (1997).

Castro: Two directions that you incorporate into your art are the metal craft traditions of Julio Gonzalez, David Smith, and Picasso and the post-World War II use of industrial methods in fine arts. Would you elaborate on each?

Hunt: The direct-metal, open-form welding tradition typically is traced from Julio González and Picasso, in that González helped Picasso make his early welded sculpture and went on to develop his own style. Then you have the Americanizing spin of David Smith, who saw the work of González in Paris, which led him toward the direct-metal, open form that characterized his work of the ’40s and ’50s. Then other people took it up.

As an aside, Herbert Read called a group of ’50s British sculptors—Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick, Geoffrey Clark, and Bernard Meadows—Britain’s “New Iron Age.” When I was a student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC), seeing work like that and especially the work by González (in a 1953 show curated by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie called “Sculpture of the Twentieth Century”) really sparked my interest in direct-metal sculpture.

The idea of exploiting welding methods and the tensile strength of metals opened up many possibilities to me.



Above: *Jacob’s Ladder*, 1978. Brass and bronze, hanging section: 15 x 7 x 8 ft., ground section: 4 x 4 x 5 ft. Opposite: *Chi Town Totem*, 1997. Bronze, 102 x 38 x 38 in.

This idea was actually linked to the increasing recognition among artists that an art which was representative of our own time ought to use materials and techniques that were at hand, whether it was new experiments using plastics, new kinds of paints, new kinds of surfaces in painting, or using materials developed during the war effort.

Castro: Some of your teachers were persecuted by the Nazis. Is there a social implication as well in using these new materials?

Hunt: In the early ’50s, not only were there many teachers



Left: *Farmers' Dream*, 1980. Corten steel, 110 x 48 x 68 in.

Opposite: *Slowly Toward the North*, 1984. Corten steel, 57 x 36 x 78 in.

who had fled to Chicago from Paris, Vienna, and the Bauhaus, but also many students who were political refugees. In my classes, some friends from Latvia and Lithuania had fled first the Germans, then the Russians. There were also returning GIs. We were moving from an academic approach to something that seemed of the time.

Castro: *Perhaps one of the benefits of being in Chicago was that the optimism of the '50s was tempered by the diverse student body. That social mix might not have been evident at Eastern schools such as Colgate or Cornell...*

Hunt: ...or at many Midwestern universities. Certainly there was an influx of people with a variety of life and art experiences and age ranges as well as students like myself who had grown up studying at the Museum and the

School of the Art Institute. This was a post-war urban phenomenon that was stimulated by Chicago's cultural traditions.

Castro: *Were there many other African-American students and/or teachers?*

Hunt: There were no African-American teachers. Out of a class of a few hundred, you could count the African-American students on one hand.

Castro: *Was there racism?*

Hunt: I suppose. The '50s were before the civil rights movement. Segregation was, as they say, the law of the land, and certainly existed in Chicago. Negroes, as we were called then, lived on the south side and on the west side in well-defined neighborhoods. I would say there was a range of attitudes, feelings, and possibilities within the school environment.

As it happened, I had a lot of interest and support for what I was doing from teachers such as Neli Bar (German and Jewish), my primary sculpture teacher, who was living in Paris before the Nazis took over the city. She thought I had ability. I became her student assistant. We spent a fair amount of time talking about life and art. Her husband, Paul Wiegardt, taught painting. Among other teachers, Egon Weiner was from Vienna and Edouard Chassaing was from France.

Castro: *Were there any lessons from that period that you still carry with you?*

Hunt: All of these émigrés were sorry they had to leave Europe, whether they blamed Hitler or something else. Their idea was that America ought to try to be more like Europe. That's what a lot of cultured Americans thought at the time too—that America ought to be more like Europe. I came to see it differently over time.

Given my current age (62)—and that I grew up in an obviously more segregated America—one of the ways my parents thought we would work our way out of the racial situation was to adopt a dualism. The African-American heritage was very much a part of my upbringing within

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my home and our neighborhood. We learned to revere historical figures such as Marian Anderson and Paul Robeson, people whom we call role models today. Marian Anderson could sing classical music with the best of them; moreover, in recognition of her heritage, she always closed her recitals with Negro spirituals. My mother, who idolized her, took me to recitals from the time I was three or four years old. If you were going to succeed in the world, you needed to understand what Western culture was all about, but you also had your own understanding of who you were and where you were from.

I came to see the strength of my own roots and past. The success of the early phase of the civil rights movement, which resulted in voting rights legislation and the breaking down of obvious barriers like segregated drinking fountains and public accommodations, gave one a sense of being able to prevail. What happened after that was chastening, tempering. Another thing, too, is to discover the obvious—that the foundations of American society were built upon the backs of our forefathers.

Then there's the whole idea that as you start to explore what the arts are or can mean in terms of cultural and economic development and identity, the European models

seem anachronistic, aristocratic, and elitist. For me, that was a dead end, or a wrong end.

Castro: *This brings us to one of your themes, which is also one of Toni Morrison's themes in her books, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, of exploring ideas of flying, of spiritual avenues toward community and wholeness in a fragmented and sometimes still-segregated society. Your work often incorporates wings that evoke birds, angels, airplanes, and childhood dreams.*

Hunt: I would say my own use of winged forms in the early '50s is based on mythological themes, like Icarus and *Winged Victory*. It's about, on the one hand, trying to achieve victory or freedom internally. It's also about investigating ideas of personal and collective freedom. My use of these forms has roots and resonances in the African-American experience and is also a universal symbol. People have always seen birds flying and wished they could fly.

The focus of my interests today has migrated from the spiritual to the historical and statistical. Slavery interests me, but I like to use my imagination in dealing with its ramifications. I don't like to get too tied up with the part of the middle passage when the Africans were stacked in



the holds of slave ships. What interests me is that this was a triangular trade. The same boats that had the germs and excrement of the slaves took their products—cotton, molasses, and rum—back to Europe. From Europe, the slavers took guns, gunpowder, and beads to trade to the chiefs for slaves.

Castro: *Your images of flight also contain danger signals...*

Hunt: Icarus fell into the sea, planes crash...

Castro: *What were the inspirations for Jacob's Ladder?*

Hunt: It was a commission for the Carter G. Woodson Public Library, a regional branch on Chicago's south side. The library is named for the father of black history, and the space houses a collection of African-American historical and literary material. I wanted to create a vertical sculpture that would hang from the ceiling and would interact with the open space. Of course, the idea for *Jacob's Ladder* comes from the well-known Negro spiritual connected to Jacob's dream and vision. This piece leaves wings and angels more to the imagination. It relates to the structure of the building. At the bottom, to involve the whole space in the composition, is a form that is circular, in part, and that reaches up toward the ladder. It suggests a sort of altar that Jacob built after having his dream.

Castro: *Your strong identity and commitment to public art seem perfectly matched to Chicago's tradition of*

sculpture in public places.

Hunt: Part of my involvement is related to the interest that Chicago architects in the '60s had in renewing that tradition in terms of Modernism. From the time of the late Beaux-Arts/Art Deco period to the Works Progress Administration to the period after World War II, when the first international sculpture was brought in, to the '60s, emerging artists like myself developed experience with public art. Chicago's political openness has brought artists and people together.

Castro: *What are some of the demands of doing outdoor sculpture?*

Hunt: First, outdoor sculpture needs to be reasonably permanent in terms of materials, techniques, and the way it's placed. The scale should integrate the sculpture into the

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