

The Sculptor's Apprentice

Until about my 16th birthday I was to become a sculptor like my father. It was only the absence of art schools in Israel that adhered to his principles and my wondering mind that led me into academia. For my 7th birthday I received a small stonemason's hammer he had ordered for me from his blacksmith and I was set to help chiseling away the roughage from the stone sculptures Kosso was working on; at first limestone then marble and by 1962 I was working as a stone mason with the sculptors in the *Yigar Sahaduta* (or 'Form in Space'), the Sculptors' Symposium in Mitzpe Ramon, Israel. By age 10 he would give me my personal project to do: "make me a pigeon", "make an eagle"... He also told me of his own training and his thinking about art in general and his sculpture in particular. These conversations continued also after I turned from art to become an ethnologist. In the following paragraphs I will try to capture what art in general was for Kosso and his thoughts about his own art.

Kosso was captured by sculpture at age 15 (1935), during a visit to the exhibit of Hana (or Chana) Orloff at the Municipal Museum in Beit Dizengoff, Tel Aviv after seeing "real sculpture and since then I did not want to do anything else". He then, with others, apprenticed with Itzhak Danziger, after the latter established his studio in 1938, where Kosso developed working skills in clay and stonecutting but most of all tried to figure "how to make a bas-relief in a climate where the sunlight was so strong that the thinnest shade doubled or tripled the visual depth of the bas-relief". In 1939 he left for the Art Institute of Chicago and Chicago School of Design in the days the Bauhaus held sway in the Windy City. It was there that his thinking about art and sculpture matured to a coherent whole.

Kosso held that "each idea has its own material", viz., has the material that expressed it most fully, and he always emphasized that each material had its character and an idea that looked best in marble would not look its best in granite, wood, bronze, etc. An idea that is best expressed in stone will not be as powerful if expressed in wood or metal. Consequently, he experimented with different materials and as new materials appeared he tried them too. Thus, for example, when he could get pliable asbestos he could shape he tried that material when he made the fountain at the Israel Police Rehabilitation Center in Nahariya. About the

same time (1957-1958) he also made the similarly shaped *Reed Fountain* (at the National and University Library in Jerusalem) of bronze.

One of my earliest memories was his recounting experiences he had had as a student at The Art Institute of Chicago. The most important for him in term of the idea/material nexus was the morning ritual the students went through. According to his story, every morning upon arriving at school they would enter through a darkened corridor where on both its sides were little curtained presentation alcoves. In each alcove was an object of a different material – a variety of woods, rocks, metals, china, glass, etc. A student would put his/her hand through the curtain into the alcove, feel the material, then record their conclusions in their notebooks as part of their homework. Every day the materials would change positions. The idea was to develop a sense of the materials and what best they were suited to represent. When years later I read *The Fountainhead*, I could readily identify the Bauhaus influence in that literary work.

Another cardinal tenet in Kosso's work was striving to present the essence of the subject matter in his sculpture. I particularly remember an early exercise I completed in clay - a pigeon. I brought him the bird for comments and he asked me "what is the *pigeon-ness* of my clay bird? What is the *lion-ness* of the lion?" and sent me back to try capture the '*pigeon-ness*' of my pigeon. This organic approach to his work was already well defined in the 1951 catalog prepared for his first one-man show in Tel Aviv:

"Where should sculpture be placed? Out of doors! In a garden and next to waters. Let it stand by the highways! While that which is indoors ... let it be part of the structure, determined by its character and proportions! The "travelling statue" is but an uprooted organism. "

("Exhibition of Sculptures, Museum Tel Aviv, December 1951 - January 1952"; Emphasis added).

The organic approach --seeking to capture the essence of your subject matter-- was probably the most important tenet of his professional life, for it penetrated all aspects of his art. It was not only the idea of striving to display the essence but included myriad of other aspects as well: that a sculpture be part of its environment (which connected him with the symposia movement); that the sculpture should

interact with the people who observe it (or as he used to say "it should work on them", or that the interaction between a sculpture and its viewer is a "dialog" and is different for each viewer); that a sculpture should be on a human scale and not make the person small (see his address "When Is Big Too Big?" to the S-10 symposium in Toronto, in this folder).

Kosso as a teacher of art (and occasional Artist in Residence) had another tenet, one which helped end my future profession as a sculptor. The tenet was that an art teacher should not teach his/her students *style* but only materials and techniques, letting them discover their own personal styles. It was after I left high-school that in the summer of 1960 together we visited the various art schools in Israel with the intention of my enrolling in one of them. The problem was that in each empty classroom we visited I could identify the teacher by the style of his/her students' works and secondly, the technical quality of these works was much below what Kosso would have let me do as his apprentice. There was nothing, according to his Teaching Tenet, that I could have learned in these classrooms. And, listening to my own 'self-ness', I moved on to other interests.

In 1960 he was invited to participate in the 2nd 'Symposium Europaischer Bildhauer' in St. Margarethen, Austria. According to Kosso, the idea developed in the late 1950's between Karl Prantl [an Austrian sculptor] and an art critic [whose name I have forgotten, although I remember from his visit to Mitzpe Ramon that he had polio as a child and limped] about the organic nature of sculpture and the need to create works in the open air. As result, in 1959 they established the 1st sculptors' symposium in the Roman quarry near St. Margarethen in Austria. These ideas resonated well with Kosso's ideas and when he returned from Austria he started working on organizing a symposium in Israel. In Austria he also began a transition from figurative sculpture -which had characterized his earlier "Israeli" period- to abstract sculpture -which would characterize the rest of his creative life. He himself used to describe his artistic transformations as a cat's 9-lives: Kosso the 1st, Kosso the 2nd, Kosso the 3rd, etc.

Austria was followed by the 'Forma Viva' Symposium in Kostanjevica, Yugoslavia in 1961; the 5th *Festival del due Mondi - 'Scultura nella citta'* - Spoleto, Italy; and 'Yigar Sahadutah' ('Form in Space') Sculpture Symposium, Mitzpe Ramon, Israel in 1962, which he had organized. During these two years the transition to abstract

consolidated. When he returned from Spoleto he destroyed most of the figurative sculptures he had left at home and his studio, he also tried to exchange newer works for older figurative works that he had given to various extended family members. He kept saying that "this work does not represent me". Thus the collection in the folder "1941-1960 The Israel Period (Early Works)" includes only those works that were not at home at the time and works which survived in photographs and printed matter (for example: the 1951 Portfolio and exhibition catalogs). Also missing are most of his commissions which I was not able to locate on the Internet, such as the 1959 commission for the EI AI Airlines Building at Lod Airport (a flock of copper birds in flight); or the afore mentioned Fountain at the Israel Police Rehabilitation Center in Nahariya, Israel; or the sculptural wall he did for a private house in Savion, Israel.

In evaluating the relative paucity of images belonging to the Israeli Period versus his justification for trying to eliminate this period from his record because "this work does not represent me", one is struck by the gulf between the Artist and the Art Historian/Critic: The Artist's interest in his/her future legacy versus the Art Historian/Critic's interest in his/her past creations. Kosso never compromised on his art. I remember his working on drawings, a pile of newsprint or other media, brush or charcoal flashing, one page after another non-stop. A day or so later he would go through the pile and out of maybe a hundred pages he'd keep one or two, in any. I think I learned most about the '*pigeon-ness* of my clay bird' from looking at what he had kept [for example, 'Cock fight', #3 in (1947-1960 The Israeli Period (Early Works) \Works on Paper)] versus what he discarded. Thus, as much as I (the historian) would like to include all his creative work on this website, I (the apprentice) am satisfied with the material which has been included.

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