

DELTA

M A G A Z I N E

Weekend in
VICKSBURG

Simple
Vacation
Meals

poolside
living

15th
Anniversary
ISSUE





"The Patriot" by Malvina Hoffman, was commissioned by William Alexander Percy to honor his father, Senator Leroy Percy.



COURTESY OF DIXON GALLERY AND GARDENS

Auguste Rodin, *Three Shades*, Courbertin Foundry, cast 4/8 in 1985, Bronze. Collection of Iris Cantor on loan to the Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis

From the Hands of a Master

The Delta Legacy of Auguste Rodin

BY HANK BURDINE

The French master Auguste Rodin, 1840-1917, was known as the father of modern art. Compared to Michelangelo, he was considered by many to be the greatest artist of his era. Rodin modeled the human body with realism and physicality using intense individual character. He was able to find—through his hands in clay—“the beauty and pathos in the human animal.” The Musée Rodin in Paris holds six thousand sculptures and over seven thousand drawings by Rodin, and his legacy is deeply rooted in the Mississippi Delta.



Richard Hoffman told his daughter Malvina, "One must 'be' an artist first of all and 'then' one can create art." Courtesy of Hoffman Properties, LLC.

MALVINA HOFFMAN

As a child, young Malvina Hoffman grew up in New York City amidst the art and music scene of a high social era. Her father was a concert pianist with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, and she was constantly immersed in artistic endeavors. Daily she listened to her father practice and play on his Chickering grand piano. She began drawing at an early age, and her favorite subjects were horses and dogs, which were quite prevalent on the streets of New York in the early part of the century. When Richard Hoffman died, she and her mother went on a year's sabbatical to Europe so Malvina could study art and be a part of the creative scene. Malvina had sculpted a portrait bust of her father and one of his protégés and carried a picture of them with her to show Rodin in hopes of becoming a student of the great master.

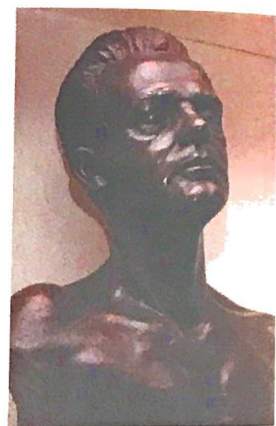
After repeated attempts to gain entrance into his studio and meet him, Malvina presented two letters of introduction to the doorman from friends and arch supporters of Rodin. She was immediately brought under the aura and tutelage of the French master. He demanded her to go to the Louvre and to study the past masters and to make many drawings, not to copy them, but to develop her own technique. According to Didi Hoffman, who has written a book called *Beautiful Bodies*, "Rodin taught Malvina Hoffman that art must come from an attempt to show the truth in nature, it must be honest, and that honesty was almost impossible to capture. Once she became master of her own art, then she could find her truth, as he continued to try to do, fearing he never would." Rodin had urged Hoffman to study human anatomy and dissection to better understand musculature and tension in clay. She took his advice, and in her works with the prima Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, her studies of the hands, arms, legs and torso were critically compared to the extensive studies of Michelangelo and da Vinci by the *New York Times*. She learned from Rodin to study intensively before she sculpted.

Hoffman returned to New York and worked with a frenzy, developing her own technique in her studio where she sculpted with a passion while taking courses in dissection of the human body. She learned the art of plaster casting and how to build the molds and the art of making bronze sculptures from the clay models she was expertly

creating. She became very well known and was sought after for portrait and full figure busts worldwide. She accepted the monumental task for the Field Museum of Chicago to travel the world and create 103 pieces of sculpture of the different races of man. This was the largest commission in the history of bronze art, and it happened to coincide with her completion of a full-figured statue of "The Patriot" that stands in a Greenville cemetery.

WILLIAM ALEXANDER PERCY

William Alexander Percy was a poet, planter, lawyer and world traveler. He was a mentor, host and friend to artists and intellectuals and even a few vagabonds and bohemians. William Faulkner, Ben Wasson, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsey, Shelby Foote, Walker Percy, Charles Bell, David Cohn, Stephen Vincent Benet, Langston Hughes and the Hodding Carters all were a part of Percy's close circle of friends, and they often spent time in his home and garden. Upon the death of his father, Senator Leroy Percy, William Alexander Percy commissioned Malvina Hoffman to sculpt a monument to his father. In Malvina's diary she wrote on October 22, 1930, after arriving from Chicago by train, "The Crusader now stands in the Greenville cemetery with bowed head, contemplating us and unmoved against his wall of stone." She and Percy later went to the nursery where together they selected the trees and shrubs to adorn the monument. Malvina Hoffman had become a close and personal part of the Delta scene, corresponding with and visiting with Percy on numerous occasions.



The first formal portrait bust Leon Koury ever created was of his friend and mentor, Will Percy.

LEON KOURY

Leon Koury was the son of a Syrian immigrant who grew up in a corner grocery store on Nelson Street in Greenville next door to Doe's Eat Place. Leon's father had entered a monastery before coming to America to become a monk, but he left before taking his vows. Leon grew up studying Nietzsche, Schopenhauer and Emanuel Swedenborg. Upon meeting William Alexander Percy, Koury found himself as a young man immersed in a world of culture, literature and music. When he heard his first symphony in Percy's parlor, he stated, "I was in a daze for weeks. This was something that I felt I had heard thousands of years before, and it had come back home to my ears. Percy was able to instill in him the realization that "there was so much more to acquire...so much more to gain."

Showing an interest in modeling, Percy gifted Koury with fifty pounds of modeling clay. With no formal training, he began teaching himself in the back of the little grocery store. His first formal portrait bust was of Will Percy. "Somehow, I already knew." Through Percy, "I was made to understand that the marvelous works of others are but the voices of artists delivering their peculiar messages to the world, to which I could at any time add my own. Then it was that I understood that it is never what you say in art that is important, but how much of yourself is speaking."

Koury went on to be shown in the 1937 National Art Exhibit in New York, the 1939 New York World's Fair, the Whitney Museum

Right: A young Bill Beckwith and his creation, "Turtle Hunter".

Far Right: Bill Beckwith and helper pouring molten bronze into a mold in his foundry in Taylor, Mississippi.



JACKIE BECKWITH



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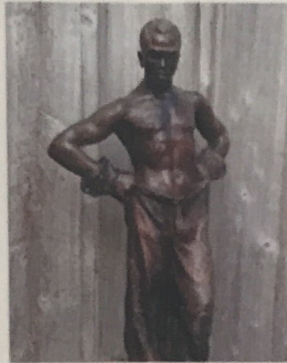
and in exhibits on the West Coast. Will Percy introduced Leon Koury to Malvina Hoffman in 1945, and he moved to New York to stay in Hoffman's studio and to "get some atmosphere, to absorb some of the facets and the workmanship." At that time, it wasn't a question of Hoffman instructing Koury in sculpture at all, he was long past that. He mentored under her and chauffeured her around New York as she introduced him to the "modern art scene" of the time, all the while instilling in him the depths of thought and inward seeking vision of the honesty of nature that had been so concisely implanted in her by Rodin.

Koury moved back to Greenville in 1961 and continued a series of black life and work in the South. Upon the death of his father, Leon closed the grocery store and opened a small hip bar called the Orbit Lounge. He wanted it to be a place where enlightened people could gather, much like the coffee houses and bistros of New York. In a 1962 article in the *Commercial Appeal* he said,

"I wanted it to be the kind of place where creative people could come together, talk, socialize, listen to good music and exchange ideas" (much like Will Percy's garden!). Young garage bands would come and practice late into the night at the Orbit Lounge. After listening to Dylan, Hendrix, Johnnie Winter, the Cream and the Stones, Koury would play Tchaikovsky, Vivaldi or some Italian opera. He became known as a "guru" to the younger crowd, enticing them to read the Harvard Classics and exposing them to the same quality of art as Will Percy had exposed to him. And he taught art lessons, opening up a whole new arena of artistic experience to talented and budding artists of the Delta.

BILL BECKWITH

During one of the jam sessions at the Orbit Lounge in 1966, a young Bill Beckwith accompanied his friends Jerry and Donnie Brown, of a band called the Candy Shoestrating, to the bistro on Nelson Street. Bill wanted to get into the music scene in order to "impress the girls." However, once he met Leon Koury, his attentions were turned to the art of sculpting. "From an early age, I had an affinity for the technical aspect of shaping matter. As soon as I entered Leon's studio and saw what he could do with clay and plaster, the music was forgotten, and the challenge to learn modeling was on. I was fourteen years old."



JANE RULE BURDINE

Compress worker by Leon Koury resides in the garden of a private residence.

"Leon taught fine modeling, classical modeling. He stressed strong side light and working in the gray area between highlight and shadow to achieve perfect form with direction on energy from the center out, as in an egg." Bill has stated that sculpture has to be the most challenging and rewarding manipulation of materials because the artist hopes to create an object which exists with a difference of content from subject matter. "It is a poem in three dimensions where you enter the mysteries of the human condition, that area that we have no words for and you strive to build a piece that connects with a feeling and becomes a symbol of something spiritually elusive." Bill went on to excel at Ole Miss in art, garnering the Student Achievement Award for the best artist at Ole Miss. He learned the art of plaster casting and became "as hooked on casting bronze as an addict to heroin." By the end of 1974, Bill Beckwith had built a complete foundry in the back yard

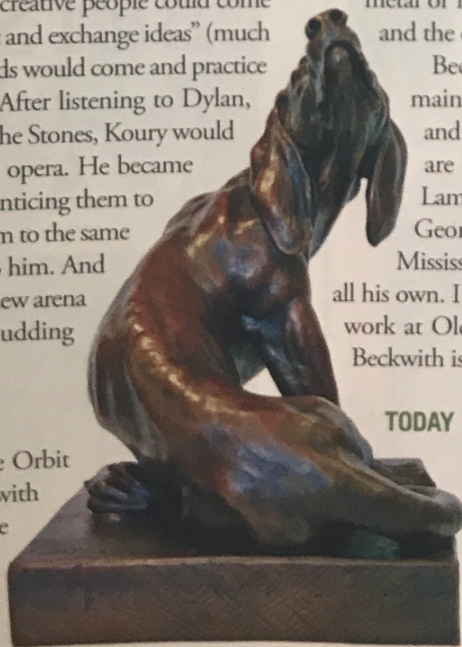
at Leon Koury's Nelson Street studio. "If you have ever poured molten metal or held the sun in your hand, you understand the power and the energy. I was hooked bad."

Beckwith became nationally acclaimed, with his work mainly figurative, and is best known for his portrait busts and full figure sculptures. On display in parks and museums are full figure busts of Elvis Presley, B.B. King, L.Q.C. Lamar, Chickasaw Chief Piomingo, William Faulkner and George Merrick of Coral Gables Florida. Renowned Mississippi artist Bill Dunlap says, "Bill Beckwith is in a class all his own. I have been a friend and an admirer since I first saw his work at Ole Miss. It's hard to make bronze look like flesh. Bill Beckwith is a master at this."

TODAY

Leon Koury taught many students in his studio on Nelson Street and in a studio set up in the Mississippi Levee Board building in downtown Greenville. Bill Beckwith has taught hundreds of students as a professor at Ole Miss, some who have gone on to be teachers of art themselves. And throughout the veins and artistic abilities of these many artists from the Delta and beyond, flow the vision, insight and depth of honesty and nature from some of the greatest

artists of our time. Beginning with Auguste Rodin, through Malvina Hoffman, William Alexander Percy, Leon Koury and Bill Beckwith, the masterful artistic karma continues. **DU**



Houn' Dawg by Bill Beckwith