



HAWTHORNE Fine Art

Dorothy Dehner (1901-1994)

Dorothy Dehner was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1901 to a family with strong intellectual and political interests. Her father was a pharmacist who was politically active, and her mother was involved in the struggle for women's rights, particularly women's suffrage. As a child she received instruction in painting and photography. There was tragedy in her childhood: by the age of fourteen Dehner had lost her father, mother and sister. She spent her adolescence in Pasadena, California, cared for by her mother's sister and visited by another aunt who brought stories of her travels to exotic places. In high school she studied dance, music and acting, and at the Pasadena Playhouse performed in some of the most recent dramas of the period. After one year at UCLA, she moved to New York to pursue an acting career. Dehner studied at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and appeared in several off-Broadway shows. She hesitated about pursuing a career in the theater and, in 1925, went to Europe. She spent six months in Italy and visited Switzerland and France. In Paris she saw works by the Cubists, the Fauves, the German Expressionists, and many examples of avant-garde art at the L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs and Industriels Modernes.

Upon her return to New York in 1925, stimulated by her contact with European modernism, she enrolled at the Art Students League. She initially studied drawing, because the sculpture taught there looked uninteresting after the works by Pablo Picasso, Jacques Lipchitz and other Cubists she had seen in Paris. Kimon Nicolaides was Dehner's life drawing instructor. She found Kenneth Hayes Miller's class rather traditional and favored the modernism Czech-born Jan Matulka brought to the school.

Other than Dehner's trip to Europe, the most crucial event of this period was her meeting and subsequent marriage to David Smith. An aspiring artist, Smith came to New York late in 1926. After meeting Dehner, he too enrolled at the Art Students League. In Matulka's class they encountered Burgoyne Diller, Irene Rice-Pereira and George McNeil. Dehner and Smith were married in December 1927 and both continued to study with Nicolaides and Matulka. Later Dehner would recollect that Matulka always treated his students as peers. The camaraderie in this class was unparalleled and resulted in long-standing friendships among some of the students. In Matulka's class, Dehner's style changed dramatically to cubist-inspired compositions with active surfaces. Often she imitated Matulka's practice of adding sand to the pigment to create textural effects.

Dehner and Smith spent nine months in the Virgin Islands in 1931. They both made still-life paintings that related to the Matulka class. For her "Virgin Island Series," Dehner often worked on gessoed wood crates. The paintings were abstractions, still indebted to synthetic cubism, but with organic forms predominating - particularly shells and marine life. In the late 1940s, nature-derived abstract shapes appeared again in her drawings and paintings.

In 1935 Dehner and Smith went to Paris, Brussels, Greece, and later the Soviet Union and Great Britain. They spent six months in Greece where Dehner made black and white sketches. Years later these drawings became the basis for sculptures; even the titles acknowledged the enduring impression of Greek art and mythology: for example, *Midas*, *Knosso Inhabited* and *Demeter's Harrow*. By the late 1930s Dehner had abandoned abstraction for a representational approach, a miniaturist style based on her interest in a book of medieval manuscripts. While many of her works of these years were lost, the "Life on the Farm" series does survive. The series depicts Dehner's life at Bolton Landing, including scenes of the daily chores on a farm she and Smith had purchased in 1929. After 1940 Red Moon Farm, renamed Terminal Iron Works, became their permanent home.



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Dehner and Smith were closely involved in each other's creative activities during the 1940s. She gave titles to his sculpture, posed for some of his works, and participated in the progress of his welded metal constructions. Often Dehner and Smith were inspired by the same images: the skeleton of a prehistoric bird which they saw at the Museum of Natural History was the basis for Dehner's drawing *Bird of Peace*, 1946, and Smith's *Royal Bird, Jurassic Bird*. For each artist the prehistoric creature assumed the appearance of a menacing predator, indicative of their political views in the post-war years. But for Dehner *Bird of Peace* also held personal associations: the spectral presence of the skeletal creature and the barren, jagged peaks below it alluding to the anguish of her private life.

Dehner considered her years at Bolton Landing a time of great elation and of deep sorrow. Her art became her source of personal sustenance, her means to freedom from her troubled relationship with Smith. A series of dramatic works on paper made in the 1940s are among the most provocative drawings of Dehner's career. The *Damnation Series* consists of skillfully rendered pen and ink studies of nude figures, accompanied by vultures, bats and other animals. *Suite Moderne* includes ghoulish figures, dancing giguees, fandangos and gavottes, all of which become dances of Death. Such images relate to postwar tensions but have more to do with her state of mind in these final years of her marriage to David Smith.

Only a few times in the 1940s did Dehner exhibit her work. She was in several group exhibitions and in 1948 the Audubon Artists awarded her a first prize for drawing. Skidmore College organized a solo exhibition of her work in the same year. By the late 1940s, Dehner was determined to devote her efforts to her artistic career. She found a copy of Ernst Haeckel's seminal 1904 study of natural forms, *Kunstformen der Natur*, and embarked on a series of drawings of microscopic organisms. She gained confidence in this new direction for her art, and created many abstractions in gouache and ink. In these works Dehner introduced a repertory of biomorphic forms that related to Paul Klee, Joan Miro, and Mark Rothko among others. Unlike the surrealists, Dehner did not emphasize the disquieting aspects of her imagery but celebrated the animate energy of these unicellular life forms.

In 1949, Dehner produced *Star Cage*, an abstract watercolor of vividly hued washes punctuated by dots of bright yellow. Jagged lines in the composition evoke the constellations of the evening sky. Dehner recalled that Smith came into her studio, admired the drawing, and said that he would like to make a sculpture. When Dehner proposed a collaboration, Smith declared himself "too jealous" for that. In 1950 Smith made a painted steel sculpture that he entitled *Star Cage* and which was undoubtedly indebted to Dehner's drawing. Although Smith never acknowledged the connection, the illusion of interpenetrating planes is transformed into linear elements of steel punctuated by small rectangles.

In 1950 Dehner left Bolton Landing, and she was divorced from Smith two years later. She took classes at Skidmore College, obtained a degree; then she came to New York City and taught at various schools. Most importantly she was able to pursue her art with freedom and determination. In 1952 she had her first solo exhibition at the Rose Fried Gallery in New York. Later that year Dehner began studying engraving at Stanley William Hayter's Atelier 17, and it was there that her desire to make sculpture returned. While still living in Bolton Landing, she created a few small pieces in wax, but she never exhibited them, nor were they cast in bronze. In the early fifties she began experimenting again with wax. Her imagery was derived from her earlier abstract drawings and paintings even going back to the organic abstractions of the 1930s.



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She began working at the Sculpture Center in 1955 and had a few pieces cast in bronze. Sculpture dominated Dehner's interest for the following thirty-two years, complemented by drawings and prints. In the same year of this major breakthrough in her art, a new stability also came to her personal life. She married Ferdinand Mann, and his affection and support for her work continued until his death in 1974.

Dehner's work has always been about contour rather than mass. She assembled her works from disparate parts and approached the use of wax as a constructivist using planar elements. Bronze casting gave elegance and refinement to her work. She often explored textural effects, beginning with her use of sand in her 1930s paintings. In the 1960s she braised and drew on the wax slabs and introduced other textures by adding small pieces of metal. To create a lively visual effect she used faceted elements to form planes that shimmer when reflecting light.

While Dehner's sculptures are abstract, they consistently make reference to the natural world: vertical compositions evoke a totemic presence, while the horizontal format can be viewed as a landscape. The sculptures also represent a personal iconography that recurs over the decades. Circles, moons, ellipses, wedges and arcs abound. Like the artists of the New York School, the generation of which she is a member, Dehner's art acknowledges that abstract symbols can communicate content that is private, but with universal implications.

In 1965 a retrospective of Dehner's work was held at The Jewish Museum in New York City. The coherence of her artistic achievement was a tribute to her progress in a medium she had only seriously explored for a decade. Dehner had mastered the technical skills of producing sculpture and the scale and monumentality of her works increased. She evoked architectural forms, and some of the totems became human scale.

In 1974, Dehner changed her medium from cast metal to wood. She made constructed pieces using small wooden elements. While the bronzes have textured surfaces, her wooden constructions rely solely on variations in the grain to create lively surfaces. These wooden constructions have a strong association with architecture and are works that Dehner referred to as "toy-like." They can also be considered to include fragments of memory and time. The architectonic structure of her wooden ensembles, with thrusting verticals or stacked elements, often resembles the skyline of a fanciful city.

In the early 1980s, Dehner began a series of works of heroic proportions in corten steel. These fabricated sculptures were based on works from the sixties and seventies that were originally cast in bronze from wax models. Dorothy Dehner died in September 1994.