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Harold Ambellan Memoir

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A native of Buffalo, N.Y., the ex-patriot sculptor Harold Ambellan was a participant in the Federal Art Project during the 1930s and a figure in the radical Artists' Union and Sculptors Guild. After naval service during the Second World War, Ambellan chose to leave the United States to escape the hostile climate of the McCarthy-era, going into exile in France. He worked primarily in a figurative style in both sculpture and painting, even while colleagues of his such as Pollock, de Kooning, and Rothko moved into abstraction, and his work has been exhibited widely on both sides of the Atlantic. He died at his home in Arles in 2006 at the age of 93.

In 2005, Victoria Diehl sat with her friend, Harold Ambellan, to record his memories of a life in art. Beginning with recollections of his childhood in Buffalo, N.Y., the memoir delves into the impact of the Great Depression, Ambellan's experiences in the New York art scene of the 1930s and his participation in the leftist Artists' Union, his Navy service, and his expatriate years in France

from the 1950s-2000s. Ambellan's memoir also includes extended discussion of his views of democracy, patriotism, and art, and his career as a sculptor.

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Background on Harold Ambellan

Born in Buffalo, N.Y., on May 24, 1912, Harold Ambellan was the middle of three sons born to a paperhanger and painter Fred W. Ambellan and his wife Thersa. In his early teens, Harold discovered two things about himself that would shape the future course of his life. First, he discovered a love for art and particularly for three-dimensional form, which he pursued, even while still in high school, through evening classes at the Albright Art School. Second, he discovered that that conformity was not in his character. For Ambellan, the two discoveries fit together intimately:

"Art was the only activity that could possibly be a personal choice to rebuke the deadly conformism. In other words, I came to believe and still believe that chief artistic motivation is criticism of certain aspects of society."

Although Ambellan's direction in life seemed set, the path would not be easy. Having the misfortune to finish high school just as the full force of the Great Depression devastated the U.S. economy, he made ends meet by taking a succession of indifferent jobs as a clerk at an insurance company and a stock boy in a department store, while managing to continue with his evening classes in art. But after falling into unemployment, Ambellan took to the road in Depression style, hitchhiking to Florida in search of opportunity, and not finding it, returning home to Buffalo by the same means.

Throughout, Ambellan remained intent on his artwork and it was on his return and resumption of his artist work that he earned his first break. Using the proceeds from a Chaloner Foundation prize for his sculpture, he moved to New York City to further his study. Settling in Greenwich Village in 1932, he took odd jobs and attended the Art Students League, and was drawn into the vibrant art scene, befriending Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and a number of jazz musicians, as well as visual artists. Ambellan also became politically active as an early member of the radical New York Artists Union, later a CIO affiliate, and the Sculptors Guild, of which he served as president in 1941. Taking part in the Union's sit-ins and other actions to demand relief from the government, he was fortunate to be selected for the Federal Art Project. During the later 1930s, he was employed painting murals at the Willert Park Courts (a public housing project in Buffalo), and making sculptures in Brooklyn and at the Buffalo Zoo, among other projects.

Exploring the figurative in his sculpture, even as many of contemporaries moved increasingly toward abstraction, Ambellan exhibited regularly during the pre-war years. His work appeared in shows with the Bombshell Group and in exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He also founded a successful business making tiles with a woman, Elizabeth, whom he would marry. The war, however, led to yet another turn in his career. Like both of his brothers, Harold was drafted into the Navy, although he was at the upper age limit for draftees at the time. His artistic background led to assignments doing graphic work and later making maps, but he sought out more active service, ending up in the wheelhouse of an LST, narrowly missing taking part in the Normandy invasion due to a broken propeller.

A radical in the labor movement prior to the war, Ambellan barely changed politically afterward, even as the United States took a strong rightward swing. Leaving naval service, he returned to New York and found employment teaching furniture design at the Workshop, and threw himself back into his tile business, even after divorcing Elizabeth. Rededicating himself to his sculpture, he began doing very large works, experimenting with geometric abstraction. Philosophically, however, he remained rooted in the human form and organic shape:

"I would like to describe my work as volitional. By that I mean starting out with a commitment to an idea rather than with the play of forms or abstract elements. The play of forms and technical means are fascinating but divorced from some kind of theme or conception, they become impersonal and meaningless."

Marrying a young girlfriend, Mona, Ambellan decided to look for a change of scenery through an extended trip to Europe, only to see his marriage dissolve soon after they reached Paris. Motivated by the hostile political climate of the McCarthy-era United States, he decided to remain in exile in France, meeting his third wife, Esther Rachel, while living in Montparnasse. In 1962, he moved to Antibes on the Cote d'Azur, operating a gallery facing the rue Thuret, drawing, and working in terra cotta. When he eventually split with Esther Rachel in 1978, he relocated to Arles, remaining active throughout, exhibiting regularly in both Europe and the United States during the 1970s through the early 2000s. Harold Ambellan died in Arles on April 21, 2006.

Scope of collection

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Administrative information

Access

The collection is open for research.

Provenance

Gift of Harold's daughter, Zoe Ambellan, 2015.

Processing Information

Processed by I. Eliot Wentworth, 2015.

Language:

English

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Cite as: Harold Ambellan Memoir (MS 855). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

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