



In Search of Motion: John William Cavanaugh

Information for Educators



Dear Educator,

The Denmos Museum Center is proud to present *In Search of Motion: John William Cavanaugh*. A PDF version of this packet with color images can be found online at www.dennosmuseum.org/education/resources/.

Denmos Museum Center K-12 educational programming aligns with Michigan Content Standards for Arts Education and the National Standards for Arts Education. We especially strive to provide experiences that will fit into a curriculum for

the new Michigan Merit Curriculum for the Visual Performing and Applied Arts. To this end, experiences at the Denmos Museum Center highlight aspects of the creative process. In order to make sure that your tour addresses what you are doing in the classroom, please inform the docent (volunteer tour guide) when contacted of any special interests or needs. For details on content standards addressed by educational programming, please go to <http://www.dennosmuseum.org/education/resources/>.

Please discuss your field trip goals with your docent prior to arriving at the museum. We are excited to work with you to create a successful and fun visit to the Denmos Museum Center. Thank you for visiting the Museum and we look forward to seeing you soon!

The Denmos Museum Center Educational Department

Image: John William Cavanaugh, Echo, Lead with Patina, 1979

BIOGRAPHY

John William Cavanaugh, was born in Sycamore, Ohio, on September 20, 1921. The third of four sons, of intensely religious, poor and rural parents, John was perceived to possess unusual creative talent very early. Premature hardships, frail health, partial hearing loss, the death of his father to suicide in 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression, while particularly dreadful, may have also equipped him with rare courage.

Cavanaugh was taught to draw and paint at an early age by his instructor, Mrs. Alice Archer Sewall James, who treated him with firm care. Her empathy for his partial deafness prompted her to say he had "a wonderful mind and heart shut in, almost without verbal expression from the early lack of hearing."

Cavanaugh registered at Ohio State University, initially studying English Composition and Literature, then during his second and third years he enhanced his curriculum with sculpting courses, receiving his undergraduate degree in 1945.

In 1946 Cavanaugh married Janet Corneille, in Columbus, Ohio. Soon after the wedding they moved to Boston where John studied at the Swedenborgian Theological School in Cambridge, under the Reverend Franklin Blackmer. In 1947, Janet became pregnant. Nine months later, suffering with hydrocephalic syndrome their baby boy died, shortly after birth. In 1949, Janet gave birth to a healthy baby boy, who they named Jon. Soon after Jon's birth, Cavanaugh fell ill with pneumonia and injured himself falling off a bus.

In 1951, resolving to further his education, Cavanaugh re-enrolled at Ohio State University. Largely working in ceramics he also experimented with cement, cast stone, aluminum, wood, sheet metal and sheet copper. That year he was awarded a National Sculpture Society Purchase Prize at the National Ceramics Show, for his sculpture *Goose*, now in the Everson Museum at Syracuse University.

In 1954, Cavanaugh created his first piece with hammered metal, *Goat Head*. Winning the highest honor at the Columbus Art League Annual Exhibition, it was again seen that year at the Eighth Annual Ohio Ceramic and Sculpture Exhibition.

In 1955, Cavanaugh had solo exhibitions at Antioch College and the Cranbrook Academy. These exhibitions promoted his growing reputation, with added recognition coming in the form of a faculty position at the Columbus Museum School where he taught clay modeling. During this time Cavanaugh also began producing sculptures of large headed children which he recognized, in retrospect, as references to his first born child. With their enchanting and equally haunting effect, the artist through the 1960's and 1970's repeated these sculptures.

Two years later, Cavanaugh's life was full of torment. With growing doubts about his sexuality, his marriage, his art and religious beliefs, he was traumatized by his battle to stay true to his wife, Janet, his son, Jon, his family, himself, and his religious training. The ensuing guilt wreaked havoc on his spirit and that September, Cavanaugh caught a

bus for New York City, leaving his wife, son, extended family and friends behind. His mother disowned him, sought to turn his brothers against him and he never saw her again. He kept in touch with his wife, and she frequently expressed her faith in him as an artist. Their son Jon's love remained strong for Cavanaugh. He was never angry with his father because he'd "never felt abandoned."

In 1962, Cavanaugh found lead. At first daunted by the medium he soon developed techniques permitting him to produce sculptures faster than he could mold clay and providing the impetus to expand his work to life-size proportions without fear of prohibitive cost.

In 1963 he had a solo exhibition at the Sculpture Center in New York City, consisting of 47 works in lead, bronze and terracotta. Reviews of the show were unreservedly positive. That same year, John decided to move to Washington, DC with his partner, Phillip Froeder. Continuing to travel to New York frequently, Cavanaugh found Washington to be a well-suited environment. He said he "produced like he had never produced in his life."

In the early 1980's John was diverted by illness, found to be related to cancer from working in lead. During his last two years, Cavanaugh worked with intensity and zeal. By June of 1984, he was depleted of the "tons and tons of energy" required to hammer the lead into shape. With typical self-sufficiency, he turned his attention to glass painting as well as sculpting directly in a combination of plastic and wax, molding pieces to be cast in bronze by the lost wax process. Five months later in December he had produced over 70 wax models for casting in bronze, including five life-sized pieces.

John Cavanaugh died in 1985, leaving his sculpture to express the courage, spirituality, optimism, and vitality, which were the essential qualities of the man and his work. His last letter to Nina Winkel ends with, "It's time for me to go."

ONLINE RESOURCE

John Cavanaugh Foundation: www.cavanaughfoundation.org

TECHNIQUE

John Cavanaugh is by far the 20th century's master in hammered lead. Possessing an intensity that is hard to match in the lexicon of American Artists, Cavanaugh produced close to 500 finished pieces in the lead medium.

The history of lead in art begins in Greece with statues and relief sculpture. As an early *cast* metal, lead has been found as votive figures in Sparta in the 6th century BCE. It was also a significant medium during the 12th century in English and French Romanesque art and architecture. Considered through the centuries as a non-pretentious medium, able to handle the elements of weather without damage, lead most recently reached its height as a sculpture medium during the 18th century, experienced a decline during the 19th century, and then again saw a resurgence in the Arts and Crafts movement. In the first half of the 20th century, lead was considered appropriate especially for architectural details and garden sculpture, such as relief panels or fountains.

Lead is soft and easily worked compared to other metals. It does not immediately become brittle and break when hammered, so there is no need to heat and temper it as other metals require. The body of lead is stable and resistant to corrosion once a light atmospheric corrosion has coated its surface.

However, lead's properties of extreme elasticity, a challenge to the artist, require considerable care when hammering, not to stretch it too much, rendering it thin and breakable. This tendency of lead to thin out and break when hammered prompted Cavanaugh's discovery of hammering from front to back, versus the usual method of hammering from the back to push out the metal relief.

Cavanaugh approached the lead sheet as a thin slab of clay, feeling its thickness and forming its volumes through the interior hollow and exterior surface at once. He would place a sheet of lead on the floor, leaning it against a pallet, or propped up with sand cushions or a mattress, giving him a flexible surface to hammer against. Cavanaugh struck the lead with a baseball bat, chisel, hatchet, file, screwdriver, stone or anything that came into his hand.

Finally, Cavanaugh would expose a finished piece to different oxidation's to achieve subtle shades in the natural lead patina. He was also known to electroplate pieces with copper and silver, achieving a beautiful and unique patina.

IMAGES



On Point
Bronze
1980



Daphne
Lead & Copper
1981