

## GWEN MARCUS

# Striking balance

One of the advantages of being a figurative sculptor today is the ability to tap into many sources for stimulation and ideas. In our post-modern era, all of visual history is available to guide and influence the direction of contemporary artistic creation. This marvelous diversity of possible inspiration also presents a major challenge to sculptors: how to draw on the wealth of the past and, at the same time, create works that are fresh, modern, and project the unique individuality of the artist. Influences can be overwhelming and can lead to works that are simply pastiches or rehashes of past styles. Additionally, teachers who have powerful personalities can also sway their students, who readily adapt the artistic styles and mannerisms of their mentors. Only by rigorous discipline can artists filter those influences to find the ones that truly nourish their creativity. It is always fascinating to discuss with a sculptor their specific sources of inspiration and to discover the threads woven into the works that reflect their goals and achievements. The revelations are always illuminating and, sometimes, surprising.

Gwen Marcus, for example, has been inspired by many sources, but has subsumed them to create pieces that are very much her own. Like many of her colleagues, she emphasizes the role of drawing and anatomical study as the foundation for any achievement in figurative sculpture. As for inspiration, Marcus has only to look around her.

"Living and working in New York City provides me with limitless inspiration—from museums, galleries, dance, opera, and music, to the faces of people I encounter," she states.

The sculptor is also inspired by her travels around the United States and the world. Her explorations of new cultures and environments provide the energy, as well as the themes and ideas that motivate the creation of her new works.

Does she have any specific influences that have shaped her work, any favorite artists? The answer is revealing: "Some of my favorite sculptors are Jean-Antoine Houdon, Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, Henry Moore, Camille Claudel, and Harriet Frishmuth. Classical Greek sculpture and nineteenth-century French sculpture have always been an inspiration to me."

At first, the enormous gap between Houdon (one of the eighteenth century's most graceful and incisive portraitists) and Moore (whose organic solidity and nature-inspired forms epitomize high modern sculpture in the twentieth century) appears unbridgeable. But influences work in mysterious ways and are not always obvious to the eye. They can be simply a way of looking at forms, shapes, or gestures without betraying themselves in formal appearances. Carpeaux, another of the favorites cited by Marcus, was a nineteenth-century French sculptor whose works grace the façade of the Paris Opéra. He also absorbed many influences, combining realism and classical heroism with Second Empire grace and—the French have a word for it—*élan*. These seemingly disparate elements bubble away under the surface in Gwen Marcus's own sculpture.

Working directly from the model, Marcus has developed an approach based on preliminary study and direct observation. "Often, the work is all about the energy that comes from the model," she states. This energy is synthesized into graceful forms and engaging shapes. "There is a rhythm to my work that captures the life force of each piece. Like music, there are moments when the composition slows down, speeds up, and maybe even pauses, but never stops. Every piece is unique in this way, each with its own rhythm." A good example of the results of this process is *Serenity*, an over-life-size piece that summarizes the sculptor's interest in the female nude.



*Serenity*, bronze, 7' x 30" x 24"

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*Hera*, bronze, 29 x 14 x 5"



*Hestia*, bronze, 28 x 9 ¼ x 7"

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Marcus conceived the figure as “both draped and unveiled, confident and humble, reflective and self composed. Her inner strength and outer strength are equally balanced.” This balance can be seen in the pose, which is quite self-contained, almost monolithic. The weight is centered on the feet, and the arms are close to the body, enhancing the sense of poise and containment. The counterpoint between the smooth surfaces of flesh and the texture of the drapery creates an active interplay that gives life to the composition.

At the other end of the spectrum is *Tempest*, a male figure, far from serene, precariously balanced on one foot as he runs into a high wind. The restless composition, the emphasis on straining muscles, the flickering surface of the bronze, and the flowing hair display the sculptor’s command of anatomy, balance, and pose. Here one can see how Marcus has absorbed the heroic idealism of her hero Carpeaux and given it new life and substance.

She is also well aware of classic Greek and Roman sculpture, but rather than trying to imitate the classical style, she lets the classical spirit shape the figures she models. For example, *Hera* and *Hestia*, inspired by a trip to Greece, are the personifications of two important goddesses of antiquity. In these two works, Marcus plays off classical poses and ideal proportions against a more naturalistic interplay of the figure and drapery, an especially important element that invigorates these two works. When asked about her approach to the draped figure, the sculptor replied, “I begin to sculpt the figure in its naked form from a posed model. After the figure is well defined, I add the drapery. This drapery is not an embellishment; it is used to enhance the form and increase a sense of drama and the dynamic of movement.” Here, the drapery, in true classical spirit, gives vitality and motion to the figures.



Other female figures are inspired by individuals much closer to home. *Ruby* and *Pearl*, for example, are based on a model with whom Marcus has worked for years. Fascinated by her model’s Caribbean heritage and responding to her positive energy, the sculptor has been moved to create a “series of strong, real, black women—confident and proud.” In these figures, the interplay between sculptor and model is quite apparent. Whether shown seated or walking, the figures emanate energy and strength.

All is not pose and anatomy in figurative sculpture, however. Bronze sculpture has a color, the patina, which plays an important—sometimes decisive—role in creating the overall effect of a piece. Simply put, patina is the result of the chemical interaction of certain acids painted on the surface of the bronze and enhanced by high heat. Marcus is very aware of the importance of finding the appropriate patina to enhance the effect of each specific figure. “The patina is the last step in making a work, and it can make or destroy a piece by the choice of color,” she says. “I prefer not to work with just one chemical; instead, I work with dozens and layer the chemicals over each

*The Tempest*, bronze, 28 x 13 x 20”



Ruby, bronze, 13 1/2 x 6 1/2 x 6"



Marcus at the foundry working on her bronze, *The Bather*.



Pearl, bronze, 10 1/4 x 8 1/4 x 7 1/2"

other. There are so many colors in my layering, but the overall effect is one tone because the colors are so subtle. The effect adds a very slight vibration to the piece. On a few of my works, I have used a wash of another color over certain areas. So, when viewing the piece, the underneath color still comes through slightly."

Marcus has exhibited frequently and has been awarded numerous honors and commissions, among them gold medals from the Allied Artists of America and the Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Art Club. She is also a member and fellow of the National Sculpture Society. ●

*Richard V. West is Director Emeritus of the Frye Art Museum in Seattle. During his tenure there, the museum adopted the mission "to celebrate the tradition and contemporary practice of representational art" and began building a collection that today includes major works by Odd Nerdrum, Steven Assael, and Bo Bartlett. Before becoming an art historian, West studied with the noted Austrian sculptor Fritz Wotruba at the Meisterschule der Bildhauerei in Vienna and worked as a studio assistant for the American sculptor George Rickey. West is currently a trustee of the Gage Academy of Art in Seattle.*

