Ibram Lassaw (1913–2003)

by Lisa N. Peters, PhD

My interest in a "sculpture of relativity" reflects for me what I consider as the universe of organic relativity. The reality I see before me is living organism and . . . all its parts are ultimately in ecological interdependence. –Ibram Lassaw (1968)[1]

One of America's foremost twentieth-century abstract sculptors, Ibram Lassaw enjoyed a long and productive career. Constantly experimenting and pursuing wide-ranging interests, he merged technique and form in his process-based "action sculpture"—considered both a counterpart to and an inventive variation on Abstract Expressionist "action painting." An early advocate of "truth to materials," he is best known for direct-metal, open-space, welded sculptures that are both geometric and biomorphic. Lassaw's enduring passion was to explore relationships between space and matter, reflecting his abiding belief in universal order and cosmic harmony.

Committed to the primacy of abstraction, Lassaw asserted in 1963 that all art focuses the viewer's attention on properties of shape, color, texture, and movement, "but they are especially important to abstract art because they emphasize, 'This is it, right here and now.'"[2] He expressed this conviction through his participation in the philosophical discourses that shaped the evolution of abstract art in the United States. In 1936, he was a founding member of the American Abstract Artists and in 1949, of The Club—a discussion forum central to the development of the Abstract Expressionist movement.

The son of Russian parents, Lassaw was born in Alexandria, Egypt, on May 4, 1913. He attended a French lycée in Egypt before immigrating with his family to New York in 1921. In 1926, at age thirteen, he took a sculpture class at the Brooklyn Children's Museum taught by Dorothea Denslow. When she founded the Clay Club (later the Sculpture Center) the following year, Lassaw enrolled, receiving classical training in clay and plaster. Among his classmates was Harry Holtzman. Lassaw's first works were academic heads, influenced by Greek sculpture. In 1930–31, he studied with Edward McCartan at the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design and took art history classes at the City College of New York.

The *International Exhibition of Modern Art*, organized by Katherine S. Dreier and Marcel Duchamp and held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1927, left a lasting impression on Lassaw. It drew his attention to nonobjective works by vanguard European artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Sophie Taeuber-Arp. On seeing Constantin Brancusi's *Bird in Space,* Lassaw recognized it as "the ultimate monolithic form."[3] In the 1920s, he began reading widely on aesthetic theory and art history. From collected articles and reproductions of art from all periods and civilizations, he compiled a thirty-three-volume scrapbook. He wanted to "own all of art history," as he explained to his daughter Denise.[4]

His quest for knowledge led him down several paths of inquiry. He deepened his understanding of Modernist art by studying the Russian Constructivists and modern sculptors, including Brancusi, Julio González, Naum Gabo, and László Moholy-Nagy. An exhibition of Alexander Calder's work at the Julian Levy Gallery in 1932 opened his eyes to the possibilities of kinetic art.[5] He read *Shelter*, a magazine edited by the architect Buckminster Fuller, and became fascinated by Fuller's ideas on space, technology, and the evolving relationship between art and scientific discovery. He devoured books on scientific topics, including astronomy, human anatomy, and cosmological theory.

Inspired by bridges and the Eiffel Tower, Lassaw abandoned his earlier monolithic work and began producing open sculptures modeled in plaster of Paris on curving wire supports—these were three-dimensional drawings in space. From 1935 to 1942, he worked for the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration as a teacher, stone carver, and sculptor. During this period, he produced a series of shadow-box sculptures that used empty space as a structural element. Inside wooden boxes with black fabric backings are wires and metal shapes that appear to float in space lit by hidden bulbs.

Despite his early commitment to abstraction, Lassaw had not met another abstract sculptor until 1936, when he encountered David Smith.[6] That same year, he became a charter member of American Abstract Artists (AAA), a group of progressive artists devoted to abstraction, including Burgoyne Diller, Suzy Frelinghuysen, Balcomb Greene, Holtzman, George L. K. Morris, and others. The only sculptor in the group, Lassaw hosted its first meeting in his studio. In 1937, the group gained press attention for its inaugural exhibition, in which members declared their revolt against "literary-subject paintings."[7] Lassaw was president of AAA from 1946 to 1949.

Drafted into the Army in 1942, Lassaw served first at Camp Lee, Virginia, where he was assigned to do body and fender work on army trucks, learning to weld in the process. He was then assigned to Fort Dix in New Jersey, where he produced needed aids such as sand tables, maps, and charts with clay terrains to demonstrate squad and company tactics. After he was transferred to a Brooklyn army base, he worked for Norman Bel Geddes making three-dimensional maps of territories. Concurrently, he rented a studio in Greenwich Village, spending mornings at the base and afternoons in his studio.[8] In the mid-1940s, he produced projection paintings—glass slides painted with translucent dyes. He also made plexiglass sculptures stained with the same dyes.

During a summer in Provincetown, Lassaw met Ernestine Blumberg (1913–2014). They were married on December 15, 1944. Having completed his military service, Lassaw took a job constructing papier maché display structures for Bonwit Teller. He held the position for three years. On the G.I. Bill, he signed up for a class at Amédée Ozenfant's school. Although he attended some meetings, he worked at home with Ozenfant serving as a mentor rather than an instructor.[9]

In 1949, Lassaw was a founding member of The Club, an informal but pivotal artist-run organization of avant-garde artists in New York. Along with Lassaw, its core members were Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Philip Pavia, and Ad Reinhardt; other participants included Elaine de Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner, and Joan Mitchell. [10] The formative meetings took place in the Lassaws' loft on Sixth Avenue and 12th Street. There the artists decided to rent a space at 39 East 8th Street to hold their gatherings.[11] Lassaw played a central role in The Club's culture and debates.

In 1950, Lassaw joined other leading modernists in signing a letter boycotting the Metropolitan Museum's "hostility to advanced art."[12] That year his *Milky Way* (1950) was included in an exhibition of contemporary American sculpture at the Whitney Museum. Lassaw considered *Milky Way* a turning point. It comprises delicate organic forms made with plastic-metal paste shaped over sturdy wire. In 1951 Lassaw acquired oxyacetylene equipment and began producing improvisational works with intricate wire mazes, which he covered with molten metals to explore what he called

Ernestine and Ibram Lassaw, Provincetown, Massachusetts, 1944.

"polymorphous space." He later added rich patinas of green and blue, using chemical treatments and sometimes incorporating crystals and minerals for textured effects.

Among his improvisational works of this time, *Kwannon* (1952; Museum of Modern Art) is a delicate, expansive open-structure inspired by the Japanese word for "that aspect of reality which we call compassion."[13] Lassaw had been reading Buddhist philosophy since the late 1930s, which he enhanced by a course he took at Columbia University with Professor Daisetz Suzuki, a Japanese Buddhist scholar. Among Lassaw's fellow students were John Cage and Betty Parsons.[14] He also drew on the psychological writings of Carl Jung, especially on dreams and alchemy.

Ernestine Lassaw, John Cage, Ibram Lassaw, Brazil, 1985.

From 1951 through 1968, Lassaw was featured in solo shows at the Kootz Gallery, New York. In a 1952 *New York Times* review, Stuart Preston called his sculptures "coherent and satisfying because their structures are unified," describing works such as *Monoceros* (1952; Metropolitan Museum of Art) as "transcendental architecture, totally abstract fantasies . . . that rear their filigree members into the air."[15] Lisa Phillips later noted their "affinity with the controlled chaos of Jackson Pollock's pulsing skeins of paint."[16]

Lassaw was included in the Venice Biennale in 1954, along with Willem de Kooning and David Smith. In 1956 he was featured in *Twelve Americans* at the Museum of Modern Art, including the work of Sam Francis, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Franz Kline, and Larry Rivers. Among his works on view was *Nebula in Orion* (1951, Museum of Modern Art), given to the museum by Blanchette Rockefeller in 1969, and *The Planets* (1954, Baltimore Museum of Art). In 1959 he was one of few abstract sculptors to be included in the *American National Exhibition* in Moscow. The following year his bronze *Presence* was installed in Steinberg Hall, Washington University, St. Louis. In an unpublished essay of about 1959, the art historian E. C. Goossen commented that Lassaw was fusing geometry, space, and organic motion, uniting cosmic metaphor with material immediacy.[17]

Lassaw's sculptures of the 1960s—such as *Enactment* (1961; Whitney Museum of American Art), *Attendant* (1963; The Metropolitan Museum of Art), *Ouroboros* (1967; Berry Campbell Gallery, Plate 8)—display a lively interplay between space and volume. In a 1968 oral history interview, Lassaw discussed his development and recent works in which he moved "occasionally toward the organic or again away from it" and was often concerned with larger voluminous shapes, exemplified by *Cytherea* (1964; Buffalo AKG Art Museum), a work of seven feet.[18]

Ibram Lassaw and Willem de Kooning, c. 1970.

When his work was shown at Zabriskie Gallery in 1968, Hal Foster, writing in *Artforum*, praised it as an affirmation of Abstract Expressionist vitality in sculpture, renewing and refining rather than merely imitating its tradition. He characterized Lassaw's "open, grid-like brass sculptures" as "bright, spatial, and labyrinthine," both "constructed and expressive," "revealing their making through visible welds and corrosion." Foster wrote that unlike the volumetric density of Smith's work, Lassaw's forms are "dematerialized, reflective, and spatially transparent, expressing 'Constructivist transparency'" and a "mystical notion of art as a means of perceiving the underlying unity in creation."[19]

Lassaw completed many large-scale architectural commissions, mostly in the 1950s.[20] He began summering in Springs on Long Island's East End in 1955 and settled there permanently in 1963. He maintained a close friendship with fellow East Ender Willem de Kooning and joined the community of artists drawn to the area's light and landscape.

Solo exhibitions of Lassaw's work were held at the Heckscher Museum, Huntington, New York (1973, retrospective); Zabriskie Gallery, New York (1977); Yates Gallery, Scottsdale, Arizona (1978, 1979); Phoenix Gallery, Washington, D.C. (1982); Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania (1983); traveling show in Brazil (1985); Benton Gallery, Southampton, New York (1986, 1987, and 1988); and Vered Gallery, East Hampton, New York (1987, 1988). In 1988, Guild Hall in East Hampton organized *Space Explorations: Ibram Lassaw.* Reviewing the exhibition, Phyllis Tuchman called Lassaw a "bridge between early twentieth-century abstraction and a meditative, spiritual approach to modern sculpture."[21] In 1990, Lassaw was included in *A Salute to Signa Gallery* at Guild Hall.[22]

From 1990 through 2003, Lassaw had solo shows at University of Kentucky (1992); Harmon Meek Gallery,

Naples, Florida (1995, 1996, and 2003); and Arlene Bujese Gallery, East Hampton, New York (1997). In 2002, the Radford Art Museum, Virginia, mounted *Ibram Lassaw: Deep Space and Beyond,* with essays by Denise Lassaw and Arthur Jones.

Lassaw continued to work until his death in East Hampton, on December 30, 2003. He was included posthumously in *Action/Abstraction: Pollock, de Kooning*, and *American Art, 1940–1976*, held in 2008 at the Jewish Museum in New York. That year a retrospective of his work was held in Matera, Italy, where it was dramatically mounted in the Sassi (caves and cliffs) of the southern Italian town. In 2023, Lassaw was the subject of a large exhibition at the Figge Museum in Davenport, Iowa.

Lassaw was the Benjamin N. Duke Professor at Duke University from 1962 to 1963. He also taught at the University of California at Berkeley, Southampton College, and Mount Holyoke College. Also a writer, Lassaw published articles on color in sculpture (1961) and on his artistic philosophy (1968).[23] Although he sometimes worked in obscurity, his career has received extensive coverage and scholarly attention. His bibliography includes more than one thousand entries, including articles, exhibition catalogues, and books. He was frequently interviewed, cited in the recollections of other artists, and the subject of two dissertations.[24]

Lassaw's work is represented in major museums and public collections across the United States and internationally, including the Baltimore Museum of Art; the Birla Museum, Calcutta, India; the Brooklyn Museum; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh; Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts; the Guild Hall Museum; the Heckscher Museum, Huntington, New York; the Jewish Museum, New York; the McNay Art Museum, San Antonio; The Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Museo della Scultura Contemporanea, Matera, Italy; the Museum of International Art, Sofia, Bulgaria; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Museum of Modern Art, Rio de Janeiro; Newark Museum of Art, New Jersey; the Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; and the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts.

Ibram Lassaw and Philip Pavia, 1999.

1 Ibram Lassaw, "Perspectives and Reflections of a Sculptor: A Memoir," *Leonardo* 1 (October 1968): 354.

2 Cited in Charles Lewis, *Ibram Lassaw* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1963), 37.

3 Phyllis Tuchman, "A Lifetime in the Abstract," *Newsday*, September 4, 1988, A13.

4 Denise Lassaw, unpublished biography of her father, Lassaw Archives.

5 Lassaw, "Perspectives and Reflections," 354.

6 Lassaw, "Perspectives and Reflections," 352.

7 Edward Alden Jewell, "Abstract Artists Open Show Today," *New York Times*, April 6, 1937, 21.

8 Ibram Lassaw, interview by Dorothy Seckler, 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

9 Lassaw, Interview with Dorothy Seckler.

10 On the Club, the women participants, and Lassaw's role, see Mary Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018).

11 Gabriel, *Ninth Street Women*, 280–81, describes the meetings that led to The Club and its early formation.

12 The painters included Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Clyfford Still, Ad Reinhardt, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, and Hedda Stern. In addition to Lassaw, the sculptors included Louise Bourgeois, Herbert Ferber, Theodore Roszak, and David Smith. "18 Painters Boycott Metropolitan," *New York Times*, May 22, 1950, 1, among many sources on this subject.

13 Quoted in "Why it's Avalokiteshvara," *Star-Ledger* (Newark, New Jersey), October 2, 1955, 126.

14 Lassaw, Interview with Dorothy Seckler.

15 Stuart Preston, "Chiefly Modern," *New York Times*, October 12, 1952, X9.

16 Lisa Phillips, "Introduction," in *Ibram Lassaw: Space Explorations–A Retrospective Survey,* 1929–1988, exhibition catalogue (East Hampton, NY. Guild Hall Museum, 1988), 5.

17 E. C. Goossen, unpublished essay on Lassaw, ca. 1959, Lassaw Archives.

18 Lassaw, Interview with Seckler, 9.

19 Hal Foster, "Ibram Lassaw," *Artforum* 16 (January 1978): 66–67.

20 Lassaw's completed commissions for Beth El Temple, Springfield, Massachusetts (1953); Philip Johnson's Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut (1953), Beth El Temple, Providence, Rhode Island (1954), Temple of Aaron, St. Paul (1955), Kneses Tifereth Israel Synagogue, Port Chester, New York (1956), House of Theology of the Franciscan Fathers, Centerville, Ohio (1958), Hilton Hotel, New York (ca. 1968), and Rockefeller Center, New York (1972–73).

21 Tuchman, "Lifetime in the Abstract."

22 Signa was established by Alfonso Ossorio in East Hampton, in 1957 and remained in existence until 1963, showing works by well-known and lesser-known East End artists to increase interest in abstract art in the community.

23 Lassaw, "Perspectives and Reflections"; and Ibram Lassaw, "Color for Sculpture," *Art in America* 49 (March 1961): 48–49.

24 Nancy Gale Heller, "The Sculpture of Ibram Lassaw" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, 1982); and Sarah Johnson, Zen and Artists of the *Eighth Street Club: Ibram Lassaw and Hasegawa Saburo* (Ph.D. diss., The City University of New York, 2005).