

# AMERICAN ARTIST

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50 CENTS



DON QUIXOTE BY WARREN CHAPPELL



# Koren

*Front and back views of the carving*

*"Struggle for Life" in lignum vitae*

*Height 6 feet*

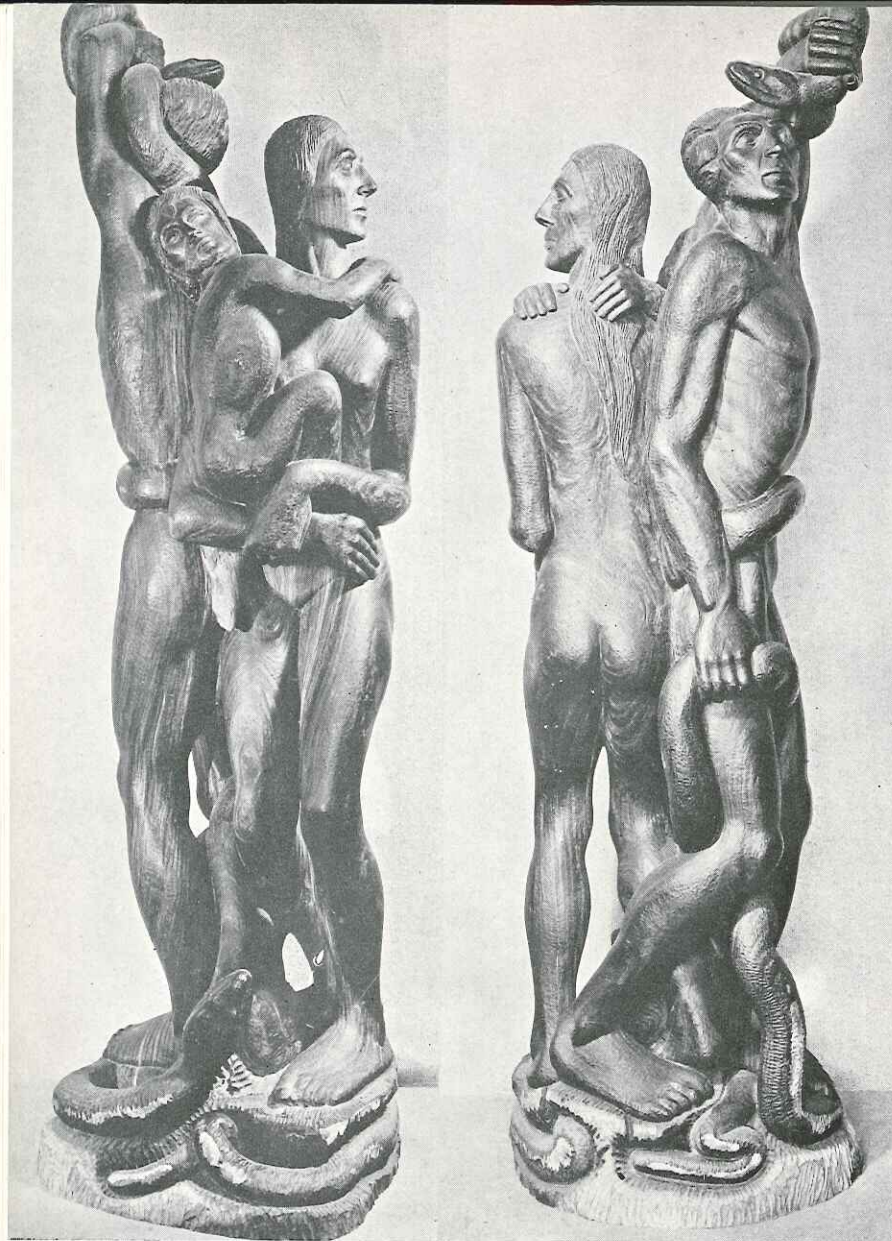
It is not uncommon for a painter to discover within himself a delight in tri-dimensional form that supplements his palette with a sculptor's chisel, but the urge usually remains supplementary, for the man who feels and thinks in color seldom finds himself wholly at home in the sculptural medium.

Occasionally, however, the urge toward symbolism within the individual reaches out for form expression that can give depth and tangibility, neither of which may be derived from the more illusory expression of a two-dimensional medium.

Especially is this true when life experiences have within them the elements of epic struggle, as in the case of the Armenian-American artist, Koren Der Harootian.

To understand his metamorphosis from painter to sculptor it is necessary to examine the emotional background against which his work stands out as if in high relief. Der Harootian's formative years were spent in

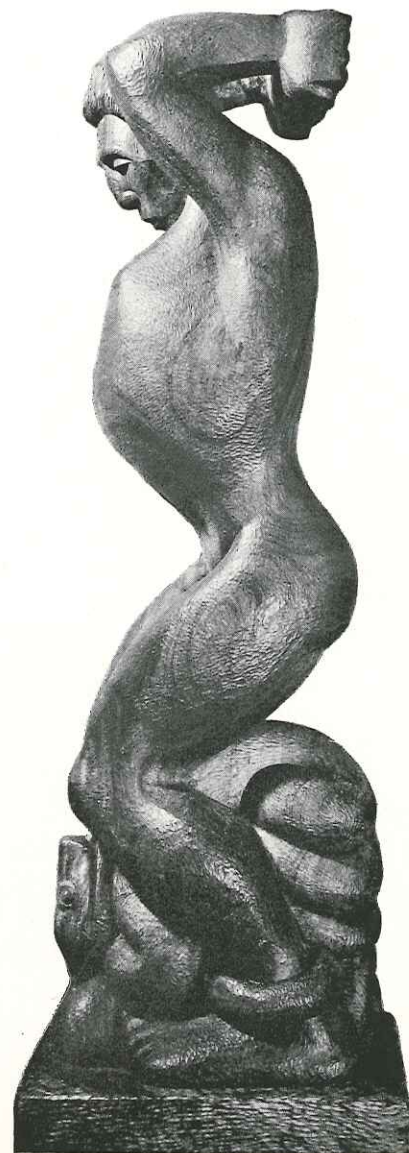
*"Death to Evil" carving in eucalyptus*



*Gorilla*

*Carving in lignum vitae*

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# Der Harootian

**Prophet of man in his eternal battle against evil**

by DOROTHY GRAFLY

the super-charged atmosphere of revolution, displacement, and escape. Born in Ashodavan, Armenia, in 1909, six years before his Priest father was murdered by the Turks, his early recollections are of escape with his mother into Russia, whence, not long afterward, he was forced to flee again from the Russian Revolution. After temporary sanctuary in Constantinople he made his way through Greece to the United States, where he landed at the age of twelve.

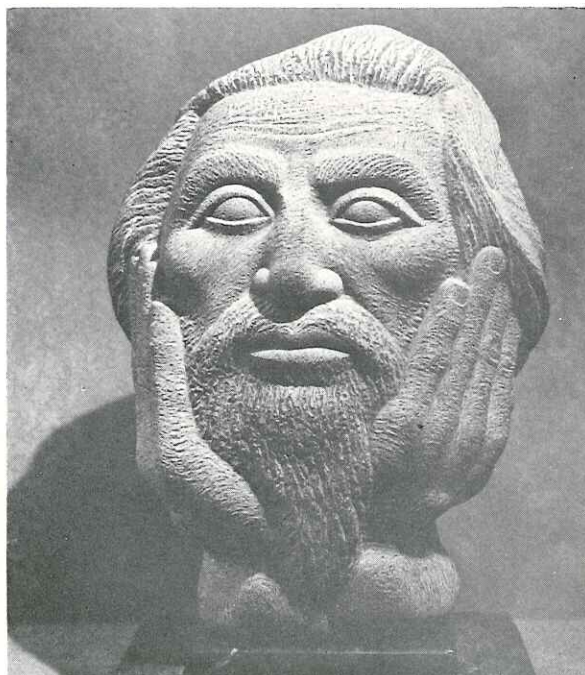
Deep in his subconsciousness lay the sense of turmoil, and as he grew older he sought to give it concrete expression. Man and his trials; the eternal battle against evil; the solidarity of the family against the terrors of life—such themes awaited only a satisfactory medium of expression. For to Der Harootian life is a series of symbols and allegories. His interest lies in the expression of thoughts rather than in the delineation of objects. His mind turns to generalizations rather than to a limited and individualized realism.

Even his heads possess primitive, symbolic feeling. His *Thinker*, for instance, is elemental man—not the highly bred modern sophisticate, but a primitive just emerging from unthinking survival in the cave-man era to grope mentally toward problems sensed rather than understood. Yet one feels that, in such a work, Der Harootian is really offering a satire on man of today, a creature not yet fully awake to the implications of his own existence. In much the same spirit are his *Head of Philistine* and *Man of Sorrows*.

His approach to the figure is almost tribal; primitive in effect, but not in execution. For Der Harootian, despite his interest in bold forms, is a sensitive sculptor, alive to the emotional support of textures and line. To insure textural quality he makes his own tools, haunting junk shops and second-hand stores for old files and other likely bits of metal.

If you ask him whether he misses his rather brilliant palette he says: "Yes, I do miss color, but it has its substitutes. By studying textures, their variety, and their play of light and shadow, I can bring color to form." Material, he feels is equally important as a color medium, and also as supporting agent for the carrying out of a particular thought. "Stone," says Der Harootian, "gives me an entirely different feeling from wood, and the choice of either is thus dependent upon what I want to express." If he works in wood he subtly adapts the grain to the movement of his idea as in *Death to Evil*, an allegorical figure carved in eucalyptus wood.

Movement is another keynote in his work. His compositions are tense with an undercurrent of foreboding



Above: "Man of Sorrows" in Jamaica stone

Below: "Thinker" in Spanish green stone



and tragedy; with a sense of strain born of two world wars, the second of which caught up with him in England. Yet there is a lift to the portrayal, a sense of upreaching that admits hope. It is this quality that lends his art something of the dignity of the old Greek tragedy. Like the Greeks (deriving subconsciously, perhaps, from his Armenian ancestry) Der Harootian uses man as a symbol rather than as an individual. As in thought, so in composition, a figure may be held to its base by shapes and suggestions of evil. A serpent writhes about the legs of man in *Death to Evil* and in *Suffering Mankind*, and coils up the body to become both symbol and decoration in the *lignum vitae* carving, *Struggle for Life*.

It is in the latter work that Der Harootian has attempted one of his most complex themes, that of man, woman and child—the family—standing with patience and resignation in the uneven battle against the odds of life. The lift of hope, however, gains compositional support in the upreaching arms of *Suffering Mankind*; the uplifted head of *Dying Warrior*; the upsweep of arms and body in *Torture* (his war themes were all executed in Jamaica when World War II was at white heat); the lithe upward balance of *Death to Evil*; the upward glance of the puzzled man in *Am I My Brother's Keeper*. And it is the compositional lift that suggests an awakened, not a baffled intelligence. For Der Harootian has the faculty of implying hope while portraying conflict. His work is neither sordid nor defeatist. Dignity of conception is fortified technically by nice feeling for flow of masses that, in turn, develops dynamic line movement. Especially is this true of such a wood carving as the recumbent *Fallen Grenade Thrower*.

Doubtless because of his deep feeling for symbolism Der Harootian strips his figures to the nude and keeps them impersonal. Occasionally there is hint of the metaphysical as he delves into male-female forms in a single face or figure. In fact, his first piece of sculpture was the dual head of Negro and Negress.

Although born in Armenia, Der Harootian gained his art fundamentals in this country at the Worcester (Massachusetts) Museum School where he studied watercolor and oil painting, supplementing his academic tutelage by observation of nature. And it is from nature, through the years he has worked alone, rather than from the study of the work of other sculptors, that his work derives.

In 1929 when Der Harootian first visited the British West Indies, the sculptural quality of his drawings and paintings drew from Sir Hugh Walpole the remark that he should experiment with tri-dimensional form. Wood of the best quality was to be had for the asking, and Der Harootian, the painter, almost overnight discovered himself as a sculptor.

Technically it is interesting to note that the accident of his sojourn in Jamaica first introduced him to the hardest of all woods—*lignum vitae*—thus paving the way, not only for skill in wood carving, but for conception in stone. So large and so hard were the great trunks of *lignum vitae* that symbolic groups of heroic size were a logical result. While the material did not actually develop the sculptor, it helped. From a single *lignum vitae* tree that was had for the taking, as it had been standing dead and dry through the years in a

nearby garden, Der Harootian fashioned three compositions, *Suffering Mankind*, *Orpheus and Eurydice* and *Dying Warrior*. The hardness of the wood and the beauty of its grain lend decorative support and textural quality.

Not long after Der Harootian had been working with *lignum vitae* he was visited in his Jamaica studio by the foreman of Hope Gardens. Fascinated by the figures emerging from the wood, the man offered him a large eucalyptus tree that had lain in the rain for a year. From it have come two other compositions.

In the course of his development Der Harootian has experienced periods of concentration on special subjects. These—though varying in content, embracing Biblical themes (*David and Goliath*), symbolic and allegorical groups, and animal studies—reveal a great common denominator of simplification. If the subject is man, he is treated not as an individual but as the symbol of mankind. If it is an animal—and Der Harootian is an animal lover—he strikes to the essential characteristics.

Many of his animal carvings were made as the result of study in the London Zoological Gardens. Each creature has its mood. *Gorilla* is powerful, and squarely compact, with great arms in reverse angles above and below the head. The treatment of the wood (*lignum vitae*) is rough and hairy. *Cat*, on the other hand, has the sleek dignity of an Egyptian goddess, a characteristic amusingly intensified in the studio where a be-friended alley cat was sitting in upright state at the base of one of Der Harootian's compositions.

How differently the same wood may be treated for texture is well exemplified in contrasting *Gorilla* with *Bird Catching Fish*. Both compositions are carved from *lignum vitae*, but while *Gorilla* is heavy, muscular, and rough surfaced, *Bird Catching Fish* is decoratively sleek, and sharp of line, almost to the point of abstraction.

At present it is toward the abstract that Der Harootian is leaning, although so strong is his sense of message that he finds it difficult to divest his forms of human or animal semblance. Rather does he tend to strip form of detail while retaining its recognizable characteristics.

His interest in rhythms, which are forms in action, finds expression in a group of Armenian dancers where mass, weight, and balance all contribute to the interpretation of the beat. Faces and heads are reduced to the abstract thus focussing attention upon the movement rather than upon the figures as such. And again, more poignantly than in the symbolic or allegorical figures, one is conscious of the basic impersonal element in Der Harootian's work.

Much of the monumental character of his art may be traced to the fact that he never models. All his carving is done directly in stone or wood. He carries ideas in his head sometimes for years with occasional preliminary line drawings in conte crayon. He seldom draws on the stone, and when he does, uses only a few lines.

In Jamaica he worked in wood, but since returning to the United States he has found stone readily obtainable, and his recent compositions, based largely on pre-occupation with ballets and dancers, are taking shape in marble. Freed from the weight of symbolic message, they veer logically toward the abstract through which

Continued on page 43



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## HAROOTIAN from page 24

rhythm may find apt interpretation. Rhythm, however, is not confined either to movement or to dance. One of the most plastic and full-formed of Der Harootian's stone carvings is a lovely *Torso* in Egyptian onyx, created as a synthesis of warm, pulsing, balanced body curves so impersonally conceived that they achieve a feminine abstract.

But the stone carver is *persona non grata* in a great American city. New York, with its impersonal millions, after Jamaica with its warmly interested few, has been an experience and a revelation to Der Harootian. In cramped quarters at 245 East 27th St., where his charming English wife presides hospitably over an antiquated two-burner gas plate, in an apartment so primitive that its existence is an anachronism in one of the world's most modern cities, Der Harootian marshals his carvings; while, in a tiny courtyard he sets up his stone and wields his chisel late into the night.

"People don't thank you for a neighbor," Der Harootian smiles with kindly eyes under heavy Armenian brows. "I keep on working until eleven or twelve o'clock at night, and this is the only place I could find where there was no objection to the noise." The reason is self-evident if one listens to the roar of the city as it surges around and past the sculptor's door.

It is, however, in keeping with the deep simplicity of the man that his surroundings are immaterial. He can work as easily in an East side court as in a garden in Jamaica. For to him the underlying spirit, not the surface irritation, is the guiding force.

## BALET from page 28

appear in American publications. Then came two years on *Mademoiselle*, first as assistant art director, then as art director. His next post was with *Seventeen* where he served as art director for one and one-half years.

At present, Balet maintains his own studio and works wholly as a free-lance. His illustrations are seen in such diverse publications as *Good Housekeeping*, *House & Garden*, *Pic*, *The Woman*, *Seventeen* and *McCalls*, to name a few. His graphic whimsy is employed by Franklin Simon, Macy's and other department stores in their newspaper advertising. Among other accounts are CBS, Lux, Life Savers, Lucien Lelong and Orin Steel.

In spare hours Balet is likely to be making pictures for children's books. "Peter and the Moon" and "Animal A B C" are two that are in progress at present. Balet paints easel pictures too. These show him to be a disciple of the French moderns. Picasso, Chagall, Guys and Lautrec decorate his studio walls. He tells us that much of his inspiration comes from the Egyptians and archaic Greek art. Although strongly favoring the moderns, he says that he is catholic in his tastes, likes all kinds of art that is good of its kind.

Balet divides his time between his studio and residence in New York City and his summer home on Long Island, near Montauk Point. He travels when opportunity permits, which will be more often now that he owns his own plane.

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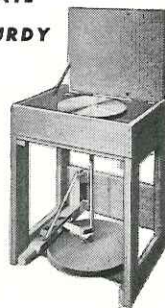
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