



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

WILHELM HUNT DIEDERICH (1884–1953)

Paper Cutouts

EX COLL.: the artist; to his estate until the present

In 1920, Hunt Diederich (the preferred version of his name) recalled an early memory: “As a child of five I embarked upon my artistic career by cutting out silhouettes of animals with a pair of broken-pointed scissors....” The occasion for the recollection was Christian Brinton’s catalogue essay for Diederich’s first American exhibition of sculpture held at the Kingore Galleries on Fifth Avenue in New York City (*Catalogue of the First Exhibition of Sculpture by Hunt Diederich*, exhib. cat. [New York; Kingore Galleries, 1920], n.p.). What began as child’s play remained a constant in Diederich’s life, an essential element of his creative process in the course of his years as a professional artist.

Throughout his career, Hunt Diederich’s art was informed by his early exposure to two very different environments: the privileged lifestyle of the Prussian landed gentry, and a cowboy’s pioneering existence in the American West. While these were contrasting experiences, to be sure, they shared a common denominator which Diederich wove into every aspect of his work: an

appreciation of and emphasis on animals. (The main source for this commentary is Richard Armstrong, *Hunt Diederich*, exhib. cat. [New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1991].)

Diederich was the son of Col. Ernest Diederich, a Prussian cavalry officer who bred and trained military horses at his estate in Hungary, and Eleanor Hunt Diederich, daughter of Boston artist William Morris Hunt. Theirs was a rarefied world of polo matches and stag hunts, exotic hounds and regal animals. Col. Diederich died in a hunting accident in 1887. After attending school in Switzerland, Diederich and his younger brother arrived in America around 1900, sent to live with their mother's New England family. Dispatched to Milton Academy, the willful and artistically inclined older brother found little to interest him in the traditional New England academic education offered there. He left without graduating. Instead, Diederich headed west and worked as a cowboy in Arizona and Wyoming, where a relation owned a ranch. There he was exposed to a society that heroized the rough and tumble "cowboy," a romantic saga played against a dramatic physical landscape that set the stage for a cultural landscape dominated by headstrong and rugged individuals accessorized by Indians and horses.

The literature on Diederich's years of training is sparse and inconsistent with regard to chronology. The salient facts, however, are well-documented. The dates for Diederich's western hegira remain unclear. He may have studied at the Boston Art School in 1903. His name appears as a sculpture student for 1904–05 on the register of the Académie Julian in Paris. From 1906 to 1908, Diederich studied sculpture at the school of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. By his own account, he was summarily dismissed in 1908 after using what the school described as "improper language" in a mixed-gender class. In 1907 and 1908, Diederich exhibited sculptures at the annual shows of the

Pennsylvania Academy. The works reflected his heritage and experience, *Indian* and *Portrait of W. M. Hunt* in 1907, and, in 1908, *Bronco Buster*. Despite his abrupt exit, Diederich did well at the Pennsylvania Academy and found a good friend in his fellow sculpture student, Paul Manship. In July 2008, Diederich enlisted Manship, on the spur of the moment, to hop a freighter bound for Spain. Manship and Diederich traveled together around Spain, sleeping out of doors and eating whatever was cheapest. Finally, Diederich loaned Manship fifteen dollars for a steerage passage back home. Of this period, John Manship, his father's biographer, wrote:

Manship formed an especially important friendship at this time with William Hunt Diederich, grandson of the painter William Morris Hunt. A talented artist with a remarkable sense of design, Diederich had a magnetic personality and was quite unencumbered with bourgeois scruples: he said and did whatever he chose. In many ways he and Manship were opposites, although they shared talent and a love of art. Manship was scrupulous and conscientious, hard-working and ambitious, while Diederich was impulsive and amoral, self-destructive to an extent, and somewhat mad.... Hunt was a natural genius with a remarkable sense of design; it is a moot point whether he influenced Manship or Manship him. Their friendship certainly enriched them both (John Manship, *Paul Manship* [New York: Abbeville Press, 1989], pp. 21–23).

John Manship says that though the artists remained friends, Isabel McIlwaine, Manship's then fiancée, later his wife, "never quite forgave Hunt, whom she blamed for having led her Paul astray" (Manship, p. 24). Diederich, at any rate, wound up in Paris. He may have sometime gone to Africa. He is also reported to have studied at some point with the French academic sculptor and *animalier*, Emmanuel Frémiet, who died in 1910.

By 1910, Diederich was settled enough in Paris enough to maintain a studio and submit works to the Paris Salon. He showed sculptures in cement and bronze at the Salons of 1910 and 1911. In 1911, he married (the first of two wives), Mary de Anders, a Russian of Scandinavian origin. He may have

gone to Rome in 1912. By 1913, he was back in Paris. Indeed, it was his entry in the 1913 Salon d'Automne, where he showed a bronze called *Levriers (Greyhounds)* that laid the basis for an international reputation. The piece attracted positive notice from art critics in Europe and America. Reviewing the Salon show, the critic for the *Burlington Magazine*, noted that “one of the finest, perhaps quite the finest, of the sculptures is the *Greyhounds* of Mr. Hunt Diederich, a young American sculptor who lives in Paris, but was up to now unknown” (R.E.D., p. 172), while a columnist for the *Boston Evening Transcript* ecstatically declared the work “this year’s revelation in the American section of the Autumn Salon ... perhaps ... of the whole Salon” (*Boston Evening Transcript*, December 17, 1913, as quoted in Janis Conner and Joel Rosenkranz, *Rediscoveries in American Sculpture: Studio Works, 1893–1939* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989], p. 20). Diederich reported that this bronze was purchased from the salon by Baron Robert de Rothschild. In the artist’s own words, “the success of my Greyhounds at the Autumn Salon of 1913 gave me a certain European position, and by the outbreak of the War I was well established and had numerous important commissions” (Brinton, n.p.). While in Paris, Diederich moved in an artistic circle that included the modernist sculptors Elie Nadelman and Alexander Archipenko. With the upheaval caused by World War I, all three found themselves in New York where they continued their friendship.

Animal themes characterized Diederich’s art from his very earliest works. Whether American Western, Spanish, or Prussian—cowboy, bullfight, or hunting-related—the motifs he used in his bronze and wrought-iron compositions almost always incorporated images of horses, dogs, bulls, deer, roosters, and other animals, wild and domesticated. In every instance he displayed an empathetic affinity for his subject, readily drawing on his own past for inspiration. Admired by

Diederich for their seemingly limitless design potential, animals increasingly dominated his compositions, and served as the ultimate organic element of his nature-based, Art Deco sensibility. He truthfully declared in 1920, “I love animals first, last and always.... Animals seem to me truly plastic. They possess such supple, unspoiled rhythm” (as quoted in Brinton).

Diederich was a restless spirit all his life, constantly shifting residence between the United States, Mexico and Europe. He made a successful career for himself in the 1920s and 1930s as a sculptor and a creator of decorative ironwork—firescreens, candelabras, weathervanes, gates—all functional and beautiful at the same time. Creative and multi-talented, he also worked in watercolor and ceramics, and, as the present work attests, papercutting.

Diederich’s devotion to paper cutting, begun at the age of five, continued throughout his career. The paper cutouts proved to be closely related to his wrought-iron works. Because the two-dimensional, silhouetted, design-oriented aesthetic was identical in both mediums, the artist found he could experiment with forms in paper first, then easily transfer them to the more robust medium. This is not to imply the silhouettes were merely studies; they were indeed finished works in their own right. Both mediums conveyed the same fluidity and spontaneity, and thus were appreciated for the same reasons. The wrought-iron and silhouettes are simply two very different mediums with a shared aesthetic, making them inextricably entwined within the artist’s oeuvre.

Diederich’s paper cutouts capture the distinctive sense of animation and vitality so specific to his art. They are elaborate, fragile, and cut with startling precision, transforming the simplest of mediums into works of great complexity. As with his wrought-iron, the forms are carefully attenuated and

generalized, yet close inspection reveals an astounding degree of detail, leaving the viewer in awe of the skill and patience on display. These slender—as Brinton described, “aristocratic”—forms are similar to his friend Elie Nadelman’s, both significantly influenced by American folk art. Indeed, the urge to cut paper into decorative or narrative shapes and attach it to a contrasting background appears to be nearly universal among cultures with paper technology. The technique has been documented as early as first-century China. Straddling definition between art and craft, the process has different names in different languages—*Wycinanki* in Poland, *Mon-Kiri* in Japan, *Decouper* in France and *Scherenschnitte* in German-speaking Europe. The craft migrated to colonial America with immigrants from Germany and Switzerland who settled in Pennsylvania and became popularly known as the Pennsylvania Dutch (the latter, a corruption of “Deutsch” meaning German, the language they spoke). Paper cutting continues to thrive today, notably in German-speaking Switzerland.

In his introduction to Diederich’s at the Kingore Galleries, Christian Brinton perceptively summed up the artist’s work and impact:

And as you survey the first collective presentation of this work, with all its nervous elegance of outline and deftly sublimated masses, you will not fail to pay tribute to the man who has helped restore to contemporary sculpture the long neglected principle of movement, the kinetic note that has become so significant a part of latter day vision and feeling.