



HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN

NATHANIEL CHOATE (1899–1965)

*Maquette for “Alligator Bender”*

Plaster, 31 x 30 1/4 x 12 in.

Executed about 1937

RECORDED: cf. Beatrice Gilman Proske, *Brookgreen Gardens Sculpture*, new ed. (Brookgreen, South Carolina: Brookgreen Gardens, 1968), pp. [381] illus., 382 // cf. A. Hyatt Mayor, *A Century of American Sculpture* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1980), pp. 39, 92 illus. in color

EX COLL: [art market, Pietrasanta, Italy, about 1984–89]; to private collection

A distinguished sculptor who rose to prominence in New York art circles of the 1930s, Nathaniel Choate fused the aesthetic precepts of primitivism and Art Deco with his highly intuitive sense of design. An expert stone-carver, he created intimate figure pieces and portraits, as well as large-scale garden sculpture executed in materials ranging from marble and bronze to onyx and alabaster. His repertoire of themes included nature and classical mythology. Like other American artists of the 1920s and 1930s,

Choate was also drawn to exotic subjects, which, in his case, were inspired by his travels to North Africa and other distant locales.

Born in Southborough, Massachusetts into a prominent New England family, Choate was a son of Edward Carlisle Choate and his wife, Gertrude Mabel (McNeil) Choate. (Choate's artistic accomplishments have yet to be studied in-depth. For a brief overview of his career, see Beatrice Gilman Proske, *Brookgreen Gardens Sculpture*, new ed. [Brookgreen, South Carolina: Brookgreen Gardens, 1968], pp. 380–81. See also “Exotic Sculpture by Nathaniel Choate,” *Pictures on Exhibit* 1 [May 1938], p. 4. The genealogical details in this essay were derived from census, passport, and death records obtained from Ancestry.com.) Edward Carlisle Choate—who operated a farm in Southborough before establishing Davis & Choate, a horse breeding firm in Cheyenne, Wyoming—was the older brother of Sarah Choate Sears, who played a key role in Boston's cultural life through her activity as an avant-garde collector, artist, photographer, and tastemaker. Nathaniel's relatives also included The Hon. Joseph H. Choate, a former U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain (“Table Gossip,” *Boston Globe*, March 7, 1920).

After graduating in 1918 from the Morristown School (a preparatory school known today as the Morristown-Beard School) in Morristown, New Jersey, Choate enrolled at Harvard University, where he studied art history under Edward W. Forbes and Paul J. Sachs and painting with Denman Waldo Ross, a respected artist and color theorist. His talent as a draftsman was recognized in 1921, when he received the Bowers Prize, awarded for proficiency in drawing directly from nature. During his years in Cambridge, Choate—a self-described “arty” who earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1922—served on the Editorial Board of the *Harvard Lampoon* in addition to participating in the university's Dramatic

Club, the Speakers' Club, and the Stylus Club, among other societies. (See [Nathaniel Choate], "Reviewer Jumps All Over First Lamppoon," *The Harvard Crimson*, October 2, 1925. Information relative to Choate's activities at Harvard can be found in the *Harvard University Register, 1921–22* [Cambridge: Student Council of Harvard College, 1921]).

In March 1923, Choate moved to Paris, where he refined his skills in rendering the figure at the Académies Colarossi, Delécluse, and Grande Chaumière, and traveled extensively throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. His initial goal was to pursue a career as a portraitist or mural decorator. However, fascinated by the ancient statuary he saw on a trip to Greece in 1924, Choate decided to focus on sculpture instead, taking his earliest aesthetic cues from the schematized forms of ancient art. During his sojourn abroad, Choate would also have had the opportunity to see examples of Art Deco, the modern, anti-academic style which originated in France during the mid-to-late 1910s and blossomed on a world-wide basis with the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels de Paris*, held in 1925. Whether or not Choate saw this exhibition is not known; however, Art Deco's emphasis on clean lines, sweeping curves, and sharply defined forms devoid of fussy detail became hallmarks of his mature style.

Upon returning to America in 1925, Choate settled in the Boston area, where he served as the art editor of *The Youth's Companion* while studying modeling techniques with John A. Wilson, a Canadian-born sculptor and Harvard professor who was best known for his Civil War monuments. Choate returned to Europe in 1927, although he appears to have established a residence in New York in 1928, when he exhibited his *Seated Figure* at the winter exhibition of the National Academy of Design. Choate subsequently divided his time between France and Tuscany (drawn to the latter's fine marble quarries,

such as those in Carrara, Querceta, and Pietrasanta) while making intermittent visits back to the United States.

During his formative years, Choate was an inveterate traveler. A pivotal moment in his career occurred in 1932, when he heard about Wisko, a remote Sudanese village on the banks of the Nile that could provide him with “exciting material for sculpture” (“Exotic Sculpture by Nathaniel Choate,” p. 4). After a sojourn in Morocco, Choate made the arduous journey to Wisko, where he spent five weeks studying the people, their environment, and their tribal art. So inspired, he went on to create innovative, small-scale sculptures of jungle animals, birds, and North-African men and women, among them *Wisko Girl* (1932; Muskegon Museum of Art, Michigan), a characteristic example of Choate’s early use of stylization and primitivist distortion. (Choate’s interest in African motifs has led to his being incorrectly identified, in some sources, as an African-American artist.)

In 1934, a selection of Choate’s African-themed works made their debut, along with portrait heads and other early sculptures, at the prestigious Durand-Ruel Galleries in New York. (See *Nathaniel Choate: Exhibition of Sculptures* [New York: Durand-Ruel Galleries, 1934]). While most of the pieces were available for purchase, the exhibition also included loans from several private collectors, among them R. Kirk Askew and George L. Maxwell of New York and Bostonians such as Sarah Choate Sears, Charles Adrian Rubell, and Paul J. Sachs—an indication that Choate had already found an audience. The Durand-Ruel exhibition enhanced his reputation further when the thirty-three sculptures on display attracted praise from critics such as Howard Devree, who described the show as “delightful,” featuring work that was both “individual and interpretive” (Howard Devree, “In Local Galleries: A Score of New

Openings,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1934). “Balance and grace, without sweetness, are characteristic,” he said, and “there is also evident an excellent decorative sense which gets its effects by composition instead of ornamentation” (Devree). Four years later, Choate had a solo exhibition at the Arden Galleries in Manhattan, which specialized in the promotion of American sculpture. As noted by Beatrice Gilman Proske, “The originality and imaginative invention already apparent in the [Durand-Ruel] showing were even more evident,” while a writer for *Pictures on Exhibit* pointed out that the works were “decoratively conceived and with surfaces simply and beautifully wrought” (Proske, p. 380; “Exotic Sculpture by Nathaniel Choate”).

In 1936, Choate settled in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, about twenty-six miles from Philadelphia. As well as working independently, he undertook several important public commissions during the late 1930s, including *Four Winds* (1936), a WPA relief sculpture made for the lobby of the post office in Pitman, New Jersey, and a set of bas-reliefs for the main entrance doors of the Federal Building at the New York World’s Fair of 1939. Choate also taught summer-school classes in sculpture in Chester Springs, Pennsylvania, for the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where he exhibited his work intermittently between 1935 and 1950. In recognition of his skills in the art of stone carving and design, the Architectural League of New York presented Choate with their coveted medal of honor in 1937—the year that he executed a medal for Harvard’s Signet Society. In 1940, Choate was elected an associate member of the National Academy of Design in New York. Although, Choate had not participated in the academy’s annuals since 1928, his nomination for membership was likely made in response to the high quality of the two sculptures, *Antelope* and *Ayesha*, which he exhibited there in 1940.

In 1941, Choate took his art in a new direction by establishing the Aldham Kilns in Aldham, Pennsylvania. Until 1947, when his furnaces and much of his work were destroyed by fire, Choate specialized in art pottery, creating polychrome figurines in china and porcelain. In the ensuing years, he resumed his activity as a carver. His later projects included designing stone carvings of the Four Evangelists and pool ornaments in the form of bronze dolphins for the *American Battle Monument* in Hamm, Luxembourg City, Luxembourg (1957), an aluminum sculpture of fish for the main lounge of the liner *SS United States* (1951), a limestone relief for Indiana University's Rabb Hall (1959), and a bronze medal depicting the Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story (1964) for the Hall of Fame for Great Americans at New York University. He continued to make outdoor sculptures too, among them figures of *Orpheus* and *Eurydice* (about 1952) for Brookgreen Gardens in Murrell's Inlet, South Carolina, the sculpture garden and wildlife preserve established in 1932 by the philanthropist Archer Milton Huntington and his wife, Anna Hyatt Huntington, herself leading sculptor. In 1962, Choate collaborated with the ceramicist Francis Von Tury in designing a mosaic mural for New York City Community College (now the New York City College of Technology).

Choate moved back to New York in about 1950, living in various addresses in Greenwich Village. At one point, he owned a four-story red brick townhouse at 237 West Fourth Street which he sold in 1957 to a group of investors who planned to enlarge it and use it as a studio-residence for younger sculptors. (See "Sculptor Sells 'Village' House," *New York Times*, August 22, 1957.) Choate was elected first vice president of the National Sculpture Society in 1953, and two years later he became an academician of the National Academy of Design. He was the recipient of the National Outdoor Advertising Award in 1961, the year in which the Society of Medalists issued their sixty-fourth medallion in his honor.

(Examples of this medal, for which Choate created images of *David* and *Goliath*, can be found in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, among other public collections.) Choate, who never married, died in New York on August 24, 1965.

Choate's melding of primitivist and Art Deco tendencies, as well as his interest in unfamiliar cultures, is apparent in *Maquette for "Alligator Bender,"* a plaster study for *Alligator Bender* (1937), a heroic, sixty-one-inch high garden sculpture, executed in marble, that was acquired for the collection at Brookgreen Gardens in 1938. (Appropriately, Choate's sculpture serves as the focal point of Brookgreen Gardens's Alligator Pond.) According to Beatrice Gilman Proske, the plaster was preceded by a small mahogany carving that Choate made in New York in about 1926. (Proske, p. 382. See also, Hyatt Mayor, *A Century of American Sculpture* [New York: Abbeville Press, 1980], p. 92.) Several years later, he sculpted this enlarged version, making the "man more robust to look like a Seminole Indian" (Proske, p. 382). In the spring of 1937, Choate took his maquette to Querceta, Italy, using it as the model for the Brookgreen Gardens piece, which he completed over the summer and autumn and exhibited at the Arden Galleries in 1938. (See Proske, pp. 381–82. Although a catalogue of the Arden Galleries show has yet to surface, *Alligator Bender* is mentioned in Edwin Alden Jewell's review of the exhibition. See Edwin Alden Jewell, "In the Realm of Art," *New York Times*, April 24, 1938.)

*Maquette for "Alligator Bender"* features a hefty man seated on the back of an alligator, grasping its jaw with one hand and its tail with the other, the creature's body forming a sweeping circle that encloses the figure. (Alligator wrestling became a popular tourist attraction among the Florida Seminole during the late-nineteenth century. See Patsy West, *The Enduring Seminoles: From Alligator Wrestling to Casino*

*Gambling* [Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008].) The wrestler's candid nudity, as well as his powerful, well-proportioned form, was no doubt influenced by Choate's exposure to the idealized sculptures of athletes and warriors that he saw in Greece, which emphasized youthfulness, health, and male beauty. By portraying the figure's head in silhouette, Choate offsets the frontal presentation of his muscular form. Consistent with the precepts of Art Deco, the figure is smoothly rendered and devoid of emotion, while the repetitive patterning created by the scales of the alligator and the incised lines used to denote the man's wavy hair add a lively decorative touch to the grouping.

Certainly, Choate's expert modeling captures the hunter's remarkable physicality, as well as his broad face, small, almond-shaped eyes, and large head. However, Choate was never concerned with creating a descriptive image of a specific ethnic type. Rather, he sought to create an artfully composed pictorial metaphor alluding to the universal struggle between man and nature. The fact that *Maquette for "Alligator Bender"* remained in Pietrasanta, Italy, well after the final version was completed suggests that Choate may have sold it to a local collector or perhaps bartered it for the precious Italian stone that he loved to use.