



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

WILHELM HUNT DIEDERICH (1884–1953)

*Window Railings for the James Byrne Residence, 270 Park Avenue, New York*

Wrought iron and brass, each 25 3/4 x 64 x 1 1/4 in.

EXHIBITED: Kingore Galleries, New York, *First American Exhibition of Sculpture by Hunt Diederich*, April 20–May 12, 1920, nos. 27–29

EX COLL.: the artist; to Mr. and Mrs. James Byrne, New York, by 1920; and by descent to 2016

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 primary source for this essay is Richard Armstrong, *Hunt Diederich*, exhib. brochure (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 diverse animals. Col. Diederich died in a hunting accident in 1887, and his sons were schooled in Switzerland. Diederich and his younger brother arrived in America around 1900, living with maternal relatives. Dispatched to Milton Academy, the willful and artistically inclined youth 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 shaped by headstrong, rugged individuals, Native Americans, and horse culture.

The literature on Diederich's years of training is sparse and inconsistent with regard to dating. The salient facts, however, are well-documented. The dates for Diederich's western hegira remain unknown. He may have studied at the Boston Art School in 1903. He is listed 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* [Abbeville Press: New York, 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” (as quoted by Christian Brinton in his introductory essay, “Hunt Diederich,” Kingore Galleries, 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.

The animal theme dominated Diederich’s art from his earliest works. Whether American Western or Prussian Continental, cowboy or hunting-related, the motifs he used in his bronze and wrought-iron compositions almost always incorporated images of horses, dogs, deer, roosters, or other animals, wild or 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.

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, window grates—all

functional and beautiful at the same time. Creative and multi-talented, he also worked in watercolor and ceramics.

In 1920, Diederich told Christian Brinton that “as a child of five I embarked upon my artistic career by cutting out silhouettes of animals with a pair of broken-pointed scissors, for I love animals first, last, and always. . . . Animals seem to me truly plastic. They possess such supple, unspoiled rhythm” (as quoted in Brinton). Diederich’s childhood fascination with silhouettes continued to inform a series of drawings, paper cutouts, and ultimately, designs for decorative work in wrought iron. The greyhound, an ancient breed of sleek hunting dog whose speed and loyalty long made them favorite companions of European aristocracy, was offered a natural subject for Diederich. Aesthetically ideal, the animal would be likely evocative of idyllic memories of early childhood on his father’s estate in Hungary. Indeed, of his father, who died when he was five years old, Diederich told Brinton, “I recall nothing . . . saving that he was passionately fond of dogs and horses.”

Diederich produced multiple variations on the theme of cavorting greyhounds in the 1910s and 1920s. These continue to charm today for the harmony of their graceful curves and the elegant proportions and artful juxtapositions of solid and void. His animals are always beautifully attenuated or stylized. While he emphasized design over realism, he never lost sight of the individual essence and nobility of his animal subjects. This early, playful, and dynamic design captures the distinctive sense of animation and vitality that marks Diederich’s work.

This set of three window grates were commissioned by Mr. and Mrs. James Byrne. Byrne was a prominent and wealthy lawyer who lived at the Marguery, an imposing Renaissance Revival

building designed by the distinguished architectural firm of Warren and Wetmore. Built in 1916, it occupied a full city block from 47th to 48th Streets between Park and Madison Avenues. Part of the building was set aside for transients and designated the Hotel Marguery. The remaining structure, intended for millionaire and celebrity tenants, contained “several of the most expensive apartments in the world (*Record and Guide*, June 21, 1919, as quoted on the website “Daytonian in Manhattan,” entry November 19, 2015). Among James Byrne’s fellow renters were Harry S. Harkness (Standard Oil Company), Harold S. Vanderbilt, Henry Huddleston Rogers, Jr. (Standard Oil), James Alexander Stillman (Chairman, National City Bank), August Belmont, and the famous Irish tenor, John McCormack.

James Byrne (1857–1942) enjoyed a long and enormously successful career as a lawyer. He served at various times as President of the Bar Association of the City of New York (1922–24); President of the Harvard Law School Association of New York; President of the Harvard Alumni Association; President of the Harvard Club of New York; member of the Harvard Corporation (the first Roman Catholic to be appointed); member and Chancellor of the New York State Board of Regents; founder and vice President of the executive committee of the American Law Institute; Commander of the Crown in Italy, Chevalier of the Legion of Honor of France; Knight of Malta of the Catholic Church; and Trustee of the City College of New York. In 1888 he joined with William D. Hornblower in law practice as Hornblower and Byrne, the founding firm of what became Wilkie, Farr & Gallagher. In 1917, before he left for service in World War I, Byrne endowed the Byrne Professorship of Administrative Law at Harvard Law School, which was occupied from 1924 to 1939 by Byrne’s former legal associate, Felix Frankfurter. Byrne was a vocal supporter of the admission of women to the Bar Association of New York, and sponsored the motion which finally succeeded in 1932.

James Byrne was a lawyer's lawyer and an active participant in civic and religious life. He and his wife were also connoisseurs of fine living. In 1906, they hired Grosvenor Atterbury (architect for Forest Hills Gardens in Queens, New York) to design an estate in Oyster Bay, Long Island, which they sold in to William R. Coe in 1913. Coe was the brother-in-law of a neighbor at the Marguery, Roger Huddleston, Jr. (The property is now the site of the Planting Fields Arboretum.) In 1926, the couple purchased Guy's Cliff, an estate overlooking Frenchman's Bay on Mount Desert Island, Maine. They hired Guy Lowell (architect of The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), to make renovations, and, in 1928, commissioned Beatrix Farrand, a landscape architect, to design a terraced garden similar to the one she created for Dunbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C.

These window grates, commissioned by Helen and James Byrne for their apartment at the Marguery, bear witness to the high degree of success and esteem that Hunt Diederich had achieved by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century. Window grates may seem a small matter in a life of opulence, but they reflect the care and taste of people who believed in choosing the best, consistently and down to the last detail. Diederich's grates are an example of the power of decorative-arts objects to bring beauty and cheer into the rhythm of everyday life. They become old friends, a piece of the fabric of life, and have been valued as such, remaining with descendants of the Byrne family through the years.