



HIRSCHL & ADLER MODERN

HUGO ROBUS (1885–1964)

Vase (Flower Vase, Enigmatic)

Polished bronze (with traces of green patina); three separate pieces: body, 65 1/2 in. high;
head, 7 x 5 1/4 x 8 1/2 in; base 5 in. high

Modeled in plaster in 1928; cast in bronze in 1940

RECORDED: Louise Cross, “The Sculpture of Hugo Robus,” *Parnassus* 6 (April 1934), p. 13 illus
// “Theme of Freedom at Sculptor’s Show: Robus’s ‘succes de scandale’ is *Vase*,” *Villager*,
September 24, 1942 // Robert M. Coates, “The Art Galleries: Getting Started,” *New Yorker* 18
(September 26, 1942), p. 46 // “Hugo Robus,” *See* 10 (January 1951), p. 33 illus. // Lloyd Goodrich,
forward to *Hugo Robus (1885–1964)*, exhib. cat. (New York: Forum Gallery, 1966), illus. // Roberta
K. Tarbell, *Hugo Robus (1885–1964)*, exhib. cat. (Washington, D. C. National Collection of Fine
Arts, Smithsonian Institution, 1979), pp. 69, 169 no. 13 illus.

EXHIBITED: Sculptor’s Guild, New York, 1942, no. 60 illus. // Grand Central Art Galleries, 1946,
Three Progressive Sculptors, no. 8 // Sculpture Center, New York, 1951 // Sculpture Center, New

York, 1953, no. 67 // Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1954, no. 141 // Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D.C., 1958, no. 3 // American Federation of the Arts, Whitney Museum, New York // Zabriskie Gallery, New York, 1966 // Forum Gallery, New York, 2007, illus. in color

EX COLL.: private collection, Great Neck, New York, until 2015

Hugo Robus, born in 1885 in Cleveland, Ohio, was the youngest of three siblings, the only son of second-generation German-American parents. By his own report, as a child, Robus “was entirely unprecocious. Supersensitiveness and shyness are probably present in the youth of many introspective persons. I had my share.” (The most complete and reliable source on Robus remains Roberta Tarbell’s 1979 essay and catalogue for the National Collection of the Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, cited above. Tarbell is the source for all information and quotations in this essay, unless otherwise indicated. Tarbell’s account is largely footnoted to the artist’s personal correspondence donated by Robus’s son to the Smithsonian Institution Archives of the American Art, Washington, D.C.) Growing up in Cleveland, Robus found little common ground with anyone in his immediate or extended family, nor was there any understanding at home of his interest in art. His father, a factory worker in Cleveland’s iron industry, died in 1908, when Robus was twenty-three. He described his mother, a homemaker, and his two older sisters, as “high in character” but “narrow in mind,” a condition he attributed to “their lack of reading and thinking” (p. 15). Harsh judgements, perhaps, but Robus never wavered in his estimate and had only minimal contact with his family after he left Cleveland.

Robus graduated from high school in 1903 and proceeded directly to the Cleveland Institute of Art, where he pursued a four-year curriculum that included instruction in life drawing, oil painting, and design. The design instructor, Horace Potter, proved especially important. He invited Robus, beginning in 1905, to work in his studio and to apprentice as a jewelry designer and craftsman in his firm, inspired by the arts and craft ideals of the English arts social reformer, William Morris. Potter's young workforce lived communally near the studio, enabling Robus to move away from his family. The most enduring presence of his Cleveland years in Robus's life was his wife, Irene Bogart Chubb (1886–1958), a Cleveland native and fellow student at the Cleveland Institute, whom he met in school and married in 1915.

Robus left Cleveland in the autumn of 1907 in search of a wider world. He began his exploration as a student at the school of the National Academy of Design, in New York City, studying painting with Emil Carlsen and Edgar M. Ward. For the next five years, as a journeyman artist, Robus returned periodically to Cleveland, where Horace Potter offered the financial safety net of work as a jeweler. Working for Potter, Robus became an accomplished ivory carver and along the way developed a lifelong belief in the distinction between the work of the artist—the creator—and the work of the craftsman—the carver. During this time Robus began to travel with friends, camping and hiking on sketching expeditions to rural Ohio, to the Hudson Valley, to the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, and as far afield as Washington, D. C. He supplemented classroom instruction by visiting museums and galleries. As Robus looked around, he at first rejected and then began to absorb modernist trends in art in his own work. In 1911, he returned for a year to Cleveland, working for Potter and taking evening classes in sculpture at the Cleveland Institute, as he accumulated the funds for a trip to Europe.

When Robus sailed for Europe in 1912, he was still supported financially by Potter who hoped the young man would choose a career as a craftsman. Landing in Bremen, Robus proceeded through Germany to Paris. Initially overwhelmed by Paris, Robus fortuitously reunited with a friend from the Cleveland Institute, the painter Abel G. Warshawsky, who had settled in Paris in 1908. Warshawsky introduced Robus to the patterns of life for young American artists in Paris, and Robus soon established the kind of routine that had been his habit in New York. He favored a curtailed social life, preferring to spend his limited funds on art materials. Robus plunged into painting with renewed vigor, sketching regularly at the École de la Grande Chaumière, his base between painting trips to the French provinces. In September 1912, he met Claude Monet in Giverny. In 1913, Robus studied sculpture with Émile-Antoine Bourdelle at the École de la Grande Chaumière before leaving for Rome, Naples, and Florence. Robus returned to Paris and then went to Cassis, near Marseilles, where he stayed at the villa of Stanton MacDonald Wright, who was about to travel home to America. Back in Paris, he met the Czech artist Frantisek Kupka (1871–1957) at a going-away party for Wright. Kupka gave heartening advice to Robus, who was feeling uncertain about how he could make a life for himself as an artist. In a letter of December 1913 to Irene, Robus wrote:

I had a talk with Kupka the night I met him. He looked at the problems of living and painting one's beliefs at the same time very optimistically. I suppose that even if one just lived—by which I mean just manages to have the absolute necessities—art is a far happier life than most any business man of wealth experiences. Kupka says, “you are young; what you have done matters little; what you may do is the big thing. Don't destroy your work, save it rather than sell it.” Nothing would please me better than to neither show nor sell (as quoted in Tarbell, p. 36).

Robus's observation here, in 1913, a brief vision of how one could live as a principled artist, accurately foretold the path that Hugo and Irene would pursue for the rest of their lives.

In 1914, Robus traveled to North Africa with a patron, J. Curtis Underwood. By May, he was on his way to America, passing through New York and Cleveland as he traveled on to California where he remained until October. In San Francisco, Robus visited the Panama-Pacific Exhibition. That autumn Robus had his first solo show of paintings, the fruit of his French sojourn, in Cleveland. His jewelry was included in a group show mounted by the Potter Studio. In 1915, Robus moved to New York and settled on East 14th Street, near Union Square, where he remained until 1933. In June 1915, he returned to Cleveland briefly where he married Irene Bogart Chubb.

Robus's correspondence with Irene before their marriage affords by far the best description of the man and the artist before 1915. If Robus was, by his own account, shy, sensitive and introspective as a child, those qualities appear to have also characterized the man. His letters to Irene reveal an earnest and striving nature. He was a critical judge of art, his own as well as that of others, but possessed of a constantly evolving aesthetic sensibility, ultimately open to styles and techniques he initially rejected. In this way he moved from his conservative roots to a modernist stance. Hugo and Irene established themselves in New York. Never at the center of any group, they were quietly involved in a number of overlapping avant-garde social circles. First, of course, were their professional colleagues, the substantial number of artists living and working along 14th Street and its immediate environs in Greenwich Village and Chelsea. From 1915 to 1918, Hugo taught at the Modern Art School, on Washington Square South. In 1918, he and Irene became part of a loosely affiliated group gathered around the Sunwise Turn Shop, a bookshop established by Mary Mowbray-Clarke, wife of the sculptor and organizer of the Armory Show, John Mowbray-Clark. Mowbray-Clark ran the shop as a literary and artistic salon, a gathering place for progressive artists and writers

to gather and share ideas. The Robuses designed and embroidered decorative art textiles, which they consigned for sale to the eclectic shop. Finally, through the connection with Mowbray Clark, the Robuses bought property and a small house on 3.5 acres in New City, New York, about twenty miles north of Manhattan in Rockland County. The purchase was funded by a loan from Irene's father. Mowbray-Clark envisioned an artists' colony, but in fact what developed was a neighborly collection of creative people living along South Mountain Avenue. Among these were artists Henry Varnum Poor and John Flanagan, as well as playwright Maxwell Anderson who incorporated South Mountain into his writing, calling it "High Tor."

Hugo Robus continued to paint and exhibit occasionally until 1920. By then his work incorporated influences from cubism and futurism, a mix of angular and curvilinear geometric shapes with suggestions of three dimensionality. Robus was fascinated by form. While it drew him toward sculpture, he had been reluctant to give up color, but, in years of striving, he had never been able to satisfy himself with the paintings he made. In 1920, Robus made the decision that he would henceforth concentrate all his effort on sculpture. In Tarbell's account, he essentially retreated to his studio, concentrating solely on his family and the creation of a series of large-scale sculptures, modeled first in clay and then translated to plaster. The family's expenses were minimal, with much of their food coming from the garden in New City. Irene was a talented seamstress and earned money that way, at one time opening a dress shop in Greenwich Village with a friend. Robus did some carpentry work, as well as architectural design, construction and farm work in New City. In 1943, Robus wrote, "Even though a living had to be earned, preference for a simple unextravagant existence made it possible to have four or five hours of each day for sculpture. I think those with an intense desire to create seldom consider as hardships self-deprivations toward that goal" (p. 59).

Robus was as methodical and painstaking with his sculpture as he had been with his painting. Through the 1920s he worked assiduously in his studio, modeling in clay and creating a group of plaster sculptures characterized by “formal simplicity, curved smooth planes, serpentine contours, and volumetric forms, all associated with human themes” (p. 60). These were clearly human forms, but not realistic in intention or appearance. Robus sanded his plaster to the finest possible smoothness. Master of all these processes, Robus did not feel the need to cast his work into metal. He could not afford the cost of casting, and more, he regarded the plasters as finished works of art. His pieces did not begin to be cast until later, when required for a patron or when finances permitted. If the decade of the 1920s was relatively solitary and single minded, in the 1930s, Robus began to exhibit. As he showed his work, he gained critical acclaim. Tarbell explains, that through the 1930s Robus’s work was still perceived as very modern. A younger generation of American abstract sculptors did not much begin to exhibit until the 1940s. Robus sold his first sculpture in 1930 to Marjorie Content, one of the founders of the Sunwise Turn Bookshop and related by marriage to the Guggenheim family.

The present sculpture, *Vase*, *Flower-Vase*, *Enigma* (so named by the artist) dates from 1928. It reflects Robus’s mature expressive style, the product of nearly ten years working in solitary fashion in his studio. Robus had not yet shown his work to any but friends who might have visited. Tarbell comments that “Robus was intentionally ambiguous” (p. 95). That is certainly the case with this young woman, pear-shaped and jaunty as she strides along. One might note the stylized face and then not give her a second glance when her head is on her shoulders. But it is not always there. Sometimes she carries her head hooked over the index and middle fingers of her right hand. (A

recessed handle on the back of her head slides out to act as a hook.) The work was first cast in bronze in August 1940. When Robus exhibited it at the Sculptor's Guild in 1942, Irene recorded that she had purchased fresh flowers to fill in the vase-like neck (p. 169). In 1941, Robus contracted for a bronze of the head alone. Tarbell notes Robus's fondness for "smooth-surfaced ovoid face[s] with narrow, almond-shaped eyes" (p. 63). She identifies these faces, which Robus used in a number of his figures, as referencing Japanese Noh masks. While *Enigma* may indeed have a stylized face, the sculptor has styled her hair into a perfectly chic 1920s bob.

By the end of the 1930s Robus had emerged from relative isolation to become a more generally involved citizen of the art world, exhibiting, serving on juries, teaching, and taking part in arts organizations. In 1937, the family, Robus, Irene, and Hugo, Jr., moved to East 4th Street, one of a row of Greek Revival townhouses near the Bowery that in the mid-nineteenth century had been elegant family homes, but by the 1930s offered high ceilings amidst the crumbling recollection of former glory. In the late 1930s Robus did some work for the Public Works of Art Project. In 1938, he was a founding member of the Sculptor's Guild and remained involved there for the rest of his life. In 1939, Irene's father died, leaving a small legacy that eased the family's chronic shortage of money. Robus taught art at Columbia University sporadically through the 1940s and 1950s, at the Brooklyn Museum Art School in the 1950s and lectured, as well as Hunter College and Yale University. By the 1950s, he enjoyed increasing recognition, a "Grant in Art" from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1957; a retrospective exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C. in 1958; and, in 1960 a traveling exhibition organized by the American Federation of Art that included a stop at the Whitney Museum, New York, in 1960.

The plaster for *Enigma* no longer exists. Robus arranged for additional castings of the head alone, one in 1941, and an additional two in 1960. So far as is known, this cast of the entire piece is unique.

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