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*Charles T. Williams*  
**RETROSPECTIVE**  
WITH FRIENDS

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## *The Sculptural Works of* CHARLES T. WILLIAMS

**Thomas Motley**

**F**rom the late forties, Charles Williams developed significant organic abstract sculptures. Throughout his career, his formal concerns paralleled the vital international art issues considered by his contemporaries. For example, Williams continued to seek new ways of presenting negative space as an active compositional participant. Like Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, Williams recognized the need to include spatial openings within mass, as nature does. *Fun with Freud* is an elegant demonstration of this concern. But Williams was also intrigued with the abstract qualities contributed by space within two-dimensional forms such as Chinese calligraphic symbols. Space patterns derived from these letters are evident in several works by Williams, including the *Weiner Fountain* (see p. 6).

Charles Williams enjoyed many opportunities to create large-scale outdoor commissions in welded sheet-metal. In addition, three related categories of the sculpture of Charles Williams can be clarified. First, many of his works illustrate his interest in international organic abstraction, largely influenced by early works of Alberto Giacometti, Constantin Brancusi and Jean Arp, which he saw as a GI in WWII Paris. Next are engaging and humorous assemblages, often done in friendly competition with artist acquaintances. The third group at first seems to overlap the second and might have been called "found art" in the sixties, except that Williams's odd eye revealed whole new contexts for found objects simply through unexpected poses. Like Gordon Matta Clark, Williams totally trans-

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formed discarded flotsam into thought-provoking objects charged with significance.

His engineering skills and laborious working method of completing extensive drawn plans and test maquettes resulted in a sculptural oeuvre of meticulous precision. The ability of engineers and tailors to see 2D pattern as 3D form relies heavily on a strong sense of mirror-imaging, of twinning visualization. Williams's expert twinning insight is evident in numerous pieces which employ coupled planes, matched material skins, or use of a shadow-twin. This constructive 2D vision, along with his use of icons and symbols, enhances the strong frontal, emblematic quality of works like *Fun with Freud* or *Lead Head*.

The latter, a 1964 biomorphic form (see p. 4), uses pliable, coupled surfaces. Williams joined the twinned soft lead sides around a plaster core for stability, to maintain the sense of organic volume. Inverted tabs, like jigsaw puzzle piece notches, break the sculpture's curved contour with a sharp, continuous linear seam which emphasizes almost human-like 3D bulges in the lead skin itself.

*Icon*, a 1958 cruciform of repeated circles (see p. 15), and *Sculptured Composition*, 1953, reveal the crisp shadow-twin of each image when perfectly lighted. With welded steel and rod, these are drawings in relief in which Williams celebrated his love of the circle as drawn shape. For *Sculptured Composition*, the artist mounted arcs (as eye-shapes), circles and half-circle tabs atop thin totem poles. The shadow-twins of these metal drawings look like traced lines in charcoal.

Williams's scores and marks apparent on the surfaces of many of the larger emblematic metal sculpture planes might first appear to be related to some of David Smith's abstract expressionist surface style, but the consistency of linear arrangement and same-mark repetition on pieces like *Solar Disc* (see color plate) and *Fun with Freud* might instead be a reflection of his lifelong fascination with Chinese calligraphy. Drawing with metal and on metal gave the sculptor opportunities to employ Chinese calligraphy as shape and as marked surface. Moreover, Williams employed an extensive process of modification of calligraphic symbols into large plantlike forms for his early *Weiner Fountain* commission.

Using crow-quill pens and brush and ink, Williams retained the fluid, organic quality of the Chinese marks straight through from the sketches and drawn designs to the built maquettes and final fountain construction. He enjoyed practicing calligraphy and experimenting with the drawn symbols throughout his life. These drawings, plus his collection of books on the subject and the wide variety of Chinese drawing media







**Weiner Fountain**, 1954, bronze  
sheet metal and bronze rods, 9' 6" h.,  
original site in garden, Weiner collection,  
Fort Worth, Texas

he used, are now in the Smithsonian.

*Fun with Freud* (see color plate) is a 1964 welded sheet copper work which illustrates Williams's universal, inclusive vision toward organic abstract sculpture. Approached frontally, the piece basically appears to be another of his "eye" shapes, with cropped sides which give it an axe-like contour. The artist raised the powerful form on a post, expanding its mysterious emblematic quality. The large center cavity may tempt viewers to associate it with similar Hepworth or Moore works. Its central negative space, however, uses another favorite Williams shape: the egg. Here the artist applies an unusual application of the form, as an egg is not normally seen as a void. Radiating scored lines on the metal surface exaggerate the outer egg shape and accent the dark, tunnel-like

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interior. The optical illusion of this interior space makes the overall piece seem deeper than it is because Williams made the rear opening in the twinned back slightly smaller than the front.

*Earth Mother* (see p. xii) is often associated with Moore's reclining figures, a possibly precipitant reading. In the late fifties Charles and Anita Williams, along with their good friend and guide, Octavio Medellin, made a three-month sojourn to study Mesoamerican art throughout Mexico, the Yucatan and Guatemala. The artist returned especially taken with the reclining rain-god figure known as Chacmool. Moore himself made many sketches of the image in the British Museum. The peculiar turn of the erect vertical head of *Earth Mother*, as well as elongated thighs and pronounced raised knees, echoes primary aspects of the iconic Chacmool that Williams saw in the Yucatan.

A kind of mental arm-wrestling between Charles Williams and his artist friends resulted in some of the sculptor's most engaging and accessible work. This visual dialogue between fellow artists is delightfully evident through many amusing pieces such as *Moritz the Elephant* (see p. 31) and *The Exhibitionist* (portrait of Jim Love), hilarious examples of this genre. The elephant's sad-eyed countenance is mounted on a rusty machine-part head and neck, its flaccid, faded red rubber hose trunk long since sucked out. The bowler-hatted *Exhibitionist* (see p. 24) has a pudgy peanut-shaped body, complete with protruding gas-valve penis. A friendly fellow, he pleasantly smiles back at the viewer with wide eyes and upturned mouth, all secured on a one-piece metal face with a blunt square-bolt nose.

Williams created the amiable *Cowboy* (see p. ix) in 1949. Perhaps amused at the sights of Texas after returning from France, the sculptor completed this work, along with a touching western-motif drawing for his young son, Karl. *Cowboy* is an ingenious wood and copper construction in three parts. The copper crown of the LBJ-style Stetson hat becomes the thoughtful eyes of the cowboy head, all in one flat, continuous organic shape. This crown-and-eyes form is surrounded by a flat copper ring, the Stetson's brim. Williams finished *Cowboy* by giving the head a clearly delineated nose, closed lip and chin, all in one "found" piece of a turned wooden rail.

Much of the artist's work involves associations with the human head and face. He was intrigued with tribal ritual masks of Polynesia, in particular with the emphatic sense of character illustrated in those of New Guinea. The treasure-trove of emblematic personae for Williams was found next door in Mesoamerican art.



Preliminary sketches with brush and ink  
for **Weiner Fountain**, 1954

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Williams relished the challenges of locating and exploring remote ancient sites and regional art collections in Mexico and the Yucatan. Anita Williams tells of transporting their car by train across the jungles to Guatemala. Karl recalls his father relating an expedition over Mexico in a Piper Cub with only the aid of a filling-station road map! In addition to seeking out the wide, medallion-like Toltec and Teotihuacan ceramic and stone face images, Williams delighted in the colorful and mysterious masks of Guerrero.

In his own work, the enigmatic faces of *Totems Suburbium*, 1962 (see color plate), are, in fact, five lavatories inverted and mounted on large supporting timbers. Assorted faces are revealed in industrial parts and openings on the undersides of the heavy sinks. At its permanent site, *Totems* stands watchfully on the horizon. The five heads look back from the crest of a deep gully, like Mesoamerican icon-sentries on a distant perimeter.

Like most vets after a war, Charles Williams just wanted to return to his home and his work. Though appreciating and learning from the disciplined methodology of the GI engineers in Europe, “war” stories were of little or no interest and such themes are not part of his oeuvre. However, Williams created a most haunting and ultimately heroic image in the form of *Helmet (Pathos)* in 1962. A steel totem body and neck support a headless helmet. The void of the helmet’s empty interior is palpable. This dark, faceless space is in sober contrast to the brightly reflecting crown of the cracked metal helmet.

*Helmet (Pathos)* echoes the sadly ubiquitous WWII image of a helmet pivoted atop a rifle as a battlefield memorial. Such spontaneous contemporary monuments repeat ancient Greek soldiers’ practice of building a “trophy” to a fallen warrior, to reconstruct the (symbolic) body at the death site out of the empty armor. This twinning of body with metal is a curiously intriguing way of giving humanizing qualities to international organic abstract sculpture. Karl remembers another emphatic helmet/head version his father made of spun copper: “I think it may have been a personal favorite as it always sat at the end of his bar in the studio.” Williams loved the camaraderie of friends and their unique personalities. As he sought the universal human spirit in many cultural faces, perhaps *Helmet* was his own *vanitas* emblem.

At right, CAT. # 45, *Helmet (Pathos)*, 1962

