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Seymour Lipton: 'Abstract Expressionist Sculptor'

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery
24 West 57th Street, Manhattan
Through May 14

Though he became an important innovator in the small sculptural wing of the Abstract Expressionist movement, Seymour Lipton (1903-86) - a practicing dentist like his colleague Herbert Ferber - started out in the early 1930's as a self-taught Social Realist carver of stone and wood. His concerns were the poor and downtrodden, as seen in "Cotton Picker" (1940).

His vision deepened and changed with World War II. Its revelation of humanity's deep-rooted thrust toward destruction, he felt, demanded a more complex artistic expression. Seeking metaphors for evil, he found inspiration in Surrealism, and its exploration of the irrational. His work took on a darker imagery, and by the mid-1940's he had begun to develop his themes of humanity and its spiritual challenges in constructed metal.

The 25 objects in this well-plotted show - including some of his meticulous preparatory drawings - form a mini-retrospective from 1936 to his death 50 years later. Working in his new medium in the late 40's, he evolved the technique that served him for the rest of his career: cutting shapes out of sheet metal, then joining them to make the finished piece. The openwork "Mortal Cage" (1949) suggests a humanoid figure made of two bent bars joined at the bottom, topped by a helmetlike device pierced with sharp prongs, entangled in a scribble of heavy wire.

By 1952 he had arrived at a distinctive process that earned him kudos as a technical innovator, using a new, rustproof metal known as Monel for the constructed sheets, then brazing them with nickel silver or bronze to produce a uniform texture. An unusually lyrical example is "Spring Ceremonial" (1951), a plantlike form whose stalk shoots up to branch out in lively leaf-and-flowerlike shapes, signifying a hope of rebirth from the tragedy of the war.

Lipton's luster, like that of Ferber and other Ab Ex sculptors, dimmed with the arrival of Minimalism. But it's time for a new look at their work, and this and the Ferber show reaffirm their place in 20th-century sculpture. GRACE GLUECK