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EDMUND VASVARY  
WASHINGTON, D. C.

HUNGARICA AMERICANA



THE LIFE AND ART  
OF  
ALEXANDER FINTA

HUNGARIAN-AMERICAN  
SCULPTOR



By  
ALFONZ LENGYEL

7

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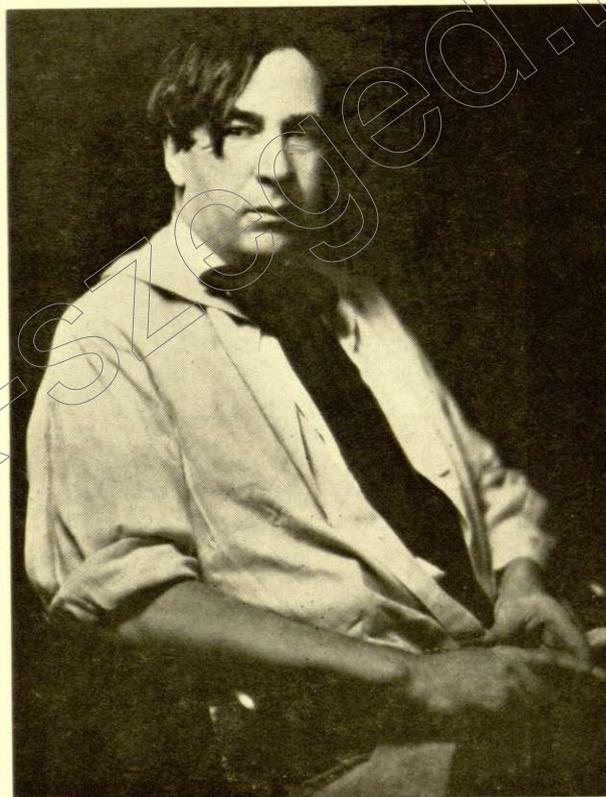
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ALEXANDER FINTA

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## PREFACE

In this essay I wish to pay tribute to the memory of an Hungarian-born American artist whose sculptures are in the permanent collections of the leading American and European museums.

Alexander Finta came to the United States after much tribulation. He became a loyal citizen and served to advance both the artistic and the intellectual life of America. Yet he was never unmindful of the country of his birth, from which he had carried away the dreams and impressions of childhood. So long as he lived, he was acutely aware of historical developments in Hungary, and this contributed to the formation of his art.

The land in which he was born, however, was too small for his artistic aspirations. During his years of wandering, he acquired a vast store of experience on which he drew after settling in America. He strove to teach everyone charity and love. Always searching for the most perfect expression of art, he offered his talents to the public, meeting with the indifference and the ephemeral popularity that those who conceal their talents escape. And these experiences, too, helped to mold his view of life.

Finta's motto was: "Learn something each day." He never created two similar works of art. In his opinion, the creative must first master their materials; then use the transforming powers of spirit to fill them with art. The spirit of the artist is carried on the wings of the imagination and therefore knows no bounds. Art, and its development, can only be boundless. The shallow artist merely makes patterns which, though they have some esthetic value, can never achieve lasting fame. The great talent, on the other hand, seeks always a new possibility, a new form of expression, and, never repeating, moves on towards immortality.

Flexibility, Finta believed, is needed to overcome limitations. Man should never allow his ideas to become ossified; he should never be the slave of his own habits. Whenever he feels it necessary to relinquish something to which he is attached, something which no longer meets his requirements, he must shed it without hesitation. There must always be progress. The new spirit of the time may appear somewhat vandalistic, but that can be modulated by the painter's brush or the sculptor's chisel.

The history of America made a deep impression on Alexander Finta. From the Revolutionary War rose a government and a constitution which welded colonists and immigrants together into a new nation with a unique and incredibly dynamic unity. That nation became a beacon of hope for

others aspiring to liberty, for nations, too, need leaders. In Finta's opinion, America's qualifications for leadership rest in her strong national unity which has joined the sons of all other nations together. The immigrant, without denouncing the country of his origin or abandoning his memories and traditions, gains freedom, security, an equal opportunity to prosper; his son, reared in this environment, is completely American. All this Finta realized and expressed in his work.

Alexander Finta was teacher, ethnographer, writer and poet as well as artist. His book, *Herdboy of Hungary*, was published by Harper Brothers, serialized in and later approved by the New York State Board of Education and included in the Public School Library Catalogue.

The honors he was awarded as a sculptor were unprecedented in the history of American art. His works won him 42 gold medals. His last prize was voted not by the jury but unanimously by his fellow exhibitors. He achieved the title "Hors Concours", which ensured his lasting fame. In Paris, he was known as the Rodin of America, and one French art journal wrote of him as the most serious competitor of Parisian artists. "Qui commence a faire serieusement concurrence a notre vieux Paris." *La Revue Moderne*, 30 Oct. 1927.

Finta's sculptures are guarded as treasures of American art in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Andersen Gallery in Washington,

D. C., in many other cities in North and South America, and in several European museums. He produced many statues, carvings in wood and ivory, and etchings, most of which were lost during his years of roaming. (It will, incidentally, be extremely difficult for art historians to identify these works once they are found.)

I am aware of the difficulties I myself must face in writing of Alexander Finta. I have a triple obligation to fulfill. As a refugee sheltered in this country after six years in a Communist prison, I wish to show my gratitude by preparing the way for the friendship that must develop between the United States and Hungary, once my homeland is free. Hungary was the first Iron Curtain nation to shed her blood in evidence of our desire to adopt the American system of government as Louis Kossuth, leader of our earlier revolution of 1848, envisaged. In 1956, our cries were drowned in the tumult of the West's own problems, but, as Finta, too, believed, the failure of the West to help in 1956, like the fact that Hungary's geographical position has involved her in two wars on the enemy side, cannot prevent the friendship that will grow between Hungary and America. I shall be thankful if my work contributes to their understanding.

I am also obliged, from my respect for the deceased artist, to honor his wishes — and in his Will, Finta asked that any future biographer avoid

a "dry, scientific manner." Although my third obligation is that of an art historian who must observe certain scientific requirements, I will bear his caution in mind, with the hope that in this slight contribution by another Hungarian to American cultural life, my words may suggest the spiritual qualities of a great artist and lend inspiration, as well as interest, to my readers.

## Chapter I

### EARLY YEARS

Alexander Finta was born June 12, 1881, in Turkeve (Hungary). The story goes that he was fast asleep when he was taken to be christened and that his father woke him, gently, because he wanted his son to be alert when anything happened around him. As the boy grew up, his father developed in him a deep curiosity and Finta passed through life with his eyes wide open. He was never satisfied with mere facts, but sought always their cause and effect.<sup>1</sup>

When he was about two years old, it was rumored that a comet would appear over the village. His father put him on his shoulders and joined the crowd waiting to see the spectacle. In this atmosphere of expectation, the boy suddenly cried out: "Papa, look! I see the comet!" Much to the amusement of the villagers, he was pointing at a drunken shepherd riding into town on a donkey. His father, much embarrassed at the boy's "stupidity", took him home immediately. That the story was often repeated around the village

1 Mrs. Catherine Finta, personal interview, Los Angeles, Calif., December 26, 1958. Permission to quote secured.

hurt his exaggerated pride in his son and for months he could barely look at him.<sup>2</sup>

It was only one year later that his pride revived and he could rejoice in his boy once more. Then, when Finta's considerably older sisters were unable to recite a poem they had memorized, their brother, who had listened to them practice, rose to the occasion and volunteered to recite it in their place. The father was so pleased with his four-year-old son's intellectual feat that he showed him off to all his neighbors and friends.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly afterwards he bought the child a penknife and taught him to carve the letters of the alphabet from wood. When the young Finta later entered school, he could read better than a fourth-grade pupil, and although making all those letters had at first appeared an insurmountable task, by the time he reached Z he had become a dexterous woodcarver, able to recognize the various types of wood, their grains and structures.<sup>4</sup>

Finta's father was again enormously proud, but he was much opposed to his son becoming an artist. He himself had been a promising woodcarver. Invited to Budapest as a youth, he took with him his childhood sweetheart, a minister's

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Alexander Finta, **Herdboy of Hungary** (original edition by Harper and Brothers, reprinted by the Hungarian Reformed Federation of America, 1940), pp. 8-13.

daughter, whose parents refused to permit their marriage. The young couple lived happily for some time in the capital. The artist's fame began to spread and he received many commissions from the aristocracy; then, unreasonably jealous of a society woman who had commissioned some work, his common-law wife left him and returned to her parents. The heart-broken man gave up his career, destroyed his tools, and went back to his village to resume the life of an ordinary peasant. After several years in self-torment and solitude, he married a local farm girl, who became the mother of his children.<sup>5</sup>

He could not — like so many others — escape the stringent economic conditions in Austria-Hungary by emigrating to a foreign land. He was bound to his place by a growing family. Instead, he collected a vast amount of information about the history of the United States and life in this country. On leisurely winter evenings he would often tell stories about America to his children grouped around the fire, stories that left a deep impression on Alexander Finta and in years to come nourished his longing for the United States.<sup>6</sup>

He was a child enchanted by colors and the wonders of nature. In his curiosity he smuggled crow's eggs into sparrow nests, sparrow eggs into lark nests, wild duck eggs into partridge nests,

5 Finta, *op. cit.*

6 *Ibid.*

watching how the bewildered mothers then fed and protected their heterogeneous broods.<sup>7</sup> (From these observations, he later said, sprang his dislike of the chauvinism and discrimination against minorities then so prevalent in Europe.) School, however, appeared immensely boring. Finta already knew the material that the upper grade was just learning. He carved the benches and drew cartoons of the teacher to pass the time away. When he was expelled for a childish prank three years later — at the age of nine — he was overjoyed.<sup>8</sup>

At last he felt free to learn what interested him — the secrets of nature and life. His mother grieved, but his father regarded the situation more practically and merely asked: "What do you want to be — a bootmaker's apprentice or a herdboys?" Finta chose the latter. Early next morning, father and son set off for a distant prairie where Miklos Finta, the boy's uncle, was tending a herd of horses with his men.<sup>9</sup>

The sudden departure from home, the new environment, the flora and fauna of the prairie, his everyday duties in tending the herd, all made a strong impression on Alexander Finta's character and gave further impulse to the development of his artistic tendencies. Living among the taciturn and contemplative herdsmen, the child absorbed their knowledge of nature, astrology and healing.

7 Finta, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

He became familiar with their tales and superstitions, which he was often able to explain. On one occasion, for instance, a herdsman unearthed the upright skeleton of a horse in a mound from which he believed he had heard neighing sounds. When he returned a few hours later with the other herdsman, the skeleton was missing. Immediately they were certain that it had been one of the legendary ghost horses which roam the prairies and stamp to death anyone who crosses their path. Having heard about the burial customs of the ancient Huns, Finta explained that the mound was the grave of some chieftain, and that the bones of the horse had probably been carried off by dogs or wild animals.<sup>10</sup>

The Ecseg prairie is a natural breeding ground for wild birds. Finta spent hours watching them, later, as an artist, he well remembered what he had learned. When Dr. Otto Hermann, the famous ornithologist, visited Ecseg, he was amazed at young Finta's vast knowledge of wildlife, especially when the boy showed the collection of birds and animals he had prepared and mounted. Hermann recognized the genius in Finta and promised to obtain a scholarship for him. It was the start of a great friendship between an aged scientist and a young boy, to whose life it brought an enormous change.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-48.

<sup>11</sup> Finta, op. cit., p. 97.

## Chapter II

### FINTA'S SCHOOL YEARS AND TRAVELS

The Ministry of Culture gave Finta a scholarship, the equivalent of about 80 U. S. dollars. By then he had six brothers and two sisters. His father, deeming it unjust that only one of his children should receive an education, moved the entire family to Nagyvarad, where all could attend school. Too, the city offered a better opportunity to make a living, for the economic effects of the Russo-Turkish war which broke out at that time could be felt in Austria-Hungary as well. Although the elder Finta and his family were strongly attached to their village — a trait common among Hungarian peasants — the prospects of a better life and education for the children finally triumphed.<sup>1</sup>

Nagyvarad, the "Rome of Hungary", lies on the border of Transylvania. For centuries it had been a defense post of Western civilization against Tatars and Turks. The streets had been laid out in zig-zags to provide better protection when the

<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Catherine Finta, personal interview, Los Angeles, Calif., December 26, 1958. Permission to quote secured.

city was under siege. Now it was a marketing center, with markets held every second day, and the colorful national costumes of the villagers who brought in their wares made a deep impression on young Finta.

His school days in Nagyvarad coincided with the discovery of ruins of the ancient cathedral in which Saint Ladislaus, King of Hungary, had been buried in 1095. One of the most valuable architectural monuments from the nation's past, the cathedral had been completely destroyed during the Turkish occupation. Not even the ruins could be found until the excavations were made.

Finta spent much of his spare time at the site, studying every technical detail with interest. What he learned there he applied later, when he himself directed excavations.<sup>2</sup>

As a boy, Finta was frequently involved in pranks and fights. He was noted among his fellow students for his physical strength and his inventiveness. Despite his mischief, he was also an eminent student, graduating from the *realgymnazium* in Nagyvarad with top honors. He then went to Kassa and enrolled in the state technical school, where he acquired a diploma in mechanical engineering.<sup>3</sup>

Ever since he had seen his first train, Finta — like many a boy — had been fascinated by

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

steam locomotives. But, with a job on the railroad, he became restless; instead of directing traffic and serving passengers, he himself wanted to travel. Resigning his post, he joined the merchant marine and in visits to Near Eastern and African ports came in contact with new peoples and cultures.<sup>4</sup> The impressions he gathered then were released in his art later on. A typical example of his ability to memorize figures and forms is the carved chest now in the possession of his widow. The characters in the Last Supper and in the low relief of Joseph and His Brothers are actual persons whom Finta saw when he served in the merchant marine, some 50 years before the chest was made.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

### Chapter III

#### EARLY YEARS AS AN ARTIST

Life in the merchant marine could not satisfy Finta, however, and he soon returned home. Visits to Budapest exhibits kindled his interest in art. He soon became engrossed in a systematic study of it. He began to carve, paint, and to model statues from clay. He recalled his early childhood when his father taught him to carve the letters of the alphabet with his first penknife. He learned ironwork and goldsmithing. A fine engraving which he sent anonymously to an exhibit was a great success.<sup>1</sup>

Finta was authorized by the Greek Orthodox diocese of Karansebes to make iconostases for its churches, work which calls for an artist who is both sculptor and painter.<sup>2</sup> An iconostasis consists of 50 to 80 icons, all of which must conform to Greek Orthodox tradition and must be arranged in a sequence prescribed by liturgical regulations. The icons, in richly carved frames, are painted reliefs. The face, hands and every portion of the

1 Ibid.

2 Alexander Finta, unpublished miscellaneous notes, (read at his widow's home, Los Angeles, California, Dec. 26, 1958).

body not covered by costume are carved and gilded low reliefs. Their composition is always symbolic.

The shepherds of the Transylvanian mountains were too poor to pay for the iconostases of their churches in cash. By the time Finta completed them, he was surrounded by a small farm of poultry, sheep, pigs and other livestock given him by the devout peasants.<sup>3</sup> Under these primitive conditions, a studio was entirely out of the question. The artist considered himself fortunate if some landowner would permit him to use an apiary as a workshop.

His assignment finished, Finta left Transylvania and went to Italy to study under Hildebrand. He then went to Paris to work under Rodin, who had had one of Finta's brothers, known by the name of Zadori, as a pupil years before.<sup>4</sup>

In 1914, Finta married a distant relative, Eszter Finta, a former school teacher. She bore him a son, Sandor, who subsequently became a physician.<sup>5</sup>

With the outbreak of World War I, Finta was obliged to return home. He was drafted for military service — by the end of the war, he had taken part in over a hundred bayonet charges and been wounded seventeen times.<sup>6</sup> He was in

3 Ibid.

4 Finta, op. cit.

5 Mrs. Catherine Finta, op. cit.

6 Potyondi, *Pesti Naplo*, 28 February 1935, p. 8.

the battles of Lozsnica and Sabac; and when a bursting shell uncovered traces of an ancient Roman settlement on the battlefield, the Hungarian National Museum requested him to direct excavations of the site. Most of the findings, however, were shipped by the Germans to Berlin.<sup>7</sup>

After the armistice, in 1918, the County of Nyitra decided to erect a memorial in honor of the war dead. The memorial committee, headed by Bishop, and Count, Batthyanyi, commissioned Finta. His work, carved from rose marble from Ruskica and rising 30 feet high, including the base, is described in an article by Karoly Lyka, the art critic. It is interesting to note that after the partition of Hungary in the Treaty of Trianon, the occupying states demolished all but one of the Hungarian war memorials on the territories they acquired. Finta's monument in Nyitra was the only exception. As Father Bangha, a Jesuit of European fame, wrote: "This is what a war memorial should be like, compelling even the enemy to respect its spirit."<sup>8</sup>

The group comprising the Nyitra memorial in its simplicity reflects the noble mind of its artist. It shows Christ lifting the body of a soldier who died in battle. The face of the Lord reflects infinite love for the man who sacrificed his life. The

<sup>7</sup> Postyeni Ujsag, 22 April 1918.

<sup>8</sup> Potyondi, *Pesti Naplo*, Ibid.

figure of the fallen soldier was that of Finta's own father, who was killed in the war.

Once the contemporary sculptor completes the model of his work, he usually leaves its execution in stone to artisans. This is a common practice everywhere in Europe. As a result, the clayish characteristics of the model are slavishly reproduced in stone; the surface of the statue lacks the touch of an artist's hand. Finta, however, followed the example of the ancient masters, executing in stone what he had modelled in clay. To him the chisel and the mallet were not merely symbols but actual tools of his trade and he himself worked on the war memorial in Nyitra, as well as on those he did in Postyén, Heves, Mezotur, Kecskemet, Ujvidek and Hatvan.

## Chapter IV

### EMIGRATION TO BRAZIL

The short-sighted peace treaties at the end of World War I were drafted in disregard of the principles outlined in President Wilson's Fourteen Points. The delegates at the peace conference failed to realize that by ruthlessly dismembering countries and casting them into economic poverty, they were creating conditions favorable to the spread of Communism. Such warning signs as the gradual consolidation of Bolshevik rule in Russia, the 133 days of Communist terror in Hungary in 1919, were completely disregarded.

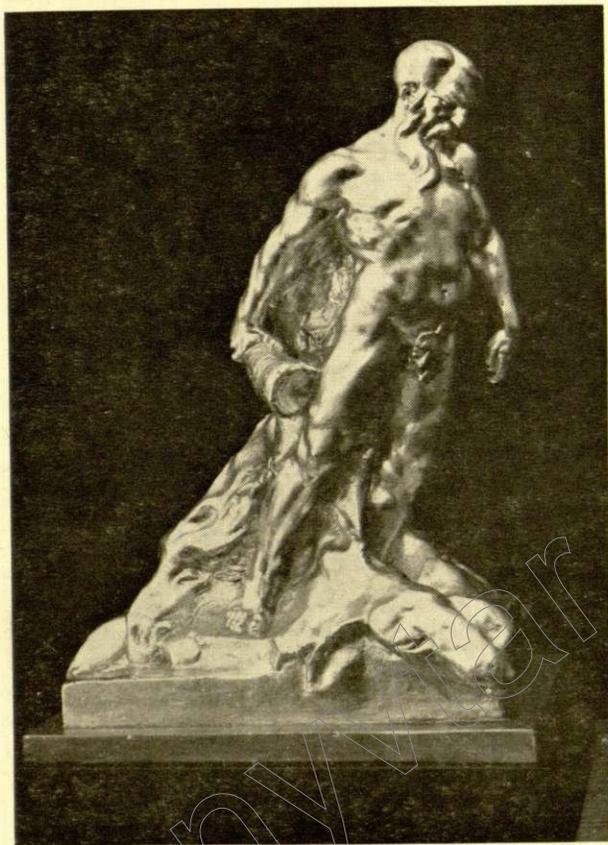
Fully aware of the political and economic plight of his country, and foreseeing the catastrophe which one day would engulf Central Europe, Finta decided to emigrate. With his second wife, the batik artist Katalin Kantor, he went to Trieste and boarded a ship for Brazil. He was already a prominent artist in Hungary and left behind him countless portraits, memorials, reliefs and small sculptural works.

Brazil was then holding a competition for the post of director of sculpture for the exhibition to mark the centennial of Brazilian independence.

Finta won the position with his granite statue, *Strength*, which now adorns the park of the Fluminense Club in Rio de Janeiro. He hammered the model for this 12-foot statue from a piece of lead. The work shows excellent sculptural technique. Holding the model in one's hand, one finds the weight of the lead insignificant in comparison with the strength that radiates from Finta's command of form, a strength, however, which is not unreined brute force but the power of security based on order, faith and self-sacrifice. It seems almost unbelievable that a piece of lead could be made into this impressive model only eight inches high. The explanation lies in Finta's ability to give life to every small part of his forms.

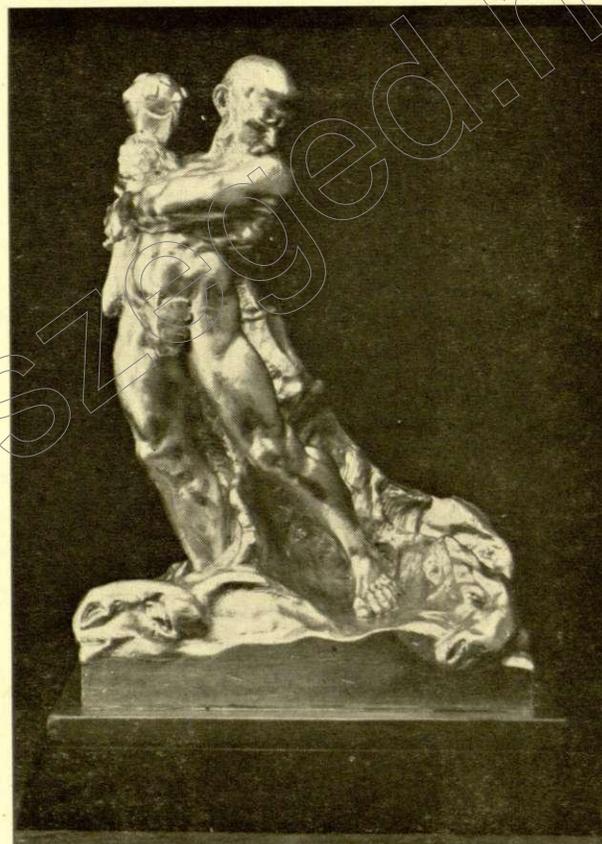
Finta adorned the gates of the Rio de Janeiro Exhibition with statues of the legendary Magyar leaders, Lehel and Botond. His next work was a stucco triptych for the Sacre Coeur Church in Petropolis, near Rio. In the bronze model of this triptych kept by Finta's widow, the soft lines and fine rhythm of the work can be seen. Contrasts of light and shade are skillfully handled and serve to direct attention to the main parts of the three compositions. The shadows created by undercutting behind the protruding figures gives the triptych a special emphasis of relief.

The left compartment illustrates the *Adoration of the Magi*. Incense rises from a Roman incense burner in the right corner; behind the Magi,



**LEHEL . . . in Bronze**  
By Finta  
Finta Museum — Turkeve, Hungary

— 20 —



**BOTOND . . . in Bronze**  
By Finta  
Finta Museum — Turkeve, Hungary

— 21 —

servants raise the gifts intended for the Infant. The center compartment of the triptych shows a Raphaelesque Madonna of soft beauty standing with the Child in her arms, kindness and love radiating from His face. The right compartment is a relief showing the Adoration of the Shepherds. In the left corner, the faint outlines of the stable and its manger are almost blended into the background. The shade and light effects focus attention on the figures: a shepherd standing in front of the stable, playing his flute; to the right, a group of other shepherds, all facing the stable, the first kneeling, the next bending intently forward, the last two standing erect — one with a round shepherd's hat on his head, the other with a lamb on his shoulder. Humble trust is reflected on their faces. They are simple men drawn by some supernatural force toward the stable, not stopping to meditate where they are going or why.

After this triptych, Finta next made the twelve Caryatides of the Petropolis cathedral built in memory of Emperor Don Pedro II. These are solid, closed compositions which give an impression of great monumentality.

To ensure the right effects of light and shadow, Finta modelled the Caryatides in the place in which they would be erected. He made a thorough and detailed study of the light effects of sunny and cloudy weather, sunrise and sunset. He subsequently taught this technique in New York and

one of his pupils, Laci de Gerenday, won first prize by using it in a contest sponsored by the Beaux Art Institute of America for over 140 art schools.<sup>1</sup>

Finta sought models for the other statues of the cathedral. Among the sophisticated urban residents suitable ones were hard to find, but he heard that many escaped Negro slaves were living in the jungle and decided to look among these primitive people. When his helper, a man by the name of Jacques, wished to take firearms along, the artist forbade him to do so. Finta took no protection but his sketch-book. He believed in the sincerity and friendliness of the people he was seeking.<sup>2</sup>

The colorful jungle scenery struck him deeply. He found beautiful flowers and animals he had never seen. He was fascinated by the religious beliefs and customs of the jungle tribes.<sup>3</sup>

On this journey Finta met Ita Giba, high priest of an Aymaran tribe who admired the artist's sketch-book. A warm friendship developed and the knot-sign message Ita Giba gave him enabled Finta to travel freely in the jungle and ensured him the natives' cooperation.<sup>4</sup> The high priest later visited Finta in his studio and let

1 Finta Notes, op. cit.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

the artist model a bust, exhibited in the Brooklyn Museum in October 1930.

Continuing his journey along the Paraguay River, Finta modelled a Guarani Indian who told him of the heroic exploits of the Guarani tribes fighting under Francisco Solano Lopez in the War of the Triple Alliance (1862-1870). The spot where Finta modelled his subject had once been a battlefield where thousands of Brazilian troops lost their lives.<sup>5</sup>

On his return to Petropolis, Finta was flooded with commissions for sculptural portraits. His trip to the interior had been most edifying. He brought back a better understanding of primitive people and a vast cache of knowledge about their way of life, character and art.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter V

### FINTA SETTLES IN THE UNITED STATES

Fleeing from an outbreak of yellow fever, the 42-year-old artist and his wife came to the United States in 1923. They became naturalized citizens in 1930. Despite language difficulties, Finta acquired a diploma from Columbia University in 1928 qualifying him as a museum director. Under the sponsorship of the First Presbyterian Church of New York, he then opened an art school for adults.

In his extensive travels, he had become acquainted with the customs and art of various nations. From primitive through modern art, he had studied all forms in sculpture, painting, architecture and folk art. These experiences he wished to impart to his students.

Finta's pedagogical methods were based on demonstrations rather than on theory. His aim was to develop, gradually, a thorough knowledge of art in his students. He believed that the art student requires a period of quiet concentration in which to find the form and style best suited to his talent and personality, that the teacher's role is to explain objectively the variations in

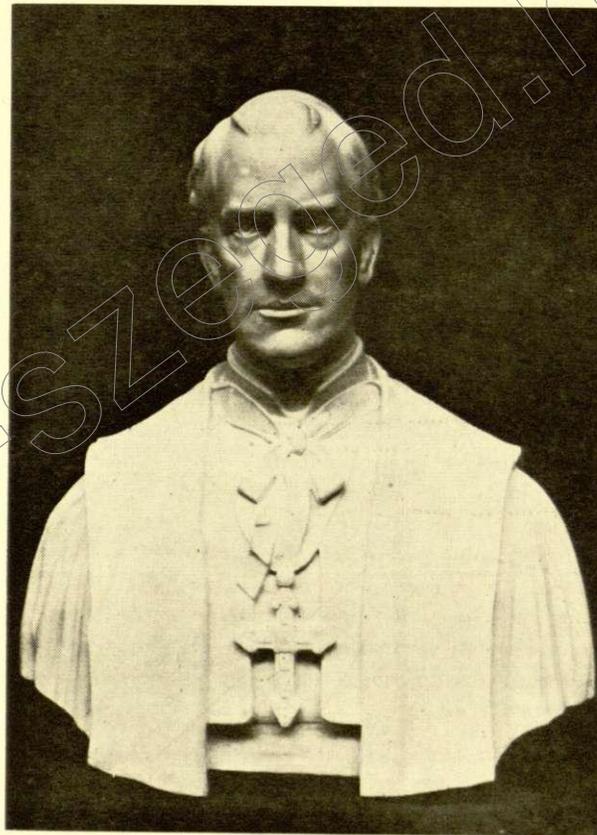
artistic expression and to let each student select his own style and form.<sup>1</sup>

In 1927, Finta received a commission from Supreme Court Justice Victor J. Dowling and banker Alexander Konta to do a bust of Cardinal Hayes.<sup>2</sup> It is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The face of the Cardinal emanates the profound dignity of a high church man. The searching eyes, under bushy eyebrows, penetrate into the very soul of the visitor. The features reveal the noble spirit of the priest. If we feel the sculpture with closed eyes, we can detect variations of the surface at fractions of a square inch. The shading of hair and eyebrows reproduced in white marble shows Finta's superb handling of light effects.

The same year Finta completed a relief plaque of Emory Holloway, the professor and writer who won the 1926 Pulitzer Prize for his biography of Walt Whitman. Holloway, who devoted a lifetime to interpreting Whitman's poetry, was himself extraordinarily gifted. Almost alone, he raised Whitman from the depths into which public opinion had cast him. At the age of 30, the self-taught 19th century poet and writer had already possessed the ripe wisdom of age which he expressed in *Leaves of Grass*. His love poems were entirely impersonal yet a prudish public had seen in them

<sup>1</sup> Finta Notes, op. cit.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



CARDINAL HAYES . . . in Marble

By Finta  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
New York

only the "heroic nudity" and objected to his treatment of nature in the human body. Holloway, who recognized the nobility of Whitman's spirit beneath the epicurean surface, had himself, Finta believed, been marked by his close association with Whitman's work. On receiving the commission, Finta first studied the traits common to both men and sought to express the imprint of Whitman's spirit on Holloway's face. He achieved his aim with remarkable success.

The Holloway plaque is a relief profile in bronze: protruding forehead, firm nose, wide nostrils, a somewhat longer line between nose and lips, a fine upper lip, full lower lip, flat ears and hair in perfect reproduction. Finta noticed the most minute lines and moldings of Holloway's face and head. The eyes are those of a genius, writer and philosopher, and if the rest of the face is covered alone reflect benevolence and kindness. If we examine only the mouth and the nose, however, we receive an impression of the tenacious energy Holloway needed to change the public's view of Whitman.

Finta was then commissioned to do a Whitman plaque, subsequently unveiled in Brooklyn, for the Walt Whitman Memorial Committee, of which Holloway was chairman.

To obtain a clear picture of the poet, Finta studied all available details. He found a strong resemblance between Whitman and the Hungarian

poet, Endre Ady, Finta's former classmate in Nagyvarad. Both Whitman and Ady won fame and provoked prejudice with their love poems. Both wished to create a better world.

Whitman, Finta learned, was opposed to conventional forms, considering them an obstacle to poetic expression. In his opinion, the work of a poet must express his personality, for he is able to write nothing that does not emanate from his own feelings. Whitman glorified America as the most productive and poetic country in the world. He recommended complete isolation from Europe and foresaw the decisive role of the United States in the struggle between East and West.

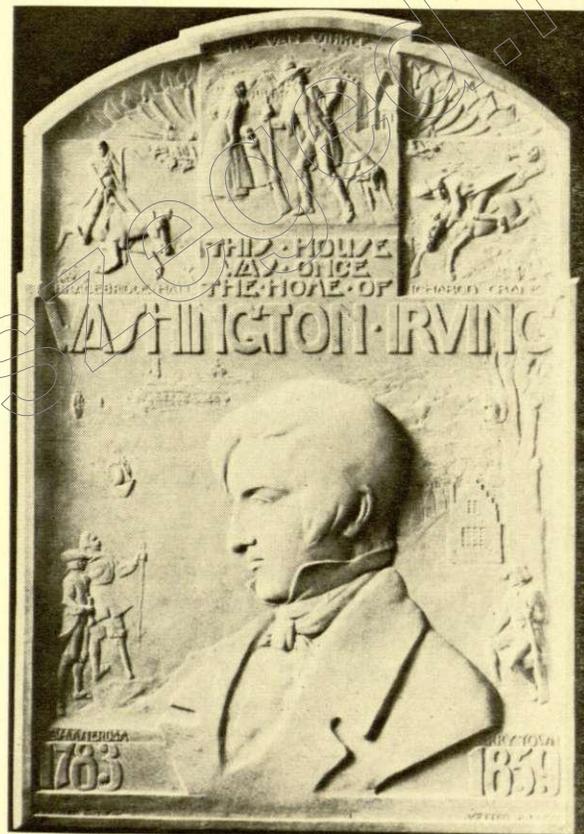
In Whitman, Finta underscored everything that was positive in the cultural history and development of the United States. He focused attention on those of Whitman's works which every American must know, selecting from them scenes which have made the poet immortal. Like the masters of medieval art, Finta reproduced these with the aid of allegories, but in their modern interpretation. In his opinion, art is the expression of scientifically observed thought in allegorical symbols. Naturally, this does not exclude the need for a thorough knowledge of the material, a secondary prerequisite for the expression of the spiritual in artistic form. The dominant factor for an artisan, Finta believed, is his knowledge of the material and his ability to shape it into form.

For an artist, however, the dominant factor is the thought that he expresses in the form.

Finta divided the *Whitman* plaque into distinctly separated parts in which he reproduced scenes from Whitman's poems: "Old Ireland", "Passage to India", "O, Captain." Perhaps the most moving of these illustrations is the one of "O, Captain." A limp figure is lying in the bow of a boat; an angel holds in his hand a laurel wreath symbolizing the captain's victory over the storm and his ability to bring the vessel to safety. The wreath, however, can now be laid only upon the captain's grave.

In 1929, Finta was elected a member of the Architectural League of New York and became a regular exhibitor at the National Academy of Design. The Federal Government commissioned him to design a memorial tablet in honor of *Robert Fulton*, the inventor of the steamboat, and also a statue of *General Ulysses S. Grant*.

Finta also designed a memorial relief for the *Washington Irving House* in New York. Commissioned by the Health Research Bureau, he designed the memorial in the New York Health Department of *Professor William Hallock Park* and *Dr. Anna Williams*. For *Saint Stephen of Hungary Church* in New York he designed a statue of its patron saint, *Hungary's first king*. The National Academy of Medicine also commissioned him to design a bronze memorial in honor of *Dr. Alfred E. Hess*.



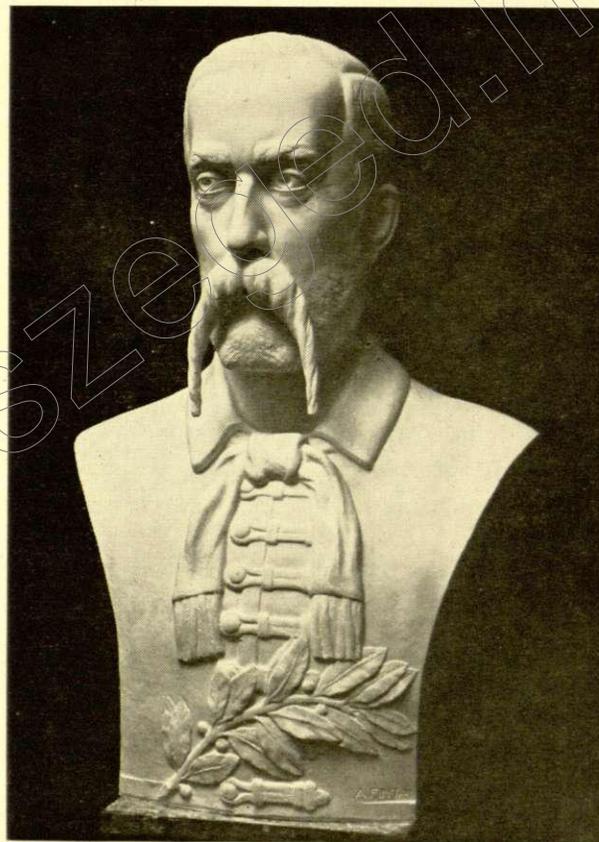
WASHINGTON IRVING . . . in Bronze  
By Finta  
17th Street, New York, N. Y.

Further outstanding examples of Finta's prolific art and sculptural technique are the *busts of Senator Robert Wagner*, the *statue of poet Imre Madach* (called Hungary's Shakespeare) in the Cleveland Public Park, and the bust of the Hungarian poet, *Sandor Petofi*, located in the Cleveland Public Library.

Finta designed the *plaque* presented to the mayor of Pittsburgh on the occasion of the centennial celebrations held in honor of Lajos Kossuth, leader of the 1848-1849 Hungarian Revolution. The plaque shows *Liberty welcoming Hungaria*, who is attempting to cover her naked child with a ragged veil, and symbolizes the tragic plight of the Hungarian emigrants and their cordial reception in this country.

The sculptor also designed Kossuth memorials for St. Louis, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles. The reliefs, *Education and Pledge*, in Public School No. 82 in New York, are also his work.

Finta was also a prolific writer and poet. He was an honorary member of the Edgar Allen Poe Literary Society of America. Manuscripts containing 1,000 poems are now in the possession of his widow. His *Herdboy of Hungary* was a best-seller in 1932; *My Brother and I* was also a great success. Short stories by Finta were published in *Target* and his "Chico" was acclaimed the "Best Short Story of 1934." Another, entitled "Trial by Steel", won a \$1,200 prize from *Pictorial Review*.



EMERY MADACH . . . in Bronze

By Finta

All Nations' Park — Cleveland

Finta's poems, short stories and novels reflect the keen mind capable of observing and describing nature with photographic precision. Characteristic of his writings are his clear style, sharp reasoning and vivid descriptions. He depicts his characters realistically, yet with moderation, without dwelling on the inferior nature of man.

With his wife, Finta made the sculptural decorations for the 20th Century Fox film, "The Hunchback of Notre Dame", taken from Victor Hugo's novel. His wife, Katalin Kantor, had won the admiration of the art world with her batiks and her composition and technique in painting on velvet. However, not wishing to compete with her husband, she neglected her own work to help him attain his just place in the world of art.

"One man", Finta wrote, "can do very little against the whole civilization."<sup>3</sup> Working at a time when the art world was rife with many cross-currents and fashions, Finta did not, I believe, gain the full recognition he deserves. I also believe that he was one of the outstanding artists of his time, that it is the duty of art historians today to lift the veil of obscurity from those artists who were not fully understood by their contemporary public.

From what has been said so far the reader will have understood that Finta did not participate in the modern movement, the twentieth century

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

revolution in taste. Though of the generation of Achipenko and Bracusi, he remained firmly and proudly in the tradition of Rodin, Hildebrand and the great schools of the past, preferring eclecticism to what he believed the delirium and deformation of the new manner. The penalty of his aloofness from the strident sloganry and exhibitionism of modernist ideology was obscurity and neglect, and the omission of his name from the records of modern art.

Finta was not a reactionary; his temperament was progressive, as were his political ideas. He simply disagreed with the philosophy of modern art and had the courage to reject it, fully realizing what sacrifice of notoriety this would entail. In his own work he experimented constantly with his materials. He invented a new kind of illusionistic low-relief by concave under-cutting; and his mastery of granite in which he rivals the sculptors of Ancient Egypt could only have been the result of long and studious experiment with the material to discover and exploit its peculiar properties. His motto was: "Learn something new each day." Neither his spirit nor his art were those of a reactionary hack fit only to carve the phony *tableaux* of Forest Lawn; nor were they those of the gesticulating fanatics who, under the banners of "progressive" art, massacre the tradition of the West and make a public spectacle of their shattered nerves. Finta's was an immense talent

which he steadily refused to prostitute to a movement that he regarded as catastrophically decadent.

This is not the place to re-assess the modern movement in art. If one were to reject the ideological valuations and interpretations of it made by its promoters; if one could survey the phenomenon from an independent position, not as an art critic or art historian, but as a general historian of the twentieth century or as a sociologist, one might come to consider it among the great failures and "destructions" of the modern world. One might simply account it as indeed the expression of its age, an age that has seen the rise and prosperity of totalitarian societies, the re-institution of human slavery, the re-birth of tribal hatred and holy war, systematic mass-murder, the abolition of the rights conferred by the Enlightenment, the enslavement of science to vicious ends, the stupefaction of the masses by commerial and political propaganda, the suspicion and persecution of cultivated intelligence, the leveling and regimentation of standards of value, the growing appeal to total force totally applied in the intercourse of nations, organized selfishness, cynicism, indifference to pain in the ruling of peoples and in the intercourse of nations. Finta perceived this, and could find no reason why he should make of his art a vehicle of agony, calamity and defeat. He believed that beauty could cure modern man's distress; and he found that beauty

already in the tradition. He could not believe the tradition was exhausted.

Here he may have erred. He was too hopeful a man, perhaps, too solicitous for the happiness of man, to read his own times pessimistically, that is, accurately. The tradition *was* exhausted, and the modern movement in a single burst of destructive contradiction killed it off.

Finta, as an artist loyal to the tradition, is fated to remain obscure. For the history of modern art is written by its partisans. As the modern style and its historiography become official, the art and the artists it disapproves will be excluded from the record. Unless an independent criticism and an objective history can be created, the history of modern art will be written out of the ideology of victorious modernism. Mr. Sheldon Cheney has assured us that in the second half of the twentieth century most historians of art — and I think he would want to add most artists and critics — are on one side; and that "the struggle for a modern attitude" has been won.<sup>4</sup> Dissenting and independent criticism is not invited; and only the friends of the movement will figure in its history. A critique of Finta constitutes a dissent from modernist orthodoxy and a plea for an objective history of modern art.

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<sup>4</sup> *A New World History of Art*, New York, Dryden Press, 1956, p. 5.

## Chapter VI

### FINTA'S WORK IN CALIFORNIA

Having completed nearly 50 portraits in New York, Finta moved to California. In 1939, he won general acclaim with his works, "*The Eternal Altar*" and "*The Thinker*", exhibited in the Stendhal Gallery.

The former is a nude group executed in eclectic style. The mother is seated, holding a child on her lap and embracing a second child with her right arm. The perfect reproduction of the human body reveals a thorough knowledge of anatomy. Though the closed composition is reminiscent of Egyptian art, though the proportions and nudity are strongly Hellenic, the group as a whole exudes spirit, as in the art of the Renaissance. The child clinging to its mother's body has also the chubbiness characteristic of Renaissance sculpture. The face of the other child in the mother's lap reflects complete satisfaction and a sense of security. Joy and pride can be read in the mother's expression. It is her lap that is "*The Eternal Altar*." The knees and thighs are portrayed with such realistic precision that they immediately claim the viewer's attention. The

smoothness of these masses and surfaces carved in wood has the lustre of the finest marble.

"*The Thinker*" is the portrait of a primitive Asiatic woman engrossed in thought. The deep-set eyes, the high cheekbones, the firm lines of the mouth and hands reveal her preoccupation. The eyes are practically lost in the deep shadows created by the constriction of the lids. Her strained features show worry. The work is, I think, a masterpiece modelled with remarkable reality. Placed beside "*The Eternal Altar*", the enormous difference in technique which Finta used in carving these two statues from wood becomes immediately evident. In "*The Eternal Altar*", the smile, the glow are produced through light effects. In "*The Thinker*", however, Finta used shadow and a coarse surface to underscore the impression of deep concentration. Rodin's "*Thinker*" produces a similar effect, but there the subject is classical rather than Asiatic. However, it should be noted that the hand which supports the head of Finta's "*Thinker*" is European. The fingers are long and delicate, though their surface is coarse, like that of the face.

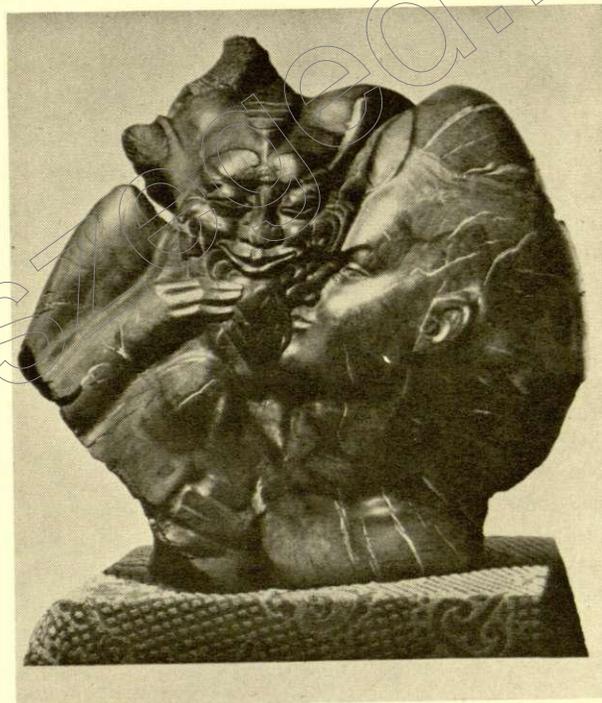
A further stage in Finta's artistic development is represented by his cherry-wood "*Nymph and Faun*" and "*The Mother*".

The recurring motif in the former composition is the heart, the symbol of love. The faun's face, beard, sideburns and eyebrows assume that shape.

In whichever direction we turn the statue, we find everywhere the same symbol. There is no part in the entire composition which — supplemented with another part — does not produce this effect. The faun's lower eyelids and their supplementing lines form hearts, expressive of desire rather than love. The nymph faces the faun in profile. The large crown of her hair, the faun's upper arm, form a heart. The nymph's face reflects not desire but tender submission and the yielding smile of the loving woman is almost in contrast to the faun's lustful leer. Regrettably, this work is in need of repair. The wood has dried, causing several cracks in the figures.

"*Nymph and Faun*" is again proof of Finta's exquisite sculptural technique. Borrowing his theme from ancient art, he used modern concepts for its interpretation. With his unusual ornamental solution of the heart symbol and his finely-conceived combination of shade and light effect, Finta was able to express what his classical predecessors showed only with groups of figures or nudes.

Finta's cherry-wood statue, "The Mother", portrays a young woman in a long dress, her head covered with a kerchief, sitting and reading the Bible which she holds in her hand. Her fine and high forehead is bent slightly forward. Her breasts, the symbol of motherhood, protrude through the dress, showing the natural shape of the nipples. If the rest of the statue is covered, the breasts alone create the illusion of nudity, and



FAUN AND NYMPH . . . in Wood  
By Finta  
Finta Museum — Turkeve, Hungary

although the texture of the dress is normal elsewhere, there it appears as thin as a veil, for Finta wished to express the mystery of motherhood by placing emphasis on the breasts. The hands holding the Bible are reproductions of Finta's own. Finta's technique, his artistic composition and the perfect harmony between light and shadow are evident in the contrast between the delicate fingers, exceptionally deep fingernails, the fineness of the breasts and the delicacy of the features, on the one hand, and the firm lines of the dress folds, the rough surface of the statue, growing progressively coarser from top to bottom, on the other.

At the request of the Civil War Association of Los Angeles, Finta prepared the model of a statue entitled, "*The Spirit of Columbia*". It is a composition comprised of two figures: on the base of the proposed statue stands a soldier, his gun at his feet; above him hovers an angel with outstretched wings, wearing a Phrygian cap, the emblem of liberty. Finta achieved the hovering effect with the aid of a block behind the soldier against which the angel, in a leaning position, braces herself with her toes. The face of the soldier reflects the pride of the victor; his thick eyebrows and moustache indicate virility and military discipline. Instead of a proud commander on his mount, the most common composition in monuments of this type, Finta preferred to portray the simple and nameless soldier on whose personal



MY MOTHER . . . in Wood

By Finta

Finta Museum — Turkeve, Hungary

bravery and endurance the outcome of the Civil War depended.

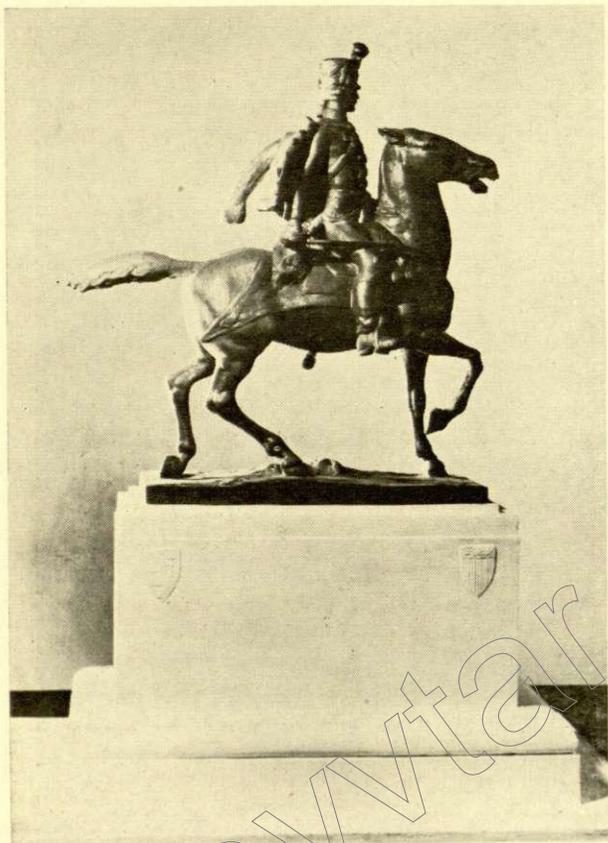
As in all of his other works, here again we find the realism characteristic of Finta's style. The angel's beauty, the detailed reproduction of the shape of her body as outlined by her dress, the soldier's military bearing, and the over-all effect of the group show his ability to note detail and to reproduce in forms of surprising perfection the fruits of his imagination.

Commissioned by the American Hungarian Historical Society, Finta executed a relief portrait of Colonel Mihaly Kovacs, the Hungarian hero, who, with his hussars, died in battle at Charleston during the American Revolutionary War. As I have already mentioned, Finta became a loyal American citizen but never lost contact with the country of his origin. In his literary, artistic and political activities he always endeavored to call attention to that small European nation which has produced so many writers, artists, researchers, medical and technical experts for world culture and science, the nation that not only stood guard over Western civilization at the gates of Europe, but also helped other nations to gain their independence.

Copies of the Kovacs portrait, varying in size, can be found in the New York Museum of Natural History, in the Historical Museum of the Hungarian National Museum in Budapest, in



THE SPIRIT OF COLUMBIA  
By Finta



COLONEL COMMANDANT MICHAEL DE KOVATS

. . . in Bronze

By Finta

Anderson Gallery — Washington, D. C.

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Colonel Kovats Square in New York, Charleston, and in the Washington, D. C., headquarters of the Hungarian Reformed Federation of America. The memorial plaque bears the following inscription:

*“Colonel Commandant Michael de Kovats  
Drillmaster of Washington’s Cavalry  
Born in Hungary June 12th 1724  
Died at Charleston, S. C., U. S. A.  
May 11th 1779*

*Dulce et decorum est pro libertate mori.”*

In the upper corner of the plaque, Finta modelled the contemporary Hungarian and American state seals. The entire field is covered with the portrait of Colonel Kovats mounted on his steed. He lowers his drawn sword in the traditional salute of the Hungarian hussars, and the tight-fitting uniform reveals his muscular body. The Arabian prancing beneath him is held at short rein, its quivering nostrils and open mouth reflecting the excitement that precedes battle. One can almost feel that the horse and its master are about to charge to a glorious death. The exceptional execution of the steed’s muscles can be attributed to Finta’s ability to note details and to the experiences of his boyhood days. Having curried his horse daily on the Hungarian plains, Finta could close his eyes and recall every muscle of his own faithful mount. Screened through the mature experience of the artist, the precise

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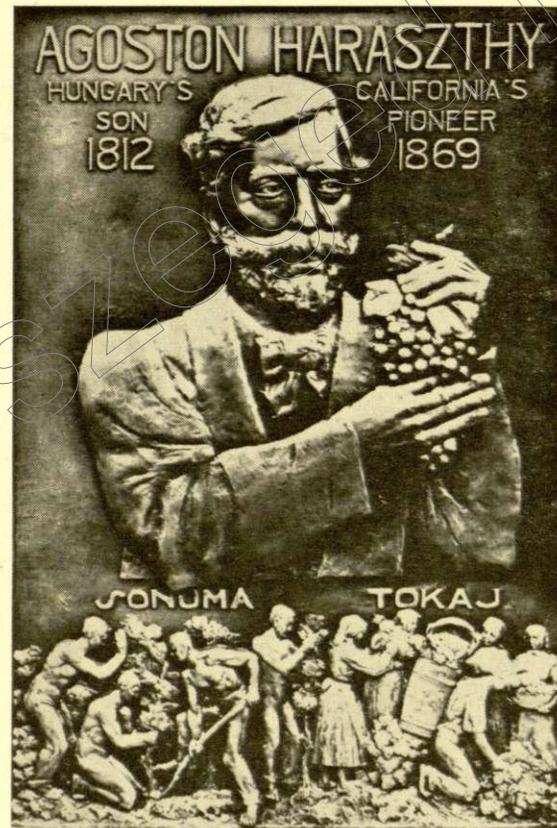
observations of his boyhood guided his creative hands as he modelled the plaque. The result is a masterpiece of realistic reproduction.

Finta later did a *statue of Colonel Kovats* seated on his horse, at the request of the Society of Cincinnati. This work, now in the Anderson Gallery in Washington, D. C., gives the same general impression as the memorial plaque. Clad in his hussar dress uniform, the son of a small overseas nation gives his final salute before charging off into that fatal American battle. The horse's ears are flattened but the strong will of his master forces him ahead, and in the fine poise of the animal's head and feet one can see that he senses the will of his master. One can instinctively feel the strong tie between horse and horseman.

The *Agoston Haraszthy Memorial* designed by Finta was unveiled in Sonoma, California, in 1958. Through the courtesy of the Haraszthy family, I was present at this ceremony.

Haraszthy came to the United States as a refugee after the suppression of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution. He settled first in Wisconsin, where, with a British friend, he founded a town and soon owned a fleet of ships.

He subsequently settled in San Juan Capistrano, California, a town founded and named by Father Junipero Serra in honor of the canonized Hungarian monk who fought under John Hunyadi



AGOSTON HARASZTHY . . . in Bronze

By Finta  
Sonoma, California

against the Turks. Later Haraszthy moved to San Diego, where he was active in various business undertakings and even served a term as sheriff. For a time he was also U. S. Consul in Mexico.

Haraszthy acquired thirteen grapevine cuttings from Tokay, Hungary. Naming this variety the *Buono Vista*, he reproduced the stock and planted vineyards in the Sonoma area, giving cuttings to other farmers on the condition that the wine pressed from the grapes would be called Tokay.

During the course of a study tour of Europe, he visited the Hungarian revolutionary leader, Louis Kossuth, in exile. He took Kossuth a cedar branch from Washington's grave and told him of the peace and freedom in the United States, where even the grapevine brought from Tokay could be domesticated.<sup>1</sup>

The upper part of the Haraszthy memorial plaque bears the following inscription:

"*Agoston Haraszthy, Hungary's Son 1812*  
*California's Pioneer 1869*"

The center field is a bust portrait of Haraszthy examining a cluster of grapes. The lower part of the plaque bears the words:

"*Sonoma — Tokay*"

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Finta, unpublished miscellaneous notes, (read at his widow's home, Los Angeles, California, Dec. 26, 1958).

Arranged in a frieze are workers planting and harvesting the vineyards.

With the surprising dexterity of his sculptural technique, Finta implanted life in Haraszthy's eyes. The execution of hair and beard, the skin-like surface of the hand, the workers' actions, even the perfectly reproduced grapes, all serve to confirm what I believe to be Finta's genius as a sculptor.

Many miniatures and small statues carved in ivory or wood remain of Finta's works, but many more have been lost. A collection of 24 carvings in buffalo bone must be considered the crowning achievements of his miniature sculpture. On one, entitled "Runic Letters", Finta carved the writing of the ancient Hungarians who had fallen into complete oblivion. A considerable degree of similarity has been established between the old Hungarian runic letters and those of the Sumerians. The results of studies in this field are summed up in a work entitled *Sumerian Affiliation*, by Dr. Ida Bobula, who in 1951 sent copies of her work to all major libraries here and in foreign countries.

Characteristic of Finta's miniatures are their peculiarly soft and fine lines, and their delicate rhythm. He combined his closed forms with a tendency toward decoration.

Finta also designed a commemorative medal for the Hungarian Reformed Federation of America. It is probably the best example of his views

on the use of allegory in art, for it had to be something more than a portrait: it had to express an ideal. The composition of the medal is a triangle fitted into a circle, signifying the world which has opened to accept the Trinity. Along the edge of the medal is inscribed: "*Si Deus Pro Nobis Quis Contra Nos*", the Federation's motto. Within the triangle is an angel holding the Gospel in one hand and a trumpet in the other, signifying the joyful tidings the Gospel contains. The angel is God's messenger, in human but strongly idealized form.

A remarkable carved chest now in Mrs. Finta's possession is adorned with superbly executed low relief scenes from the Bible and from the life of Finta and his wife. The front part of the chest shows Joseph and his brothers; the rear panel is the Last Supper. The cover illustrates the temptation of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from Paradise. The left side of the chest depicts the life of Alexander Finta; the right side, that of his wife.

The portrayal of Joseph surrounded by his brothers who beg forgiveness inspires a feeling of remorse and humility. The scene is somehow reminiscent of the humiliation of Rodin's citizens of Calais. The humbly-bent, once-haughty brothers now stand before Joseph as if they had always loved him, had never sold him into slavery. They personify the frailty of human nature, leading man

to sell his brother for a dish of lentils and later to bow before him because he is the more powerful.

Finta divided the cover of the chest into one large and two small fields. The right field shows the Annunciation, the center — the Original Sin, the left field — the Redemption.

In the Annunciation scene, the Virgin stands humbly listening before an angel with wings spread and hands raised in blessing. A serpent and flowers are at the Virgin's feet. The entire scene is touched by rays of divine light from above.

The scenes of the Original Sin and of the Expulsion from Paradise are presented with Michelangelo-like force. The figures, executed in a strongly rounded form, reflect the significance of the act with few but essential movements. The serpent, coiled around the trunk of the apple tree, its demonic head peering through the branches, the entire field into two parts: the left illustrates the commission of the Original Sin, the right shows the Expulsion, which Finta executed with a tragic and dynamic force. The Archangel Michael, a halo around his head, is strictly enforcing God's command. His wings are portrayed in perfect detail. Pointing ahead with the forefinger of his left hand, he holds a sword in his right hand and shuts off the view toward the background with his wings. Crushed by the burden of their guilt, Adam and Eve step out from the eternal happiness of the Garden into the sufferings of life on earth.

Mankind, however, is redeemed from its plight by Christ. The third field on the cover of the chest symbolizes this Redemption. Christ is portrayed in a vertical position, poised between Heaven and earth. A cross above His head signifies His sacrifices to redeem the world. Accompanied by rays of heavenly light, a messenger descends from Heaven to Limbo, bringing glad tidings to the suffering souls.

Varying the rounded effects of the composition, Finta underscored the essential parts of the scenes and intimated the consequences of the main acts. The strong firm lines in the figure of Christ dominate, while the less-rounded figures of the souls in Limbo and of the angel blend more into the smoothness of the background. Although the lines of the subordinate characters are less distinct, their figures are nevertheless carved out with great detail.

In the Last Supper, Finta produced the impression of a strongly-accentuated, three-dimensional room. The walls narrow down in perfect linear perspective. On the wall forming the background three pictures illustrate the main Biblical events in the history of mankind. The left shows Noah's ark and the rainbow of promise shining after the deluge; the center illustrates the story of Cain and Abel; the right shows the betrayal and capture of Christ.

In the front of the scene is the supper table, extending across the entire room, with a sheep

lying beneath it. Two lamps suspended from the ceiling serve to emphasize the table's length. Christ is sitting in the center, with a halo and tongues of fire about His head. One of the disciples stands with outstretched arms; Judas holds a moneybag in his hand. The other disciples, seated, listen to the last words of Christ. A woman is entering through the left door.

The robe of Christ is markedly different from the simple robes of the disciples, for it is evocative of the vestments of a Catholic priest. The folds of the disciples' sleeves, caught at the wrists, are carved with great detail and precision.

Finta produced the desired impact with his composition, with his intermittent light and shade effects, and with the penetrating force of expression. The room is tense with a certain feeling: "Someone will betray Me." With arms outstretched, Peter explains and protests the suspicion; the shrinking Judas fingers his bag of money. The rounded relief expresses subdued but explosive emotion and the scene imparts the difference between the insidious and premeditating traitor and the self-respecting man who is not sufficiently strong to resist duress. Knowing what is about to happen, Christ performs the mystery of the Last Supper and prepares for the task His Father has assigned to Him.

On the left side of the chest Finta carved the events of his own life in miniature, fully utilizing the space available. The upper part is divided

into three fields; the lower part is not divided but filled symmetrically with a series of different scenes.

In the left field of the upper section, Finta appears proposing to his wife. He shows her one of his works to indicate his profession. The center field bears the inscription, "SANDOR Alexander FINTA", below which stands a self-portrait in profile. Finta's hair is reproduced merely on the back of his head and then only in faint outline. He holds the fingers of his hand somewhat like Leonardo's Bacchus. Resting on his upward-pointing forefinger is a nude with her knees bent forward and her arms raised. In the right field Finta kneels as he receives the blessing of an angel. With this blessing, Finta and his wife start off into the world to fulfill the role of artist for which God destined him.

In the lower section of the left side is a scene showing a draw well at which horses are being watered. In the right corner of the same scene is a hut built of cornstalks, with crows flying overhead. Four peasants stand before it. Two of them watch the crows, the third is engrossed in thought, while the fourth slaps his hand into the palm of the third in the Hungarian peasant's traditional fashion of bargaining for horses. The next scene is again a portrait of Finta, showing him on the back of his horse, Mocskos, in Ecsegi Puszta, Hungary. To the right he appears again standing beside his horse, waiting to go into the brush to study wild life.

The entire life of the artist is depicted in these miniature reliefs following one after the other.

The right side of the chest contains scenes from the life of Mrs. Finta. Here again the upper section is divided into three fields and the lower section is filled with miniatures illustrating scenes from the years of her wedded life.

In the left field of the upper section is Finta, attired in an artist's cloak with a staff in his hand, bent under the load of his wife, whom he carries on his shoulder. Their faces reflect suffering, hardship and the merciless trials of life. In the right, however, Finta is erect and seems to be proceeding with a jaunty stride. Here again he carries his wife on his shoulder, their faces reflecting cheerful happiness. Mrs. Finta holds a laurel wreath in her hand, the symbol of recognition which they acquired through combined effort, self-sacrifice and devotion. The two reliefs together are a symbol of the couple's marriage vows.

The center field in the upper section is a profile relief of the artist's wife, bearing the inscription: "KATALINA FINTA". In her hand she holds a rose, their favorite flower.

Proceeding from left to right, the miniature reliefs in the lower section on the right side of the chest illustrate the following scenes: The Budapest memorial to Merey, the theater director — he holds a theatrical mask symbolizing Thalia, Muse of Drama. In the next scene Finta and his wife pull a plow. Here the artist allegorizes their common

efforts in the work of a peasant: As a peasant cannot harvest without first plowing, so, without hard work Finta and his wife would have been unable to reap the glory of artistic renown. Behind the plow stands Fate, with outstretched wings, prodding the couple across the rugged field of life. Next, follows a reproduction of "Strength", the statue with which Finta won the post of director of sculpture for the International Exhibition in Rio de Janeiro. Above this scene is a reproduction of the bust of Ita Giba. The next scene, to the left, shows the memorial which Finta designed in honor of his paragon, Colonel Mihaly Kovacs, hero of the American Revolution. Next, in the last miniature, is the model of the famous war memorial in Nyitra with which Finta paid tribute to the memory of his father.

The composition of all the reliefs, the detailed precision and skilled execution, the emphasis on changes in mood, the perfect solution of light and shadow, the effects produced by variations in the degree of roundness in the figures, the use of three-dimensional illustration, the eyes and movements, the excellent interpretation of the artist's thought, the harmony of the various scenes, the life inspired in the miniatures by their appropriate grouping, all are striking evidence of Finta's artistic greatness and maturity.

In the reliefs on this chest Finta condensed the entire expressive power of his artistic beliefs, his masterful technique, and his spirit.

## Chapter VII

### FINTA'S PHILOSOPHY OF ART

Devoting practically his entire life to the study of art, Finta developed his own philosophy of art.

As a prerequisite to proper conclusions, he felt it necessary to define art, its essence and meaning. First he had to decide whether the materialistic or the spiritual approach could provide the proper answers. On the basis of his observations and years of study, Finta concluded that a combination of material and natural forces can produce forms but that such forms lack spiritual content. Natural forces, such as the wind, water, erosion, the transformation of nature, or oxidation, can produce remarkable forms perceptible to man. These, however they may gain one's admiration, still do not possess the magnetic attraction which only the soul of the artist can develop.

Thus Finta came to the question of the foundation of art, its source and primary cause. According to Finta's theory, art derives from God. The basis of artistic talent is the soul which, through thought, induces the artist to seek to express himself in form. To satisfy its creative impulse, the soul shapes, from material, forms which reflect the Creator. Finta wrote:

The foundation of art is like the foundation of man. It is the knowledge of causes and the secret motion of things . . . Every cause is the off-shoot of the first cause . . . Art is creation. The first cause of creation is God, therefore, every creation consequently should be radiated from His as the source of its existence . . .<sup>1</sup>

Art, motivated by beauty, is an integral part of the general progression of causes and effects that constitutes the universe. Art is an expression of thought and not of the impulse to create. This impulse alone is vain if not accompanied by thought. Finta, therefore, considered thought of primary importance in art and recommended that artists develop their minds. Impressions on the artist's mind must always be progressive and based on science. In the cultural history of mankind, art has always developed parallel to science. Advancements in science prompt the development of art and the influence of the two is by nature mutual. For example, the idea of aviation was first conceived by an artist whose imaginative drawings of a primitive aircraft led scientists to develop and perfect the theory and means of flight.

The creative artist shapes his thought into form, but to qualify as perfect art, the form must express every detail of the artist's thought. Most

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Finta, *The Relation of Mind and Matter in Art*, (unpublished pages read at his widow's home, Los Angeles, Calif., Dec. 26, 1958).

persons admire merely the form and fail to perceive the idea expressed in it. To detect the fine shades of thought expressed in form, one must develop a feeling for art, and since perception is limited to experience, the understanding of art requires study.

According to Finta, the scientific concept of space not only gives the artist a better understanding of the infinite nature of God, but also promotes realistic reproduction in art. He wrote:

God exists in space, or we may say space is the volume of God, the first cause . . . The gifted artist is he who is enabled by the Creator to sense or feel space, he who is able to use the third dimension, mysticism, in Art. And he alone may face the pleasure of creation.<sup>2</sup>

In Finta's opinion, the main purpose of the artist should be to achieve perfect harmony. Life can be richer, better and more tolerable if art does not deviate from this principle. Finta claimed that happiness depends to a considerable extent on art, primarily on applied art. In a modern home, for example, practically everything is built-in. What little furniture is left is uncomfortable and grotesque. A small table is not sturdy enough to fulfill its purpose. The furniture lacks ornamental lines or carvings. The fantastic compositions of the paintings on the wall add to the disquieting

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

effect. Primarily because of the influence of ultra-modern industrial artists, the home, he believed, has lost its soothing atmosphere of peace and quiet.

According to Finta, every true creative artist endeavors to use a new line or solution that becomes characteristic of his work. Although hidden in the over-all effect, this imaginative mark is immediately evident to the observer. In the same manner, the creative artist also conceals his idea behind the lines of his work. What the artist wishes to express is only evident to the experienced eye and for this reason training in the appreciation of art is of considerable importance. The average person measures works of art merely with a yardstick and not with his feelings. He looks for flaws, but can detect only flaws in the material. If, for example, a town votes on the site on which a statue is to be erected, usually very little consideration is given to the fact that the idea expressed in the work must be in harmony with the environment.

Concealing his ideas in — or rather, presenting them subtly, without ostentation — every one of his works, Finta did not become a mannerist. Since a work of art is judged in its entirety, the artist must find the lines with which to express the character he wishes to give it. Behind these lines lies the idea which gives the work its special character. The artist must continually strive for absolute perfection. When he feels that he has nearly reached his goal, he must suddenly realize how far he still is from it. The principle that one

must strive to know more today than yesterday applies not only to science but to art.

According to Finta, the goal of art is harmony created by rhythm. The idea must be blended with the form to create a feeling of perfect harmony. Though the form is more limited than the idea, two different emotions can be expressed within it. This is evident, for example, in Finta's composition, "Nymph and Faun", described above. Here the form is the shape of the heart, the symbol of love. Within this form, the artist was able to blend harmoniously the sensual lust of the faun and the modesty of the yielding nymph.

In Finta's opinion, the purpose of form is to "... reduce the intolerable chaos of the world, when truth and beauty collide, to an understanding unity and order . . ." <sup>3</sup> Idea cannot be expressed without form, but an exaggerated decomposition of form only enlarges chaos and produces grotesque works which express ideas more usually conceived in a deranged mind. "The Greek artist", he wrote, "took a block of stone, projected into it his dream, and then cautiously worked inward, discarding all that was superfluous, until his dream stood revealed to the world." <sup>4</sup> Though he believed that the artists' "task . . . is to liberate themselves from the domination of their materials", <sup>5</sup> he saw this as a process proceeding from discipline rather than anarchy.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.    <sup>4</sup> Ibid.    <sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The perfection of an artist's form is limited by his knowledge. For example, he cannot paint a picture of a horse if he has never seen one. But even if he has, the work can be a perfect piece of art, Finta believed, only if it is an exact likeness of a horse, bearing the characteristics of that animal and the character which sets it apart from others. This is why Finta claimed that art is an achievement based on the artist's knowledge and research. Having condensed his observations in his mind, he expresses them in terms of form, color, or light and shadow effects. The manner of expression, Finta believed, should be such as to make the artist's observations recognizable, and preferably to everyone.

The artistic effect of form should convey the idea the artist wishes to express in his work, for idea is inseparable from form, though the artist, of course, must possess the talent to implant in his work this intellectual — and — spiritual element. "The weakness in contemporary art", he said, "I attribute to its materialistic foundation."<sup>6</sup> And, again, "The allegories and symbols which embellish the creation of the ancient artists are their glorification of Ideas."<sup>7</sup>

Form is influenced by various factors, such as color, temperature, weight, angle of observation,

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Finta, unpublished miscellaneous notes, (read at his widow's home, Los Angeles, California, Dec. 28, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

and so on. In his works, Finta took every possible factor into consideration and advised his students to do the same. To assure harmony between his statues and their environments, his first step in designing a statue was always to make a detailed study of the future site.

He selected the material for his statues with great care, avoiding contrasts between it and the idea the statue would express. He also stressed the technique of handling the material properly. "Greek sculptors", he noted, "became artists only after an apprenticeship in stone carving, but the modern sculptor is considered an artist when he leaves the art school. The ancient master developed into a creative artist through the craftsman's acquaintance with his material, but the modern sculptor usually leaves the execution of his statue to artisans."<sup>8</sup> In his wood carvings, Finta produced a marble-like smoothness where emphasis was necessary and left a rough surface on the parts to which he did not wish to call primary attention. "The Eternal Altar", mentioned above, is an excellent example of this technique.

Both form and idea evoke our emotions. The first impression produced by a work of art is always the basis for our further study of it. If the first impression is false, it is more than likely that the final conclusion will also be false. In evoking that first impression, both the material

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

and the spirit of the work work in conjunction. As Finta wrote,

The old master had a full appreciation and respect for his material. But most modern statues are the result of indolence, ignorance of material and a sort of adventurous bravado. It is no wonder that such works die an early death.<sup>9</sup>

The quality of the first impression, he believed — a belief unusual in a secular age — makes the artist responsible for the effects of art on the development of morals and mentality, especially with respect to future generations. Finta's works reflect this belief. They depict heroism, self-sacrifice, purity, motherhood. He never produced anything reflecting decadence.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter VIII

### THE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF FINTA'S SCULPTURAL TECHNIQUE

If a true master were suddenly to become blind, he would still be able to model with the aid of his sense of touch. However, form in itself is not enough. The effects of light and shadow are also necessary, especially in the case of massive forms. Finta believed that sculpture is actually the art of light and shade.

The effect produced by a work of art is influenced by its surroundings as well. They can reduce the effect of the idea which the sculptor wishes to reveal or they may even alter the content completely. Therefore, the site is not a matter of indifference, and should be left to the sculptor. Naturally, statues that are placed in museums or private collections present a different case; the sculptors cannot be consulted, for such statues are usually acquired after their deaths. Then, however, it is essential that an expert be consulted about their placement, since, otherwise, the sculptors' ideas may too easily be misinterpreted by a public largely uneducated in art.

Like a human being, a statue consists of two elements: the body and the soul. Here the body is the form, the soul, the idea which the statue expresses. It is difficult to model the form of the statue, but it is even more difficult to inspire its soul, the idea within the form. The dimensions of the form can be established by measurement. The texture and formation of the surface can be felt by touch, but the idea expressed can be felt merely with the delicate seismograph of one's own soul. The average person who has not yet reached the spiritual level enabling him to sense a statue's idea reacts primarily to form. With training and practice, however, the impression created by the form and the material of the statue can change to a complete spiritual appreciation of it. Consequently, a statue containing no idea cannot produce a sense of complete satisfaction and enjoyment in a viewer of refined artistic taste.

The sculptor and nature age in partnership with each other. The sculptor models the surface, and nature provides the light and shade. Without nature's assistance, a statue could be examined only through our sense of touch. The effect of light and shadow is the testing stone of a sculptor's creative talent, of his touch, of the soundness of his spatial solutions, and of all other factors that are essential to a good statue. Strong lights directed on a statue from every direction create the illusion that it is completely smooth. Since there

is no shadow, curves and variations of the surface cannot be detected. Depending on the intensity of the light, the light and shade effect will reveal new characteristics each time the light is so applied from a different direction. A more detailed study of the light and shade effect can be made by viewing a statue first with one eye (for the primary effect) and then with both eyes (for the secondary effect). The eyes, the nose, the lines around the mouth, the forehead, the chin, the cheek bones and the ears will produce a different impression each time the light and shade effect is changed.

If we examine a statue of the human body, we find the surface changes within every square inch. With his sharp eye and heightened powers of observation, Finta noted these changes and his sensitive fingers reproduced them realistically in his works. He wrote:

The living human form is never absolutely straight in its lines anywhere, not absolutely flat or regularly curving in any of its surfaces, not even for one square inch. It is this quality, these living lines and living surfaces, that has characterized all the great sculptured figures of the past.<sup>1</sup>

Statues from the Hellenistic period substantiate Finta's theory and technique. While their

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

predecessors strove to idealize their subjects, the sculptors of the Hellenistic period copied nature realistically.

Finta excelled not only in sculpture, but also in low reliefs. He was able to control their depth with such fineness that they are practically paintings. His ability to produce an extremely fine degree of roundness is evident in the Triptych he made for the Petropolis cathedral, in the carved chest described above, and in all of his other works executed with the same technique. His miniatures, too, are masterpieces of fine relief work.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Finta's statues is the reproduction of the color of hair and eyes, using light and shade effects. He was also a genius at instilling life into his portraits and in bringing out the spiritual characteristics of his subjects. During his confinement in a field hospital during World War I, one of his nurses, Countess Zedwits, asked Finta to model her. After the bust was completed, her husband told the artist that in all his years of married life, he had never realized that the Countess possessed all of the fine traits which Finta was able to express.

In all his works, Finta sought to fulfill the mission of an artist — to give people love, peace and spiritual enjoyment. Pain and sorrow are unavoidable in life. It is the task of the artist, he said, to make life more tolerable, more beautiful and noble.

Finta was one of those great artists, who, by the fineness of their souls, are able to grasp the beauties of nature and reproduce them for the benefit of mankind and for the further advancement of human culture. The Greek masters, the great artists of the Renaissance, Rodin, Hildebrand, and Finta in modern sculpture, each kindled a flame on the altar of culture, a flame that can warm the heart of humanity, longing for warmth and love, a flame that can destroy selfishness, profligacy and degenerateness, and help to create for future generations an atmosphere of greater and nobler idealism.

THE END

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