

HARRY BERTOIA

March 10, 1915–November 6, 1978

The Man

Born in San Lorenzo, Italy, Harry, at the age of 11, copied a 100 Franc note so perfectly that it couldn't be distinguished from the original . . . thus began his art career.

When he was 15, Harry and his Father traveled to Detroit to visit Harry's older brother, Oreste. The young Bertoia elected to stay in Detroit and attend the Cass Technical High School (now known as the College for Creative Studies) in a program for talented young artists. In 1936, he graduated and earned scholarships to both the Detroit Society of Arts & Crafts and Cranbrook Academy of Art. At Cranbrook he studied painting and taught metal work. During this time, he created a unique style of monoprinting which he showed to the Cranbrook president, Eliel Saarinen. Saarinen advised Bertoia to stay with metalworking! Luckily though, a fellow student told Harry about the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York City (now known as the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) where he subsequently sent nearly 100 prints to Hella Rebay, museum director and personal curator for S. R. Guggenheim, to be evaluated. Keeping some for herself, with the remainder going to the museum, Ms. Rebay bought all the prints.

In 1943, Bertoia married fellow student Brigitta Valentiner, whose father (Wilhelm) was the director of the Detroit Museum of Art and a foremost art historian. Through Mr. Valentiner, Harry was exposed to the Old Masters and German Expressionists.

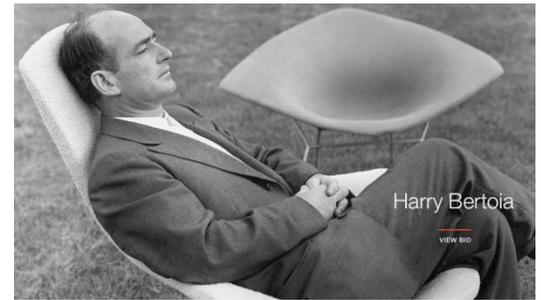
Following the wedding, Harry (and Brigitta) moved to California to work with Charles Eames on molded plywood projects and he also contributed to the war effort by making airplane parts. While working in San Diego for the Navy on "human engineering" (now known as "ergonomics") he started making metal sculptures.

1950 found the Bertoia's moving to Pennsylvania to work at Knoll Associates. While at Knoll, (1950-53) Harry designed a series of 5 wire pieces of furniture. The famous "Diamond" chair was a sculptural form made from a molded lattice work of welded steel. It has sold over 12,000 pieces, and, with the lump sum agreement he received rather than royalties, Harry was able to establish his own studio.



By 1953, Harry was tired of furniture design and was selected to create a sculpture for General Motors. This began his career of large architectural sculptures.

Bertoia's greatest passion was for "sound" sculptures which began quite by accident in the 60's when he struck a metal rod while bending it. The sound resonated in his mind and memory. According to his son, Val: "He (Harry) had an intuitive understanding of physics and mathematics and applied that in a two-brained method.' But he had no formal musical training." Bertoia performed in concerts with many of his pieces and produced a number of L.P.'s.





As a consequence of working so many years with metal, Bertoiia learned that he had lung cancer. He spent the remaining time of his life organizing his monoprints and other works of art. He died November 6, 1978, at the age of 63, and is buried in Bally, PA, next to the barn that contains 100 of his sound sculptures. He is buried beneath a one-ton Bertoiia Gong.

Like many artists, Bertoiia was not a businessman and his passion was his art. While he could have amassed a fortune, especially when RCA wanted to sell his L.P.'s, he elected to do his passion.

The KIA Art

Untitled "Spray" 1960



Wire Construction: "Extremely fine stainless steel wires radiate from a central stainless steel base. The illusory aspect of the work is increased by two factors: the physical lightness and flexibility of the wires and the reflective quality of the material. The slightest breeze causes the fine wires to move, subtly changing the shape of the work and in some cases actually opening up parts of the surface."

"Motion is also an important aspect of this work, for when gathered at the top and then released, it re-establishes its equilibrium." It is thought that the late stage of a dandelion, when it's ready to blow apart, inspired his wire construction sculptures.

Bertoiia's Other Art

His other forms of art can be classified into the following groups:

1. Monoprints (graphics)
2. Welded Bronzes
3. Spill Casting
4. Directly Formed Bronze
5. Sounding Pieces
6. Gongs

Etc.

Excellent source: Bertoiia Family Estate (<http://harrybertoiia.org/>). Besides viewing different art, one can listen to some of Bertoiia's "sound" sculptures.

To tour the Sonambient Barn at the Bertoiia family compound in Bally, PA., and get a demonstration of the sound sculptures, call Bertoiia Studio for an appointment and rates at 610.845.7096.

Other KIA Bertoiia Works: "Sketch for Welded Sculpture Screen", 4 available.

Library Source: Harry Bertoiia, Allentown Art Museum Show program, 14 Dec. 1975- 8 Feb. 1976.