

Harry Bertoia  
Sculptor

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  11. Monoprint (before 1948)  
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James Rupert, photographer
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## Preface

The quietly poetic personality of Harry Bertioia so impressed me when first I met him on board the *Cristoforo Colombo* bound for Italy in 1957 that I became interested in learning more about his work. When I returned to America the following year, my first visual contact with the golden sculpture wall in a bank on Fifth Avenue in New York whetted my appetite and I began looking for Bertioia sculptures wherever I went, finding them in museums, churches, and business establishments all over the country. Realization came gradually of the extent and variety of his artistic output.

Surprised to discover there was no monograph available giving details concerning the sculptor and his work, I wrote Bertioia in the spring of 1966 requesting permission to undertake such a study. Permission and cooperation were freely and generously granted, even though Bertioia was (and is) somewhat reluctant to have his work summarized while he feels there is still a great deal more of it to come. His cooperation involved spending many long afternoons with me in his studio answering questions and digging through his files to provide information and photographs. It has included reading through my manuscript and correcting factual errors and misinterpretations on my part while refraining from comment on my value judgments. His patience and kindness as well as his enthusiasm for his work provided inspiration for mine.

My work began in Detroit where this study was undertaken as a master's thesis under the direction of Dr. Wayne Andrews, professor of art and art history, Wayne State University, whose courses, "The Artist in American Society," I had been following with interest and benefit. Dr. Andrews has given encouragement and help on many occasions since that time, as has Dr. Bernard Goldman of Wayne State University.

Many persons interested in Harry Bertioia and his work have patiently answered written inquiries or granted personal interviews, for which I am extremely grateful. I have received the cooperation of the art galleries representing Bertioia in New York, Chicago, Cincinnati, and Detroit. Librarians in Detroit and New York have been most helpful, and personal friends in several cities have performed indispensable services

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which have been greatly appreciated. My cheerful and patient husband has always provided me with good counsel when it was needed.

I wish to thank the companies (particularly Northwestern National Life Insurance Company of Minneapolis), museums, and private collectors who have either kindly given permission to publish or supplied photographs for reproduction of works in their possession. Many architects have been generous with their time in checking details, as well as with the photographs lurking in their files.

To all persons, named and unnamed, who have contributed to the production of this volume, go my sincere thanks.

J. K. N.  
Kinnelon, New Jersey  
December 1968

## Life and Personality

Harry Bertoia was born on March 10, 1915, at San Lorenzo, a village near Udine in northeastern Italy. Except for the fact that some of his antecedents came from Pieve di Cadore, Titian's birthplace, family connections are unknown. However, there were Bertoias who had been artists of one kind or another in northern Italy for centuries. The short-lived Jacopo Zanguidi Bertoja, a celebrated mannerist painter from Parma, was active during Titian's lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Father and son, Giuseppe and Pietro Bertoja were noted scene designers at Venice and elsewhere in Italy during the nineteenth century. And just prior to that, Valentino Bertoja, father of Giuseppe, had been first violoncellist at Venice's Teatro La Fenice.<sup>2</sup>

As a boy Harry was interested in drawing, art, and artists, and was always listening to family discussions on these subjects. There was also a great deal of interest in music in his immediate family. Both his father Giuseppe Bertoia and his brother Oreste had considerable musical talent, although it was used for relaxation and not professionally.

Harry was given his English name at birth by his father, who had already been to Canada and stayed long enough to become a Canadian citizen. He hoped to emigrate to the New World with his entire family, but things did not work out quite the way he planned. Harry attended primary school in Italy, and it was not until he was fifteen that he and his father came to America, then in the first stage of the great depression. Giuseppe Bertoia worked first as a miner in Canada and later as a laborer in Detroit, where the pair went to be near Oreste, who had preceded them to this country. After a few years the elder Bertoia returned to Italy and Harry remained with his brother. He never again saw his father, who died during World War II.

At first Harry had trouble with English. (He still speaks with the trace of an accent, carefully chooses his words, and dislikes lecturing or public speaking.) But after a year of Americanization classes at the Davison School, he entered Cass Technical High School in Detroit, a public school which for the past fifty years has maintained a special program for talented students in the arts and sciences. At Cass Tech he had classes in jewelry and handcrafts, as well as in drawing and

painting. Perhaps the most talented art student Cass Tech ever had, he maintained an attitude of seriousness toward his work that was uncommon to his classmates, most of whom were several years his junior. "It was not necessary to tell Harry exactly what to do to a drawing. The teacher could make suggestions and Harry would bring from within himself the solution to the problem," said one of his teachers recently.<sup>3</sup> Upon graduation in 1936 he won a scholarship to the Art School of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts, where he studied painting and drawing for a year under John Carroll and Sarkis Sarkisian.

In 1937 another scholarship, awarded on the basis of his work in metalcrafts at Cass Tech, sent him to the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, which profoundly affected his career. The unique character of the Cranbrook Academy in the thirties, and the effect it had on all who were privileged to enjoy its atmosphere, cannot be overemphasized. There was no rigid curriculum and consequently no degrees were awarded. There was a small number of students and a great deal of freedom. Studios and shops were accessible at all hours so students and faculty could work whenever they wished to. Cranbrook was a gathering of artists who taught and learned from each other under ideal conditions. Discussions with visiting European artists were common. One with Walter Gropius particularly stands out in Bertoia's memory. Cranbrook was a significant factor in the artistic development of Harry Bertoia, as well as in that of other well-known artists who were there at the time, such as Eero Saarinen and Charles Eames. "The basic thought was simple and good," Bertoia says. "The many artists from Cranbrook now working in their chosen fields demonstrate the worth of the idea."<sup>4</sup>

Harry entered Cranbrook as a student of painting and drawing. Though he called upon resident-sculptor Carl Milles many times during his stay there – just as he often visited resident-ceramist Maija Grotell – he never attended classes in sculpture. This fact may help account for the experimental freedom with which he has always approached materials and techniques.

In 1939 the architect Eliel Saarinen, father of Eero and director of the Cranbrook Academy of Art, asked Harry to stay on to start a department of metalworking. There was a metal shop in existence at Cranbrook but it had not been used for several years. Harry took on the job, reorganized the shop, and began teaching metalworking techniques to small groups of from five to ten students. Almost immediately all metals except silver became hard to obtain as a result of the war in Europe and priorities in America. Harry became an expert silver craftsman, producing a handsome tea service for Eliel, as well as quantities of unusual abstract jewelry, some of which is owned by his Cranbrook friends and acquaintances, including Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, Eero's sister.