

Holland I
Mari Andriessen

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Laan van N. O. Indie I-c
The Hague,
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Mr. W. S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Despite their illustrious past and noteworthy present, the people of the Netherlands have a modest wisdom about the way the world ignores their recent cultural accomplishments. After all, they seem to say, who wants to read novels and poetry in such a minor language, or study our paintings when Paris is just a few hours away?

A visitor here should not argue too much against this modesty. It does have a basis of realism and is furthermore supported, iceberg fashion, by a great underlying mass of moral certitude which condemns bragging and ostentation. On the other hand, a visitor will discover some unexpected pleasures if he sidesteps this modesty and looks for himself.

An excellent place to start looking is in the field of the plastic arts, which have been experiencing a surprising boom here since the war ended.

In this letter, I will focus my remarks on the work of the sculptor, Mari Andriessen, who unveiled his latest commemorative bronze in re-surfing Rotterdam the other day, before the admiring eyes of Princess Wilhelmina, press photographers, and thousands of the city's burgers.



The Princess later sent her congratulations in a letter which Andriessen has just answered after some amused

Andriessen's Rotterdam Monument

conjectures on the form of address proper to the dignity of both royalty and artist. A few of the more modern-minded critics have withheld their praises. Generally, the Rotterdam citizenry seems satisfied that Andriessen has once more performed a major commission with distinction.

The work is explicit, powerfully moral, and almost brutally instructive about its theme: the wartime spirit of the city which was gutted by German bombers on May 3, 1940. Like Andriessen's other war monuments, it describes the moral strength of the war's victims rather than their actual trials. In short, it is a work of homage. In all his periods, Andriessen seems to have been paying homage of one kind or another; this quality has set limits on his art and given it a particular distinction.

It is a characteristically Dutch spirit which has led local communities to commission several hundred such war monuments in the past twelve years. No other European country has spent equivalent energy trying to fix a permanent moral value on the experiences of war and occupation. A later generation will be better able to judge the quality of the small army of bronze and stone works produced. Some, like Andriessen's, seem very adequate to their purpose; others have failed ludicrously, like the cross-roads monument which contains a flashing traffic light. On the whole, an outsider wonders whether a later generation will be able to bear living with even the best of the war monuments, which give such uncompromising, direct instructions about firing squads, bombings and genocide.

Leaving such considerations aside for the moment, it is enough to observe that sculpture has been reborn as a major art form in the lowlands during these years. Not since the renaissance flourishing of Flemish wood-carving have the Dutch people supported so many able sculptors and lived so closely with their products.

Mari Andriessen has created his postwar reputation in a spacious studio at the back of his home in the woods outside Haarlem. Within a few minutes after our interview began last week, he was speaking about the war, a subject which seems permanently lodged in the more accessible parts of the Dutch mind. There was something incongruous and impressive in watching the gentle Andriessen act out one of his experiences in the Resistance.

The incident took place in 1942 in the same sitting room where he now welcomed me with coffee and cigarettes. When the Nazi secret police came to the front door, the resistance meeting broke up and his comrades raced out the back door into the woods. Andriessen hurriedly locked himself in a closet next

to his studio, leaving his son to witness the inevitable search. Once locked in, he remembered that a package containing two revolvers had been left in plain sight on the wooden chest in the sitting room. While pictures of disaster were flashing through Andriessen's mind, the son greeted the searchers and nonchalantly pocketed the package. The leader searched the chest thoroughly and moved over to the alcove at the end of the long room.

At this point in his story, Andriessen led me over to the alcove and opened a cabinet below the shelf which now supports tiny plaster models of his later works. While I bent over to watch, he reached in past an assortment of wine bottles and slid the rear wooden panels aside. "Here is where the sten-guns were hidden. Lucky they didn't find them!" He said this with simple delight and innocence. For a moment, all the heroism of the Dutch resistance seemed to be expressed in the amateurism of underground agents like this lanky, white-maned artist.

Superficially, Andriessen's background does not seem to cast him in the role of an underground leader who stock-piles sten-guns, though it has suited him admirably for the task of commemorating the Resistance with heroic-scale bronzes.

He was born in 1897 in Haarlem to a family which has produced distinguished musicians. As a Roman Catholic, he was from birth a member of a small religious minority in Protestant Haarlem. His pre-war religious sculpture, which can be found today in Catholic churches all over the Netherlands, brought him very small commissions, but it was the tradition-bound taste of the church authorities rather than the size of their payments which limited his interest to secular themes after the war.

The qualities which distinguish his art in either period are certainly related in some way to his Catholic upbringing and to his passion for the music of Mozart. He has been influenced more discernibly, however, by the eminent, beloved Professor J. Bronner, a family friend who first taught him the principles of his art at the Royal Academy in Amsterdam. In talking so much and so admiringly of Bronner, Andriessen is acknowledging a debt which almost all Dutch sculptors share.

Admirers can call Bronner "the father of Dutch sculpture," though it would be more accurate to assign honorary parenthood to his elders, Lambertus Zijl and the imaginative Mendes da Costa. Justified or not, the father metaphor does a good job of describing the authority which Bronner came to exercise in Dutch sculpture, which was neither very Dutch nor very remarkable as an art discipline in the first years of this century.

A work period in Paris exposed Bronner to the same ideas which later set Picasso and Braque off on their exuberant duet of cubistic abstraction. When he took over his professorship at the academy in Amsterdam in 1914, he had already started his stone pieces for the Hildebrand monument. In the years since, he has helped ripen the talents of younger men like Andriessen, Sondaar, Wezelaar, van Hall and Esser (the maker of some unconventional and amusing bronzes of baseball players), but Bronner's own work on the Hildebrand monument is not yet finished.

Oddly enough, forty-four years of part-time labor on a single project suggests Bronner's strength as a teacher rather than an intermittent quality in his inspiration. He has worked prodigiously to get at the plastic essentials of form, and some of his seriousness and rationality has passed on to the best of his pupils. At its worst, this kind of attention to simplification and mass has led to the "Tired Heroic" style which lesser Dutch artists have afflicted on some buildings and public parks. In other cases, it has helped artists like Andriessen bring out their own capacities for honesty and rigorous control over materials, setting, form and theme.



Amsterdam: Striking Dockworker



Haarlem: Resistance Fighter

Looking into the cluttered corners of Andriessen's studio, you see evidence that he is one of Bronner's prize pupils. The scores of plaster and metal models standing around describe many subjects but show a general unity in style: the masses are composed with a dependable sense of harmony, the element of abstraction is controlled and rational, and the total plastic effect is of extreme simplicity, which the onlooker may call "elemental" or "static" depending on his tastes. The whole studio seems to argue that its occupant finds enough to love in the world he sees, without diving down into the obscure depths of his own ego.

It is striking, however, that only two examples of his pre-war "Gothic" style are in sight: an elongated bronze portrait of a gentleman in cape and top hat, and an ascetic version of The Annunciation. Of course there is no special reason why works done more than seventeen years ago should be in evidence, but the lack probably has something to do with Andriessen's intense modesty and the impact of the war on his art.

His modesty has led his friends to enshroud him in a minor myth, concocted of facts and friendly exaggerations. The most typical story seems to be the one in which he is walking through Haarlem, Amsterdam or Enschede with some companions. He will suddenly excuse himself on some flimsy pretext and agree to meet his friends a ten minutes later at some point farther on. When this happens, they know they are coming to a section where one of Andriessen's monuments stands. He seemed to be showing the same fear of praise when I asked him about the remarkable door panels he carved from coromandel wood for the High Court building before the war. He quickly turned the conversation around to the bronze portrait in front of the building which his close friend van Hall executed before the war. Andriessen would leave no doubt whatsoever that van Hall was a far superior sculptor.

Van Hall died in Poland in 1945, a casualty in a war which had given the Dutch nation no chance to shout out its moral revulsion. When Andriessen emerged from the war period--during which he had lost his closest friend, seen dozens of Jewish friends disappear, and had himself played a dangerous, shadowy role in the underground--he was prepared to help Dutch communities represent their deep sense of shock and wonder in permanent plastic form. His own art had gone through a transformation from the earlier "Gothic" to a blocky, elemental heroic style which suited him perfectly for the important commissions he was to receive.

One of the first commissions came from his own city of Haarlem, and Andriessen's response set the style for his later works. He got his inspiration from a magazine photograph showing a Greek partisan before a German firing squad. His own creation



Left: Andriessen and one of his many models of Mozart.



Right: Example of prewar "Gothic" style in religious sculpture.

was a brutally simplified bronze version of the same scene, in which a Dutch resistance fighter stands before the German's rifles in an idealized state of courage and resignation. Its message is as inescapable and unsubtle as moral issues tend to be in a country where Calvin has had such a mighty influence.

Probably the most successful of Andriessen's war commemoration monuments is the gigantic bronze figure of an enraged dock worker, which stands in a square in the center of Amsterdam's former Jewish quarter. Holland had a small but vigorous minority of 140,000 Jews before the war, and 104,000 of these had been executed by 1945. Anne Frank's attic was located not far from the spot where Andriessen's bronze now symbolizes the spontaneous strike which Amsterdam's communist-led dock workers launched to protest and prohibit the further shipment of Jews out of the city to their fate. The big bronze dock worker has done his maker credit by merging naturally into his setting, and some of the impact of his anger has been softened by the overhanging shade trees. Still, I wonder if any adult can pass him by without being compelled in imagination back to the day of the strike when burly, armed workers were seen to break Nazis over their knees.

More ambitious and less successful is Andriessen's

monument in Enschede, a town close by the German border. It took Andriessen many years to finish the seven large bronze groups which are now spread out in geometric formation in one of Enschede's lovely parks, and, from photographs I have seen, the group appears to lack a unifying element apart from the common war experience of the uniform-sized hostage, soldier, Jewish mother, bomb victim, intellectuals and resistance fighter depicted.

With the completion of his Rotterdam monument, Andriessen has apparently arrived at the limits of what he can accomplish with the particular style of his war monuments. He thinks that he is repeating himself, and he obviously is. Like the entire Dutch nation, he feels that it is high time to let the war's memory sink down to a less conspicuous place in postwar life.

At sixty, Mari Andriessen could hardly be expected to begin experimenting with radically new modes of expression. His two models for monuments commemorating the Zeeland flood show more freedom than his earlier works: one is for an immense, blocky pair of hands reaching up from the earth, and the other shows two birds rising in a beautifully abstracted design, presumably suggesting the victory of life over the flood waters. The bird composition is so lively and free that it could almost be taken to represent Andriessen himself escaping from his depressing, heroic postwar themes. But even these soaring birds would probably be considered sensible and beautiful by the Zeelanders who are paying the bill; it seems to be Andriessen's fate to be understood and appreciated.

Now that the sculptor has a bit of free time from the task of paying public homage to varieties of heroism, he is paying his own respects to Mozart with a series of plaster models showing the composer at various ages and in different poses. These models seemed quite at home in Andriessen's Haarlem studio, but they were a little shocking when I saw them prominently displayed last Sunday at an exhibition of Netherlands Sculpture in Rotterdam: they suggest grace, refinement and civilization--qualities which seem downright improper according to the strict conventions observed in the works of the younger sculptors whose works were exhibited. As always, Andriessen is modestly going his own way, and, like a good Dutchman, operating within the limits of his competence.

No matter where Andriessen goes from here, his stamp has been firmly imprinted on the sculpture of the past ten years. It has been a curious decade, in which Dutch sculptors have enjoyed the confidence of the public and prospered. I know a painter who claims that Dutch sculptors all drive big cars and smoke expensive cigars. It was neither very true nor very sporting of him to say this. Now that the commissions for war monuments have

stopped coming in, the new generation of sculptors will probably have enough experience with cold garrets and skimpy meals to satisfy the most conventional of the La Boheme'ites.

In the meantime, Andriessen and his generation of artists seem to have convinced the Dutch public that sculpture is something to live with. Their works have already remade the appearance of several Dutch cities. It will be worthwhile watching their products as they turn from war commemoration to other types of expression.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Boyd R. Compton". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Boyd R. Compton

Received New York 6/10/57.