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JOHN B. FLANNAGAN (1895-1942): A REEXAMINATION OF HIS LIFE
AND WORK

by

KATHERINE RANGOON DOYLE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New
York

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Fig. 163. *Mother Earth, "Deirdre,"* n.d., wood, 25 ½ x 2 3/8 x 7 inches. Collection The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana.

Fig. 164. *Mother Holding Child in Her Lap*, n.d., black crayon rubbed with powdered graphite, 11 7/8 x 9 (sheet). Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 165. *Mountain Landscape*, n.d., pastel, 18 7/8 x 23 5/8 inches (sheet). Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 166. *A Not Too Wild Cat*, n.d., brush and black ink, 7 x 5 7/8 inches (sheet). Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 167. *Not Yet*, 20th c., bronze, H. 13, W. 9 1/2 inches. Collection The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Fig. 168. *Nude*, n.d., crayon, 16 x 11 inches. Collection Ogunquit Museum of American Art, Ogunquit, Maine.

Fig. 169. *Nude (Half length)*, n.d., crayon, 17 x 8 1/2 inches. Collection Ogunquit Museum of American Art, Ogunquit, Maine.

Fig. 170. *Nude Standing*, n.d., pencil on paper, 11 x 7 inches. Collection Ogunquit Museum of American Art, Ogunquit, Maine.

Fig. 171. *Nude Woman*, n.d., marble, H: 5 1/8 x W: 8 1/4 x D: 4 inches. Collection The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio.

Fig. 172. *Pelican*, a.k.a. *Duck*, n.d., stone, 11 1/4 x 4 3/4 x 4 3/4 inches. Collection Fogg Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Fig. 173. *Pig*, n.d., granite, measurements not available. Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 174. *Play*, n.d., stone, 10 x 8 x 5 1/4 inches. Collection Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida.

Fig. 175. *Reclining Nude*, n.d., fire brick, H: 3 1/2 x W: 8 1/2 x D: 2 1/8 inches. Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 176. *Seated Nude Girl*, n.d., limestone, 13 1/16 x 8 x 5 inches. Collection Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 177. *Semi-Nude Girl Standing*, n.d, watercolor washes with red and black inks on paper, 18 1/4 x 9 inches (inside measurements). Collection The Chaim Gross Studio Museum, New York, New York.

Fig. 178. *Ship on High Sea*, watercolor with traces of graphite, n.d., 13 7/8 x 12 3/8 inches (sheet). Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 179. *Squirrel*, n.d., brownstone, 8 x 6 ¼ x 6 1/8 inches. Collection Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida.

Fig. 180. *Standing Female Nude*, n.d., black crayon, 17 ¾ x 11 ¾ inches (sheet). Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 181. *Standing Female Nude (looking right)*, n.d., watercolor, 18 7/8 x 10 5/8 inches (sheet). Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 182. *Standing Nude*, n.d., alabaster with circular wooden base, H: 10 ¼ x W: 3 ½ x D: 3 inches. Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 183. *Standing Nude from Back*, n.d. watercolor, 18 ¾ x 11 ¼ inches (sheet). Collection Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Fig. 184. *Torso, Black and White*, n.d., black and white ink, H: 19 x W: 12 inches. Collection Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Fig. 185. *Triumph of the Egg II*, 20th c., granite, 4 ½ x 9 x 5 1/8 inches. Collection Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan.

Fig. 186. *Untitled (Cow and Dog)*, n.d., wood engraving, 10 x 5 ¾ inches. Collection Fogg Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Fig. 187. *Untitled (Goat and Horse)*, n.d., wood engraving, 5 x 4 inches. Collection Fogg Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Fig. 188. *Untitled (Two Horses)*, n.d., wood engraving, 9 9/10 x 5 2/3 inches. Collection Fogg Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Fig. 189. *Whippet*, n.d., crayon, 10 1/8 x 13 7/8 inches. Collection Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington.

Fig. 190. *Young Fawn*, n.d., bronze, height 14 1/2 inches. Collection Butler Institute, Youngstown, Ohio.

Fig. 191. Sam Kennedy with Thomas Lo Medico, *Death Mask of John Flannagan*, bronze, 10 ½ x 7 x 6 inches. Collection Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

INTRODUCTION

The American artist John B. Flannagan (1895-1942) came of age in the Progressive era and led a career that was bracketed by the two world wars. He started exhibiting with the Society of Independent Artists in March of 1919 and ended his life in January of 1942, just two months before a planned ten-year retrospective at the Buchholz Gallery in New York City. Though primarily known as a sculptor, Flannagan was also an active writer whose goals and working methods may be gleaned from his many letters and artist's statements. As Judith Zilczer points out, he was one of five American sculptors¹ who participated in the revival of direct carving—"the technique of creating sculpture by cutting organic natural materials, usually wood or stone"²—and who helped to codify its theories between 1910 and 1940.

While the older American sculptors William Zorach and Robert Laurent were the most audible spokesmen for this technique during the twenties, it is John Flannagan's credo, "The Image in the Rock," 1941, that has come to define direct carving. For Zorach and Laurent, direct carving—one of several modernist approaches to sculpture—was but one of several formal directions they took during their sculpting careers. For Flannagan, however, direct carving personified the creative process, to the extent that he abandoned it as his principle technique only when he was too weak and sick to use it. Of these prominent sculptors, Flannagan most intuitively combined direct carving with the conviction that stone embodied certain eternal and metaphysical properties. Flannagan's credo that the image in the rock could be released through direct carving was bolstered by

¹ The other sculptors are Robert Laurent, William Zorach, Chaim Gross, and José de Creeft.

² Judith Zilczer, "The Theory of Direct Carving in Modern Sculpture," *The Oxford Art Journal* 4, no. 2 (November 1981): 44.

a personal imperative to find form for such archetypal themes as fertility, birth and regeneration, growth, and death. The text of Flannagan's statement is reproduced below:

THE IMAGE IN THE ROCK

Often there is an occult attraction to the very shape of a rock as sheer abstract form. It fascinates with a queer atavistic nostalgia, as either a remote memory or a stirring impulse from the depth of the unconscious.

That's the simple sculptural intention. As design, the eventual carving involuntarily evolves from the eternal nature of the stone itself, an abstract linear and cubical fantasy out of the fluctuating sequence of consciousness, expressing a vague general memory of many creatures, of human and animal life in its various forms.

It partakes of the deep pantheistic urge of kinship with all living things and fundamental unity of all life, a unity so complete it can see a figure of dignity even in the form of a goat. Many of the humbler life forms are often more useful as design than the narcissistic human figure, because, humanly, we project ourselves into all works using the human figure, identifying ourselves with the beauty, grace, or strength of the image as intense wish fulfillment; and any variant, even when necessitated by design, shocks as maimed, and produces some psychological pain. With an animal form, on the contrary, any liberty taken with the familiar forms is felt as amusing—strange cruelty.

To that instrument of the subconscious, the hand of the sculptor, there exists an image within every rock. The creative act of realization merely frees it.

The stone cutter, worker of metal, painter, those who think and feel by hand, are timeless, haunted by all the old dreams. The artist remembers, or else is fated by cosmic destiny to serve as the instrument for realizing in visible form the profound subterranean urges of the human spirit in the whole dynamic life process—birth, growth, decay, death.

The stone carving of an alligator called *Dragon Motif* was simply chiseled with primary interest in the abstract circular design. Yet in so doing fascinated by something of the wonder and terror that must have made the fearsome monster fantasy—an old dream. Vitalized by that perfect design pattern, the circle, fitting symbol of eternity, the movement is both peripheral and centrifugal. Restless, it moves ever onward, finally to turn back into itself, an endless movement.

With such abstract purpose, instead of classic poise, there is more of the dynamic tension that is movement, even accentuated by devices that are restless such as a deliberate lack of obvious balance in design and the

use of repetition to heighten the occult activity with velocity, as in the psyche of our time—speed without pauses or accent.

Even in our time, however, we yet know the great longing and hope of the ever recurrent and still surviving dream, the wishful rebirth fantasy, *Jonah and the Whale—Rebirth Motif*. It's eerie to learn that the fish is the very ancient symbol of the female principle.

In the austere elimination of the accidental for ordered simplification, there is a quality of the abstract and lifeless, but lifeless only contra spurious lifelikeness. Instead of which a purely sculptural attempt by the most simple unambiguous demonstration of tactile relations, the greatest possible preservation of cubic compactness, carved to exclude all chance evasive spatial aspects to approximate the abstract cubical elemental forms and even to preserve the identity of the original rock so that it hardly seems carved, rather to have endured so always—inevitable.

The artistic representation of the organic and living now takes on an abstract lifeless order and becomes, instead of the likeness of what is conditioned, the symbol of what is unconditioned and invariable, as though seeking the timeless, changeless finality of death. Sculpture like this is as inevitable.

All as part of the profound social purpose of art—communication. We communicate something of the record of the human spirit.

—John B. Flannagan
June 1941³

Because he worked during the 1920s and 1930s, decades not traditionally associated with innovation in sculpture, Flannagan is often seen as a transitional figure in American art.⁴ But his career is worthy of further study for the ways it embodied American sculpture's brief but intense preoccupation with direct carving, which was considered an avant-garde aesthetic between 1913 and 1930.⁵ From 1920 to 1940, direct

³ Reproduced from *The Sculpture of John B. Flannagan* (exh. cat.) (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1942), 7-8.

⁴ See Barbara Rose, *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1967) and Sam Hunter, *American Art of the 20th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972).

⁵ Roberta K. Tarbell, "Direct Carving," in Rutgers University Art Gallery, *Vanguard American Sculpture, 1913-39* (exh. cat.) (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1979), 45.

carving was the prevailing style in American sculpture.⁶ Statuary was no longer the only path open to the American sculptor, and though Flannagan also sought commissions for monumental sculpture for economic reasons, the great majority of his work was executed on an intimate scale. He also departed from the nineteenth-century sculptor's reliance on preliminary models that were subsequently enlarged and carved in stone by assistants or used to make bronze casts.⁷ Direct carving was his preferred technique, one that also enabled him close contact with his materials during the process of creation. As Wayne Craven has written, direct carving was more than a technique. It also embodied an aesthetic principle: "That the medium has certain qualities of beauty and expressiveness with which the sculptor must bring his or her own aesthetic sensibility into harmony."⁸

As a modern sculptor aware of the most recent trends, Flannagan was no doubt cognizant of Brancusi's tremendous European presence and benefited from his influence and stature as one of the first celebrated direct carvers of the twentieth century. At the time of Brancusi's eagerly awaited trip to New York City in 1926, Flannagan was living in and around Manhattan. Flannagan also would have been familiar with the older direct carver's work from shows of his sculpture in New York galleries during the twenties, as well as from books. The small scale of Flannagan's sculpture, as well as their simplified, streamlined forms, are reminiscent of Brancusi. Indeed, Flannagan uses the term "abstract" seven times in his credo. Yet Flannagan did not take abstraction as far as

⁶ Roberta K. Tarbell, "Advanced Tendencies in American Sculpture, 1910-1925," in Delaware Art Museum and the University of Delaware, *Avant-Garde Painting and Sculpture in America, 1910-1925* (exh. cat), organized by William Innes Homer (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 1975), 27.

⁷ Though committed to direct carving, Flannagan did allow unfinished bronze casts to be made from his original stones in the late thirties when his health was failing. However, he personally finished these works with great care, in contrast to the posthumous casts that were made after his death.

⁸ Wayne Craven, *American Art: History and Culture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 494.

Brancusi and had little interest in the partial figure. Flannagan's carved works always preserve a likeness to their subjects.

Conceiving of stones as the "bones of the earth," Flannagan altered their shapes very little, often carving simple linear designs within their contours and leaving their textures rough and unpolished. His interest in preserving the outer "skin" of the rock—as opposed to introducing a mediated surface such as highly polished marble or bronze—is another aspect that sets him apart from Brancusi. In his direct carving, Flannagan removed just enough to reveal the subject's essential forms. From about 1926, he used fieldstone most often, not only because he was poor and quarried stone was expensive, but also because it fit his organic approach and existed naturally in many of the locations where he worked. Flannagan was not interested in the industrial materials of the machine age, believing instead that a return to nature and its forms represented an antidote to the spiritual vacuousness of his time. Most of his sculptures are closed shapes, and many of his animal and human subjects are folded in on themselves in deference to the contour of the rock. Flannagan connected direct carving's central tenet of truth-to-materials—its respect for the shape of the rock and its natural color and texture—with the personal belief that stone was invested with eternal qualities that had carried through the centuries.

In addition to the sculpture of Brancusi, Flannagan probably also was receptive to the work of Alexander Calder, who attended the Art Students League in the twenties and exhibited at the Weyhe gallery (with whom Flannagan also showed) in 1928. While Calder originally emulated Flannagan's early wooden animals, which the former no

doubt saw at the Whitney Studio Club in 1925,⁹ Flannagan may in turn have been influenced by the linearity of Calder's early wire sculptures and translated this quality into his stone sculpture. However, while Calder in 1930 turned fully towards abstraction and kineticism, Flannagan retained a more figurative and static conception of sculpture, the most radical manifestation of which were his mid-career experiments with circular forms. In contrast to Brancusi and Calder, who came to represent the most avant-garde tendencies in modern sculpture, Flannagan represents a more intermediate position. Associating total abstraction with lifelessness and strict representation or "classic poise" with frivolity, Flannagan navigated a personal definition of direct carving that incorporated both psychological and speculative meaning.

While not a pioneer of American sculpture, Flannagan at the same time personifies a change in perception about what sculpture could be. The American art scene into the 1920s was a diverse entity that nonetheless continued to be dominated by the conservative National Academy of Design and the National Sculpture Society, which sponsored most of the large-scale exhibitions. As Roberta Tarbell has written of the 1910-25 period, "there were several alternatives to this academic-classical mode, one of which was the style inspired by August Rodin"¹⁰ and was exemplified by such sculptors as George Gray Bernard. She outlines the other viable styles as the archaicism of Karl Bitter and Paulanship, as well as the sculptural equivalent of the work of the New York Realists—what has sometimes been termed the "genre sculpture" of Abastenia St. Leger Eberle and Mahonri Young.

⁹ Compare Flannagan's *Giraffe* (fig. 144) also known as *Gothic Animal* or *Gothic Horse* (collection Philadelphia Museum of Art), with Calder's *Giraffe* (private collection), reproduced in Joan M. Marter's *Alexander Calder* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 72.

¹⁰ Roberta K. Tarbell, "Advanced Tendencies in American Sculpture, 1910-1925," 26.

At the other end of the spectrum, isolated exhibitions of truly avant-garde sculpture were shown during the twenties—most notably at Katherine Dreier’s Société Anonyme and at New York City’s most progressive galleries. In contrast to the alternatives offered by both the radical experiments of the Europeans and the practitioners of direct carving in the United States, however, public perception continued to be dominated into the thirties by monument makers and a strong belief in the union of sculpture and architecture. Dore Ashton points out that as late as the 1941 annual exhibition of the Sculptors’ Guild, “a relatively progressive organization, . . . only one abstraction—a welded piece by David Smith—appeared in the annual exhibition.”¹¹ Somewhere in the middle of the gamut of styles ranging from conservative to modern, Flannagan personified a more private approach that equated smaller sculpture with greater personal meaning and accessibility.

Although Flannagan continued the legacy of sculpture in the figurative tradition, he invested his work with qualities of emotion and immediacy that speak to a transcendent worldview shaped by childhood and life experiences. Unlike in England—where writers and critics helped to define the direct carving aesthetic—in the United States, sculptors themselves did the work.¹² Though not at the forefront of evolving a new modern aesthetic for American sculpture of the period, Flannagan endowed direct carving with a psychological valence unique among his contemporaries. Very much a product of his time, he also worked to meld several influences, some of them personal, others cultural. These include his early Catholic upbringing; the influence of Eastern mysticism in the United States; contemporary psychoanalytic ideas; Henri Bergson’s writings about

¹¹ Dore Ashton, *Modern American Sculpture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969?), 16.

¹² Judith Zilczer, “The Theory of Direct Carving in Modern Sculpture.”

intuition, duration, and reality as a constant state of dynamic flux in which past, present, and future form a single continuum; the wedding of Gothic and African forms; and the borrowing of Celtic conventions such as the spiral and interlace, symbolic of the cycles of life and search for the soul.

Because Flannagan himself chose to emphasize the psychological repercussions of direct carving in his credo, it seems only natural to foreground this methodology when looking at Flannagan's life and work. To this end, eight chapters follow—all of which point to the importance of Flannagan's early childhood experiences on his emergent aesthetic and spiritual sensibility. In the interests of tying Flannagan's biography to his work, I have supplemented the text with a catalog of reproductions, the most complete collection of Flannagan's work ever assembled. Here are presented not only the seminal works of Flannagan's credo but also a large number of drawings not previously published or shown. Together, the text and the catalog of this dissertation offer a reexamination of Flannagan's life and work, the first such undertaking since 1965.

Chapter 1

SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

In the second and third decades of the twentieth century, sculpture became a vehicle to express a variety of interests also open to painting. The spiritual was one, though research in this area has not centered on the medium of sculpture.¹ “Primitivism” was another, one that often went hand in hand with the method of direct carving. Finally, though it had a much “greater formative influence” in England,² the Arts and Crafts movement was yet another, one that probably helped to set the stage for the unmediated aesthetic of direct carving.

As stated in the introduction, Flannagan participated in many of the modern currents of his time and though well regarded in New York art circles by the mid-thirties, his reputation suffered greatly after his death at the age of 46 in 1942. Contemporary books included him, but the amount of coverage varied. *Modern Art in America* by Martha Candler Cheney (1939), counted Flannagan among the most important sculptors of his era, placing him within the new and influential category of direct carvers and reprinting part of his artist’s statement. Sheldon Cheney’s *A Primer of Modern Art* (1932 or 1939) focused on Expressionism but mentioned Flannagan as one of the sculptors who avoided “forthright distortions.” Later books, such as Monroe Wheeler’s *Painters and Sculptors of Modern America* (1942) published Flannagan’s artist’s statement in its entirety and reproduced two of his best-known works. Compilations of drawings, such as *Modern Drawings* and *Treasury of American Drawings* (both 1947) supplemented

¹ Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1980-1985* (exh. cat.), organized by Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art/New York: Abbeville Press, 1986).

² Zilczer, “The Theory of Direct Carving in Modern Sculpture,” 45-46.

anthologies of sculpture such as C. Ludwig Brummé's *Contemporary American Sculpture* (1948). Finally, books such as Charles Seymour's *Tradition and Experiment in Modern Sculpture* (1949), juxtaposed work by contemporary American sculptors such as Flannagan with pre-Classical and non-Western examples.

After 1950, Flannagan continued to be included in surveys on sculpture and styles, collections of drawings, and anthologies of artists' writings. However, the range of books to include him widened to more specialized studies, collections of artworks based around a theme, and artists' practical/how-to books. In an effort to more fully understand Flannagan's reception within both the scholarly and general art historical literature, I documented nearly every critical reference to the sculptor. After his death, Flannagan was not uniformly identified as a direct carver and a number of sources communicated an ambiguity about how to place him within a modern narrative of American sculpture. Add to this the limited coverage sculpture has traditionally been given in preference to painting, and the decline of Flannagan's reputation begins to find some explanation. Entries on Flannagan are most plentiful in art history surveys from the sixties and seventies, though short mentions and/or reproductions of his work are also contained in several books on art appreciation and American cultural history. After these two decades, the further erosion of Flannagan's stature coincided with his only very occasional inclusion in art history texts and other more general books on art. Flannagan was written out of the most recent version of *History of Modern Art* for space considerations and because he was not considered important enough relative to other artists.³

No substantial books or monographs on Flannagan have ever been published, beyond several short exhibition catalogs. The Museum of Modern Art's *The Sculpture of*

³ *History of Modern Art*, fourth edition, edited by Marla Prather (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).

John B. Flannagan (1942), along with Flannagan's *Letters* (1942), is the most heavily cited document in the published literature on Flannagan. Yet it includes reproductions of far fewer works than were included in the show, and there is no substantial catalog text. While the MoMA show helped to solidify Flannagan's reputation as a sculptor, it did not communicate the range of Flannagan's work, especially during the years when "primitivism" and physical and metaphorical attempts to return to nature were so critical to him.

Since Flannagan's death, there have been sporadic small-scale exhibitions of his work given by the Weyhe gallery, American art museums, and college art galleries. While some of these have attempted to examine his larger body of work, none has produced a catalog that has come into wide circulation. The first in-depth studies to be written were two dissertations, by Joseph S. Bolt and Robert J. Forsyth respectively, two decades after Flannagan's death. Because of the scarcity of material on Flannagan, they—in conjunction with the aforementioned publications from 1942 and the writings of W. R. Valentiner, Walter Pach, and Carl Zigrosser, all before 1950—must be considered the sum total of important works in the body of literature on the artist. Before continuing on to a discussion of the two dissertations, it seems relevant to assess the role of Flannagan's contemporaries both in helping to establish a profile of the artist and in illuminating the need for more in-depth study.

W.R. Valentiner, the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts from 1924-1945 and the North Carolina Museum of Art from 1956-58, was best known as a Rembrandt scholar and was instrumental in bringing Diego Rivera to Michigan to paint *Detroit*

Industry in the Institute's garden court in 1932.⁴ It is unknown whether Valentiner knew Flannagan personally⁵; he was almost twenty years older than the artist. Most likely, Curt Valentin, owner of the Buchholz Gallery (and Flannagan's second dealer) asked Valentiner to write the introduction to the anthology of the sculptor's letters. *Letters of John B. Flannagan* was compiled by Flannagan's second wife and published by Valentin to coincide with a memorial exhibition of the sculptor's work at the Museum of Modern Art in November of 1942.⁶

In his introduction to *Letters* and a shortened version of the same article in *Art News*,⁷ Valentiner defined Flannagan's aesthetic, or guiding principle, as his emphasis on nature. That this assessment proved enduring was shown by an article four years later by Holger Cahill, director of the WPA Federal Art Project, that quoted Valentiner.⁸ It is also shown by Richard McLanathan's *The American Tradition in the Arts* (1968), a book of art appreciation that chose to introduce Flannagan not in the context of direct carving, but of nature. Valentiner also continued to champion Flannagan in more inclusive articles on sculpture throughout the forties.⁹ While "nature" is the emphasis of the introduction to

⁴ Valentiner first met Rivera on a trip to California to see the tennis player Helen Willis, as stated in an unpublished manuscript by Valentiner (William R. Valentiner, "Artists I Remember: Diego Rivera," William R. Valentiner Papers, PC 1556, North Carolina Archives, Raleigh, North Carolina).

⁵ According to Walter Pach, Valentiner "had acquired for the museum he directs a work by the sculptor long before Margherita Flannagan compiled the present volume of her husband's letters" (Walter Pach, "John B. Flannagan, American Sculptor," *Kenyon Review* 5 [summer 1943]: 387). At the very least, Valentiner shared an interest with Flannagan in African art. As Helen Shannon wrote in her 1999 dissertation, Valentiner corresponded with Alain Locke about "the possibility of acquiring African sculpture" for the Detroit Institute of Arts (Helen Marie Shannon, "From 'African Savages' to 'Ancestral Legacy': Race and Cultural Nationalism in the American Modernist Reception of African Art" [Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1999]: 249).

⁶ This was a much larger exhibition than the one that took place at the Buchholz Gallery the preceding March.

⁷ W. R. Valentiner, "John Flannagan: Return to the Rock," *Art News* 41 (November 1, 1942): 16-17.

⁸ Holger Cahill, "In Our Time," *Magazine of Art* 39 (November 1946): 323.

⁹ W.R. Valentiner, *Origins of Modern Sculpture* (exh. cat.) (St. Louis: City Art Museum of St. Louis, 1946) and "The Simile in Sculptural Composition" in *The Art Quarterly* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Arts, 1947): 262-77.

Letters, the first half of the essay is devoted to Flannagan's biography. Though the chronology is basically accurate, there are several small inaccuracies and oversights.¹⁰

The tenor of this section is that Flannagan was a tragic genius who contributed to his own demise.

Flannagan's character was such that, knowing how the quality of his art would increase with the intensity of the struggle, he instinctively looked for difficulties which made him suffer. The doctors who cared for him after mishappenings or nervous breakdowns were of the opinion that his will directed him towards misfortune. If this shortened his life, it has also contributed to the creation of works of deep quality and intensely imaginative conception.¹¹

Interestingly, the biographical section of the essay was later excised from the article when it was reprinted for *Art News*. Instead, the periodical chose to focus on the sculptor's aesthetic.

One of the charms of Flannagan's art is its intimate connection with nature. Sculpture is generally an art of city people. Its greatest aim in the nineteenth century was the monument in the park, street or public building, expressing hero worship of an individualistic age. Flannagan's art shows his belief that the era of individualism has passed, that the revival of the human race can come only from a return to nature.¹²

Unlike many of Flannagan's critics during his lifetime, Valentiner saw the sculptor's restraint not as lending an unfinished quality to the work but as respect for the integrity of the rock: "Nature itself with all the richness of its crystalline forms and colors is still alive

¹⁰ Flannagan's father was a policeman not a newspaperman, and Flannagan was found "near starvation" by a friend of Davies's wife, not Davies himself. There is also no mention of Flannagan exhibiting with the Whitney Studio Club.

¹¹ Valentiner, "John B. Flannagan," introduction to *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, Margherita Flannagan, ed. (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 9.

¹² Valentiner, "John Flannagan: Return to the Rock," 16.

in the variety of material Flannagan uses without destroying its skin.”¹³ In this way, Valentiner also aligned Flannagan with the “primitive” artist.

This feeling of the relation of the cosmos connects us with the prehistoric man in whom the consciousness of this relation must have been still more alive because he was nearer to the origin of man when he was born out of the cosmos. Flannagan like the best artists of our time expresses clearly this congenial feeling for prehistoric and primitive art.¹⁴

In Valentiner’s estimation, this respect for rock as almost an organic, living thing set Flannagan apart from the mainstream. Perhaps even beyond the pantheism he described in the body of his essay, Valentiner concluded with evidence of Christian mysticism:

What Flannagan’s art produced is not directed towards history but towards elementary nature. It is the mystic voice of a prophet of the future emerging from the masses and disappearing again as quietly as it came after it has spoken its message, that man should not praise himself, but kneel in adoration for the vastness of creation.¹⁵

How Flannagan himself conceived his aesthetic, as discerned from the *Letters* themselves, will be considered in chapter 4. In early 1943, the book was reviewed by Barbara E. Sweeney in the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* and Robert J. Goldwater in the *Art Bulletin*. Both singled out the high quality of Valentiner’s introduction; the importance of Flannagan’s close friends, notably Zigrosser, in helping to sustain the artist; and Flannagan’s absorption in his work. Goldwater’s comments, among them that the theme of the *Letters* is really “Flannagan’s simple struggle for existence”¹⁶ and that Flannagan himself realized that the return to nature he sought was not possible, reflect a more

¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴ Valentiner, *Letters*, 13.

¹⁵ Valentiner, “John Flannagan: Return to the Rock,” 18.

¹⁶ Robert J. Goldwater, “John B. Flannagan, *Letters*,” *Art Bulletin* 25 (Spring 1943): 287.

pragmatic perspective. What is most revealing about his review, however, is that Goldwater did not mention Flannagan's relationship to primitivism, beyond a comparison of the sculptor's rural wanderings to the Pacific retreats of Gauguin. In 1938, Goldwater had written *Primitivism in Modern Painting*, a study that the most well-known scholar on Flannagan, Robert J. Forsyth, relied on to define the sculptor's oeuvre. But Goldwater did not include American artists and sculpture was not even considered until the book was revised as *Primitivism in Modern Art* in 1966 (after Forsyth's dissertation had been completed). While we will never know the reason for Goldwater's omission, Helen Shannon's suggestion that "American modernist primitivism was neglected because the artists were perceived to be derivative of the European avant-garde"¹⁷ seems appropriate. As far as Flannagan's reputation as a "primitivist" was concerned, it would need to wait for the 1960s and Forsyth's dissertation to be argued in any comprehensive way.

The second contemporary to write an appreciation of Flannagan was Walter Pach. Pach, one of the organizers of the Armory show and an important art critic, was on the committee to award Flannagan the Alexander Shilling Prize in 1941.¹⁸ In an article in the *Kenyon Review* (1943),¹⁹ he described Flannagan's aim as "the achievement of a sculpture that should fulfill a definite function in the social consciousness of many,"²⁰ that looked toward a "fundamental verity"²¹ and a "feeling embracing *all* of life."²² Following the decade of the 1930s, which produced such populist works as *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Pach's article perhaps reflects the cultural climate in which he was

¹⁷ Shannon, "Race and Cultural Nationalism," 8.

¹⁸ Pach was the president of the Alexander Shilling committee, which first purchased Flannagan's sculpture *Figure of Dignity*, then donated it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

¹⁹ Walter Pach, "John B. Flannagan, American Sculptor," *Kenyon Review* 5 (summer 1943): 384-393.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 388.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 387.

²² *Ibid.*, 388.

writing as much as his subject. It also displays the nativism that had begun to manifest itself in the 1920s in response to World War I.²³ Though contemporary criticism alluded to the role of “primitivism” in Flannagan’s work, it was rarely specific. Pach was the most eloquent writer after the artist’s death to renew the connection to non-Western art, particularly the art of the Americas.

Another matter of compelling interest, one which will need but little discussion, is his orienting our course toward a vision representative of the American continent as a whole. This is apparent from the moment that we think of numbers of his sculptures (monkeys, alligators, insects, etc.) beside those of the ancient artists of Mexico—or of Ohio.²⁴

Even in the title of his article—“John B. Flannagan, American Sculptor”—Pach identified what to him was the artist’s most salient identification, his “Americanness.” Instead of seeing European influences as part of the continuum that informed Flannagan’s work, Pach saw ancient American models as helping to form an unbroken indigenous chain.

And so, the easiest way to see his art as American is by way of the melting pot theory, which would have additional confirmation if we note the “modern” aspects of his work, thus coming again to a French contribution to his development.

But, as so often in art matters, the easiest way is a wrong way. The essential unity of Flannagan’s work, the thing that makes all talk of influences very nearly ridiculous, comes from an American quality quite the reverse of the melting pot, since it is intrinsically of the soil. I insist now—as I have written at an earlier time—that this soil is not just that of the United States, but of that larger America which includes (as the name was meant to include) the whole of the Western Hemisphere. The sculptor’s Irish blood, his medieval (European) ideals, and whatever he learned in schools or museums carrying on the art of the Old World, all sink to a minor significance when one considers Flannagan’s work in its

²³ W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Matthew Baigell, “American Art and National Identity: the 1920s,” *Arts Magazine* 61 (Feb. 1987): 48-55.

²⁴ Pach, “John B. Flannagan, American Sculptor,” 384.

relation to the sculpture of the ancient Americans—those of our own country and those of Mexico.²⁵

Pach's interest in citing Flannagan's native American influences must be seen as both an attempt to place the artist within the American avant-garde and to be himself identified as an enlightened critic, aware of the most recent trends.²⁶ A 1957 article Pach wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly*²⁷ continued similar concerns. In it, he chastised the museum establishment, particularly the Museum of Modern Art, for not acquiring more of the work of American artists. But he praised Flannagan because in his estimation the sculptor continued the tradition of animal subject matter first initiated in ancient Mexico.

The third contemporary to write an appreciation of Flannagan was Carl Zigrosser. Zigrosser was the director of the Weyhe Gallery in New York City from 1919-40 and then the first curator of prints and drawings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from 1941-63. His most substantial published writings on Flannagan appeared as the introduction to the exhibition catalog for the sculptor's memorial show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1942 and as a chapter in his book *A World of Art and Museums* in 1975. Aside from several slight differences, however, the content of the essays is substantially the same.

The MoMA essay asserted "this is not the occasion to analyze his [Flannagan's] psyche or to enumerate the handicaps and malign forces which frustrated his personal life from childhood on."²⁸ But in spite of this disclaimer, Zigrosser, like Valentiner,

²⁵ Ibid., 390.

²⁶ In "The Art Criticism of Walter Pach," (*Art Bulletin* 65 [March 1983]: 106-21), Sandra S. Phillips cites Pach's preference for European art and his growing conservatism toward avant-garde art after the Armory Show.

²⁷ Walter Pach, "Submerged Artists," *Atlantic Monthly* 199 (February 1957): 68-72.

²⁸ Carl Zigrosser, "John B. Flannagan," introduction to *The Sculpture of John B. Flannagan* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1942), 9.

succumbed to the temptation. In all fairness, Flannagan himself, in his writings, often likened his art to his life. Zigrosser began with the metaphor of the oyster and the pearl:

There is a theory about the origin of art that is exemplified by the oyster that creates the pearl. Art—in this case the pearl—comes about through irritation and pain and suffering. If the theory has any plausibility, it is borne out in the life of John B. Flannagan.²⁹

Zigrosser turned to Flannagan’s writings as a point of departure for explaining “the two leading themes he once elaborated to me as being dominant in his attitude”³⁰: a passion for anonymity and the philosophy of pity. The first was associated with Flannagan’s attraction to the artist of the Middle Ages who neither signed his work nor sought to make a name for himself. According to Zigrosser, Flannagan “might perhaps have led a happier life in the age of universal faith”³¹ because he admired the “functional relation, the give and take, between artist and society.”³² The second theme that Zigrosser traced as part of Flannagan’s aesthetic was a “sympathy for all living things, particularly the humbler animals.”³³

As illustrated by a consideration of the critical reception following the MoMA retrospective show (see chapter 5), a significant amount of commentary followed Zigrosser’s statement that Flannagan was both apart from and of his time. “He stood apart from it in that he was essentially a mystic, one who aligned himself with spirit rather than mechanism. He was modern by reason of his intelligent grasp of the problems of the artist today.”³⁴ While it was the “modern” label that Zigrosser elaborated upon,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 10.

³² Ibid., 11.

³³ Ibid., 10.

³⁴ Ibid.

however, it was that of the “mystic” that stayed in the minds of the critics. For Zigrosser, Flannagan’s modernity rested on his interest in the “applicability of sculpture to building” and his “consistent preoccupation with abstraction.”³⁵ But he failed to explain why Flannagan might be called a mystic, beyond a dislike of such pop-culture staples as comic strips and Walt Disney. The label of “mystic,” like the label of “primitivist,” effectively closes off other ways of looking at the artist and should be examined for its exact relevance.

Zigrosser’s chapter on Flannagan in *A World of Art and Museums* in many ways takes on the guise of a promotional piece. It repeats the same qualities that he asserted made Flannagan’s work desirable to own in a 1934 Weyhe Gallery brochure (with in some cases, a mere change of tense to signal the artist’s death). As will become apparent in later chapters, Zigrosser’s chief contribution was not toward the body of literature on the artist but in helping to sustain him, both as intellectual confidant and friend.

In asserting the need for his dissertation, Robert Forsyth (see below) summarized the introductions by Valentiner and Zigrosser in this way: “Both introductions give stylistic analyses of Flannagan’s work and some biographical detail, and though indispensable, they are limited in scope and inconclusive, because of space limitations in the publications in which they appeared.” While I would agree that the writings by these two men (as well as Pach) are not lengthy, for better or worse they contributed salient themes regarding Flannagan’s guiding principles and interests—nature, “primitivism” and spiritualism—that helped to create a collective profile of the artist. But these essays by Flannagan’s contemporaries also raise a number of questions that warrant further investigation. What was unique about Flannagan’s vision in any of these manifestations?

³⁵ Ibid., 11.

Many artists of the thirties were drawn towards nature, especially the Regionalist painters. Did he really believe that a return to nature was possible, especially given the massive urban transportation projects initiated by Fiorello LaGuardia and Robert Moses at the same time? What was the relation between Flannagan's "primitivism" and his interest in medieval sources (what Zigrosser calls the artist's "philosophy of pity")? And finally, what was the nature of his spiritualism, especially in regard to mysticism? Most likely, all of these issues are interrelated and best seen in context. Taken together, Flannagan's interest in nature; "primitivism," or the communication of a direct and heartfelt expression unspoiled by the commercialism of modern life; and spiritualism point to an inclusive worldview incorporating elements of pantheism, mysticism, and organized religion. Neither of the dissertations deconstruct the meanings of these terms in relationship to Flannagan. Forsyth defines Flannagan in relation to primitivism alone and Bolt ignores the relevance of all of these key concepts as applied to Flannagan.

In 1960, author and museum professional H. H. Arnason wrote of the need to place Flannagan within a historical perspective. While suggesting influences on the sculptor (all of them European³⁶), Arnason also admitted to a lack of general knowledge about the artist and called for the "essence and quality of his style [to be] defined more specifically."³⁷ As if in answer to Arnason's appeal, several illuminating group shows were mounted in the following decades that included Flannagan and two dissertations were written about him exclusively in the nineteen sixties. Based variously around the thirties decade or the Depression; the concept of avant-garde painting and sculpture in

³⁶ Duchamp-Villon, Gaudier-Brzeska.

³⁷ H. H. Arnason, "John Flannagan," *Art in America* 48, no. 1 (spring 1960): 66.

America, modern sculpture, or abstraction; and around the theme of the figure in American sculpture, the exhibitions included from one to 14 Flannagan works.

Potentially more advantageous even than Flannagan's one-man shows in helping to place him within a meaningful context, several of these exhibitions offered excellent catalogues that represent among the best scholarship on the artist and related topics. Of these catalogues, *Avant-Garde Painting and Sculpture in America, 1910-1925*, published by the Delaware Art Museum; *Vanguard American Sculpture*, published by the Rutgers University Art Gallery; and *The Figure in American Sculpture: A Question of Modernity*, published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art present the most detailed and insightful background information.

Both of the dissertations written on Flannagan also establish important groundwork, though naturally in much greater detail. The advantage of both of these dissertations over subsequent scholarship is that, in being written roughly two decades after Flannagan's early death, they incorporate interviews with contemporaries of the artist. In addition, neither scholar seems to have been hampered by current restrictions on the availability of personal information. However, a great many discrepancies—particularly regarding Flannagan's biographical information—exist between the two dissertations. Some details cannot be confirmed with certainty; for example, the date Flannagan first came to New York City. Others were resolved, or at least clarified, through research contained in this dissertation. In addition to contributing to the body of literature on the artist, further justification for this dissertation lies in resolving these contradictions.

The first dissertation, by Joseph S. Bolt in 1962,³⁸ is a critical biography that chronicles the sculptural climate in which Flannagan worked. Bolt maintains that, in spite of isolated experiments, the 1920s was largely an age of normalcy, one that continued to demand monuments and that perpetuated the academic concerns of the nineteenth century. Even after Rodin's death in 1917, according to Bolt, the French sculptor still represented the antithesis of the American sculptural ideal because of the conception that his work lacked finish. Against this conservative backdrop, Bolt saw Flannagan, William Zorach, and Alexander Calder as pioneers in "redirecting American sculpture in the age of normalcy."³⁹ Four biographical chapters follow, two of which center around events in Flannagan's life (his trips to Ireland and his confinement at Bloomingdale psychiatric hospital) and two of which include spans of years. Bolt's final chapter concentrates on Flannagan's sculptural theories and the content of his work. He posits that Flannagan's stone roundel and ovoid sculptures, those symbolic of the state of becoming—sleep, birth, and death—are most successful. As opposed to the wood and/or vertical figure pieces, Bolt also believed that the roundel and ovoid sculptures were the works in which Flannagan was best able to capture an abstract image (as much as this was possible given Flannagan's uneasy relationship to abstraction).

Almost twenty years later, Bolt contributed an essay to the North Carolina Museum of Art on an artificial-stone piece then in its collection called *Bear*. As much as he still saw Bergson's philosophy as central to Flannagan's aesthetic, his view of Flannagan's sculpture had darkened considerably: "Among Flannagan's works the writer has found that the most constant subjects are those of abortive birth, suspension *in utero*,

³⁸ Joseph S. Bolt, "John B. Flannagan: 1895-1942," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1962).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

sleep, hibernation, torpid emergence, death.”⁴⁰ Instead of the *élan vitale* that is normally associated with the concept of becoming, Bolt endowed it with a valence of extreme negativity in reference to Flannagan, pointing to the “inseparability of birth and death” in the sculptor’s work. In his investigation of Flannagan’s psychiatric records and in his interest in seeing a connection between Flannagan’s subconscious and the finished work, Bolt was the first to take an interest in applying a psychoanalytic approach to the study of the artist.

The irony of Bolt’s dissertation is that while he apparently had access to Flannagan’s psychiatric records at Bloomingdale, he declined to cite from them directly.

Equally frustrating is the lack of a bibliography to accompany the dissertation.⁴¹

Although Bolt labeled Flannagan a “psychopath,” it is not clear from the events of the artist’s biography as Bolt presents them why this might be. In contrast to Forsyth, who scrupulously researched Flannagan’s genealogy in the mid-west (where Forsyth was himself a student), Bolt basically threw up his hands in regard to Flannagan’s origins, declaring, “It must be said that such few factual data are available on John B.

Flannagan’s early life that all attempts to reconstruct an early developmental evolution must end in patchwork.”⁴² Although Bolt promises a psychoanalytic approach, he does not follow through. While pointing, I believe correctly, to Flannagan’s inability to separate his art and life, Bolt does not show how his art was inflected by his biography and worldview. A more satisfying use of this methodology would be to trace the roots of Flannagan’s dysfunction to the actual facts of his childhood.

⁴⁰ Joseph S. Bolt, “A Note on John B. Flannagan’s Bear,” *North Carolina Museum of Art Bulletin* 9, no. 3 & 4 (March 1970): 16.

⁴¹ Although I queried Harvard’s microfilm department on this omission, I was assured that the entire dissertation had indeed been microfilmed.

⁴² Joseph B. Bolt, “John B. Flannagan,” xix-xx.

The second dissertation, by Robert J. Forsyth in 1965,⁴³ is a formal analysis of the works set against a biography of the artist. Of the two dissertations, Forsyth's is the better known and more frequently cited. A 1980 exhibition at the Clark Art Institute relied heavily on his research for its catalogue, as do most gallery professionals interested in Flannagan's work. In exhaustive fashion, Forsyth discusses the iconography of a great number of works as well as attacks the thorny issue of dating. Forsyth states that the purpose of his study is "to isolate and examine the particular contribution made to American sculpture by John B. Flannagan."⁴⁴ The first chapter is a chronology of the events of the sculptor's life, the second is an essay on the role of primitivism in his work, and the remaining chapters focus on the iconography of Flannagan's works within the periods of his sculpture. Primitivism is the lens through which Forsyth sees both Flannagan's work and life. According to Forsyth, not only does Flannagan's sculpture assume stylistic affinities to Prehistoric, Celtic, African, and Pre-Columbian art, he is a modern primitivist who is inspired by a way of life that stresses "fundamentality and simplicity" in both "thought and visual expression."⁴⁵

Forsyth's study is a major contribution to the literature that accomplishes nearly all of its stated goals. He presents the first major study on Flannagan to supplement the *Letters* and the Museum of Modern Art's 1942 exhibition catalogue,⁴⁶ he proposes a chronology of the sculpture and reproduces many of the works for the first time, he corrects many of the errors that have been repeated in the secondary literature, he

⁴³ Robert Joseph Forsyth, "John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works," (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1965).

⁴⁴ Forsyth, "John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works," 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65,

⁴⁶ Joseph Bolt's dissertation predated Forsyth's but was less comprehensive in scope.

considers the works within the “framework of his [Flannagan’s] total development,”⁴⁷ he discusses the role of the critics, and he is the first to “examine his [Flannagan’s] full development as a so-called ‘primitivist’ in modern art.”⁴⁸

However, the intervening years between the date of Forsyth’s dissertation and the present allow us to see just how racist his views of “primitivism” now appear. Perhaps unaware of Franz Boas’s writings on cultural relativism, Forsyth liberally extended the label of “primitivist” to the sculptor’s life, seemingly ready to deny the differences (race/culture/language) that separated Flannagan from other cultures. Flannagan *is* primitivist in “creating a style that drew on sources outside the Western mimetic tradition.”⁴⁹ But it seems an overstatement to see this label as describing the artist’s life. Though independent and aloof, Flannagan was not apart from his culture. Desirous of emulating the pure motives and expressions of “primitive art,” he was well read and savvy about pursuing the proper channels to further his career. While interested in a great many divergent paths—mysticism, Eastern religions, Prehistoric, Medieval, African, and pre-Columbian art—none of these dominated his thinking or forced him to live outside of the mainstream.

Clearly, Forsyth could not have foreseen such a revisionist critique and in all fairness to him finds company alongside a great many other scholars who have celebrated European and American “borrowings” of the art of indigenous people at the expense of indigenous peoples themselves. Nor is it plausible to deny the seminal role that “primitivism” played in the genesis of modern art in the twentieth century. Forsyth’s

⁴⁷ Forsyth, “John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works,” 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 331.

reliance on primitivism as a way to characterize Flannagan is an unambiguous attempt to place him at the forefront of innovation in American art.

In her dissertation on American primitivism,⁵⁰ Helen Shannon points to the rising tide of cultural nationalism as one of the reasons for the decreased interest in African art during the twenties.⁵¹ For Flannagan, who was not present in New York to see the landmark show of African art at “291” in 1914⁵² or to see African art at the other known venues (the Modern Gallery and the Washington Square Gallery) in the late teens,⁵³ exposure and assimilation probably came later. Since Flannagan’s most African-inspired sculpture dates from the 1920s, he was not, contrary to what Forsyth asserts, among the first to work in this style.⁵⁴ Nor, as Forsyth states, did an interest in primitivism on the part of modern American sculptors begin in the 1920s.⁵⁵

Helen Shannon’s study is also an interesting filter through which to see Flannagan’s early carved furniture. In her chapter on modernist primitivism and African art, she writes, “The change from an appreciation of African functional works to anthropomorphic and zoomorphic sculpture is the engine of modernist primitivism.”⁵⁶ In other words, the ability to see African works, regardless of their use value, as works of art was the hallmark of the most forward-looking artists and critics of the teens. In 1921, the

⁵⁰ Helen Marie Shannon, “Race and Cultural Nationalism.”

⁵¹ As Shannon points out, Pach nevertheless continued to pursue an active interest in African Art and was invited by Alain Locke to serve on the selection committee of his short-lived Harlem Museum of African Art, 270.

⁵² As cited in Shannon’s dissertation, “Statuary in Wood by African Savages—The Root of Modern Art,” Gallery “291,” 3 November-8 December 1914.

⁵³ As cited in Shannon.

⁵⁴ Robert Laurent and William Zorach had both carved sculptures inspired by primitivist exaggerations of form in the teens.

⁵⁵ Forsyth, “John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works,” 81.

⁵⁶ Shannon, “Race and Cultural Nationalism,” 56.

height of interest in African art among the white avant-garde,⁵⁷ Flannagan had not yet begun to carve African-inspired furniture, let alone the sculpture he was to describe as created with a “Negroid intention.”⁵⁸ In light of the chronology of Flannagan’s sculpture, he was clearly less progressive than Forsyth intimates.

Less a shortcoming than a curiosity is Forsyth’s reliance on Goldwater. As noted earlier, Goldwater did not point to any relationship between Flannagan’s work and primitivism in his review of *Letters*. As Shannon so eloquently writes, “As the standard for the study of modernist primitivism, Goldwater’s lack of interest in American modernism is one of the major reasons why later scholarship has also neglected this area.”⁵⁹ It is thus rather ironic that Forsyth chooses Goldwater’s *Primitivism in Modern Painting* as a model, for he is then limited to extrapolating from a study that focuses on another medium. Perhaps because of this, Forsyth’s definition of primitivism is extremely inclusive: “As such, primitivism is not a period or school in the history of art, but an attitude oriented toward that which is primitive, i.e., images from prehistoric times, the creations of a pre-literate culture such as that of the African Negro, or the earliest representations of an historic style in art, or certain formal peculiarities in the expressions of an untutored child, or the work of a mature but unschooled artist, or many other examples. All of these diverse illustrations have in common one quality, a stress of fundamentality and simplicity in their thought and in their visual expressions.” Given this definition, Forsyth finds ample formal correspondences between Flannagan’s sculpture and “primitive” sources. Yet he also seems to subscribe to antiquated ideas of cultural

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁵⁸ Bernard Lemann, notes on Flannagan’s sculpture, Museum of Modern Art, Flannagan artist file, unpagged.

⁵⁹ Shannon, “Race and Cultural Nationalism,” 122.

evolution, especially in conceiving of the thought of “pre-literate cultures such as that of the African Negro” as “simple.”⁶⁰

In his bid to portray Flannagan as a “primitivist,” and hence vanguard sculptor, Forsyth not only comes perilously close to appearing racist but also overemphasizes this dimension of the artist’s work at the expense of others. It is perhaps in “isolating” Flannagan’s contribution to American sculpture that Forsyth’s study opens the door to future scholars. Nearly sixty years after his death, it is still difficult to articulate Flannagan’s place within the history of American art. Though Forsyth mentions other direct carvers and particularly the legacy of Brancusi, Flannagan’s relationship to other modernist sculptors is still not clear, nor is his position within modernism itself. How should Flannagan be characterized? Does the definition of “loner” still suffice and is it really a productive one? Though fascinating as a label, it is also prohibitive, discouraging further research and suggesting dead ends as a foregone conclusion. Charles Eldredge echoes this sentiment in reference to another American artist who has often been seen in like terms, the painter Albert Pinkham Ryder: “His reputation as a figure apart, a reclusive visionary outside of the mainstream, has lately been modified by studies that place the artist in community and in context.”⁶¹

The scholarship on Flannagan would be greatly enriched by a contextual approach that would look more at the sculptor’s relationship to other important people and events of the twenties and thirties. Perhaps most revealing in this regard would be Flannagan’s relationship with his principal dealer—Carl Zigrosser of the Weyhe gallery. Not only was

⁶⁰ Forsyth, “John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works,” 65.

⁶¹ Charles Eldredge, “Nature Symbolized: American Painting from Ryder to Hartley,” in Maurice Tuchman, Judi Freeman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986), 113.

Zigrosser Flannagan's chief confidant before, during, and after the years he was represented by the Weyhe gallery (1928-1938), he was also the foremost print authority in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. Of the 86 published letters written by Flannagan to 18 different correspondents, 38 are to Zigrosser. Zigrosser left his papers to Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania in 1973. These papers were not available to either dissertation, nor are they cited.⁶² A reconsideration of Flannagan's work gives me the opportunity to redress the limitations in early, but nonetheless important, scholarship.

In a 1963 essay for a show on Flannagan at the University of Notre Dame, Forsyth wrote the following: "As Frank Lloyd Wright affected architecture earlier in the century, Flannagan released American sculpture from the studied, calculated aridness of the academic studio to a state of expressive naturalness."⁶³ Given the state of the literature on Flannagan, it is difficult to see him alone as responsible for changing the tide of American sculpture. Today, when Flannagan is so little known, it seems especially curious that both scholars subscribed such grand aspirations to the artist.

Though written to attract interest, sweeping statements such as this beg the question: How should we see Flannagan with the intervening perspective of some sixty years? How helpful are some of the labels that have been used to describe him? Do these labels totalize an individual who didn't easily fit categories? Flannagan admired Louis M. Eilshemius and, though some thirty years younger than the painter, their careers in some

⁶² In his acknowledgements, Forsyth does cite "special research material" given to him by Zigrosser but it is unclear what this material consisted of.

⁶³ Robert J. Forsyth, "Sculpture and Drawings," page 2 of unpaginated introduction.

ways converged.⁶⁴ They are both also traditionally seen as apart from the mainstream of modern art. In a recent essay in which he rethought his past writings on Eilshemius, Paul Karlstrom wrote of the need to stake “a claim for Eilshemius on his own terms,”⁶⁵ not necessarily to fit him neatly in to a progressive view of modernism. Towards this end, he suggested that perhaps “Eilshemius’s art represents an alternative form of modernism.”⁶⁶ Since little contextual work has been done on Flannagan, it is still unclear how he relates to modernism itself, let alone whether he should be considered a case apart. The goal of this dissertation is to reexamine the disparate scholarship on Flannagan while adding a much-needed focus on his relationship to his time. Other ways to conceive of Flannagan are necessary in order to make his life and work seem relevant and worthy of further consideration.

It is my hope that a contextual approach will bring the scholarship on Flannagan in line with his critical reputation. Although Forsyth proposed a provisional catalog of Flannagan’s work, no one has yet revisited this project. Since I would argue for the close connection between the artist’s psychology and his work, such a reexamination seems imperative. As noted earlier, Forsyth undertook the arduous task of dating many of the artist’s works. However, in his dissertation, he did not embark upon compiling exhibition and publication histories, and in the span of some forty years, many works have changed hands and are no longer extant.

⁶⁴ Eilshemius was “discovered” by Duchamp at the first annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 (Flannagan first showed with the Society in 1919) and he died in late 1941 (Flannagan died in early 1942).

⁶⁵ Paul J. Karlstrom, “Eilshemius Redux,” in Steven Harvey, *Louis M. Eilshemius: An Independent Spirit* (New York: National Academy of Design, 2001), p. 35.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

To be sure, the task of compiling a catalog of Flannagan's work is not a simple undertaking. Not only are many works in private collections—making them difficult to study—but also many of the public institutions that presently own his work have largely abdicated the responsibility of dating them or compiling provenance and exhibition/publication histories to accompany them. In the catalog that follows this dissertation, I have included two sections—Dated and Undated—based on the large number of reproductions that have either been supplied to me with no dates at all or with vague spans of years (1920's/30s, 1915-1942). The dated section is arranged chronologically, and the undated section that follows it is arranged alphabetically by title. Where possible, further information is given in footnotes.

In an effort to gain familiarity with the sculptor's oeuvre, I gathered 190 reproductions between 2001 and 2002, a process which began with the consultation of the Smithsonian's Inventory of American Sculpture. The award of a Henry Luce Dissertation fellowship allowed me to continue to research collections and to acquire additional photographs. For liability reasons, I have chosen to focus (with rare exceptions) on works belonging to public institutions instead of those from individuals or galleries. However, because of space considerations, not every illustration is discussed in the dissertation.

Another major stumbling block to the compilation of a complete catalog raisonné has been the lack of access to those Flannagan works still owned by the Weyhe Gallery and presently warehoused. Although Erhard Weyhe's daughter passed away early in January of 1993, to my knowledge no decision regarding the disposition of those works has yet been made.

In addition, the issue of unauthorized reproductions lends a further complication to such a project. Where multiples from a single work are involved, it is impossible to compile exhibition or publication histories unless some clues to provenance are given. Also, Flannagan was not careful about giving discrete titles even to unique sculptures or works on paper. There are a great number with such generic names as “Nude,” “Head,” and “Elephant,” and many early exhibition checklists do not offer media or measurements. Flannagan also often gave two different titles to a single sculpture; for example, *Maternal Bird/Early Bird* or *Lady with Death Mask/Pieta*. The variation in titles makes it difficult to ascertain the history of a given work unless there is a reproduction. In order to supplement the information supplied to me by museums, I consulted *Art Index* from its inception to the present, as well as contemporary databases.

While a complete and comprehensive catalog of Flannagan’s work would greatly add to the body of literature on the artist, the realization of such an accomplishment does not seem promising. Forsyth abandoned the undertaking years after completing the dissertation following his failure to find a publisher, and it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to include a full catalog here. With the goal of providing more contextual information on Flannagan and adding to and clarifying the work of earlier scholars, I am providing the most comprehensive information available for a chosen group of works.

Chapter 2
BIOGRAPHY

Though both of the previous dissertations on Flannagan concentrated on the sculptor's life, neither went so far as to suggest a causal relationship between the trauma of his early childhood and the choices he made in his adult life. However, the events of Flannagan's formative development seem inextricably linked to his later hesitancy and equivocation in both his life and art. The purpose of the present chapter is twofold: to present additional information regarding Flannagan's upbringing and art training; and to consider the role that the sculptor's early life might have played both in his participation in the art scene and in the creation of his sculpture.

In spite of Bolt and Forsyth's efforts to characterize the artist, much confusion continues to surround his identity. John Bernard Flannagan was born on April 7, 1895, in Fargo, North Dakota—though numerous published sources offer the date and place of his birth as 1897¹ or 1898² in Woburn, Massachusetts. The root of these errors seems to have come from the artist himself, for Flannagan intentionally skewed this information.³ Forsyth posits that the artist's motive was to escape the painful memories of his past, a suggestion that takes on particular relevance in the context of recent studies pointing to

¹ Daniel Trowbridge Mallet, *Mallet's Index of Artists* (New York: Peter Smith, 1948); Peter Falk, *Who Was Who in American Art* (Madison, Ct.: Sound View Press, 1985); *Current Biography 1942: Who's Who and Why*, ed. Maxine Block (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1942).

² *The Index of 20th Century Artists* 3, supplement to vol. 3, no. 9. (New York: Research Institute of the College Art Association, Oct. 1933-April 1937). Reprint, 4 vols. in 1 with cumulated index (New York: Arno Press, 1970); Hans Vollmer, *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler des XX Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: A. Seeman, 1953-58).

³ In a 1929 response from Woodstock to a query from Carl Ziggrosser, Flannagan maintained that he was born April 7, 1896, in Woburn, Massachusetts. Letter no. 3, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, Margherita Flannagan, ed. (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 20-21.

the links between adverse childhood experiences and troubled adult outcomes.⁴

Flannagan inherited a weakness for alcohol and suffered from depression as well: these adult “demons” were a perpetual reminder of the abuses he had suffered as a child. While all of the events of Flannagan’s life are not clearly documented, the facts that have come to light hint at an unstable family life coinciding with not one but several potential triggers for addiction and mental illness: emotional, physical, and possible sexual abuse; growing up with a distant or neglectful single parent; witnessing or being the object of violence; and/or being raised in a household with substance abuse.

The issue of Flannagan’s slippery identity should also be considered in the context of the sculptor’s often-fragile state of mind. In light of Flannagan’s alcoholism and short-term memory loss as a result of Korsakov’s psychosis,⁵ I do not think it altogether impossible that he did not also suffer from dissociative symptoms related to his childhood.⁶ If this is so, Flannagan’s fibs and borrowings might have had less to do with a conscious desire to deceive than with actual disruptions within his memory and sense of identity. Flannagan was predisposed towards Korsakoff’s syndrome because of a combination of factors: his regular consumption of large amounts of alcohol and his probable malnourishment due to sustained poverty. According to *Merck’s Manual of*

⁴ “Childhood Events Linked to Alcoholism, Depression,” *DATA: The Brown University Digest of Addiction: Theory and Application* 21, no. 4 (Sept. 2002): 9; “Childhood Trauma Associated with Adult PDs,” *Brown University Child & Adolescent Behavior Letter* 15, no. 10 (Oct. 1999): 2; Daryl J. Higgins, Marita P. McCabe, et al, “Relationships Between Different Types of Maltreatment During Childhood and Adjustment in Adulthood,” *Child Maltreatment* 5, no. 3 (Aug. 2000): 261; Christopher R. Browning, “Trauma or Transition: A Life-course Perspective on the Link Between Childhood Sexual Experiences and Men’s Adult Well-being,” *Social Science Research* 31, no. 4 (Dec. 2002): 473; Benjamin A. Shaw, Neal Krause, “Exposure to Physical Violence During Childhood, Aging, Health,” *Journal of Aging and Health* 14, no. 4 (Nov. 2002): 467; Sandra W. Key, Daniel J. DeNoon, et al, “Adult Health Problems Linked to Traumatic Childhood Experiences,” *World Disease Weekly Plus* (May 25, 1998): 20.

⁵ E-mailed letter stating clinical diagnosis to author from James L. Gehrlich, Head of Archives, New York Weill Cornell Medical Center Archives, 4 April 2003.

⁶ Barbara Apgar, “Childhood Trauma and Dissociation in Adulthood,” *American Family Physician* 60, no. 3 (9/1/99): 972.

Medical Information, a person with Korsakoff's Syndrome characteristically loses his or her recollection of recent events and has such a poor memory that he or she often makes up stories to try and cover up the inability to remember.

Psychological interpretations aside, perhaps there are other more overtly pragmatic reasons why Flannagan falsified his biographical information. The East Coast was a more prominent center of art and culture and Flannagan might have wanted to seem less provincial. In addition, claiming a younger age might have made him more attractive for fellowships and qualified him to show in a greater number of exhibitions. At the time of the Museum of Modern Art's 1930 exhibition entitled "Work by 46 Painters and Sculptors Under 35 Years of Age," in which Flannagan participated, the artist was already 35. Several of Flannagan's obituaries stated that he was 44 when he died, which would reflect a birth date of 1897; actually, he was 46.⁷

Additional confusion has centered on the similarity in spelling with another American sculptor of the same name, John Flanagan. This sculptor was born in 1865 and studied under Augustus Saint Gaudens in New York. In spite of the difference in the two artists' styles and techniques, aspects of the life of the academic Flanagan continue to be attributed to the modernist Flannagan.⁸ To complicate matters further, the Flannagan family did not spell their surname consistently. As a child and in art school, Flannagan followed his family's preference and spelled his name "Flannigan." As a young man and sculptor, however, he usually used the spelling "Flannagan."⁹

⁷ *Herald Tribune*, 8 January 1942; *New York World Telegram*, 8 January 1942, 39.

⁸ The entry for *Who Was Who in American Art 1564-1975* (1999) describes John Bernard Flannagan as a medallist and a former member of the National Sculpture Society (the entry for 1940-41 listed him as an engraver). This information should be attributed to John Flanagan, especially since in 1902, when the membership in the NSS was recorded, John Bernard Flannagan was only seven years old.

⁹ In a 1936 agreement between the artist and the Fairmount Park Art Association, however, Flannagan signed his name with only one "n."

Flannagan was six in 1901, when his father, who was a policeman, died “from a complication of diseases, the immediate cause of his death being heart disease.”¹⁰ That Flannagan’s father was an alcoholic is implied in many of the sculptor’s letters; Bolt’s claim that Martin H. Flannigan died of Bright’s disease would seem logical in light of the illness’s pathology—a dysfunction of the kidneys aggravated by alcohol consumption.¹¹ Forsyth and Bolt disagreed on Martin H. Flannigan’s profession and death date. In addition to serving as a policeman, he also had worked as an inspector in Fargo. At the time of his death, Flannigan was in charge of an “employment agency,” which he had started after resigning from the police force approximately a year before.¹²

From interviews with surviving relatives, Forsyth discovered that John and his two younger brothers then began to attend classes at St. John’s Orphanage in “a building immediately next to their house.”¹³ However, it is not known whether the orphanage also assumed childcare responsibilities for those children who did not reside there. According to the 1900 census, eight individuals lived in the Flannigan household in the year before the father’s death: the artist himself; his parents (Martin H., 34, and Margaret A., 36); his two brothers (Arthur J., 3,¹⁴ and Martin H., 2); two of Mr. Flannigan’s siblings (Patrick H., 29, and Celia L., 23); and a boarder (Curtis H. Lynch, 8). Mr. Flannigan’s mother also lived on land adjacent to her son and held the deed to both properties. The fact that Flannagan’s father rented and took in boarders confirms Flannagan’s later accounts of his family’s poverty. In 1901, two additional members of the family are included in the

¹⁰ “Flannigan Dead,” *The Fargo Forum and Daily Republican*, 10 December 1901, 5.

¹¹ Because I am not a blood relative, I was unable to obtain a copy of Martin H. Flannigan’s death certificate containing his cause of death.

¹² “Flannigan Dead,” *The Fargo Forum and Daily Republican*, 10 December 1901, 5.

¹³ Forsyth, “John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works,” 7.

¹⁴ According to Forsyth, Arthur Joseph, born 1896, died shortly after birth.

Fargo city directory as living at the Flannigan address: Francis J.; and Miss Kate, who is listed as a teacher. What all this would seem to imply is that Flannigan and his brothers had ample opportunity to be cared for by extended family and that the constitution of his home was extremely unstable.

St. John's Orphanage was run by the Presentation Sisters Order, a Catholic religious congregation founded in Ireland in 1775. The order arrived in Fargo in 1882 and shortly thereafter opened a school. Nano Nagle, the founder of the Order, centered her apostolate on helping children, especially those who were abused and exploited. She is often depicted holding a book, a symbol of literacy and learning. St. Joseph's Convent and Academy, which later became St. John's Orphanage and Free School in 1897, was surrounded by a high board fence. Because the Presentation Sisters wished to continue the rules of strict enclosure that had governed their order in Ireland, it seems reasonable to assume that they carried these expectations to the orphanage.

Again according to interviews with surviving relatives, Forsyth recounted in his dissertation that an older first cousin of Flannigan's was a nun in the Presentation Order that managed the orphanage, and so "the sons of Martin Flannigan were admitted, at very little expense, to the school of the orphanage next door."¹⁵ Indeed, the cost of private school for a family with as little means as the Flannigans is an indication of how important educational attainment was to his mother. By all accounts, Mrs. Flannigan was an intelligent and most certainly devout woman who tied her religious commitment to schooling. Though both of Flannigan's grandparents were immigrant farmers from Ireland, both of his parents knew how to read and write.¹⁶ Judging by their respective

¹⁵ Forsyth, "John B. Flannigan: His Life and Works," 7.

¹⁶ 1900 Census for Fargo, North Dakota.

professions (his father did not need to perform manual labor for a living and his mother was listed as a nurse in the 1901 Fargo city directory), both had risen to well-respected occupations in a relatively short period of time. As representative of the Irish ethnic group around the turn of the century, then, the Flannigans must be judged as successful professionally (though certainly not economically due to Mr. Flannigan's early death). Flannigan's subsequent attendance at two institutions of higher learning and consistent interest in the world of books is atypical for an Irish youth at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁷

Regardless of whether the orphanage intervened, the difficulties young children face while being raised by a single parent are well documented. Problematic early family formation impacts both tangible and intangible measures of well being, including future economic, social, and even psychological success.¹⁸ If Mrs. Flannigan was detached emotionally from early on, Flannigan might have suffered from attachment disorder, negatively influencing his later ability to trust and relate to other people. Forced to find means of supporting her family, Mrs. Flannigan presumably began to look for work in Fargo. Whether she could not find it, because of quarrels with the paternal side of the family (as Forsyth contends), or in order to rejoin her own parents, she consequently decided between 1902 and 1905 to move to Minnesota with her children in order to pursue nurse's training. However, unlike the half-measure of sending her sons to school at the orphanage next door, Mrs. Flannigan in 1910 made a much more drastic decision.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Irish educational values around the turn of the twentieth century, see Joel Perlmann, *Ethnic Differences: Schooling and Social Structure Among the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Blacks in an American City, 1880-1935* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

After relocating the family to Breckinridge, Minnesota, Mrs. Flannigan took a job at St. Francis Hospital in order to undergo further training as a practical nurse. Because Mrs. Flannigan chose to receive room and board as part of her payment, she placed the boys in an orphanage 100 miles to the east, which was run by the same motherhood of Franciscan nuns that directed the hospital.¹⁹ Though this enforced separation may, to twenty-first-century sensibilities, seem needlessly cruel, few options were available to single mothers during the early part of the twentieth century. “The majority of children in ‘orphanages’ were actually not orphans, but children whose mothers could not support them.”²⁰ According to Forsyth, the boys stayed at St. Otto’s Orphanage for five years, 1905-10,²¹ so that Mrs. Flannigan could complete her training.

Although Forsyth does not offer any details related to Flannigan’s stay at St. Otto’s, Bolt quotes a passage from the sculptor’s second wife, who maintained that Flannigan had told her that he underwent strict privation and physical abuse during these years. The recent literature on the importance of childhood familial environment is immense; in addition, the nineteen nineties saw the emergence of numerous studies on American orphanages. Many of these books point to the unavailability of positive interactions with adults within large asylums and the limited opportunities for children to develop emotionally or psychologically within their walls. Given Flannigan’s accounts of physical abuse, it seems possible to conjecture that St. Otto’s was a highly regimented place where it was difficult for children to develop strong relationships with parental

¹⁹ Forsyth, “John B. Flannigan: His Life and Works,” 8.

²⁰ Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 23.

²¹ These dates could not be confirmed with the holders of the orphanage records (the Diocese of St. Cloud) without permission of Flannigan’s next of kin (although I was able to locate Flannigan’s grandson, he has not responded to my letters). According to Bolt (“John B. Flannigan, 1895-1942,” xv, note 26), Flannigan only stayed at the orphanage for a short time, living instead with his grandmother.

figures. Certainly, his inability to relate to authority as an adult seems connected to the lack of emotional warmth he received as a child.

At the other end of the spectrum, some small orphan asylums came much closer to replacing the family through the support of education and religious training. St. Otto's operated under the auspices of the Catholic Church and probably set a strong stake on instilling moral values within the children in its charge. It continued the religious training begun at the school of St. John's Orphanage and, though a harrowing alternative to a normal childhood, probably provided the only stability Flannagan had known since his father's death.

Since orphan asylums were a last resort to those who turned to them, Mrs. Flannagan's choice not to prevail upon extended family seems especially tragic. Already genetically vulnerable towards the effects of alcohol, Flannagan's later use of this substance as a way of coping with damaging experiences from early life hardly seems surprising. In addition, the debilitating effects of poverty, even at a young age, cannot have escaped as sensitive a person as the artist. As his later classmates would attest, Flannagan was visibly embarrassed and humiliated by his circumstances. The Progressive Movement fought to show that impoverishment did not necessarily equate with immorality, particularly in regard to the segregating of dependent children in orphanages. Perhaps as a residual effect of his time in these institutions, however, Flannagan, seemed to internalize this negative relation as a given.

In 1910, when John was fifteen, the family reunited and moved to Graceville, Minnesota. From there, he attended commercial and academic classes²² in the preparatory

²² Flannagan's application for the Merchant Marine (United States Shipping Board), 30 July 1918 (National Archives and Records Administration, record group 41).

department of St. John's University at Collegeville, whose mission was the preservation of "Catholic and Benedictine values." According to records from the archivist at St. John's, Flannagan attended the Junior Department (high school) from September 6, 1910 through 1912, and the Senior Department (college) from September 4, 1912 through January 20, 1913. Although Flannagan's entire school record is not extant, documentation from his first two semesters lists classes in arithmetic, bookkeeping, catechism, Christian Doctrine, correspondence, civics, mechanical drawing, geography, grammar, history, law, penmanship, phonography, reading, spelling, and typewriting. Significantly, while he received high marks in several subjects, he was most successful in catechism and Christian Doctrine.

As I indicated in chapter one, Forsyth did not point to the relevance of Flannagan's strong Christian upbringing and instead saw "primitivist" as the most productive way to define Flannagan's life and work. In contrast, Bolt wrote that Flannagan "felt a marked antipathy for the Church"²³ as a result of his maltreatment as a child. Given the psychological impact of physical abuse and abandonment and its clear connection in Flannagan's life with religion, a ready conclusion such as Bolt's does not seem far-fetched. However, the evidence of Flannagan's art indicates otherwise. In spite of the pain of his childhood, he seemed able to uphold the conviction that God is loving and forgiving, not vengeful and punitive. In his sculpture, Flannagan most often depicted religious groups, mother and child figures, and small animals. Most exude a vulnerability and innocence that point to a faith in the interconnectedness of all of life. If Flannagan in his own life did not always adhere to the teachings of the Catholic Church, he seemed to

²³ Joseph Bolt, "John B. Flannagan," xvi.

transfer its highest ideals to his art. His sculptures exude a wholeness that belie his troubled life. The supreme irony of Flannagan's upbringing is that instead of serving to close his eyes to the good in the world it did just the opposite. Able to relate to others only with difficulty, Flannagan turned to sculpture as a way to personify the optimism that he did not always see in mankind.

After three years at St. John's, during which John took his first drawing class, the family decided to relocate again—this time to Minneapolis. According to Forsyth, John and his brother Martin arrived first, in 1913 or 1914; his mother and youngest brother, Joseph (b. 1900) followed soon afterwards. Immediately, or soon after moving to Minneapolis, John began to take night classes at the Minneapolis School of Art,²⁴ where he would count his education as lasting for two and a half years.²⁵ During the day, he worked as a draughtsman and bookkeeper.²⁶ Since his younger brother was not healthy and his mother needed to stay home to care for him part of the time, John and Martin were the principal breadwinners. However, when Joseph died of tuberculosis in 1916, John made the decision to withdraw his support from the family and to attend the Minneapolis School of Art full time. By the winter of 1918, John had completed his course work.²⁷ In an even more drastic move to assert his independence, he abandoned

²⁴Forsyth cites an entry for "J.B. Flannigan" dated 29 September 1913, in the registrar's records at the Minneapolis School of Art (Forsyth, "John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works," n. 41, 52). However, Flannagan himself, on a 1940 Guggenheim application, noted that he had attended the school starting in 1914. The current registrar at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (the school's present name) now refuses to confirm this information either way but in 2002 maintained that Flannagan (note spelling) began in October of 1913.

²⁵ Flannagan's application for the Merchant Marine/United States Shipping Board, 30 July 1918 (National Archives and Records Administration, record group 41.)

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Though Forsyth wrote that Flannagan had completed his coursework in the summer of 1918 based on the artist's records at the MSA (Forsyth, "John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works," 15), he suspected that this information was incorrect, since Flannagan entered the Merchant Marine that same summer. The current registrar at MCAD will now not release Flannagan's records but in 2002 claimed that he had finished in Winter 1918.

his mother and surviving brother and enlisted in the U.S. Merchant Marine in the summer of the same year. According to Forsyth, John never contacted his family again. My research confirms that his mother died destitute in 1922 and was buried by the Little Sisters of the Poor in an unmarked grave in Minneapolis's St. Mary's Cemetery. County vital records indicate that Mrs. Flanagan (note variation in spelling) died of a heart attack at the age of 60, her occupation listed as "housework." The lack of a paid obituary also attests to the continued poverty of the family. Saddest of all, the terrible toll that Flanagan's mother exacted on her sons in order to pursue her nurse's training seems to have been fruitless. The fate of Flanagan's other brother is not known.

Since Flanagan's early years at the Minneapolis School of Art were bound closely together with trying to make a living to support his family, it is not clear how much energy he was able to invest in his art training. Though not a major cultural center, Minneapolis was not a sleepy Midwestern city oblivious to developments in modern art either. As Thomas O'Sullivan writes, with the founding of the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts in 1883, "Minneapolis had established its preeminence as the region's art capital."²⁸ By 1886, the Society had founded the Minneapolis School of Art (MSA); 1915 saw the establishment of a museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA), designed by McKim, Mead and White. Significantly, instead of pursuing a curriculum in the vocations, as he had at St. John's, Flanagan enrolled in Fine Arts Studies at the MSA.

²⁸ Thomas O'Sullivan, "Robert Koehler and Painting in Minnesota, 1890-1915," in Michael Conforti, ed. *Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi, 1890-1915: Minnesota 1900* (Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses in association with the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1994).

Robert Koehler, who was German-born and had been trained in academic painting in both Munich and New York, was director of the MSA from 1893-1914.²⁹ Like the country's other prominent art schools—that of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Art Institute of Chicago—the MSA relied on the “Academic Method,” which was based upon graded proficiency in the drawing of the human body.³⁰ Koehler taught elementary, antique, and life drawing classes, as well as painting in the studio and *en plein air*.³¹ In contrast to the instructional technique of the School as well as his own personal style, however, Koehler was liberal in his teaching philosophy. He strongly believed that his students should be exposed to different styles and influences, both American and European. According to O’Sullivan, Koehler “broadened the curriculum at the school to include decorative design and handicrafts, under the direction of Mary Moulton Cheney”³² (who later became director of the School, 1917-1926). Koehler’s progressivism in wanting to offer instruction in areas besides painting is not surprising given his background. As a young man, he had worked in commercial printing shops, and at the Royal Bavarian Academy in Munich, his goal was to be a lithographer.³³ Once the Minneapolis Institute of Arts was founded in 1915, its first two directors, Joseph Breck³⁴

²⁹ Koehler was Director Emeritus of the school from 1914-16 and continued to teach during those years.

³⁰ Jeffrey Hess, *Their Splendid Legacy: the First 100 Years of the Minnesota Society of Fine Arts* (Minneapolis: The Society of Fine Arts, 1985), 11.

³¹ O’Sullivan, “Robert Koehler and Painting in Minnesota, 1890-1915,” 100; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Catalogue of the Minneapolis School of Art, 1914-1915, 11; Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Catalogue of the Minneapolis School of Art, 1915-1916, 9-12.

³² O’Sullivan, “Robert Koehler and Painting in Minnesota, 1890-1915,” 100.

³³ O’Sullivan, “Robert Koehler and Painting in Minnesota, 1890-1915,” 93, and Hess, *Their Splendid Legacy*, 14.

³⁴ Breck was also director of the art school in the interim period between Koehler and Cheney.

and Russell A. Plimpton both brought backgrounds in decorative arts to the job and actively included the field in the museum's acquisition program.³⁵

Koehler founded an organization called the Artists League in 1893 in order to help introduce art into the local community, and in 1903, when the Minnesota Legislature passed a bill to create the Minnesota State Art Society (only the second state-supported art organization in the U.S.),³⁶ Koehler was named its first president. Koehler was a popular lecturer around the state and espoused a teaching philosophy integrating art and life.

While Koehler personally had difficulty relating to the most recent trends in modern art, he recognized the historic importance of the Armory Show and in April of 1913 traveled to Chicago to see a partial showing at the Art Institute.³⁷ In his lectures, he continued to encourage acceptance of all kinds of art, and in the same month wrote to Walter Pach to ask that a representative showing be brought to the Minneapolis Society's galleries³⁸ (which were then located in the Minneapolis Public Library). When the show arrived in March of 1914, Koehler delivered an accompanying talk.

Before an audience thoroughly representative of the art loving element in Minneapolis, Mr. Koehler on the evening of Friday, February 27th, gave a lecture on "Modern Tendencies in Art," illustrating with the assistance of numerous lantern slides the origin and development of the post-impressionists', cubists', and futurists' theories and ideals. Without himself professing allegiance to the new ideas, the lecturer demonstrated their justification and pleaded for an open mind on the part of the art lovers in order to vouchsafe to them the enjoyment of what is worthy of attention while it is being placed before them. The lecture has given rise to

³⁵ Hess, *Their Splendid Legacy*, 35-6.

³⁶ O'Sullivan, "Robert Koehler and Painting in Minnesota, 1890-1915," 98.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

³⁸ Walt Kuhn, Kuhn family, and Armory show records, Archives of American Art, reel D-72, frame 789, as cited in Laurette E. McCarthy, "Modernists on Tour: A New Look at a Historic Show" (*Archives of American Art Journal* 37, nos. 3 & 4, 1997): 2 and n. 1, 11.

much favorable comment because of its educational value and requests have been made for its repetition before a larger audience.³⁹

Also concurrently, Koehler corresponded to Pach, “I feel the seed has been sown and it will depend on proper nourishment to make this wider appreciation of art a living thing.”⁴⁰ Since Flannagan did not keep a diary, we do not know whether he was aware of the exhibition. Recent scholarship has contended that the Armory Show was not nearly as influential to American artists as previously thought. However, unlike other modernist sculptors such as Zorach, Laurent, and Weber, Flannagan did not have the opportunity to study in Paris. What seems notable about Flannagan’s early training is that it was not necessarily as conservative as Forsyth implies.

It is interesting to consider Flannagan’s brief stint in creating carved furniture (see chapter 1) in light of the school’s commitment to decorative design. Mary Moulton Cheney, a Minneapolis native who had studied at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, taught a three-year course of study in the field. Her approach mirrored that of William Morris: a belief that handmade arts and crafts represented the highest in creative accomplishment and that their production could effect a betterment of society. Cheney owned her own design studio and had exhibited with the Minnesota Arts and Crafts Society in 1901. In addition, she was a member of the Handicraft Guild of Minneapolis, which offered classes and exhibition space to individual artists and then mainly teachers from 1904-18. At the MSA, she taught classes in embroidery, leather working, china painting, jewelry making, and woodworking.⁴¹ While Flannagan pursued instruction in

³⁹ “Notes,” *Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* 3, no. 3 (March 1914): 30.

⁴⁰ Robert Koehler to Walter Pach, 7 March 1914 (Minneapolis Institute of Arts Archives), as quoted in O’Sullivan, “Robert Koehler and Painting in Minnesota, 1890-1915,” 112.

⁴¹ Hess, *Their Splendid Legacy*, 17.

painting and design,⁴² he mentions Cheney as part of a dream in a 1931 letter from Clifden, Ireland, to Carl Zigrosser, and it is unlikely that her philosophy and teaching methods were unknown to him.⁴³ Minneapolis at large was an active center of the international Arts and Crafts movement.⁴⁴ The MSA was but one of the organizations that helped to establish this reputation.

In addition to displaying work, the Handicraft Guild offered items for sale, as did Mary Moulton Cheney's *The Artcraft Shop: Sign of the Bay Tree*, and John Scott Bradstreet's *Craftshouse*. Both Cheney and Bradstreet were fascinated by Japanese motifs. Cheney imported prints from Japan and also based some of her own graphic designs on Japanese examples. In the field of interior design and decoration, Bradstreet both imported Japanese goods and manufactured reproductions, introducing "a unique style of furniture based on the traditional Japanese technique of carved and treated cypress wood, *jin-di-sugi*."⁴⁵ Indirectly, Bradstreet helped to form many of the important collections of Asian art in the Minneapolis area.⁴⁶ When he died in 1914, his collection of Japanese decorative arts was bequeathed to the MIA, to be exhibited in a special room dedicated to him.⁴⁷

Until the founding of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1915, the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts sponsored exhibitions at the Minnesota Public Library. These mainly

⁴² Flannagan's application for the Merchant Marine/United States Shipping Board, 30 July 1918 (National Archives and Records Administration, record group 41.)

⁴³ "I had a funny dream the other night. I dreamt we were in Art school and the whole gang were playing "hide and seek". Miss Cheney was "it" and Adolphe [Adolf Dehn] was hiding in the men's toilet." Flannagan to Zigrosser, Clifden, 23 January 1931. Carl Zigrosser Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

⁴⁴ Marcia G. Anderson, "Art for Life's Sake," in Michael Conforti, ed. *Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi, 1890-1915: Minnesota 1900*, 122.

⁴⁵ Michael Conforti and Jennifer Komar, "Bradstreet's Craftshouse: Retailing in an Arts and Crafts Style," in Michael Conforti, ed. *Art and Life on the Upper Mississippi, 1890-1915: Minnesota 1900*, 63.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Hess, *Their Splendid Legacy*, 31. Bradstreet was one of the founding members of the Society of Fine Arts and remained active on the board of directors for many years.

consisted of works borrowed from local collections, but in 1900 the board of directors voted to institute annual exhibitions of American art. However, European art continued to be favored. When the MIA was founded, according to O'Sullivan, Koehler's *Head of an Old Woman* was the only work by a local artist to be included in the opening exhibition.⁴⁸ Wanda Gág, one of Flannagan's schoolmates at the MSA (see below), mentioned seeing Millet's *The Spinner* and a self-portrait by Irish-born society portraitist William Orpen at the museum in early 1915.⁴⁹ In addition to Bradstreet's collection, further acquisitions and gifts were made in Far Eastern art during the time Flannagan attended the MSA: in Chinese painting and Japanese screens in 1916⁵⁰ and in Japanese color prints the following year.⁵¹

As this summary of art activity around the turn of the century indicates, Minneapolis's creative and intellectual ferment did not necessarily keep pace with its exhibitions. The city slowly began to become more diversified in its art offerings, though as has been claimed by others, there were few exhibitions of contemporary art in the Twin Cities in 1915.⁵² The only exception to this, it seems, were the exhibitions organized or brought in by Koehler.

Another important aspect of Flannagan's attendance at the MSA was his acquaintanceship with several other Minnesota artists who also relocated to New York: painter Arnold Blanch, printmaker and illustrator Adolf Dehn, printmaker Wanda Gág (author/illustrator of the children's storybook *Millions of Cats*), painter and printmaker

⁴⁸ O'Sullivan, "Robert Koehler and Painting in Minnesota, 1890-1915," 97.

⁴⁹ Wanda Gág, *Growing Pains* (New York: Coward McCann, Inc. Publishers, 1940), 360.

⁵⁰ "Chinese Painting," *Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* 5, no. 4 (April 1916): 27-30; "Two Screens by Yeitoku," *Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* 5, no. 6 (June 1916): 41-43.

⁵¹ "An Important Gift of Japanese Color-Prints," *Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Art* 6, no. 9 (November 1917): 65-68.

⁵² Richard Cox, "Adolph Dehn: The Life" in Joycelyn Pang Lumsdaine and Thomas O'Sullivan, *The Prints of Adolph Dehn* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987), 2.

Harry Gottlieb, and painter and printmaker Lucile Lundquist. All of these artists kept in touch after their art school days, though to greater and lesser degrees depending upon individual circumstances. In the late teens in New York, Gág roomed with Lundquist, and Dehn roomed with Blanch.⁵³ Lundquist and Blanch married in 1920 but later divorced. All of these artists except Gág also eventually lived and worked in Woodstock, N.Y. Despite their individual styles and chosen media, all of these artists conceived of nature as a vital and restorative force, both for the artist and for his/her work.

In a diary entry dated November 13, 1916, the time they were in art school together, Gág described Flannagan in the following manner:

“Bernard Flannigan [John Flannagan], Adolphe [Adolf Dehn], and I are impatient with some of the people at the school—their wailings and mutual praisings are irritating to us. It is not kind to be so and I suppose it is more or less transient with Adolphe and me. (I don’t know about Flannigan. Flannigan is a taciturn, un-smiling creature who reads Nietzsche and Schopenhauer and is all for the modern tendencies in art.)⁵⁴

Clearly, by the time Flannagan attended the MSA he had internalized many of the problems of his youth, which manifested themselves as a deep-seated sense of inferiority. Although classes at the MSA seemed to have inspired camaraderie, it does not appear that Gág ever got to know Flannagan well. Gág became romantically involved with Dehn and in 1919 became very upset with him for deciding to leave New York with Flannagan as a deck hand on a boat to China.⁵⁵ While Audur Winnan, author of a catalogue raisonné on Gág, described Flannagan as “Gág’s old friend from Minneapolis” in the context of the sculptor lending encouragement to Gág after her first one-artist exhibition in New

⁵³ Audur H. Winnan, *Wanda Gág: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Prints* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 11.

⁵⁴ Wanda Gág, *Growing Pains* (New York: Coward McCann, Inc. Publishers, 1940), 453.

⁵⁵ Wanda Gág diary, 16 December 1919, Wanda Gág Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

York,⁵⁶ mentions of Flannagan in Gág's papers are scarce.⁵⁷ One of the few is a diary entry dated July 10, 1933, in which Gág describes attending a party at Flannagan's apartment, accompanied by Carl Zigrosser, Diego Rivera, and Frida Kahlo. Before visiting Flannagan's, the group had gone out to dinner and then to Rivera's studio, where there was a large photograph of his Radio City mural.

After this, I would almost have been content to go home and think over what I had seen, but there was another treat in store for us. The "party" was at the home of John Flannagan, a former art-school mate of mine. He has just returned from Europe (Guggenheim fellowship) with his new sculpture. He uses ordinary field stones much of the time and does some very fine things. "Magnifique" was Rivera's comment.

I would enjoy making a drawing of Flannagan's work shop. Just a small bare room, with some half-finished chunks of stone lying on a very makeshift bench, and a few chisels and hammers lying about. I love to see partly realized sculpture—it looks like something being born—a concrete idea growing out of an amorphous mass.⁵⁸

Of the artists from Minneapolis, Flannagan seems to have become closest to Dehn, who was most conscious of his friend's misery and its outward display in alcoholism.

According to Richard Cox, a biographer of the artist, Dehn had liberal political leanings⁵⁹ but was ultimately more committed to art than to politics. In his art school days, however, Dehn tried to get his fellow art students in Minneapolis to subscribe to *The Masses* and posted notices of upcoming lectures by such progressive thinkers as Eugene Debs,

⁵⁶ Winnan, *Wanda Gág*, 13.

⁵⁷ A biography on Wanda Gág; her father, Anton; and her sister Flavia by Julie L'Enfant (Afton, Minnesota: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002) also confirms this.

⁵⁸ Winnan, *Wanda Gág*, 275 (original letter located at Annenberg Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania). I am grateful to Thomas O'Sullivan for originally calling my attention to this letter.

⁵⁹ Cox, "Adolf Dehn: The Life." According to Cox, Dehn's father was an anarchist and atheist and passed a distrust of authority down to his son, p. 2 and n. 9.

Margaret Sanger, and Emma Goldman.⁶⁰ More politically conscious than his schoolmates and aware of his good looks, Dehn seems to have become a kind of instigator to Flannagan, Gottlieb, and Blanch. According to Gottlieb, “We went downtown to work, drink, and hear political speeches, not look at art.”⁶¹

Though drafted into the First World War in 1918, as a professed socialist Dehn refused active service and was interned in South Carolina. He then volunteered during the Armistice. Once in New York in 1919, Dehn became acquainted with many of the socialist journalists still trying to save *The Masses* from censorship—illustrator Boardman Robinson and writer/editors Max Eastman and Floyd Dell. Gág did drawings for *The New Masses* and the *Liberator*, as well as for *Broom* during the twenties,⁶² but according to Cox, Dehn was hesitant to return to political cartoons after his internment. He nevertheless continued to submit a small number during the decade after the first World War. Perhaps because Dehn was in Europe for much of the decades of the twenties and thirties, there is no known correspondence between the two men. Significantly, however, Flannagan’s own political leanings seem to have been very much influenced by Dehn, who was one of the founders of the American Artists’ Congress.

While all of Flannagan’s schoolmates won honors at the MSA, Flannagan himself does not seem to have been recognized. In May of 1915, Blanch was awarded a scholarship for “First Year Students in Design,” and Gág and Dehn received honorable mentions for other scholarships.⁶³ All three also won local scholarships the following

⁶⁰ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶¹ Excerpted interview with Gottlieb in Cox, “Adolf Dehn: The Life,” 2.

⁶² Winman, *Wanda Gág*, 69-72.

⁶³ Catalogue of the Minnesota School of Art, 1915-1916, p. 19

year.⁶⁴ Then, in 1917, Gág and Dehn were notified that they had been awarded scholarships to the Art Students League in New York.⁶⁵ Lucile Lundquist won a scholarship to the ASL in 1918.⁶⁶

As noted above, Flannagan finished his coursework and enlisted in the United States Shipping Board/U.S. Merchant Marine in 1918. Since he had just finished art school, it seems surprising that he chose this path over another more suited to his training. However, even at this late point in the war it was still uncertain when hostilities would end. By enrolling in the Merchant Marine, Flannagan was guaranteed not to be drafted into active service. In addition, the Merchant Marine offered young men the opportunity to travel. In an effort to posit reasons why Flannagan's life took the turns it did, perhaps his enlistment represents a lingering ambivalence about who he felt he was and who he wanted to be.

At 5 feet, 7 inches tall and 117 pounds, Flannagan applied for the job of waiter (mess-man) on his application form (he was too light to qualify for work as a fireman or coal-passer). According to documentation located by Forsyth, Flannagan made at least one trip to France and returned to New York in November of 1919.⁶⁷ He must have arrived in the city earlier that year since he exhibited with the Society of Independent Artists. For the next several years, he seems to have signed on as an independent seaman

⁶⁴ According to Gág's diary entry dated May 1916 in *Growing Pains* (p. 444), Gág won the McKnight Scholarship, Dehn the Palettite Scholarship, and Blanch the Eastern Scholarship (which was awarded locally but provided for study at an art school in the east).

⁶⁵ Gág, *Growing Pains*, 459. The entry is undated but the register to Gág's papers at the Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library specifies that the notification took place in April of 1917. Lucile Lundquist was awarded a Palettite Scholarship during this year and Harry Gottlieb was named as an alternate for two scholarships.

⁶⁶ Woodstock Artists Association, *Woodstock's Art Heritage* (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1987), 58.

⁶⁷ National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C., to Robert Forsyth, 19 October 1961 (Forsyth Papers, Archives of American Art) as cited in Forsyth, "John Flannagan: His Life and Works," 16 and n. 66.

in order to earn money. In her diaries, Gág mentions the trip to China with Dehn in December of 1919, and Forsyth points to a subsequent trip to Germany in November of 1920.⁶⁸ The latter trip followed a short stint as a part-time guard (along with Dehn and possibly Gottlieb) with the Holmes Electrical Protective Service in New York,⁶⁹ a position that enabled Flannagan to paint during the day.

The relation of Flannagan's trips to Europe and the Far East during his engagement with the U.S. Merchant Marine (and later as an independent seaman) and the development of his art is an area that warrants further study. Preliminary searches of crew lists for the aforementioned trips did not yield extant manifests. And Flannagan's trip to China with Dehn is not mentioned in the literature on the latter artist. However, there are compelling reasons why connections might be made between Flannagan's sculpture and drawings and Chinese art. The concept of *fengshui*, or the importance of site, corresponds closely within Flannagan's aesthetic to the integration of sculpture with its surroundings. In addition, the aspect of contemplation that is characteristic of many of Flannagan's figures (fig. 176) is also particular to Chinese religious statuary intended for worship. Also worthy of mention is the possible link between Flannagan's brush and ink drawings (figs. 2-3, 79, 87, 92-93, 95, 99, 113-115, 118-119, 139-140, 142, 155, 157, 166, 184) and Chinese calligraphy, one of the most highly valued of the Chinese arts.

In spite of his precarious financial situation and sporadic absences during the months he was at sea, Flannagan made an effort to gain exposure for his art in New York City. He exhibited again with the Society of Independent Artists in 1921 and 1925; and in 1921 also sold a drawing to *The Dial*, the distinguished literary magazine of the 1920s. It

⁶⁸ Holmes Electrical Protective Service, New York City, to Robert Forsyth, n.d. (Forsyth Papers) as cited in Forsyth, "John Flannagan: His Life and Works," 16, and n. 70.

⁶⁹ Forsyth, "John Flannagan: His Life and Works," 16, and Cox, "Adolf Dehn: The Life," 5.

is unclear how this arrangement first took place. Perhaps Flannagan heard that the magazine bought drawings through Dehn. Dehn was friendly with Scofield Thayer,⁷⁰ the editor/financial backer to the *Dial*, who sent him to Germany during the twenties to negotiate with Herwarth Walden to acquire pictures from the Expressionist review *Der Sturm*.⁷¹ Dehn was also hired to be superintendent of *The Dial's* Portfolio of Modern Art.⁷² Flannagan's first drawing for the *Dial* (fig. 3) appeared in the May 1921 issue, sandwiched between a short story by Konrad Bercovici and a translation by Ezra Pound.⁷³ Two others appeared there in 1926.⁷⁴ All three drawings have stylistic affinities to Flannagan's early woodcarvings of the same period (fig. 15) and do not have distinctive titles (the first is entitled "A Drawing"; the latter two are both entitled "Drawing for Carving").

Judging by Flannagan's interest in and knowledge of the writers it published, it seems likely that he subscribed to or read *The Dial*. One of Flannagan's best-known sculptures, *Triumph of the Egg* (1937, MoMA), is named after a short story by Sherwood Anderson that appeared in the March 1920 issue. As evidenced by his correspondence, Flannagan was both well read and knowledgeable about contemporary arts and letters. During its tenure, *The Dial* published works by such eminent art and cultural critics as Roger Fry, Henry McBride, and Van Wyck Brooks; important writers and poets such as D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot; and European and American artists such as Henri Matisse,

⁷⁰ The best-represented artists in the *Dial* were Dehn and Picasso.

⁷¹ Nicholas Joost, *Scofield Thayer and The Dial: An Illustrated History* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University, 1964), 211.

⁷² Cox, "Adolf Dehn: The Life," 5.

⁷³ This drawing was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1982 as a bequest of Scofield Thayer.

⁷⁴ Perhaps Flannagan renewed his connection with *The Dial* through an acquaintance with one of his neighbors at Patchin Place in New York's Greenwich Village. According to the exhibition catalogue for the ninth annual exhibition of The Society of Independent Artists, Flannagan lived at #6 Patchin Place in 1925; Alyse Gregory, the magazine's managing editor, lived at #4 from roughly 1922-30.

Pablo Picasso, Charles Demuth, and Charles Burchfield. It is interesting to note that just as Thayer disliked abstract art except when it preserved representational elements, Flannagan harbored similar feelings. It is probably not an overstatement to suggest that *The Dial* served as a formative influence on the artist.

In 1922, Flannagan chanced to meet William George Tinckom-Fernandez, a newspaper reporter for the *New York World* and a friend of Dr. Virginia Meriwether Davies. Wife of painter Arthur B. Davies, Dr. Davies owned a farm in Congers, N. Y. and, at Tinckom-Fernandez's suggestion, agreed to give Flannagan work in exchange for room and board. There is little documented information on Flannagan's relationship to Arthur B. Davies⁷⁵ but Forsyth and Bolt maintain that the older artist mentored Flannagan, encouraging him to take up sculpting and to experiment with wax painting. Paradoxically, however, in a 1960 letter to Forsyth, Tinckom-Fernandez maintained that "Flannagan was merely a hired hand to help with the cows, and nothing was said or done about his being an artist."⁷⁶ Since Davies only spent weekends in Congers, was almost thirty years Flannagan's senior, and was by nature quite reserved, it is difficult to imagine the two artists becoming close. However, given Davies's interest in other artists and willingness to help their careers, his influence could have been considerable. Davies was extremely open to the art of different cultures as well as to some of the same disciplines that later interested Flannagan—symbolism, mysticism, and the occult. In addition to

⁷⁵ Brooks Wright's *Artist and the Unicorn* (New City, New York: The Historical Society of Rockland County, 1978) and Bennard B. Perlman's *The Lives, Loves, and Art of Arthur B. Davies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) make but brief mention of Flannagan. My letter to Davies's grandson, Niles M. Davies, Jr., dated July 12, 1999, was not answered.

⁷⁶ William George Tinckom-Fernandez, Middletown, N.Y., to Forsyth, 31 August 1960, Forsyth Papers, Archives of American Art.

collecting American and European painting and sculpture, Davies also collected Japanese prints and envisioned holding a second, Armory Show–type exhibit of Far Eastern art.⁷⁷

Because of his dedication to direct carving, one of the most likely European modernist sculptors Flannagan studied was Constantin Brancusi. As Judith Zilczer points out, two early works by this artist—*Sleeping Muse* (1909-1911)⁷⁸ and *The Muse* (1912)—“were among his [Davies’s] prized possessions.”⁷⁹ There is some chance that Flannagan might also have seen two of Davies’s paintings as early as 1914, when the Minneapolis Society of Fine Arts acquired the Martin B. Koon Memorial Collection.⁸⁰ It seems likely that Flannagan’s emerging sensibility as an artist was very much shaped by Davies. It also may have been affected by Davies’s eclectic choice of media: of the painters who made up The Eight, Davies was the only one who tried sculpture. Finally, Davies was also a printmaker and, interestingly enough, the Weyhe Gallery was the first to publish his prints.

It is believed that Davies gave Flannagan his first professional break by inviting him to exhibit alongside himself and five other well-established artists at the Montross Gallery in 1923. Considered the “dean of dealers specializing in American art,”⁸¹ Newman Emerson Montross had earlier shown works by The Ten. Davies seems to have played the role of trusted adviser to Montross.⁸² Around this time, Flannagan began to alternate between residences in New York City and rural locations upstate—either in

⁷⁷ Perlman, *Lives*, 258.

⁷⁸ Sidney Geist gives this sculpture the date of 1910 in *Brancusi: A Study of the Sculpture* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968).

⁷⁹ Judith Zilczer, “Arthur B. Davies: The Artist as Patron,” *The American Art Journal* 19, no. 3 (1987): 55.

⁸⁰ *Spring in the Valley* and *Night’s Overture* by Davies were two of the paintings described in “The Martin B. Koon Memorial Collection,” *Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Fine Arts* 3, no. 8 (August 1914): 94-95.

⁸¹ Unsigned article, “N.E. Montross, Art Galleries Head, 83, Dies,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 December 1932, sec. 1, 24.

⁸² *Ibid.*

New City or Woodstock. This enabled him to secure a steady stream of exhibitions at both the Whitney Studio Club and Galleries (starting in 1925) and at the Weyhe Gallery (starting in 1927) into the thirties. After working in Congers, Flannagan returned to New York City to rent an apartment in Patchin Place, in Greenwich Village. Gottlieb also lived there, as did a number of writers and other creative individuals. Here, Flannagan met a woman named Florence Rollins who became his mistress and helped to support him. It was also at Patchin Place, between 1923 and 1925, that Flannagan and Rollins conceived of the plan for the sculptor to make and sell hand-carved furniture.

Davies may also have told Flannagan about the informal artist's colony then beginning to flourish in New City, New York, a town near Congers and home to anarchist couple John and Mary Mowbray-Clarke. John Mowbray-Clarke was a sculptor/member of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors (of which Davies had been president), and Mary Mowbray-Clarke was an artist/teacher and co-founder of the Sunwise Turn (1916-28), a New York bookstore partly inspired by Davies and frequented by Zigrosser and other members of the liberal Ferrer Center. The Sunwise Turn was a meeting place for struggling writers and artists, and in addition to selling books on modern art, literature, philosophy, and education, it also displayed artists' work, "often selling things for Hugo and Irene Robus, the Zorachs, Martha Ryther and many others."⁸³ According to Mary Mowbray-Clarke's obituary, "among those who patronized the shop and became her friends were Eugene O'Neill, Ernest Hemingway, Havelock Ellis, Padraic Colum and Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, art expert."⁸⁴

⁸³ Alan Anderson, "Remembering South Mountain Road," New City, N.Y., January 1996, unpublished manuscript, Rockland County Historical Society, 1.

⁸⁴ "Mary Mowbray-Clarke is Dead; Widow of Sculptor War Critic," *New York Times*, 21 November 1962, 33.

Coomaraswamy's *Dance of the Siva*, a copy of which was owned by Flannagan, was published by the bookstore, and many of Coomaraswamy's other writings were issued as pamphlets.

The Mowbray-Clarkes lived on South Mountain Road in New City, in the area that attracted many actors, artists, and writers during the 1920s. According to Alan Anderson, son of playwright Maxwell Anderson and a resident of South Mountain Road as a boy, "Mary Clarke, directly or indirectly, was responsible for most of the artists finding South Mountain Road and vicinity. . . . John and Mary named their home 'The Brocken' and set about creating an artist's colony, first providing tents for young visiting artists and later building cabins for the purpose."⁸⁵ Forsyth and Bolt do not discuss Flannagan's political sensibility or the way this dimension of his character helped to inform his art. Starting with his friendship with Dehn, Flannagan continued to take an interest in individuals who thought against the mainstream, many of whom lived on the fringes of society. Consistently eschewing large-scale sculpture in favor of small, intimate conceptions, Flannagan preferred to render subjects that were unassuming and even powerless. Given his siding with the underdog, his conception of sculpture seems all of a piece.

In 1926, Rollins started construction on a house in New City, and Flannagan spent much of that year in Rockland County. By that time, the South Mountain Road area had attracted many eminent residents such as Maxwell Anderson; Rollo Peters, the Shakespearean actor; Kurt Weill, the composer; and Weill's wife, Lotte Lenya, the actress and singer. It also drew many less prominent artists, some also connected with the

⁸⁵ Anderson, "Remembering . . .," 1.

theater, including Henry Varnum Poor, the painter, ceramicist, and self-taught architect;⁸⁶ his wife Bessie Breuer Poor, the editor and novelist; Martha Ryther and her husband, Morris Kantor, painters; Carroll French, woodcarver and painter; Ruth Reeves, textile designer; Millia Davenport, costume designer, Hugo and Irene Robus, sculptors;⁸⁷ Herman Rosse, painter and theater/film designer; and Gilbert Rose, designer and creator of decorated fabrics.⁸⁸

According to Quentin Anderson,⁸⁹ eldest son of Maxwell Anderson, Flannagan could often be seen wandering the roads and was well known as a drinker. Mr. Anderson recounted to me the story of how his parents invited Flannagan to dinner at their house and at dessert, Flannagan raised his bowl of Jello as if to drink it. It was not clear at the time whether Flannagan was inebriated or was puzzled by the consistency of this unfamiliar dessert. Padraic French,⁹⁰ son of Carroll French, was also well aware of Flannagan's reputation as a drinker, though he said in retrospect that many people in the community drank a lot at that time. As a child, he was afraid of Flannagan and was warned not to walk around in Flannagan's immediate neighborhood. Mr. French's father built plinths for Flannagan's sculpture and also helped him to gather stones to carve. According to Padraic French, Flannagan was generally not well liked because he drank too much. Anne Poor recalled her mother's feelings for the artist during this period in the following way:

The fact is, I remember my mother's concern about him. She was always carrying him home to our house in a state of collapse and taking care of

⁸⁶ Poor later built a studio-house for Maxwell Anderson (1935), as well as larger houses for cartoonist Milton Caniff (1941), actor/director John Houseman (1946), screenwriter Ben Hecht (in Nyack), and actor Burgess Meredith (in Pomona).

⁸⁷ A letter to Barbara Robus, daughter-in-law of Hugo Robus, was not answered.

⁸⁸ Alan Anderson, "Remembering . . .," 3.

⁸⁹ Quentin Anderson, personal interview by author, New York, N.Y., 5 October 1999.

⁹⁰ Padraic French, telephone interview by author, New York, N.Y., 9 September 1999.

him. He did not drink a lot but must have had some metabolic handicap that resulted in his unhappy condition. At least that was my understanding at the time.⁹¹

While it is not known just how well Flannagan became acquainted with the work of New City's artists,⁹² it is interesting to note that a craft tradition seemed to be very much the guiding practice in this small community. Many of the artists worked in the decorative arts; however, the person who most seemed to exemplify the philosophy of the arts and crafts movement was Henry Varnum Poor. Poor was familiar with the ideas of William Morris and like Davies, was a master of a number of different media. However, it was in ceramics that he was the most vocal proselytizer, often tying the process of creation together with his medium, the earth. In 1958, he published *A Book of Pottery, From Mud to Immortality*, a summary of his artistic philosophy, and began the first chapter by repeating a motto found on an old English plate: "Earth I am, it is most true. Disdain me not, for so are you."⁹³ Poor's words are reminiscent of Flannagan's own conception of stones as the bones of the earth: "I like to call it mud to emphasize that the most common may be the richest materials from which to make rare and beautiful objects."⁹⁴ Flannagan also shared Poor's belief in representational content.

The creative impulse—What is it? I think the simplest and most natural showing of it is in the desire to represent nature. Great works of art have

⁹¹ Anne Poor, New City, N.Y., to author, 16 September 1999.

⁹² Flannagan does not seem to have visited New City later than 1928, though he mentions in a 1929 letter to Zigrosser that Bessie Poor had written to him from France and that the family was staying near Marseilles. Letter no. 3, Flannagan, Woodstock, New York, to Zigrosser, *Letters*, 20-21.

⁹³ As quoted in Linda Steigleder, "Henry Varnum Poor: The Effect of the Hudson River Valley on Henry Varnum Poor and Some Notes on the Artist's Philosophies," *The Studio Potter* 12, no. 1 (1984): 53-56.

⁹⁴ Henry Varnum Poor, *A Book of Pottery, From Mud into Immortality* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1958), 22, as quoted in Steigleder, "Henry Varnum Poor," 54.

come out of that simple impulse and all the other more complex desires built up around that must be based in that fundamental impulse.⁹⁵

As noted earlier, Forsyth and Bolt did not see the relevance of the Arts and Crafts movement to Flannagan, either as a formative influence or to undergird his direct carving. However, his New City experience might have served to underline early lessons from Minneapolis concerning both the importance of medium and “nature” as the seat of creativity. Flannagan did not study sculpture at the MSA and only began to carve when he arrived in New York. As previously discussed, however, he was probably aware of the places in Minneapolis where he could see handmade objects. Perhaps Henry Varnum Poor helped Flannagan to tie these early lessons to a more three-dimensional conception.

In January of 1927, Flannagan had his first show at the Weyhe Gallery, and by late in the year was on friendly enough terms with Carl Zigrosser to invite him up to New City for a visit.⁹⁶ Several undated letters from Flannagan in New City to Rollins in Manhattan convey topical news and professions of affection. But by early 1928, Rollins had already written to Zigrosser asking for “support in urging a thoro [*sic*] examination of his [Flannagan’s] condition.” And by late in the year she confessed that “John is in a really bad way—he had been drinking most of the spring out at my place—so that I had to conclude there was nothing more I could do for him.” Forsyth writes that the breakup was caused by Flannagan’s physical or mental abuse of Rollins.⁹⁷ In light of Flannagan’s own probable mistreatment, his repetition of this behavior is not unusual. As previously discussed, the artist frequently fell into cycles of recapitulation that, while repugnant to

⁹⁵ Henry Varnum Poor, 1960, as quoted in Marticia Sawin, “On the Art of Henry Varnum Poor,” in *Henry Varnum Poor: Paintings, Ceramics, Sculptures* (exh. cat.) (West Nyack, New York: Rockland Center for the Arts, 1975), n.p.

⁹⁶ Flannagan, New City, N.Y., to Zigrosser, 8 November 1927, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

⁹⁷ Forsyth, “John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works,” 19.

him, also seemed unavoidable. The couple parted ways and by the spring of 1929 Flannagan had met and married a woman by the name of Grace McCoy.

Although few of his papers from the twenties are extant,⁹⁸ Flannagan seems to have alternated his New York City and New City sojourns with stays in Woodstock at the Maverick colony. Minnesota classmates Harry Gottlieb and Arnold and Lucile Blanch had all moved to Woodstock in the early twenties, and Dehn, when he was not in Europe, sometimes stayed as a guest of the Blanches. In 1906, Woodstock had begun to host the summer sessions of the Artists Students League. Arnold Blanch originally visited the colony through the League in 1919 and, after purchasing a home in Woodstock in 1922, remained a permanent resident until his death in 1968 (as did Lucile Blanch, who died in 1981).

The Maverick colony was founded in 1905 by novelist Hervey White and was best known for its musical and theatrical festival, held annually in August. Three years before, in 1902, White had co-founded the Byrdcliffe colony with English visionary Ralph Whitehead and artist Bolton Brown but left in a dispute with Whitehead. Byrdcliffe was created as a utopian community for artists and craftspersons and was ideally sited among the mountains, following the prescriptions of the writer and critic John Ruskin. The difference between the two colonies can bluntly be described in this way: “Byrdcliffe gravitated around the pre-Raphaelite fascination with craft and artists guilds, while the Maverick, with its writers, musicians, and artists was more of an

⁹⁸ In a letter dated 16 August 1942 to Zigrosser from New City, Florence Rollins wrote, “In a period of severe illness a few years ago I destroyed all personal letters with the exception of a few fragments uncovered today in an envelope containing photographs of his earliest work.” Carl Zigrosser Papers.

experiment in free living. Harvey [*sic*] White, founder and protector of the Maverick, took “free” to mean both “untrammelled” and “cheap.”⁹⁹

White bought the land for the 102-acre Maverick farm and built cottages, which he rented out for \$100 a year.¹⁰⁰ The low cost of living was undoubtedly an attraction for Flannagan, as was the democratic temperament of White. Residents worked at what they could in order to earn their keep; the Blanches ran a restaurant called the Intelligentsia.¹⁰¹

Local historian Alf Evers described Flannagan’s early introduction to Woodstock:

In 1924 when Hervey’s Maverick Colony was nineteen years old he asked maverick sculptor John B. Flannagan to hew the trunk of a chestnut tree that had been growing on the hillside above the Concert Hall into a symbol of The Maverick – and so the Maverick Horse was born. Flannagan was at the outset of his career and had not yet taken to picking up the worn and rounded stones which he transformed into the images of animals and humans on which his reputation rests. An epidemic of chestnut bark disease was then killing American chestnut trees. The wood was of little cash value but was admirably suited to sculpture and durable when exposed to weather as the Maverick Horse was planned to be. Using no tool but an axe and working with the intense, explosive burst of energy which was a feature of his character, Flannagan took only a few days to convert the eighteen foot log into the Maverick Horse. Flannagan shared with Hervey a belief in cooperation rather than competition – that was why he was glad to work with an axe for a payment of the prevailing wage for unskilled labor – fifty cents an hour. The Horse, like the maverick stallions of the western canyons was unbranded; Flannagan seldom signed his work. It belonged to no one and at the same time the colony which had captured its passion for freedom.¹⁰²

In addition to the familiar faces from Minnesota at the Maverick, Flannagan also became friendly with ceramic sculptor Carl Walters (1883-1955), who had attended the

⁹⁹ Dennis Drogseth, “Before the Bird,” *Woodstock Times*, 28 June 1979, courtesy Woodstock Artists Association Archives.

¹⁰⁰ Rebecca Daniels, “Woodstock: From Plough to Easel,” *Woodstock Times*, 23 July 1987, courtesy Woodstock Artists Association Archives.

¹⁰¹ *Woodstock Townsman*, 31 October 1968, courtesy Woodstock Artists Association Archives. According to Karl Ann Marling, the “Intelligencia” was originally opened by anarchist Hippolyte Havel. Her essay appears in *Woodstock: An American Art Colony*, the publication of an exhibition given at the Vassar College Art Gallery, January 23-March 4, 1977 (Poughkeepsie: Vassar College Art Gallery, 1977), n.p.

¹⁰² Alf Evers, unlabeled, typed account of the Maverick Horse, Woodstock Public Library, Flannagan file.

Minneapolis School of Art from 1905-07, and sculptors Eugenie Gershoy (1901-1986) and Hannah Small (1903-1992). Both saw Flannagan as a mentor, and Small recalled the carving of the Maverick Horse (fig. 11).

Everyone on the Maverick was watching. They were fascinated. We loved everything that Flannagan did and we were terribly excited about it. I remember seeing him working; he was working frantically and he was doing the whole thing with an ax. It was the fastest work I'd ever seen. When it was finished he went off and had another drink.¹⁰³

Though the Maverick did not perpetuate the high-minded intentions of the Byrdcliffe colony, Hervey White nonetheless continued to champion the production of high-quality hand-made objects. As representative of the extremely dexterous and tactile artists who were invited to work there, Flannagan's inclusion comes as no accident. Though Forsyth consistently mentions the "primitive" aspects of life on the Maverick, this only worked to supplement the arts and crafts mandate under which these artists lived.

In January of 1928, a year after his first show at the Weyhe Gallery, Erhard Weyhe began to furnish Flannagan with a weekly allowance in exchange for representing the sculptor's work. Flannagan continued to receive this stipend until 1938, when he and Weyhe had a falling out. As was later made clear, this arrangement was not a contract and Flannagan was also free to sell his work outside the gallery.¹⁰⁴ However, the psychological effects of this plan on Flannagan were far-reaching. Instead of helping to

¹⁰³ Hannah Small, from unpaginated program of Maverick Sunday Concerts, 1916-1990 within headline "The Horse Returns: 1979," courtesy Woodstock Artists Association Archives.

¹⁰⁴ Laura Canadè (on behalf of Erhard Weyhe), New York City, to Carl Zigrosser, 2 December 1942, Carl Zigrosser Papers. The letter was prompted by an article in *Newsweek* after Flannagan's death stating, "An arrangement with the Weyhe Gallery which gave him \$25 a week for all his work kept him just short of poverty."

relieve the worry of sustaining a livelihood, the artist felt indentured by the pressure of trying to produce enough works for regular shows.

Yet, the unbinding nature of this plan was also demonstrated by Flannagan's relationship to the Whitney Studio Club and Galleries, the precursors to the Whitney Museum of American Art. Flannagan had been offered his first exhibition at the Club in 1925 and continued to be given the opportunity to show and sell his work even after his agreement with Weyhe began. In fact, as enumerated by a letter dated March 20, 1930, Erhard Weyhe bought seven of Flannagan's sculptures from the Whitney Galleries prior to the artist's departure for Ireland (see below). While accepting of Juliana Force's support, however, Flannagan was cynical about her motivations, as indicated by this sentence from a 1929 letter to Zigrosser from Woodstock: "Everyone is excited just now over an impending visit of the Dowager Queen and the Crown Prince, otherwise [known as] Mrs. Force and Forbes Watson."¹⁰⁵ Throughout his life, Flannagan would have trouble censoring his distrust toward those in powerful positions. One could easily speculate that Flannagan's beginnings severely compromised his ability to cultivate a sense of optimism and to keep an open mind.

In the spring of 1930, both to celebrate Flannagan's marriage and to stimulate further work, Weyhe offered to pay the sculptor's expenses for a year in Ireland. Flannagan's conflicted feelings toward Force are further shown in the following excerpt of a letter to Zigrosser:

As yet I haven't turned in anything yet to the Whitney Galleries, but I shall next week. After talking with you I saw Mrs. Force. She was very enthusiastic about my going away (suspicious?) Anyway she thinks it's just the right thing for me at this time etc. In the course of the talk, I told her of course that Mr. Weyhe was making it possible. She was very

¹⁰⁵ Letter no. 2, Flannagan, Woodstock, N.Y., to Zigrosser, *Letters*, 20.

pleased – so much so that she said she would come in there soon to personally speak of what a “generous and sporting” thing it is. That is very interesting to me, because I’m anxious to see you sell my things whether they belong to you or to me – eventually I benefit. So I suggested that if she felt that way she could do me a very real favor by interesting anyone she could (in my stuff) and passing them on to you. She said she could and would.

Also I was told I was “ripe” (whatever that is) for a show over there. She assures me she can arrange exhibitions in Paris & London. However pointing out the likelihood of not selling much of anything over there, but would gain through the prestige and attendant publicity here which she can arrange. Bad news – I shall have to meet Jo Davidson tho.¹⁰⁶

In addition to his cynicism, Flannagan here also reveals his antipathy toward more figurative sculptors such as Jo Davidson. Davidson does not fall squarely within the academic camp and it is interesting that Flannagan could register such a distaste for his work in spite of its expressionistic handling. But Flannagan also felt derision toward more abstract sculptors, including Brancusi. On the subject of Brancusi’s sculpture entitled *The Miracle*, Flannagan allegedly remarked that it was a miracle that the older sculptor could be taken seriously.

Once arrived in Ireland, Flannagan’s initial elation about living in a foreign country soon turned to frustration over his isolation and inability to have his tools sharpened locally. Nevertheless, he felt a new confidence in his work, despite constant anxiety about money and apprehension over the recent birth of his only child, Moira.

I feel now that I’ve made a great mistake in coming here so far off from everything. Despite the wealth of very beautiful stone – conditions practically are all against the sculptor. The mere matter of tools alone is heart breaking. I have to ship them to Galway to get them properly sharpened. They cost me a shilling apiece to sharpen. Working entirely in Granite or marbles just as hard and at the rate I’ve been going I send down 40 a week. Sculpture is hardly an art for a poor man so sculptors shouldn’t have children. This is not in any sense a complaint but rather an endeavor to show you why I have found it necessary to call on you for money. This

¹⁰⁶ Flannagan, Woodstock, N.Y., to Zigrosser, winter 1929-30, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

is all my own funeral, but I've got one great thing since I've come and that is a certain sort of assurance as to the future. I mean by that I'm dead sure of the things I do now. In short I feel *capable*, and I think touched a sculptural secret that is real. So I suppose the future will take care of itself at any rate I'm not worrying about it as much as I used to, even so, with a new responsibility there are times when I feel uneasy.¹⁰⁷

In spite of Flannagan's feelings of coming into his own as a sculptor, his ambivalence about fatherhood and the added responsibility of his daughter are disturbing. One cannot help but feel that Flannagan did not have the proper tools to be a parent and that his words are prophetic of problems to come. After staying in Ireland for almost a year, Flannagan moved his family to France in May of 1931. Unfortunately, however, his productivity overseas did not continue; he became inebriated and several friends then living in Paris stepped in to help Grace and the baby. Flannagan's wife returned to the United States,¹⁰⁸ and Harry Gottlieb wired the Weyhe Gallery for money to pay Flannagan's return passage.¹⁰⁹ The sculptor Heinz Warneke (also represented by the Weyhe Gallery) and his wife, Jesse, lent their own money to help defray Grace's expenses.¹¹⁰ Apparently Flannagan could not deal with the added responsibility of supporting a family, especially given his own fragmented upbringing. Like his own parents before him, Flannagan turned to other means of escape, both through drinking and actual physical displacement. Flannagan returned to the United States that spring, but not without piquing Erhard Weyhe's discomfort concerning the artist's alcohol

¹⁰⁷ Letter 8, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, September 1930, *Letters*, 28.

¹⁰⁸ A cablegram from Paris dated May 20, 1931, from Grace Flannagan to Carl Zigrosser reads "PLEASE CABLE ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS REPATRIATION SELF AND BABY TO AMERICAN AID SOCIETY CARE AMEXCO PARIS DESTITUTE JOHN DRUNK TEN DAYS FORCED TO LEAVE HIM" (Carl Zigrosser Papers).

¹⁰⁹ Harry Gottlieb, Paris, France, to Erhard Weyhe, cablegram, 23 May 1931 (Carl Zigrosser Papers).

¹¹⁰ Jesse Warneke to Carl Zigrosser, Paris correspondence dated 28 May 1931, 18 June 1931, 13 July 1931, and 8 April 1943 (Carl Zigrosser Papers).

problem.¹¹¹ Flannagan had his fourth show in November of 1931 at the Weyhe Gallery and received a Guggenheim Fellowship for an additional year in Ireland the following year, 1932-33.

There is very little information available about Flannagan's second trip to Ireland. Most surprising of all is that he wished to go back to a place that had triggered so much unpleasantness. In the previous year, he had managed to complete only about half of the promised number of sculptures to Erhard Weyhe. He also clearly felt overwhelmed by the changes in his personal life. Once arrived, he continued to carve the animal subjects that had begun to establish his reputation, as well as to paint watercolors of the countryside. But this time, he and his family stayed in Dublin, which offered the chance for much-needed social interaction. Flannagan received an introduction to an Irish judge by the name of C.P. Curran through the writer Padraic Colum.¹¹² This is worthy of mention because Flannagan offered to give Curran one of his sculptures, *Mother and Child* (fig. 160), as a token of his friendship. Knowing Flannagan's financial circumstances, Curran felt that this represented too much of a sacrifice. A compromise was reached by Curran's purchasing the sculpture and then presenting it as a gift to the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin. As discussed below, this work would prove pivotal for several later sculptural endeavors in the decade.

By the early thirties, Flannagan was becoming established professionally but ever more troubled in his personal life. On his return to New York in June of 1933, he faced few immediate prospects, although his work had been recognized by the Fairmount Park

¹¹¹ According to a letter dated 12 January 1942 (shortly after Flannagan's death), from Zigrosser to Weyhe, the latter had a "revulsion against drunkenness," which no doubt culminated in the severing of Flannagan's stipend in 1938. In a cable of 13 June 1931 either to Gottlieb or Warneke, Weyhe wrote, "CAREFUL FINANCING FLANAGAN DRINKING PARIS PRISON EXPERIENCE" (Carl Zigrosser Papers).

¹¹² Forsyth, "John B. Flannagan: His Life and Works," 32 and n. 144.

Art Association in Philadelphia in the 1933 International Exhibition of Sculpture the previous month. This exhibition was significant in that it qualified the chosen sculptors to win a limited number of commissions to design works for the Samuel Memorial in Fairmount Park. Flannagan would eventually be awarded one of these, and his thinking during the decade was affected by the challenges inherent in working on a larger scale.

In November 1931, in his application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, Flannagan had written, “My program would be one of individual application with special attention and observation to the co-ordination of sculpture and architecture as expressed, notably, in 13th century Gothic. The ultimate purpose being the simplification of sculptural designs and structure so as to be effective in the severe architectural scheme prevailing now.”¹¹³ Flannagan was likely aware of the building of the Rockefeller Center complex in New York City even while he was working abroad. It is also probable that he heard about possible commissions for Rockefeller Center through his acquaintance with Diego Rivera, whom he had met at a party (as mentioned earlier) in July of 1933.

The combination of his desire to attain an architectural commission as well as to earn a salary under Juliana Force’s tenure as regional director of the Public Works of Art Project inspired Flannagan to look to past work. Before he had left Dublin, he made a mold of *Mother and Child*; it was this work that the sculptor now decided to use as a model to create an enlarged version of the same subject, renamed *Design for Skyscraper Court* (fig. 68). On an information card for the program, he described his intended work in this way:

A sculptural group designed for the court or garden of our modern buildings. The compositional scheme being the production of a sculptural

¹¹³ Application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a Fellowship, November 1931, *Letters*, 98.

group so related to height, as to “carry” as well when seen from a 13 or 14 floor as well as from the ground. The starting date [Dec. 22, 1933] indicates that I have begun the search for stone.¹¹⁴

As early as the end of January 1934, however, Flannagan could not be located during periodic checks on his progress. He was separated from the payroll on March 29, 1934, for the stated reason that “Upon investigation it was disclosed that Mr. Flannagan was not giving the required thirty hours per week but was staying at home in a state of constant intoxication.”¹¹⁵ In spite of a letter from Flannagan’s psychiatrist to Juliana Force dated shortly after his suspension, he was terminated from the Project on April 28, 1934.

Flannagan’s *Mother and Child* from Ireland coincides with his daughter’s infancy and his inability to come to terms with his role as a new parent. His erratic behavior, aggravated by alcoholism, made the normal attention a happy father bestows upon his child conspicuously absent. The sculpture, on the other hand, represents a depiction of ideal nurturing. Perhaps the fact that Flannagan “recycled” this sculpture for the PWAP is also significant. It must have occurred to Flannagan at some point that he was repeating the same types of behaviors as a parent that had made him feel unwanted as a child. Seen in this way, *Mother and Child* is a negation of this abandonment and loss and a restoration of emotional and psychological well-being.

Flannagan continued to work on *Design for Skyscraper Court* through 1935, perhaps aided by the sculptor Aaron Ben-Schmuel.¹¹⁶ However, his personal life and domestic situation were worsening and he attempted suicide in September of 1934. Flannagan stabbed himself with a bookbinding knife, a revealing choice of weapon given

¹¹⁴ Flannagan, New York City, to Public Works of Art Project, copy of undated postcard, Forsyth Papers.

¹¹⁵ Xerox record of Flannagan’s employment with the Public Works of Art Project, New York City, n.d., Forsyth Papers.

¹¹⁶ Grace Flannagan, New York City, to Carl Zigrosser, undated letter (probably 1934 or 1935) annotated “Thursday” (Carl Zigrosser Papers).

his love of books, especially as a source of reproductions and knowledge about art. For the next seven months he was hospitalized at a sanatorium in White Plains, New York, called Bloomingdale. According to the registers of Bloomingdale Hospital, Flannagan was voluntarily admitted on September 18, 1934, at the age of 37; his admission status was changed to “involuntary confinement” about a week later. Other recorded information reveals Flannagan’s place of residence as New York City, his occupation as sculptor, and his “obligants” as Grace Flannagan and Carl C. Grosser (*sic.*).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Bloomingdale in White Plains, which was established to handle the psychiatric care once provided by New York Hospital, was regarded as one of the most progressive mental institutions in existence. “At the request of the New York State Commission in Lunacy, colored sketches and plans of the institution were exhibited at the Paris Exposition in 1900 and at the St. Louis Exposition in 1904.”¹¹⁷ Contemporaneous with its relocation in 1894 from Manhattan, the term “asylum” was removed from its title in order to help neutralize the automatic equation of mental illness with mental defect in the public mind. According to Bloomingdale’s registers, Flannagan was diagnosed with “psychosis due to alcoholism—Korsakov’s psychosis.” The connection between insanity and intemperance was established in the nineteenth century; Korsakov’s syndrome in particular began to receive added attention during the modern period.

In reflecting upon the fact that Flannagan’s time at Bloomingdale represents yet another institutional experience, it is also important to take note of the changes that some mental hospitals—like some orphanages—were undergoing at the turn of the twentieth

¹¹⁷ William Logie Russell, *The New York Hospital: A History of the Psychiatric Service, 1771-1936* (New York: Columbia University Press, 19445), 350.

century. Due in part to the reforms of the Progressive period, orphanages were evolving toward a more humane model somewhere between the Dickensonian horrors of the nineteenth century and the sugar-coated unreality of *Boy's Town* in the thirties. Likewise, Flannagan's attendance at Bloomingdale can be seen as representative of a temporal cusp within the history of mental institutions. At the close of the nineteenth century, before psychotropic drugs were discovered, "medical thought, and to a large extent, medical practice in mental illness were . . . still dominated by the conception of structural and physiological disturbances as the basic factors in causation and as the main objects in treatment."¹¹⁸ As one example, since dentistry was believed to hold a connection to mental disturbance, many patients had teeth removed to promote neurological health. This belief persisted into the mid-thirties, when Flannagan himself complained about this treatment.

Rehabilitation for mental patients at Bloomingdale centered around a broad spectrum of measures designated under the term "moral treatment." Alcoholics also followed this program, undergoing occupational, recreational, and social activities that focused on abstinence and diversion. As William Seabrook, an acquaintance from Bloomingdale, wrote in *Asylum*, the hospital at that time no longer relied on the use of restraints and depended instead on new and alternative treatments such as hydrotherapy and massage. An even greater array of services was offered to Bloomingdale's paying clientele. As further evidence of its doctors' faith in their plan of treatment, sedative and hypnotic medications were rarely used.¹¹⁹ To the witty Seabrook, Bloomingdale was an institution turned on its head—a place where the orderlies and doctors might easily trade

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 365.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 414.

places with the inmates. Indeed, Seabrook compares Bloomingdale to Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, where the director of the institution/authority figure is finally revealed to be insane. In contrast to Seabrook's irreverent musings, however, Bloomingdale to the medical establishment maintained a seriousness of purpose that was beyond reproach. Modern clinical and laboratory methods were introduced as early as 1905 and advances in the general medical service of the hospital continued to be made in the following decades. During the twenties, the teachings of Sigmund Freud were known and had been studied by several physicians, and individual psychotherapy was pursued intensively into the thirties.

While confined, Flannagan was not permitted to work in stone because of the belief that he might try and further harm himself with his carving tools. He instead turned to drawing and experiments in cast metal, one of the "crafts" that was offered under the umbrella of "moral treatment." Flannagan continued to perceive poured metal as a viable alternative to carved stone through the late thirties. In an addenda to an Outline of Project dated October 1939 for a second Guggenheim Fellowship, Flannagan wrote the following:

I have been too exclusively devoted to stone, which because of its very physical character is limited as an art medium by the inexorable logic of stone. As material, there is so much one cannot do and still be true to the essential nature of stone. However, so often the same subject will come off effectively in the more flexible medium of metal even to the point of feeling as a statement that is inevitably metallic.¹²⁰

It is unclear whether Flannagan really believed what he stated in his application or whether he thought that skill in casting metals might make him seem more versatile as a sculptor.

¹²⁰ John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation application, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

When Flannagan was released from Bloomingdale on May 4, 1935, his condition was noted in the discharge register as “much improved.” Nevertheless, by this time, Flannagan had come to believe that he had been incarcerated against his will and that his wife did not have his best interests at heart. A library for the use of patients was available at Bloomingdale and it seems likely that Flannagan became extremely conversant with his treatment while confined. Once again in New York City, he found that his wife and daughter had left him. Though never formally divorced, Flannagan shortly thereafter began a new relationship with a woman named Margherita LaCentra, who perhaps not insignificantly shared a variant of the same first name as his mother, Marguerite (Margaret).

In February of 1936,¹²¹ Flannagan was notified that he had been nominated to sculpt the *Miner* (fig. 96), one of the limestone figures representative of the history of America, for the Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial, adjacent to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The other sculptors selected to create limestone figures were Wallace Kelly, Hélène Sardeau, and Heinz Warneke; Robert Laurent and Maurice Sterne (who replaced the recently deceased Gaston Lachaise) were chosen to create bronze groups.¹²² Asked to respond in writing to the overall plan as outlined by Executive Secretary Henri Marceau, Flannagan replied, “The general conception of the Memorial is very thoughtful and yet so liberally allows a wide scope for a free expression on the part of the artist that it seems to me the real opportunity for a social art form and to

¹²¹ Henri Marceau, Philadelphia, Pa., to Flanagan [*sic*], 18 February 1936, Fairmount Park Art Association Archives, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹²² Penny Balkin Bach, *Public Art in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 97.

call forth the best of what the artist might have to say.”¹²³ He signed a contract with the Fairmount Park Art Association two years later, in July of 1938, and received his first payment (towards a total of \$5,000) the next month.

What ideally might have been a relatively trouble-free period of steady work and reliable payments, however, became a complicated series of often-uncomfortable interactions between artist and approving committee. In 1936, Flannagan’s leg was broken when he was struck by a car while intoxicated. The accident slowed his progress, but what complicated the situation further was Flannagan’s inexperience at carving the figure, especially at a scale and in a style to which he was unaccustomed. Though figures were an important part of his oeuvre, they were often loosely abstracted and created as autonomous works that did not need to conform to a group. After numerous revisions to his original study, Flannagan was forced to withdraw it and to present a new one.¹²⁴ Then, for a meeting with Marceau in the fall of that year, he arrived drunk, occasioning a letter to Zigrosser and threatening the completion of the project.¹²⁵ Through Zigrosser’s diplomacy, Flannagan was able to finish the commission in 1938, but he was never happy with it. Later referring to it as “The Minor,”¹²⁶ Flannagan may consequently have never actually seen the figure in place.

Also in 1938, Flannagan exhibited with the American Artists’ Congress¹²⁷ and the Sculptors Guild¹²⁸ (fig. 98) (he had earlier exhibited with Congress at its first annual

¹²³ Flannagan to Henri Marceau, New York City, 28 February 1936, Fairmount Park Art Association Archives, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹²⁴ Henri Marceau, Philadelphia, Pa., to Flanagan [sic], 29 July 1937, Fairmount Park Art Association Archives, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹²⁵ Henri Marceau, Philadelphia, Pa., to Zigrosser, 26 November 1937, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

¹²⁶ Letter no. 41 from Flannagan, New York, N.Y., to R. Sturgis Ingersoll, Autumn 1938, *Letters*, 62.

¹²⁷ #196 *Figure*, #197A *Head of a Goat*.

¹²⁸ #20 *Goat*, #21, *Morning*.

membership exhibition in 1937).¹²⁹ These two shows followed the severing of Flannagan's relationship with the Weyhe Gallery and his last exhibition there in the spring of 1938. There is very little correspondence about either organization in Flannagan's papers so it is difficult to gauge his level of commitment. However, the simple fact of Flannagan's interest in the Artists' Congress hints at a liberal ideology which runs counter to Forsyth's conception of the sculptor as a modern primitivist aligned more with nature than society. Perhaps Flannagan agreed with Congress's goals on an intellectual level but found himself unable to sustain the kind of group cooperation necessary to their attainment. Also important to Flannagan may simply have been the opportunity to show his work, though none of the sculptures he exhibited carries any known socio-political valence.

The first outdoor exhibit of the Sculptors Guild was most notable for the citywide attention it drew, both in terms of attendance and accompanying publicity from politicians and public servants at both the local and national levels.¹³⁰ Forty-six sculptors, many of them well known, exhibited ninety-six pieces,¹³¹ and 40,000 people saw the exhibit.¹³² Plainly unable to come to terms with anything other than representational art, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia remarked before an abstract study of a bird, "If that's a bird, I'm Hitler."¹³³ Unlike direct carver and founding member William Zorach, Flannagan did not remain involved with the Sculptors Guild (see chapter 5), in spite of the exposure it

¹²⁹ #193 *The Rag Doll*.

¹³⁰ Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, Robert Moses, Edward Bruce, and Eleanor Roosevelt all attended.

¹³¹ "Sculpture Gets Down to Earth," *New York Journal*, 13 April 1938, Sculptors Guild Scrapbook, Archives of American Art.

¹³² *New York Times*, 14 May 1938, Sculptors Guild Scrapbook.

¹³³ "Art Gets Bird," *New York Journal American*, 5 May 1938, Sculptors Guild Scrapbook.

offered. True to form, he preferred to keep to himself, playing out the series of stops and starts that characterize his professional life.

The next year, 1939, saw a severe decline in Flannagan's health when he was again struck by a car, this time suffering a serious brain injury. Forced to undergo several gruesome surgeries, he temporarily lost some of his motor skills before beginning a slow and painful recovery. Flannagan showed one sculpture in the New York World's Fair¹³⁴ (fig. 83) and in December of 1939 was approached by F.E. Hyslop, Jr., of Pennsylvania State College to sculpt a "lion shrine." Presumably, Henry Varnum Poor suggested Flannagan's name; Poor himself had painted a mural for the college.¹³⁵ Interestingly, in applying for this commission, Flannagan seems to have been able to put the uncertainty and self-doubt related to his latest monumental project out of his mind: "Of course, my figure of the Gold Miner for the Samuel Memorial in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia, should demonstrate graphically my ability to handle the large subject in stone."¹³⁶

It is important to point out that *The Miner* was not carved directly but enlarged from an original model by the process of pointing and executed with a pneumatic drill. Flannagan also failed to mention his recent experiments in cast metal, deciding instead to hold himself out as a stone carver exclusively: "Your plan to have the sculpture done in stone rather than bronze is interesting to me, particularly since I have always worked in stone, feeling the necessary clay preliminary to bronze an often fatally facile medium; whereas the sterner character of stone seems to represent a final triumph of the human spirit over a tough and stubborn material."¹³⁷ Flannagan's true working methods were by

¹³⁴ #621, *Head* (granite).

¹³⁵ Flannagan, Boston, Mass., to Zigrosser, 7 January 1940, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

¹³⁶ Letter no. 54, Flannagan, New York, N.Y., to Mr. F. E. Hyslop, Jr., May 1, 1940, *Letters*, 74.

¹³⁷ Letter no. 46, Flannagan, Boston, Mass., to Mr. F. E. Hyslop, Jr., December 26, 1939, *Letters*, 65-66.

this time clearly at odds with his rhetoric. In the spring of 1940, the correspondence between Hyslop and Flannagan ended. Although the exact circumstances are not known, Flannagan lost the commission to Heinz Warneke.

Flannagan's health continued to improve but he was unable to complete very much new or original work. For the last several years he had been borrowing back carvings from the Weyhe Gallery to make molds that could then be used to make casts in bronze or artificial stone.¹³⁸ The ramifications of this practice do not seem to have been felt by Flannagan because he was so in need of money. He was thus extremely relieved in late 1940 when he learned that one of his sculptures, *Figure of Dignity* (fig. 52), had been chosen by the Shilling Committee to be presented to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the time, the sculpture, carved in Ireland, belonged to the Weyhe Gallery. Erhard Weyhe generously agreed to sell the sculpture back to the artist for a nominal fee and to make no claims toward the award money.

In 1941, Flannagan entered into an agreement with Curt Valentin to represent his work.¹³⁹ Born in 1902 in Hamburg, Valentin immigrated to this country in 1937 from Nazi Germany. The following year, he opened the Buchholz Gallery, where he helped to promote many of the European artists—Arp, Brancusi, Braque, Beckmann, Chagall, Feininger, Kirchner, Klee, Lehmbruck, Leger, Moore and Picasso—whom he had come to know as a dealer in Germany. Although Valentin only actively represented Flannagan

¹³⁸ Although it is possible that Flannagan only used the original carvings as models and made clay copies that could then be used to make casts, this seems unlikely.

¹³⁹ According to the press release for Flannagan's memorial show at the Buchholz Gallery, Valentin met Flannagan in 1939. New York Public Library Artists' files.

for a year before the latter's suicide, he continued to show the artist's work through the forties and into the fifties, up until his own death in 1954.¹⁴⁰

A letter of July 18, 1941, from Valentin to Flannagan enumerated the terms of the agreement.

I am referring to our conversation regarding a monthly payment, which I confirm herewith in writing.

I agree to pay \$100 (dollar one hundred) monthly, out of which I will pay the rent for the new studio, amounting to \$50 to be paid at the first of every month, while I will send you \$25 at the 15th of every month. This agreement starts with the first of July and ends on June 30th, 1942.

In return I will be the sole agent for your work as agreed before, and you will deliver all sculpture, drawings and graphic work which you finish within the above stated period, to my gallery. With the year ending June 30, 1942, we will reconsider the balance and in case the returns from sales should exceed \$2400 you will receive one-third of the sum exceeding that amount.

This agreement is apart from our agreement concerning the purchase of the compressor, as stated in your letter of June 21, 1941. And, it also is apart from the agreement concerning the casts in bronze and stone, as stated in your letter of June 11, 1941. But I should like to consider this agreement in case we are successful in selling these casts.¹⁴¹

Flannagan had earlier worked with a compressor, or pneumatic drill, on *The Miner*. But the contents of his studio were sold at public auction in July of 1940 in order to pay accumulated debts related to his illness and it is not clear whether he used such a tool to carve any other sculptures before 1941. In an effort to increase his output, Flannagan asked Valentin to purchase a compressor for him, "Return payment, cash or sculptures.

¹⁴⁰ "Sculpture," Sept. 26-Oct. 14, 1949; "Drawings by Contemporary Painters and Sculptors", Dec. 16, 1952-Jan. 10, 1953; "Drawings by Contemporary Painters and Sculptors," 1953?; "Sculpture and Sculptors Drawings," Dec. 22, 1953-January 24, 1954.

¹⁴¹ Curt Valentin, New York City, to Flannagan, 18 July 1941, Flannagan Papers, Archives of American Art.

You, Valentin, to set the prices—to apply to the obligation.”¹⁴² In an autobiographical fashion very similar to the manner he had written to Zigrosser, Flannagan justified the purchase in this way:

Long ago, I had a job, a good one and carved and painted all the nights. That was “amateur.” So I quit the job to compel myself to live (by) Art alone. I’ve done a lot of starving since, but had always a completely professional point of view and still have—a good one—That’s why I speak truly of “turning stones into bread,” but alas, no matter how fast one labors; carving by hand is pathetically slow, when trying to make at least a bare living by it. So I think of an Air compressor to help. After all we must forever do our “thinking by hand.” With a compressor I can always make a living; that way it will be “making our bread from (air) Wind and stones.”¹⁴³

Flannagan’s metaphor for making a living, “turning stones into bread,” is an allusion to bread as the body of Christ, but here it is a secular transmutation. The agreement gave Valentin exclusive rights to reproduce Flannagan’s work in cast stone or bronze and required that the artist sign all casts; during his lifetime, these seem to have been limited to seven of each piece. In exchange, Flannagan received a flat sum of \$500 but no further compensation for each work sold. However, receipts in Valentin’s papers from John Asmussen & Sons Sculptural Cast Stone and Anton Basky Sculptural Service indicate that casts continued to be made after Flannagan’s death.¹⁴⁴ It is unclear whether Valentin himself authorized these casts or whether they were requested by Flannagan’s common-law wife, Margherita.

Like Zigrosser, Valentin was an extremely patient and supportive friend who forgave the artist’s personal weaknesses for the sake of his art. Indeed, in spite of his

¹⁴² Flannagan to Curt Valentin, n.d., presumably June 1941, Curt Valentin Papers, Museum of Modern Art Archives.

¹⁴³ Flannagan, New York, N.Y., to Valentin, 15 June 1941, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

¹⁴⁴ Curt Valentin Papers.

doctor's warnings not to drink, Flannagan suffered a short lapse in late 1941 that occasioned Valentin's withholding his stipend. Just a few short weeks later, Flannagan committed suicide. The press release to Valentin's retrospective show contains the final details of his short life.

On December 31st last, John Flannagan stopped at the Buchholz Gallery to discuss his coming show with Curt Valentin, his friend and director of the gallery, and also to wish him a happy New Year. At that time he stated that this show was the one thing that kept him from taking gas, his head pains had grown so piercing. Six days later he committed suicide, adding his name to the tragic figures in the art world down the ages, out of whose frustration and miseries great works are born.¹⁴⁵

Perhaps the most salient aspect of Flannagan's biography is his misfortune and self-torture. Indeed, his early abandonment seems to have created a self-perpetuating cycle of alcoholism and depression, alienating those who could help him most. How do we mitigate between such extreme expressions of revulsion as those of Jesse Warneke (Heinz Warneke the sculptor and his wife, Jesse, were the couple that had helped Flannagan's wife in Paris) and those of abiding admiration by contemporaries such as Valentin, Zigrosser, or Bessie Breuer Poor (wife of Henry Varnum Poor)? Jesse Warneke wrote that "Even yet when the door-bell is rung at an unexpected hour, everybody jumps and says 'John Flannagan!'"¹⁴⁶ Yet Poor called him a "tragic and tender man"¹⁴⁷ and wrote the following words to Zigrosser after Flannagan's death:

About Flannagan!—I missed the funeral by the same sort of bad luck that always happened in things to do with him. . . after a weird psychic experience I will tell you about some day . . . A letter from Margareta [*sic*] said what you say, what we all feel . . .from the beginning his life

¹⁴⁵ Press release for Flannagan's memorial show at the Buchholz Gallery, New York Public Library Artists' files.

¹⁴⁶ Jesse Warneke, Paris, France, to Zigrosser, 13 July 1931, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

¹⁴⁷ Bessie Breuer Poor, New City, N.Y., to Robert Forsyth, n.d., Robert Forsyth Papers.

rushed to that conclusion . . . I wrote a story about him which, year's ago! I called Portrait in Ichor, put it away, and on the day he died, I all unknowing, took it out, and put in a sentence about immortality, and the next day Kurt Valentin called up! . . . I don't fool myself, all of us die a little with his death, and all of us gain by it, for he was truly a sacrificial lamb . . .¹⁴⁸

Regrettably, Flannagan's art is overshadowed by the more sensational aspects of his life, for just as Flannagan was forced to withdraw from others, the majority of his sculptures are reticent animals folded in on themselves in defense of the larger world. But they also speak of a purity and simplicity inflected by a love of living things and the interconnectedness of all of life. Given Flannagan's strong Christian upbringing, it is not at all surprising that Bessie Poor spoke about him in religious terms. Flannagan lived in a difficult time, yet one that was incredibly rich in opportunities and art world personalities. He was an active participant in this milieu, and in spite of his idiosyncrasies, should not be seen as a part from it.

As this chapter demonstrates, Flannagan's formative training was diverse, inflected by craft and nonwestern art traditions not previously noted in the critical literature. In addition, Flannagan was exposed to some of the most progressive thinking of the time, both in terms of culture and politics. How did these influences help to form him? What would he keep and what would he discard? Carl Zigrosser's role in Flannagan's life is another unexamined aspect of the story, one that should further contribute to a fuller understanding of the artist.

¹⁴⁸ Bessie Breuer Poor to Zigrosser, n.d., Carl Zigrosser Papers.

Chapter 3 INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue to Flannagan's memorial show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1942, Zigrosser wrote that Flannagan "revealed very little outside influence"¹ and that as a sculptor he was self-taught. It is difficult to name artists that might have served as mentors, yet several contemporary sculptors reciprocally conceived of him in this role (see chapter 7). While the influence of other artists of the period seems to be conspicuously absent, however, Flannagan was knowledgeable about art history and was abreast of contemporary crosscurrents in literature and critical thought, naming several of his works after characters in novels, plays, and short stories and producing written statements which seem inflected with much of the admittedly alternative individualist and spiritual sensibility of the time. Zigrosser and his wide network of acquaintances also offered inspiration in a less tangible form. The way that these influences may have affected Flannagan's art and thinking is the subject of this chapter.

In his published letters, Flannagan mentions a number of artists, both contemporary and past, but writes about none consistently as a source of ideas for his art. In correspondence to Zigrosser, Flannagan sometimes asked about fellow artists in the Weyhe stable, mainly Adolf Dehn but also Rockwell Kent. Other brief mentions reflect topical events in Flannagan's life, such as seeing the painter Augustus John in his roadster in Ireland; relating current news of the Henry Varnum Poors; mentioning to collector Reverend Andrew J. Kelly that he had seen paintings by the former's friend

¹ Carl Zigrosser, *A World of Art and Museums* (Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press, 1975), 176.

Eilshemius at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; telling Zigrosser that he could approximate the small size of some of Maillol's bronzes in his own works in metal (the Weyhe Gallery commissioned editions of Maillol's bronzes, which Flannagan probably saw there); expressing scorn over having to meet the relatively more successful sculptor Jo Davidson; or communicating a desire to cooperate with two of the other sculptors of the Samuel Memorial in Fairmount Park, Robert Laurent and Wallace Kelley. Familiarity with other artists is more difficult to prove. Is it merely a coincidence that both Archipenko (who came to this country in 1923 and taught at Woodstock) and Flannagan gave the same name to one of their sculptures?² As I proposed in chapter 2, Flannagan did not seem to have any sustained interaction with any of these artists except for Dehn and Poor.

Flannagan's mentions of long dead or recently dead artists are sometimes tinged with gratitude, sometimes derision. He thanked Curt Valentin "for Donatello" (perhaps a monograph on the artist)³ but stated in a 1937 letter to Zigrosser, "Rubens is a sour example after a winter with Miller pupils to whom he is the ultimate in art and life etc. Personally I don't react to him very much. For one thing, there's his notable inability to do anything with the figure of Christ, which seems to me to indicate a banal inability to grasp the spiritual essential, much less a spiritual abstraction."⁴ A letter to Valentin concerning a recent sculpture communicates a similar tone: "The Pelican—title 'Long Bird'—might do for G. It is 18 inches tall and *carries* so well from a distance as to be

² *Woman Combing Her Hair*: Archipenko, 1915 (Museum of Modern Art); Flannagan, c. 1930-39 (Metropolitan Museum of Art).

³ Letter no. 74, Flannagan, New York, to Zigrosser, 7 August 1941, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, Margherita Flannagan, ed. (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 89.

⁴ Letter no. 35, Flannagan, Ridgefield, Ct., to Zigrosser, June 1937, *Letters*, 58. Although this excerpt would lead one to believe that Flannagan had briefly taken over a class regularly taught by Kenneth Hayes Miller, there are no records at the Art Students League to verify that Flannagan ever taught there.

effective outside. That varied surface produces a stimulating play of light—it sparkles. That by the way is what Rodin was trying to do.”⁵

In his unpublished notes, typed by his second wife, Flannagan compiled a list of epigrammatic sentences and phrases. Though a few are attributed, most are not. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Flannagan never ascribed the central idea of his credo—that there is an image in every rock and that the efforts of the sculptor merely release it—to Michelangelo. That Flannagan was conversant with the Renaissance artist’s sculptural ideals, however, is indicated by the following quotation: “Michelangelo once said a piece of sculpture properly conceived could be rolled down a mountain side, meaning that its architectonic construction should be such that it should stand the ordinary vicissitudes of fortune in being structurally sound.”⁶

It seems likely that Flannagan had read R. H. Wilenski’s *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* (1932), which highlights Michelangelo’s defenses of sculpture over painting as well as carving over modeling. This book was included in Flannagan’s posthumous “Bibliography,” also compiled by his second wife. The book might also have served as the wellspring of or confirmation for a number of the artist’s ideas. In this book, direct carving holds prominence over cast sculpture and the modern sculptors (Epstein, Zadkine, Hepworth, and Moore among them) are heralded as heroes of freethinking. Margherita Flannagan recorded the artist’s impressions of several of these sculptors.⁷ None is particularly complimentary, confirming Flannagan’s lack of commitment to the most experimental tendencies. Flannagan felt that total abstraction was “dead” and that

⁵ Letter no. 74, Flannagan, New York, to Curt Valentin, 7 August 1941, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, Margherita Flannagan, ed. (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 90.

⁶ John B. Flannagan, “Notes,” Flannagan Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

⁷ While reliable on the whole, I feel that this list is nevertheless open to some question because of Margherita Flannagan’s subjectivity and tendency to embellish.

the representation of living forms helped to breathe life into sculpture. Some of Flannagan's rounded, ovoid forms (fig. 72) superficially resemble works by Brancusi, whose work the former might have seen in Davies's collection or reproduced in books. However, Flannagan's sculptures do not abbreviate the human or animal form as much as they simplify it. Because of this, they never approach being, as Sidney Geist has written of Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse*, "an *object* that yet has human resonance."⁸ Indeed, Flannagan's goal was to make sculpture that appeared natural and unmediated. Nor do Flannagan's works skip to the realm of idea, as Brancusi's *Bird in Space* evokes the concept of flight.

As opposed to the modern sculptors, Wilenski chastised the archeologists and historians of Classical art as Jack Horner's all devoted to the "prejudice-pie" of unchallenged knowledge, specifically that the Greek "ninepins" represent the height in sculptural accomplishment. Wilenski argues that it is impossible to know what the Classical sculptors actually produced because none of the great works has survived intact. It is therefore erroneous to allow Classical sculpture to serve as a benchmark, since its example actually serves as an impediment to the development of new "sculptural values." As discussed later, the tenor of these ideas finds confirmation in Flannagan's speech to the Galway Chamber of Commerce in Ireland, though Flannagan's remarks actually predate Wilenski's book.

Seemingly more influential to Flannagan than individual artists, even such experienced American direct carvers as Robert Laurent, were broader ideas associated with modernism—such as direct carving and "primitivism"—as well as certain period styles. Wilenski pointed to the modern sculptor's models as Negro and Indian sculpture,

⁸ Sidney Geist, *Brancusi: A Study of the Sculpture* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968), 35.

and Zigrosser wrote that Flannagan despised the Graeco-Roman tradition: “His work belongs rather to the great anonymous plastic tradition, the art of Egypt and China, of pre-Columbian America, and of Romanesque and Gothic Europe.”⁹

It is important to point out that Flannagan’s ideas about what styles and periods to emulate were very much apiece with those expressed by other artists and writers of his time. One is struck by how similar Flannagan’s interests were to those of even conservative and moderate sculptors such as John Gregory, Paul Manship, and William Zorach, as shown by their coauthored introduction to the catalogue for the 1939 World’s Fair. “Primitive and early sculpture has had tremendous influence on contemporary art,” as well as “Sculpture is an art that is closely related to architecture and city planning”¹⁰ are both statements with which Flannagan would have agreed. Though more prolific on the subject of the second than the first, Flannagan tried to work within the shifting parameters of the art world as they were then being set.

Art historians have pointed to the emergence of a public category of sculpture in the 1920s and 1930s that was intended to be compatible with such style-conscious developments as Rockefeller Center.¹¹ Though not as successful in an art deco idiom as Manship, Flannagan followed the rhetoric of such a union. His *Mother and Child* (see chapter 4) was meant to fit the sculptural program of Rockefeller Center but was never accepted. Two contemporary books from 1939 that were also included in Flannagan’s “Bibliography” echo his desire to create an “architectonic” kind of sculpture during the thirties. *Modern Art in America* called for sculpture’s “expressive integration with

⁹ Zigrosser, *A World*, 177-78.

¹⁰ John Gregory, Paul Manship, and William Zorach, “On Contemporary Sculpture,” in *American Art Today—New York World’s Fair* (New York: National Art Society, 1939), 171.

¹¹ Joshua C. Taylor, *The Fine Arts in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 187.

twentieth-century architecture”¹² and *Sculpture of To-day* proclaimed, “what so many architects and town planners forget is that in a good modern plan, sculpture can be used to the highest advantage, not *on* buildings, but in *association* with them.”¹³ Though it is difficult to imagine Flannagan taking center stage in any artists’ group or playing a prominent role in the organization of major cultural events, he benefited through peripheral associations with such entities. After exhibiting with the American Artists’ Congress in 1937 and 1938, he also was able to take advantage of the Congress’s gains in enabling contemporary art to be shown at the 1939 World’s Fair.

For Flannagan, as for many earlier American modernists, Wilhelm Worringer’s ideas held crucial importance, most specifically his books *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (Munich, 1908) and *Formprobleme der Gotik* (Munich, 1911). In his dissertation, Joseph Bolt points out that *Abstraction and Empathy* was not translated into English until 1953 but that Flannagan “could have known parts of it from translations made by a German-reading friend, possibly the painter Adolph Dehn.”¹⁴ Another possibility is that Flannagan had read Herbert Reed’s *Art Now* (1933), which discussed Worringer’s ideas as well as the significance of “primitive” art. *Form in Gothic* (in German) was in Flannagan’s collection when he died. Judging by his artist’s statements, I would contend that he was familiar with the content of both books.

In *Abstraction and Empathy*, Worringer argues that certain artistic inclinations, whether toward mimesis or abstraction, are exemplified by certain kinds of art. The urge toward the former, which comes from a feeling of confidence toward the world and its

¹² Martha Candler Cheney, *Modern Art in America* (New York, London: Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., c. 1939), 163.

¹³ Stanley Casson, *Sculpture of To-day* (New York: The Studio Publications, Inc., 1939).

¹⁴ Joseph Bolt, “John Bernard Flannagan: 1895-1942” (Ph.D. diss.: Harvard University, 1962), n. 6, vi.

forms, is exemplified by Classical and Renaissance art. The urge toward the latter, which derives from an insecurity toward the universe and a desire to address spiritual needs, is exemplified by Egyptian, Byzantine, Gothic, and primitive art. Flannagan, while a sculptor in the figurative tradition who no doubt believed in art's capacity for eliciting empathy, was also touched by modern industrial impulses that gave way to alienation. His need to create a highly personal, spiritual kind of art that did not exactly reproduce nature was thus an answer to the call to abstraction. As for Worringer's second book, Flannagan was ready to concede the primacy of the Gothic style as early as 1931, when he wrote in his application for a Guggenheim fellowship, "My program would be one of individual application with special attention and observation to the co-ordination of sculpture and architecture as expressed, notably, in 13th century Gothic."¹⁵ Flannagan also reiterated the ideas in Worringer's books in his lecture at the Galway Chamber of Commerce in Ireland in 1931.

In this talk, entitled "The Development of Art," Flannagan spoke of art history in terms of a series of overlapping styles. Egyptian art, though not always appearing to conform to a high degree of craftsmanship, was actually "freed from convention and, accordingly, enjoyed a sense of spiritual freedom."¹⁶ Greek art, while benefiting from an "immediate plasticity" from Egyptian art that allowed it to achieve greater idealism, was not necessarily a beneficiary of the same kind of intellectual or spiritual outlook. Indeed, its "cold, impersonal and inhuman statuary had led the world of art astray ever since." Moving quickly on to a consideration of the fifteenth century, Flannagan admitted,

¹⁵ "Application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a Fellowship, November 1931," in *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, Margherita Flannagan, ed. (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 98.

¹⁶ This and subsequent quotations about Flannagan's lecture in Ireland come from "Discussion on Art: American Sculptor at Chamber of Commerce," *Connacht Tribune*, 2 May 1931, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

“Although Greek art had handed on a great tradition, the Gothic was more human.” Here we see the genesis of Flannagan’s argument, elucidated in other places, about the role of the artist: to always perceive of himself as subservient to the work of art. It is easy to see the sculptor looking to the Gothic cathedral builders of the past for his model: “My aim is the achievement of a sculpture that should fulfill a definite function in the social consciousness of many instead of a limited few.”¹⁷ Flannagan also praised the Hiberno-Romanesque style of Irish architecture, arguing “after Greek art had become divorced from architecture, it degenerated into a sort of tour de force, expressive of achievements on the athletic fields or in literature.”

Flannagan’s interest in Irish art was probably first whetted by his family ancestry in combination with the Celtic Revival of the turn of the century, whose clearest manifestation was actually in literature. According to Tinckom-Fernandez, the newspaper reporter who had befriended Flannagan in the early twenties, Flannagan was fascinated by stories about the painter Jack Yeats, who came to New York City around 1910 and often talked of the poetry of his son W.B. Yeats and other members of the Celtic movement such as J.M. Synge.¹⁸ Tales about these writers probably served as the strongest impetus for Flannagan’s desire to travel to Ireland and to learn more about its history and legends. Once abroad, Flannagan eagerly absorbed many of the decorative conventions of the Hiberno-Romanesque style—the incorporation of animal motifs and sculpted human heads, as well as the use of the spiral and the interlace—which he then translated into freestanding sculpture. Flannagan’s interest in combining sculpture with

¹⁷ Zigrosser, *A World*, 172.

¹⁸ William George Tinckom-Fernandez, Middletown, N.Y., to Robert J. Forsyth, 19 September 1960?, Robert J. Forsyth Papers, Archives of American Art.

architecture was most surely influenced by the examples he saw on medieval buildings and churches in Ireland.

Worringer's broad definition of "Gothic" as all art of the western world not shaped by classical Mediterranean culture found an audience with Flannagan, though the German art historian's ideas seemed to hold more relevance for him in theory than in practice. Flannagan's personal brand of abstraction had its limits, although the examples of sculptors that he saw represented by the Weyhe and Buchholz Galleries must have provided food for thought.

Pure abstraction is dead, make it come alive by the use of living form. Warm the cold geometry of abstraction with a naturalism in which the superficial and accidental have been eliminated by their union with pure form. A withdrawing of the too close view of things in order to see them in their atmospheric content. Use abstraction to achieve a finality, but, in humanizing it with immediacy, retain it always in a state of becoming, rather than being.¹⁹

Flannagan's engaged but problematic relationship with the theories of Worringer may also be seen in his interest in the last type of art believed to be equated with the urge toward abstraction, namely "primitive" art. Though for other artists more inclusive, this category for Flannagan represented the art of Africa and pre-Columbian America. Though Flannagan was probably unaware of Stieglitz's and de Zayas's exhibitions of African art in the teens,²⁰ he might have been familiar with de Zaya's books on "primitive" art. He was also no doubt acquainted with Erhard Weyhe's huge stock of art books—a substantial number on nonwestern subjects such as Mexican, Central and South

¹⁹ Zigrosser, *A World*, 173.

²⁰ In 1914, Stieglitz and de Zayas mounted an exhibition of African sculpture at 291; De Zayas and others opened the Modern Gallery in 1915, where important modernist collectors such as John Quinn purchased "primitive" sculptures.

American art; Pre-Columbian and American Indian art; and Chinese and Japanese art—even before he started to exhibit with the gallery in 1927.²¹ In 1926, the American artist Max Weber published *Primitives: Poems and Woodcuts*—the same year that *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, which included illustrations of works in the Barnes collection, was also published.²² Flannagan also knew of Joseph Brummer’s Gallery and might have seen African sculpture there.²³

Though the Weyhe Gallery did not hold a comprehensive exhibition of African art until after Flannagan’s death, it routinely showed African sculpture, as evidenced by a note of thanks for a gift from Zigrosser to the sculptor and his wife, Margherita: “We had always thought it enough to look at the little African bronzes at the gallery and in books. Having the monkey and the thrilling textile give an almost ridiculous sense of possessing riches.”²⁴

While it is impossible to account for all of the books that Flannagan read, he is known to have visited the Museum of Natural History,²⁵ which had also inspired Weber. As mentioned before, Arthur B. Davies might also have shown him his collection of “primitive” art. There are many sources that help to explain the artist’s interest in translating the formal properties of “primitive” art into a modernist idiom during the twenties. The frontal and totemic qualities of African art helped Flannagan to evolve an aesthetic based on simplicity and purity of form. But probably the most compelling

²¹ As mentioned earlier, Flannagan might also have patronized The Sunwise Turn, which Carl Zigrosser also was known to have frequented.

²² Gail Levin, “American Art,” in *Primitivism in Modern Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, vol. 2 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 455 and 466.

²³ A “Collection of African Negro Sculpture” was shown at the galleries of Joseph Brummer from November 6 to December 2, 1922.

²⁴ Margherita Flannagan, Boston, Massachusetts, to Zigrosser, n.d., Carl Zigrosser Papers.

²⁵ Letter no. 4, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, ed. Margherita Flannagan (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 22.

reason why he so emulated African art was a personal one: that it represented for him a means of returning to nature and to beginnings

Zigrosser might have been at least partially responsible for Flannagan's interest in pre-Columbian art. In his second memoir, Zigrosser writes of his refusal to acquire pre-Columbian art for the gallery both for ethical reasons and for fear of being accused of smuggling,²⁶ which indicates a measure of his respect for the art of these ancient cultures. And in a letter from Ireland, Flannagan mentions eagerly awaiting an essay by Zigrosser on Latin-American culture.²⁷ Though the content of this article is not known, Zigrosser saw a vital artistic tradition beginning far in advance of European contact and culminating in the work of contemporary Mexican artists. Though not "primitive" in Worringer's sense, living Mexican artists Orozco, Charlot, Tamayo, and Rivera were all represented by the Weyhe Gallery. And as noted in chapter 2, Flannagan met Rivera in 1933 and may have asked for guidance. Flannagan's solid, closed forms, particularly in his mid-career sculptures of animals, seem to point most strongly to the art of the Aztecs. Though he does not seem to have cultivated any kind of sustained relationship to his contemporary William Zorach, similarities between the sculpture by the two men suggest that both may have been looking at Aztec art during the thirties and that each was aware of the other's work.

Judging by his correspondence and the titles of several of his sculptures, Flannagan was also conversant with some of the more popular literature of his time, particularly works by Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson. In an undated letter to Carl Zigrosser, Margherita Flannagan wrote, "We journeyed all over N.Y. state in order

²⁶ Zigrosser, *A World*, 87.

²⁷ Letter no. 6, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, 30 July 1930, *Letters of John B. Flannagan* (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 25.

to get to Dreiser's Sunday—the great master fell hard for John and presented him with his latest book with 'admiration and affection.' The trip was quite expensive—but we think it might eventually be very worthwhile!!!"²⁸ Because this letter is undated, it is difficult to know which of his books Dreiser gave to Flannagan. However, the work that seemed to make the most lasting impression on the artist was the author's first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900).

Sister Carrie, considered Dreiser's most accessible novel and a masterpiece of the American naturalistic movement, is the story of a small-time girl from Wisconsin who moves to Chicago and rises from menial employment to success on the stage. However, the series of ethical decisions confronted by the main character are the real substance of the novel, a fact that originally led the publisher to hold back the book from circulation because of anticipated charges of immorality. The superficial ingredients of the story would have appealed to the artist, as he himself was a transplant from rural beginnings to the big city. But it was probably Carrie Meeber's rags-to-riches journey that would have provided enduring fascination to Flannagan, both personally and intellectually.

To whatever degree Flannagan struggled with his Catholic upbringing in later years, he equated his poverty with the asceticism of the Church. In the last years of his life, particularly, he often referred to the sparseness of his existence. To Zigrosser he wrote, "That card I sent you on my birthday should have read—Sentence 'Life in Solitary.' Even so I have tools and stones and my pipe and want no more."²⁹ In contrast to Flannagan's real life, Carrie pursued a fictional life of material comfort both through her romantic liaisons and her later rise to fame. Dreiser based the character on the life of

²⁸ Margherita Flannagan, Greenwich Village, to Zigrosser, n.d., Carl Zigrosser Papers.

²⁹ Letter no. 83, Flannagan, New York, to Zigrosser, 21 November 1941, *Letters*, 95.

one of his own sisters, and his writing style was heavily influenced by his journalistic background. To Flannagan, this could not have been a novel for the “‘Escapists’ [who] have their comic strip and Walt Disney.”³⁰ Describing his recently completed credo in 1941, Flannagan wrote, “This statement has nothing of that ‘flight from reality’ the ‘romantic’ and neither have I.”³¹ As well as helping to illuminate Flannagan’s sensibility, these declarations also help to explain his attraction to this naturalistic work of literature.

As noted earlier, Flannagan disparaged the painting of Rubens because to him it lacked a spiritual essential. In this context, it is easy to see his attraction to Dreiser. Flannagan grew up in the Progressive era and Dreiser was well known as one of the period’s leading reformers. Dreiser even wrote for the abolition of orphanages. Like Dreiser, Flannagan chafed against the growth of large-scale industrial capitalism. The need to physically retreat to nature, as well as the guise of “primitivism,” were two ways Flannagan chose to return to a less corrupt and more spiritually fulfilling time.

In 1936, Flannagan wrote excitedly to Zigrosser about a sculpture he had just completed.

. . . I have been very elated over the last thing I have done. It’s the figure of a nun and really comes off to me as a religious, or better still as an expression of the abstract idea of FERVOR along with being a really tender little human thing. It would seem that the deep associational emotions of boyhood have given the thing a curious richness. I have shown it to a few people who have all been tremendously enthusiastic and moved by it. Psychologically, the response is a little bit startling in that everyone who has seen it has immediately said in a sort of astonished way, “Je . . . sus Christ!” The last person was Seabrook, who after staring at the thing for about half an hour with “Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ,” said, “I know just the person I can sell this to positively.” Gertrude Stein. He wants a picture of it to send to her. He was probably thinking of “Saint Theresa Not Interested.” I had thought of getting Dreiser’s permission to

³⁰ Letter no. 73, Flannagan, New York, to Valentin, *Letters*, 89.

³¹ *Ibid.*

call it "Sister Carrie." It would be something of a unique literary competition . . . Dreiser versus Stein over what is to me just a little nun.³²

As noted in chapter 2, Flannagan met the writer William Seabrook at Bloomingdale in 1934. The name by which Flannagan's sculpture is now known is *St. Theresa Not Interested* (fig. 81), but what is most interesting is how the artist originally conceived of it. In an ironic send-up of Dreiser's title, Flannagan played on the double meaning of the word "sister," applying the notion of fervor to deterministic behavior of any kind. Like a nun, Carrie Meeber is a character type to be studied, controlled by her instincts and passions. But she is a sister only in the familial sense of the term, for her manna is not spiritual but secular.

Seabrook's title, while not as revealing of Flannagan's thinking, provides a further glimpse into the artist's cultural milieu. The words Seabrook used to name Flannagan's sculpture were taken from the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* by Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson. "If it were possible to kill five thousand Chinamen by pressing a button would it be done/Saint Therese not interested" might possibly allude to Japanese aggression in China during the thirties. One of the American Artists' Congress's targets for protest, the situation in the Far East cannot have escaped Flannagan's awareness. This opera premiered at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Ct, on February 8, 1934. Produced by the Atheneum's director, Chick Austin, *Four Saints* was the first opera to feature an all-black cast. Other now well-known names associated with the production were John Houseman, in his directorial debut; painter Florine Stettheimer, who designed the costumes and sets; and photographer Lee Miller, who was

³² Letter no. 27, Flannagan, Woodstock, to Zigrosser, 29 May 1936, *Letters*, 50.

commissioned to do portraits of the cast. Featuring cellophane backdrops and coordinated color scheme, the opera was visually stunning. More difficult to characterize is Gertrude Stein's libretto, a combination of brain puzzles and memorable lines such as "Pigeons in the grass alas." Although the opera was only staged for six days in Hartford, the publicity for the production put the New England city on the map. It then traveled to New York City, where it had the longest run of any American opera before *Porgy and Bess*.³³

It is unknown whether Flannagan visited Hartford in early 1934,³⁴ but it's possible that he saw the production when it came to New York. It is also likely that he was aware of the attendant publicity generated by the opera. Zigrosser himself saw the opera several times when it came to New York and admired Florine Stettheimer's designs. He was also an occasional guest at the Stettheimer's Manhattan salon, where he often gossiped with Henry McBride. It seems plausible that Zigrosser might have spoken to Flannagan about the opera.

It also seems likely that Flannagan was familiar with Sherwood Anderson's writings, either from reading *The Dial* or possibly even before. Although there is no evidence that Flannagan knew the American writer personally, he might have met the writer's sculptress wife, Tennessee, through common exhibitions at the Whitney Studio Club in the 1920s (see chapter 6). Zigrosser was also friendly with Tennessee and helped her to buy several works through the Weyhe Gallery. Sherwood Anderson's naturalistic style has much in common with Dreiser and both authors also shared mid-Western

³³ Eugene Gaddis, *Chick Austin and the Transformation of the Arts in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 248. Gaddis's biography provides an excellent discussion of the opera.

³⁴ Flannagan is known to have stayed in Ridgefield, Ct, in the summer of 1937 but his papers do not contain evidence of any other Connecticut locations that were farther afield. However, Flannagan's friend the Reverend Andrew J. Kelly lived in Hartford and the two men corresponded shortly before Flannagan's death.

beginnings with the sculptor. Yet Anderson's direct and simple approach to writing seems to present an even more direct parallel to Flannagan's spare and essential approach to sculpture. The short story "The Triumph of the Egg," from Anderson's collection of tales and poems of the same name (1921) must have provided inspiration for Flannagan's identically named sculpture (fig. 88).

In the story, the psychological frustrations of a small family are foregrounded against their attempts to make a living in small-town America. After the failure of their egg farm, a mid-Western couple decides to open a restaurant near a train station. However, a regular flow of customers is not guaranteed and the father decides he must come up with some sort of gimmick to encourage people to stay and order more food. Struggling one night to detain a lone male customer whose train is delayed, he proceeds to perform a series of egg tricks in order to entertain him. The tricks follow an unsuccessful attempt to interest the man in his collection of chicken grotesques, a group of malformed birds preserved in alcohol in little glass bottles behind the counter. The passenger shows little interest in the performance, and with the arrival of his train, quickly gets up to leave. In his rush to accomplish his latest trick, the restaurant owner breaks the egg and explodes in a fit of anger and frustration.

The couple's maladjustment to their surroundings and inability to communicate painlessly with the outside world mirrors Flannagan's own circumstances. The title of his 1937 sculpture, often mistakenly attributed to alluding to the triumph of life or symbolically to Christ's Resurrection, actually signifies just the opposite. Joseph Bolt, Flannagan's first biographer, pointed out the true valence of this title in his 1962 dissertation but Robert Forsyth did not. In Bolt's estimation, "The Triumph of the Egg"

really meant the triumph of death, or the withholding of life. Often called a comic study of a couple's incompatibility with their surroundings, this short story is consistent with Flannagan's belief in man's ineffectuality. But considering Flannagan's likely familiarity with ancient and Eastern art and mythology, he probably also thought of the egg as representing the womb of life.

In addition to the contemporary American writers just discussed, Flannagan admired contemporary Irish writers James Stevens, Lennox Robinson, Sean O'Casey, and the Irish-born but American naturalized writer Padraic Colum. Flannagan apparently tried to look up this group in Dublin on his first trip to Ireland but was unsuccessful.³⁵ Of these individuals, Colum is the only one whom Flannagan mentions in later correspondence, in one specific instance relating to Zigrosser that Colum had come to visit him and was in the process of writing a novel with a sculptor as its protagonist.³⁶ Colum was a frequent contributor to *The Dial* during the twenties (at times serving as writer of "The Theatre" column) and the magazine itself often published articles from Ireland and reviews of books on Ireland. This common interest in a shared national heritage apparently formed the basis for the two men's friendship.

When I first met John Flannagan he had been in Ireland, and he was enthusiastic about the possibilities of plastic art in Ireland. You know about his insistence on the fact that the sculptor should be very faithful to his material? In the stones strewn about the Irish country he saw admirable material. His great urge when I first saw him was to make use of such stones. It was he who directed my attention to the quite unknown pieces (three) of sculpture in blackened stone that are in the Catholic Church of St. Nicholas in Galway. I discovered that nobody looked at them. They were probably in the old St. Nicholas Church and were thrown out when the Puritans took Galway. They must have got buried in rubbish. No one

³⁵ Letter no. 6, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, 30 July 1930, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, ed. Margherita Flannagan (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 25.

³⁶ Letter no. 34, Flannagan, Ridgefield, Connecticut, to Zigrosser, 28 May 1937, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, ed. Margherita Flannagan (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 57.

seems to know about them. They made a great impression on John Flannagan.³⁷

The final literary figure to make his name into Flannagan's correspondence was the Scottish poet Robert Burns, who, though writing nearly a century and a half earlier than the American and Irish writers recently discussed, also captured some of the same emotional expression that Flannagan sought in his sculpture. Shortly before his death, Flannagan wrote to collector Edgar Kaufmann, jr.,³⁸ about his carving of a grasshopper, entitled *Little Creature* (fig. 111), that the latter acquired from the Buchholz Gallery: "Robert Burns could feel for the intimate and little creatures so sincerely that they become bigger than even the artist's heart, and are grand and simple things beyond heroic attitudes and never become the mock-heroic."³⁹

Though Flannagan followed his own preferences, basing his emerging aesthetic on models of his own choosing, Zigrosser's influence should also not be underestimated. While on his first trip to Ireland, Flannagan received a package of three books from his dealer: *Droll Peter* by Felix Timmermans, according to Flannagan a "re-creation of the physical (socio-religious) aspects of Breughel's time"⁴⁰; *History of Art* by Elie Faure, which had been translated from the French by Zigrosser's friend Walter Pach; and *The Dance of Siva* by Ananda Coomaraswamy, which Flannagan already knew. Zigrosser and Flannagan were both drawn to ideas, and it is instructive to look at Zigrosser's early

³⁷ Letter from Padraic Colum, New York, New York, to Robert Forsyth, n.d., Robert Forsyth Papers, Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

³⁸ This was the son of Edgar J. Kaufmann, Sr., the owner of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water*, 1934-37, Bear Run, Pa.

³⁹ Letter no. 71, Flannagan, New York, to Edgar Kaufmann, 15 June 1941, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, ed. Margherita Flannagan (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 87.

⁴⁰ Letter no. 5, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, 22 June 1930, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, ed. Margherita Flannagan (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 24.

background and interests in order to gauge his influence on Flannagan's intellectual development.

Walter Pach and German print dealer Alfred Ströllin recommended Carl Zigrosser (1892-1975) to Erhard Weyhe for the job of curator, a position that Zigrosser assumed after working in the conservative print house of Keppel & Company from 1912-17. As a librarian/researcher at Keppel's, Zigrosser had his wings clipped early on when his request to establish an experimental print shop as an adjunct to the principle business was denied. Zigrosser gave up his position when Keppel's decided not to employ men of draft age during the First World War. Before that, Zigrosser had attended Columbia, developing an interest in libertarian education. Not having earned a degree in art history, and though not in his words an "orthodox" art historian, Zigrosser nevertheless went on to become the foremost print authority in the United States in the period from 1900 to 1950. Zigrosser's association with the Weyhe Gallery lasted from 1919-1940, followed by 24 years as director of prints and drawings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Besides the concern of a diligent curator for a struggling artist, what brought Flannagan and Zigrosser together? Although both the more conventional and personal aspects of this relationship are discussed in more detail in chapter 6, the element of trust played a large role. A self-described sculptor, Flannagan also allowed himself to be "handled" by his dealer, to the extent of branching into different media at the latter's suggestion. Since I would argue that Flannagan's drawings are not ancillary to his sculpture and the prints represent a different kind of exploration altogether, Zigrosser's influence should be seen as considerable. In addition to affecting Flannagan's working methods, Zigrosser also represented a sustained source of intellectual stimulation.

Zigrosser was far more engaged politically⁴¹ than Flannagan, actively participating in the events of the liberal Ferrer Center and serving as editor for *The Modern School* magazine until 1919. He probably knew many of the anarchist artists and thinkers who worked and wrote in the teens before the first Red Scare, partly by attending meetings of the Modern School, an experimental school that eschewed a set curriculum and instead tried to encourage independent learning. An invitation to one such meeting listed Robert Henri, George Bellows, Gutzon Borglum, Jo Davidson, John Dewey, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman among its prospective guests.⁴² In 1919, Zigrosser received a letter from Henri regretting his lack of free time to write an article for the upcoming Walt Whitman number of *The Modern School*.⁴³

Zigrosser's brand of anarchism was more rooted in ideology than active syndicalism. Practically and philosophically, he did not believe in institutions of centralized control, whether traditional forms of education or the art academy. His recollections of the Armory Show, which he attended as a young man, hint at this independent thinking.

. . . The air was electric with the clash between old and new. New vistas were being opened, new discoveries made: primitive and folk art, long neglected arts of the past. The vested interests fought viciously to protect their position; accusations of charlatanism, insanity, or, mildest of all, technical incompetence were directed against the innovators. The battle for *freedom of expression* [italics mine] took on aspects of a crusade that appealed to youth and all free spirits. The battle was not won in a day—it was to endure for many years. But this was the beginning of the fray when

⁴¹ For a more complete characterization of Zigrosser's thinking and political affiliations during the teens, see Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art Politics, and the First American Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), esp. chapters 6 and 7.

⁴² Max Heideleg and Leonard Abbot, New York City, to Zigrosser (attached list), 10 December 1917?, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

⁴³ Robert Henri, New York City, to Zigrosser, 28 May 1919, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

there was hope that many young Davids would appear to slay the Goliaths of convention and reaction.⁴⁴

Of the many guises of anarchism in the teens, the variety that Zigrosser seems to have been most closely aligned with, as Alan Antliff points out, was anarchist individualism. This was also the point of intersection with Flannagan, for Zigrosser believed that the artist was in a unique position to effect change. It is important to clarify that Flannagan did not subscribe to all of Zigrosser's positions. Zigrosser was an ardent pacifist and Flannagan had served in the U.S. Merchant Marine (then known as the U.S. Shipping Board) at the end World War I. However, they seemed to converge on certain ideas that fall on the liberal end of the spectrum, particularly in regard to the artist's personal responsibility to society. In his lecture to the Galway Chamber of Commerce in 1931, Flannagan stated that the object of art was to express the temper of the time. However, by 1940, his views seemed to have softened.

Concerning the mooted social significance of my stuff; a so profound simplicity concerned entirely with fundamental verity, is in itself a compelling form of social protest or comment—especially by its very avoidance, showing as negligible the banality of bourgeois luxury art with its effete insincere sentiment. Lenin said “Art was a weapon” —it is to me only when it's art and sincere.⁴⁵

Since Rivera also used this phrase to write about art, it seems logical that it might have served as a topic of discussion among the three men.

Flannagan's thinking on nature and art might also have been influenced by Zigrosser. Writing about the child's ideal program of study at the Modern School, Zigrosser replaced organized religion with pantheism:

⁴⁴ Carl Zigrosser, “A Catalogue,” *Art in America* 51 (centennial issue of the Armory Show), no. 1 (February 1963): 47.

⁴⁵ Letter no. 57, Flannagan, New York, to Joseph Lilly, Summer 1940, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, ed. Margherita Flannagan (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 76.

It will be noticed that in the above outline there is no provision for formative religion. The Modern School does not teach any dogmatic religion. Its religion, if it may be so called, is that of nature and art, a striving toward harmony with nature, and worship of beauty in man and world. Toward the development of character it offers the cardinal virtues of Courage, Self-reliance, Honesty, Sensitiveness, Reverence for one's Ideals. It draws emotional fervor, not from the hope or fear of a future existence, but from the epic of evolution, the ascent of mankind, the continual struggle of life, the divine curiosity of man, the poetry of nature, the cycle of birth, death, growth, decline of man, season and world.⁴⁶

Though written in a far different context from Flannagan's later musings on aesthetics, there are two important ideas here that seem to inform Flannagan's art. The first is the sense that an inner spiritualism can arise out of a connection with nature. The second is the implication that this communion can only take place through physical retreat and independent thought. Throughout his writings, Flannagan often referred to the importance of place, always equating nature with rejuvenation.

There is here a certain quiet I have sought for a long time. There is peace in the unhurried and simple existence of life here, so that I, in relishing it feel out of place in the highly mechanized drift of our time and have found where I belong. I'd sell my soul to stay on here always and just carve.⁴⁷

Although Flannagan was deeply religious and made religious subject matter a significant part of his oeuvre, he was also cynical about his early upbringing in orphanages run by the Church. Nevertheless, he still believed that Nature was God's gift. In his tract for the Modern School, Zigrosser was writing from the point of view of a liberal intellectual very much disillusioned by capitalism and the excesses of material culture. For him, there had

⁴⁶ Zigrosser, "The Modern School," 1917 pamphlet with cover illustration by Rockwell Kent, 16-17. Carl Zigrosser Papers.

⁴⁷ Letter no. 5, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, 22 June 1930, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, ed. Margherita Flannagan (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 23.

never been any question that religion could provide any answers. It is fascinating that both Zigrosser's passage and Flannagan's narration about *St. Theresa Not Interested* both contain the word "fervor." The rift between the simply emotional and the religious is demonstrative of the divergence in the two men's views. Nevertheless, for both, industrialism became the outward source of blame.

Zigrosser was also very interested in the ideas of the Anglo-Sinhalese writer and curator Ananda Coomaraswamy. Like Zigrosser, Coomaraswamy was a frequent visitor to the Sunwise Turn bookshop, a meeting place for Ferrer Center intellectuals that often hosted anarchist speakers.⁴⁸ As noted earlier, Flannagan owned a copy of Coomaraswamy's book *The Dance of the Siva* and was no doubt familiar with his ideas as well as the reproductions contained within it. One branch of Coomaraswamy's writings dealt with the belief that India's indigenous craft tradition had been submerged by European colonialism and that a return to a preindustrial past would stimulate a cultural awakening in Asia. It is interesting to speculate whether Flannagan's familiarity with these ideas might have attracted him to New City. As close friends of Coomaraswamy, the Mowbray-Clarkes would undoubtedly have invited the writer to 'The Brocken'. Had Flannagan established a personal relationship with Coomaraswamy, he probably would have been aware of the collection of Asian art started by Ernest Fenellosa at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and continued by Coomaraswamy when he was later a curator there.

The writings by Coomaraswamy that most specifically interested Zigrosser were those pointing to a rising tradition of Western anarchist idealist individualism. In Coomaraswamy's conception, this model would parallel the Eastern path to spiritual

⁴⁸ Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism*, 126-27.

enlightenment, attainable through the renunciation of personal power. Coomaraswamy saw the signs for the coming revolt in the writings of William Blake, Walt Whitman, and Friedrich Nietzsche. And he saw modern art as the primary medium through which this idealism could be expressed.⁴⁹ It is thus not surprising that Zigrosser saw Flannagan as a possible agent of this transformation. Though never overtly anarchist, Flannagan remained open to many of the ideas espoused by anarchist thinkers in the teens and twenties and shared by Zigrosser.

Adolf Dehn probably first helped to sensitize Flannagan to the alternative of voluntary association and to the plight of the weak and oppressed within accepted forms of government. These ideas were probably further nurtured by John Mowbray-Clarke in New City. Flannagan translated this empathy into visual form in his sculptural subjects. His mother and child groups depict figures pressed closely together into unified wholes and his animals are curled tightly in on themselves in attitudes of self-protection. The spatial configurations of the sculptures also relate to Flannagan's own insecurities from his early abandonment and lack of a stable upbringing.

In addition to Zigrosser and the Sunwise Turn, Flannagan's acquaintance with Coomaraswamy's ideas might also have come from *The Dial*. In "Art and Craftsmanship," Coomaraswamy defined art as "the involuntary dramatization of subjective experience. . . . For the greatest art is required not merely love, but the comprehension of what is loved, and full self-consciousness."⁵⁰ Flannagan's reverence for animals and nature surely fit this description, as did his ability to release the image in the rock while leaving his stones seemingly untouched. While superficially pantheistic,

⁴⁹ Ibid., 134-35.

⁵⁰ Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Art and Craftsmanship," *The Dial* (June 1920): 744-45.

Flannagan's belief in the artist's role in the continuum of organic processes signals a type of spiritual experience more akin to East than West.

Intellectually and aesthetically, the Syrian mystic and poet Kahlil Gibran may have presented another influence on Flannagan, and like Coomaraswamy, he was also published in *The Dial*. Flannagan recounted an unusual dream to Zigrosser that reminded him of Gibran's writing. The letter bears quoting for its illumination of Flannagan's psychology.

That reminds me of something strange that happened to me in Galway while Grace was in the hospital. It was a dream, one of those startlingly vivid ones that seem more real than reality. I had just dropped off to sleep and dreamt—I was in a very dark room—it was impossible for me to see—yet I felt another presence standing over me—I was startled and in order to find out whether I was seeing things—or whether it was a being—I suddenly jumped up and grasped what seemed to be a real person—holding him by the hands I shouted—who are you? With a strange laugh the calm answer was—I AM YOU and he was gone. This seemed to happen over and over and always the same I AM YOU—I AM YOURSELF. I hardly slept the rest of the time in Galway. Yet the thing felt more mocking than sinister. I suppose you think I'm going mad. To me it seems to explain my persistent insomnia as psychically being afraid of one's own subconsciousness. I'd like to ask an analyst. The damn dream sounds like Kahlil Gibran.⁵¹

Flannagan's mention of the subconscious begs the question of the entry of these ideas into his intellectual development and emerging aesthetic. A familiarity with the writings of the European Surrealists as well as those of Sigmund Freud are both possibilities.

While Flannagan was seeing a psychiatrist during his short tenure with the PWAP and most certainly at Bloomingdale, the former passage from 1930 seems to imply an even earlier conversance with psychoanalytic thought.

⁵¹ Letter no. 8, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, September 1930, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, ed. Margherita Flannagan (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 30.

Gibran⁵² shared some of the same interests as Coomaraswamy in terms of bringing about a closer understanding between the East and West. He also centered much of his attention on the life of the soul and believed that art was one of its sincerest manifestations. Like Gibran, Flannagan felt that art should not be self-contained but should represent the interplay between the inner and outer worlds. This may help to illuminate why Flannagan felt that that pure abstraction was a dead end and that nature was so vital to his work. In his own art, Gibran was concerned both with the essential idea and its outward form. Flannagan, of course, tied the same qualities of simplicity and fundamentality to his sculpture. In both thought and visual expression, the two men had much in common.

While it is impossible to know how invested Flannagan was in the ideas of these spiritualist writers or what he really believed, Zigrosser helped to expose him to a greater range of intellectual inquiry. But were his ministrations always positive? Zigrosser was probably most responsible for the characterization of Flannagan as a “mystic,” which he included in his introductory essay to the artist’s memorial show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1942. Instead of resonating with Flannagan’s strong Christian beliefs and his spiritual openness, however, this label instead carried the connotations of a recluse, an individual who took no interest in society and preferred to stay a part from it. The term “mysticism” also appears in a variety of forms in Flannagan’s journal. From his comment, “Art—the dynamic and acceptable form of mysticism,” there emerges the sense that the term was not well received or understood in Flannagan’s time in spite of its origins in organized religion. Yet for intellectuals such as Zigrosser and Flannagan,

⁵² See “On the Art of Kahlil Gibran,” by Alice Raphael, the introductory essay to *Twenty Drawings by Kahlil Gibran* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919), unpagged.

contemporary writings about mysticism seemed to have held particular relevance. Evelyn Underhill's ideas seem most appropriate in this regard; more so, for example, than Claude Bragdon's writings about numerology, harmonious proportions, and color valences. As mentioned in the first chapter, these qualities may have held more appeal for painters.

Flannagan, on the other hand, distinguishes himself by the desire to translate the spiritual into sculpture. In *Practical Mysticism* (1914), Underhill wrote that the mystic's goal was a contemplative consciousness that would lead to a deeper communion with the levels of life. The achievement of such a state, according to her, would result in true contact with Reality and a cleansing of the doors of perception. For Underhill, artists not only were more likely than others to be capable of pure receptivity but also were more able to express the revelation they had received.

Several other defining characteristics of Underhill's argument are especially well matched to Flannagan's aesthetic. First, she believed that self-simplification and withdrawal of the will from its "feverish attainment of things" led to the surest education of the mystic sense. Second, the discovery of "God in His Creatures" was a defining step, since animals, with their keen receptivity to sensations, were already united with true Reality. While it's likely that both Zigrosser and Flannagan were familiar with Underhill's writings, I would surmise that Flannagan was more invested in the specific idea that direct knowledge of God could be attained through subjective knowledge.

Zigrosser wrote, "the true artist worth his salt is apt to be a maverick, a lone wolf—one who does not follow the herd. It is well to keep in mind that the rest of the herd, or to change the metaphor, those who climbed aboard the bandwagon in the past,

are more apt to be forgotten or known only to specialists, than the artists who were once the mavericks.”⁵³ I would contend that Zigrosser’s willingness to classify Flannagan apart from the mainstream actually contributed to the decline of his recognizability.

In view of his eclectic range of interests and intellectual stamina, it is perhaps also a little surprising to register that Zigrosser’s taste in art might be judged rather conservative. This is suggested in his prejudices toward abstraction and his inability to come to terms with art for art’s sake.⁵⁴ In spite of these detractions, however, I think we must see the balance of Zigrosser’s influence on Flannagan as overwhelmingly positive. As representative of one of the many problems in researching Flannagan, a study of the sculptor’s “artistic development” does not yield much of relevance. Because of this, “intellectual development” must assume a much larger role. Perhaps because he was not an artist himself but a highly informed and passionate insider, Zigrosser had the ability both to stimulate the sculptor intellectually and to encourage his expansion into different media. Assuming a role far beyond that business contact or even friend, Zigrosser himself served as a kind of mentor. In combination with the ideas promulgated by individuals in both art historical and contemporary literature, this single individual was probably more influential to Flannagan than any artist before or of his time.

⁵³ Zigrosser, *A World*, 304-5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 202.

Chapter 4
AESTHETIC

It may seem paradoxical that together with his occasional reliance on contemporary literature, Flannagan was adamant that his sculptures speak for themselves: “Titles are literary,” he wrote in his journal, “and serve sculpture to indicate or suggest the initial impetus of a conception the realization of which is a wholly sculptural expression.”¹ And in envisioning the catalogue for his retrospective show, he wrote, “A catalogue should have no more than a preface. The carvings tell the story. There is no story.”² The idea that titles were merely touchstones for a larger and more transcendent range of meaning made possible by the artist was an enduring part of Flannagan’s aesthetic. It also explains why the vast majority of Flannagan’s animal sculptures are not given distinctive names. As early as 1929, he had started to delineate the beginnings of his famous credo, “The Image in the Rock,” which was first published in 1942. Surely also in response to the critics, he stated, “such qualities of humor or the grotesque or whatever you find are accidental and very subordinate to a conception originally ‘purely sculptural’.”³

As the years passed, Flannagan continued to evolve his aesthetic, sometimes expanding on his ideas and making his language more complex, sometimes contradicting himself and even reversing his original ideas. In his 1931 Guggenheim application, he wrote, “This constant tendency toward experiment and research, toward the elimination of technical sophistry, literary or dramatic or sentimental values in favor of a purely sculptural concept (pure form) has meant disciplining oneself to think and see and feel so

¹ John B. Flannagan, unpublished journal, Flannagan Papers, Archives of American Art.

² Ibid.

³ Letter no. 3, Flannagan, Woodstock, to Zigrosser, 1929, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, Margherita Flannagan, ed. (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 20-21.

naturally as to escape the precious or the esoteric.” Culminating in “The Image in the Rock,” many of Flannagan’s other ideas in relation to nature, primitivism, ideal subject matter and the role of the artist seemed to find a home alongside this initial “sculptural concept.”

Of course, “the image in the rock” could not be released without the agency of the artist and it is Flannagan’s conception of the sculptor as a kind of shaman (divining the hidden) or mystic (attaining ultimate reality through subjective experience) that is the linchpin of his credo. It is interesting to compare Flannagan’s initial conception of the artist’s ideal status (as an anonymous guild craftsman of the Gothic period) with what he would later write. In his credo, Flannagan’s use of psychoanalytic language hints at his familiarity with Freud and Surrealism. The “conscious,” the “unconscious,” and the “subconscious” were all terms employed by Flannagan, and it is the heroic artist—not the anonymous one—who is “fated by cosmic destiny to serve as the instrument for realizing in visible form the profound subterranean urges of the human spirit.”⁴ That the hand of the *sculptor* (emphasis mine) is an “instrument of the subconscious”⁵ is an indication of this individual’s import, for without the artist’s intervention the “profound social purpose of art—communication”⁶ would not be possible.

As noted earlier, Zigrosser had called Flannagan a “mystic” in his essay for the sculptor’s retrospective show at the Museum of Modern Art but had limited his definition to a traditional one that did not make reference to Flannagan’s quest for a more profound experience of God, spiritual truth, the unconscious, or ultimate reality: “He was medieval

⁴ John B. Flannagan, “The Image in the Rock,” *The Sculpture of John B. Flannagan* (exh. cat.) (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1942), 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

in his disinterested and truly mystical passion for humility and anonymity.”⁷ Perhaps Zigrosser believed that the credo by itself (contained in the same catalogue) would illuminate his own essay, or shared Flannagan’s opinion that “it [the credo] has clarity for those with the effort toward intelligence.”⁸ Flannagan had also described himself as a mystic at the end of his life when he had returned to religious subjects and was finishing his last works. But a productive reading of the credo without some background knowledge of Flannagan’s intellectual development or interests is difficult. “The Image in the Rock” is most accessible not in the context of Flannagan’s short-lived attraction to primitivism but in his embrace of mysticism.

As noted earlier, several ideas taken together help to explain Flannagan’s thinking about the mystical, including his identification with stone. Direct carving lent itself naturally to Flannagan’s aesthetic because he conceived of the very act of releasing the image in the rock to be a mystical act. The resultant sculpture became not only the object of a physical birth but a spiritual one. He began his credo with the following statement: “Often there is an occult attraction in the very shape of the rock as sheer abstract form. It fascinates with a queer atavistic nostalgia, as either a remote memory or a stirring impulse from the depth of the unconscious.”⁹ Although potentially accessible to a general audience, Flannagan—like Underhill in her description of the mystic in search of true Reality—clearly assumed this experience to be most available to the artist. The kind of rock was also important. The “rude rock is partly protest against Art as mere

⁷ Carl Zigrosser, “John Flannagan,” *Sculpture of John B. Flannagan* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1942), 9.

⁸ Letter no. 73, Flannagan, New York, to Curt Valentin, 26 June 1941, 89.

⁹ Flannagan, “Image,” 7.

ornament, and rather an affirmation of vigour.”¹⁰ Flannagan rejected “classic poise”¹¹ in favor of “technique never hard or overdone—rather the vitality (suggestiveness) or seeming awkwardness—understatement—disdain of ostentatious skill, manual facility.”¹²

Flannagan’s abstract simplification of natural forms enabled medium to take center stage. One of his most often repeated goals was “to preserve the identity of the original rock so that it hardly seems carved, rather to have endured so always—inevitable.”¹³ But it is here that the artist fell into an internal contradiction, for how can “the eventual carving involuntarily evolve from the eternal nature of the stone itself”¹⁴ when the “shape of the stone does not determine the design”¹⁵? This disparity had been remarked upon by the critics (see chapter 5), as had the “unfinished” quality of some of the sculptures, but as Flannagan stated above, this latter characteristic was intentional. Flannagan seems to have been caught between the desire to make his sculpture appear unstudied and yet also to claim responsibility for its ultimate realization. Some of Flannagan’s preceding statements also suggest the quality of animism, as does the following paragraph from his second application for a Guggenheim:

This is an austere art which compels a clear perception of its scope and limitations. Therefore it seems that it should be of a generalized universal symbolic nature . . . man, woman, child, animal. The fusion of abstract design with feeling and representational values is one of the major problems of art expression. The design, the sculptural form is of course fundamental but it is necessary to vitalize this through emotion and verisimilitude else the work become cold and remote. Over and above the tactile organization of lines, planes and masses should brood the mystery of a living thing.¹⁶

¹⁰ Letter no. 66, Flannagan, Boston, to Walter Pach, March 1941, *Letters*, 83.

¹¹ Flannagan, “Image,” 8.

¹² Flannagan, unpublished journal, Flannagan Papers.

¹³ Flannagan, “Image,” 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁵ Letter no. 3, Flannagan, Woodstock, to Zigrosser, 1929, *Letters*, 20.

¹⁶ Flannagan, “Application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, October 1939,” *Letters*, 99.

In spite of Flannagan's inclusive listing, he clearly felt most comfortable with animals as subject matter. Writing from Bloomingdale in 1934, he expressed doubt about his ability to render the human form, telling Zigrosser "I no longer have any illusion about how completely I've fallen down in the use of the human figure . . ." Several years later, however, this preference seemed to have hardened into practice, for Flannagan wrote that he had "devoted considerable attention to the use of varied animal forms perhaps as a protest against the universal narcissistic use of the human figure as the only graphic symbol."¹⁷ Although Zigrosser ascribed this choice to Flannagan's "philosophy of pity," Flannagan during his lifetime wrote in his notebook that it was "not a mere sentimental love of animals [but] rather [an expression of] the deeper pantheistic kinship with all living things."¹⁸

This love of all living things was stimulated by nature, which served as a catalyst for Flannagan's creativity not only in sculpture but also in other media. His letters to Zigrosser are punctuated by occasional outpourings of joy upon finding himself in an isolated spot close to an ample supply of stone.

This comes from the rocky wilds of Connemara and these hills are a sculptor's dream—or nightmare—I still don't know which. Stone—stone—green—white—black marble—granites including my black. None of it being quarried—you find it in the fields and fences. Ireland is the most beautiful country I've ever seen and that's said with no sentiment. I'm tempted to paint again—so don't be surprised if I fall.¹⁹

As discussed later in this chapter, Flannagan's mood was very much influenced by his surroundings and access to working materials. To Zigrosser, he spoke of "a realism of feeling rather than a painting or carving of realism." The animal sculptures seemed the

¹⁷ Letter no. 46, Flannagan, Boston, to Mr. F. E. Hyslop, Jr., Department of Agriculture, Pennsylvania State College, 26 December 1939, *Letters*, 66.

¹⁸ Flannagan, unpublished journal, Flannagan Papers.

¹⁹ Letter no. 5, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, 22 June 1930, *Letters*, 22-23.

ideal conduit for such emotion, though Flannagan recognized the “irony of expressing dignity with the figure of a goat”²⁰ (fig. 52, *Figure of Dignity*).

Flannagan’s early exposure to Christian teachings allowed him to believe in the interconnectedness of life and to conceive of sculpture as a way to embody God’s transcendence. However, his devotion to nature and contemplation also point to an interest in Eastern religions as well as pagan legends and rituals. The combination of such a wide range of belief systems does not seem strange when the example of Irish art and culture is taken into account. Flannagan cannot have been ignorant of the importance of the seasonal solstices in Ireland before Catholicism brought a belief in one God. Ancient Irish ritual held great reverence for the Tree of Life, a symbol of the perpetual Earth Mother. In Celtic belief, the earth was believed to sustain the ever-winding tree, in which the spirits of those who were both born of the earth and later returned to it lived forever.

Flannagan’s “humble purposes” were also served by his commitment to a smaller scale. In this case, his actions and statements are somewhat contradictory for he had attempted monumental sculpture during his lifetime and proposed coordinating sculpture and architecture as early as 1931.²¹ But in 1935 he turned down an invitation to do architectural sculpture for the Section of Painting and Sculpture,²² and in 1938 he wrote in the foreword to the catalogue for his Weyhe Gallery show, “There are monumental miniatures and miniature monuments.”²³ Reminiscent of Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy*, he corresponded with Zigrosser in 1936, “I see the things I’m doing now as

²⁰ Flannagan, unpublished journal, Flannagan Papers.

²¹ Flannagan, “Application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a Fellowship, November 1931,” *Letters*, 98.

²² Letter no. 19, Flannagan, New York, to Edward Rowan, 25 April 1935, *Letters*, 41.

²³ Flannagan, “Foreword to Weyhe Catalogue,” February 1938, Carl Zigrosser Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

perhaps more human thru a closer union of the organic with pure abstraction and of course more mature.”²⁴ In this last statement we see two components of “good sculpture” as conceived by Flannagan: a personal element, contingent on scale; and an additional immediacy based on a softening of abstraction through a sensitivity to nature (fig. 69, 121).

In Flannagan’s thinking, the development of sculpture as a “purely personal idiom”²⁵ did not automatically preclude it from being accessible to others. He believed that direct, living observation of life in its varied forms would hold wide appeal. But it was the sculptor’s role to substitute the “austere elimination of the accidental for ordered simplification.”²⁶ In this way, he could achieve “a sculpture feeling as direct and swift as a drawing, a sculpture with such ease, freedom and simplicity that represented it hardly seems carved, but rather to have endured so always.”²⁷

Flannagan’s equation of sculpture with the immediacy of drawing is not surprising given his early formal training, which focused on instruction for painting. However, both he and his dealer downplayed his actual reliance on drawing for the genesis of the sculpture. In his autobiography, Zigrosser quoted Flannagan as having once written, “Preparatory drawing seems much like doing one’s thinking on paper and then carving the conclusion. I prefer to think the thing out first and last in stone or the medium for which it was intended.”²⁸ And in response to Forsyth’s request for a particular drawing within the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Zigrosser replied, “Generally speaking, the studies—if they exist at all—were more like shorthand

²⁴ Letter no. 25, Flannagan, Boston, to Zigrosser, 30 March 1936, *Letters*, 47.

²⁵ Flannagan, “Foreword to Weyhe Catalogue.”

²⁶ Flannagan, “Image,” 8.

²⁷ Flannagan, “Foreword to Weyhe Catalogue,” November 1931.

²⁸ Zigrosser, *A World*, 175.

notes. Most of the time he worked directly with the material. He had an extraordinary visual memory.”²⁹ Forsyth later presented a paper at the Whitney Museum of American Art that contended that Flannagan did indeed depend heavily upon graphic studies before he embarked upon most of his sculptures: “For almost every major piece of sculpture created between 1922 and 1942, a corresponding drawing exists, sometimes executed before, concurrently, or after the sculpture.”³⁰ See, for example, figs. 57/114, 67/68, 74/124, 87/88, and 108/109.

Like Forsyth, I, too, believe that the drawings played an important role in helping Flannagan to work out “a conception purely sculptural.” Yet I also believe that the implications of this practice are revealing not only of Flannagan’s method but also of his state of mind. Although drawings frequently play a role in the work of sculptors, Flannagan specifically promoted himself as a direct carver, a sculptor who prides himself on unmediated contact with his materials. Both Zigrosser and Flannagan probably recognized that admitting to a heavy reliance on drawing would diminish the sculptor’s credibility. It would also have damaged the idea that the sculptor was a mystic uniquely capable of releasing the image in the rock.

In preparation for a never-completed catalogue raisonné, Forsyth collected photographs of numerous rough sketches on scraps of paper as well as finished drawings. The sketches are all in graphite, while Flannagan’s finished drawings were variously completed in crayon, ink, or charcoal. A close study of Flannagan’s correspondence reveals that the sculptor continued to produce drawings throughout his life for all of the

²⁹ Zigrosser, Philadelphia, to Forsyth, 23 September 1961, Forsyth Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

³⁰ Robert Forsyth, “Drawings of a Sculptor,” Goodson Symposium on American Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1, Forsyth Papers.

following reasons: to provide relief from the strenuousness of producing sculpture; to serve as visual records of what he had seen; to act as preliminary studies; and to extend his inventory of saleable works.

Part of Flannagan's denial of drawing as an integral part of his creative process hinged upon this very insistence that he possessed an acute visual memory, which in turn fit with his self-proclaimed identification as a mystic. Within Margherita Flannagan's notes, she remarks that Flannagan once told her, "I used to go sketching with neither a pencil or paper."³¹ In all likelihood, Flannagan was more dependent upon visual representations as reminders for his subject matter than he chose to admit. The Flannagan Papers contain a folder of source material for the artist's sculptures, mostly clippings of animals in various poses taken from *Life* magazine. A very large number of Flannagan's drawings are also nudes, but Zigrosser contended that the artist rarely worked directly from a model.³²

In addition to the drawings, Flannagan also worked in bronze and other metals, painted watercolors, and printed woodcuts and possibly lithographs—but none of these other media held for him the metaphysical qualities of stone. Toward the end of his life, he maintained that he utilized "to the utmost the quality particular to the material,"³³ but one wonders if he would have turned to bronze or metal if health problems had not intervened.

I am working very hard but damn it I tire too easily, which is discouraging because there was a time when one didn't. Perhaps my interest should be more alive than it is just now. I miss stone very much, which makes the switch to such a different medium disconcerting. However, we'll take that

³¹ "Notes by Margherita Flannagan," Flannagan Papers.

³² Zigrosser, *A World*, 175.

³³ Letter no. 17, Flannagan, White Plains, New York, to Zigrosser, winter 1934-35, *Letters*.

medium too in our stride. . . . Ah well—I know I’m doing something with metal as valid in its own way as stone was.³⁴

In his earlier letters, Flannagan mentions stone frequently, often elaborating on its quality, availability, and his feelings toward it. He called the stone in Woodstock “difficult,”³⁵ went on “stone hunts” with his folk-singer friend Sam Eskin in his car,³⁶ and in Boston took “a shack next to a pile of granite.”³⁷ Artist-acquaintances such as Raoul Hague recalled Flannagan’s trips out to the stone yard under the Queensborough Bridge³⁸ and Henry Varnum Poor told of an old stone quarry in New City that was probably also frequented by Flannagan.³⁹ Flannagan was also concerned with keeping his “material somewhat diversified,”⁴⁰ writing for example in 1935, “I feel temporarily fed up with sandstone and hope to get enough granite to keep me going for some time.”⁴¹ In addition to sandstone and granite, Flannagan also carved in marble, limestone, bluestone, basalt, and alabaster. (Before turning exclusively to stone in 1926, Flannagan also carved in a variety of woods: walnut, mahogany, rosewood, violetwood, stainwood, hazelwood, tulipwood, and ebony.)

Half jokingly, Flannagan wrote to Zigrosser of “that animus toward rock that keeps me tearing it to pieces,”⁴² but his feelings toward stone were indeed complex. Practically speaking, the artist felt that “sculpture is hardly an art for a poor man so sculptors shouldn’t have children.”⁴³ However, he also tied the practice of direct carving

³⁴ Letter no. 49, Flannagan, Boston, to Zigrosser, January 1940, *Letters*, 69.

³⁵ Letter no. 20, Flannagan, Woodstock, to Zigrosser, 21 July 1935, *Letters*, 42.

³⁶ Letter no. 21, Flannagan, New York, to Zigrosser, August 1935, *Letters*, 43.

³⁷ Letter no. 22, Flannagan, Boston, to Zigrosser, 22 November 1935, *Letters*, 44.

³⁸ Raoul Hague interview by Avis Berman, 29 September 1983, 12-13, Archives of American Art.

³⁹ Henry Varnum Poor interview by H. Phillips, 1964, 13, Archives of American Art.

⁴⁰ Flannagan, Woodstock, to Zigrosser, 29 May 1936, *Letters*, 51.

⁴¹ Letter no. 21, Flannagan, New York, to Zigrosser, August 1935, *Letters*, 43.

⁴² Letter no. 43, Flannagan, New York, to Zigrosser, 27 December 1938, *Letters*, 64.

⁴³ Letter no. 8, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, September 1930, *Letters*, 29.

to religious penance or “working out a dubious salvation in stone.”⁴⁴ In light of the considerable number of sketches and sculptures that include children both alone and with their mothers, these statements seem especially poignant. As opposed to what were presumably his true feelings, expressed in his letters to Zigrosser, Flannagan presented a very different side when writing in a self-promotional capacity. Corresponding with Henry Allen Moe of the Guggenheim Foundation, he wrote,

Perhaps for the first time I have summed up as a whole all the varied aspects of more than twenty years’ quest for the meaning of art, and honestly critical, it should be wider in scope. I have been too exclusively devoted to stone, which because of its very physical character is limited as an art medium by the inexorable logic of stone. As material, there is so much one cannot do and still be true to the essential nature of stone. However, so often the same subject will come off effectively in the more flexible medium of metal even to the point of feeling as a statement that is inevitably metallic.⁴⁵

Only two months earlier, however, Flannagan had pledged a lifelong commitment to stone, telling F.E. Hyslop, Jr., at Pennsylvania State College, “your plan to have the sculpture done in stone rather than bronze is interesting to me, particularly since I have always worked in stone, feeling the necessary clay preliminary to bronze an often fatally facile medium; whereas the sterner character of stone seems to represent a final triumph of the human spirit over a tough and stubborn material.”⁴⁶

The necessity of working in metal instead of stone because of health reasons presented Flannagan with unwanted restraints but also new opportunities. But when offered commissions or awards, he often seemed to jettison his aesthetic in order to

⁴⁴ Letter no. 9, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, 17 November 1930, *Letters*, 32.

⁴⁵ Letter no. 47, Flannagan, Boston, to Henry Allen Moe, 17 February 1940, *Letters*, 67.

⁴⁶ Letter no. 46, Flannagan, Boston, to F.E.Hyslop, Jr., 26 December 1939, *Letters*, 66.

express what he thought the judges wanted to hear. Beneath this strategy seems to have loomed an underlying insecurity, made manifest by statements tinged with grandiosity or queries eager for reassurance. As noted earlier, Flannagan in his later years rationalized the loss of his ability to carve stone with the assertion that he knew how best to utilize whatever the chosen medium. And in spite of shows of uncertainty to Zigrosser, especially in regard to his drawings, the latter wrote that “he grasped, intuitively perhaps, and he managed to convey in his work, the essential nature, the significant gesture of an animal, the cattiness of a cat, the dogginess of a dog, the womanliness of a woman. His drawings have the same rightness and precision of simplification.”⁴⁷

Flannagan’s introduction to metal casting had been mixed, compelled as he was to select it as a medium when he was confined at Bloomingdale from 1934-35 and did not have access to his carving tools. In the intervening years before his death in 1942, he increasingly began to rely on less physically strenuous means of producing sculpture. He would borrow back his original carving, presumably to make a plaster working mold, hand it over to a caster, and then finish the final surface of the cast sculpture. However, since bronze was expensive, it is doubtful whether he completed many works in that metal. A change of medium became particularly urgent after his brain injury of 1939, and in 1940 he wrote to both Walter Pach and Juliana Force not about his direct carving but about his work in bronze. The content of the letter to Pach concerned a possible retrospective at the Brummer Gallery in which Flannagan planned for a substantial number of bronzes,⁴⁸ and the one to Force concerned a submission to her annual exhibition of painting and sculpture.

⁴⁷ Zigrosser, *A World*, 175.

⁴⁸ Letter no. 51, Flannagan, Boston, to Pach, February 1940, *Letters*, 70-1.

I have sent in a bronze because it was the one major thing I had—and anyway, I have decided to work very seriously in metal. After last summer, I feel like starting all over—as I shall do now in a new medium. I began carving stone in the first place simply because I could afford nothing else than the stones in the field. However, I think there was a rightness of the combination of native craft and a so-compelling creative impulse that would fashion things out of any material at hand. Now I feel still unbeaten by circumstances and am going to fulfill another sculptural purpose by working for a complete mastery of metal. The sculpture I sent for your show is the beginning.⁴⁹

The sculpture that Flannagan was speaking of was *Not Yet*, which has been variously named by several different museums and which was originally conceived in stone (figs. 137, 161, 167).

In addition to duplicating original stone works in bronze, Flannagan also authorized cast-stone versions as early as 1934 and turned to the aid of a compressor in the last years of his life.⁵⁰ In spite of the ways that this machine negated central ideas in Flannagan's credo, he still managed to present himself as a kind of shaman whose agency was absolutely necessary to the creation of the work of art: "The wonder machine is coming but it requires the guidance of a "Miracle Man" the artist. We'll see."⁵¹ It is unknown how many of Flannagan's original carvings were duplicated in bronze or artificial stone, since the number was unregulated after Flannagan's death.

Little has been written on Flannagan's works on paper, with the exception of Forsyth's earlier-noted lecture on the relationship between his drawings and sculptures. Flannagan himself rarely mentioned his watercolors or prints, though like his drawings, they seemed to have provided creative relief from the sculptures.

⁴⁹ Letter no. 48, Flannagan, Boston, to Force, 9 January 1940, *Letters*, 68.

⁵⁰ Flannagan's decision to use mechanical means to help complete his sculpture might also have been reinforced by such contemporary books as *Sculpture of To-day* by Stanley Casson (1939), which proclaimed, "To-day sculptors use the electric drill and emery sand. Even that is laborious."

⁵¹ Letter no. 73, Flannagan, New York, to Curt Valentin, 26 June 1941, *Letters*, 88.

All this leads up to a confession. For the most part at night and when too tired to carve I have perpetrated a lot of watercolors. There are about 35 of them and I was about to send you the lot, but got “cold feet” and mailed a few samples. I don’t know what to think of them. If they interest you do *anything* you can with them and I’ll send on the rest. I went out a few times and tried to work direct, but caught myself sizing up rocks mostly. A sure indication I suppose that after all I’m *only a sculptor*.⁵²

In my efforts to get a feeling for the breadth of Flannagan’s oeuvre, I located about 20 watercolors with subjects ranging from scenes of Ireland to nudes (figs. 44, 116).

However, the watercolors do not show the same level of facility as the drawings. Perhaps Flannagan felt less comfortable with this medium because he could not rely on the simplicity of line. Many of the watercolors are muddy and seem to signal a struggle to represent competing values. Flannagan’s indecision regarding the quality of these works was perhaps related to his feelings about his early oil paintings (none of which I was able to locate and which in large number Flannagan allegedly destroyed).

Though the linear quality of printmaking would seem to fit more naturally into the dimension of Flannagan’s aesthetic that centered on simplification, he seems to have enjoyed its execution less—at least during the late twenties. Perhaps originally encouraged by Zigrosser (the Weyhe Gallery was best known for its lithographs by American artists)⁵³ Flannagan wrote to him in 1929, “I have come to hate the sight of woodblock. Hope you can find it in your heart to remit my sentence to only ‘one art’.”⁵⁴ For her dissertation on the Weyhe Gallery, Reba White Williams located nine⁵⁵ “block prints” (both wood-block prints and linoleum cuts) attributable to Flannagan, almost all

⁵² Letter no. 7, Flannagan, Clifden, Ireland, to Zigrosser, September 1930, *Letters*, 27.

⁵³ Reba White Williams, “The Weyhe Gallery Between the Wars,” (PhD diss., Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1996), 63.

⁵⁴ Letter no. 3, Flannagan, Woodstock, to Zigrosser, 1929, *Letters*, 21.

⁵⁵ As first pointed out by David Kiehl, curator of prints and drawings at the Whitney, two prints listed separately, *Goat in Landscape* and *Landscape with Goat*, are probably the same print. I would add that two additional prints, *Landscape with Dog and Scottie* and *Cow Near Cottage in Hilly Landscape* may also be the same print.

in private collections.⁵⁶ Although not previously noted, impressions of several of these prints also belong to major museums on the East Coast. Besides these, a few additional woodcuts are extant (figs. 8, 12, 45), as well as three uncataloged linoleum blocks at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Though not unequivocally attributable to Flannagan, the iconography and subject matter of these blocks—a nude woman standing in front of a horse, a nude woman with eyes averted, and a wolf—are very much in keeping with the artist's other works on paper. Flannagan also made reference to lithostones/lithographs on two occasions⁵⁷ but it is unknown if he actually produced any prints using this method. In an undated letter to Zigrosser, Flannagan's second wife asked, "Would you like to ship on our lithographs . . . [?]" ; however, it is unclear from the context whether the prints were made by Flannagan or another artist.⁵⁸ In contrast to the majority of the drawings, which seem directly tied to the sculpture, many of Flannagan's watercolors and prints appear to me to be discrete works. Forsyth disagrees, maintaining that the drawings, watercolors and prints alike were all anticipatory to the sculpture.

To me, many of the watercolors and prints convey not only a very different impression from the drawings/sculptures but also from each other. In the watercolors, Flannagan seems to be working out figural and bodily relationships within the total content of the image's frame. Flannagan's sculpture does not capture the essence of landscape nor is there a concentration on anatomical details because of the simplification inherent in direct carving. In the watercolor scenes from Ireland, Flannagan appears to be experimenting with a number of competing subjects. Likewise, the watercolors of nudes

⁵⁶ *Quiet Woman or Nude* is erroneously listed as belonging to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It belongs to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

⁵⁷ Zigrosser Papers: Flannagan to Zigrosser, 28 November 1941; Flannagan to Jane Saberski, 28 November 1941.

⁵⁸ Margherita Flannagan to Zigrosser, 28 August [possibly 1936?], Zigrosser Papers.

seem to focus on relationships—such as the spaces around arms and legs, a long mane of hair and the way it surrounds a face, or a towel draped around a woman’s hips—that are not easily explored with a single block of stone.

The woodcuts seem even more remote from the sculpture. There is a uniformity of surface and sense of all-over patterning that to me is reminiscent of the arts and crafts movement, specifically woven textiles. As previously noted, Flannagan first became exposed to the arts and crafts movement in Minneapolis and later lived in artists’ colonies in New City and Woodstock that celebrated the uniqueness of hand-made products. As part of the Celtic Revival, the arts and crafts movement, unlike Irish painting and sculpture, was one of the few areas to see a resurgence of activity in the early part of the twentieth century. Flannagan may have also been looking at German Expressionist prints.⁵⁹

What were Flannagan’s main works in sculpture? Those superficially familiar with Flannagan’s output would probably point to his stone sculptures of animals or infants. Though he also worked in wood at the outset of his career, gradually moving from a two-dimensional conception to sculpture-in-the-round, his early wood plaques and “primitive”-inspired works would probably not be noted. “I think I judge a real sculptor by the sensitivity of tactile surface, like texture, etc.,” Flannagan wrote, “because to get it one *must love stone*.”⁶⁰ Flannagan himself became most interested in the symbolic capabilities of stone sculpture at the end of his life, tying his work ever more closely to his credo. He saw two of his sculptures from the thirties, *Jonah and the Whale* (1937) (fig. 84) and *Dragon Motif* (1932-33) (fig. 57) as “profound,” writing Valentin in 1941

⁵⁹ The Anderson Galleries in New York City held an exhibition of Expressionist art in 1923.

⁶⁰ Letter no. 78, Flannagan, New York, to Valentin, 28 September 1941, *Letters*, 92.

that arrangements needed to be made to borrow them from Erhard Weyhe for his upcoming retrospective at the Buchholz Gallery.

The stone cutter is timeless and *haunted by old human* dreams; so old—prehistoric; yet the Artist does remember. The Alligator called the “Dragon Motif” carved by a chisel that *thinks and feels* fascinated by the *wonder* and terror that must have made the fearsome phantasy that was the “*Monster Motif Phantasy*.” The great longing of the *wishful—rebirth phantasy* that is in “*Jonah*.” These things are not *conscious*, may be *unconscious*, though only *by hand* and just now I realize the *fish* (as in *Jonah*) is the very ancient symbol of the Female Principle. So “*Jonah and the Whale the Rebirth Motif*.”⁶¹

Here Flannagan applied many of the ideas he had been evolving for the credo to two specific works. Among these were a belief in atavism (the reoccurrence to a specific person in the present of dreams belonging to remote ancestors), the sculptor as medium, and the power of the unconscious to channel back to primal myths and archetypes. “So Dragon Motif is not [a] story but older than even the invention of that art form . . . ,”⁶² Flannagan wrote. And in reference to *Jonah and the Whale*, “I have taken considerable liberties with the literal, but I think that in that deeper verity of the symbolic it is right.” As if in summary of Flannagan’s methods, Zigrosser explained, “‘Thinking with his hands,’ as he used to call it, he could in other respects be more receptive to psychological overtones, promptings of the unconscious, suggestions of age-old dreams and fantasies.”⁶³

Compared to Flannagan’s more naturalistic sculptures from his Early Stone and Irish periods,⁶⁴ *Dragon Motif* and *Jonah and the Whale* are more stylized. The former

⁶¹ Letter no. 70, Flannagan, New York, to Valentin, 15 June 1941, *Letters*, 86-7.

⁶² Flannagan, unpublished journal, Flannagan Papers.

⁶³ Zigrosser, *A World*, 174.

⁶⁴ In his dissertation, Robert Forsyth broke down Flannagan’s oeuvre into six periods: the period of Paint and Wood, 1922-26; the Early Stone period, 1925-30; the First Irish period, 1930-31; the Second Irish period, 1932-33; the Middle Period of Stone, 1933-39; and the Final Period of Metal and Stone, 1939-42.

was based on the roundel shape with which Flannagan was doubtless familiar from his studies of Celtic art and his travels in Ireland. He also experimented with this form with domesticated animals (figs. 54, 131). *Jonah and the Whale* relies on the linear edge of the whale shape, positioned vertically, with the figure of Jonah incised, womblike within it. However, *Dragon Motif* continues Flannagan's interest in placing his sculptures close to the ground, as if they grew organically from it. It was also the sculpture in which Flannagan tried to interest Walter Pach when the latter expressed the desire to select one of Flannagan's works with monies from the Alexander Shilling fund. Very different from the dormant quality of many of Flannagan's other sculptures, "in this 'Dragon Motif' the movement is both peripheral and centrifugal. Restless, it moves ever onward finally to turn back into itself, an endless movement—the mysticism of the geometric."⁶⁵

Coinciding with Flannagan's growing consciousness of his own mortality, his statement to Pach points directly at the cyclical nature of existence. As a contemporary Irish sculptor has written, "spiral motifs are symbolic of the ever-inward search for the soul and the ever-expanding universe."⁶⁶ At the same time, these ideas are very much tied to a feeling for design.

There is in its elimination of the accidental, its ordered simplification, a quality of the abstract—lifeless—lifeless, only contra spurious lifelikeness. Yet I attempt by the most simple and unambiguous demonstration of tactile relations, the greatest possible preservation of cubic compactness, few effects of light and shade; a modeling excluding all chance evasive aspects, an approximation to the abstract cubical elementary forms. The artistic representation of the organic and living in this case shifts into the higher domain of an abstract lifeless order, and becomes, instead of the likeness of what is conditioned, the symbol of what is unconditioned and invariable—as though seeking the timeless,

⁶⁵ Letter no. 58, Flannagan, New York, to Pach, 14 September, 1940, *Letters*, 78.

⁶⁶ Patrick Gallagher, as quoted in Lynne Ames, "Tara Circle Keeps in Step with Its Educational Programs," *The New York Times* (March 17, 1996):WC2.

changeless finality of death. Again, the strong metaphysical content of the purely geometric.⁶⁷

Diametrically opposed to the immutability suggested by *Dragon Motif* or even *Triumph of the Egg* (discussed in chapter 3), *Jonah* expresses rebirth. This work is unlike Flannagan's earlier religious sculptures (figs. 16, 18) in that "primitivism" plays no role whatsoever and the intrinsic qualities of the medium are not salient. It does not seem accidental that Flannagan chose this Old Testament salvation story. The fish, as the whale is conceived in the Bible, is one of the most familiar of the Early Christian symbols representing Christ. Similarly, Jonah is considered one of the seers of the Old Testament and a popular exemplar of deliverance from disaster. The fish also represents spiritual wisdom in the older Celtic religions.

Though it may appear overly simplistic to compare the artist to the recalcitrant prophet Jonah, there are certainly similarities between these two character types. Flannagan's frequent cynicism concerning the motives of others is mirrored in the vindictiveness and distrust of Jonah. And yet rebirth is symbolized by God's granting Jonah another chance to carry his message to the Assyrians. The message of God's forgiveness must have assumed a personal relevance to Flannagan, who wrestled with inner conflict throughout his life. He must also have wanted to reiterate the story's message—that God's love is all-encompassing, even towards the enemies of Israel and the lowliest of beasts.

God's inclusive love, particularly towards animals, took on a special resonance with Flannagan. Although he never sculpted any of the animals associated with the four Evangelists, several of his other creatures carry symbolic meaning or have Biblical

⁶⁷ Op. cit.

connections within the Judeo-Christian tradition. The most notable examples are the sacrificial lamb (figs. 104, 154) as a symbol of Christ, as well as the donkeys (fig. 43) and asses (fig. 42) that figure in the Entry into Jerusalem, and the pelican (fig. 172) from the Bestiaries. To Flannagan, *Jonah* also stood for the “female principal,” the miracle of life that makes gestation possible within the female form. Of Flannagan’s sculptures, *Jonah* is probably the most often reproduced in books, not only in its original carved version but also in bronze and artificial stone.

In addition to evoking God and Jesus in his personal letters, Flannagan also named Gautama [Buddha],⁶⁸ an indication of Eastern religion’s import to his worldview and aesthetic. Coomaraswamy’s and Gibran’s influence on Flannagan’s emergent spirituality was noted in the last chapter, as was the connection between Flannagan’s sculpture and *fengshui*, as well as the possible link between his brush and ink drawings and Chinese calligraphy. Together with his interest in animals carrying symbolism within the Judeo-Christian tradition, Flannagan also chose animals from within the twelve signs of the Asian animal zodiac, including the dragon, snake, hare, horse, ram, monkey and dog. Interestingly, the dragon, which is associated with evil in Christian culture, was seen as a beneficent entity in Chinese religion prior to the advent of Communism.

Mother and Child (Design for Skycraper Court) (1934-35) (fig. 68) may be considered another of Flannagan’s principal works. As previously noted, this work was inspired by Diego Rivera and represents Flannagan’s second attempt at monumental sculpture. (Flannagan saw his 1924 *Maverick Horse* as his first “monument,” and Fairmount Park’s *The Miner* [1938] must logically be considered his last.) Though Rivera

⁶⁸ Letter no. 81, Flannagan, New York City, to Margherita Flannagan, 21 November 1941, *Letters*, 94.

had encouraged Flannagan to propose a sculpture that could be integrated into the Rockefeller Center complex, the work itself was not original. Flannagan had carved the prototype on his second stay in Ireland and had returned to the United States with a mold. However, his ideas about the siting of the sculpture conformed to his mature aesthetic. He enlarged the scale so that the sculpture could hypothetically be appreciated from multiple angles in the buildings above it while at the same time still be conceived as a natural part of the landscape. The sculpture was not accepted but was eventually acquired by the Fogg Museum of Art. Flannagan explained his plans in a letter to Paul Sachs, director of the museum: “Considering the essential nature of the piece and its intention, I’d suggest a base or footing of 18 inches height—no more, as it shouldn’t feel formally ‘mounted,’ but rather should *belong* as part of the earth, which is, after all, its simple intent. The *rock* should be an intimate part of the terrain . . .”⁶⁹

The question of Flannagan’s regularity in the use of bases is not easily answered. Carroll French helped Flannagan to build plinths for his sculpture in the twenties and the majority of supports for his early sculptures are consonant with the style of his carvings. As Flannagan began to evolve his credo throughout the thirties, however, he planned fewer and fewer discreet bases for his works, writing in 1937 that he desired to create in the viewer the impression of discovering an “occult fossil.”⁷⁰ Contrary to Flannagan’s artistic conception, pedestals were installed for his retrospective show at the Museum of Modern Art in order to raise the works into what was presumed to be a more comfortable viewing space.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Letter no. 67, Flannagan, Boston, to Paul J. Sachs, 14 March 1941, *Letters*, 84.

⁷⁰ Letter no. 34, Flannagan, Ridgefield, Ct., to Zigrosser, 28 May 1937, *Letters*, 57.

⁷¹ Flannagan object files, Museum of Modern Art.

As previously discussed, Flannagan's goal was to combine personal vision with universal appeal through simple, direct statement. But his point of departure was often autobiographical, a sort of recapitulation, according to Zigrosser, of childhood experiences. This observation becomes particularly relevant in Zigrosser's quoting of Flannagan on the subject of *Mother and Child*: "As a boy I very rarely saw my mother, and I think that the whole psychological story of what that means to a child is implied in this piece, which is a consistent architectonic statement as well."⁷² As in *Jonah*, Flannagan was simplifying his forms into an organic whole. Thus the figure of the child in this sculpture merges into the figure of the mother, forming a single, insoluble bond. Although Flannagan was drawn to the humbleness of animals and the innocence of children, mother and child groupings form another important category within his oeuvre.

The mother and child sculptures (figs. 23, 62, 159) take on a range of meaning that mixes Christian, pagan, and secular elements. Symbolically evocative of the Madonna and Child, they also incorporate a devotion to nature that equates a woman's fertility with the fecundity of the earth. Finally, Flannagan might also have conceived of such groupings as surrogates for the family he had lost. The serenity of such groupings belies the abandonment Flannagan suffered not only as a child but also later, as a husband and father.

Flannagan also shed light on the autobiographical dimension of his sculpture through his notebook. "So many things come to me from the unforgettable impressions or memories of the small boy—frogs—grasshoppers—all learned so thoroughly by the atavistic cruelty of the small boy and his innate curiosity—dissection. I know frogs and

⁷² Zigrosser, *A World*, 175.

grasshoppers with such thoroughness.”⁷³ In addition to the “baser” creatures of the earth, Flannagan often chose to represent larger animals, some of which seem invested with human emotions. In *Monkey and Young* (fig. 61), the mother’s instinctive protectiveness is mixed with a warmth that is traditionally more often attributed to humans.

A provisional “canon” of Flannagan’s principal works might also include *Figure of Dignity* (1932-33) (fig. 52). This was the work that Walter Pach ultimately chose in preference to Flannagan’s *Dragon Motif* with moneys from the Shilling Fund. Since Flannagan typically titled his animal sculptures simply, often only by the type of animal, his deviation here seems significant. Flannagan composed the following letter to Pach after the Metropolitan Museum of Art (on whose board of directors Pach served) had accepted the Fund’s gift of *Figure of Dignity*:

Dear Walter Pach,

It is fitting that my piece should come to the Met—now in the Bock season. A few words concerning it as being an expression of a life-long Assisi point of view—meaning simply a feeling embracing *all* of life as a whole, a fundamental unity that can find an image of dignity even in the figure of a goat.

So often in seeking that ultimate order that is dynamic design, especially in its most direct moments, it is necessary to take a liberty or so with surface aspects—which liberty with the human seems to provoke a response of some psychological pain—but if the figure be that of some other animal, we condescendingly find it acceptable.⁷⁴

Flannagan’s mention of his “Assisi point of view” relates directly to St. Francis of Assisi, the saint who devoted his life to poverty and delighted in nature and animals. It is also evocative of his Catholic upbringing, particularly the Franciscan sisters who raised him at St. Otto’s Orphanage in Minnesota. In this short passage, Flannagan confirms his identification as an animal sculptor, but one with Christian inclinations who has

⁷³ Flannagan, unpublished journal, Flannagan Papers.

⁷⁴ Letter no. 66, Flannagan, Boston, to Pach, March 1941, *Letters*, 83.

incorporated his worldview into his art. He also reiterates his interest in abstraction, justifying his choice of animal subject matter. The irony of *Figure of Dignity* is that while Flannagan celebrated the nobility of an animal far removed from the petty concerns of humanity, the sculpture seems to speak for the “psychological pain” of the artist himself. Tragically, Flannagan found it much easier to see the quality of “dignity” in animals than in humans.

Though Flannagan’s subject matter and materials were sometimes diverse, his work was always closely tied to a worldview incorporating a strong belief in God’s transcendence. Nevertheless, to many, he is now barely distinguishable from the vast number of animal sculptors who worked during the first part of the twentieth century. Flannagan’s declining health no doubt played a role in his increased attention to honing a written aesthetic. But whether his credo has contributed to or detracted from a greater appreciation of Flannagan’s work is matter of debate. Had Flannagan lived a full life, things might have been very different. While his work was not always distinctive, especially from 1939-42 when health concerns intervened, Flannagan nevertheless documented his artistic journey in a unique way. In helping scholars to focus on the role of the sculptor as well as the metaphysical properties of stone itself, his written statements help to provide some of the keys that the unrealized sculptures cannot.

Chapter 5
CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although Flannagan seems to have made every effort to begin exhibiting as soon as he arrived in New York, recognition came slowly. The art scene was still dominated by the conservative academies into the teens, and young artists had few places to show their work. In addition, patterns of patronage were shifting. Modern sculptors such as Flannagan did not have the ready audience or income of the more established artists who regularly worked on commission. Most often creating small works with no particular person or purpose in mind,¹ Flannagan relied heavily on consistent though limited exposure at the Weyhe Galleries during the twenties and thirties.

In spite of the obstacles facing young sculptors desiring to deviate from strictly realist tendencies, however, Flannagan arrived in New York during a period of intense transformation and change. In the first decade of the century, the Eight had held their landmark exhibition in protest of the exclusionary exhibition practices of the National Academy of Design. Shortly afterward, in 1910, an even larger breakaway group exhibited as the Independent Artists. Influential artist-organizers such as Robert Henri, Walter Pach, and Arthur B. Davies were urging other artists to take a more active role in promoting themselves and in becoming more knowledgeable about the latest trends in modern art. The Armory Show, the crowning achievement of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, was largely responsible for freeing the American public from a sleepy provincialism and opening American artists' eyes to the incredible strides being made by European modernists.

¹ See Roberta K. Tarbell, "Advanced Tendencies in American Sculpture," in *Avant-Garde Painting and Sculpture in America* (exh. cat.) (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 1975), 27.

As Roberta Tarbell has written, “innovations in American sculpture were catalyzed by exhibitions of paintings and sculpture in Paris and New York.”² Though Flannagan’s attendance at such shows during the teens is a matter of conjecture, it seems likely that such galleries as Joseph Brummer were familiar stomping grounds once the artist was settled in New York during the twenties. In 1917, two more developments helped to expand opportunities for young artists. First, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Juliana Force started the Whitney Studio Club, which for a nominal membership fee afforded even unknown artists the opportunity to show their work.³ Second, 1917 was the year that Walter Pach, among others, succeeded in organizing the Society of Independent Artists, which in open contrast to the academies and like its French counterpart, was intended to operate under the aegis of “no jury-no prizes.” Though the Whitney Studio mainly showed paintings and the Society mainly showed Realists, these two entities were among the first to exhibit Flannagan’s work.

In the late teens and early twenties, Flannagan served in the Merchant Marine and as an independent seaman and was thus limited in his efforts to become established in the New York art world. Nevertheless, in 1919 he showed with the Society of Independent Artists in its third annual exhibition.⁴ Two works by Flannagan are listed in the catalogue,⁵ but their media are not given. While Flannagan self-reportedly started to whittle as a child, he did not turn to carving wood until the early twenties and stone until the mid-twenties. It is most likely that the works shown were paintings in oil, the medium

² Roberta K. Tarbell, “Early Nonobjective Sculpture by Americans,” in *Vanguard American Sculpture, 1913-1939* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1979), 7.

³ According to Alexander Brook (Brook, *Juliana Force and American Art*), Ms. Force routinely forgave dues from the poorest of artists, as recounted in Avis Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 159.

⁴ In the catalogue to the Independents’ third annual exhibition, Flannagan’s address is listed as the U.S.S. Congaree.

⁵ #195, *Song of Bondage* and #196, *Bewilderment*.

that Flannagan had studied in art school. The artist also exhibited in the Independents' fifth annual exhibition in 1921—#307 *Prelude* and #308 *Overture*—and earned a brief mention in the *New York Post*: “John B. Flannagan is as musical as the suggested cushioned hammers in his prelude and overture.”⁶ Again, the works are no longer extant, nor are their media given. The last Independents exhibition to include work by Flannagan was its ninth annual in 1925, which according to the critic Margaret Breuning included “about 2000 items in sculpture, paintings, and drawings.” In the catalogue, four works by the artist were listed. In spite of the size of the show and the large number of artists included, Flannagan’s work was mentioned as a high point within the sculpture exhibits.⁷ In addition, Henry McBride, the experienced and respected art critic who also wrote for *The Dial*, singled out Flannagan as worthy of notice.⁸

In 1923, Flannagan was invited to exhibit in the Montross Gallery’s *Special Exhibition of Contemporary Art*. The Montross show was a big break for the artist, one presumably made possible through Davies’s generosity and influence as the former president of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors and the galvanizing force behind the Armory Show.⁹ In the Montross show, Flannagan exhibited five “wooden pictures” of religious subjects and two “wax paintings.”

The other artists who exhibited—William Glackens, Walt Kuhn, Charles E. Prendergast, Maurice B. Prendergast, and Charles Sheeler—were vastly more experienced than Flannagan and at least a decade older. As might be expected, the critical reception of the show centered on these more established painters and offered but brief

⁶ “Independents’ Art Show Voluminous,” *New York Evening Post*, 28 February 1921, 7.

⁷ Margaret Breuning, “Independent Show Displays Vast Array of Mediocre Work Along With a Few Good Things. . .,” *New York Evening Post*, 14 March 1925, sec. 5, 11.

⁸ Henry McBride, “Art Show Hope of ‘Unknowns,’” *New York Sun*, 21 March 1925, 15.

⁹ See also Judith Zilczer, “Davies, the Artist as Patron,” *American Art Journal* 19, no. 3 (1987): 54-85.

mention of Flannagan's work. The conservative critic Royal Cortissoz lauded Davies, Charles Prendergast, and Glackens but wrote that "otherwise the exhibits by Mr. J. B. Flannagan, Mr. Walt Kuhn and Mr. Charles Sheeler are of that arid tendency which is to be designated as modernistic."¹⁰ McBride introduced Flannigan [*sic*] as a newcomer and credited him with "attractive carvings in relief and by some paintings that are puzzling."¹¹ In general, few critics chose to describe Flannagan's work in detail, though Breuning and an unnamed *Times* reporter recognized what they in turn perceived as Gothic and Mannerist impulses in the woodcarvings.

The Montross Galleries are holding a special exhibition of contemporary art which includes one new name, that of J.B. Flanagan [*sic*], who works in wood and wax with, for the most part, religious themes. The twisted figures of his carved wooden panels are elongated to a Grecoesque tenuity. They inherit the mood of an age when agony rather than serenity inspired sculptors and painters. They form a striking contrast to the decorative and joyous panels of Charles E. Prendergast and their technical quality hardly compensates for the dreariness of their emotional message.¹²

The show at Montross in 1923 enabled Flannagan to obtain much-needed exposure and to become associated with more established artists. Research has not shown him to have exhibited any paintings after this date, perhaps because they became linked in the artist's mind with McBride's criticism. In spite of the mixed response to his carved pieces, he continued to work in wood and made it the focus of his next big show.

Flannagan became associated with the Whitney Studio Club shortly after his last showing with the Society of Independent Artists in March of 1925. According to Avis Berman, Alexander Brook—a neighbor of Flannagan's at Pachin Place and a painter in his own right—helped to bring the sculptor to Juliana Force's attention through their

¹⁰ Royal Cortissoz, "Portraits and Pictures," *New York Tribune*, 28 January 1923, sec. 5, 7.

¹¹ Henry McBride, "Notes and Activities in the World of Art," *New York Herald*, 28 January 1923, sec. 7, 7.

¹² "Art, the Height of Exhibition Season . . .," *New York Times*, 28 January 1923, sec. 7, 7.

mutual acquaintance, Alice Campbell.¹³ From 1924-27, Brook served as assistant director of the Whitney Studio Club and much of his job centered on scouting out up-and-coming artists. Force believed that Flannagan was gifted, and helping him to get established fit naturally with her personal imperative to help young and struggling artists.

Flannagan's group show at the Whitney Studio Club in December of 1925 represents the first time he was given the chance to present a large body of work. Though he shared billing with the painters Leon Hartl, Charles Houghton Howard, and Dorothea R. Schwarcz, Flannagan showed twenty-one pieces in a room of the Club devoted to his sculpture¹⁴. At least one of these, *Ebony*, had been exhibited before and a majority seems to have been carved in wood.¹⁵ However, this was the first time that Flannagan had exhibited his carved furniture (#20, *Oaken Chest*) and his stone carvings.¹⁶ The three salient themes that emerge from the critical reviews are Flannagan's talent as a woodcarver,¹⁷ his use of "Negro/African-inspired forms," and his stylistic interest in elongation and attenuation.

In a review of the show in the December 19, 1925, *New York Sun*, McBride reintroduced¹⁸ Flannagan as "a young man who is not at all the John Flanagan [*sic*] who did the bust of St. Gaudens recently for the academic Hall of Remembrance." He continued with the following:

Mr. Flannagan's carvings are amazing. He carves in wood, but so fluently that sometimes one is embarrassed by the curves as one is by candy

¹³ Berman, *Rebels*, 221.

¹⁴ "Whitney Club Introduces Leon Hartl," *New York World*, 13 December 1925, sec. 3, 9.

¹⁵ The media of all of the works on the checklist cannot be identified with certainty.

¹⁶ Although Flannagan's representation in this show seems to have been dominated by wood carvings, several pieces can be identified with reasonable certainty as stone: *Rock* (1925), *Pyramid* (1925), *Fragment* (c. 1925), and possibly *Sitting Figure* (1927).

¹⁷ Margaret Breuning, "An Art Record of New York . . .," *New York Evening Post*, 26 December 1925, sec. 5, 12.

¹⁸ McBride had reviewed the Montross show in 1923.

images that melt. They are immensely clever just the same. They have an irrepressible flow like the impulses of Greco, but the fiendish quality of the latter is altogether missing. Not that fiendishness is to be held up as a virtue, but Mr. Flannagan would be the better for a little more sting.¹⁹

In this first substantial mention of Flannagan's work, McBride established the groundwork that would encourage other critics to take notice of the emerging artist.

McBride put forth the idea that Flannagan was an artist worthy of critical attention and one who could be likened to a master from the art historical canon. Flannagan's fluency with his medium would often be mentioned in subsequent reviews, as would his lack of daring.

Though Flannagan never wrote about it extensively, some of his early work holds obvious affinities to African art (figs. 19-22, 30). According to Bernard Lemann, who worked for the Weyhe Gallery and consulted with Flannagan about its inventory of his works, the sculpture made with a "Negroid intention" between 1924 and 1927 belonged to his "period of thinking of African sculpture".²⁰ Since many of the most avant-garde painters and sculptors who had gone to Paris had been influenced by African art, Flannagan may also have seen this imitation of nonwestern sources as a strategy to appear "modern" (a self-consciousness that was remarked upon by the critics; see below). However, he was still very much interested in the Gothic, a style that had continued to fascinate him since his school days. In a curious review that predates McBride's and seems to introduce the candy metaphor, an anonymous critic commented on Flannagan's mixture of influences.

J. B. Flannagan, a group of whose sculpture may also be seen, is rather heavier in his wit. He uses wood very much as one might use it if he were

¹⁹ Henry McBride, "Whitney Studio Discoveries," *New York Sun*, 19 December 19 1925, 8.

²⁰ Museum of Modern Art, Flannagan artist folder.

under the delusion that Negro wood sculpture had been made with molasses candy. Mr. Flannagan buries what appears to be a real talent under so much superfluous affectation that it is difficult to know how much this talent may amount to when Mr. Flannagan decides to forget his self-consciousness.²¹

Two additional reviews mentioned specific works. The first, by Cortissoz, called Flannagan “a modernist in the Mestrovich²² tradition” and singled out the wood carving *The Pilgrim* (location unknown) as the most worthy manifestation of “a curiously accentuated rhythmic expression and feeling for emotion.”²³ The second, by an unnamed reviewer in the *New York Times*, hinted at the exaggeration of Gothic influences, favoring instead one of Flannagan’s few stone sculptures.

J. B. Flannagan is either nonchalant or overwrought, or at times without any obvious attributes. He is most attractive when nonchalant, if only because this is a rare state these days. In this mood he has modeled an elephant called “Rock,” a reversal of the usual nomenclature. It shows certainly a primitive African influence, but has been made by a sophisticated tool.²⁴

The origin of the term “primitive,” as combined with African art and applied to Flannagan’s work, seems to have first emerged in the aforementioned review from 1925. It is important to point out, however, that the rough and unfinished quality that is here equated with African art was, as noted in the critical reception following the Montross show in 1923, at that time associated with medieval art. Given the early appearance of this term in relation to Flannagan, it is not surprising that Forsyth latched onto it as a means of defining the sculptor’s life and work.

²¹ “Whitney Club Introduces Leon Hartl,” *New York World*, 13 December 1925, sec. 3, 9.

²² Ivan Mestrovic (1863-1962) was an American direct carver born in Yugoslavia who was very much in vogue during Flannagan’s lifetime.

²³ Royal Cortissoz, “Random Impressions in Current Exhibitions,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 13 December 1925, sec. 5, 9.

²⁴ “Etchers at the National Arts . . .,” *New York Times*, 13 December 1925, sec. 9, 11.

Flannagan's first one-man²⁵ sculpture exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery took place in January of 1927, but as Reba White Williams points out, the circumstances under which he was offered the show are not known with certainty.²⁶ Avis Berman asserts that Carl Zigrosser became aware of Flannagan's work through his exposure at the Whitney Studio Club.²⁷ Forsyth, on the other hand, suggests that Adolph Dehn, Flannagan's art-school friend from Minnesota, made the introduction to Zigrosser in 1926.²⁸ Both explanations are equally plausible, as is the possibility that Davies introduced Flannagan.²⁹

For this show, the checklist indicates that nine of the works were in stone, 14 were in wood, and three were in plaster³⁰. Though he was mistaken about the year of Flannagan's original Whitney exhibition and the fact that it included only woodcarvings, Edward Alden Jewell was the first critic to state a preference for Flannagan's stone sculptures.

Mr. Flannagan's art seems to have been carried forward by seven-league boots since he exhibited at the Whitney Studio Club last year. That was a fine exhibition, exclusively devoted though it was to slightly sugary woodcarving. Now, however, that Mr. Flannagan is getting the better of his earlier emphasis on the carving, which resulted in some rather tortuous designs, his sculpture has taken a solidity and strength previously missing. There is still a lightness about his amusing stone pieces of elephants and kangaroos, and the symbolical studies of mother and children, but that surely will be remedied.³¹

²⁵ Alfred Maurer was showing paintings and watercolors at the Weyhe at the same time.

²⁶ Reba White Williams, "The Weyhe Gallery," (Ph.D. diss., Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1996), 238.

²⁷ Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, 221.

²⁸ Robert J. Forsyth, "John B. Flannagan: His Life and Work," (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1965), 24.

²⁹ Davies exhibited prints at the Weyhe Gallery in the early twenties.

³⁰ Despite evidence to the contrary, Forsyth states that half of the works were in wood, half in stone (Forsyth, "John B. Flannagan," 26).

³¹ Edward Alden Jewell, "Georgia O'Keeffe's [*sic*] Arresting Pictures—Work by Schulhoff, Maurer, Flannagan," *New York Times*, 16 January 1927, sec. 7, 10.

Of the 26 sculptures shown, seven were of animals. Breuning, in a brief mention of Flannagan's work, stated that the artist's "animal sculpture is particularly effective."³²

As noted, in many of his early woodcarvings, particularly of religious and symbolic figures (figs. 14-16), Flannagan had relied on the attenuated forms of the Gothic. This style fit naturally with the figure, particularly the themes of suffering and penitence that Flannagan chose to portray. These carvings hold strong affinities to medieval sculpture, along with both the idea of the anonymous craftsman and the element of fear of God and the unknown. Religious figures appear far less frequently after the late twenties, though mother and child groups remained a constant throughout Flannagan's life. It is difficult to know whether the artist modified his output of religious sculptures because of reviews such as the preceding one by Jewell. Certainly, a strong Christian belief system continued to inform Flannagan's art but without the idea of a vengeful God. It is also relevant to point out that stone constricted Flannagan's range of subjects due to its inherent solidity.

"Primitivism" as a catchall term for a given critic's belief in the resemblance of Flannagan's work to that of other cultures began to appear with regularity in 1927. In response to Flannagan's exhibition in that year, Cortissoz wrote the following:

Sculpture by J. B. Flannagan is shown in both wood and stone. That he is eminently familiar with wood as a medium is apparent in such an intricate and decorative piece as the nude figure and deer entitled "Casuals." He takes its motivation from the primitive, showing a wide range of subject matter. Some pieces suggest themselves as fragments of totem carving; in others his studied simplicity is slightly reminiscent of Oriental forms.³³

³² Margaret Breuning, "Notes and Comments on Art Exhibits of the Week," *New York Evening Post*, 8 January 1927, sec. 5, 12.

³³ Royal Cortissoz, "Random Impressions in Current Exhibitions," *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 January 1927, sec. 6, 10.

Another critic, perhaps having read Cortissoz's review, chose to put the emphasis on Asian influences:

Sculpture of distinctive inspiration in wood and stone by J. B. Flannagan may be seen in the Weyhe Gallery, together with paintings by Alfred Maurer. Mr. Flannagan has carved from granite Buddhistic and other deistic figures of the Far East which look ancient enough to have survived the wear of centuries, and some of his wooden carvings have much the appearance of coveted antiques.³⁴

In light of Flannagan's 1919 trip to China, the remarks of the previously quoted critics seem significant. Only briefly mentioned in later, secondary critical literature, the affinity of Flannagan's stone sculpture to ancient Chinese sculpture suggests a stronger familiarity with this culture's art on Flannagan's part than has previously been noted. Chinese sculpture from the Han period (206 BC-AD 220) in particular reflects not only the Buddhist aura of contemplation (mentioned earlier), but also a sculptural concern for the shape of the rock and the essential qualities of the thing depicted. All of these qualities were vital not only to Flannagan's individual aesthetic but also to his identity as a direct carver.

Also in 1927, Tennessee Mitchell Anderson, second wife of short-story writer Sherwood Anderson and a fellow member of the Whitney Studio Club, held an exhibition in Chicago and included work by Flannagan. C.J. Bulliet, art critic for the *Chicago Evening Post*, wrote that "The sculptor Flannagan contributes a superb negro head, chiseled out of rough stone, primitive in feeling, intensified by the medium."³⁵

Although a checklist for Flannagan's second show, at the Weyhe Gallery in 1928, has not been located, Forsyth believes the show to have contained twenty-one works—20

³⁴ "Art Notes," *New York World*, 17 January 1927, 7.

³⁵ C.J. Bulliet, "Celotex Cottage Is Off to Flying Start," *The Chicago Evening Post*, May 10, 1927.

in stone and one in wood³⁶. The critical literature centered on the theme of “primitivism,” first in a review by Jewell in the *New York Times* and then in an unsigned review in *Art News*.

Also displayed are some pieces of sculpture by J. B. Flannagan of Minnesota. These little figures, done in wood and in stone, are mostly grotesques, heavy and crude—purposely so. Many of them are carved in common fieldstone and might have been dug up by archaeologists from the resting place of some long-lost archaic civilization. They have a certain terseness of statement. And a few of the figures convey a sense of serenity, even of simple nobility.³⁷

One is struck not only by the vocabulary—particularly the term “grotesques,” which seems to embody racist connotations—but also the emphasis on prehistory and archeology. Quite different from being linked to a specific culture, Flannagan seems to be tied here to time immemorial and to the beginnings of civilization. However, Jewell is careful to say that this sculptural result is intentional. The *Art News* review rehashes many of the same ideas from Jewell’s and other earlier reviews.

Also on exhibition is recent sculpture in wood and stone by J. B. Flannagan. Mr. Flannagan has gone quite archaic and his figure pieces show considerable simplification over his earlier tortuous technique. Some of the animals which he has hewn from rough field stone appear primitive enough to puzzle even the archeologically expert and the static quality of these crude grotesques serves as an excellent accent for the nervously galvanic drawings.³⁸

From January 22 to February 9, 1929, Flannagan showed 15 sculptures at the Whitney Studio Galleries alongside monotypes by Blendon Campbell and paintings by

³⁶ Reba White Williams includes Forsyth’s list in her dissertation, “The Weyhe Gallery,” 239. Forsyth’s original citation to this material is on page 26 and page 58 (note 118) of his own dissertation. I was unable to find this list in Forsyth’s Papers at the Archives of American Art.

³⁷ Edward Alden Jewell, “Modern and Early Work on Friendly Terms—Pascin’s Drawings—the Pendulum,” *New York Times*, 29 January 1928, sec. 9, 12.

³⁸ “Exhibitions in New York: Drawings by Pascin, Sculpture by J.B. Flannagan, Weyhe Gallery,” *Art News* 26 (February 4, 1928): 13.

Emil Ganso, Paul Rohland, and Harry Gottlieb. The exhibition received the most critical attention to date, much of it voicing approval³⁹ and alluding to the artist's transformative powers. Of the 15 works exhibited, nine were sold.⁴⁰ McBride, in an article for the *New York Sun*, also emphasized the creative aspect of Flannagan's approach, the fact that although his sculptures were representational, their realization depended upon both the skill and guided chance of the artist.

. . . Of these it is Mr. Flannagan who seems to be most arousing. He is one of those sculptors who is more than a sculptor. That is to say, the business of modeling does not consist to him in literally rendering form. He plays with form, plays with sculpture. His strange animals and huddled human beings most often turn out as surprisingly to him as to the spectator. In other words, he has fantasy and humor and he allows the theme to carry him where it will, like an artist. He has a feeling for stone, too, and shows his pleasure in the surfaces of the various kinds of stone he uses.⁴¹

McBride singles out Flannagan both from the other artists exhibiting contemporaneously at the Whitney Studio Club and other sculptors of Flannagan's day. In 1922, Daniel Chester French had completed the Lincoln Memorial, and in 1927 Gutzon Borglum began his work on Mt. Rushmore. Though these sculptors had long represented the prevailing taste in American sculpture, by the end of the twenties they signaled the waning of the Beaux-Arts tradition. While there is an undercurrent of Surrealist experiment in the previous passage, McBride also points to the modernist aesthetic of truth to materials. This was the centerpiece of the direct carving aesthetic: the belief that the physicality of the stone was inviolate and that the rock's basic shape and texture should remain unaltered.

³⁹ *Gotham Life*, 3 February 1929, 17-18.

⁴⁰ Berman, *Rebels in Eighth Street*, 256.

⁴¹ Henry McBride, "Attractions at Various Galleries," *New York Sun*, 26 January 1929, 9.

Jewell's 1929 review of the same show, still very much apiece with his earlier criticism, also suggested a modernist conception, this time the transformation of a found natural form.

The stone sculpture by Flannagan improves as acquaintance lengthens. He has exhibited at Weyhe's, so that New Yorkers already know the peculiar appeal of these crude figures carved from fieldstone—just the sort of stone you pick up anywhere. The finished product—never carried far beyond the original contour of the medium—remains all the time close to the earth. Grotesqueness sets its seal upon many of the strange little forms, and sometimes there is a smoldering sort of beauty.⁴²

The last review to appear contemporaneously with Flannagan's 1929 Whitney Studio Galleries exhibition came from a critic whose byline had not previously been associated with the artist. Forbes Watson wrote for *The New York World* and for the magazine *The Arts*, which was principally subsidized by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney and Juliana Force.⁴³ Watson's close relationship to Juliana Force, both personally, as her lover, and as a consultant to the Whitney Studio Club and Galleries, made his notice of Flannagan's work unsurprising. Watson was much more direct than either McBride or Jewell, attributing the self-consciously primitive aspects of Flannagan's work to his lack of proficiency as a sculptor.

Mr. Flannagan's sympathies are for the primitive. He likes simple forms and respects the character of his medium. His sculpture comes out of the rock and gets its character from the rock. Sometimes the result may be cruder than the intention and limitations may be fixed upon to meet the problems of incomplete mastery. But no one with any feeling for the sculptural would fail to overlook the slips if he had to choose between Mr.

⁴² Edward Alden Jewell, "Group of Five, and Other Art Shows," *New York Times*, 27 January 1929, sec. 10, 19.

⁴³ Berman, *Rebels on Eighth Street*, 294.

Flannagan's least successful sculpture and all the prize-winning sculpture of all the academies. Despite marked limitations there is a crude stony power in his work. It had infinitely more sculptural dignity than the kind of birthday cake stuff that a Daniel Chester French produces for official consumption.⁴⁴

Watson's review was a backhanded compliment. While stating a clear preference for modernist tendencies in sculpture, he perhaps also helped to reinforce Flannagan's deeper insecurities about his talent as an artist.

While Flannagan shared the precarious existence of most artists during the Depression, he was afforded a kind of safety net by the Weyhe Gallery, especially through its worst years before work relief programs were put into effect. As discussed in chapter 2, in January of 1928, the Weyhe Gallery offered him a stipend in return for a certain number of works a year, which alleviated some of the strain. However, the stock market crash of 1929 plunged Flannagan back into financial uncertainty and perhaps made him look more actively to possible commissions and to membership within artists' groups as a means of helping to promote his work in the following decade. In retrospect, it seems rather remarkable that the Weyhe Gallery offered Flannagan a trip to Ireland in 1930. A December 1931 article in the *Chicago Post* by C. J. Bulliet expresses Carl Zigrosser's faith in American art:

Young American artists are doing better work in the midst of the depression than they have at any time during the last decade, Carl Zigrossir [*sic*] told us in New York a few days ago.

Zigrossir is manager of Weyhe's, more sensitively in touch with the heart throb of American art, perhaps, than any other gallery in America.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Forbes Watson, "Exhibitions Coming and Going," *The Arts* 15, February 1929, 126-27.

⁴⁵ C.J. Bulliet, "Young of America at Their Best," *Chicago Post*, 29 December 1931.

Other changes within the art scene itself also worked in Flannagan's favor. The revival of direct carving, or "cut direct," had been spearheaded by older artists such as Robert Laurent, Max Weber, and William Zorach in the teens but didn't catch on the popular literature until the twenties. The greater awareness of this aesthetic among critics helped Flannagan's work to gain acceptance.

Cut direct is a phrase one hears often. It has to do with sculpture, with the making of sculpture. It is an old way, as old as man, and is being revived again.

Sculpture has passed through a very bad period where quick, easy methods and clever mechanical devices of calculation have been used with weakening results. So now there is a general impetuous [*sic*] to return to what was thought the most difficult way but in reality is the most simple way, cut direct.⁴⁶

In a review of Flannagan's third show at the Weyhe Gallery from April 7-26, 1930,⁴⁷ the critic Ruth Green Harris stated simply, "John B. Flannagan is a stone cutter." She went on to assert that Flannagan was not a "parlor sculptor" and that his works, because they were not overly realistic, allowed the nobility of the stone to come through. Perhaps encouraging the limited number of works of monumental sculpture that Flannagan was to attempt in the ensuing years, Harris wrote: "These things belong out of doors, on a building, to make that necessary transition between architecture and the man for whom architecture is erected."⁴⁸ Flannagan would incorporate these ideas into his Guggenheim application for a second trip to Ireland one year later.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *The Argus*, 1 May 1923.

⁴⁷ As Williams points out ("The Weyhe Gallery," 240 and note 37, 272), a checklist for this exhibition has not been located. However, on page 240 of her dissertation she lists 13 works that she credits to Forsyth's Papers at the Archives of American Art. I was unable to find this same list within Forsyth's Papers.

⁴⁸ Ruth Green Harris, "A round of Galleries," *New York Times*, 13 April 1930, sec. 10, 11.

⁴⁹ Application to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a fellowship, November 1931, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, ed. Margherita Flannagan (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 98-99.

My program would be one of individual application with special attention and observation to the co-ordination of sculpture and architecture as expressed, notably, in 13th century Gothic. The ultimate purpose being the simplification of sculptural designs and structure so as to be effective in the severe architectural scheme prevailing now.

McBride's review of Flannagan's 1930 show at the Weyhe Gallery also distanced him from the academic tradition: "Mr. Flanagan [*sic*] is one of the least academic of our sculptors and the chief charm of his work is that it always seems improvised. Also, he works in all sorts of stones which aids him in avoiding stiffening mannerisms."⁵⁰ Two other critics explained Flannagan's technique as the reduction of subject to the simplest possible mass.⁵¹ In general, critics seemed to display a much greater level of understanding of Flannagan's work than in the twenties. Also as opposed to the previous decade, specific works by the artist began to be singled out with greater regularity, both as accomplished examples of direct carving⁵² and as representative of the "primitive plastic impulse."⁵³ Reproductions of his works began to appear in art magazines with greater frequency starting in 1931.

By his fourth show at the Weyhe Gallery from November 9-28, 1931, Flannagan had narrowed his focus both in terms of media and subject matter. He had recently returned from his first trip to Ireland, and many of his sculptures were inspired by animals that he had seen in the countryside. Included for the first time in a Weyhe announcement was a short statement written by Flannagan, which provided the germ for his later credo, "The Image in the Rock," 1941. In it, Flannagan spoke about sculpture

⁵⁰ Henry McBride, "Varied Attractions in the Galleries," *New York Sun*, 12 April 1930.

⁵¹ Carlyle Burrows, *New York Herald Tribune*, 13 April 1930, sec. 8, 10, and an unnamed critic in *Social Calendar*, 21 April 1930, 21, 23.

⁵² Presumably *Sitting Figure* (1927), as mentioned in *Social Calendar* (see n. 64) and by Ruth Green Harris in the *New York Times* (see n. 61).

⁵³ *Coiled Snake*, as mentioned in Ralph Flint, *Creative Art* 6 (June 1930 supp.): 120.

exclusively. There is no mention of painting, and stone—fieldstone in particular—is singled out over wood. Also as if in response to the critics, Flannagan discounted some of the qualities, such as “humor” and the “grotesque,” that reviewers had attributed to his sculpture in the twenties.

Of the 35 works in the show, 23 were of animals, and it was this larger group, as opposed to the figural one, that was remarked upon by the critics. Jewell, picking up on his earlier criticism and combining it with a consideration of Flannagan’s statement, compared him to an artist of ancient times whose convention “is to do as little carving as possible. These hares and lambs and goats and cats and barking puppies emerge from the stone with a kind of massive reticence. . . . Mr. Flannagan’s pieces might almost be stones picked up at random in a meadow, each curiously resembling an animal form.”⁵⁴

Many of the same qualities that Flannagan himself linked to his sculpture were repeated by the critics, as were critical observations made in earlier years. Howard Cook of *Art News* pointed out their “rude and primitive charm,” and “an almost Gothic simplicity and severity of form” in *Kid* and *Goat*.⁵⁵ Carlyle Burrows of the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote that “Flannagan’s animal sculptures are rough hewn and carry a bold sense of mass, though not all of them are sufficiently realized.”⁵⁶

McBride’s commentary was perhaps the most insightful, calling attention both to Flannagan’s sensitivity and to his mastery over the medium: “His sleeping pigs, lambs and ambling animals have the quality of life, stylized for the sculptor’s use, but never perfunctory. There is one big ram’s head in stone that is almost abstract, but one does not

⁵⁴ Edward Alden Jewell, “American Sculpture on View,” *The New York Times*, 11 November 1931, 26.

⁵⁵ “Howard Cook, J.B. Flannagan,” *Art News*, 28 November 1931, 10.

⁵⁶ Carlyle Burrows, “News and Comment on Current Art Events,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 November 1931, sec. 7, 9.

have to be a modernist to succumb to its force and beauty.⁵⁷ Far from calling Flannagan's professionalism into question, McBride helped to situate the artist's work within the context of modern sculpture. Flannagan's work was not avant-garde in the sense of being abstract. However, according to McBride, it was not academic either, though it used the centuries-old technique of direct carving. Pointing to the stylization inherent in Flannagan's sculpture went a long way toward bridging the gap between strict representation and pure abstraction.

In late 1934, the critic William Schack, who was also a champion of the American Romantic/Symbolist painter Eilshemius, wrote an article called "On Abstract Sculpture" in which he prominently featured Flannagan.⁵⁸ Schack took McBride's cue in assigning Flannagan the middle road among what he saw as three degrees of abstraction. In many ways reminiscent of Worringer, Schack believed that abstraction corresponded naturally with the tenor of stress and strain of the Depression and that it represented a backlash to the romantic sculpture of Rodin. Archaic sculpture—African, Greek, Egyptian, and Central American—provided the roots for all modern sculpture. Flannagan's work embodied Schack's ideal in that it incorporated abstraction while still preserving some of the representational, and hence emotional, elements that he believed made sculpture meaningful. Three of Flannagan's works were reproduced in the article and his work was discussed alongside such prominent modern European sculptors as Alexander Archipenko, Jacques Lipchitz, Constantin Brancusi, and Osip Zadkine. Interestingly, these latter artists did not always succeed as well as Flannagan in Schack's estimation.

⁵⁷ Henry McBride, "Attractions in Other Galleries," *New York Sun*, 14 November 1931, 34.

⁵⁸ William Shack, "On Abstract Sculpture," *Magazine of Art* (November 1934): 580-88 [need volume].

Even during the decade following Flannagan's death, American critics continued to conceive of "primitivism" as an intermediate space between the conventionalism of pure representation and the extremes of abstraction. Writing 12 years after Flannagan's death, Dorothy Grafly, critic for the *Philadelphia Record* and daughter of the American academic sculptor Charles Grafly, reproduced the sculptor's *Triumph of the Egg* amid images of other modern works, as well as examples of primitive and prehistoric sculptures.

To the general public nothing has been more confusing in the rapid art changes of the past fifty years than the sculptor's recession from naturalistic representation. Three-dimensional form seemed to many a sturdy and steadfast bulwark against the distortion and the non-figurative design idioms used by abstract or semiabstract painters. Yet pacing changes both in painting and sculpture has been a return to vitality and inventiveness that predated mere reproduction as practiced in the Victorian era.

In the field of sculpture the contemporary is by-passing late Greek classicism, so dear to the nineteenth century, to rediscover and adapt archaic and tribal concepts to design. What has been developing, in fact, is a fecund union of primitive strength and twentieth-century sophistication.⁵⁹

Considering Flannagan within the larger context of European sculpture had also been proposed by Zigrosser in the exhibition brochure for the artist's fifth show at the Weyhe Gallery in early 1934.

We take pleasure in presenting an exhibition of sculpture by one of the most original and important sculptors in America, Mr. John Flannagan. Not only do we consider him one of the outstanding, one of the few *real* sculptors in this country, but we feel confident that he is one of the few Americans who will eventually achieve an international reputation. In

⁵⁹ Dorothy Grafly, "Form Unlimited," *American Artist* 18 (March 1954): 30.

view of these unusual claims, it behooves us to examine his achievement and show wherein it is significant and distinguished.⁶⁰

At the same time, in the paragraphs that followed, Zigrosser took pains to position Flannagan as an original artist who had little outside influence and was not swayed by current fashion. The quality of artistic integrity was buttressed by accolades relating to the artist as a keen observer of nature with a developed plastic sense. Coinciding with the contemporary interest in direct carving, Zigrosser made sure to state that Flannagan had chosen direct carving over modeling. An additional paragraph echoed the artist's 1931 statement regarding the goal of seeming inevitability in sculpture. Presaging Schack's article, Zigrosser wrote that "Flannagan attacks one of the major problems of art expression: the fusion of abstract design with feeling and representational values." As a final point, the dealer pointed to an affinity between Flannagan's work and the art of some of the same cultures Schack named later in the year, those of Egypt, China, pre-Columbian America, and Romanesque and Gothic Europe.

This was Flannagan's second show to include works sculpted in Ireland and his first show as sole exhibitor at the Weyhe Gallery. Although a checklist for this show has not been located, Reba White Williams reconstructed a partial one from Forsyth's notes and from the Weyhe Gallery Scrapbooks that includes seven works.⁶¹

The critical response to Flannagan's fifth Weyhe show in 1934 continued to qualify the sculpture both within the parameters set by earlier reviews and within the larger context that began to be delineated by the most important critics. In a mixed review

⁶⁰ "The Sculpture of John B. Flannagan," brochure for Flannagan's fifth exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery, January-February 1934.

⁶¹ Williams, "The Weyhe Gallery," 242.

in the *New York Evening Post*,⁶² Breuning wrote that Zigrosser's catalogue description did not apply closely to Flannagan and that many of his pieces, while executed in the currently popular technique of direct carving, did not achieve a requisite finality of statement. Similarly, an unnamed reviewer in the *New York Times*, struggling to come to terms with Flannagan's work alongside that of the realistic animal sculptor Herbert Haseltine, described the former's forms as "unarticulated." Only the *Mother and Child*, designed for Rockefeller Center, was excused from this critique because of its categorization as architectural sculpture. In contrast, Burrows saw in Flannagan's figures an expression of "primitive feeling."

He is not an artist who responds readily to new stimuli, and no startling changes in style are encompassed by his recent work, which remains essentially simple and sincere. If anything there is a deeper note of primitive feeling in his figures, some of them like the figure of a mountain goat, and that of a preening water bird, recalling the dignity and beauty of ancient or prehistoric sculptural forms.⁶³

Interestingly, what several of the aforementioned critics found unfinished and unarticulated, McBride found "sketchily treated" and "full of challenges." For him, Flannagan was "a product of today," whose imagination would not have allowed him to "come to anything in the period of, say, Hiram Powers."⁶⁴ Lewis Mumford, the American writer and cultural critic, wrote about the artist in like terms:

John Flannagan's sculpture at the Weyhe Gallery is a successful combination of apparently contradictory qualities. Much of it is done in a coarse Irish granite, and yet the effect is delicate; it is strong in form, the

⁶² Margaret Breuning, "Art World Events," *New York Evening Post*, 23 January 1934, 7.

⁶³ Carlyle Burrows, "Further Comment on Current Events in the Art Galleries," *New York Herald Tribune*, 21 January 1934, sec. 5, 10.

⁶⁴ Henry McBride, "Attractions in Other Galleries," *New York Sun*, 27 January 1934, 11.

minor disturbances in surface are well suppressed, yet the modelling is subtle; it respects the nature of the stone, yet it elusively slips away from its dictatorship; it combines an understanding of the plastic relationships with a tenderness toward the object itself, as in the very fine piece of a monkey with its young. . . . Flannagan seems to me one of the most promising and well-integrated of that younger group of sculptors who, for no apparent reason whatever, have during the last decade come into existence here. Are they perhaps the farthest wave of that great terrestrial disturbance in Europe that was called Rodin? I should not be surprised.⁶⁵

While both McBride and Mumford saw Flannagan as an individual with unique goals and talents as a sculptor, they also were interested in claiming him as part of a group. Modern sculpture in America during the thirties was a diverse entity, still very much in a state of flux. As a mark of his growing popularity, Flannagan was included in The Museum of Modern Art's fifth anniversary exhibition entitled *Modern Works of Art, 1934/35*. In a brief introductory essay on Sculpture and Constructions, Alfred H. Barr mentioned Flannagan as a direct carver who exploited the "surface quality of the stone."⁶⁶ But the show plainly celebrated European sculpture and included only a handful of sculptors who worked primarily in the United States.⁶⁷

Flannagan's sixth show at the Weyhe Gallery took place from February 24-March 14, 1936, and included 24 works in mixed sculptural media. From 1934-35, the artist had been hospitalized after a failed suicide attempt, and it was at Bloomingdale Hospital in White Plains that he experimented with metal casting, mainly in silver. After his release in mid-1935, Flannagan and his second wife spent the summer in Woodstock, where Flannagan carved several of the large figural pieces that would be included in the next year's show.

⁶⁵ Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker* 9 (January 27, 1934): 58.

⁶⁶ The Museum of Modern Art, *Modern Works of Art, Fifth Anniversary Exhibition*, November 20, 1934-January 20, 1935, page 18.

⁶⁷ Isamu Noguchi, William Zorach, Reuban Nakian, and Ahron Ben-Shmuel.

The critical response to the show's work was enthusiastic and is especially interesting in light of Flannagan's return to the figure and newfound interest in metal casting. Jerome Klein, writing for the *New York Post*, maintained that "Flannagan has been working toward a freer, more plastic conception of the human figure"⁶⁸ and Carlyle Burrows stated that two of his figures,⁶⁹ "fairly large and massive in proportions," suggest "new strength and scope."⁷⁰ Mumford echoed Burrows's choice, judging the figures of women of even higher quality than the much-loved animals. Finally, an unnamed reviewer in *Art News* saw the theme of mother and child as holding many possibilities for the artist.⁷¹ As opposed to the tentative language used in earlier unsigned reviews, the descriptions now appearing in print—most by recognized critics—assumed a greater air of confidence.

Flannagan's use of natural forms, carved with the utmost economy, is now well known. Often this carving will seem to go little beyond the use of incised line—the subject suggested, never fully objectified. On the other hand, in many instances Flannagan develops his form by stylizing and without any dependence upon material shapes furnished by nature. For such purposes he is wont to use limestone, sandstone, marble, artificial stone or metal.⁷²

McBride continued his support, calling the artist "an original" and declaring that Flannagan's instinct for cutting and choosing stone was reminiscent of Brancusi.⁷³ Mumford's review also attempted to situate Flannagan's work within the larger context of modernism.

⁶⁸ Jerome Klein, "Mere Field Stone Made Beautiful," *New York Post*, 29 February 1936, 24.

⁶⁹ *Young Woman* (sandstone) and *Morning* (sandstone), 1937.

⁷⁰ Carlyle Burrows, "Notes and Comments on Events in Art," *New York Herald Tribune*, 1 March 1936, sec. 5, 10.

⁷¹ *Art News* 34 (March 7, 1936): 10.

⁷² Edward Alden Jewell, "Solo Exhibitions by Nine Artists," *New York Times*, 1 March 1936, sec. 9, 9.

⁷³ Henry McBride, "Raoul Dufy's Latest Exploit," *New York Sun*, 29 February 1936, 14.

John Flannagan's sculptures have the strong and simple quality that so often comes to capable hands that work in the solid block. The sculpture that lives today has for the most part moved away from the vacant ironic monumentality which was bequeathed to it by the decay of baroque art in the nineteenth century. Statues must live in their own right, no longer in the shadow of palaces and tombstones but within the circle of a cottage living-room or a simple country garden. Flannagan emphasizes this feeling for the sanities of the earth by discarding for the most part the elegant stones, particularly marble, that carry so many funereal associations with them; likewise he will have nothing to do with clay and plaster and poured metal. He works in humbler materials—a coarse Irish granite and a sandstone, to say nothing of that fine Hudson bluestone of which paving blocks used to be made.⁷⁴

Of course, Mumford did not seem to take notice of the marble and cast pieces in the show, but these were in the minority.⁷⁵ His review is poetic in that it romanticizes organic stone, but it also points to an appreciable shift regarding the public's conception of sculpture. Mumford seemed to be registering the moment when the word "statue" no longer needed to refer to large, outdoor memorials, and marble and bronze were no longer the requisite materials for the sculptor.

In February of 1937, William Schack published another article that included Flannagan, this time in a magazine of the College Art Association, *Parnassus*.⁷⁶ Instead of focusing on abstraction within the context of European sculpture, "Four Vital Sculptors" centered on the work of four artists who worked in America: Heinz Warneke, Chaim Gross, Ahron Ben-Shmuel, and Flannagan. According to Schack, these sculptors had three things in common: they were all direct carvers; they all understood the "purely abstract, non-representative sculpture developed by Lipschitz and Brancusi" but couldn't themselves "dispense with the living form as a point of departure"; and they "all

⁷⁴ Lewis Mumford, "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker* 19 (March 7, 1936): 37.

⁷⁵ Flannagan also did several plaster pieces during the twenties.

⁷⁶ William Schack, "Four Vital Sculptors," *Parnassus* 9 (February 1937): 14, 40.

conceive[d] of their art as being essentially decorative, without recourse to stylization.”⁷⁷

The second characteristic echoes Schack’s earlier article: Flannagan qualified as a vital sculptor because he was “influenced by the idea of pure forms” but at the same time “infused his work with profound feeling.”⁷⁸ The third characteristic perhaps looks forward to the kind of “intimate functionalism” connected with Ruth Green Harris’s ideal of architectural sculpture, though the word “stylization” clearly had a negative connotation for Schack.

There does not seem to have been universal agreement over the detriment of the term “stylization” however. In a review of Flannagan’s sixth Weyhe show the previous year, Jewell took the opportunity to draw a distinction between Flannagan’s sculpture and that of William Zorach, which was then being exhibited at the Downtown Gallery. Jewell saw Flannagan’s “method of plastic simplification” as much more extreme than Zorach’s. In contrast to Schack, Jewell seemed to equate stylization with modernism, though both critics ultimately brought the artist’s name together with other contemporary American sculptors working in the direct carving tradition. Two exhibitions in New York City during 1937 may have further helped to publicize Flannagan’s work.

Early in 1937, Flannagan exhibited in a show of contemporary American sculpture alongside Paulanship, Gaston Lachaise, Jacob Epstein, William Zorach, Heinz Warneke, Alexander Archipenko, Hunt Diederich, Elie Nadelman and Maurice Sterne at Milch Galleries. According to Jerome Klein of the *New York Post*, the show ranged from “conservative classicism to extreme personal expression.”⁷⁹ As if to come full circle, Flannagan finished the year with an exhibition at the Passedoit Gallery with

⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁹ Jerome Klein, “A Critic Takes a Glance Around the Galleries,” *New York Post*, 6 February 1937, 12.

the direct carvers José de Creeft, Heinz Warneke, and William Zorach. Breuning wrote that “however diverse the gifts of the artists or varied their approach to sculptural design, they appear to share in common one aim, that of escaping from the deadening conventions of conservative sculpture and of bringing vitality into their art.”⁸⁰ Both of these shows helped to widen Flannagan’s reputation both as a direct carver and as an artist able to invest figurative sculpture with expressive qualities. In spite of the clear partisanship of some critics toward this combination, however, academic sculpture still continued to present a viable alternative in the galleries.

The issue of scale took center stage in the artist’s last exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery from February 9-March 5, 1938, *Small Stone Sculpture by J. B. Flannagan*. The brochure for the show was the third for the Weyhe Gallery to include a statement by the artist.

Instead of direct and living observation, sculpture alas is too often a habit of seeing along the lines of carving conventions. The effort represented by these things has been simply the creation and development of a purely personal idiom—an idiom that while simple and natural is yet large of pattern and thoroughly plastic.

The size is deliberately small physically, partly to make possible their use in even a small domicile (social purpose), and partly a reaction to the so-called heroic—too often mock-heroic. There are monumental miniatures and miniature monuments.⁸¹

Here, Flannagan equated a more diminutive size with a more personal and creative conception. Of course, it was also a thinly veiled attack against academic sculpture in general. Practically speaking, however, the artist’s approach is interesting in the context of his recent critical success at the Weyhe Gallery in 1936 with larger, figurative sculpture.

⁸⁰ Margaret Breuning, “Art in New York,” *Parnassus* 9 (December 1937): 28.

⁸¹ Brochure for “Small Stone Sculpture by J. B. Flannagan,” February 9 to March 5, 1938, at the Weyhe Gallery.

Ever open to possible markets for his work, Flannagan seems to have been aware of contemporary articles in the popular press about decorating and designing interior spaces with sculpture.⁸² By 1939, Flannagan was having his work commercially reproduced in terra cotta by the Dorothy Paris Workshop and in cast stone by the Robinson Galleries. Both places offered art lovers small sculptures “priced according to the purchasing power of today.”⁸³ According to a 1938 review for the *New York Herald Tribune* signed by J.C.C., “Mr. Flannagan keeps his sculpture within deliberately restricted limits in order to make them usable in the average home.”⁸⁴ The interest in sculpture serving a decorative purpose, like the fascination with sculpture created to complement architecture, also found its way into contemporary literature. Stanley Casson’s *Sculpture of To-day* (1939) concluded, “The future of sculpture is thus to a very large extent bound up with the future of architecture and decoration. It need no longer rely on the traditional uses and places to which it has been accustomed.”⁸⁵

Reviews of the 1938 Weyhe Gallery show were largely favorable, with Jewell borrowing from Flannagan’s statement and qualifying the work as “an art of suggestion, of austere understatement.”⁸⁶ Martha Davidson, in an article for *Art News*, included a brief discussion of Flannagan’s work, along with that of the European artists Georg Kolbe, Saul Baizerman, and Maurice Garnier.⁸⁷ Her specific comments about the artist’s work are less interesting than her perception of modern sculpture, however, for like Schack, she saw a reaction against Rodin. Throughout the twenties and thirties, the

⁸² “Design for a Music Room . . . Sculpture,” *Arts & Decoration* (December 1934): 27-40.

⁸³ Brochure for The Dorothy Paris Workshop, 1939.

⁸⁴ J.C.C., “Notes and Comment on Events in Art,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 20 February 1938, sec. 6, 8.

⁸⁵ Stanley Casson, *Sculpture of To-day* (New York: The Studio Publications, Inc., 1938),

⁸⁶ Edward Alden Jewell, “Small Carvings in Stone Are Presented by John B. Flannagan at Weyhe’s,” *New York Times*, 19 February, 1938, 16.

⁸⁷ Martha Davidson, “Contemporary Sculpture Contrasts: Four Shows,” *Art News* 36 (February 26, 1938): 11-12.

expressive surfaces of followers of Rodin such as Jo Davidson or Mahonri Young represented an additional alternative to the smooth surfaces of academic sculpture. The artists that Davidson chose for her article, while very different from one another, to her represented a return to “the basic geometry which is universal to all form”. . . “and thus to a symbolization of nature rather than to the imitation of the accidental appearance of surfaces.”⁸⁸

After Flannagan’s last exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery had closed, Ruth Green Harris reiterated her hope that the artist would be given a commission to do work for New York’s parks, streets, or architecture.⁸⁹ Ironically, Flannagan had already completed his first monumental sculpture, *Design for Skyscraper Court* in 1935, which, as noted earlier, had been conceived as if to be seen from the various floors of a tall building. Two years before, Flannagan wrote on his project card for this PWAP work, “Having always considered the architectural aspect of sculpture as the apotheosis, I am interested in this government project, and sculpture, being the stepchild of the arts, any material influence manifested would be perfectly swell.”⁹⁰

Harris was probably also unaware that in 1936, as the result of his submission of six works⁹¹ to the International Exhibition of Sculpture in 1933, the Fairmount Park Art Association had awarded Flannagan a commission to complete a sculpture for the Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial near the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The 1933 exhibition garnered Flannagan two short mentions in Philadelphia and Baltimore papers: “Among

⁸⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁹ Ruth Green Harris, “Jeremiad to New York,” *New York Times*, 20 March 1938, sec. 10, 9.

⁹⁰ John B. Flannagan, Project Card, Public Works of Art Project, December 22, 1933, RG 121/104, National Archives, Washington, as cited in Belisario R. Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press/London and Toronto: Associated University Presses), 92. [need copyright]

⁹¹ *Head with Hand on Neck, The Blues, The Goat, Cat and Kitten, Artemisia, The Sisters.*

the many others whose works are well known in the art world and who are represented in this exhibition are Gaston Lachaise, Mahron [*sic*] Young, John Flannagan, Duncan Ferguson, Alexander Archipenko, Mme. Hélène Sardeau, Mrs. Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.”⁹² “Aristide Maillol’s ‘Venus’ is of a different school as is Louis Millione’s portrait head of his mother and the funny little figures in stone of John Flanagan [*sic*], an American Celt who is now working in Ireland on behalf of the Guggenheim Foundation.”⁹³ As discussed earlier, Flannagan’s sculpture for the Samuel Memorial, entitled the *Miner*, was to accompany two large bronze groups by Robert Laurent and Gaston Lachaise, as well as a limestone piece by J. Wallace Kelley. Installed in 1938, Flannagan’s and Kelly’s sculptures received disparaging reviews from conservative critic Dorothy Grafly: “In composition if not in craftsmanship, Kelly’s figure is the better, although both serve notice on the public that the contemporary sculptor has scrapped the principles of anatomy without substituting any brilliant new commentary upon form. Neither is there compensation through force of design.”⁹⁴ Regrettably, it is difficult to reconstruct a complete body of critical literature on the memorial, since it was completed over the span of several decades.

Between the close of his last exhibition at the Weyhe Gallery and the installation of *The Miner* in late 1938, Flannagan exhibited with the American Artists’ Congress⁹⁵ and the Sculptors Guild. As discussed in chapter 2, Flannagan’s level of involvement in the American Artists Congress is not known, but he was not a documented member. In

⁹² *The Baltimore Sun*, 14 May 1933, sec. 2, 2, Fairmount Park Association Archives, box 118, folder 9, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁹³ *The Evening Bulletin-Philadelphia*, 2 June 1933, 8, Fairmount Park Association Archives, box 118, folder 9, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁹⁴ Dorothy Grafly, “The Samuel Memorial,” *Art Digest* (December 1938).

⁹⁵ American Artists’ Congress, Second Annual Members’ Exhibition, May 5-21, 1938.

response to the two sculptures he showed in its second annual, he was mentioned only as giving a “good account” of himself in *Art Digest*.⁹⁶

The Sculpture Guild, founded by William Zorach and Aaron Goodelman in 1937, was less catholic in its call to membership than the American Artists Congress, nor was it motivated by the same degree of political ideology. It, too, was a nonprofit organization but its membership was drawn specifically from sculptors “working in modern trends,”⁹⁷ and its purpose was to promote public interest in American sculpture. Flannagan’s was among the names of the original sculptors asked to attend the preliminary planning meeting,⁹⁸ and he exhibited with the Guild just once as a member⁹⁹ at its first outdoor exhibit on the northeast corner of 39th street and Park Avenue, New York City, from April 12-May 15, 1938.¹⁰⁰

Given Flannagan’s short tenure with the organization, it is difficult to know what first made him accept membership. Zorach implies in his autobiography that Flannagan did not evince the same level of cooperation as the other sculptors, showing up at the designated site after the work had been completed and asking where his sculpture would be placed (at the same time intimating that Zorach had reserved the best spot for himself).¹⁰¹ Though his anecdote relates only to the installation of the show, it is not difficult to see this incident perpetuating further animosity. In response to the two

⁹⁶ “Congress, Less Militant, Holds 2nd Annual,” *Art Digest* vol. 12, no. 16 (May 15, 1938): 14.

⁹⁷ “History of the Sculptors’ Guild,” typescript, Sculptors Guild scrapbook material, History of the Guild, Archives of American Art, reel D266A, frame 0157.

⁹⁸ Sculptors Guild scrapbook material, Aims, Purposes, Incorporation correspondence, AAA, reel D266A, frame 0014.

⁹⁹ Flannagan’s resignation was noted in the “Minutes of the General Membership Meeting,” Sculptors Guild scrapbook material, October 27, 1938, AAA, reel D266A, frame 0172.

¹⁰⁰ On the printed program, the exhibition period for the Sculpture Guild’s first outdoor sculpture show was listed as “April 12 into May.” By popular demand, the terminal date was later extended until May 15 (*New York Sun*, 7 May 1938). AAA, reel D266, frame 0108.

¹⁰¹ William Zorach, *Art Is My Life* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1967), 106.

sculptures that Flannagan exhibited, #20, *Goat* and #21, *Morning*, the latter was mentioned both as a “fine example in direct stone cutting”¹⁰² and as one “of the items that appeared . . . to possess particular qualities inviting pause.”¹⁰³ Perhaps Flannagan’s initial interest in the Sculpture Guild may be traced to one of its ten stated purposes: “To enlist the cooperation of the architectural profession that the sculpture and the architecture of building may again be planned simultaneously and homogeneously.”¹⁰⁴ As discussed earlier, Flannagan had voiced such an aim in his 1931 application to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. In addition, this purpose seems directly linked to Ruth Green Harris’s writings and to contemporaneous interest during the New Deal in relating sculpture to architectural forms.¹⁰⁵

Flannagan’s relative absence from the art scene due to his brain surgery in 1939 was apparently not missed. In the following year, 1940, Ruth Green Harris’s “Sculpture in Search of the Architect” praised Flannagan and stated her belief that he worked on a small scale “because he has not received the civic commissions that he, more than any other, should.”¹⁰⁶ The article was a continuation of Harris’s argument for the cooperation between artist and architect in an era where the public’s relation to art was constantly being reexamined.

We are not asking an artist of Flannagan’s stature, to draw a little decorative wreath on a draughtsman’s plans nor add as an afterthought an equestrian statue at the entrance of a finished building. We are asking for an honest co-operation, not in order to decorate a building but to make it

¹⁰² Jerome Klein, “Sculpture Hits Park Avenue and Slum Show Reaches Fifth,” *New York Post*, 16 April 1938, AAA, reel D266, frame 0098.

¹⁰³ E.A. Jewell, “A Roundup of Our Recent Sculpture,” *New York Times*, 8 May 1938, AAA, reel D266, frame 0111.

¹⁰⁴ “Sculptors Guild, Inc.: A Society of American Sculptors,” Sculptors Guild scrapbook material, Aims, Purposes, Incorporation correspondence, AAA, reel D266A, frame 0002.

¹⁰⁵ Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art*, 92.

¹⁰⁶ Ruth Green Harris, “Sculpture in Search of the Architect,” *London Studio* 20 (July 1940): 12.

more sensible. Building is an enlargement of the sculptor's problem, a practical alliance of material, service and idea. A problem few artists understand so well as John B. Flannagan.¹⁰⁷

Nevertheless, Flannagan would never again return to monumental sculpture and that year showed two drawings at the Arden Gallery¹⁰⁸ a bronze at the Whitney,¹⁰⁹ and a cast stone and a bronze at the Art Institute of Chicago.¹¹⁰ He also exhibited two sculptures at the Buchholz Gallery,¹¹¹ one probably from the same edition as had been exhibited at the Whitney. According to one contemporary reviewer, drawings were shown alongside sculpture at the Buchholz Gallery and "John Flannagan's black and whites enlarge one's pleasure in the piquancy of his [sculpture] *Little Creature*"¹¹². However, another reviewer remarked on the "wide diversity of styles to choose from, ranging all the way from the abstractions of Alexander Calder and Hugo Robus to such relative conservatives as John Flannagan and Doris Caesar."¹¹³ Placed alongside the work of more experimental sculptors, Flannagan's work suddenly did not seem as distinctive or unique. Nevertheless, at the conclusion of the Buchholz show in 1941, Flannagan was offered representation by its owner, Curt Valentin, a German immigrant whose gallery was known for showing European artists.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁸ #22, *Child Creeping* (pencil) and #23, *Buffalo* (pencil). "Drawings by Contemporary American Sculptors," January 9 to January 27, 1940, Arden Gallery.

¹⁰⁹ #129, *Not Yet* (bronze). "1940 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Art: Sculpture, Paintings, Watercolors, Drawings, Prints," Whitney Museum of American Art.

¹¹⁰ #270, *Mother and Child (Design for Skyscraper Court)* (cast stone) and #271, *The Rag Doll* (bronze). "American Paintings and Sculpture," The Art Institute of Chicago, Nov. 14, 1940 to Jan. 5, 1941.

¹¹¹ #14, *Not Yet* (wrought bronze, 1940) and *Little Creature* (fieldstone, 1940). "Exhibition of American Sculpture of To-day," December 30, 1940 to January 18, 1941, Buchholz Gallery.

¹¹² James Lane, "American Sculpture in Contemporary Styles," *Art News* 39 (Jan. 4, 1941): 11.

¹¹³ Robert Coates, "The Art Galleries," *The New Yorker*, 11 January 1941, 57.

Around the same time as the Buchholz Gallery show, Flannagan was awarded the Alexander Shilling Prize for his sculpture *The Goat*, also known as *Figure of Dignity*. The sculpture was then donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Walter Pach, who was chairman of the Shilling Fund and a trustee of the museum.¹¹⁴ *The New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *Magazine of Art*, *Art Digest* and *Art News* all announced the award in the spring of 1941. Given an opportunity to comment on the sculpture, Flannagan spoke about how it fit his aesthetic. In contrast, the Fund's statement focused more on the value of the work as a one-of-a-kind commodity.

This technique of direct carving makes the heaviest demands on the sculptor, but aside from the uniqueness of each piece so produced, it has the advantages of being most closely adapted to the material and of revealing the true evolution of the work—a thing hewn from a block, whereas clay sculpture is built up from a central core.”¹¹⁵

By the end of 1941, Flannagan had become increasingly depressed over his loss of strength and the pains in his head.¹¹⁶ Although he had been preparing for a retrospective at the Buchholz Gallery scheduled for March of 1942, he committed suicide on January 6, shortly after the United States entered into World War II. Because of Flannagan's untimely death, Valentin decided to hold a smaller show concentrating on the last decade of the artist's life and to leave a complete retrospective to the Museum of Modern Art, which then planned a much larger show for the late fall. According to the checklist, there were 35 works in the show: 24 sculptures and 11 drawings.¹¹⁷ Valentin

¹¹⁴ Flannagan wrote to Pach recommending a different sculpture in September of 1940 (folder Sh 6191, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives). *Figure of Dignity* was accepted by the Metropolitan on December 16, 1940 (gift form, folder Sh 6191), and Flannagan signed the museum's acquisition form on January 7, 1941 (uncopyrighted object form, folder Sh691).

¹¹⁵ *Art Digest* 15 (May 1, 1941): 12.

¹¹⁶ According to a press release issued by the Buchholz Gallery, Flannagan had earlier warned that he might commit suicide: “At that time [Dec. 31, 1941] he stated that this show was the one thing that kept him from taking gas, his head pains had grown so piercing.” New York Public Library, Artists' files.

¹¹⁷ The press release noted above listed 22 works total and 10 wash drawings.

also arranged for a brochure to be created reprinting Flannagan's artist statement from the March 1942 issue of the *Magazine of Art*. In addition to Flannagan's credo, "The Image in the Rock," 13 illustrations—six of sculptures that were exhibited in the Buchholz show—were also included.

The critical reception for the Buchholz show focused on broad assessments of the artist's talent as a sculptor and the relative merits of cast versus directly carved pieces. Of the 24 sculptures, six were in bronze and two were in cast stone. In some places, the criticism was also inflected by a familiarity with the artist's statement. It is unknown whether the critics had seen the spring issue of the *Magazine of Art* or the reprint of Flannagan's statement. It appears that those who had read the statement were more open to the artist's work. One magazine also quoted substantially from it.¹¹⁸

Both Cortissoz and Jewell offered a mixture of positive and negative criticism. According to Cortissoz, Flannagan had a "faculty for endowing subtle expression" and his pieces had charm and a "searching touch." But like William Schack, Cortissoz found fault with Flannagan's use of stylization. Cortissoz could also not relate to the artist's use of allegory, a device he used sparingly throughout his career but employed more frequently towards the time of his death: "When he is a little confused in aim, as in the 'Jonah and the Whale,' he is disappointing, but when he is in full command of his power of expression he carries conviction."¹¹⁹ Jewell's review was also extremely literal: "Some

¹¹⁸ "A Decade of Flannagan's Sculpture Reviewed," *Art Digest* 16 (April 1, 1942): 17.

¹¹⁹ Royal Cortissoz, "Sculpture and Painting in New York," *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 March 1942, sec. 6, 8.

of the sculptural ideas are coherently expressed with real distinction. Others seem inchoate or but weirdly hinted at.”¹²⁰

Robert Coates’s review in the *New Yorker* reiterated some of the negative criticism of Flannagan’s work that had appeared over the years; for example, “that it was occasionally slightly trivial, and that “he had a tendency at times to stop just short of the full realization of his figures,” but came down squarely on the side of Flannagan’s talent. The quality that won Coates over was an adherence to what he called the “sculptor’s creed,” “working with the stone and never against it.”¹²¹ Similarly, *Art Digest* maintained that “Flannagan’s conception of the sculptor’s art is vividly evident in the Buchholz display:”

Flannagan was acutely sensitive to the texture, solidity and shape of his material, and in all his sculptures these qualities are preserved, accentuated and linked organically to his aesthetic concept. This tight union between the sculptor’s creative urge and the essential quality of the stones he worked, kindled a glow of life in such adamantine substances as granite. He pushed it only far enough to shape the essential forms of his subject, and these he orchestrated in simple, dignified rhythms.¹²²

Rosamund Frost seems to have been the only critic to comment upon the bronze and cast-stone pieces in the exhibition. She contended that they showed a very different side of Flannagan, one that was more concerned with “creation and the imposing of his own inventions on a less organic material.” Compared to the direct carving method that Flannagan set for himself and wrote about, “to extract the image yet not disturb the rock that holds it,” Frost found casting the less preferable approach:

¹²⁰ E. A. Jewell, “In the Realm of Art: A Quandary and Other Matters,” *New York Times*, 22 March 1942, sec. 8, 5.

¹²¹ Robert Coates, “The Art Galleries—Two Americans,” *The New Yorker* (March 28, 1942): 61.

¹²² “A Decade of Flannagan’s Sculpture Reviewed,” *Art Digest* 16 (April 1, 1942): 17.

When Flannagan imposes an idea like *Jonah and the Whale* or the *Triumph of the Egg* he does it in a mystical and utterly improbable way. If we find these less satisfactory it is because there is something extraordinarily moving about an artist of his stature too reticent and too humble to alter nature.¹²³

Interestingly, neither Cortissoz nor Frost seemed to like *Jonah and the Whale*, yet each attributed this to a different cause: the former to its failure to present a simple statement, the latter to its medium (bronze). The pairing of the words “mystical” and “improbable” confirms the confusion the former term held for Frost.

In contrast to the preceding reviewers, a *New York World Telegram* columnist incorporated many of the ideas that Flannagan himself had expressed in his artist’s statement. While acknowledging that “his images hardly stir from the stone or bronze” and “never are they completely released,”¹²⁴ this reviewer did not equate these qualities with a lack of finish. Instead, he/she offered these qualities as proof of Flannagan’s philosophy and world view—that life is ephemeral and that “only stone and [the] earth . . . live on.” This was probably the closest the critical reception ever came to characterizing Flannagan’s belief in God and the interconnectedness of life.

Flannagan’s own statements were also used as a touchstone to understanding his work in reviews of the Museum of Modern Art’s retrospective exhibition *The Sculpture of John B. Flannagan* from October 28–November 29, 1942. This show, which was mounted along with a simultaneous show of Pavel Tchelitchew’s paintings and drawings, included 43 sculptures and 30 drawings, watercolors, pastels, and prints. An illustrated catalogue that included Flannagan’s statement “The Image in the Rock” and an essay by

¹²³ Rosamund Frost, “Flannagan Exhibition, Buchholz Gallery,” *Art News* 41 (April 1, 1942): 27.

¹²⁴ E. G. “Sculpture, Paintings in New Solo Shows,” *New York Telegram*, 21 March 1942, 7.

Carl Zigrosser was also available for purchase.¹²⁵ In his essay, Zigrosser delineated many of the main themes that would come to dominate the literature and which probably first came to the critics' attention through the museum's press release (see chapter 1). The first was an emphasis on Flannagan's biography, the second was the characterization of Flannagan as a mystic, and the third was the portrait of an artist more concerned with realism of feeling than realism of style.

Newsweek's critic concentrated almost exclusively on the events of Flannagan's life, pointing to the irony that "Flannagan's reputation as a superb sculptor should now be spreading" while "in his 47 years he knew no fame—only wretchedness, poverty, and unhappiness."¹²⁶ The article repeated some of the inaccuracies of the original press release¹²⁷ and added one glaring misstatement of its own: "An arrangement with the Weyhe Gallery, which gave him [Flannagan] \$25 a week for all his work kept him just short of poverty." As Zigrosser pointed out in a letter to the editor a few days later, there was never any contract for the sculptor to turn over all of his work to the gallery.¹²⁸

While untrue, the characterization of Flannagan as a naïve artist taken advantage of by his unscrupulous dealer endured to some extent in the popular imagination.¹²⁹ However, the label that proved most resilient was that of a mystic. While it is not known with certainty how Zigrosser first arrived at this appellation, as previously discussed, his familiarity with contemporaneous writings such as those by Underhill is likely.

Ironically, there were also intimations of such a comparison in the critical literature of the

¹²⁵ According to an advertisement in the New York Public Library's Artists' Files, the show was also available for circulation to other museums for a rental fee of \$100.

¹²⁶ "Flannagan's Finale," *Newsweek* 20 (November 16, 1942): 80-81.

¹²⁷ According to Robert Forsyth, Flannagan's father was a policeman, not a newspaperman.

¹²⁸ Carl Zigrosser to Editor of *Newsweek*, Philadelphia, November 19, 1942, Carl Zigrosser Papers, Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, microfilm 9A, reel 4621, frame 267.

¹²⁹ See Sam Hunter's description of Flannagan in *American Sculpture of the 20th Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972).

1920s. As already noted, the artist's wooden carvings had been likened to the work of El Greco, the Mannerist painter whose spiritual canvases were conditioned by religious mysticism.

In concentrating on the sculptor's written statement, Edward Alden Jewell was the principal critic to focus on the mystical trend in Flannagan's work. In a brief review on the day the show opened, Jewell remarked: "Economy and a certain elusive mystical trend are prime ingredients in Flannagan's sculptural expression."¹³⁰ However, in a much longer review a few days later, mysticism framed his comments on both artists: "The two artists [Tchelitchew and Flannagan] though bracketed in this showing, appear to have little in common save a strain of mysticism, and that attains expression in quite dissimilar ways. . ."¹³¹ While generally reserving judgment on Tchelitchew's work, Jewell directed his harshest criticism toward Flannagan: "Yet in my opinion, as slowly shaped through the years, persists a feeling that Flannagan's is a minor talent, evocative in some degree, but chained to a kind of muted mysticism that veils more than it is ever equipped to reveal." For Jewell, Flannagan's writings—as well as the label of "mystic"—were a barrier to finding meaning in his work: "Taking him at his own word, we must credit John Flannagan with vast cosmic conceptions that, in the sculptural result, reduce themselves to mere plastic understatement in the delineation of animal and human forms."

After Jewell's article had been published, two letters of protest appeared in *The New York Times*. The first of these, by an unknown attendee of the exhibition, is quoted below.

¹³⁰ E. A. Jewell, "Modern Museum Holds Two Shows," *New York Times*, 28 October, 1942, 24.

¹³¹ E.A. Jewell, "Two Whose Messages Are Obscure," *New York Times*, 1 November 1942, sec. 8, 9.

To my mind, Flannagan's sculpture is most evocative, not to "some degree," as the critic finds it. To me the "mysticism that veils" makes that granite breathe—flesh and soul. And the beauty and simplicity of line and design, properly balanced by the thought, and feeling and superb execution (not according to Hoyle; but El Greco and Vermeer were not in that class either) makes it a desecration to go from the Flannagan gallery to that of the coffee-sequin Russian flame thrower!¹³²

The other letter writer was art historian John Rewald, who conceded that Jewell "may be right in stating that Flannagan's was but a 'minor talent' but added that "it would have been more accurate to add that in spite of this he was one of America's best sculptors."¹³³

As the preceding discussion would seem to indicate, the label of "mystic" proved prohibitive even for experienced critics such as Jewell. Perhaps because of his strong personal convictions against organized religion, Zigrosser chose not to illuminate Flannagan's devotion to Christianity. In turn, the sources of Flannagan's "mysticism" remained unexplained and confused the critics. As the extract above shows, however, the artist's eclectic brand of spiritualism was not lost on everybody. The pagan belief in animism that Flannagan himself named in his statement seems to have been understood by this letter writer.

The last class of criticism following Flannagan's large retrospective show centered on style, and the critics who voiced opinions along these lines were divided according to the liberalness of their tastes. To the conservative critic Cortissoz, the show left "a mixed impression, as though there were two forces active within Flannagan's personality." The first, which led to "dubious results," was that directed toward "abstractionism and stylization"; the second, where Flannagan could "prove his mettle," was that which "embodied a passion to express the very spirit of a subject."

¹³² Marion K. Epstein, "Opinions Under Postage," *New York Times*, 15 November 1942, sec. 8, 11.

¹³³ John Rewald, "Opinions Under Postage," *New York Times*, 15 November 1942, sec. 8, 11.

But in his more or less mystical liberation of his subjects from their rough investiture he somehow missed the magic of design and is outré where one would wish an artist of his imaginative caliber to be more directly conclusive. An atmosphere of frustration obtrudes again and again, handicapping his essential power.¹³⁴

Formalist Clement Greenberg wrote that Flannagan was often in danger of succumbing to subject matter but that a sensitivity to abstract forms saved him. While he noted that “there can be discerned in his work most of the hesitations that afflict the contemporary artist,” he also asserted that “it is quite likely that Flannagan was the best native sculptor we have had in this country.”¹³⁵

The critic from *The Art Digest* also considered the issue of abstraction, but in the context of Flannagan’s own writings.

He loved the hard resistance of stone, and he worked it only just enough to liberate the design he felt was inherent.

“I would like my sculpture,” he explained in a letter to Carl Zigrosser, “to appear as rocks, left quite untouched and natural, and . . . inevitable.” In this implacable simplification of form, Flannagan was necessarily abstracting nature, and, as Zigrosser points out in the show’s catalogue, Flannagan was consistently preoccupied with abstraction, but not with pure abstraction. “Pure abstraction,” he wrote on one occasion, “is dead. Make it come alive by the use of living form. . . .”¹³⁶

At the same time that Cortisoz and Greenberg disagreed about the desirability of abstraction in Flannagan’s work, other critics centered their arguments on the element of design. For Robert Coates in the *New Yorker*, Flannagan’s greatest weakness lay in this area: he had a feeling for his materials but it “at times led into the lazy habit of letting the shape of the stone dictate his forms—and thus into an easy and rather repetitive

¹³⁴ Royal Cortisoz, “A Varied Week in the Galleries,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 1 November 1942, sec. 6, 5.

¹³⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Art,” *The Nation* 152-155 (Nov. 14, 1942): 522.

¹³⁶ “Careers of Tchelitchev and Flannagan Reviewed by the Modern,” *The Art Digest* 17 (November 15, 1942): 10-11.

symbolism involving egg shapes and circles.”¹³⁷ During his lifetime, Flannagan knew he needed to be sensitive to this criticism and in the statement printed along with the checklist for his 1931 show at the Weyhe Gallery had included the sentence, “There are often necessary compromises, but the shape of the stone does not determine the design; more often the design dictates the choice of the stone.” However, this line did not make its way into “The Image in the Rock.” The issue of artist’s agency, more than a seeming contradiction within Flannagan’s aesthetic, thus also became an uncertainty among the critics.

Manny Farber’s article in the *New Republic* echoed many of Robert Coates’s critiques about design. But for Farber, “extreme morbidity dominate[d] John Flannagan’s sculpture. . . . more than not, the form is asleep, or dead, rather than alive within his frequent womb symbol.”

Flannagan’s predilection for the circle is strange because he seldom breaks the contour: circular design is common in the plastic arts, but seldom is it so closed. Flannagan describes his conception of this form: “Restless, it moves ever onward, finally to turn back on itself, an endless movement.” To the contrary, Flannagan’s pie shapes and ovular forms don’t move at all, let alone endlessly—because of static designing. The evenness of his rock’s contour, as if it were earth and wind made, leaves the color a monotone, unbroken into various planes of dark and light. This increases the sculpture’s passivity.¹³⁸

Farber concluded by calling Flannagan’s sculpture incomplete, a criticism that had often been waged in the artist’s lifetime. Had Farber been aware of Flannagan’s sources, he might not have focused so exclusively on the formal qualities of the sculptor’s work. As noted, Flannagan’s interest in Irish art, principally the spiral form as a symbol for the inner search for enlightenment, helped to inform his choice of design. Like Coates,

¹³⁷ Robert M. Coates, “The Art Galleries,” *The New Yorker* 18 (November 14, 1942): 69-70.

¹³⁸ Manny Farber, “John B. Flannagan,” *New Republic* 107 (November 23, 1942): 680-81.

Farber attributed the passivity in the sculptor's work to Flannagan's "negating himself before the greatness of the rock." In spite of Flannagan's attempt through his writings to elucidate the aims of his work, they often had the opposite effect. Clearly many of the negative reviews of Flannagan's work after his death were rooted not only in misunderstanding but also in ignorance of his interests and sources. While dissention may have fueled interest in a living artist, Flannagan's untimely death put much of the active dialogue on his work to rest.

Although Flannagan once wrote to Zigrosser that [reviews] "only interest me when they seem to have hit close to what I'm driving at,"¹³⁹ his choice of media and subjects indicate otherwise. Flannagan seems to have followed closely on the words of the critics. However, he also personified what Coates called the "sculptor's creed," the contemporaneous interest in direct carving as a modernist aesthetic. During a two-decade period, Flannagan and the critics formed a symbiotic relationship of mutual affirmation. As much in dialogue with Flannagan as with one another, these critics helped to map the sculptor's trajectory as an artist—both from wood to stone and from an amalgamation of derivative styles and influences to a more personal idiom.

¹³⁹ Letter 3, Flannagan, Woodstock, N.Y., to Zigrosser, 1929, *Letters*, 21.

Chapter 6
FLANNAGAN AND THE ART MARKET

In the twenties and thirties, critics, the gallery scene and individual dealers, collectors, and museums all played salient roles in the fortunes of artists. Most important, in Flannagan's estimation, were his dealers: Carl Zigrosser at the Weyhe Gallery and Curt Valentin at the Buchholz Gallery. Flannagan relied on both men to serve in business and personal capacities and also communicated their indispensability at different times to each. Flannagan saw the critics at the opposite end of the spectrum, and it is perhaps illuminating to start this chapter with a short discussion of his impressions in order to gauge his awareness of this group.

Within the papers of Jane Wade, who worked for Flannagan's second dealer, Curt Valentin, there is an undated list of comments that is identified in part, "Some of John's thoughts. 1st refers to L. Mumford at an 'Independent' show admiring his own portrait."¹ To my knowledge, there are only two minor references to the writer and cultural critic Lewis Mumford in Flannagan's papers, the first remarking on the "dubious purpose that reviews and reviewers sometimes fulfill"² and the second referring to Mumford's use of the term "Hudson River bluestone"³ in a 1936 review of the sculptor's work. Were Flannagan to have read Mumford's *American Taste* (1929), he might have discovered that they shared the belief that the single spirit of the anonymous artisan was lost during the Renaissance when the functions of the engineer and artist were split. However, the disparaging nature of Flannagan's description would seem to suggest otherwise. Indeed,

¹ Jane Wade Papers, AAA, roll 2322, frames 1180-81.

² Letter no. 25, Flannagan, Boston, to Zigrosser, 30 March 1936, *Letters*, 46.

³ Letter no. 26, Flannagan, Woodstock, to Zigrosser, April 1936, *Letters*, 49.

Flannagan's sculpture of a monkey entitled *The Critic* (collection Philadelphia Museum of Art) (fig. 31) would appear to sum up his feelings about this group in general.

Judging by the aforementioned list, Flannagan also had opinions about other critics that ranged from the fairly benign to the caustic. "The lady thesaurus," probably refers to *New York Times* critic Elizabeth Luther Carey, and "The critic who writes golf books" is most likely *Vanity Fair* editor Frank Crowninshield.⁴ Forbes Watson is "not interested in art but in his own opinions of it" and Henry McBride is probably "the bland critic who need not look at the show." Flannagan's dislike of Forbes Watson has already been noted in the context of his accompanying Juliana Force on a visit to Woodstock ("the Dowager Queen and the Crown Prince"). However, Flannagan's antipathy for McBride is more surprising considering the latter's early support and proclivity for recognizing new talent. Perhaps Flannagan's comment was based on McBride's dislike for Diego Rivera,⁵ an artist Flannagan particularly admired. In contrast, Zigrosser, who became acquainted with Elizabeth Luther Cary and Henry McBride when he first worked for Keppel and Company in the early teens, wrote in his memoirs, "Our educational efforts at the gallery were aided by the sympathetic attitude of the press. Although the reactions of the leading critics were not always predictable or favorable, they were, in the aggregate, benevolent."⁶

Flannagan seemed to view galleries as apart from the vagrancies of the critics, and like a number of other artists, saw representation at Weyhe's Artbook Store and Gallery as both a path to greater exposure and a welcome source of financial support. In addition

⁴ Flannagan includes last names or initials near each description.

⁵ Henry McBride, "Diego Rivera and the Radio City Scandal," in *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticisms of Henry McBride* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1975), 308-10.

⁶ Carl Zigrosser, *A World of Art and Museums* (Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press), 37.

to Flannagan, Erhard Weyhe also provided stipends to Alfred Maurer, Emil Ganso, and Vincent Canadè.⁷ There were few galleries in existence that even exhibited American sculpture with modernist tendencies during the twenties and thirties, and Weyhe's gave many artists their first chance. As a point of reference, Alfred Stieglitz, who was the first to show many of the most avant-garde European and American artists, only mounted four sculpture shows out of a total of 79 from 1905-17.⁸ Referring to Black Friday and its aftermath, Zigrosser wrote, "Although the crashes were dramatic and catastrophic, it was several years before the full impact of the depression was felt in the business of the Weyhe Gallery But by 1935, even we began to feel the pinch."⁹

Erhard Weyhe was the son of a bookseller and had established contacts with European publishers of art books before he moved to New York. These earlier contacts afforded him continued access to European titles as well as the opportunity to publish American editions.¹⁰ Weyhe's probably offered the most varied stock of art books in New York at that time. This was a critical contribution to the art world, given that artists with little means to travel, particularly during the Depression, could gain exposure to the art of varied cultures without leaving the city. As previously discussed, Flannagan was an avid reader and likely gained inspiration, particularly in terms of non-Western sources, from Weyhe's bookshop.

⁷ Reba White Williams, "The Weyhe Gallery Between the Wars" (PhD diss., Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1996).

⁸ Roberta Tarbell, "Impact of Vanguard Exhibitions in Paris and New York, 1908-29," in *Vanguard American Sculpture, 1913-39* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1979), 8.

⁹ Carl Zigrosser, *A World*, 53-54. In her dissertation, Williams implies that Zigrosser's remark was cavalier and that Erhard Weyhe felt the crisis of the Depression more acutely.

¹⁰ Walter Pach, "The Weyhe Book and Print Shop," unpublished manuscript, Carl Zigrosser Papers, Anenberg Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

As Reba White Williams points out, Weyhe also offered prints for sale through his catalogues even before the gallery was opened in 1919.¹¹ After that, the prints he sold were more likely to have been by Weyhe-affiliated artists published by the gallery. In the early years of the bookshop, Weyhe also sometimes displayed prints, a practice that was regularized with his hiring of Carl Zigrosser. According to Zigrosser, Weyhe knew little about prints¹² and asked him to run a print gallery to complement the bookselling side of the business. In his memoirs, Zigrosser writes that he himself was responsible for adding most of the printmakers to the Weyhe roster, including Frederico Castellon, Howard Cook, Adolf Dehn, Mabel Dwight, Wanda Gág, Emil Ganso, Rockwell Kent, and Harry Sternberg. However, Williams implies that Weyhe probably assumed a much greater role in the gallery than he has henceforth been given credit for. As noted above, Weyhe himself began to show works on paper and small sculptures by mostly European artists during the teens and purchased works by Lehbruck, Kolbe, Barlach, and Maillol during summer trips to Europe.¹³ However, he also supported the American painter Alfred Maurer and is credited with offering American sculptor Alexander Calder his first show in 1928.

After prints and drawings, sculpture was the next most popular medium that the gallery sold.¹⁴ In addition to Calder and Flannagan, Weyhe offered solo shows to Arnold Ronnebeck, Heinz Warneke, Wharton Esherick, Dorothea Greenbaum, and Doris Caesar. In his memoir, Zigrosser also noted that “mention should be made of our active

¹¹ Williams, “The Weyhe Gallery,” 45.

¹² Zigrosser, *A World*, 37.

¹³ “Bookseller and Artists’ Angel,” *Look* 14 (June 20, 1950): 96-101.

¹⁴ Williams, “The Weyhe Gallery,” 231.

commerce in pre-Columbian stone sculpture and African wood carvings.”¹⁵ The gallery’s biggest exhibition of the latter, “African Negro Art,” was held in 1940,¹⁶ two years before Flannagan’s death.

Since Zigrosser ran the gallery at Weyhe’s, he was in charge of most of the day-to-day interactions involving artists. In Flannagan’s case, this involved a myriad of functions, both business and personal. It does appear that Zigrosser genuinely believed that Flannagan was a talented artist. This devotion is manifest in both public and private statements and does not seem to have diminished over the course of their acquaintance. It is not an overstatement to say that in spite of two significant relationships with women—Grace and Margherita—Zigrosser was the most important person in Flannagan’s life. What makes this remarkable is that Zigrosser acted as a kind of lifeline between Flannagan and the outside world. Clearly, Zigrosser was responsible for many of the important contacts Flannagan was able to enjoy throughout his life. And through Zigrosser we may see aspects of the artist that otherwise would have remained closed.

Zigrosser helped Flannagan in three different capacities: as promoter, as friend and defender, and as confidante and confessor. The first role was the most straightforward.

John B. Flannagan is, in my opinion, one of three important sculptors in America. And of the three, I believe, he is the most original. We have recently held an exhibition of his work, a catalogue of which is enclosed. In this exhibition were a number of very fine sculptures cut directly in stone. Sculptors and those who appreciate the problems involved in creating sculptures were enthusiastic about these pieces and realized his masterly solution of this problem. In some curious way he has the same quality which animated the primitive stone carvers of Chartres or Mexico. It is not that he imitates or is influenced by other work: his conceptions come from within himself on the same principle as that which dominated

¹⁵ Zigrosser, *A World*, 43.

¹⁶ Williams, “The Weyhe Gallery,” 446.

the old masters. It is my conviction that future generations will consider Flannagan one of the outstanding sculptors of his generation.¹⁷

Zigrosser personally attended to all of the details involving Flannagan's representation at the Weyhe Gallery. Though the checklists for Flannagan's shows were generally modest in length, Zigrosser wrote a preface for Flannagan's fifth show at the Weyhe Gallery in 1934 (see chapter 5). Flannagan does not seem to have been an effective record keeper and left all of the business and physical accounting of his works to the gallery. Although Williams decries the condition of Zigrosser's financial records in relation to other artists,¹⁸ his accounting of Flannagan's works through the Weyhe Gallery is all we have left. Zigrosser's papers are replete with pleas from Flannagan asking for money. How Zigrosser negotiated the sculptor's financial needs with Erhard Weyhe's diminishing patience with the artist is a matter of wonder. Most beneficial professionally to the sculptor, however, was Zigrosser's habitual practice of filling out applications and soliciting references from personal acquaintances in the art field. These ranged from collectors and museum professionals to established artists. The following excerpt from a letter from Gaston Lachaise is typical.

Dear Zigrosser,

Thank you for your note. I received today from the Guggenheim a blank report concerning Mr. Flannagan. I shall be very pleased to do all I can for him and wish him good luck. As I do feel that he is one of the few good sculptors in America.¹⁹

Through Zigrosser, Flannagan also benefited from the help of two other individuals active in the arts during Flannagan's lifetime, Walter Pach and Tennessee

¹⁷Zigrosser, undated typescript, perhaps 1931, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

¹⁸Williams, "The Weyhe Gallery," 91.

¹⁹Gaston Lachaise, Georgetown, Maine, to Carl Zigrosser, 20 November 1931, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

Mitchell Anderson. In his memoirs, Zigrosser wrote that he had first gotten to know Walter Pach outside of Keppel's around the time of the Armory Show,²⁰ and in the later teens the two shared an interest in the Modern School. Then, in 1926, the Weyhe Gallery mounted exhibitions of Pach's etchings and his wife's paintings.²¹ Though Zigrosser did not feel particularly close to Pach,²² his papers indicate that the two men kept in contact over the years and provided assistance to each other whenever possible. Like Mumford, Pach was clearly more impressed with European art than American art. However, as Sandra Phillips points out, his greatest role—beyond that of “artist, translator, journalist, art critic, and lecturer on art”—was probably as a “friend to great and minor artists, critics, collectors, and art dealers.”²³

As discussed earlier, Pach helped to orchestrate the Shilling Fund's purchase of Flannagan's *Figure of Dignity*, which was then gifted to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. After Flannagan's death, Pach also worked to further an interest in Flannagan's work in Mexico. On December 9, 1942, Pach wrote the following to Zigrosser:

Dear Carl,

The book of Flannagan's letters reached me today; so this seems a good day for a line to you, congratulating you on the big share you had in making that whole work possible. The Mexicans are very keen for it, and when I showed it at *Cuadernos Americanos* today, they ordered an article. Have you seen the one I have in the current issue? It's a great magazine. Good wishes to you.²⁴

Pach subsequently explained to Zigrosser that the article that was accepted for the March/April issue of *Cuadernos Americanos* [*American Notebooks*] was the same in

²⁰ Zigrosser, *A World*, 28.

²¹ Williams, “The Weyhe Gallery,” 97.

²² Zigrosser, *A World*, 29.

²³ Sandra S. Phillips, “The Art Criticism of Walter Pach,” *Art Bulletin* 65 (March 1983): 106.

²⁴ Pach to Zigrosser, Zigrosser Papers.

translation as the one that he had written for the *Kenyon Review* (see chapter 1).²⁵ Pach's article also appeared in the August 1943 issue of *El Hijo Prodigio [The Prodigal Son]*, which like the article in *Cuadernos Americanos* and unlike the article in English, contained reproductions of Flannagan's work, one of which was placed alongside an Aztec sculpture. Several other short articles on Flannagan in Spanish also appeared after the artist's death, one by Guatemalan painter and printmaker Carlos Merida²⁶ and another by an unknown writer by the name of Felix Kraus.²⁷ It is not unreasonable to suspect that Pach was in some way responsible for these also.

In New York, Pach was friendly with Joseph Brummer, with whom he had studied under Matisse. Before agreeing to be represented by Curt Valentin, Flannagan thought about approaching Brummer about the possibility of holding a retrospective show. Though it is not known whether Flannagan ever met Pach face-to-face, the two men occasionally corresponded. Flannagan first checked with him²⁸ to ascertain whether Brummer might be receptive to the idea.

Dear Mr. Brummer,

Walter Pach, who because of his great and vital devotion to art, has always been interested in my sculpture, told me to be sure to go in and see you. I stopped in the other day but unfortunately you were busy and could not be seen. . . .

Most of the things are available and the idea was that you might be interested in a retrospective show as you have always seemed to me to be the one person of all most alive to the proper and understanding presentation of sculpture, that most neglected of the arts.²⁹

²⁵ Pach, Mexico, to Zigrosser, 21 February 1943, Zigrosser Papers.

²⁶ "John B. Flannagan." The date and publication in which this article appeared are unknown, but in it Merida refers to *Letters*, published in late 1942 (Museum of Modern Art, Flannagan artist file).

²⁷ "J.B. Flannagan," *Northern Continental Review*, Dec. 1942 (Museum of Modern Art, Flannagan artist file).

²⁸ Letter no. 51, Flannagan, Boston, to Pach, February 1940, *Letters*, 70.

²⁹ Letter no. 53, Flannagan, New York, to Brummer, 18 April 1940, *Letters*, 73.

Brummer's response to Flannagan's request has not been located and no show was ever recorded. However, Flannagan was successful in gaining additional shows—this time in another city—presumably due to the efforts of one woman, Tennessee Mitchell Anderson.

Tennessee Mitchell Anderson was the second wife of Sherwood Anderson and a sculptor in her own right. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, she may perhaps be seen as the Weyhe Gallery's "Chicago connection," the reason so many Weyhe artists were included in Chicago shows, which in turn were reviewed by Chicago newspapers. Flannagan had a double "in" with Anderson. He probably knew her from the Whitney Studio Club, where they had exhibited together,³⁰ and he also admired her former husband's work (Anderson and Mitchell were separated in 1922). In addition to this personal connection, Anderson's husband habitually wrote reviews of Weyhe exhibitions for the *New York Herald*, and Tennessee had acquired several works from the gallery through Zigrosser. "I'm glad I have the Maurer and the Bateman," she wrote him in 1926, "and I'll try and get them shows at the Arts Club—the best place here for their kind of thing."³¹

Of course, Anderson's motives were not purely altruistic since she herself needed a place to exhibit. The next year she confessed to Zigrosser, "I'm working hard but people here tell me some of my things couldn't be shown in a gallery—one is of a pregnant woman and another one could imagine the female had been bitten by a mosquito

³⁰ "12th Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture by the Members of the Club," February 16-March 15, 1927; "First Annual Sculpture Exhibition," March 6-29, 1928.

³¹ Tennessee Mitchell Anderson to Zigrosser, 21 November 1926, Tennessee Mitchell Anderson Papers, Anenberg Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania.

on her buttocks. But surely that is only a Chicago prejudice.”³² Nevertheless, she later asked if he could sell three or four of her sculptures through the Weyhe Gallery.³³

Flannagan and a number of other Weyhe artists seemed to benefit from the Zigrosser-Anderson relationship. In the spring of 1927, Peggy Bacon, Alexander Brook, Flannagan, Wanda Gág, Emil Ganso, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Henry Mattson, and Charles Sheeler were all invited to show at an “Exhibition of Painting, Drawing and Sculpture by a Group of New York Moderns” at a gallery Anderson had herself established called the “Celotex Cottage.”

In addition to being invited to exhibit at Anderson’s own gallery, Flannagan was offered a solo exhibition at the Arts Club of Chicago in 1934,³⁴ and reviews and reproductions of his work appeared in the *Chicago Post* during the late 1920s and early 1930s.³⁵ He was also represented at the Art Institute of Chicago in four shows³⁶ and was well enough known by that institution in 1939 that its then-director, Daniel Catton Rich, asked him to serve as an exhibition jurist for the Annual Exhibition by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity.³⁷ Flannagan originally suggested to Valentin that he would have preferred the *Figure of Dignity* to go to the Art Institute instead of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.³⁸ Clearly, Flannagan’s Chicago presence was significant, contradicting Forsyth’s

³² Tennessee Mitchell Anderson to Zigrosser, 20 August 1926, Tennessee Mitchell Anderson Papers.

³³ Tennessee Mitchell Anderson to Zigrosser, 13 February 1927, Tennessee Mitchell Anderson Papers.

³⁴ March 16-30, 1934.

³⁵ *Chicago Post*: April 19, 1927; June 14, 1927; February 21, 1928; September 4, 1928; April 15, 1930.

³⁶ “Forty-second Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture,” October 24-December 8, 1929;

“Forty-sixth Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture,” October 24-December 8, 1935;

“Fifty-first Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture,” November 14, 1940-January 5, 1941;

“Fifty-second Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture,” October 30, 1941-January 4, 1942.

³⁷ Daniel Catton Rich, Chicago, to Flannagan, 25 July 1939, Flannagan Papers, Archives of American Art.

³⁸ Valentin, New York, to Flannagan, 15 July 1941, Flannagan Papers.

assertion that the artist's "record of exhibitions [was] limited to New York City during his lifetime."³⁹

As Zigrosser got to know Flannagan better, he also extended himself to helping the artist in matters of a more personal nature. In April of 1936, Zigrosser wrote to Chauncey Stillman, one of Flannagan's collectors, to ask if he might consider purchasing a farm near Woodstock and allowing the artist to live there under financial conditions amenable to both. Zigrosser was often an eloquent letter writer and began by thanking Stillman for his most recent support of the artist: "Your gesture, is in my opinion, of much more significance than is involved in the purchase of a sculpture by an American artist: it means giving practical aid and encouragement, at a critical point in his career, to the greatest sculptor we have in this country."⁴⁰ Stillman declined to help, responding in part, "I doubt, too, that mere security would permanently exorcise his demons. To change the idiom, he is obviously suffering from severe neuroses, and the kindest and most realistic thing his friends could do would be to persuade John Flannagan to be treated by a psycho-analyst, and to help supply the means. (I would help contribute to such a scheme.)"⁴¹ Zigrosser's final words on the matter are indicative of his strong concern for Flannagan and his personal convictions about the dealer's role in nurturing the artist:

Flannagan, after all, is not only an interesting psychological case but a great artist as well. And I am interested in trying to make the path of a creator as easy as possible. Of course, I may be on the wrong tack entirely. It is possible that the resolving of his inner conflict may destroy the artist in him (or at least the impulse to create) and diminish the tragic intensity of his expression. But it seems to me a bit complacent and cruel to doom him to a life of suffering if he can be helped at all by external means.⁴²

³⁹ Robert J. Forsyth, "A Head by John B. Flannagan," *The Register of the Spencer Museum of Art* 5, no. 6 (Fall 1978): 19.

⁴⁰ Carl Zigrosser, New York City, to Chauncey Stillman, 24 April 1936, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

⁴¹ Chauncey Stillman, New York City, to Carl Zigrosser, 29 April 1930, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

⁴² Carl Zigrosser, New York City, to Chauncey Stillman, 2 May 1936, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

This extract also conveys the compassion that Zigrosser maintained for Flannagan, a personal conviction that, as previously mentioned, often put him at odds with his employer. Indeed, Zigrosser had considered but quickly dismissed the prospect of approaching Weyhe for the money to buy the upstate farm.⁴³ Only after Flannagan's death did the full measure of Weyhe's anger about Flannagan come to the fore, precipitated by an unknown comment made by Zigrosser.

Dear W,

I have been turning over and over in my mind the unfortunate incident and have come to the conclusion that it must be due to a misunderstanding. You took what I said in a general sense whereas I meant it specifically in relation to Flannagan. Such a sweeping statement about your relation to all artists would not have occurred to me for it has no basis in fact, as the example of Ganso, Ronnebeck, Cook, Gág, Dwight and many others can testify.

It is unfortunate perhaps that the relation with Flannagan was ever undertaken. I did not know until long after the relation was established that you had such a revulsion against drunkenness. I can understand the feeling, for my wife has it in exactly the same way: she cannot condone it nor will she have anything to do with people suffering from that weakness. But I do not share it. Flannagan was a great artist who was his own worst enemy. It is most unfortunate that you became involved in situations which aroused your revulsion and disgust and stifled any generous and human impulse. That is one of the reasons why I could not understand why you should want to continue to be identified with Flannagan.

Well, I am sorry for my part in the affair. Let's forget it. I for one shall forget such statements of yours as "You never would write an introduction for any of my shows" since I am sure you did not mean it. I hope you will assure me that you have taken what I have said in good part. Otherwise I shall never feel free to speak frankly to you again.⁴⁴

Zigrosser wrote this letter from Philadelphia, where since the previous year, he had been working as the first curator of prints and drawings at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It shows the level of devotion Zigrosser felt for Flannagan as well as the candor and open-

⁴³ Carl Zigrosser, New York City, to Chauncey Stillman, 24 April 1936, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

⁴⁴ Carl Zigrosser to Erhard Weyhe, 12 January 1942, Philadelphia, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

mindedness characteristic of the man. These qualities were what prompted Flannagan to share his most private thoughts with Zigrosser, further cementing their friendship and helping the artist to continue to function.

Most of Flannagan's letters to Zigrosser are written in a loose and flowing hand. However, those that describe feelings of pain and uncertainty condense smaller letterforms into less space. It is not clear whether the difference signals Flannagan's drinking or his awkwardness in writing after his 1939 surgery. In any case, these letters skip easily from topic to topic, often including memories of his childhood and ending with an apology. Flannagan and Zigrosser also corresponded during the months the artist was recovering at Bloomingdale, one of the most trying times of Flannagan's life. He claimed that he had been "tricked" into his confinement and that his stay was "punishment."⁴⁵ In his 1936 correspondence to Stillman, Zigrosser related that he had written to Flannagan when he had been at Bloomingdale "that there was some inner conflict which he had refused to face all his life. Why not have it out with himself while he was there?"⁴⁶ However, as Zigrosser described to Stillman, "he did not see it that way at the time,"⁴⁷ and indeed, Flannagan replied, "I'm writing just to indicate that I don't refuse to listen, and that I appreciate the spirit in which you wrote."⁴⁸ Though Flannagan saw Zigrosser as a "Father Confessor,"⁴⁹ he was unwilling to commit to the level of introspection that Zigrosser had suggested. Nevertheless, Zigrosser continued to perform those functions that sustained Flannagan both emotionally and financially, seemingly without judgment.

⁴⁵ Letter 14, Flannagan, Bloomingdale, to Zigrosser, December 1934, *Letters*, 38.

⁴⁶ Carl Zigrosser, New York, to Chauncey Stillman, 2 May 1936, Carl Zigrosser Papers.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Letter 15, Flannagan, Bloomingdale, White Plains, New York, to Zigrosser, winter 1934-35, *Letters*, 38.

⁴⁹ Letter 14, Flannagan, Bloomingdale, White Plains, New York, to Zigrosser, December 1934, *Letters*, 38.

In two undated letters from presumably only a few years apart, Margherita wrote to Zigrosser and Valentin expressing her concern about her husband's health. "You are the person he considers his only friend,"⁵⁰ she confided to Zigrosser in the earlier one. By 1940, however, Zigrosser had left the Weyhe Gallery to assume his new position at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Though he stayed in touch, Flannagan must have felt the void left by his first dealer. In 1941, he signed with Valentin for what would prove to be less than a year. "Truly you have come to be the only encouragement left him in what has been an unfriendly world,"⁵¹ Margherita later wrote to Valentin. Though Valentin shared much less in common with Flannagan⁵² than Zigrosser, the dependence the artist felt on him was strikingly similar to the previous relationship.

Zigrosser knew Valentin from the Flechtheim gallery, "the leading dealer in advanced modern art in Berlin,"⁵³ where he had visited to buy prints for the Weyhe Gallery in the 1920s.⁵⁴ Perhaps he steered Flannagan to Valentin. Regardless of how the two men became associated, however, there were remarkable similarities in the backgrounds of Erhard Weyhe and Curt Valentin. Both German, Weyhe immigrated to the United States just before the First World War while Valentin immigrated shortly before the Second. Valentin (1902-1954) was twenty years younger than Weyhe (1882-1972) but had also pursued an apprenticeship in the book trade before coming to this country. Finally, both sustained personal links with many European artists, perhaps more so in Valentin's case since he chose gallery work over bookselling.

⁵⁰ Margherita Flannagan, New York, to Zigrosser, possibly February or March 1937, Zigrosser Papers.

⁵¹ Margherita Flannagan, Boston, to Valentin, undated, Jane Wade Papers, Archives of American Art, roll 2322, frame 0957.

⁵² Flannagan and Valentin both enjoyed classical music and corresponded about Beethoven, Bach, and Satie.

⁵³ "Curt Valentin, 52, Art Dealer, Dies," *New York Times*, 21 August 1954.

⁵⁴ Zigrosser, *A World*, 78.

Generalizing on the two men's major strengths, one might say that Weyhe was more established in publishing while Valentin was more active in promoting artists. However, Valentin was also known for publishing small and original catalogues to accompany his shows, and both galleries were leading exponents of drawings and prints. Valentin's greatest passion, however, lay in sculpture and he is credited with helping to promote a greater interest among Americans in the work of European sculptors. In this way, he helped many Italian, English, and German sculptors to obtain recognition alongside the French and for the former group's works to find their way into important private collections in the United States. Flannagan's record of attendance at Buchholz Gallery exhibitions is unknown. Valentin opened his first gallery in New York in 1937 and moved to his 57th street address in 1939. Since Valentin was such a respected dealer, however, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that Flannagan would have been aware of the Buchholz Gallery's exhibitions even before ties were severed with the Weyhe Gallery in 1938. In an undated letter to Valentin, Margherita Flannagan lamented "being unable to see the Lehmbruck/Maillol exhibition."⁵⁵ Research reveals that this show took place from November 16 through December 6, 1941.

As noted earlier, Valentin was probably most responsible for encouraging Flannagan to create multiple copies of his work. Variations on *Dragon Motif* and *Triumph of the Egg* were produced in 1941 with the aid of a compressor (figs. 107 and 185). And although works in artificial stone are listed in Weyhe Gallery catalogues from

⁵⁵ Margherita Flannagan, Boston, to Valentin, undated, Jane Wade Papers, reel 2322, frame 0955.

the 1930s,⁵⁶ the production of bronze casts increased both during Flannagan's association with Valentin and after the sculptor's death.

I shall do another cast as soon as I possibly can, so I shall get my working cast (plaster) all ready for the founder and then get an estimate on the cost of casting and if it is within my limited means, have it cast as soon as possible. Then I finish it by hand. As a matter of fact, on the cast you sold, and any others I might do, there is considerable work to be done even on the cast, because I really, to a certain extent, model directly on the metal by pushing the metal here and there over the complete piece. But I shall try to get you another cast as soon as it's humanly possible.⁵⁷

However, without Flannagan to supervise, the high standards of quality that the artist maintained during his lifetime seem to have been compromised.

The names of two other galleries—the Marie Sterner Gallery in New York and the Grace Horne Galleries in Boston—also appear in letters by Flannagan but there is no evidence that the sculptor entered into agreements with either. Marie Sterner (1880-1953) was an art dealer best known for her support of the American artists Rockwell Kent and George Bellows (both of whom were also affiliated with the Ferrer Center and had shown at the Weyhe Gallery). Her first marriage was to the artist Albert Sterner, who was one of the founders of the Painter-Gravers of America. Ever guarded towards others' efforts on their behalf, Flannagan's second wife referred Sterner to Zigrosser on receipt of an inquiry about his work: "He [Flannagan] has a letter from Marie Sterner (enclosed with reply) and hopes you can do something about it. We like the 'I am trying to interest a client' very much when the fact of the matter is obviously that the client has interested her in John's stuff."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ For example, "Woman's Head," catalogue 77, December 1936 and catalogue 79, December 1937 and "Mother and Child," catalogue 77, December 1936.

⁵⁷ Letter no. 64, Flannagan, Boston, to Valentin, 18 February 1941, *Letters*, 82.

⁵⁸ Margherita and John Flannagan to Zigrosser, Monday evening, Carl Zigrosser Papers, reel 4621, frame 989.

The Grace Horne Galleries are mentioned in a 1939 letter to Zigrosser from Boston,⁵⁹ where Flannagan was trying to secure shows and interest private collectors in his sculpture. Margherita's parents lived in Boston and as early as 1936 Flannagan seemed to be sizing up his prospects there: "I've met quite a few people here lately, chiefly thru the Edsalls. There seems to be quite a lot of certain enthusiasm that I think and hope will be contagious enough to cause a sculpture plague here in Boston. I just missed meeting your friend Seidenberg. Alas."⁶⁰ Important European modernists such as Maillol, Gauguin and Picasso were shown at Grace Horne, as were fellow Weyhe artists Arthur B. Davies, Wanda Gág, Rockwell Kent, and Emil Ganso.⁶¹ Flannagan also refers to [Nathaniel] Saltonstall, president of The Institute of Modern Art in Boston and listed as a possible reference for a Guggenheim fellowship in Flannagan's papers. (The Institute of Modern Art, formerly The Boston Museum of Modern Art, was originally an offshoot of the Museum of Modern Art in New York but severed ties with the mother institution in 1938.)⁶² However, the available documentation does not suggest that Flannagan ever showed with Grace Horne or the Institute of Modern Art. The Fogg Art Museum appears to be the only institution in Boston to have acquired Flannagan's work.

Many prominent individuals collected Flannagan's sculpture: Chauncey Stillman, investor and philanthropist; R. Sturgis Ingersoll, Philadelphia lawyer and Fairmount Park Art Association committee member; Edsel Ford, son of car manufacturer Henry Ford;⁶³ Henry Goddard Leach, editor of the controversial magazine *The Forum*; Edward M.

⁵⁹ Letter no. 44, Flannagan, Boston, to Zigrosser, May 1939, *Letters*, 65.

⁶⁰ Letter no. 25, Flannagan, Boston, to Zigrosser, 30 March 1936 *Letters*, 46.

⁶¹ Untitled article, *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 February 1927, Weyhe Gallery Scrapbooks, vol. 3, February 1927-March 1928, p. 52.

⁶² Russell Lynes, *Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 292.

⁶³ Adolph Dioda, Philadelphia, Pa., to Robert Forsyth, 2 April 1960, Forsyth Papers, Archives of American Art.

Warburg, one of the founders of The American Ballet Company and son of banker Felix Warburg; the Reverend A. J. Kelley, collector and founder of an organization to promote artists; Edgar J. Kaufmann, jr., son of the owner of Frank Lloyd Wright's *Falling Water*; Frederick A.P Zimmermann, well-known musician in the New York Philharmonic; David G. Thompson, Pennsylvania landscape architect; Susan Dwight Bliss, philanthropist and champion of the social and medical welfare of children and psychiatric patients; Fredric Wertham, psychiatrist and author; and Milton Lowenthal, an important benefactor of American art. By the end of his life, Flannagan had gained a true appreciation of just how vital a role his dealers and individual collectors played in his survival as an artist. Writing to Valentin less than a year before his death, Flannagan offered his cooperation in presumably following his dealer's strategy to keep a steady supply of sculpture on the market. The artist had also realized the importance of making personal contacts with collectors.

Dear Curt:

You are helping me in more [ways] than you know. I'm grateful and will assist you always in any way I can in your part of our relation—I want you to make money on my stuff. I'm writing a note to Kaufmann to indicate my delight and something of the meaning of the *apparently little* things I do. I carve them big however—Bigger than they are. Read the Kaufmann note and if you approve, address it and mail—or keep and hand to him whenever you see him again—as you think best. It has been my experience, our fellow human beings can be a good lot, all of them. They do appreciate even such effortless little things of courtesy and interest as this. It's also my experience, courtesy and interest are *potent*.⁶⁴

The Kaufmann note referred to above is the only example to this particular collector in *Letters*. Though there are no published letters to Chauncey Stillman, he and R. Sturgis Ingersoll seem to have been the most important collectors to Flannagan during his lifetime. Both purchased multiple works and took a personal interest in the artist.

⁶⁴ Letter no. 70, Flannagan, New York, to Valentin, 15 June 1941, *Letters*, 86.

Stillman became acquainted with Flannagan through a friend who had stayed at Bloomingdale at the same time as the artist during the mid-thirties. Stillman later bought a stone torso of a woman dating from 1936⁶⁵ (also known as *Rondo*)(fig. 75) and paid for the gift of another sculpture, *Mother and Child*, (fig. 62) to Vassar College in the same year. Among the other sculptures at one time owned by Stillman were *Dog* (round) from 1937 (sculpture unlocated; drawing collection Addison Museum of American Art) (fig. 131) and *Morning*, n.d., collection Ogunquit Museum of American Art (fig. 98).⁶⁶ Stillman also commissioned Flannagan to carve a pair of deer for his country estate in Amenia, New York in 1937/38 (fig. 89). As discussed earlier in this chapter, Zigrosser approached Stillman in 1936 about helping to finance a house for Flannagan. Although Stillman did not think that the arrangement was appropriate, his concern for the artist in letters to Zigrosser was readily apparent.

Flannagan's relationship to Ingersoll was of a much more personal nature, with the two men corresponding directly over the course of several years (*Letters* contains six examples) and Flannagan often mentioning his difficulties in staying sober. Ingersoll wrote that he had first come to know Flannagan in the fall of 1937, when the sculptor visited Philadelphia to see the planning committee of Fairmount Park's Samuel Memorial.

After the Committee meeting, Flannagan and I went to the Zoo—after hours—and watched the great snakes being fed. He came out to spend the night with us. We drank copious whiskies. In a few days I received a postal from him saying, "I must make you a snake." He did—delivered early in 1938. It is illustrated in the Museum of Modern Art catalogue above referred to. "Snake" is my title for it.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Carl Zigrosser Papers. The sculpture was exhibited as #15, *Woman*, in "Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture" at the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts, May 4-17, 1936.

⁶⁶ Zigrosser Papers.

⁶⁷ Sturgis Ingersoll, Philadelphia, to David Wright, 4 September 1956, Zigrosser Papers.

As discussed in chapter 4, Flannagan often made drawings in anticipation of sculptures. Forsyth's papers contain a photograph of a sketch that is very close in appearance to the final sculpture (fig. 100). This would seem to be one of the "suggestions" that Flannagan referred to in a 1937 letter to Ingersoll.⁶⁸ The sketch is inscribed, "I think I like this best. I hadn't realized before the possibilities of the snake for essentially abstract design." Like *Dragon Motif*, one of the two works highlighted in Flannagan's credo, *Snake* "moves ever onward finally to turn back into itself, an endless movement."

In the same letter from 1937, Flannagan also alludes to a "slight memento" that he is sending to Ingersoll, a "recollection of tragi-comedy in the snake house of the zoo—seen *soberly*." This is perhaps a related ink and goache drawing (fig. 101) that Ingersoll's grandson mentions in a 1987 letter to Hirschl & Adler Galleries,⁶⁹ the present owner of *Snake*. Inscribed "To Sturgis and Mrs. Ingersoll," the watercolor was offered as a gesture of thanks for the Ingersolls' hospitality in Philadelphia.

In addition to *Snake* and related works on paper, Ingersoll also owned *Dragon* (presently collection Whitney Museum of American Art) (fig. 56) and *Swimming Girl* (location unknown). The two men also apparently discussed other Flannagan sculptures, among them the *Miner* (fig. 96) in Fairmount Park and *Mother and Child* (collection Fogg Museum of Art) (fig. 68). Flannagan wrote disparagingly of the former; years later, Ingersoll himself commented that *Gold Miner* was "not up to his [Flannagan's] full

⁶⁸ Flannagan, New York, to R. Sturgis Ingersoll, September 1937, *Letters*, 60.

⁶⁹ Robert S. Ingersoll, Philadelphia, to Stuart P. Feld, 1 September 1987, courtesy Hirschl & Adler Archives, New York, NY.

standard”⁷⁰ due to the sculptor’s deteriorating health. *Mother and Child* represented a greater source of accomplishment for Flannagan, and he sent pictures of the sculpture to Ingersoll in the hope of interesting another Philadelphia collector in this or another work.⁷¹ Interestingly, in an excised portion of one of Flannagan’s earlier published letters to Ingersoll,⁷² he mentioned Edith Halpert of the Downtown Gallery as having a client in Philadelphia interested in a garden piece. Though the Fogg eventually acquired *Mother and Child* and the unnamed collector was never revealed, Flannagan’s allusion to the Downtown Gallery again hints at his active involvement in the contemporary art scene. Given the artist’s early exposure to craft traditions, his knowledge of the Downtown Gallery as a well-known venue for folk art is not surprising.

It seems possible that Flannagan and Ingersoll also discussed the subject of garden sculpture. Flannagan briefly mentions this category in a mid-career letter to Zigrosser in the context of making arrangements for an upcoming show at the Weyhe Gallery.⁷³ Flannagan never wrote at length about garden sculpture and his interest in modernist strategies such as direct carving and simple, direct statement would seem to preclude an interest in the subject. In addition, garden sculpture seems inextricably tied to commissioned works, which Flannagan seldom solicited. However, he probably shared views expressed by Ingersoll in an article entitled “Sculpture in a Garden” published shortly after Flannagan’s death. In this essay, Ingersoll wrote, “ ‘Garden sculpture’ and ‘sculpture in a garden’ sound alike, but they do differ,—the one, in our time, being

⁷⁰ R. Sturgis Ingersoll, “The Ellen Phillips Samuel Memorial,” in *Sculpture of a City: Philadelphia’s Treasures in Bronze and Stone* [sponsored by the Fairmount Park Art Association] (New York: Walker Publishing Co., 1974), 252.

⁷¹ Letter no. 44, Flannagan, New York, to Ingersoll, January 1939, *Letters*, 64.

⁷² Flannagan to Ingersoll, undated, Zigrosser Papers, reel 4621, frame 212 as compared with letter no. 41, *Letters*, 62.

⁷³ Letter no. 4, Flannagan, Woodstock, to Zigrosser, winter 1929-30, *Letters*, 22.

somewhat limited to frogs, nymphs, and babies, whereas the other includes all good sculpture placed in a garden.”⁷⁴

Dovetailing with Flannagan’s ideas about sculpture appearing natural and untouched, Ingersoll maintained that “all sculpture aside from certain religious and cabinet items should be out of doors.”⁷⁵ Flannagan’s interest in garden sculpture makes sense when considered in the context of his aesthetic: that sculpture should remain integrated with the organic world, not removed from it. Finally, artist and collector shared faith in the technique of direct carving, with Ingersoll writing, “there is a certain heroism in spending month after month in hewing sheer form, nothing but form, out of a great block of hardness.”⁷⁶

The proximity of these two individuals’ beliefs also represents a turning point in traditional conceptions about sculpture and patronage. Shaking off nineteenth-century connotations of affection and preciousness, the conventional garden sculpture comes to represent not a made-to-order object but a creation of the artist’s own choosing. It also enters into the realm of domestic consumption, controlled not so urgently by the whims of a single wealthy patron as by the tastes of devoted art lovers in consort with favored artists. Flannagan’s small-scale animal sculptures, similar to small-scale genre sculptures in scale but unlike them in meeting the demands of the marketplace during the twenties and thirties, capitalized on what art historians such as Daniel Robbins have called the “softening up” of modern sculpture.⁷⁷ Free from the expectations of commemorative

⁷⁴ R. Sturgis Ingersoll, “Sculpture in a Garden,” *Magazine of Art* 35 (May 1942): 170.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Ingersoll, “Sculpture,” 171.

⁷⁷ Daniel Robbins, “Statues to Sculpture: From the Nineties to the Thirties,” in *200 Years of American Sculpture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1976), 143.

works, Flannagan's garden pieces were further envisioned to transform the uses of sculpture.

Perhaps because of Flannagan's early death and the scarcity of his sculptures on the present-day market, he has never been seen as an eminently collectible artist. However, several art periodicals close to the time of Flannagan's death chose to see him in this light,⁷⁸ specifically in the hands of a young woman from Narragansett, Rhode Island, named Lois Orswell (Mrs. Fletcher Dailey). One of the most important collectors of Abstract Expressionist art and a correspondent of David Smith, Orswell made Flannagan's *Early Bird* (1941; Fogg Museum) (fig. 109) her first sculpture purchase. Though she never knew Flannagan, she, like Ingersoll, subscribed to some of the same modernist ideas as the sculptor, such as the tenet of truth-to-materials as well as "abstraction related to nature, wherein mood and emotion are emphasized."⁷⁹ A pioneering collector of modern sculpture, Orswell also gathered sculptors' drawings (fig. 108). It should thus come as no surprise that Orswell was shocked and dismayed to learn that Curt Valentin had allowed casts to be made of *Early Bird* before it was sold to her.⁸⁰ In a strange twist of fate, Orswell ultimately became the victim of the same process that had celebrated her: the promotion of art for public consumption.

Flannagan's relationship to several major museums—the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Fogg Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art—has already been noted in the context of their acquisitions or exhibitions of his works. Most of these institutional associations, as

⁷⁸ Aline B. Louchheim, "Who Buys What In the Picture Boom," *Art News* 43 (July 1944): 23; "Orswell Collection," *Art Digest* 21 (May 1, 1947): 16.

⁷⁹ Aline B. Louchheim, "Narragansett Novitiate," *Art News* (May 1947): 40.

⁸⁰ Marjorie B. Cohn, *Lois Orswell, David Smith, and Modern Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 2002), 88.

well as his connections with individual collectors, came later in life. However, the cases of the Whitney Museum (along with its progenitors) and the Museum of Modern Art form the exceptions.

Juliana Force's role in giving young artists the opportunity to exhibit was discussed in chapter 5. The other individual who is perhaps worthy of mention in this regard is Holger Cahill, director of exhibitions at MoMA before becoming director of the Federal Art Project under the WPA in 1935. Cahill was particularly sensitive to indigenous art traditions, particularly folk art. (In 1929 he entered into a partnership with Edith Halpert to found the American Folk Gallery, later located on the second floor of the Downtown Gallery).

In the thirties, MoMA included Flannagan in four exhibitions which met with varying degrees of success in terms of attendance: *46 Painters and Sculptors Under 35 Years of Age* (1930); *American Sources of Modern Art* (1933), which also featured Pre-Columbian art; *Modern Works of Art: Fifth Anniversary Exhibition* (1934-35); and *Art in Our Time: An Exhibition to Celebrate the Tenth Anniversary of the Museum of Modern Art and the Opening of Its New Building* (1939). Edgar J. Kaufmann, jr., curator in the department of industrial design at the museum, shared some of Cahill's interests and organized an exhibition of Mexican antiques and folk art there in 1940. Finally, in the following decade, Cahill's wife, Dorothy Miller, curated Flannagan's retrospective show at the museum. In the context of MoMA's oft-cited preference for acquiring and exhibiting European works over American ones, Flannagan's experience with this museum from an exhibitions standpoint is significant.

One of only a handful of artists offered stipends by the Weyhe Gallery (and later by the equally respected Buchholz Gallery), Flannagan sought exhibitions or was approached by the Brummer Gallery, the Grace Horne Galleries, the Marie Sterner Gallery, and the Downtown Gallery. That Flannagan chose to remain with the Weyhe Gallery for nearly ten years is perhaps a measure of both the limited opportunities available to artists during the Depression as well as Flannagan's loyalty to Zigrosser. Perhaps more watchful of the needs of his artist-friends than the needs of his employer, Zigrosser helped to provide the safety net that kept Flannagan afloat.

Taken together, Flannagan's involvement with the art market of the late twenties and thirties was more considerable than previous studies have indicated. Although Flannagan professed a discomfort with museums and large institutions as well as the critics, both actually helped him to further his exposure and to find his own voice. Far more at ease with the stability of the Weyhe Gallery and his relationship with Zigrosser, Flannagan benefited from his dealer's wide network of connections. Only later in his career would Flannagan discover the magnanimity of certain collectors and his own abilities to cultivate such contacts.

Chapter 7 INFLUENCE

In an effort to assess Flannagan's contribution to American sculpture, Carl Zigrosser wrote, "Imitators have managed to discover a bag of surface tricks without ever penetrating into the animating spirit within. Flannagan was not without influence as a pioneer of direct carving in America."¹ Yet perhaps owing to Flannagan's increasing obscurity, it is difficult to name artists who later shared both his aesthetic and the rigor of his process. Many other American sculptors during the twenties and thirties chose animals as subject matter. Some, like direct carver Cornelia Chapin (1892-1972) took a very different path from Flannagan, producing technically flawless works in an academic tradition far removed from the experiments of modernism. Others, such as Flannagan's friend Heinz Warneke or their student Jane Wasey, came much closer to sharing Flannagan's aesthetic in terms of associating the image with its material and arriving at an expression of emotional authenticity. But what of the other direct carvers—William Zorach (1889-1966), Robert Laurent (1890-1970), José de Creeft (1884-1982), and Chaim Gross (1904-1991)—who worked roughly contemporaneously with Flannagan?

It is perhaps not surprising in light of the shortage of information on Flannagan that there is little readily accessible information on the sculptors who came under his influence. Laurent, Zorach, De Creeft, and Gross all actively taught sculpture,² but Flannagan preferred a more one-on-one approach and has been associated with only a handful of lesser-known sculptors. Jane Wasey was born in Chicago, studied briefly in

¹ Carl Zigrosser, *A World of Art and Museums* (Philadelphia: The Art Alliance Press, 1975), 173.

² Zorach and Laurent taught at the Art Students League; and Laurent, Gross and de Creeft taught at the Educational Alliance. In addition, Laurent also taught at the Ogunquit colony.

Paris, and then came to New York, where she studied with Flannagan.³ Wasey was unable to continue her instruction with Flannagan because of his alcoholism.

Nevertheless, she went on to exhibit and teach for several decades after her first solo show at the Montross Gallery in the thirties.⁴ Like Flannagan, Wasey carved mainly in wood and stone but later in her career also made casts in bronze. Also like Flannagan, Wasey favored animals as subjects. However, while her sculptures share the poignancy of Flannagan's creatures, they are rendered in a more realistic manner. They do not carry the sense that the image has been released from the rock. Though as a direct carver Wasey clearly subscribed to the principle of truth to materials, her sculptures do not possess the rough, unfinished quality of many of Flannagan's works.

Other direct carvers who cited Flannagan's influence were Maverick colony artists Hannah Small and Eugenie Gershoy. As noted in chapter 2, Small witnessed the carving of Flannagan's *Maverick Horse*. Outwardly much more akin to Flannagan's work, Small's sculptures share his interest in the varied surfaces of organic materials. There is also a much greater feel for simplified, direct statement than in Wasey's work. Though taking the female form as their most frequent subject, Small's sculptures share the same reticence and self-protectiveness as Flannagan's animals. Small studied at the Art Students League under Boardman Robinson and Alexander Stirling Calder.⁵ However, her exposure to the ideas of José De Creeft has also been noted. According to art historian Susan Leval, Small—like De Creeft—relied much more on intuition during

³ Exhibition brochure for Jane Wasey, 30 April-24 May 1986, Kraushaar Galleries (Museum of Modern Art subject files on Wasey).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Press release, Woodstock Artists Association, Inc., April 27, 1992.

the course of her carving than Flannagan.⁶ While difficult to prove, the genesis of this assertion no doubt relates to Flannagan's oft-quoted statement that the shape of the rock does not determine the design—a deviation from the direct carving creed.

Eugenie Gershoy also attended the Art Students League, where she met Small and studied briefly under the same teachers before going to Woodstock to work.

John Flanagan [*sic*], the sculptor, was a great friend of ours, and he was up there, too. I was very much influenced by him. He used to take boulders in the field and make his sculptures of them, and also the wood that was indigenous to the neighborhood—ash, pine, apple wood, and so forth. So I began immediately to carve in stone and wood without any training whatsoever. At the Art Students League, I had just done some clay work. From then on, after the boulder period, I carved in marble, in sandstone, and in alabaster, and in ash and apple wood.⁷

In addition to direct carving, Gershoy started to experiment with different methods and materials at Woodstock. Assigned to decorate a children's library for the WPA sculptors' project in the late thirties, she continued to use papier-maché and polychromatic techniques that naturally seemed to lend an element of fantasy to her work.⁸ Out of Gershoy's incredibly varied and creative output of sculptures, her early work most closely resembles that of Flannagan. In her case, unlike Small's, his example proved to be more a point of departure than a steady source of influence.

Other sculptors whose name has been associated with Flannagan's are Domenico Mortellito, a sculptor/consultant to DuPont⁹ who worked in synthetic materials and may have counseled Flannagan on his cast-stone pieces; Adolph Dioda, a sculptor who

⁶ Susan T. Leval, "Profile: Hannah Small/Eugene Ludins, *Art Times* (Jan./Feb. 1988): 10-11.

⁷ Tape recorded interview with Eugenie Gershoy by Mary McChesney, 15 October 1964, Archives of American Art.

⁸ Raymond J. Steiner, "Profile on Eugenie Gershoy," *Art Times* (Nov. 1984): 8-9.

⁹ "Artist to Talk to Pen Women About Color," Museum of Modern Art subject files on Mortellito.

assisted Flannagan in the late thirties and later taught at Temple University; and Ahron Ben-Shmuel, a stone carver who may have helped Flannagan in the early thirties and much of whose work now belongs to the Museum of Modern Art.

While it would seem most logical that Laurent and possibly Zorach played a role in Flannagan's artistic development, no evidence has been found to corroborate this. As confirmed by Zigrosser, Flannagan "revealed very little outside influence" (see chapter 3). But what about the reverse: Did Flannagan influence Laurent and/or Zorach? Several years older than Flannagan, both Zorach and Laurent reached artistic maturity sooner. Zorach began as a painter and began to carve wood in 1917. His sculpture was influenced by study in Paris—where he was first exposed to African art and Cubism—and by exhibiting alongside European modernists at the Armory show. Laurent came to the United States from France in 1910 and first showed here in 1913. He is credited with introducing the technique of direct carving into modern American sculpture. While Zorach's sculpture may sometimes be likened to Flannagan's in terms of its compactness (from their mutual interest in Pre-Columbian art) and such surface aspects as an interest in texture, Zorach's has a greater feeling for monumentality while Flannagan's is more intimate. In contrast to both, Laurent's has the greatest look of refinement and finish.

Although Laurent worked in New York City at the same time as Flannagan, there are no substantial references to the naturalized American sculptor in the latter's papers. Flannagan made brief mention of Laurent in a postcard to Valentin¹⁰ and also wrote of

¹⁰ Presumably, Valentin had asked Flannagan about locating an available sculpture studio and Flannagan had referred him to Laurent. Flannagan to Valentin, 24 June 1941, Curt Valentin Papers, Museum of Modern Art Archives.

visiting Laurent's studio in order to see his model for Fairmount Park.¹¹ While it thus seems extremely unlikely that Flannagan influenced Laurent, a more likely exchange of ideas could have taken place between Flannagan and Zorach. As noted earlier, Zorach knew Flannagan from the Sculptors Guild and in his autobiography remarked upon the latter's opportunism and unreliability. Flannagan does not mention Zorach at all in his papers.

Though not as accomplished a writer as Flannagan, the quantity of Zorach's writings are impressive. In addition to two books, he wrote numerous articles, among them a 1926 essay on Brancusi and part of the introduction to the catalog of the 1939 World's Fair. In 1943 he wrote an article on American sculpture in which he summarized the talents of five sculptors: Gaston Lachaise, John Flannagan, José de Creeft, Hugo Robus, and Minna Harkavy. Flannagan was the only sculptor who received a halting endorsement.

John Flannagan who died last year was one of our most talented sculptors. His best work was based upon the idea of freeing the form imprisoned in the rock. One always felt that he was capable of developing an expression of greater power than he actually attained. There is a fine sensitive quality to his work but he never sufficiently faced [*sic*] the form from the rock and was carried away by the fascination of the suggestion of the emerging forms that a sculptor evolves in the early stages of stone carving. Flannagan was one of the few whose sculpture was based on Pre-Columbian art—the Mayan and Aztec—rather than the European and Oriental.¹²

In both *Art Is My Life* (1967) and *Zorach Explains Sculpture*, (1947), the element of self-promotion takes center stage. In contrast, Flannagan's limited writings are much more metaphysical and centered on his evolving credo.

¹¹ Letter no. 29, Flannagan, Woodstock, to Henri Marceau, 8 July 1936, *Letters of John B. Flannagan*, Margherita Flannagan, ed. (New York: Curt Valentin, 1942), 53.

¹² William Zorach, "American Sculpture," *London Studio* (June 1944): 186.

While it is perfectly possible that Zorach arrived at his ideas about direct carving independently, there are striking similarities between several passages from *Art Is My Life* and Flannagan's letters and credo. It is worth quoting at length Zorach's description of his conversion from wood to stone in 1922 to prove just how similar these two sculptors' ideas ran:

I seem to have given up wood. I don't know why. In the last years I've gotten so involved in working in stone and get so much pleasure out of the material that I think in stone; something happens with stone that doesn't happen working in other materials. It's a sort of resonance; something comes through. It's a metaphysical sort of thing which you are playing with, almost like a sailor's relationship with the sea in which he becomes a part of the elements, of the sun, the storms, and the waters. You are actually creating and at the same time battling hard material. Then there is a peace and a quietness that you get out of the communication—something that is not related to our materialistic world but that goes back to the ancients and the primitives. Its takes you back into timelessness, where there is no time and space is endless. If you pry up a boulder that's been lying in the ground or in a sand pit, it's sort of alive, whereas a rock that's been exposed to weather out on a beach or in a quarry is very brittle and not nearly as responsive to carve. There's a sense of eternity in a glacial boulder that's been rolled around for millions of years. It has a marvelous feeling of permanence. When I began working in stone it was a great revelation to me, watching the form emerge from the rock, living and eternal. It was very satisfying. There is a beautiful, heroic, almost Olympian, feeling in these things. I can't tell you exactly how or why I get that into the stone; it comes from the inside. It's from the quality of your personality, of your feeling and love for nature and for life, for people and for animals. It's a sort of inner vision. It is seeing with a spirit that is timeless.¹³

Writing 26 years after Flannagan, Zorach reiterates many of the core concepts from the "Image in the Rock" that relate to the role of the sculptor: conceiving of the image in stone, asserting the importance of the original material and establishing a

¹³ William Zorach, *Art Is My Life* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1967), 167.

reciprocity with it, and revealing the inner spirit hidden in brute matter.¹⁴ However, Zorach's words have none of the economy or poetics of the younger sculptor. The terseness and cogency of Flannagan's statement, on the other hand, make it stand as almost a manifesto of direct carving. Though the tenets of direct carving had been outlined earlier in the century by European sculptors (with the seminal idea of releasing "the image in the rock" dating even earlier) Flannagan was the first American sculptor to offer a personal statement on direct carving contemporaneous with a body of work.

In addition to Flannagan's 1941 credo, Zorach may also have visited the younger sculptor's shows. In 1938, for his last exhibit at the Weyhe Gallery, Flannagan wrote a short statement containing the sentence, "There are miniature monuments and monumental miniatures" (see chapter 5). The beginning of one of his chapters in *Zorach Explains Sculpture* points to a clear familiarity with Flannagan's words.

Small sculpture is beautiful, enriches our lives and is a constant pleasure in our homes and museums. But sculpture is basically a monumental art. To really convey its message, sculpture should be on a grand scale. This does not mean large sculpture necessarily expresses grand and profound ideas. Small sculpture can be monumental in feeling and monumental sculpture can be trivial. But essentially sculpture is a natural means of expressing the feelings and aspirations of mankind on a grand scale and the power of expression increases with the scale—within limits.¹⁵

This passage reveals a lot about Zorach. While using Flannagan's idea as a touchstone, he also takes the opportunity to differentiate himself from the younger sculptor. As if to reinforce his point, a reproduction of his *Builders of the Future* from the New York World's Fair appears on the facing page. As his writings (though not always his

¹⁴ The characteristics of direct carving are taken from Penelope Curtis's *Sculpture: 1900-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 73-97.

¹⁵ William Zorach, *Zorach Explains Sculpture* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996), 275 (originally published by the American Artists Group, New York, 1947).

sculpture) prove, Flannagan's ideas about scale were diametrically opposed to Zorach's. Generally, Flannagan's aesthetic is more personal. To put it most harshly, in Zorach's sculpture this differing conception often manifests itself in "stiff, monotonous masses and with only occasional flashes of the profound simplicity he had admired in the ancients."¹⁶

Regrettably, there is no evidence that Flannagan associated with José de Creeft, who came to the United States from Spain in 1929. Nevertheless, his widow, Lorrie Goulet, told me that her husband knew his work and held it in great esteem.¹⁷ Chaim Gross also admired Flannagan's work and probably acquired the five previously uncataloged¹⁸ works presently in the collection of the Chaim Gross Studio Museum when the contents of Flannagan's studio were liquidated in 1939. In spite of the lack of documentation attached to these works, Flannagan inscribed one of the objects, a watercolor, "To Chaim Gross, with Admiration and Affection." Gross also facilitated the sale of at least one of Flannagan's sculptures (fig. 104).

Gross was ten years younger than Flannagan and had studied with Laurent at the Educational Alliance. Asked about the influence of other contemporary sculptors near the end of his life, Gross responded, "Flannigan [*sic*] was already way before my time. He was already a master carver where he carved those fieldstones."¹⁹ As Gross's comment indicates, Flannagan belonged to the first generation of American direct carvers. There are many differences between the work of these two sculptors, most notably Gross's preference for figurative, often narrative subject matter as well as for wood—and eventually bronze—over stone. In spite of the ways that these two sculptors' work

¹⁶ Dore Ashton, *Modern American Sculpture* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1968?), 15.

¹⁷ Visit to Lorrie Goulet de Creeft's studio by author, July 2001.

¹⁸ April Paul, director of The Chaim Gross Studio Museum, located these works within Gross's large collection in 2001 after I showed her a 1960 letter to Robert Forsyth from Gross's wife, Renee.

¹⁹ Interview with Chaim Gross by Milton Brown, 27 May 1981, Archives of American Art.

diverges, however, Gross's interest in acquiring the work of Flannagan suggests some sort of shared sensibility.

Aside from Zorach, research suggests few common links between Flannagan and other direct carvers of his time. More likely, Flannagan's work provided an indirect impetus for later sculptors, such as Raoul Hague. When asked about Flannagan, Hague responded that the nature of the older artist's influence was more in the manner of encouragement than specific guidance.²⁰ Flannagan's example also served as inspiration for American sculptor Phillip Pavia, who in respect for the rigor of the direct carving technique with which Flannagan's name has been associated, entitled one of his sculptures *Homage to John Flannagan* (1962-66).

Since Flannagan died in middle age, there's also the possibility that contemporaries such as Henry DiSpirito (1898-1995) and/or slightly older artist Samuel Rothbort (1882-1971) became familiar with his ideas later—in the decades after 1942. DiSpirito began as a stonemason and evinced an appreciation for nature that manifested itself in carvings of insects and animals. Like Flannagan's subjects, these seemed to emerge naturally from the wood or stone. Rothbort also shared this love of nature, and his writings are strident in their injunctions against man and his propensity to unthinkingly destroy God's gifts. While Flannagan conceived and wrote about stones as the bones of the earth, Rothbort referred to organic materials that, tragically, have already entered into man's commerce.

Using only wood that washes ashore from all the corners of the world,
fieldstones, stones from buildings which stand in decayed back yards, I
come across wood with pieces of shrapnel, wood cities with termite

²⁰ Interview with Raoul Hague by Avis Berman, 29 September 1983, Archives of American Art.

architects building their streets and tunnels, I ask myself: “What right have I to destroy a Universe?”²¹

Much more didactic than Flannagan in his writings about God, Rothbort nevertheless shared a belief in “Collective life.” Like Flannagan, however, Rothbort professed a distrust of science and advocated a return to beginnings and the purity of nature.

Not always a strictly orthodox direct carver, Flannagan strayed from the exclusive use of organic materials in the mid-thirties. Though committed to the technique of direct carving and its accompanying aesthetic, as noted earlier he employed other methods such as casting in bronze and stone. Casting openly negated many of the intrinsic principles that were dear to him, especially the spiritual communion between artist and material that was established during the act of direct carving. As Roberta Tarbell has written, “one impetus for the innovations of the abstract expressionist sculptors was the discovery that their teachers . . . did not always adhere to the gospel as they preached it.”²² Not always able to bear out his theories consistently, Flannagan in this way may perhaps be seen as less of an influence than a figure to react against.

With the sculptors that followed him, like those of his contemporaries who seemed to work autonomously beside him, there are few obvious connections. The Abstract Expressionist movement ushered in a much greater variety of working materials following David Smith’s first experiments with welded “heads” in the early thirties and the American Abstract Artists’ use of plastics later in that decade. After 1940, the organic

²¹ Checklist, Charles Barzansky Galleries, New York City, “Out of Wood and Stone,” by Samuel Rothbort, Oct. 2-14, 1961 (Courtesy Brooklyn Museum of Art).

²² Roberta K. Tarbell, “Direct Carving,” in *Vanguard American Sculpture, 1913-1939* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1979), 64.

materials of direct carving no longer held sway. To be sure, the principle of truth to materials was a limiting one. Sculptors needed to work with the intrinsic properties of a given piece of wood or stone, whether in terms of size or color. Sculptors such as Gershey, while pointing to her profound debt to Flannagan, also felt constrained by his aesthetic. She found much greater freedom in a range of materials, including the most unconventional, as well as in the use of unbridled color, as her polychromed works suggest.

In addition, figurative subject matter, though it had proven the ability to communicate a wide range of human feeling during the twenties and thirties, came to be seen as only one limited approach. Indeed, some art historians have even pointed to direct carving as an impediment to the development of abstract expressionist sculpture²³ in general. Interestingly, abstract expressionist sculptors Seymour Lipton (1903-1986) and Herbert Ferber (1906-1991) both began as carvers of figurative subjects in the thirties. However, Lipton later went on to evolve a more associative iconography, and both turned to metal in preference to wood.²⁴ For these two sculptors, direct carving was a necessary stage in their development, not an end in itself. Eclipsed more by the strength and diversity of a new art movement than for a lack of distinction in his own work, it is perhaps not surprising that Flannagan produced few followers. Though little known except among sculptors and art historians, he continues to represent a purity and ideal that have seldom been matched.

²³ John I. H. Baur, *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 75.

²⁴ Roberta K. Tarbell, "Direct Carving," in *Vanguard American Sculpture, 1913-1939* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1979), 58.

Chapter 8
CONCLUSION

Did Flannagan merely “let life pass by ineffectively,” as Robert Goldwater wrote in summary of Valentiner’s introduction for the published letters,¹ or was he (in Zigrosser’s words) a “pioneer of American sculpture”? The answer to this question depends upon whom one asks. Both authors of previous dissertations on Flannagan credit the sculptor with redirecting the course of American sculpture. Yet such a bold claim simply does not fit an individual who described himself both as a primitive and as a mystic.

As this dissertation has shown, Flannagan was a complex man who was full of contradictions. Although he worked in traditional media, his approach to them was modern.² Because of this element of self-consciousness, Flannagan’s “primitivism” cannot be seen as the definitive judgment on his life and work and represents only one way to look at his diverse career. More important was his belief in mysticism, an amalgamation of belief systems centered on the concept of “oneness” and for him finding its roots in Christian doctrine. In spite of the fact that Flannagan has now come to be known simply as an “animal sculptor,” his conception of sculpture as an extension of the artist and his/her quest to elucidate “True Reality” wedded perfectly to the contemporary interest in direct carving.

Taking Goldwater’s opinion as a point of departure, what might be an objective set of criteria for measuring a sculptor’s success? If influence is one consideration (see chapter 7), Flannagan plainly falls short. He did not interact a great

¹ Robert Goldwater, book review of Flannagan’s *Letters*, *Art Bulletin* 25 (spring 1943): 288.

² Roberta K. Tarbell, “Direct Carving,” in *Vanguard American Sculpture, 1913-1939* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1979), 64.

deal with contemporary artists, nor was he a frequent teacher. However, as the examples of Samuel Rothbort, Henry DiSpirito, and Phillip Pavia show, his influence was diffuse. Years after his death, the ingredients of Flannagan's aesthetic, especially his respect for nature and organic processes, continue to provide inspiration to artists. Another gauge of a sculptor's importance might be his or her success in obtaining paid commissions. Flannagan took little interest in this area, completing just one, for Fairmount Park in Philadelphia. Though he, Zorach, and Laurent all submitted sculptures to the Rockefeller Center project, only Zorach and Laurent were ultimately successful in having their works accepted.³ On the subject of reputation, however, Flannagan is not as easily dismissed.

Though not currently well known, he was popular in his time and continues to command a rare measure of respect among those familiar with his work. Indicative of his desirability, a great number of museums own Flannagan sculptures (though they seldom show them). In addition, many works remain in private collections and never come onto the market.

While Goldwater's critique holds some resonance, especially by conventional standards, it is important to point out that Flannagan worked in the modern period and was able to exercise a much greater degree of autonomy than sculptors before him. The traditional relationship between artist and patron was also changing as galleries such as the Weyhe began to take on more of the role of marketing the artist's work. Flannagan's personal imperative to create an oeuvre consistent with his own worldview was consonant with a willingness to live simply and to make just enough money to survive. His sculptures were most often created for no particular purpose or person in mind.

³ Wayne Craven, *Sculpture in America* (Newark: University of Delaware, 1984), 575.

However, while his lack of self-promotion has often been construed as an aloofness from his times, my research has not confirmed this. Participating in the Public Works of Art Project, the Sculptors Guild, the American Artists' Congress, and the New York World's Fair, he was sensitive to topical interests of the thirties—such as the union of sculpture and architecture—as well as its politics. Although he has often been portrayed as a recluse, his inability to sustain his professional commitments relates more to his shortage of confidence and dependence on alcohol than on his lack of initial concern.

Never an eager participant in groups, Flannagan was not a member of the Artists' Union, and his introspection probably precluded all-out involvement in artists' organizations. But his exposure to the ideas of such anarchist thinkers as John Mowbray-Clarke and Carl Zigrosser, as well as communist Diego Rivera, has never been noted. The relevance of Flannagan's conversance with these men's ideas is that he translated a belief in the innocent, the weak, and the oppressed into his art. As expressed throughout this dissertation, Flannagan's carvings of animals are surrogates for human warmth and emotion. During the course of his lifetime, Flannagan was presented with many opportunities to reflect on the plight of children: not only during his own years in orphanages but also later in life when he met collectors Susan Dwight Bliss and Fredric Wertham, who cared deeply for children's welfare. As discussed earlier, Flannagan was probably also very familiar with the ideas of such Progressive reformers as Theodore Dreiser.

As well as providing a rationale for his sculpture, mysticism was a spiritual means of coping with depressed feelings of loss and emptiness brought on by events in Flannagan's early life. Paradoxically, because of the strong role that religion played in

the orphanages that oversaw his care, Flannagan continued to find strength in traditional Christian symbols as well as a belief in the interconnectedness of all of life.

Flannagan's retreats into nature were a way to physically displace himself from aspects of society that bothered him, and also to re-connect with his inner self. In spite of the advantages of changes in technology and transportation during his lifetime, he abhorred the growth of cities and mass culture.

More than a parenthetical aside, as Forsyth makes reference to it, the Depression weighed heavily on Flannagan, both in terms of its privation of material comfort and in its effects on his individual psyche. In tandem with his own feelings of hopelessness, Flannagan saw little cause for optimism in the context of the times in which he lived. "I don't want to celebrate the holidays," he was quoted as having stated before his death, "There is too much distraction and too much war in the world."⁴ It does not seem purely coincidental that Flannagan killed himself just one month after the United States declared war on Japan and Nazi Germany.

While Flannagan's full motivations must remain a matter of speculation, an enlarged range of inquiry helps to lend relevance not only to his life and work but also to the context of other artists' lives during the Depression. Much easier to pin down, his main interests during his lifetime seem to have been clear: to evolve a body of work combining both the humanist tradition and a modernist approach, and to articulate a personal statement to accompany it. Flannagan's significance to early-twentieth-century American sculpture hinges on the way he did this: by applying a limited number of salient themes—primitivism, nature, and spiritualism—to the technique of direct carving.

⁴ "Sculptor, Long Ill, Commits Suicide," *The New York Times* (Jan. 8, 1942): 23.

As Flannagan's MSA classmate Wanda Gag once remarked (and as noted earlier), Flannagan was "all for the modern tendencies in art." Like many of the most avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century, Flannagan looked to the art of other cultures for inspiration. However, his work did not always meet with outside approval. His early wood sculpture was described as incorporating "Gothic and mannerist impulses" and ultimately elicited confusion on the part of the critics. Worried, perhaps, about seeming derivative, Flannagan changed course, and with his "African-inspired" forms was seen to be more in keeping with the most recent trends.

Finally hitting upon consistent favor with the critics with his animal sculpture in the early thirties, Flannagan seemed to become less buffeted by critical response. As previously discussed, animal sculpture represented a more collectible form of sculpture with greater public appeal. Settling on an approach that was more broadly informed by "primitivism" than self-consciously primitivizing, Flannagan continued to draw on outside sources. His later sculpture reveals the influence of Pre-Columbian art in its use of compact, closed forms but they are swollen and softly rounded. No longer consistently frontal and totemic, and now carved exclusively in stone, much of his mature work shows the same truth to materials.

While Flannagan modified his output of sculpture to satisfy the critics, he also continued to cultivate a personal interest in "primitivism." But this interest coincided with a more enduring concern for his place within the universe and the cycles of life. The example of Flannagan's death mask (fig. 191) may be seen as evidence of his continued interest in the art and rituals of ancient and non-Western cultures. Friends of the artist, presumably at either his or his second wife's request, cast it. The death mask may also be

viewed in the context of his eclectic spirituality, especially because the use of such effigies is associated with a belief in the return of the spirit to the body. Contrasting and complementing the example of Flannagan's death mask, the following passage illustrates both the sculptor's sustained commitment to the Catholicism of his upbringing and his mystical concern for the unity of all of life (Flannagan wrote this statement shortly before his death and included it alongside a sketch of a pieta in a letter to his second wife (fig. 118):

The profound/great sorrow and pity of a mother holding/shielding [?] her dead so instinctive that impulse to cover—and in making the two figures as one thru drapery we get the perfect symbol of death—return to being part of the Mother principle as we all shall and be covered by Mother Earth.

It is impossible to appreciate to full import of Flannagan's words without considering the fact of his double abandonment: first by his father's death and second by his mother's recourse to orphanages as a substitute for her care. Through not only his sculpture but also his drawings, Flannagan sought to restore the physical and psychological unity denied to him as a child.

As this dissertation has shown, Flannagan was unable during his lifetime to sustain the ideals he set forth for himself in his carvings. When health issues intervened, the development of his credo took center stage in place of his sculpture. Nor was Flannagan the quintessential direct carver in every respect, even in the twenties and early thirties. Although spontaneity played a large role in his credo ("My aim is to make sculpture feeling as direct and swift as a drawing"), the fact remains that he *did* rely heavily on preparatory drawings as a means of planning for his sculpture. Indeed,

although unperforated “volume” assumes clear precedence, “line” often also plays an important role, especially in the more stylized works such as *Jonah and the Whale* where incising is present. In addition, Flannagan deviated from a strict adherence to the direct carver’s aesthetic. For him, the shape of the rock didn’t always determine the design; instead, it was up to the sculptor. Flannagan’s thinking regarding the agency of the artist and the role of the subconscious point to a familiarity with other art styles and movements, particularly Surrealism. However, his distaste for abstraction makes further analogies difficult. Finally, Flannagan eventually strayed from the exclusive use of organic materials, duplicating his carvings in cast stone and bronze, a fact that not only makes his statement seem less compelling but also devalues his original carvings.

During the course of this dissertation, in addition to specific book sources, I have discussed several important factors that enabled Flannagan to arrive at his individual aesthetic. As Roberta Tarbell has suggested, an appreciation for arts and crafts may have sensitized direct carvers such as Flannagan to a later embracing of primitivism. However, I would argue that the sculptor’s exposure to an arts and crafts tradition began even earlier than his acquaintance with Hervey White at the Maverick colony.⁵ As noted in chapter 2, Flannagan probably first became aware of the arts and crafts movement in Minneapolis. Sensitized to a simpler way of life from his own rural beginnings, Flannagan may have been naturally disposed to conceiving of the connection between hand-made objects and the pre-industrialized past.

Flannagan’s psychological yearning for a retreat from urbanism and the cult of materialism were mirrored in his perennial flights from the city. It is thus not surprising

that his sculpture celebrated nature and a return to the earth. As previously mentioned, several of Flannagan's classmates at the MSA—particularly Wanda Gág and later, Adolf Dehn—also drew upon nature as a theme, looking upon it as a vital, restorative force. As described at length, Flannagan's own feelings for nature went beyond nostalgia and world-weariness to a very personal brand of spiritualism composed not only of Christian beliefs but also of Eastern religious thought. While traditionally credited to the influence of Coomaraswamy, a commitment to these latter ideas might also have been nurtured by other contemporary individualist thinkers such as Gibran. Zigrosser's appellation of Flannagan as a mystic, then, finds resonance in a combination of the sculptor's beliefs: in God's inclusive love, particularly towards animals; in the spirit of contemplation and respect for place consonant with Buddhism; and in a pagan animism, probably drawn from ancient Celtic belief, that endows natural objects with souls. Though other modernist artists also evinced an interest in spirituality, particularly theosophy and numerology, Flannagan's committed beliefs about nature and his place in the world consistently informed both his life and art.

Not only were Flannagan's sources much broader than has previously been acknowledged, they were assimilated over a longer stretch of time. In addition to early exposure to craft and non-Western traditions in Minneapolis, as well as a conversance with the American avant-garde "primitivism" then in vogue in New York City, he was an avid reader who took inspiration from the literary world. In combination with the books that Flannagan sought out on his own, Carl Zigrosser's influence was also considerable. Not only did the sculptor benefit from his dealer's wide network of connections with

⁵ Roberta Tarbell, "Primitivism, Folk Art, and the Exotic," in *The Figure in American Sculpture* (Los

other artists, collectors, and museums, but Zigrosser may have also helped to shape his thinking through discussions of mutual interest as well as encouragement to experiment with other media.

As I have tried to show by a concentration on the context of Flannagan's life and art, considering the artist's sources in a vacuum without also illuminating the reasons why he found them relevant does an injustice to the artist. The answer to the question of why we should care about Flannagan first rests on his sensibility as an individual. Flannagan should not be seen apart from the events of his early biography, particularly the years of his life spent in institutions where religious structure substituted for normal parenting. Alcohol abuse and depression were the adult manifestations of early loss, separation, and abandonment. Clearly, Flannagan continued to search for a unity in his work that he found missing in life. The world of books and ideas complemented his religious faith, allowing him to perceive of his sculpture as life affirming.

In spite of the relevance of Flannagan's example both to the centrality of the direct carving movement during the twenties and thirties, as well as to the continuation of the humanist tradition in sculpture, scholars have shied away from further study. While I have pointed to some of the reasons for this neglect (totalizing labels that have discouraged further research, Flannagan's preference for figuration over abstraction, prejudices about the period in which he worked)—as well as little or no systematic categorization of his work on the part of museum professionals—there are other obstacles as well. The shortage of primary source documentation on Flannagan, including two important gallery checklists from 1928 and 1930, makes progress difficult. In addition,

Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1995), 111.

some sixty years after his death, even individuals who knew Flannagan as children are dead or near the end of life. Because of this lack of information and the advantage that Robert Forsyth had in gathering his research only twenty years after Flannagan's death, Forsyth's findings must be seen as a crucial part of the puzzle.

Flannagan should not be seen as a "case apart," a mystic whose interests and sources are impervious to discovery or understanding. Truly a participant in the American modernist moment that combined the resurrection of direct carving with the strategy of primitivism, Flannagan's work and writings deserve to be better known precisely for the ways that he *is* a transitional figure in American sculpture. A sensitive and intelligent artist, Flannagan assimilated a variety of influences from both Eastern and Western traditions. His borrowings were never a purely formal exercise, however. They transformed not only his art but also his existence in helping to provide a vital source of rejuvenation to a troubled and often desperate life.

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