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Raoul Hague

Stevens, Mark. "Trunk Show." New York Magazine, October 6, 1997, pp. 68-69.

The primal trees of the American Abstract Expressionist sculptor

Raoul Hague, overlooked for too long; blood and guts in SoHo.

Raoul Hague DIED IN 1993 AT THE AGE OF 88, AN eccentric American sculptor who was then all but forgotten. Once admired by his contemporaries—among them Gorky, Guston, and Tomlin—Hague had a brief moment in the sun during the fifties when the curator Dorothy Miller included him in a group show at the Museum of Modern Art. The short-lived Washington Gallery of Modern Art gave him an exhibition in 1964; he had several gallery shows; occasionally, a critic noticed. But that's about it. This represents an important—and foolish—oversight, for Hague is a significant figure, an artist who deserves a place among the well-known figures of Abstract Expressionism.

The reasons for the oversight are easily explained. An immigrant from Constantinople who came to the United States when he was 16, Hague did not find his distinctive voice until he was middle-aged, when he abandoned conventional representations of the figure and began to work exclusively with brawny tree trunks. The beautiful works he created in the fifties were difficult to transport and to show, and young artists and critics were already turning against Abstract Expressionism toward the end of that decade. No less important, Hague was a recluse who hated the spotlight. He lived alone in a small rustic cabin in Woodstock, New York, that he heated with a potbellied stove. His companions were about a dozen old, ticking clocks that he turned into works of art and compared to teenagers—temperamental, noisy, and requiring lots of attention—and, of course, the somber tree trunks that he chose to awaken.

The Lennon, Weinberg gallery in SoHo is now showing seven of Hague's works (through October 4), ranging in date from the early sixties to the eighties.

**Abstract Expressionism:
Hague's tree-trunk sculpture
Bainbridge
(1967).**



The history-minded will note the inspiration of Brancusi in Hague's formal simplifications and his reverent feeling for the material at hand; they will also recognize the thoughtful tension of cubism and the propulsive energy of Abstract Expressionism. While highly educated in art and literature, however, Hague also had the idiosyncratic character of the folk artist who creates a private world. "You make one cut, then you become intimate," he told an interviewer in 1981, describing how he began work on a trunk. "That thing becomes humanized, a being. It becomes part of my life for the next three or four months. I do my chores around it."

Working mainly with walnut trees, Hague would carve, shape, and sand the trunk: "By cutting away," he said, "I make additional space." He never let himself overwhelm a tree with his tools, with the result that no work is just wood; each also retains the memory of the tree. "I consider the wood has got half of the relationship with me," Hague said. "I cannot dominate the material. It is a very close association." The works are brilliantly balanced in this respect, with man and nature given equal weight. The smooth also seems reconciled to the rough, the outer to the inner, the rooted to the

free-flowing—the private mood to the public face. Hague liked this singsong quote from Auden, which conveys what it is like to come upon one of the artist's works in a SoHo gallery: "Private faces in public places / Are wiser and nicer / Than public faces in private places."

By letting the tree live on in his work, Hague could create a powerful, primal aura—an ancient-seeming "spirit of the wood." At the same time, the massive trunks suggested the thighs and trunk of the primal human body; the nooks and crannies of the forest became those of a man or a woman. As befitted an artist raised in a Mediterranean culture, Hague drew strongly upon pagan myths. He

chose to identify, he said, not with the ocean but with the mountain brook. ("It talks, it whispers, and the Greeks listened to them," he said.) His art is composed of fragments—in the modern way—but retains the mysterious wholeness characteristic of myths. Daphne, running from Apollo, was transformed into a laurel tree. In Hague's art, you can still catch a glimpse of her.

Photograph courtesy of Lennon, Weinberg, Inc.