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Art in America

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Chaim Gross at Forum

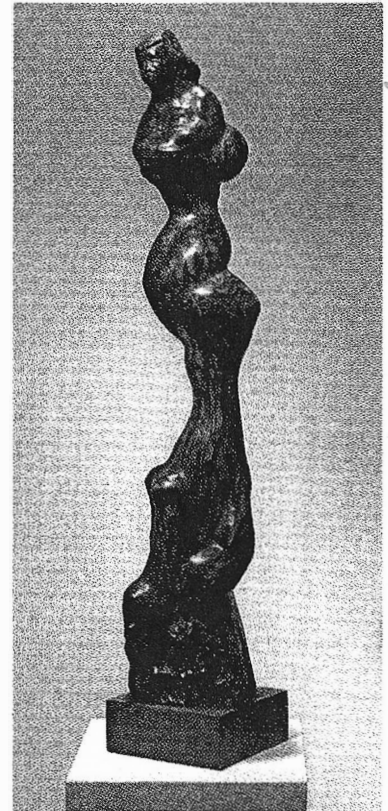
Throughout his long and productive career, Chaim Gross (1904-1991) invested his exuberant sculptures with a keen show of form and content and an understanding of the expressive possibilities of his materials. Gross was introduced to wood carving by his family, Austrian lumbermen given to whittling as a pastime. He arrived in New York in 1921 and attended the Educational Alliance, Art Students League and the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design, where he discovered the relationship between tribal art and carved-wood sculpture, and began working with exotic woods. Objects in this exhibition were carved from lignum vitae, sandalwood, sabicu, cocobolo and ebony, woods sought by sculptors for their density, color and grain. Gross also worked in alabaster and onyx; his bronzes are festive works with open forms, modulated surfaces and rich patinas. These relatively small sculptures demonstrate Gross's range, from the monumental and weighty

to the balletic and ethereal.

Like his colleague Alexander Calder, Gross was drawn to the circus, as evidenced by many of the 19 works on view (dating from 1942 to 1985). Acrobats appear in the ascending curves of the 25-inch-tall lignum vitae *Tumbler* (1944), an inverted caryatid, its contours harmonious with the colors and grain of the wood from which it's hewn, folded arms and head resting on a circular base carved from the same block of wood. The 4-foot ebony *Young Tumbler* (1958) supports a baby atop her sleek, inverted figure. A closely related 30-inch cocobolo *Baby Balancing on Feet* (1950) is a similarly columnar figure rich with the striations of the wood, the form of a child at its upper extremity. The 5-foot sabicu column *The Twins* (1943-44) consists of a woman down on one knee on a pedestal, a child balanced on her other knee, its sibling poised on her raised hands.

Emerging from a block of relatively soft white Mexican onyx, *Sisters at Play* (1942) seems as luminous as alabaster, its sensuous, intertwined figures disporting on a plinth of dark, variegated polished stone. The theme is reiterated decades later in the abstracted, rosy *Loving Mother* (1978) in pink alabaster and in the white alabaster mass of *Mother, Daughter and Son* (1980), in which the smoothly sculpted, near-molten-looking and impassive faces suggest those of pre-Columbian Mexico. In 1957

Gross turned from the removal process of revealing form within blocks of stone and wood and began to work directly in plaster, for later casting in bronze. Among these, such figures as the roughly 15-by-15-by-12-inch bronze *Flying Trapeze on Ice* (1958) evoke Matisse's dancers expanding outward as though propelled by centrifugal force. Such dancing forms presage Barry Flanagan's leaping anthropomorphic hares of decades later. Intended for public sites, Gross's figures stand in the world with a sense of lightness, movement and monumental scale. —Edward Leffingwell



Chaim Gross: *Baby Balancing on Feet*, 1950, cocobolo wood, 29½ inches high; at Forum.