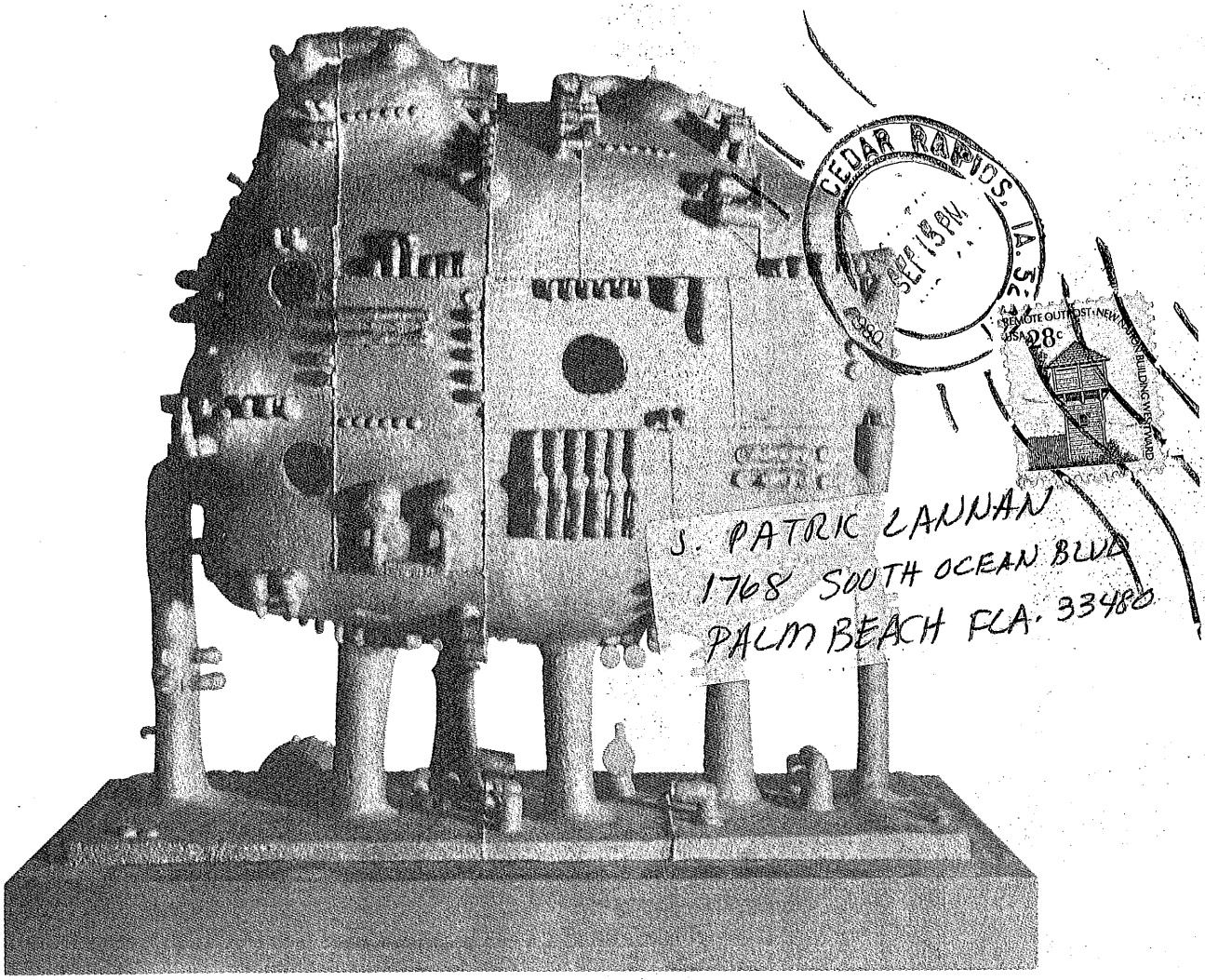
JULIUS SCHMIDT



SWOPE ART GALLERY

September 5 through October 5, 1980

The Art of Julius Schmidt

Julius Schmidt is descended from the tradition of the artists-inventors of Colonial America on the one hand and from Cubism and Surrealism on the other. He prides himself on his Yankee ingenuity. As a child of humble circumstances in Stamford, Connecticut, he quickly came to understand the value of imagination and enterprise as the means to self-realization. If the tools, materials, and techniques essential to the expression of his imagery did not exist in the field of art, Schmidt discovered them in industry and elsewhere or invented them himself.

Schmidt has been a dreamer and a builder since childhood. When lightning flashed in the sky, young Julius saw instead golden chains and yearned to make something as fabulous. He constructed in the dirt of his backyard an imaginary city with elevated highways, bridges, towers and tunnels, long before he had heard of Le Corbusier and city planning. Schmidt's father was a pattern maker for a foundry that made lead fish sinkers, and he supervised his seven-year-old son in the pouring of lead into homemade molds in the family kitchen. Schmidt was introduced to plaster in junior high school and readily responded to the casting challenges it afforded. He also had a penchant for constructing abstract objects from old machine parts and motors found in junkyards. After high school, Schmidt took a one-year course in industrial design, where he learned the art of structural representation, such as developing one form, a cube, for instance, into a variety of others. All of these experiences shaped his philosophy and the expressive character of his sculpture.

Schmidt found time to paint while serving as an aerial gunner in the Navy during World War II. Following separation from the service in the winter of 1950, he enrolled at Oklahoma A. & M. College at Stillwater and eagerly acquired a knowledge of chemistry, geology and metallurgy which has benefited him in his art. Schmidt earned the B.F.A. degree from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1953, and for the next two years studied sculpture under Ossip Zadkine in Paris and at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, Italy. He returned to Cranbrook in 1955 for the M.F.A. in sculpture.

Schmidt had been trained in the lost-wax method of bronze casting, but since the early days spent rummaging through junkyards for materials and ideas, he had admired iron. It has an integrity, he says, and always retains its identity, unlike bronze, which can be made to do anything. Schmidt is intrigued by the thought that the core of the earth may be made of nickel-iron. Moreover, all of the machines and huge valves that he has admired are made of cast iron, and he has wanted his sculpture to be made of this same durable and democratic material. If bronze is a time-honored fine-arts material, iron is the rude material of modern industry. There is something of the Dada repudiation of art as an elitist activity in this preference for the material of toys, machines and junk, but the anti-art side of Dada is alien to Schmidt.

What was needed was a practical method of casting sculpture in iron, one which would not require the facilities and heavy equipment of a commercial foundry. Schmidt first adapted from industry the core-sand process of mold-making and later learned from the American Foundrymen's Society how to construct small and inexpensive iron-melting cupolas or furnaces out of scrap materials, furnaces suitable for use in an artist's workshop.

It was in Pontiac, Michigan in 1951 that Schmidt first saw automobile parts being cast in iron by the core-sand process. The molds were made of particles of sand bonded together by core oil and baked into hard blocks capable of withstanding the intense heat and pressure of molten iron. Schmidt discovered that he could carve core-sand blocks with abrasive tools, such as a dentist's drill. Lacking iron-foundry facilities, however, Schmidt did not pursue the process until 1956, when, using a simple crucible, he cast a small sculpture. Pleased with the result, Schmidt began to work more extensively with cast iron at a time in his career when he could not afford the expense of casting exclusively in bronze. Schmidt has defined the core-sand process in the following:

> The sculpture is carved in reverse in blocks of core sand, a fine sand mixed with a binder which when baked becomes a permeable but hard block, easy to carve but strong enough to withstand the heat and pressure of molten metal. The carving is done with various abrasive tools. From the carved blocks a multiple piece mold is assembled, its cavities fitted with various cores to make the sculpture hollow and

with sprues, runners and gates to allow the metal to flow to every part. Now the molten metal is poured into the finished mold. When cool, the mold is smashed off and the sculpture emerges.[1]

The lost-wax method of casting requires the sculptor to fashion a model from which a mold is made. Because of the expense and technology required to equip and operate a foundry, not many educational institutions can afford one, and few of the commercial foundries can afford to specialize in casting works of art. Most artists must rely on commercial foundries to cast their sculpture, which is expensive, and the results often are disappointing since the artist has no direct control over the actual casting. In 1958, Schmidt wrote: "Of fundamental importance in the education of the sculptor is the knowledge of materials and processes. This knowledge makes it possible for the sculptor to speak through form, and through form to evoke the images of his imagination."[2] By entrusting the casting to foundrymen, Schmidt argues, the sculptor never learns all that he should about his materials and processes and thus inhibits the range of his imagination and achievement.

As a direct method of casting, the core-sand process eliminates all of the non-art intermediate steps involved in the lost-wax method and thus is comparatively inexpensive. The opportunity to control the entire process and to achieve an immediate result appealed to Schmidt. He also enjoyed the conceptual challenge of direct casting, which requires the artist, like diemakers, to visualize the result in the negative. Indeed, in a remark reminiscent of Jackson Pollock,[3] Schmidt has said: "I don't know what my works will look like until I am through with them,"[4] i.e., until they emerge from the mold. It is only then that he can recognize all of the associations that he has put in a work. As much as Pollock's famous statement, this sounds like the doctrine of psychic automatism as propounded by André Breton, the theoretician of Surrealism. One could argue that it is not so much the character of the imagery in Schmidt's early iron sculpture as it is the nature of his creative process that qualifies him as one of the foremost practitioners in sculpture of the principles of Surrealism.

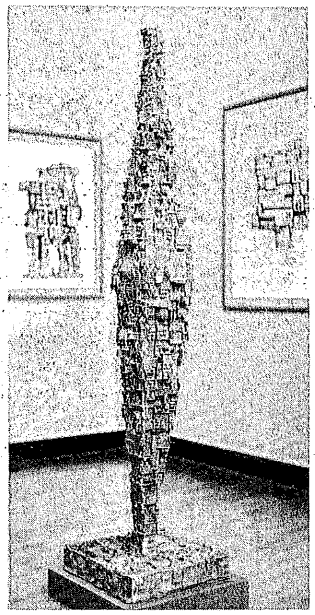
Schmidt served as Chairman of the Sculpture Department at Kansas City Art Institute from 1955 to 1959, and it was there, between 1957 and 1959, that he produced his first major body of work in cast iron and gained critical attention. He won First Prize and the Purchase Award in the Mid-America Annual at the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum of Fine Art in 1957 and 1958. In 1958 he was included in *New Talent, U.S.A.*, a traveling exhibition organized by the American Federation of Arts in New York, in *Six American Sculptors* at the Arts Club of Chicago and the Milwaukee Arts Center, and in *Sculpture 1950-1958* at Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College. Allen Weller, Dean of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Illinois, included Schmidt in the 1959 exhibition *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture*. The major breakthrough for Schmidt came in 1959, when a major one-man show of 36 bronze and iron sculptures and 10 drawings was organized by the Nelson Gallery and Atkins Museum of Fine Art in Kansas City. That exhibition and the catalog essay by Patrick J. Kelleher of Princeton University attracted the attention of Dorothy Miller of the Museum of Modern Art, who included Schmidt in the 1959 exhibition *Sixteen Americans*. Schmidt's inclusion in major group exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, Whitney Museum of American Art, and Galerie Claude Bernard in Paris in 1960 was followed by his first one-man show in New York in 1961 at the Otto Gerson Gallery, perhaps the leading sculpture Gallery in America at the time. Other group and individual exhibitions followed in quick succession, and international recognition was attained in 1963 with Schmidt's inclusion in the *VII Bienal* in São Paulo, Brazil and in *Sculpture in the Open Air* in London. Schmidt was invited to the White House Festival of the Arts in 1965.

Meanwhile, Schmidt had taught at Rhode Island School of Design in 1959-60, had lived and worked in Santa Barbara, California in 1960, and had served as Visiting Professor at the University of California at Berkeley in 1961. He was invited in 1962 to head the Sculpture Department of Cranbrook Academy of Art, where he remained until 1970, when he accepted his present post at the University of Iowa.

Schmidt's study of tradition and his travels have had a profound influence on the stylistic development of his art. His knowledge of art history encompasses the Western and non-Western traditions. His work reflects the formal and iconographic influences of ancient Chinese bronzes, Indian art, the art and architecture of Ancient Egyptian and Pre-Columbian cultures, and modern European art. But human, insect,

plant and landscape forms have also left their mark. All of these sources have been synthesized with machine forms to produce a highly original body of sculpture.

During high school and college, Schmidt was eclectic. His high-school sculptures recall Brancusi, Arp, Zorach and Moore, while Brancusi emerged as the dominant influence in Schmidt's Oklahoma years. Schmidt's student works at Cranbrook owe much to Zadkine, Flannagan and primitive sculpture, especially the vertically-organized aerial *Malanggan* figures of New Ireland.



Pl. 14. *Untitled,* 1960, cast iron, unique, height: 72 inches, collection: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (not in the exhibition).

In Kansas City from 1957 to 1959 the influences of modern sculpture were brilliantly synthesized with the other sources mentioned above. A trip to Mexico in 1958 seems to have catalyzed this synthesis. The abstracted forms of insects and cacti merge with those of gears, chains and valves (Pl. 2) and with others inspired by the Pre-Columbian art and architecture of Mexico (Pl. 3), by Chinese bronzes (Pl. 4), and by Dogon ancestor figures from West Africa, *Malanggans* from New Ireland, and Picasso's Surrealist figures of the late 1920s and 30s (Pl. 1). All of these works evidence the compartmentalization introduced by flashings, i.e., the iron that seeps through the gaps between the core-sand blocks. The *horror vacui* of Chinese and Mayan art seems to have compelled Schmidt to embellish nearly every compartment with a profusion of motifs in raised and sunk relief. The most common motifs are clusters of nodes, depressions, sunbursts, circles, concentric circles, cones, pyramids and stars. Some of the sculptures stand on legs. Whether solid or aerial in design, all of the pieces are Surrealist in aspect. They evoke alternately images of prehistoric relics encrusted with age, of robots or war machines bristling with armament, and of nature's more exotic and fearsome creatures. Some of these strange hybrids seem monstrous, while others evoke a nostalgia for the glory of past civilizations. The works in Pls. 3 and 4 may resemble ancient cities excavated by archaeologists, but they also derive from the imaginary city of Schmidt's childhood.

Schmidt's work at the Rhode Island School of Design evolved along the lines of the complex style developed in Kansas City. One of the major pieces produced in Rhode Island is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Pl. 5). It further develops the elevated city motif introduced in 1959, but is larger and more complex than one of its forerunners (Pl. 3) and less ponderous than the other (Pl. 4). The conical, hemispherical, pyramidal and rectangular shapes are composed and related in a manner even more suggestive of the sacred and secular buildings of an ancient city.

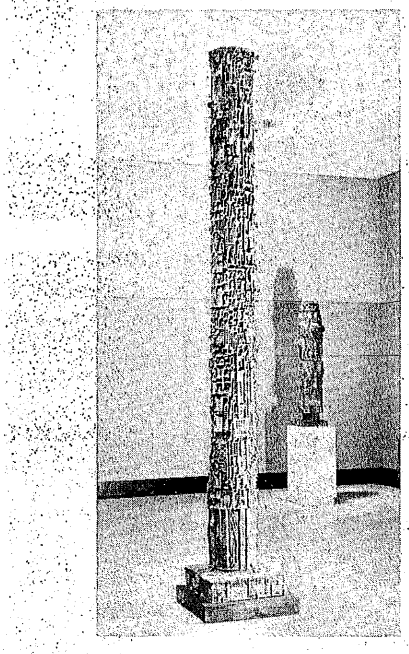
The year spent in Santa Barbara, California was an exceptionally productive one for Schmidt. Lacking foundry facilities, he eventually persuaded the owner of a foundry that manufactured manhole covers to allow him to do his own casting there. In a prodigious effort, Schmidt cast 34 iron sculptures weighing five tons. The linear and aerial designs of Kansas City (Pls. 1, 2) were replaced by works generally more compact and massive (Pl. 10). Fragmented columnar forms appeared, and flashings were made to function as the arrises between the flutes of column shafts (Pl. 10-top left). In other works, horizontal compartmentalization persisted, along with the usual surface embellishments. Some reliefs also continued to exhibit the full range of surface detail within compartments (Pl. 10-

lower right, but other reliefs featured the simple repetitive design of fluted columns (Pl. 10-lower left).

Vertically-organized sculptures continued to predominate in the Berkeley works of 1961. Schmidt's work had always been monumental in aspect, but now some sculptures of considerable size also appeared. Two of the three major vertical compositions of the Santa Barbara and Berkeley periods were cast by the core-sand process in the first successful cupola built by Schmidt, (Pls. 9-left, 15). The piece now in the Hirshhorn Museum (Pl. 14) was cast by Schmidt at the commercial foundry in Santa Barbara. This six-foot high totem is a pier with radical entasis and is divided into a maze of compartments, the character and organization of which resemble the nests of some insects. The commemorative Column of Trajan with its helical relief band finds an echo in the 10-foot high column in Pl. 15, although a rocket on its launching pad encircled by the myriad pipes and valves of its gantry is not an improbable source. Schmidt has noted that the computer and space industries were starting in Santa Barbara when he was there and that his sculptures of the time are emblematic of that and of the industrialization of Berkeley. A storm-shattered tree or ancient architectural ruins are evoked by the massive four-foot high piece in Pl. 9-left. The amount of carving and the technical skill required to design and cast such complex constructions stagger the mind.

Many of the horizontal works of the Berkeley period resemble industrial architectural forms. The sculpture reproduced on the cover, for example, could pass for one of the huge gas storage tanks along the industrial waterfront of Stamford that Schmidt had admired as a child, but insect forms also come to mind.

Schmidt was prolific in his eight years at Cranbrook, to which he returned in 1962. A fully-equipped foundry and improved finances permitted him to work more extensively in bronze. The range of his imagery expanded, and his art evolved through three distinctive styles. During the early Cranbrook period (1962-64), the styles and motifs developed earlier were refined. The city motif was divorced from the legs that previously had elevated it. Plate 6 is reminiscent of a Pre-Columbian city with its temple crowning a great platform mound; it also evokes the image of the conning-tower deck of a submarine—is this an image of the lost island of Atlantis, or simply a remembrance of eight years spent in the Navy? Several variations on the column were produced, but new motifs and forms also appeared, chief among which were the phallus (Pls. 11,12), bell and egg. These works were important for the later development of Schmidt's art, for in them the shapes became more organic, the earlier flashings became either fins or slits (functioning as metaphors for the phallus and vagina), and in some the surfaces were simplified (Pl. 12). Schmidt's marriage in 1963 may explain the sudden introduction of sexual metaphors.



Pl. 15. *Untitled,* 1962, cast iron, unique, height: 120 inches (not in the exhibition).

Works of the middle Cranbrook period (1965-66) were reduced to a few large geometric shapes. The earlier compartmentalization of surfaces evolved into a Cubist fragmentation and displacement of form, and surface embellishment ceased. Plate 7 is a transitional work, and the new style is fully developed in Pl. 16. The earlier nodes and cones have grown into huge orbs (breasts and buttocks) that have been sliced into sections and penetrated by phallic fins which alternate with vaginal cavities. When asked why he abandoned the textured and detailed forms of his early works for smooth volumetric shapes,

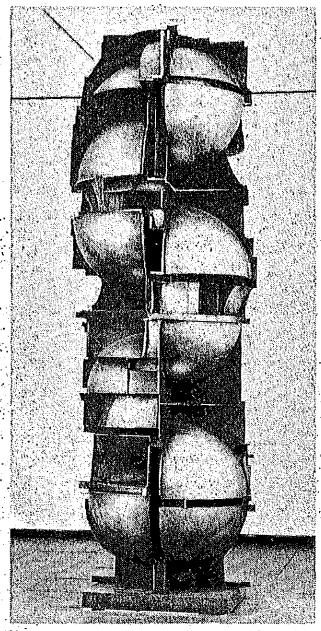
Schmidt replied: "My roots are in Cubism—displacement comes out of that, and it's the common thread in my work. Also, I have always liked totemic images."[5] Here, then, Cubism has been pressed into the service of creating sexual totems.

The new ideas and images of these years evolved rapidly during the late Cranbrook period (1967-69). Plate 19 is an excellent example of the sexual metaphors discussed above, though, as always in Schmidt's art, inherent iconographical contradictions or alternatives are present. Here, for example, the I-beam, storage tank and bulkhead forms could as easily relate this work to architectural, industrial and maritime images. That sexual symbolism is primary seems certain in Pls. 13 and 18, wherein metaphors for male and female forms and coitus are more explicit. The drum-like base of Pl. 18 contains the germ of the Iowa cylinder series.

Schmidt left Cranbrook in 1970 for the University of Iowa. The contrasting volumetric and rectangular forms of his late Cranbrook period evolved into a distinctly new style, one seemingly more rational and constructivist than his early surrealist works in iron. The new cylinder series began with drawings and maquettes cut from laminated pine wood on a newly acquired band saw. These were cast in highly-polished bronze (Pl. 8) and stainless steel (Pl. 21). The moveable curvilinear and rectilinear parts invite the onlooker to alter the formal relationships. A touch of Dada again emerges in this concern for audience participation, and the preoccupation with transformation stems from Cubism. The purist formalism of these works makes comparison to minimal sculpture unavoidable, but similarities to kinetic and conceptual art seem more to the point.

The cylinders have been called conceptual puzzles by one critic, who did not fail to recognize their bio-sexual structuring.[6] But the cylinder is deeply rooted in Schmidt's iconography and formal vocabulary. It derives from the shapes of industrial storage tanks (cover) and from the sewer pipes and plumbing fixtures that he melted down in his furnaces. Schmidt's preference for the cylinder was reinforced when he gazed upon the architectural ruins at Olympia in Greece. The drums forming the column shafts of ancient temples and the rectilinear components of the entablature carried by the columns find a distant echo in Schmidt's cylinder-series works. Schmidt has said that "This series incorporates the universal symbols of the cylinder and key with strong sexual implications viewed through a machine idiom."[7]

In the bronze maquette series of 1974, Schmidt juxtaposed the cylinder to the pyramid on topographical groundlines (Pl. 17). The pyramid has also been a constant in Schmidt's art from the beginning. The references to ancient civilizations and to all of the cultural and technological associations with the wheel, lever, sacred tomb, sun and moon seem clear.



Pl. 16. *Untitled,* 1966, cast bronze, unique, height: 114 inches, collection: State of New York (not in the exhibition).

These works pay homage to the dual nature of man's needs since primitive times, i.e., to art and religion on the one hand, and to technology on the other. The gentle curves into which some of the cylinder and pyramids have been divided may have been inspired by the rolling countryside around Iowa City, which reminds Schmidt of Connecticut, but the fecundity of nature is also symbolized in the expansive curves and volumes (female components) and in the angular forms (male components), and the coitus metaphor persists in the dynamic interrelationship of these contrasting elements. If the pyramid is a symbol of stability and eternity, the curvilinear sections into which it is divided (Pl. 22) could symbolize the

upheavals and vicissitudes to which civilizations, like nature, are prone.

Recently, Schmidt has been obsessed with the column (Pl. 20) and the pyramid (Pl. 22), and his enthusiasm for cast iron has been rekindled. The eight-foot high wood and cardboard construction in Pl. 20 is a model for a stratified iron column intended for placement in a public space. Compared to the slender surrealistic columns of the early 1960s (Pls. 14, 15), this one has robust proportions and the stark geometry of ancient monuments. Schmidt has always been fascinated by the form and symbolical significance of the column and the pyramid. He regards them as cultural absolutes, universal public images of ritual and victory. Unlike the smooth-fitting drums or sections out of which ancient columns are made, Schmidt's is comprised of moveable asymmetrical strata, which, like the curved layers of the pyramid (Pl. 22), could symbolize the rise and fall of empires and the precariousness of modern civilization. To the imagery of ritual and victory, Schmidt has added that of the need for vigilance.

It is clear from Schmidt's art and from his remarks and published statements that nature, the machine and tradition have inspired his imagery. Schmidt insists that the dichotomy between the organic and the mechanical is the subject matter of his art. In a 1959 statement that is as applicable to his bronze and stainless steel cylinders of the 1970s as it is to his iron sculptures of the 1950s, Schmidt said: "I wanted to express, through art, the age we live in. It seemed to me that machinery is the measure of civilization, for we judge a people's progress by their technology."[8] However, Schmidt immediately qualified this statement in a manner reminiscent of the *Esprit nouveau* writings of the Purists and Léger: "I saw that machine forms often were inspired by the forms of humans and plants and insects—a lifting crane, for instance, has an 'arm' like a man. And so I, as the artist, would use the machine forms evolving from nature to express nature again."[9]

Aside from admitting that his art is a metaphor for the creative process in nature, Schmidt has been reluctant to discuss the content of his work. He disclaims any social significance for his art but suspects that the concept of fragmentation, which is a constant in his art, could symbolize the troubled condition of contemporary society. The dichotomy between the organic and the mechanical could symbolize the need to restore the balance between nature and technology. Perhaps the motif of an elevated city is an appeal to rise above pollution and squalor. As Schmidt uses machine forms to symbolize the creative process in nature, he uses female forms as a way of humanizing nature. Schmidt is intrigued by atavism, i.e., "the possibility of reversion to an ancestral trait or to a very basic experience,"[10] and by the Jungian notion of cultural consciousness. He is tempted to think that art can arouse a consciousness of basic human experience and cultural values, which may explain his preoccupation with archetypal forms such as columns, cylinders and pyramids. Schmidt insists, however, that a strict philosophy or body of theory for his art does not exist. He has steadfastly refused to title his works, preferring instead to allow them to evoke their own imagery, an imagery that has never failed to be rich and provocative.

Robert D. Kinsman
Director

NOTES

1. *Sixteen Americans,* New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1959, p. 64.
2. Unpublished statement, 1958.
3. Pollock said: "When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about." (From *Possibilities 1,* 1947-8. "Problems of Contemporary Art," v. 4, New York, George Wittenborn, Inc.)
4. *The Kansas City Star,* April 3, 1959, p. 6.
5. Personal interview, June, 1980.
6. Ratcliff, Carter, *Art International,* XVI: 1:67, January 20, 1972.
7. University of Iowa, *Spectator,* March 11, 1976, p. 12.
8. *The Kansas City Star,* April 3, 1959, p. 6.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Personal interview, June, 1980.