

Steptoe

Diversity & Art: A Virtual Tour

George Segal

United States (1924-2000)

Girl Resting



Work

George Segal began his career as a painter but is best known as a sculptor. In contrast with many of the pop artists, his art is fraught with a deep sense of social conscience and a commitment to reflecting the human condition. His works were inspired both by personal experience as well as by exposure to events that impacted the world and those around him. One example that brings the two together is his powerful and moving Holocaust memorial located in San Francisco's Lincoln Park, featuring a sole survivor facing a pile of corpses, inspired by the personal experience of his uncles perishing in the Holocaust.

Critics credit Segal for helping revive artistic interest in the human figure after World War II. His figures are not idealized, as Segal was not so much interested in the human figure itself, but in its relationship and interaction with the world around it. Placed mostly in urban settings and reflecting mundane activities by ordinary people, his figures are most often withdrawn and wrapped in a subtle yet pervasive sadness and surrender. Neither his figures nor their settings seem complete, calling viewers to fill in the gaps and impose their own realities, sentiments, and views.

Consciously or not, Segal lets it be known that no artwork is ever complete until it comes face to face and interacts with its viewers. To paraphrase W.H. Auden in his tribute poem *Memory* of W.B. Yeats, Segal's works are meant to be "modified in the guts of the living." To facilitate this process, his figures are left white and rough, with features blending and vanishing in the depths of a white blank canvas. Eluding direct identification, his figures become universal, driving a subtle but

inevitable dialogue and interactive relationship, which reflect the viewer no less than the artist.

Segal was further aided in this process by using orthopedic bandages dipped in plaster, a material he discovered through a chance acquaintance with an employee of Johnson & Johnson. He used the material to create casts first of himself, and later of his family and friends, literally wrapping them with wet bandages. While this was as personal as it could get for him and those around him, it allowed Segal to cast shapes of average people who could stand in for anyone. The hollow shells he created became the actual sculptures, which he left as they were, rough and open to interpretation. Though far from the depiction of the ideal human body of classical Greece, Segal's sculptures like those of the ancient Greeks are made to human size, never monumental or imposing, making them all the more relevant and accessible.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Segal began creating his "fragments" and wall reliefs, again using his signature technique of plaster bandages. Partial casts of the human body that seem to have randomly broken off the whole. *Girl Resting* is one of Segal's fragments that combines the elegance we find in museum fragments that may have been dug up in Italy or Greece, steeped in the story of humanity, yet with a personal story that is lost to the ages.

About the Artist

Viewed as one of America's most respected 20th century artists, George Segal is best known for his plaster sculptures of ordinary people as they go about their lives. He was born in New York to Jewish immigrants from Poland, who ran a kosher butcher shop in the Bronx and later bought a poultry farm in New Jersey.

Segal attended Stuyvesant Technical High School where he studied science. Instead, he discovered his passion for art. To help his family after his brother was drafted during World War II, Segal interrupted his studies and moved to his parents' chicken farm in New Jersey. He eventually attended Pratt Institute of Design, Cooper Union Art School, and New York University, where he received a teaching degree in 1949. To support his family he taught art and English at a local high school and at Rutgers University. Returning to his studies, he received a Master of Fine Arts from Rutgers in 1963. He eventually bought his own chicken farm in New Jersey, where he lived with his wife Helen until the end of his life.

Segal was mentored by the great Abstract Expressionist Greek American William Baziotis and Tony Smith, a minimalist and abstract expressionist. The abstract expressionist movement influenced Segal greatly, but his concerns about society and humanity at large led him to focus on the human figure and the challenges facing average people. While he is considered as a leading artist of the "Pop Art" movement, along with such greats as Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, critics view Segal as the only "pop artist" with a strong social conscience.

His work has been exhibited in many museums in the United States and around the world, with his first museum solo show taking place at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (1968). There have been major retrospectives of his work at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Seibu Museum of Art, Tokyo; Sezon Museum of Modern Art, Karuizawa Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, National Museum of Art, Osaka, and Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki (all in Japan); Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC; the Jewish Museum, New York; the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia; and the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Jersey; among others. His works also include publicly commissioned sculptures honoring the gay rights movement, and memorializing the 1970 Kent State shootings and the Holocaust, when his father lost all of his brothers. Segal is also the recipient of many awards and numerous honorary doctorate degrees.