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Albin Polasek Biographical Profile

Life: 1879-1965

Birth place: Frenstat, Moravia

U.S. Citizenship: 1909

Occupation: Artist, Sculptor

Education: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,
American Academy of Art in Rome

Retirement: Winter Park, FL

Internationally renowned artist Albin Polasek is one of America's prominent sculptors of the 20th century. While he worked in a variety of mediums, including stone, bronze, plaster, wood and painting, Polasek's legacy is left in the sculptures he created. He strove to show the essential unity of head or figure and the beauty of "movement." He believed the flow of one mass into another made the difference between a living work and something inanimate.

Polasek was born in 1879 in Frenstat, Moravia (now the Czech Republic). He was apprenticed as a wood carver in Vienna before immigrating to the United States in 1901. He continued to work as a wood carver in the American Midwest until 1906. Polasek began formal art studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts under mentor Charles Grafly. While there, he learned traditional classical sculpting techniques while refining his own, distinct style. As a student, he produced *Man Carving His Own Destiny* (1907) and *Eternal Moment* (1909), two of his earliest and most acclaimed works.

In 1909, Polasek became an American citizen. The following year he won the Prix de Rome competition and the accompanying three-year fellowship at the American Academy of Art in Rome. He earned an Honorable Mention at the 1913 Paris Salon for the *Sower* (1913), a piece created during his time in Rome. Upon completing his studies in Italy, Polasek returned to New York and opened a personal studio. Polasek's most recognized impact on the American art scene began when he was invited to head the Department of Sculpture at the Art Institute in Chicago, a position he retained for nearly 30 years. He gained a reputation as a "Chicago" artist because he created many monumental landmarks. His sculptures can still be seen throughout that city in front of buildings and in parks.

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Large public commissions made Polasek a renowned sculptor. The *Sower* (1913) is now proudly displayed in the Chicago Botanical Garden. Also in Chicago, the *Spirit of Music* (1923) resides in memory of the founder of the Chicago Symphony, Theodore Thomas.

Abroad, Polasek's work is just as highly regarded. The Czech Republic holds in great esteem the *Wilson Memorial* (1926), *Radigast* (1929) and *Sts. Cyril and Methodius* (1929). Additionally, his bronze sculpture depicting the grief and horror of World War II, *Mother Crying Over the World* (1942), evoked an emotional response world-wide and is still meaningful today.

Polasek observed the advancement of his reputation by the public and critics alike, but remained unassuming and reminiscent of his humble, Czech upbringing. In 1927, he was elected an Associate Member of the prestigious National Academy of Design. This honor is reserved for America's top painters, sculptors, printmakers and architects and cannot be applied for; it can only be conferred.

In 1950, Polasek retired to Winter Park, Florida, to a home he designed on picturesque Lake Osceola. His long time friend and former student, Ruth Sherwood, introduced Polasek to Winter Park several years earlier when she retired to the beautiful city herself. In December 1950, at the age of 71, Polasek made Sherwood his first wife. Sadly, Sherwood passed away only 22 months later.

Five months after moving to Winter Park, Polasek suffered a stroke in May of 1950 that left the left side of his body paralyzed. Although he spent the remainder of his life in a wheelchair, he continued to paint, draw, sculpt clay, carve wood and, with assistance, carve stone. Following his stroke, Polasek spent a great deal of time perfecting and reproducing his best known works, but also created 18 new, more intimate pieces.

Polasek married a second time in 1961, at the age of 82, to Emily Muska Kubat. That year, the pair established the Albin Polasek Foundation to share with the public his life's work. They began buying back some of the 400 works Polasek created during his lifetime and opened the estate to the public. Today, 200 of Polasek's works are on display in the museum and gardens.

Upon his death in 1965, Polasek was buried in Winter Park's Palms Cemetery with the *12th Station of the Cross* (1939) as his monument.

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