

ENZO PLAZZOTTA

My attic studio was a paradise. It had a dormer window with glass on three sides so I had enough daylight to work in. A little staircase led up from the first floor which previously had gone all the way down into the old kitchens in the cellar beneath the house and had been used by the servants so their masters would not have to see them! Now the attic was the home of a pair of barn owls with three chicks!

About six months after we arrived in England and in the middle of my Rodin period, I saw some photographs of bronzes by Enzo Plazzotta in an art magazine. Because I had greatly admired them and envied the skill of the sculptor, I decided to write to him and ask if I could possibly visit and seek his advice. In the letter I enclosed some photographs of the sculptures that I had done so far. Enzo very kindly wrote back agreeing to meet me and on my next trip to London, and for the first time in my life, I entered a real art studio. Northern light, proper stands and even a little changing room for a model! I was overawed. Enzo specialised in ballet dancers and female nudes so all around me were beautiful wax figures.



'Enzo Plazzotta' working in his studio

Enzo made me a cup of coffee and looked at some more photographs that I had brought with me. I then asked him if, in his opinion, I should continue to try and earn a living as a sculptor. "Do you want to do anything else?" I replied, "No." He looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Then why are you asking me? Go and do it."

Enzo worked with a medium that he made himself, a mixture of beeswax, resin and a pigment that turned it a beautiful rich red ochre. He advised me to try it, as he found it inspiring to work with, and gave me some to try. The wax had to be kept warm and to do this you needed to have a saucepan of water suspended over a gas flame. When the second winter came I built myself a table with the armature steel and mounted it on rollers so it could be wheeled about the attic. It had a shelf on the bottom to hold the gas cylinder, one pipe going to the burner and another to a hand torch.

So began the era of my maquettes, which was one of the most enjoyable sculpting experiences I have ever had. (A maquette is defined as a small wax model that the artist intends to enlarge.) All that winter I worked upstairs in the warmth of the attic, coming down for lunch and a chance to sit down, before going back to work until it was time for a bath before dinner. Compared to the freezing barn it was like a tropical island.



My first wax maquettes were 'Dancers'

That first winter I did some fifteen different figures. The great thing about wax is that you can make it do anything you wish by using fine copper tubing as an armature. The problem was, what was I going to do with them all? You can't sell wax sculptures, they have to be turned into bronze. Enzo had all his maquettes cast in Italy, something quite out of the question for me.

While I worked in the attic, Margie took care of the boys, driving them to school, shopping and doing all the 101 things busy mothers do when caring for three growing boys and a husband. Because she was so efficient at doing all this I was able to work for as long as I was able to stand up, there being no sitting down for a sculptor as you have to keep moving around to view your work from all sides. It was like being back on the farm with me out in the paddocks all day, only coming in for lunch. It was a routine we were used to and it worked as well now with sculpting as it had then.

Come the spring Enzo advised me to sculpt a small child figure and have it cast in real bronze to test the market so I repeated the small sculpture that I had done of Mark as a two-year-old when working on the farm.



'Mark with Bird', my first bronze sculpture

When I had finished the clay, Roy did a positive plaster cast and it was then that I discovered I could do extra work on the plaster and obtain a smoother surface before handing it over to the foundry. Roy suggested that I have it cast at a place he knew in Chelsea, so I took the plaster to them and left it there. I returned in a month and collected the sculpture.

I was very pleased with the finished product, but found the manager very abrasive. I asked Enzo for advice and he suggested that next time I should try the Meridian Foundry in Peckham that was run by Jack and Peter Crofton. He thought they would also be interested in casting my maquette waxes.

I made an appointment with the Crofton brothers and drove out to meet them. I had never been to that part of London so it was quite an adventure. Eventually I found the foundry after a great deal of searching because it was hidden in the arches of a railway viaduct. If it hadn't been for the fact that they had told me to look out for a railway line I don't think I would ever have found it. Over the following years I used to take clients out there to see their commissions being cast and I always took great delight in watching their faces. They would soon start to ask where we were going and then get really worried when we eventually pulled up in a jumble of arches with steam belching out of pipes sticking through walls. The place looked like a gangster-movie set.



'Leonardo da Vinci's Horse' in wax

Jack Crofton, his wife and Peter, his brother, were three of the nicest people you could wish to meet. The foundry furnaces took up the ground floor of the railway arch while upstairs were the finishing shop and a tiny office. I showed them three of my wax maquettes and asked them if they would be interested in casting them and quote on the cost. "Certainly we will and straight away." Peter showed me around while Jack and his wife worked out the prices.

It was the first time I had watched liquid bronze being poured into a mould. It is one of the most thrilling things to see in the world.

Working in the attic on the maquettes during the second winter at Marwood was a time of great experimenting. By using the hand torch I could stroke the wax with a flame and achieve a polished finish to the surface that appealed to the touch and could be repeated in the bronze.



'Prometheus' in wax...



...and in bronze



Dancers

One of the maquettes I left with Meridian was the *Hammer Thrower*. Little did I know at the time that this small figure of a man throwing a hammer while balanced on one foot would play such an important part in my life.

When I went back to collect the maquettes I was thrilled by the job the Croftons had done. Not only were the castings superb, but the patination was amazing and my maquettes looked like antique bronzes. I was delighted and promised to bring more waxes on my next trip. When I got back to Marwood, Margie and I set the bronzes up on the sitting room table and celebrated them with a champagne toast. The *Hammer Thrower* maquette in particular seemed to talk to me, and what he was saying was, “*I want to be BIG.*” I agreed, but the question was, *How BIG?*



The 'Hammer Thrower' maquette

I have never liked exact life-size adult figures as the finished sculptures always look small, which doesn't apply to children as they come in all sizes. Another problem is that when hot bronze cools it shrinks, which makes a significant difference. I decided that the *Hammer Thrower* had to be bigger than life, in fact a giant and nine foot high!

The maquette casting had taken place during the spring. Margie and I had watched Jimmy's garden come alive and the buds on the trees turn to leaves. Both of us were enchanted by the Devon countryside. It was a million miles away from the Ninety Mile Desert and we loved every moment of our new life. Jimmy's camellias filled the garden with their pink flowers and the lawns were carpeted with daffodils. In front of the house drifts of crocuses appeared through the grass. With the arrival of the second spring I came down from the attic and moved back into the barn and started to build the armature of my first heroic statue.

Although the *Hammer Thrower* would be nine feet high if he stood up, as he was leaning right back his head would only be six feet off the floor. The angle was dictated by the centrifugal force he was generating as he spun around with the hammer. He was on one foot so I gave him a solid six-inch high thick base to stand on. I hung the armature on wires from the roof beams of the barn to take the weight and climbed up onto the skeleton to test their strength as the last thing needed was for the sculpture to fall on me as *Françoise* had.

I stretched chicken wire over the frame and then filled it with damp newspaper. When all was ready I nearly had a completed figure formed out of metal and wire netting so it would only need an inch of clay to cover it, which would lessen the load on the wires.

I bought 15 new packs of clay and was ready to start work. I began to block up the figure that quickly took shape and by the evening had him completely covered. He looked huge! Had I been overambitious? I covered up the figure with plastic to keep him moist and turned out the lights. There was nothing to be done about it if he turned out too big as I certainly wasn't going to start all over again!

I opened the doors of the barn in the morning with trepidation and uncovered the figure. I decided he was the right size and if he had been any smaller he would have been insignificant, so I set to work again. All I had to work from was the little maquette and an anatomical model that Enzo had given me, so there was going to have to be a lot of guesswork about which muscle went where! I wished I knew as much about anatomy as Michelangelo had, but on the other hand I didn't think I could have cut up human corpses, as I hadn't much liked killing sheep!

It was amazing how quickly the *Hammer Thrower* came together. By the end of the week I was able to call Roy to find out when he could come down, as I was beginning to worry about the thin skin of clay drying out and falling off. I called him on Friday evening and he said he would be down on Monday, after collecting some plaster. This suited me as it gave me the weekend to keep working on the clay. One of the troubles with cold bronze is that there is no way you can alter the surface after the waste mould has been taken so it was essential to make the surface as smooth as possible while I had the chance.

Roy arrived on Monday evening and immediately we went to see the *Hammer Thrower*. I thought this was a good idea, as it would give him the whole night to think about how he was going to take the mould! After Margie had given him a good meal we packed him off to bed and I wasn't too far behind. I knew the next day was going to be a tough one, as I would have to lug several large rubbish bins full of water across from the house.

After breakfast we walked over to the barn and stripped off the covering plastic. Overnight Roy had worked out how to take the mould, which in fact he said would be relatively simple as long as the wires from the beams didn't break! He planned to take one large mould off the whole of the back of the figure and have eight small sections covering the front. By lunchtime we had the shims in dividing up the sections and the first layer of plaster all over the back. After lunch Roy bent up metal reinforcing rods that would be incorporated into the thicker second layer of plaster for the back, a job that actually takes longer than the plastering as each rod has to be bent to fit the curve of the area where it is to be used. Roy used to bend all the 3/8-inch diameter metal rods over his knee, which made me wince with pain every time he did it. I tried it once and found it was agony. What his knees looked like at the end of the day I just hated to think.

By the time we knocked off I was exhausted and yet I hadn't done half of what Roy had done. The whole figure was covered in plaster and steaming hot from the chemical reaction of the plaster hardening. We shut the doors of the barn and stumbled into the house ready for a whisky and a bath. I worried all night in case the wires would break and we would find the whole thing lying on the floor in a broken mess of plaster and clay!

We opened the barn doors and much to my relief found that all was intact. The *Hammer Thrower* was still just as we had left him. He hadn't moved a muscle! We started straight in to take him to pieces as Roy wanted to get away early enough to drive back to London. Off came the chest section and then the

belly. Next the top of the thighs and the fronts of the lower legs. We dug out the clay and cut away the chicken netting and pulled out the wet paper. I felt like a vulture ripping up a carcass.

Roy had borrowed a trailer, as there was no way we could get the mould into his station wagon. As soon as we cut the wires and freed the back we loaded the giant plaster. Then came the job of sticking all the back pieces on to the front section to stop any warping. The whole thing looked very odd, with the head over the front of the trailer and the feet sticking out of the back with a red danger flag attached. Roy bathed and changed and was ready to go. I said, "Drive carefully, we don't want to have to do that again." He grinned at me and set off for London. I walked back to the house feeling really flat and glad I didn't have an eight-hour drive ahead of me. Derek Crowther had said the big stuff was too expensive for the Chelsea Show, so my next problem was what was I going to do with the sculpture when it was finished.

Roy rang me a month later and said that the sculpture was ready for inspection and asked when could I come and look. "Tomorrow!" I couldn't wait a day. When I arrived at his garage the doors were closed but he had heard me arrive and swung the doors back to reveal the *Hammer Thrower*. It just fitted in under the roof beams! How had he managed to make that in there? To look at the back of the figure I had to squeeze past the sculpture. It was an unbelievable job and I was absolutely over the moon as it was 100 times better than I had hoped. One shouldn't be really pleased with one's own work, but I was! This was the largest thing I had ever done and I was thrilled. Roy and his dear wife Olive were grinning away, waiting for my reaction and asked me if I was pleased. I laughed, "Pleased, I am amazed and delighted. What a job! We need photographs to show Derek."

The husband of a friend from my childhood days called Belinda had bought a mansion not too far from London. It was called Trafalgar and had apparently been built as a gift from the nation to Nelson, although his death at the battle interfered with that plan. I knew she had extensive lawns in front of the house so asked her if I could photograph the sculpture there, to which she kindly agreed. Roy and I hired a van and loaded the *Hammer Thrower*, which was quite a job as even though it was only made of resin, it still weighed an incredible amount because of all the piping Roy had used inside as re-enforcing. To keep it from falling over Roy had left a three-foot length of two-inch pipe sticking out of the bottom to hold it up. I hadn't told my friends that I would have to dig a hole in their lawn, but as I secretly hoped she would buy the sculpture when she saw it in place, perhaps she would never know! My hope of a sale stemmed from the fact that Belinda had bought an edition of the *Hammer Thrower* maquette. Perhaps her husband would like to give her a present of a larger version!

We got the sculpture around to the front of the house, dug the hole, took lots of photographs, and left it sitting there for them to find at the weekend. The photographs came out really well but the husband balked at the price, so we had to go back and collect the sculpture and fill in the hole. Luckily Roy had a friend with an empty shed where we could park the sculpture until I could find a buyer. It was time to take the photographs around to Derek Crowther at Syon Lodge.

As it turned out it was lucky that Belinda hadn't been indulged by her husband as Derek was very enthusiastic about the sculpture and said he would like to show it at the next Chelsea Flower Show. I was really excited by the

prospect of the *Hammer Thrower* being seen at such an important venue and couldn't wait for May to arrive.

Again Margie and I went to the show on the first public day and I must say the *Hammer Thrower* looked very imposing on the Crowther stand. Derek told me that he had sold several children but had had no luck with the big fellow, but it had been a great attraction so he was delighted that it was there. I was not really surprised it hadn't sold, as it did look very large outside Derek's stand. However, a miracle happened before the show ended. Derek rang to say he had sold the *Hammer Thrower* to the City of London!

He went on to tell me that it had been brought by Mr Cleary who was in charge of the Gardens of London and it would be placed between All Hallows by the Tower and the Bowring Building. I was delighted by this because *Françoise and Claude* were already in All Hallows and to have another sculpture outside would be simply marvellous. Not only that, the courtyard was the entrance to my stepbrother Peter's office. It all seemed too much of a coincidence to believe.



'Hammer Thrower', London

But I now had a real problem on my hands. If I let the sculpture go to London, which I obviously had to do as it had been sold, it would mean that it would remain unique. Because it was my first large sculpture and because other people seemed to like it, I didn't want to lose the chance of selling it as an edition. I talked this over with Roy and he suggested that he should take a

rubber mould from the sculpture between collecting it from Chelsea and delivering it to the City. This would be possible as he had been given the job of adding secure fixing to the base before it was installed on a special plinth. The sculpture arrived back at Roy's garage and he took a rubber mould, added stronger fixings to the sculpture and delivered it for installing.

The *Hammer Thrower* was unveiled on a bitterly cold day. The space had buildings on three sides, but was open to the street on the fourth. I nearly died when I saw the engineers had faced the sculpture so when he let go of the hammer it would go flying straight through the glass of the building on the right and not out into the void!

After the close of the Chelsea Flower Show I received an amazing telephone call from a man who spoke English with an East-European accent. "John Robinson? I am Fred Kobler. I liked your *Hammer Thrower* at the Chelsea Flower show, but I am not paying Crowther's prices! You want to sell me a copy at a special price?" The conversation went on for about 15 minutes, at the end of which he had a deal and I had an invitation for lunch to his apartment in London. Fred told me that he had gone to the Flower Show the previous year and had bought the *Waterfall Children* from Crowther and had installed them in his country-house garden south of London.

I sold the same sculptures to the City of Melbourne and they were installed near the Botanical Gardens and I am glad to be able to say that they have not yet been vandalised.



'Waterfall Children' in Melbourne

Living in North Devon and being invited to have lunch with Fred Kobler in London meant driving up to town and staying a couple of nights. Fred had given me his address in Westminster as Stag Place. On the appointed day I set off in good time to meet my mysterious caller. Stag Place turned out to be a glass skyscraper that looked more like an office than a residence. I told a doorman that I had an appointment with Mr Kobler and was directed to a lift and instructed to press the button marked Penthouse. I stepped out into an

enormous grey sitting room to be greeted by a handsome young man who introduced himself as Antoine.

Antoine came from Malta and I later discovered he was from an old aristocratic family. He was my age, but tall and slim, with a deeply-tanned skin. He was very elegantly dressed in a dark pinstriped double-breasted suit. I followed him into the grey vastness of the sitting room around which were dotted enormous vases of flowers. One wall of the room was glass that overlooked the gardens of Buckingham Palace. Fred was sitting on a grey leather sofa and, in contrast to Antoine, was casually dressed. He was approaching 70 and in every possible way the opposite to his young friend.

“Would you like a drink?” I can’t remember what I had but I do remember that they both drank mineral water and I am sure I didn’t, as my nerves needed steadying. After my drink we moved to a glass-topped dining table and Antoine served us a superb meal of cold fresh salmon and salad. The conversation covered a whole range of subjects, but was mainly about how I had become a sculptor having been a sheep farmer in Australia. I personally don’t find anything strange about this, but most other people seem to!

After lunch we moved from the grey dining area back to the grey sitting room for coffee, after which Fred took me into an enormous grey bedroom, sat me down on an acre of grey bed and asked me to count the wad of notes he handed me. I had never held that much money before in my life so my counting was not as professional as it should have been, but as I knew Fred would have counted it, I was happy just to pretend. Fred explained that he always paid in notes as he could then just think of it as petty cash, and not have to worry about doing any paper work as accountants cost money!

When I got to know Fred better I learnt that he was very careful with his petty cash. Before the sculpture was ready for delivery he drove me down to his house in the country to show me where he wanted it placed. He owned an enormous 30-year-old Cadillac, which he loved passionately because it never needed repairing, although it did use quite a lot of petrol so we had to fill up on the way. I pointed out a garage soon after he mentioned the need for fuel, but he passed it by telling me that he knew of one further on where the petrol was a penny a gallon cheaper! I hoped that we would not run out before we got there as the car would have been very heavy to push!

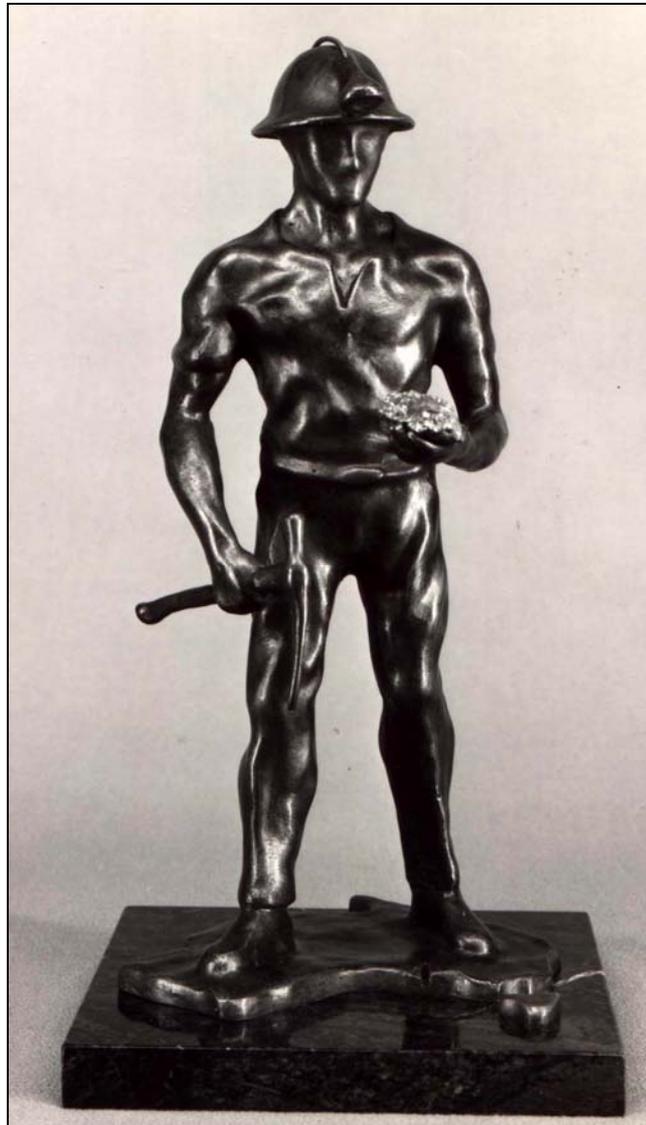
It was during this trip that I learnt about Fred’s origins. He had escaped from Germany at the outbreak of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, and had lost his whole family to the gas chambers. He had arrived in England without a penny in his pocket. He didn’t tell me how he became the silent partner in a hotel chain, only that when he and his colleague sold up he found himself to be a millionaire. Fred’s passion was Opera and, as he had no family, he gave his money to Glyndebourne for the production of Mozart operas as a 'thank you' to the country that had given him a home.

His country house was very modern, set in acres of lawn and bordered by giant beech trees. The lawns fell away down the side of a hill, giving a spectacular view out over a valley. It had originally been the site of a Victorian monstrosity, which he had bought and pulled down so he could build a modern home in an old setting. There was a lake at the top of the hill that fed a tumbling stream with rock pools and it was on one of these that Fred had placed his *Waterfall Children*. The extraordinary thing was that when I told my mother where I had been it turned out that Fred’s home was only about a mile away from where she had lived as a child.

As soon as Roy told me the *Hammer Thrower* was finished we set it up right in the middle of the front lawn with Fred supervising through the sitting-room window. When the job was completed he invited us into the house to have a look through the glass wall at the sculpture. I must say it looked very spectacular against such a grand vista.

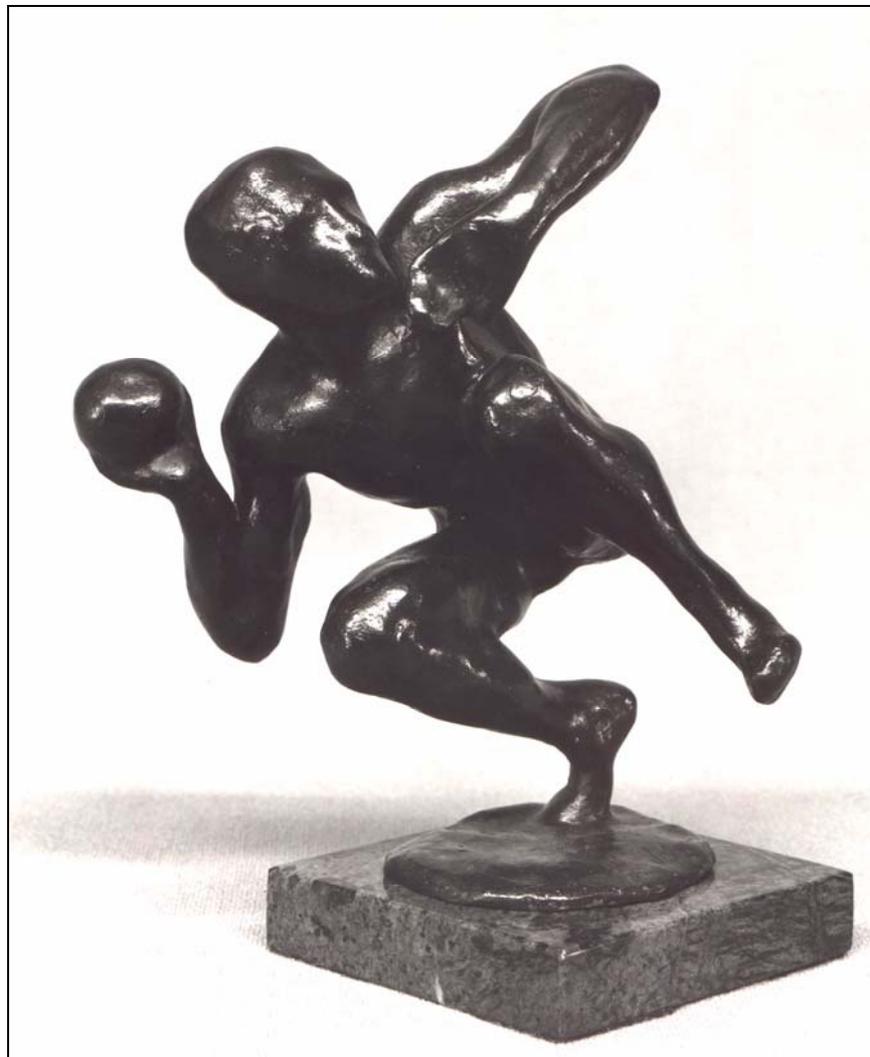
They say that things happen in threes. The Kobler adventure was hardly over when I received a letter from Sir Maurie Mawby, who had taken over as chairman of the Zinc Corporation when my father had suddenly died. He told me that he wanted to commission a sculpture as a tribute to the Miners of Broken Hill for a site outside the office in Melbourne. He envisaged a statue of a miner dressed in working gear holding an ore sample. If I agreed to do the job, he would send me a helmet, light and belt-battery, and a lump of ore!

I of course agreed and set about making a maquette of the sculpture that I thought would be suitable. When finished, I had it cast in bronze and sent him a photograph, which led to him asking me to bring it out to show him so we could discuss its possible enlargement.



Broken Hill Miner

I travelled to Melbourne via New York because I had not been there since the age of five when Mike, Nana and I had been shipped out to Australia. Maurie had given me an introduction to one of his mining associates who asked me if I would like to meet Joseph Hirshhorn, a friend of his who collected sculpture. I had no idea who Hirshhorn was, but said that I would and so he gave me an office telephone number to call. I rang the number and talked to a secretary who made an appointment for me to telephone again next morning. I did as I was told and was put through to Joseph who asked me what I was doing and where I was going. I told him that I was on my way to Australia with a maquette of a miner to show Maurie and that I hoped to do a life-size edition if it met with approval. Joseph said that he would like to see it and would I bring it around to his office on Park Avenue. I agreed and packed up the *Miner* in my canvas bag along with the maquette of the *Hammer Thrower*, which I planned to show Maurie. I threw in the *Shot Put*, which I had brought along with me, just for luck!



Shot Put

I arrived at the Park Avenue address, found Hirshhorn's name and took the elevator up to his office and admired the incredible view out over the city. When I was shown in Joseph said, "What have you got to show me?" I

unpacked the little *Miner* and then the *Hammer Thrower* and explained that I had been commissioned to do the former, but hoped to persuade Maurie to use the latter, and call it the *Pathfinder*. We chatted about this idea for a while and then he pointed at the bag, "Anything more in there?" I pulled out the *Shot Put* and put it on the desk. Joseph picked it up and turned it around in his hands several times. "I haven't bought anything today, how much do you want for this?" "Two hundred and fifty dollars," I replied, hoping it didn't sound too much. "Done, I'll give it to you in cash when you leave." I had made my first American sale!

Joseph then told me the story of his life and how he had been so poor at one point he had eaten scraps from restaurant rubbish bins! He had somehow made some money and then bankrolled prospectors looking for uranium in Canada. He took half of everything they found and they found a lot, so he was now called Mr Uranium. He told me that he loved sculpture and had the finest collection of Rodin sculptures in the world and asked if I would like to see it? Of course I immediately said "yes please", so he suggested that as tomorrow was Saturday he would send his car to collect me for lunch at his house in Connecticut. That suited me, as I was not due to fly out until Sunday morning, although it did mean that my visit to the Metropolitan would just have to wait until another time. Hopefully I would return to New York one day!

Joseph's car collected me and we soon arrived at a very large house surrounded by vast lawns crowded with sculpture. I was tickled pink to see the *Shot Put* all by itself on the hall table when Joseph met me at the front door and I thought it looked very good sitting there in such an important place. However, I was soon put back in my box when Joseph took me out into the garden. He had not been joking when he said he had the finest collection of Rodin sculptures in the world as he owned more than were in the Musée Rodin in Paris. It was the most extraordinary display I have ever seen as not only were there Rodins, there were sculptures by Maillol, Giacometti, Brancusi and every other famous sculptor you can think of. I suddenly felt very small.

When Margie and I were in Washington many years later we visited the Joseph Hirshhorn Museum. When I had met him, he had told me that he planned to build a museum next to the Smithsonian and give his entire collection to the nation that had been so kind to him. When we were walking around his museum I wondered if the *Shot Put* was hidden away in a little box in the basements or being used as a door stop! I am sure no one there had a clue what it was, or who did it. Still it is nice to think that I once sold a sculpture to Joseph Hirshhorn and whenever I look at my own copy of the maquette I think of the kind man in Connecticut with fond memories.

I liked the little *Miner* I had done, but while working on the maquette I had had the idea that the *Hammer Thrower* would perhaps capture the *Pathfinder* spirit better. When I went to see Maurie in Melbourne I showed him the *Miner*, which he liked, and then the *Pathfinder* maquette. Maurie immediately chose the *Pathfinder* and thought it would look great outside the offices in Collins Street. I returned home very pleased and immediately rang Jack Crofton and asked him to quote me a price for casting it in bronze. He said he would have a look at the sculpture by the Tower and get back to me.

The casting of the *Pathfinder* was a milestone in my life as it was my first heroic sculpture in bronze. Both the London sculpture and the one for Kobler were in cold bronze and cast by Roy. The one for Melbourne was to be the real

thing. I was delighted by this step forward and when I went to see the finished casting I was simply thrilled and couldn't stop grinning.



'Pathfinder' at the Meridian Foundry

By the time the *Pathfinder* reached Melbourne, Maurie had retired. His successor was set on pulling down the offices and building a bigger one where there was no place for sculpture. Maurie decided to lend it to the City of Melbourne and it now stands in the Victoria Gardens between St Kilda Road and the Botanical Gardens. The excitement of Chelsea, All Hallows, Kobler, Hirshhorn and Maurie had opened up a whole new world for me. What a summer it had been and all quite beyond belief!