

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

The 70 foot Millennium U.S. Capitol's west lawn year's National Capitol tree is decorated with ornaments, handmade by volunteers, and with 10,000 lights.

Alberto Martinez, 886-4370

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'It's like a rodeo,' sculptor Danny O'Dowdy said of 'Sunshine,' Milles' bronze water nymph riding a dolphin.

Art world rediscovers figurative work

Local sculptors review once-taboo art of Milles

By PAIGE ROSS
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An art deco figure of a dancing Greek goddess looked on as two artists, animal sculptor Kent Ullberg and multimedia sculptor Danny O'Dowdy, strolled through an exhibit of more than 40 works of the late Swedish sculptor Carl Milles, currently on display at the Art Center of Corpus Christi. From widely varying viewpoints they each

Australia and several cities in the northern United States.

"He mastered his medium," Ullberg said of Milles. "He was a consummate craftsman, a great draftsman in clay."

'The Hand of God'

In the center of the gallery, a freshly-formed Adam stands atop the large, richly textured hand of his creator, looking up, perhaps expectantly, his face somewhat blank. "The Hand of God" is one of Milles' best-known works, executed on a monumental scale in four cities around the world



spoke or art, education and of being moved by the work of the early 20th-century sculptor.

Something of antiquity is evoked in the works of Milles, an influential artist almost lost in a wash of modernism in mid-century, when figurative work and classical allusions went out of fashion.

But art depicting people, animals and nature in nontraditional ways has been

appearing in galleries, leading some in the art community to call for a reassessment of an older generation of figurative works once considered taboo in mainstream art circles.

"Milles is just now gaining the recognition he deserves as an international artist who made significant contributions to the history of sculpture," George Gurney, curator of sculpture at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American Art, wrote for the catalog of the touring exhibition.

The exhibit was mounted in Rome and has toured Tokyo, Mexico City,

and designed to be seen as a silhouette against the sky.

"This is a really, really strange piece," O'Dowdy said, walking around the large maquette. "I'm not taken by it."

"It doesn't have any character," he said, looking at the figure. "The hand has character."

Both O'Dowdy and Ullberg noted the whimsy inherent in the blank look of the figure.

Ullberg also addressed the connection to a late piece by Milles' teacher, Rodin, who did a large "Hand of God" in which the fingers are shaping a mass of clay.

"In Milles, man is completed," Ullberg said. "And he seems to be looking up with bewilderment, like, 'What now?'"

"A spindly, fragile man looking up toward the heavens. Just like Milles, a seeker right to the end."

Making his mark

After apprenticing as a commercial wood carver, Milles began his art education in Sweden, then studied in Paris with Auguste Rodin. He also studied with Ammanuel Fremiet, a famous animal sculptor who took him to the Paris zoo for models.

Milles, who died in 1955, later spent time in Italy and 20 years in the United States, teaching at the prestigious private Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., influencing several contemporary sculptors.

Part of Milles' legacy is the impact he had on his students, who included Carroll Barnes, Robert McKnight and William McVey. Duane Hanson, his best-known student, startled gallerygoers with realistic contemporary figures, including a bag lady pushing a shopping cart and an American tourist strung with cameras. Milles impacted art in Corpus Christi through his influence on Ullberg, although the younger sculptor did not study directly with Milles.

"If you want to blame somebody for why you ended up with a large fish on your bayfront, it was Carl Milles," Ullberg said, referring to his



A Phoenician princess floats atop the massive body of a bull in 'Europa and the Bull,' a bronze sketch Milles made for a large fountain built in Sweden in 1926.

"Wind in the Sails" statue of two sailfish on Shoreline Boulevard. "He was a great influence on me."

Touched

Much of Milles' work was monumental, figures standing sometimes four or five times the height of a person. Many of the pieces in the show at the art center are maquettes, models or studies made in preparation of the larger works, Ullberg said.

"Look at the strong neck on that horse," Ullberg said, admiring "The Blinding of Paul," a statue by Carl Milles depicting the saint and his horse cringing from a bright light. "The rhythm of that neck has a lot of power."

"Milles' work has a deep spiritual

Please see MILLES/A18



The visual image of 'The Hand of God,' one of Milles' best-known works, initially appeared to the sculptor in a dream, he once said. Monumental versions of the piece stand in four cities around the globe.

PHOTOS BY DAVID PELLERIN