

Calendar weekend

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Art: Milles' Bernini-Bauhaus Connection

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the operatic extravagance of Baroque emotionalism, resulting in pieces at once pedestrian and illustrative.

To their credit, Milles' sculptures combine the crowd-pleasing accessibility of the popular arts with the heartwarming earnestness of a hobbyist and the democratic conviction that art is for everyone. Unpretentious to the core, they are animated by a sense of Midwestern blandness—of craftsmanship that steers clear of extremes to get the job done in a respectable fashion. His earliest works are small bronzes that date from the first decade of the 20th century and

show the influence of Rodin, in whose Paris atelier Milles worked.

"The Female Beggar," "The Milk-Carter" and "Women in the Wind" translate the existential gravitas of the master's monumental figures into tabletop scenes whose compact dimensions give them the presence of a student's studies.

Made at the same time, Milles' "American Buffalo" bears comparison to similarly scaled bronzes by Remington and Russell. In contrast, his "Playing Elephants" goes well beyond the American illustrative capacity to make mass and movement complement one another.

In the teens, Milles increased the

size of his sculptures. He eliminated the aggressive gesturalism of their craggy surfaces in favor of smoothly modeled contours. The rich inner lives once implied by his figures also disappeared, having been replaced by a cross between stylish classicism and cartoonish portraiture.

These streamlined forms recall Art Nouveau and anticipate Art Deco. "Girl With an Apple" (1912-13) and "Dancing Maenad" (1913) are transitional works. Their cautious realism quickly gives way to the goofy exuberance of "Sunshine" (1917-18), in which a double-tailed mermaid, head flying, hurtles through the surf on a pump doll's back.

The 1920s mark the apogee of Milles' artistry, with works like "The Flying Horse," "Europa and the Bull," "Hunting Dogs" and "Diadema" building upon the confident simplicity of "Sunshine." As a group, these lumpy yet lively sculptures appear to be the missing link

between Socialist Realism and Fernando Botero. Embracing neither the formulaic polemics of the former nor the bloated silliness of the latter, they still look good today because they do not take themselves too seriously.

Most of Milles' sculptures from the 1920s onward were designed to decorate large public fountains, like those that still stand in front of Federal Savings and Loan. Because many of the works exhibited are small versions of single figures in multipart arrangements, the survey would benefit from the addition of photographs that depict the fountains and their surroundings.

A few of Milles' drawings sketch the outlines of several ensembles, but most focus on solitary details or narrate the dreams in which his images came to him.

In the 1930, '40s and '50s, Milles added religious stories to a repertoire that included Swedish and Greek myths, fanciful animals and contemporary genre scenes such

as swimmers and ice skaters. Alongside "The Binding of Paul," "Jonah and the Whale" and "The Hand of God," angels appear frequently, playing musical instruments, standing tiptoe on a stem, visiting a praying girl and wrestling with Jacob.

Formally, Milles' sculptures got looser, more expressive and interior-oriented. Reverting to the look of his earliest works, they lost the tautness of his best pieces. An exception to this slackening is "Wild Boar" (1940), in which he transforms the animal's blunt musculature into an abstract pattern of refreshingly simple beauty.

As an artist, Milles is at his best when he appears to be untroubled by the idea that his sculptures are ornamental—nothing more and nothing less than decorative embellishments that enhance everyday surroundings by making life a little more pleasant.

"Wild Boar" (1940), one of Carl Milles' later works, transforms blunt musculature into an abstract pattern.

'Bernini of Cranbrook'

Carl Milles' sculptures steer clear of the extremes that so deeply influenced him.

Art Review

By DAVID PAGEL
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Located in the small town of Bloomfield Hills, Mich., and inspired by the arts and crafts teachings of William Morris, the Cranbrook Academy of Arts was often called the American Bauhaus. From 1931 to 1951, Carl Milles (1875-1955) served as resident sculptor and head of the sculpture department. He was known as "the Bernini of Cranbrook."

Although it's hard to imagine



"Sunshine" (1917-18) depicts a mermaid riding a frisky dolphin.

more unlikely bedfellows than Bernini and the Bauhaus, it's easy to see how these incompatible influences shaped Milles' bronze sculptures, 41 of which are displayed alongside 17 sketches by the Swedish artist who became an American citizen in 1945.

From the 17th century Italian Baroque sculptor Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini, Milles borrowed a lot of energized line, spiraling motion and athletic bodies adrift on swirling currents of air. From the 20th-century Bauhaus, he drew a desire for simplicity, severity and equilibrium.

Unfortunately, Milles didn't have the talent to synthesize the styles. In his figurative sculptures the button-down rationalism of Bauhaus utilitarianism cancels

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Millard Sheets Gallery, 1101 W. McKinley Ave., Pomona, (909) 865-4560, through March 31. Closed Mondays.