

JANUARY

1969

# American Artist

ONE DOLLAR



# ELAINE RAPP

## STONE CARVER



*The sculptor in her studio, drawing*



MOTHER AND CHILD (1965)  
LIMESTONE 26" HIGH

BY JOAN HESS MICHEL

SO MANY OBJECTS in our world today—from toys to houses—are made from molds. Pour in the plastic and out comes the form, born full-round. Our world is all for speed: do it faster, do it in quantity. Shortcut recipes for so-called works of art are seized and exploited. In our haste we have almost overlooked the ancient art of stone carving, which dates back thousands of years. We find it difficult to comprehend the long hours of patient, careful cutting and polishing that are required to create a sculpture in stone. There are only a few direct stone carvers working today, perhaps because this area

of sculpture is too slow and demanding for the overnight sensations who seek overnight results.

Elaine Rapp is a gifted member of the small group of stone sculptors. She works in the time-honored tradition of this ancient art using the very same tools that were employed by the Greeks and Romans and Michelangelo. Her talented hands release the life which she feels is inherent in each stone, shaping it into beautiful form.

A native of New York, Elaine only began her art training after her marriage, motivated by a strong "feeling" for art, but unaware in what field her talent lay. She first attended C. W. Post College on Long Island, where she met Pierre Bourdelle, then the sculptor-

in-residence. He was influential in Elaine's artistic development; he urged her to seek more serious study at an art school. Elaine knew that there was much she had to learn: she needed drawing, anatomy, life classes, sculpture techniques. She enrolled for a strict four-day schedule at The Brooklyn Museum School, and gradually came to realize that sculpture was to be her field of concentration. Her commitment became so all-encompassing that she subsequently sought additional training at The Art Students League. Here she studied with John Hovannes, who is a classical disciplinarian. It was at the League that she did her first direct carving. She recalls, "Hovannes has the ability as a teacher to let you work on



HEAD (1965) ALABASTER 15" HIGH

your own and develop. He used to say, 'I have many flowers in my garden.' He stresses the importance of keeping an individual outlook and viewpoint.

Commuting to the city five days a week and trying to keep up with family responsibilities provided to be physically exhausting to Elaine. It was at this time that her husband Stanley Rapp, an advertising executive, proved himself to be unusually understanding. He and Elaine reached a mutual decision to transfer their Monday to Friday residence from a suburban house to a one-and-a-half room apartment, furnished with the barest necessities, near the city. Thus Elaine's traveling time to her art classes was reduced, and house-keeping tasks became minimal. It was

also necessary for six-year-old daughter Stephanie to enroll in a city school. This unusual arrangement demonstrates the unselfish devotion of the family and their deep belief in Elaine's talent, which they felt should be given every opportunity to flower and mature.

Because she was a student at the League later than most, Elaine felt she had no time to waste: "I had to hurry. I had a tremendous drive to find out where I stood. I had to know if the 'feeling' I had for art meant anything." After three years of study and work at the League, Elaine believed that her ability had matured enough for her to work independently. She set up a studio in the garage of her suburban home

and began to carve for her own satisfaction and fulfillment. She had no thoughts of selling her sculpture; she was merely giving expression to the feelings within her.

Direct stone carving is a painstaking art. A body of representative work builds up slowly, and the sculptures are of such weight and fragility that it is difficult to transport them. Therefore it was only rarely that Elaine felt motivated to show her work. She entered a piece of sculpture in a local outdoor group show and for the first time was able to see the reaction of the public to her work. Over a period of years two Long Island galleries, Beyond the Blue Door and The Bottini Gallery, also showed a few pieces of



MARGARET (1966) MARBLE 13½" HIGH  
Collection, Evansville Museum of Art



WHITE CAT (1967) ALABASTER 15"  
Collection, Mr. and Mrs. Edward L. Nash

her work. Through a friend Elaine met Rita Mornel, director of The Park-South Gallery in New York, who encouraged Elaine to exhibit some of her sculpture. These were the small beginnings of Elaine Rapp's public career.

In January of last year Elaine Rapp was accorded her first one-man show, at New York's Bodley Gallery, which she describes as a "thrilling, yet terrifying experience. It was a little frightening to bare my soul artistically for so many people to see." At the urging of David Mann, director of the Bodley Gallery, Elaine gathered together twenty-six pieces of her sculpture, representing five long, hard years of work in her studio. The subjects included whimsical cats, fragmented torsos, graceful mother-and-child studies, and handsome heads in a variety of stones, among them Italian marbles, alabasters, African wonderstone, Indiana limestone, agate, steatite, gabro rosso (almost unknown now and difficult to obtain), and Tennessee marble.

Her sculptures are not overpowering, massive statements; rather, all of them have a warm, personal quality. They are stones cut by a gifted hand and fashioned to expose their beauty to the fullest. The viewer responds personally to them and is not awed by grandeur. They are intimate statements.

Elaine's work was well received, and eighteen pieces were sold. Among the purchasers were the Emily Lowe Gallery of Syracuse University, The Evansville, Indiana Museum of Art, and private collectors from California, Texas, and New York. Elaine especially likes the idea that her work will be in museums. She hopes that in some small way it may stimulate young people to become interested in direct stone carving.

Idealistic in her approach to sculpture, Elaine says, "In the studio, nothing else exists except the stone I am working on currently." It is this complete dedication and devotion to work that impresses one when meeting Elaine

Rapp. As she talks of her work, her eyes light with enthusiasm, and one senses the important part sculpture plays in her life.

Elaine's is a comfortable studio, formerly the attached garage of her suburban Tudor house. It has been tastefully transformed into a compact workroom. The floor had to be strengthened and reinforced to withstand the weight of stones of various sizes, and has been covered in white vinyl tile. The roof was raised and a large skylight installed. The walls are painted white, some covered with pegboard to accommodate neatly hung tools: chisels, rasps, mallets, points. There is a sink, worktable, and stool. The place is pristine and neat in appearance—business-like, yet pleasant.

Her working day begins early, usually between seven and eight in the morning. She admits that when she is involved in cutting stone, she can hardly wait to get into her studio. The first important task every day is sharp-

ening her tools. She has learned to pace herself, energywise, doing hard physical work such as the actual stone cutting early in the day when she is fresh and at the peak of energy. As time passes and energy wanes, other jobs are accomplished—sketching and planning, sanding and finishing—which are less demanding physically and not as creatively exciting. There is no communication between studio and outside world until evening.

Direct stone sculpture is usually thought of as a man's art. The actual wielding of hammer and chisel does require strength and results in muscular development, especially of the forearm. Large hands are also an asset. Elaine formerly used a four-pound mallet which accomplishes more in a shorter time. However, she now prefers to use a two or two-and-a-half pound hammer, which is slower but better suited to her small hands.

There are also definite health hazards. The ever-present fine dust from cutting the stones can be dangerous to the lungs. Therefore air conditioning is a necessity. Filters become quickly clogged and must be changed very often. A high-powered industrial fan also helps to keep the air dust-free.

Elaine's working costume is a little more complicated than a mere artist's smock. She wears dungarees, one of her husband's discarded shirts, and sneakers, as well as two scarves covering her hair (that demon, dust, again). A plastic shield protects her eyes and face from tiny particles of flying stone. A dust mask equipped with changeable filters is worn over her nose. And, as another precaution, Elaine applies a thick layer of cream all over her face. It would seem difficult to concentrate on work bedecked in all this paraphernalia, but it is Elaine's daily uniform and a real necessity. Her hands are submitted to constant shock with each blow of her mallet so, in addition, Elaine finds it helpful to wear a shock-absorbing glove on her left hand.

How does a stone sculptor begin? By choosing a stone and securing it firmly in place on the cutting stand. This is accomplished by a support of burlap and plaster, which hardens quickly and breaks away easily when work is completed. For Elaine, a few

rough sketches and a general idea in her mind are a sufficient guide for a proposed sculpture. Thoroughly grounded in anatomy from art-school days, she quickly sketches directly on the stone, using charcoal to outline the general shape. The stone is then wet down so that its markings—masses of color, grain, and striations—may be seen. Points (steel tools which break away large pieces of stone) are employed first to rough out the shape. Then the hammer and chisel work begins, first with coarse-toothed chisels and then with finer ones. The stone is moistened repeatedly in order to show unusual veins or markings which may suggest shape modifications or changes in the cutting procedure. The teeth of the chisel bite into the stone and send up little bits of dust. The alchemy has begun.

The initial period of work on a sculpture—that of blocking out the shape—is very physical. The actual carving is also hard work, and the mind

must work ahead of the chisel. This requires intense concentration and energy. Because all direct sculptures are individual pieces of work, the time necessary for their completion is variable.

The sculptor's tools are simple: mallets, points for breaking, chisels in varying sizes for the actual carving, rasps for smoothing, and sand and silicone papers for finishing and polishing. There are no shortcuts in the carving process. Elaine says, "You must refine and refine, and let your carving emerge slowly. The power is behind the hammer. When you carve directly you must solve problems as you go along. There are risks, for the sculptor does not know what he will find. The plan which he has worked out in his head may be in conflict with what is in the stone. The exciting thing about a stone's grain is that the sculptor must be flexible and shift his vision and approach if the stone dictates it. A sculptor can do a

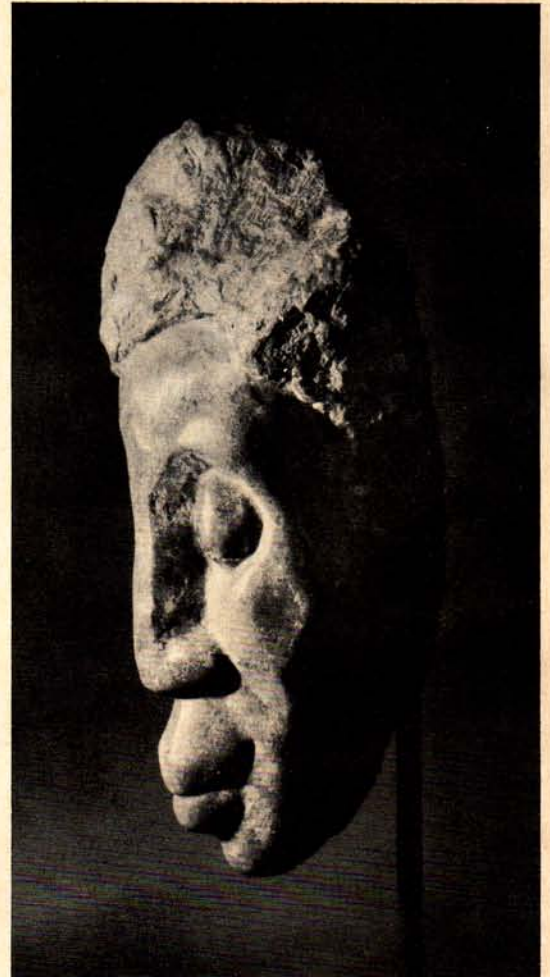
*Continued on page 30*



TORSO (1967) ALABASTER 18" HIGH



MOTHER AND CHILD (1967) ALABASTER 15" HIGH



FROM ANTIGUA (1964) GABRO ROSSO 15½" HIGH

lot of sketches and then disregard them. He must first go to the stone. If he starts with a definite, rigid idea, he will not be able to fight the stone, which has its own character. The sculptor's idea must meet the stone's will, for stone cannot be forced; if it is forced, it will get even with the sculptor by fracturing into many pieces."

Elaine adds thoughtfully, "I must work directly in stone. To conceive a sculpture in a plastic medium like clay and execute it in a nonplastic material like stone does not seem honest to me. I object to such work, for it seems too cold and static."

A stone sculptor must have some knowledge of geology to know what

approach to use in cutting a particular stone. Each stone is different. For example, Carrara marble cuts clean and evenly, while African wonderstone is shaley, brittle, and sharp. A sculptor, therefore, must choose his tools in terms of the particular stone's mineral makeup. Stone is a natural material, therefore it is not predictable. It may reveal marvelous striations and markings of color which the skillful sculptor may use to his advantage. For example, African wonderstone is so named because one never knows what is inside. While cutting a torso in this stone, Elaine revealed wonderful dark-colored whorls. She utilized them to accent the pelvic area in her sculpture.

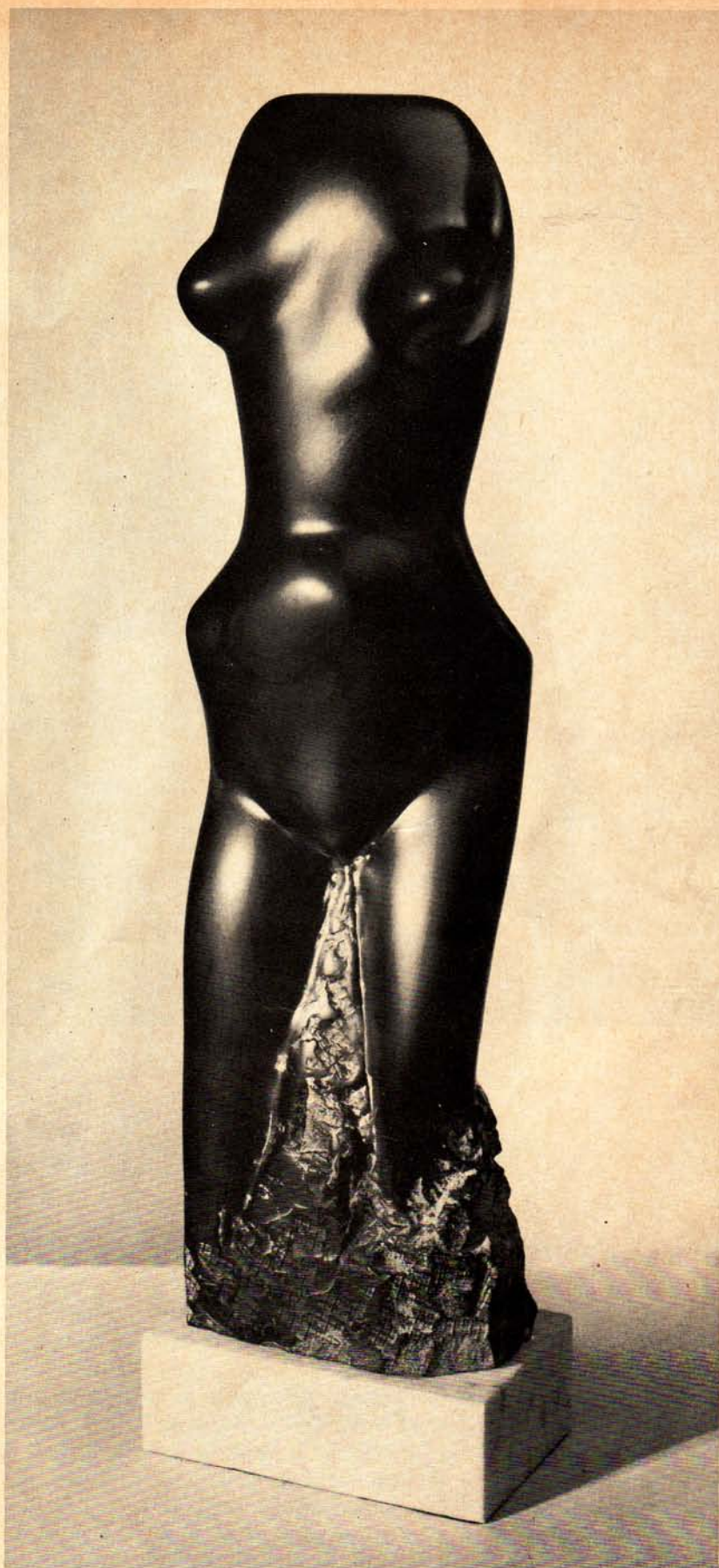
Times and finances have changed since the days when Elaine used to get her stones from demolished buildings and haul them home in an old hearse. Sales of her work have made it possible to buy many stones of her choosing in advance. Her favorite is Italian marble. From it she has carved such pieces as *My Owl* (1967) and *Red Cat* (1967).

A group of "unborn" stones is clustered shyly in the corner of Elaine's studio. She points to them individually and lovingly introduces them as if they were children: "That is limestone. That's a piece of bad travertine; it has sand pockets, but I'll make something of it yet. And that's chiparino alabaster.

It has horizontal striations and suggests birds or fish to me." She runs her hand over its rough contours, her mind and hands anxious to work.

On the cutting stand is a piece of white Vermont marble, in work only a few days. One can see the rough shape of a woman's figure emerging. Elaine wets down the stone, and its unique markings and grain become visible. She points eagerly to a vein of dark color. "See this," she says with excitement, "it is running almost in the area of the figure's spinal column. It is a lucky accident. I will have to modify the figure slightly, distort it a bit, to take advantage of this coloration. That's the excitement of cutting; that's the challenge. You never know what you will find or uncover when you begin to cut." Elaine will use mallet and chisels of different sizes, chipping away, little by little, in the round, until her sculpture emerges, just as if it had been there all along waiting to be released. When one sees the raw stone, and then a beautifully cut and polished piece of completed sculpture, it is almost beyond belief that all this has been accomplished by *hand* with only a few simple tools.

Elaine Rapp's sculpture invites an immediate tactile reaction. The stone is still a stone, it has not lost its physical properties; yet its inner beauty has been revealed and enhanced by skillful cutting and shaping. Sensitive to the basic properties of stone, Elaine Rapp is aware of its inner life and vitality, and regards herself as the liberator of its spirit. Her work has tamed and refined natural stone into sculptures of long-lasting beauty which inspire and delight.



BLACK TORSO (1966) WONDERSTONE 19½"  
Collection, Mr. & Mrs. S. Scharrer



MY OWL (1967)  
MARBLE 10" HIGH