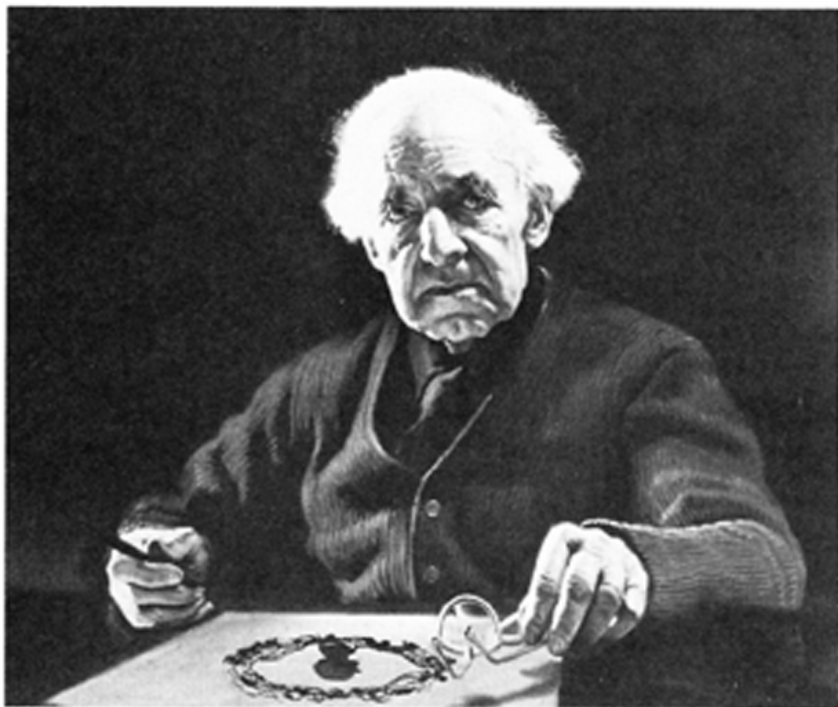


**UGO
MOCHI:
SHADOWS
IN
OUTLINE**

BY ALTON TOBEY



Top: *Ugo Mochi*, by Alton Tobey, oil, 28 x 32. Collection Alton Tobey.

Right: *Bearhunt*, from the book *America* by Theodore Roosevelt, 1953-4. The work was originally done 3' x 2'. Normally Mochi works much smaller, but in this instance he wanted a more impressive work for an exhibition. Notice the minute moustache and glasses.



MY FIRST ACQUAINTANCE with the work of Ugo Mochi occurred more than a decade ago at the College of New Rochelle, New York. His exhibition of black paper cutouts was a large one, and I remember my delight as I went from work to work examining his efforts. I recollect remarking to my companion that here was a demonstration of how an artist—taking for his bailiwick a seemingly peripheral craft—can transform it into bona fide art. In that show, cut out of sheets of black paper, were a full-rigged ship, a frieze on transportation, a number of portraits of some great musicians, and many animal groups. The rigging on the ship was hairline in thinness, and the miniature figures on deck, animatedly going about their business, were exactly in scale. All the other works held to that proportion, and it was difficult to realize that they were only black paper on a white background.

Later, after I had visited Signor Mochi's home and had the privilege of seeing more of his work, I was certain that the art form of shadow outline as he had developed it could not really be compared to anything that has gone before; moreover, it is improbable that it will be equaled by anything in the future. The antecedents of his art go back to the cave paintings of ancient Europe and Africa, to the early pottery decorations of Egypt and Greece, to Chinese sculpture, to Persian leather book binding, and finally to 18th century Italian cut paper designs.

It seems that certain aspects of art can remain dormant for countless years, then suddenly reflower. Sculptural outline, the ancient art of

the shadow profile, has reawakened and lives in the modern creations of Ugo Mochi. His work suggests that he is impelled by the overwhelming necessity for self-expression in that mode, and its creation is offered to some unknown and passionate ideal. Architectonic conception and a steady hand for material execution, an acute perception, and the sensitivity for the aesthetically expressive forms combine to guide his hand.

Mochi works on a heavy glass surface. On it he lays a sheet of black paper and over this a thin sheet of white tracing paper with a faint, non-detailed outline drawn upon it. The picture is cut out with a pencil-shaped knife, a lithographer's tool honed to a razor's edge. The blade is curved on the wide side, a half-moon shape, and honed sharp on the narrow side. As he cuts, he is a pitiless perfectionist in his concern with scale, foreshortening, harmony, and balance. When the cutting is finished, the outline or "black plastic," which has been produced in one piece, completely connected so that it may be picked up in its entirety, is mounted on white paper.

"Shadows in outline" is the name the artist prefers using to describe his work, not the term silhouette. In truth, the use of the word silhouette in reference to his work is indeed a misnomer. It seems that Etienne de Silhouette, a French minister of finance during the 18th century, became extremely unpopular with his fellow countrymen because of his measures for strict economy, for austerity. Thus the appellation "silhouette" was applied to anything parsimonious or incomplete. It, however, stuck to the kind of cut-paper likenesses that were having a

vogue in Paris because they were a cheap imitation of the real thing. Silhouetting is the practice of tracing the outlines of a subject's actual shadow. The result frequently lacks artistic merit and is flat and unimaginative.

The Dray Horses and Wagon effectively illustrates the differences between a silhouettist's and Mochi's mode. In this work the two heavy horses are coming toward us in extreme foreshortening. Nothing in this is actually in profile. Yet we see the whole thing. We sense the mass, the power, the rightness of the structures both animate and inanimate, even though we can discern no details inside the black. In this manner Mochi harnesses our imaginations and stimulates our associations to complete this picture.

A great deal of the quality comes from an acutely developed sense of form. Form as expressed through outline is an absolute value, because the outline does not change under any source, color, direction or intensity of light; color and chiaroscuro, meanwhile, do change and therefore are relative values. In fact, Mochi likes to point out that the simpler the form, the presentation, the more immediate and dynamic becomes the impression. Mochi studied sculpture, and it is easy to understand that a sculptor would search for the characteristic silhouette, since the sculptor, as he moves around his subject in his work, perceives a multitude of outlines.

Ugo Mochi's work, which covers an enormous variety of subjects, has appeared in a myriad of articles, architectural designs, and books. He has illustrated an immense number of contemporary activities and indus-

trial subjects, including moments in farm life and street repair. The London public transportation system has used his posters, and so have some American oil companies. The artist has lectured in galleries and museums, and over the years the venerable Mochi's work has been internationally exhibited. He is a ranking officer of the New York Society of Animal Artists, and it is in his animal illustrations that his art reaches one of its peaks. These "outlines" are unlikely to be matched, for it is because of his thorough knowledge of the internal structure of a particular animal that he can impart to it such extraordinary aliveness. They become so three-dimensional, so pulsatingly alive that they transcend the material limitations of the paper.

Mochi was born March 11, 1889, in Florence, Italy, of an aristocratic family whose title goes back to 1639. His ancestors perhaps included Francisco Mochi, the sculptor whose baroque statues can be seen in St. Peter's, Rome, and, interestingly enough, a 17th century monk named Mochi who also cut paper landscapes.

As a youngster Mochi manifested an intense affection for animals, an affection he still possesses. Rats, birds, mice, and butterflies were some of the

creatures found in his early collections. At age six he began to cut out figures that were quite mature from white paper. At eight he began his formal training at the studio of a painter, and two years later he entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence to study sculpture. The Art Academy in Berlin awarded him a scholarship at the age of 21. There in Berlin he spent hours at the zoo, studying and modeling animals that interested him. To supplement his income during this period, he sang in various places as an entertainer.

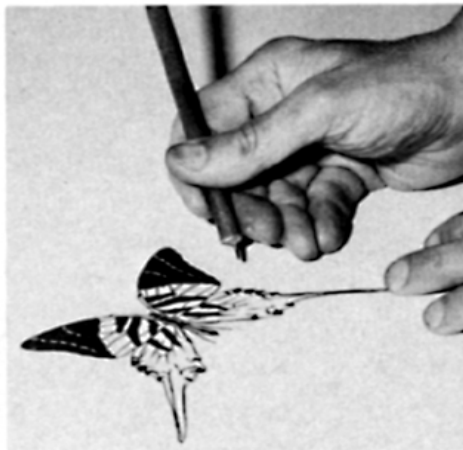
Trained as a sculptor but doing well as a singer, Ugo Mochi opted for singing as his profession. He became a well-known tenor, but he always continued cutting his shadow pictures. In 1922, while on a concert tour in London, he was invited to show his efforts in the home of a patron of the arts. This work—so completely different and enthralling—brought both royalty and commoner alike to marvel and to buy. He became a smash hit. Queen Mary of England bought one work called *Oxcart and Olive Tree in Tuscany*. It depicts a bullock resting under a tree whose foliage is of exquisite intricacy. Others of similar sort were snapped up by eager buyers.

This extraordinary acclaim turned

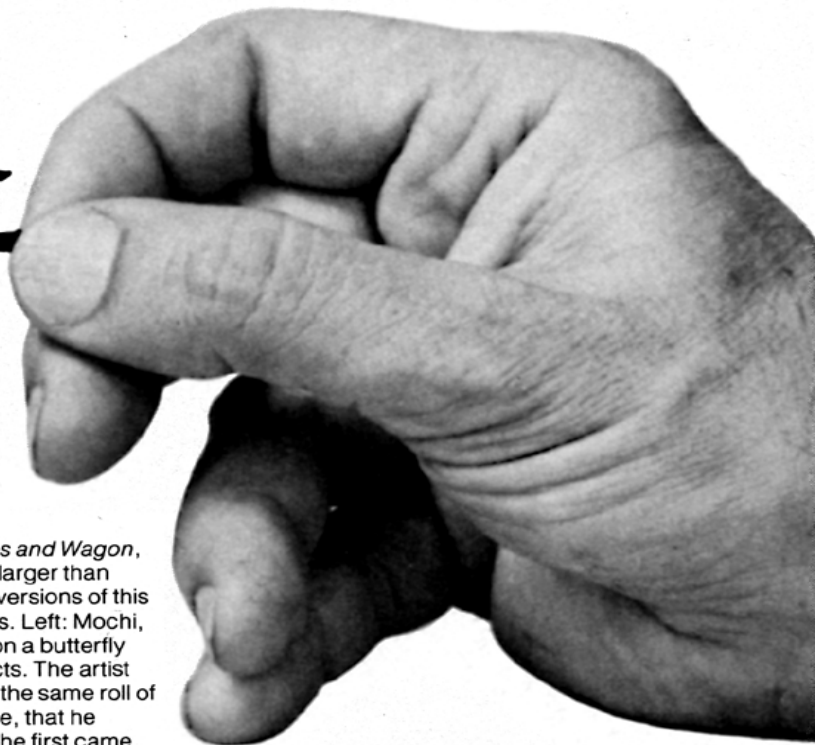
the tide. From that time on Ugo Mochi abandoned sculpture and singing to immerse himself in the art of outline; nevertheless, his training as a sculptor and his involvement with music did have an influence. His sense of dimension and the feeling for composition and harmony can be traced to these previous occupations. His training as a sculptor also explains the extraordinary impression of volume and of mass he is able to achieve in his frail paper figures.

In 1928 he came to America, first living in Yonkers, New York, where the Hudson River evoked in him recollections of the Italian lakes. Nearby New Rochelle was the next community that he moved to and where he still lives. There he and his wife, whom he had met when he first came to the U.S., raised their two daughters. There, through the years, he poured forth a host of creations, published and gave lectures.

Besides the art of outline, he originated another technique called "silk mosaics." For a silk mosaic the black paper is cut as in the art of outline, but instead of paper the outlines are backed by tiny pieces of colored silk, and the finished composition is sandwiched between two pieces of glass. The black outlined design looks like a



Above: *The Dray Horses and Wagon*, 2½" long (shown here larger than life.) Mochi did several versions of this subject in different sizes. Left: Mochi, knife in hand, working on a butterfly from his series on insects. The artist continues to work from the same roll of black paper, a yard wide, that he brought with him when he first came to the U.S.



woodcut, and the tiny silk pieces are precisely cut and fitted behind it. Lighted from behind the result has the strength and luminosity of a stained glass window. A panel executed in this technique belonged to the St. Regis Hotel in New York. It was installed in 1928 and disappeared in 1935, a casualty of changing management and economics.

But perhaps the most magnificent example Mochi did by this process is the Medici Series, actually completed for the Villa Careggi in Florence but now in the artist's home. A wealthy man in Germany who owned the modest villa, once inhabited by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), commissioned Mochi to detail Ficino's life in 24 panels. Each panel of the series on Ficino is rather small, though they do vary in size—18 are 9½" x 5", and the remaining six are 11½ x 9½". All of them are massed together and read like a book. The Ficino picture story took from 1921 to 1923, which does not include two years of research, study of the school of Renaissance Neoplatonism to which Ficino was so intimately involved.

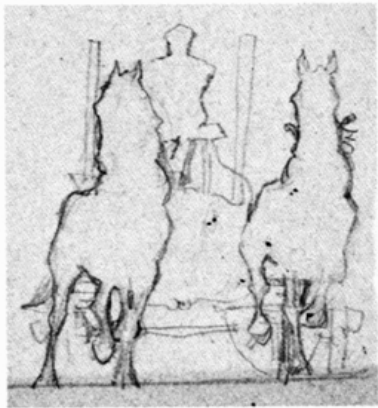
The reason that this masterwork of Mochi's is still in his house is simple: the man who commissioned it went
Continued on page 67



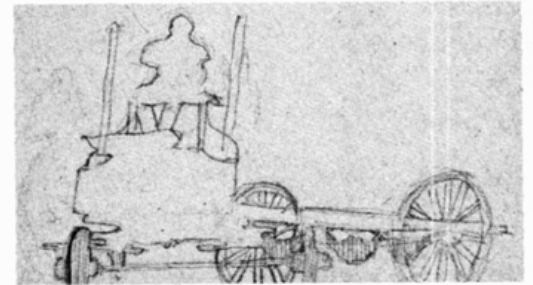
Neopolitan Cart, 7" long.



Covered Wagon, 1927, 7" long.



Dray Horses and Wagon, 1955, 2' x 2'. Here we can see how the artist first develops separate sketches of the background subject and the foreground subject and then combines them for the finished work to provide an almost 3-dimensional sense of space.



bankrupt. Today the depiction of the life of Ficino glows richly in a room on Mochi's first floor. It is an extraordinary performance, with the sculptural aspect emphasized by the resonance of color.

In this unique manner murals, panels, and lamps were produced. They are unique for they cannot be duplicated. While the wealthy clients acquired these, Mochi also produced work as a commercial designer. He created window displays, patterns for lamps, and designs for furniture for the home. The *Women's Home Companion*, *Collier's* and *American* magazines carried his cutouts for advertisements and illustrations. The scope of the subject matter went from pills for reducing to the life history of the praying mantis. An encyclopedia commissioned his renowned First Ladies Series. Done in his black paper style is a group of 32 works, each one of which shows the wife of a President. They are depicted in their inaugural gowns and standing against a contemporary background. Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the last of the group.

I mentioned Mochi's series of musicians, a few of which appear in Herbert Goodkind's definitive volume on Antonio Stradivari. There are 550 of these musicians, with either authentic or facsimile signatures affixed. The portraits cover a period from the ninth century to the present day. Mochi's task began in Berlin in 1911 when he was asked to do some of these heads for postcards. He went to the Berlin library, became enthralled by the wealth of information, and went feverishly to work—incidentally forgetting about the original commission. Other publishers asked him to enlarge on his group, which he did.

World War I put a damper on further negotiations, but Mochi continued to add to the portraits. As a singer he knew many of the musical greats, who gladly posed for his sketchbook. Composer Edgar Varese, singer Geraldine Ferrar, Leo Slezak, Arturo Toscanini, and a host of others became part of his portrait collection, and all autographed the final work. (Incidentally, Mochi posed for me when I was making the painting for the cover and frontpiece of Goodkind's book on Stradivari. Since no one knew what Stradivari looked like, I felt that the fine features of this Florentine artist were just right.)

Mochi is represented in private and public collections both here and abroad, including The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Berlin Museum of Natural History, and England's Windsor Castle. The general public became aware of his work essentially through his book illustrations. The Literary Guild in 1934 selected his *African Shadows* for its junior membership. A few preeminent works on natural history have his illustrations, such as Austin Rand's *American Water and Game Birds* and Theodore Roosevelt's *America*. A tour de force was his *Hoofed Mammals of the World*, accomplished in 1953 with T. Ronald Carter, a naturalist, writing the text. The artist cut out the mammals to the exact scale of 7 inches equals 32 inches. Ignoring the superb aesthetic effect, so accurate are they zoologically that the scientists are unanimous in their acclaim. Crossword puzzle fans will recognize the words wildebeest, ibex, gnu, hartebeest. But instead of mere words, these creatures become living things under the cutting magic of Mochi's scalpel.

In New York, the American Museum of Natural History has a major and permanent display of Mochi's work. Even before scalpel touched the paper, the artist spent two years researching all the natural forms involved. Now 14 2-foot-by-8-foot panels displaying different aspects of nature decorate the renovated dining room. Each panel is a sandwich of two sheets of Plexiglas with the black cut-out creations in the middle. Lighting is from the back. They glow. Reptiles, prehistoric mammals, marine creatures, bird life teem on these panels. Each panel is produced in superb perspective, and together they feature a gamut of backgrounds ranging from waters of the earth, to the jungle, the forest, the deserts. These works suggest a panorama of life, of the world's creatures marching before the viewers' eyes. It is a feat of combining biological accuracy and aesthetic beauty.

It is appropriate to mention here a dramatic moment when the series of panels was half completed. The artist was involved in cutting out the blossoms of the flowering tree in the background of one panel. Each one of the myriad of blooms would be different, he decided. Day after day the tedious task continued, rendering him edgy and exhausted. One evening, unable to sleep, he went upstairs to continue the work. They found him lying there in the morning. Subsequent diagnosis indicated a stroke. Mochi's friends and family were distraught. What irony—his masterwork would never be finished. It seemed as though the gods conspired to chastise this presumptuous mortal. However, Mochi tenaciously began to improve, and he finished the work. In 1969, at the completion, the Museum honored him with a great reception.

Now in his mid-80s, he still works on the second floor of his home. There, on the walls, on the piano—in fact, everywhere one looks—one sees examples of his art, which really should be in a museum.

One last anecdote: When Carl Milles, the great Swedish sculptor, first saw an exhibition of the shadow outlines, he remained a long time in silence. Then, turning toward Ugo Mochi, who had addressed him as "Master," he said, "You call me Master, but you yourself are a Master. From now on I am Carl and you are Ugo." ●

The photo to the left shows Tobey with Mochi, whom the artist used as a model for his portrait of Antonio Stradivari for the Goodkind book on the famous violin maker. [ed.]



Below, the artist provides scale for a series of panels permanently installed in the Museum Restaurant of The American Museum of Natural History in New York City. There are 14 panels in all, each measuring 8' x 2'. Panels shown include (left to right) *Africa*, *Mountain Landscape, Alaska*, *Australia*, *Baboons—Africa*.



