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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART OPENS RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION  
OF SCULPTURE BY JOHN B. FLANNAGAN

The first important exhibition of the season at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, will open to the public Wednesday, October 28, when the Museum will present simultaneously two one-man shows: The Sculpture of John B. Flannagan and Tchelitchew Paintings and Drawings. The entire second floor, the Museum's largest gallery space, will be devoted to the double exhibition which will close November 29. Each of the two shows will be the largest retrospective exhibition ever held for either artist: 43 sculptures and 25 drawings by Flannagan; 214 oils, gouaches, watercolors, drawings and stage and costume designs by Tchelitchew.

Dorothy C. Miller, Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture for the Museum, has directed the Flannagan exhibition and installed it. She has also edited the catalog for the exhibition, which is a book of 40 pages with 33 halftone plates selling for seventy-five cents. Carl Zigrosser has written the introduction to the catalog.

In the catalog, Mr. Zigrosser writes of the artist:

"Flannagan had a tragic life... But his art was not tragic: it was pure and self-contained, profound yet simple... Flannagan was both apart from and of his time. He stood apart from it in that he was essentially a mystic, one who aligned himself with spirit rather than mechanism. He was modern by reason of his intelligent grasp of the problems of the artist today..."

"Possibly only a sculptor can appreciate the daring and rightness of Flannagan's simplification of planes, the solidity of his masses, and the inner logic of his forms. He was a great technician. His knowledge of the idiosyncracies of wood and stone and metal and the mechanics of the sculptor's craft was unsurpassed. But he had gone far beyond mere technique, which he called 'hardness--the display of obvious skill and an overdone imitation of the surface aspects of reality...'

"Flannagan had an innate feeling for style. It was apparent in his talk and in his writing, which often had an epigrammatic quality. But it was most evident in his art... There was no dross of imitation or second-hand feeling in his work. He often spoke of 'a realism of feeling rather than a painting or carving of realism.' He was one of the most original of American sculptors."

John B. Flannagan was born on April 7, 1895 at Fargo, North Dakota. His father, a newspaper man, died when the boy was five, and his mother was compelled to put her three children in an orphan asylum for a number of years. When John was nineteen he began

studying painting at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, at the same time supporting his mother and the two younger children. From 1917 to 1922 he shipped as an able-bodied seaman with the Merchant Marine, making several trips to Europe and South America. Back in New York, he nearly died of starvation, but in 1922-23 he had a job as a handyman on the farm of Arthur B. Davies at Congers, N. Y. He painted at night and, with Davies' encouragement, started to carve in wood.

Flannagan exhibited for the first time in 1923 at the Montross Gallery with Davies, the Prendergasts, Glackens, Kuhn and Sheeler. About 1926 he began to carve stone as well as wood, and after 1928 gave up wood entirely. Several exhibitions at the Whitney Studio Club and the Weyhe Gallery were followed by a contract with the Weyhe Gallery guaranteeing a monthly stipend in return for sculpture, an arrangement which lasted until 1937, with annual exhibitions at the Gallery. A Guggenheim Fellowship in 1932-33 enabled him to live in Ireland, where the wealth of beautiful stone and the charm of the country inspired some of his best sculpture.

In 1939 Flannagan survived four major brain operations made necessary by an automobile accident. The severity of this experience and the precarious state of health which followed had a profoundly depressing effect upon him. Warned against the effort of cutting stone, he turned to metal, working directly on unfinished bronze casts. But toward the end of 1941, although he had begun two large stone figures, his letters reveal that he felt unable to go on. He died a suicide on January 6, 1942.

Because he was too poor to buy stone Flannagan used the stones he found strewn about in the fields--a medium which seemed particularly suited to his sculptural purpose. He once wrote:

"Next to birth, the greatest thing in my life happened working alone in the country, when out of great necessity and urgent creative need I found the material naturally in the fields. Rocks, a couple of chisels and we retrace our footsteps through history, knowing the way by memory. Hunting stones, shaping and making a few tools, all with the unspoiled simplicity of the very hungry, I went back....

"It has often been assumed that the use of field stone was an effort toward an adroit utilization of the accidental shape of the stone. Instead the stone has usually been sought for its adaptability to an already achieved idea--the purpose not the seemingly accidental, but rather to avoid destroying the rock, to preserve it, feeling that it had been that image always and inevitably."

Again he said: "My aim is to produce sculpture as direct and swift in feeling as drawing--sculpture with such ease, freedom and simplicity that it hardly seems carved but rather to have endured so always. This accounts for my

preference for field stone: its very rudeness seems to me more in harmony with simple direct statement... I would like my sculpture to appear as rocks left quite untouched and natural and, as has been said, inevitable. Such qualities of humor or the grotesque or whatever may be found therein are for the most part accidental and subordinate to a conception purely sculptural."

After it closes on November 29, the exhibition of The Sculpture of John B. Flannagan will be sent on tour by the Museum's Department of Circulating Exhibitions for showings in other cities in this country.