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ART

BUSCAGLIA at the Institute of Culture

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Special to the STAR

It's easier to move a mountain than to sculpt it. Jose Buscaglia has moved mountains several times in preparation for his "Thirty Years of Sculpture" retrospective exhibit now at the Institute of Culture. Some of the bronze sculptures in the Dominican Convent Courtyard are 10 to 14 feet high, not counting the bases which, compared to most sculpture in Puerto Rico, is really mountainous. Our sculptures are mostly bibelots.

The cast-plaster models for Buscaglia's bronzes were produced on the University of Puerto Rico's grounds in the 60's. Buscaglia stood on 20-foot-high scaffoldings for which the studio roof had to be lifted. Then the heavy breakable casts had to be taken to a bronze foundry in Spain. Now, 8 years later, some of the bronze statues are here for you to see. Some of them will end up at the Parque de las Americas in Hato Rey as a sculptural ensemble, bigger than most in the Caribbean.

Architect Sanz tells me a special committee is now dreaming up the proper placement, bases, fountains and lighting for the sculptures in the American heritage plaza. I hope they get the proper surrounding trees, too, since Buscaglia's style has a curious art nouveau quality which could be rejected by shapes which are too vertical or too horizontal. With proper spacing between the trees and the various sculptural groups, the effect of negative and positive spaces should be quite handsome.

Just now at the institute the sculptures look out of space, face, and scale against the bare architectural geometry surrounding them. Against such a background the paintings of Hernandez Cruz which are also at the institute are more harmonious in shape than the sculptures.

It has taken 16 years for Buscaglia's monumental dream to come this far. What a long line of heartaches. "But he is capricious," Tomas Batista the sculptor tells me. "He has found people to help him because he stuck with his capricho or dream." How true. An artist has to be a collector of money and friends to have a work published in Puerto Rico.

Buscaglia's Fuente de Puerto Rico y America was planned for the UPR central quadrangle between the tower and the theater in 1960. It was refused because of lack of money.

Then the idea grew into an garden-ensemble, Fuentes de la herencia, for the Ponce museum. Ferre paid for most of the materials, hired the help to do the small scale models, then the final clay originals, the plaster moulds and the plaster casts, but he didn't pay for Buscaglia's work. Then he refused the whole thing.

I don't blame Ferre or his architect. The Ponce Museum garden is only

about 100 by 80 feet, too small for the statues. Besides, the geometricity and horizontality of the architecture would have fought the sinuous figures off.

After the Ponce denial the design was planned for Munoz Rivera Park behind the Supreme Court building but the project fizzled. Finally the Puerto Rican government paid \$25,000 for part of the foundry work. Capitol Transportation, Sealand, Phillips Petroleum and Rexach Benitez Construction also helped.

Two of the five heritage plaza groups are on exhibit at the institute. The largest central one is due in shortly from Spain. ITT is paying for part of the fourth group which is now at the foundry. Financing is owed for the last one and a half groups. Do you want to contribute?

Most of the impressive 73 sculptures and 22 so-so drawings in the show seem to have grown by addition, like plants. Buscaglia is an organic modeler not a carver like Batista. A botanical linearity pervades even his human figures. It stems from Medieval, Gothic and Moorish influences besides the art nouveau. They are in his roots.

"He worked like hell in Madrid," sculptor Lindsay Daen tells me. "I was in the Madrid foundry at the same time he was. In winter the air from the Guadarrama hills snuffs no wick and moves no leaf but it kills. We froze our backs while our faces and hands were being burnt by the foundry fires. The fumes were infernal and very lethal. Lead poisoning is just a 'catarrito' to the workers. Jose turned into a ghost from an El Greco painting. But he stuck to it."

If a professor in Puerto Rico ever dealt with a student the way don Enrique Monjo y Garriga, the Catalan sculptor, dealt with Jose Buscaglia, 20, in 1958 the professor would be picketed and maybe prosecuted for violating a student's civil rights. But it's been done in Catalan ateliers since Medieval times. It's called the apprentice system.

"What you (usted) have drawn and sculpted up to now is a merde. You Americans are flojos," don Enrique Monjo began in 1958.

Buscaglia had studied sculpture for 12 years, from the time he was 8, under Ismael D'Alzina in Puerto Rico. He went to Harvard at 18 where an official sculptural portrait was commissioned from him. He studied under various artists, including Ben Shahn who was then Harvard's resident painter and Elliot Norton lecturer. Ben Shahn arranged (for the first time in Harvard's history) for Jose to study abroad and be given Harvard credit for his studies and Jose himself had selected Enrique Monjo as his mentor after he saw Monjo's "40 Years of Sculpture" show in New York City. It was, Jose thought, a vigorous eye-expanding show by a vigorous Cata-

lan personality. Now they were facing each other in Barcelona.

"Yes, your work is a merde. You Americans are all softies... To accept you I would have to form you all over; test you in earnest. Sculpture is not a game, it's a calling. Furthermore, to accept you as my apprentice, I refuse to speak with you. Bring me your father."

It didn't matter that Buscaglia's father was far away in Puerto Rico. The father had to be produced if Jose wanted to study under the patriarch. Jose's children here in Puerto Rico can vote and carry arms when they are 18.

In view of two witnesses, the Catalan patriarch put his hands on Jose father's shoulders. "Senor Rafael Buscaglia, father of Jose Buscaglia, are you disposed to relinquish all authority over your son, the said Jose Buscaglia?"

"Of course, Maestro. It is my son's express wish to become your apprentice."

"Then, it is a formal contract. But before I let him enter into my studio he will have to pass a series of tests. Otherwise he goes back to America. You, Apprentice. On Monday you shall report to Colonel So-and-So at the Royal Equestrian Academy. You shall mount Regalito. It's your obedience test."

Regalito had not been broken in yet. But what's a broken neck if you want to study sculpture and your first lesson is to mount a crazy horse? You mount the horse. So Jose passed the first sculpture test. Later, all of Jose's lessons in aesthetics were received on horseback in Barcelona's parks: a galloping, cantering, trotting and jumping series of lessons. The old man knew his stuff, and the many parks and buildings visited had many sculptures to study, many of them produced by Monjo himself. Jose's formal style was formed a canter at a time.

The silence and perseverance-plus obedience test came next. "I will not talk to you until you cube that huge block of stone. Goodbye." It took three months of hard labor and countless bloody wounds before the huge cube of stone was perfect. "That's acceptable now. I thought you would lose all your blood or else go back to America. Now you must sculpt something from that cube of stone before I can allow you in my studio as an apprentice beginner". Which was done. It took a year.

Jose Buscaglia rose in apprentice rank until he became the personal secretary and principal aide of Maestro Monjo. At the time, the master was arranging for his library to be taken over by the Barcelona government. Also aided by Monjo, the Monjo Museum was being built to house all of his works. And, the entrance to the municipal cemetery was being changed to go with his self-designed and sculpted tomb. Monjo had al-

ready built the Barcelona Town Hall Chapel where his remains would be displayed on his death.

But why did you stick with him?" I asked Jose.

"Why I stuck with him is explained by Monjo's dedication and ability tests," Buscaglia explained. "He had no children. So one day he brought a nice girl to me. 'This is my niece,' he said. 'From now on you ride with her in the parks, then you shall marry her. The marriage is all arranged.' She was very intelligent, dedicated and loyal to him, and with her collaboration, after eight months, we skipped that test. We demonstrated a lot of diplomatic ability, and dedication to him, as also happened when he wanted me to be his heir."

And so Jose Buscaglia's formal style was decided in Barcelona by a series of charming happenings under a patriarch.

"Hey, not quite!" says Buscaglia. "It is true I never planned my style. It happened." Buscaglia could have sought Marino Marini or Manzu in Italy or Henry Moore in England. Harvard would have approved them also. But Jose chose Monjo. That's like life; it happens.

"Besides," Buscaglia continued, "I am changing. Notice my latest works. They are social-realist." Which is true. Witness his 1975 bronzes "Napalm," "Pieta," "The Minority Suffers" and "The Majority Kills." His is not condensed modern and epic social-realism such as Ernst Barlach's or Kathe Kollwitz's but it works in the way that Daumier's and Meunier's work. As a matter of fact, a peculiar clumsiness in Meunier's bulky workers figures resonates in Buscaglia's.

But, Buscaglia, why are so many of your works Art Nouveau-botanical, just as Barcelona is so Art Nouveau botanical? Its buildings and parks became Art Nouveau-botanical, especially under Antoni Gaudi, who joined Medieval visions with modern mathematics but could not produce the fully Baroque effect of a strong curve and its counter-curve. Gaudi's curves go bloop and slow bloop, as in clinging vines when they are stopped on the way upward.

"Rodin was quite botanical too!" Buscaglia answered.

Which is true in some cases. Also Gauguin and Toulouse Lautrec. It was a fine-de-siecle sickness. Why should Buscaglia pay now for Art Nouveau's sins?

Buscaglia, about the botany...

"I've been thinking since you mentioned it. There is something to it. Our home in Guaynabo was in the old McCormick botanical gardens. It was called Bonnie Brae. The gardens had Japanese pagodas, beautiful plants, flowers, climbing vines as a child, I used to dream in them for days on end."

So Buscaglia has come full circle. Now I know he can grow in Puerto Rico. And bloom. He is only 38.

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Two (of three) studies of Pablo Casals (1973 bronze)



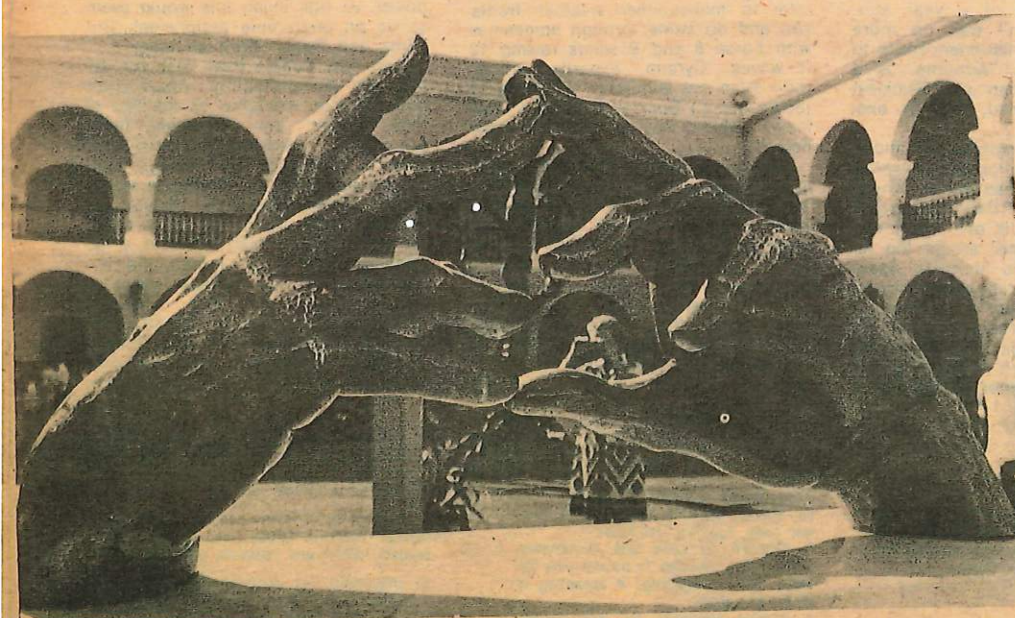
Robert Frost (1962)



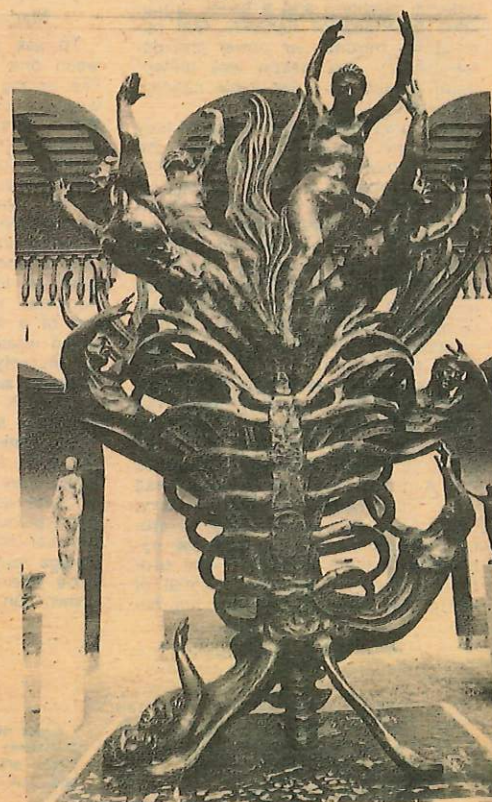
Photographed by Jose Feliciano



Rey de la Paz (1960 bronze, detail)



Study of Hands (1973 polished bronze)



Napalm (1975 bronze)