

LOSING ESTELLE

A HAUNTED ARTIST, THE WOMAN
HE LOVED, AND A CITY THAT
MISPLACED A 3½-TON SCULPTURE



Long before she died, Estelle Horn became a ghost.

It happened gradually, often in the mornings. Milton Horn would sketch or sculpt his wife's likeness as she modeled for him, dreaming up the spectral images while she lived that would haunt him for years after she died.

She was not a classic beauty, Estelle. Her face was raw-boned and her features seemed raked to a point like the prow of a ship, all brow and nose and chin. But those eyes--so hooded and fierce, dark and mysterious. "The whole love story is all right there in his work," says Paula Ellis, an artist who befriended and cared for Horn late in his life and who serves as executor of the Milton and Estelle Horn Fine Arts Trust. "You can feel him looking at her and her at him."

Of all Horn's pieces--at least 18 are on display in the Chicago area, mostly bronzes and wood panels that stare out at the world through Estelle's eyes --the massive bas-relief that hangs just north of the Chicago River on the west-facing wall of the Columbus Drive Bridge almost certainly has borne mute witness to the strangest things.

Meant as a representation of the artist's adopted city, "Chicago Rising From the Lake" depicts a bull, an eagle and the central figure of a woman--modeled after Estelle, of course --holding a sheaf of wheat while standing hip-deep in Lake Michigan.

Horn finished "Chicago Rising" in late 1954, and in 1955 it was mounted on the wall of a parking garage in the Loop, where it hung until the garage was torn down in 1983. On a bright April day in 1998 it was given a new home on the bridge at Columbus Avenue.

But what happened to it in the intervening years confounded Horn and raised public awareness of a broader problem: Like a set of car keys, the 3 1/2-ton sculpture went missing and later turned up in the weeds outside the city's bridge-repair shop on the South Side.

"Like a goddess in the jungle," says Ellis' husband, Peter, an architect at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

The plight of "Chicago Rising" drew media attention and helped rally public support behind a Chicago lawyer's push to make officials keep better track of taxpayer-purchased artwork. Valuable pieces languished in open fields, dank basements and other nondescript locations throughout Chicago.

"Two years ago we were chasing a painting around for a while and our clues took us all the way out to the water sheds in the middle of the lake," says Michael Lash, who oversees the city's public art program for the Department of

Cultural Affairs. "We get rumors all the time and have to check them out. When you find something, it's kind of like finding an archeological piece." The tale of one such piece, "Chicago Rising," is a love story and a ghost story rolled into one, with a subplot of bureaucratic bungling thrown in for suspense.

On a cold night in 1925, a young architect and plaster caster named Milton Horn pulled on a short-sleeved shirt because it was all he had, plucked a wrinkled wool suit off the floor of his apartment and ironed it, then set out for a party in Manhattan.

There he met a woman, Estelle Oxenhorn, who made him sorry he had brought a date. Horn took his date home early and returned to spend time with Estelle, a poised young woman who could speak Russian with him. She was a student of modern dance, and they talked about the arts.

Horn made sure to keep his jacket on so she couldn't see his short sleeves. It was a night the artist would remember, later describing it in detail for family members, including his younger brother, Hyman. Hyman, in turn, would recount his brother's courtship for a reporter.

In the summer of 1928, after sundown on the Lower East Side, Milton and Estelle were married in a lavish Jewish wedding that happened to fall on Milton's birthday. At the reception, Milton and Estelle danced and celebrated with family and friends, unfazed by the curious discovery that they were distant cousins whose kinship had been obscured by the politics of immigration: Milton's father had dropped the "Oxen" from his name to get a passport out of Russia.

As the years passed, Milton became increasingly dependent on Estelle, for everything from keeping the books to boiling an egg. "She was his muse, his publicist," Paula Ellis says. "They acted as one."

In 1949, after Horn had worked for a time as a professor at Olivet College in Michigan, he and Estelle moved to Chicago. "After visiting Chicago and getting to know Frank Lloyd Wright, he decided Chicago was the kind of city that really needed and wanted public works," Ellis says. "Not much was going on."

Four years later, Horn's vision paid big dividends. Then-Mayor Richard J. Daley commissioned him to do a sculpture that would be the city's signature piece, an iconic work that would be as readily identifiable as the Statue of Liberty. Daley wanted something that would show Chicago's central place in the Midwest and the world.

The sculpture, for which the city paid the then-considerable sum of \$5,000, was to hang on the north-facing wall of a parking structure under construction on West Wacker Drive.

"That piece was significant for Milton because it articulated everything he loved about the city," Paula Ellis says. "He talked about Chicago raising the sidewalks and changing the direction of the river. He said, 'That wouldn't happen anywhere else in the country. These are tough people.' "

After getting the city's approval for his design, he cleared everything from one side of his Lincoln Park studio and set to work building a floating wall: two large panels that shifted back and forth and that would hold the enormous weight of the clay. Unlike Jackson Pollock, Horn didn't create his art flat on the floor; he liked working on a piece of art vertically, as it was to be viewed by the public.

He erected bamboo poles and suspended tin lamps on them, just above the wall. He built a scaffold and a ladder. With Estelle he mixed clay in big aluminum trashcans until they were up to their elbows, then began slinging it on the wall.

As it dried, the artist would climb toward the ceiling, his

broad, flat thumb stroking and shaping the gray clay, his tools etching it and giving it texture, his bearded jaw hanging slightly slack.

Sometimes Estelle would stop working and read her husband poems and psalms. Slowly the piece took shape, revealing the figures of the woman, the bull and the eagle. According to Horn's vision, three bronze bars would curve around the front to represent railroad, industry and commerce, as well as the swell of a globe with Chicago at the center.

Horn rose each morning, drew brush-and-ink sketches of Estelle to limber up "Like a pianist, he would do his scales," Peter Ellis says and went back to work on his sculpture.

Estelle was no passive model. When it came time to mix the plaster to make a cast of the clay sculpture, she was right there in it, goop up to her shoulder blades. She helped Horn slop it on the clay and later remove it in sections. She also would type letters for Horn: to the construction company, to the architect, to a foundry in Long Island, N.Y.

Finally, in November 1954, the plaster cast was finished and shipped to the foundry to be cast in bronze.

"Large relief for parking facility No. 1" was Horn's working title for the sculpture. He hated coming up with titles for his work, typically resisting them until the last minute. That time came in the summer of 1955, when the bronze casting was ready to be shipped back to Chicago on the Erie Railroad. Horn decided to call the piece "Chicago Rising From the Lake."

"It was," Lash says, "a work of figurative symbolism with strong biblical references."

For almost 30 years the sculpture hung dwarfed on the parking garage. "It kind of was a postage stamp on a very large structure," Lash says.

When the garage was torn down in 1983 to make way for a new hotel in the Loop, Horn was in the hospital with a bleeding ulcer. Without his knowledge, city workers took his piece down, and it was hauled away to the bridge-repair shop's iron-working facility at 31st Street and Sacramento Avenue.

"At the time we didn't have an art-storage facility like we do now, so we don't lose things like we did in that case," Lash says. "We're trying to learn from our mistakes."

At first the piece was stored in a warehouse just north of 31st Street, says Willie Crot, a longtime city crane operator and engineer at the bridge shop who is now retired. Then it was moved outside into a storage area called the bone yard.

Nobody at the bridge shop knew the history of the mysterious, 165-square-foot thing with the lady and the animals. "I don't think anybody really thought of it as a piece of art," Crot says. "It was just lying out there upside down like a soup bowl."

"First the cats got into it, then the dogs ran the cats off, then the raccoons ran the dogs off."

Portrait of the artist: By most accounts Horn was opinionated and cantankerous, contrary and reclusive, conceited and abrasive. He viewed himself as "the 20th Century man, nourished by his art, living in the present with a responsibility to the future."

But perhaps the best reflection of Horn's personality lay in his descriptions of others. Jackson Pollock was a no-talent drunkard. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was a clown. Alexander Calder? Ha. The man was a toymaker. "He was full of himself," Peter Ellis says affectionately. "He put down almost everybody."

There was, roiling free in Horn's speech and demeanor, an

abiding resentment for those whose work did not agree with or validate his own. It didn't help that Horn's art for a long time received only tepid reviews.

"Milton came out of the Works Progress Administration era, and his pieces weren't regarded as high art for a while," Lash says.

Howard A. Sulkin, president of the Spertus Institute for Jewish Studies, says of Horn: "In the history of art in Chicago, he was very important. In the history of art in the world, he was much smaller."

The Ellises met Horn at a dinner party in 1979 on the Gold Coast. The artist showed up late, looking rabbinical in a wild gray beard. It didn't take long for the conversation to turn heated.

"He lambasted everything about modern art," Peter Ellis says, "and then Paula showed him some of her work.

"He said, 'Where is the work? I don't see it. This isn't art.' "

Offended and outraged, Paula Ellis lashed out verbally at the arrogant old man. To her dismay, she and her husband later were wrangled into giving Horn a ride home.

Pulling up to the snowy curb in front of his house and studio on North Lincoln Avenue, the Ellises reluctantly agreed to accompany Horn inside to look at a book about Frank Lloyd Wright. Then, mounting the icy stairs of the townhouse, they stepped unprepared into the secret world of Milton Horn.

"It was like a time warp," Peter Ellis says. "There was this white, hot museum light on all these pieces of sculpture, while out the window it was dark. It was an absolutely magical place."

It also was haunted. Estelle had died four years earlier of a ruptured aneurysm.

Peter and Paula Ellis were the first people he had invited in since Estelle died, and her ghost was everywhere around them in the sculptures and photos and drawings that filled the place.

A bust of Estelle sat on the mantel. In the front window sat a charged and erotic sculpture called "God and Israel," which Horn had created in the throes of his anguish over Estelle's death.

"He talked of her constantly," Peter Ellis says. "He would talk about his work and their collaboration, he would talk about how she read him poetry and psalms while he was sculpting. Almost every time he mentioned her he would break down and cry, just completely collapse.

"He was close to not wanting to live at all."

Horn brought out cheese and salami and the hours flew until dawn broke fragile through a snowstorm.

I should have taken her dancing, he said.

By the time "Chicago Rising" went missing in 1983, the Ellises and Horn had become nearly inseparable. Doggedly, Paula Ellis helped her mentor and surrogate grandfather look for his lost work, which represented "the loss of his own self and his demand and reputation," Peter Ellis says.

Ahead lay 14 frustrating years of searching, finding and losing the piece, then searching, finding and losing it all over again. Nowhere, it seemed, was there a record of where the sculpture had been taken. If there was, Lash says, "it was

probably in a file somewhere that kept getting pushed aside because it was an SEP: Someone Else's Problem.

"Not many folks knew what happened to it when it came down off the parking garage, and those who did know really didn't care."

A year passed and Paula Ellis got no answers. City administrations changed. Ellis, with Horn in tow, gave up on one mayor, Jane Byrne, and ambushed a new one, Harold Washington, whom they set upon at his favorite breakfast place in Hyde Park.

Washington told Ellis and Horn whom to see, but it took them six months to get an appointment, and the meeting seemed to do no good: No one knew anything.

Another year went by.

When a public works employee finally called in 1988 to say the piece had been found outside the bridge shop, Paula Ellis bought Horn his first pair of sneakers and they rode out to 31st and Sacramento. City employees lined up and applauded, then removed a tarpaulin to reveal the sculpture.

"Milton and I walked inside," Ellis says. "I stood in her nose. It was an astounding moment. There was not one chip, not one crack. She was in great shape."

All that remained was to find the curved bars that went with the piece, which still were lost, and to find money and a site for mounting the sculpture. And then more bad luck. Prospective sites, including the Civic Opera House, fell through. Then Washington died, leaving Horn and Ellis to deal with yet another administration.

"Everything came to a screaming halt," she says. "We were nowhere again."

Three or four more years went by. Horn, suffering the effects of a stroke and consumed with other works, lost his grip on the project. Then, in 1991, he and Ellis started searching for the piece again, "because we heard from some other friends in the city that it had been mysteriously moved."

What happened, Crot says, is that the Fire Department and ambulance service took over what had been the city's iron-working facility, sending the bridge shop across the street to the south side of 31st. The sculpture was moved along with the bridge operation.

This time the big bronze piece was laid on old railroad tracks to keep it off the ground and help protect it from the elements. Ironworkers taking smoke breaks gazed into the eyes of the thing, wondering what it was.

Seeing the woman, many of the ironworkers thought of sex.

Seeing the bull, 52-year-old John Heredia thought of basketball.

Seeing the wheat and the eagle, foreman George Russell thought of the West.

"First time I saw it, I didn't even know what it was," he says. "But I knew it was valuable. I knew it was bronze. That's why we always kept it close by the department."

In March 1995, Pat Matsumoto of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs wrote Lash a memo titled "Milton Horn Sculpture."

"Because of the advanced age and frail health of the artist, people close to Horn are lobbying to have the piece placed back on public display," she wrote. "Does it belong to the city? Why is it in storage and not on display? "Can it be on display somewhere?"

So many questions, so few answers. Though some people were talking about displaying the piece again, nobody really knew where it was.

In April 1995, Horn died. He was 88 years old, lonely and desolate. Too long lost to him were his beloved wife and one of his proudest pieces of work, a sculpture he had shaped while gazing on Estelle's face.

By the time a firefighter stumbled on "Chicago Rising" in September 1997 and recognized it for what it was, the sculpture was sinking into the ground, weighted down with hundreds of wooden pallets and filled with dirt, twigs, broken glass and cigarette butts.

"The piece had been moved just downriver a few hundred yards," Lash says. "When I first saw the piece, it was sitting on some railroad tracks that had been abandoned, and it had grass growing through it and critters slithering in and around it.

"It was, in some ways, a very sad thing to see, and in other ways, it was still majestic."

The curved bars were nowhere to be found, but Lash and other city officials went to work looking for a place to mount the piece. "It took us a few months to get our act together and to get a spot ready for it," he says.

About a year before the sculpture would be remounted and dedicated, a city crane operator named John Bertucci hauled the piece onto his truck and took it to a conservator under contract to the city Park District.

The conservator, Andrzej Dajnowski, examined it and found rust, holes and tears in the metal.

At that point, an attorney named Scott Hodes sat up and took

note. Hodes is a small, restless man with important clients in the art world and a family history that extends deep into City Hall. His father, Barnet Hodes, was Mayor Richard J. Daley's first campaign manager and corporation counsel. The younger Hodes has made a name for himself writing books on artists' rights and helping found Lawyers for the Creative Arts. In September 1999, he won a landmark case involving artist Jan Martin and his once-prized steel sculpture, "Symphony I," which the City of Indianapolis bulldozed as part of an urban-renewal project. Martin sued the city and was awarded the maximum \$20,000 in statutory damages and \$130,000 in legal fees and other expenses.

"I came out like a superstar," says Hodes, who took the case pro bono. "I won the case and got paid. That was a home run out of the park."

The following month Hodes filed another splashy lawsuit, this time against the City of Chicago, asking for a full accounting of how the Department of Cultural Affairs had spent its annual allocation for the city's public arts program, worth an estimated \$400,000. The program had been criticized for a lack of administrative and fiscal controls, even as officials claimed they were working to end the chaos.

In 1999 the Chicago Public Schools announced that an inventory of public works in the system had turned up \$20 million worth of paintings. "Like the Milton Horn piece, they were not regarded as important a couple of years ago," Lash says.

The city's lost artworks include a Walter Ufer portrait of Mayor Carter Harrison; a Laredo Taft monument to the Iroquois Theatre Fire that turned up in a storage room in the bowels of City Hall; and an anonymous ceramic relief that was found, along with boxes of spare light bulbs, in the dark, dank basement of a fire station.

"Whether or not there are still pieces out there we don't know

about, I can't guarantee you that there aren't," Lash says. In fact, the Ufer painting never has been found. On the trail of that piece two years ago, Lash followed clues and rumors that led him all the way out to the Lake Michigan water sheds. But he came back to shore empty-handed.

In the summer of 1999, Hodes lost patience with the city bureaucracy after officials didn't comply fully with two public records requests. He filed suit to ferret out the city's forgotten art treasures, which had found an icon in Horn's "Chicago Rising."

"As far as illustrating the plight of the artwork and the serious disarray of the records, the Horn piece really symbolized it," Hodes says. Last August, Mayor Richard M. Daley's administration quietly proposed tightening a law that governs how public artwork is purchased and cataloged by the city, prompting Hodes to drop his freedom of information lawsuit against the city. The revised ordinance calls for the city's Department of Cultural Affairs to submit a detailed report to the City Council each year describing all expenditures of the department's public art program, including a listing of works purchased from Chicago-area artists.

Hodes, ever wary, made sure the new ordinance required the annual accounting to list the location of each artwork.

Will the system work better now? Lash thinks so. "Once we find pieces of artwork now, we do have a much better way of keeping track of them," he says. Resurrecting "Chicago Rising" from the yard behind the bridge shop cost \$60,000, more than 10 times what the city originally paid for it, and involved dozens of workers, Lash says.

Bertucci, the shaggy-haired, 44-year-old crane operator, claims he put 100 miles on the piece hauling it around the city to be restored, strengthened and then mounted on the bridge. Once, on Damen Avenue, the sculpture nearly struck an

overpass when Bertucci swerved to avoid a truck. Another time it nearly hit a motorcyclist.

Bertucci's first stop was the Park District's South Side plant in Hyde Park, where Dajnowski used heat, hydraulic car jacks and heavy blocks of wood from a scaffolding to straighten the warped piece.

The 42-year-old Dajnowski, who began learning about art restoration and conservation in Poland when he was 15, studied sculpture as a post-graduate at Harvard University, then went to work for the Smithsonian Institution. He worked carefully and methodically on "Chicago Rising," though the sculpture wasn't one he would call great.

"It's too symbolic," says the soft-spoken Dajnowski. "There is a lot he wants to say in his sculpture, too much of the history of Chicago he tried to put in just one piece."

Dajnowski finished straightening, patching and restoring the piece in early 1998. Then, in a final ironic twist to the strange odyssey of "Chicago Rising," Bertucci gathered it up on his crane, put it back on his truck and took the repaired sculpture from Dajnowski's shop back to the iron-working facility where it had lain all those years while Ellis and Horn scoured the city for it.

When it arrived at the city's bridge-repair shop, foreman Russell took a highlighting marker and drew a yellow band across two weeks in his little black schedule book, blocking out time for a team of five workers to build a stainless-steel framework to strengthen the piece before it was remounted.

"It really amazed me big-time after we started working on it," says Russell. "I was so happy to see it go somewhere."

A team of five ironworkers built and installed the framework, hunching goggle-eyed over their flame-spitting welding tools.

The piece had come full circle. From the meticulous conservator who straightened it to the wisecracking crane operator who hauled it to the river to be remounted, those who resurrected Horn's sculpture had transformed it into a piece that spoke to the spirit of Chicago in a way the artist never imagined.

The curved bars still were nowhere to be found. But that didn't seem too important in light of so much rebirth and redemption.

By the time it was remounted in May 1998, "Chicago Rising" was a piece 73 years in the making, its genesis rooted in Horn's defining moment of inspiration: his chance introduction to Estelle, one winter night long ago, when the world was young, there were no ghosts in the clay and the artist dared not take off his jacket.

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