LOUIS POTTER: A SCULPTOR WHO DRAWS HIS SYMBOLISM FROM INTIMATE UNDERSTANDING OF PRIMITIVE HUMAN NATURE:
BY M. IRWIN MACDONALD

Sometimes it happens, even in this commercial age, that a man is so absorbed in his work, so entirely given up to the delight of expressing what is in his own soul, that he forgets to put himself much in the way of public notice. A few people perhaps realize what he is doing and know that in a few years more or less it is inevitable that the public as a whole will perceive and acknowledge the significance of his work. But when he has not exhibited in the well known galleries and has been content to remain, for the most part, away from the great centers of civilization and to work in surroundings which bring him closest to the thing he is trying to express, the revelation of what he has done is apt to take people by surprise and to make them wonder how it could ever have escaped the prominence which we in America are beginning to give to new and vital expressions of art.

Not many people in New York knew that from the middle of April until early in May there was a notable exhibition of sculpture by Louis Potter at the rooms of The Modern Athenian Club, of which he is a member. The club itself is newly formed and its home at present is in a brownstone house, of the usual New York type, situated among a row of others exactly like it on Forty-sixth Street. Invitations for this exhibition were sent out by the club and during the first days the attendance was limited to friends of the sculptor and those who remembered having seen here and there a statuette or bust of the quality that is remembered. Then people began to wake up to the fact that this was an exhibition not to be missed and so it has amounted to what is practically the first introduction to the New York public of the work of a notable American sculptor.

When one entered the exhibition rooms the first impression was that of being given glimpses of kaleidoscopic life and action, with here and there a bit of mystic symbolism. Then as one made a closer study of group after group, the impression of mysticism and spirituality grew steadily stronger until it was plainly to be seen that this was the force which dominated all the work. There were bronzes and marbles, studies and finished pieces, groups, details, portrait busts and statuettes, and from all one received the same impression,—of so sure a grasp upon humanity that the artist was enabled by means of it to attain to the expression of the universal spirit.

And as it happens this is exactly what has taken place, for, begin-
ning with the most vivid realism in his studies of types and conditions, Louis Potter seems to have developed, from the keen perception and warm humanity which made his earlier work so vital and convincing, a power of intuition that enables him to portray symbolically certain significant expressions of the universal life force which lies behind all created things. Yet the symbolism, spiritual as it is, is so simple and natural that it seems inevitable. A child might interpret it; in fact, it probably would make a more intimate appeal to the understanding of a child, sensitive to the significance of unseen things, than it would to the mind of a grown person, hampered as it is by tradition and steeped in the obviousness of civilized thought and surroundings.

Yet even the most prosaic or preoccupied man or woman would be apt to pause for a good while before the group called “Earth Bound” and to reflect upon the significance to humanity of the story it tells. Three generations are there,—the old man, bent and staggering under the burden of inert matter that typifies material things and all the crushing weight of conditions to those who grapple with them solely upon the physical plane. The woman bends still more beneath her burden of life, which, although not so large as that resting upon the shoulders of the strong man at her side, yet bows her nearer to earth. The man, although himself bending under the weight, struggles to stand erect and to lift some little portion of the mass which is crushing down the woman. In the center of the group stands a little child,—a woman child upon whom no burden rests as yet, but who is bowed and groping blindly beneath the shadow of what is to come.

In direct antithesis to this group is another of which the meaning is less obvious and which expresses more strongly the feeling of mysticism. This is “Embodied Space, Time and Life.” Space is symbolized by a reclining figure, rather vague and ill-defined, as if hidden behind a veil, and expressive of limitless and changeless calm. The emanations from this figure sweep around in a magnificent swirl which rises at the back like the crest of a wave; and springing out of this wave is Time, represented by an old but vigorous man clearly and strongly modeled. From the hands of Time springs Life,—a slender, vigorous young woman, her arms flung above her head in ecstasy and supporting a lusty, joyously-kicking child who, like the mother, seems to pulsate and glow with the sheer gladness of life.

Tenderness, reverence and exquisite poetic feeling are all shown in the group called “The Molding of Man,” which is done in marble. Had it not been that this group was conceived and executed before Rodin’s “Hand of God” was brought to this country, there might
"THE DANCE OF THE WIND GODS": LOUIS POTTER, SCULPTOR.
have been some question as to its originality, because of the similarity shown in the symbolizing of the act of creation. But there all resemblance ends, for in this case the Divine hands are so beautiful, so strong and tender and fine, that the impression they give of the force which shapes Man is markedly different from that conveyed by Rodin’s conception of the hand of God. From the mass of matter under these wonderful molding hands, Man and Woman arise like twin flames, the man showing the traces of his animal origin in the suggestion of hair on the lower limbs, and the woman more delicate and complete, as ascending more readily to a higher scale of being. The man’s attitude expresses at once protection, reverence and a certain lack of understanding. The woman takes no heed of him as yet, but droops like a flower, gazing down into the hollow of her own hand and arm, which are curved as if to hold a child. Were it any part of the intention here to give a technical criticism of Mr. Potter’s art, attention might be drawn to the sculpturesque quality of this group and to the delicate perfection of its modeling. But of these it is enough to say that Louis Potter is a thorough craftsman and that appreciation of his technical skill is apt to be secondary to the interest felt in the spirit and the meaning of his work.

Less definitely symbolic, but equally spiritual, is a single figure which, taken all in all, is perhaps the best thing in the exhibition. This is “The Call of the Spirit,” represented simply by the nude figure of a gaunt, sinewy Indian half seated upon a tree trunk and bent slightly forward in the intensity of his response to the summons of the Unseen. The expression of the face and the whole body is that of intense spiritual exaltation,—of breathless waiting for the message which must surely come from the depths of the Unknown and bring with it the understanding that will give light in dark places. Indian also, but in sharp contrast to the stillness of this figure, are the single statues called “The Fire Dance,” “The Arrow Dance,” and “The Herald of the Storm,” and also the group entitled “The Dance of the Wind Gods.” All of these express the intensity of action, of rejoicing in strength and of gay, bold battling with the elements. “The Dance of the Wind Gods” symbolizes also the East and the West; the East being represented by Souzano, the wind god of Japan, and the West by a lithe, powerful Indian.

These are all joyously pagan and elemental in feeling, but when we turn from them to “The Master Builder” we get back into the realm of exalted mysticism, for the creation of worlds by the unknown force is here symbolized by a majestic seated figure, bending over, intent and smiling, to watch the whirling spheres shape themselves among his robes and float out from him as emanations of his own
being. The thought that irresistibly comes to one looking into the tranquil happiness of the face is: “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.”

The road along which Louis Potter has traveled to the freedom of his present expression is an interesting one. He is an American,—born in Troy, New York, in eighteen hundred and seventy-three,—so he is still a young man. As soon as he left college he went to Paris with the intention of becoming a painter and studied for a year or so under that master draughtsman, Luc-Olivier Merson. Bit by bit the young man realized that modeling, and not painting, was the form of expression most natural to him, so he went for his final training into the atelier of Jean Dampt. During this time he was as much at home in the house of Boutet-de-Monvel as a son, for he was the closest friend and companion of Bernard Boutet-de-Monvel. Such association and his studies in drawing and painting combined to keep alive and intensify in the young student the keen color sense which has been of such value to him in obtaining the contrasts of light and shade in his modeling, contrasts so vivid that one always gets a sense of color from his work, whether in marble or bronze.

From Paris he went to Tunis to study Oriental types, which have always had a great attraction for him. Here he entered into the life of the people, lived in the Arab quarter, made friends with the Bedouins and negroes around him and soon contrived to overcome the lack of understanding between the East and the West, so that he was enabled to move about freely among the people, and to draw, paint and even model them without exciting their suspicion and antagonism. He experienced great difficulties at first in obtaining models, because every good Moslem believes that, if he allows a counterfeit presentation of himself to be made, Allah will at the last day require from him a soul to animate the image. Therefore most of the Arabs were very shy of allowing themselves to be modeled, until one day a sad-faced Bedouin woman came to the sculptor and said simply that he might model her if he chose; that it was said women had no souls to be imperiled and, even if she had, her children wanted bread. She was the wife of a Bedouin outlaw who was wandering in the desert with a price upon his head and she and her children were refused all aid in the town and were stoned in the streets. We reproduce here the bust that was made of this “woman who had no soul,” for, in addition to showing the quality of Mr. Potter’s earlier work, it is a human document significant enough to appeal even to our Western sense of security and material well-being. Others followed where the woman of the desert had led the way and in the end Mr. Potter
gained headway enough to bring his work to the notice of the Bey of Tunis, who sent for him and decorated him with the Order of Nichan Ifzikhar, or the Order of Renown, thus making him a member of one of the nine great chivalric Orders of the world. Furthermore, the Government chose his work alone to represent Tunisian types at the Paris Exposition in nineteen hundred.

At the close of his year in Africa Mr. Potter returned to America, where he spent two or three years doing for the most part commission work, such as portraits and monuments; but about four years ago he was again seized with the longing to get out into the open and back to the primitive life which meant so much to him. So he went to Alaska and there began the second distinct stage in his development, for the realism of his earlier work now began to give place to an imaginative mystic quality that found satisfaction in representing the strange, inarticulate, crudely formed human beings that he discovered in the far north. And in getting at the inner meaning of their life and their religion, he found himself approaching ever closer to an understanding of the universal spirit of humanity. This Alaskan work is most interesting on account of the strange, primitive, almost crude quality which characterizes it, and which is in such strong contrast with all the rest of Mr. Potter’s work, for these people of the north seem to be molded in masses and to have about them a heavy, archaic quality that is not unlike their own rude carvings. One of the most appealing is the statue of “An Auk Mother,” of which we published a photograph in The Craftsman for March, nineteen hundred and eight. It is primitive womanhood and primitive motherhood that is represented here and all the spiritual quality it possesses seems to come from its kinship with the earth to which it is so close. “The Spirit of the Taku Wind,” although symbolic, has also the simple primitiveness that distinguishes all of Mr. Potter’s Alaskan work. There is none of the sense of power and the elemental joy of life that we find in “The Dance of the Wind Gods.” Instead it is a strange, pathetic, almost awkward spirit, striving rather to understand the element which he represents than sporting with it and controlling it. It is a pity that none of these Alaskan groups and statuettes are represented in this exhibition, because the work is not only interesting and significant in itself as a representation of a type of humanity that is very little known, but it is most important to an understanding of Mr. Potter’s work as a whole.