

# ROBERT JULIUS TOMMY JACOBSEN

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Robert Jacobsen was self-taught. In his youth he earned his living by such different jobs as bartender, badminton player, sailor (traveling as far as America), warehouseman, and banjo player in an orchestra. In the years during and immediately after World War II he also took part in three different films created by the gifted avant-garde artist Albert Mertz (1920–1990) and the highly regarded film director Jørgen Roos (1922–1998). He derived his earliest impressions of the world of art when, as an errand boy, he came across Henning Larsen's Kunsthandel in Copenhagen, where he met various artists such as the naturalist painters John Christensen (1896–1940) and Søren Hjorth Nielsen (1901–1983) and the surrealist Wilhelm Freddie (1909–1995).

Jacobsen fashioned his first sculptures in wood around 1930. In 1932, *Den Frie Udstilling* in Copenhagen put on a display of the German Expressionists along with the works of the Swiss artist Paul Klee (1879–1940). Klee's work especially made a deep impression on the young Robert Jacobsen.

Jacobsen made his first appearance in the *Kunstnernes Efterårsudstilling* in 1941, and four years later, in the year marking the end of the war and the conclusion of the German occupation of Denmark, he showed a number of heavy stone sculptures with the common title of "Fabulous Monsters." During the war he had worked with painters including Asger Jorn (1914–1973), Carl Henning Pedersen (b. 1913), Egill Jacobsen (1910–1998), and Ejler Bille (1910–2004), who gathered at the periodical *Helhesten* and at the *Høstudstillingen* exhibition. The "Fabulous Monsters" were related to the mythical creatures found in these abstract works by these painters, and if Jacobsen had continued developing this fantasy universe, he would have ended at the center of the Cobra movement. However, he chose a different path.

In 1947 he was awarded a grant which would cover a temporary stay in Paris, where he went with his family, accompanied by Richard Mortensen (1910–1993). The two Danish artists quickly became accepted in the circle around Denise René and her gallery. Artists exhibiting there, among others, included Jean Arp (1887–1966), Jean Dewasne (b. 1921), Alberto Magnelli (1888–1971), and Serge Poliakoff (1900–1969).

Jacobsen settled in France for the next twenty-two years. For a year or so, he shared a flat and studio with Asger Jorn in Paris, but then he acquired his own workshop and began to develop a type of constructive black-painted iron sculptures in which the interspace acquired greater and greater significance. It was as if it were framed by the metal so that the air was transformed into the weightless mass of the work. The sculptures possessed a hitherto unseen rhythmical lightness and almost appeared to be movable. Standing against a white wall, they resembled calligraphic signs, but they were purged of any narrative expression, exclusively animated by clear and pure artistic language.

To earn a living, Jacobsen worked for a long time together with mechanics in the Paris suburb of Suresnes. There he gained practical training in the use of tools and the theory of materials at the

same time learning to weld and use iron in all conceivable ways. In the piles of scrap in the workshops he found free iron for his concrete sculptures, which were exhibited in the Galerie Denise René and where they were very well received. After a few years, the artist changed his mode of expression so as not to repeat himself and lose his sensitivity. He turned to sculptures that were more dense in structure and more stable. The black paint disappeared and was replaced by various means of treating the metal with acids, resulting in a range of subtle colors.

The 1960s brought a radically different mode of expression with the series of “dolls” that gradually developed into “personages,” inspired partly by African cult figures, made of all kinds of random rubbish welded together with visible traces of ornamentation and magic. The first “dolls” were humorous, graceful, and mainly friendly. The “personages” were awkward, often aggressive, and suffused with traces of malice.

In 1969, Robert Jacobsen moved back to Denmark and bought a farm near Egtved in central Jutland. There he executed various small surrealist-inspired scenes with figures. In addition to iron sculptures, he made a series of fascinating graphic works using a variety of techniques, often syntheses of earlier works, for example, the Loeb collection’s *Opus Egtved*. He also executed many large-scale works intended for public places. The clear, concrete form continued in Robert Jacobsen’s work, at times in interplay with more expressive forms and in later years quite often painted red or blue.

Especially during the last twenty years of Jacobsen’s life, various monumentally large sculptures, constructions mainly cerebral in form, left the master’s workshop in Tågelund to be erected in many places throughout the world. He exhibited in countless places in Denmark and abroad, including many important international museums and biennials.

He was a member of *Høstudstillingen* 1941–1943 and of the *Groupe Denise René*, Paris, from 1947. He took part in the exhibitions arranged by *Linien* on several occasions and was also a member of *Den Frie Udstilling* from 1959 and of *Grønningen* from 1976. From 1962 to 1981 he was a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich and from 1976 through 1985 was professor of wall and space art in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts Schools of Visual Art. He was also an honorary professor in the Academies of Florence and Munich. Honors awarded to him include the Venice Biennale International Prize for Sculpture in 1966, the Thorvaldsen Medal in 1967, and the Swedish Prince Eugen Medal in 1974.

Throughout his life, Robert Jacobsen was a member of the Copenhagen Artisans’ Association (*Håndværkerforening*) and was the recipient of distinguished decorations from France such as the “Arts et Lettres” (Knight) and The Legion of Honour (Officer).

S.L.

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