Tête d'Orphée (Head of Orpheus)

OSSIP ZADKINE (Russian- French, 1890–1967)

Ossip Zadkine was one of the leading sculptors of the École de Paris, the cosmopolitan milieu that fostered the artistic avant-garde in the first half of the 20th century and a central figure in the development of modern sculpture. Born in the Russian Empire and raised between Smolensk and Vitebsk, he was the son of a professor of Greek and Latin, and his early imagination was shaped by literature, classical culture. Sent to England as a teenager, he trained in London, attended evening classes at *Regent Street Polytechnic* and worked for furniture artisans in the East End, where he developed a practical knowledge of carving. This early experience with wood and direct cutting would remain fundamental to his sculptural language throughout his career.

In 1910, Zadkine settled in Paris, where he briefly enrolled at the *École des Beaux-Arts* before rejecting academic training in favour of independent work. The discovery of Egyptian sculpture in the Louvre proved decisive, encouraging him to seek life through the simplification and accentuation of form. Like many of the most innovative sculptors of his generation, Zadkine was drawn to primitivism, direct carving and non-classical sources of form. He established himself in Montparnasse and La Ruche, moving among artists and writers including Amedeo Modigliani, Alexander Archipenko, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire.

Zadkine is considered alongside Jacques Lipchitz, Henri Laurens and Raymond Duchamp-Villon as one of the pioneering sculptors who translated Cubist principles into three dimensions. Although closely associated with Cubism, he never allowed himself to be absorbed entirely by a single movement. His work shared Cubism's interest in fractured planes, multiple viewpoints and the geometric construction of the figure. Yet, it retained a lyrical and emotional intensity that was distinctly his own.

During the First World War he volunteered for the French Foreign Legion and served as a stretcher bearer before being gassed and discharged in 1917. During the Second World War, because of his Jewish ancestry, he fled first to unoccupied France and then to the United States, where he taught at the Art Students League in New York. After returning to Europe, his visit to the bombed city of Rotterdam inspired his most celebrated public monument, *The Destroyed City,* a powerful post-war image of suffering, rupture and human resilience.



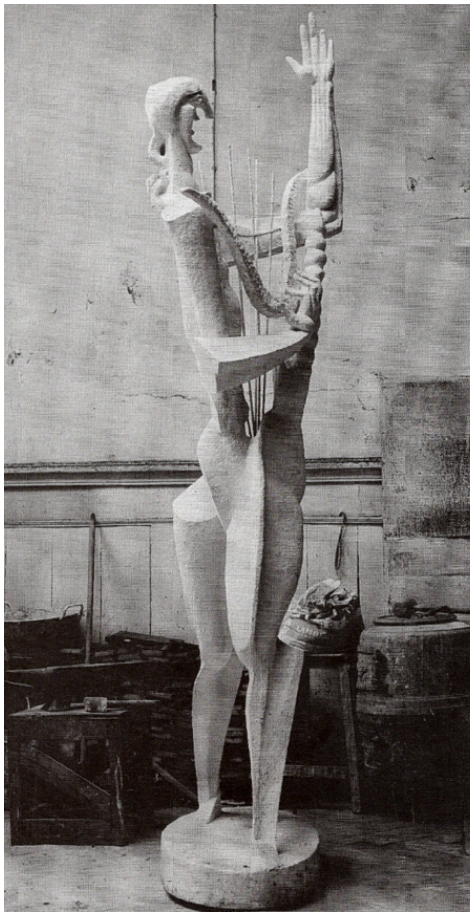
Ossip Zadkine, *De Verwoeste (The Destroyed City),* 1953, Rotterdam

Works by Ossip Zadkine are in important museum collections such as the Centre Pompidou, Paris; MoMA, New York; Tate, London; the National Gallery of Art, Washington; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian, Washington; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, among many others.

Conceived in 1956, *Head of Orpheus* belongs to Zadkine's mature exploration of the figure of Orpheus, a subject that recurred throughout his career. Orpheus allowed Zadkine to unite several of his central concerns: the human figure, music, poetry, myth and the transformation of the body into a symbolic form. For Zadkine, mythology was not a matter of illustration or classical revival. He sought instead to strip ancient subjects of narrative detail and recover their essential symbolic force.

The present work is an autonomous bronze that Zadkine would then also use for a monumental *Orpheus* in 1959. It is worth noting that the present sculpture shares key features with Zadkine's

earlier large-scale *Orpheus* of 1948, particularly the hollowed eyes and bird-like profile. These recurring characteristics help situate *Tête d'Orphée* within the artist's distinctive treatment of the head, confirming its importance within his wider sculptural production.





Ossip Zadkine, Orphée (Orpheus), 1959 Ossip Zadkine, Orphée (Orpheus), 1948

As Philippe Diolé observed of Zadkine's works on Orpheus, "Orpheus does not play the lyre. He is the lyre." [1]In *Head of Orpheus*, this idea finds particularly powerful expression in the reduction of the figure to the head alone, which Zadkine turns into a potent symbol of voice, music, and imagination.

The sculpture's mask-like presence reflects Zadkine's wider treatment of the human head as a symbolic form. Its features are simplified into sharp planes, recesses and openings, creating a powerful sense of inward energy. These hollows are not decorative; they suggest sound, breath and inner resonance, as if the bronze were vibrating from within.

[1] Sylvain Lecombre, *Ossip Zadkine: L'Oeuvre sculpté* (Paris: Paris-Musées, 1994).



Ossip Zadkine, detail of *Grand Orphée (Big Orpheus),* 1956, Skulpturenmuseum Marl, Germany

Orpheus was one of the key themes through which Zadkine explored the expressive possibilities of sculptural form. The presence of major works on this subject in public collections, including the Centre Pompidou and Musée Zadkine in Paris, KMSKA and the Middelheim Museum in Antwerp, and the Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten Marl, among others confirms its importance within his career. The significance of the present work is further reinforced by the fact that examples of Head of Orpheus, are held in the collections of both KMSKA and the Musée Zadkine.

The present *Head of Orpheus* is especially significant for the way it brings together several of Zadkine's lifelong themes in a mature and fully developed form. Compact in scale yet powerful in presence, it offers a rare opportunity to acquire an important work by one of the leading sculptors of the twentieth century.

Literature:

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