



JULIO GONZALEZ (1876-1942)

Mask of an Adolescent

Bronze proof, #1/8

Lost wax cast by Claude Valsuani, March, 1970 (after the iron original)

Signed: GONZALEZ ©

H. 12.6, W. 6.69, D. 1.38 in

#106 in the catalogue raisonné, Electa, 1987

Iron original: IVAM, Valencia

Provenance

- Galerie de France, Paris
- Private collection in France, acquired in 1987

Sources

- Archives of the Galerie de France, IMEC.

Bibliography

- Descargues, Pierre, "Gonzalez, sculpteur du fer," ("Sculptor of Iron") *XXème siècle*, n°35, December, 1970, p.151.
- *Julio Gonzalez (1876-1942), les matériaux de son expression (His Expressive Materials)*, vol. I & II, Edition Galerie de France, Paris, 1970, n°58, vol.II (iron reproduced...)
- *Donacion Gonzalez*, Ayuntamiento de Barcelona, Museo de Arte Moderno, 1974, n°18 (bronze MAM, Barcelona, not reproduced).

- Gibert, Josette, *Catalogue raisonné des dessins de Julio Gonzalez (Catalogue Raisonné of Julio Gonzalez's Drawings)*, volume 2 : *Projets pour sculptures, figures*, Editions Carmen Martinez, Paris, 1975.
- Merkert, Jörn, Julio Gonzalez, catalogue raisonné des sculptures, Electa, 1987, n°106, p.89 (iron reproduced).
- *Julio Gonzalez dans la collection de l'IVAM*, Fondation Dina Vierny-musée Maillol, Paris, 17 November 2004-21 February 2005, Hazan, 2004, p.47 (iron reproduced).
- Mercè Donate, *Julio Gonzalez retrospectiva*, Barcelona, Musée National d'Art de Catalogne, 25 October 2008 - 25 January 2009 ; Madrid, Musée National Centre d'Art Reine Sofia, 10 mars - 1 June 2009, n°101, p.80 (bronze MAM, Barcelona reproduced).

This *Mask of an Adolescent* is a bronze cast made from the original work in iron, which is held in the IVAM (the Modern Art Institute of Valencia) in Valencia, Spain. This cast, done in March, 1970, is the first one of an edition initiated and supervised by Roberta Gonzalez, the artist's daughter. Of excellent quality, it was cast by the Claude Valsuani Foundry and has a nuanced reddish-brown patina, which evokes the iron of the original.

The context of the edition of the *Mask of an Adolescent*

In 1969, the Galerie de France, which had shown and supported Julio Gonzalez's work for forty years,^[1] organized, along with Roberta Gonzalez, editions of some of his iron sculptures "in order to fulfill the wishes expressed by my father."^[2] These works were then included in a large traveling exhibition titled *Julio Gonzalez, les matériaux de son expression (His Expressive Materials)*. The catalogue for that exhibition includes a list of the bronze pieces that were editioned from iron originals.^[3] The *Mask of an Adolescent* is listed as number 58. Julio Gonzalez himself editioned some of the bronzes from the iron originals, while others were done by his daughter. Thus the artist cast some of his sculptures in bronze, and some of those were based on iron originals, as is the case with this sculpture. The catalogue focused on the fact that the artist used a variety of materials, and therefore the popular notion that he used only iron is misleading.^[4] Gonzalez lived very modestly and couldn't afford to have his works cast. Roberta remembered her father saying, "If I had the means, I'd execute my sculptures in a variety of metals, such as gold, silver, and bronze."^[5] These materials assure the work a greater longevity. Hans Hartung, who knew Julio Gonzalez well and became Roberta's husband, further clarified this point: "He had no choice but to make do with iron, a material that cost almost nothing, and which he knew how to make magnificent."^[6]

In choosing Claude Valsuani, Roberta Gonzalez engaged one of the best founders of the time as well someone who had worked with Gonzalez while he was alive. And she was careful to edition only sculptures that would lend themselves well to casting, which is the case with the *Mask of an Adolescent*, with its full shape.

The edition consists of 8 numbered pieces and four marked 0, 00, EA (artist's proof) and HC (hors commerce) as well as one for the Gonzalez bequest, marked MAM, Barcelona, which is held in the National Museum of the Art of Catalonia in Barcelona. The proofs numbered 1 through 5 and MAM, Barcelona were cast by Valsuani around 1970, while the other proofs were cast later by Godard.[\[7\]](#) The proof presented here, being the first of the eight is therefore one of those cast under the direction of Roberta Gonzalez. It came to us very directly, as it was acquired from the Galerie de France in 1987 by a French collector who has kept it in his collection up until now. In 1981-82, the work was shown in the exhibition *Julio Gonzalez, dibujos y esculturas (drawings and sculptures)*, which went to Madrid in Spain and to Monterrey in Mexico.

Thanks to their policy of creating serious, careful, and high-quality editions, Roberta Gonzalez and the Galerie de France have engendered an additional posterity for the artist's sculptures by greatly increasing their diffusion, which in turn has widely increased the awareness of his work. "If Roberta hadn't editioned some of her father's particularly reproducible sculptures, his work wouldn't have the world-wide recognition that it has today."[\[8\]](#)

The context of the creation of the *Mask of an Adolescent*

Because he didn't discover sculpture until he was 50 years old, Gonzalez's overall output is relatively limited. He came from a family of Catalan silversmiths and metal-workers, and he worked first in his family's business. He moved to Paris in 1900, where he continued to make jewelry and also began to draw and paint. It wasn't until 1927 that he made his first experimental sculptures in forged iron. In the Salon of 1929, he was shifted from the "Decorative Arts" section to the "Sculpture" section. Iron was a natural choice for him because it was a material that he had already mastered and that was readily available to him. His talent and accomplishments made him a central figure of the group of Spanish artists then living in Paris. He frequently collaborated with Pablo Gargallo, who consulted him on various technical problems, and in 1928 Pablo Picasso asked him for help in creating an iron sculpture using oxyacetylene solder. "You work metal like it was butter," Picasso told him.[\[9\]](#) This collaboration with Picasso was a determining moment in the development of Gonzalez's sculpture. Contact with this friend liberated his creative intuitions, and he began creating works that would profoundly mark the art of the 20th century, revolutionizing the relationship between

sculpture and space, matter and void.

The *Mask of an Adolescent* dates from this period of creative effusion, during which Gonzalez frequently featured the head; it was through exploring this theme that he evolved his sculptural language and confronted problems of volume.

The sheet of metal like a sheet of paper

This harsh, hard face with its sharp nose surges forth from a sheet of iron cut and folded while hot. As in the Matisse cut-outs, the forms cut out of the sheet of metal come directly from drawing, from the line. Created around the same time, *The Woman with the Amphora II*[\[10\]](#) is another example of a figure conceived as a flat silhouette in cut-out metal. It's the form that prevails, essential, significant form, like that that the ancient Egyptians sought. "From a preliminary drawing, Gonzalez traced the lines onto the sheet of iron, cut them out with great precision, separated the silhouette from the background to create a relief, and then folded the edges . . . then he incised the surface to create a play of light and shadow."[\[11\]](#) As Margit Rowell remembered, ". . . Gonzalez's vision was based upon a flat drawing and not on some earlier sculptural experience."[\[12\]](#) This sculpture does not engage with volume.

Little by little, Gonzalez developed his work in metal, bringing the drawing out into space. At the beginning of his experiments, around 1927, he created reliefs using a repoussé technique that brought out a fullness in the sheet. He then moved on to the cut-out sheets, such as the *Mask of an Adolescent*, in which the sheet is worked like a sheet of paper. In this case, it's a simple fold that opens the flat plane, giving the face a slight depth, whereas in other masks from this period, he used a series of planes soldered together to create volume. The *Mask of an Adolescent* is reductive in the extreme; a simple line determines the profile, and an orthogonal incision and a fold form the socket of the eye.

It's not trying to evoke a specific physiognomy; it's a mask. Its distance from a real face is immediately established. It's a representation of a face, a face made of signs whose structure is barely suggested, but enough to allow this abstract language to yet define a figurative form. Though later Gonzalez went further into abstraction, he always remained attached, no matter at what distance, to figuration, to the forms of the real. He underscores this commitment here by giving the work a descriptive title: *Mask of an Adolescent*. That said, though in the *Sharp Mask*[\[13\]](#)(*Masque acéré*) and the *Mask of an Adolescent*, the facial features are in the "right" place, from 1930 on, the artist worked increasingly toward masks that foregrounded a fluid plasticity, such as the *Mask "Shadow and Light"*[\[14\]](#)(*Masque "Ombre et Lumière"*) and the *Sharp Head (Tête aigüe)*.[\[15\]](#) In these, the human face, no more than a memory, gives way to a play of

light across the surface. His friend Brancusi was also, at this time, exploring an abstract and synthetic vision of natural form.

Gonzalez was interested in the avant-garde, in emerging forms of expression, and in cubism. The *Mask of an Adolescent* shows his affinity with this movement—though over—in its angular forms as well as by the multiple perspectives of the same plane (profile and face). But the *Mask of an Adolescent* is above all, and directly, the inheritor of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*,^[16] the painting that introduced the mask to modern art as a substitute for the face. "For this generation of sculptors, the move from the face to the mask was a definitive break. A break with Rodin, with the model, with psychology, and with modeling"^[17] African art, in particular, became the reference point for these artists. As in African masks, the eye sockets are empty and the facial features are evoked with geometric lines. And, like Henri Laurens in his cubist period (around 1920), Gonzalez developed a repertory of signs to indicate different parts of the anatomy, such as the triangular incisions in the *Sharp Mask (Masque acéré)* and *Sharp Head (Tête aiguë)*.

From 1910 on (thus three years after *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*), Gonzalez drew many masks. Around 1929-30, his drawings, still prolific, became the basis for his heads in cut iron. A *Face of a Young Girl* in black pencil on white paper reproduced in the catalogue raisonné of his drawings^[18] has a structure and form similar to that of the *Mask of an Adolescent*. "A wash is used to underscore the shaded areas, the very ones that are suppressed in the sculptures."^[19] It's truly the void that gives life to the *Mask of an Adolescent*, as well as the play of light and shadow.

Plasticity and Metaphysicality

Constantly shifting, light and shadow compose and recompose the face by fusing and refracting from differently angled planes of the metal sheet. The coarse surface of the iron and its rusty tint—aspects present in this bronze due to the excellence of the casting and the subtle nuances of the patina—give the play of light a particular warmth and expressivity. The *Masque "Shadow and Light"* explicitly foregrounds his experimentation with the complementarity of light and shadow.

Because the *Mask of an Adolescent* is almost flat, depth, and thus three-dimensionality, are indicated by vacancies. In 1934, during an exhibition at the Percier gallery, Maurice Raynal referred to Gonzalez as a "sculptor of the void." The artist offers us an experiment on the relationship between matter and form and its environment. It's an experiment not only in plasticity but also in physicality: the cold metal has taken shape through the heat of fire, and the sharp-edged forms of the *Mask of an Adolescent* recall the violence of the

process. "The sheets of metal that form the *Masks* of the 1930s are worked by fire and hammer, torn and cut by a gas flame, which also allows different steels to come together through fusion. Held up by a thin support, the masks function as screens, tearing the light, wounding space with their cutting profiles.[\[20\]](#)

The opposite but complementary ideas of light and shadow, hot and cold, and empty and full found in this sculpture echo a universal creative duality that runs beneath human spiritualities, from the dual principle of the Aztecs to the Chinese philosophy of yin and yang to the Cartesian dualism of body and soul.

In this piece, the sculptural experience leads through a combinatory, minimal, and austere language to a metaphysical perception of the work of art. This approach was adopted by several sculptors later in the 20th century, such as Richard Serra, with his steel plates that question the relationship of the material to its environment on a monumental scale.

"The keys to the *new art, drawing in space*, were *points* in infinity . . . the real problem to resolve is not how to make a harmonious work, a beautiful, well balanced ensemble . . . No! But how to manage to fuse and render inseparable the body and the spirit through a marriage of matter and space, of real forms and forms obtained or suggested by the established points, or by perforations, and by natural law as well as by love." Julio Gonzalez[\[21\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) The first contract with the artist dates from 1930.

[\[2\]](#) Roberta Gonzalez in « Les matériaux de son expression » ("His Expressive Materials"), vol.I, 1970.

[\[3\]](#) « Les matériaux de son expression » ("His Expressive Materials"), vol.II, 1970.

[\[4\]](#) In addition to his works in iron, he also created sculptures in wood and plaster.

[\[5\]](#) Roberta Gonzalez in « Les matériaux de son expression » ("His Expressive Materials"), vol.I, 1970.

[\[6\]](#) Hans Hartung in « Les matériaux de son expression » ("His Expressive Materials"), vol.I, 1970. In addition: "I often heard Gonzales lament the fact that he didn't have enough money to have the casts done that he would have liked."

[7] They date from after Roberta Gonzalez's death in 1976.

[8] Descargues, 1970.

[9] Jean-Luc Daval in "Julio Gonzalez dans la collection de l'IVAM," 2004, p 25.

[10] 1929-1930, cut bronze, 35,2 x 10,2 x 0,17 cm, IVAM (Institut Valencià d' Art Modern), Generalitat.

[11] Doñate, 2008, p.20

[12] Merkert, 1987, p.11.

[13] Circa 1929-30, iron forged, cut, curved, and soldered 26 x 17.5 x 4.3 cm (Merkert, 1987 n°105).

[14] Circa 1930, iron forged, cut, and soldered 24 x 10.5 x 5.5 cm (Merkert, 1987 n°107).

[15] Circa 1930, iron forged, cut, curved, and soldered 25.5 x 16.2 x 11.5 cm (Merkert, 1987 n°113).

[16] 1907, oil on canvas, 243.9 x 233.7 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

[17] Brigitte Léal in *Masques de Carpeaux à Picasso (Masks from Carpeaux to Picasso)*, Musée d'Orsay, Hazan, Paris, 2008, p. 211.

[18] Gibert, 1975, vol. 2, p. 9?

[19] Gibert, 1975

[20] Jean-Luc Daval in "Julio Gonzalez dans la collection de l'IVAM," 2004, p. 25.

[21] Extract from Julio Gonzalez's text on Picasso, "Picasso and the Cathedrals, Picasso Sculptor" c. 1931-32, manuscript held in the IVAM, cited in "Julio Gonzalez dans la collection de l'IVAM," 2004, p. 29.