

JOHN CAVANAUGH FOUNDATION
Article for the InTowner
September 2, 2017

Gordon J. Alt
Executive Director, The John Cavanaugh Foundation
Vice President The National Sculpture Society
Member, Editorial Board of Sculpture Review Magazine

The installation of the Cavanaugh Sculpture Garden on the grounds of the Women's National Democratic Club at Q Street and New Hampshire features four female sculptures by Washington artist John Cavanaugh (1921 – 85). It extends an already important collection of his sculpture in Washington, particularly in this DuPont Circle neighborhood, where he was active and very visible in his studio at 1818 18th Street NW.

Cavanaugh came to Washington in the mid 1960's after a career in his home state of Ohio in which he was a successful ceramic sculptor, after graduating from Ohio State University. In 1957, he moved to New York City where he continued to work in ceramic and bronze and successfully explored and mastered the difficult technique of hammered lead sculpture. He was able to have free studio space in the well known Sculpture Center in Manhattan, because he fired the kilns at the Center. The Sculpture Center was founded by artist and activist Dorothea Denslow who wanted a space in Manhattan so both professional and amateur sculptors could work together with the equipment necessary for them to succeed. It was here that Cavanaugh was exposed to new and advanced techniques. It was also a place he successfully was able to exhibit his work in an important Manhattan location.

Even though he was receiving positive critical review in the New York Times and the Herald Tribune for his work, especially his evolving hammered lead pieces, he moved to Washington in late 1963 to join his partner, architect, Philip Froeder. Although he continued to exhibit his work at the Sculpture Center in New York through the 1970's, in Washington he was able to find larger and cheaper space in order to retain a working studio. He also developed opportunities to have exhibitions in his studio as well as exhibits in his apartment, sometimes on a bi-annual basis.

His last studio space was a glass store front, which offered him a chance to meet curious neighbors and passer-byes and to invite them in to see his activities and work. And also it offered him an opportunity to invite them to his bi-annual exhibitions. As he hated galleries, because he felt they charged too much commission, he developed a way local collectors of his work could put a down payment on a piece, and pay it off over ten installments, often times while they enjoyed the piece in their apartments.

In order to maintain an income as well as his active interest in the neighborhood, he and his partner began to buy vacant apartment buildings in the dilapidated DuPont Circle of the time. Since no banks would offer any loans to the neighborhood, they saved what they could and borrowed money from family and friends and started to restore the buildings and rehab small apartments and studios to meet the growing need for the younger professions moving into the expanding DuPont Circle neighborhood.

In 1978 the Washington Herald featured Cavanaugh and Froeder in their entire Sunday color supplement, highlighting their important rehab and restoration projects - naming the supplement, "*The Preservationists of Swann Street.*" The section highlighted their creative and contemporary renovations, and applauded them as being some of the early and important contributors in improving the DuPont Circle community and neighborhood. Cavanaugh acted as the foreman and it was during the early phase of their rehabilitation projects that Cavanaugh decided to permanently attach his relief sculpture on some of the buildings. On the building highlighted in the Washington Herald supplement, he created several panels based on the novel of Proust's Swann Way, influenced by the street address at 1801–1803 Swann Street NW. For many years Cavanaugh and Froeder continued their successful projects and Cavanaugh continued to create successful sculpture.

Cavanaugh's sculpture is nationally recognized and admired. His work has been exhibited nationally in galleries and museums, and he has permanent installations of his sculpture in several states. Cavanaugh was a prolific sculptor and he continued to work until the last months of his life. When the materials like lead became too heavy for him to work, he invented a wax process, whose formula is kept in the National Sculpture Society archives, in which he was able to form works directly from the malleable wax sheets he created. He created hundreds of pieces in lead alone, some of which are life size. No one achieved what he was able to create in the medium, and in his 1996 retrospective in the National Sculpture Society Gallery in New York City, a critic from the American Artist Magazine, called him the "*Master of Hammered Lead*".

Cavanaugh worked in many styles and in ceramic, terracotta, bronze, hammered lead and wax. He was successful in all these media. He also pursued many subjects in his work. Creating whole exhibitions of charming and humorous children, exhibits of horses and cats, however, his most successful subject was the female figure. Even by his own admission in his autobiographical notes, he felt the female form was his most important work. In the late 1970's he became fascinated with the idea of movement in his figures, rather than static poses. He began to attend dance performances, especially at the Kennedy Center and study books on ballet. After an initial exhibit of dance figures in 1977, mostly lead, which he was not fully satisfied, he feverishly completed a second exhibit which he felt truly achieved his ability to add a sense of motion in his work, and he continued to concentrate on creating robed figures and dancers as his primary subject.

The four figures installed in the Cavanaugh Sculpture Garden represent four periods in women's lives. The first, The Trip is of a young girl astride a hog gliding through the air. It is one of the

most popular of his sculptures and one of the earliest to successfully add a sense of motion to his work. The Trip was selected by the USID Diplomats in the Arts Program that selects works of art to be displayed in U.S. Embassies around the world, and it was on loan for several years traveling to several countries. In 1998 it was selected to be included in an exhibition of The Fifty Important American Figurative Sculptors at the Fleischer Museum of Art in Scottsdale Arizona. In his retrospective in Columbus Ohio in 2005, critic Jordan Gentile noted "The graceful way Cavanaugh renders the animal, it might as well be a unicorn carrying his precious cargo from cloud to cloud".

The next sculpture, Pas de Trios is of three young ballet dancers swirling together. It is one of his favorite subjects and he created over eight versions of this image. These he developed during his late period where movement was important to his themes. Another Pas de Trios is permanently install in the rookgreen Garden Sculpture Collection in South Carolina, the largest exhibition of permanently mounted nineteenth and twentieth century sculpture in the United States.

Alice is the third female sculpture and represents middle age. Cavanaugh refereed to this work as his colossal head, and it is the reposing head of Alice B. Toklas in her hat. She was the companion of Gertrude Stein. Cavanaugh liked Stein's work and visited sites related to the arts period that were famous during Stein's history in Paris in his trip to Europe.

The fourth statue is called Standing Female, and it represents the strong older female figures throughout Cavanaugh's life. This particular image is very much like early photographic images of his mother. Cavanaugh's father had died of suicide when he and his four brothers were young. His mother keep that family together and represented a strong figure in Cavanaugh's early life. His mother, recognizing Cavanaugh's artistic talent, took him to Alice Archer Sewall James, who was an important leader of the Urbana Movement in Ohio, when Cavanaugh was still in high school. He lived with her almost like a son, and she introduced him to the arts and allowed him to take art classes at the Urbana University and grounded him as an artist. Throughout his life, Cavanaugh would periodically create an image of a strong female figure in his sculpture, as several women played an important part in his career.

While not in the sculpture garden, there is an important fifth female sculpture of Cavanaugh's in the entry hall of the Women's National Democratic Club. It is a hammered lead sculpture of firebrand Congresswoman, Bela Abzug, from Manhattan, New York City. She was a leading environmentalist and early supporter of civil rights, womens rights and gay rights throughout her career. Dorothea Denslow, another strong female figure in Cavanaugh's life, was a supporter of hers and Cavanaugh had met her through activities held at the Sculpture Center when he had his studio space there.

The Cavanaugh Sculpture Garden is an important addition to DuPont Circle, and Cavanaugh's legacy to this neighborhood. The garden came about with the coordination and support of the Policy Studies Organization, the John Cavanaugh Foundation and the Women's National

Democratic Club. The Historic Preservation Committee and the Washington City Council unanimously supported this effort and all applauded the importance of this project. A local civic leader once referred to Cavanaugh as the “Mayor of DuPont Circle’ and in a way, while he was active here, he might have been. In the 2006, Not for Tourists article, John Petro expressed his amazement at his discovery of the Cavanaugh reliefs in the DuPont neighborhood and noted, “As I learned Cananaugh's story, I was amazed at how much his life typified the city and the neighborhood which he lived”.