

# Louis Rosenthal, Master in Miniature Sculpture

By ABRAHAM CAPLAN



IN the history of art, miniature painting for several centuries has held an important part but not a commanding place. Artists who paint on small canvases and etchers who design on diminutive

plates are, notwithstanding the exacting demands of their work, not uncommon. The Royal Society of Miniature Painters of London, to take perhaps the most noted group of workers in miniature, numbers more than 100 members, among which are craftsmen in miniature along various lines.

But miniature sculpture—in the sense in which it will be considered here—is definitely a departure in art. It is a revelation. All great sculpture has been of heroic character; at least, of substantial proportions, from the pure standpoint of measurement. Only one period, as yet undetermined by archaeologists but thought to go back to a very distant time, has distinguished itself for diminutive figures in metal, wood or stone that can be regarded as worthy sculpture. Benvenuto Cellini wrought for popes and emperors, princes and cardinals jewels, candle-sticks and salt-cellars, but Cellini's miniature work was less sculptural than decorative, vague from a strictly composition standpoint, blurred and overdone—exaggerated and passionate, as his own tempestuous nature.

Miniature sculpture that is marked by vivid detail, authentic composition, vigorous flow of line—in other words, sculpture that, in figures not more than an inch in height and oftener less than an inch, retains the characteristics of sculpture of ample measurement—such work is being brought to the amazed attention of the world by a young Baltimore Jew, Louis Rosenthal.

Rosenthal was born about 35 years ago in Plungyan, Lithuania. His father was a scholarly and pious man, substantial in affairs. Hence it was that Rosenthal went through the usual course traversed by Lithuanian Jewish youths. He studied in the Yeshiva until he was old enough to enter his father's milling business. But neither the Yeshiva nor his work in the mill crushed out an impulse that since early childhood urged him to draw and carve. With his pencil he drew incessantly and with his pen-knife carved anything and everything that was made of wood, not infrequently articles of furniture serving as material for sculptural treatment, not to mention the trunks of the trees that flourished near his home.

When he was 17 years old, Rosenthal came to the attention of Turak, a teacher in a Viennese school of painting, who had visited one of the rich Lithuanian landed gentry under whom the Rosenthals lived. Impressed with Rosenthal's drawings, Turak urged him to go to Cracow but, observing Rosenthal's unwillingness to go to Austria, referred him to Ephraim Lilien in Berlin with a letter of introduction. In Berlin the young artist remained several months, during which his mother and other members of the family went to

America. For a while Rosenthal thought of going to Palestine but later determined to join his family in their new home.

In the United States Rosenthal found no immediate encouragement in his efforts to secure thorough artistic training. Not even his relatives rightly appreciated his needs or eased his path to artistic development. Nothing, however, permanently daunted him. It was necessary for him to engage in all sorts of work—menial and otherwise—before he found himself in a position to train under competent teachers. For years he struggled in an atmosphere of cutting indifference, eking out a living under trying conditions, working variously at umbrellas, straw hats, cloaks, aprons and men's clothing, and, when jobs were scarce, at picking strawberries or collecting for an installment house. But every hour in which he could apply himself to the work to which he had dedicated an almost frenzied ambition was occupied with feverish activity.

Finding that he somehow must get an education without being required to pay the fees, however modest, he carved out of marble, with chisel and mallet, the head of William Jennings Bryan and later designed two groups in clay which, upon being shown to Ephraim Keyser, the famous sculptor, won for Rosenthal a four-year scholarship in the Rinehart School of Sculpture, of which Mr. Keyser is the head.

The years following his work under Keyser were years of harrowing struggle but of notable results insofar as technical and artistic development was concerned. Rosenthal's style from the first was characterized by an incisive power of delineation and by an almost irresistible predilection for the sorrowful and pathetic. He was never quite so much at home as when depicting a

Jewish theme, whether of historical or contemporary significance. The multi-colored background of Jewish history was the mental canvas upon which he chose to place his eloquent figures. Everything he did conveyed a vital message; whether he reveled in sheer beauty or in glorious pain, he executed his designs with vigorous, almost impetuous, assurance. For several years he modeled magnificent heads of sages, the pathetic little figures of children forsaken by the world, and tender and enchanting things of beauty the themes of which seethed in the artists' fertile, intellectual brain.

But Rosenthal's distinctiveness as an artist was yet to come. During the last three or four years Rosenthal determined to devote his time almost exclusively to miniature sculpture. His peculiarly individual artistic urge led him to concentrate his energies upon a phase of the sculpture that no sculptor, of this or any other known age, has resorted to with quite the same success as has crowned his work. With nothing more than a pen-knife (and *only* a pen-knife could serve as a tool) he has modeled figures one inch, two inches or three inches in height with an accuracy of design that invariably elicits a feeling of astonished surprise from those who look at them. One who regards the tiny figures and notes the artist's feeling for form and his admirable composition, his capacity for effecting mass and powerful grouping, wonders if the sculptor works under a microscope. He does not.

In his calm moments, Rosenthal informs his little figures with a decided pastoral quality, serene like an eclogue of Virgil. An airy fancy hovers over these placid, fanciful little designs, classical in the sheerness of their beauty. Gracefulness of touch seems to attain a character beyond which it is inconceivable for gracefulness to be achieved.

But in his more reflective periods, the sculptor employs a vigorous symbolism, flights of poetic imagination and an eager moralism, a passionate longing to solve the problems that assail the world. In one of his group designs—The Deluge—a figure not more than three inches high—he pictures in dramatic, almost overpowering fashion, the terror and confusion that threatens the world. In his deeper moods Rosenthal wields not a pen-knife but a flaming sword.

Rosenthal's miniatures have to be seen at close range; they are so small that they cannot be adequately photographed. But the sculptor's feeling for form is so marked and his modeling is so accurate as to inform his tiny figures with telling vitality and an insinuating poetic charm. Rosenthal's hand has a magical lightness of touch and his soul is steeped in poetic idealism.

Although Rosenthal adheres closely to severely classical lines, he is essentially intellectual and didactic in his message. In his work, Greek suavity and Hebrew fervor blend amicably; they do not engage in combat. Now he employs a mythological theme and invests it with the qualities of an ode of Theocritus, and again he utters a prophetic message with the fiery passion of an Isaiah. In his larger figures, no less than in his miniatures, this young artist manifests varied ideals, but fundamentally the Jew in him—the longing, restless, pitying Jew, clamoring for justice and hateful of tyranny and cant—holds forth admonishingly. A Philo of art, he may be said to be not the Philo who reflected on Biblical passages in the luxurious precincts of his Alexandrian home, but the Philo who championed his people against Roman tyranny and prevailed.

Recently Rosenthal received word from London that he had been elected associate of the Royal Society of Miniature Painters. He was placed in nomination by Alyn Williams, the society's president, a miniature portrait painter of world-wide

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STATUETTE TO EARL BALFOUR.

Designed by Louis Rosenthal, and presented as a gift from American Jews to Earl Balfour last week by Dr. Chaim Weizmann. The statuette is eleven inches high. Shaft and base are of silver, while the decorative figures are in gold. Funds for the statuette were raised by popular subscription.