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ART FOR CITIZENS AND CELEBRANTS:
The Sculpture of Robert C. Koepnick

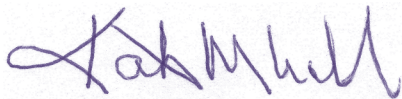
March 16 – Sept. 7, 2014

At University of Dayton Libraries, we are pleased to celebrate the life and work of local sculptor and beloved teacher Robert “Bob” C. Koepnick. Our 2014 exhibits and programs provide visitors with a chance to get to know this wonderful artist and educator.

Koepnick taught many UD students at the College of the Dayton Art Institute. He was granted an honorary doctorate from the University of Dayton shortly before his death in 1995. Three years ago his family generously donated Koepnick’s archival papers and many of his sculptural studies to University Archives. This wonderful addition led us to further enhance our historical record of Koepnick and his career. Under the guidance of university archivists, a study of Koepnick’s life began to emerge. During the last two years, a UD photography student created a photographic record of Koepnick’s studio, and many of his former students provided oral histories describing their experiences with him. We created an online map of his public works and extensively studied his record for our exhibits and this booklet. Additionally, select materials were digitized and posted online.

These initiatives demonstrate University Archives’ commitment to highlighting our unique collections, and our ongoing efforts to obtain, preserve and interpret the history of the faculty, alumni and friends of the University of Dayton.

There are many people to thank for making these exhibits and collections possible. You will find a list included in this booklet. I hope you enjoy the exhibit, and I invite you to explore the other archival collections at University of Dayton Libraries.



Kathleen M. Webb
Dean, University Libraries
February 2014

Robert Koepnick was born in Dayton, Ohio, July 8, 1907. He was raised in West Dayton at 326 Pontiac Ave. and attended nearby St. James Catholic Church and School. Koepnick's father, Louis Koepnick, was born in Dayton in 1879, making Koepnick at least a third generation Daytonian. Koepnick attended high school for only a short time (not uncommon in the early 20th century) but with his talents obtained work as an architectural modeler and plasterer. Koepnick studied sculpture at the Dayton Art Institute and then under renowned Swedish sculptor Carl Milles at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan.

Koepnick met and married Mary Elizabeth "Betty" Borland, of Wheeling, W. Va., during World War II. Their sons, Richard and John, were born in 1944 and 1950 respectively.

Right: Koepnick (far right) with his brother, Louis, and sister, Verna, c. 1920.

Below: Koepnick relaxing outside of one of the architectural modeling firms he worked for as a plasterer, c.1930. He worked at George Heidenreich Company in Trotwood and at A.J. Musselman Sons in East Dayton.





Koepnick modeling the head of a male subject.

Even though he attended high school for only a short time, Koepnick's talents and experience working as a decorative artist earned him a place as a student at the Dayton Art Institute. In time he was given an opportunity to teach Saturday children's classes and later to head the sculpture and ceramics department.

Koepnick worked at this position, with the exception of World War II service from 1941 to 1946, for nearly 40 years. From 1933 to 1938, under Siegfried Weng, director of the Dayton Art Institute, Koepnick produced terra cotta figures for Dayton schools as part of Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. Also, with Weng and other Dayton Art Institute staff, Koepnick founded the Dayton Society of Painters and Sculptors in 1938.

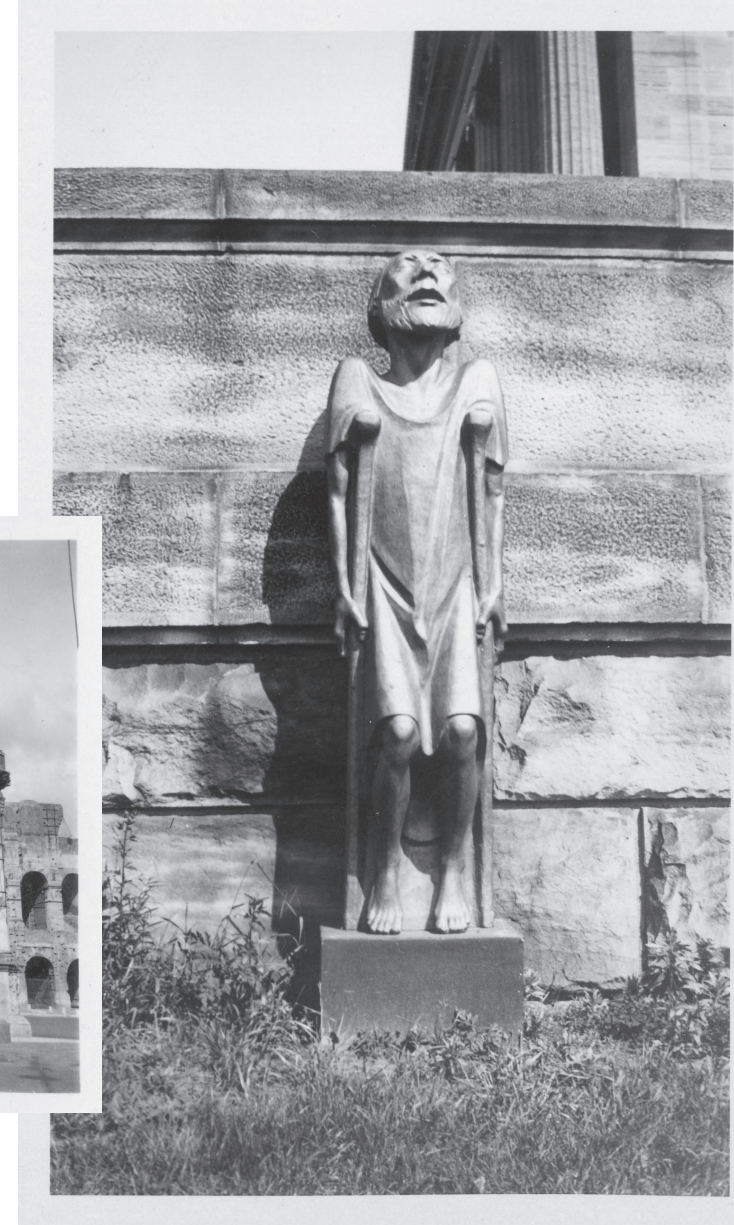
The society, now more than 75 years old, continues to mount regular shows at their High Street Gallery in the St. Anne's Hill Historic District in East Dayton.

As part of his continuing education, Koepnick traveled to Europe in summer 1938 to view and photograph significant art and architecture. He toured with Robert Metcalf (fellow Dayton Art Institute faculty member), often photographing stained glass windows. Both Koepnick and Metcalf sensed war was imminent and that much of Europe's great architecture would soon be in peril. While in Europe, Koepnick visited the studios of sculptor Ivan Meštrović, who was a major influence on his work.

Koepnick also collected postcard views of famous architectural sites to use as visual aids in his classes at the Dayton Art Institute. As a young art teacher, Koepnick traveled simply and inexpensively.



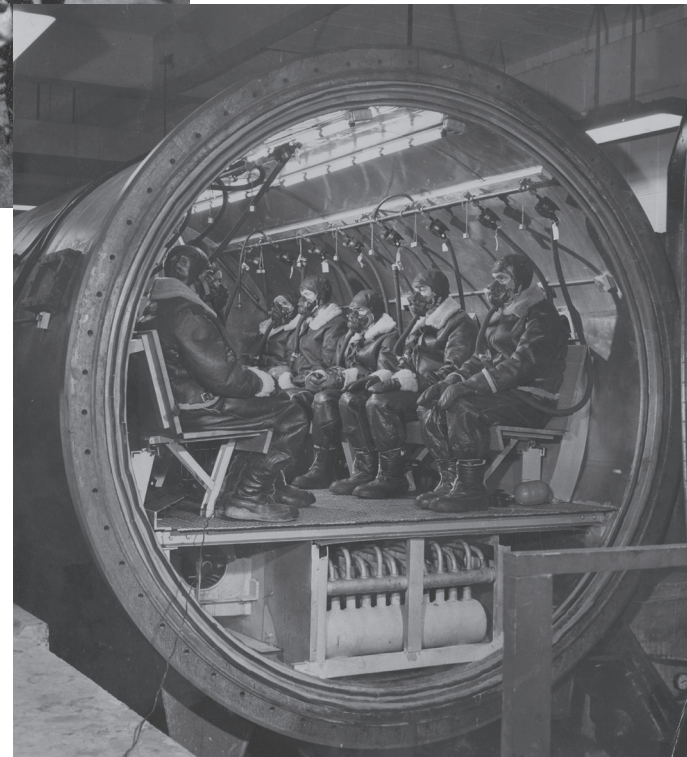
Photos from Koepnick's 1938 European tour.





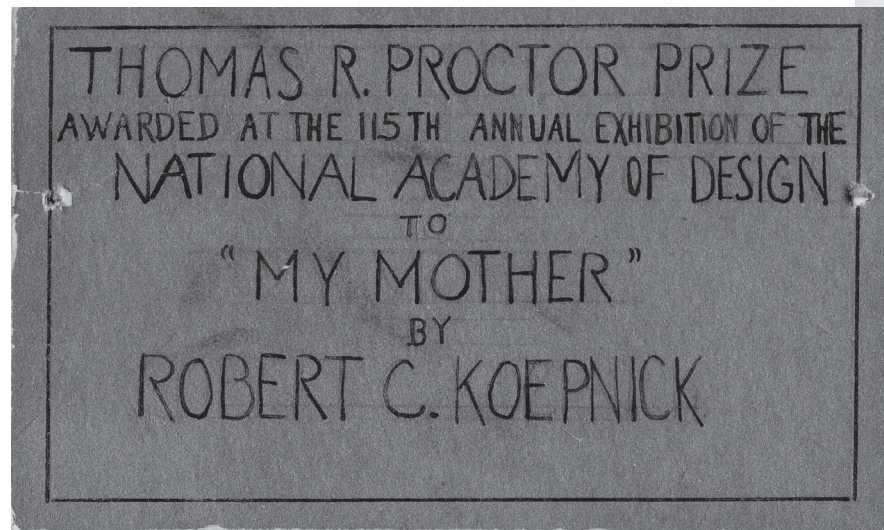
Above: Koepnick, kneeling front row, with a group of soldiers, c.1943.
Right: Army Air Force personnel testing demand oxygen mask, c.1943.

Koepnick served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He volunteered his artistic services and was put to work at Wright Field outside Dayton, designing and testing equipment, especially oxygen masks, for aviators. Koepnick and his colleagues worked with anthropological and other references to design masks and gloves for various sizes. Despite his specialized work, Koepnick was a regular GI when he was not working as an artist-designer.



While a beloved teacher, Koepnick also had a long, active career as an independent artist. He is perhaps best known for the ecclesiastical pieces he executed for churches or for architects designing churches. Koepnick also produced logos and commemorative plaques and busts for corporate clients. Further commissions included public art for schools, governments and other service agencies around the Dayton area.

Koepnick also pursued his own artistic vision by creating personal works. These works were accepted for exhibition by major art institutions as early as 1940 and were still being exhibited as late as 1993.



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openings
 walls
 bridges
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photographs
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"ESSENTIAL IMAGES OF DOORS"

ROBERT C. KOEPNICK

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terracotta
 plaster
 alabaster
 limestone
 walnut

"IMAGES OF WOMEN"

July 1 to August 15, 1993
 Glen Street Gallery



Koepnick created public art that adorns many schools, libraries and government buildings. He was called upon when those clients wanted to make a permanent statement about their place in history, their mission or their beliefs.

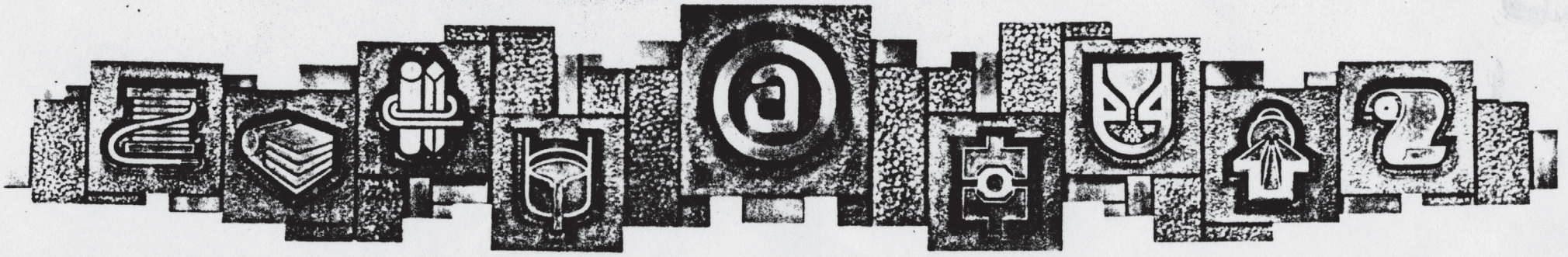
Unfortunately, much of his work for local schools, including Roosevelt High School, Fairview High School, Belmont High School and Eastmont Park Elementary School, has been demolished in recent years. His creation of the knight for Archbishop Alter High School, in Kettering, still stands. Major public works include sculptures at the entrance gate of the Montgomery County Fairgrounds and on the main façade of the Dayton Metro Library's downtown headquarters. Some believe that the latter two structures, and their artwork, are also in imminent danger of destruction due to upcoming relocation and renovation.

Many of these pieces were created during the 1950s and '60s, a prosperous era for Dayton. Industry was thriving and the population was growing. New residential construction added to the city's footprint, and new suburbs still focused on a vibrant center city. Baby boomers crammed into old school buildings and made new ones necessary. Prosperity brought enthusiasm and optimism for a bright future, and inspired local leaders to build boldly.

Left: *Untitled*, a sculpture of four figures, each holding a book, located at Dayton Metro Library, East Third Street.

Right: Koepnick examines the *Simon Kenton* figure he was working on for the Cincinnati Bicentennial Riverwalk which opened in 1988.





Koepnick titled this drawing *Sculpture lineup of ten division logos*. He did this preliminary sketch for the Aluminum Association of America; the finished sculpture is on exhibit.

HONORED LEADERS

A portion of Koepnick's work was for corporate clients who wanted to commemorate an honored leader.

Among the many local executives Koepnick portrayed in three dimensions or modified two-dimensional plaques are entrepreneur Jacob Donenfeld; William Ross of Ross Foundry; Colonel Edwin Deeds of DELCO and NCR; Albert Horstman, Montgomery County Democratic Party chairman; and Max Rudolph, conductor of the Cincinnati Symphony for more than a decade.

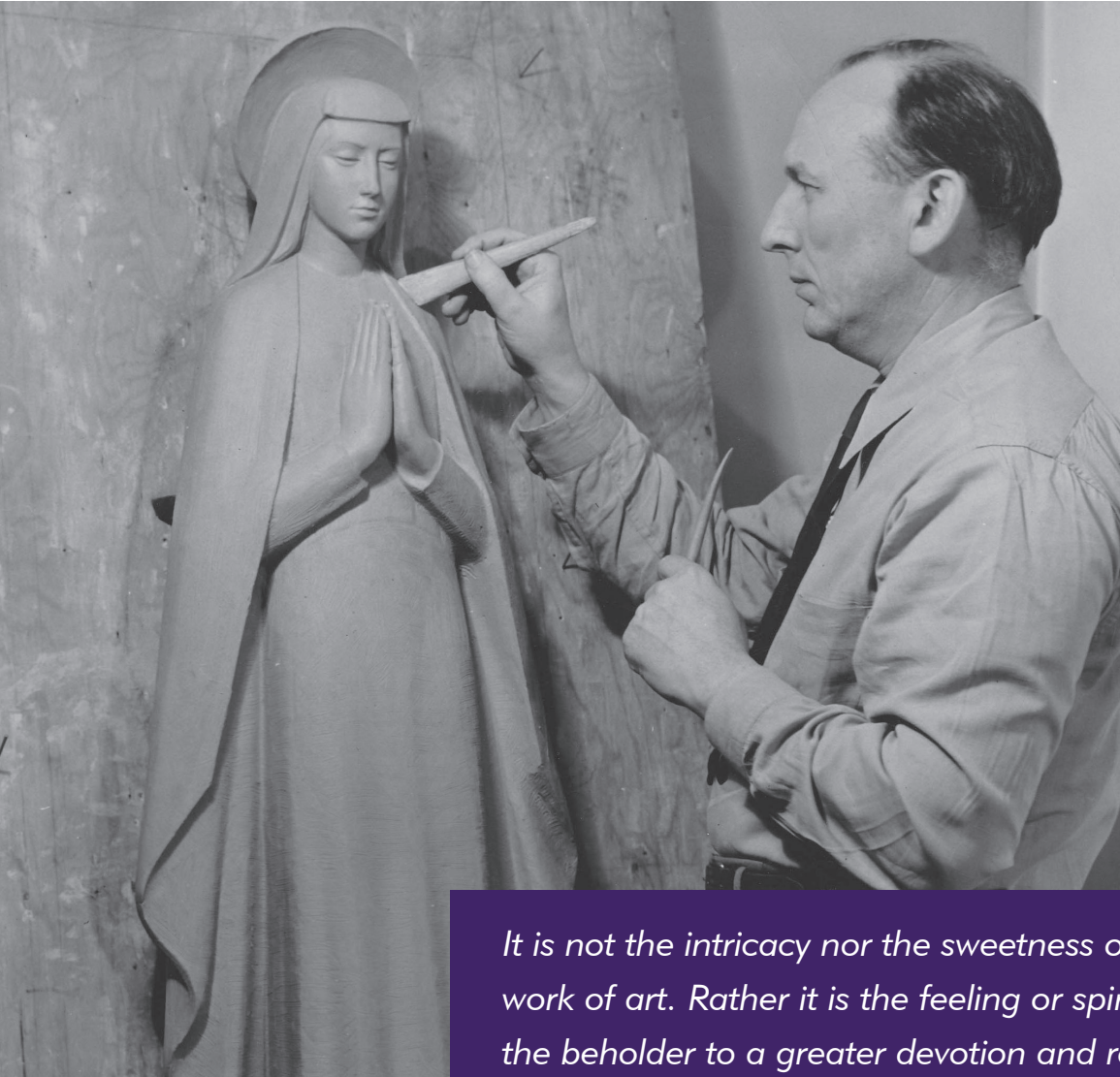
As with many artists who strive to make a living, Koepnick felt that this bread and butter work, though less inspiring and challenging than other projects, was useful and practical, and could perhaps lead to additional commissions for public art.

DISTINCTIVE LOGOS

A portion of Koepnick's work was for corporate clients who desired a distinctive logo or striking image to define their identity or mission.

In his work on logos and other identity pieces, he worked as easily in abstract or even nonobjective styles as in representational form. Although sculpture is typically a three-dimensional art, many of Koepnick's logo pieces are primarily two-dimensional. They might almost be classified as graphic or industrial design even though there is some depth and relief about them.

More than his executive portraits, Koepnick's logo and collage work allowed for interpretive freedom and distinctive creations.



Throughout his career, Koepnick completed many sculptures for churches and other religious organizations. He worked mainly with Catholic institutions, but he also did a considerable amount of work for Protestant organizations and almost signed a contract with a Jewish temple in Lima, Ohio.

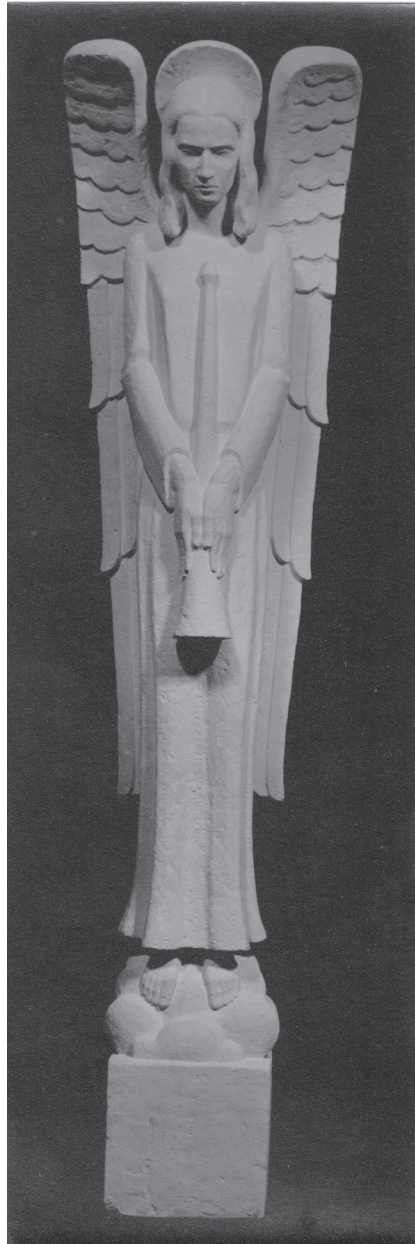
Koepnick's work can still be seen in southwest Ohio sites such as Woodland Cemetery; Bethany Village; Dayton's St. Anthony, St. Rita and St. Stephen churches; Cincinnati's St. Peter in Chains Cathedral; St. Gregory Seminary; Spring Grove Cemetery; the College of Mount St. Joseph; and St. James of the Valley. Whether working with architects or religious men and women, Koepnick remained calm, accepted critiques and advice, and worked patiently to please his clients. The architect Max Pohlmyer commented that it was "a pleasure to work with an untemperamental sculptor who was both highly skilled and cooperative."

It is not the intricacy nor the sweetness of the work that makes a piece a truly fine religious work of art. Rather it is the feeling or spirit of the design, conceived with the purpose of aiding the beholder to a greater devotion and reverence.

— R. Koepnick, from an April 10, 1956, speech

Koepnick's iconic Christian figures often drew on liturgical art of the past. For example, the pleated robe of Koepnick's Angel Gabriel recalls those worn by the early Gothic Christian figures in Chartres Cathedral. The vertical folds in those 12th century stone carvings echo the soaring lines and spaces of a cathedral designed to evoke the transcendent experience of leaving the terrestrial world for a heavenly realm. However, Koepnick's angel has a decidedly 20th century look with its clean lines and more abstract features.

For clients requesting more modern imagery, Koepnick found inspiration in the work of early 20th century European artists whose work he admired. For example, his gaunt, elongated figure of Christ on the cross echoes the pathos of the wooden crucifix carved by Croatian expressionist Ivan Meštrović.



Left to right: *Angel Gabriel*, Marquette, c. 1962, plaster. Koepnick carving a Christ figure based on an oil clay study mounted on the wall behind him, c. 1952.



Koepnick modeling the portrait of his son Richard, c. 1955.



Like many modern figurative sculptors of the early 20th century, Koepnick continued to use traditional processes — wood and stone carving, clay modeling and metal casting — well into the late 20th century.

WOOD AND STONE CARVING

Wood and stone sculpture involves removing hard material with cutting tools to reveal the form. Although carving was less frequently used by Koepnick, some of his strongest small figurative work was made using this process. Tools used for marble and other kinds of stone include metal wedges, adzes, stone chisels and grinding wheels. For softer materials like wood, he would shape with coping saws, knives, wood chisels and sanders.

MODELING IN CLAY

Modeling is the process of adding and manipulating pliable material, such as natural clay or an oil-based clay, usually on a sturdy support called an armature. The main tools used are the artist's hands, but for detailed work, special implements are helpful.

TRANSFERRING AN IDEA TO WOOD OR STONE

The artist may transfer a design to the material to be carved by attaching a drawing to the surface and then pushing a sharp tool, like a small drill or an awl, through the drawing into the material to make an outline of small points to serve as a guide.

Koepnick was particularly drawn to Michelangelo's method of making outlines of the front, sides and back of the figure on all four sides of a marble block and working from the outside inward.

The transfer method is especially useful for wall reliefs like Koepnick's stone carving of three children playing musical instruments and the large unfinished wooden crucifix. If you look carefully at the crucifix in the exhibit, you can see tiny holes outlining the figure of Christ.

METAL CASTING

The technique Koepnick used most often was to model a figure in clay, then cast the model in metal using a complicated method called the lost wax process. You can follow this method by watching the “The Lost Wax Process” video.

PIONEERING A NEW CASTING PROCESS

Because traditional bronze casting can be costly and cumbersome, Koepnick sought ways to make the process faster, more efficient and less expensive. To make large scale work easier to handle and give it a more contemporary feel, he used aluminum instead of bronze.

For example, to simplify casting in either metal, he developed a three-step molding process:

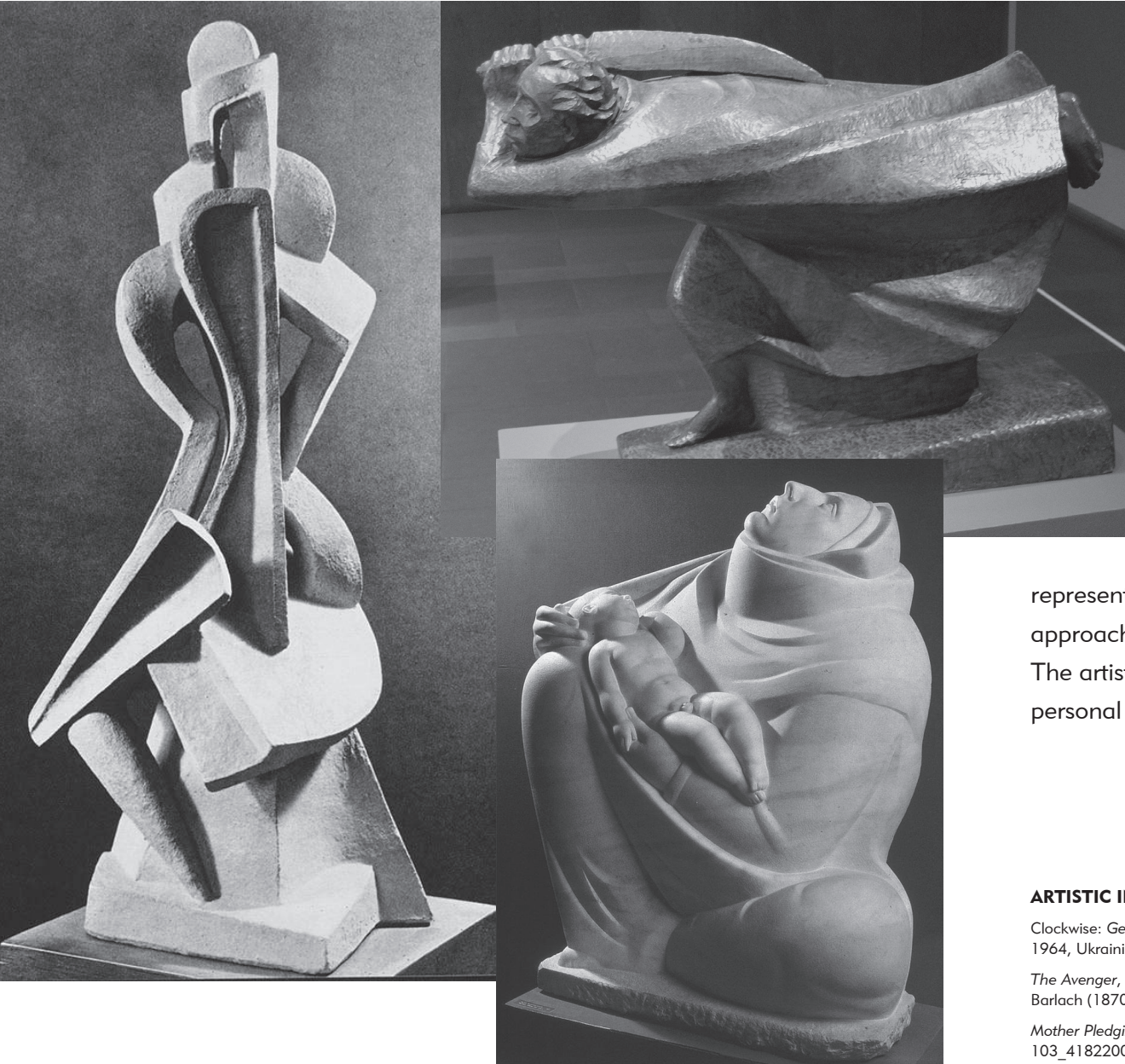
- 1) A slightly damp clay figure was coated with lacquer to keep it moist.
- 2) A mold was made, and the still-pliable clay was removed from the mold.
- 3) Molten metal was poured into the mold.

Although cost effective, the method was risky because the original model was damaged in the process.

Koepnick used this more efficient technique for large-scale aluminum work, both secular and ecclesiastical. Examples include the wall-mounted figures for the Dayton Metro Library (seen on page eight), and *Michael the Archangel*, which was made in 52 pieces and welded together in the foundry. To make these castings, Koepnick worked with commercial foundries.

Michael the Archangel, 1965-66, cast aluminum.
St. Michael's Church, Houston, Texas.





As a teacher and artist, Koepnick admired and referred to work by many early modern figurative European sculptors prominent in the years between the two world wars (1918-1939). These influences were particularly evident in his secular work.

Although early 20th century modernists broke the rigid rules of proportion and literal interpretation prevalent in 19th century academic training, many continued to work in traditional materials: carved wood and stone, clay and cast bronze. Eventually, these groundbreaking artists were overshadowed by the more radical movements of the period such as surrealism, dadaism and constructivism.

While his portrait heads are Koepnick's most literal representations of the figure, he selected from a range of stylistic approaches to express the unique character of each subject. The artist reserved his most adventurous experiments for his own personal work, usually in the form of a figure.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Clockwise: *Geometric Figure with Space and Concave*, 1920, bronze. Alexander Archipenko (1887-1964, Ukrainian). Estate of Alexander Archipenko and Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York City.

The Avenger, 1914-1930, original wood version was carved in 1914 and later cast in bronze. Ernst Barlach (1870-1938, German). Barlach Haus, Hamburg, Germany.

Mother Pledging her Child, 1927, marble. Ivan Meštrović (1883-1962, Croatian). ARTstor: 103_41822000292019.

Koepnick's life spanned most of the 20th century. His career at the Dayton Art Institute covered nearly every year of the school's existence. His public art, both ecclesiastical and secular, appeared throughout a period when architects and clients felt such work was critical to important buildings and institutions.

Koepnick passed away nearly two decades ago, but his art and memory survive. His legacy as an artist is unquestioned. His achievements and record as a man — son, husband, father, grandfather, teacher and mentor — will stay with his descendants, former students and members of the Dayton community for generations to come.

We extend a very special thanks to the Koepnick family for generously donating Koepnick's archives to the University of Dayton and helping in every phase of exhibit and program planning and implementation.

Koepnick with son John.



"Mr. Koepnick was never heavy-handed. He could stop you in your tracks and make you think ... but ultimately you would think you came up with it on your own."

—Steve Gatchie, student

The Robert C. Koepnick Papers, from which the information and documents for this exhibit were drawn, are in University Archives of University of Dayton Libraries, which is home to approximately 40 of his sculptures.

The works on exhibit mostly belong to the Koepnick family, and we are grateful for their generous loan. We also appreciate the services of Creative Impressions, Dayton, who scanned images for graphic panels, and the National Sculpture Society, New York, who supplied the educational video. We wish to thank the following people who made this exhibit possible:

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