

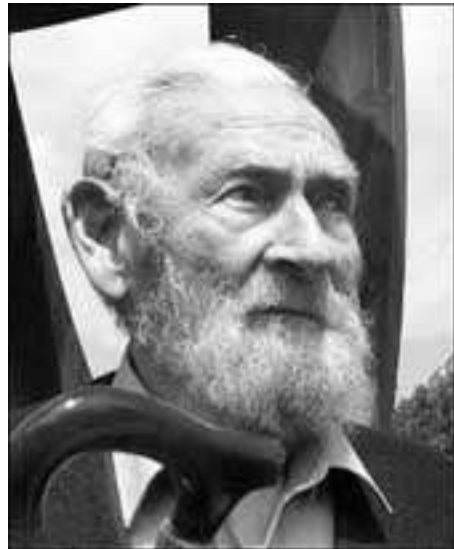
## A Vagabond Magus Whose Specialty Was The Space

by Mila Parot Zubimendi

Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza died on April 9, 2003 in a hospital in the Basque city of Donostia. He was 94. Oteiza's work marked the beginnings of abstract art in his native Navarre. He made a great impact on the artistic world at home and abroad during the 1940s and 1950s. His influence on contemporary sculpture is due not solely to his body of work but to his extensive philosophical writings. Alike as sculptor, teacher, writer, poet and nonparty politician, Oteiza was the most controversial artist of his generation in Navarre.

A prime example of his power to startle is his complex and organic sculptures like landscape. Himself a legendary survivor, Oteiza remembered that a quick and unwilling getaway was the law of life for many Basques. He also knew that their knowledge of the landscape is a survival skill that even brought Charlemagne's powerful army to defeat. Inspired by

his metaphysical understanding of cosmic time and space and the geometric structure and essence of the natural landscape, Oteiza executed a series of stone sculptures--his choice of stone was surely inspired by its familiar natural substance and universal presence, and its continuity with the eternal past. Taking the cube as point of departure, these particular sculptures are a combination of hollowed curves and flat planes in a modified prismatic structure. The staggering arrangement of lit and shaded surfaces, echoing the unpredictable contours of the natural landscape, as well as its reassuring permanence, has overtones of which no sensitive observer could be unaware.



Was Oteiza shaman or charlatan, sage or pest, saint or silly? Everyone had an opinion, and everyone gave it. But in the context of the times, Jorge Oteiza was the inevitable and the indispensable man, the man who stirred the cultural scene with a very long spoon and brought it to the boil. And while it would be too much to say, with W.H. Auden, that when he died on April 9 "the little children cried in the streets", it was undoubtedly the end of a phenomenon that would never recur in Navarre. Never again was an artist of his stature likely to go from place to place, like a wandering friar, and talk to small groups of people in hopes of saving the world by individual regeneration.

Basque sculptor [Jorge Oteiza](#). Photo courtesy of [Diario de Noticias](#), Navarre.

Born in the town of Orío, Gipuzkoa, western Navarre, in 1908, Oteiza had in boyhood an exceptionally vivid imaginative life in which mythology, theatre and biochemistry all played a part. He also became conscious of the identification of prehistoric cultures with their environment, and of the Basque neolithic cromlech as an archetypal construction that isolates the outer and subordinate to focus on the inner and essential. He once characterized the

cromlech as the highest point of creativity reached by prehistoric Basques after a long and hard learning process that began at Altamira, Lascaux, Ekain and Trois Frères--a symbol of human experience that shows the spiritual identification of a prehistoric culture with the universe based on an understanding of natural and cosmic laws. It should be emphasized that Oteiza studied the religious beliefs, mythologies and artifacts of prehistoric societies in South America and in his native Navarre not in order to solve problems of form and content for sculpture, but in order to understand man's metaphysical relationship to the universe. Understanding the structure and meaning of the spiritual (religious or magical) experience was primary. Giving concrete form to it was secondary.

In 1920 the Oteiza family moved to Lekarotz in residual Navarre. In 1927 they moved to Madrid where Oteiza studied architecture and medicine. A year later his father migrated to Argentina. Oteiza, meanwhile, financed his studies by working as a waiter, keeping the books for the owner of a grocery store and working as a linotype operator. In 1929 he abandoned his studies in medicine and enrolled at the Madrid School of Arts and Crafts. Two years later Oteiza was awarded first prize in The Ninth Competition for New Artists from Gipuzkoa with his sculpture *Adam and Eve*.

Oteiza's earliest sculptures from the 1930's show single, sometimes double figures, crudely carved or modeled in diverse materials. These images seem, like primitive idols, inhabited by a spiritual energy. Their monolithic silhouettes may be identified with forms in the natural landscape, such as the trunk of a tree or an eroded stone. In the 1940s, Oteiza began to separate the limbs from the body in his figurative subjects and to create hollowed spaces. Thereafter, the hollow stayed with him and turned up in a variety of unexpected contexts.

He had exceptional charisma as a teacher -- so much so that when he left Peru's Universidad de Trujillo in 1947 (Oteiza stayed in South America from 1935 to 1948), his students carried him in farewell across the campus. The expansive personality of Oteiza sets the tone for much of the most important art that was produced in Spain in the 1960s. His students include Gerardo Rueda (co-founder of the Museum of Abstract Art in Cuenca, Spain), Eusebio Sempere and Pablo Palazuelo of the Equipo 57 group. They saw art as a form of behavior within society and advocated the integration of the arts, an end to the commercial exploitation of the phenomenon of painting and the plastic arts, and pictorial teamwork.

As a sculptor, Oteiza had a gift for the unforgettable image that made him a favorite with the commission of a religious statuary for the Basilica of Arantzazu in Gipuzkoa in 1950, later banned in 1954 and restarted in 1968. The large body of figurative work, which Oteiza projected in 1953 and executed in 1968-69 for the Basilica of Arantzazu, is consistent with his general aesthetic philosophy. "Religious statuary, by definition, has a timeless, spiritual content and, in order to be legible, an unchanging or timeless iconography. Oteiza respected the traditional iconographic conventions of this subject motifs: an Ascension of the Virgin, a Pietà, and a frieze of apostles. However, he depersonalized their features and stylized their forms, translating them into more anonymous figures or carriers of spiritual content."<sup>1</sup>

The 14 apostles, including Judas and Matthew, "are presented with their bellies missing, with great hollows opened up in them like those produced naturally by ice as it melts, revealed as beings opening themselves up to others, stripped of their own selves and, with their powerful monolithic forms, seeming to be guardians of the temple. Above this frieze, crowning the crest of the facade, is the dramatic Pietà, with the Son of God dead at her feet."<sup>2</sup>

These images were like nothing that anyone had seen before, and there was heated discussion -- especially among artists of an envious and ungifted sort -- as to whether they could be called sculpture at all. But they turned out to last very well, both as examples of covert autobiography and as encapsulations of the landscape and the mythology of an ancient people.

In post civil war Spain, Jorge Oteiza had a unique situation. No one was ever less on the make than he, and in the art world of the 1950's he broke the mold of the "career in art." To the fast-money men who, then as now, were everywhere in the art world, it was an exasperation that he spent so much of his time in unmarketable activities, and was ready to spend unlimited amounts of time in open-ended discussions which, though searching in content, were invariably pacific in tone.

In fact, Oteiza attracted extremes of admiration and contempt, with not much in between in the way of objective assessment. But at all times -- and not less during the illness that led to his death -- he went his own way, said his own things, and acted upon the belief in what he called the ethical function of sculpture.

The essence of his ethical sense was that sculpture ought to shape the artist to work for her/his society. *An artist without a community to love and serve, an orphan of community, will always be an incomplete artist, a mutilated and frustrated artist* 3, Oteiza once said. In 1964 he created, with the financial help of Funcor Cooperativa, the first public Ikastola (school in which instruction is carried out in the Basque

language) and the Elorrio theatre. A staunch critic of the Basque nationalist government for its anemic cultural policy in three Spanish Basque provinces, Oteiza turned down a proposal to donate his work to the government of Araba, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa. But he donated his entire estate to "the people of Navarre." The government of Navarre created the Oteiza Museum and Foundation in the sculptor's farmhouse in Altzuza "to preserve his work and extend his legacy."



[Oteiza Museum and Foundation in Altzuza, Navarre](#). Photo courtesy of Gara.

Oteiza's commitment to art as a way to promote political conscience, even in times of dictator Franco, made him a controversial figure. It was also a dream with him that one day the voice of the unaligned voter would be heard and could have some effect. This was in essence a formulation of his activity as a vagabond magus for whom art and political discourse were one.

His work in sculpture stayed close to his innermost concerns. Sometimes his own life motivated it, and sometimes the life of the society in which he had been raised. On the other hand, Oteiza was not interested in modern technology or modern utopias but in the unchanging human relationship to the natural landscape.

His abstract works in stone, iron and steel, like his earlier figurative work, are guided by the same objective: to create anonymous forms which express a fusion or identification between enclosed volumes and open space. Oteiza's experimentation with concrete form was to express the unity between the individual spirit and the broader cosmic environment such as he had observed it in pre-historical sites and statuettes, but also in the work of Malevitch and Mondrian. His ultimate goal was to capture the essence of the empty/void space, defined as spiritual and physical energy.

His most prevalent and best known theme is that of the *Disoccupation of the cube*, a series of sculptures that are a synthesis of all his earlier experiments. The *Empty Boxes* and *Metaphysical Boxes* are the most representative of this theme. The simple four-sided boxes reflect no ambition on the part of the artist to create "original" or "expressive" forms. Yet, despite the attempt to express universal laws, these works, in their multiple variations, are neither neutral, anonymous nor impersonal."

"Although Oteiza's work developed somewhat independently from the mainstreams of modern art, one might venture to say that, almost despite of the artist, he arrived at a sculptural solution which is a synthesis of contemporary preoccupation and a paradigm of modern sculpture."4

Oteiza created the experimental political theatre in Santiago de Chile, and taught ceramics at several schools in South America. He took part in numerous exhibitions and symposiums, and he was also commissioned for several architectural projects. He defined his art and wrote *Proposito Experimental* between 1956 and 1957 when he reached his greatest activity. He was awarded the Diploma of Honor at the IX Triennale of Milano in 1951 and the International Prize for Sculpture at the IV Biennial of Sao Paulo in Brazil in 1957. In 1959 he gave up his activity as an sculptor, publishing "El final del arte contemporaneo: Razones por las que abandono la escultura" (The end of contemporary art, reasons for abandoning sculpture), in 1960. He developed his theories in the following years. He gave lectures and carried out several projects and even made some documentary films. He founded artistic centers and groups and published manifestos, such as *Quosque Tandem...!* (1963), in which Oteiza not only questioned Art but also Anthropology and Linguistics as a consequence of his detailed studies in Navarre.

Nevertheless, Oteiza took part in exhibitions in Europe since 1960 and in 1972 he resumed some of his incomplete works based on his "Laboratorio de Tizas" (Chalk laboratory). He participated in the Venice Biennial in 1976 and in many other exhibitions in European museums. Oteiza, who was once described by American architect Frank Gehry as the Picasso of modern sculpture, turned down an offer to mount a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim-Bilbao.

He also contributed significantly to monumental public art in public buildings, squares and churches throughout Navarre and Spain.

Oteiza was big, generous and tireless. He served society as a cross between a seer, a safety valve, an inventor of spirited boxes and an untamed Pyrenean *red skin*. In Navarre, which had the need for all these things, he was an irreplaceable human being, and was regarded as such even by those who found him most exasperating. He will be missed immensely.

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Sources: 1, 4: Margit Rowell, De Varia Commensuración. 2. Luis Burgos, Arte del siglo XX. 3. Eusko-Ikaskuntza, Ikusgaiak 2, 1997.