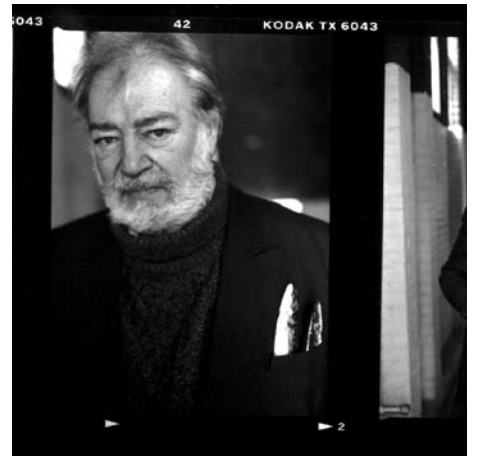


# Joseph Kurhajec

*Prisoners*



*Introduction by*  
Christine McCarthy  
Edward Bryant  
Laurent Danchin



# Director's Foreward

## *Director's Foreward*

The Provincetown Art Association and Museum is very pleased to present the work of Joseph Kurhajec, an exhibiting sculptor of international recognition since the early 1960s. Chosen specifically to highlight his powerful and mythical fetish sculptures, as well as his politically focused marble heads, this highly-charged body of work encompasses Kurhajec's emotions, imagination, and religious beliefs. Kurhajec's combination of the classical, the tribal, and the political is symbolic of a spiritual quest that has been ongoing for forty years.

The successful realization of this exhibition is due to the invaluable contributions of numerous people. My deepest thanks go to the artist, Joseph Kurhajec, who has been incredibly gracious throughout the entire organization of this project. His careful selection of works and attention to space has made this a truly rewarding experience.

We are indebted to Donald Butterfield for bringing the work of Joseph Kurhajec to Provincetown and to the attention of PAAM's Exhibition Committee.

This catalogue would not be possible without Dr. Butterfield's dedication and support, and for this we are extremely grateful.



At the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, our special appreciation goes to Peter Macara, Mike Wright, and James Zimmerman for their never ending enthusiasm and expertise.

Joseph Kurhajec is a remarkable artist whose creativity continues to shock and amaze us with art that speaks directly to the viewer. His quest for the extraordinary has led him on a global journey to which all of us are invited to share.

*Christine McCarthy*



# Repent Sculpture

*The recent sculpture of Joseph Kurhajec*

Joseph Kurhajec is a wild and generous artist, the creator of formidable, declarative sculptures which bite sharply into our fin de siècle complacency. A cry in the 1990s wilderness, Kurhajec is an embracer of life, a primitivist yearner for a simpler world based on the impossible dream of basic values restored. With gusto he performs his role as expressionist wanderer, working intuitively to give from those dark, primitive, and mysterious forces within myth, legend, self, dream, and belief. Independent of stylistic consensus, he creates with an individualistic raw directness of great forcefulness. On the edge of “artistic evangelism”, his recent work prods us to reconsider those unthinkable premises for survival after the deluge, the rain of fire, when art will be at the service of the emotional, the irrational and the magical. Fetishes, masks, armored warriors, gagged heads, and the expressive madness of materials forewarn us of an era post-mortem rather than post-modern!

These emotionalized works, aggressively asserting a non-esthetic premise in both concept and realization, have sources in diverse intense experiences of the artist, both in life and art. Perhaps too much has been read into the fact that Kurhajec grew up on a mink ranch in Wisconsin, where as a child he was in constant contact with the fatalistic life cycle from endering kit to chic fur coat. In 1960, while studying with direct-metal sculptor Leo Steppat at the State University of Wisconsin, he was very impressed by an exhibition of Congo fetishes at the Art Institute of Chicago. “At that point I moved from welded assemblage into fetishes. I recognized a strong desire to put such a vital quality of spirit into my work, which ever since has had a strongly religious nature. Like African fetishes, my works come into existence here and now in a manner inexplicable and paradoxical, as though a primal part of the mind has sustained new ancestral memories capable of threatening our complacent weakness. ...Mine as been a search for the truth, the soul, that spiritual mystery, the magic of art, the sacred presence”.

In 1961, after receiving his M.A. in Studio Art at the University of Wisconsin, for two months Kurhajec was in Merida (Yucatan), Mexico, to study Mayan culture and its powerful visual imagery. Returning to Racine, Wisconsin, he opened his own gallery, The New Generation Group, where he exhibited his first fetish sculptures, human images wrapped and bound, which he called “mummified art”. At this time he became aware of Chicago’s avant-garde of controversial artist critically dubbed the “monster roster” for their urgent expressionist images, including Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Cosmo Campoli, H.C. Westermann, Richard Hunt, and others. The pungent imagery created from industrial junk by New York sculptor Richard Stankiewicz also interested him.

In 1963, Kurhajec moved to New York City. His sculptures became more intensely subjective, larger, more complex, tougher. A frequent theme was an organic form wrapped in fur and/or leather and tightly bound in rope or thongs. A plastic tube or other coupler joined it to a metal geometric solid, suggesting an interdependent, erotic relationship. Tall singular sculptures, phallic in form and



twisted with energy, have a strangely ceremonial restraint. In 1963 the Allan Stone Gallery in New York exhibited a group of these fetishes, and in 1965 presented them in a solo exhibition. The Whitney Museum of American Art exhibited Kurhajec's sculptures in the 1964 Annual Exhibition and in "Young America 1965". As Associate Curator of the Whitney Museum at that time, it was the writer's pleasure to select the Kurhajec works for those exhibition. At the end of the 1960s Kurhajec also translated his creative ideas into the two dimensions of collage and relief prints, using a matrix of fur, reptile skins, hair, cloth, plastic and other decorative materials.

In the 1970s Kurhajec began to work in Rome during the summers, welding massive warriors covered with mail armor of bronze and steel plates. Other works combined fur, bindings, and animal horns. One of the most striking of these is *The Struggle*, an awesome gladiatorial conflict, surely between bitterly opposed aspects of the human psyche. In 1976 Kurhajec created his largest and most abstract works to date: monumental geometric sculptures juxtaposing massive black sheets of steel with enormous blocks of Carrara marble still retaining parallel grooves from having been quarried. These were effectively exhibited in the Piazza Rondanini in Rome.

By the mid 1970s, Joseph Kurhajec and his wife, artist Primarosa Cesarini Sforza, and their two sons, were living in Rome during the winters, and removing themselves for the summer to a small village in Upstate New York, where they converted the former town hall into studios and living areas. In that quiet rural setting his work underwent changes which were the fulcrum for his subsequent political works. Becoming interested in forged iron work, he gathered pieces of old farm implements and beat out metal shapes, some incorporating stones, that suggest torture instruments he had seen in European museums. In 1978 he carved a schematic stone head gagged by a steel cable attached to a dominating upright jagged sheet of metal, and mounted both to a slate base. Titled *Prisoner*, it was seminal to his next series, begun in outrage at the terrorist kidnapping, captivity, and killing of former Italian prime minister Aldo Moro.

Between 1978 and 1980 this incentive brought Kurhajec's introspective expressionism into sharp political focus. In a letter of September 5, 1980, he wrote: "I have finished five new marble sculptures. The work has taken a good direction - for me a direction so powerful and so to the point that the commitment scares me... These sculptures are a statement of our times - the political unrest, the turmoil in men's minds, the struggle of existence". This referred to a series of heads, each about four feet tall, representing political prisoners.

Sufficiently related to Etruscan and Roman portrait heads, they remind us of those surviving remnants of our Classical legacy so important to defining our concepts of civil law and civil liberties. Hostages of unseen captors, they are immobilized, silenced by iron gags, their eyes bulging and necks straining against choking iron collars - the suppression of human rights personified. The bases of some, like gravestones, are inscribed with epitaphs: I Stand for Freedom and I stand for Liberty. "They are prophets of our time, and yet they are absurd", he wrote. "How can our prophets be gagged?" One head, however, is that of a helmeted fascist pig (literally) in military uniform - mouth twisted by the gag attached to a spike collar - victim of his own violent ideology. An

America Indian, almost two-dimensional (suggesting the old Indian head coin), is gagged by a chain connected to a vertical iron strap mercilessly pulled down over the side of his head and attached to an iron band around the “tombstone” base.

The human head as seat of intelligence and order, and chamber of imprisoned emotion and irrationality, as continued as a strong humanist symbol in Kurhajec’s work. From a terracotta series, 1983-1987, two blankly smiling “heads” are actually masks tied back to back onto an upright central form. Enhanced by animal horns, hair braids, feathers, and bones, they are titled Prince of Men and Janus. Their finely delineated facial features ironically suggest the vacuousness of fools.

In 1987 and 1988, Kurhajec made several fetishes from horse skulls, one with leather and other materials to be read as a female torso. Another, persuasive as a potent ritualistic object, combines the skull and jawbone of a horse painted with magic symbols, and ceremonially bound together with other objects. Altogether, Kurhajec’s recent fetishes are made strikingly credible by their extraordinary energy. The working process is hardly evident, as though these images just happened – as direct manifestations of the *élan vital*, that enduring original vital impulse essential to life and consciousness.

These recent works confirm Kurhajec’s long interest in fetishes, which for years he has sought out in major collections in Europe and the United States. They call to mind aboriginal images of important tribal ancestors, culture heroes and god-kings from the tribal cultures of Africa, New Guinea and Oceania. Each of Kurhajec’s small figures with its diverse attachments suggest that, like its prototype, upon propitiation, it is capable of awesome effects. Many of Kurhajec’s fetishes are structured of pitted and eroded stones, to which are attached hair, horns, bones, amulets, dessicated offerings, cast skulls. Lacking the impassive remoteness of, say, a Bakuba statue of a culture hero, or a Uli figure from New Ireland, these fetishes for our times are full of rage, and project a sense of imminent violence, hate, and disorderly minds in beings mangled, distorted and horrific. Their intensity rings with the frightful prospect that the demarcation for the end of civilization has already been drawn by whatever the amazing ingenuity of humankind has devised.



Significant to his work is Kurhajec’s personal and professional move from Italy to France, where he has become very interested in *l’art brut*, avidly studying the large collection established by Jean Dubuffet and the *Compagnie de l’Art Brut*. It seems inevitable that at this point in his career he would have this encounter with the “raw art” of psychotics, children, *naifs*, art outside artistic culture, direct, non-imitative, crude and pure.

With this recent work Kurhajec reaches a new creative level. It is as though in the creative process such intense energies were generated in these images that the artist stepped aside to allow the work to relate even more directly to its viewer. Thereby, freed of his own egocentrism, the artist became the medium through which these sculptures could establish their awesome presence.





# Statues of Liberty

## *Statues of Liberty*

Why do I like the work of Joseph Kurhajec whereas so many sculptors of today leave me completely cold? Because it is a work that, in many ways, passes the merely formal, intellectual or decorative preoccupations, while showing real art skills and obvious aesthetic qualities.

Strongly organic, animated by a vital instinct mingling with audacity the strengths and the materials of different reigns, the works of Kurhajec, in all his periods, are like objects of power of which the efficiency, often fascinating, comes from the internal tension, or even from the short circuit between the contradictory elements that compose them. In this measure these are works that, at least ideally, are nearer to the primitive conception of art than to the contemporary theories of the industrial world. They tend to operate a sort of symbolic regression to the roots, magic and collective, of creation.

In his masks and fetish objects of the more recent periods, where his inspiration would rather carry him toward the primitive rituals of some imaginary archaic civilization, Kurhajec mingles the stone, the horn, the bones or the animal fur to the basic form, generally modeled in terracotta. These ceramics are overloaded of gray-gray, like the *Nkisi Nkondi* from the Congo tradition. In another aspect of his work, his wooden toys –toys for adults, more frightening than funny–, where the form, raw, sometimes ornaments itself of leather, horse hair and ropes, this native of Wisconsin, raised on a ranch but today familiar of the long walks in the Jura forest of France, joins the rustic simplicity of the Folk Art of his native country, America.

In this older series, the *Prisoners*, inspired by a long stay in Italy, at the time of the “lead years” (those were the Red Brigades, of disaster memory, kidnapped then murdered Prime Minister Aldo Moro), it is the stone and metal, marble and steel that enter the conflict, as if the artist, skillfully playing with the whole inventory of the antique statuary until Picasso’s neoclassicism, felt the need to gag violently the most advanced symbols of the western humanist tradition.

Torturers with pig heads, kapos with “ceillères”, heroes or Aphrodites jailed by the bars of a demon mask more frightening than Mario Bava’s, the *Prisoners* of Kurhajec are protest sculptures. They are violent symbols of a committed art, stronger to be three dimensional than a simple poster or a press drawing, and intended to remind us that censorship, confinement, slavery and torture are always there, ready to make the bodies suffer, to muzzle beauty and to silence the moral conscience of humanity.

Terrifying allegories of the most brutal contradictions of our time, Kurhajec’s sculptures are, in a manner deprived of all academicism, Statues of Liberty.

*Laurent Danchin*



*Prisoners*  
*Works*











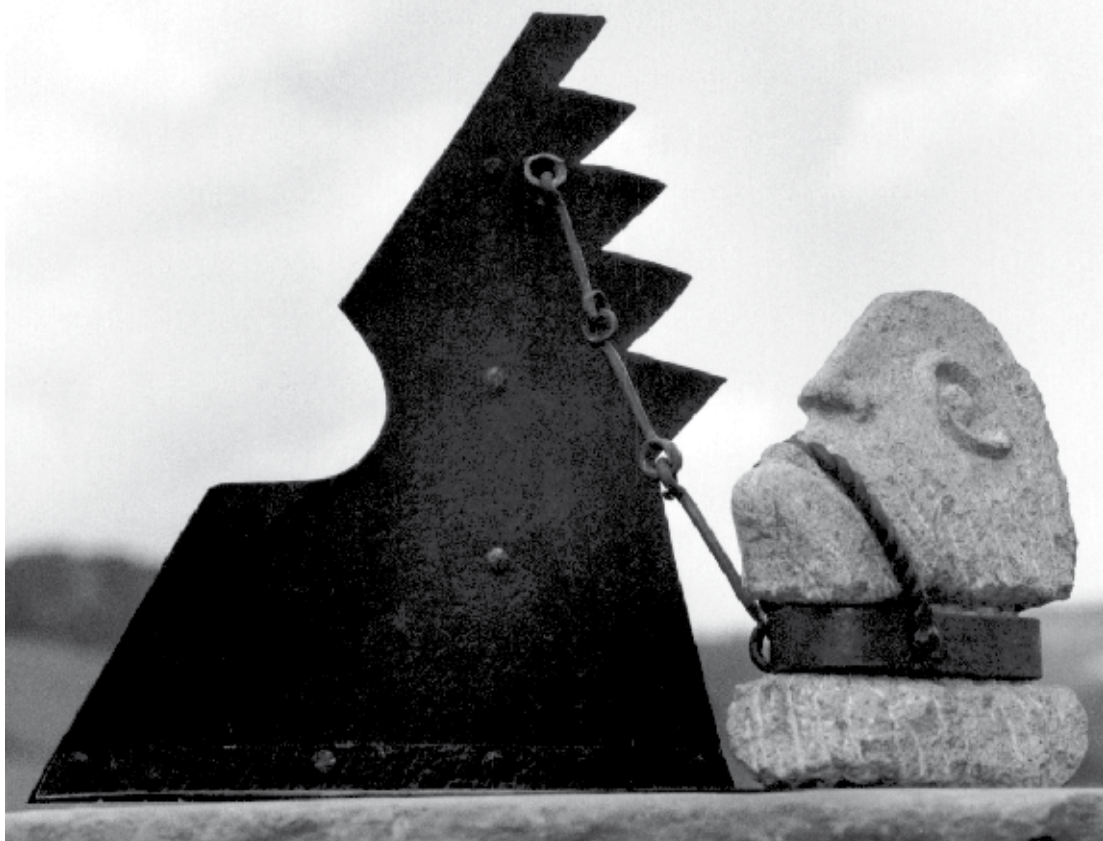






































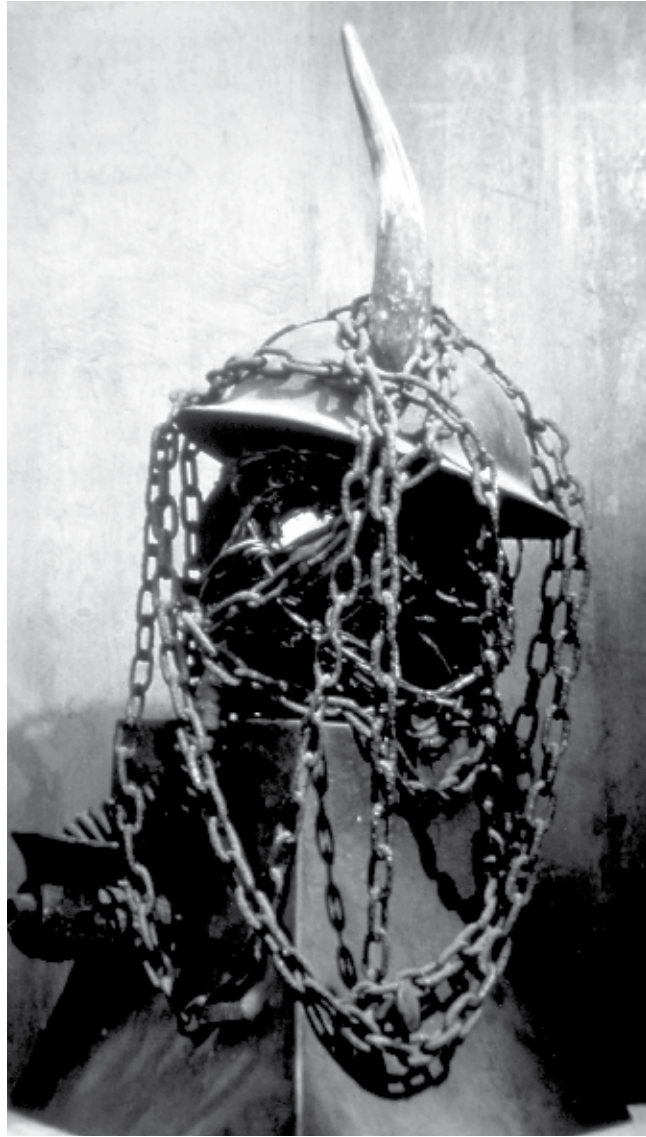




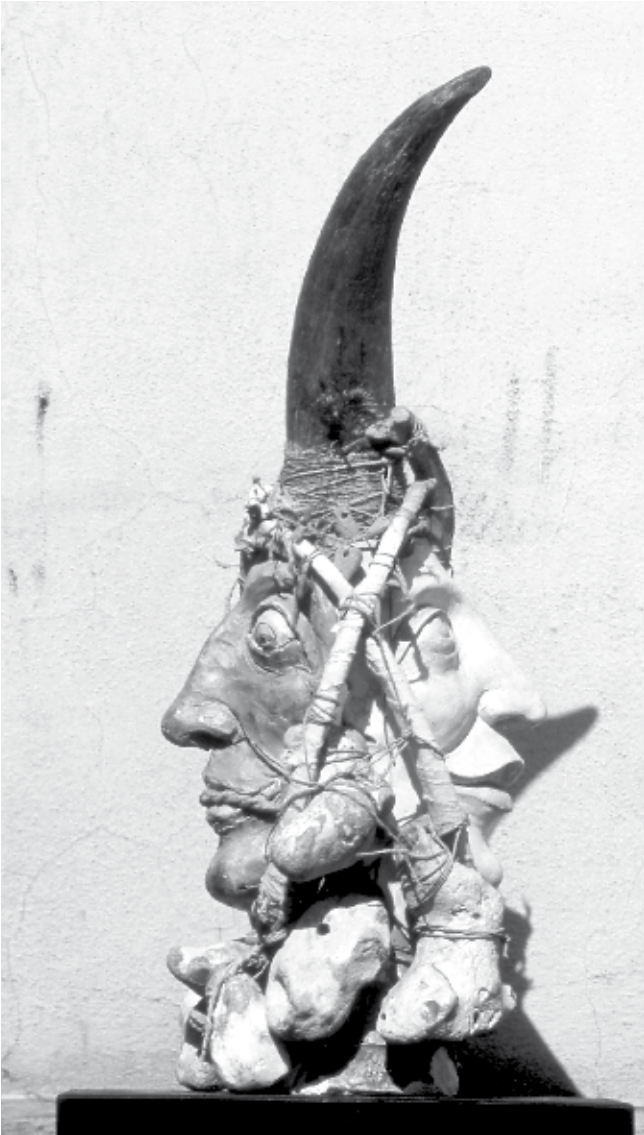


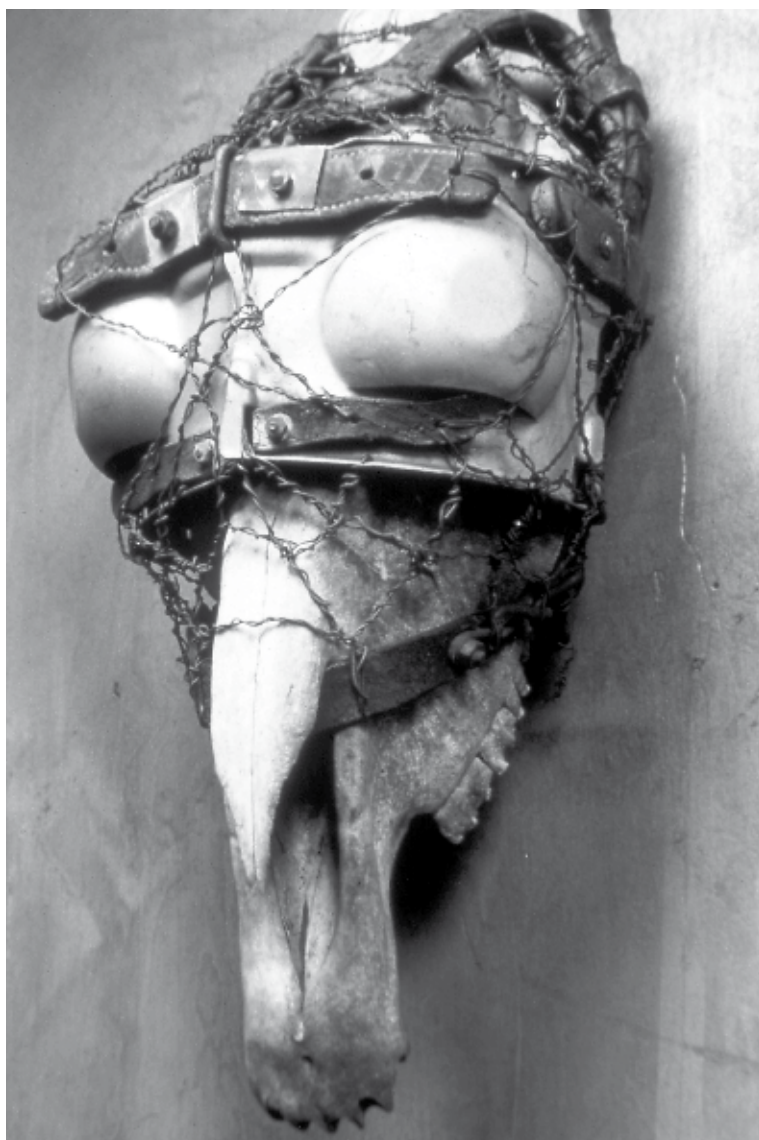


















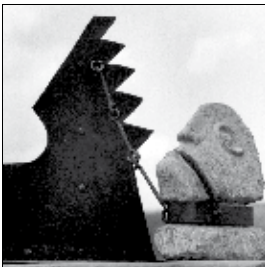
*Untitled 1980*  
Marble, forged iron, 30"x18"  
D. Butterfield Collection  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Untitled 1980*  
Marble, forged iron, 30"x18"  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Liberty 1980*  
Marble, forged iron, 30"x18"  
D. Butterfield Collection  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Homage to Aldo Mars 1979*  
Steel, stone, forged iron, 20"x25"  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Prisoner III 1979*  
Peperino, forged iron, 24"x18"  
Cesarini Sforza Collection  
Photo by Mimi Gnoli



*Prisoner IV 1979*  
Peperino, forged iron, 24"x18"  
Photo by Mimi Gnoli



*Pig 1978*  
Peperino stone, steel, 24"x17"  
Photo by Mimi Gnoli



*Skull in the Sea 1992*  
Ceramic, stone, rope, 18"x18"  
Photo by Sergio Kurhajec



*World War II 1964*  
Steel, rope, leather, 24"x24"  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Indian 1981*  
Marble, forged iron, 35"x16"  
D. Butterfield Collection  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Hostage 1982*  
Marble, forged iron, 6'x5'  
Photo by Charles Winters



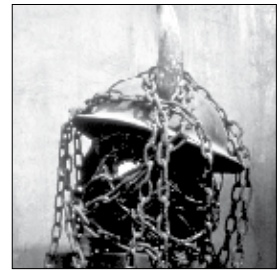
*Hostage 1980, detail*  
Marble, forged iron, 6'x5'  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Pig II 1980*  
Lime stone, forged iron, 24"x22"  
Allan Stone Collection  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Pig 1980*  
Lime stone, forged iron, 24"x15"  
D. Butterfield Collection  
Photo by Charles Winters



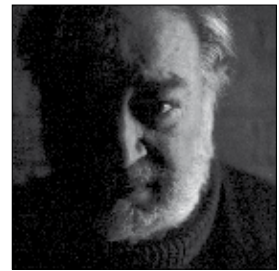
*World War I Memorial 1964*  
Metal, bone, forged iron, 2'x18"  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Homage to Dalí 1987*  
Ceramic, cord, 2'x14"  
Photo by Charles Winters



*Horse Blinder 1985*  
Horse skull, metal, leather, 2'x18"  
Photo by Charles Winters



Portraits by Sergio Kurhajec

# *Expositions*

- 2003      Galeria Mesta Bratislavy – Bratislava, Slovak Republic.  
2001      Historical Society – Dehli, NY, “END OF AN ERA”.  
            Smithy Gallery, “Pioneer” – Cooperstown, NY.  
            Treadwell Museum of Fine Art, Treadwell, NY.  
2000      53<sup>rd</sup> Salon De Vanves – Vanves, France  
            Galleri Sting – Stavanger, Norway  
            Neo Galleri – Stavanger, Norway  
            Island Summer Art Festival – Akureyri  
            TMFA, “40 years of Art” – Treadwell, NY.  
1999      Musée Bourdelle – Paris, France.  
1998      La Galerie du Congul – Jeanick Hubert – Paris, France.  
            Gallery Cari Haddad, Hudson, NY.  
            La Gallery Pelegro, New Orleans, LA.  
1997      Halle Saint-Pierre, Musée d'Art, “Civilisations Imaginaires”, Paris, France.  
1996      TMFA, “Work on Paper”, Treadwell, NY.  
            Cech Museum of FineArt, Praha, Cech Republica  
1995      Svolvaer Kunstforming, Luforton, Norway  
            La Commanderie Saint-Jean, Corbeil-Essonne, France.  
1994      Margurite Oestreicher Fine Art, New Orleans, LA  
1992      Grand Palais, “Salon De couvertes”, Paris, France.  
1991      “Recent Ceramic Sculpture”, Stvanger, Norway.  
            Eemil Halosen Museo, Lapinlaitie, Finland.  
            Galerie Caroline Corre, Paris, France.  
            Grand Palais, Salon de Paris Figuration Critique, Paris, France.  
1988      Musee de Pontalier, “Retrospective”, Pontalier, France.  
1986      Everson Museum of Art, “Other Gods”, Syracuse, NY.  
1983      Galleria La Margherita, Rome, Italy.  
1981      Galleria d'Arte 1' Ariete, Rome, Italy.  
1980      Allan Stone Gallery, New York, NY.  
1979      Galleria Rondanini, Rome, Italy.  
            Janet Karden Institute of Contemporary Art, “Masks Tents Vessels Talismans”, Pennsylvania,  
            University of Pennsylvania.  
1978      La Brenville Gallery, New Orleans, LA.  
1977      Gallery Alexander Monet, Brussels, Belgium.  
            Tyler School of Art, Rome, Italy.  
1975      Art 6 '75, Basel, Switzerland.  
1974      Galleria Etrusculudens, Rome, Italy.  
            Storm King Art Center, Storm King, NY.  
1973      Allan Stone Gallery, New York, NY.  
1972      Guggenheim Museum, “Ten Independents”, New York, NY.  
1971      Museum of Contemporary Crafts, “Furs and Feathers”, New York, NY.  
            Dorsky Gallery, New York, NY.  
1969      Graham Gallery, “Birds and Beast”, New York, NY.  
            Bienville Gallery, New Orleans, LA.  
1968      Picker Art Gallery, Hamilton, NY.  
1967      World House Gallery, “Sculpture From All Directions”, New York, NY.  
1965      Allan Stone Gallery, New York, NY.  
            “Young America 1965” curator Edward Bryant, New York, NY.  
1964      Whitney Museum of American Art, Annual Exposition, New York, NY.  
            Allan Stone Gallery, “All Fur Art”, New York, NY.  
            De Minell Collection, “Constant Companions”, Houston, TX.  
1963      Allan Stone Gallery, New York, NY.  
1962      Milwaukee Art Center, “Brotherhood of Man”, Milwaukee, WI.  
1961      Art Institute of Chicago, Artist of Chicago an vicinity, Chicago, III.  
1960      Devorah Sherman, Art for Young Collectors, GalleryChicago, III.

## JOSEPH KURHAJEC

Studio: 58 Rue Didot, 75014 Paris, France - Tel: 00 33 0145459123

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Member: Sculpters Guild Inc., N.Y

Owner: Treadwell Museum of Art, Treadwell, N.Y.

[www.tmf.net](http://www.tmf.net)

- 1938 Born in Racine, Wisconsin, U.S.A.
- 1956 Quincy College, Franciscan Fathers, Quincy, Ill.
- 1958 Attended 10 seminars given by Frank Lloyd Wright, Spring Green, WI.
- 1961 B.S. in Art Education with a minor in Art History and Sculpture, University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- 1962 Archaeological Research, Merida, Yucatan for M.F.A. University of Wisconsin.
- 1962 Along with Marvin Lipovsky, assisted Harvey Littleton to set up his class studio.
- 1963 Assisted Seymour Lipton for two years in New York City.
- 1964 Assisted Salvatore Scarpitta with race cars.
- 1965 Guest Artist for one year at Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.
- 1966 Traveled with Harvey Littleton to Venice and Murano for glass research.
- 1967-1969 Taught sculpture at Newark School of Industrial and Fine Art.
- 1970-1971 Artist in Residence, University of Wisconsin, Menomonie.
- 1972-1973 Instructor of Sculpture, University of New York, New Paltz.
- 1973-1983 Studio instruction in stone carving, welding and ceramic sculpture, Rome, Italy.
- 1983-1986 Fashion Designer for Adrienne Landau and sculpture, New York City.
- 1988-1989 Artist in Residence, Bradford College, Bradford, England.
- 1990-1993 Hayter Graphic Studio Contrepoint, Paris, France.
- 1991-1992 Invitational International Ceramic Experimental Studio, Kecskemet, Hungary.
- 1992-1993 Invitational "Rogaland Kunstmuseum Sykkelfabrikken", Sandnes, Norway.
- 1992-1993 Invitational Portaanpaakristelnen Kansanopisto, Lapinlahtie, Finland.
- 1993 Halonen Museum Foundation and Halosvalimo oy Bronze Works, Lapinlahtie, Finland.
- 1995-2001 Stage Coach Run Open Studios, Treadwell, N.Y.
- 1997-2001 Ceramic Workshop with Elizabeth Nields, Otego, N.Y.
- 1991-2001 Curator, Annual Erotica Arts Festival, TMFA, Treadwell, N.Y.
- 2002 Curator, Sacred Arts Festival, TMFA

Special thanks to Dr. Donald Butterfield

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